

Challenge, Focus, Strike!
Adventure Hooks for Legend of the Five Rings
140 through 152

Winter Court

Winter Court

140 – The Evil Within

Greetings and Salutations, friends!

It's time for Winter Court once again. Last year we looked at some situations where the PCs met old friends and/or rivals at Court. This year, we're going to take the opposite track and examine some scenarios where the PCs are stuck in a castle where they don't know anyone. To start, we'll see what happens when they fail to make a good first impression.

Challenge:

The PCs arrive in Winter Court to find that few, if any, people they know are in attendance this year. This could be because the party has been sent to a minor or remote court, or because they have managed to secure invitations to a more prestigious location than most of their friends and comrades. In any case, the PCs will have to get to know their fellow guests before they can do much socializing.

Focus:

But while the PCs may not know anyone, there are several people present who have heard of the PCs. Rumors of their past deeds have preceded them, and many guests are already talking about them. Indeed, the most common thing any of them hear upon introducing themselves is "So *you're* (character's name)."

Strike:

Only after several days have passed do the PCs find out that the stories people have heard about them are not entirely accurate. They may be exaggerated, embellished, lacking important details, or completely false. Whatever the case, a great number of people at Court have already formed a first opinion of them based on those rumors, and the PCs will have to find some way to deal with their new reputations.

This scenario is great for showing players how their actions can come back to haunt them. Any lapses in honor, duty, or judgement can be used as the basis for a negative reputation. As long as there was one person around to witness the deed, the PC may eventually be called on his actions and forced to deal with the social backlash. In a closed setting such as Winter Court it's even possible for a character to suffer much longer and more severely than normal, due to the fact that gossip travels fast in a small castle.

Of course, you're not limited just to instances of dishonorable behavior. If you want to twist a PC's successes against them you can have their deeds misinterpreted and distorted over numerous retellings. The Tainted monk they destroyed could be mistaken for a devout follower of Shinsei. The bandits they slew might appear to be innocent peasants from a distance. A traitorous courtier who spoke out against them did so only because she was heartlessly jilted by one of the PCs, or even left with child! Remember that most news in

Rokugan is spread by word of mouth, and there's no guarantee that everyone in the Empire may be fully up to date on all events or get the story perfectly straight when they pass it on.

Another trick is to give a PC a reputation for excellence in a skill he does not have. This works very well if one of the PCs made an outrageously lucky roll earlier in the campaign. A one in a million shot with a bow can land a PC a reputation as an expert archer, even if he doesn't deserve it. Winning a haiku contest must mean that the PC is a legendary master of poetry, right? And even if there were a dozen other soldiers helping him, the samurai who landed the killing blow to an already severely wounded oni will be lauded as having slain the monster all by himself.

You can do this with situations where the dice were unkind to the PCs as well. Did a peasant get a lucky shot against the party's Hida Bushi? His weakness is sure to be the talk of the Court. And woe to the character who failed a particularly easy social skill roll in front of witnesses. Even if he's not as uncouth as the stories would make him seem, people are going to remember his one spectacular failure more than any of his successes.

One subtle, but potentially effective way to get under a PC's skin is to have NPCs cling stubbornly to their mistaken impressions or make the same mistakes again and again. Can he keep his temper and maintain a civil attitude after being asked to show off his prowess as a duelist or skill as a musician by twenty different people? How about when the same person asks twenty different times? Even after a character displays proper manners again and again, having people remember her for her one breach of etiquette is sure to cause more than a few hard feelings. Just what will it take to show people what kind of person she really is? Can they ever be convinced? They say you never get a second chance to make a good first impression.

A reputation can be a fragile thing, so take care not to let it get damaged. Repairing it is so very, very difficult.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

141 – Everybody's Crazy About a Shy Dressed Samurai!
Greetings and Warm Welcomes, friends!

The weather is getting colder and colder as of late, and it has become increasingly common to see passers-by bundled up in warm clothes and boots. Your samurai do have warm clothes, don't they?

Challenge:

While traveling to Winter Court, one or more of the PCs meets a terrible misfortune. An encounter with some inclement weather (a mudslide, late torrential rains, difficulty crossing a river, ect) leads to the loss of all of his or her clothes. Even the set he or she is wearing is ruined,

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having been torn, stained, or both, during the trip.

Focus:

Luckily, a friendly courtier from another family or Clan learns of the PC's plight and is able to help. He (or she, as appropriate) has an extra kimono that is exactly the PC's size. It isn't in the PC's Clan colors, but it is quite fashionable, and would work as a substitute until the PC can find some new, clean clothes. It's certainly better than the alternative of arriving at Court in filthy rags.

