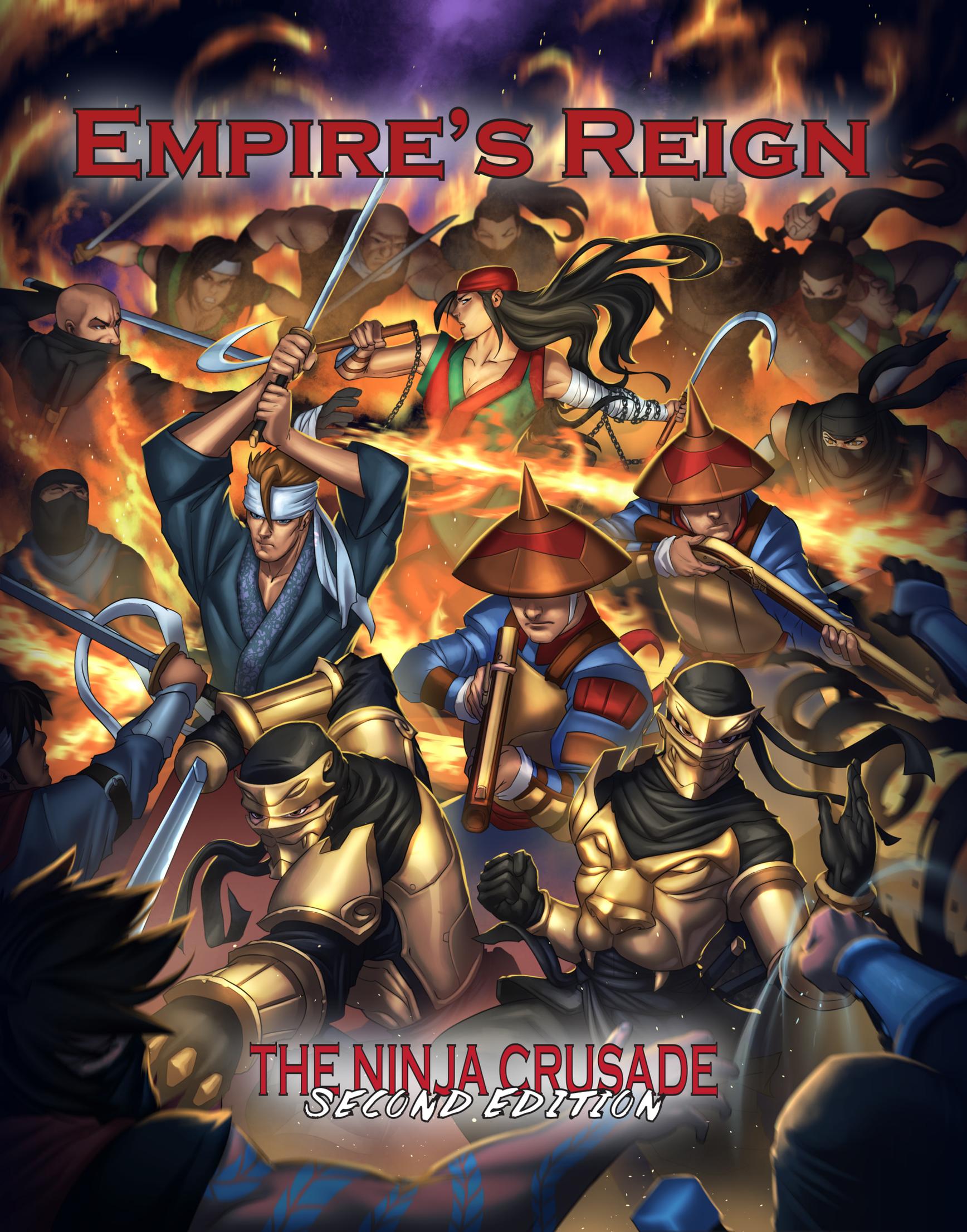
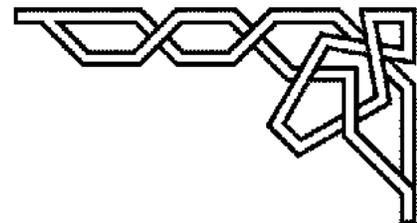


# EMPIRE'S REIGN



**THE NINJA CRUSADE**  
*SECOND EDITION*



**ISBN:** 978-1-944487-15-7

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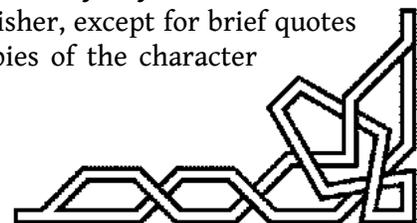
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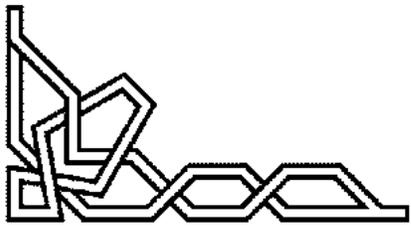
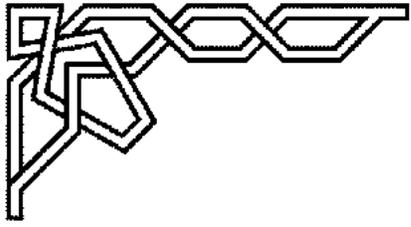
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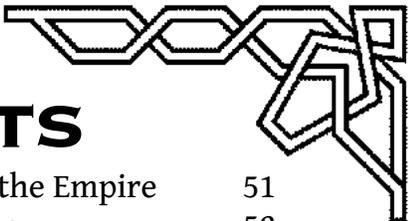
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Katsura watched the people gathering as he and the other troops marched into the city. A young man watched them with lips pressed together and hands balled into fists. A young girl watched solemnly from behind her father's legs. She clutched an old doll. When Katsura caught her gaze, she ducked out of sight. A woman watched from the door of a small shop. She shook her head and went back inside.

"Why are they staring at us?" Katsura asked.

"Maybe because we're so handsome." Okuda, his friend, said.

Katsura chuckled. They were disrupting people's lives; though that wasn't something to be proud of, it was for the greater good of the Empire. He believed that. The ninja were a menace and no longer useful. They terrorized the world and prevented peace from returning to the land. He hoped one day the citizenry would understand and not resent them.

The explosions took out three buildings directly in front of him.

Katsura took cover next to another building with the rest of the troops. People screamed, shouted or cried as they sought shelter. Ninja appeared through the smoke and attacked the soldiers, who were still reaching for their weapons. Three soldiers went down before Katsura moved again to press farther back behind a door. Their screams reached his ears through the heavy wood. Okuda pressed his back up against the wall next to Katsura.

"An ambush!"

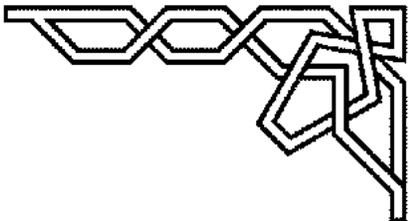
"Tell me something I don't know," Katsura said through gritted teeth. He pulled out his sword and rushed toward the nearest ninja. With visibility low, he guessed where the strike would come from and was lucky. Their swords clashed and Katsura pushed against the ninja with all his strength.

The ninja proved stronger than expected, and the rest of the battle faded away as Katsura focused on saving his own life. He ducked under a swipe and managed to backtrack into a doorway. Another soldier sideswiped the ninja when he tried to follow. By the time Katsura stepped back out, the battle was over.

The ninja fled, having given their warning, and would no doubt be back. Katsura looked around as the soldiers gathered together in the street. The smell of blood, smoke and fire filled his nose. Citizens started to peek out from their shelters. Some checked on casualties and wounded. Katsura stepped toward a soldier who was clutching her forehead and bleeding.

He stopped.

A small doll sat abandoned in the middle of the road. He picked it up; blood stained his gloves from the doll's clothes. In training, the instructors told Katsura death could arrive at any moment. Katsura understood for the first time what they meant. The ninja would pay for their attack and he would take this doll as a reminder of his mission.



# CHAPTER ONE: A MILITARY LIFE

*From the simplest means he came,  
A man blessed of wisdom and virtue  
To raise up the just sword in just cause  
To avenge his family's name and honor  
He brought knowledge from darkness  
And was granted dominion over land and sea  
Through blood, the land became whole  
And the land knew peace, unity and greatness  
His benevolence shines upon us still in his most holy son  
And may he protect us through dark and troubled times.  
Praise to the nation that bears its father's name!  
Praise Izou!*

This oath is taught to children at a young age, and they hear it throughout their entire lives. When those full of deep conviction and absolute authority say the oath, it rings out; a clear challenge to the rest of the world that the Izou Empire is unstoppable and its glory will never fade. But to the people of the land, it represents the belief that one person can rise up and bring about great change if they are resolute and follow their dreams.

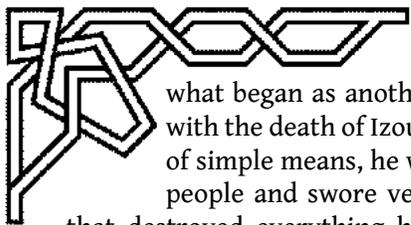
When the family of Izou Zurui, the first emperor, was killed, few knew this act of senseless carnage would be the

impetus of massive change. By all accounts, Zurui would have lived his life as many farmers do. He would have grown his crops in the lands of his ancestors and done his best to bring pride to them, fortune to his pockets and love to his family. Instead, everything he ever loved was taken from him and replaced with a fire that galvanized him to fix the world around him.

## RISE OF THE EMPIRE

Though the use of ninja had seen large-scale armies fall out of style, the growing strength of the city-states led to renewed tensions as they began to fight over territory and resources. The ninja had once been the ultimate deterrent to total warfare but now that the nations had grown strong enough to not bow to their threats, war became inevitable after a five-year drought forced nations to fight each other for control of the rivers and food stores. Soon farmlands became battlefields and villages burned throughout the night as the armies fought.

It may have begun as an insignificant skirmish on an ignored battlefield when the armies of two nations fought over a fishing village, but

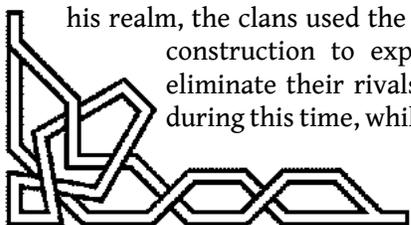


what began as another pointless skirmish ended with the death of Izou Zurui's family. A fisherman of simple means, he wept over the remains of his people and swore vengeance against the armies that destroyed everything he had. As Zurui slept after burying the remains of his family, he had a dream where he walked through a land at peace with his descendants living happily in a nation that was not divided due to differences of religion, language or people. He saw the people of the land living together in harmony under one leader, and as he walked down golden hallways with statues of the great leaders of the land, he was visited by spirits claiming to know his destiny. Zurui never spoke of everything the spirits told him, but when he woke the next morning he found a golden sword lying next to him and he had the image of a nearby dojo where he would learn how to wage war. Gathering together supporters and seeking out the ninja of the Grasping Shadows, he bargained with them for the means to raise an army that would destroy those who would ruin the land with pointless conflict.

The Grasping Shadows pledged to assist Zurui and helped him train his army, which used that elite training to become a fierce fighting force. Zurui excelled in his education, and soon would lead them against armies that dwarfed his own—but would be defeated through his clever use of strategy and bold leadership. He was a revolutionary and bold leader, and he never treated his soldiers as if their lives were expendable. Those who flocked to his side became heroes worthy of legend and song, and to this day many noble families in the Empire claim descendants from these people.

Zurui's armies grew, and so did the lands he conquered. Portraying himself as a liberator, Zurui brought doctors and scholars with him as he conquered new lands and would see to the needs of the people. He never burned villages to the ground or destroyed sacred temples, and he knew when to show mercy to defeated enemies and when to make examples of them. As his power grew, he found generals chose to join his side rather than face him on the battlefield, and soon he found himself the ruler of an empire far greater than the Orime Dynasty could have hoped for.

Though he was grateful for the tutelage the Grasping Shadows provided, the Emperor never fully trusted the ninja and was careful not to become indebted to them. He knew their loyalty would only last so long as there was mutual respect, so he very carefully began negotiations with other clans he encountered on his travels. Willing to leave them in peace so long as they did not threaten his realm, the clans used the opportunity of the Empire's construction to expand their own power and eliminate their rivals. Several clans disappeared during this time, while new clans were discovered



as their lands were brought into the fold.

When Izou Zurui died, he left behind four decades of peace and prosperity. The nation was strong, and it was said that when the Emperor drew his last breath a dragon was seen flying over the Imperial Palace. This dragon escorted the Emperor's soul into the heavens, where he remains to watch over his people for eternity.

Despite leaving behind a powerful empire, the Emperor's nephew, Izou Junshinichi, would destroy this peace by leading the newly founded Izou Empire through the Expansion Wars that would make up the majority of his reign. New provinces, such as the Iron Province, were brought into the Empire and new ninja clans were pacified or otherwise made to understand the benefits of joining Imperial rule. This style of rulership would continue throughout the centuries as an Emperor would follow one of two paths during his reign: that of the conqueror, adding new realms and people to the glory of the Izou Empire, or that of the administrator, who saw to the needs of his people.

## THE JAHATA REBELLION

The Empire's early years were not completely devoid of struggle, as the Jahata Rebellion saw a wave of insurrection that rocked the very Empire to its core. In the small city of Jahata, a famine destroyed the crops and the seas became even more dangerous as fleets of murderous pirates from the Land of Crashing Waves made fishing almost impossible without bribing the pirates. As the people struggled, a strange man came riding into the city on the back of a yak and preaching a new litany of religion that appealed to the people. He taught the people that they did not need to fear an unjust Empire that turned its back on them, and they could be their own masters. Emboldened by the monk's words, the people rose up in rebellion.

The rebellion spread like wildfire, and soon the standard of the Yak was in many villages across the Empire. Even Imperial garrisons began to turn to the monk's side, as some had not received payment in months and their own food stores had begun to run low. Soon the Empire broke out into open conflict, and the Imperial court argued with itself on what plan of action they should undertake while the Emperor, a young man who had assumed the throne after his father had died of the Wheezing Sickness, was unprepared for the task of keeping the Empire together.

His sister, Lady Sako, was more adept at military matters than her brother. Having studied hard under the tutelage of her uncle, she had begged her brother to give her a commission in the military and let her learn how to be a soldier. Though she struggled through the ranks at first due to her fellow officers believing a woman could never





fight as well as they could, she became known as a fierce and competent commander. She won her soldiers' loyalty by her brave and brilliant tactics that saw them win against forces many times the size of their own, and soon she became Commander of the Southern Legions. Though the Jahata rebels fought fiercely against her, she managed to cripple their forces with a series of bold raids and the rebellion ended with Jahata burned to the ground and the last of the Yak banners thrown on the burning wreckage.

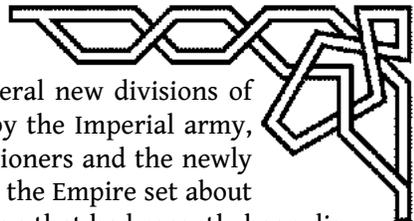
Of the priest who led the rebellion, few know of his fate. It is said that towards the end of the rebellion, a team of ninja stormed his stronghold and tried to bring an end to the war. Few records survive of that encounter, but the ninja who returned told tales of snakes with the heads of men and other creatures too foul to comprehend.

## THE NINJA CRUSADE

The ninja continued to be the source of legend and fantastic stories throughout the growth of the Empire. Though the conflicts among the ninja clans would occasionally force the Empire to step in, the majority of their operations were low key and kept to the shadows. Most ninja found gainful employment from the Empire, who saw the need for skilled operatives and would frequently employ them for their skills. As the Izou Empire grew, so did its people, and even greater and more magnificent discoveries and accomplishments emerged. Even when faced from outside threats, the Empire stood as a beacon of grace, power, and honor throughout the world.

This would change with another tragedy that would again shake the Empire and begin a conflict that would change history. The Emperor declared that a great purge must begin in the Empire, and that those responsible for the death of his son would be brought to justice. He immediately passed new laws banning the teachings of the ninja and ordered his generals to arrest even those ninja who worked with the government until their loyalty could be proven. This was not done out of hatred, but as a precaution against what the ninja could do—as the Emperor knew well what horrifying powers the ninja had at their disposal.

For the Imperial army, this was a welcome chance to finally break the one threat that always challenged their control of the land. The ninja had operated for too long with impunity and many commanders saw their ways as blasphemous and dishonorable. They wanted control of their lands without having to appease or otherwise avoid a group that was nothing more than terrorists. Aiding this endeavor were the Golden Lions, an ancient group of ninja who were the “Emperor’s Clan” and received personal permission from Mamoru to continue their jutsu practic-



es and teachings. With several new divisions of warriors being developed by the Imperial army, such as the dreaded Executioners and the newly revitalized Engineers Guild, the Empire set about their work using an invention that had recently been discovered: gunpowder.

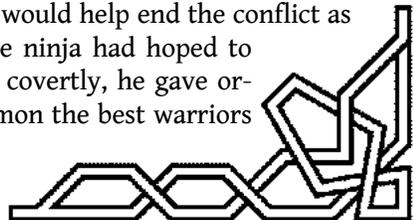
Once only used to create fireworks and for stage tricks at plays, the development of gunpowder as a military weapon gave the Imperial Army a formidable edge over the ninja. Though the ninja could strike from the shadows with precision and mystical powers, the army could now field soldiers wielding weapons that could pierce through almost any defense, defeating the antiquated forces of the few villages loyal to the ninja. Mamoru spared no expense in the training of his forces, and soon the Ninja Crusade began to purge the ninja from the Empire.

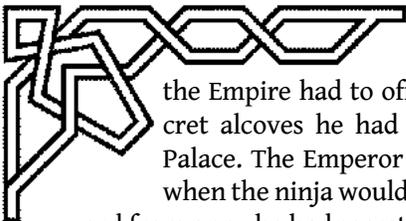
As the Ninja Crusade grew, so did the revenge tactics of the ninja grow more deadly and destructive. Despite protecting her with every resource at his command, the Emperor’s beloved consort, Izou Hana, was killed by an unknown ninja and her head placed on a pike outside of the Imperial Palace. Their daughter Megumi, whose voice was once said to be more beautiful than the dawn, was left suffering from the effects of a mysterious poison that continues to cause her to waste away. The Emperor’s wrath grew and he ordered no one to be spared in his war against the ninja.

This act of barbarism brought about a tidal wave of change. The Emperor sent his envoys to the people and spoke of the horrible things the ninja had done to him and to others. He told the people how he would end the tyranny of the ninja once and for all, and that no more would the people have to be afraid of the vigilantes that had long been outside the reach of Imperial law. The people, shocked by the the Emperor’s eldest son, and rallied behind their leader, bowed to his wisdom and sent their finest sons and daughters to be part of the new Imperial army that he was creating.

## THE IMMORTAL EMPEROR

As the war raged against the ninja, the Emperor received news from his spymaster Katosoge that the ninja were planning an all-out attack against him. The Emperor knew that if he traveled amongst the people then the ninja would use them as shields, and being a practical strategist, he set out to lay a trap that would help end the conflict as swiftly and decisively as the ninja had hoped to gain for themselves. Acting covertly, he gave orders to his generals to summon the best warriors





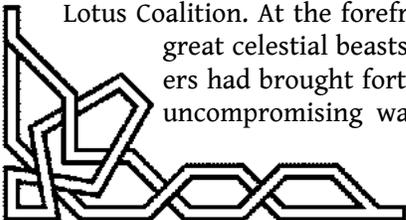
the Empire had to offer and hid them away in secret alcoves he had constructed in the Imperial Palace. The Emperor waited patiently for the day when the ninja would strike, and when he received word from a spy he had secreted among the Lotus Coalition that the ninja were on their way, he made ready for them.

The ninja met little resistance as they swept through the Imperial city and into the tunnels. Their maps led them deep beneath the palace and into the throne room. As the ninja emerged from their hiding place, one of their number saw the Emperor sitting on his throne and threw a dagger at his chest. As the Emperor slumped over on the floor, the ninja pulled back his robes to discover it had been a servant dressed as the Emperor. Their deception revealed, the secret passage sealed behind the ninja opened and the entirety of the Golden Lions, Executioners and several Silver Blades emerged from their own hidden tunnel and swept into the ninja like a bloody tide.

Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the ninja fought fiercely to try to escape from the room but, it was too late. The Golden Lions, known for stealing their powers for themselves, negated the one advantage the ninja had. The Silver Blades and the Executioners, who were notorious rivals, soon meted out a bloody punishment upon the ninja and slaughtered them in combat. As the ninja died, one of their number managed to break away from the fighting and retreated deeper into the palace where he had the fortune of finding himself in the council room where the Emperor, who had been escorted by the few of his bodyguards not sent to eliminate the ninja, had been taken away by his men out of fear for his life. The Emperor, seeing his best men fighting for their lives against the brutal jutsu of the ninja, could no longer restrain himself and drew his sword.

It is here that official reports drift from solid facts to myths and legend, but what is known is that the last surviving ninja, Danketsu, managed to escape from that room despite suffering grievous wounds. When he made it back to the Lotus Coalition, he delivered the great news that they had been hoping to hear: the Emperor was dead. The people feared their leader had been killed, and the Imperial court forbade any news from leaving the palace. No one knew the fate of the Emperor until several months later when suddenly the Imperial legions thundered forth once more. This time they were armed with more than sophisticated weaponry; they also knew the locations of even the most well-hidden temples and dojos of the ninja, and they did not spare any village that professed allegiance to the Lotus Coalition. At the forefront of the legions, marched

great celestial beasts that the Imperial Summoners had brought forth from the heavens to wage uncompromising war across the land. But the



## FAMOUS EMPERORS AND THEIR DEEDS

- ✦ **Emperor Zurui** – The First Emperor. Created the Izou Empire.
- ✦ **Emperor Junshinichi** – The Conqueror. Expanded the Empire's Borders.
- ✦ **Emperor Huhua** – The Blessed. Supported the arts and sciences, leading to the discovery of gunpowder.
- ✦ **Emperor Akono** – The Horseman. Led the fight against the Matamoto, a clan of Raiju demons that sought to conquer the Empire.
- ✦ **Empress Xia** – The Lonely Empress. Said to have led the Empire through famine and restored it to glory.
- ✦ **Emperor Gong** – The Corrupt. Spent the entire treasury on his infamous Golden Pleasure Palace. The only Emperor to suffer a humiliating death because of choking on his food.
- ✦ **Emperor Ide** – The Lawgiver. Said to have codified the thousands of minor laws into an easily understood system that is still in place today.

great monsters of legend and the bloodthirsty legions were not the only thing that brought fear and awe into those who stood in their path.

The Emperor still lived.

Emperor Mamoru rode at the forefront of his armies, and though he seemed changed by the battle, he was as strong and healthy as before. The Emperor seemed to be his old self, and the few times he was drawn into battle saw him fight with as great a skill as Izou Zurui himself. Despairing and unsure of how the Emperor was still alive, the Lotus Coalition gathered in their newly christened village of Danketsu and prepared themselves for a long, lengthy battle with the Imperials. To the people of the Empire, seeing Mamoru himself alive and well and taking an active interest in his Empire once more brought them the hope that the vicious threat of the ninja would finally come to an end.

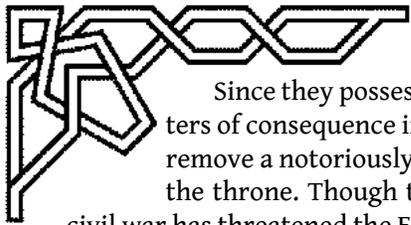


## THE THRONE

The Emperor of the Izou Empire is more than a hereditary ruler of a nation. The Emperor is seen as the divinely appointed ruler of the nation, whose authority not only has the support of the gods but of the ancestors of the Empire's people. Seen as a living bridge between the past and present, the Emperor defines the fate of the nation. A strong Emperor means the Izou Empire will see great fortune and stand firm against its enemies. A weak Emperor means bickering nobles, plagues and a poor economy will overrun the nation. While the Emperor's actions do affect the outcome of his people, more often than not it comes down to fate and how the Emperor will face their destiny.

Though the Empire is said to be run solely by the bureaucracy, the Emperor is the one absolute power in the realm. Under the Articles of Heaven, a document created by Izou Zurui and later expanded by Emperor Ide, the Articles outline the power and authority of the Imperial throne with the rest of the Empire. Indeed, while many provinces have assemblies or councils of nobles to run their lands, the Emperor may step in and change anything they see fit. The Articles do provide a guideline for how the Emperor interacts with his realm. Princes and princesses grow up studying the Articles so that they may be better prepared for when they may inherit the throne.

Though rare, there have been times when a woman has ascended to the throne of the Empire. Since the Emperor always chooses which of their children is most fit to lead, there have been times when the Emperor has chosen a daughter to assume control. An Empress has the same duties and responsibilities, but faces the chauvinistic tendencies of some nobles. They are forced to work harder to be seen as worthy of respect as a male would. Those who have risen to the rank of Empress in the past have not only excelled as a leader, but also led the Izou Empire through numerous hardships, more than earning their place in history.



Since they possess divine authority in all matters of consequence in the Empire, it is difficult to remove a notoriously poor or cruel Emperor from the throne. Though there have been times when civil war has threatened the Empire, peace has been maintained either through the Empire doing its best to deal with the Emperor's weakness or staying strong in the face of barbaric treatment. Only once in the nation's history has an Emperor been assassinated, and this was by one of his sons whom he passed over for rulership because of his particularly heinous nature. The son's name was stricken from the records, and the nation benefited from the leadership of Empress Xia, who although young when she assumed the throne, led the Empire for thirty years into a wondrous age of prosperity.

## **IZOU MAMORU, IMMORTAL SON OF HEAVEN**

One of the greatest victories the Lotus Coalition ever struck during the Ninja Crusade was when they believed that Danketsu had killed the Emperor. When the wounded ninja had managed to not only escape from the palace but return to the hidden village that would later bear his name, the treasures he brought with him were all the evidence they needed to believe Izou Mamoru was dead. His golden sash stained with blood, and the gem taken from the Emperor's crown were too perfectly recognizable to have been forgeries. Danketsu died without revealing all the details of his fight with the Emperor, but after that night, the Golden Lions sealed the Imperial Palace and an entire legion of soldiers locked down the capital. The people were unsure of what had happened to their ruler, and soon ninja messengers traveled across the land spreading news that the Emperor was dead.

The Ninja Crusade briefly halted, allowing the ninja to finally catch their breath and lick their wounds. Though raids from the Golden Lions and Executioners increased for a time, the Empire was more concerned with trying to keep itself together. Nobles began to plot and scheme, and the Emperor's daughter was rushed away to a secure location. As generals threatened to wage war with each other, the Imperial city came to life and the gates of the palace suddenly raised. Standing tall and wearing his battle armor, Mamoru walked through the city and greeted his people. He was strong and healthy, showing no signs of any injuries at all. The people were so amazed at his recovery that few questioned it, and across the Empire priests sang hymns in praise of a heavenly miracle.

The only sign Mamoru had changed was that

he became more proactive in his war against the ninja. Acting quickly, and displaying knowledge of hidden temples and bases scattered across the Empire, Mamoru led his army in a bloody assault that devastated the Lotus Coalition. Hundreds of ninja and their families were killed, and Mamoru seemed invincible. The few ninja who managed to fight their way past his soldiers died by his sword, and he moved with grace and power no mortal could match. Mamoru quickly became known as the Immortal Son of Heaven, and his battle standard was replaced with the sign of a phoenix rising up from the hilt of a sword.

Though given renewed strength and vigor, Mamoru's paranoia has not changed. He still suspects traitors within his ranks, and he does not hesitate to purge his council of advisors of anyone who is not absolutely loyal to him. When the Emperor sits at court, the room is often deathly silent, as few want to speak out of turn and say something that might offend him. Meanwhile, Mamoru continues to keep his daughter locked away from the public for fear something might happen to her. Some wonder if Mamoru will turn his eye outwards for new lands to conquer when the last ninja is exterminated or if his blood rage will be subdued.

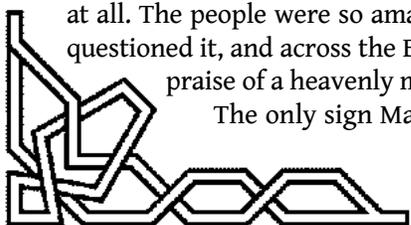
## **THE TRUTH, THE LIE, AND THE MYSTERY**

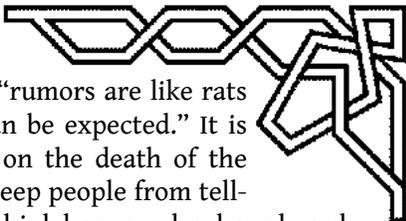
**Note:** This section covers what happened to Emperor Mamoru, and may possess spoilers that could change the outcome of the story for players who want to discover what happened to Mamoru on their own. Skip ahead if you do not wish to know.

The facts that have been slowly gathered over the years have been muddled with fiction and fantasy, and strangely there is little evidence that can be corroborated. A grand conspiracy is at work, but who its creator was is unknown. Curiously, there are few survivors left from the battle that supposedly claimed Mamoru's life. While nobles tell the people the fighting was savage or the survivors simply refuse to speak about it, it seems the majority of those sworn to fight by the Emperor's side that night have disappeared without a trace.

The following are known facts:

- ✦ Over five squads of Imperial soldiers and forty specialists were involved. Notable Imperial heroes Mitsuo Harama of the Black Smokes and Musashi Harama of the Silver Blades were among those killed.
- ✦ Danketsu, the only known ninja to survive the encounter, escaped from the Imperial palace and avoided capture.





## THE EMPIRE'S HIERARCHY

- ✦ **The Emperor**
- ✦ **The Crown Prince**, whose power is tempered by the wisdom of the Royal Advisor and their parent.
- ✦ **The Royal Advisor**, who is responsible for interpreting the Emperor's wishes and seeing they are done.
- ✦ **Reikoshogun**, the supreme military commander beneath the Emperor.
- ✦ **The Ministers**, led by the First Minister, and responsible for specific aspects of the government such as trade, logistics, art and more.
- ✦ **Lord of Domaru**, a position held by the eldest sibling of the current Emperor.
- ✦ **Nobles of the Court**, whose own internal power structure changes upon the successes and defeats they achieve politically.
- ✦ **Eldest Grandmother**, a position reserved for the eldest maternal figure in the Emperor's family. Mainly a ceremonial position.
- ✦ **Shoguns of the Fleet and Army**, who are given great authority over all military matters in the realm.
- ✦ **Imperial Governors**, who control their provinces and are the official representatives of the Emperor to their people.
- ✦ **The First Merchant**, who is the elected representative of the trade guilds and is their voice to the Emperor.
- ✦ **The Mayors** of each individual village, whose authority rarely extends beyond the reach of their villages.

- ✦ The Imperial Palace was locked down and hundreds of soldiers occupied every street of the Imperial City for almost a year. The public, presuming the Emperor was killed, became unsettled and people feared rioting in the streets.
- ✦ The Emperor emerged alive from the palace. He immediately reorganized the Imperial Army and called for a renewed war effort against the ninja.
- ✦ Mamoru has become much crueler than before, and the most common punishment he orders for any infringement is death. His dedication to the extermination of the ninja has only intensified.

As the old saying goes, "rumors are like rats and multiply faster than can be expected." It is illegal to openly speculate on the death of the Emperor but this does not keep people from telling stories about what they think happened or have heard from their neighbors.. The more cynical of their number believe none of them to be true, but can offer no explanation for what has happened.

- ✦ The Emperor is dead, and one of his bodyguards has assumed his identity. The court took their time to groom this doppelganger so he would pass even the strictest scrutiny.
- ✦ The Emperor was saved when a Celestial Animal was summoned and merged with his body. This animal is said to be a glorious Phoenix, who has gifted the Emperor with his resurrection.
- ✦ The Emperor died, and his soul was consumed by an Oni from the deepest depths of the underworld. This new Emperor's cruelty is the Oni sating its infernal appetites.
- ✦ The gods stepped in and deflected Danketsu's blade at the last minute. Danketsu was given his trophies by the trickster god in order to mislead the ninja, whom he believes failed to properly worship him over the years.
- ✦ Danketsu lied, and he stole the trophies on his way out of the palace, leaving his friends and comrades to be slaughtered. The Emperor merely sequestered himself away to prevent himself from being the target of more assassination attempts.
- ✦ The Emperor is dead, but his cruelty and dark personality have kept his body animated. His spirit refuses to leave until he sees the last ninja put to death, and his body is slowly beginning to rot beneath his armor. Emperor Mamoru must work harder than ever to accomplish his goal before his body disintegrates and his soul is cast into one of the Hells.

The Emperor jokes about his "resurrection" and has adopted the moniker of the Immortal Son of Heaven, but in private he has commanded that any who spread stories that he was actually in danger from ninja will be punished. This has not stopped the Emperor from using his immortality stories to strike fear into his enemies and, since his return, he seems stronger and more capable than before. The Emperor has become colder towards the needs of his people but still maintains the Empire and sees to keeping its borders safe and that food and currency continue to flow where they are needed.





## WALLS OF SILK – THE IZOU COURTS

If the Emperor is the head of the Empire and the people are its heart, then the bureaucracy of the Izou Courts is the body that holds it together. Though often the butt of many jokes, without the complicated system of government making sure taxes are gathered, bills are paid and the daily needs of the people are met, the Izou Empire would have collapsed in on itself long ago.

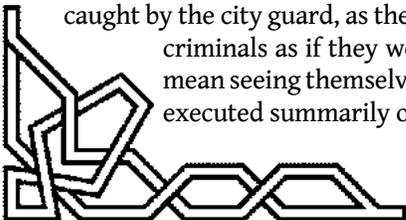
The hierarchy of the Empire is best summed up simply as “The Emperor Commands; the Empire Obeys.” From there, the actual execution of the Emperor’s edicts is left to a juggernaut of ancient traditions combined with modern law. To those outside of the system it might seem a convoluted mess, and in some ways, it is. The idea of the Emperor being responsible for every function of government is at odds with the ministers who control the government, but the system, for better or worse, works more often than not.

A great emphasis is placed on education within Izou, as it is a way for their families to advance. A poor family living in a city hopes their children may find a high-ranking position in the local government, and these positions are only awarded to those who can prove themselves to be the best candidates who more than excel over their rivals. Competition is notoriously fierce, and the drain it can place upon students has been the source of many plays and songs. But to those who manage to secure themselves a comfortable position, it can mean their entire family line is uplifted into a better caste than they were before.

The nobles of the Empire earned their status through many ways, with inheritance of grand titles and estates being chief among them. Others were uplifted by Imperial decree in recognition of great service to the Empire. Almost every noble house has control of the lands they live on, and many have control of key businesses in the Empire that provide them income. Due to the immense power they control, many noble houses consider themselves above the law. Often an Imperial governor will have to manage their politics carefully so as to not offend nobles living in their region and to make sure that the nobles do not undermine their authority.

The military, under the control of the crown prince, Izou Kano, is responsible for the defense of the realm. Although their power often only extends to warfare, many officers are responsible for making sure the law is enforced in the land, so it is not uncommon for soldiers to be the ones who carry out Imperial decrees or the enforcement of the law. A criminal who is captured by soldiers is often worse off than one caught by the city guard, as the military tend to prosecute all

criminals as if they were prisoners of war. This can mean seeing themselves banished to a labor camp or executed summarily on the spot.



## THE ROYAL COURT

The Imperial court meets at the will of the Emperor, but on average they will come to session twice a month. Since the Emperor does not want to trouble himself with having to deal with each minister and official in his government, he may schedule smaller meetings when only select officials may attend, but it is tradition for the Emperor to have his court meet in their full capacity routinely so that he can hear about every trouble and triumph affecting his Empire.

Full court is a regal and dignified occasion, where the political elite gather to display their wealth and power before their rivals. Court often lasts a whole day, with numerous feasts and performances scheduled regularly to entertain the assembled guests. New inventions are demonstrated before the wondrous eyes of potential patrons, and only the best soldiers are selected to be on hand to provide protection.

Around midday, the great bronze bells of the throne room ring and all nobles are expected to attend. Court is quiet, with anyone who speaks out of turn running the risk of being admonished by the Emperor himself, which can often doom an aspiring politician’s career before it has begun. The Royal Advisor is in control of the agenda, and those who need to petition to speak before the assembled nobles need to speak with them well in advance. The Royal Advisor determines the agenda, but although they are expected to act honorably it is not unheard of for petitioners to attempt to bribe them to obtain an earlier session with the Emperor. The court lasts for as long as it holds the Emperor’s interest, which means there is no set amount of time for how many are allowed to speak.

The exception to this is the day following the anniversary of Izou Zurui’s death. After a day of solemn reflection



### NINJA AND THE LAW

For centuries, the ninja of the Will of Iron were a force for justice and peace throughout the Empire and many Imperial wardens and constables came to rely upon them for aid in solving crimes and keeping people safe. Despite the Ninja Crusade, many Hagane still wish to continue this endeavor even though the Imperial Army now considers them all criminals. This has led to an “off the books” policy many captains of the city guard maintain with the Will of Iron. Although they have to try to arrest them at all costs, they also occasionally accept any help the Will of Iron offers them in exchange for denying their involvement. This arrangement, though scandalous if the Imperial Army were to find out about it, has helped keep crime from flourishing in the wake of the war.





and celebration over the great events of his life, the Emperor opens the palace to the public so he may hear their problems or arbitrate their disputes personally. Often considered the only way for the poor and politically disenfranchised to speak with the Emperor, some spend their life's savings just for the chance to get a few moments with him. Emperor Mamoru still honors this tradition, though his judgments depend upon his moods. Occasionally he dismisses an argument if he considers it too dull or he will give a strange proclamation and settlement of the matter if he thinks it will be the most amusing to him. Since his apparent resurrection, Mamoru's judgments have only gotten more brutal. Hundreds still line up to see him under the hope that his brutality will come down in their favor and against their enemies.

### **THE CRUSADE AND THE COURT**

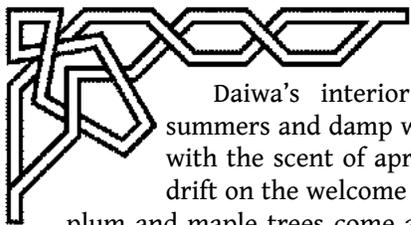
Though the court is firmly behind the Emperor, and no one would dare risk the standing of their house to go against his will, the matter of the great Crusade has been a topic of interest in the court since the beginning. Publicly every noble talks of nothing but support for the Crusade, but behind closed doors the nobles and elite of the Empire debate whether it is truly a just cause, whether it was inevitable and if it should continue. Some view the Ninja Crusade as a costly endeavor that has led to nothing but bloodshed and misery for the Empire. Others point out the dangers it has unleashed such as the

Summoner Skirmishes or the great latitude of authority given to the Executioners and Golden Lions who roam the land with impunity. The Emperor has declared that the Crusade shall continue until every ninja has been driven from the Empire or destroyed, but many in the court have begun discussing amongst themselves of another way to end the war without losing honor or earning the wrath of the Emperor.

## **MILITARY LOCATIONS**

### **DAIWA (MIDDLE PROVINCE)**

Also known as Harmony City, Daiwa serves as the Empire's beating heart; an everlasting symbol of sovereignty or oppression, depending on your perspective. It is the largest metropolis in the Ten Provinces, but Daiwa's permanent population is still uncommonly low due to recent events. Of its previous 800 thousand inhabitants, less than two-thirds remain in the city. Its spacious streets and public places have a leisurely pace, broken only by the arrival of envoys, merchants and the rare protestor. Indeed, for most of its citizenry, the terrors of war are distant memories, best left forgotten.



Daiwa's interior location produces humid summers and damp winters. Its spring air is thick with the scent of apricots, while cherry blossoms drift on the welcome breeze. In autumn, the city's plum and maple trees come ablaze with vibrant reds and yellows. Leaf-peeping celebrations are popular during these seasonal changes. An abundance of wildlife lives within the city's extensive parks, ranging from sika deer to tanuki. Song birds and monkeys chatter in the rooftops year-round, while spotted cats stalk the streets at night. Considered the Emperor's property, these animals fall under his protection – so the city-dwellers leave them alone.

Holding firmly to the past, the city's architecture embraces the folk tradition, with most citizens occupying wooden townhouses (*machiya*) serving as homes and businesses alike. Since its inception, Daiwa's focus on harmony has promoted *karesansui* (dry landscape) rock gardens throughout the city, even amongst its poorest residents. The largest garden encircles the Hall of Heroes Memorial, resembling a flowing river with mossy islands and frozen waterfalls. Wide roads and open parks create an airy quality, while its vast sanitation system and street-sweepers assure the city's cleanliness. This manicured appearance belays the dissent and fear churning beneath the city's harmonious facade.

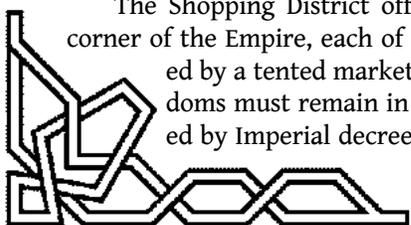
### **THE NOBLE DISTRICT**

The Siege of 757 IE left deep scars that are still clear today, particularly in Daiwa's Noble District. Entire Loyalist families fell, cut down in swathes, leaving their sprawling estates empty and untended. Most have disappeared under the rampant overgrowth from their gardens, hidden away behind walls of bamboo and vines. Occasionally, squatters like Untouchables and criminals occupy these moldering ruins. Even the once-peaceful Children's Palace – a playground for noble children – lays abandoned and desolate; a haunted place where restless dead and unhallowed creatures dwell.

By Imperial Decree, several estates became fortresses, buttressed by an intricate system of earthworks and canals fed by the Seimei River. In addition to increasing the city's defensive capabilities, these structures can quickly act as firebreaks. Recently, Crown Prince Kano has begun rewarding loyal members of the Warrior class with estates, much to the chagrin of the few remaining noble families. Several merchant families have also bought holdings here, insinuating themselves amongst the local gentry.

### **THE SHOPPING DISTRICT**

The Shopping District offers commodities from every corner of the Empire, each of the Ten Provinces represented by a tented market. Merchants from other kingdoms must remain in the smaller bazaars, restricted by Imperial decrees and tariffs. Tradespeople of



every kind work out of their family *machiya*. They produce everything ranging from lacquered armor to fine tableware, and specialized food items to alchemic components.

Many rare items can be found here, as well. For example, the Black Veil Market is one of the only locations outside Kokudou to acquire *kokuei* steel.

Traditional inns (*ryokan*) are also in abundance, each vying for the lucrative tourist trade. Due to the Noble District's diminishment, an increasing number of diplomats and travelers lodge here. Innkeepers have spent exorbitant amounts to fulfill their specialized desires, offering comforts from their distant homelands. This has encouraged a growing number of expats settling in the district.

The district's transitory nature holds other benefits, as Arata Koizumi of the Ika Clan has discovered. Turning his Herbalist skills toward beer, he has built the most popular brew house in Daiwa. Drunken guards and dignitaries provide him with vital information, which he then shares with the Lotus Coalition. More socially-inclined ninja often pose as travelers and merchants, hiding in plain sight.

### **THE KOCHOU DISTRICT**

Also known as the floating world, the Kochou District is Daiwa's pleasure quarter, offering artistic delights and nighttime recreations. Run by geishas, the district's exclusive tea houses (*ochaya*) allow patrons to indulge in conversation, drinking and traditional entertainment, such as games, music and dancing. Bars and restaurants create exotic foods and liqueurs, from the simplest street dishes to multi-course dinners. Private *ryokan* offer refined comforts to those unwilling to stay in the Shopping District. Communal bath houses are extremely popular amongst all classes. Those who prefer games of chance have plenty of gambling dens to choose from. Discrete lanterns mark hidden alleyways that lead to ephemeral courtyards and *machiya*. Here, courtesans of both genders offer sensual delights of every kind. Kochou's senior geishas grudgingly tolerate this flesh trade, receiving payments in coin and information. The latter, in particular, has given the geishas considerable political power.

### **THE TEMPLE DISTRICT**

Walled on all sides by a bamboo grove, the Temple District feels like entering the spirit world. Its austere and tranquil streets guide visitors past temples that predate the Empire. Within the district's heart stands Tengoku Temple, a massive wooden structure built atop a natural spring – its purified waters flowing eternally. So expertly designed, its sanctified construction is completely free of nails. Monks and priestesses attend to its countless celestial shrines, offering solace and healing to regular worshippers. Each spring, during the cherry blossom festival, all of Daiwa come to Tengoku to attend the Sky Dragon's Ceremo-



## THE SLUMS

Daiwa's slums exist, but neatly cordoned off from the rest of the city, hiding its squalor behind ivied walls. Thousands of people live amidst the crumbling townhouses and narrow streets, be they commoner, crippled veteran, untouchable or disgraced noble. The lucky find menial work in the city, but most live in absolute poverty. City guards rarely venture here, so crime is commonplace. Most of Daiwa's underworld answer to one person, Jirokichi; a cunning and violent man possessed of unnatural skills. Unknown to all, Jirokichi is actually a Celestial Rat who remains from the recent Summoner Skirmishes. He's amassing an army of lawbreakers, spreading his influence as far as Nanchou; for what purpose, however, remains to be seen.

