

Challenge, Focus, Strike!

Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings

VOLUME IV: CFS OF THE WEEK #36 THROUGH #52

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Foreword

Following is the fourth volume of a series of documents collecting the esteemed Isawa Nazomitsu's "CFS of the Week" feature in the L5R RPG GMs section of AEG's gaming forum (www.alderac.com/forum).

For the sake of further organizing these, I have attempted to give each hook a title (also taking inspiration from suggestions on the forum). The hooks themselves are presented in the order that they were originally posted, edited for brevity and typography.

This volume is longer than the others, for the sake of keeping all of Nazomitsu's acclaimed Winter Court scenarios (not to mention his wicked oni scenarios) together.

– Sean C. Riley (a.k.a. Pirate Spice)

36. Character Assassination

In August we faced haunting ghosts and restless spirits. In September we fought roving gangs of vicious bandits. In October we battled bloodthirsty hordes of zombies. Now it's time for something even more terrifying:
Winter Court.

CHALLENGE

The PCs are asked to escort a popular young courtier to Winter Court. The courtier, Saya, is the daughter of a powerful lord and is an influential figure in the Court in her own right. While her father will host guests in his own home, she will travel to visit another Clan.

Just after reaching the palace where they will spend the winter, however, the characters receive an anonymous message warning that an assassin will attempt to kill Saya sometime during Winter Court.

FOCUS

A number of people who could be considered Saya's enemies are present in the court, ranging from childhood rivals to political opponents. Further, several generals who have fought heated battles against her father are also there. And the ex-lover of Saya's betrothed. And the son of the mahotsukai she gave testimony against last winter. And the list goes on! Every delegation contains at least one person who seems likely to be behind the death threat.

STRIKE

The warning was actually sent by Kouji, one of Saya's aides. Jealous of the attention and praise she received, the young man blamed her for his failure to gain recognition in the courts. Although he does not actually intend to have her killed, he does want her taken out of the picture long enough so that he has a chance to shine. By instilling a sense of tension and paranoia in Saya, Kouji hopes to create a chance to gain glory for himself by taking over her regular duties.

Saya's reaction to the death threat depends on the type of personality you want to give her. If she takes the threat seriously, she agrees to any precautions the PCs suggest, even to the point of staying isolated in her chambers if they believe it is necessary. This will make Kouji quite happy, as he will be able to schmooze to his heart's content. On the other hand, if Saya insists on living her life as normal, it may cause the PCs some serious woes in their attempts to keep her safe. Numerous dignitaries and courtiers request private meetings with her every day, and her nights are often spent in romantic walks with her betrothed. Needless to say, these are not settings in which armed guards are welcome.

Of course, for those who like the simple and classic "assassination threat" style, the plot involving Kouji can be discarded in favor of another culprit. There are numerous people who would like to kill Saya, and any one of them could have hired an assassin. Or perhaps, in a moment of weakness, the ambitious Kouji became an accomplice, and his "meetings" with other courtiers are actually updates on the security plans of the player characters.

The troubles need not end with the exposure of Kouji's scheming, either. Saya's popularity is not the only reason he has not been promoted—his skill as a diplomat is sadly lacking. While Saya has been sequestered away for her own protection, he has managed to anger and offend several powerful daimyos. If something is not done to mend relations soon the spring thaws may see a declaration of war, and the job is too big for Saya to handle alone.

Ah, the joys of Court...

37. Poetic License

The weather continues to get colder and colder. Winter is almost upon us. You have secured an invitation to Court, haven't you?

CHALLENGE

A week or so after the start of Winter Court, one of the characters is asked to give a private poetry recital for an important member of his clan who is present in the palace. The woman is quite old and has difficulty leaving her room, but her grandson Tatsu is on hand to attend to her during the character's visit, and she is greatly appreciative of the gesture.

FOCUS

When court is assembled the next day, Tatsu stands before the host and recites the player character's best poem as if it were his own. The host reacts quite favorably, heaping ample praise on the young man. Tatsu responds by reciting a few more of the character's compositions.

STRIKE

One of the many courtiers present remarks that the player character is reported to be a skilled poet as well. Hearing this, the host of the Winter Court then turns to the character in question and asks if he can match Tatsu's display of poetic skill.

Remember that everyone is watching this exchange as it happens. Winter Court is a social affair, and just about everything takes place in the public eye. As such, there could be numerous consequences for the character's actions.

Dealing with Tatsu can be a one-time event, or a continuing problem for the character. He could be a talentless hack, or a skilled but unscrupulous poet in his own right. Likewise, he could be a relative nobody within the court, or have numerous connections to call upon if necessary.

If possible, have the player of the character in question actually compose some poems for the recital in the Challenge section (which you can steal for Tatsu's big performance later on). Be careful if he or she comes up with too many poems, however, because having a stock of poems eliminates a lot of the pressure in this scenario.

*Colder than the snow,
This icy blade in my heart –
A friend's betrayal.*

38. Contagious Rumors

I'm afraid I'm feeling a little under the weather this week. I suspect the cold I'm suffering from came from one of my students. One interesting thing about the Japanese people I teach: When someone nearby is ill, they react quite fearfully. When they themselves are sick, however, they have no qualms about exposing others.

But at least my suffering can bring some benefit for others...

CHALLENGE

During Winter Court, the party members find themselves in a position where they must negotiate with various emissaries from a number of different Clans and families. They could be making a business deal to secure vital resources for their Clan, arranging a marriage to cement an alliance, exchanging military secrets about a rival Clan, or trying to find (or hide) information about a political scandal. Whatever their mission, it will require several meetings and a great deal of politicking.

FOCUS

Early in the season, one or more of the characters are exposed to a sickness of some sort. It could be an allergic reaction to some harmless substance, a cold caught while venturing outside in the winter chill, or just a passing sore throat picked up from a servant. Whatever the nature of the illness, it is brief and non-fatal, but unpleasant enough to require rest in private.

STRIKE

The court is soon filled with rumors about "the true nature" of the characters' illness. This could be simple gossip, or malicious lies spread by one of the party's rivals. One version says that the characters have been afflicted by the Shadowlands Sickness. Another claims that it is an outbreak of the Ebon Fever which swept the Empire fifty years ago. Even the mildest rumors speak of infectious fevers and punishments from the Fortunes, causing many to give the party a wide berth.

With such whispered warnings in circulation, how will the characters manage to convince anyone to meet or speak with them and complete their mission?

If you want to make things even more difficult for the party, this scenario can also be reversed. Infect one or more members of the Clans they must speak to with a disease such as influenza or typhoid fever and set up the Rokugani version of Outbreak. Will the characters risk their health for the sake of speaking to a potential ally? Will they risk being shunned by other members of the court for speaking to an afflicted person?

Keep in mind that Rokugani medical knowledge is not equal to the scientific expertise we have today. While healers can recognize symptoms, treat illnesses, and prevent diseases from spreading to a limited degree, the nature and causes of diseases are still a mystery to even the most learned scholars. People know enough to avoid victims who are sick because they observe the sickness spreading to others nearby. But the cause of the illness may as well be evil spirits, and even a case of the flu can be fatal in such a society. Thus, the best advice possible is to keep one's distance and pray to the Fortunes.

39. Don't Bite More Than You Can Chew

For those of you who live outside the United States, today is Thanksgiving. For those of you who do live in the USA, have a Happy Turkey Day!

And while the holiday may not be traditionally celebrated in Rokugan, there's no reason why we can't have a feast anyway.

CHALLENGE

A friendly young man named Kawachi (or another friend or clan mate of the characters) approaches the PCs with an idea. He has noticed that recent bad weather has cast a dark cloud over Winter Court, and he wants to do something to brighten people's spirits. To that end, he proposes an elaborate dinner party with lavish food, and asks the PCs if they would help him organize it.