Strike:

While it is not customary for one to wear the colors of one's Clan at all times, it is the common fashion. Those who see the PC in a kimono from a different family may assume he or she belongs to a different Clan. Or they may wonder why he or she is going about Court wearing the colors of a different Clan. Is it a political statement, or perhaps a claim to membership in that family? Even though the truth is quite simple, it may not be as popular as the rumors that onlookers spread and the PC will have to deal with the aftermath.

This adventure, like last week's, takes a minor point and turns it into a major problem. Winter Court is a breeding ground for rumors and baseless speculation, so even something as small as the color of one's fan might become the popular topic for gossip. People are going to notice that the PC is defying the established styles, and may assume that he or she is doing so in order to make a statement. Even if the character in question explains the situation, people may suspect that there is some deeper meaning to his or her choice of clothes.

If you want to be even more subtle, you can give the character a spare kimono that is very close to their old one but just slightly different. Maybe it is decorated with the mon of another family from his Clan. Or it could bear the symbol of a school other than the one he attended. This can make things easier for the character in question, but it also means that people are going to have an even stronger belief that the character is what he or she appears to be. Even in Crab colors a Kakita artisan might not look much like a Hida bushi, but he could certainly be mistaken for a Kakita duelist if the brush on his family crest was replaced with a sword. A particularly fine kimono might make a samurai look like he is more rich and influential than he really is. For women, the length of one's sleeves changed as one grew older and got married. How will onlookers react if a married woman appears in a kimono that is obviously meant for a much younger lady? What if they don't know she's married at all and assume that she's as available as she appears to be?

One fun trick with this scenario is to have a ronin be the recipient of the courtier's kindness. Because most of a ronin's clothes are already worn and messy, the opportunity to have a clean kimono may be a chance to good to pass up. On top of which, the fact that people treat the ronin much better when he or she is wearing Clan colors is an interesting social point to explore. Will the PC try to keep their ronin status a secret and enjoy

the experience of being a "Clan samurai" as long as possible, or will they reveal their true status make an issue of how shallow people are because they let clothes shape their image of someone's worth?

If you want to go really over the top, you can have the borrowed kimono lead to a much larger case of mistaken identity. The clothes could be marked with a particular individual's personal mon or another kind of special symbol, which the courtier who lent them out may not be aware of. Magistrates aren't going to be very friendly toward someone who walks around openly displaying the mark of the Black Lotus Smuggling Cartel on his clothes. Members of the Cartel may want to have words with him as well, either because they assume he is a fellow member or because they wish to teach the pretender a painful lesson.

While it might strain some players' suspension of disbelief, you can also have the mistaken identity problem arise even without the loaned kimono being a factor. Maybe people assume the PC is someone else simply on the basis of some shared feature or mannerism. They may not have actually seen the fearsome duelist Takeda Eichi before, but they've heard that he has a scar on the back of his hand and bites his lower lip when he concentrates - just like one of the PCs does! It must be him! Or perhaps the PC in question looks similar enough to someone else that onlookers mistake them for one another. The PC might have a long-lost twin or identical cousin who is also in the area. While incredible and unbelievable, identity mix-ups have been a staple of comedies and soap operas for quite some time, and just may be the thing to keep Court interesting for your group.

Desperately awaiting the day when men's kimono styles will include [colors](#) that don't look [horrible](#),
-Isawa Nazomitsu

142 – Who Was That Masked Man?
Greetings and Salutations!

We've got more scenarios about being at a Winter Court where no one knows you and you don't know anyone else. Try to be on your best behavior.

Challenge:

The PCs arrive at Winter Court to find a great many unfamiliar faces in attendance. Although they are given formal introductions, keeping straight exactly who is who in such a whirlwind of names and titles is quite a challenge. Several times during the next few days the PCs cross paths with people they have already met yet whose names they cannot remember.

Focus:

A few days later, a fellow guest approaches one of the PCs. The man wears a heavy grey coat to ward away the cold, covering any mon his kimono might bear. None of the PCs remembers meeting him before, but by the way he talks it appears that they were at least introduced. He

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wishes the PC in question a pleasant afternoon, and then proceeds to ask his opinion on some matter. He could want to know what the PC thinks about a certain samurai, his feelings on the recent tax increases, or what he makes of a particular work of art. Whatever it is, he looks towards the PC expectantly until he receives an answer.

Strike:

Unbeknownst to the PC, the guest he is speaking to is actually connected to the matter in question. He might be the husband of the woman in question, the governor who sets local policies and taxes, or the artist who painted the picture they are discussing. If the PC does not watch his words carefully he could end up speaking far too frankly and delivering a grave insult. Recovering from such a faux pas will take quite a bit of effort.