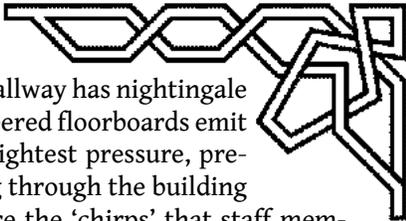
ny. Accompanied by musicians and revelers, monks parade a sutra-covered dragon through the city to the Emperor's Palace, thus assuring divine protection for the Emperor and his people. For most, this is also the only opportunity to catch a glimpse of their esteemed Emperor.

## THE EMPEROR'S PALACE

Manicured parks and gardens surround the Emperor's Palace, including the highest concentration of shrines and temples. Keyhole-shaped mounds rise from the central lake, their enameled structures glittering like polished gemstones. The tombs of former emperors, each is ceaselessly guarded by dedicated Silver Blades. Oddly, an honor guard stands over Emperor Mamoru's mausoleum – even empty as it should be. Food and souvenir stalls line the park, eager to profit from the pilgrims and dignitaries who travel here to pay homage to the Izou family. Each day, the towering palace's shadow traces across these central parks, a constant reminder of the Emperor's omnipresence.

From time to time, an incensed mob publicly executes a captured ninja here, in hopes of currying the Emperor's favor. Following the Siege of 757 IE, this trend has gained in popularity, attracting both the morbid and curious. Not all those found guilty actually belong to the clans. However, the extra coin from spectators helps ease the locals' consciences.

Even before Danketsu's failed assault, the Imperial Palace's defenses were formidable. Steeply sloped thirty-foot walls, and deep moats form concentric rings around the Imperial compound. Emblazoned flags fly above their ramparts, symbols of the Emperor's omnipotent power. The original palace, constructed after the Fall of Daiwa, consists of a singular tenshu-castle with hip-and-gable roofs, dormer gables and resplendent roof ornaments. Twenty stories tall, its copper tiles catch the early morning sun, visible for



miles around. Every palace hallway has nightingale floors. These specially engineered floorboards emit a bird-like chirping at the slightest pressure, preventing anyone from moving through the building undetected. So distinctive are the 'chirps' that staff members can identify individual footsteps, and even their location inside the palace. Secret doors and sliding walls allow guards to quickly move through the structure undetected and family members to escape during an attack.

With each subsequent emperor, the Palace grounds continued to expand and develop, each new Imperial family maintaining their ancestral households. In addition to these familial estates, there are numerous residences for the staff, guards and trusted dignitaries. Crown Prince Kano and his advisors live in the Imperial Barracks, staying close to their troops. Ponds and groomed parks decorate the expansive grounds, populated by exotic wildlife and faithfully maintained by an army of gardeners and zookeepers. A solitary machiya stands in the Northern Garden, guarded endlessly by silent Golden Lions. This is the former home of Izou Megumi, the Emperor's precious daughter. Many nights, the Emperor visits this lonely building; his cries of rage echoing across the palace.

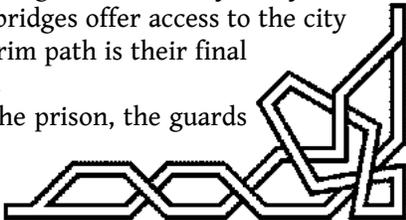
## NANCHOU (MIDDLE PROVINCE)

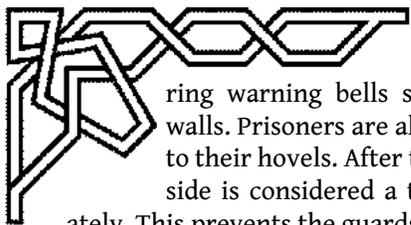
Nanchou originally served as the Middle Kingdom's main training camp during the Mercenary Wars. The Southern City rose and fell over several generations until eventually being abandoned after the Expansion Wars. Its numerous buildings and facilities lie derelict, consumed by the jungle, and would have remained forgotten entirely if not for Emperor Mamoru. Ever resourceful, he ordered the moldering ruins converted into a penitentiary to house the Empire's myriad criminals, traitors and undesirables. With the Ninja Crusade, the prison-city's population has swollen by tens of thousands, straining its already crumbling infrastructure.

## THE WARDENS

Two large military facilities secure Nanchou's North and South Gates, while sentry camps and interconnected guard towers line the city's walled circumference. Twin ranks of high, wooden palisades surround the entire city, each partition separated by ten yards of weed-choked ground. Feral dogs patrol this muddy stretch of hell, feeding off the bloated corpses of would-be-escapees shot by watchful sentries. Fortified sally ports at the main gates are the city's only entrances. Beyond them, drawbridges offer access to the city proper. For prisoners, this grim path is their final glimpse of the outside world.

When they must enter the prison, the guards





ring warning bells stationed around the prison walls. Prisoners are allowed ten minutes to retreat to their hovels. After this time, anyone caught outside is considered a threat and treated appropriately. This prevents the guards from being outnumbered as they move around the city. Riots are rare and dealt with harshly with guards using explosives and flaming arrows from the safety of their high walls.

## THE PRISON

Nanchou's lower wards are ruins; demolished and flooded, forming a natural moat around the city's interior. Most of the submerged sections are now deep-water rice fields and fisheries for carp, which prisoners tend to regularly. This slave labor allows the Izou Empire to continually feed its ever-hungry army. Many exhausted workers die from disease, drowning and snake bites; their bones littering the moat's brackish depths. The cruel fact that starvation claims hundreds of prisoners while they're surrounded by food isn't lost on them. However, the punishments for stealing the 'Emperor's Bounty' far outweigh an empty belly.

The ruined metropolis rises toward its original fortification in a tiered design hosting five districts in all. The lowest tier, the Scatters, consists of little more than a violent shantytown of collapsing huts and makeshift markets. Many prisoners never leave the Scatters, as new arrivals are constantly at risk of robbery, murder or enslavement by their fellow inmates. Case in point, the city's many gangs arrange 'welcoming committees' to take advantage of the weak and unwary. There's only one rule in Nanchou: You keep whatever you can take, including people.

As the tiers rise, buildings and facilities become more intact, offering better shelter and resources, as well as determining one's position in the prison's hierarchy. Unless necessary, the guards avoid these dangerous mazes, leaving the inmates much to their own devices. As such, dozens of criminal families and gangs continually struggle for control of the upper tiers, trying to wrest the highest point from one another. Turf wars are fought in the streets every night, mutilated corpses left as grim warnings. During the day, prisoners scavenge the ruins for whatever they can find. On occasion, an ancient cache of tools or weapons surfaces, tipping the balance of power.

## THE TRIADS

Currently, three factions dominate much of Nanchou: The Iron Dogs, the Deadly Lilies and the Night Foxes.

- ✦ **The Iron Dogs** are all former soldiers, led by Masa Tamotsu: An Executioner condemned for his brutality against civilians. Tamotsu promotes the worship of the evil Celestial Canine, Inugami. This includes burying enemies up to their necks, allowing them to die from dehydration. The bodies are then used in dark, magical rituals. In

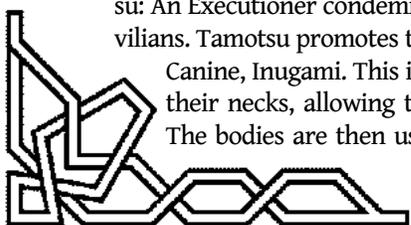
addition to their martial skills, the Dogs also control one of Nanchou's most precious resources: large caches of fresh water. Due to poor sanitation, diseases such as cholera and dysentery are prevalent throughout the city, especially in the lower tiers. Owning several massive cisterns, the Dogs lord this liquid currency over the prison population.

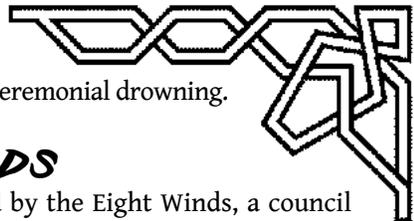
- ✦ **The Deadly Lilies** were former artisans, courtesans and educated women. Their leader, Rangiku Sato, once served as a geisha in the Imperial court until a Hidden Strand falsely incriminated her to further his political machinations. Her hatred for the clans knows no bounds, and she will kill any suspected ninja without hesitation. Under her command, the Lilies protect the female inmates from the prison's terrible life, if they pledge their lives to the gang. Extremely popular, their heavily-guarded brothels offer sensual comforts in exchange for coin and trade. Death awaits anyone stupid enough to break their strict rules of conduct, as the Lilies are experts in natural poisons: their favorite being wolfsbane.
- ✦ **The Night Foxes** have a mysterious leader; a figure known only as Noppera-bō (Faceless). Every member must murder at least one person to join. Once they do, they forsake their name, their station and even their face - hidden behind masks resembling flying foxes. They extort the other prisoners for protection at night. Those who refuse typically disappear. A Night Fox's rank is determined by the number of ears collected from their victims, worn around their necks for all to see.

## KIWAN (BRIDGE TO THE WORLD PROVINCE)

Established during the Orime Dynasty, Kiwan's high cliffs, deep waters and sheltered inlet offered pirates the perfect reprieve from storms and naval patrols. Its name, Turtle Bay, originated from the turtles that once nested on its sandy beaches, long since killed off for their meat and eggs. Over the years, pirate families constructed permanent docks and residences built directly into the canyon walls. After decades of piracy, the port's affluence grew considerably. Unfortunately, this prosperity enraged the Orime emperor, who sent his forces to conquer the city. The battle was short-lived, as the Imperial fleet blockaded the inlet while troops surrounded the bay from above. Trapped like rats, the pirate captains had little choice but to surrender and await their inevitable executions.

Much to their surprise, the Emperor enlisted them as privateers for his war against the Land of Crashing Waves. Thus, Kiwan grew from pirate haven to Izou's largest port and launching point for campaigns against the Land of Crashing Waves.





## SKY DRAGON'S CEREMONY

For several hundred years, the Sky Dragon Ceremony has played a vital role in Imperial culture. Honoring Emperor Izou Zurui, it depicts his glorious transition into the afterlife. According to legend, upon his death, the Sky Dragon carried his body across the Empire so the people could witness his sacrifice for them. Due to Zurui's humble beginnings, the ceremony is extremely popular amongst the peasantry, as several performers working together to puppet a giant dragon while they pull a reenactment of Zurui's last stand on a float behind them. It is a magnificent sight, followed by fireworks and celebration.

## EYES OF GENBU

Atop its twin headlands, two fortresses – the Eyes of Genbu – guard Kiwan's entrance and serve as lighthouses for approaching ships. Stationed here is a sizable Imperial garrison supplementing the Empire's naval yard. Beyond this narrow passage, the cove's placid interior is lined with stone quays and wooden piers, as well as an impressive shipyard at its farthest end. As industrious and vibrant as seabirds, inhabitants have built their city into the steep cliffs, using the many sea caves and wave-cut terraces. A spiderweb of rope bridges and platforms connect a bustling metropolis of homes and businesses, each decorated with colorful signs and flags. After centuries of riotous construction, this multi-level warren often disorients visitors to the city, and even long-time residents on occasion. Every naval industry has a presence here, from rope-making to shipbuilding, offering the city its continual independence.

The Rokuju merchant district surrounds the entire inlet on the cliffs above. A city unto itself, it serves as the home for traders, workers and visitors, as only 'native' residents can reside in Kiwan itself. Warehouses use giant treadwheel cranes to raise and lower cargo to the docks below. Under the harbormaster's watchful eye, dozens of ships load and offload in an endless cycle, running well into the night. Several guilds and trading companies have permanent headquarters here. The district also features one of the largest seafood markets in the Ten Provinces—perhaps the world. Some of the finest restaurants are here, cooking the ocean's rich bounty.

Worship of Genbu – the Celestial Turtle – has remained prevalent in Kiwan since its founding. To appease him for the past slaughter of his children, they hold festivals throughout the year in his name. The Voice of Genbu – the city's high priest – supervises all these religious observances, as well as imposes spiritual tariffs. Every family sponsors the public temples, while shopkeepers and captains maintain the lesser shrines that adorn every street and pier. Killing a turtle, for

any reason, is punishable by ceremonial drowning.

## THE EIGHTWINDS

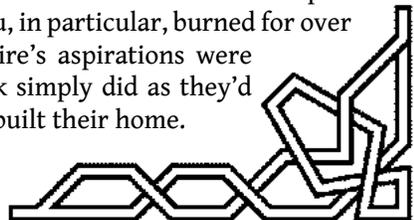
Kiwan itself is governed by the Eight Winds, a council representing the city's oldest and most powerful families of merchant princes and trader queens. They decide virtually every aspect of city management, ranging from berthing costs to declaring maritime raids. Divided like a compass, the four senior houses – the cardinal directions – hold two votes, while the junior houses – the intercardinal directions – hold one vote. On the rare tie, the Voice of Genbu casts the deciding vote. As the Winds' favor can create or destroy entire fortunes, infighting and corruption are rampant and unforgiving. Indeed, the junior houses are allying themselves with trading guilds from Fouchou, the Floating City, to wrest control from their elders.

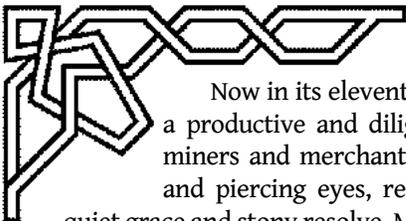
Supported by the Land of Crashing Waves, one merchant family belongs to the Wanizame – shark worshippers. They work to secretly undermine the Eight Winds, influencing their members through bribery, extortion and seduction. Each year, they conduct clandestine rituals to honor their patron goddess, which includes eating captured enemies.

## KOKUDOU (BLACK VEIL PROVINCE)

Like the phoenix, Kokudou has burned and risen from the ashes a dozen times over during its lengthy history. Located atop a prehistoric horst, the region attracted miners from across the continent, eager to partake of its mineral wealth. Their mining settlements soon blossomed into a thriving city. After decades, Kokudou's ceaseless forges rained soot for leagues in every direction, garnering the city its name: The Black Road. Much to the city's regret, this insatiable need for wood deforested the already bleak landscape, adding untold hardship on its residents. The old saying, 'Steel cannot grow rice no matter how brightly it shines,' continues to this day.

During the Expansion War, the Izou Empire used Kokudou as the launching point for its invasion of the Land of Exalted Flame. A massive fortress sprang from the wind-swept plateau, its watchtowers taking advantage of the elevated position. Builders worked tirelessly constructing barracks, armories and underground reservoirs to supply the Imperial Legions for their prolonged campaign. The city itself modernized and expanded, building over its ancient foundations. Tragically, all these preparations were for naught. The disastrous conflict unleashed destruction upon the entire province; Kokudou, in particular, burned for over a fortnight. While the Empire's aspirations were dashed, the city's hardy folk simply did as they'd done for generations and rebuilt their home.





Now in its eleventh incarnation, Kokudou is still a productive and diligent community of artificers, miners and merchants. Typified by their olive skin and piercing eyes, residents suffer hardships with quiet grace and stony resolve. Much as those who came before them, they live in extensive pit-houses hewn into the rock, incorporating ancestral dwellings and structures. Indeed, a family's prestige is directly proportional to the number of hereditary 'layers' in their home. Throughout the city, buildings and streets feature stone-graffiti that declare its people's stories over centuries – proving Kokudou's resilience to future generations. This inherent sense of community stems from the prevalence of Kasai worship; an influence of the Land of Exalted Flame.

In addition to its unsurpassed steel manufacture, Kokudou produces some of the finest engineers in the Ten Provinces. This stems from the city's disproportionately high population of artificers and blacksmiths, as well as skilled tradespeople. Out of necessity, most children apprentice early in life, contributing to their family prosperity and the city's survival. Local elders plan to construct an engineering college in hope of garnering Kokudou more Imperial support.

Although assailed on all sides, Kokudou endures like a desert flower amid the Black Veil's nightmarish wastes. Red

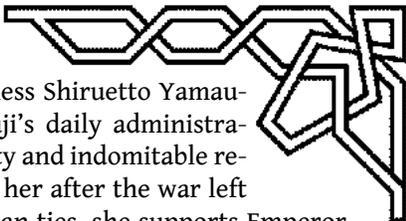
and yellow ochre paint its sunbaked minarets, while delicate tiles decorate its cramped archways. Sand-cats lounge beneath shades of woven leather, indifferent to the people pressing through the ephemeral stalls and shops. Richly painted shutters line every window, only closed to keep out the frequent dust storms. When the baking sun disappears, open malls fill with dazzling lights and exotic scents, patrons warding off the chilly night with sesame cookies and mint tea.

## HOTARU NO KOUJI (IRON PROVINCE)

In a land consumed by despair, Hotaru no Kouji's serene beauty and cultural diversity have become enduring symbols of hope. Initially built for war, the city developed into the diplomatic center for the Land of Seed and Blossom, the Land of Five Blades and the Izou Empire. Even at the height of the Ninja Crusade, representatives from these three kingdoms continue journeying to Hotaru no Kouji in search of peace and enlightenment.

Nestled between the Akino and Raion Rivers, the local watershed creates the perfect sanctuary for fireflies. In early





## KOKUEI STEEL

Kokuei 'night' steel is renowned as much for its durability as its beauty. The secret tempering techniques used in the forging process create hypnotic patterns of shadow and twilight. Due to the materials required, it is only produced in Kokudou.

summer, Hotaru no Kouji and the surrounding countryside ignite in a scintillating display of light, as thousands of fireflies begin their intricate mating dance. Visitors arrive from every corner of the Ten Provinces to view this natural wonder. For this reason, the city is known as the Firefly Path. Of late, more superstitious residents have been troubled by the increasingly large swarms of fireflies, which are believed to be the souls of casualties of war. For them, this ghostly pageant holds ominous portents for Hotaru no Kouji, which has been razed several times during its history.

Like its namesake, Hotaru no Kouji metamorphoses through the migratory influx of foreign merchants, travelers and pilgrims. Well-maintained bridges and canals divide the city into dozens of neighborhoods, each with their own distinctive cultures. Open-air bazaars and gardens prevail throughout the city, as well as lavish restaurants, ryokans and bath houses supported by the plentiful tourist trade. The merchant class holds positions usually reserved for noble families, owning impressive estates acquired from the profits of tea and textiles. An epicenter for aesthetics, the city has also attracted an impressive artisan community, featuring one of the Empire's largest kabuki theaters. In the shadows, a thriving red-light district offers untold pleasures to the more adventurous.

## PALACE OF THE LIONS

One of the Empire's architectural marvels, the Palace of the Lions' copper and sandstone spires rise from the city's heart like pillars of flame. Countless porcelain Shisa (Lion-dog) adorn its winding hallways, ever-watchful and rumored to come to life in the Palace's defense. Diplomats from the kingdoms of Izou, Five Blades and Seed and Blossom live and work here, negotiating the fates of their respective homelands. The palace's labyrinthine design allows them complete anonymity when needed; entire delegations stay for weeks without ever encountering one another. Dutiful monks attend to their every need, as well as keep the Palace grounds. Called the Silent, these men and women have willingly surrendered their tongues, lest they reveal anything overheard during their duties.

From the Palace, Governess Shiruetto Yamauchi oversees Hotaru no Kouji's daily administration. A woman of harsh beauty and indomitable resolve, the Will of Iron raised her after the war left her orphaned. Despite her clan ties, she supports Emperor Mamoru rather than the Lotus Coalition, believing the Ninja Crusade will purge the clans of their arrogance and corruption. Indeed, she supplies the Emperor with continual updates of the city's political climate. Unmatched in martial and diplomatic skills, Shiruetto protects her city and its people at all costs.

Maintaining Hotaru no Kouji's idyllic veneer is hard won. Its crimson towers and tiled streets are mortared with ash and powdered bone, grim remnants of former wars. Komainu, the city's constabulary, were an ancient sect of the Golden Lions – former guardians of the Palace of the Lions. They ceaselessly patrol the city streets, unmistakable in their red-gold uniforms. Incorruptible, they answer solely to Governess Shiruetto and dispense justice swiftly and mercilessly. Only the foolish or desperate dare test their resolve. Citizens turn a blind eye to their capital punishments, content to enjoy the prosperity and safety the Komainu provide.

A leftover from more violent times, Hotaru no Kouji hosts an annual martial arts tournament. Held at the end of harvest, the event runs for two to three weeks, attracting challengers from neighboring kingdoms. Fights take place on an elevated platform without railings, constructed in the city's center. Combatants must either knock their opponent off the platform, achieve a submission, or incapacitate them. Personal grudges are also settled here; although duels to the death are fortunately rare. The fighter with the greatest number of victories gains the title of Firefly Champion. Governess Shiruetto encourages this competition as a healthy release of social tensions, and has even been Champion – defeating ninety-four opponents over fifteen days.



The bound ninja glowered at Hideatsu, defying him from the basement floor where she lay. He sighed. Information would come forth, of that Hideatsu was sure; the ninja just didn't know it yet. He hadn't used a quarter of what he knew on her, and Hideatsu wanted to use as little force as possible. He raised an eyebrow at Yasumoro, standing in the darkest part of the room.

"I just make the information useful," the Golden Lion had said before starting the mission. "Finding out the information is your job."

Oname guarded the other side of the basement door. Her main job was to track the ninja and, as expected of an Iron Breaker, she came through. They received the mission before dawn and by nightfall they were here, interrogating the ninja.

Or would be, if the ninja hadn't turned out to have more fortitude than expected. Hideatsu squatted down and looked her in the eye.

"No one has to know you told us anything," he said. "You must have people you care about? You don't want anything to happen to them, and neither do I. We can stop the violence, but only together. We are all caught up in this mess and we can all do our part to make sure there is as little bloodshed as possible." He chuckled to himself. "I am sorry you feel that way. I will do what I can to make sure nephew is not hurt, perhaps we can get him adopted."

The squirming stopped and Hideatsu stood.

"You don't know anything," the ninja stammered.

A bold lie, but a lie nonetheless, because Yasumoro had brought that useful piece of information with him before they ever met the target.

"We just want to know where the ninja are going to steal from next. We know you scouted places for them and you know where they are going to hit. We want to protect our people and our resources—you tell us, we move the supplies and no one gets hurt. They'll find an empty room, turn back, and you will have saved lives."

Silence.

"I would much rather have you deal with me than anyone else. We have our differences, but in the end, we do what we think is right and hope for the best."

Hideatsu walked over to the table where the sharp implements of his trade shone in the dim light of the room. He looked them over, selected a long knife and slowly tapped his finger on the point.

"I have my orders, just like anyone, and my orders are to get the information by any means necessary. I just don't want to use all the methods at my disposal. Do you understand me?"

The sound of the people overhead drifted downstairs in the silence.  
"They are going to hit the Silver Turtle Inn."

Hideatsu smiled.



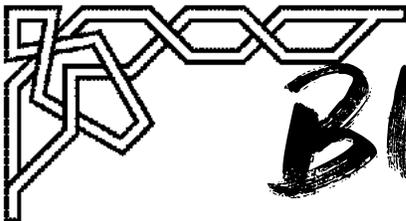
# CHAPTER TWO: ASSIGNMENTS

Even if they all show a profound devotion to the Izou Empire and fight against their land's enemies with all they have, not all soldiers are equal in capability. An Izou soldier must follow orders and respect the hierarchy established centuries ago, but each of them should strive to be better than the soldier beside them. By showing one's talents on the battlefield, they can prove their worth to join one of several exclusive Assignments. Each has its own requirements and qualifying tests, but being chosen means you are a step above a foot-soldier and endowed with special advantages, sometimes mystical in origin.

Some Assignments work well together, while others may have diametrically opposed viewpoints that could put them at odds. Black Smokes and Engineers work well together, making up a refined ranged assault, while Golden Lions and Iron Breakers both wield stolen ninja power and often collaborate. On the other hand, tactics employed by Jadesmiths and Executioners are known to collide in the worst of ways, and the Enlightened and Sil-

ver Blades rival over whose fighting expertise is superior. In the end, however, they all have a mission, and they must work together. They face a much larger threat in the ninja, after all, so most believe cooperation against all odds is the only way they'll make it out alive.

- Black Smokes (pg. 22)
- Engineers (pg. 24)
- The Enlightened (pg. 26)
- Executioners (pg. 28)
- Golden Lions (pg. 30)
- Iron Breakers (pg. 32)
- Jadesmiths (pg. 34)
- Silver Blades (pg. 36)



# Black Smokes

- ✦ **Other Names:** Aines, Shatters, Black Powder Brigade
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** The future, Thrill-seekers, Playing a dangerous game
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Weapon Style: Ranged, Fighting Style: Eagle or Wildcat, Alchemy
- ✦ **Favored Tactics:** Way of the Gun (pg. 75)
- ✦ **Skills:** Athletics +1, Marksman +1, Perception +1, Perform +1

## HISTORY

There was once a time when mixing sulfur, charcoal and saltpeter was known only as black powder and it was only used to create fireworks to light up the night sky and for simple magic tricks. It wasn't long, however, before clever users figured out it was also a powerful explosive agent, capable of causing destruction on a scale humanity hadn't seen since the invention of the katana. The Empire began hoarding the majority of black powder, now also called gunpowder, placing it in the care of the Black Powder Brigade. They followed the Engineer's Guild around, hauling their wares and loading their weapons when necessary. Even though the engineers knew their way around gadgets and explosives, they did not see the delicate nature of their new tools.

With the help of a few discrete inventors, the Black Powder Brigade created the very first firearms. These amazing weapons elevated gunpowder from a purely destructive force to a thing of beauty. Its feel, its sound, it is all completely different from any other tool in the Empire's arsenal. Members of the Brigade were often called Aines, due to their love of the sound of a bullet firing; it became euphoric for many of them. The Brigade's numbers appealed to the Emperor for their own authorities and responsibilities, hoping to prove to their exalted leader they could handle them. In the end, they donned the moniker of the Black Smokes, and became the soldiers who turned the tide during the Expansion Wars. Other nations bowed before their superior technological advances, and the Empire became the force it is known as today.

The Black Smokes are just as integral to the Empire's success during the Ninja Crusade. The

ninja are quick to use their jutsu and martial training to best a common soldier, but one trained in the ways of firearms can take on dozens of ninja without breaking a sweat. A bullet is the ultimate equalizer in a war against magic-wielding enemies, easily neutralizing a foe before they can perform their hand symbols, and while anyone can hold a gun and fire it, it takes a Black Smoke to really make it sing.

## LIFESTYLE

The lifestyle of a Black Smoke differs little from that of a common soldier. They take commands from their officers, fall out into squads balanced to maximize their advantage in the field and ultimately take on the enemy. Instead of charging forth with a sword or spear, however, the Black Smokes hold back, take aim and strike down their enemy from afar. Those in the Brigade who do jump into the action employ smaller sidearms, twirling and firing in close combat as they dance through a battle. They believe that to use a gun is to be an artist; the battlefield is their canvas and the blood of their enemies is their paint, making their firearms the perfect instrument to create their art. Some members of the Black Smoke Brigade make a race out of how many targets they can fell, comparing their tallies at the end of a battle with the winner taking the loser's favorite firearm. Others become obsessed with their creations, believing that firing a bullet is like losing a piece of their soul. In exchange, they often take their victims' eyes with them as trophies, which are then dried, ground and mixed with the gunpowder to ensure they kill their target again.

When they are not on assignment, they are holed-up in their mines, extracting more gunpowder ingredients from the Earth or are melting and pouring their own bullets. They prefer to extract their own materials, creating better-quality gunpowder than can be found anywhere else. Both are time-consuming projects, but ones they happily perform. There is a reason why the Black Smokes have remained in charge of firearms for nearly a century... they hold the secrets of bullet creation, the mixing of gunpowder and the best sources of its ingredients and are not about to share them with anyone.

## MISSIONS

Compared to the number of foot soldiers in the Izou Army, the Black Smokes are quite diminutive. For every ten foot soldiers, there is likely only a single Aine. Of course, with their special training, they are also often more capable than your average soldier. They are versatile; useful in almost any kind of mission, except for stealth operations, as they are quite fond of the loud sounds their tools create. Some prefer to use smaller, more accurate weapons, while others prefer larger rifles that let them operate from a distance. Rifle-wielders are great for long-distance attacks and sniping an enemy before they ever know what's coming. Pistoleers, on the other hand, get up close to their targets and eliminate them with flair and attitude. In the end, the Emperor knows not to send a firearm to handle a problem a sword can handle more discreetly.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - One with the Gun:** Members of the Black Powder Brigade are trained in one of two ways to fight: up close and at a distance. Players pick one for their soldier. Up-close characters gain +1 Marksman when using firearms at Close Range and gain a +1 bonus to all Dodge rolls. Distance characters gain +1 Marksman when using any weapon with the Ranged Quality and gain a +3 bonus to their next ranged attack when they use a Plan Attack Action. Regardless of their training, however, all Black Smokes receive +1 Initiative, as they are often the first to strike in Battle.

◆ **Trigger - Powder Runs Dry:** Black Smokes are completely dependent on their firearms, often forgoing any kind of backup weapon or training with anything other than their favorite tool. This leaves them in a terrible situation if they ever run out of ammo. Gain 1

Karma when the character is left defenseless because of their reliance on their guns.

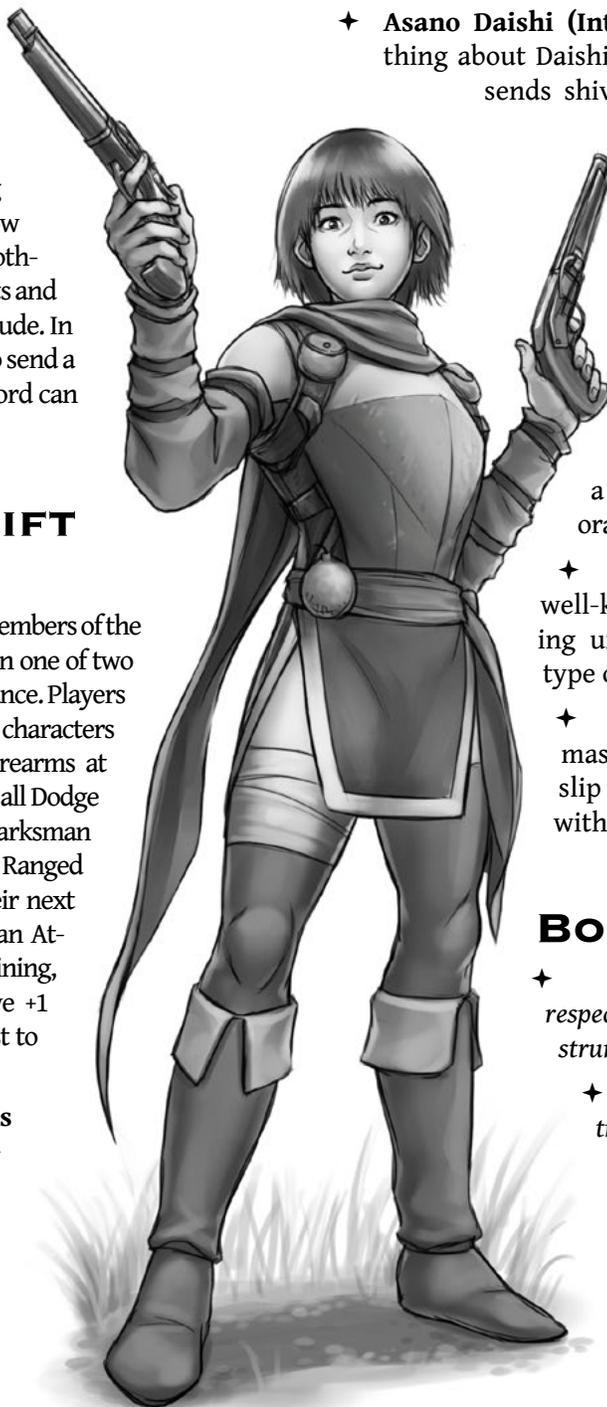
## CONTACTS

Choose one Ally and one Rival.

- ✦ **Torisei Teto (Empathy)** - Teto is a warrior who knows no fear and looks death in the face almost every day.
- ✦ **Asano Daishi (Intimidation)** - There's just something about Daishi and the way he holds guns that sends shivers down his target's spine. It's bad to be his target.
- ✦ **Sugai Chiemi (Survival)** - Being a miner means she knows her way around the rocky cliffs of the Izou Empire. Chiemi can make a mission much easier or much harder.
- ✦ **Fukuoka Zennosuke (Perform)** - Zennosuke is a talented politician, capable of moving a crowd to a frenzy with his skills in oration.
- ✦ **Takishita Juri (Crafts)** - She is a well-known gunsmith, capable of crafting unique bullets to take down any type of foe.
- ✦ **Egami Yachiho (Deception)** - A master of disguise, she knows how to slip in and out of almost any location with just a few choice words.

## BONDS

- ✦ Choose one other character who you respect for their artistry, even if their instruments differ from your own.
- ✦ Choose one other character who distrusts firearms, and always goes out of their way to show you that traditional weapons are superior.
- ✦ Choose one other character who has needed your help on the battlefield on more than one occasion, and is expecting to have to pay you back soon.





# Engineers

- ✦ **Other Names:** Imperial Inventor's Guild, Sages, Builders
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Crazy, Impractical, Radical
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Weapon Style: Ranged or Paired, Trap Master, Fighting Style: Snake
- ✦ **Favored Tactics:** Ingenuity (pg. 63)
- ✦ **Skills:** Crafts +1, Intuition +1, Knowledge +1, Marksman +1

## HISTORY

The Engineers are a secret order; to which the Emperor has only recently given his blessing for their true intentions. Once considered another facet of the Imperial Army, the Engineers would work on designs to build aqueducts and dig trenches using ancient, but standard, principles. Thanks to the Emperor's great grandfather, Emperor Han, taking a renewed interest in their work and seeing the usefulness of their strange philosophies, the Engineers have become an institution of scientist-philosophers whose goal is to expand the sum of human knowledge and to test their creations outside of the confines of their laboratories.

It started with a man named Hinshin and his daughter, Nakomi. Hinshin was a strange man whose designs for machines that could fire hundreds of fireworks into the air drew the attention of crowds during festivals but had no practical use outside of it. Meanwhile the Empire was at war with the Matamoto, a clan of Raiju demons who invaded several towns within the Empire. As Nakomi watched one of Hinshin's machines shoot fireworks into the sky to try to calm down the people of the Empire, she had a powerful idea. Taking several of Hinshin's designs, she expanded upon them. When a wave of attacking demons set upon the local garrison and almost overwhelmed it, Nakomi revealed her new war machines, which blasted the enemy's lines apart and led to victory. News of these machines reached Emperor Akono, who made Nakomi and her father the new commanders of the Imperial Engineers.

Since then, the Engineers have advanced science and rational thinking while trying to perfect their marvelous machines. Though some machines

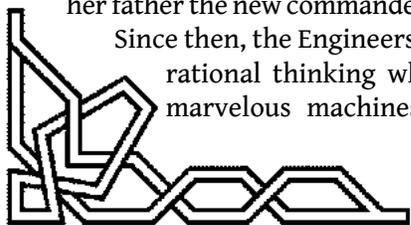
are accident-prone or seem too convoluted to be of any practical use, the Engineers seek to test their inventions in the real world and to build upon their results. "Whether the experiment succeeds or fails, learning from it is the true success" has been the unofficial motto of the Engineers. Equally praised and reviled by their comrades in the Imperial army, the Engineers are almost always essential to any campaign succeeding.

## LIFESTYLE

Engineers celebrate both order and chaos, as they have had to combine centuries of practical knowledge with a sudden influx of increasingly strange, yet powerful, theories. For years, they obeyed the Emperor's command of only researching practical things to aid the Empire, but now they have been encouraged to seek new means, causing them to splinter into many branches of philosophies and ideas. This makes the Engineers often hard to get along with, as the traditionalists do not appreciate the rapid changes the Engineers push forward nor do they understand the odd new philosophies they push.

This has led many Engineers to only work alongside their peers. In their hidden experimental sanctums, the Engineers work to build upon what new discoveries are made each day with the practical knowledge handed down through centuries of research. Engineers in specific fields tend to flock together, with those interested in creating military tools working together to build greater war machines and those with an interest in developing new alloys keeping to their forges. It can seem a remote and aloof lifestyle to outsiders, but to the Engineers it is home.

Engineers are looked upon with a sense of marvel and disdain by Izou citizens. A village may be profoundly grateful for new means of drawing water from a well or developing efficient heating through their homes. A village may also become irate and angry with the Engineers when the town's supply of metal goes missing or the new printing press releases rancid fumes that sicken the town. To the Engineers, this is all part of the long march towards discovery, and they do what they can to help humanity while furthering the great cause that is science.



## MISSIONS

The Engineers' goals, as complex as they may seem to outsiders, are very simple: to grow and nurture the creative sciences within the Empire and expand their understanding of the scientific world. Now they have the authority to travel the Empire, recruit the most brilliant minds and test out their creations. Many Engineers try to solve problems the Empire faces through science and technology, and are always on the hunt for rare resources. They view their continuing struggle with the traditionalists of the Imperial court as a transitional step, as they continue to delve into the greater secrets of the world.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift – Sudden Genius:** It is not enough to invent; an Engineer should also adapt and reconfigure as the need arises. The Engineer gains +2 Crafts when dealing with anything mechanical. They may also, when faced with an issue that seems impossible to overcome, spend 2 Karma to ask the GM a question about how to ingeniously get around the obstacle before them. The GM should answer with an “If you do this action, you think it’ll do this...” statement, but ultimately let the Engineer’s roll decide their fate.

◆ **Trigger – Insatiable Curiosity:** An Engineer prides himself on not just advancing their understanding of the world but in seeking out the unknown. This can lead to them pursuing something they consider to be more interesting than their current mission. Gain 1 Karma when you are presented with a task or a mystery that consumes your concentration regardless of what you need to focus on.

## CONTACTS

Choose one Ally and one Rival.

◆ **Matsumura Tagane (Marksman):** A one-eyed marksman with a wooden left hand, Tagane is said to have perfected

the art of making trick shots with his specially constructed rifle.

◆ **Gima Ron (Crafts):** A savant using simple tools to create larger machines, citizens speak of his willingness to trade his information in exchange for a home cooked meal or stones from far-off lands.

◆ **Takeshi Aiko (Knowledge):** Once a teacher at the now-destroyed Wind Valley Dojo, she travels the countryside seeing to the needs of small towns and rebuilding what the ninja and the army have destroyed.

◆ **Matmura Rei (Intimidation):** Known as the Iron Banshee, Rei is renowned for her machines that create high pitched shrieks and roars, disorienting her foes and said to scare off attacking ninja.

◆ **Dai Hanako (Persuade):** A quartermaster whose jaded personality comes from years of having to fight for respect among her fellow Engineers, he is said to know where everything is in the inventory of the Empire.

◆ **Hirane Goto (Perception):** A proud, boastful man, several of his peers still consider Goto essential to working out problems with experimental machinery. He does so for free, but often his ego can turn people away from him.

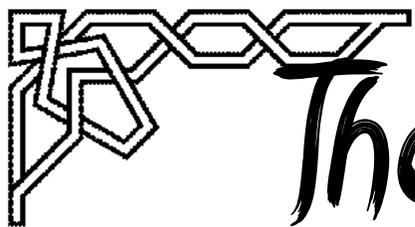
## BONDS

◆ Choose one other character you feel a fascination with and want to learn something meaningful from.

◆ Choose one other character who you find simple and ignorant about the wonders of science.

◆ Choose one other character you believe will always understand you.





# The Enlightened

- ✦ **Other Names:** Koans, Followers of Ko, The Bound
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Patient, Charitable, Vicious Warriors
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Fighting Style: Any, Weapon Style: Reach, Portents
- ✦ **Favored Tactics:** Path of the Body, Path of the Mind, Path of the Spirit (pg. 67-69)
- ✦ **Skills:** Discipline +1, Empathy +1, Holistics +1, Speed +1

## HISTORY

The Enlightened have existed longer than the Empire has stood and will continue on long after. Monastic history states there was once a being centuries ago named only Ko who sought to leave the shackles of mortality behind. Through meditation they freed their mind from the idea of possessions and even emotions, and through specialized body techniques they left behind the idea of man or woman or even human. Once Ko's vessel was prepared, they separated their spirit and ascended to the heavens to meet the gods and convene with the celestial courts. Ko stayed in a trance for days, their students even believing death was their fate, but then they opened their eyes and spoke. "I have unlocked the secrets to attain true enlightenment. I have returned to show those desiring the secrets of the spirits."

Ko spent decades teaching their lessons of mind and spirit, mixed with extreme fighting techniques to prepare the physical body for such a journey. Thousands of monks learned the Tenets of Ko, passing the lessons of their supreme teacher to the next generation. While Ko's physical body died long ago, their spirit has transferred from body to body, reincarnated over and over again. Their followers call this being the tamashi, and when one dies, another receives the calling. Specialized squads of monks are sent in search of the next tamashi, sometimes spending years in their pursuit of a new spiritual leader.

The Followers of Ko influenced the Izou Empire, teaching their lessons about reincarnation to the masses. While the Empire taught of a strict system of social classes and dharma, the Enlightened offered another solution to those who wanted out of the oppressiveness.

Though this may seem at odds, their messages fed into each other, creating a pleasant symbi-

osis between the two groups. The Enlightened, furthermore, have tried hard to stay out of any official wars the Emperor calls, but could not say no to the Ninja Crusade. Their tamashi was assassinated shortly before the Year of Floods, throwing their numbers into chaos. It is widely believed the ninja did this to cripple the monks, but it only served to push them into the battle.

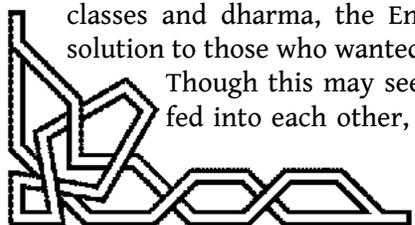
## LIFESTYLE

While the Enlightened have monasteries in almost every land, the majority of them exist within Izou borders, usually high in mountains or hidden by some other kind of obstacle that makes it difficult to visit their home. Hopeful students must overcome these obstacles as the first of many trials from the Tenets of Ko. Becoming one of the Enlightened is as easy as submitting to be taught and forgoing your past life. No family, no friends and no attachments. In exchange, monks are given a place to sleep, regular meals and nonstop training from sunup to sundown.

To the Koans, everything is an opportunity to learn a new lesson about the universe. Monks have certain things they must abstain from, such as emotional connections, alcohol and causing harm to the universe. Every life, even that of an animal or insect, sends a ripple through the soul that takes millennia in the celestial courts to work off. Many believe that the intense martial arts training they receive goes against their tenets of pacifism, but just because they will not begin a battle doesn't mean they won't defend themselves or their comrades. When they are not physically training, a monk may be found in deep meditation, clearing their mind of all distraction and freeing their spirit into the world. This is not an easy task, however, and only veteran Enlightened can attain such states without hours in trance.

## MISSIONS

The tenuous alliance between the Followers of Ko and the Izou Army is beneficial for both sides... for the moment. The army receives a small number of highly trained warriors. The Koans get to battle those who murdered their leader, and prove to the Empire that their teachings best ninjutsu once and for all. The ninja are



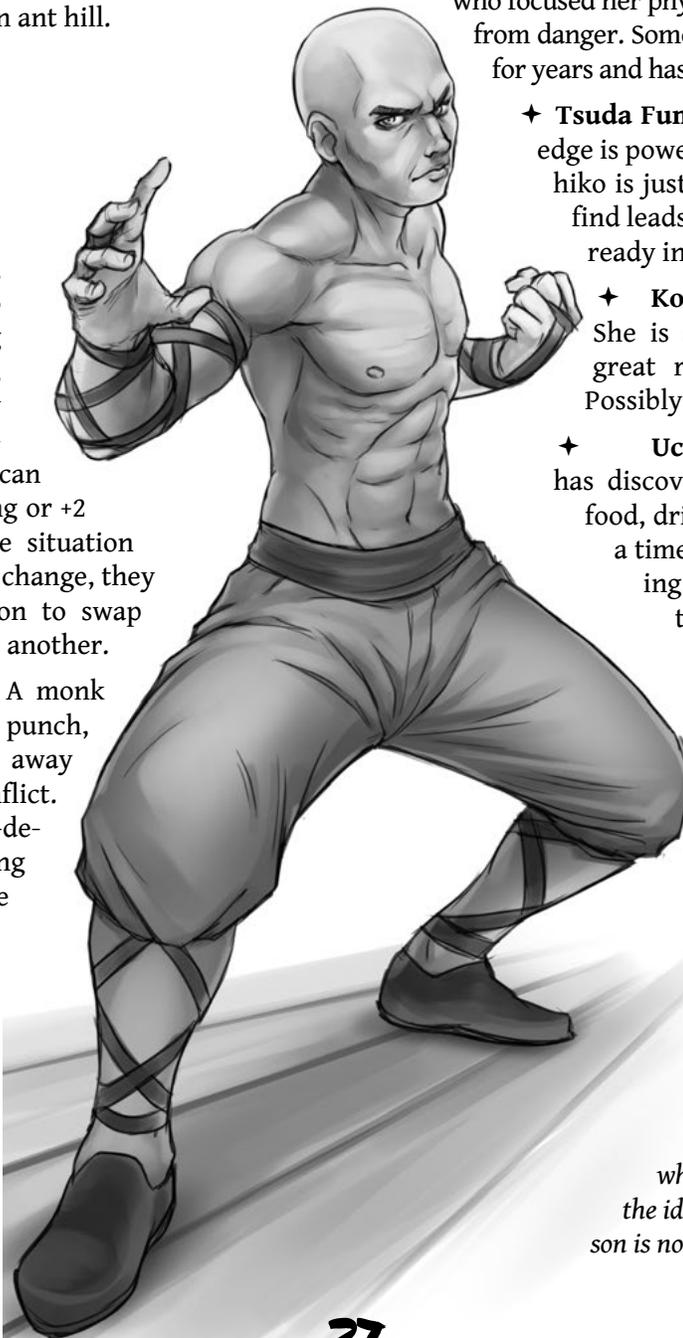
an affront to the monks' teachings, believing there is a quick way to power without hard work and stealing away many students who might have been able to enhance their souls. Ninja are little more than tricksters who need to be finally dealt with, so people can return to the Tenets of Ko once more.