FOCUS

While Kawachi's idea has merit, his guest list and his menu are both overly ambitious. He has asked several people from every clan to attend, and while none of the guests are particularly powerful, they are all quite active in spreading gossip around the courts. Furthermore, the menu is also quite complex. Kawachi intends to serve sashimi, chopped seaweed salad, red miso soup, dried pheasant, pickled cucumbers, grilled fish, chestnut rice, and marinated mandarin oranges. And, to better bring joy to his guests, he'll make the entire meal by himself.

If the characters ask around, they can find out that while Kawachi is an aspiring cook, the only item on the menu he has any experience in preparing is red miso soup.

STRIKE

If the player characters let Kawachi go through with his plan to prepare the entire feast by himself, they run a terrible risk. If the meal is not a success, his reputation in the courts will surely be ruined. But if they come out and tell him their concerns directly, he's certain to be insulted and dejected. While his confidence in his own cooking skills may be overblown, he does sincerely want to make people happy through his own efforts.

Perhaps the player characters can find some way to make everyone happy at the same time. And enjoy some good food while they're at it.

If you want to put a light-hearted spin on this adventure, increase Kawachi's skill in the kitchen to make him a master chef. Then have his assistants fall ill. Instead of flexing their diplomatic skills to find a way to make the banquet a success, the PCs will have to take an active hand in making the banquet itself. Of course, with Kawachi's guidance there shouldn't be any problem...right?

You can also raise the stakes by playing up the social nature of Winter Court. Important figures will want to know whether or not one of Kawachi's feasts is worth going to in the future. Aspiring courtiers will want to have a hand in its success. Rivals of the Clan will want to prevent him from gaining influence with his grandstanding. And the PCs will have a good deal to gain from either side.

For more information about historical Japanese food (as well as some recipes) this site is an excellent resource. Turns out some of our "traditional" favorites like sushi and tempura aren't all that traditional after all. Definitely worth a look.*

* <http://fibers.destinyslobster.com/Japanese/Food/japfood.htm>

BONUS CFS: THE IRON CHEF VERSION!

CHALLENGE

Kawachi has another problem. He's been called upon to prepare dinner for a distinguished courtier (Otomo Amato), his yojimbo (Yotsu Karami), and the Abbot of a temple to Hotei (Master Nigasa). He's gathered the ingredients for his famous red miso soup, and he's selected a nice area of the palace in which to hold the event. But he's not sure how to keep the trio entertained for the entire evening by himself, and he wants to know if it would be possible, maybe, if they're not busy, for the party to accompany him?

FOCUS

As soon as the Abbot meets the party he becomes visibly excited. He reveals that his duties as a temple keeper have always kept him too busy to pursue his lifelong dream of traveling the Empire. While Hotei has blessed him with a warm bed and a full meal every night, he would dearly like to sample the cuisines of other Clans, and he asks the player characters which type of food is the best in the Empire.

Upon hearing their ideas, Otomo Amato challenges Kawachi and the player characters to prepare the foods they have suggested. After all, he claims, if those dishes really are as delicious as the player characters say, even the efforts of an unskilled cook would be a pleasure to try. Upon hearing this idea, Abbot Nigasa jumps in with an offer to pray to Hotei on behalf of the person who could bring him such joy with their cooking, and even Karami asks the characters if they really believe that their Clans' cuisines are the best in the Empire..

Of course, if their suggestions were made not with confidence, but simply misguided pride, they're welcome to back down...

STRIKE

Kawachi has a good relationship with the kitchen staff of the palace, and is able to call upon just about any common ingredients or cooking materials needed for the competition. While this is good news for the PCs, it also means that Kawachi can prepare just about any food he has heard of. While the loser of such an impromptu and unorthodox contest faces no social stigma, the blessings of a monk of Hotei (and the respect of allies in the Court) are not a prize to pass up lightly. Not to mention the pride to be gained from defending the honor of one's Clan.

If the player characters are ill-prepared to deal with the challenge, you can tone down the level of competition Kawachi presents by having him choose to prepare a dish other than his famous red miso. If you have a few aspiring chefs in the party, however, you can take off the kid gloves and let them face off against a delicious soup featuring baby clams, tofu, seaweed, and fine vegetables.

The preferences and personality quirks of the three guests, unforeseen difficulties in cooking, attempts to outdo other characters, and outside interference can all add levels of complexity to this contest. Rather than boiling things down to a single die roll, breaking the challenge into several different stages and asking the players for their strategy in each stage can make the process more involved and enjoyable. And if someone finds a way to use a bugei skill, school technique, or mystic spell to their advantage, more power to them!

And of course, if you wished to build an entire campaign around this sort of thing, there are always new venues to aspire to. Why satisfy yourself with being an Iron Chef when you could be the Jade Chef, or even the Emerald Chef of the Emperor himself?

40. Good Fortune, Bad Company

Winter Court continues. For many, the court is filled with rivals and enemies. For others, it holds countless friends and allies. And for some, it holds a number of annoying acquaintances.

CHALLENGE

During a courtly gathering, a shugenja from another family strikes up a conversation with one of the player characters. He explains that his hobby is divination and offers to tell the character's fortune.

FOCUS

During the divination session, the shugenja claims that his own future is highly compatible with the character's future. He suggests that they support each other as much as possible in order to benefit from this harmonious coincidence. While this may sound like a harmless gesture of friendship, the shugenja is quite enthusiastic about their "unbreakable partnership." He begins following the character around at all hours, asking him for advice and trying to be helpful in return.

STRIKE

Besides his skill in divination, the shugenja brings no useful skills to the party. In fact, his low stamina, lack of combat skills, social ineptitude, and unlucky nature may even hold the character back from time to time. As the winter drags on, the player character must decide how he will deal with the hindrance his constant companion has become.

Two points that can significantly change the way in which the players react to the shugenja is the shugenja's age and gender. An older NPC may be treated with more respect by some players, while others may show more leeway to a younger and more inexperienced NPC. Likewise, a female NPC can often avoid trouble in situations where a male would be scorned. Know your players' habits and you can create an NPC which is likely to bring out the initial reaction you desire.

Of course, prophecies are much more interesting when they are true. If the targeted player character manages to get rid of the shugenja somehow, you can have the shugenja come into some good fortune which allows him to aid the player character later on. If the player character sticks it out and accepts the shugenja as a companion, their continued association eventually allows the shugenja to develop skills and abilities which let him aid the player character in a vital situation later on.

This scenario can also be used to introduce a new player character into the party. If so, you may want to eliminate signs of weakness and incompetence from the new character, and instead have him plagued by rivals, social conflicts and family problems. These can cause trouble for the party while still allowing the new PC to be a viable member. After all, you wouldn't want the party to try to get rid of a new player.

Keep the people you don't like close. Keep the people who really get on your nerves closer.

41. Forgive and Forget

Today's Winter Court scenario was originally going to be about finding strange allies in unexpected places. However, a recent rash of dabblings in thread necromancy have given me unexpected inspiration. So instead, we turn our imaginations to examine what may happen when words are not forgotten.

CHALLENGE

While at Winter Court, one of the PCs makes an unfortunate and inadvertently humorous social blunder. While the incident is quite embarrassing, it is thankfully minor and quickly forgotten.

FOCUS

Or at least it would be quickly forgotten if not for the wagging tongue of a court dandy named Yukio. The smiling courtier seems to think that the character's mistake is the most humorous story he has ever heard, and he delights in bringing it up again and again. It quickly becomes his favored joke, and any time the two are in the same room the character can expect Yukio to ask "Hey, do you remember that time you..."

