

In Time of War

A One-Round Low/Mid-Rank Adventure for Heroes of Rokugan (Champions of the Emerald Empire)

by Rob Hobart

A summons from a Scorpion of questionable motives sends you on an enigmatic mission across the lines of the Lion-Crane war. What desperate secret lies in Shiro Kyotei?

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A four-hour time block has been allocated for playing this game. The actual playing time should be about three and a half hours.

It is a good idea to ask each player to put a name tag in front of him or her. The tag should have the player's name at the bottom, and the character's name, race, and gender at the top. This makes it easier for the players to keep track of who is playing which character.

The players are free to use the game rules to learn about equipment and weapons their characters are carrying.

Some of the text in this scenario is written so that you may present it as written to the players, while other text is for your eyes only. Text for the players will be in ***bold italics***. It is strongly recommended that you paraphrase the player text, instead of reading it aloud, as some of the text is general and must be adapted to the specific situation or to actions of the player characters.

GM's Information

THIS TOURNAMENT SHOULD NOT BE RUN COLD!

This adventure is a Low/Mid-Rank adventure. This means that only Rank 1, 2, or 3 Characters should be allowed to play. This adventure was not written with Rank 4 or 5 characters in mind and cannot anticipate all that these characters may bring to the table.

All bulleted information is just that, pure information. Feed it to the players through an NPC when appropriate. Sometimes, reading it straight just doesn't sound right.

The world of Rokugan is a cross between feudal Japan and China. It is set in an age of honorable samurai, serving their Lords (Daimyos) and Empire. Remember that family names come before personal names. Akodo Toturi is from the Akodo family and his personal name is Toturi.

A note on female designations: If a samurai has the designation of -ko, then the samurai is a female. For example, if you see Samurai-ko, then this denotes a female samurai.

A note on commerce in Rokugan: Samurai are not supposed to care about worldly possessions, especially money. A samurai pays a commoner as if the money is meaningless, a concession to the commoner's silly needs. Between samurai, the exchange of money and merchandise is an exchange of "gifts."

Glory and Honor Awards and Penalties

This adventure contains suggested Glory and Honor awards (and penalties) for dealing with the challenges presented herein. However, at times the players may take extra actions which the GM judges worthy of additional reward – or punishment. The following may be considered as guidelines:

- Performing an act of selfless, sacrificial loyalty to one's daimyo or clan: +1 point of Honor.
- Abiding by the tenets of bushido when one could gain an obvious advantage from breaking them: +1 point of Honor.
- Betraying or disobeying your duty, Clan, or family: lose 1-10 points of Honor and Glory, depending on the severity of the failure.
- Crying out in pain when injured: lose one point each of Honor and Glory.
- Using sneaky, underhanded, or treacherous methods when at an Honor rank higher than zero: lose 1-5 points of Honor.
- Using poison: lose 1-10 points of Honor, depending on the circumstances (there is always an Honor loss for using poison).
- Performing a socially acceptable public act of extreme courage and skill: +1 point of Glory.
- Drunk, insulting, or otherwise ill-mannered in public: lose 1-5 points of Glory.
- Made ronin: Glory drops to zero.

Adjusting for Party Strength

This is a Low/Mid-Rank adventure, and thus can involve parties of widely varying capabilities. The encounters have been optimized for a party of average Rank Two.

Although most of the challenges here are role-play oriented and thus not terribly dependent on party strength, a few changes can be made to adjust the adventure difficulty for low-end and high-end parties, as follows:

Low End Party (most/all characters Rank One):

- Lower the TNs for skill rolls by 5. TNs for Simple Trait rolls can also be lowered by 5 at the GM's discretion.
- Futame will not attempt to poison the PCs.
- Futame's thugs have Earth of 2 and Tantojutsu skill 4. Kicho has Earth of 3 and Agility 3.

High End Party (half or more of the characters are Rank Three):

- The GM may increase skill roll and trait roll TNs by 5, if it seems appropriate.
- Kicho the Kolat ninja has Tantojutsu 7, Reflexes 5, and Strength of the Earth at Rank Two. Her weapon is poisoned to inflict 2k1 extra wounds on its first hit.

Adventure Summary and Background

This scenario is triggered when each of the PCs receives a letter from Shosuro Tajiki. Tajiki is a Scorpion assassin and special agent who travels around the Empire, using his position as an Emerald Magistrate to provide cover for all manner of “dirty work” which he conducts on behalf of the Scorpion Clan. PCs who have played for some time may well have met Tajiki more than once – he appears in the adventures *Satsume’s Tournament*, *A Foreign Legacy*, *A Chance Meeting*, and *Way of Deception*.

In recent months, Tajiki has started to put together a selection of different clues which add up to a disturbing pattern. Numerous strange incidents, disappearances, and assassinations have been blamed on the Scorpion over the years, but Tajiki is well-placed to know that in fact the Scorpion Clan had no involvement in many of these crimes. He is beginning to suspect that some other, more sinister, organization may be using the Scorpion Clan as cover for its own activities. He is, in fact, on the trail of the Kolat, the legendary secret conspiracy which has been manipulating Rokugan from the shadows for centuries.

Tajiki’s most recent discovery concerns the destruction of the Hare Clan by his own Clan’s armies a few years ago. At the time, it was widely believed that the Scorpion were acting on some secret vendetta, and everyone was very surprised when several honorable samurai stepped forward afterward to accuse the Hare of practicing *maho* (black magic). Although it was commonly believed that the Scorpion had merely bribed or blackmailed these witnesses, Tajiki knows that they actually came forward of their own free will. Which is very surprising, since Tajiki was in the Scorpion army which assaulted the Hare castle, and therefore also knows perfectly well that no such vile *maho* practices were found.

Tajiki has decided to ferret out the truth behind these strangely convenient witnesses. His attention has focused on a recently-deceased Crane daimyo, Doji (Tsume) Retsu, lord of the minor castle of Shiro Kyotei. Tajiki plans to use the PCs as his agents in this

matter, to look into Doji Retsu’s past and, if possible, learn why he was so willing to support the Scorpion with false testimony.

Unfortunately, current events are making Shosuro Tajiki’s investigation difficult. The Lion Clan armies, having already recaptured the city of Toshi Ranbo from the Crane, are now pressing on into the winter in hopes of conquering Shiro Kyotei, which is also a former Lion stronghold. In order to carry out Tajiki’s mission, the PCs (some of whom may be Lion themselves) will have to cross the lines of battle, risking the wrath of Lion and Crane alike.

And the Kolat do not look kindly on having their secrets unraveled...

The Dark Truth: The Hare Clan was destroyed after they accidentally interrupted a Kolat operation and captured several of their encrypted documents. After the Scorpion were pushed into destroying the Clan, several witnesses were arranged to cover up the matter.

Tsume Retsu was deeply in debt to a number of gamblers, including a local Scorpion, Shosuro Aki. A Kolat agent named Futame, operating under the cover of being a moneylender, bought up Retsu’s debts and used them to force the Crane daimyo into testifying against the Hare, then arranged to make sure a fallen Lion woman would be able to murder Retsu, silencing him forever. Later, he forgave Retsu’s debts in order to place his son, Takashi, under obligation to him.

Unfortunately for the Kolat, Retsu knew more about them than they imagined, and he left a few clues behind... if the PCs can find them.

CREDIT where it is DUE: Shiro Kyotei, its environs, and the various NPCs inhabiting it are based on materials originally published in the adventure “Honor’s Veil” (Alderac 1997).

Introduction

The scenario begins at the end of the Month of Hida (November). All of the PCs receive a letter (Handout #1 for Clan PCs, Handout #2 for ronin PCs) from Shosuro Tajiki. The letter requests that they meet with him at the Inn of Hotei’s Rest in the village of Ninkatoshi. Tajiki emphasizes in the letter that he is writing the PCs in his capacity as an Emerald Magistrate, not merely as a Scorpion. This makes refusing him a highly questionable act, one which should cost Honor for most PCs (particularly those who are Emerald Magistrates themselves).

If the PCs ask about where they are going, any of them who are Lion Clan will automatically know about Ninkatoshi, a minor farming town in northeastern Lion lands which has recently become a center of military activity for the ongoing Lion campaign against the Crane. Other PCs will be aware of this if they have Way of the Lands (Lion lands), or can roll **Lore: Lion Clan/Intelligence** at TN 10.

The Inn of Hotei's Rest will only be familiar to PCs who can roll **Theology** (or a Lore skill judged suitable by the GM)/**Intelligence** at TN 25, in which case they recall a legend of the Fortune of Contentment stopping to rest in the hot springs behind a small nameless Inn, and being so pleased with it that he blessed the Inn to always prosper. PCs with Way of the Lands (Lion lands) can also remember this story with a **Simple Intelligence** roll at TN 20.

Side-Note: Kolat-controlled PCs

Some PCs may have acquired the cert "Owned By the Kolat" due to meta-gaming activities (at Interactives and elsewhere). These PCs will receive a second letter (Handout #3) while on their way to the meeting with Shosuro Tajiki. The letter mysteriously appears in their room one morning. It will be impossible to learn how it got there.

It will be entirely up to the PC how to deal with the problem posed by this letter. However, the Kolat will be monitoring the PC's action from afar, and both failure and success will have consequences.

Part One: The Village of Ninkatoshi

The first snowfall of the winter has blanketed the lands with a thick layer of white, sparkling under the light of Mother Sun. Breath hangs in the air as a cloud of white crystals. The weather has made your travel difficult, but you have nevertheless managed to reach the village of Ninkatoshi by the late afternoon of the 6th day of Togashi, known among commoners as the month of the Rat (December to gaijin).

The small farming village has been transformed into an armed camp. Troops of Lion bushi march back and forth between the rows of military tents which cover the surrounding fields, and banners sporting the mon of the Matsu and Ikoma families snap and flutter above a central cluster of larger tents. The streets of the village itself have been trampled into dark, clutching mud. Couriers on sturdy Rokugani

ponies gallop back and forth, heedless of the treacherous footing.

As you cross a small arched bridge into the village, looking around for the Inn you are supposed to find, a half-squad of Lion bushi trots up to you. Their commander, a stern-looking man without a family mon, looks you over carefully and says, "Greetings, samurai. May I see your travel papers?"

Shosuro Tajiki's letter included travel papers for any PCs who are not themselves Emerald Magistrates. The Lion officer, whose name is Chugitsu (a former Akodo), will scrutinize the papers carefully, noting the Scorpion name on them, and then questions the PCs further, asking their business in Ninkatoshi. His tone is polite, and he cannot really refuse passage to samurai traveling in the name of an Emerald Magistrate, but he makes it clear that the PCs are not welcome here. He will be especially suspicious of Crane and Scorpion PCs, and warns the Crane not to interfere in "military matters" on pain of arrest. If any of the PCs are Lion, he will give them a very fish-eyed look, and drop hints that they should have better things to do than serve the whims of some Scorpion magistrate.

If any non-Lion PCs ask about the Lion war effort, or mention how unusual it is for war to be waged in wintertime, Chugitsu is coldly unresponsive, and his troops grow edgy and grip their weapons. He will question such PCs with especial detail and fervor, clearly suspecting them of being spies.

If a Lion PC asks such questions, on the other hand, Chugitsu will shrug. "It is neither our place nor our duty to question the commands of our Champion Matsu Tsuko," he says.

Eventually, unless the PCs manage to get themselves arrested as spies, Chugitsu will tire of questioning them and allow them to pass on. If any of the PCs ask, he can give them directions to the Inn of Hotei's Rest. Otherwise, the PCs can get directions from any of the local commoners.

The Inn of Hotei's Rest

The Inn is located some ways off from the village's main street, on a secondary road which leads past some rugged, forested ground west of the village. Here, the shouts and tramping feet of the Lion troops are only distantly audible, and the small fields interspersing the trees are covered in smooth, unspoiled snow.

The Inn is a large, sprawling, single-story structure tucked in among tall overhanging trees. Thick clouds of steam rise up from behind the building, suggesting the presence of a hot spring, while the pleasant odor of woodsmoke comes from the chimneys of the Inn itself. Traffic on the road is modest, but there are clearly at least a few other guests enjoying the Inn's hospitality. As you approach the front door, you can see a simple signboard: the kanji for "Hotei's Rest" above a small picture of the Fortune of Contentment sitting in a tub, a towel on his head.

The Inn is a cozy, comfortable place. The guests here are mostly commoners, along with a few ronin and low-ranking samurai traveling through the area. (The Lion do not allow their troops to "go soft" by staying at Inns.) The Innkeeper, a rosy-cheeked middle-aged woman named Yamiko, greets all of her guests personally, displaying a friendly, motherly air which even the harshest samurai will not find offensive. She will urge all her visitors to avail themselves of the Inn's excellent hot springs, to "soak the cold from your bones." If any PCs ask her about Shosuro Tajiki, she will purse her lips and cock her head to one side. "Oh yes, that charming young Scorpion. I believe he's having a soak right now. He did say he was expecting visitors... is that you?"