While helpful in any battle, the Enlightened are small in number, especially since those participating in the Ninja Crusade are volunteers only. The vast majority of their monks have chosen to stay out of the conflict. The generals usually send the Enlightened when large numbers of ninja need to be dealt with. Otherwise, it is like using a cannon on an ant hill.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - Mind, Body, Spirit:** The Followers of Ko have spent years enhancing their abilities on every level, balancing their body so they never falter. At the beginning of a Scene, the monk can gain +2 Discipline, +2 Fighting or +2 Intuition, depending on the situation they anticipate. If situations change, they can spend 1 Dynamic Action to swap their bonus from one Skill to another.

◆ **Trigger - Pacifism:** A monk will never throw the first punch, always attempting to walk away or talk their way out of conflict. They'll only battle in self-defense (or on missions serving the greater good), but are never quick to act. Gain 1 Karma when a swift punch would have saved them a lot of trouble and danger, but they just couldn't throw it.



## CONTACTS

Choose one Ally and one Rival.

- ◆ **Kahae Taku (Deception)** - A local magistrate who can always tell when someone is lying. His past as a bandit leader gives him insight other law officials could never dream of.
- ◆ **Yunokawa Gingka (Intuition)** - He is the monk currently in charge of finding the new tamashi. Gingka is often busy, but has many resources at his disposal.
- ◆ **Onishi Shizue (Might)** - There are tales of a mother who focused her physical strength to save her child from danger. Somehow, she has retained this gift for years and has become her village hero.
- ◆ **Tsuda Fumihiko (Knowledge)** - Knowledge is power and is always for sale. Fumihiko is just the woman a monk needs to find leads on the ninja... unless she's already in the Lotus Coalition's pocket.
- ◆ **Koyanagi Yaeko (Perform)** - She is a Blazing Dancer who holds great respect for the Enlightened. Possibly a great tool or a spy.
- ◆ **Uchiyama Eiri (Fortitude)** - Eiri has discovered techniques to stave off food, drink and even sleep for days at a time without jutsu or monk training. Few know how he's done it, though.

## BONDS

- ◆ Choose one other character who has forgotten the ancient teachings. It's up to you to become their mentor, whether they want it or not.
- ◆ Choose one other character who shares the patience of a monk. The two of you often meditate together, while the others thrive in chaos.
- ◆ Choose one other character who scoffs at the Tenets of Ko and the idea of pacifism. This person is not to be trusted.



# Executioners

- ✦ **Other Names:** Anti-Ninja, The Scarred, Butchers
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Insane, Intimidating, Doing a job no one else can
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Weapon Style: Any, Fighting Style: Tiger or Bear
- ✦ **Favored Tactics:** Ki Negation (pg. 65)
- ✦ **Skills:** Deception +1, Fighting +1, Intimidation +1, Might +1
- ✦ **Ki Balance:** +1 Yin or Yang

## HISTORY

After the fourth great war, when the old agreements between the Empire and the clans were all but eradicated, the Emperor looked for options to deal with the nuisance that were the ninja. No matter what kind of firepower they sent to put down his magical enemies, they would vanish from sight, brainwash the soldiers or use their jutsu to win the battle. It was imperative that the Empire find a way to take away a ninja's tricks to keep order and peace in the land.

Rumors of those who could resist a ninja's jutsu led to the discovery of Uoya Ikuto, a serial murderer locked deep within Nanchou and kept in solitary confinement due to his violent outbursts. Mystical effects were somehow deflected from Ikuto like water off a duck's back, which gave the Emperor an idea. Calling on the Golden Lions to dissect the man and investigate his unique abilities, they constructed a spiritual blueprint of Ikuto's mental instability and aura that could be applied to a person's soul. The end result was always either a new type of soldier, slightly insane but ready to fight to the death for the Empire or a sniveling waste of a soul, forever destroyed in the process. Even those who survived clawed at their own soul, leaving a number of scars on themselves.

The Executioners, as they become widely known, were the perfect instrument for the Emperor when ninja started being put to death. No normal soldier, not even a Golden Lion, could hold a ninja long enough for a public death, which led to Executioners performing their namesake's duties for crowds of hundreds. Beyond their official role as instru-

ments of the state, they were also sent to lead many an attack on ninja villages, nullifying any magical traps or defenses that would otherwise keep them out. It didn't take long before almost any Izou unit included at least one Executioner in its ranks. Now that the Ninja Crusade is here, their role has become all the more important; they are the perfect anti-ninja to win the war.

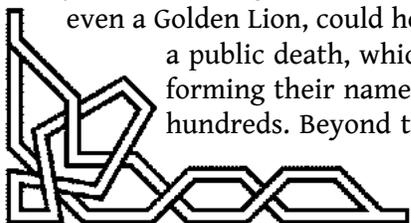
## LIFESTYLE

An Executioner's life is a whirlwind of blood and violence. Even if they were once a normal person or patriotic soldier, their will is consumed with the need to tear their enemies apart for the glory of the Emperor. They spend years training in a variety of martial styles, but the mystical template placed upon them also gives them a fundamental understanding of how to use weapons to cause maximum carnage. Even while they sleep, they dream of war, of killing, seeing Ikuto in their dreams and hearing his eternal screams. To turn this extreme emotional existence into a weapon, they practice ritual scarring to focus and hone their abilities, and in order to keep themselves from being complete monsters at all times. They are always just a bit off, in the end, making others wary in their presence.

They are not Ikuto, however, even if his psychotic memories creep into their subconscious from time to time. Each Executioner is an individual with their own wants, usually involving advancement within the army and the eventual command of their own unit. They have little time for personal attachments beyond that, looking at almost everyone as a tool to advance their station or a target to be eliminated. Some pity the position the Scarred see themselves in, but every single one of them was a well-informed volunteer. The power they wield is intoxicating, leading more and more to attempt the procedure.

## MISSIONS

Executioners have proven time and time again to be proficient warriors on the battlefields, though they are seldom sent on stealth missions. Their tendency to turn to all-out bloodshed as a first resort is against the idea of leaving no trace behind. While their involvement in



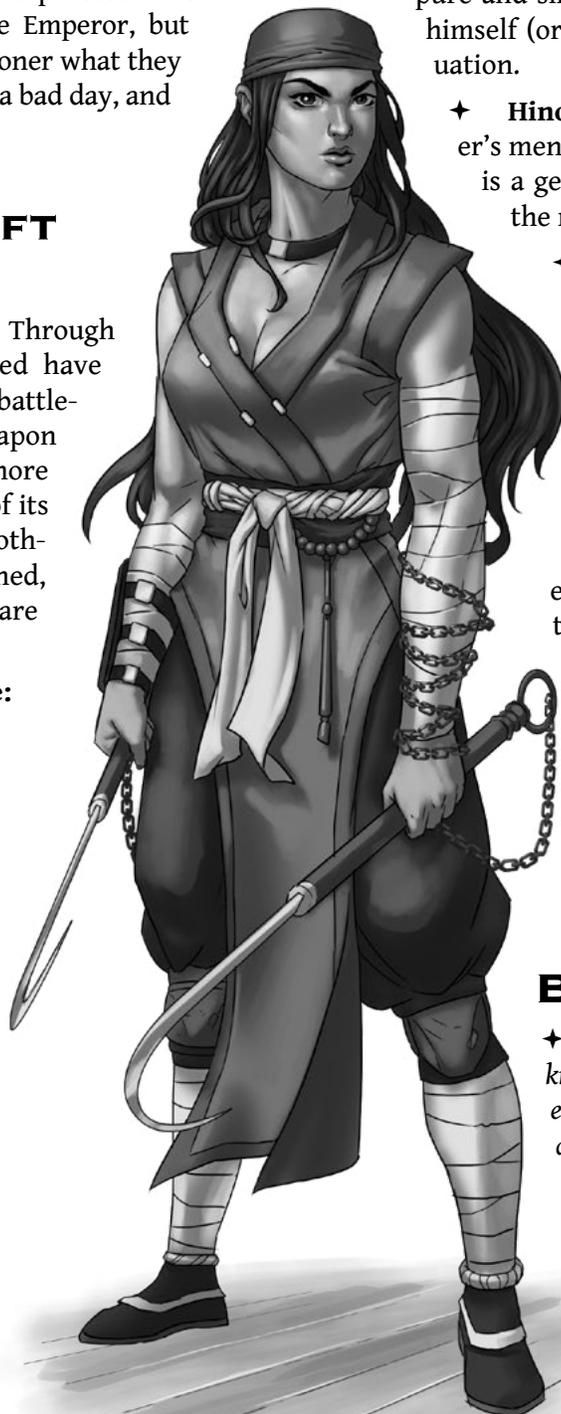
Imperial affairs has increased during the Ninja Crusade, their numbers have not risen dramatically to keep up with the demand. This is in addition to their penchant for dying in spectacularly gruesome ways in battle.

Not all Executioners go for the kill, either. Often they take prisoners of war, playing with them like toys until they're done and discard the now-broken, battered victim. Some believe they are leaving their own imprint on their victim's soul in the process. This isn't exactly encouraged by the Emperor, but few are willing to tell an Executioner what they can and can't do. Catch them on a bad day, and heads will roll.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - Battle Masters:** Through exhaustive training, the Scarred have become the masters of any battlefield. They gain access to all Weapon Styles, and they may entirely ignore the Pain Condition, regardless of its level. They may also pick one other Physical Condition (Poisoned, Bleeding, etc.), and its effects are reduced by 1.

◆ **Trigger - Ikuro's Curse:** An Executioner is never wholly in their right mind, since Ikuro's spirit scratches at their soul at every opportunity, causing sporadic bouts of chaos. Gain 1 Karma whenever the character creates random (and damaging) chaos that causes issues for themselves or their group.



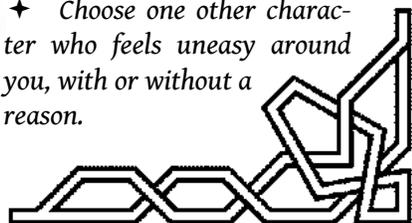
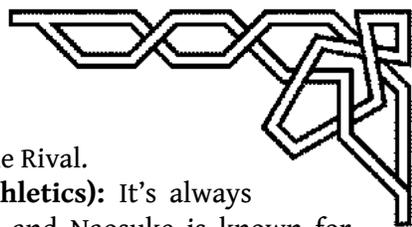
## CONTACTS

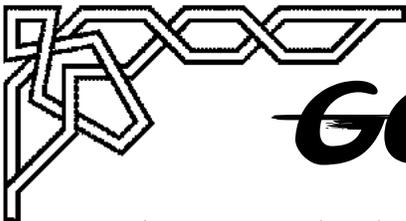
Choose one Ally and one Rival.

- ✦ **Ajibana Naosuke (Athletics):** It's always good to have backup, and Naosuke is known for leaping from rooftop to rooftop to provide that for his allies.
- ✦ **Morioka Sakyō (Persuade):** A thief, pure and simple, Sakyō is a man who can talk himself (or his friends) out of almost any situation.
- ✦ **Hino Kaiya (Empathy):** An Executioner's mental state is always in flux, but Kaiya is a geisha who knows how to calm even the most savage person.
- ✦ **Soga Reiha (Fighting):** She is an Executioner who loves to take her aggressions out on husbands caught in the red light district. It's not actually illegal, but that doesn't bother her at all.
- ✦ **Nozaki Shingo (Survival):** He has survived in ninja-infested lands for decades, and knows how to hunt one down for a fee.
- ✦ **Kamon Kenko (Holistics):** She is the perfect ally to have when in need of healing after a battle, but cross her and you'll find it hard to get the treatment you require. She's spiteful that way.

## BONDS

- ✦ Choose one other character who knew you before you were an Executioner, and distrusts you now that you're different.
- ✦ Choose one other character who can pull you out of your bloodlust.
  - ✦ Choose one other character who feels uneasy around you, with or without a reason.





# GOLDEN LIONS

- ✦ **Other Names:** The Glorious Legion, Celestial Warriors, the Guard
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Cruel, Cold, Loyal
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Fighting Style: Tiger or Mantis, Master of Spies, Alchemy
- ✦ **Favored Jutsu:** Way of Dazzling Pilferage (pg. 72), Jutsu Retrieval (pg. 65)
- ✦ **Skills:** Fighting +1, Intimidation +1, Perception +1, Stealth +1
- ✦ **Ki Balance:** +1 Yin or Yang

## HISTORY

The Golden Lions are a rumor, a fairy tale and a nightmare to the people of the Izou Empire. The people say the Golden Lions will always be there to protect them from threats. They also say that if one offends the Empire in any way, they will come for you at night, and not a trace of the offender will remain. They are both secret police and a formidable bodyguard designed for one purpose: to neutralize the ninja by using their own abilities against them.

They were once a completely different clan centuries ago. Izou Zurui, the first Emperor, set out to bring the Empire together and encountered a monastery that had been burned to the ground. Inside were the defeated remains of a ninja clan who had been betrayed by their allies and had seen their people conquered and their lands destroyed. The Emperor had grown distrustful of the Grasping Shadows, and among these shattered survivors he saw potential allies. Swearing to serve the Emperor for eternity if they were given the chance to get revenge upon their enemies, the newly christened Golden Lions became a formidable shield for the Emperor. They have protected the Emperor from threats for centuries, though their numbers were not as many as they are now.

The Golden Lions benefit from the considerable resources the Emperor has granted them. They receive first access to slain ninja, and they are given considerable leeway to protect the Empire. Their ferocity and knowledge of other clans' abilities has made them formidable opponents. The Golden Lions were responsible for protecting the Emperor and are said to be the only ones who know the truth about Emperor Mamoru and Danketsu's duel. The Golden Lions

serve the Emperor's will completely and loyally, and he can make no demand that they will not follow.

## LIFESTYLE

For many, becoming a Golden Lion is a grave honor. It is more than just being the best killer or the bravest bodyguard, as other Assignments cover those areas very well. Instead it is about having the means and the will to do anything needed to serve the Emperor, no matter the consequences. The Lions' unforgiving ruthlessness has made them into one of the most feared threats the Lotus Coalition faces, and they are proud of it. They are also resolute in their duty to safeguard the Emperor, a charge the entire clan would follow into death if necessary to protect him.

As a clan, they do their best to eliminate compassion within their warriors. This goes beyond the need to show mercy in battle, as the Golden Lions are also experts at stealing the skills and secrets of the ninja and incorporating them into their own fighting styles. Their methods for stealing these skills are often as simple as bribing traitors and stealing ancient manuscripts, but also include darker, more macabre practices.

The Golden Lions know they cannot stand toe to toe with the Silver Blades or the Executioners in single combat, but that is not how their fighting style works. They work as a team, with each Lion focusing on overwhelming their opponents but working to set up their comrades as the ones to strike the finishing blow. The Golden Lions consider themselves on the path to becoming the ultimate warriors, and their drive to ferret out ninja cells and to obtain their secrets has helped them grow even more powerful. They are just as protective of the secrets they have stolen, and work to keep their dojos hidden from friends and enemies alike.

## MISSIONS

The Golden Lions stand apart from their fellow Assignments but are an essential part of the Ninja Crusade. They are proud of the fact that they terrify the ninja and use it to their advantage. Meanwhile they look upon the Silver Blades with contempt for their unwillingness to get their hands dirty, and view the newer Assignments with suspicion that they will try to supplant the Lions as

the Emperor's bodyguards. Their current strategy is to continue to hunt down all ninja and take their lore and jutsu by force to expand their understanding and knowledge. Then, once the ninja are wiped out, the Golden Lions will be the sole custodians of this knowledge.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFTS AND TRIGGER

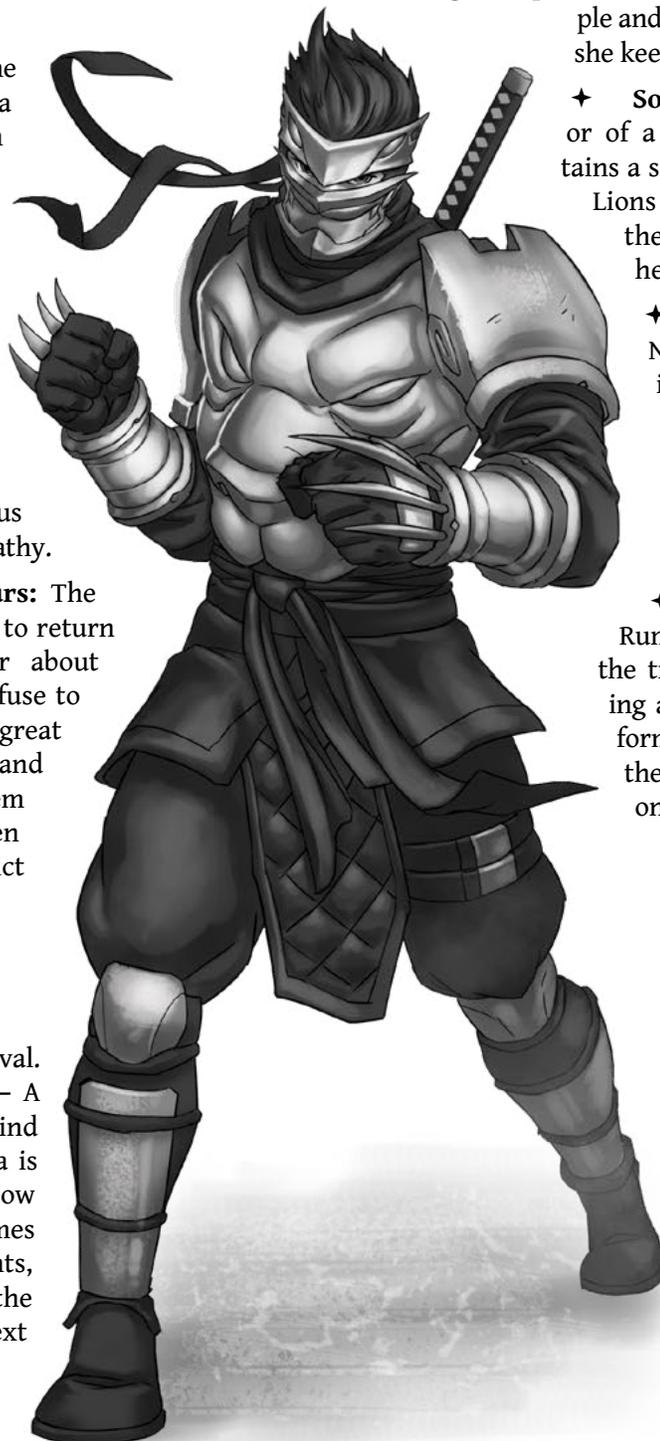
◆ **Gift - Stolen Arts:** The Golden Lions have perfected a training regimen taken from the teachings of dozens of ninja clans and the best instructors in the Empire. When attempting to decipher secrets or lore belonging to another ninja clan, they gain a +2 bonus to their roll. They also gain +1 Intimidation against ninja, raised by another +1 bonus for every other Golden Lion in their squad. This bonus cannot exceed the ninja's Empathy.

◆ **Trigger - It Will Be Ours:** The Golden Lions will always seek to return all knowledge they uncover about the ninja to their clan and refuse to let others know. They go to great lengths to obtain these secrets and will do their best to keep them from others. Gain 1 Karma when this mission comes into conflict with the rest of the group.

## CONTACTS

Choose one Ally and one Rival.

◆ **Naiko Akira (Athletics)** - A ruthless mind hides behind a heart of gold, and Akira is often at odds with his fellow Golden Lions when it comes to how they treat peasants, but he sees himself and the Golden Lions as the next great heroes of legend.



◆ **Yuki Gin (Fighting)** - Her armor is scarred with tally marks from all the ninja she has killed. This ruthless enforcer has served numerous bosses over the years and knows many secrets on how to take down an opponent.

◆ **Jin Chika (Deception)** - An opera singer who travels the Empire, she is secretly loyal to the Emperor although she pretends otherwise. She is viewed as simple and unintelligent, but this is a ruse she keeps to better spy on others.

◆ **Sokei Misao (Might)** - The mayor of a mountain village, she maintains a secret alliance with the Golden Lions to keep her people safe from the ninja who claimed the life of her father and brother.

◆ **Tomi Yokio (Holistics)** - No one knows how old he really is or where he is from, but Tomi Yokio has centuries of wisdom and knowledge behind his eyes. He has a soft spot for those who seem genuinely wanting to learn.

◆ **Shiro Tanaka (Stealth)** - Rumored to have snuck into one of the training dojos and masquerading as a student despite not being formally accepted, Shiro trades the information he learns to anyone who can pay his price.

## BONDS

◆ *Choose one other character who you have chosen to trust, despite your better judgement telling you not to.*

◆ *Choose one other character whom you scorn for the weakness you see inside them.*

◆ *Choose one other character who you seek to get to acknowledge your superiority.*



# IRON BREAKERS

- ✦ **Other Names:** Corruptors, Breakers, Black Bones
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Frightening, You can't hide from them, Necessary evil
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Weapon Style: Blunt or Chain, Fighting Style: Dragon, Trap Master
- ✦ **Favored Tactics:** Black Bones (pg. 62)
- ✦ **Skills:** Crafts +1, Fortitude +1, Persuade +1, Survival +1

## HISTORY

Ninja have enjoyed the warm blessings of the heavens for centuries, gaining the ability to call upon celestial animals to aid them in battle. When this was used to the Empire's advantage during the Expansion Wars, it was a great boon. As the ninja clans and the Empire began to part ways, however, the loss of such a military advantage was felt throughout the Izou forces. The Emperor coveted the ninja's connection to the celestial families and sought to find a way to steal their secrets for his own. He called on the greatest trackers and beast masters the Empire had to offer, sending them in every direction to find celestial animal dwellings on Earth, learn their customs and figure out ways to subjugate the creatures. During their travels, they learned of the celestials' aversion to demons and their hellish powers.

As the story goes, the Emperor summoned a powerful demon by the name of Kuroi Hone and plunged a magical sword into it, killing it instantly. With the help of his trackers, they skinned the demon to reveal his bones, which had certain properties needed to fashion weapons capable of unlocking the power the Emperor so desperately coveted. To test their theory, they found the lair of Vakhesh the Fire Ape and Izou soldiers impaled his hands, feet and neck with demon black spikes, usurping control of his body and giving it to the trackers, now called the Iron Breakers. This was quite the feat, as Vakhesh was one of the most powerful summoned creatures in existence... and he now belonged to the Empire. This terrifying monster was later used during the Summoner Skirmishes of the Ninja Crusade, sending the ninja into confusion. How did the Empire master summoning celestial animals without being ninja?

The Year of Floods was an important time for the Iron Breakers. While everyone retreated

to lick their wounds, their members once again scoured the land, finding hibernating celestials and forcing captured ninja to turn on their animal families. They have become the ninja's worst nightmare in many ways.

## LIFESTYLE

Becoming an Iron Breaker requires just the right training; initiates are often seasoned wilderness scouts or forest rangers skilled in tracking, or expert animal trainers who know the ins and outs of any beast they come across. Each Corruptor is then led to the carcass of a celestial animal (either one they've already captured or they may be forced to seek their own) and fed a hunk of its meat, instilling a slice of its essence into their own ki. Their first celestial prisoner becomes their trophy, giving them their new Iron Breaker name. One who captures a celestial bear may become known as Ferocity Jin, while another who enslaved a celestial canine may simply be called Snarl.

The day-to-day life of an Iron Breaker is often full of excitement and danger. While few in number, they are always busy. Some may be scavenging the corpses of demons seeking more of the black bones that gave them one of their famous names. Others are on the road looking into leads to the next celestial animal they can capture. Stories of a stranger traveling with a rooster on her shoulder is sure to need follow-up, as does a mining crew's discovery of a large egg hidden in the mountains. What the Golden Lions are to the ninja, the Iron Breakers are to the celestial animals, making them a mean team when taking on the Lotus Coalition.

## MISSIONS

Iron Breakers have talents that can complement any squadron against the ninja. Obviously, if the enemy is employing celestial animals of any type, they are the perfect soldiers to take them down. However, if there is an elusive ninja, the Corruptors are also expert trackers. The Ninja Crusade has upped the number of Breakers who have been recruited, as the Emperor hopes to settle the entire thing with another overwhelming summer battle. Since the Iron Breakers are actively enslaving new celestial animals while also stealing those who once

worked with the ninja, the Izou Army is growing steadily in power. While incredibly useful, they do not make friends easily, even with other soldiers. The cruel acts they inflict on the beasts are considered heinous by most sensible people who care about fellow living creatures. This doesn't affect their demeanor in the slightest, however, and they often wear masks to hide their true emotions on the matter, further increasing their eeriness.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - A Pound of Flesh:** The Corruptors have also learned how to alter their own bodies by consuming the flesh of celestial animals. To start, they are eternally sated, never in need for food or water. They gain +2 Survival for all tracking checks (raises to +3 bonus if tracking a Celestial Animal). When facing a Celestial Animal, they also gain a bonus against any of the creature's abilities equal to their Rank.

◆ **Trigger - Disconnected:** To do what they do requires a person to disconnect with their very humanity, especially after serving as an Iron Breaker for a few years. Gain 1 Karma when their lack of compassion and basic human decency causes issues for the group.

## CONTACTS

Choose one Ally and one Rival.

◆ **Gensai Zetsumei (Perception)** - A monk with the ability to sense ki, Zetsumei always asks for an act of charity in exchange for his services.



◆ **Choshi Miko (Stealth)** - Miko is highly talented at blending in with a crowd. Few ever remember meeting her seconds after they've left her presence, making her the perfect thief or con artist.

◆ **Tokaji Konan (Speed)** - Ever been on a team with the smartest person in the room? Konan's trivia knowledge is amazing, and she can come up with answers to difficult questions faster than anyone else can.

◆ **Shigeki Haji (Marksman)** - He's a great gun to have on your side, but he definitely has a chip on his shoulder.

◆ **Fuwa Shion (Discipline)** - A professional go player, she is known for staring long and hard at a problem to find just the right solution.

◆ **Hagino Kento (Travel)** - Where do you want to go? Kento can get you there on his wagon or boat; just ask him!

## BONDS

◆ Choose one other character who you've known since childhood. You enlisted together, but they are uneasy with how disconnected you are now.

◆ Choose one other character who has been ordered to protect you (whether they want to or not).

◆ Choose one other character who thinks the Izou Army can win the war without Iron Breakers, seeing the character as useless.



# Jadesmiths

- ✦ **Other Names:** Builders, Diplomats, Voices of the Empire
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Stoic, Authoritative, Unyielding.
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Weapon Style: Defending, Fighting Style: Dragon or Eagle, Master of Spies
- ✦ **Favored Tactics:** Voice of the Emperor (pg. 71)
- ✦ **Skills:** Empathy +1, Fortitude +1, Perception +1, Persuade +1,

## HISTORY

The Engineers build the infrastructure that keeps the Empire going, but the Jadesmiths build the people. When the Emperor needs to ensure his people obey and respect his will, he first sends in the Jadesmiths. It is a heavier task than it seems, as the Jadesmiths perform a duty as the Emperor's voice to the leaders of the Empire. They represent a special authority, and work with the nobles—and when they are needed, they are as invaluable as a sword to a soldier.

In the Empire's early days, there was a need to enforce one set of laws and customs so that there would be no disagreement across the land. Izou Zurui summoned the greatest lawmakers and wise counselors to his court to see what could be done. Hundreds came, but the sounds of their bickering rang through the palace. The Emperor seemed resigned to having to deal with endless chaos when he noticed a man dressed in simple green robes sitting in the center of the room but refusing to say a word. When the Emperor commanded the man to speak, he said "Now is not the time to speak. The time to speak is when everyone has stopped talking and realizes they need to listen."

When the man next spoke, his words carried with them wisdom. The man's proposals soon became codified as Imperial Law and the Emperor, so impressed with the man's simple and honorable nature, handed him the most important task he could think of: that although the Emperor had forged an empire, this man would build it to last.

Today the Jadesmiths, whose sacred duty is inscribed on special jade pendants worn around their neck, do their best to preserve peace in the land and to see to the needs of civilized society. Their conflict with the ninja is an ideological one, and they see the fear

that many peasants live with when the ninja threaten to swoop down and brutally enforce their ways. That is why the Jadesmiths promote the greatest aspects of the Empire, and they work to make sure that a peaceful and just society prospers in the wake of outside aggression.

## LIFESTYLE

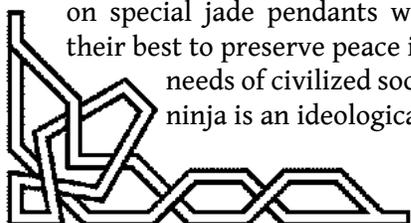
The life of a Jadesmith is split between hours of countless study and days of debate over the meanings of things. A Jadesmith may need to arbitrate a land dispute between two fishing villages one day, then bring a mis- sive of peace to a hostile barbarian tribe threatening to invade the Empire's borders. They must be able to teach others, while at the same time knowing when to listen and learn. This is a near-impossible task when times are tough, but the Jadesmiths rely upon their abilities to read people and to say what people need to hear, or tell the lie they want to hear and to do so convincingly.

Though some Jadesmiths travel in relative luxury, most spend their days studying and training themselves to be in peak mental and physical fitness. The Jadesmiths may not carry the same weapons as Silver Blades, but they carry their words like a saber and know when to strike to disarm an opponent and crush them.

The respect afforded the Jadesmith often differs throughout the Empire. Though they speak with authority, they are only allowed to use their rank when given a Jade Declaration from the Imperial court. These Declarations are tasks or missions assigned to the Jadesmith, and their power only works within the confines of the Declaration. Some abuse this power, while others use it only when they absolutely must. The intoxicating power the Declarations give the Jadesmith is a temptation, a curse and a great power. They must instead marshal this authority carefully, and always be prepared to pay the price if they overstep their bounds.

## MISSIONS

The Jadesmiths are often sent on missions to offer diplomatic or social support, while also providing knowledge and understanding not easily given by others. They are the generals of the political and economic battlefields of the Empire, their knowledge has been essential and



meant the difference between success or failure on more than one occasion. The Supreme General attempts to put at least one Jadesmith with every squad, hoping they can help coordinate efforts and relay orders more accurately and with more authority than the average soldier.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFT AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift - Do As You Are Told:** Even when not following a Jade Declaration, the Jadesmiths speak with authority and skill that comes from years of training and following their duty. At the beginning of each Scene, they may choose to gain either +2 Persuade or +2 Knowledge, depending on whether they need to be knowledgeable or wordy at the time. Also, while giving orders, they can spend 1 Karma to create an order or obligation the target must follow. The target suffers a -2 penalty on any roll going against the order.

◆ **Trigger - Give and Take:** The Jadesmiths understand diplomacy is a delicate art, and sometimes they must concede points to achieve their goal. Gain 1 Karma when forced to concede something vitally important to the group despite protests from others.

## CONTACTS

Choose one Ally and one Rival.

- ◆ **Ku Hiroshi (Deception)** - An accomplished actor, Hiroshi is said to have told so many lies that he has forgotten his true self.
- ◆ **Ken Kiyoshi (Knowledge)** - Though Kiyoshi never recovered from a vicious poisoning attempt by the ninja, he spends his days reading and sharing information with others so that he may leave behind a world that is better than when he was in it.

◆ **Murasaki Riku (Travel)** - While few know of Riku's role in the day-to-day running of the Empire, she is responsible for maintaining the corps of messengers who carry important communications across the Empire.

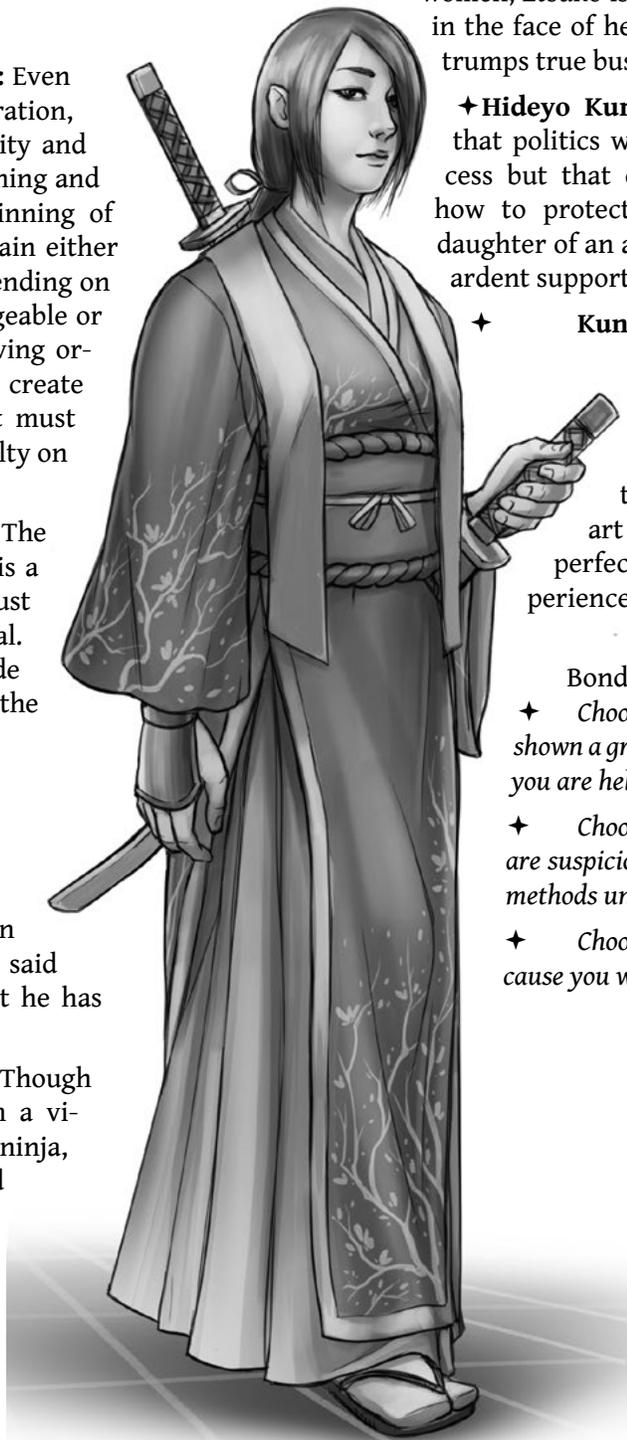
◆ **Kanaka Etsuko (Persuade)** - A respected business-woman whose iron business has always been run by women, Etsuko is charming but stands strong in the face of her rivals who believe gender trumps true business acumen.

◆ **Hideyo Kuma (Fighting)** - A believer that politics will always achieve true success but that every diplomat must know how to protect themselves, Kuma is the daughter of an assassinated minister and an ardent supporter of the Ninja Crusade.

◆ **Kun Akio (Perform)** - A retired speech writer whose politics nearly saw him cast out from the Imperial court, Akio believes that public speaking is an art form that can be honed and perfected through training and experience.

### Bonds

- ◆ Choose one other character who has shown a great need for your guidance, and you are helping them.
- ◆ Choose one other character who you are suspicious of, and constantly put their methods under scrutiny.
- ◆ Choose one other character whose cause you wish to help however you can.





# SILVER BLADES

- ✦ **Other Names:** The Ichikyo Family, Sword Saints, Honor Dogs
- ✦ **Stereotypes:** Noble, Honorable, Deadly
- ✦ **Martial Training:** Weapon Style: Sharp or Paired, Fighting Style: Mantis or Tiger
- ✦ **Favored Tactics:** Way of All Rivers (pg. 73)
- ✦ **Skills:** Discipline +1, Fighting +1, Intimidation +1, Persuade +1

## HISTORY

Throughout the Empire there is perhaps no other family as famous as the Ichikyo. They have spent centuries devoted to the art of the sword, and of that craft there are no finer artisans or swordsmen. The Emperor has maintained the position of the Court Duelist for centuries and it has almost always been an Ichikyo, and to the commoners of the Empire legends are told of villages saved by traveling Silver Blades who stopped and lent a hand in sparing them from bandits and marauding demons.

Ichikyo Moromito, their founder, was an orphan whose family died in the Empire's early days, when a band of attacking bandits devastated their village. As an adult he sought training so he could protect others, and his family established an elite fighting force to not only keep their lands safe but be examples of true warriors. Though they removed themselves from doing work like farming or mining, they instead dedicated themselves to the task of mastering swordsmanship and dueling. Their philosophy, the Way of All Rivers, has taught them a strict code that defines who they are, how they should treat others and how they should conduct themselves.

The Silver Blades now are not well received in the Imperial court as they have become highly vocal of the Emperor's crusade. They believe the Ninja Crusade has served its purpose, and now the war with the ninja has become heartless and cruel, only leading to the suffering of the land and people. They do not believe the ninja were innocent of all charges levied against them, but there are greater threats to the Empire, and the Emperor's cruelty must be addressed before it leads the Empire down a dark and sorrowful path.

## LIFESTYLE

Silver Blades believe quiet contemplation and dedication are the most important virtues one can maintain in life. Knowing a rational mind tempered with never backing down can defeat any challenge has made each Silver Blade a master of their craft. The family's philosophy teaches that patience will always be rewarded, and good conduct and strict adherence to honor are not short-sighted nor flaws to be exploited, but rather strengths to aid them through harsh times. The Silver Blades' honor comes from their dedication to the Way of All Rivers, a philosophy that teaches life is a constant flow from different streams that lead into a larger source. The philosophy maintains that the pursuit of perfection is just as worthy as achieving it.

The high standards of honor to which the Silver Blades hold themselves have put them at odds with their fellow Assignments when it comes to how they treat others. Almost all Silver Blades hail from the warrior class of society, meaning they hail from wealthy families and most of the time they need to practice their blade techniques and fighting styles. The few who began as commoners may never rise to the highest levels of the Assignment. The Silver Blades believe in honorable surrender, which their comrades in the Golden Lions do not. The Silver Blades also believe in protecting the people over pursuing the ninja, and though they are not afraid to kill, they believe in following the letter of the law. In this way, they often cross paths with the Will of Iron, and it is said that, despite the Ninja Crusade, the Hagane and the Ichikyo were rivals who came to each other's aid as often as they were at odds.

## MISSIONS

The Silver Blades are at a crossroads in their existence. Though loyal to the Emperor, the members of the Assignment do not agree with the goals of the Ninja Crusade. Though they believe that some ninja are a threat to the Empire, many Silver Blades have seen nothing but honor and good intentions demonstrated by several they have faced in combat. They will still serve the Empire faithfully and prefer missions where they can bring the superiority of their code of honor to crush the wicked and vile enemies of the realm. They also prefer tasks that test

their strength in combat, as only by challenging great enemies can a Silver Blade become great themselves.

## ASSIGNMENT GIFTS AND TRIGGER

◆ **Gift – Focused Warriors:** The Silver Blade intuitively affects the flow of fate swirling around them, gaining +1 Fighting by honing these energies into their sword. They may also enter a special meditation, clearing their mind of all complications. By spending 1 Dynamic Action, they may reflexively reduce all current Mental Conditions they are suffering by 1.

◆ **Trigger – Honor Bound:** The Silver Blades are often surrounded by ruthless people, and though they are willing to serve the Emperor they must stay true to themselves and to their teachings. Gain 1 Karma when the pursuit of honor comes into conflict with a decision that carries grave consequences if you are forced to go against the needs of your comrades.

## CONTACTS

Choose one Ally and one Rival.

- ◆ **Izumi Sako (Holistics)** – An adept at the spiritual world, she has dedicated herself to non-violence but owes the Silver Blades and views them as the rightful protectors of the Empire.
- ◆ **Hiteroshi Kaiyo (Crafts)** – She lost her sword arm in a duel, and though her swords are finely prized, she is very strict in choosing her clientele.

◆ **Matsuruchi Eichi (Discipline)** – A recluse among the proud order, many have said Eichi has discovered a deeper level of understanding. Now considered strange and elusive, he still possesses great wisdom he is eager to share.

◆ **Kataoka Ren (Perception)** – An Imperial investigator who travels from city to city, her skilled mind and sharp eyes often uncover clues that others do not find.

◆ **Hamada Shoraku (Fortitude)** – A martial artist whose dedication to the law led her down a different path from the Silver Blades, she is said to have seen her future, and prepares for a dangerous journey.

◆ **Ichikyo Mitsada (Fighting)** – An expert duelist and former Court Duelist, he has gone into seclusion since the Ninja Crusade began. It is said his honor would not permit him to stay, an act which has earned him the enmity of the Executioners.

## BONDS

- ◆ *Choose one other character you feel great respect for due to their discipline and philosophies.*
- ◆ *Choose one other character who you find too chaotic and unfocused in their conduct.*
- ◆ *Choose one other character who you feel needs to be taught the hidden truth of your philosophy.*



Mekiko hoisted the bundle of sticks onto her back and shambled forward. Her body already spent from hours of chopping, the sticks swayed precariously. Once on the path, she kept her eyes down and focused on her steps. Mekiko had to get home as fast as she could to start the dinner fire and make sure the children did their chores.

Shouting brought her eyes up from the dirt.

An Izou soldier stood blocking the road while he stared at the Bamboo Herbalist across from him. The ninja's smirk betrayed her indifference to the soldier's glare. Mekiko would have to go around and hope to go unnoticed. She didn't think this would be too difficult as their eyes never strayed from each other.

Watching them carefully, she maneuvered to the side of the road and nearly lost her bundle twice as the ground turned uneven. One misstep and the bundle would come crashing down around her and she would be wasting time picking it up and putting it back together, not to mention gathering the attention of the soldier and the ninja.

"You have some nerve to come into our territory and steal our crops," the soldier said and stepped forward, puffing out his chest.

"I wasn't aware that flowers were a crop," the Herbalist said with a smirk on her face.

"All of this belongs to the Empire, now give back our property."

"No."

"No?"

"You heard me."

Just keep talking, Mekiko thought as she drew up next to them.

"That's pretty arrogant when you don't have your friends around you to help."

"I don't need them." The ninja laughed. "I can defeat you with no trouble."

The soldier grunted and rushed forward with his sword at the ready. Gracefully leaping aside, the ninja didn't bat an eye. Turning quickly to change his speed and direction, the soldier caught the ninja by surprise and crashed into her on the turn. Letting out a gasp of surprise, the ninja recovered and went on the attack forcing the soldier back to the grass.

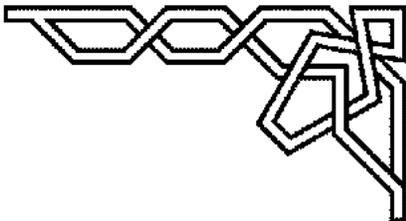
Right where Mekiko stood with her bundle of wood.

In slow motion, Mekiko saw the soldier's back looming large and throwing shadows across her face. Mekiko knew she should move, but she had no time and could only watch in horror as they tumbled into her and knocked her unconscious.

When she woke, her chest hurt and wood spread out around her like an aura. The soldier was picking up the wood and the ninja was nowhere to be found. Sitting up made Mekiko dizzy and the soldier came over to help her.

"I'm sorry about that. That ninja won't be bothering anyone around here now."

This thought did not comfort Mekiko.



# CHAPTER THREE

## A SIMPLE LIFE

### BLACK VEIL PROVINCE

Shadows, both literal and figurative, darken the faces of the Black Veil people. The shadows of war have poisoned the Veil's natural resources, threatening the very survival of the people. The Grasping Shadows rule over the province with an iron fist, and the people live in fear of drawing their attention. A Veil citizen spends their life warding off shadows from all sides.

Nobody would dare speak ill of the clan in the province, because words have a habit of reaching the Shadows and getting people killed. Your trusted neighbor could be a Shadow informant or simply betray you to the clan for a favor. Dissent would see your house burned, your family mutilated, or worse. That is why Black Veil citizens meddle little in other people's affairs.

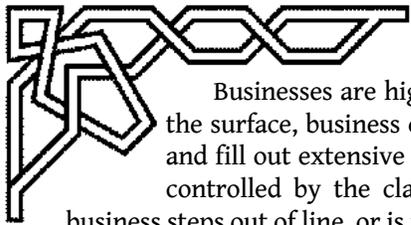
In the Veil, keeping your mouth shut gains you respect. Travelers in the province who ask too many questions or seem too friendly usually receive a raised eyebrow and little else. Speaking ill of the province, on the other hand, will garner dirty looks or a fight. Many of the people have lived in the Veil for generations and remain there, despite the dangers, because it is their home and only other citizens

understand the complicated feelings of fear and pride in its citizenry.

The Shadows will take jobs from citizens at times in order to strengthen their hold, but discovering how to reach the Shadows can be difficult. Someone may confide in a friend or relative of their need, or lament their problem to another sympathetic ear, often saying much without actually saying anything. If they are lucky, their confidant will have sought out the clan before or know someone who has and passed on the contact method by word of mouth. Simply speaking of the problem or need out loud indicates a dire situation to anyone in the Veil.

Then the ninja approaches the petitioner if they find their plea worth the clan's time. The Shadow asks "Why do you build a fire but retreat from its heat?" and the citizen responds "Because I prefer the shadows." An incorrect answer often leaves a mutilated body where the petitioner once stood.