CHALLENGE

As long as the story remains in the public mind, the character's image will suffer. And as long as Yukio is left to his own devices he will continue circulating the story. There are, of course, several ways to deal with Yukio. He could be told of an even juicier incident, reasoned with, stoically ignored, slandered to the point of losing all credibility, threatened into silence, or even silenced permanently. In the end, it all depends on what kind of person the character is deep down, and how he or she deals with mistakes.

If you do not want to role play out the initial scene that involves the target PC's social mistake (or your players are smooth enough to avoid making such mistakes), you can rule that the incident in question occurred at a different Winter Court when the character was much younger, perhaps during their initial meeting with Yukio. This bit of history can also be helpful in establishing feelings of rivalry toward Yukio, as his infuriating retelling of the same old story has continued since their youth.

Alternately, you could make Yukio's motivation much more malevolent in nature. Perhaps he is jealous of the character and his stories are his way of lashing out. He might be using the character's blunder as a joke in an attempt to make himself more popular. Or Yukio could be trying to ruin the character's reputation for other reasons. Maybe he's even working in tandem with another person within the court to set the character up for further manipulations.

One thing to keep in mind is to refrain from making Yukio's comments too overtly insulting or offensive. As long as his stories are true and delivered in a light, off the cuff manner, the character in question should have no real justification to seek vindication. Of course, if you decide that Yukio's true intent has been to goad the character into a duel all along, you can make his comments as biting and spiteful as you wish.

Be careful what you say (or write, for that matter). It may be brought back for all to see someday later.

42. Child's Play

Today saw snow (or frozen rain at the very least) in Osaka, and flurries in several locations throughout Japan. It made me glad to know I had a warm home to return to, and I hope all of you can enjoy the same luxury. Of course, this type of severe weather is exactly the sort of thing which forces samurai to choose between braving the elements or braving the Courts. For those who are lacking in social graces and political connections, Winter Court can be a fearsome place, but it is also a place where new alliances can be made.

CHALLENGE

While attending Winter Court in the palace of another Clan, a player character receives a mysterious message from an unknown source.

Esteemed samurai,

First, let me say that it is a great shame that your prowess and skill are not appreciated by the emissaries that dominate the palace this season. Your power, wisdom, and integrity are a credit to your Clan, and I believe the Empire would benefit if there were more samurai of your caliber.

At the risk of being overly direct, I would beg your assistance in a matter of great importance. A despicable villain stalks the Court, plotting some evil mischief. Although I have gathered a small group of magistrates to monitor his activities in the hopes of foiling his plans, our numbers are small, and his depravity boundless. If you could lend us your strong arm and keen insight, it would be both a great help and a huge honor.

Although I cannot yet risk revealing my presence to the scoundrel and his cronies, I will send a servant to meet with you tomorrow afternoon and explain the situation in greater detail. I hope you will choose to aid me in this matter, and look forward to working with you.

May the Fortunes watch over you this night.

The Judge

FOCUS

The next day, the character is approached by a young girl named Mari. She explains that she is a student of "the Judge," who has asked her to relay his directions while he coordinates with other magistrates in the Court. She expectantly asks if the player character has decided to aid the Judge in striking against evil and corruption, and does her best to secure an affirmative answer.

If the character agrees to help, Mari reveals that the suspect is a man of low character named Toshihide. While his smooth tongue and careful manner allow him to enjoy a good reputation in the Court, the Judge has reason to suspect that Toshihide is not as honorable as he seems, and he would like the PC to seek out evidence to that end. Mari volunteers to help, pointing out Toshihide and giving basic information about him.

After a few days of observation, it becomes clear that Toshihide is not a nice fellow. He is abusive to servants, drinks and gambles with ronin in secret, tries to seduce married women, and lies profusely. However, his skill in navigating the Court and hiding his misdeeds allows him to avoid any negative consequences of his actions.

STRIKE

In truth, there is no "Judge." Mari is the only other member of the investigation. She founded the "secret group" for the sole purpose of tormenting Toshihide. Two weeks ago, Toshihide carelessly stepped on one of Mari's dolls and broke it. When she complained, he teased her until she cried, embarrassing her in front of a large crowd. Vowing to embarrass him in the same way, she formulated a plan and quickly sought out allies who could serve as her voice in adult society. Once she and the PC have observed enough of Toshihide's behavior, she will "accidentally" let slip some of his misdeeds in public. With the PC's testimony to back up her claims, she figures she can finally expose Toshihide as the snake he truly is.

This adventure idea is best suited for a character who is less socially adept than others. While a courtier with several allies and acquaintances in their web of contacts has little to gain from entering such an alliance, a bushi with few friends in court may be more tempted to take whatever support he can find.

Furthermore, Mari can actually become a useful ally to the player character in her own right. She is cunning and resourceful, and quick-witted enough to keep her ears open for news that may be important. Her age gives her a great deal of leeway in the Court, and those who dismiss her as a mere child do so at their peril. While not as overtly powerful as an ambassador or emissary, she can give aid to those who befriend her.

This scenario can also be useful as a change of pace from conspiracy driven campaigns. Players who have read all about the Kolat, Gozoku, and Black Lotus may think they know all the secrets in Rokugan. Presenting them with a plot to expose the "vile crimes" of a single dishonorable courtier, masterminded by a little girl, should turn any preconceived ideas they might have upside-down.

43. The Gifted Poet

There are only a few shopping days left until the holidays. Are you ready? And while the holidays we celebrate are not observed in Rokugan, the custom of gift giving is no less important. In fact, it may be even more vital for one to find the "perfect gift" when honor and glory are on the line.

CHALLENGE

The famous poet, Yukishima, has just finished a new collection of poems, entitled "Winter Memories." This is the fourth set of poems Yukishima has composed over the last fifteen years, completing the set he started with "Spring Wishes," and continued in "Summer Dreams" and "Autumn Regrets." To honor this great occasion, the host of Winter Court has announced three days of feasting in Yukishima's honor.

FOCUS

Yukishima is a celebrity in courtly circles and the completion of his greatest poetry series is an auspicious occasion. Many dignitaries and members of the court have brought gifts of congratulations to offer at the feast. Yukishima is famous for his practice of refusing gifts with appropriate haiku poems, and many members of the court are looking forward to seeing how he will respond when presented with unique and exotic gifts.

Needless to say, if the PCs do not prepare a suitable gift for Yukishima, their reputation will suffer most severely.

STRIKE

The feast begins and a schedule is drawn up for the presentation of gifts to Yukishima. Unless the PCs do something to change their position in line, they are scheduled to give their gift to Yukishima on the second day of the celebration.

On the first day they watch as many gifts are given, met with poems of refusal, offered again, refused with new poems, offered a third time, and finally accepted. If they pay attention, they may notice that Yukishima tends to react less favorably to gifts that have had little thought put into them, or gifts that are similar to gifts he has already

received. As the first day's festivities eventually begin to wind down, a samurai from another Clan approaches Yukishima and offers his gift. It is almost identical to the gift the PCs have selected.

The PCs have one day to decide what they will do in the face of this new development.

The similarity of the other samurai's gift to the gift the party members have selected may be coincidental, or deliberate. If they have a rival who seeks to discredit them in court, their plans may have been overheard by a spy and their ideas stolen. The samurai might be a desperate individual who latched on to the first good idea that caught his ear. Or it could simply be bad luck.

If a player wishes for his or her character to be a fan of Yukishima's previous works, you can let them make a Storytelling (Poetry) skill roll to recall some details. And if a player tries to compose a haiku poem of his or her own, by all means, encourage them to do so. Yukishima is a genuine lover of the arts, and appreciates even the simplest offering of talent (but not quite enough to waive the need for a present).