The hot spring is a large pool of water, steaming hot, bubbling up out of the rocky hill behind the Inn. A bamboo fence surrounds the pool of hot water and separates it into male and female sides. The PCs will be expected to bathe and clean themselves before entering the pools to soak. If any of the PCs are female, they will have to decide whether to break propriety by seeking Tajiki on the men's side of the hot springs, or wait for him to emerge.

A Meeting with Shosuro Tajiki

The young Scorpion is an athletic, good-looking, smiling man in his mid-twenties, and wears a minimal silk mask designed to accent his handsome features. He lounges at ease in the bubbling water of the hot spring, but PCs will note that his daisho set is resting on a nearby boulder, ready to hand – an unusual choice when at an Inn. Tajiki greets the PCs by name, in a friendly and familiar fashion, regardless of whether their past relations (if any) have been hostile or not. He will speak of inconsequential matters at first, while urging them to join him in the water, and suggesting it would be best if they all discussed matters here rather than inside the Inn. If any of the PCs are female, Tajiki will suggest that they join the conversation from the female side of the bath, perhaps leaning against the

bamboo wall divider. "That way we can be sure no prying ears are listening to our conversation."

If the PCs do not meet Tajiki in the bath, he will not discuss anything inside the Inn where others might be listening. Instead he suggests that they take an evening stroll to "enjoy the sunset upon the pure snow" and speaks with the PCs during their walk.

Either way, Tajiki will explain himself carefully. With non-Scorpions (especially ones who have tangled with him in the past), he will open the conversation with something along these lines:

"I do not expect you to appreciate the duties I perform for my Clan and the Empire, or the sacrifices I make in fulfilling those duties. But if you believe nothing else I say, believe this: I am as much a servant of the Emperor as you are. And I have called you here in my capacity as an Emerald Magistrate, to address a threat to the entire Empire."

With Scorpion or Scorpion-allied PCs, he will take a somewhat different tack:

"There are times when it is too easy to forget that we are the servants of the Empire, just as much as the Lion or the Crab. Ours is the duty to undertake those tasks which our more 'honorable' Clans would never let soil their pretty hands. We pride ourselves on our ability to manipulate others, to make them all dance to our direction like theater puppets. But," he lowers his voice cautiously, "I have begun to suspect that we, ourselves, may be played and manipulated as well, by people or forces unknown. Such a force would be a threat, not merely to us, but to the Empire which we serve. I am both an Emerald Magistrate and a Scorpion, and both duties demand my attention... and yours."

Finally, to ronin PCs, Tajiki will take a more direct and pragmatic approach:

"Ronin-san, my Clan usually has little use for wave men. But to be blunt, on this occasion I may be able to trust you more than them. I have need of investigators who will be trustworthy, and who do not have some higher motive which may lead them to betray me. You may fit my needs quite nicely, and if so, I can offer you proper compensation. Three koku now, and more later if you succeed. What say you?"

Tajiki Explains

Assuming the PCs do not storm out or otherwise refuse to cooperate, Tajiki will begin to explain the situation.

“Some of you may recall that, a few years ago, my Clan was responsible for the destruction of the Hare Clan. A number of witnesses came forward afterward to accuse the Hare of practicing maho, thereby proving that our actions were correct. However, I have begun to suspect that these witnesses may have been lying, that they may have been acting on behalf of some other force, some faction which desired the extermination of the Hare. A faction which manipulated my own Clan just as surely as it did those so-called witnesses. If such a thing were true, it would mean that a conspiracy has managed to distort the very law and justice of the Emperor himself.”

Tajiki explains that one of the questionable witnesses was the late Doji Retsu, lord of Shiro Kyotei. *“His testimony was considered unquestionable – why would a Crane lord of a distant castle lie about such a thing? Yet I am certain, from my own sources, that he did lie. And just a year later, he died, in a most curious fashion – a vengeful Lion woman somehow managed to get into his castle and slay him in his sleep. A striking coincidence, if such it be.”*

Tajiki wants the PCs to travel to Shiro Kyotei, interview Retsu’s son Takashi (the current lord of Shiro Kyotei), and look for any sort of evidence that Retsu was being controlled or manipulated in some way. Officially, the PCs cannot investigate Retsu’s death – the case has been closed – but they can study it as part of an investigation into other matters surrounding his life and activities. Tajiki is especially interested in getting documentary evidence, clues, or names which can be followed up elsewhere, perhaps leading to larger discoveries.

Tajiki explains that he cannot look into this matter himself because “neither the Lion nor the Tsume family are likely to look favorably on a lone Scorpion snooping about in their midst. Besides which, I have other lines of investigation which I need to pursue on this matter.” A PC who makes a **Contested Awareness** roll with Tajiki will realize that, while everything he has said is true, he also has other reasons for wanting to send the PCs. If the PC beats Tajiki by at least 10 on the roll, s/he realizes that Tajiki suspects this investigation to be dangerous, and is using the PCs as expendable cat’s-paws.

If the PCs question him about his motives, Tajiki will insist that he has to investigate other matters related to

this same problem. “This is not the only aspect of this... mystery... which I have found. I must follow other clues while you look into Tsume Retsu’s past for me.” He will also remind the PCs that a group of yoriki working for an Emerald Magistrate will be more likely to get cooperation than a “lone Scorpion.” Finally, toward low-Glory-rank PCs he will point out that, as an Emerald Magistrate, he has a right to expect their obedience.

If PCs with Glory 3.0 or better (or who are Emerald Magistrates themselves) press him heavily, Tajiki’s reaction will depend on how they have impressed him so far. If they seem overly suspicious of his motives, he will stonewall them and simply insist on his status as an Emerald Magistrate. On the other hand, if they have come across as genuinely interested in his investigation, he may decide to confess the true situation: “Those who probe too deeply into these matters always seem to wind up dead, or at best dishonored ronin. If I am to have any chance of ferreting out the truth about this mystery, I must protect myself, just as a general is protected by bodyguards. You understand?”

Ultimately, it is up to the PCs whether or not to assist Shosuro Tajiki. PCs who refuse him may be looking at a potential Honor loss, depending on their attitudes toward bushido and duty. Tajiki will also regard them as his enemies thereafter (they gain Sworn Enemy: Shosuro Tajiki).

Assuming the PCs do agree to help, Tajiki will share the following additional information and assistance:

- He has secured travel papers authorizing the PCs to visit Shiro Kyotei in order to “record the deeds and death of Tsume Retsu, for the Imperial histories.” He is confident that these papers will pass muster among the Crane, but warns that the Lion armies may still try to obstruct the PCs from crossing the battle-lines. He also offers a separate set of papers appointing the PCs as his yoriki (assistants) to investigate “Tsume Retsu’s testimony regarding the destruction of the Hare Clan, and any matters related thereto.”
- He will urge the PCs not to dawdle in pursuing their investigation. “So far the Lion have been stymied in their drive toward Shiro Kyotei... but with a commander as able as Matsu Tsuko leading them, they could potentially break through at any time.”

- The official story on Tsume Retsu's death is that he was murdered by a Lion ronin, a samurai-ko who had survived when Retsu captured Shiro Kyotei fourteen years ago. Tajiki finds this story highly suspect. How did a ronin manage to get into the castle and make it past Retsu's bodyguards?
- If any of the PCs seem like properly ruthless or dishonorable sorts, Tajiki will provide them with a useful piece of information on Retsu's son, Takashi, the current daimyo of Shiro Kyotei. "Takashi found himself burdened with many debts, left behind by his father. Gambling debts, I am told, to various commoners. Somehow he managed to pay them off, despite their size considerably exceeding the production of his lands. He has managed to keep his father's gambling habits secret, lest they dishonor his family." Tajiki smirks. "No doubt he would be willing to go to some lengths to keep such a secret." If the PCs ask how he learned about such matters, Tajiki smiles. "We of the Scorpion have many contacts among the more... disreputable classes. The bosses of gambling dens, for example."
- If any of the PCs are of the Shosuro family, Tajiki will tell them that one of these gamblers is a Scorpion Clan agent in the town of Chikuzen, outside Shiro Kyotei. He is named Shosuro Aki. "Aki has his own missions which are different from mine. He knows much, but will not be able to offer any help beyond information."
- Tsume Retsu was one of five witnesses, all from different Clans, who came forward after the destruction of the Hare Clan to accuse the Hare of maho. It was widely believed that these were "cover" arranged by the Scorpion to excuse their massacre of the Hare. Tajiki, however, has been unable to find anyone in the Scorpion Clan who knows how these witnesses were arranged. "Given my... close connections with the leaders of our Clan, I should have been able to find this out. It is as though someone else was arranging things, and using the Scorpion for cover."
- Tajiki was in the Scorpion army that attacked the Hare Clan. He knows with certainty that there was no *maho* in Shiro Usagi.
- The "real" reason for the attack on the Hare was supposedly that the Hare daimyo's heir had murdered a Scorpion diplomat in the Imperial Capital. That alleged murder is one of the other

investigations which Tajiki plans to pursue. "The man died, certainly. But how and why... that may not be so simple."

- Finally, Tajiki will urge the PCs not to trust other magistrates or similar authority figures, and to tell Tsume Takashi as little as possible. "There is no telling who may be a part of this mystery. Best to keep this among yourselves." The PCs are free to take his advice or ignore it – they may find that a little truth-telling earns them better cooperation.

Information the PCs can learn on their own

The PCs may wish to supplement the information Tajiki gives them from their own knowledge and resources. They can learn the following, depending on which skills they have:

- **Tsume Retsu:** Any PC can roll **Lore: Crane Clan/Intelligence**, **Lore: Lion Clan/Intelligence**, or **History/Intelligence** at TN 15 to remember the history of Tsume Retsu. Retsu was the heir to the first Tsume, who ruled the Kintani valley. He was an aggressive general who captured Shiro Kyotei from the Lion Clan, wiping out the Lion vassal family of the Damasu who had previously lived there. His entire reign was marked by frequent aggression and constant border clashes with both the Lion and Phoenix Clans. His son Takashi, however, has followed a more peaceful path.
- Tsume Retsu died two and a half years ago, murdered in his own quarters in Shiro Kyotei. Later rumors blamed either a ronin or a geisha assassin. (Crane PCs who belong to the Tsume vassal family will know that a geisha was executed for the crime.)
- Any PC who rolls **Commerce/Intelligence** at TN 15, **Gambling/Intelligence** at TN 15, **Courtier/Intelligence** at TN 20, or **Lore: Crane Clan/Intelligence** at TN 25 will recall hearing gossip that Tsume Retsu was a notorious gambler who secretly frequented gambling dens. Such stories have never been publicly confirmed, however.

Part Two: Traveling to Shiro Kyotei

The PCs will be well aware that Shiro Kyotei lies on the far side of the battle-lines between the Lion and

Crane Clans. In fact, Kyotei and its associated territory, the Kintani Valley, is the last remaining Crane stronghold in the north. Matsu Tsuko, Champion of the Lion, has publicly sworn that the castle will be reclaimed for the Lion Clan by spring.

Any PCs who are from the Lion Clan, Crane Clan, or Phoenix Clan, who have Way of the Land for any of those three Clans' territories, or who roll **Simple Intelligence** at TN 20 will know that it is possible to reach the Kintani Valley from Phoenix territories, although that will be a long round-about trip rather than the more direct route across the Lion battle-lines.

Going Through the Lion

If the PCs wish to take the direct route to the Kintani Valley, they will have to cross the Lion battle-lines. As Shosuro Tajiki suggested, this will be difficult.

If the PCs simply head in the direction of the border, they will be intercepted by another Lion patrol, which will demand their business and their travel papers. After reviewing the papers, the patrol leader (a brusque Matsu woman named Hime) will curtly inform the PCs that no travel across the border can be allowed at this time, due to the ongoing military campaign. Hime will be adamant, and will not be swayed by rank or political influence. "I am sorry. My commander has given me orders, and it is my duty to carry them out."

Smart PCs will pre-empt this problem by going to the local commander, Ikoma Gunjin. Hime will also suggest speaking with Gunjin if the PCs are insistent about their need to cross the battle-lines. Gunjin is housed in the largest tent outside the village, and the PCs will have to cool their heels for a couple of hours before meeting him.

Ikoma Gunjin is a slim, athletic, quietly intense man in his late thirties, with piercing eyes and a long goatee beard. He will listen politely to the PCs' words, not speaking or showing any reaction. If the PCs are polite and eloquent, and stress that they are on a mission for an Emerald Magistrate, they can roll **Sincerity/Awareness** at TN 15 to convince him to grant them a special dispensation to cross the battle-lines. The PCs get a Free Raise if they include Lion or Imperial Family in their ranks, or have Allies or Favors with either of those factions.

If the PCs fail to convince Gunjin, he will inform them that the orders of Matsu Tsuko, Champion of the Lion, will not allow him to pass anyone through to Crane territories while this campaign lasts. He suggests that

the PCs circle around and approach the Kintani Valley from Phoenix territories.