Citizens might ask the clan to intimidate someone for business or personal reasons, acquire resources not available to the common person or, in extreme situations, for someone's assassination. Depending on the service, the Shadows may ask for information, money, supplies or anything else the clan can use in return.



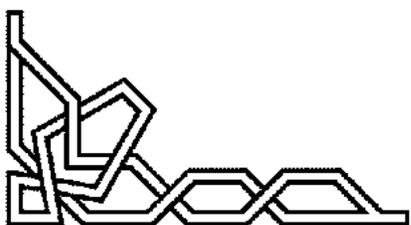
Businesses are highly regulated in the Veil. On the surface, business owners are forced to pay fees and fill out extensive paperwork by administrators controlled by the clan. Beneath the surface, if a business steps out of line, or is perceived as such, the control manifests as a night raid or other intimidation techniques. A merchant who persists in such behavior often disappears from the province. It is not an easy task to run a business in the Veil and requires careful tending of a relationship with the clan to be successful.

Spirits add another layer of danger the citizens deal with often. Objects move and sensitive people may say the oddest things eventually come true. It is not unusual to have a conversation with a citizen at night, only to find they have been dead many years. These souls have been bound to the province by their violent or tragic deaths. The real danger comes when the spirits coerce a citizen or unwary traveler to help them pass on to the other side. The penalty for not helping is harassment and haunting until the person gives in or dies. Most citizens deal with spirits as a part of living in the Veil and learn from an early age not to get into verbal contracts with anyone they are not sure is living, and to even be careful of speaking with those who are alive. Citizens usually carry charms and know prayers and chants to protect them. Uneducated travelers may find themselves the target of a spirit without someone knowledgeable to guide them.

An overall impression of the people from outside the province is that the residents are a stoic, no-nonsense group of citizens, but underneath something darker lurks. References to customs or events they don't understand and have no context for might seem innocent on the surface, but often leave travelers unsettled. If a traveler can earn the trust of the people, then they will have loyal allies who won't ask them a lot of questions and use what little they have to help them.

An assignment on the edge of this area is considered dangerous and usually given to those new to the army as a trial and test of their resolve. It is not unheard of for the residents to organize raids on the Izou encampments near their territory just for the fun of it, and the Grasping Shadows make it clear to the soldiers their presence is not welcome. Sending a soldier to the edge of the desert is also a threat used by officers to keep soldiers in line, because once the soldiers experience the desert, not many are eager to return there.

The people of the Veil have survived and will continue to survive no matter what the Empire has in store. If a soldier respects that strength, they may survive the Veil too.



## BRIDGE TO BATTLE PROVINCE

The citizens of the Bridge to Battle province are divided by the wounds of war. The people who live along the picturesque rivers, beaches and forests have been used and abused by both sides of the war, even though it is an Imperial state, because of its strategic position between the north and south. A soldier traveling to this area must be careful of its citizens, because the chance of meeting an enemy or a friend is equal.

Some citizens just want to live and think both sides are evil, some think the Empire has put them in a riskier position than other provinces and resent the price they pay for an Imperial war and some think the ninja should just give up. These arguments are everywhere in the province. It is not uncommon for the local law to be called upon to break up a political dispute between neighbors. Many of the people in the Bridge feel like a rope pulled between two hungry dogs threatening to snap at any moment.

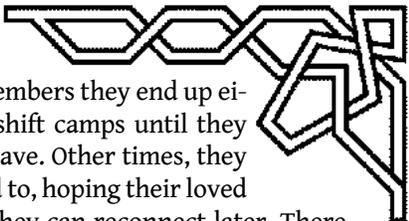
Citizens cannot forget their circumstances because of the massive training areas, barracks and camps in the area filled with Izou soldiers. Going out for bread or visiting friends means seeing soldiers every few steps along their journey. If not soldiers, then they note the effects mining has on the Bridge people. Citizens walk the streets coughing from working in the mines for years and never get better, shattering the surface illusion of an idyllic province.

Citizens who dare to venture into the Inks' forests can ask the clan for favors by petitioning with messages at one of the various shrines set up there. Requests for medicines or other resources from the forest can be obtained if one is willing to owe the clan, who might ask for labor, ore from the mines, exports or spreading of information in return.

The Inks themselves are not opposed to using what they can get so they can have an advantage in the province and look to spread a larger influence over the other clans and the people. Though they don't feel as illegitimate a clan as they used to, the Inks use the people to gain status out of habit as opposed to any real need to prove their worth. Inks will take credit for events they were not involved in like stopping or starting battles or a plague, depending on which story would benefit them. The people endure this posturing most of the time for the sake of province peace. Citizens know that if they were to call out the Gardeners for lies, it would lead to more battles and division and the people aren't ready for that, yet. The people understand the need to pick battles wisely. However, apathy is wearing thin all over the province and the citizens are starting to fight back.

Citizens fight with the Empire, citizens fight with the Inks, citizens fight with outsiders and citizens fight with





each other if given a reason. It's their only way to get back against a world they feel has used them for rewards they probably won't see themselves. Understanding why does not take much digging when looking at the exploitation of their province, not just for its position, but for its resources as well. Most citizens fear what will happen when the resources run out or they are no longer useful.

Planting caches of supplies and other preparations for freedom are underway by a small resistance, and many who are a part of it fear what will happen if either side finds out the Bridge province is planning to make themselves independent of any rule. It's a dangerous undertaking, but the dream of being free of both ninja and the Empire is becoming widespread in the private meeting halls late at night. Outwardly, they keep up appearances and are careful not to mention anything that would draw suspicion.

A simple conversation about current events can lead to a veiled discussion about planning to take the province back. Those in the resistance feel out others and plan to grow their numbers until they have enough to battle in the open. Recruitment started with single men and women, who didn't have much to lose, but has grown in recent days to include families who have an interest in a life without the Empire or the clan. Caution is paramount to these discussions because of the wide variety of feelings about the state of the province. The resistance has patience and is willing to wait until the time is right to strike.

A soldier who finds out about this resistance has a choice to make. They can turn the citizens in for a possible reward. They could try to benefit from the knowledge themselves and blackmail the residents. They could help the residents for small favors. They could play both sides or no sides like many in the province do themselves. It depends on the soldier and their feelings toward the Empire and why they joined in the first place.

Life for the people of the province is a constant decision of when to push and when to hold back, and travelers to the province soon learn this lesson, or leave.

## BRIDGE TO THE WORLD PROVINCE

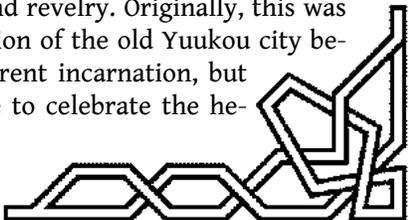
The western side of the continent contains the Bridge to the World Province, named for its port cities that allow the Izou to reach almost anywhere in the world. This collection of ports makes the province one of the wealthiest, since it is responsible for the vast majority of the Empire's imports and exports. Its cities have seen a large increase in growth in the number of military soldiers leaving and those returning from war. The port cities are also flooded with refugees trying to flee the war-torn areas, but since many cannot afford

passage for all their family members they end up either stuck in slums or makeshift camps until they can scrounge up enough to leave. Other times, they send only who they can afford to, hoping their loved ones survive the journey so they can reconnect later. There are those who are instead drawn to these areas of conflict like a moth to a flame, knowing that if they have the right motivation and a proper streak of luck, they can dramatically improve their station by exploiting the current black market for certain goods or services.

While no ninja clan truly holds absolute sway over the Bridge to the World Province, the closest are the Living Chronicle, having installed many temples in the province. It is the perfect location for them, as it keeps their connection to the Land of Crashing Waves intact, and gives them a hub to plan the best way to spread their missionaries over all the Izou Empire. With so many passing through the region, recording the stories of refugees and war heroes alike is easy here.

The province itself has few permanent residents, instead being a waypoint for travelers from all over the world. Seldom do actual Bridge citizens call upon ninja, though. Instead, they know the customs; if they have a problem, they should simply share it with a monk of the Living Chronicle, who will record it for posterity. Leaving a legacy is incredibly important to these citizens, and inscribing it upon a historian's skin is the best way to do that. If the request is one deemed important enough for the ninja to step in and change the course of history, then the monk contacts a ninja within the organization to handle the situation, either directly or by leaning on the Lotus Coalition. This happens infrequently, however, making the Bridge citizenry pretty self-reliant by nature. They don't look to the Empire, the criminal families or the ninja to handle their problems... they solve them alone. They are less loyal to the throne than others and help the clans whenever it seems beneficial, but recognize the Empire holds the reins to their lifestyle and are careful not to tip the balance too much.

The merchant circles here primarily focus on services rather than goods. The wealth is obvious to even the casual observer as there are thousands of oil lanterns constantly ablaze lining the streets, regardless if it is day or night. This level of opulence is almost unheard of outside of the city as the cost to maintain this system is immense. Almost any thirst can be quenched here, as the province hopes to cater to people from all over the world. During the Summer Solstice, many towns hold the Flesh Carnival, a parade of scantily clad or naked citizens, being playfully chased by others dressed as monsters, culminating in the city center with 24 hours of drinking and revelry. Originally, this was to memorialize the destruction of the old Yuukou city before being rebuilt in its current incarnation, but has since become an excuse to celebrate the he-



donistic lifestyle lived by most of its citizens on a daily basis. With the amount of money and intrigue floating around the Bridge to the World Province, it's no wonder it has become a haven for cutthroat mercenaries and others looking for a quick piece of jade on the backs of others.

## CRADLE OF LIFE PROVINCE

Though caught in a vicious ninja war of its own in recent years, it is the true breadbasket of the Izou Empire, providing much of the Empire's food. The vast swaths of open space allow for ample grazing ranges for cattle ranches and horse farms, which have only increased as more soldiers receive training in mounted combat. Once one of the most fertile areas within the Empire, the province was attacked by ninja using mystic and traditional techniques to poison the land, making much of it unfit to grow crops. The amount of farmland is still greater than most provinces and the quality of food is still better, but these attacks dramatically reduced the quantity the region can produce. There are numerous remaining farms, and military presence around such communities has been increased since any more loss could cause irreparable harm to the war effort.

The Empire used the attacks in the Cradle of Life Province as the focal point of a propaganda campaign against the ninja and their supporters, which was very effective on the Cradle citizens themselves, who are primarily farmers and simple land owners. The attacks were said to be responsible for widespread famine and food shortages, the cause of riots, public disturbances and in areas heavily dependent on outside agriculture, starvation and death. This information is dispersed throughout the Empire by all government officials and representatives, especially if distributing foodstuffs to families in need. This has led many Cradle families to throw their support behind the Empire wholeheartedly. The ninja have no place in the province, and all they do is put the average citizen in danger. Ninja operating in the area rarely receive support from the citizenry. More often, their presence is relayed to Izou authorities in a swift manner.

This is not just a province resistant to the ninja. They are actively defiant toward any ninja interaction, even that of the Pack of the Black Moon who holds control over the province. It used to be that hanging a dried-out duck over one's doorway was an offering to the ninja's dog and a way to gain their favor. However, since the Ninja Crusade began, the clan has received fewer and fewer requests. Those Cradle citizens still loyal to the ninja keep quiet, as they could be regarded as traitors by their own people. Burying the dried duck is a way to still call out to the Hounds, however,





and the ninja are eager to serve the people and hopefully regain their trust.

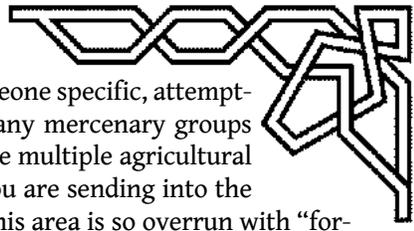
All of this was sparked by the war between the Recoiling Serpents and the Pack of the Black Moon, which has led to animosity between the two clans, even in the Lotus Coalition. The Izou army has learned much of this shadow war from their prisoners of war with loose lips, and have actually gone to great lengths to draw out the conflict through artificial means. This keeps the citizens of the Cradle under their sway and the ninja on the outs—and both at each other's throats, just as they like it. In the meantime, the government is also constantly researching ways to restore the fertility of the affected areas to restore their former levels of production.

Unlike other provinces where travelers may be looked down upon or seen only as a source of opportunity, the Cradle of Life is at the center of hospitality. Citizens are always welcoming of a stranger, often inviting them into their home to share a meal or sleep off their travels in exchange for work on their farms or even just interesting stories of things they've seen. They always have time to answer questions, and most tourists cringe at the number of words a Cradle citizen can pack into a single sentence. Their dialect is fast, but also contains a drawl that makes it hard to understand them at times, but that won't stop them from trying to have a conversation with anyone willing to listen.

## FLAME RIVER PROVINCE

This mountainous region is the birthplace of the ninja tradition and is among the most active with insurgent activity during the Ninja Crusade. The land is full of sharp, jagged peaks, active volcanos and harsh, rocky northern shores. The largest volcano in the Izou Empire, the Ensen volcano, regularly belches thick, dark smoke and ash, filling many of the surrounding mountain valleys with layer upon layer of fine ash. These remote areas are often researched by the finest agriculturalists the Empire has at its disposal to see if putting small farming communities or work camps in these valleys could help offset some of the agricultural loss of the Cradle of Life province. Though not as active as it once was, the insurgency is still alive, supported by the more rebellious members of the citizenry, as ninja continue to use the mountains and cave systems as hiding spots for their efforts.

The northern regions act as a raucous area full of criminals, outlaws, bandits, mercenaries and freedom fighters. Refugees from both the Land of Mountains and Valleys and the Land of Exalted Flame come to the Flame River Province looking for a place to escape the ongoing conflicts in their respective lands. Due to its geographic position, very few agents of the Emperor ever travel to the region. Those who

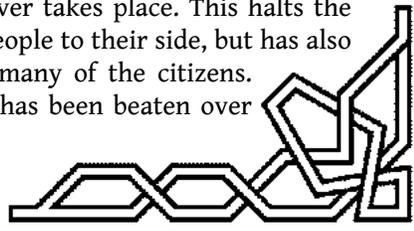


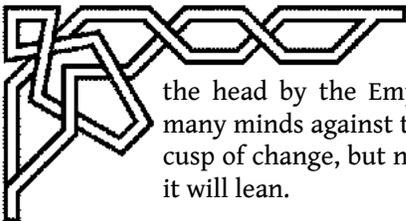
do are either looking for someone specific, attempting to employ one of the many mercenary groups there or are part of one of the multiple agricultural expeditionary groups the Izou are sending into the nearby mountain systems. This area is so overrun with “foreigners,” however, that few Flame River citizens would venture there either.

The Flame River Province is under the purview of the Blazing Dancers, who built their Wu Ji Theater at the base of the Ensen Volcano. The grand stages that stand there were once destroyed by the rains and flooding that affected most of the area, but they were rebuilt and are more grandiose than ever. The massive red gates, rumored to be hand crafted by giants, remain and are an awe-inspiring sight to those who have never attended a performance. While the theater is no longer open, people still see it as a place of hope. Many make pilgrimages to the theater in hopes of being taken on as a disciple of the troupe, while others use it as a way to contact the clan for missions. Leaving an invitation to put on a show in the requester's village is all that is necessary, and the Wu Ji doorstep often has hundreds of requests at any given time piling up. If the invitation is accepted, the Blazing Dancers announce a new city on their tour and seek out the requester during the show, which is often enough to distract anyone from their true mission. Even if it takes months to respond, however, they will always follow up on any request made, which makes the Blazing Dancers quite different from other clans.

Today, performances put on by the Blazing Dancers are overwhelmingly supportive of the Emperor, his generals and allied nobles, occasionally playing up changes made on the fly to curry favor with a certain high-ranking spectator in the audience. To do otherwise would likely draw the ire of Izou loyalists, and may even draw the attention of the Emperor himself, leading to a wealth of unwanted attention. There have been a few performances recently thought to poke fun at certain decisions of local politicians, and even a couple making satirical jabs at the Emperor himself. These are few and far between, but are certainly more prevalent than they were even a few months ago. Many new performances are accompanied by a week of celebration leading up to their release.

The Flame River citizen is a keen observer, however, and they see the hidden messages in every performance. Every time the Blazing Dancers leave their theater to put on a show, the citizens are filled with hope. Their people overwhelmingly support the ninja, as does anyone who sees the truth behind their performances. Sadly, the Izou army has gotten wise to these hidden messages and put a stop to many a show before it ever takes place. This halts the ninja's ability to sway the people to their side, but has also brought a hopelessness to many of the citizens. The once-hopeful province has been beaten over





the head by the Empire's propaganda, changing many minds against the ninja. It is a region on the cusp of change, but no one knows which direction it will lean.

## IRON PROVINCE

Residents of the Iron Province used to be proud citizens of the Land of Five Blades, until the Emperor occupied the area during the Expansion Wars, established Sensoumon (Gate to War) and launched a two-pronged attack on the Land of Seed and Blossom and the Land of Five Blades from the Triumph Province. One of those battles ended with the strategic occupation of what is now the Iron Province. The citizens know their land the Empire now occupies they took before they could no longer sustain the two-pronged attack and the people remember the Empire's greed.

Rituals weave through every aspect of daily life here. A soldier arriving in the province will take note of how even the smallest interactions are some form of ritual and most of the citizens take them seriously. They range from a simple prayer to the complex layers of a dozen spells that protect the ancient temple of the Iron clan from intruders. Passed down through the generations, these rituals are kept out of tradition and even habit. This is a more recent development since the Empire is running out of funds to keep the area under control and the younger people have taken to not only subtle ritual, but skirmishing with Imperial soldiers as well. Wise soldiers pay attention to their surroundings at all times, unless they want to become the victim of combative citizens. Though these skirmishes have not outright turned to war, such an event might not be far in the future.

The mystical Aikuchi Mountains in the west of the province create a sense of timelessness. Shrouded in mist and housing the oldest temple of the Will of Iron clan, the Iron Province residents live amid mystery and magic. This means the people tend to accept that change is a part of life and they can be part of that change, and some are willing to risk everything for it. They have seen what the clan can do and some have started to think that they too can hold such power. The temple's defenses include disappearing and appearing on another peak of the mountain range and causing citizens to forget how to get there once they have conducted business. The older people feel the mountains and the clan that occupies them are protection against forces that might try to conquer them again. The younger loyalists see the mountain as a threat to the Empire they belong to.

A trip to the temple for the people to ask the Will of Iron clan for help is arduous and some never come back. If they do find the temple they can petition the clan for help with protection and can offer materials they have mined to the clan to make weapons. This material is precious in times of war and the citizens use this fact to their advantage.

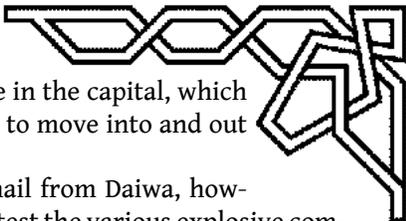
Some of the older residents hope with the help of the people the clan will be strong enough to take back the province.

The Will of Iron's influence has waned since the occupation; they are eager to protect the province from the Empire, but the clan can no longer stop the open war that is coming. There are different opinions about the prospect of war in the region, mostly between the old and the young. The older folks who remember when the province was part of the Land of Five Blades hope that the clan will oust the Empire. This can create lively discussions around the dinner table on occasion. However, until there is open battle the residents will continue to make the best lives possible for themselves and their families.

The people of the province tend to be passionate and resolute. This comes from the tension they live with every day, and willingness to stand up and do what is imperative to survival. Citizens here make things with their hands and craft amazing weapons and tools from metal. Other citizens farm fields and work the land. What the people know is the land and working with their hands and they are adamant about issues that will prevent them from continuing their lifestyle, like the Empire or the clan, depending on the person.

Though they may disagree, the people still help each other when they can, because they know that there may come a time when they need help as well. A traveler who is also willing to help the people will be received well and thaw the people a little. A traveler who shows they know the meaning of work with calloused hands and a willingness to do hard labor will also gain the respect of the people. Practicality will also win over the people as well as a lack of wastefulness, since resources are precious in the region. The residents reuse what they can and don't often have what they might view as many decorative or luxury items in their homes, preferring to leave the space for necessary furniture and supplies.

Simple lives of farming, mining, and commerce are what the province wants and their most valuable resource for the economy of the province is the metal they mine from the mountains. Metal in a time of war is precious, and while most resent the fact they have to sell to those who control them, they have little choice in the matter and continue to do the practical option to survive. That isn't to say there aren't those who make sure the best metal gets into the hands of those committed to helping the province free themselves from the agenda of others.



## MIDDLE PROVINCE

The Middle Province is the physical and spiritual center of the Izou Empire, and the cornerstone upon which the rest of the Empire is built. Due to its location at the geographical heart of the Empire, the Middle Province is awash with travelers and visitors, be it tourists from the outer reaches of the Emperor's domain, artisans and merchants legitimately peddling their wares or underhanded associates of various criminal ventures. All have their foothold in the province, and the beating pulse of the Empire sustains and invigorates them, with the current political and social climates influencing the ebb and flow of these populations.

Like the Middle Province itself, Daiwa, the capital, welcomes a wide array of people within its boundaries. There is a constant flow of aspiring politicians, nobles wanting to pay respects and emissaries from distant kingdoms hoping to build political relationships with the illustrious Izou Empire by offering assistance or council in the Ninja Crusade. This tide of people is a fraction of what it once was, with many of the wide avenues still empty, but certain areas are still heavily traveled. Since the war, there is a pall hanging over the city, only serving to make it appear more empty and lonely than it should.

Every month there are organized cultural celebrations representing every corner of the vast nation. These celebrations have singing, dancing, food and wares from these different locations, perfectly illustrating the richness and diversity of the cultures in the Izou Empire. These celebrations seem to have done some good to promote diversity, but critics have stated that these all seem forced and overly orchestrated to detract from the ongoing problems since the war.

Contacting the Wardens of Equilibrium is the easiest thing. Simply walk into any shop and hand the proprietor jade inside a bag soaked in milk. The ninja take a hands-off approach to much of the regular goings-on in the Middle Province, but every shop owner from Nanchou to Daiwa feels the presence of an invisible overseer who chooses whether they continue to stay in business. The requester is visited by a Warden within the hour of dropping off their jade, but their requests must stay in line with what the clan holds dear... balancing the scales. A rich person cannot ask for more wealth, for instance.

Most people in the Middle province are loyal to the throne, constantly bombarded with propaganda about the Emperor's immortality and the greatness of the Empire. The Ninja Crusade has taken less of a toll on Middle citizens than on other provinces, but there are still a number of families who have lost power, wealth and authority. Some have found new positions of power amongst the downtrodden, still believing in the superiority of the Empire, but others secretly work with various ninja clans. These families

still have significant leverage in the capital, which the ninja use to their benefit to move into and out of the city with impunity.

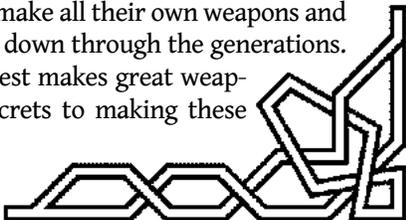
Not all Middle citizens hail from Daiwa, however. Other areas are used to test the various explosive compounds, weapons and alchemical reagents that have polluted the land. Since the Year of Floods, the soil has reclaimed its fertility and is once again bounteous, arable farmland. This dangerous and toxic legacy sometimes rears its head, when the occasional farmer stumbles upon a hidden cache or secret laboratory holding many still-potent alchemical substances, even though they are decades old. There are rumors the rebellious alchemist-general, Ishimaru Kaito, concealed a massive weapons cache with enough explosives to leave the entire valley in ruins. These are often dismissed as nonsense, but certain ninja clans give credence to these rumors and are looking for Kaito's agents.

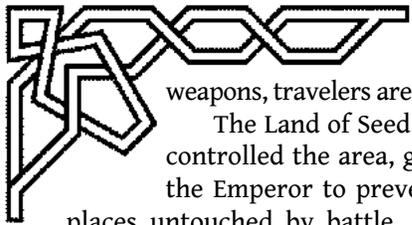
The largest and oldest festival in the Middle Province is the Harvest Festival of Heigenchou, which is a great place to request services from the Wardens. Citizens from all over the province bring goods to share with one another, along with food, drink and traditional dances in celebration of the harvest. Rural communities continue to work together to help maintain each other's fields, plow and sow new crops and lend a hand if a someone is injured. This sense of community, reinforced by the annual festival, has been ingrained in the culture and only serves to strengthen the heart of the Empire.

## OAK LEAF PROVINCE

Oak trees provide acres of forest and shade for this province, providing the name of the area. The people are hunters of great skill, quite comfortable with the trees and woods surrounding them. They know how to move silently and most are great archers, having learned from the time they were small to fend for themselves. A bounty of game and plants grow here and the people know them all and can steer travelers in the right or wrong direction for what they seek.

Wood is of course important to daily life in the province and many of the buildings are made out of the oak trees, whether they are built up in the trees or in clearings miles into the shadowy forests. Pelts and other natural items provide furniture and warmth. Most of the people here make their living by trading what they find with travelers and each other. They are dark haired and usually pale of complexion because of the shade the trees provide, but their smaller stature and general ability to move easily helps them hunt the most dangerous creatures in the forests. They make all their own weapons and usually those skills are passed down through the generations. The ample wood from the forest makes great weapons and though there are secrets to making these





weapons, travelers are still able to purchase them.

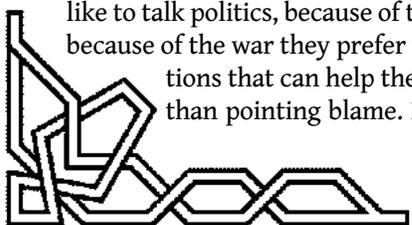
The Land of Seed and Blossom, who originally controlled the area, gave the province as a gift to the Emperor to prevent war. It is one of the few places untouched by battle, because they didn't put up much resistance. Though the cities have mostly moved on since the Expansion Wars, most of those living in the smaller villages and alone in the outskirts of the province are not pleased by either side and prefer to remain silent. Some have even stopped trading with either side to protest their treatment.

Though they have fallen somewhat out of favor with the rural minority, the Bamboo Herbalists have brought back their protection to the region and have holdings here as an extension of their homeland. The Herbalists protect the region with illusions—illusions that cause other ninja to lose their way if they show they are hostile. The people take this in stride and are mostly glad the Herbalists don't choose to use their illusions on them. Most of them think the war between the ninja and the Empire is ridiculous, which they can afford to do because they were the least affected by the occupation.

Independent and self-sufficient, the people of the Oak Leaf Province look down on anyone who they decide cannot take care of themselves. Solving your own problems and putting food on the table are of primary importance and getting involved in other people's wars seems like a waste of time to them. If a soldier talks to the people, they will find this is the case as the people here also have no interest in mincing words. They speak plainly and then go about their business of hunting and taking care of their families. A soldier wanting to hunt or partake of the resources here would be wise to make sure they have the permission of the resident who owns the area or they could find themselves driven out of town.

The citizens here are in good health and generally live good lives because of the Herbalists and their capitulation to the Emperor. Though most are happy they have come through the war so far relatively unscathed, there are some who feel the guilt of their act and wonder what would have happened if they had not traded independence for relative peace. That is why the people here are very helpful to those who come into their province. They have the privilege of distance to see how war affects everyone from the soldier to the citizen and that often people are caught in between power plays from two bigger powers they have no control over. Many refugees seek to travel here from other areas, so one is just as likely to run into a refugee as a citizen.

Though the people are helpful to everyone, they don't like to talk politics, because of the diversity in the region and because of the war they prefer to keep the discussions on actions that can help the people and offer aide, rather than pointing blame. If they can, they will mediate



discussions between groups or seek to break up arguments. These folk are probably the most welcome in any of the other provinces and they use that to supply aide for others.

People from all over the world come to the province to learn and heal. Soldiers are treated no differently than anyone else here and if they are in need of healing or guidance it will be found. Soldiers sometimes arrive here just to take in the sights and have a respite from the visions of war surrounding them most of the time. The Herbalists help the people and it is rare that they turn anyone away, all one has to do is show up at their headquarters in the city and present their problems and if the Herbalists can help, they will. The people here probably feel the most protected out of all the provinces and so have the resources to help anyone who asks for help in return.

The central palace houses twelve families, because space is found anywhere it can to meet the needs of the residents and those who come to heal. Everyone who lives in the province pitches in and it is a life where one pays no attention to how things once were. Shops now house animals. Old houses now house the healing and those who take care of them. It is a place where your past remains your past.

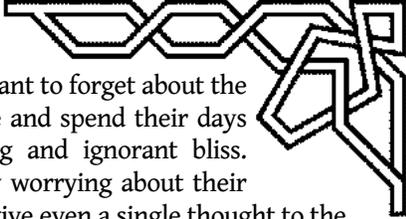
## SILK BELT PROVINCE

Almost completely unscathed by the Ninja Crusade, the Silk Belt Province is beautiful, tranquil and the landscape is a mixture between sweeping grassland and dense forests depending on where one finds themselves. The relative silence of the province is a pall hanging over the region that few even notice, as the Hidden Strands of Fate rule the upper echelons of the province, but operate in almost absolute secrecy. The level of fear of ninja retaliation from the citizenry is beaten only by the Black Veil Province ruled by the Grasping Shadows. The Silk Belt Province, however, has so much going for it that few spend their days worrying about the ninja until it's too late.

Several cities across the province offer theaters, tea houses, outside performance venues for actors and musicians, galleries and a wealth of libraries and museums of all kinds. Artisans here can make a living well beyond those in other parts of the Empire, making it the artistic epicenter of the Empire. The Silk Belt, however, bent quickly to the will of the Emperor and the Ninja Crusade, since city leaders didn't want to risk losing their precious archives or disrupting their sprawling tourist trade. Joining the Empire was the closest thing to a preservationist approach they could take, mirroring the actions taken by the Hidden Strands of Fate when the war began.

And that is what the Silk Belt Province has become. A place



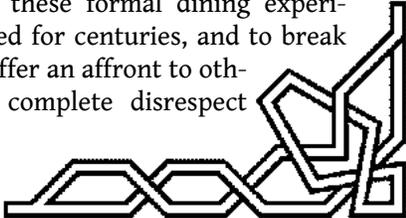


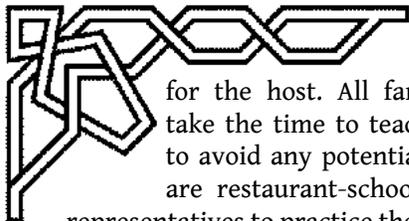
for citizens who want to forget about the war to congregate and spend their days in booze, partying and ignorant bliss. Most are too busy worrying about their own problems to give even a single thought to the war. Some hope for the best, but can't be asked to do more than "keep the soldiers in their thoughts" while they gamble away their cares or visit the red-light district. No one could say that Silk Belt citizens are bad people, but their culture of self-absorption has been carefully cultivated by the Hidden Strands and several of their political leaders. Travelers visiting the province may find it disturbing, but they are even more likely to get swept up in the same sentiment before too long.

Politically, the province has a long history of those in power gaining their positions or retaining them through unscrupulous methods, but losing them just as quickly in a manner just as underhanded. Tennokiba, a city to the south, acts as neutral territory for the rival nobles and politicians to meet away from the prying eyes of enemies and allies in their own territory. Many deals and treaties have been solidified within the borders of the city, bringing about eras of peace just as frequently as those of strife and turmoil. Knowing these deals that could affect the Empire for generations are being struck at any given time would make some worry, but the nonchalant attitudes of the Silk Belt Province make this business as usual.

The Hidden Strands of Fate once held more obvious control of the province, but as the Ninja Crusade has escalated, the existing power structure has been corrupted by the various criminal organizations vying for control. The citizenry has not thrown their lot in with the ninja or the Empire, but their loyalties can change with the passing wind as long as their way of life remains unchanged. The criminal families make the most sense presently. The ninja have begun infiltrating these families, often treating them as equals to their face and plotting their death behind their backs.

Among the many subtle nuances of the political machinations, dining with one's enemies or potential allies has become somewhat of an art form in the province. Strict social rules of etiquette around these formal dining experiences have evolved for centuries, and to break these rules is to offer an affront to other attendees or complete disrespect





for the host. All families, noble or commoner, take the time to teach their children these ways to avoid any potential embarrassment, and there are restaurant-schools where families can send representatives to practice these ways. It is in these schools where many alliances and deals initially take root. Leaving an invite under a stone on one's doorstep is the easiest way to call upon the Hidden Strands for those who still seek the clan for missions. If a ninja accepts the invitation, they will expect a ceremonial meal to solidify the details of the assignment, and it will always cost the asker something precious to them. These invitations have, thus far, escaped notice by the Izou army, but the two sides may dine together soon.

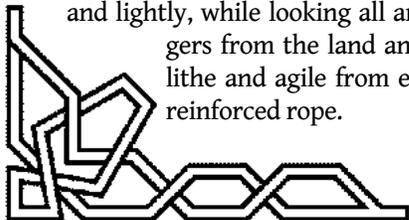
## TRIUMPH PROVINCE

The Recoiling Serpents make their home in the center of this province, in the murky swamps and bogs only the Serpents know how to navigate. They have no fear anyone will attempt to steal their power; their buildings set amongst the trees and nestled on swamp islands are secure from curiosity-seekers and those wishing to harm the clan.

Battles are a daily occurrence between Izou Soldiers, ninja and the residents because of the central and advantageous position of Triumph and its resources. The people learned through the landscape of Triumph and life experience that they have to fight for survival and those in power will do everything they can to bring them down and make the people nothing more than pawns in power games. They do this by adapting and working within the tensions in the region and working to make their hardships work for them if they possibly can, which is not always an easy task.

The name of the province became Triumph to reflect the conquest of the Emperor; to gloat about what he did, but it has come to mean more to the people of the province than just an Emperor's pride. It is an apt name for the people and how they triumph in adverse conditions. They have told each other in passing Triumph will be the Emperor's downfall because they will use it as a unifying cry to wait out whatever fate has in store for the Emperor and the ninja. The people of the Triumph Province will still be standing.

Triumph is the largest province in the Empire, but with likely the lowest population. Most of the cities of the province are separated by huge swamplands ruled over by Serpent overlords. The residents have had to grow tough to travel between the cities and around the province. They walk quickly and lightly, while looking all around them for potential dangers from the land and the ninja, most of them are lithe and agile from everyday living, but tough like reinforced rope.



Citizens might call upon the Serpents if they require medicines or other items only the ninja would have access to or knowledge of. Serpents usually find you if you walk around the swamps long enough, but they also have small territory warnings that are good places to run into the ninja. Though, as with most citizens petitioning the clans, it is usually an act of desperation and only used in the worst circumstances.

Burnt ground and bloodstained plants mark the area around the few province cities. Battle cries and the smell of desperation are the background for everyday life in the more populated areas. Children born in the cities can't remember a time before sieges. The people go through work and play knowing at any moment things could change and they will have to find the nearest shelter. Soldiers are more numerous than civilians here and a soldier living in this city would be avoided or catered to in order to prevent conflict.

Living under siege means certain luxuries are scarce and sometimes even the basics are hard to come by when the siege is broken and then renewed. The uncertainty of life in the cities has created people who don't make waves and try to be as unobtrusive as possible. A soldier would get a sort of fearful courtesy when approaching a citizen, if the soldier even noticed the citizen was there at all.

People lose time when they live under the constant threat of death and so the people don't keep track of time the way other provinces do, just in case they don't have a future. Gallows humor is the rule of the land, if the people could not joke about what is going on then they know that they have truly lost all hope. It's what keeps them from crying or sinking into despair. This might unsettle travelers to the region, but it is something travelers learn to understand if they spend any time in the region, even the children can make jokes to lessen the load that they live with every single day.

A soldier training in the cities would be among the Izou's best warriors because the constant siege creates the perfect training ground, even for the infamous Golden Lions and the Silver Blades. The people are forced to accept this, even if they don't like it. Soldiers have become a normal part of the landscape and even businesses have learned to adapt to the needs of the soldiers in order to survive by selling them items they might need, or luxuries the army might not provide. A soldier might even be able to swing better deals or more materials if they show that they can wield the gallows humor as well as any citizen.

The time of warrior/farmers tending their fields with sickles by day and practicing their katas with sickles at night are gone. Though there are some older folks still trying to carry on these traditions even when the world all around them is changing as tensions rise.

They know how to adapt and their province is one that pays an exacting toll on those who are not tough enough to survive the poisonous landscape. Residents rarely succumb





to disease or wounds. They have spent a lifetime building their bodies and minds to defend against the swamp in the middle of their province and the Recoiling Serpents living there, especially the people of Night's Bog who are particularly close with the dangerous waters and swamps. The people can wait for their opportunity to fight back.

Sometimes a former resident travels back to see what has become of their devastated town, but all they find is a people with haunted looks, buildings on stilts and flooded streets. No longer the center of fishing and commerce in the vicinity, the people stay steadfast and wait to be free.

## RELIGION IN THE EMPIRE

Religion is woven into the Empire at its foundation. From the most common citizen to the Emperor himself, most possess some level of spirituality. Prior to the Izou Empire's rise, each state had its own religion. The Empire did not institute any official state religion, however it does tacitly approve of the most widespread belief that one is reincarnated based on one's dharma; that is, how you behave in this life determines your status and quality of life in the next. In the Empire's eyes, this belief is a foundation of the balance and harmony it needs to run smoothly. They understand faith can strengthen or weaken the state, and have gone so far as destroying the symbols of other, independent states' religions to prevent any from becoming widespread enough to rally in resistance to the Empire. Though the Imperials do not go as far as the Enlightened do, believing there is a way to ascend past the cycle, they are at least on the path. It is one of the reasons the Enlightened allied themselves with the Imperials after the ninja assassinated their tamashi. Many ninja are portrayed by the Empire as souls who did despicable things in their past lives; some even hint their souls are corrupted by Oni who would spread their evil by disrupting the peaceful rule of their Emperor. The fates of the Emperor's son, daughter and wife are often held up as examples of the devilry practiced by these beings who attack from the shadows and live in darkness. Strangely, these loyal officials do not bring up the Emperor's temporary absence as any kind of example of the ninja's treachery, but they will bring up the devastating attack from a couple of years ago, which left the capital in ruins in another failed attempt to murder their beloved Emperor.

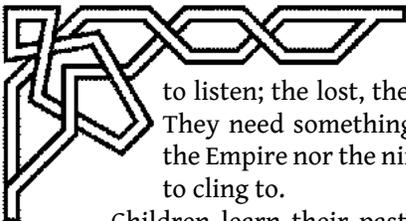
There are several gods, or kami, who fall under the broad definition of this faith. As it is not one unified dogma, most practitioners also worship their families' ancestors and various spirits. Sometimes they also worship the village founders. To remember, pray to and venerate them brings strength and honor to their families and communities.

Gods, spirits and even ghosts are part of the day-to-day lives of those who dwell in the Izou Empire.

Though some villages have modest public shrines and temples, most homes also have smaller, family altars, called kamidana. Praying to one's ancestors, though just as ubiquitous as belief in dharma and reincarnation, isn't quite codified as part of an official religion. Neighbors cast a suspicious eye now and then when rumors whisper that one's ancestor may have been a ninja. Some families take pains to exclude those who were known to be ninja; even though it may make some heartsick to do so. An entire generation of constant war has driven some to question a faith that counsels knowing your place, when so many have been displaced and driven to lie, steal and even kill just so they and their families could survive. Those who quietly nurse spite against the Empire are not necessarily friends of the ninja either. Some villagers along the worst-hit paths of the fighting pray to their ancestors for guidance on how to free themselves from both powers. Village leaders tell their people the Empire and the ninja have forgotten those they claim to fight for. They tell them one day, perhaps soon, they will have a voice loud enough to remind them.

There is a time between death and reincarnation. Some spirits stay in the Celestial Courts for a time, helping their descendants on Earth and preparing for their eventual return. There are some who, if their families have a relationship with them, travel to the realms of their Celestial Animal allies. Some still provide for their family, even after death, by strengthening their bonds with the Animal families. Of course, depending on the family, the realm their spirit travels to could be welcoming or not. Still, they may help by guiding their still-living relatives to help those Celestials captured by the Iron Breakers.

Even those who are devout practitioners may not consider themselves part of an organized sect. They practice a ritual-oriented worship that intertwines with their daily lives. They may call upon their ancestors to speak to the spirits of wind, sun and rain to ensure their family will have enough to eat through these difficult times. Citizens who have lost everything pray for strength to get through the next day or to change their station and take up arms against whoever hurt them. This could mean leaving their destroyed farm to join the Imperial Army, or seeking out someone who claims to know how to put them on the path to the whispered sanctuary of the ninja, Danketsu. Others pray for forgiveness as they seek out known criminal families to join, because there is nothing left for them as an "honest" citizen. The Enlightened believe those who break the laws to survive are spiritually weak. However, followers of the Tenets of Ko teach those who are willing to listen, set aside the faith of their childhood and walk this new path. They have seen a slight surge in those willing



to listen; the lost, the displaced, the disheartened. They need something to guide them, and neither the Empire nor the ninja have given them anything to cling to.

Children learn their past lives determined their current one, just as their current life will influence their next turn of the wheel, including their class. Most believe they deserve their current circumstances and station in life. This encourages them to live a life accumulating good karma. It keeps them from wasting time aspiring to a higher station. One precept of their faith is that honoring the Empire's decrees also earns good karma. Recently, however, there are more who would defy the Empire, defy the ruts tradition mandates, and follow the criminal ninja in abandoning the idea of dharma. Some do so because they have hidden relatives, exiled for being ninja, whom they know are good people fighting a good fight. Others have lost faith that either the Empire or the ninja care what happens to them or what path they follow.

While it's not true for all, many still believe they are born to their prescribed roles. As such, they focus their energies on being the best in that role. To serve both the Empire and Heaven, they will be the best soldier, the best merchant or the best farmer they can be. The duties one must fulfill to their karma, to their family and their Empire are not always

in sync, which may lead to some difficult choices. Not all ninja spirit their families away to Danketsu. Leaving them behind may have been a difficult choice for them, but also introduces potential problems for those left. If any officials found out and couldn't be sufficiently bribed to keep quiet, it could mean disaster. Some flee their villages, ironically taking refuge with the Enlightened. Those monks who do not travel live in mountain monasteries. They keep themselves secluded in study most of the time, but just like their traveling brethren, they stay conditioned as to defend themselves and their homes—particularly now that they are receiving an influx of those who have nowhere else to go.

After the Emperor launched the Ninja Crusade, some who questioned the karmic system still leaned heavily on their ancestors, as well as some spirits. Others though, they sought out demons, Oni and spirits of a nefarious nature. Demons once had run of the lands that the Empire now claims; they have long memories, old aspirations and fresh worshippers. The Oni thrive on sorrow and chaos, and there is plenty to be found in the wake of a war. Spirits are a part of daily life, and Oni exploit that among the regular citizenry. They play the long game; masquerading as helpful spirits that folk may call upon to protect their villages, they wait to extract their ultimate price. They fan the flames of suspicion and distrust, starting rumors and gorging on the devastation that follows.





## THE RECONCILED

With the Emperor's recent reappearance, many believe there are none more powerful, but the Reconciled preach that there is a single being in Heaven more powerful than even the Emperor. Those who have seen and perpetrated horrors can be forgiven in this life, their dharma does not need to damn them to lifetimes of misery and pain. Through penance and prayer, they can find redemption in this life. A tempting prospect to those who have lost so much to what seems like a never-ending war.

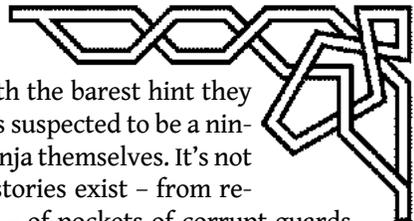
Although the Enlightened teach that one can purify oneself and reach Heaven, there is a tinge of judgement surrounding them that is off-putting to those already on the lowest rungs of society. The Reconciled seem more accepting to those who have been through the hardest times, but still are not so jaded to have lost all hope of redemption.

The Reconciled also do not close themselves off on high mountaintops. Redemption is for all, but it must be earned; not in hidden contemplation, but on the streets of the cities feeding the hungry and tending to the sick and forgotten. Prayer is necessary, but penance is in their actions.

## ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE EMPIRE

Wherever there are laws, there are always those who live outside their boundaries who provide illegal goods and services or who just don't believe the laws should apply to them. The Izou Empire is no different. The Emperor rules and his Imperial Army and Golden Lions enforce his will, while a multitude of officials and local law enforcement see that his divine will is carried out. When those in power create and bend laws to make life harder for those they see as enemies, even when their only crime is a dissenting voice, and Imperial soldiers move in to crush even that, more than voices can rise in rebellion. It doesn't help when some labeled as "enemy" have had their very existence outlawed.

Ninja have, over generations, become completely outlawed, and those who can manipulate ki, even if not trained as ninja, can be looked upon with suspicion unless they prove themselves loyal to the Empire. Even then it can be a struggle to stay on the "right" side. The very presence of ninja, the implied presence of ninja in an area can mean many innocents are caught up in searches and interrogations because someone saw something out of the ordinary. Laws can be fine when administered fairly, but they can also be abused by those who are corrupt. Officials know that capturing or killing ninja found in their towns can bring goodwill from their superiors, and the populace knows it too. More than once an official has found they can extort a little extra from citizens,

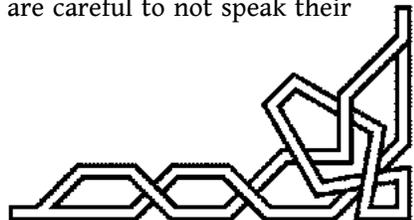


either in coin or services, with the barest hint they or a member of their family is suspected to be a ninja sympathizer, or worse, a ninja themselves. It's not like this in every town, but stories exist – from remote villages to larger cities – of pockets of corrupt guards and/or leaders making life more difficult than the war already has.