HAIKU SAMPLES

As a bonus for over-worked or under-inspired GMs, here is a selection of haiku poems you can use for the adventure above. They are arranged in sets of three, as any properly educated samurai knows enough to refuse a gift twice before accepting it.

Don't forget to save one set for the present the player characters eventually give!

HAIKU SET 1

I seek not your gifts.
I wish only to delight,
And brighten your heart.

Your kind words alone
Are present enough for me.
Your words and your smile.

Generosity:
In this virtue, you give all
A great example.

HAIKU SET 2

You lend me your ears,
Appreciating my words.
I could wish no more.

In truth, I owe you.
To hear a dear friend's laughter?
Worth a hundred gifts.

Sincerely you give
This wonderful gift to me.
My thanks to your house.

HAIKU SET 3

A sword fit for a king,
As powerful as your Clan.
A waste in my hands.

This fine blade you give
I must turn away, I fear,
Lest I seem too keen.

Your gift honors me.
Though I am far from worthy,
I humbly accept.

HAIKU SET 4

A thing of beauty
Shines with the light of Heaven.
Far too fine for me.

This gift before me,
Fit for a prince or hero
Not one such as I.

You stand before all,
Your heart as pure as your words.
How can I refuse?

HAIKU SET 5

And if you want to show your players how Yukishima reacts to a gift that is lacking in thought or is too similar to a present he has already received:

Offer naught, my friend.
Worry not for simple things.
Your warm thoughts suffice.

Nay, again, I say.
Please be seated and relax.
It is no bother.

If it brings you joy,
I will accept this token
And give you this poem.

44. Under Pressure

I hope this week's installment finds you all happy and well. It's all too easy to become overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of the holiday season, and remembering to relax and enjoy yourself can be more difficult than it seems.

Which is all the more reason to spend some quality time gaming with your friends.

CHALLENGE

An influential courtier from the Otomo family approaches the characters in private. He offers them great favors and rewards if they agree to help him, but he insists that they swear an oath of secrecy before explaining further.

FOCUS

The courtier is worried about his son, Shigeki, who is behaving strangely. He fears that Shigeki might be possessed, tainted, cursed, drugged, acting under coercion, influenced by the Lying Darkness (if it has been revealed in your campaign), the victim of an abduction and replacement scheme, or even brainwashed. He asks the characters to investigate without causing a big scandal or disrupting his son's duties.

STRIKE

The cause for Shigeki's strange behavior is a completely mundane one. His duties in the courts have been extremely stressful as of late, and the extra work has caused him difficulties with his family. Feeling like he has been assigned an impossible task, and unable to seek comfort at home, Shigeki is in the early stages of a nervous breakdown.

If the party learn of this and inform Shigeki's father, the courtier is grateful and bestows upon them the promised reward. However, if the PCs go the extra step and try to help Shigeki deal with his personal problems (without overstepping the bounds of etiquette, of course), they may also gain a permanently grateful ally in the courts.

Keep in mind that psychology is only a rudimentary science in Rokugan, and society encourages samurai to deal with their feelings in a completely different manner than we are used to. While the effects of pressure and isolation on morale are understood, methods of coping with those problems are not. A samurai must control his emotions, even if they threaten to tear him apart.

If you want to add a more dramatic element to this tale, you can combine Shigeki's normal stress with one of the other possibilities listed above. Perhaps his work in the courts is being monitored by a criminal overlord who is threatening to blackmail him unless he performs certain tasks. Or a rival might be lacing his evening tea with drugs to cause horrible nightmares, disrupting his sleep. He could even be battling a manipulative yokai for his very soul!

BONUS PLOT HOOKS

Editor's Note: Akodo Akira provided an excellent post on a possible solution or further complication for this adventure.

Geisha.

Geisha were the people that Samurai went to talk out their problems. There were no psychologists, but there were great listeners. And you paid in advance, in gold, and always had references.

Heck, just getting the poor guy an invitation to a geisha house, let alone a private meeting, would be an adventure in and of itself. Possible plot hooks:

- The geisha is inexperienced.
- The geisha has a steady client who is resentful of the new client.
- The geisha is a glutton for attention, and demands more and more of his time.
- The house is suffering financial difficulties and needs more clients, regardless of the needs/wants of the geisha.
- The boy falls in love with the Geisha. (Marriage troubles anyone?)
- The geisha is a spy for [insert faction here].
- The father thinks the geisha is a spy for [insert faction here].
- The geisha wants to become an official concubine or even a spouse and ruthlessly pursues that.
- The geisha house also hooks samurai on opium, and the poor boy gets hooked.
- **Ninja geisha!** (Not Lying Darkness, just a shinobi.)
- Oni geisha?

45. Beauty and Wisdom

In his remarks on last week's scenario, the esteemed Akodo Akira managed to unwittingly guess the theme for this week's scenario. I speak, of course, of those most beautiful and graceful creatures: geisha.

Now, before we get into the scenario, there is one thing I must clear up. I admit it's a pet peeve of mine, but I absolutely must insist that people who speak of geisha understand one basic fact.

Geisha are NOT prostitutes!

A lot of people think geisha are paid to provide such services, but that is a misconception. And those who claim otherwise are doing nothing but spreading ignorance. While the two professions may appear similar, they are, in fact, completely different.

Now that we have that out of the way, we can get have a pleasant evening of delightful entertainment.

CHALLENGE

While staying at the Winter Court of another Clan, one of the player characters (or someone close to the player characters) is introduced to Yumi, a charming and intelligent young geisha. While the other geisha present are popular for their beautiful songs and dances, Yumi specializes in the art of conversation, and has thus been overlooked by most of the guests.

FOCUS

If the PC spends any time talking to Yumi, it becomes clear that the girl is wise beyond her years and has a keen understanding of human behavior. After listening to a person's problems she is able to offer a solution and provide the right words of encouragement to motivate the listener to put that solution into motion. If given a chance to use her skills on behalf of the party she can prove an invaluable source of advice on many topics.

STRIKE

Of course, such frequent meetings with a geisha will not go unnoticed, and Winter Court is a breeding ground for gossip and rumors. If subtle hints and hushed whispers are not enough to get the point across, eventually other members of the character's family will confront him directly and pressure the him to "curb his desires." Whether the character (or Yumi herself) harbor any such feelings is irrelevant—in Rokugan, image is all that matters.

Will the character choose to save face, or continue to benefit from Yumi's wisdom?

Some players may be slow or wary to act on Yumi's advice. While this is their choice, you can move things along by offering them a Free Raise on any rolls they make when taking an action she has suggested. This should give even the most reserved character a reason to seek her out again and again.

If the character who meets Yumi does not become close enough to her that he has to choose between his reputation and her advice, it is possible for one of his rivals to do so instead. Or she may find another samurai who appreciates her intellect, giving him advice that leads to success after success in the courts.

Of course, if a lasting relationship should blossom between the character and Yumi, there are a wide range of other problems. The coming spring will mark an end to their meetings, as the character's home is far from the geisha house where Yumi lives. And even if they were to continue meeting each other, it could never work out...could it?

In the courts, even beauty and wisdom are weapons. Do you have what it takes to resist them? To wield them?

46. A Matter of Recognition

The days are getting longer and the weather is getting warmer. Spring can't be far off. Have you attended to all your business at Winter Court?

CHALLENGE

A peasant servant who has served one or more of the characters (or their family) faithfully for many years approaches him and pleads for a favor. Although it is not his place to make requests of a samurai, he is quite distraught and begs the character to at least hear his story.