Meeting with Matsu Tsuko?

Some especially persistent (or high-ranking) PCs may decide to take their case directly to the Lady of Lions. She is headquartered in a separate, smaller military camp a couple of miles farther up the road, surrounded and guarded by the all-female Lion unit known as the Lion's Pride. These fierce, matriarchal warriors will only admit the PCs to the presence of the Lion Champion if they have Glory 5.0 or better (4.0 or better if they are Lion or Imperial), have Major Allies with the Lion Clan, or possess the Ear of the Emperor.

Tsuko is a fiercely beautiful woman with a sharp temper and a tongue to match. She will listen impatiently to whatever the PCs say, interrupting overly chatty visitors.

To convince Tsuko, the PCs will have to make it totally clear that they are on a mission for the Emerald Magistrates. Furthermore, she will never trust the word of any Crane or Scorpion PC, and will openly insult any representatives from those Clans, labeling them cowards, liars, and similar. (Insults from a Clan Champion must be endured honorably.)

If the PCs have no Crane or Scorpion in their ranks, and if they make it abundantly clear that they are working on behalf of the Empire, Tsuko will grudgingly grant them permission to cross the battle-lines.

Through the Battle-Lines

A day's ride brings you to the front. Several thousand Lion bushi and ashigaru are spread across the snowy hills, resting after a day's hard march through the snow. Tents and pavilions are going up and scouts patrol diligently in the direction of Crane territory.

The Lion are confident of victory, but also frustrated that the Crane have so far refused to meet them in open battle, instead fighting a series of delaying actions. Nevertheless, two dozen Crane bushi fell this day, and a group of eta are busy stripping their bodies, mounting the heads as trophies, and preparing their equipment to be shipped home to their families.

The local Lion officer is a sullen, bloodthirsty man named Matsu Gohei. The Butcher reads the PCs' travel papers and then sends them through with the warning not to get in his way when he reaches Shiro Kyotei.

Once the PCs advance past the Lion army, they will enter an empty expanse of snow-covered, thickly-wooded hills and narrow valleys. A couple of miles farther, they will encounter the Crane defenders. The Crane forces, most of whom bear the mon of the Tsume vassal family (the lords of Shiro Kyotei), are much fewer in number than the Lion, with many ronin supplementing their numbers. The PCs will be stopped well short of the Crane camp and questioned carefully, then taken to meet with the Crane commander, Daidoji Ogami.

The Crane commander has a small but pleasant tent pitched beneath the trees, with a few lanterns piercing the gloom of the evening. He is a slim man with carefully-groomed hair and eyes of piercing gray. He looks you over carefully and then snaps, "This is a place of war. You do not belong here."

Despite his harsh initial attitude, Daidoji Ogami will be more cooperative than the Lion once he learns that the PCs are here on behalf of an Emerald Magistrate. He has little time to spare for dealing with troublesome travelers, and once the PCs give him their word that they are here only on the business of the Empire, he will pass them through his lines. However, he will look hard at any Lions among the PCs, and bluntly informs them that he cannot guarantee their safety if the battle-lines move closer to the Kintani Valley.

If anyone asks how the battle is proceeding, or whether the Lion will actually reach the valley, Ogami will look at them carefully before answering. He will confine himself to generalities ("we will fight with all the spirit of bushido behind us") unless none of the PCs are Lion, Scorpion, or Phoenix. In that case he will grimly remark that he cannot do more than slow the Lion and hope that winter exhausts their supplies.

Going Around

PCs who wish to avoid dealing with the Lion Clan can opt to circle around into Phoenix territory, eventually approaching the Kintani Valley from the north. This is a much longer trip, and will take about nine days. Given Tajiki's suggestions, the PCs should be wary of taking too long, but even if they follow the slow route they will always have at least a day to investigate in the Kintani Valley.

If the PCs choose to take the long route, they are treated to a scenic tour of many miles of snow-shrouded Rokugani landscape. The trip is tiring – travel in wintertime is very difficult, and takes about twice as long as during clear weather. There are no

problems along the way – the Phoenix and Crane border guards greet them politely, inspect their papers and wave them on.

Part Three: Arrival in the Kintani Valley

Regardless of whether the PCs approach from Lion or Phoenix territories, they will eventually be greeted by the same sight:

Snow shrouds the rugged hills – almost low mountains – which surround the long, winding Kintani Valley, the prosperous heart of the Tsume family domain. A large stream, almost a river, runs down the valley, although it is now crisped with ice. You can see the huts of several small farming villages dotting the valley's floor. Closer at hand, the merchant road you are following leads to a medium-sized town called Chikuzen, clearly home to several hundred people, perhaps a thousand or more. Above the town, perched on a rocky crag which projects out from the hills, is Shiro Kyotei: a small, practical-looking castle with a three-story tower rising into the sky. The usual adornments seen on many Crane castles are absent, and you recall that, until twenty years ago, this was a Lion castle.

PCs who played in the Interactive adventure "Winter Court: Shiro Kyotei" have visited this castle before, and may even have made the acquaintance of its current lord, Tsume (Doji) Takashi.

Chikuzen, also known as "Kyotei Town," is currently a quiet and somewhat anxious place – winter has shut down much of the usual activity, and many of the young men are away serving as ashigaru in the Crane armies opposing the Lion. Villagers peer out from their buildings as the PCs pass through. The place boasts a large Inn (called the Golden Peony), several teahouses and two geisha houses (on a street called, appropriately, "Geisha Row"), an open-air marketplace (currently unused in the depths of winter), and numerous artisans and craftsmen's shops (blacksmiths, carpenters, silk weavers, etc).

Shiro Kyotei itself is a classical castle design, with an entry ramp that circles three-quarters of the way around the square base of the structure, climbing up two stories before ending in an inner gate. Several Crane bushi stand sentry on the walls above the gates, and will order any visitors to wait outside. The bushi are polite but firm. Eventually a pair of servants will come to the

gates to take the PCs' names, chops, and reason for visiting.

Once the PCs have identified themselves and stated their business, they will be admitted to the castle after a short wait (half an hour or so). Their mounts (if any) will be taken to the stables in the basement of the castle, while the PCs are invited to bathe and change clothes before meeting with the daimyo.

If the PCs choose to stay at the Inn instead, they will be charged two silver bu per night. Tsume Takashi may see this as a snub, the PCs inadvertently (or perhaps deliberately) suggesting that his castle is not suitable lodging. Depending on how the PCs handle it, this could prejudice him against them.

Part Four: Investigating in Shiro Kyotei

Meeting with Tsume Takashi

Unless the PCs decide to stay in the town Inn, it is likely that the first person they speak with about their investigation will be Tsume (Doji) Takashi, son of the murdered Tsume Retsu and daimyo of the Tsume family. Takashi meets them in the small audience hall of Shiro Kyotei, alone except for servants. Two guards wait outside, but Takashi does not insult his guests by bringing armed men into the meeting. He keeps his sword politely on the floor to his right.

Takashi is a tall, handsome man in his early twenties, dressed immaculately, with long white hair bound back in a ponytail. His manners are perfect and his every motion and gesture is carefully practiced. He seldom lets his true feelings show on his face, except when dealing with ronin. (He has bitter feelings toward ronin due to the circumstances surrounding his father's death, and will never be polite or cooperative toward ronin PCs.)

Takashi will greet the PCs politely and ask why they are visiting Shiro Kyotei. It is up to the PCs how they approach Takashi and how much they tell him. Openly explaining Tajiki's involvement will not serve them well unless they word things very carefully – unless the PCs make sure to emphasize Tajiki's role as an Emerald Magistrate, Takashi will automatically assume a Scorpion's involvement means they are really here to seek evidence to dishonor him and his family. On the other hand, telling him as much as possible (while keeping the identity of their superior secret) will probably go a long way toward earning his trust.

Ultimately, the GM must adjudicate how much cooperation Tsume Takashi will offer. Takashi is an honorable man, and one who tries to uphold bushido and the ideals of the Crane; he feels ashamed of his own past failings, particularly the fact that his own passion for a geisha contributed to his father's death. He does not wish to sully his father's name, but he is also aware that the late Tsume Retsu was a gambler and a violent, aggressive leader who earned the hatred of the Lion Clan. With a careful and diplomatic approach, the PCs should be able to gain considerable cooperation from Takashi.

• General Information

Takashi has no personal knowledge or suspicion that his father was being manipulated or controlled in any way, and will profess indignation at the suggestion.

• The Murder of Tsume Retsu

If the PCs ask Takashi for information or details of his father's death, he will grow quiet and even a bit uncomfortable (a rare occasion when he allows his emotions to show). He be very reluctant to discuss this, murmuring that it is improper to speak of such a private tragedy. The PCs will have to be both polite and persistent, or perhaps cite relevance to their current investigation, to get him to speak of the matter.

“My father was murdered by a geisha. She was... visiting the castle, and managed to slip into his room and murder him. The karo, Tsume Ishin, investigated the matter, tracked down the geisha and learned that she was a former Lion, a child of the samurai family which lived here before my father took the castle. She was executed. We believe she may have been assisted by a ronin named Itto, some ruffian who the villagers imagine to be a selfless protector.” He frowns. “We have never been able to catch and question him, but Ishin says there are still rumors that he lurks in the Kintani Valley somewhere.”

Takashi will not name the geisha unless the PCs ask him. In that case he remarks, in an off-hand way, that she might have been called Reika, and worked at the Pine House, one of the two geisha houses in the town of Chikuzen.

This is not the whole story. If a PC defeats Takashi with a **Contested Awareness** roll, it will be apparent that he is hiding something about the murder. However, he will not reveal more unless a PC whose discretion he trusts speaks with him in private. Any Crane or Imperial PC will qualify, as will other PCs who display Honor, circumspection, and proper etiquette. He will certainly never speak the truth to a

Scorpion or ronin, and probably not to a Lion either. Regardless, the PC will have to speak persuasively (good role-playing and a **Sincerity/Awareness** or **Manipulation/Awareness** roll at TN 15).

If Takashi tells the truth, he will confess that the geisha, Reika, was able to get into the castle because he was seeing her regularly, and smuggled her in to spend the night with him. “I believe she drugged my sake, that night. I know I feel asleep very quickly and heavily. She was able to slip through the castle to my father’s rooms, using hidden passages from when the place was a Lion stronghold.”

Any PC with knowledge of courtly matters, romance, or the world of the geisha (any courtier/diplomatic-school PC, and any PC with at least one skill rank in Courtier, Seduction, or Commerce) will know that inviting a geisha to visit one’s home is a highly symbolic act, suggesting deep affection or love. Takashi is deeply ashamed and bitter that he allowed himself to be seduced by a geisha whose real goal was to murder his father.

- **Retsu’s testimony against the Hare**

Takashi will not readily listen to the suggestion that his father might have lied about the Hare Clan. “My father, whatever faults he may have possessed, was an honorable man. He would never have lied about such a matter.” A **Contested Awareness** roll will detect an undercurrent of doubt – Takashi knows his father lied about other things (such as his debt).

Five years ago (three years before his murder), Retsu was on a journey to visit the Asahina temples when he supposedly witnessed *maho* at the Hare castle, Shiro Usagi. “Our harvest had been poor, and my father sought the advice of the shugenja to learn whether we had angered the kamis. It was a long journey to the Asahina temples, he did not return for over two months.” If the PCs ask, the karo, Tsume Ishin, ran the castle while Retsu was absent.

If the PCs ask whether Retsu said anything about encountering *maho*, or seemed upset or fearful when he returned from his journey, Takashi will reluctantly confess that nothing seemed out of the ordinary. “He said the trip had been peaceful and without incident. There was no mention of *maho* until after the Hare were destroyed, when he stepped forward and testified at the Imperial Court.” Takashi will be very reluctant to make any inferences from this. “Perhaps he did not realize at first what he saw, or perhaps he sought to shield us from the knowledge, lest the *maho*-tsukai strike at us.”

Takashi did not witness his father’s testimony in person and does not know what was said, only that his father supposedly witnessed *maho* practices in Shiro Usagi. If the PCs ask whether anyone else can confirm his father’s story, he thinks back carefully and remarks that two bushi traveled with his father. He does not remember who they were – it was five years ago – but if the PCs are persistent on the matter, admits that the karo Tsume Ishin would probably know.

- **Retsu’s Journal**

If the PCs ask about documents or personal journals, Takashi does not know whether his father kept any such records beyond the mundane records of his territory’s production and taxation, expenses of the castle, etc. If the PCs have impressed him poorly, Takashi will strongly suggest that it is improper for them to be poking their noses into “my father’s private affairs.” The PCs will need to convincingly persuade Takashi that they are honorable investigators who have no interest in damaging the Tsume family name. It will help if they can sincerely argue that some larger evil is behind all of this.