When the laws are skewed to benefit some at the expense of others, those who work outside the law do so to fight corruption and injustice. Often, it's not one extreme or the other. In this war-torn time, the things some have had to do to survive may cross the line of legality, but some would still hesitate to call them "wrong". Hiding a relative visiting from Danketsu or simply showing basic human compassion to a wounded stranger can bring down unwanted attention; so, some turn to organized crime. By definition, they are criminals, and they may do things they once swore they never could, but it is not as easy as all that to label them as "evil," although the Empire, and some ninja from clans such as the Will of Iron, may easily do just that.

Family dynasties are not just for the Emperor and the noble families. Indeed, some of the "nobility" and their wealth came from such criminal roots, while others deal with these families for goods and services they cannot get elsewhere, either because they are illegal substances, or they're simply too hard to get legally because of shortages caused by the ongoing war. Sometimes the problems with the supply lines that prevent the troops from getting food, weapons and basics like blankets and other supplies also keep even the wealthier citizens from getting furnishings for their homes, food for their galas, and people to fulfill the special kind of entertainment not discussed at afternoon gatherings. To keep those services going takes reaching out to some of the criminal organizations in the Empire.

These itsutai that have formed are not all blood-relations. Although some of the higher-ranking members are treated as equals to their faces, behind closed doors and away from their sensitive ears, the "true" nobles talk about them as if they are no better than petty thieves or thugs and murderers for hire on the streets or alleyways of the cities. They'll invite them to their homes, they'll visit them at their compounds, but they will not always treat them as equals. A few have even been known to court the wrath of some of the more powerful families by calling them pretenders and chastising them for reaching beyond their dharma's grasp; after all, they modeled their organizations after nobility's guilds, they use their ill-gotten gains to dress up and pretend to belong among the elite. After a few public accidents, any nobles who believe this are careful to not speak their opinions too loudly.





## FROM THE NOBLE ESTATES...

Some itsutai leaders can put on airs to interact with the nobles, as well as get down-to-earth and blend in with the peasants on the streets. They have information on all levels of society, they are the ones that slip through the cracks, fill the gaps of needs and wants that “honest” citizens could not. It’s also not just the nobility that uses their services. Local officials turn a blind eye from time to time for extra coin or favors they can’t ask their superiors for.

## ...TO THE ALLEYWAYS OF THE CITY...

And as far as the common people, sometimes these are the only avenues they have if they want to attend to their family’s basic needs. Even the ninja are known to work with criminals in townships they’ve not been to before. They are the ones who know the lay of the land, and the best ways to avoid the local law. They must be careful though; occasionally there is the criminal who will take a ninja’s coin for safe passage, and turn around to take more coin from the local law to turn them in. Not all criminals are this daring though, crossing the ninja has led more than one criminal to an unexpected “peaceful” death in their sleep.

## ...TO THE FARMERS’ VILLAGE.

Still, there are some families who are not lords over large compounds in larger cities. Smaller towns and regions have their own criminal families who have an odd and uneasy relationship with their neighbors. These people grew up together, faced the same tough seasons, the same natural disasters and they see their homes as needing protection. Even if not everyone is a member of the family, if they are loyal, if they see these “criminals” as friends and neighbors and people they can rely on more than the Emperor’s enforcers or the ninja they seek, then they have a built-in layer of protection. In return, they protect everyone from the madness outside their boundaries.

Of course, some would rather rule through overt fear, but others prefer to cultivate a more peaceful relationship. When someone does go against the family, when one betrays the community, they are dealt with quickly and sometimes viciously. Even if it doesn’t happen publicly though, whispers will carry the reason for their neighbor’s downfall was because they crossed those who were only trying to protect them. There’s already an infrastructure in the Empire that everyone has a role to fulfill. The organized crime families have created a niche for themselves in society that – especially during this long, drawn-out

war – has normalized some of their behaviors. Though it has helped some, this is not altogether a good thing.

They are hardly all noble vigilantes protecting their cities from corrupt officials. There are some truly power-hungry individuals who thrive on fear and chaos. They see the distraction the ninja provide to the Imperial troops and local guards as an opportunity to exploit for their own benefit. Some families take payment from peasants in the form of their children, husbands or wives. Taken away to be trained as couriers or warriors for the guild, or even as the “goods and services” provided to their noble clients, families have been torn apart without ever seeing an Imperial soldier or a ninja.

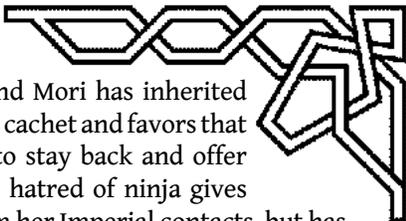
Here are just some of the guilds in the Izou Empire:

### ***ITSUTAI NAKATSUNE***

Nakatsune Haga, patriarch of his family and guild, has never traveled very far from his village, Nogata, but his influence has spread. From a young age, he could quickly discern what people needed and was extremely creative in finding ways to get it for them. The young men of the village wanted spirits to drink? He would make deals with local traders to get a bottle or two as they passed through the village, if he would carry through the town contraband so the guards searching their caravans would not find and confiscate them. He quickly found out he could move more material for other villagers if he recruited his friends to also carry through illegal goods, carry bribes to guards and local law enforcement, or even cultivate some of the older kids going into the government as resources. After all, these were friends, neighbors and even family, and what was a favor here and there?

The gang grew. He had a loose structure populated near the top with his closest friends. However, he made sure they all knew who was always in charge. He had some rules he held to – and held his people to – very strictly. The girls in the village weren’t to be prostitutes, but he felt they were quite capable of gathering information and acting as couriers, and a few as bodyguards and enforcers. The elders of the village were never to be targets of theft or assault. The village has enjoyed prosperity because they revered their ancestors, and he would not invite their ire by disrespecting the current elders. He is also adamant about keeping large-scale violence away from the village borders. This is his home, it’s always been his home, and he has built his power on protecting it.

As long as the people understand everything he does is to protect his village, he doesn’t have to be ostentatious or obvious about his power. The village leaders come to him for guidance; no one calls it asking permission or seeking approval. There are some who aren’t thrilled with his leadership, however, and recently there have been attempts on



his life; the last one not even carried out directly by whoever wants him dead. The coward sought a group of ninja to destroy him and the peace he worked so hard to build. It was one of the rare times he could not keep violence out of his beloved village. His loyal guards killed most of the intruding assassins, but two are still alive. He has recently sent word to a childhood friend, Norisue Aya, now a Golden Lion, to come home and interrogate these traitors.

He wishes to be a good citizen... and find out who sent these ninja to destroy him and the peace he's worked to build. He would be surprised, and heartbroken, if he knew the truth.

The gang travels to neighboring towns and some of the larger cities to arrange what contraband the itsutai will carry, and to remind the larger groups what Haga will not allow. They mostly carry liquor and finer things liberated from Imperial supply lines, items bound for officials in other towns, weapons meant for soldiers and sometimes smuggle people in or out of cities. Haga isn't fond of the ninja, but their coin spends; and he understands that sometimes protection needs to be paid in the form of favors.

The gang has also loaned out people to fill out the ranks of smaller groups of Imperial soldiers on specialized missions. This isn't always in the form of muscle; some of the itsutai members are very good at blending in and picking up valuable information.

## **PIRATES IN THE EMPIRE**

Though much of the Ninja Crusade has brought many opportunities for the enterprising criminal franchise, the potential on the high seas hasn't been ignored. The Bridge to the World Province, in particular, has several pirates - now privateers - who banded together in a loose conglomeration. Although they still comply with their bosses, some of their loot they tithe to themselves and their new guild before turning the rest in.

The guild's head is a triumvirate of captains: Riyono Mori, who inherited the ship from her mother, Anayama, when a group of ninja "liberated" a shipment of weapons bound for Imperial soldiers; Akifusa Nakagawa, who rose through the ranks the old-fashioned way—by killing the former captain; and Chikanori Chiba, a former first-mate (and before that former sailor), whose captain retired while the getting was good. Chiba is the oldest, and a generally agreeable soul. Wicked with his blade and pistol if you cross him or his crew, as long as you stay on his good side he's a fair captain and a fine traveling companion. He doesn't short his crew their share, approves heartily of a little raucous shore leave now and then and has no political affiliations; a move that opens up who he'll work for. He's quoted as saying, "I don't sort my loot by whose pockets it came from; I'm too busy spending it!"

Both Mori and Nakagawa are young, and somewhat hot-headed and contentious. However, Mori's mother was the

"main head" of the group, and Mori has inherited her title, as well as some of the cachet and favors that come with it. Chiba prefers to stay back and offer guidance when asked. Mori's hatred of ninja gives her credibility and favors from her Imperial contacts, but has upset more than one contract. At this point, although she has allowed Chiba to take on some ninja clientele, she supports the Emperor's crusade. Nakagawa's harsh and bloody attitude (and reputation) has scared off some potential customers; he's far too nasty with those he considers marks. Chiba understands that with war comes compromises - particularly with one's moral center - and if they want the most contracts, they'll need to accommodate those who are not as familiar with their ways, not terrify them. After all, today's frightened potential customers are tomorrow's witnesses for the state.

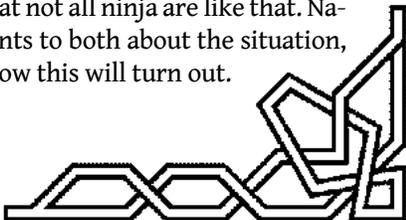
Mori's crew sails the Dancing Dragon; the ship earned its name under her mother's captaincy for its fast maneuverability, and well-placed cannons. Her crew has mostly former soldiers of the Empire. Deserters, thieves and those who enjoy the violence a little too much - they would still rather the Empire rule than see a ninja live any longer than absolutely necessary. They steal back the Izou weapons taken by the ninja, though sometimes they just take the good stuff for themselves.

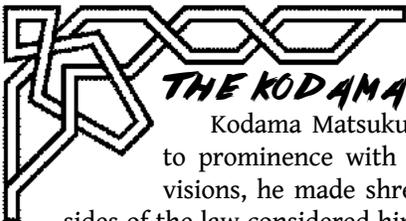
Nakagawa and his crew sail on the Bloody Tiger, named to strike fear into those they boarded, as much as for the barrage of harpoon guns interspersed between the cannons. These pirates thrill in the violence; some having drawn close to wanting to be Executioners, but not quite up to their level. They primarily move people - slaves - to, from and through the Empire.

Chiba bought his ship from his former captain for a sizable sum and re-named it the Laughing Bear. Like its captain, seeing it at first glance does nothing to tell you of all the possible dangers. They like to steal easily-fenced coin and goods. They prefer not to carry slaves, but they'll abduct a person if they are short a crew member or two.

Banding these three crews together is not without its problems. Besides arguments over what contracts to take, sometimes splitting the shares can get contentious if one crew shouldered most of the work. Mori does her best to have multiple contracts going at one time, farming out the work based on the skills of each crew. That way, they stay sharp, in practice and occupied with bringing in coin rather than worrying about who did what to whom.

One thing they all agree upon; they will never work with the Will of Iron, both because of their inflexible morals, and because it was one of their judges who slew Anayama. Chiba has tried to explain to Mori that not all ninja are like that. Nakagawa made neutral comments to both about the situation, but bides his time watching how this will turn out.





## THE KODAMA COLLECTIVE

Kodama Matsukura, oyabun of his guild, rose to prominence with his mother's help. With her visions, he made shrewd decisions. Many on both sides of the law considered him brilliant and unpredictable. He soon had a strong grip on power in Tennokiba. Gambling establishments, brothels and slave trading made up the bulk of the organization. With his seer's help, he established rotating routes to locations near Fuchou. There he bought and sold slaves to and from Horde Island. He gained a reputation for avoiding both ninja and the Imperials at an astounding rate.

When he brought his pregnant consort Hiki back to their home, Kodama Gou welcomed them. She then attempted to poison her that same night. After the attempt, he imprisoned his mother in a suite of rooms guarded by his most loyal men.

Gou knew what her son and his organization did; she helped him do it. "But what we do has purpose," she said. "There are rules. We have a code." She tried to convince him that the thing he was siring would bring only chaos and upset the balance and order of things.

Ruthless Matsukura had little love in his heart. But his love for his consort and unborn child blinded him to the visions his mother had. She was wrong. He convinced himself she was wrong.

Gou continued, "Its first victim will be that poor girl. She will never leave the birthing bed alive."

It was the only vision his mother ever had that he refused to believe.

She remained alive, and cared for, but never left the rooms. When he requested her guidance to deal with running the business, she continued to do so. She told him where the supply lines would be, where the most war-torn of villages were – and how many refugees were there for the taking. His people would swoop in before ninja or Imperials could get there to take and loot as they would. With each vision she used to help the itsutai avoid Imperial scrutiny or ninja traps, she would also tell him: "The child is unnatural. It will bring only death."

He would thank her for her help in bringing their family prosperity, and pointedly ignore her warning about his child.

Hiki died in childbirth.

Matsukura raised his son Taro to inherit the guild if he proved himself worthy. He showed approval or disappointment as he deemed fit; but no real affection for his son.

The organization had three main arms: Weapons, Gambling/Prostitution and Human Trafficking. He knew his grandmother gave his father visions on how to best leverage the resources of the collective to thrive in each of their chosen arenas. Taro never questioned the pain and suffering perpetrated by the itsutai. This was his

world, and he reveled in it.

Careful rumors whispered that he embodied rage and violence. His very birth was an act of rage that rent his mother apart.

Matsukura and his most loyal guard allegedly died by the hands of ninja hired by a rival guild. Taro then led a cadre of his own vicious and loyal people to mete out revenge. He found the small town that was home to the upstarts and slew them. The elder leadership of the town swore they held no allegiance to the guild. They offered what valuables they had in small recompense. Taro thanked them with great sincerity for their willingness to make things right.

At his signal, he and his people murdered everyone who did not ride in with them. They spared not even the smallest and most helpless. Taro stood in the middle of the carnage, bathed in blood, brains and entrails. Even his teeth were bloody. Most of those who rode with him reveled in the destruction, chanting to Taro, worshipping him.

They did not burn the bodies, nor raze the buildings. They left the town intact so that all would see the retribution of Taro Kodama. As destructive and chaotic as he is, he has a sharp mind. He looks for ways to streamline his own empire. He has taken family members of those with high gambling debts and put them to work—sometimes in the brothels, sometimes selling them on the slave routes. They order particularly persuasive women and men from the brothel to high-stakes games. There, they encourage the high-rollers to bet beyond their reason and means. When they lose, Taro begins with requesting favors for payment... before moving on to family members as possible recompense.

## ZAITSU, THE IMMORTAL

Zaitzu the Immortal is a 150-year-old warlord and was once a Bamboo Herbalist. He left his home to seek a great master of the sword, despite the fact he had been forbidden from doing so by his clan. The rogue ninja never did find his home, but he did find friends and foes in plenty. Innumerable bandits and ronin eagerly joined his rag-tag company, which soon became a small army. The ambitious ninja eventually tested this army against the Empire, but failed. Now, many decades later, Zaitzu has escaped his prison in the chaos of the Ninja Crusade, and seeks to rebuild his army. The Lotus Coalition has attempted to contact Zaitzu numerous times, only to be stopped by the Bamboo Herbalists, who refuse to call upon the traitor, even now.

He was a horrible ninja, in all honesty. Zaitzu lacked stealth, and he relied far too heavily on his 'family' of ronin; they protect him, as he protects them. That being said, the Immortal is a powerhouse in his own right. He's an unrivaled front-line fighter, especially when leading his army. Zaitzu has three default commanders, many more ronin, and an army of Bandits and ex-soliders who can number



anywhere between a few hundred to a few thousand as the plot or his position in it requires.

- ✦ **Hideaki:** A young man Zaitzu saved from Nanchou, Hideaki is a natural prodigy with his blade, and an innocent man who was framed for whatever crimes the empire thinks he committed. Zaitzu offered to help the man escape the city and to train him in the ways of the ninja, something eagerly accepted by the young swordsman. Hideaki takes after Zaitzu, his new master (and father-figure), lacking mobility and cunning, but making up for it with physical capability and skill.
- ✦ **Dokuohtei:** A former Golden Lion who defended a young ninja child during a hidden village raid. For this act of mercy, he was stripped of all rank, condemned as a traitor and sentenced to death. On the eve of his execution however, a small group of ronin, lead by Zaitzu arrived just in time. In exchange for his life, Dokuohtei swore an oath to protect and serve the immortal. He is arguably the only true ninja within the rogue group, and serves as their primary bodyguard for Zaitzu. He and his followers wear ramshackle recreations of the armor of the Golden Lions.
- ✦ **Tanzan the Mad:** A once famous general of the Imperial Army, Tanzan the mad earned his name from his unorthodox battle tactics, which often conflicted directly with imperial doctrine. Despite his success, he was forced to retire young. Tanzan then served with many mercenary companies, taking advantage of the Ninja Crusade. Tanzan has found a friend and a powerful ally in Zaitzu, with whom he shares many world views and opinions.

Sakurai studied the battle from her vantage point on top of the monastery's bell tower. The ninja's forces pushed against their own, but neither side could gain an edge in the narrow streets of the village. That was where Sakurai came in. Her job as a Black Smoke was to ensure victory went to the Empire from afar.

She scanned the field. Soldiers protected themselves in alleyways in the hope of funneling the ninja so they could take them in easier numbers. The ninja were quick and the soldiers on the street-side of the alley got the worst of it. Other soldiers fought openly in the street; and still others destroyed shops and buildings.

Sakurai moved to the edge of the tower and leaned out, straining to see through the glare of the early morning sun. More troops moved through the gates and engaged the ninja. The ninja started to back up toward the buildings in the center of the city, as they were now fighting on two fronts with the new arrivals.

That should draw the commander out, Sakurai thought with satisfaction.

She could wait.

The commander emerged seconds later from the government building. Sakurai smiled. She cradled her gun against her shoulder and aimed. Ninja obscured the commander's head by weaving in and out between each other. The commander surveyed the field, giving orders.

She would have to get closer.

The wind picked up as she stepped up onto edge of the roof, judged the distance and leapt to the next roof. It wasn't as high as the bell tower, but it was closer and perhaps a better angle. Sakurai checked the shot and cursed. It still wasn't close enough.

The next roof sat about four feet above her and much farther across. She'd never made a leap that far before, but she was the only sharpshooter here and she didn't have much choice. Sakurai strapped her gun carefully to her backpack and eyed the distance again. She threw the backpack over her shoulder, got a running start, and launched herself from the roof.

A few seconds of flight and Sakurai's fingers gripped the edges of the roof. She hauled herself onto the flat surface and brought out her gun again. This time the commander's head appeared clear as river water through the sight.

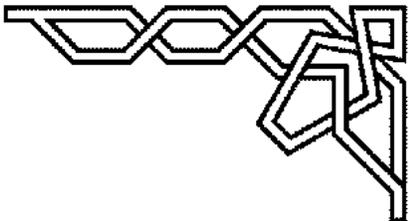
Perfect.

She took a deep breath and pulled the trigger.

The shot rang through the streets and the commander tumbled over. His bodyguards formed up around him and looked around for the culprit. The soldiers used the distraction to press forward and overwhelm the ninja.

Sakurai leaned back and grinned. A job well done and she could look forward to a nice bonus or reward. The ninja would be scrambling about and lose the village, allowing them a new trade route to get supplies to the front. Which was of course the whole point of taking the village in the first place.

Not a bad day's work at all.



# CHAPTER FOUR: BUILDING AN EMPIRE

Making soldiers for the Izou Empire is very similar to creating ninja, but with a few changes. For instance, steps One, Two, Four, and Five remain the same for both character types. However, Step Three changes from Tragedy to Motivation. Likewise, there are some differences for Step Six, where players choose Martial Training, and Step Seven, where they would normally choose Jutsu.

The following applies to Black Smokes, Engineers, Executioners, Iron Breakers, Jadesmiths, and Silver Blades:

**Step Six: Spend six (6) levels between Martial Training and Favored Tactics.**

**Step Seven: Skip this step**

The following applies to the Enlightened and Golden Lions:

**Step Six: Choose two (2) levels of Martial Training.**

**Step Seven: Spend five (5) points on Favored Tactics, using same costs as Jutsu. The Enlightened may purchase only from their Paths. Golden Lions may select ANY jutsu normally, even those from other Clans.**

## ASSIGNMENT EXCEPTIONS

### *THE ENLIGHTENED*

The Enlightened follow a strict path known as the Tenets of Ko, leading them to improve their body, mind and spirit to one day ascend to the heavens. While all living things possess ki energy, only ninja truly harness its power. The Enlightened cannot learn jutsu or mold ki, but do possess a trait called Balance, reflecting their spiritual ascension. A monk is assumed to have Balance equal to 2x their Rank. For example, an Enlightened at Rank 2 has Balance 4. The Enlightened, however, have a long road ahead and reach new Ranks for every 75 XP they gain (instead of every 50 XP). When activating their Tactics, the Enlightened uses the standard difficulties used for jutsu, but suffer no Backfire or Training effects.

### *EXECUTIONERS*

While they do not actively use Ki and cannot select Jutsu, Executioners still have a Ki Balance just like ninja. See Ki Negation (pg. 65) for more information.



## STEP THREE: MOTIVATION

Whether it is adventure, loyalty, impulse or money that brought the character to join the Empire, motivation holds them to the cause and gives them a reason to fight. What brought the character here and how does it help or hinder them? This choice influences the relationship between the character and the Empire, as well as their priorities in the army.

During character creation, the player chooses one (1) Motivation for their character's enlistment, making sure to record their starting Skills on their character sheet. Then, they pick one (1) Reason that best suits their character's personality and history, and record their Ki Balance, Reason Gift and Reason Trigger.

### ALLIANCES

The character can't choose their family or the situation they are born into, and this can influence their decisions regarding what they can and can't do with their lives. These characters joined because of these obligations and fulfill their duties for the honor of their loved ones.

**Skills:** Crafts +1, Marksman +1, Perception +1, Survival +1

### DUTY

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** The character has a duty to perform and, whether they like it or not, they will perform their duty—which includes joining the army. Gain +1 Discipline when the character performs an action above and beyond the call of duty to complete a given mission.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Sometimes duty can get in the way of other interests and the soldier must decide how dedicated they are to duty. Gain 1 Karma when the character cannot neglect their duty; even when doing so causes complications for the group.

### LOYALTY

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** Unwavering loyalty is an admirable trait and one the character has in abundance. This loyalty drove them to join the army. Gain +1 Fortitude when the character performs a loyal action to the cause/person/organization they swore loyalty to.

- ✦ **Trigger:** Torn between loyalty to their vow and the freedom to act as they want, the character's loyalty can sometimes end in betrayal. Gain 1 Karma when the character's loyalty is abused, taken advantage of or betrayed and it affects the group in a negative way.

### REVENGE

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** Revenge is a dish best served cold and the soldier will do whatever it takes to exact justice on the ninja who wronged them. The army, they decided, was the best place for revenge against their foe. Gain +1 Intimidation when the character performs an action moving them forward on the path to revenge.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Even the most dedicated vigilante will sometimes take detours on the way to their goal. Gain 1 Karma when the character must choose between revenge and the group, and they choose the group.

### TRADITION

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** The scaffolding of life is built on tradition passed down through the generations, and the character was born to uphold that structure. The tradition of joining the army continues with this soldier. Gain +1 Knowledge when the character discusses their traditions or has pertinent information for the group because of their traditions.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Changes bring new traditions, and sometimes even the oldest traditions are ignored in favor of betterment for all or to make room for establishing modern traditions. Gain 1 Karma when the character's actions go against the tradition they were brought up in and they backfire.

### COERCED

Life is full of choices, for some. For these characters, life has given little choice and they are bound—either by honor or circumstances—to ally with the Empire. How this unfolds will be the focus of their story.

**Skills:** Discipline +1, Perform +1, Speed +1, Travel +1

### CONSCIENCE

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** Everyone has events in their past they wish they could change. This soldier has something in their past they felt could only be redeemed by serving the Empire. Gain +1 Empathy when the character performs a selfless act and continues on the path to redemption.

- ✦ **Trigger:** Good intentions only stretch so far, and sometimes this character will slip and do something that pushes them two steps back. Gain 1 Karma when the character's good deeds lead to negative consequences for the group.

## DRAFTED

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** The character had no choice when they joined the army, but joining does have benefits and the soldier is not above using them when the situation calls for it. Gain +1 Athletics when using a move the character learned in the army, such as a sword parry or attack style specific to the Empire.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Joining the army comes with constraints and sometimes those constraints and rules keep the character from moving forward on personal missions. Gain 1 Karma when being a soldier prevents the character from going somewhere, participating in an event or anything else that would advance a personal goal or mission.

## PROMISE

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** Promises are easily made and sometimes even easier to break. This character made a choice to never give

a promise they don't intend to keep, and to do everything it takes to keep those promises. The promise this time was to join the army. Gain +1 Persuade when the character is convincing someone to trust the army (e.g. information, resources).

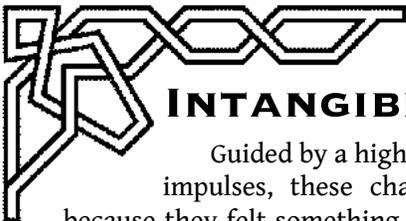
- ✦ **Trigger:** Life will not always allow for promises to be kept; and every time this happens the character feels like it is their own personal failing, even if there was nothing they could do about it. Gain 1 Karma when the character fails to keep a promise and it results in the loss of an associate.

## RUNAWAY

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** There are many reasons to run away: an arranged marriage, a criminal record or a horrible home life to name a few. Whatever it was that drove this soldier away from home, they decided the army would be the perfect place to hide. Gain +1 Stealth when avoiding people or events related to what they ran away from.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Sometimes the things the character ran away from come back to torment them, and this can have a damaging effect on their mind. Gain 1 Karma when their past affects their new life in a negative way.





## INTANGIBLE

Guided by a higher purpose or just their high impulses, these characters joined the Empire because they felt something bigger than themselves was calling them to fight. These characters follow this calling wherever it may lead.

**Skills:** Empathy +1, Fortitude +1, Knowledge +1, Stealth +1

### BELIEF

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** Conviction is a beautiful thing and this soldier is willing to discuss what they believe with anyone, and try to convince them to see their perceived truth. They believe in the cause of the Empire and are both loved and hated for their pure belief. Gain +1 Perform when making a show of praising the Empire.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Beliefs can conflict with what is necessary and when that happens the soldier feels empty. It takes some time to believe again. Gain 1 Karma when the character purposefully goes against their belief and it has a negative impact on the group.

### DESTINY

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** Cords of fate bind the world together and this character believes they are a big part of the pattern. No one can deter them from what they see is their pre-ordained place in the world. This soldier's destiny lies in the army. Gain +1 Intuition when they answer the call to destiny and move one step closer to fulfilling it.
- ✦ **Trigger:** When presented with evidence that their destiny may not be what they believed, or even rumors fate may not exist at all, the character must take some time to trust they can feel the pull of fate again. Gain 1 Karma when their actions or words contradict the destiny they believe they have.

### IMPULSE

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** People who follow their instincts gain strength from the adrenaline uncertainty provides. This character thrives on this feeling and often indulges their impulses, just like the impulse to join the army. Gain +1 Fighting when they are in a battle caused by their impulses.

- ✦ **Trigger:** Impulses can also be dangerous when unforeseen circumstances rear their heads. Going forward without thinking it through has

the potential for disastrous side effects. Gain 1 Karma when their impulses cause chaos in the group.

### QUEST

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** An object of great worth, someone dear to them or knowledge only gained through travel. Whatever it is they seek, this soldier decided the army would be the best place to look for it. Gain +1 Travel when traveling closer to the goal of their quest.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Sometimes a person should step back momentarily in their quest to make leaps later or to save their own life; when this happens, the character can think of little else. Gain 1 Karma when taking actions that take them a step backward from their goal.

### MONEY

Currency in all its forms makes the world go 'round, and nobody knows this better than these characters. The ebb and flow of money, whether necessary for survival or something the character wants to accumulate, motivated them to help the Empire.

**Skills:** Athletics +1, Holistics +1, Intuition +1, Persuade +1

### ALLOWANCE

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** Money makes the world go 'round and with the war going on, the military may not be the best job, but it keeps food on the table for family back home. Gain +1 Empathy when the character takes on extra work, so they can send more money back home.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Even money can't stop this soldier's stomach from turning from time to time. Some orders the army can't pay enough to complete. Gain 1 Karma when the character is caught without funds when they need it, because they've sent it all home.

### GLORY

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** Fame and honor are the most important goals in life and a war is the perfect opportunity to make a name. This character sees their tale being told for generations to come. Gain +1 Intimidation when the character's deeds and reputation precede them.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Sometimes an idea seems like it will gain the soldier popularity, but when all is said and done it pushes them back toward the bottom of the ladder.

Gain 1 Karma when their actions cause them or the group to lose prestige in the army.

## PROFITEER

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** War is profit and this character joined so they can make as much of it as possible. Gain +1 Deception when performing actions that will make them money off the war.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Money comes and money goes and when it goes this soldier wonders if it is all worth it. Gain 1 Karma when they purposefully lose money on a deal and it goes poorly for the group.

## RESOURCES

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** When you don't have clean clothes, a warm bed, a full stomach or a roof over your head, the army is your only option to survive. That's why this character joined and while they don't like the work, at least they are alive. Gain +1 Crafts when making things from resources the army provides them.
- ✦ **Trigger:** This soldier understands they aren't the only one with bad luck and no money. Sometimes they feel bad and share what they can with those as-or-less fortunate than they are. Gain 1 Karma when the character gives away resources and it harms the group later.

## NATURE

Certain characteristics make up the core of who the character is and what they will be. There is no fighting their nature, it's who they are and defines the reason they joined the fight.

**Skills:** Deception +1, Fighting +1, Intimidation +1, Might +1

## ADVENTURE

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** The spirit of adventure and daring feats sees these soldiers going to new places in pursuit of thrilling heroics. The army is the perfect place to meet new people and see new places. Gain +1 Travel when the character is traveling to a place they have never been before.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Just because a character wants adventure doesn't mean they know how to find it; sometimes they just find trouble. Gain 1 Karma when the character goes off the beaten path and it ends badly.

## BLOODLUST

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** The thrill and smell of battle motivate this character to search for bigger and better fights. They long to prove themselves on the battlefield and gain strength from conflict. What better place to do this than the army? Gain +1 Athletics when the character incapacitates an enemy in battle. This remains in effect for the duration of the Battle.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Characters may not always have time or the choice to seek out the honor of battle and when they choose not to, it can have a negative effect on their motivation. Gain 1 Karma when the character chooses not to incapacitate an enemy and it comes back to haunt them.

## DISASTER

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yang

- ✦ **Gift:** This character has a knack for getting themselves into dangerous situations and getting out of them again. That's how they ended up in the army. Gain +1 Speed when the character's action could lead to their death.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Sometimes characters choose the safe path, and sometimes it turns out a risk would have been the better option. Gain 1 Karma when the character chooses the safer course of action and it hinders the group.

## STUDY

**Ki Balance:** 1 Yin

- ✦ **Gift:** Learning is the most rewarding experience in the world and the character takes every opportunity to learn new skills. The army is a great place to learn new things, after all. Gain +1 Intuition when the character attempts a type of action they've never tried before.
- ✦ **Trigger:** Knowledge is power and it can be harmful for others if knowledge is not shared. Gain 1 Karma when the character chooses not share helpful knowledge they have with the group.

# TACTICS

## BLACK BONES (IRON BREAKERS)

The Iron Breakers forged terrifying weapons from the bones of legendary demons summoned and then slaughtered by the Izou Army. They became affectionately known as Black Bones, long rods that can be instantly summoned and wielded like any other staff, but also used to enslave a celestial beast. The process of applying the Black Bones are never pleasurable, involving piercing the beast's form, usually with the rods sticking out at each end. Some rods must be applied, sometimes plunged through the muzzle, neck, arms, legs and heart of the Celestial Animal, differing slightly in the approach of the individual Iron Breaker.

Unlike free Celestial Animals who spend their time in familiar realms surrounded by kin, enslaved celestials are sent to a dark dimension of solitude. There is no physical world to touch, no one to converse with and no light to touch their skin. The Celestial Animal simply floats in an abyss of nothingness, often going mad in the process if not summoned by their Iron Breakers regularly. Some attempt to give the barest level of care to their "pets," while others enjoy breaking the spirit of a once pure and heavenly being and getting off on the power trip.

As much as the ninja have tried, they have not found a way to remove Black Bones from celestials, even after the commanding Iron Breaker has been defeated. They are forever touched by darkness, and soon find that they can no longer travel to their home realms, further cutting them off from their kind. In fact, if they were to travel home, their fellow animals would smell the demon taint on them and cast them out anyway. There are stories of those beasts who return to the Empire to serve, voluntarily, seeing it as the last place they go where they will be welcomed.



## USING BLACK BONES

From the outside, a user of Black Bones and a Summoner are virtually the same. However, while a Summoner cultivates friendships and gains a reputation with the animal family, Iron Breakers instead tap into the ki centers of the celestial animals they face and control their actions. They are not limited by Animal Families but do not gain a Minor Animal companion either. The longer they use these demon-forged rods, the stronger their control grows and the more Celestial Animals they can command at the same time. They can have up to one Celestial Animal simultaneously summoned per Level. Unfortunately, Greater Animals have proven immune to Black Bones.

Once an Iron Breaker has captured an animal, it is theirs as long as they choose to keep it. However, they may also remove their rods to attempt to capture another Celestial Animal if they so choose, usually done when achieving a new level of mastery (i.e. getting rid of a Warrior to capture a Master instead). Some leave them behind and never look back, while Iron Breakers with a taste for celestial flesh may choose more sinister disposal methods.

## LEVEL ONE

- ✦ **Rank 1 - Tamer:** When they start on their journey, the Iron Breaker gains one Major Animal they have enslaved, gaining the ability to summon and control it in an instant. At this level, the animal must be a Warrior. The player should pick a name for the Major Animal and write it in as a Rival, with a Skill matching the Animal Family's associated Skill. The Iron Breaker is not at the mercy of the animal, so they don't need to provide literal favors; however, if the Owe a Favor box is marked, the Celestial Animal is considered injured, crazed or otherwise useless. Going a Session without summoning the animal will remove the Mark. If they are summoned with a Mark anyway, the animal suffers a -2 penalty on all checks. They can only control one Celestial Animal at a time.
- ✦ **Rank 2 - Ready for More:** The Iron Breaker gains control over another Major Animal, using the same process as Rank 1. At this level, the animals can now be a Warrior or Squad. Also, The Iron Breaker can now summon their Black Bone weapons in the form of a bo, tonfa, nunchaku, sansetsukon or yari without the need of a Quick Action or a Prepare Action. Black Bones are indestructible in either weapon or animal-controlling form.

## LEVEL TWO

- ✦ **Rank 3 - Tending the Stable:** The Iron Breaker gains control over another Major Animal, using the same process as Rank 1. At this level, their animals can now be a Warrior, Squad or Master. They can now control two Celestial Animals simultaneously.
- ✦ **Rank 4 - Call Me Master:** The Iron Breaker gains control over another Major Animal, using the same process as Rank 1. While the Celestial Animals are still considered Rivals, the Iron Breaker now only suffers a -1 penalty to their associated Skill (instead of -2).

## LEVEL THREE

- ✦ **Rank 5 - Take Me There:** The Iron Breaker gains control over another Major Animal, using the same process as Rank 1. They can now also control three Celestial Animals simultaneously. In addition to this, the demon dimension where animals are stored can now be used for faster travel from one place to another. To the observer, the Iron Breaker disappears from one place and instantly appears in another seconds later. This ability can be used a number of times per Session equal to the character's Knowledge and allows them to travel up to (Intuition) miles away. If used in Battle, they must spend a Dynamic Action, but it can be used to instantly avoid an attack, reposition themselves or retreat from the battle entirely.

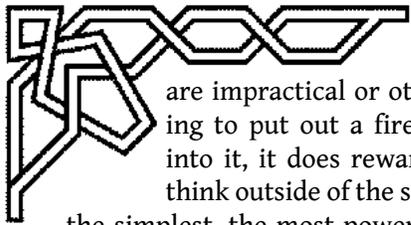
## SUMMONING ENSLAVED BEASTS

Summoning a Major Animal from their reserves requires effort on the part of the soldier. The Summoner takes either 1 physical or 1 mental damage and then makes a Moderate (2) Intimidation + Discipline check. The Major Animal can stick around for the Scene or until its task is completed. Iron Breakers who share an Element with the beast's animal family receive a +1 bonus to their summoning checks.

## INGENUITY (ENGINEERS)

Ingenuity is the key to the Engineers' secret power. The Engineers know they are on the forefront of a new field and their explorations into the unknown will radically change the Empire. They know each device they create, each step they dare to take and each scientific discovery has the possibility for endless uses to benefit humanity—and the Engineers are not afraid to go down that path.

Ingenuity is not just about who is the smartest or what idea has the most scientific merit. While it does not easily reward those ideas that



are impractical or otherwise wrong, such as trying to put out a fire by spraying flammable oil into it, it does reward those who are willing to think outside of the situation and find the easiest, the simplest, the most powerful or some combination of those three methods into solving it.

An Engineer needs to dedicate themselves to the philosophy or field they are trying to best emulate in their inventions. An Engineer with an affinity for clockwork devices will tailor their gear to accommodate them, while another Engineer who works with Black Smokes may come up not just with more powerful rifles but ways to use them outside of combat, such as firing grappling hooks.

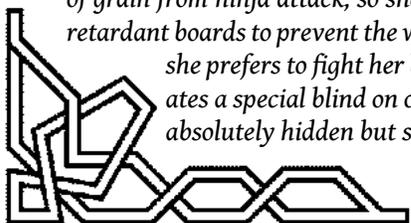
## RESOURCE POINTS AND CREATING INVENTIONS

Engineers receive Resource Points (RP) from the Imperial College to make their inventions, but can spend time scavenging and salvaging from trash piles, existing pieces of equipment or rummaging through houses to acquire more throughout the story. This requires a Moderate (2) Crafts + Intuition roll, where each success yields 1 RP. No Engineer may have more than 10 Resource Points at any given time.

Inventions may increase an item's strength or give a critical advantage for a Scene. An invention may help a climber scale the side of a building or allow a soldier to neatly fold up a raft into a cube; both are equally invaluable. Such Inventions cost 1 RP and last for a single Scene before they need repair or to be recreated. By spending 1 RP in addition to the standard cost, the player may extend the duration of the invention to the Session.

To create an invention, the Engineer rolls their Crafts + a Skill associated with the device's goal for each modification applied to the device. Modifying a firework to fire more accurately would fall under Marksman, while creating special shoes that don't leave footprints requires Stealth. For each success gained, they may modify a device's dice pool or stats by 1. Each modification to the invention costs 1 point of Resources, and is assumed to take some time to complete. Jury-rigged alterations may take a few turns to complete, while fortifying a building may take a day. The GM and player should discuss how long such a change should reasonably take.

*Example: Tika the Engineer wants to protect a shipment of grain from ninja attack, so she decides to make special flame retardant boards to prevent the wagons from catching fire. Since she prefers to fight her battles from a distance, she creates a special blind on one of the wagons to let her stay absolutely hidden but still let her fire her rifle.*



*Assuming Tika has 4 Resource Points, she decides the wood covering is her priority. Her player rolls Crafts + Fortitude, as she is trying to make the wagons sturdier. She gets 3 successes, and decides to use these to make a covering that provides AR +3 to the wagon for the Scene.*

*Next, she tries to create the blind to fire from, spending 1 RP and rolling Crafts + Stealth, which gives her 2 Successes. The blind now adds +2 Stealth while she is inside of it.*

At the end of a Story, an Engineer must turn over any inventions to the Imperial College for further examination to determine their worth. An Engineer often receives half the amount of Resources invested in the item as reimbursement, which the Engineer can use as they see fit.

## THE STUDY OF INGENUITY

- ✦ **Level One:** The Engineer may purchase two Fields of Study from the list below, and begins each Session with 2 Resource Points.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Having refined their ability to use materials more efficiently, the Engineer gains two more Fields of Study, begins each session with 3 RP, and automatically gains 1 free RP with each successful scavenging check.
- ✦ **Level Three:** The Engineer has mastered their craft, and remembers their past designs clearly. The Engineer gains the final two fields of study, begins each session with 4 RP, and counts 9s and 10s both as 2 successes (instead of just 10s) when rolling for creating their inventions.

## FIELDS OF STUDY

These Fields can be very specific or encompass an idea, but Storytellers are encouraged not to let the player take one Field that is too broad or all encompassing. The following is a list of potential Fields:

- ✦ **Black Powder:** Creating new kinds of black powder devices, from harmless noisemakers to enhancing grenades and bombs.
- ✦ **Equipment and Gear:** Creating new kinds of climbing devices, hidden compartments in cloaks and modifying existing pieces of equipment to have new functions.
- ✦ **Civil Engineering:** Construction of aqueducts, plumbing and buildings, as well as creatively altering their use to produce things like water cannons and fortifications.
- ✦ **Metallurgy:** Improving armor by adding to its effectiveness to resist wounds, improving upon metal structures to hold more weight and creating new materials that are lighter than steel but twice as strong.



- ✦ **Covert Equipment:** Inventing and improving spy-glasses, hidden inks, covert compartments and forged documents.
- ✦ **Clockwork Designs:** Creating clockwork or steam-powered devices to aid in lifting heavy loads, helping weakened limbs move again and pneumatic and hydraulic devices.

## JUTSU RETRIEVAL (GOLDEN LIONS, 99 STYLES)

Any other clan calls what the Golden Lions do an unforgivable theft. In their minds, however, their traditions simply retrieve jutsu knowledge that might otherwise go missing. Outside the Golden Lion clan, the retrieval process is perceived as a dissection of (sometimes living) subjects, meticulously scrutinizing each detail of their victim's body and spirit. Tales of these dissections grow crueler and more monstrous with each retelling, to the point where many dismiss them as fear-mongering propaganda. It might be hard to believe someone is capable of such deviant acts just to acquire knowledge, but their truth might be even grimmer than the rumors.

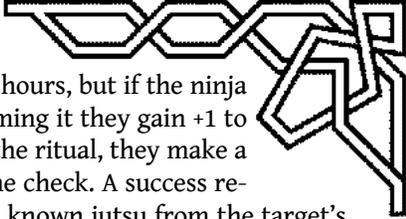
### THE STUDY OF JUTSU RETRIEVAL

- ✦ **Level One to Three:** Level One gives access to the ability. Level Two and Three each reduce the Difficulty of the Jutsu Retrieval check by 1. So, at Level Two, they make a Moderate (2) check, and at Level Three, they make a Simple (1) check.

### THE JUTSU RETRIEVAL RITUAL

Retrieving a jutsu is a long, trying and gruesome ritual. The target must be undressed and covered in symbols, written in the blood of a Celestial Animal in a room filled with special burning incense reminiscent of a cinnamon scent. After that, they inflict excruciating pain upon the victim. While decidedly cruel, this is necessary to raise their ki levels and bring their jutsu secrets to their mind and soul for extraction. Managing the target's pain threshold is incredibly difficult. Few targets survive their first retrieval. After the target reaches the desirable level of pain, they are cut open and dissected. Years of study allow the Golden Lion to understand how jutsu work by seeing how their usage affects a target's bones, muscles and internal organs.

It's very important to keep the target well restrained throughout the process, or it might try to escape and hurt its valuable body and the information contained within. Jutsu Retrieval used on a corpse, while easier, suffers a -2 penalty to all checks.



The ritual lasts at least 8 hours, but if the ninja spends the whole day performing it they gain +1 to their roll. When performing the ritual, they make a Tough (3) Holistics + Discipline check. A success retrieves the secrets of a single known jutsu from the target's body, but kills a living character or destroys a dead body. Jutsu retrieved are chosen randomly from the jutsu known by the target, so even the character doesn't know what secrets will be revealed. A Boost either allows the target to survive, the Golden Lion gets to choose the jutsu retrieved, it retrieves an additional jutsu, or it halves ritual length (player's choice); a dead body is destroyed, even on a Boost. A target cannot be subjected to the same ritual again for a whole week, as the body needs time to recover. This recovery cannot be aided by jutsu, because it could alter the precious information inside a target's body.

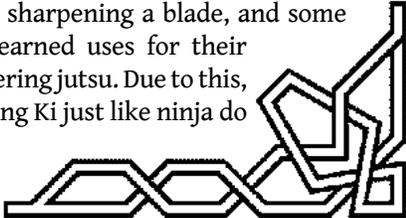
Jutsu retrieved are thus written down in scrolls and can be learned normally by the retriever, but cost -2 XP. If they can retrieve multiple ninja who know the same jutsu, this cost reduction would effectively give them a free jutsu after they understand it fully. It is impossible to understand the notes of a fellow retriever - the ritual of jutsu retrieval is extremely personal. The use of Celestial Animal blood as ink is the main reason behind certain partnerships with the Iron Breakers.