FOCUS

The servant explains that his daughter is pregnant with the child of a samurai from another family. If the child is not recognized by the father it will grow up as a heimin, or a ronin at best. But if the father accepts the child as his own then the baby's future will be assured. Although the servant's daughter has asked her beloved to recognize the baby several times, he has yet to do so.

STRIKE

The servant asks the character to tell the entire court that the samurai in question has fathered the child his daughter is carrying. He hopes that by bringing the matter to a head he can force the samurai to recognize and accept the baby. As he lacks the social status to make the claim himself, the servant places himself at the mercy of the character if he will do this deed in his stead.

Depending on how difficult you want to make this scenario, you can give the samurai in question much lower Status and Glory than the PCs, or much higher Status and Glory. Depending on the way in which the PCs break the news and the samurai's reaction to it, a number of serious political events could be set into motion. Remember that in Rokugan testimony from someone of higher Status always trumps the claims of those with less influence.

Of course, your players are free to come up with alternate ways of accomplishing their goal. Bribery, blackmail, negotiation, compromise, and persuasion are all viable alternatives to making a big scene in the court, each with their own good points and bad points.

If your players are comfortable being placed in difficult situations and mature enough to deal with matters of romance, you could also try using one of them as the target of this scenario. If so, you may want to have the servant ask the other PCs to convince the father to accept the child, as players can often resent being forced to do something.

Never a dull day in Winter Court...

47. Broken Trust

Today's scenario is a new twist on an old favorite. While the "tragic accident" and "difficult choice" are well established in previously published material, the politically charged atmosphere of Winter Court allows for any number of deliciously evil twists and turns.

Feel free to put on the pain. It's all part of the fun.

CHALLENGE

While at Winter Court, a visiting lord brings one of his prized possessions to show the host. As the host is a fan of fine arts, he is quite impressed with the unique treasure, a porcelain vase decorated with a floral design that was painted by the grandmother of the Kakita daimyo, and asks the visiting lord to display it in a location where everyone can gaze upon its sublime beauty.

FOCUS

During the course of their stay, the characters happen to witness a young courtier clumsily bump into and knock down the vase, causing it to crack. The courtier is the son of another visiting lord from a different family, and he flees before anyone else sees what he has done. The incident occurs quickly, and few (if any) other members of the court are present to witness what happens.

STRIKE

When the owner of the vase discovers what has happened he demands that the host of the Winter Court take responsibility for failing to keep his precious heirloom safe. He claims that he would never have brought the vase to display if he knew that proper measures to protect it were not going to be taken, and goes on to point out that, since the host was aware of the vase's importance, his failure to keep it safe is a clear lapse in duty.

If the PCs help defend their host or reveal the young courtier's secret they will spare the host further trouble.

If the PCs say nothing they can save the young courtier and his family from shame and embarrassment.

If the PCs find some other way to settle the problem they may end up making a number of new allies or enemies.

It's their choice.

One way to make the decision even more difficult for the characters is to give them a number of opportunities to interact with and get to know the various personalities involved. It's one thing to accuse a courtier you have never met in order to shut up an old man you barely know. It's something else completely to choose between two friends when you know you will have to betray one of them.

Of course, the player characters have most likely been through tough decisions like this before, and will no doubt deal with this one in stride. Alternately, player characters being the cunning and capricious beings they are, they may take a completely unexpected course of action (such as using magic to repair the vase, or framing a rival who was completely uninvolved). If this happens, you can keep the action moving by remembering that Winter Court is a place filled with clever and ruthless people seeking political gain. An "eyewitness" may step forward to implicate one of the characters. Or other members of the court may become involved through bribery or blackmail. Which is sure to cause a scandal. Followed by an accusation. Followed by a counter-accusation. Perhaps even leading to a challenge?

And even if the matter of responsibility is decided, what then? Will the groups and individuals involved remain angry and bitter with each other, or will they be able to "pick up the pieces?"

No one ever said being responsible was easy.

48. The Play's the Thing

It's been a long winter, and we've had many adventures together. We've seen a wide variety of horrors, surprises, and wonders. We've gone through a number of courtly CFS scenarios, sharing both good times and bad.

Of all the challenges we've encountered, this one is my personal favorite.

CHALLENGE

The host of a large and mixed Winter Court, Akodo Minoru, proposes a game to pass the time. A devout fan of the theater, he asks his guests to perform various dramatic scenes from well-known plays for everyone's enjoyment. He makes it clear that acting skill is in no way required—the game is just for fun and an unskilled but spirited performance will be sufficient.

FOCUS

As the schedule for the performances is being drawn up, Minoru asks the player characters if they would present the story of his illustrious ancestor's final duel. The story's climax, featuring Akodo Shujin's death at the hands of Kakita Tairitsu, has been the subject of many famous plays, and Minoru would like it to be performed for all to see.

STRIKE

Many versions of this warning tale exist. Some sources say that Shujin was defeated because he had been weakened by a Scorpion rival's poison. Another version tells of how a Phoenix shugenja was hired to put a curse on Shujin to cause his loss. One rendition claims that Shujin's foolish pride led him to challenge a superior opponent, while yet another says that Tairitsu took unfair advantage of a loophole to set the conditions of the duel against his opponent.

As the night of their performance approaches, the player characters must choose which version they will present.

As always, feel free to change the Clans and identities of the NPCs involved. Depending on the families Shujin and Tairitsu come from, you may wish to come up with other versions of the story. Perhaps Shujin was a wise old Mirumoto who allowed his younger opponent to win. Or maybe Tairitsu was a tainted Crab who used maho to secure his victory.

You can also use the court setting to make the decision rougher on the players. Everyone loves a story where their Clan is presented in a favorable light, but negative portrayals can draw ill will and anger. Even those who are not vilified may have something to say about the way their ancestors are presented on stage, and there is a thin line between "naive youth" and "clueless buffoon."

One final option for added fun is to have your players actually act out the scene as they perform. You can have them go for a full rendition, or let them simply recite the lines they will speak. The story and script, of course, are up to them to decide, with all the responsibility that such freedom entails.

It's like I've always said: Noh theatre is good theatre.

(Editor's Note: *I can't believe he went there. Anyway, here is a website suggested by the esteemed Isawa Nazomitsu for researching Noh-Kyogen theatre: <http://www.ijnet.or.jp/NOH-KYOGEN/english/english.html>*)

49. Keep Your Enemies Closer

Those of you who live outside Japan may or may not be aware that tomorrow is the day of the Setsubun festival. The main event of the festival is a ritual to drive out the evil spirits that have accumulated in the household over the long winter. Some participants wear oni masks, while others throw dried beans at them and shout "Good luck, come in! Oni get out!" It's really quite fun and interesting.

Thus, in recognition of Setsubun, I hereby declare February to be Oni Month at CFS of the Week! Yay, oni!

CHALLENGE

An ally or superior of the PCs asks them for help on behalf of an old friend. She explains that Inoue Sadahiro, a minor vassal of the Asahina family, has gone into hiding. Over the past six months his only communication with anyone has been to send out a call for capable and resourceful samurai. Naturally, the PCs fit the bill, and she would like them to give her friend Sadahiro whatever aid they can. Although she does not know the nature of Sadahiro's dilemma, she can give them directions to the village where Sadahiro is staying.

FOCUS

If the PCs meet Sadahiro and agree to help him he explains that he is the victim of a dark curse. Thirty years ago, his grandfather, the magistrate Daimon, defeated a hated rival. Mad with rage, the rival swore he would have revenge by wiping out every member of Daimon's family. Over the years, the killer systematically hunted down and butchered Daimon and his kin. Sadahiro, his wife, and his unborn child are the only surviving members of his line.