On the other hand, if the PCs have impressed him favorably, Takashi will explain that his father kept to himself, and the karo Tsume Ishin actually knew more about him than Takashi did.

- **Retsu’s Gambling Debts**

Takashi will be quite upset if the PCs mention this, no matter where they heard it from. His face will tighten, his eyes grow cold, and he remarks that the PCs are here as his guests and he will thank them not to slander his family to his face. The PCs will have to quickly apologize and make a good excuse if they are to get any more cooperation from Takashi.

To get more information, the PCs will have to follow the same procedure as with his father’s murder – a PC he trusts will have to speak with him in private, and make a **Sincerity/Awareness** or **Manipulation/Awareness** roll at TN 15.

Thus persuaded, Takashi will sadly confess that after his father’s death, he was “most perturbed” to discover that Retsu owed a very considerable debt to “a number of dishonorable persons, including a Scorpion agent named Shosuro Aki, who runs some dicing parlor in the town.” If the PC asks whether the debt is still outstanding, Takashi smiles and explains that, fortunately, an “honorable moneylender, Futame,” bought up the debts and then erased them as a service to the Tsume family. “A loyal heimin, worthy of the

Crane Clan's protection," Takashi says approvingly. He knows nothing else about Futame except that he is a local commoner who has run a loan business for many years.

- **Takashi's Current Relationships**

If any PC should ask, Takashi is not yet married or betrothed. He hoped to find a bride at this year's winter court, but the war and the unexpected Lion winter offensive has blocked such plans and forced him to remain here. He is too well-mannered and self-controlled to make any romantic/courtship overtures to female PCs.

If anyone asks whether Takashi still sees geisha, or keeps a mistress, he will be insulted (unless the question is asked VERY carefully). However, anyone who asks others in the castle (the karo, the guards, or even the servants) can easily learn that Takashi still visits the Pine House from time to time.

The Karo, Tsume Ishin

If the PCs wish to speak with Takashi's karo, who investigated the murder of his father, they will need to ask Takashi themselves (he will not volunteer an interview). If the PCs have not convinced Takashi to tell the whole story about his father's death, he will be very reluctant to let them speak with Ishin, and will openly suggest that, since he has already told the PCs everything, they are insulting him by demanding to get the same story from his underling. They will need to be diplomatic to avoid giving offense.

If the PCs speak carefully and persuasively (they can aid their cause with a **Courtier/Awareness** or **Sincerity/Awareness** roll at TN 15), Takashi will allow them to interview his underling.

If the PCs have already convinced Takashi to tell the truth about the geisha, he will not object to their speaking with the karo, and summons him with an aura of weary acceptance.

The first meeting with the karo will be in the presence of Tsume Takashi. If the PCs return later, they can arrange to meet with Ishin privately.

Tsume Ishin is a quiet, soft-spoken older man, in his early forties, who never raises his voice or loses face. He always speaks very carefully and precisely, without any interjections or hesitations. His features are undistinguished, and he is short of stature. In general, he is an easy man to underestimate. In fact, Ishin is a competent and perceptive man who has served the

Tsume family for more than two decades. He is potentially one of the best allies the PCs can find here, but he is also intensely loyal to the Tsume family – the PCs will have to earn his trust by demonstrating their own honor and discretion. Explaining their purpose honestly (that they are trying to learn if Tsume Retsu was somehow manipulated or blackmailed) may or may not impress Ishin, depending on how the PCs phrase it. (Like his lord, Ishin will not like the idea that the PCs are working for a Scorpion.)

Tsume Ishin knows the following:

- **The murder of Tsume Retsu**

He investigated the murder, and found physical evidence which suggested that the killer had traversed a hidden false ceiling within the castle's residential level, a secret only a resident of the castle could have known.

He eventually traced the crime to a geisha from the Pine House, Reika. Ishin will attempt to gloss over the details of how he learned the killer's identity, unless Takashi indicates it is acceptable to tell the truth. In that case, he will explain that "it became clear that the killer had originated in Lord Takashi's room, and that he had been drugged. The geisha had gone missing from her house. It was not difficult to put the pieces together."

Ishin eventually tracked Reika to a small hut outside the village, where she was hiding alone. She refused to be taken alive, claiming to be samurai, a child born of the Lion nobles in the castle. Ishin sighs as he recounts the affair. "It was a difficult matter. She was born a samurai, but lived as a geisha. Even if I had been able to arrest her alive, it would have been difficult to determine how the law applied to her case. Perhaps it was for the best that she chose to die with sword in hand."

Ishin never found out how Reika learned of her Lion heritage, who told her of the interior of the castle, or where she got her sword. He suspects that a local ronin named Itto had some involvement, since it was known at the Pine House that she was seeing the man in her free time. "Itto is, by all accounts, old enough to have been a samurai in Shiro Kyotei when Lord Retsu captured it. Unfortunately, I have been unable to track him down since then, although there are continued rumors among the common folk that he remains in the Kintani Valley."

- **Tsume Retsu's character and behavior**

Lord Tsume Retsu followed a very aggressive policy toward his Lion and Phoenix neighbors, and might have started another war if he hadn't died. In his

private life, however, Retsu was a quiet and retiring man, especially after the death of his wife many years ago. (If a PC asks, she died of a fever the year after Takashi was born, the year before Retsu attacked and captured Shiro Kyotei.)

Retsu did not keep a mistress. He sometimes visited one of the geisha houses in the village of Chikuzen, the Chrysanthemum House. He did not have any particular favorites there, at least not that he told anyone.

Ishin will not admit that Retsu visited gamblers unless Takashi has already admitted it or the PCs have completely earned his trust. In that case he will sadly confess that “gambling was Lord Retsu’s one real vice.” He says Lord Retsu frequently visited a local gambler, a person “calling himself Shosuro Aki, although I wonder why the Scorpion Clan would allow such a creature to claim one of their family names.”

- **Retsu’s journal**

If any PC asks whether Tsume Retsu kept a personal journal or other such record, the karo will frown thoughtfully. “I do sometimes remember him writing in a small book in the evenings, when the day’s business was done and he was preparing for bed. I never asked about it, of course – that was not my business.” He does not remember finding such a journal among Retsu’s personal effects after his death. “Perhaps he destroyed it later, or perhaps it was hid too well for us to find. Or possibly it was stolen by the geisha murderess. I found no such thing in the hut where I tracked her, however.”

- **Retsu’s gambling debts**

If the PCs ask about Retsu’s debts, the karo will reluctantly confess (if he has decided to be open with the PCs) that they were considerable. He will not name a value unless the PCs have truly earned his trust. In that case, he will sadly admit that the debts totaled over 300 koku!

If the PCs ask about how this massive debt was paid off, Ishin will say only that “Lord Takashi has dealt with the problem.” He will not say more in the presence of Takashi. If the PCs speak with him alone later, and if they have earned his trust, he will explain that “Lord Takashi dealt with that matter himself, and did not confide in me. However, he assured me that the debt is paid.”

- **Retsu’s testimony against the Hare**

“I was not with Lord Retsu during the journey on which he encountered the Hare crimes. He was traveling to the Asahina lands to consult the shugenja

there regarding a bad harvest which had plagued us the year before. I did not learn until later that he had stopped at Shiro Usagi.” He cannot personally confirm that Retsu ever visited Shiro Usagi, although he will express bewilderment at the suggestion that Retsu might have lied. “Why? Retsu was a man of honor, however warlike he may have been. I cannot imagine any reason for him to have lied about such a thing.”

If the PCs think of it, they can ask to speak with the two bushi who escorted Retsu on his journey. Ishin will explain sadly that one of them, Tsume Boku, died in an “unseemly brawl” at the Pine House last year, but the other, Tsume Genshiro, is still in the castle. See below for details of what Genshiro can say.

- **Futame the Moneylender**

If the PCs ask about moneylenders, or mention Futame by name, Ishin has heard of him, and looks down on him as lowly even for a merchant. “He does not even sell anything, merely uses money to make more money.” He will be quite upset if he learns that some of the samurai in his care have used the moneylender’s services.

The Castle Samurai

Currently, much of Shiro Kyotei’s garrison is in the field, helping to hold the line against the Lion advance. However, there are still over twenty bushi in the castle. The PCs can speak with them at any time, should they desire it.

- If the PCs ask the castle bushi about Tsume Retsu’s murder, the topic will cause some embarrassment. The bushi still feel ashamed that their Lord was murdered under their very noses. The guards who watched his room that night offered their seppuku in apology, but Takashi denied it, saying they were not at fault.
- None of the bushi know any of the details of the crime, although they are all aware of the general story that Tsume Ishin tracked the crime to a geisha who had once been a Lion.
- Most of the bushi knew Tsume Retsu, and remember him as a “stern, hard lord, but a skilled general.” They express the view that he would never allow Shiro Kyotei to fall to the Lion (thereby making an implicit criticism against his son Takashi, although they will never be open about this). They also know he frequented one of the geisha houses (the Chrysanthemum House)

although they will not mention this unless a PC asks something to prompt it.

- The guards have heard rumors that Tsume Retsu had gambling debts, but none of them will repeat these rumors to anyone outside of their Clan. A few of the bushi sometimes visit the house of the gambler Shosuro Aki, but this is something they are ashamed of, and they will not admit it readily to anyone, even a fellow Crane.
- Some of the bushi have heard of the moneylender Futame, and a few of them have borrowed money from him (usually to cover debts from gambling or visiting the geisha houses). Again, they consider this to be shameful, and will not admit it without being prodded hard.
- If the PCs track down Tsume Genshiro, the surviving bushi from the pair who escorted Tsume Retsu on his trip south five years ago, they will find him to be a heavy-set, slightly thick-witted man in his late thirties. He will assume that the PCs must be high-ranking personages and will become confused if they deny this. If the PCs ask him about the trip, he will bob his head and confirm that they visited Shiro Usagi. “I didn’t see anything myself, lord, I was only escorting Lord Retsu-sama, but we did stay at the castle, I’m sure of it.” A **Contested Awareness** roll against his Awareness of 2 will confirm that he is lying.
- Tsume Genshiro will be reluctant to admit the truth – he does not wish to say anything which reflects poorly on his late Lord. Also, he is a little paranoid after the death of his friend Boku (although he will deny this). The PCs will need to either gain the cooperation of Tsume Takashi and/or Tsume Ishin, or take an extremely persuasive approach when speaking with Genshiro (skills such as Oratory, Manipulation, Political Maneuvering, or Obeisaseru can be very helpful here). If they fail to convince him, Genshiro will stubbornly insist “that’s how it happened” until the PCs give up.
- If Tsume Genshiro is persuaded to talk honestly, he will wring his hands together in an agony of distress. “I don’t want to be casting any insult on the late Lord Retsu-sama, a fine honorable lord he was. But the fact is, my lords, we didn’t stop at that castle. Lord Retsu came to me a couple years later, to me and Boku that is, and told us that we had stopped there, and if we didn’t remember it we must be mistaken. Well, he was the Lord, so his

word was true, right? Boku didn’t like it, he said we were helping Lord Retsu lie about something, but I figured he must have had a good reason for it, him being an honorable lord and all.”

- If the PCs ask about Boku’s death, Genshiro knows nothing about it. “He used to visit that geisha place, the Pine House. I didn’t see no need for going there, but he liked the place. Got into some kind of fight and broke his neck. A real shame, he was a fine bushi, my lords.”

Physical Investigations

If the PCs ask in a properly respectful manner, they will be allowed to view the rooms on the top floor of the castle where Retsu lived (and where Takashi lives now). They will be escorted by the karo at all times. He will not allow them to explore the secret passages which the geisha Reika used to murder Retsu.

There is no useful information to be found here. The spirits have long since forgotten about the murder.

Part Five: Investigating in Chikuzen

The PCs may decide to investigate in the village of Chikuzen, either on their own or as a result of information they gain in the castle. The GM should not discourage this – ultimately, it is in the village that the PCs can find the clues to the truth behind Tsume Retsu’s fate.

The Golden Peony Inn

The Inn is a large and prosperous one, a two story structure with several attached outbuildings, including a stables and a sizeable bathhouse. At present, in the depths of winter and with many bushi away at war, business is slow, and most of the customers are commoners looking for a little sake to warm their evening. There are, however, four grubby ronin, looking for work in a land threatened by war. Two of them are customers at Shosuro Aki’s gambling house. None of them are Itto.

The Innkeeper is Koi, a plump, pleasant little woman in her forties, with graying hair and nearsighted eyes. She will be happy to have customers, even if they are just visiting for a drink and a few questions. If they actually decide to stay with her rather than at the castle, she will be delighted, and goes out of her way to help them any way she can.