## KI NEGATION (EXECUTIONERS)

The rituals involved with imprinting the ability of jutsu negation on an Executioner is long and excruciatingly painful, but it is more than just a newly-formed mystic aura that makes them what they are. Through the use of ritual scarring, Executioners learn how to balance their internal ki and use it to alter their environment, attacking other beings with ki. Yin is best combated by the bright energy of Yang, while Yang can be bested by the soul-crushing power of Yin. Ninja have mastered how to harness both sides of their soul, but not how to set them against each other... not like the Executioner has. With this ability, the soldiers become unstoppable juggernauts against any squad of ninja who rely too heavily on their jutsu to survive against the Empire. They are in for a surprise, indeed.

### LEARNING KI NEGATION

Once their vessel is prepared, their ki is transformed into a weapon, giving them an edge in almost any battle. Honing one's negation powers is like sharpening a blade, and some veteran Executioners have learned uses for their abilities beyond simply countering jutsu. Due to this, Executioners have Yin and Yang Ki just like ninja do





and advance the same way, but cannot Mold more. Level One is available to all Executioners, but it requires Rank 3 to reach Level Two and Rank 5 to reach Level Three. It should be noted that while an Executioner wields ki as a weapon, they cannot mold ki, nor can they learn jutsu.

## LEVEL ONE

- ✦ **Rank 1 - Jutsu Suppression:** First, the Executioner receives Sense Ki from Portents (NC2E, pg. 79). Also, when they are present during a jutsu activation, they can spend 1 Dynamic Action to make a Discipline + Opposite Ki (if the jutsu uses Yang, the Executioner adds Yin and vice versa) roll to suppress its effects. Each success the character gets cancels 1 success their target gets. If they are successful in fully canceling the jutsu, they gain 2 Karma, and the ninja suffers a -1 penalty to use that particular jutsu for the Scene. Likewise, the character may simply spend 1 ki of the appropriate type to cancel the jutsu outright (regardless of whether it is Basic, Median or Advanced).
- ✦ **Rank 2 - Ki Alignment:** Every Executioner is trained alongside a partner whose ki affinities opposes their own. If one is strong with Yang, then their partner is usually a strong Yin type to teach how to use one's ki alignment as a weapon. If the Executioner possesses more Yang than Yin at any time, they re-

ceive +1 Fighting and +1 Fortitude, gain +1 Yang when using Jutsu Suppression, and gain a +2 bonus when giving Support (NC2E, pg. 137) to a character who is Yin-aligned. If they possess more Yin than Yang at any time, they receive +1 Marksman and +1 Stealth, gain +1 Yin when using Jutsu Suppression, and gain a +2 bonus when giving Support to a character who is Yang-aligned. If they are ever balanced (equal Yin and Yang), they gain all Skill bonuses, but not their Jutsu Suppression or Support bonuses.

## LEVEL TWO

- ✦ **Rank 3 - Jutsu Theft:** Foolish ninja fighting a seasoned Executioner may find that not only are their jutsu suppressed, but they may actually bolster the Executioner in the end. Instead of simply suppressing a jutsu, the Executioner can now either steal its effect or reflect it back to its original user. If they fully cancel a jutsu with Jutsu Suppression, the Executioner may now assume any beneficial effects it would have given the ninja. If the jutsu had a target other than the ninja, it turns against them, and the ninja must now Defend against it, with Difficulty equal to the successes rolled by the Executioner.
- ✦ **Rank 4 - Ki Destruction:** When fighting a ninja, the Executioner may reflexively sacrifice their own ki to

destroy the ki in their target. This is destroyed in the following manner:

1 Ki	Destroys 1 Ki
2 Ki	Destroys 2 Ki
3 Ki	Destroys 4 Ki
4 Ki	Destroys 7 Ki
5 Ki	Destroys up to 10 Ki

Ki destroyed in this manner cannot be remolded for the Scene. For instance, if a ninja has Yang 4 and Yin 2, the Executioner may sacrifice 3 ki to destroy 2 Yin and 2 Yang, all the target's Yang, or any combination of 4 destroyed ki.

## LEVEL THREE

- ✦ **Rank 5 - The Land Attacks:** There are very few masters of Ki Negation, due to the short lifespan of most Executioners, but those who do wield immense power. First, the character can cut off the ability to mold ki from an environment with 4 Taps by sacrificing 1 Ki of either type. Cutting off a 6-tap environment requires sacrificing 2 Ki. Once they have stopped the flow of ki, the Executioner can cause the energy to build and attack their enemies with it. With a Marksman + Discipline check, the Executioner can send ki energy at the target, dealing +3 damage and a Level 1 Condition of the GM's choosing (based on the environment type). They can do this a number of turns equal to the taps the environment once had.

## PATH OF THE BODY (THE ENLIGHTENED)

### BASIC

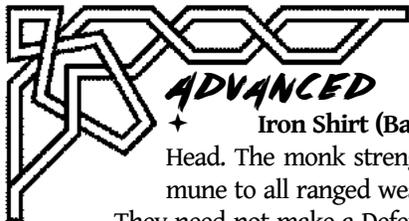
- ✦ **Diamond Finger Technique (Balance + Fortitude):** The monk's strikes become as deadly as a blade as they strike specific pressure points with their pointer finger. They deal +1 damage (as if they were armed) and are considered to have the Sharp Weapon Quality.
- ✦ **Intangible Strike Method (Balance + Speed):** The monk increases the speed of their strikes, allowing the force of their attacks to pass through material things like Armor. They may ignore a target's Armor level for a number of strikes equal to successes gained.
- ✦ **Silence of Wind (Balance + Stealth):** This technique is used to promote stealth above brute strength. Once activated, the character's movements are totally cloaked

in silence. Not only this but inanimate objects they may come in contact with feel the effects as well. Jumping into water creates a silent splash. Knocking over a picture means it falls to the ground without a sound. Any animate being or creature touched during this effect is able to hear the monk normally. On a Boost, the monk also receives +2 Stealth for the Scene.

- ✦ **Sliding Stance (Balance + Fortitude):** The monk slips into their sliding stance, bending their body into near impossible positions. They gain +1 Athletics for the Scene and can perform unthinkable contortions without a problem.
- ✦ **Twisting Stance (Balance + Travel):** The monk turns their body into their twisting stance, making it impossible for them to be the subject of Knock Down or Knock Back effects for the Battle.

### MEDIAN

- ✦ **Cat Stance (Balance + Speed):** The monk bends into their cat stance, making their movements unpredictable. They gain a +2 bonus to all Defense checks for a number of Rounds equal to successes gained.
- ✦ **Iron Head (Balance + Fighting):** Must have Twisting Stance. The monk launches their head at their target, crushing them and forcing them backward. Roll activation as their attack check, dealing +1 damage and creating a Knock Back effect of 10 ft. per damage dealt. With a Boost, they inflict a Pain 2 Condition.
- ✦ **Lizard Climb the Wall (Balance + Travel):** Scaling a wall can be difficult for anyone, but the monk has mastered this art. Once activated, the Enlightened immediately climbs 20 ft. + 10 ft. per success gained. The space is traveled in a single Turn, usually leaving others behind.
- ✦ **Ringing Round a Tree (Balance + Athletics):** Must have Sliding Stance. The monk has practiced their strength training, making it possible for them to uproot trees. This multiplies their Strength by x2 and raises their physical damage by +1. On a Boost, their Strength is raised by x3.
- ✦ **Swift Eye Gouge Technique (Balance + Speed):** Must have Intangible Strike Method. With a quick motion, the monk can remove an object from hands, pockets, etc. A master can even use this lightning fast action to remove someone's eye before they even have a chance to counter, giving it its sinister name. Roll activation as the attack check, but this attack ignores any penalties for striking a small target and adds +4 Initiative if it is the monk's first Action for a Round. Can only be used once per Round.



## ADVANCED

✦ **Iron Shirt (Balance + Might):** Must have Iron Head. The monk strengthens his body, making it immune to all ranged weapons, such as bows and kunai.

They need not make a Defense roll, as the weapons simply bounce off their skin. If the weapon is a firearm, they receive Armor 2, instead of simply ignoring its effects.

- ✦ **One Finger of Chan Meditation (Balance + Intuition):** Must have Swift Eye Gouge Technique. The monk has learned to attack what is inside, leaving the exterior free from harm. If the flame from a lantern goes out, but the glass remains unbroken, they have mastered the technique. Against a living target, this means massive internal damage. The monk rolls activation to attack, dealing an Injured 1 Condition for each success (instead of damage). If this exceeds the Level 5 limit for Conditions, the remaining damage becomes a Deprived 1 Condition instead.
- ✦ **Series of Blows (Balance + Speed):** Must have Lizard Climb the Wall. The limits of their martial prowess are without match, allowing them to take on large groups of enemies in short order. For all intents and purposes, this duplicates the effects of 10,000 Fists (NC2E, pg. 113), except that successes gained must be split between Inflict Harm and Move Actions for the monk to travel around the battlefield.
- ✦ **Surge of Life Meditation (Balance + Fortitude):** This technique allows some monks to defeat their worst enemy: mortality. Through this meditation, their life can be slowed down, explaining how some masters are over 100-years old. On a successful activation, the character slows one year of their aging to the number of years per success gained. For example, a monk who gets 5 successes with Surge of Life Meditation will age only one year within the next 5 years. At the end of the 5 years, he may roll again. The first 5 times the character performs this technique, it counts for one year of his life, as above. Then for 2 years for the next 5 times. Then 3 years for the next 5 times. Until the technique has no more effect, as the number of years outweighs the character's dice pool.
- ✦ **Universal Flow (Balance + Empathy):** Must have Cat Stance. The monk gives themselves completely to the flow of ki in the universe, removing thought from all actions and making them more effective warriors. For the rest of the Battle, they gain +3 Initiative, ignore penalties from the environment (including lack of visibility) and score a Boost with only 2 additional successes on combat checks.

## PATH OF THE MIND (THE ENLIGHTENED)

### BASIC

- ✦ **Altered Truth (Balance + Deception):** A simple trick, the monk can put a thought in the mind of their target. It must not be something easily contradicted ("I'm your brother") or obviously untrue ("the sky is red"), but can be used to change opinions on the fly. The effects last a Scene.
- ✦ **Floating Position (Balance + Discipline):** Overcoming the physical limitations of gravity with the power of their mind, the monk can hover up to (Balance) x10 ft. off the ground. They travel at only half their normal Movement while doing so, however.
- ✦ **Linked Minds Meditation (Balance + Empathy):** The monk links the minds of themselves and a number of others equal to successes gained. They can send mental messages to their targets within Far Range but must act as a go-between for the others (they cannot communicate with each other directly).
- ✦ **Stable Mind Meditation (Balance + Discipline):** The mind is a fragile thing, but the monk has learned to stabilize their own. Each success gained during activation frees their mind, lowering a Mental Condition by 1. This cannot be attempted during Battle or duress.
- ✦ **Stoic Warrior (Balance + Intimidation):** The monk's resolve allows them to appear much more intimidating on the battlefield. They receive +2 Armor against mental attacks and may ignore 1 Armor when launching their own mental attacks.

### MEDIAN

- ✦ **Art of Invisibility (Balance + Stealth):** Must have Stoic Warrior. This ability clouds the minds of those they wish not to see them. The Difficulty for this ability is equal to the target's Perception, but the GM may apply penalties or bonuses based on the situation. If affecting a group, use the highest Perception of the group. If the roll succeeds, the monk is invisible to the target(s), with no need to roll again for the rest of the Scene. The monk cannot act aggressively (not even against a wall or a door) while using this technique or it instantly ends.
- ✦ **Finger Lock (Balance + Knowledge):** Once in a Grapple, the monk simply grabs his opponent's finger, paralyzing them. Roll activation as the attack check, the monk bends their finger in an enigmatic way, causing Pain Condition levels instead of damage. On a Boost, the victim also suffers an Embarrassed 2 Condition.

- ✦ **Mind Over Matter (Balance + Knowledge):** Must have Stable Mind Meditation. Through the Tenets of Ko, truly awesome physical feats are possible. The monk meditates to focus their mental will and gains a bonus to their next physical Skill check equal to successes gained.
- ✦ **Sleep Touch (Balance + Persuade):** With a quick touch, the monk hits certain pressure points to apply a Knocked Out 2 Condition. If attempted in combat, they suffer a -2 penalty to their activation.
- ✦ **Twin Lock Stance (Balance + Speed):** The monk joins their forearms together to form a solid wall, capable of repelling any attack. They gain a +1 bonus to Defense checks and may Block weapons without penalty for the Battle.

## ADVANCED

- ✦ **Crippling Strike Amenti (Balance + Discipline):** Must have Finger Lock. This most accurate punch debilitates the target, making it hard for them to even move and function. Use activation for the attack check, and apply a Broken 1 Condition for each success in addition to +1 damage. If the Condition exceeds the Level 5 limit, they gain a second Broken Condition for another Skill.
- ✦ **Forgetful Mind Prana (Balance + Knowledge):** Must have Altered Truth. Using this ability on a victim, the monk can remove thoughts and memories from his mind or create new ones through the use of pressure points to the brain. For all intents and purposes, this duplicates the Information Consumption jutsu (NC2E, pg. 128), but takes only moments to use instead of requiring a ritual. An Exceptional success means the victim accepts the new memories without thought.
- ✦ **Paralyzing Strike (Balance + Holistics):** There are certain ways of defeating your opponent; the least of them is incapacitating them. Their activation is their attack, and if successful, the monk paralyzes their target, taking away a number of Actions equal to their Balance, along with dealing +1 damage. A Boost doubles all effects. For example, a monk with Balance 4 would deal +1 damage and take 4 Actions from the target. If they only had 2 Actions left for that Round, they also lose 2 Actions from the next Round.
- ✦ **Share Minds (Balance + Empathy):** Must have Linked Minds Meditation. The monk sits in meditation with their target, opening up their minds to each other. Once used, the two know everything about each other, from their names, occupations, emotions, family life, etc., as well as any dark secrets they may possess.
- ✦ **Unlocked Puzzle Prana (Balance + Crafts):** The monk looks at any puzzle or situation, applying a web of logic

to solve the issue as quickly as possible. They gain a number of +2 bonuses equal to successes gained, which can be used on any mental check for the Scene.



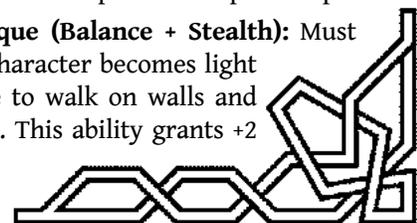
## PATH OF THE SPIRIT (THE ENLIGHTENED)

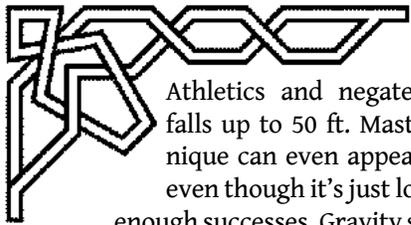
### BASIC

- ✦ **Bow Stance (Balance + Perception):** The monk takes their bow stance, aligning their spirit to find fault in another's. For a number of attacks equal to successes gained, the monk inflicts an automatic Confused 1 Condition on their target.
- ✦ **Elemental Training (Balance + Fortitude):** By priming their spirit, the monk can withstand adverse weather. The character can survive for (Balance) hours before feeling adverse effects and gain Armor 1 against any Elemental jutsu for the Scene.
- ✦ **Following the Tenets (Balance + Travel):** The Tenets of Ko teach the way to go in one's life, making traveling easy. Use before a Journey, gain a number of bonus dice equal to successes gained that any member of the group may use for their Stage checks (with the Enlightened's permission).
- ✦ **Ki Strike (Balance + Discipline):** When fighting ninja, the monk can cripple their greatest weapon. For a number of attacks equal to successes gained, they may negate damage from a successful attack to drain 2 ki from their opponent instead.
- ✦ **Spirit Steps (Balance + Discipline):** The monk takes a meditative stance that allows their spirit to leave their body. They can remain outside their body for a number of minutes equal to successes gained. In this form they are invisible, undetectable and cannot affect the physical world. They are effectively spirits themselves.

### MEDIAN

- ✦ **Affect the World (Balance + Empathy):** Must have Spirit Steps. While using Spirit Steps, the monk can become partially corporeal using this Tactic. They can affect the physical world with a number of checks equal to successes gained, allowing them to attack, steal an item, etc. Can only be used once per use of Spirit Steps.
- ✦ **Graceful Swan Technique (Balance + Stealth):** Must have Bow Stance. The character becomes light as a feather, being able to walk on walls and jump incredible lengths. This ability grants +2



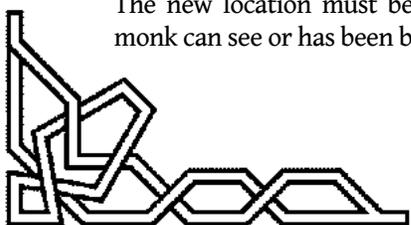


Athletics and negates damage from falls up to 50 ft. Masters of this technique can even appear to be in flight, even though it's just longer jumps with enough successes. Gravity still affects them, however. They can only stay on wall or ceiling surfaces unmoving for up to a number Turns equal to their Balance, before falling. On a Boost, the number of Turns is doubled.

- ✦ **Horse Stance (Balance + Discipline):** The monk takes their horse stance, the best for focusing one's spirit. Once activated, their Balance is raised by +2 for a number of Tactics uses equal to successes gained.
- ✦ **Knowing the Soul (Balance + Intuition):** Looking into the eyes of a Close target, the monk can instantly discern a number of things about them equal to successes gained. These can be game-related things like Rank, Ki Levels, Clan/Assignment, etc. or personality tidbits such as likes, dislikes, favored name, etc.
- ✦ **Long Distance Punch (Balance + Intimidation):** This ability allows the character to attack a target from a distance. Once activated, they may use their Fighting Skill on any target within Near Range. On a Boost, this extends to Far Range.

## ADVANCED

- ✦ **Hand of Sun Rays (Balance + Empathy):** Must have Horse Stance. The monk calls spiritual energy to their hands, causing them to both glow with shining power and causes spiritual damage. Use activation for the attack check, and apply a Dazed 1 Condition and Burned 1 Condition for each success gained. If the Condition exceeds the Level 5 limit, levels are converted to damage (2 damage per success).
- ✦ **Piercing the Veil (Balance + Travel):** Must have Spirit Steps and Horse Stance. The monk can instantly teleport to any location within 10 ft. multiplied by the number of successes. For instance, rolling 4 successes would allow instant relocation within 40 ft. The new location must be somewhere the monk can see or has been before.



- ✦ **Poison Hand Technique (Balance + Fighting):** Must have Ki Strike. The monk fills his aura with ki-degrading energy for a number of attacks equal to successes gained. If hit, the victim feels a poison course through their body, taking 1 physical damage and suffering a Poisoned 1 Condition in addition to any damage dealt. They take 1 automatic damage, and their Condition raises by +1 each Round for (Balance) Rounds. On a Boost, all effects are doubled.
- ✦ **Split Essence Meditation (Balance + Discipline):** Must have Affect the World and Knowing the Soul. The monk splits themselves into two beings; one who commands all their intellect called the yume and another who possesses all their physical strength, known as the akuma. The yume receives a +2 bonus to any mental roll, but cannot participate in physical Battles. Meanwhile, the akuma gains a +2 bonus to physical rolls and automatically fails any mental or social checks (except for Intimidation) due to their bestial mind. They mirror each other for all other stats, like Initiative or Dynamic Actions. They can stay separated for a number of hours equal to successes gained and can be any distance away from each other, making multitasking simple. For instance, the yume may pick a lock while the akuma fights a gang of guards without missing a step. The yume retains the monk's Psyche, while the akuma uses their Health. If one reaches 0, the Tactic ends as the two halves are thrown back together; the character suffers a Knocked Out 2 Condition in this case. If neither side is defeated, the two souls re-merge without any negative consequence once the Duration ends.
- ✦ **Vibrating Strike (Balance + Discipline):** After 1 Round of meditation (no attacking or defending), the martial artist can launch a critical strike at his target. The next hit they land deals no physical damage, instead marking the target's spirit. The strike will then do 1 damage in Round 2, 2 damage in Round 3, 3 damage in Round 4 and so on, for (Balance) Rounds. The damage affects Psyche before Health, usually ending with the victim falling unconscious. On a Boost, they can switch it to affect Health first if they choose.

## VOICE OF THE EMPEROR (JADESMITHS)

Politics is a game where the brave, the foolish and those caught in-between exchange clever words and cunning social moves, and in the Empire this game has become a constant factor in every citizen's life. There are those with even greater skill than a simple politician could hope to dream of: Jadesmiths. The Voice of the Emperor, as it is more commonly

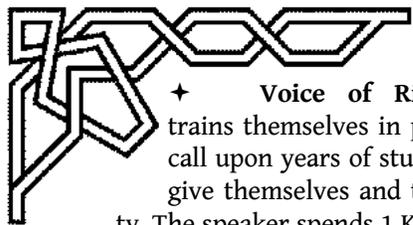
known, combines simple verbal tricks with focusing on the larger scheme of things on a level others simply cannot comprehend. The Voice can be a gentle, guiding hand or a blunt instrument of change, but when used, it can be every bit as powerful as a sword.

### STUDYING THE VOICE

- ✦ **Level One:** The character learns Air of Authority and either A Subtle Implication or Voice of Rebuke. The wielder is well-versed in the Izou courts, gaining +1 Knowledge when related to politics and bureaucracy.
- ✦ **Level Two:** At this level, the speaker understands how to stir a crowd into action and summon even greater authority. The wielder of the Voice gains Voice of Righteousness and the ability they did not select from Level 1.
- ✦ **Level Three:** The speaker is now fully invested with the Voice of the Emperor and gains either Voice of Fury or The Lord's Will.

### VOICE OF THE EMPEROR ABILITIES

- ✦ **A Subtle Implication:** Words are as dangerous as weapons, and the right word can raise someone into a great fury, crush their will to live or cause them to obsess over the smallest detail. It is picking a moment, knowing what to say and how to say it. The character makes a Tough (3) Empathy + Intimidation check. Upon a success, they can place an idea in a target's mind that they will spend a number of Scenes obsessing over, equal to the level of success gained. This ability may only affect up to (Intuition) targets at any given time.
- ✦ **Air of Authority:** Authority stems from two places; power, and the threat of having to use it. While sometimes it is enough for others to acknowledge authority, this power gives the user a permanent +1 bonus to all tests involving social or mental skills. The user always appears regal and noble, as if their natural state is to be in charge, and the character may cause an Embarrassed 1 Condition with any Boost (physical or mental). All attempts to sully the user's appearance or dismiss them out of hand suffer a -2 penalty to the attempt.
- ✦ **The Lord's Will:** This ability allows the speaker to demonstrate absolute authority that reaches the highest levels of government and forces even the most dismissive listener to heed their words. As long as the Jadesmith holds their Action during a Battle, instead standing back and issuing orders, each Karma spent counts as two dice and any time Karma would be gained, they may add two dice to the pool.



✦ **Voice of Righteousness:** The speaker trains themselves in passionate speeches, and can call upon years of study and learned knowledge to give themselves and their allies an air of authority. The speaker spends 1 Karma and gains a +2 bonus to Deception, Empathy, Intimidation, Perform or Persuade checks for the Scene. A +1 bonus may carry over to up to (Empathy) comrades who also gain this bonus.

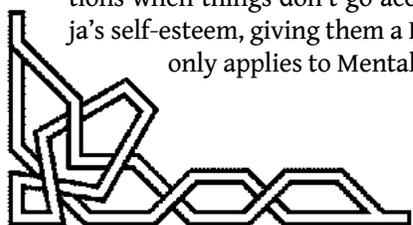
- ✦ **Voice of Fury:** There are times when the speaker may drive a crowd into a frenzy and force them to focus their rage on an idea, a person or a belief. The speaker makes a Challenging (4) Empathy + Intimidation roll to affect a crowd and, if successful, the crowd follows the speaker's commands for the rest of the Scene. The character may have them cause or stop a riot, attack an enemy or defend a location, making the crowd into their own personal army. The Difficulty of attempts from others to affect the crowd's behavior go up by +1, as well.
- ✦ **Voice of Rebuke:** A Jadesmith must often keep others in check through diplomacy. More effective than a simple threat, the speaker learns how to channel their thoughts into a weapon that stings at the pride of their target and weakens them. By spending 2 Dynamic Actions, the speaker may make an Intimidation + Deception check against the target's Intimidation + Discipline, saying just the thing to throw them off their game. If successful, the target suffers a -4 penalty to their next roll.

## WAY OF DAZZLING PILFERAGE (GOLDEN LIONS)

Element: Water

**Training:** Learning how to copy abilities and mimic techniques requires a deep understanding of the foundations of all techniques. Golden Lion ninja have very strong basics, practicing these foundations repeatedly beyond the point other clans aim for. Along with their honed attention to detail, this strong foundation allows them not only to mimic most abilities but to better defend against most forms of attack. On a Boost, they gain +1 to defend or resist against jutsu or styles for the Round.

**Backfire:** Stealing, copying and adapting instead of creating make Golden Lion ninja inflexible. This lack of options when things don't go according to plan hurts the ninja's self-esteem, giving them a Level 1 Bruised Condition that only applies to Mental damage.

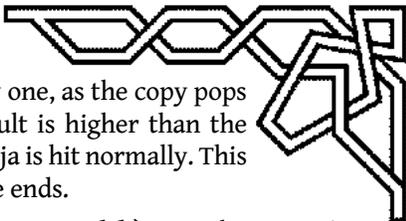


## BASIC JUTSU

- ✦ **Armor Synch (Yang + Perception):** The ninja aligns their ki with their armor, allowing a specific jutsu to use the armor's reserves. When the ninja uses the jutsu thereafter, they do not make a new roll – instead, they use their Armor Synch activation result. A ninja can synchronize (Intuition)/2 jutsu at a time. A particular jutsu remains synchronized until Armor Synch is performed again. A careful strike to one of the armor's golden plates will rob them of their ki energy. A successful attack with a -3 penalty destroys one of the Golden Lion's plates and makes them unable to use one of their jutsu.
- ✦ **Golden Aura (Yang + Discipline):** The ninja summons energy from the golden armor, surrounding themselves with an aura that allows them to move faster and hit harder. The ninja gains Fighting +1 or Athletics +1 (player's choice) until the end of the Scene. On a Boost, they gain both. This jutsu can be interrupted by a careful attack, just like Armor Synch.
- ✦ **Lion's Pounce (Yang + Stealth):** The Golden Lion leaps upon a target, unnoticed, attacking viciously. If the ninja's next attack is a surprise attack, it deals +1 damage. On a Boost, it deals +2 damage.
- ✦ **Pack Tactics (Yang + Empathy):** The Lion's pack hunts together. After another character uses a jutsu, a Golden Lion gives them a +1 bonus on their activation check per success gained (up to their Knowledge).
- ✦ **Jutsu Reading (Yang + Perception):** To copy jutsu, a ninja must first understand it. By activating this jutsu, the Golden Lion gains a +2 bonus to defend or resist against a specific jutsu for the Battle. May affect up to (Intuition) jutsu at one time.

## MEDIAN JUTSU

- ✦ **Lion Blast (Yin + Marksman):** Concentrating the ki energies from the armor on the lion's mouth, the ninja releases a deadly beam of ki with Long Range. The beam deals +1 damage, and on a Boost it deals a Level One Bruised Condition.
- ✦ **Lion's Roar (Yin + Intimidation):** A loud roar erupts from the ninja's mouth, disrupting hearing and intimidating opponents. Anyone within Near Range of the ninja suffers a Sensory Loss 2 Condition until the end of the Scene and suffers a mental attack (defend with Discipline + Fortitude against the activation check).
- ✦ **Jutsu Mimicry (Yang + Perception):** Must have Armor Synch. A Golden Lion ninja can use this ability to temporarily copy a jutsu they have seen, synchronizing it to their golden armor. Jutsu Mimicry can be used reflex-



ively by spending a Dynamic Action. This jutsu can be disrupted by a precise attack, in the same way as Armor Synch. Jutsu mimicked this way count against the number of jutsu synchronized to one's armor.

- ✦ **Skill Mimicry (Yang + Perception):** After being attacked, the ninja may mimic the ability used by their foe. The ninja gains a +1 bonus to a Skill in the attacking enemy's combo for the Battle per success. This bonus cannot be higher than the target's Skill level.
- ✦ **Style Mimicry (Yang + Perception):** Must have Skill Mimicry. After seeing a technique from a fighting style or weapon style being used, the ninja can mimic the same technique until the end of the Scene. This jutsu can be used reflexively by spending a Dynamic Action.

### ADVANCED JUTSU

- ✦ **Golden Interference (Yin + Fighting):** Must have Armor Synch. The ninja uses the ki flow in her golden armor to interfere with the enemy's flow. This usually takes the form of a head butt, using the helmet to make contact with the enemy. The target can't use the Zen Mind Dynamic Action until the end of the scene. On a Boost, they can't mold ki at all. This jutsu can be interrupted by a precise attack, as Armor Synch.
- ✦ **Golden Shield (Yang + Crafts):** The ninja adjusts his armor to resonate with the attacking jutsu, absorbing it completely. The opposing jutsu is negated. To use this jutsu, the ninja must give up his normal defense or resistance check against the jutsu. This jutsu can be disabled by a precise attack, as Armor Synch.
- ✦ **Jutsu Prediction (Yin + Intuition):** Must have Jutsu Reading. They say a Golden Lion can see the future and therefore know what jutsu you are going to use. That's not true, but they can use subtle hypnotics to nudge their opponent into using a specific kind of jutsu. A target opposes the activation check with Discipline + Intuition. If the Golden Lion wins, they can choose an element. If the target uses any jutsu the next Round, they must be of the element chosen. Regardless of the target using any jutsu or not, the Golden Lion adds a bonus equal to their Yin to any attempts to defend against the target's attacks or to resist against the target's jutsu for that Round.
- ✦ **Shadow of the Pack (Yin + Deception):** Must have Pack Tactics. The Golden Lion uses minor illusions to make it seem like they are not one, but many. Each success in the activation check creates an illusion - an identical copy of the Golden Lion. When the Golden Lion is hit by an attack, roll a die. If its result is lower than the number of copies, one of the copies is hit instead; the number of

copies is then reduced by one, as the copy pops like a balloon. If the result is higher than the number of copies, the ninja is hit normally. This jutsu lasts until the Battle ends.

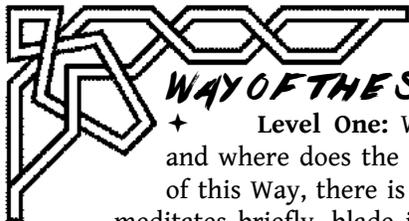
- ✦ **True Lion's Pounce (Yang + Stealth):** Must have Lion's Pounce. As the lion in his clan's name, the ninja stalks the area, getting ready for a devastating strike. It works like Lion's Pounce, but the bonus damage is equal to the amount of successes obtained.

## WAY OF ALL RIVERS (SILVER BLADES)

Swords are some of the most favored weapons in the Izou Empire. Several military styles focus heavily on their use, especially among the Silver Blades. These unique Weapon Styles are part of their training and can be used with any sword at their disposal. This includes curved blades, short swords or even wooden swords.

### WAY OF THE SILVER TIDE

- ✦ **Level One:** The most well-known Silver Blade style, it emphasizes cutting always and at all ranges. When they strike, they cut. When they defend, they cut. When they breathe, they cut. Every movement, every thought, every waking moment is spent on the edge. A warrior cuts even when they defend. On a Boost during a Block/Parry check against a weapon attack, they may cut the opponent's weapon in half. On a Boost in a Block/Parry check against an unarmed melee attack, the opponent receives an Injured (Limb) 1 Condition.
  - ✦ **Level Two:** Range is no object to a master Silver Blade. Swiping their blade through the air precisely, this strike cuts not only what is in front of the Blade, but everything else before them in a straight line up to Near Range. This tactic is often used to attack multiple, lined-up opponents. The Silver Blade rolls only once for the Attack, applying the result to multiple targets.
  - ✦ **Level Three:** This advanced version of the Silver Tide works like its lesser version, but cuts up to Far Range and deals +1 damage. It can be used only once per Battle because it strains the blade. If used to attack at Far Range twice in the same Battle, the blade shatters afterward.
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## WAY OF THE SWORD'S HEART

- ✦ **Level One:** Where does the warrior end and where does the sword begin? For an initiate of this Way, there is no answer. The Silver Blade meditates briefly, blade in hand, creating a spiritual connection between warrior and sword. Make a Simple (1) Fighting + Intuition check. They gain +1 Fighting and cannot be disarmed of that blade by any circumstance for a number of Rounds equal to successes gained.
- ✦ **Level Two:** A precise and deadly strike, known to be able to cut a bird in mid-flight. The Silver Blade cuts from above to below and immediately reverses the attack, cutting again from below to above. The attack deals +2 damage and the enemy defends against it with a -2 penalty. This attack can only be used if the warrior has bonded with their sword, and after it is used, the bond is broken.
- ✦ **Level Three:** This extremely deadly technique is a horizontal cut that strikes the left shoulder, neck and right shoulder at the same time. The attack deals +3 damage, and enemies who survive suffer a Bleeding 3 Condition. This attack can only be used if the Silver Blade has bonded with his sword, and after it is used, the bond is broken.

## WAY OF THE TIGER RUSH

- ✦ **Level One:** Tiger Rush consists of several techniques to employ raw muscle power to make a blade cut deeper. It is rather unorthodox and risky, making it popular among younger Silver Blades. On a critical failure using this style, the blade shatters due to the strain. Before striking, the Silver Blade holds the weapon point with one hand, preparing the strike with the other. This builds more power before the attack, making each cut deadlier. As a Quick Action, make a Simple (1) Athletics + Discipline check. On a success, the blade receives the Brutal quality for the Round. On a Boost, it lasts the whole Battle.
- ✦ **Level Two:** When the warrior defends successfully from a Close attack, they use the momentum to deliver a deadly counter-attack. On a Boost while defending, reflexively make a Moderate (2) Athletics + Fighting, with each success adding +1 damage if the character performs a counter-attack. This bonus damage can't be higher than the original attack's dice pool.
- ✦ **Level Three:** After a successful attack, the Silver Blade either kicks or punches their blade, increasing damage but straining the weapon. On a hit, reflexively make a Moderate (2) Athletics + Fighting check. Each success adds +1 damage. If this technique is used twice within the same Battle, the blade instantly shatters.

## WAY OF INSTANTSTEP

- ✦ **Level One:** The Silver Blade learns to close the gap between themselves and their target, taking every possible advantage of their speed. They can Move as a Quick Action without incurring the standard penalty to their follow-up action. Alternatively, the warrior may accept the penalty to move four times their Movement (instead of three).
- ✦ **Level Two:** The Silver Blade moves so fast they become a silver blur before they reach their target. When they attack with a sword using Speed after using a Quick Action to move, they deal +2 damage.
- ✦ **Level Three:** The warrior runs so fast they seemingly disappear, cutting any opponents crossing their way. Any space between the Silver Blade and their target seems to be suppressed instantly. Roll Fighting + Speed, spend 1 Dynamic Action and make an immediate attack on one opponent within Near Range per success gained. This ability can only be used once per Battle.

## WAY OF THE SILVER IAIJUTSU

- ✦ **Level One:** The art of drawing the sword and attacking the opponent in one fluid strike is central to the Silver Blade way. First, the Silver Blade can draw a weapon without spending a Quick Action to do so. They also gain +1 Initiative per Silver Iaijutsu level, as long as their weapon is sheathed at the beginning of the Round.
- ✦ **Level Two:** A Silver Blade veteran can defeat enemies with but a look before even drawing the sword. Before a sword is drawn, the Silver Blade may spend 1 Dynamic Action to make a reflexive Intimidation + Speed check that deals +2 mental damage. This can only be used once before the sword is drawn.
- ✦ **Level Three:** A drawn sword is a dead sword. It takes intense training, but these warriors have learned to immediately sheathe their weapon after a successful attack. If they do so, they can use the other Way of Silver Iaijutsu abilities even if it is not the first Battle Round.

## WAY OF LAST BLOOD

- ✦ **Level One:** Known as the fastest blades in the Empire, the Silver Blades always draw first blood. However, they understand that in a battle, first blood counts for very little. Last blood counts for more. When the warrior strikes an opponent that has yet to act in the Round, the attack deals +1 damage per level.
- ✦ **Level Two:** If the first blow is not a killing blow, it must not allow a killing blow in retaliation. After striking an opponent that has yet to act in the Round, the warrior gains a +1 bonus to Defense (+2 on a Boost).



✦ **Level Three:** The warrior chooses their prey carefully and studies it before delivering a decisive blow. If the warrior is the first character to act in a Round, roll a Moderate (2) Perception + Fighting check. On a success, the warrior gains +2 Fighting for their next attack. On a Boost, the target gains a Bruised 1 Condition.

## WAY OF THE GUN (BLACK SMOKES)

Black Smokes are the masters of firearms, being some of the only soldiers trusted to wield these mighty weapons. Beyond the limitations on materials needed for crafting a wealth of firearms, the Black Smokes are also much less likely to cause friendly fire and treat each bullet with respect, not wasting ammo. The following Styles can be used with any kind of firearm unless otherwise stated.

### AINE'S RING

✦ **Level One:** Some Black Smokes stay close to the action, never letting normal physical limitations keep them back. They are so close to their firearms that the ring of each firing begins to change them. They now ignore one Sensory Loss Condition level per level of Aine's Ring, as they get used to seeing through smoky areas

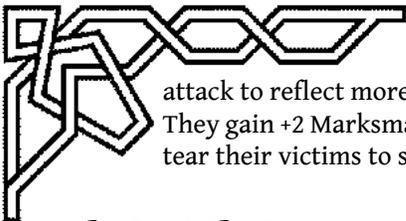
and resisting the sting in their ear.

✦ **Level Two:** Some say firearms make too much noise to be effective against ninja. Black Smokes beg to differ. If using a weapon with the Loud Weapon Quality, the Black Smoke learns to use this frailty to their advantage. When attacking with their weapon within Close Range, they cause +1 damage to Psyche from the bang. On a Boost, they cause a Sensory Loss (Hearing) 2 Condition to their target.

✦ **Level Three:** Now they've learned how to perform a little crowd control when needed. No one but the Black Smokes like the loudness caused by their powerful tools. When firing their weapon, everyone within Close Range must make a Tough (3) Perception + Fortitude check or suffer a Sensory Loss (Hearing) 1 Condition and an Afraid 1 Condition.

### DOUBLE BARREL

✦ **Level One to Three:** It takes considerable training to be able to wield more than one firearm at a time without blowing one's arms or legs off in the process, but some Black Smokes have made this an art. Dual-wielding can only be done with Pistols or other smaller firearms, as Rifles are too weighty. Mechanically, this gives the character extra dice during an



attack to reflect more bullets flying at their target. They gain +2 Marksman per level, allowing them to tear their victims to shreds.

### **EAGLE EYE**

- ✦ **Level One:** Some Black Smokes pride themselves on their ability to hit a target no matter its distance. They become the perfect marksmen. At this level, their aim is improved, giving them an additional +1 bonus (per level) when using Plan Attack to aim. For instance, a character with Eagle Eye 2 would gain a +4 bonus from Plan Attack, instead of the base of +2.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Lining up the perfect shot becomes second nature to the Black Smoke, allowing them to strike multiple targets with the same bullet. On a Boost during an attack, another target within Close Range to the original target must now also Defend against the attack. This can repeat up to (Perception) times before the bullet becomes useless.
- ✦ **Level Three:** They are now able to aim on the fly, as targeting becomes instinctual. They may use one Free Plan Attack Action per Round.

### **NEVER UNARMED**

- ✦ **Level One:** Many members of the Black Powder Brigade keep their firearms by their side at all times, nurturing them like a child or caressing them like tender lovers. To that end, it is never outside their reach, making it easier for them to quickly draw the weapon when the need arises. They can draw their firearm without spending a Quick Action to do so. They also gain +2 Initiative for the first Round of any Battle.
- ✦ **Level Two:** Once they have mastered their primary firearm, it's time to prepare their backups. If at any time they are disarmed (or run out of ammo), they have a number of backup firearms on them equal to half their Strength (since they have to lug them around). For instance, a Black Smoke with Strength 4 could lose their firearm twice, but still never be without one.
- ✦ **Level Three:** Few know what a Black Smoke has up their sleeves, bringing with it a big surprise. If they are ever disarmed, they receive a free Counter Attack as they bring their backup weapon out.

### **SMOKEY AFTERMATH**

- ✦ **Level One to Three:** The Black Powder Brigade know just how much gunpowder to use for an effective blast. Too little and the bullet does not reach its target; too much and they can create a smoky aftereffect. This technique utilizes the latter to create cover for the Black Smoke and give them an edge in Battle. They gain +1 Stealth for each

firearm attack they've taken that Round, using it to position themselves for their next attack or retreat altogether. They may only utilize this up to (Level x3) dice, however. For example, a Black Smoke with Smokey Aftermath Level 2 can gain up to +6 Stealth for the Round. Cannot be used with a weapon with the Loud Weapon Quality.

## **NEW WEAPON STYLES**

### **DEFENDING**

A good defense might be the best offense. Masters of defensive combat are more focused on surviving or ensuring others survive than they are on killing their enemies. However, they also study how to quickly go from defense to offense.

### **EFFORTLESS DEFENSE**

- ✦ **Level One:** Each level of Effortless Defense lets the fighter make one additional defense per round without suffering any penalties.
- ✦ **Level Two:** If the warrior uses Block/Parry as their Defense successfully, they gain a +1 bonus (+2 on a Boost) on their next Defense. Subject to Repetitive Use rules if they continue to only use Block/Parry.
- ✦ **Level Three:** When the warrior fails a Defense check, they may reflexively spend a Dynamic Action to negate any additional effects they might suffer if their attacker Boosts.

### **IN HARM'S WAY**

- ✦ **Level One:** When the defender Protects another character, they receive Armor 1 per level against the attack.
- ✦ **Level Two:** When performing the Protect Defense, the defender's Movement increases by +4.
- ✦ **Level Three:** When the defender uses Thicker Skin (NC2E, pg. 141), damage is reduced by 2 points per Dynamic Action spent (instead of by 1).

### **TURN THE TIDE**

- ✦ **Level One:** On a Defense Boost when the warrior defends, they gain +1 Fighting per level versus the opponent they defended against, for the Round. This bonus can only be applied against one opponent per Turn the Tide level at a time.
- ✦ **Level Two:** If the warrior uses Counter Attack, they also deal +1 damage.
- ✦ **Level Three:** When the warrior uses the Deflect Attack

option, they only need to spend 1 Dynamic Action (instead of 2).

## REACH

A master of Reach weaponry establishes a deadly perimeter around them, creating their own personal domain. They control positioning by pushing targets away, spin their weapon to attack multiple targets and create such a pressure with their weapons making it hard to even concentrate near them.

## SPINNING WEAPON

- ✦ **Level One:** A single precise step carries a spinning weapon bounding from one attack to another. If the fighter spends a Dynamic Action to attack a second time in a Round, this attack receives a +1 bonus.
- ✦ **Level Two:** A spinning blade becomes a shield, stopping opponents before they approach and parrying incoming attacks that cross its path. After a successful attack, the fighter gains a +1 bonus (+2 on a Boost) to Block/Parry for the Round.
- ✦ **Level Three:** As an Action, the fighter may spin their weapon around and attack everyone within Near Range. This attack deals -1 damage.

## UNBREAKABLE BOUNDARY

- ✦ **Level One:** The practitioner's weapon gains the Driving quality.
- ✦ **Level Two:** With a Boost on a weapon attack against an opponent at Close Range, the warrior can perform a Knock Back immediately.
- ✦ **Level Three:** When an opponent moves from Far Range into Near Range, the warrior can immediately make a weapon attack against them.

## WATCHFUL SENTINEL

- ✦ **Level One:** Just standing within the perimeter established by a Reach weapon is quite unnerving. Opponents within Near Range of the warrior suffer a -1 penalty on Discipline rolls per Watchful Sentinel level.
- ✦ **Level Two:** If an ally attacks an opponent within Near Range of the warrior, roll Intimidate + Fighting. On a success, the warrior's threatening presence gives the opponent a -1 penalty for their Defense check (-2 on a Boost).
- ✦ **Level Three:** As an Action, the warrior can assume a watchful stance. While in this stance, the warrior gains +1 to Defense and any opponent within Near Range of the warrior suffers -1 to Defense. If the warrior moves,

this watchful stance ends immediately.

## NEW WEAPON QUALITIES

<b>Defending</b>	+1 Free Defense check before applying penalties.
<b>Driving</b>	+1 on Knock Back attempts.
<b>Exploding</b>	On a Boost, this weapon deals +2 additional damage. On a critical failure, the one wielding the weapon suffers 2 damage.
<b>Loud</b>	A character suffers a -2 penalty to Stealth after using this weapon.
<b>Reload</b>	On a critical failure, a character attacking with this weapon is out of ammunition and can't use it to attack again until he replenishes it himself.
<b>Restraining</b>	On a Boost, a character attacking with this weapon may initiate a grab automatically.

## NEW WEAPONS

### BLAST BRACER

Favored by Engineers, these bracers are filled with gunpowder shells. When an attacker hits hard enough, the shells explode, dealing additional damage. However, in some cases they detonate still inside the bracer, harming the user.

### DUN (SHIELD)

A small hand-held board of metal or wood; primarily used to block attacks but can also be used to push enemies away or to bash them.

### GONNE (HAND CANNON)

A simple and effective firearm that shoots exploding projectiles at nearby targets, but its range is limited by its design.