All is not lost, however, for Sadahiro has a plan. He has found an ancient ritual called the Rite of Hospitality. Designed to secure and preserve peace in the days before the kami, the ritual prevents an individual from committing violence against anyone whose hospitality he has accepted. Sadahiro has already retained the services of a shugenja to perform the ritual and bless a cup of sake on his behalf. All he needs the PCs to do is track down his rival, lure him back to Sadahiro's home, and trick him into drinking the blessed sake. If they do that, the curse will be broken and the killer will be rendered forever unable to harm Sadahiro or his family.

STRIKE

The individual who swore to extinguish Daimon's family line is none other than the infamous Oni no Toketsu, the Demon of Blood and Bile.

Feel free to make Oni no Toketsu as threatening as you wish. It may be possible for the PCs to slay it through conventional means, or it could be nigh impossible to cause the monster any lasting harm. If the PCs do destroy the monster before the ritual is complete, Sadahiro may be safe for a while, but eventually the oni will return from Jigoku to complete its vengeance. In which case it may also decide to pay the player characters a visit for old times' sake.

Another way to make the scenario more difficult is to give the oni an idea of what Sadahiro has planned. While your typical slaving oni may or may not be open to the idea of a drink before tearing out your liver and feasting upon it, Oni no Toketsu could have enough sense to avoid anything he is offered. Do the PCs force the sake down his throat, or do they find another way of "showing hospitality" and try to cast the ritual again?

And do they remember to have the sake blessed in their own names as well?

"Good luck, come in! Oni, come in! And have a drink too!"

Editor's Note: *For more information on the Setsubun Festival, check out: <http://www2.gol.com/users/steve/setsubun.htm>*

50. My Word Is My Bond

This week marks the fiftieth installment of Challenge-Focus-Strike of the Week. To mark that milestone, we're going to have an extra large, extra intense adventure seed today.

I hope you brought your best armor.

CHALLENGE

The player characters, as well as several of their friends, family members, rivals, and other notable members of the community are invited to visit the home of Lord Ueshima and participate in a ritual of blessing. Ueshima is a member of the Emerald Magistrates, and is quite influential in the politics of his Clan, so a ceremony at his home is considered quite the social event. His home sits on a high hill overlooking the farming village he oversees, and is built like a fortress. Stories tell of how the building was besieged three times by bandits, and how the defenders were able to hold out against superior numbers each time.

It is, of course, impolite to bring weapons or spell scrolls into the home of someone who has invited you to such a ceremony. Those who arrive with swords on their hips will be politely offered the services of Lord Ueshima's armorer, who is quite adept at polishing blades. Shugenja are also advised to relinquish their scrolls and talismans to Ueshima's shugenja for purification, as a recent assassination attempt by a band of maho-tsukai has left the magistrate suspicious of spellcasters.

Upon entering the main hall, guests are met by Lord Ueshima's son, Akamaru, and his second-in-command, Shouchiro. They explain that Lord Ueshima went to the next village to personally escort the shugenja who will perform the blessing through the valley, and is expected to return some time in the afternoon. The characters are invited to mingle with the other guests and relax until lunch is served. This should give them enough time to get to know everyone else present.

FOCUS

Lunch is served at noon in the main audience chamber of the central building, a spacious room overlooking a small garden. All of the guests and most of the household's staff gather to enjoy an extravagant meal which has been specially blessed to fortify the body and harmonize the spirit in preparation for the ceremony that will be held afterward. Several of the older guests are gossiping away, while young mothers try their best to keep their children from bothering their neighbors. The soft sound of a musician's flute can be heard over the din of conversation that fills the room, and servants bustle about with trays of food and pots of tea.

Indeed, the scene is so peaceful and normal that everyone is taken completely by surprise when the oni leaps forth and grabs Akamaru's beloved bride, Moemi!

The oni lifts the girl by the throat and threatens to snap her neck unless the castle guards promise to abandon their weapons, sit down, and remain seated. With several paces separating the samurai from the oni, there is no way Shouchiro and his men can save the girl before the oni makes good its threat. Reluctantly, they comply with its demands. No sooner have they done so than a squadron of the oni's spirit slaves (see below) appear, gathering the weapons and disarming any other guests who might try to resist. The oni retains its grip on Moemi's throat, using its poison (again, see below) to cause her to cry out in pain. Only after it has coerced her into promising not to move does it release her to join Akamaru, who has sat through the entire scene in a kind of paralyzed shock.

As lunch comes to an abrupt end, Lord Ueshima's samurai, servants, and guests, including the player characters, have all become hostages.

STRIKE

Once the estate is secured and its spirit slave guards are in place, Oni no Kyohaku introduces itself and issues its demands. Although it first recites them to Akamaru, it goes to the main gates to repeat them when Lord Ueshima returns. It asks first for nearby Engyoji temple to be completely cleared of all holy items and religious trappings. Once this is completed, it calls for several maho-tsukai who are being held captive and awaiting sentencing in nearby villages to be freed and escorted to the temple. Finally, it forces Lord Ueshima (and any others it can threaten into complying) to enter the abandoned temple and let the maho-tsukai bind their names to oni. If this is done, Oni no Kyohaku promises to let all remaining hostages leave unharmed. Otherwise, the demon makes no guarantees.

In between negotiations with Lord Ueshima, the oni spends its time manipulating and torturing the other guests for its own enjoyment. The PCs and the other hostages are given freedom to move throughout the living quarters and the main audience chamber, but the oni's spirit slaves patrol the other areas of the estate, making access to the armory and barracks difficult. While it is possible for small groups to gain some degree of privacy, the oni and its guards are seldom far away.

Outside, Lord Ueshima is powerless to do anything, lest the oni slay his son and his honored guests. His only recourse is to attempt to bargain with the oni for either a more acceptable offer (which is not likely to happen, as the oni holds all the cards) or for more time. The hostages inside can do even less, for they are completely at the oni's mercy. The oni need only bide its time and wait. If its demands are met, Oni no Kyohaku will have gathered itself a number of mortal slaves and several oni servants, which will only further its reign of terror. If its demands are refused, the oni will still be able to slay a number of helpless mortals, causing chaos and despair. It's a win-win situation as far as the demon is concerned.

Unless something can be done to foil its plans.

Once the situation is established, there are several ways you can take this adventure. You can let the characters attempt to slip away and sneak around the fortress looking for weapons or some way to evacuate the other hostages. Of course, Moemi has already promised not to move, and Akamaru will be loathe to leave without her, but no one ever said it would be easy.

You can put them in the role of negotiators, trying to find and exploit a loophole that the oni did not expect. Through quick thinking and fast talking, it is possible they could find a way to use the oni's own power against it.

If they keep from causing any direct trouble, Oni no Kyohaku might even dispatch them to help Lord Ueshima complete the preparation of Engyoji temple (under suitably powerful oaths to return, of course), giving them a chance to help plan a siege. If you're feeling particularly kind you can even have the oni let them go without making any kind of vow. After all, it still has their families in its clutches.

One point to be wary of when running this adventure is to keep the players from feeling as if they are powerless to do anything. While the oni is cunning and powerful, it can and should make the occasional mistake. It may forbid a samurai from using his sword, but forget to levy a similar restriction against his courtier companion. It may accept an old woman's promise "not to walk through that door," but neglect the possibility of that same woman being carried through by a heroic player character. And while the oni will try to secure promises of non-interference from most guests before it leaves for its talks with Lord Ueshima, it cannot possibly predict everything that the PCs might try while it is absent.