Koi is well-acquainted with the local gossip, and can share the following information:

- Everyone is worried about the approaching Lion army. The older villagers tell stories about how harsh and difficult life is under Lion rule (of course Koi will not mention this around Lion PCs). Everyone prays for victory for the Tsume family.
- Most of the villagers know the “popular rumor” version of Tsume Retsu’s life and death: a bold and fierce warrior who warred with the Lion Clan, then died at the hands of a geisha, Reika, who was actually a vengeful Lion maiden.
- Koi can give directions to the hut at the edge of the village where the karo found and killed Reika.
- Reika worked at the Pine House. Her notoriety seems to have hurt the House’s reputation – it used to be known as the better geisha house in Chikuzen, but now its competition the Chrysanthemum House is better-regarded. There was even a lethal brawl at the Pine House last year, in which a samurai from the castle was killed.
- Lord Retsu always favored the Chrysanthemum House. Lord Tsume Takashi still visits the Pine House, however. That’s probably the only reason it’s been able to stay in business after the scandalous murder of his father.
- It is rumored that the ronin Itto helped the geisha win her revenge. Itto was widely known and admired as a “good ronin” who helped the common folk and slew bandits and criminals. He was also rumored to be a lover to the poor geisha, Reika – they were frequently seen in each other’s company. Since Lord Retsu’s murder, however, Itto has been missing, and the castle samurai keep an eye out for him. There are rumors that he has been seen in the Kintani Valley, or at the hut where Reika died, but nobody can say for sure if these are true sightings or merely stories.
- Some villagers have told stories about old Lord Retsu visiting the local gambling house, but Koi is “sure” these were merely rumors, not truth. She can give directions to the gambling house if the PCs ask, but warns that it is a “low-down place, full of vice and filth. A Scorpion runs it, I have heard.”

- If any PCs ask about moneylenders, Koi can identify Futame, a “very wealthy man.” She disapproves of him, since he preys on those in need and then charges them astronomical interest. She does not know of his connections to Shosuro Aki or the Tsume family, but she can give directions to his house.

The ronin at the Inn are an unimpressive quartet, dirty and foul-mouthed. They are the dregs – anyone with any skill or manners has already been hired by the Crane. They will generally be sullen and hostile (while avoiding giving too much offense) to any PCs who are not ronin themselves. If questioned persistently (or someone gets them a meal or a drink), they can share the following information:

- None of them have been able to get work from the Crane – the guards told them they had already hired all the ronin they needed. This is generally regarded as an insult. “High-and-mighty Crane think we aren’t good enough to fight for them. We’ll see what they say when the Lion are marching into this little valley of theirs.”
- If any PC asks about gambling, two of the ronin can direct them to Shosuro Aki’s gambling house. They visit it often themselves, and sneer at any PCs who are too “snooty” to lower themselves to gambling.
- If the PCs ask about Itto, none of these ronin have seen him in the village, but one of them remembers seeing a “worn-out old ronin” in the woods outside the town when he first arrived.
- If any PCs ask about Futame the moneylender, one of the ronin, Mataka, owes him money. He can provide directions to Futame’s place of business. He also complains that the moneylender wouldn’t hire him, even though he only had a couple of “commoner thugs” for security.
- None of these ronin can afford to visit the geisha houses.

The Gambler, Shosuro Aki

If the PCs have not already learned about Aki from Shosuro Tajiki, they will have to ask around (either samurai in the castle or commoners at the Inn or elsewhere) to discover his existence. Tsume Takashi and Tsume Ishin both know the location of this disreputable establishment, although they will urge the PCs to stay away from such a disgraceful place. Some

of the castle samurai will also know where Aki's business is located, and in the village, the innkeeper, the ronin staying at the Inn, and the village headman can all give directions to the place.

Aki's den is not marked by any normal sign, but instead by some criminal slang symbols scraped into its exterior walls. PCs who simply search the town for a gambler's den, rather than asking directions, will have to roll **Gambling/Perception**, **Kuenai/Perception**, or **Commerce/Perception** at TN 15 to spot these markings ("dice inside") on a nondescript house near the marketplace.

Stepping through the door, you enter a low-roofed, grubby room with no windows, poorly lit by a pair of paper lanterns. A thick haze of tobacco and opium smoke hangs in the air, and you can hear the rattle of dice. A circle of dirty, poorly-dressed men – commoners and ronin, by the look of them – are seated in a rough circle near the center of the room. A short, slim, bald-headed man in a dark sleeveless kimono sits on wooden chair, leaning over the circle. "Last bets, last bets," he chants, holding out a straw hat into which the gamblers toss coins. A moment later, there is a clatter as someone tosses the dice onto the floor in the center of the circle. Groans and shouts of triumph echo through the small room.

The man on the chair is Shosuro Aki. He was aware of the PCs the moment they entered, but will wait to see how they behave. If they do nothing, he will lift his head after the dice are tossed. "Yes, samurai-san? Can I help you? Or do you wish to try your luck?"

If any PCs decide to toss the dice themselves, they will automatically lose unless they have the Gambling skill (which is the skill of cheating – all the other gamblers have at least one rank in it). If they do have the Gambling skill, they must make Contested rolls of **Gambling/Awareness** against the other gamblers. The two ronin roll 5k2 and 4k2 respectively, while three of the commoners roll 3k1 and the other two roll 3k2.

How cooperative Aki will be depends on who the PCs are (Scorpion or non-Scorpion) and how they behave. Aki will (obviously) cooperate readily with any non-junshin Scorpions, so long as they do not behave foolishly. If other PCs are present, Aki will drop hints that the Scorpions should return alone later.

Non-Scorpion PCs who condemn gambling and turn up their noses at the scene in Aki's hut will get little cooperation from him, and will draw irritable looks from the two ronin sprawled on the floor. (These ronin

have their swords – this is no Inn where swords are left at the door – but will avoid provoking a fight with anyone who isn't a fellow ronin.)

On the other hand, PCs who are excessively polite or obsequious, or who seem more interested in gambling and drinking than in talking, will also get little cooperation from Aki. He will regard such PCs as fools and oafs, unworthy of his attention.

If the PCs are rude or aggressive, Aki will try to placate them, offering them a round of sake from a pot to one side of his chair. If they actually initiate violence, he will toss the straw hat full of winnings onto the floor, causing a mad scramble from the other gamblers – in the confusion, Aki will escape through a concealed back door. He will not be seen again.

PCs who take a pragmatic approach, or who manage to be subtly threatening rather than crudely threatening, will be most likely to get cooperation from Aki. He will be more likely to cooperate with PCs who explain that they are here on behalf of Shosuro Tajiki, or who express the view that whatever they are investigating is not a "Scorpion plot."

Once the PCs earn Aki's cooperation, he will shoo the gamblers out of his hut, then sit down, open his sake jug, and take a long sip. After offering a drink to the PC(s), he smiles and says, "Now. What do you want to know?"

- Tsume Retsu had only one vice, but that vice was gambling. "The dice seemed to fascinate him. He returned again and again, despite his poor luck and mounting debt. Perhaps he saw this as a battle, and could not understand why he could not triumph over chance as he had over the Lion. Certainly he attacked each throw as fiercely as a battle."
- Aki will firmly deny that he hooked Retsu on gambling, plied him with sake, or any other such trickery. "Indeed, sometimes I suggested that perhaps he should not pick up the dice until he paid off the debts he already owed, but he always cursed me and insisted that I offer him the chance to win back what he had lost." Aki spreads his hands helplessly. "What could I do? He is the daimyo. Such a pity the Fortunes did not favor his dice as they did his warmaking."
- Retsu finally seemed to get hold of himself soon after his debts exceeded 70 koku. "I believe he had many other debts as well, with other gamblers. Perhaps he finally added up the totals. In any case

he suddenly stopped coming here. I tried once or twice to remind him of his debt, with private messages. I had no wish to embarrass him publicly.” Aki smiles pleasantly. PCs may suspect him of Scorpion trickery if they wish. “In any case, he never answered, and I came to suspect the monies might be lost to me.”

- A local moneylender, Futame, bought out Retsu’s debts about six months before his death. “He offered me quite a good price, 85 koku. No doubt he intended to charge even higher interest to Retsu-sama, although I wonder if he could have collected – samurai do not often treat their debts in the same way as commoners.”
- Aki has heard (“from private sources”) that Futame also bought up all of Retsu’s other gambling debts. “It must have been quite a lot, all totaled up. I wonder what convinced Futame that he could persuade Retsu to pay. And of course, recently I have heard that after Retsu died, Futame forgave the entire debt. Quite the generous gesture. Perhaps his entire goal was simply to ingratiate himself to the Tsume family, though this seems a most expensive way to earn their favor.”
- Aki has no other information on Retsu, and suggests asking at the castle or the local Inn if the PCs want to learn any gossip about the late daimyo.

The ronin who are gambling here are two of the ones from the Golden Peony Inn, and have the same information here as there.

Geisha Houses

There are two geisha houses in Chikuzen, the Chrysanthemum House and the Pine House. Retsu frequented the Chrysanthemum House while he lived, whereas Takashi visited the more exclusive Pine House – where he met Reika, the girl from the Lion Clan who murdered his father. He still goes there, although the Pine House’s reputation has fallen due to Reika’s crime.

The *okasans* (madams) of the two geisha houses are Akiko (Chrysanthemum House) and Kumiko (Pine House). Both are proper, restrained women in their 60’s, who always appear in elegant kimonos and wearing full geisha makeup. Both are originally from the capital city, Otosan Uchi, and make a point of maintaining proper etiquette and manners.

In order to meet with either of the *okasans*, the PCs will have to arrange an invitation (any samurai who attends the houses will be acceptable, as will a letter from Tsume Takashi or Tsume Ishin). In the absence of such an invitation, the PCs will have to convince the *okasans* to violate protocol. A polite appeal which flatters the *okasans* and acknowledges the rudeness of the PCs’ demands will work best. (A bribe of at least one koku will also work.) Alternatively, the PCs can invoke higher authority (Glory rank, social position, status as yoriki to an Emerald Magistrate, etc), although this approach will antagonize the *okasans* and leave them in an uncooperative mood. The PCs will have to go through this social gauntlet separately with each of the two geisha houses.

Regardless, the PCs will have to come in the evening – during the day, everyone at the geisha houses is asleep. If the PCs try to barge in during the day, they will get little or no cooperation, and may even attract hostile attention from the bouncers. The Pine House has an especially large and formidable bouncer, Big Yoji, who always keeps a tetsubo ready to hand.

Once the PCs manage to arrange an interview, they can learn the following:

Kumiko will sadly recount how Lord Tsume Takashi (“he was just the young heir then, of course”) met the geisha Reika at a party, and later began seeing her regularly and sending her gifts. Kumiko was horribly shocked when she learned later that Reika had murdered the great Lord Tsume Retsu. Fortunately, Lord Takashi did not hold that against her establishment, but many of her other clients have switched to the Chrysanthemum House. She bitterly resents all the trouble caused by that “ungrateful girl.”

If the PCs ask about Itto, Kumiko scowls and explains that the ronin used to come by almost every day, trying to visit with Reika. Kumiko discouraged that, of course – a penniless ronin couldn’t provide properly for Reika. However, she knows they sometimes met away from the house when Reika was out on errands, visiting the marketplace or otherwise.

Tsume Retsu never visited her establishment – he frequented the Chrysanthemum House.

If a PC asks about Reika seeing anyone besides Itto and Takashi, Kumiko will smile and remark that Reika had many samurai customers. “She was one of my finest girls,” Kumiko sighs. “How could she have turned on me like this, and brought such disrepute to my house? And after all I did for her!” If the PCs specifically ask

about strangers, commoners, or about her seeing anyone else immediately prior to the murder, Kumiko will frown, fluttering her fan. Finally she remarks, “Well, I did hear some gossip that she was seeing some wealthy local, an old moneylender. I can’t imagine why – no commoner could have provided for her the way a samurai could. Just one more sign of the girl’s perversity.”

If the PCs ask about the brawl which killed Tsume Boku, Kumiko will be upset and embarrassed. She flutters her fan and murmurs, “Surely we can speak of something more civilized.” If the PCs are persistent, she sighs and explains: “It was a visitor, Doji Akuei-sama, a very fine lord who was passing through the village. He had an introduction from one of my old customers. But he brought a couple of ronin with him, uncouth wave-men. They provoked a fight with poor Tsume Boku-san, called him a prancing girl with a sword. After it was over, they fled. Lord Akuei-sama apologized, of course, and paid me generously in restitution, but the poor Crane samurai was still dead.” She allows a few artful tears to run down her face.

A PC can roll **Lore: Crane Clan/Intelligence** at TN 20, or **Commerce/Intelligence** at TN 20, to recall hearing the name of Doji Akuei as an extremely wealthy Crane nobleman with many political connections.

Akiko will happily confirm that the great Lord Tsume Retsu regularly visited her house while he was alive. She will claim that Tsume Retsu had no particular favorite among her girls, and came to her establishment merely to seek “rest and refreshment, relief from the cares and responsibilities of his life, as is proper.” However, any PC who makes a **Contested Awareness** roll against her Awareness of 3 will be certain that she is concealing something. In order to persuade her to tell the truth, PCs will have to emphasize that they have no animosity toward Retsu’s memory, and no desire to violate the privacy of Akiko’s customers. Privacy is paramount – samurai will not attend her geisha house if they do not trust that their privacy will be respected.