### IJAN (SABER)

Favored by Izou royalty, this thin, straight sword is deceptively hard to master. It is a practical defensive tool in court, as well as an offensive



weapon on the battlefield.

### **KARAMBIT**

This small knife is usually a last resort weapon. It doesn't have a hilt; it can be held in one hand or tied to one's hair. Some youths in the Izou courts take to wearing them as a fashion accessory.

### **NEST OF BEES**

A hexagonal tube filled with dozens of rocket-tipped, often poisonous arrows. Lighting the end allows for several of the arrows to be launched at a time. It is two-handed and takes up a fighter's entire Round (once it is lit, they can only attack with it for the Round). Once the Round is done, it is empty and no longer usable.

### **PISTOL**

A simple and portable firearm, more advanced than those available to civilians.

### **RIFLE**

A longer and more cumbersome military firearm.

### **SILVER STAFF**

This two-pronged staff is made to either grab an opponent between its prongs or to push him away with the simultaneous impact in two different spots.

### **URUMI (CURLING SWORD)**

This treacherous weapon has a sturdy handguard and a flexible blade of edged steel that resembles a whip. When not in use, the blade is coiled around the user's waist, as a belt.

### **WEIGHTED SCARF**

Long scarves with weights sewn to each tip. Easily mistaken as normal pieces of clothing, they can be used to wrap around weapons, limbs or a neck; therefore, these unusual weapons can be used to disarm, restrain or strangle opponents. They may also be used to hit normally with the weights, almost like a kusari.

<b>Blast Bracer</b>	Blunt, Brutal, Exploding, Loud
<b>Dun (Shield)</b>	Defending, Driving
<b>Gonne (Hand Cannon)</b>	Exploding, Reach
<b>Jian (Saber)</b>	Defending, Piercing
<b>Karambit</b>	Concealable, Quick
<b>Nest of Bees</b>	Ranged, Explosive, Poisonous, Reload
<b>Pistol</b>	Concealable, Loud, Piercing, Ranged
<b>Rifle</b>	Brutal, Piercing, Ranged, Reload
<b>Silver Staff</b>	Driving, Restraining
<b>Urumi (Curling Sword)</b>	Chain, Concealable, Sharp, Unwieldy
<b>Weighted Scarf</b>	Disarming, Reach, Restraining, Unwieldy

## **MASS COMBAT**

Most of the time, Ninja Crusade battles occur on a relatively small scale. It's a handful of ninja and Empire soldiers against each other, with some squads to fill out the action. But sometimes your stories might call for all-out war, with conflicts so big that not every combatant can see every participant over the horizon. These rules exist to help you tell those kinds of stories, to keep them simple, action-packed and most importantly to focus on what really matters instead of wondering if Nameless Soldier #583 took 4 or 5 points of damage.

## **THREATS**

Both sides of the struggle exist as Threats. Below you'll find a few ranks of threats, which are relative and mutable. Depending on the circumstances and specifics of the battle, one identical military force could be any given degree of Threat. A competent general seeks to lower their opponent's relative Threat level before the battle even starts. Also, Threats can shift, ebb and flow as the battle persists.

Threat Rank	Rank Power
Pitiful	2
Minor	4
Moderate	6
Fearsome	8
Unstoppable	10

To determine the starting Threats, first assume both forces start as Moderate Threats. The larger force is upgraded to Fearsome. If the smaller force is half the size of the larger, it's downgraded to Minor. If it's a tenth the size of the larger, it becomes Pitiful. The better-equipped force is upgraded one category. Also, the Buildup Scene can dramatically influence these ranks.

On the one hand, having a higher Threat rating means numerous advantages in the war, and a higher overall likelihood of victory. Having a lower rating means one thing: The force with the lower Threat rating has Initiative. In mass combat, there aren't Initiative rolls. Simply give Initiative to the force with the lowest rank. After all, they have fewer resources to manage.

## THE STAKES

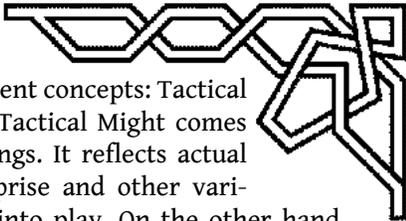
It may not seem it, but there are always reasons to fight a battle. Both sides want something, even if one side simply wants to stay alive. These are the Stakes of your mass combat.

When starting the mass combat conflict, figure out the Stakes for both sides. The GM can rule one side's Stakes unrealistic. For example, a force of five villagers trying to slaughter a thousand well-armed Empire troops simply won't happen, no matter what the dice say. But, try to find a way to work with the intent of the Stakes.

Additionally, both sides should offer up a "compromised stake," which is a lesser version of the same Stakes, with significant losses or sacrifices factored in. During any clash action (see below), a force can choose to seize their compromised stake and withdraw. Regardless of success or failure, this costs them a Threat rank. But if successful, they get that meager win and can withdraw from the conflict. This doesn't mean the opposition cannot pursue, but if they do, it's considered a separate mass combat with new Stakes, new Threat ratings and new Buildup (however, given limitations of time, probably no Buildup.)

## TACTICS AND STRATEGY

Where most battles in Ninja Crusade have the characters fighting with physical force or mental acuity, mass



combat reflects on two different concepts: Tactical Might and Strategic Might. Tactical Might comes from the mental side of things. It reflects actual tactics, clever plotting, surprise and other variables the armies can bring into play. On the other hand, Strategic Might is more directly physical, reflecting actual numerical forces, their armaments, support engines and other weight on that side of the struggle.

Just like with a normal fight, these traits reflect the general health of the overall force. So, each side in the battle has a Tactical Might and Strategic Might. A force's Tactical Might, which functionally takes the place of Psyche, is based on the side's Threat rank power (see above), plus twice the Intuition Skill of that side's leader. A force's Strategic Might, which takes the place of Health, is based on the side's Threat rank power, plus twice the Fighting Skill of that side's leader.

Note that since Threats change during a battle, each time Threat increases or decreases, you'll add or remove two Tactical Might and Strategic Might from the force in question. This makes every shift in Threats pivotal to the scope of the battle at large. When a force loses a rank, they lose a significant part of their force. This isn't an easy, mathematical number, since ranks increase and decrease dynamically throughout the struggle. Simply reflect this in the narration.

## SPOTLIGHT ACTIONS

Every turn of a mass combat, two things happen: the forces clash, and a spotlight action occurs. The forces clashing is the macrocosmic level of the battle, where the armies go back and forth, trying to overwhelm each other. The spotlight, however, is where individual actors can tip the scales for the entire fight. Each turn, the player in charge of a force's leader chooses who gets the spotlight on their side. The spotlight occurs before the main clash, because the spotlight can often influence it.

Spotlights are handled like normal actions, but receive even larger than normal narration. This is where individuals get to shine. While a spotlight action might narratively involve a small group (the players' team, for example), only one person makes a single action roll.

Make the action as normal. However, instead of applying damage or otherwise calculating the mechanical costs, simply apply the action's successes to the clash roll as bonus dice. Additionally, Boosts can increase or decrease a force's Threat rank by one degree. Explain how this happens in the narration. For example, a ninja might tear through dozens of soldiers with a single jutsu, causing her enemies to lose a rank instantly.



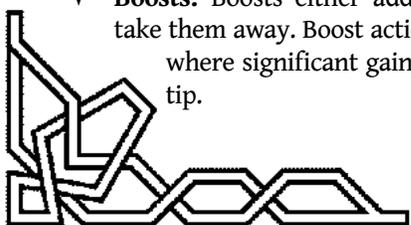
## CLASH ACTIONS

Clash Actions are the higher-level actions that take place in a mass combat. They happen in addition to spotlight actions, and are often enhanced by spotlight actions. If the first clash was a surprise (established during the Buildup actions), only the surprising force can act during the first clash.

All clash actions resolve normally, made by the force leaders. On every given clash, the superior Threat takes +2 to their roll. On the other hand, the inferior Threat acts first. These rolls don't benefit from normal modifiers such as tools or support. Instead, spotlight actions add to these clash actions. As with normal actions, be creative in allowing leaders to choose their relevant Skills.

✦ **Difficulties:** Clash Difficulties are equal to 1 + the number of Threat ranks between the forces, in either direction. It's very hard to significantly damage a bigger force, but it's also difficult to put down the underdogs, who are fighting to survive. Note that Threat ratings change during the war, so these difficulties can shift from clash to clash, or even from force to force.

✦ **Boosts:** Boosts either add Threat ranks to a force, or take them away. Boost actions reflect massive flourishes, where significant gains are made and scales quickly tip.



✦ **Damage and Defeat:** Instead of causing Psyche or Health damage, attacks reduce Tactical Might or Strategic Might. If either reaches zero, that force can no longer fight. It doesn't mean they're dead or incapacitated, but that they're in a strategic situation that's simply untenable and they can no longer mount a meaningful opposition. At this point, individual survivors can take individual actions, but the war is over, and the Stakes are won or lost. The defeated group fails to gain their Stakes, while the winning group achieves theirs.

## LEADERS

Leaders will take most mass combat actions. These are usually, but not always, the formal leaders of a force. Sometimes, if a character shines above and beyond their leadership, they can be considered the de-facto leader. However, if a leader falls, the force must take a full action to appoint a new leader. Removed leaders tend to cripple armies, leaving them immensely vulnerable. Only the greatest soldiers can step in quickly, reorganize their armies and mount effective counterstrikes.

For this reason, ninjas specialize in moving in silently and removing war leaders at opportune times, often to compensate for inferior forces on their own sides. The Em-



## COUNTERS

This isn't a hard rule, but the fight will feel much more dynamic if you use tactile counters while playing. Get a number of counters to represent the different aspects of the battle – six different colors or more would be ideal. That way you can physically remove them from the table or add more as the battle tides shift.

pire counters by heavily defending leaders, and by training potential replacements well.

## THE BUILDUP (AND COUNTDOWN)

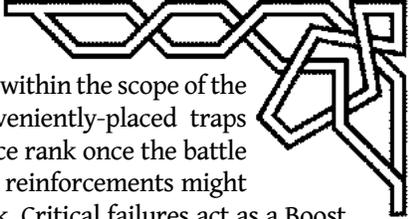
One huge difference between a small-scale engagement and mass combat is that mass combat takes some time to occur, and at least one side knows it's happening well in advance. This is handled through Buildup Scenes, which reflect everything in the war that happens before the first shot is fired or the first blow is struck.

Buildup is handled in a very abstract fashion, based on time. Simply, there are three kinds of Buildup: Short, Medium and Long. These afford one, two or three Buildup actions, respectively. Note that different forces might have different Buildup, depending on when they discover the upcoming conflict. This is why surprise is an immensely valuable tool in warfare. To determine surprise, just use the normal rules, taking into consideration spies and other agents who may be able to tip off a force's leader.

- ✦ **No Buildup.** Any conflict that takes place within an hour of first alert does not receive Buildup actions.
- ✦ **Short Buildup** happens before a conflict that occurs within an hour to a day of first notice.
- ✦ **Medium Buildup** happens before a conflict that occurs more than a day, and up to a week after first notice.
- ✦ **Long Buildup** requires more than a week of preparation time.

The force leaders take one action per level of Buildup. These actions are handled like any other actions. However, the successes are set aside as bonus dice the leader can draw on during the war effort. These dice can be spent one-for-one to add to dice pools during clashes. Boosts, on the other hand, do one of three things:

- ✦ Increase the leader's force rank by one degree.
- ✦ Decrease the enemy's force rank by one degree.
- ✦ Provoke surprise in the first clash.



Explain why this happens within the scope of the narrative. For example, conveniently-placed traps might reduce the enemy's force rank once the battle starts, or a well-timed call for reinforcements might increase the allied force's rank. Critical failures act as a Boost given to the opponent.

## DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENTS

Battles on an open, flat field are nowhere near as fun as environments where the very setting is causing complications. Dynamic Environments in mass combat work similarly to the normal Dynamic Environments (NC2E, pg. 147-148), but they act on a much larger scale.

## BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

**Element:** Earth

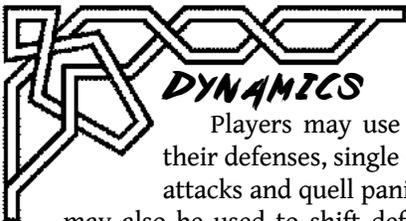
The opposing armies find themselves engaged in a vicious urban battle, fighting street-to-street. The players' force is tasked to defend the village's marketplace: a crowded square surrounded on all sides by high walls and shops. Although defensible, the market has many streets leading into it; each a potential avenue of attack from superior enemy forces. Compounding their difficulties, most of the unarmed villagers have retreated here. They must mount a suitable defense while ensuring innocents aren't killed in the ensuing combat.

The GM sets the Buildup, usually Short, to determine how much preparation time the players have. Stakes are then established, with the attackers specifying how many Turns the mass combat continues. As their compromised stake, less scrupulous defenders may sacrifice the villagers to insure their force's retreat.

For defenders, Spotlight actions can include fighting on rooftops, singling out leaders, buttressing failing defenses and launching minor counterattacks. For attackers, Spotlight actions can include setting fires, concentrating their forces, using siege weapons and attacking weak spots.

The marketplace can provide defenders with invaluable resources. The GM is encouraged to reward inventive players, providing bonuses to their force's Tactical/Strategic Might. However, the GM may impose dramatic Conditions as well, resulting from panicking villagers or raging fires.





## DYNAMICS

Players may use dynamic actions to enhance their defenses, single out enemy leaders, force back attacks and quell panic amongst the villagers. They may also be used to shift defenses to counter unexpected changes in the battlefield.

## FINALE

If the players hold out for more Turns than the opposing force specified, they succeed in driving the attackers back, ending the mass combat. Should they succeed in reducing the attacker's Tactical Might or Strategic Might to zero prior to that, they're allowed to counterattack in full – likely destroying the opposing army. Should their defenses fail, however, the attackers succeed in taking the marketplace – capturing the remaining defenders and likely slaughtering the villagers.

## TIP OF THE SPEAR

**Element:** Fire

Blinded by rage and glory, the opposing Vanguard launches an assault on an ancestral shrine. The enemy general and his elite forces are renowned for their brutality and skill. If their assault succeeds, the shrine's destruction will panic the players' force – possibly causing it to break. However, if they stop it, the Vanguard can be surrounded and destroyed. Better yet, capturing the general's standard (sashimono) will severely demoralize the enemy forces. Unfortunately, time is short, as the opposing Main Guard bears down on them.

Due to its suddenness, the battle's Buildup is Short. The GM secretly rolls one die with a +3 'bonus' (for a result of 4 to 13). This determines the number of Turns before the Main Guard arrives, ending the battle. Stakes are set by both sides, such as breaking the opposing defenses, burning the shrine, stopping the assault and capturing the general and/or claiming his sashimono. Examples of compromised Stakes for the attacker include destroying the shrine despite overwhelming casualties, while defenders might sacrifice themselves to fell the General, achieving a pyrrhic victory.

Spotlight actions generally focus around attacking the General and his elite guard. The general is equivalent to a Master, such as a Silver Blades Kensai (NC2E, pg. 165) or Vicious Ninja Master (NC2E, pg. 166); although, the GM may choose to make him a fully developed NPC. Worn on his back, his sashimono is nearly impossible to capture without incapacitating him first. His bodyguards are all Warriors, equal to the players in number and ability. Clash actions are handled as normal, except for the victory conditions below.

## DYNAMICS

Dynamic actions may be used to interrupt enemy actions (such as torching the shrine), slip past the bodyguards, push back enemy forces and incapacitate the general.

## FINALE

If players subdue the general and/or his force prior to the countdown's conclusion, the battle ends. Demoralized, the enemy's Main Guard either retreats or halts their attack, beginning a new narrative phase. If the general succeeds in burning the shrine, the players' force is demoralized instead. Worse yet, if the countdown is exceeded, the players find themselves surrounded – beginning a new and more desperate battle.

## DEATH BY A 1,000 CUTS

**Element:** Metal

With their elevated position, hill fortifications offer several strategic advantages, such as information and defense. Opposing armies on the move cannot ignore them, lest they risk attacks from behind. The players' force has been tasked with seizing a hill castle from enemy control. A daunting mission in and of itself, the presence of skilled sappers only compounds their difficulties, such as Engineers or Trap Masters.

The players' force must navigate a maze of abatis and punji sticks. Hidden beneath the muddy ground, thousands of caltrops await an unlucky step or stumble. All the while, they endure a ceaseless barrage of arrows, gunfire and explosives. Even after they've reached the fort's stone redoubt, the force must still overcome the fortified defenders.

As the attackers, the players determine the Buildup period. However, the GM can impose narrative time-limits, signifying the military campaign's overall progression. For example, if their siege is prolonged, they may run out of supplies or enemy reinforcements arrive to assist the defenders. The Stakes will revolve around the siege's length and cost in manpower. As a compromise, the attackers may accept massive casualties (lowering their Threat) to achieve victory, while defenders may destroy the fort in order to retreat.

For attackers, spotlight actions may include destroying fortifications, suppressing archers and helping pinned soldiers. For defenders, these actions could include throwing explosives, sniping obvious leaders, repairing defenses and healing the wounded.

Due to the dangerous environment, the GM may impose different Conditions on the players. These include Slowed (stepping on a caltrop), Confused/Sensory Loss (obscuring smoke), Burned (from fires) and Bleeding/Injured (maimed by booby trap). Each Clash Action, the GM rolls one die; on a 1-2, reduce the attackers' Threat one rank, as they suffer grievous losses due to the hostile terrain.

## DYNAMICS

Dynamic actions include avoiding injuries, suppressing incoming fire, destroying fortifications and advancing faster than normal movement. The attacking leader may expend one Dynamic action per Clash Action to ignore the Threat reduction from hostile terrain.

## FINALE

The battle ends when either the attackers retreat or the defenders surrender (or destroy the fort).

## A MAIDEN'S TEARS

**Element:** Water

The Namida Bridge is vital to any military campaign. Consisting of five arch bridges, its ancient, wooden structure spans one of the widest sections of river. The opposing armies must capture it intact or be forced to march several leagues out of their way. As the battle begins, however, they discover the bridge's darkest secret. A demoness of considerable power, Hashihime, lives beneath its stone piers. She resembles a woman with white painted-face and iron fingernails; her river-bloated body tangled in a rotted wedding dress. She despises trespassers and is very hungry.

In this battle, the armies fully control the opposing riverbank. As such, the Buildup can be Short, Medium or Long, depending on how much time they allow the other side to prepare. Indeed, the GM may wish to run narrative Scenes, including flanking missions, weakening the bridge and encountering Hashihime. Once the battle begins, possible Stakes can include capturing the opposite shoreline, preventing a crossing and routing the enemy force entirely. A compromised stake could include destroying the bridge.

The bridge's arched design poses several difficulties for the combatants; the GM is encouraged to impose penalties due to the limited space, unsure footing and broken line of sight. On each Spotlight action, roll one die:

- ✦ 1-2: The river remains eerily still.
- ✦ 3-5: Hashihime emerges from the river, dragging several helpless enemies to their deaths – reduce Opponent's Threat rank by one degree.
- ✦ 6-8: Hashihime emerges from the river, dragging several helpless allies to their deaths – reduce players' force's Threat rank by one degree.
- ✦ 9-10: Hashihime emerges from the river, attacking the characters. The GM receives 7 dice to roll against the players, with a success dealing +1 damage. Any player who gets a Critical Failure on their Defense roll has their character dragged off the bridge and imposed with Drowning Conditions.

All Clash actions proceed as normal.

## DYNAMICS

Dynamic actions may be used to knock opponents into the river (preventing Hashihime from attacking one Turn), save allies from the demones, maintain their footing, strengthen their defenses and dodge Hashihime's attacks.

## FINALE

The battle ends when one side takes the opposing shoreline, thus establishing a bridgehead. Hashihime ceases her attacks; gluttoned on the corpses in the river. The battle also ends upon the bridge's partial or complete destruction.

## FOREST FOR THE TREES

**Element:** Wood

The Empire's bamboo forests are mythical places filled with long shadows and glittering sunlight. Their cramped, humid interiors create natural barriers normally avoided by marching armies. However, due to bad luck, the two opposing forces have literally run into one another in the thick woods. Staggered and out of formation, the confused armies risk doing more damage to their own troops than each other.

The battle has no Buildup; being effectively instantaneous. Both sides are considered surprised, so neither side receives this bonus. The Stakes are set normally, usually consisting of destroying the opposing army. Unlike normal battles, forces choosing a compromised stake suffer the loss of two Threat ranks as their force becomes hopelessly scattered in the forest.

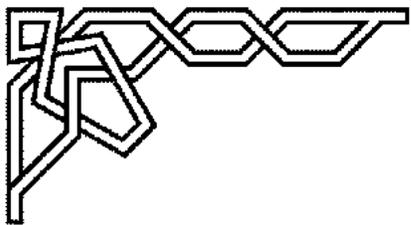
Spotlight actions will focus on more personal encounters, such as individual combats, rallying broken troops and forming defensive lines. On each Clash Action, the leaders from each force must test their Intuition skill. On a failed roll, their force loses one Threat rank as they kill their own troops in the mass confusion. On a Critical Failure, they lose one Threat rank and suffer a Rating 1 Condition (chosen by the GM) for the remainder of the battle, such as Afraid or Burning. In addition, the GM should impose further restrictions on mounted and missile combat, as these units will be effectively useless in the forest's restrictive terrain.

## DYNAMICS

Characters may spend dynamic actions to rally their troops, prevent friendly fire, locate enemy leaders and organize a safe retreat.

## FINALE

The battle ends after one side is destroyed or retreats. Depending on the surviving force's size, it may take some time to rally together.



# ADVENTURE: *FIGHTING DIRTY*

This adventure puts the players directly into a conflict between the ninja and the Empire. In an effort to fight a political war against the ninja, the Empire mounts a frame job, a smear campaign to turn public opinion into a weapon. Meanwhile, the ninja are fighting back: investigating the smears, going after the architects of those rumors and trying to clear their names. The Empire's goal is to cause maximum damage with a small force, and largely indirect harm. What seems like a simple public relations assault ends up more complicated, as the ninja don't take character assassination lying down.

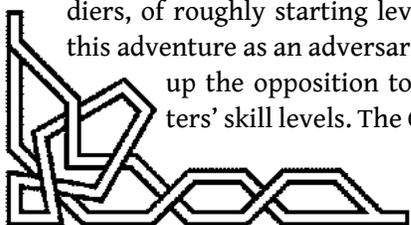
Characters will be tasked with infiltrating a village, framing a murder scene, evading the ninja, ultimately defending themselves and making certain their propaganda stands up to scrutiny. This requires a good mix of expertise, from stealth to manipulation and the ability to fight off assailants.

This adventure is best suited for three to five Izou soldiers, of roughly starting level. Because of the nature of this adventure as an adversarial scenario, it's easy to scale up the opposition to match the players' characters' skill levels. The GM can just use a group built

from the sample characters in the corebook (NC2E, pg. 216-233). Since they're also starting level, they make for solid adversaries, and since there's a swath of them, you can bring one or two extras in to round out the challenge if the players are doing particularly well.

## SETTING THE STAGE

This adventure is assumed to take place in Shiraiwa, a village a couple day's travel northeast from Daiwa in the Middle Province, at the foot of the mountains. Shiraiwa largely exists on its lumber and mining industry, which feeds raw materials to suit Daiwa's immense needs. However, this story can take place in any rural village under Imperial scrutiny where the Empire has a vested interest in keeping ninja influence to a minimum. Shiraiwa has a small cadre of ninja, who it's currently on the fence about. They're not firmly against the ninja, but they're skeptical. If the village embraces the ninja, the Empire might as well write the village off as a loss. However, the Empire is looking for a way to turn the tables and make the village side with them.





Selling the Empire to the players is all about contrast. The Empire, according to the Empire, is successful, efficient, organized and frankly, right. More Imperial control should always be presented as clean and pristine, while the rural villages are rough places, unkempt and lawless. Within Imperial cities, the people should look nourished and content, working leisurely and proud, while the rural people are working long and hard for meager scraps, with hungry, often diseased children.

Of course, this is all bias. You can even present it that way. “Just like your commander says, the village people show signs of a grave pox.” This isn’t to say urban residents don’t have the same pox, it’s just that Izou soldiers are more likely to overlook those ailments, while assuming the few they see in the rural areas are the rule, not the exception.

If you want to go a little further, subtly increase your voice to just above the comfortable level when presenting villagers, while using a slightly softer tone while portraying Imperial agents. This will ensure the players feel just a little on edge when dealing with outsiders, as they’re brash and uncivilized to the Imperial mindset. Also, don’t hesitate to add small idiosyncrasies, customs and turns of speech for villagers, and perhaps make them react oddly to things the Izou soldiers would consider perfectly normal. This isn’t to say it should be particularly challenging to deal with them – quite the opposite, since most villagers fear reprisal from the Empire – but there should be a definite and obvious line drawn between insider and outsider groups in all interactions.

During the mission, the players will be framing a small group of ninja, about one ninja per Izou soldier.

## SCENE 1: RECEIVING THE MISSION

Our story starts at an Izou military encampment between Daiwa and Shiraiwa. The characters are installed on temporary assignment in this woodland camp, and they know the only way out of this otherwise dead-end assignment is to perform well. Unfortunately, opportunities to perform just simply are not there. That changes when this adventure begins.

The camp itself is meager, underfunded and understaffed. It’s not that the Empire doesn’t feed and clothe its people, but this place is simply not a high-priority outpost. Nothing they’re doing bears essential status. Still, the equipment is well-maintained, and the place is much clean-

er than the nearby villages.

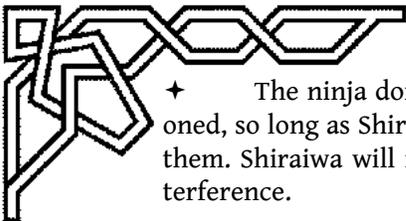
The camp commander, Tachibana, has an assignment. It’s pressing, and it’s a big one. A small mining camp from Shiraiwa was wiped out by animals. Imperial scouts found the fresh corpses. Because of the location and timing, they have a perfect opportunity to turn this into a maneuver against the ninja. The crew is to rush out to the bodies before the people of Shiraiwa find them, and stage them in such a way as to implicate the local ninja.

Make certain the characters are aware that this mission is their ticket out of boring, monotonous work. This is a perfect opportunity for advancement into greater things. Sell the mission not just as an essential assignment, but as the chance of a lifetime, where failure is not an option. Tachibana knows what this means to them, and uses it as a motivating tool. She peppers her explanation with plenty of references to choosing them because she knew they were the right soldiers for the job. Ultimately, Tachibana knows that success for them means success for her, and she wants out of this outpost just as much as they do, if not more. And they are the best she can send. If they pry, she admits she wishes she could go herself, but regulations require she stay at the outpost. She wants to be in the field, working. If they talk to her about the topic, she’ll seem downright curious, interested in hearing stories of their success. But she shakes it off and gets back to business quickly.

If the characters ask, they can receive a short briefing on the ninja of Shiraiwa. Just give them a rundown of the ninja you’ve chosen as the opposition. You may leave one or two out, to reflect imperfect intelligence reports. However, if one of the players has a relevant Contact, don’t skimp on the information here. In fact, go a little further and give a couple of important details about their possible jutsu.

Important things to note:

- ✦ The ultimate goal here is to claim Shiraiwa as a village loyal to the Empire. Ideally, this should be without force against the village, as it’s better to be respected than feared.
- ✦ No unnecessary deaths. We’re framing murder here, not committing murder. This is a public relations stunt, and making the Empire look like a bunch of murderers is not acceptable.
- ✦ By extension, the public opinion must be against the ninja before they can be taken down. Don’t let them die as heroes or victims.
- ✦ If the people find out about the Empire’s meddling, pull out all stops. The Empire cannot be implicated, under any circumstance.



★ The ninja don't have to die or be imprisoned, so long as Shiraiwa rejects them and exiles them. Shiraiwa will fall in line without their interference.

The mining camp is but hours away. Commander Tachibana demands they make haste.

## SCENE 2: THE BODIES

The mining camp is a very small affair, just a crew of a dozen in total around a shallow, nearly dry gold mine along a creek. Two larger tents each housed five or six workers, and a smaller tent sheltered their foreman, who was not present for the killing. The scene is a massacre. cursory investigation reveals fur and claw fragments from bears.

The bears picked at the bodies, but did not eat them entirely. Nine of the twelve workers died; the other three (including the foreman) are nowhere to be seen. Framing the ninja will be difficult and take some creativity. If the soldiers received a briefing on the Shiraiwa ninja and they use any of that information to personalize the frame job, they receive a +2 bonus to relevant dice rolls. Don't worry too much about success or failure here, so long as the players have a relatively creative plan for the frame. Just take note of details to bring up later, things that can make later scenes more interesting or challenging. Hang on to the specifics, and bring them up when the frame comes under scrutiny.

Once the frame is just about ready, the bears come back for seconds.

Bears generally do not attack humans unprovoked. However, these bears are rabid and hungry, and close in for the kill. There are x1.5 as many bears as soldiers, rounded up. While somewhat tough, this should mostly be a chance to work out and show off a little. Stats for Larger Animals can be found on NC2E, pg. 159.

If the players investigate the claw fragments and other traces from the bears, they'll realize there was one other bear, who lost a claw during the killing. That bear was not present in the group attacking the soldiers.

After the bears are dealt with (and probably disposed of, since they could throw a kink into the plans), the next step is to bring the story to the people of Shiraiwa.

## SOME SIDE DIRECTIONS

Players might have some plans which pull them from the immediate scene of the crime. This is fine, but should introduce a bit of complication to the story. For example, a group of Shiraiwa villagers may show up on the scene, and it may take some fast-talking or strong-arming to make sure they don't ruin the plan. Here are a few possibilities they might come up with:

- ★ Gathering specific supplies to help sell the ruse.
- ★ Stealing one of the ninja's weapons to help put them at the scene of the crime.
- ★ Stowing some of the gold from the mine in order to make it look like the ninja stole the gold to profit themselves.

## SCENE 3: SELLING THE STORY

Next, the soldiers must sell their story to the people of Shiraiwa. The people are not inherently hostile, but they don't necessarily trust the Empire sight unseen. Fortunately for the soldiers, they're also not inherently trusting of the ninja in their midst.

This scene could take place at the site of the massacre, or at the village, depending on how the players choose to sell the story. This doesn't particularly matter, except for the fact that the entire village will be involved if they choose to tell the story at the village, whereas only a small fraction of the villagers will travel out to the scene of the massacre.

There are three main villagers who will pose conflict in this scene, demanding to see the bodies, regardless of where the scene takes place. If the players manage to convince at least two of them, the village sides with their story. While they're not all excellent fighters, they'll support a plan and help to divert some attention and tip the scales in the soldiers' favor.

While the skeptics have questions, the soldiers may divert and distract to make on-the-fly cover-ups to address their concerns. Answers prepared in advance that match the questions asked all benefit from a +2 bonus to relevant rolls.

As this scene progresses, use the three skeptics as your voice characters. Engage the players, and make the soldiers justify their falsified story. You don't need to play the rest of the village, but use them as set dressing. At first, they'll be immensely skeptical, but as the three



skeptics begin to warm up to the soldiers' story, the village whispers and nods along accordingly.

And remember to sell the village as something different than the Empire. Have one of the soldiers step in horse dung. Have the soldiers pass by someone manually shucking rice as she complains her mill is broken down and too expensive to fix. Others might be discussing bandit attacks, and debating starting a village posse to hunt down outlaws since the Empire isn't helping anyone out here. Many homes are abandoned and overgrown by foliage, because money's been scarce, and most of their best workers have left for Daiwa.

## THE THREE SKEPTICS

The following three villagers are the most important in the conversation. Convincing them will convince the rest of the village. With two convinced, the village will turn on the ninja. If the characters manage to convince all three, the village will actively oppose the ninja, and favor the Empire.

Each character ultimately has a question that needs an answer. Unless sufficiently answered, they won't side with the soldiers' story.

### **MINE FOREMAN, SEO HIDEO**

Seo was the foreman who wasn't among the bodies at the site. During the killing, he was leading a couple of his men back to the village for supplies. He's a stubborn man, but highly practical and pragmatic. He's unlikely to take someone's word, but even a shred of credible (seeming) evidence should sway him. More importantly, he's devastated. His crew has died. This constitutes most of the mining workforce in Shiraiwa, and these men ate, drank, worked and slept with him for most of his life. Now they're gone. For this reason, simple evidence mixed with an emotional appeal will be markedly successful in convincing him. He wants justice. He wants blood. And if convinced, he'll be the first to lift his tools in anger against the culprits.

Seo's objection is that only he and his men — who he was with — knew the camp had found gold, and even then, only a small amount. According to him, the ninja shouldn't have known about the gold, and thus shouldn't have had motivation to attack the camp. With a convincing enough display, he could be convinced to turn on one of his assistants, blaming them for leaking information about the gold. Fortunately for the soldiers, one of the assistants did talk about the crew's find. Even though this information didn't make it back to the ninja, the crewmate shows signs of guilt,

and can be convinced to confess if pressed.

Normally, Seo is Difficulty 4 to convince. With a good display, he's Difficulty 3. Particularly impressive efforts bring him to Difficulty 2.

### **HUNTRESS, SHINOMIYA AZUSA**

Shinomiya is a professional hunter. She brings her quarry back to the village, and distributes it to the people. She spends much of her time stalking the woods, looking for the next week's wages, and trying not to tax the land too heavily of one particular animal. Shinomiya is a fun-loving celebrant, who enjoys every second of her job. She loves the woods, she loves the air and she loves the hunt. She loves helping to feed her village, and she loves contributing to their society. She wants to be sure others won't die by bear as well.

Shinomiya found a bear out in one of her hunts. She says it was rabid, and covered in human blood. She found it near the massacre. She said she burned the body, so as to not let it infect anyone, but she was dead certain it was human blood on the thing's maw, and it suffered the nicks and cuts of armed men fighting back. Her opposition is that the story seems fishy. She thinks there couldn't have been much time between this supposed ninja killing, bears attacking and the soldiers finding the massacre. She needs a good cover story: a way the bear could have injuries and had human blood on its maw, while not actually being the culprit. Of course, a simple answer would be that nine men wouldn't fall at the hands of a single bear, rabid or not. She would accept this story with skepticism, wanting to investigate the scene for signs of other bears. If the characters did a good job in covering up the bear attack, she'll believe their story. They could also turn the story against Shinomiya, accusing her of being a ninja and potentially having her arrested. This doesn't help to convince the villagers, but it does silence her objections. It may also swing the villager's opinion in favor of the ninja.

If she investigates the massacre with the soldiers nearby, she'll tell them that she knows it was a bear attack. She doesn't mind that they're lying to the people, but she needs reassurance that the bears have been killed and their bodies destroyed by a sanitary method. If the soldiers can provide that assurance, showing their work, she'll accept their story and tell the village she believes the ninja were at fault.

Convincing Shinomiya of the story is Difficulty 3. If they assist with the bears and assure her, she's Difficulty 2.



## VILLAGE GOVERNESS, SAKAMOTO KAYOKO

Governess Sakamoto holds no true, honorific title. She has some noble blood somewhere far back, but she's not recognized by the Empire in a formal sense. The village, however, respects her greatly, and acknowledges informal authority as her family stretches back centuries and has always held leadership in the area. Right now, she's the last of her line. If she passes without bearing any children, her name dies with her.

She's a lovely young woman, stately beyond her years. She's the most dignified person in a place that's ultimately not very dignified. She knows her village isn't a crowning glory of the Empire, and doesn't expect to be treated as such. But she does recognize that she's important locally, and refuses to be talked down or condescended to. She does care about her village, though, and her family's role within. She also has a bit of a romantic streak, and falls for flattery. She's lonely, and most of the village keeps her at arms' reach, since she's their only "noble."

Sakamoto isn't against the story, per se. Her objection is purely personal. The ninja would be no love lost. As far as she's concerned, the ninja can boil in a vat outside her family's shrine for this perceived slight or that one. Her objection, though, is that if the village seeks the Empire's aid in bringing the killers to justice, that the village will be beholden to Izou. She wants assurance that the village will be left to self-governance, and more importantly, to her governance.

This desire of course is beyond the authority of the soldiers. That doesn't stop them from trying to placate her, or lying to her. Getting over on her is Difficulty 2, but convincing her earnestly is Difficulty 3.

## SCENE 4: BRINGING FALSE JUSTICE

Assuming the village goes along with the soldiers' story, the next step is to bring the ninja to justice. They live in a house a little way up the mountain, on the outskirts of the village. It's lightly trapped, mostly to alert the ninja of invaders. Mostly, the ninja use obscured pit traps, and have lightly hidden, sharpened bamboo stakes in strategic points along the path. Both traps cause only 1 damage, but alert the ninja. The pits have bells attached to the obscuring planks, and anyone stepping on a bamboo stake is likely to yell in pain. If the soldiers notice the traps with Difficulty 2 checks, they're easy to

scure planks, and anyone stepping on a bamboo stake is likely to yell in pain. If the soldiers notice the traps with Difficulty 2 checks, they're easy to

overcome, and thus the ninja can be surprised or otherwise taken off-guard.

Note that this hideout isn't luxurious by any stretch. It's a somewhat large rural home, well-kept for what it is but lacking in modern amenities. The floors creak (-1 Stealth if the soldiers attempt it) and the tatami mats smell lightly of mildew.

Unless attacked, the ninja try to pose a defense. They'll make up loose, flimsy alibis. It turns out, they were actually stealing from some of the villagers to make ends meet. They don't want to admit this though, for the same reasons. If discovered, this can also be leveraged if done cleverly.

Also, they'll try to poke any obvious holes in the soldiers' stories. The soldiers get the chance to rebut the ninja. To make this particularly challenging for the soldiers, employ Akiyama Mihoshi (NC2E, pg. 216) or Ishikawa Ryota (NC2E, pg. 223) since they're masters of deception, or Chuushin Naomi (NC2E, pg. 218). Fujimoto Eiji (NC2E, pg. 219), Arai Kaede (NC2E, pg. 217), and Higashi Masaru (NC2E, pg. 221) are good examples of ninja without much ability to spin a good defense, so they won't pose a great challenge in this regard.

But ultimately, it'll come down to a fight. The ninja won't go in peacefully without extreme mitigating circumstances. They know arrest is tantamount to death. If the fight goes particularly well for the soldiers, don't hesitate to throw in one more ninja attacking from surprise in order to turn the tables a little.

Lastly, the ninja will attempt to run if they don't believe they stand a chance of winning.

If in the previous scene, the characters convinced all three of the skeptical villagers to the veracity of their story, the village will send a mob to assist in taking down the ninja. They're considered a squad.

### VILLAGERS (SQUAD)

Health: 16 Psyche: 12

Attack: 6 Actions: 1

Defense: 5 Armor: 1

Initiative: 5 Damage: +1

Dynamic Actions: 1

Suggested Skills (3 dice): Fighting, Intimidation, Intuition, Perception

Additionally, if the three skeptics all stood by the soldiers' story, the ninja will actively attack the villagers, and possibly attempt hostage actions in order to oppose the soldiers. This, of course, puts them on even worse terms with the village, and gives the soldiers a chance to come out looking like heroes.

## SCENE 5: CONCLUSION

With the frame job finished and hopefully the ninja "brought to justice," the soldiers can return to Commander Tachibana to report their success (or failure). While the soldiers rest and recuperate, Tachibana sends an intelligence operative to investigate the parameters of the operation, and just where the soldiers performed well or poorly.

### SUCCESS

With the ninja caught or killed, and the village sympathetic to the Empire, Commander Tachibana declares the operation a success.

- ✦ • If they cleverly set up the murder scene, convinced the village of their story and brought the ninja alive, she recommends them for a position managing propaganda within Daiwa city. This is not only an improvement in job situation, it's also an opportunity for advancement down the line.
- ✦ • If they managed to convince all three skeptical villagers to side with their story and killed or arrested the ninja, the village falls to Imperial control. This not only results in a referral for a more prestigious (and less monotonous) role, it also means promotion for every soldier involved. What amounts to peacefully winning over a village is highly admirable, and proves great promise. The villagers can become Allies. Every player who made an impression can make a roll to reflect that impression. The highest gains the Allies.
- ✦ • If they convince only two of the village skeptics, but two or more of the ninja escape, the village remains contested even though the operation is otherwise considered successful. The characters can expect to remain stationed on the outskirts of the village, until such a time they can turn the tides and win the village over, one way or another. The unconvinced villager is likely to become a Rival to one of the characters. The Empire expects the soldiers to continue their battle against these ninja, who root deeper in the village and attempt to make themselves out as protectors of the downtrodden.

### FAILURE

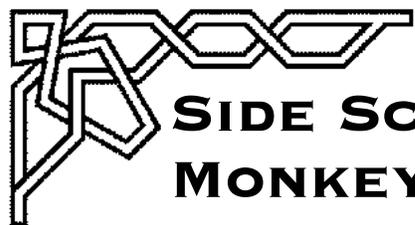
A few scenarios lead to Tachibana determining the operation was a failure. Failure means transfer to a much more difficult (if less boring) role elsewhere.

- ✦ • If they fail to convince two of the villagers of the veracity of their story, even if they take down the ninja in the end, the village sides with the ninja and opposes the Empire. Those unconvinced villagers are likely to become Rivals, as are the remaining ninja. However, a convinced villager can become an Ally. Every player who made an impression can make a roll to reflect that impression. The highest gains the Allies.
- ✦ • If they convince two of the village skeptics, but don't manage to arrest or kill the ninja, the village remains contested, as the ninja can hold off Imperial envoys and do everything they can to win over the hearts and minds of the villagers.
- ✦ • If the soldiers completely botch the cover-up, fail to convince the villagers and fail to remove the ninja, they'll be shamed and offered an opportunity for a war campaign to "redeem themselves." This mission will be essentially a suicide mission.

Once Tachibana decides what happens with the soldiers, award the players experience points.

### EXPERIENCE

+1	Creatively framed the murder scene
+1	Sold the story to two villagers
+1	Sold the story to all three villagers (+2 total)
+1	Defeated and arrested (or killed) the ninja
+1	Thwarted a sabotage effort by the ninja



## SIDE SCENE: MONKEYWRENCH- ING

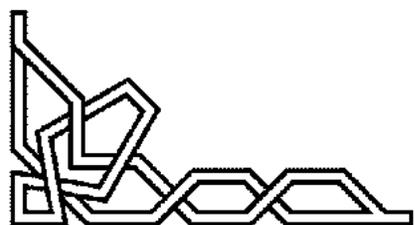
Here, the ninja try to sabotage the effort and clear their names. This is an optional scene, good if the story is playing out quickly and you need to fill some extra time, or if the players had a blunder that gave away their positions. Essentially, to use this scene, you need an anchor to grab onto: a reason within the narrative the ninja catch on to the ruse before the final encounter where the soldiers attempt to arrest or kill the ninja.

In this scene, half the ninja directly attack the soldiers, attempting to distract them. Meanwhile, the other half attempt to tear apart the framed narrative. What they do depends on when this scene comes into play. If it happens during or right after Scene 2, they'll attempt to tamper with the murder scene, so when the villagers see it, it looks different than the soldiers' story. If it happens during or right after Scene 3, they'll attempt to engage some of the villagers — particularly any of the unconvinced skeptics — in an effort to sell their own version of the story. If it happens during Scene 4, the ninja try to turn the tables and ambush their would-be captors before the soldiers get to the ninja hideout. In that case, it's a one-two punch, where the characters are ambushed, then led to the hideout where the other half of the crew is prepared

and waiting for them. Then, the whole crew can surround the soldiers and villagers in a fearsome pincer attack.

The attack isn't a full-blown attempt to destroy the soldiers. Since only half the ninja are present for the assault, they're more likely to stick and run, attacking from hiding and escaping. They'll run away from their compatriots, trying to draw the soldiers away. They're more concerned about providing a diversion and surviving than actually winning the fight. Keep in mind they do have a home turf advantage. If the players pursue, the ninja get a +2 bonus to any rolls to evade, dodge and lose the soldiers. Also, they know many hiding places, having bolt-holes and safe houses hidden all around the village's immediate region.

The other side, the monkeywrenchers, are trying to move quickly and efficiently. Who handles this depends on what they're doing. Try to choose one or two characters who would be good at that particular aspect of the operation, be it sabotaging the framed scene, convincing the villagers or launching the ambush against the villagers and soldiers on their way to the ninja safe house. Remember that they're ninja — act accordingly. They're not going to play fair. They're going to go in, sneaky and deceptive as they need to be to maximize their impact. They'll drop proverbial bombs. And if that's not enough, they'll drop literal bombs.



# BAISOTEI RYUU

## ELEMENT: WOOD, TEMPERAMENT: PERFECTIONIST

- ◆ **Gift:** Loves to do things perfectly. +1 Speed to repeat a successful combo (non-cumulative).
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he becomes fixated and won't stop until it's perfect.

## PROFESSION: OUTSIDER, FOCUS: DRIFTER

- ◆ **Gift:** Has traveled the lands extensively. +1 Fortitude against environmental effects.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when he lacks resources when needed.

## MOTIVATION: MONEY, REASON: RESOURCES

- ◆ **Gift:** The Empire offers a lot to their soldiers. Gain +1 Crafts when making things from resources the army provides them.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when he gives away resources and it harms the group later.

## WARTIME ROLE: COMMANDER, TITLE: STRATEGIST

- ◆ **Gift:** Knows the historical significance of battles. +1 Knowledge to recall advantages or disadvantages of battle plans
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if a strategy he created ends poorly for the group.