The lack of initiative or creative thinking shown by the spirit slaves is another weakness that the player characters can exploit in their struggle against the oni. A command not to let anyone leave a room says nothing of people entering. Slaves who have been ordered to "attack anyone with a weapon" may not realize the destructive capabilities of a serving tray until it is too late. A daring and clever group of players should be able to find something to do, if you give them the proper opportunities.

The situation may seem hopeless, but dark times are when heroes shine most brightly.

Of course, player characters being the consummate heroes that they are, your group may go the exact opposite route. The shugenja with Fires that Cleanse as an Innate Ability, the bushi with Crab Hands, and the ninja with hidden weapons might just decide to rush the oni straight on. If they really feel this is a good move, let them go for it. Oni no Kyohaku is smart enough to keep human shields within handy reach, and completely without regard for other living creatures. The heroes may win the day when all is said and done, but Oni no Kyohaku will be sure to send a number of their friends and loved ones to the grave before it is driven back to Jigoku.

One last note on the timing of this adventure: The socialization that takes place between the Challenge and Focus stages is highly recommended, as it gives the player characters a chance to sympathize with their fellow guests when the oni attacks. If the various NPCs you gather are seen as nothing more than nameless extras, your heroes may not feel any obligation to rescue them. The beginning of the Focus stage, however, has a lot of action that does not involve the PCs directly, and may cause some players to get bored. If you think this may be a problem, you can deal with things in media res, cutting directly from the time just prior to lunch to the point where Oni no Kyohaku has gained control of the building and revealing in the details of what has happened as you go along. If you feel really dramatic, you can start the action at the Strike stage, filling in all of the background later.

ONI NO KYOHAKU

Known as "the bargaining demon," Oni no Kyohaku appears as a tall, slender man with pale skin and yellow eyes. Its facial features are slightly elongated, causing its nose and ears to come to sharp points, and its completely hairless head is crowned by seven short horns. If the oni wears a hooded robe or wide brimmed hat, it can pass for human under cursory inspection. Its long fingernails appear bright red, and its tongue is completely black.

The oni's Traits and Skills may be adjusted depending on the Rank and abilities of the party. Its mental Traits and Social Skills are quite developed, making it more than a match for any courtier present. Its physical attributes are more geared toward speed than brute strength and stamina, but if pressed it will be more than able to put up a fight. Its most terrifying weapon, however, is the uncanny power it holds over the minds and hearts of its victims.

THE POWERS OF ONI NO KYOHAKU

MASTER AMBUSER: Oni no Kyohaku's only real combat ability is its incredible speed, which it uses to get the drop on opponents. You can express this ability either by giving the oni the Combat Reflexes advantage, letting it roll and keep any number of extra dice for initiative rolls, or simply dictating that the oni always has the option to go first in a combat round.

Of course, the oni prefers to take hostages or hide behind non-combatants rather than face enemies in a straight fight. After all, what's the advantage in fighting with honor?

MIND READER: Oni no Kyohaku is able to read the emotions and surface thoughts of individuals nearby. It uses this ability to determine what buttons to push when making a threat or offering a deal. Keep in mind that while the oni is unable to read anything more than a target's emotional reactions or immediate intentions, it is a master of psychological manipulation. It has a great deal of experience in dealing with mortals and generally knows what to say or what type of questions to ask in order to get victims to think about their plans, fears, or desires.

POISONED GRASP: Oni no Kyohaku is able to inject a poison into victims through its claws. Although a single strike cannot deliver a sufficient amount of poison, anyone who is grappled and held by the oni will suffer its effects. While the poison is not lethal, it causes extreme pain and agony, increasing in severity the longer the victim is exposed. Assume that the oni is able (if it so wishes) to make an automatic Anatomy (Torture) skill roll against anyone it grapples, gaining a Free Raise with each subsequent round. As with its Mind Reading ability, Oni no Kyohaku uses this power to force uncooperative victims to accept the bargains it offers.

BINDING OATH: Oni no Kyohaku's most feared ability is the incredible influence it holds over those it speaks with. Any promise or bargain made within 100 yards of the oni is rendered inviolate. The speaker is not made aware of this enchantment when the oath is spoken, and even if the speaker or the oni move out of this range the effects remain. Only the death of the oni or complete fulfillment of the bargain end the oni's hold over the target (which is why the oni prefers agreements which last indefinitely to those that require a single action). If a character attempts to break the promise he is struck by a flash of incredible pain, effectively bringing him to the Down wound level until he stops resisting. Those who defy this power repeatedly are struck dead (although the oni can, at its discretion, simply render such victims unconscious). The oni is also affected by this power, and will always attempt to ensure that any promises it makes have no negative consequences for itself.

Some bargains that the oni might offer include:

- "Do what I say and I'll put down the child."
- "Break your sword and I'll stop hurting your daughter."
- "If you promise not to attack me, I promise not to attack you."
- "If you swear to obey my orders, I'll let a fellow prisoner of your choosing leave this place."
- "I'll spare this man's life if you tell me what those bushi over there were planning before I came in this room."
- "If you can cut off your own leg, I promise not to harm your family. Otherwise, I make no guarantees."
- "You can have medicine for the wounded, if you give one of them to me."
- "Kill that woman. Then I'll let these others go free."

Note that while the oni is likewise bound to honor the promises it makes, it is not above twisting the spirit of such agreements. For example, in the case of the first bargain listed above, the oni may tell the target to stand motionless for the next 10 minutes, put down the child it is holding, and then, having fulfilled its part of the bargain, pick the child back up and devour it.

Note that a good way to reveal the unbreakable nature of promises made to the oni (if you choose to do so) is to have one of Shouchiro's guardsmen from the Focus section of the adventure outline above attempt to break his oath to remain seated. Letting the PCs watch the poor man writhe in agony while the oni chides him for breaking a promise should give them an idea of its powers.

SPIRIT SLAVES: The price for breaking a promise made in the oni's presence doesn't just end with pain, however. Victims who die as a result of the Binding Oath power are forced to serve the oni in death. Oni no Kyohaku may summon the ghost of any character killed in such a manner and press them into service. There is no chance for a spirit slave to resist, for they are unable to take any actions besides those dictated by the oni.

By the time the adventure begins, Oni no Kyohaku has already trapped the spirits of thirty samurai from across the Empire (give or take, depending on the power level of the party), which it will summon as soon as it has secured a hostage and forced the guards to lower their weapons. If the PCs try to engage a spirit slave in combat, assume it has the stats it had in life. Again, you will want to adjust the School Ranks of the spirit slaves the party faces depending on how much of a challenge you want them to present. In most cases, the fact that spirit slaves are fully armed and armored while the player characters are clad merely in kimono should be a sufficient deterrent. If you want to drive things home even more you can give the spirit slaves a Free Raise on any attack roll they make against an opponent who is unarmed. Or, if you want to give the PCs a break once they get their weapons back, you can give any character who is using a proper weapon a Free Raise on attacks against the spirit slaves. This makes the oni's guards fearsome in the early stages of the adventure, but gives the player characters a chance to turn the tables later on.

If killed, a spirit slave is dispelled and cannot be summoned until after the next sunrise. The only true way to give such tortured souls peace, however, is to slay the oni.

OTHER ABILITIES: If you feel your party needs more of a challenge, you can give Oni no Kyohaku spellcasting abilities similar to those of a shugenja, Shadowlands Powers, or even techniques from one or more Courtier schools.

Wow! That was a whopper! I hope you enjoy this extra special installment of Challenge-Focus-Strike of the Week as much as I've enjoyed the challenge of writing it. Oni are one of the signature monsters of L5R, and I tried to make this one as menacing and threatening as possible while still offering a unique type of adventure scenario with more punch to it than "an oni attacks a village." If you go all Die Hard on its butt and take it down hard, more power to you! If you end up getting your elderly uncle eaten somewhere along the way, well, you were warned.