Although Akiko is a mere *hinin* (“non-person”), the PCs will find it difficult to threaten or intimidate her. Her status as the madam of a popular geisha house gives her the backing of Tsume Takashi, whereas the PCs are strangers here on a dubious mission. Physical threats will be of very little use against this 60-year-old woman, and she knows the PCs will never be allowed to torture her.

If the PCs do convince her to speak honestly, she will admit that, a few months before his tragic death, Lord Retsu began keeping his private journal – a so-called “pillow book” – at the Chrysanthemum House. He entrusted the book to her care when he left, and she would present it to him each time he visited. Akiko has no idea why he started keeping it with her instead of in his castle, and she will be very reluctant to give the book to strangers. If the PCs role-play a convincing appeal, she will reluctantly agree to give them the book. This is Handout #4 (Retsu’s Journal).

Itto the Ronin

To find Itto, the PCs will have to track down the hut where Tsume Ishin brought justice to the geisha Reika.

The hut is a small wooden structure, half-buried under snow, tucked in among some trees a mile outside of Chikuzen. Both Tsume Ishin and Koi the Innkeeper can provide directions to it.

The snow around the hut shows no footprints, and inside the building is bare, empty, and cold. To find Itto, the PCs will have to search the surrounding trees and make a **Hunting/Perception** roll at TN 15 or **Investigation/Perception** at TN 20. A success discovers sandal-tracks in the snow, which can be traced back to a small lean-to shelter deeper in the woods.

Alternatively, the PCs can wait here for a few hours and watch for Itto. A **Simple Perception** roll at TN 20 will spot him skulking in the trees, trying to figure out who these strangers are visiting the abandoned hut. If the PCs approach him or call to him, he will quickly retreat back to his campsite (unless they can convince him they are not here to arrest him).

Itto is a grim, haggard man in his late forties, with shaggy hair and an unshaven face. His skin is roughened by years of life on the road, and his clothing is ragged and filthy, but he keeps his swords in excellent condition. Confronted or pursued to his campsite, Itto will immediately snatch out his katana and demand to know who the PCs are and what they want with him.

Itto knows he is guilty of assisting in Tsume Retsu’s murder, and he will not willingly cooperate with anyone who seems likely to arrest him. He will be especially hostile and suspicious if the PCs have Cranes among them. “Why should I help you, samurai? Your affairs have nothing to do with me.” He will claim ignorance of everything the PCs mention, asserts that he never knew any geisha named Reika, and so forth.

If the PCs press him, insisting on his involvement in the crime, or try to arrest and question him, he will either fight or flee as seems best. (Itto has lived as a ronin for two decades, and is perfectly willing to run for his life.)

The PCs will have to convince Itto that they have no hostile intentions toward him. If they are lying, this will require a **Sincerity/Awareness** roll at TN 25. If they are actually telling the truth, and have no intention of arresting him, the TN is only 15.

If the PCs do win Itto over, he will share at least some of the following information with them. Exactly how much should be determined by the GM, based on who the PCs are and how well they present themselves. (Itto will never cooperate as much with Cranes or Scorpions as he will with other Clans.)

- Itto was a samurai at Shiro Kyotei when it fell to Tsume Retsu twenty years ago. He managed to escape the slaughter, but with the rest of his family wiped out, had nothing to live for except vengeance.
- He knew that Reika was the last daughter of the daimyo who had ruled Shiro Kyotei. He kept watch over her and, when she was old enough, told her of her true identity and heritage. He trained her secretly in the way of the sword, hoping to help her take vengeance on Tsume Retsu.
- Itto told Reika about the hidden passages in the castle, but he did not plan for her to murder Tsume. He had hoped Reika would be able to confront the old lord for a duel. “With time, I could have trained her well enough to defeat the old man.” He was quite surprised when Reika came to him one night, shaking with emotion, and told him she had slain Retsu in his sleep. She asked him to take her away from the Pine House, so he took her to the abandoned hut.
- Reika said someone else had helped her, given her a sleeping drug to disable Tsume Takashi so she could slip away and murder Retsu. She didn’t say who this mysterious helper was.
- Itto was away getting supplies, hoping to smuggle Reika out of the area, when the castle karo tracked her down. He blames himself for this – “I was not cautious enough about covering my tracks, the situation had surprised me so.” By the time he returned, Reika had died fighting.

- If the PCs question Itto carefully about this mysterious benefactor (e.g. asking him to think back, was there anyone else Reika was seeing, etc), he will scowl and rub his face, trying to remember. She had many customers at the Pine House besides Tsume Takashi, he points out. Finally he mutters that he saw her speaking a few times with “some rich commoner in the village, some moneylender I think.” He does not know the man’s name – Itto still has his standards, even as a ronin, and does not associate with merchants or bankers.

Itto will not offer the PCs any other assistance besides the information he has accumulated. He is waiting here in the hope that he can participate in a final Lion assault on Shiro Kyotei. He has nothing else to live for, and has no particular interest in solving the question of who arranged Tsume Retsu’s death. “It was not done as I would have preferred it... but dead is dead. Our family was avenged. Now the recapture of the castle can make my life complete.”

Part Six: The Moneylender, Futame

Eventually, the PCs should (hopefully) figure out that the clues all lead back to Futame the Moneylender. If they ask around about him, any of the villagers can identify Futame, who is notorious for his high interest rates and ruthless enforcement of his debts. He is an old man, but is known to have a couple of commoner thugs working for him.

If the PCs wander through the village, or make a point of identifying the businesses and artisans in the town, they can roll **Commerce/Perception** at TN 15 or **Simple Perception** at TN 20 to notice a small shop, tucked in a side street near the empty marketplace, with a narrow signboard reading “Loans and Brokerage.” Hanging at the bottom of the sign is a large wooden koku. There is always a muscular, thuggish commoner sitting outside the shop during the day, warming his hands over a small iron brazier and watching passerby carefully. At night, the guard is absent, but light can be seen inside the shop at most hours.

Visiting with Futame

The door-guard thug, Hotsu, will regard the PCs with a dour expression whenever they approach. He demands to know their business (using the minimum of courtesy to avoid being attacked by a touchy samurai). If they say they are in need of money, he will admit them. If

they say anything else, he grunts that “Futame-san can’t help you” and tries to send them on their way.

If the PCs are insistent or threatening, assert their authority, etc., Futame will slide open the door. “Enough, Hotsu-kun, can’t you see you are insulting our important guests? Please, come in, come in. I am always glad to help magistrates.” Conversely, if the PCs pretend to want to borrow money, Futame will meet them inside, smiling and chatting pleasantly.

Futame is a thin, stooped man in his late fifties or early sixties, with thin hair stretched across his scalp, yellow teeth, and watery eyes. Inside the door of his shop is a large room with several tatami mats, a small stove for heat, a low table, and a low writing desk where Futame seats himself. The furnishings are simple but obviously of high quality, and there are several fine paintings on silk banners covering the walls. A curtained doorway leads back into what you assume to be living quarters.

There is another thug inside the shop, a huge man with an ugly scar across his neck, who speaks in a rasping whisper (he is named, appropriately, Sasayaku – “Whisper”). He will say nothing unless spoken to, and watches the PCs carefully while standing with crossed arms.

A small, shy servant girl will bring tea and rice cakes for the guests while Futame asks what he can do for them. If they start asking him about Tsume Retsu, debts, and similar things, Futame will pretend surprise that samurai would be interested in such “mundane things.” He will try to laugh off the whole thing, suggesting the PCs surely have better things to do. If the PCs are persistent, Futame will share the following “information”:

- If the PCs ask about Tsume Retsu’s debts, Futame will pretend ignorance. If the PCs insist that they already know about the debts and Futame’s involvement, he will sigh and claim that he promised to say nothing. “I sought to serve the Crane Clan and the Tsume family, in my own small way, by disposing of those unfortunate debts. The expense was not beyond my means, and it seemed a worthy way to repay the Crane Clan for my lifelong prosperity under their protection.”
- Futame will deny any connection with the geisha Reika. If the PCs cite the reports of others (such as Kumiko or Itto), he sighs. “They must have made a mistake. I am far too old to chase after geisha.” This line of questioning will make him somewhat suspicious of the PCs.

- If the PCs accuse him of anything, Futame will seem both amused and indignant. “I can’t imagine why you would want to accuse someone like me, samurai-sama,” he says. “Surely you have more important things to do than to frighten a poor old man.” He will continue to insist on his innocence while trying to poison the PCs (see below).
- Any PC who rolls **Commerce/Intelligence** at TN 10 will know that all merchants have patrons in the samurai caste. If the PCs ask for the name of Futame’s patron, what he answers depends on whether he suspects them of knowing too much. If he suspects them, he gives the name “Doji Mumei.” If he does not suspect them, he gives the name “Doji Akuei.”
- Any PC who rolls **Lore: Crane Clan/Intelligence** at TN 25, **Commerce/Intelligence** at TN 20, or **Heraldry/Intelligence** at TN 25 is confident they have never heard of a “Doji Mumei.” The same rolls (at TNs of 20) will identify “Doji Akuei” as an extremely wealthy Crane nobleman with many political connections.

Poisoned Tea

If the PCs say enough things to make Futame suspicious, he will consider trying to poison them with the tea his serving girl, Kicho (“Precious”), is providing. (Kicho is actually a Kolat ninja.) He will certainly do this if the PCs openly discuss their investigation, reveal that they have discovered Tsume Retsu’s journal, or otherwise “blow their cover.” He will also consider it if the PCs try to have him arrested, although in that case he might instead rely on his political connections to protect himself.

If Futame does decide to poison the PCs, he will make a subtle hand-signal to Kicho. When she next emerges from the back room to refill the PCs’ teacups, the tea will be dosed with Wari Paseri (hemlock). There will be no discernable immediate effect, but after half an hour the PCs will begin feeling stomach pain and numbness in their extremities. If they immediately regurgitate the tea, the pain and numbness will subside and eventually fade away (the PCs will be at +10 TN penalty until then). Otherwise, they will die after several hours of increasing numbness and muscle failure.

A PC who is actually watching Kicho can sense that she is more than she seems with a **Simple Awareness** roll at TN 25. A PC who has realized this can

potentially pick up on a subtly different manner from her when she serves the poisoned tea. This will require another **Simple Awareness** roll at TN 20. Once the poison symptoms set in, PCs can realize what they are facing (and how to treat it) with a **Medicine/Intelligence** roll at TN 20, **Herbalism/Intelligence** at TN 20, or **Poison/Intelligence** at TN 15. Barring that, the spell *Hands of Jurojin* can save one or more PCs.

Arrest?

If the PCs try to arrest and question Futame, he will either try to poison them, or else go quietly and count on his political connections to protect him. (In general, if the PCs are Low-Rank, Futame will go quietly, since he is confident that they cannot make any charges stick.) While he is gone, Sasayaku, Hotsu, and the ninja-girl Kicho will attempt to dispose of any incriminating evidence in his shop (his ciphered papers and so forth). If they are interrupted, they will try to kill the PCs and then burn down the shop, destroying all evidence.

Visiting During Battle

If the PCs approach Futame's shop after the Lion army arrives (see Part Seven below), Hotsu will not admit them. Futame, Sasayaku, and Kicho will be inside hurriedly packing (and destroying anything they can't transport), preparing to leave the town before it becomes a battleground.

In this situation, Futame will plead the crisis of the moment, apologizing that he does not have time to speak with the PCs right now. "You understand the urgency of the situation," he says, pointing a gnarled hand at the approaching battle. "Please, honored samurai, permit me to collect my humble belongings and flee, before the scourge of battle overruns our poor town." He will make all sorts of promises (to meet with the PCs at a later date, answer all their questions, etc) to try and put off the PCs while he flees.

If the PCs force the issue, or try to arrest him, Futame will make a gesture and his minions (Kicho and the two thugs) will suddenly attack. Due to the shocking speed of their assault, they gain +10 to their initiative totals on the first round unless the PCs were specifically on alert (watching them closely, keeping hands on weapons, or similar). Futame will try to flee out of the back of the shop with some of his papers while his servants first battle the PCs, then try to set fire to the shop.

Futame will only fight if he has no other choice. He lacks skill in combat, but wears a ring with a poison needle, which he will try to use against any PCs who attack him. He will try to make this a surprise strike (meaning his opponents' TN to be hit is 5+Armor). See his character stats for details on the poison.

Capture?

Futame and his servants are Kolat fanatics and can never be taken alive against their will, nor can they be broken with torture. Futame himself has the ability to stop his own heart by reciting a brief haiku. The two thugs and Kicho will fight to the death rather than be captured or questioned – if they are in serious danger of being captured, they will stab themselves through the throat. Even if the PCs can somehow find some ingenious way of taking one or more of these people alive, they will never break under torture, and will go to their deaths silent and defiant.