## ASSIGNMENT: SILVER BLADES

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Focused Warriors:** +1 Fighting when using a Sword. May spend 1 Dynamic Action to reduce all current Mental Conditions by 1.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Honor Bound:** Gain 1 Karma when the pursuit of honor comes into conflict with a decision that carries grave consequences.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Maturuchi Eichi (Discipline):** A recluse among the proud order, many have said Eichi has discovered a deeper level of understanding. Now considered strange and elusive, he still possesses great wisdom he is eager to share.
- ◆ **Rival - Izumi Sako (Holistics):** An adept at the spiritual world, she has dedicated herself to non-violence but owes the Silver Blades and views them as the rightful protectors of the Empire.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Armor of Blades 1 (Sharp Style):** Close and Near attackers suffer -1 penalty to hit him from constantly spinning blades. Defense Boost = +1 Fighting to next attack.
- ◆ **Mantis Stands Steadfast (Mantis Style):** Double highest Skill when resisting trips, falls or knockdowns.

## WAY OF ALL RIVERS

- ◆ **Way of the Tiger Rush 1:** Makes their blade much deadlier. Simple (1) Athletics + Discipline roll to give blade the Brutal Quality for the Round. Boost = lasts the Battle.
- ◆ **Way of the Tiger Rush 2:** On a Boost while defending, reflexively make Moderate (2) Athletics + Fighting roll, adding +1 damage per success if they counter-attack. Bonus cannot exceed attacker's attack pool.
- ◆ **Way of Instant Step 1:** Can Move as a Free Quick Action or may take normal penalty to move x4 normal Movement.
- ◆ **Way of Instant Step 2:** When they attack with a sword using Speed after using a Quick Action to Move, they deal +2 damage.

## STATS OF NOTE

Health: 7, Psyche: 7, Rank: 1, Initiative: 7, Dynamic Actions: 1, Dynamic Dice: 3, Strength: 3, Movement: 11, Weapon: Katana (Sharp, Quick)

Ryuu was born always watching people. He wanted to know why some people were the haves and others were the have-nots, studying the rich and the poor to see what made them different. What he discovered is that he could only know the truth after experiencing both extremes. He traveled the world as a vagabond, earning what he could through his blade or the kindness of others, before eventually joining the Izou Army to see what it meant to have everything you could ever need provided to you.

While in training, Ryuu caught the eye of the Silver Blades. He possessed a raw talent they believed they could mold into a real warrior. Despite his meager origins, Ryuu possesses a keen mind and uses it to win battles before anyone draws swords. He knows that he'll one day leave this life behind as well to forge a life for himself, but that can't happen until this war is over and done.



## SKILLS

Athletics 3, Crafts 0, Deception 1, Discipline 2, Empathy 0, Fighting 4, Fortitude 2 (Drinking), Holistics 2, Intimidation 2, Intuition 1, Knowledge 0, Marksman 1, Might 0, Perception 0, Perform 2 (Slumming it), Persuade 3, Speed 3, Stealth 0, Survival 2, Travel 2

# DEUSHI RIKO

## ELEMENT: FIRE, TEMPERAMENT: CONFIDENT

- ◆ **Gift:** She's incredibly brave. +1 Empathy vs. Fear.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if she becomes overconfident.

## PROFESSION: ARTISAN, FOCUS: SMITH

- ◆ **Gift:** Has expertise in crafting materials, especially arrows. +1 Marksman to hit small targets.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she chooses brute strength and it turns out horrible.

## MOTIVATION: NATURE, REASON: BLOODLUST

- ◆ **Gift:** She loves to take down the enemy. Gain +1 Athletics when she incapacitates an enemy (Lasts the Battle).
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character chooses not to incapacitate an enemy and it comes back to haunt them.

## WARTIME ROLE: SCOUT, TITLE: OBSERVER

- ◆ **Gift:** She knows how to get into places. Gain +1 Stealth when slipping past guards or soldiers.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character has flashbacks to the war and it incapacitates them.

## ASSIGNMENT: ENGINEERS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Sudden Genius:** +2 Crafts when dealing with mechanics. May also spend 2 Karma to ask the GM for a new idea to tackle an obstacle before them.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Insatiable Curiosity:** Gain 1 Karma when you are presented with a task or a mystery that consumes your concentration regardless of what you need to focus on.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Takeshi Aiko (Knowledge):** Once a teacher at the now-destroyed Wind Valley Dojo, she travels the countryside seeing to the needs of small towns and rebuilding what the ninja and the army have destroyed.
- ◆ **Rival - Hirane Goto (Perception):** A proud, boastful man, several of his peers still consider Goto essential to working out problems with experimental machinery. He does so for free, but often his ego can turn people away from him.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Absolute Defense 1 (Paired Style):** Armor 1 against Sharp weapons.
- ◆ **Poison Striking 1 (Snake Style):** On a Boost, the fighter may create a Poison 1 Condition per Level for their opponent.
- ◆ **Living Missiles 2 (Ranged Style):** Utilizing trick shots, all Range penalties are reduced by 1 and she may ignore 1 level of her target's Armor.

## INGENUITY 2

- ◆ **Starting Resource Points:** 3 RP (Max 10)
- ◆ **Fields of Study:** Equipment/Gear, Civil Engineering, Metallurgy, Covert
- ◆ **Scavenging:** Moderate (2) Crafts + Intuition roll to comb the area for supplies for inventions, where each success yields +1 RP. Riko gains 1 auto success in this task.
- ◆ **Using RP:** To make item alteration, spend 1 RP and make Crafts + Appropriate Skill roll. Each success adds +1 bonus die when using the item for specified purpose.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 6, **Psyche:** 6, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 6, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 3, **Movement:** 9, **Weapon:** Defensive Pistols (Ranged, Paired)

Raised by a village hunter, Riko became a dedicated sniper early in her development. Her father took her on many an outing to teach her how to craft and utilize blackpowder, but most importantly gave her the confidence to always be on the lookout for new uses. She fancies herself a revolutionary scientist within the Engineers, looking for ways to innovate and improve beyond her colleagues. Riko quickly left her studies, however, when she learned of her mother's death at the hands of ninja. An intense hatred courses through her veins now, especially when she discovered those same ninja kidnapped her younger brother. Much of her time she now spends tracking down leads and seeking information to hopefully find clues of what happened to her family. There is nothing Riko will not do to get that information, and she has acquired a taste for performing terrible acts on any ninja she finds as a result.



## SKILLS

Athletics 2, Crafts 3 (Firearms), Deception 1, Discipline 1, Empathy 0, Fighting 3, Fortitude 1, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 1, Knowledge 1, Marksman 3, Might 1, Perception 3, Perform 2, Persuade 1, Speed 2, Stealth 2 (In the Shadows), Survival 0, Travel 1

# HIRAOKA TAKESHI

## ELEMENT: EARTH, TEMPERAMENT: LINGUIST

- ◆ **Gift:** He knows a lot about different cultures and languages. +1 Knowledge to recall local/cultural information.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he recalls incorrectly.

## PROFESSION: DEDICANT, FOCUS: MONK

- ◆ **Gift:** He is used to long meditation. +1 Fortitude to remain unmoving.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character chooses observance over safety.

## MOTIVATION: ALLIANCE, REASON: TRADITION

- ◆ **Gift:** +1 Knowledge to discuss or remember vital information pertaining to his traditions.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character's actions go against the tradition they were brought up in and they backfire.

## WARTIME ROLE: PACIFIST, TITLE: OBJECTOR

- ◆ **Gift:** +1 Fortitude for prolonged activity in protest.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when sharing their opinions brings conflict.

## ASSIGNMENT: THE ENLIGHTENED

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Mind, Body, spirit:** At the beginning of each Scene, player chooses +2 Discipline, +2 Fighting or +2 Intuition, depending on what they anticipate. May spend 1 Dynamic Action to swap their bonus to another during Battle.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Pacifism:** Gain 1 Karma when a swift punch would have saved them a lot of trouble and danger, but they just couldn't throw it.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Onishi Shizue (Might):** There are tales of a mother who focused her physical strength to save her child from danger. Somehow, she has retained this gift for years and has become her village hero.
- ◆ **Rival - Kahae Taku (Deception):** A local magistrate who can always tell when someone is lying. His past as a bandit leader gives him insight other law officials could never dream of.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Portents 1:** Sense Ki and Divination. (Immune to ambush, and +1 to find/avoid traps. May interpret dreams, and significance of it)
- ◆ **Watchful Sentinel 1 (Reach Style):** He becomes an imposing figure on the battlefield. Opponents within Near Range of the warrior suffer a -1 Discipline on all rolls.

## PATH OF THE BODY

- ◆ **Cat Stance (Med, Balance + Speed):** In this stance, he gains +2 bonus on all Defense rolls.

## PATH OF THE SPIRIT

- ◆ **Spirit Steps (Basic, Balance + Discipline):** Goes into a trance and leaves his physical form, becoming a spirit for (successes) minutes. In this form they are invisible, undetectable and cannot affect the physical world.
- ◆ **Knowing the Soul (Med, Balance + Intuition):** Through the eyes, the monk can discern (successes) things about a Close target. Examples: Rank, Ki Levels, Clan/Assignment, etc. or personality tidbits such as likes, dislikes, favored name, etc.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 6, **Psyche:** 8, **Balance:** 2, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 9, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 3, **Movement:** 11, **Weapon:**

Takeshi grew up within the Enlightened Monastery like many of his spiritual brothers and sisters. He excelled as a warrior monk, but his focus centered on learning about other cultures and the intricacies of their languages and interactions. As others perfected the wielding of a bo, Takeshi could instead discern intention and emotion like a weapon.

When the Ninja Crusade started, his heart dropped. The Empire once was a place where all citizens could celebrate all cultures, but no more. His superiors sent him to the capitol in adherence to the Tenets of Ko... when the Empire requires assistance, the monks are to provide it. This doesn't mean Takeshi keeps his opinions to himself. He often calls out hypocrisies and poor choices for what they are, in the bluntest of fashions. Few have the nerve to argue, however, as the Enlightened have a certain reputation of being the perfect warriors. He's far from such, but he isn't opposed to using the stories to his advantage.



Bo (Reach, Blunt)

## SKILLS

Athletics 3, Crafts 2, Deception 0, Discipline 3, Empathy 2, Fighting 3, Fortitude 1, Holistics 2, Intimidation 0, Intuition 3, Knowledge 0, Marksman 1, Might 0, Perception 1, Perform 1, Persuade 2, Speed 3 (Balancing), Stealth 2 (Hiding his Body), Survival 1, Travel 0

# IZUMI CHINATSU

## ELEMENT: WOOD, TEMPERAMENT: LOQUACIOUS

- ◆ **Gift:** Likes to draw a crowd. +1 Perform to draw others to her.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if they let a secret or important info slip at the wrong time.

## PROFESSION: ENTERTAINER, FOCUS: TUMBLER

- ◆ **Gift:** Knows how to flip and tumble around. +1 Athletics for such things.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if she fails in front of a crowd, to her embarrassment.

## MOTIVATION: ALLIANCE, REASON: DUTY

- ◆ **Gift:** She is quite devoted to the army. +1 Discipline to go above and beyond a mission objective.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she cannot neglect her duty; even when doing so causes complications for the group.

## WARTIME ROLE: STRIKER, TITLE: ASSASSIN

- ◆ **Gift:** Always knows how to get the jump on her target. +1 Speed when making a Surprise attack.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she underestimates her enemy and they gain the edge.

## ASSIGNMENT: EXECUTIONERS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Battle Masters:** May ignore all Pain Conditions and all Bleeding Conditions are reduced by 1.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Emotionless:** Gain 1 Karma whenever she creates random (and damaging) chaos that causes issues for her or her group.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Hino Kaiya (Empathy):** An Executioner's mental state is always in flux, but Kaiya is a geisha who knows how to calm even the most savage person.
- ◆ **Rival - Kamon Kenko (Holistics):** She is the perfect ally to have when in need of healing after a battle, but cross her and you'll find it hard to get the treatment you require. She's spiteful that way.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Thick Skin 1 (Bear Style):** Tougher than she looks. +1 physical Armor.
- ◆ **Taste Your Own Blood 2 (Tiger Style):** On a Boost, she may reduce a Pain Condition by 1. Twice per Battle, she gains +1 Initiative and +1 Fighting from this act.
- ◆ **Unstoppable Attack 2 (Paired Style):** May attack twice with a single action, but both attacks suffer a -1 penalty.

## KI NEGATION 1

- ◆ **Sense Ki:** Immune to ambush and gains a +1 bonus to all checks involving detecting and avoiding traps. If looking for a ki disruption, make a Moderate (2) Empathy + Knowledge to track.
- ◆ **Suppressing Jutsu:** When a jutsu is activated in her presence, spend 1 Dynamic Action and roll Discipline + Opposing Ki. Each success cancels a success the target gained on their roll. Fully negating a jutsu garners 2 Karma and target suffers -1 penalty to activate again for the Scene.
- ◆ **Canceling Jutsu:** To outright negate a jutsu use, the Executioner may spend 1 Ki of the opposing type. Note: They cannot mold addition Ki, and must wait for it to replenish naturally.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 8, **Psyche:** 5, **Yang:** 1, **Yin:** 2, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 4, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 4, **Movement:** 8, **Weapon:** Hook Swords (Reach, Unpredictable, Paired, Unwieldy)

Chinatsu was, like many others, enraptured with the Blazing Dancers while growing up. She even created her own performance troupe in her hometown, putting on local shows in hopes of catching the Wu Ji Theater's eye. When the theater closed its doors and the war began, however, Chinatsu knew she had to follow a different calling... service to the Empire. She didn't know, however, that they would erase what she was before and replace it with a killer.

Since then, she has become a weapon master and expert assassin specializing in capture and interrogation. Chinatsu loves to use her words to intimidate before eventually taking out her target, finding it hard to stop talking at times. The information she lets out could one day lead to the ninja gaining an edge, but it's a good thing no one has even survived one of her sessions. Their tricks don't work on her, you see.



## SKILLS

Athletics 2, Crafts 1, Deception 1, Discipline 0, Empathy 1, Fighting 4, Fortitude 3 (vs. Poison), Holistics 1, Intimidation 3 (Interrogation), Intuition 0, Knowledge 0, Marksman 3, Might 2, Perception 1, Perform 1, Persuade 1, Speed 1, Stealth 2, Survival 3, Travel 0

# KIHARA YASU

## ELEMENT: METAL, TEMPERAMENT: METICULOUS

- ◆ **Gift:** Her eye for detail gives a +1 Marksman to hit enemies at Distant Range.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when missing a crucial detail hurts the group in devastating ways.

## PROFESSION: NOBLE, FOCUS: MAGISTRATE

- ◆ **Gift:** Often the arbiter of conflict. +1 Intuition to assess a situation.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character refuses to bend or break the law to help the group.

## MOTIVATION: NATURE, REASON: DISASTER

- ◆ **Gift:** She just has a nose for trouble. +1 Speed when her action could lead to her death.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she chooses the safer course of action and it hinders the group.

## WARTIME ROLE: STRIKER, TITLE: GLADIATOR

- ◆ **Gift:** She is an expert duelist. +1 Fighting in a one-on-one battle.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she underestimates her enemy and they gain the edge.

## ASSIGNMENT: IRON BREAKERS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - A Pound of Flesh:** Doesn't need food or water. Gain +2 Survival (Tracking) or +3 for tracking Celestial Animals. Gain (Rank) as a bonus against any Celestial Animal abilities.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Disconnected:** Gain 1 Karma when their lack of compassion and basic human decency causes issues for the group.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Shigeki Haji (Marksman):** He's a great gun to have on your side, but he definitely has a chip on his shoulder.
- ◆ **Rival - Choshi Miko (Stealth):** Miko is highly talented at blending in with a crowd. Few ever remember meeting her seconds after they've left her presence, making her the perfect thief or con artist.
- ◆ **Rival - Sita (Speed):** Celestial Monkey Warrior, NC2E, pg. 172

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Chain Lightning 2 (Chain Style):** Increased momentum makes their attacks lightning fast. Boosts Initiative and, on a boost, the fighter can use the chain to reflect light into their target's eyes. Moderate (20) Fortitude check or target suffers Sensory Loss 1 Condition.
- ◆ **Force of Nature 2 (Blunt Style):** After a Boost, target makes a Tough (3) Athletics + Speed check or they are tripped, taking +1 damage in the process.
- ◆ **Trap Master 1:** -1 Difficulty for making Capture or Knock Down Traps.

## BLACK BONES 1

- ◆ **Summoning:** May summon her Celestial Animal slave to assist. When summoned, mark the Owe a Favor box. If they go a Session without summoning, the mark is erased. If summoned with a Mark, the animal suffers a -2 penalty to all rolls.

## STATS OF NOTE

Health: 7, Psyche: 6, Rank: 1, Initiative: 6, Dynamic Actions: 1, Dynamic Dice: 3, Strength: 5, Movement: 10, Weapon: Three-Section Staff (Chain, Blunt, Reach, Unwieldy)

Yasu grew up the perfect daughter of a Middle Province governor, always presentable at social engagements and well-behaved in her schooling. When the sun fell, however, she donned a mask and took to the streets where commoners held sway. She always had a nose for getting into trouble, and used that to find fights to insert herself into and arguments she could help resolve, all without anyone knowing she was of noble blood.

While her family taught her the basics of war and strategy, she had still never tested herself in a real, life-or-death battle. When the Ninja Crusade began, she knew this was her chance to become the warrior she always dreamed of. Yasu immediately enlisted in the Izou Army against her family's wishes, and found yet another challenge before her... battling Celestial Animals and taming them for the Empire. Her first was a Celestial Monkey, but who knows what comes next for her.



## SKILLS

Athletics 2, Crafts 1, Deception 3 (Feigning Emotion), Discipline 1, Empathy 0, Fighting 3, Fortitude 2, Holistics 1, Intimidation 2, Intuition 0, Knowledge 0, Marksman 1, Might 3 (Pinning Down), Perception 0, Perform 1, Persuade 1, Speed 3, Stealth 1, Survival 4, Travel 1

# KOIZUMI EMIKO

## ELEMENT: METAL, TEMPERAMENT: HONORABLE

- ◆ **Gift:** Lives by a code. +1 Fortitude to stave off deprivation for her honor.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if her honor gets in her own way.

## PROFESSION: ENTERTAINER, FOCUS: ACTOR

- ◆ **Gift:** Knows how to put on a face. +1 Deception when faking a personality, emotion or identity.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Hard to tell when she's acting or being sincere. Gain 1 Karma when her insincerity causes issues.

## MOTIVATION: ALLIANCE, REASON: LOYALTY

- ◆ **Gift:** +1 Fortitude when performing acts in service to their Loyalty.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when her loyalty is abused, taken advantage of or betrayed and it affects the group in a negative way.

## WARTIME ROLE: STRIKER, TITLE: ASSASSIN

- ◆ **Gift:** Always knows how to get the jump on her target. +1 Speed when making a Surprise attack.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she underestimates her enemy and they gain the edge.

## ASSIGNMENT: JADESMITHS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Do As You Are Told:** At the beginning of a Scene, they may choose between +2 Persuade or +2 Knowledge. Also, they can spend 1 Karma to create an order or obligation the target must follow or they suffer a -2 penalty on any roll against the order.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Give and Take:** Gain 1 Karma when forced to concede something vitally important to the group despite protests from others.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Kanaka Etsuko (Persuade):** A respected businesswoman whose iron business has always been run by women, Etsuko is charming but stands strong in the face of her rivals who believe gender trumps true business acumen.
- ◆ **Rival - Ku Hiroshi (Deception):** An accomplished actor, Hiroshi is said to have told so many lies that he has forgotten his true self.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Effortless Defense (Defending Style):** May make +1 Defense Action per Round without suffering penalties.
- ◆ **Master of Surroundings 2 (Dragon Style):** +2 bonus to all Defense rolls after the First Round.
- ◆ **Dragon Whips Tail 1 (Dragon Style):** +1 Fighting to attack all within Close Range. If they fail a Dodge, they are Knocked Down.

## VOICE OF THE EMPEROR

- ◆ **A Subtle Implication:** Tough (3) Empathy + Intimidation roll to make target obsess over something she said for (successes) Scenes.
- ◆ **Air of Authority:** +1 Knowledge when politics-related. Also gains +1 bonus to all social rolls dealing with them using their courtly authority. May cause an Embarrassed 1 Condition with any Boost.
- ◆ **Voice of Rebuke:** Spend 1 Dynamic Action to make Intimidation + Deception roll against target's Intimidation + Discipline. If successful, they suffer -4 penalty to next roll.
- ◆ **Voice of Righteousness:** Spend 1 Karma +2 bonus to Deception, Empathy, Intimidation, Perform or Persuade checks for the Scene. May extend +1 bonus to up to 3 comrades.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 9, **Psyche:** 9, **Yang:** 1, **Yin:** 2, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 6, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 2, **Movement:** 7, **Weapon:** Katana (Sharp, Quick)

As far back as she can remember, Emiko was the constant companion and guardian of a powerful noble's daughter. While she could have employed any ruffian, Emiko's master wanted someone more discrete. As a result, Emiko was taught courtly graces alongside her fighting skills, all to complement, but never overshadow her charge, Sakura. These skills would be put to the test when a ninja came to assassinate Sakura, with Emiko narrowly fending him off. This might have been the high point of her life, until Sakura declared her love to her bodyguard. Emiko felt the same, but was forced to rebuff her charge's advances since it would be unforgivable for a bodyguard to abandon her duty.

Eventually, Emiko would follow her young mistress into the military, since there were just as many enemies within the Empire as without. Emiko was recruited into the Jadesmiths, as her ability to defuse a situation with words was often more desirable than using one's fists. The military even offered her a freedom she never expected to have, a chance to perhaps do a deed worthy of gaining the hand of Sakura, and the favor of her family. One day, she plans on taking them up on that offer.



## SKILLS

Athletics 1, Crafts 2, Deception 2, Discipline 1, Empathy 3, Fighting 2 (Tessen), Fortitude 2, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 0, Knowledge 0, Marksman 2, Might 2, Perception 2 (Sight), Perform 2, Persuade 1, Speed 2, Stealth 0, Survival 2, Travel 2

# MASASUJI REN

## ELEMENT: METAL, TEMPERAMENT: HONORABLE

- ◆ **Gift:** Lives by a code. +1 Fortitude to stave off deprivation for his honor.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if his honor gets in her own way.

## PROFESSION: WARRIOR, FOCUS: SOLDIER

- ◆ **Gift:** He served in a militia turned bandit force. +1 Discipline vs. Pain.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when his loyalty to the group and to his old army conflict.

## MOTIVATION: COERCED, REASON: PROMISE

- ◆ **Gift:** Gain +1 to persuade whenever trying to convince someone to trust the army.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain +1 karma when the character fails to keep a promise and it results in the loss.

## WARTIME ROLE: COMMANDER, TITLE: OFFICER

- ◆ **Gift:** With people under his wing, he gains +1 Intuition to guess the enemy's next move.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he puts personal attachments over those of the mission.

## ASSIGNMENT: SILVER BLADES

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Focused Warriors:** +1 Fighting when using a Sword. May spend 1 Dynamic Action to reduce all current Mental Conditions by 1.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Honor Bound:** Gain 1 Karma when the pursuit of honor comes into conflict with a decision that carries grave consequences.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Kataoka Ren (Perception):** An Imperial investigator who travels from city to city, her skilled mind and sharp eyes often uncover clues that others do not find.
- ◆ **Rival - Ichikyo Mitsada (Fighting):** An expert duelist and former Court Duelist, he has gone into seclusion since the Ninja Crusade began. It is said his honor would not permit him to stay, an act which has earned him the enmity of the Executioners.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Splitting Arrows 1 (Sharp Style):** Can Block ranged attacks normally with no penalty.

## WAY OF ALL RIVERS

- ◆ **Way of Instant Step 1:** Can Move as a Free Quick Action or may take normal penalty to move x4 normal Movement.
- ◆ **Way of the Silver Tide 1:** Defense Boost against a weapon, cuts weapon in half. Defense Boost against an unarmed attack causes Injured (Limb) 1 Condition to attacker.
- ◆ **Way of the Silver Iajutsu 1:** May draw weapon for Free, and gains +3 Initiative at the beginning of Round weapon is drawn.
- ◆ **Way of the Silver Iajutsu 2:** Before a sword is drawn, spend 1 Dynamic Action to make Intimidation + Speed roll that deals +2 damage. Can only be used once before sword is drawn.
- ◆ **Way of the Silver Iajutsu 3:** Sword is automatically sheathed against on a successful attack.

## STATS OF NOTE

Health: 7, Psyche: 9, Rank: 1, Initiative: 7, Dynamic Actions: 1, Dynamic Dice: 3, Strength: 4, Movement: 9, Weapon: Katana (Sharp, Quick)

Born in the capital to a prominent family loyal to the emperor, Ren was raised to follow in his father's footsteps as a Silver Blade. It's a path he excelled at quickly, garnering the attention of the Emperor himself. Utterly loyal to his emperor, Ren nonetheless possesses a few oddities that could greatly trouble him. Firstly he is very curious. What really happened with his Emperor's supposed death and the ninja who supposedly assassinated him? Secondly, he possesses no enmity towards the ninja, indeed he is actually intrigued by them. Finally, Ren met a girl years ago whom he defended as a teenager; that girl is actually a Blazing Dancer and he desperately seeks information about her. Finding her may be a way for Ren to learn more about the Empire's supposed enemies.



## SKILLS

Athletics 2, Crafts 0, Deception 1, Discipline 4, Empathy 1, Fighting 4 (Swords), Fortitude 2, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 2, Knowledge 1, Marksman 1, Might 2, Perception 1 (Sight), Perform 2, Persuade 1, Speed 2, Survival 1, Travel 1

# NAKADA JUNKO

## ELEMENT: FIRE, TEMPERAMENT: SILVER TONGUED

- ◆ **Gift:** Always knows what to say. +1 Deception to convinced someone she's right.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when they try to use words to terrible effect when force is better suited.

## PROFESSION: ARTISAN, FOCUS: BUILDER

- ◆ **Gift:** Gains +1 Perform to sell wares or show their skill to a crowd.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when something they made is used against the character or group.

## MOTIVATION: COERCED, REASON: RUNAWAY

- ◆ **Gift:** Gain +1 Stealth when avoiding people or events related to what she ran away from.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when their past affects their new life in a negative way.

## WARTIME ROLE: FOOT SOLDIER, TITLE: CHAMPION

- ◆ **Gift:** She fights against sicknesses. +1 Fortitude against poison
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma whenever sharing the truth about the war with the wrong person causes conflict/trouble

## ASSIGNMENT: BLACK SMOKES

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - One With the Gun:** +1 Marksman when using firearms in Close Range and +1 bonus to all Dodge rolls.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Powder Runs Dry:** Gain 1 Karma if they ever run out of ammo at a crucial time.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally: Takishita Juri (Crafts):** She is a well-known gunsmith, capable of crafting unique bullets to take down any type of foe.
- ◆ **Rival - Sugai Chiemi (Survival):** Being a miner means she knows her way around the rocky cliffs of the Izou Empire. Chiemi can make a mission much easier or much harder.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Blackout the Sun 1 (Ranged Style):** After a Boost on a ranged attack, she may attack again for free.
- ◆ **Flying Into Battle 1 (Eagle Style):** May make a full Move Action after a successful Dodge Defense. Does not trigger a Retreat Attack.

## WAY OF THE GUN

- ◆ **Aine's Ring 1:** Resistant to losing her senses. Ignore up to two levels of Sensory Loss Condition.
- ◆ **Aine's Ring 2:** When using a weapon with the Loud Quality in Close Range, cause +1 Psyche in addition to any other damage. Boost = Also causes Sensory Loss (Hearing) 2 Condition.
- ◆ **Double Barrel 1:** Fights with two pistols instead of one, raising their chances of hitting. +2 Marksman when using twin pistols.
- ◆ **Never Unarmed 1:** May draw guns for Free and gains +2 Initiative for the First Round of Battle.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 5, **Psyche:** 8, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 10 (12), **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 4, **Movement:** 11, **Weapon:** Pistols (Concealable, Loud, Piercing, Ranged)

Growing up in the Bridge to the World Province made Junko self-reliant and quite the saleswoman. Her family made and sold climbing gear, perfect for tourists wanting to scale the cliffs of Kiwan, but it was altogether unfulfilling for her. When her brother, Kin, showed he could manipulate ki like a ninja, it intrigued her a little, but ultimately made her scared for their family. This fear was well-founded, as neighbors turned in Junko's family to the authorities. She got away, but her mother, father and brother were all taken for suspicion of being ninja.

With nothing to her name, her family's business ruined and she on the run, Junko got an idea... why not join the army. Surely, they wouldn't be quick to suspect one of their own. Junko keeps to herself and fortunately has a way of talking around her past instead of about it. She'll fight for the people who took her family from her until she can find out where the Empire is holding them and get them back.



## SKILLS

Athletics 3 (Running), Crafts 1, Deception 0, Discipline 3, Empathy 2, Fighting 2, Fortitude 0, Holistics 0, Intimidation 1, Intuition 3, Knowledge 0, Marksman 3, Might 1 (Strong Grip), Perception 3, Perform 3, Persuade 0, Speed 3, Stealth 0, Survival 0, Travel 2

# NOSEICHI MAHIRU

## ELEMENT: FIRE, TEMPERAMENT: SADISTIC

- ◆ **Gift:** She loves to hurt others. +1 Fighting after she's hit them once already.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when she can't stop herself.

## PROFESSION: HEALER, FOCUS: GEKAI

- ◆ **Gift:** Skilled at seeing the signs of illness and knowing what they mean. Gain +1 Intuition when diagnosing a patient.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character loses a patient.

## MOTIVATION: NATURE, REASON: STUDY

- ◆ **Gift:** Always looking to learn something new. +1 Intuition when she attempts a type of action she's never tried before.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character chooses not to share helpful knowledge they have with the group.

## WARTIME ROLE: MEDIC, TITLE: BONESETTER

- ◆ **Gift:** Knows the long arduous hours of medical work. +1 Discipline to stay awake.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if a surgery fails and the character could have stopped it.

## ASSIGNMENT: IRON BREAKERS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - A Pound of Flesh:** Doesn't need food or water. Gain +2 Survival (Tracking) or +3 for tracking Celestial Animals. Gain (Rank) as a bonus against any Celestial Animal abilities.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Disconnected:** Gain 1 Karma when their lack of compassion and basic human decency causes issues for the group.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Fuwa Shion (Discipline):** A professional go player, she is known for staring long and hard at a problem to find just the right solution.
- ◆ **Rival - Tokaji Konan (Speed):** Ever been on a team with the smartest person in the room? Konan's trivia knowledge is amazing, and she can come up with answers to difficult questions faster than anyone else can.
- ◆ **Rival - Aphato (Athletics):** Celestial Feline Warrior

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Flying Chains 2 (Chain Style):** Chain weapons can be thrown at Near Range at no penalty. Also, on a Boost, target's Initiative is reduced by 2. If they Boost against same target in the same Battle, target also suffers a Slow 1 Condition.
- ◆ **Bone Crusher 1 (Blunt Style):** +1 damage with Blunt weapons, and create Pain 2 Condition (instead of 1) on Boost.
- ◆ **Force of Nature 1 (Blunt Style):** After a Boost, target makes a Mod (2) Athletics + Speed check or they are tripped.
- ◆ **Trap Master 1:** -1 Difficulty for making Capture or Knock Down Traps.

## BLACK BONES

- ◆ **Summoning:** May summon her Celestial Animal slave to assist. When summoned, mark the Owe a Favor box. If they go a Session without summoning, the mark is erased. If summoned with a Mark, the animal suffers a -2 penalty to all rolls.

## STATS OF NOTE

Health: 6, Psyche: 7, Rank: 1, Initiative: 5, Dynamic Actions: 1, Dynamic Dice: 3, Strength: 3, Movement: 7, Weapon: Kusari-fukku (Hook-chain) (Chain, Restraining, Reach, Unwieldy)

The child of physicians, Mahiru witnessed in her tenth summer the destruction an oni causes. When the empire began to employ the Iron Breakers, she heard about the black weapons ripped from demons. Fascinated and used to unorthodox experiments with the supernatural her parents conducted, she honed her skills and joined the breaker training, specializing as a medic.

She doesn't believe the Ninja Crusade's goal is really to exterminate all ninja, so she uses her amazing abilities for her own pursuit: theorizing and testing the hidden potential of the black bones. Despite her usual attitude of using people and ideas as tools, especially her captured animals, Mahiru really likes her feline, treating him similar to a companion.



## SKILLS

Athletics 1, Crafts 2 (Weapons), Deception 2, Discipline 2, Empathy 1, Fighting 3, Fortitude 1, Holistics 3 (Surgery), Intimidation 2, Intuition 1, Knowledge 2, Marksman 1, Might 2, Perception 2, Perform 0, Persuade 1, Speed 1, Stealth 0, Survival 3, Travel 0

# SHIOMIYA ZURUI

## ELEMENT: METAL, TEMPERAMENT: AUTHORITATIVE

- ◆ **Gift:** Is striking and controlling. +1 Intimidation to issue commands
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if/when he makes a wrong call.

## PROFESSION: SCHOLAR, FOCUS: SAGE

- ◆ **Gift:** He is often hired as an expert. +1 Knowledge to analyze evidence.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when a client's needs come before the group's.

## MOTIVATION: INTANGIBLE, REASON: BELIEF

- ◆ **Gift:** Believes, without a doubt, that serving the army is the right choice. Gain +1 Perform when making a show of praising the Empire.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he purposefully goes against his belief and it has a negative impact on the group.

## WARTIME ROLE: VILLAGER, TITLE: GUARDIAN

- ◆ **Gift:** He is the defender of his village. +1 Might when defending civilians or the weak.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the thing he protects is put in danger he cannot stop.

## ASSIGNMENT: GOLDEN LIONS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Stolen Arts:** +2 bonus when attempting to decipher secrets or lore belonging to another clan. Also gains +1 Intimidation against ninja, raised by another +1 bonus for each other Golden Lion in their squad.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - It Will Be Ours:** Gain 1 Karma when their lust for uncovering other clans' secrets comes into conflict with the rest of the group.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Tomi Yokio (Holistics):** No one knows how old he really is or where he is from, but Tomi Yokio has centuries of wisdom and knowledge behind his eyes. He has a soft spot for those who seem genuinely wanting to learn.
- ◆ **Ally: Network of Spies (Thieves).**
- ◆ **Rival - Naiko Akira (Athletics):** A ruthless mind hides behind a heart of gold, and Akira is often at odds with his fellow Golden Lions when it comes to how they treat peasants, but he sees himself and the Golden Lions as the next great heroes of legend.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Master of Spies 1 (Thieves):** Gains Thieves as an Ally.
- ◆ **Jutsu Retrieval 1:** Perform rituals to rip clan secrets from his victims.

## WAY OF DAZZLING PILFERAGE

**Training:** On a Boost, gain +1 to Defense or against jutsu for the Round.

**Backfire:** Suffers a Bruised 1 Condition for Mental damage.

- ◆ **Jutsu Reading (Basic, Yang + Perception):** After seeing a jutsu used, they gain a +2 bonus to resist that jutsu. This may be used on up to two jutsu during a single Scene.
- ◆ **Armor Synch (Basic, Yang + Perception):** Stores one jutsu in their armor, using this activation roll for all future uses. A successful attack with a -3 penalty unsyncs the jutsu.

## WAY OF EBONY CLUTCHES

**Training:** Shadows surround him. +2 Stealth on a Boost

**Backfire:** -1 cumulative penalty to Stealth.

- ◆ **Solid Shadow (Med, Yang + Discipline):** Target's shadow can now be harmed, giving them -2 penalty to all Defense rolls.

## WAY OF GREAT SERPENTS

**Training:** On a Boost, they may raise or reduce a Poison Condition with Near Range by 1

**Backfire:** Suffers a Slowed 1 Condition.

- ◆ **Hypnotic Eyes (Basic, Yin + Perception):** May use Yin + Persuade as Defense against any incoming attack. Boost = attacker's Movement reduced to 0 for the Round.

## STATS OF NOTE

**Health:** 7, **Psyche:** 8, **Yang:** 2, **Yin:** 1, **Rank:** 1, **Initiative:** 7, **Dynamic Actions:** 1, **Dynamic Dice:** 3, **Strength:** 1, **Movement:** 7, **Weapon:** Shuko - Hand Claws (concealable, Paired, Skilled (Climbing), Fragile)

Named after the founder of the Izou Empire, Zurui always knew he was destined for remarkable things. He carried himself with a presence akin to his name, as well, and led many local initiatives to better the Empire, his home and the lives of the people around him. When the Ninja Crusade began, he rejoiced in the Emperor's new war, knowing it must truly be righteous, and enlisted in the army right away, even bringing many others with him.

After years training with the Golden Lions, and learning the truths behind the army, he is even more convinced that they must destroy the ninja. Zurui requested that he be allowed to return to his hometown to root out ninja, defend his village and bring those closest to him into the fold. The clan can always use more Lions after all.



## SKILLS

Athletics 0, Crafts 0, Deception 1, Discipline 3, Empathy 2, Fighting 2, Fortitude 2, Holistics 2 (Jutsu Retrieval), Intimidation 2, Intuition 2, Knowledge 2, Marksman 0, Might 1, Perception 3 (Armor Synch), Perform 0, Persuade 3, Speed 2, Stealth 2, Survival 1, Travel 0

# SHIZUMA MASATO

## ELEMENT: WATER, TEMPERAMENT: WISE

- ◆ **Gift:** He's been around. +1 Intuition to randomly come up with correct common knowledge.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if he recalls seemingly-truthful but wholly inaccurate information instead.

## PROFESSION: MERCHANT, FOCUS: TRAVELER

- ◆ **Gift:** He is very good at her job. Gain +1 Persuade when haggling or negotiating.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when he gets himself (and usually his squad) lost.

## MOTIVATION: NATURE, REASON: STUDY

- ◆ **Gift:** Always looking to learn something new. +1 Intuition when he attempts a type of action he's never tried before.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character chooses not to share helpful knowledge they have with the group.

## WARTIME ROLE: COMMUNICATIONS, TITLE: SPY

- ◆ **Gift:** He is an expert spy. +1 Stealth for covering his tracks.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if his cover is blown at the worst of times.

## ASSIGNMENT: ENGINEERS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Sudden Genius:** +2 Crafts when dealing with mechanics. May also spend 2 Karma to ask the GM for a new idea to tackle an obstacle before them.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Insatiable Curiosity:** Gain 1 Karma when you are presented with a task or a mystery that consumes your concentration regardless of what you need to focus on.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Matsumura Tagane (Marksman):** A one-eyed marksman with a wooden left hand, Tagane is said to have perfected the art of making trick shots with his specially constructed rifle.
- ◆ **Rival - Matmura Rei (Intimidation):** Known as the Iron Ban-see, Rei is renowned for her machines that create high pitched shrieks and roars, disorienting her foes and said to scare off attacking ninja.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Coil and Strike 2 (Snake Style):** Skip 1 Round without Action (may Defend normally). On next turn, gain +1 bonus to attack equal to Actions (normal or Dynamic) skipped multiplied by 2, up to a +6 max. This attack also deals +1 damage.
- ◆ **Trap Master 2:** -2 Difficulty for making Immobilize Traps. -1 Difficulty for making Attack or Explosion Traps.

## INGENUITY 2

- ◆ **Starting Resource Points:** 3 RP (Max 10)
- ◆ **Fields of Study:** Equipment/Gear, Civil Engineering, Metallurgy, Covert
- ◆ **Scavenging:** Moderate (2) Crafts + Intuition roll to comb the area for supplies for inventions, where each success yields +1 RP. Masato gains 1 auto success in this task.
- ◆ **Using RP:** To make item alteration, spend 1 RP and make Crafts + Appropriate Skill roll. Each success adds +1 bonus die when using the item for specified purpose.

## STATS OF NOTE

Health: 5, Psyche: 7, Rank: 1, Initiative: 7, Dynamic Actions: 1, Dynamic Dice: 3, Strength: 1, Movement: 5, Weapon: Nest of Bees (Ranged, Explosive, Poisonous, Reload)

Masato has lived quite the life, having been a son, a husband and a father. His experiences have brought him all over the world and given him an insight few others possess, but he has always sought for something he felt missing in his life. After years of the Ninja Crusade occurring around him, Masato finally had enough; he made the difficult choice to leave his family behind to enlist in the army.

The Izou forces received an accomplished builder with a unique mind and a spy who can fit into almost any culture without raising alarm, and in return Masato has broadened his horizons even further on the Empire's tab. Many of his inventions serve the soldiers at the front lines as they use them against the ninja, granting him a medal here and there for his efforts. He and his wife exchange lengthy letters every week to let her know he's okay, and he knows that when this is all over, he'll go home finally fulfilled.



## SKILLS

Athletics 0, Crafts 4, Deception 2 (Exaggerations), Discipline 2, Empathy 1, Fighting 2, Fortitude 0, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 4, Knowledge 3, Marksman 2, Might 1, Perception 0, Perform 1, Persuade 0, Speed 0, Stealth 2 (In a Crowd), Survival 2, Travel 2

# YUHURA HIKARI

## ELEMENT: WATER, TEMPERAMENT: CALM

- ◆ **Gift:** Has a calming spirit. +1 Discipline to stay calm and ignore distractions.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if/when her calm demeanor comes off as cold.

## PROFESSION: NOBLE, FOCUS: KUGE

- ◆ **Gift:** A truly skilled aristocrat. +1 Discipline during tough conversations.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma if political skeletons rear their heads.

## MOTIVATION: INTANGIBLE, REASON: DESTINY

- ◆ **Gift:** It was fate she would become a part of the great Izou army. +1 Intuition to follow one's destiny.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when her actions or words contradict the destiny she believes she has.

## WARTIME ROLE: SUPPLIER, TITLE: STEWARD

- ◆ **Gift:** She is a master of figuring out mixtures. +1 Knowledge to determine ingredients in any mixture.
- ◆ **Trigger:** Gain 1 Karma when the character's finicky nature causes friction for the character or group.

## ASSIGNMENT: JADESMITHS

- ◆ **Assignment Gift - Do As You Are Told:** At the beginning of a Scene, they may choose between +2 Persuade or +2 Knowledge. Also, they can spend 1 Karma to create an order or obligation the target must follow or they suffer a -2 penalty on any roll against the order.
- ◆ **Assignment Trigger - Give and Take:** Gain 1 Karma when forced to concede something vitally important to the group despite protests from others.

## CONTACTS

- ◆ **Ally - Hideyo Kuma (Fighting):** A believer that politics will always achieve true success but that every diplomat must know how to protect themselves, Kuma is the daughter of an assassinated minister and an ardent supporter of the Ninja Crusade.
- ◆ **Ally: Network of Spies (Gatherers).**
- ◆ **Ally: Network of Spies (Assassins).**
- ◆ **Rival - Ken Kiyoshi (Knowledge):** Though Kiyoshi never recovered from a vicious poisoning attempt by the ninja, he spends his days reading and sharing information with others so that he may leave behind a world that is better than when he was in it.

## MARTIAL TRAINING

- ◆ **Turn the Tide 1 (Defending Style):** Gain +1 Fighting against an opponent she has Defended against in the same Round.
- ◆ **Master of Spies 2:** Gains Gatherers as an Ally.
- ◆ **Master of Spies 1:** Gains Assassins as an Ally.

## VOICE OF THE EMPEROR

- ◆ **A Subtle Implication:** Tough (3) Empathy + Intimidation roll to make target obsess over something she said for (successes) Scenes.
- ◆ **Air of Authority:** +1 Knowledge when politics-related. Also gains +1 bonus to all social rolls dealing with them using their courtly authority. May cause an Embarrassed 1 Condition with any Boost.
- ◆ **Voice of Rebuke:** Spend 1 Dynamic Action to make Intimidation + Deception roll against target's Intimidation + Discipline. If successful, they suffer -4 penalty to next roll.
- ◆ **Voice of Righteousness:** Spend 1 Karma +2 bonus to Deception, Empathy, Intimidation, Perform or Persuade checks for the Scene. May extend +1 bonus to up to 3 comrades.

## STATS OF NOTE

Health: 7, Psyche: 7, Rank: 1, Initiative: 5, Dynamic Actions: 1, Dynamic Dice: 3, Strength: 0, Movement: 5, Weapon: Jian Saber (Defending, Piercing)

Hikari has served the Empire in the Izou Courts ever since her 18th birthday, fully accepting her role in society. She rarely questions what path fate has put her on, knowing that all things work out for her in the end. Every political double-cross has been uncovered by sheer luck before it occurred, and her calm, often cold demeanor often plays a part in uncovering these plots.

She was selected after only 2 years to become a Jade-smith, a mouthpiece for the Emperor himself after one of her political rivals died in service. This was a sign Hikari could not refuse, and she took on the mantle with ease. Using her connections and extensive contacts, she has become a lawyer, often called to try cases against those accused of being or conspiring with ninja. Her ability to discern poisons and investigate crime scenes has helped her to tackle these cases head-on, but she enjoys the ability to order others to do it for her as well.



## SKILLS

Athletics 0, Crafts 1, Deception 2, Discipline 2, Empathy 3 (Picking a weak target), Fighting 2, Fortitude 2, Holistics 0, Intimidation 2, Intuition 2, Knowledge 3 (Izou Empire), Marksman 0, Might 0, Perception 2, Perform 1, Persuade 3, Speed 0, Stealth 2, Survival 0, Travel 3

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