51. The Oni's Prison

The Month of the Oni continues, bringing even more carnage and destruction. Armed with great strength, incredible size, powerful abilities, and the blessings of Jigoku, oni are capable of causing massive amounts of damage.

Sometimes, this is a good thing.

CHALLENGE

The party is summoned before an elderly and esteemed shugenja. The shugenja is either a member of their Clan, a former officer in the organization to which they belong, or simply someone who has reason to trust the player characters. The shugenja starts the meeting with a barrage of questions, asking about the characters' willingness to protect the Empire even at the cost of their own lives, and what they know of the dangers of the Shadowlands. At last, she gives them a jade spike about the size and shape of an ox's horn. She explains that the spike is a powerful artifact that has been handed down to worthy protectors through the ages. She entrusts it to the party to do with as they will, but warns them never to use it unless there is no other course of action.

There are three lines of symbols carved around the base of the spike. The first two are indecipherable to anyone not trained in the history of magic, but have something to do with blessings and bindings. The last line, however, can be clearly read by anyone.

BY THE FLESH BOUND WITHIN, I SUMMON YOU. BY THE PURITY OF JADE, I COMMAND YOU. SAISEI, HEED MY CALL.

FOCUS

If the player characters ever become desperate enough to use the jade spike, they witness a gruesome spectacle. Tiny pieces of skin, flesh, and bone fly through the air, racing toward the party from far away. The bits of flesh adhere to the base of the spike and clump together, forming a misshapen body that gradually becomes larger and larger. Before long, the body of Oni no Saisei becomes fully formed, revealing a four-legged centaur-like beast with four arms, two reptilian tails, and a gaping mouth like a shark. The oni stands four meters high, and has two rows of sharp spikes running down its back, including the jade spike from which it was originally called.

The oni obeys the commands of the character who held the jade spike before it was summoned, and will fight or perform other tasks on his behalf. Although it is a ravenous, violent creature, it is completely unable to harm or threaten the character in any way while the jade spike retains its enchantment. This protection may be extended to anyone the summoner names as an ally, but constant attention is required to keep the oni from striking out at any targets that present themselves.

Although the oni is able to regenerate any normal injuries, the jade spike affixed to its back is a constant source of damage. Eventually, the injuries become too severe, and Oni no Saisei melts back into the ichor from which it came, leaving only the jade spike behind. Once it has died in this manner it may not be summoned again for a full day.

STRIKE

The spike is actually a piece of the oni's flesh encased in jade. Because Oni no Saisei's regenerative powers prevented him from being killed in the normal manner, a ritual was enacted upon one of the spikes broken from his back, turning it to jade. As long as the last piece of the oni's body remains sealed in jade the monster will be unable to regenerate fully. Each time the oni reforms it suffers damage from exposure to the jade, which eventually causes it to melt back into sludge. However, the incredible power of the oni's taint is slowly wearing down the effectiveness of the jade. Each time the oni is summoned the jade becomes a little more tarnished and black. One day the jade will melt away from the broken spike completely and Oni no Saisei will be free once more.

Maybe the oni can be summoned many more times before it becomes dangerous. Maybe it will break free the very next time it is called. There is no way to know for sure. All that the party can be certain of is that controlling the power of the oni is their responsibility.

For a party that is normally used to fighting oni, the chance to use one against their enemies may be quite tempting. On the other hand, you may find your players hesitant to call upon a source of power that could cost them their lives and their very souls. Both lines of thinking can bring about some excellent role-playing opportunities.

If necessary, you can press the issue by placing the PCs in situations where using them must choose between calling upon the oni or facing a threat that is more immediate. Whichever course of action they choose, they will have to accept and deal with the consequences of their choice.

And if they do call upon oni one time without suffering any ill effects, why not a second?

Calling upon an oni when things become difficult is certain to have political ramifications, however, even if the PCs act for the right reasons. The PCs may find themselves accused of crimes against the Empire if they are not careful, and even if such claims cannot be substantiated they are certain to have a negative effect upon their reputations. Another point that may draw unwanted attention is the nature of the jade spike itself. The magic that was used to encase an object in jade, and the spell binding the oni to the will of the spike's holder are unknown throughout the Empire, and shugenja will want to examine and study the magic for their own purposes. Furthermore, the potential for using the oni as a weapon of destruction is certain to make an impact on any who know of its existence. Thieves may attempt to steal it. Generals may command the party to use it in battle. Inquisitors may try to destroy it. And rivals may decide that it is too dangerous to leave in the hands of the PCs, seeking either to gain it for themselves or nullify its power. Even if the PCs never call upon the oni at all, the spike may still be a source of great danger.

Oni may be troublesome opponents, but they are even more distressing allies. Next week we'll wrap things up with another festival and a good old-fashioned slaughterfest.

52. Baby Dolls

Oni Month started with a festival, so it is only fitting that we end it with one as well. Many families here in Japan are already preparing for Hinamatsuri, the Doll Festival. It is an especially important festival for young girls, who often dream of growing up and meeting a handsome man to marry, just like the Empress in the traditional display.

Of course, things don't always end so happily...

CHALLENGE

As the city where the player characters are stationed prepares for the Doll Festival, a merchant begins selling ornately crafted ceramic doll sets. The beautiful dolls she creates are quite popular, and soon become the talk of the town. Almost every family aspires to buy a set, and with prices running from inexpensive to extravagant there is hardly a young girl in the city without at least one of the merchant's new dolls for this year's festival.

If any of the PCs have a young daughter, sister, niece, or cousin, they will notice one of the merchant's dolls on the display stand in their home. Otherwise, a well-connected PC may receive one as a gift from a friend or admirer.

FOCUS

On the eve of the festival, the player characters are awakened in the middle of the night by a crash and a shriek coming from the main chamber of their estate. It turns out that one of their servants has accidentally knocked over and broken the largest doll, revealing an underdeveloped (but still living) oni fetus sleeping inside!

If the other dolls in the set are searched, they are all found to contain gestating oni. Depending on your mood, some of these oni may even have matured enough to survive and fight after being discovered.

STRIKE

Although dawn is fast approaching, most of the city is still asleep. There is not enough time to find and visit everyone who bought a doll set from the merchant, and the early hour makes spreading the news difficult. The characters must act quickly, lest the Doll Festival be marked by a gruesome slaughter, and it is up to them to choose what they will do and who they will save first.

One way to add more drama to this scenario is to have the player characters be visiting another person's home when the doll containing the unborn oni is discovered. Not only does this cut down on the amount of time they have in which to act, but it also makes the danger a lot more personal. Their home might be all the way across town, and any number of problems could delay them as they rush to save their loved ones. Do they investigate the screams from a house they pass along the way, or continue on their mission to save their own families?

You could even leave the doll unbroken, giving the player characters no advance warning of the danger that is waiting for them. Whether they are at home or not, the sight of small yet dangerous oni bursting forth from the dolls should shake the PCs up quite a bit.

Once the crisis is past, this adventure can also be expanded by assigning the party to search for the merchant who created and sold the dolls. Who or what is she, and why did she strike in this way? Why would anyone attack young girls? Is this a random act of violence, or is there some method to her madness?

If you want to be especially devious, you can make this event the first stage of an invasion attempt by Pekkle no Oni spawn. Perhaps only certain homes received dolls with oni inside. While the characters run around warning every household they can find, the oni in other homes break free, slay the children of important figures, and assume their identities for some nefarious purpose.

Editor's Note: Take a look at this website for examples of hinamatsuri dolls: <http://japanese.about.com/library/weekly/aa022501a.htm>