Finding the Evidence

The back room of Futame's shop contains extensive notes and papers written in the Kolat's notoriously difficult cipher. In order to find any of this evidence, the PCs will have to search Futame's residence before his three servants can finish "cleaning it up." This will probably require a fight, since these Kolat minions will never willingly allow the PCs to search the shop.

Some PCs might decide to sneak into the shop (at night, or during battle). This will require the PC(s) in question make a **Stealth/Agility** roll against **Investigation/Perception** rolls for any of the Kolat inside. At night, only one of the Kolat will be awake (typically one of the thugs) and the PC will get a Free Raise against that person, due to their weariness.

Part Seven: The Lion Assault

At some point during the scenario, the Lion army will arrive. Exactly when this occurs will depend on which route the PCs took to reach Shiro Kyotei (if they took the "long way around," the Lion will arrive in one day no matter what) and on how far they have advanced in their investigations. In general, the best time for the Lion to appear is immediately after the PCs discover Tsume Retsu's journal, but before they have had a chance to confront Futame the moneylender. The PCs will thus be forced to track down Futame and try to capture his ciphered documents while the valley is being engulfed by battle.

If the PCs do not find Tsume's documents, or if they dither too long in their investigations, the Lion will arrive anyway, at a time chosen by the GM. Their appearance signals the closing act of the adventure.

The galloping hoofs of a Rokugani pony resounds through the still winter air. You see a dozen or more Crane samurai galloping up the merchant's road. They head straight for the castle, pushing their mounts as fast as they can go. Behind them, the dark shapes of many other samurai on foot can be seen. Some of them are retreating in good order, while others – mostly ashigaru and ronin – are running.

On the crest of the distant hills, you see sunlight flashing on the gold-brown banners of the Lion Clan. The Lion host flows down the hills toward the valley and the castle, unstoppable as the tide.

The gates of the castle open, and you see banners waving there, rallying the Crane forces. Many of the Crane troops retreat in that direction, but others are scattering across the valley and through the town, too far apart to reach the castle in time.

The PCs must decide what to do – stay in the town, retreat to the castle, or join the fight on the Lion or Crane side. Crane PCs will probably be attacked by the Lion no matter what they do, and Lion PCs will likewise be liable to sudden attack from the retreating Crane.

If the PCs attempt to stay out of the battle but remain in the village, the GM can use sudden attacks from the “Generic Crane” and “Generic Lion” NPCs to represent the effects of battle. The situation should be a chaotic and frightening one, with attackers suddenly coming around corners, buildings going up in flames, screaming peasants on every side, and so forth. At the GM's option, Matsu Gohei can make an appearance at this point.

Eventually the Lion frontline will sweep through the town and move up to assault the castle. PCs who are still in the town at that point will be confronted by larger and larger Lion patrols, all of them at hair-trigger readiness to attack strangers. If the PCs can manage to convince them not to attack immediately, the patrols will demand that they leave the village and wait in the Lion army's camp until the battle is finished. The local Lion commander (none other than Ikoma Gunjin) will have no time to spare for the PCs, and will keep them as “guests” until the battle resolves.

If the PCs retreat inside the castle, they will be in serious danger. The Lion army will soon assault the castle, bringing up siege ladders and battering rams. In the heat of battle the Lion will not distinguish between the castle's defenders and its guests, and the PCs will quickly find themselves on the Battle Table (page 239 of the *L5R Game Master's Guide*). If they are unwilling to fight in defense of the Crane, the PCs can request a truce while they leave the castle – so long as they are not Cranes, the Lion will permit this., and Ikoma Gunjin will provide them with an escort to take them beyond the battle-lines.

If any of the PCs voluntarily join the battle (on whichever side), they will immediately go to the Battle Table. On the first two rounds, the Lion will be Winning (as they sweep through the town) and the Crane losing. Then there will be a pause as the Lion prepare for a siege of the castle (see below). If any Crane (or Crane-friendly) PCs did not retreat to the castle, they will be in serious trouble – Lion patrols will hunt them down mercilessly.

The Siege of Shiro Kyotei

Once the Lion have swept through the town, they will bring up siege equipment and prepare for an assault on the walls of Shiro Kyotei. The siege equipment must be hauled up a single narrow road to the rocky spire where the castle waits, under archer fire from the walls. Nevertheless, by late afternoon the Lion are in position. Red-orange sunlight blazes from their armor as they begin the assault.

There will be two rounds of Even battle before sunset. As night falls, the Lion redouble their efforts. Any PCs on the Lion side (or who are observing the battle from behind the Lion lines) will realize that the Lion seem strangely desperate to take the castle quickly. None of them will say why.

The Lion will be Winning all rounds of battle after nightfall. Starting with the second round after nightfall, in order to keep the castle from falling, any defending PCs will have to succeed at three Heroic Opportunities and/or Duels for each round of Battle. Any Duel results should normally be the “Generic Lion” or “Generic Crane” NPCs, but at the GM's option, one of the duels might be Itto, fighting alongside the Lion to retake his old castle. A PC whose personal background includes a Sworn Enemy in the ranks of the other Clan might encounter that NPC here as well (the GM should create appropriate stats for such a person). Finally, if a Rank Three Crane-side PC draws a duel, the GM can

offer that PC a chance to confront Matsu Gohei if s/he wishes.

Failure to score three successful Duels/Heroic Opportunities during the second or subsequent round of battle means the Lion break through and overrun the castle. The PCs will be part of a small remnant, led by the karo Tsume Ishin, which retreats into the inner tower. There the PCs will encounter Tsume Takashi. He proposes to go forth and challenge the Lion commander to single combat. Tsume Ishin will argue against this, instead suggesting that Takashi retreat out the castle's escape tunnel and carry on the fight elsewhere.

If this happens on the fourth round of the night battle, the discussion will be interrupted by the arrival of the Imperial Edict (see below). Otherwise, the PCs' vote will determine what Takashi does – in the event of a tie, he chooses to fight.

If Takashi retreats, Ishin will urge the PCs to accompany him. "This is not your battle, and your voices will be needed in court to tell of what has happened here." The PCs can stay or go as they choose. If they stay, they will die – they have no hope of surviving against an entire Lion army.

If Takashi chooses to fight, Ishin will still urge the PCs to take the escape tunnel. "We are grateful for all you have done, but this is our battle, not yours." Regardless of what the PCs decide, Takashi will march forth alone, sword drawn, challenging the Lion commander to "face me, if you have the courage!"

If Matsu Gohei is still alive (e.g. no PC killed him), he will slaughter Takashi easily. Otherwise, Takashi will manage to slay several Lion officers before falling. Ikoma Gunjin, who is commanding from a hilltop across the valley, will not halt the battle to go fight a duel with a defeated opponent.

The Imperial Edict

The reason for the Lion impatience will become apparent if the night battle lasts four rounds. A horseman gallops up the merchant's road, accompanied by a yojimbo with a blazing torch. The man on the horse is a Miya herald, bearing an edict from the Emperor himself.

The edict commands the Lion to cease their assault and end this "unseemly winter warfare." Winter is the time for rest, the Son of Heaven declares, not fighting. Ikoma Gunjin reads the letter, grimaces with disgust,

and orders a halt to the attack. The Lion army sullenly retreats, leaving smoke, wreckage, and death behind.

If the castle has already fallen, the Miya will still arrive a few hours later. He stops, gazes on the scene sadly, and then turns away, his message undelivered.

What happens if the PCs don't fight?

If none of the PCs participate in the battle, the castle will fall on the second round of the night battle. Takashi will be slain by Matsu Gohei, the "Butcher." The Imperial Edict arrives too late to save the Kintani Valley.

Conclusion

If the PCs recovered any of the ciphered papers from Futame's shop, they can attempt to decipher them. This will require three successive **Cipher/Intelligence** or **Nazado/Intelligence** rolls at TN 20, 25, and 30. (Investigation/Intelligence can also work, but at +5 on the TN.) Each roll represents eight hours of intensive study. If any of these three rolls fail, that PC must start over again from the first roll. Each PC attempting to break the code must roll separately. No PC may attempt to break the code more than three times in a month.

If the PCs succeed in deciphering the documents, they learn that Futame was part of a wide-ranging conspiracy with members and operations in almost every part of the Empire. All PCs who read the deciphered documents gain one free Rank in the skill **Lore: Kolat**.

A couple of weeks after the PCs leave the Kintani Valley, Shosuro Tajiki will send them a letter asking them to meet him in the Northern Hub Village of Ootosan Uchi. He will listen carefully to their report. If they retrieved any papers (Retsu's journal or Futame's ciphers) he will ask that they be handed over. (If the PCs refuse, he will consider them Sworn Enemies, just as though they had failed to perform the mission for him in the first place.)

Assuming the PCs do hand over the evidence to Tajiki, he will be cautiously pleased (especially if they retrieved the ciphered papers). He thanks the PCs for their help and promises that he will remember them favorably. He also warns them: "This is not over. Whoever is behind this will not look kindly on our interference. I may need your help again soon – I hope I will be able to rely on it."

Rewards for Completing the Adventure

At the end of the scenario, any PCs with Shadowlands Taint must make a Simple Earth roll with a TN of 5 + (5 x Taint Rank). If the roll is failed, the PC acquires one additional point of Taint.

Experience Points

Playing through the adventure:	2 XP
Good role-playing:	+1 XP
Non-Kolat PCs retrieved Futame's papers:	+1 XP
OR	
Kolat-controlled PCs sabotaged the investigation:	+1 XP

Total Possible Experience: 4 XP

Honor

Kolat-owned PCs who successfully sabotage the investigation lose 3 points of Honor.

Glory

PCs who fight in the battle (on either side) earn 1 point of Glory for each Heroic Opportunity and 1 point of Glory for each victorious duel.

Also, see "Other Awards/Penalties" below.

Other Awards/Penalties

If the PCs successfully recover the ciphered papers from Futame, and return them to Shosuro Tajiki, they gain his gratitude. He speaks of them favorably to his fellow Scorpions. Any enmities which the PCs had with the Scorpion Clan are deleted (except Sworn Enemy: Bayushi Dainashii). Also, PCs who already have Allies or Favors with the Scorpion Clan gain 2 additional points of Glory as the Scorpion Clan promotes them in court.

PCs who successfully decipher and read the coded documents from Futame's shop gain one free rank in the skill **Lore: Kolat**.

All PCs who are not owned by the Kolat gain **Minor Enemy: Kolat**. If they already have the Kolat as a Minor Enemy, it is upgraded to Major Enemy.

If the PCs refuse to help Shosuro Tajiki with his investigation, or refuse to give him any papers they recover from the Kintani Valley, they gain him as a **Sworn Enemy**.

GM's Aid: NPCs

Shosuro Tajiki, Scorpion assassin and Emerald Magistrate

FIRE 4	AIR 3
	Reflexes 4
EARTH 3	WATER 3
	Perception 4
VOID 3	

School/Rank: Shosuro Shinobi 3

Honor/Glory: 0.4/3.7

Skills: Acting 6, Archery 6, Athletics 3, Battle 3, Defense 4, Etiquette 5, Explosives 3, Horsemanship 4, Iaijutsu 5, Kenjutsu 4, Law 3, Medicine 4, Ninjutsu (shuriken) 5, Poetry 3, Poison 4, Seduction 6, Sincerity 5, Stealth 6

Advantages/Disadvantages: Apparent Honor (2), Dangerous Beauty, Heartless, Shadow Brand (1), Social Position (Emerald Magistrate)/Dark Secret (Shosuro assassin), Sworn Enemies (many).

Equipment: Kimono, light armor, daisho set, poisoned shuriken (in hidden pouch), puzzle box (contains poisons), sash of an Emerald Magistrate.

Doji (Tsume) Takashi, Daimyo of Shiro Kyotei

FIRE 3	AIR 3
EARTH 2	WATER 2
	Perception 3
VOID 3	

TN to be Hit: 15 (22 in light armor)

School/Rank: Kakita bushi 3

Honor/Glory: 3.5/6.0

Skills: Athletics 3, Bard 5, Battle 1, Courtier 7, Defense 6, Etiquette 5, Iaijutsu 6, Kenjutsu 6, Kyujutsu 2, Lore (Crane Clan) 4, Meditation 2, Shintao 3, Sincerity 5.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Gentry, Social Position (head of Tsume family)/Dark Secrets (father's debts, father's death)

Equipment: Fine light armor, fine daisho set (3k2/2k2 damage), fine kimono.

Tsume Ishin, Karo of Shiro Kyotei

FIRE 3	AIR 3
Intelligence 4	Reflexes 4
EARTH 3	WATER 2

	Perception 3
VOID 3	

[Wounds are at +3 per rank due to Daidoji Rank One Technique]

TN to be Hit: 20 (27 in light armor)

School/Rank: Daidoji Bodyguard 3

Honor/Glory: 3.7/3.4

Skills: Athletics 2, Bard 2, Battle 3, Courtier 3, Defense 5, Etiquette 4, Iaijutsu 4, Investigation 5, Jiu-jutsu 3, Kenjutsu 6, Kyujutsu 3, Law 3, Lore (Crane Clan) 2, Oratory 2, Sincerity 3.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Bland, Social Position (karo of Shiro Kyotei)

Equipment: Fine light armor, fine daisho (3k2/2k2), fine kimono.

Itto, Lion ronin

FIRE 3	AIR 3
Agility 4	
EARTH 3	WATER 3
VOID 3	

TN to be Hit: 15

School/Rank: Akodo Bushi 3

Honor/Glory: 3.4/0.3

Skills: Athletics 3, Bard 5, Defense 6, Etiquette 2, History 4, Hunting 5, Iaijutsu 3, Kenjutsu 7, Kuenai 4, Kyujutsu 5, Nofujutsu 3, Sincerity 4, Stealth 4.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Social Disadvantage (clan ronin).

Equipment: Kimono (poor quality), daisho set, sandals, traveling pack, 4 bu in assorted coinage.

Shosuro Aki, gambler, Scorpion agent

FIRE 2	AIR 3
Intelligence 4	Awareness 5
EARTH 2	WATER 2
Willpower 4	Perception 4
VOID 3	

TN to be Hit: 15

School/Rank: Shosuro Butei 3

Honor/Glory: 1.3/0.8

Skills: Acting 5, Athletics 2, Calligraphy 4, Courtier 3, Defense 3, Etiquette 4, Forgery 5, Gambling 8, Investigation 5, Jiu-jutsu (Hand-to-Hand) 3, Meditation 5, Sincerity 4, Sleight-of-Hand 7, Stealth 4.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Allies (Shosuro family)/Bad Reputation (gambler).

Equipment: Assorted clothing, dice, 6 koku in various coinage secreted in different pockets.

Futame, Moneylender, Kolat agent

FIRE 2 Intelligence 5	AIR 2 Awareness 5
EARTH 2 Willpower 4	WATER 1 Perception 4
VOID 4	

TN to be Hit: 10

School/Rank: None

Honor/Glory: 0.0/0.3

Skills: Acting 7, Calligraphy 5, Commerce 8, Courtier 5, Defense 2, Etiquette 6, Forgery 7, Investigation 6, Jiu-jutsu (Hand-to-Hand) 3, Meditation 4, Poison 4, Sincerity 6, Sleight-of-Hand 4, Stealth 3.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Allies (many, including Kolat), Blackmail (many), Wealth (multiple ranks)/Dark Secret (Kolats), Social Disadvantage (heimin).

Equipment: Clothing, purse with 15 koku. Futame wears a ring with a sharp point for delivering poison, and carries a small calfskin-sealed bottle of pufferfish venom. If he is attacked, he will stick the point through the calfskin, dosing it, then try to stab a PC with it (this requires a successful Hand-to-Hand attack). A PC injected with pufferfish venom must roll **Simple Stamina** at TN 20 or die. If the PC lives, s/he still suffers from numb extremities for several hours (+10 to all physical TNs).

Sasayaku and Hotsu, Futame's Thugs

FIRE 2 Agility 3	AIR 2 Reflexes 3
EARTH 3	WATER 2 Strength 3
VOID 2	

TN to be Hit: 15

School/Rank: None (commoners)

Honor/Glory: 0/0

Skills: Athletics 3, Intimidation 3, Jiu-jutsu (Hand-to-Hand) 4, Stealth 4, Tantojutsu 5.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Allies (Kolats)/Dark Secret (Kolats), Social Disadvantage (heimin).

Equipment: Clothing, tanto (2k1)

Kicho, Kolat ninja

FIRE 3 Agility 4	AIR 4
EARTH 4	WATER 3
VOID 3	

TN to be Hit: 20

School/Rank: None (commoner)

Honor/Glory: 0/0

Skills: Acting 5, Athletics 6, Climbing 5, Defense 5, Etiquette 6, Jiu-jutsu (hand-to-hand) 5, Locksmith 4, Poison 7, Seduction 4, Sincerity 5, Stealth 8, Tantojutsu 6.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Quick, Strength of the Earth (rank one)/Dark Secret (Kolats), Social Disadvantage (heimin)

Equipment: Kimono, knife (very sharp tanto, 2k2).

Generic Ronin

FIRE 2 Agility 3	AIR 2 Reflexes 3
EARTH 2	WATER 2
VOID 2	

TN to be Hit: 15

School/Rank: None

Honor/Glory: 1.2/0.7

Skills: Athletics 3, Commerce 1, Defense 3, Gambling 4-5, Hisomu 2, Iaijutsu 2, Jiu-jutsu (hand-to-hand) 3, Kenjutsu 3, Sincerity 2, Sleight-of-Hand 3.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Social Disadvantage (ronin).

Equipment: Daisho (2k2 katana, 1k2 wakizashi), poor-quality kimono.

Generic Lion Bushi

FIRE 2 Agility 3	AIR 2 Reflexes 3
EARTH 2	WATER 2 Strength 3
VOID 2	

TN to be Hit: 15 (20 with light armor)

School/Rank: Matsu Bushi 1

Honor/Glory: 3.5/1.0

Skills: Athletics 3, Battle 2, Defense 2, Iaijutsu 2, Kenjutsu 4, Kyujutsu (Archery) 3, Lore (Lion Clan) 2, Sincerity 2.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Death Trance/Brash

Equipment: Daisho (fine katana, +1 skill die), light armor, bow with 20 arrows, kimono.

Generic Crane Bushi

FIRE 2 Agility 3	AIR 3
EARTH 2	WATER 2
VOID 3	

TN to be Hit: 20 (light armor)

School/Rank: Kakita Bushi 1

Honor/Glory: 3.5/1.0

Skills: Athletics 2, Battle 2, Defense 3, Etiquette 3, Iaijutsu 4, Kenjutsu 3, Kyujutsu (Archery) 3, Sincerity 2.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Quick

Equipment: Daisho (fine quality, +1 skill die to both weapons), light armor, fine bow (+1 skill) with 20 arrows, kimono.

Matsu Gohei, the Butcher of the Clan Wars

FIRE 3 Agility 5	AIR 3 Reflexes 4
EARTH 4	WATER 5 Strength 6
VOID 3	

TN to be Hit: 20 (30 in heavy armor)

School/Rank: Matsu Bushi 4

Honor/Glory: 4.3/3.4

Skills: Athletics 4, Battle 6, History 2, Intimidation 4, Iaijutsu 4, Jiu-jutsu 3, Kenjutsu 6, Kyujutsu 3, Sincerity 3.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Combat Reflexes, Student to Water/Brash, Overconfident, Proud

Equipment: Heavy armor, daisho set, bow with 20 arrows.

Player Handout #1: Letter from Shosuro Tajiki

Honored samurai,

I write to you in the Emperor's name, for as one of his magistrates, I serve him directly, spreading the blessings of law and peace throughout his splendid and beautiful Empire.

A most puzzling matter has come to my attention, one which I feel merits deeper investigation. Unfortunately, the many responsibilities which the Son of Heaven places on my shoulders leaves me with little time opportunity to look into something which may or may not represent a true threat to the peace of the Empire. Therefore, I have thought of you. Your names have been spoken to me as samurai of skill, talent, and honor. I am confident of your dedication to the Empire and your loyal devotion to the Son of Heaven.

If you can spare the time to assist me in my humble investigation, I will be in your debt, and you will be serving the enforcement of the Emperor's blessed Law. I am confident that a samurai of your reputation will be more than willing to assist me. Please meet me at the Inn of Hotei's Rest in the village of Ninkatoshi on the 6th day of the Month of Togashi. I urge you to be prompt, for I will not be able to wait there more than a day.

Yours in the service of Emperor Hantei the 39th,

*Shosuro Tajiki
Emerald Magistrate*

Player Handout #2: Letter from Shosuro Tajiki

Ronin-san,

I write to you in the Emperor's name. As one of his magistrates, I serve him directly, spreading the blessings of law and peace throughout his splendid and beautiful Empire.

A troublesome matter has come to my attention which I feel merits deeper investigation. Unfortunately, my other responsibilities to the Son of Heaven leave me with little time opportunity to look into this problem. Therefore, I am prepared to offer you employment as a temporary yoriki on my behalf. Your name has been spoken to me as a samurai of discretion and skill, who can be relied on to carry out the tasks for which you are paid. I am confident of your dedication and good judgment.

If you wish to undertake this task, I can assure you that you will be properly compensated. Meet me at the Inn of Hotei's Rest in the village of Ninkatoshi on the 6th day of the Month of Togashi. Be prompt, for I will not be able to wait there more than a day.

*Shosuro Tajiki
Emerald Magistrate*

Player Handout #3: Letter to Kolat PCs

You find this letter on the floor of your room one morning.

friend,

You have been contacted by a certain Scorpion individual who seeks your help. The matter on which he seeks your aid is one which should not be solved. What he seeks cannot be found. Whatever he believes he may know, is not to be known.

This investigation must not bear fruit. However, even the open sabotage of this investigation may tell more than should be known. Therefore you must see to it that nothing is learned, while giving the appearance of investigating honestly. You should not find this difficult. After all, bushido forces you to lie every day. And besides, you have already shown yourself willing to do whatever we require.

Do not fail. We will be watching.

Player Handout #4: Doji (Tsume) Retsu's journal

This is a small book crowded with hurriedly-scribbled kanji. Each paragraph is a separate page.

I have returned from that foul mission. I stood before the Imperial Court and lied, telling them a fool's tale of maho and madness, and the Scorpions smiled at me and praised my honesty. So now the Hare Clan stands condemned before the Empire, and my family's reputation is safe.

I spoke today with the creature F. I told him I had performed his filthy task, and demanded to know when he would clear my debts as he had promised. He simply smiled that simpering, disgusting smile of his, and remarked that I should have thought of that before I gambled away so much. I nearly drew and killed him, thoughtless in my rage, and heedless of the presence of his tame thugs. They could never withstand a samurai's blade.

But reason prevailed. I cannot have my family disgraced, my son and my ancestors made nameless ronin for my own foolishness and greed. Lord Satsume-sama would strip my name if he learned I had indebted myself from gambling, the sin of desire. This filthy creature, this servant of Scorpions, is right - I have done this to myself.

I begin to wonder about F. I assumed him a Scorpion, yet now through discreet inquiries I have learned that he is truly a commoner, and his sponsor is actually one of our own Clan, a Daidoji. Does he betray his sponsor on behalf of the Scorpion? Is he playing some double or triple game? I must learn more. I cannot have my family's honor held hostage by an enigma.

Last night I finally took action, but I wonder now if it would have been better to do nothing.

I pretended to spend the night here at Okasan Akiko's house, but after the house drifted to sleep I departed, silent as a Scorpion. So has my foolishness with the dice reduced me to that which I despise. As I have seen before, F dispatched one of his thugs in the small hours of the night. I followed the man, and sure enough, he approached the merchant convoy that was preparing to depart. A servant waited for him, and they exchanged letters. But I must have made a noise then, or perhaps their senses were unnaturally sharp. The thug suddenly spun about and pointed to where I watched from the shadows, and both men drew blades, long knives like tantos. Then another man, one I had never noticed, came out of the dark behind me! I cannot even say who he was, for he shrouded his face with dark silk. Only the senses honed on a score of battlefields saved me, and I barely got my katana out in time. Then all three men were upon me.

If you had told me yesterday that I, Tsume Retsu, the victor of Shiro Kyotei, would be fighting for my life against three commoners with knives, I would have laughed at you.

I would have said that no multitude of common trash could stand against the blade of a single samurai, let alone one of my experience. Yet against these three men I was fighting for my life. Finally I managed to strike down the merchant's servant - he seemed the least skilled of the three - and wounded the stranger. He and the thug retreated, and I hurriedly searched the wagon and retrieved the letter.

I am looking at it now, and I know I have stumbled into waters deeper than I imagined. It is F's hand, unmistakable, but written in cipher, some code I have never seen. Who was it intended for? Who does F serve? And... who am I serving, when I dance to F's tune?

The body was never found, nor any blood. I might almost think the whole thing was a dream. I have made inquiries, and learned that the merchant caravan was bound for Phoenix lands. The last one went south to Otosan Uchi. Is there some cabal in one of those places?

F dropped hints, in our discussion today, that he knew what I had done. He said he might forgive me if I showed proper courage on the battlefield. HE might forgive ME, a daimyo and a samurai! What monstrosity is this?

I have burned the ciphered letter - I do not trust keeping it here, or any other place. F expects me to start a war with the Phoenix. Enough. I do not dance to the tune of a commoner's flute, even one who holds my honor in his hands. If he does not work for the Scorpion, he cannot expose me credibly. Let us see who his masters truly are, and what they can do when their puppets stop dancing.