There are a number of other ways a character's words can cause trouble, and depending on how things play out you can subject the PCs to just about any type of misunderstanding. Of course, the most basic is for the PC in question to in some way insult an individual, but there are other possibilities as well. An NPC could ask about any number of topics. A PC may even put his foot in his mouth without outside help. Speaking negatively of another Clan may cause listeners to see the PC as prejudiced or seeking war, while expressing doubts about one's own Clan might make people think the PC's a traitor or lacks faith in his daimyo. Giving a low opinion of someone in a position of power such as the Emperor or Emerald Champion could have dire consequences for the PC indeed. Alternately, an expression of admiration for another Clan or one of its members might make it seem as if the PC has divided loyalties, or is in some way sympathetic to another family. Giving praise that is too glowing might be taken as insincere, especially if the PC does not have enough reasons to back up his opinions. Maybe the NPC wants an honest opinion, and dismisses the PC as "just another idiot sycophant" when he refuses to say anything critical.

If you can, try to ask the PC about something he or she actually has strong feelings about. Otherwise you run the risk of getting an answer like "It's nice, I guess," or "I don't really know." Politics is usually good for eliciting a reaction from players and their characters, as well as matters of Clan pride. People and/or groups can be used if the party members have had sufficient chances to cross paths with them and form a strong impression. Anything that has had a direct effect upon the PCs or their actions in the past is also a good choice. For works of art I find giving a visual aid or recital can often work wonders. Showing the players a crude drawing or reciting a bad poem often leaves no doubt in their minds as to how they feel about the "art" they have experienced.

It's possible that player characters who are especially polite or especially wary of causing offense will try to avoid giving any strong opinions about anything without determining beforehand that there is no way they might suffer from doing so. Words can be as deadly as swords in Rokugan, and it is not conducive to a long life to use

either foolishly. One way to loosen player's tongues is to have someone who appears to be completely unconnected to the topic pose the question. If the PCs know that the governor is an older man they feel safe decrying his policies in front of a younger woman. Until they find out that she is the governor's daughter, that is. You can also have the figure who talks to the PC actively seek to hide his identity in order to find out how people really feel about him or what he has done. This works especially well if you can establish that the NPC in question has a habit of traveling incognito before the encounter begins. Players are very good at keying in on information that they think will be immediately important, and will likely suspect a trick if you reveal a artist's habit of anonymously asking people what they think of his work just a few minutes before having "a mysterious guest" ask them what they think of the artist's work. I find the best way to do so is to have someone the PCs are talking to mention it in passing several game sessions before the NPC actually shows up in disguise. That way the players (as well as their characters) have a chance to forget the information and lower their guard, only to remember how they were warned several weeks ago when the true identity of the person they talked to is revealed. It's also possible to reveal the NPC's habit after the PC has encountered him and learned who he really is, although players may feel you have stacked the odds against them or hidden necessary information if you are not careful. Remember that a good trap leaves the victim thinking "I should have seen that" rather than "Where did that come from?" Setting the PCs up for a fall they take on their own is fine, but pushing them down is something entirely different.

Another good trick is having someone the PC knows he can speak freely with pose the question and letting the person being discussed overhear the PC's answer. Even a courtier wise enough to choose his words carefully may let an unkind word or two slip if he thinks no one but his close allies is around to hear them. Or, you can have the PC be asked a question in front of a mixed audience, where he is likely to offend someone no matter what he says. You can have another guest ask whether the PC thinks the Kakita style or Mirumoto style of swordsmanship is superior, with students from schools listening eagerly to his answer. Or he might be called upon to give an opinion as to which of two poems he prefers, not knowing that both poets are in attendance. Countless marital troubles (and even a war or two) have been started because of arguments over which woman was the most beautiful of the group. In a Court filled with members of many different Clans it takes a quick wit and smooth tongue to avoid offending *someone.*

One last way you can make things difficult for the PCs without forcing them to respond to the NPC's question in a particular matter is to have someone else make the mistake and leave them to pay for it. Perhaps someone else blamed the PCs for spreading rumors about the NPC, either to get the PCs into trouble or to save himself from reprisals. Or maybe the last member of the PC's

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Clan to visit that particular court was very outspoken in his criticisms of the NPC in question, leaving him with a negative outlook towards their Clan as a whole. It's even possible that the party may have been selected to attend that particular Winter Court because the representative who preceded them wore out his welcome before autumn was even over. The only thing worse than making a mistake and having to make up for it is having to clean up a mess that someone else left behind.

In modern Japan, bowing and saying "I'm really, really sorry," will get a politician out of almost any trouble. At Winter Court, it takes a lot more than that.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

143 – Sheep in Wolf's Clothing
Salutations and Greetings! Or is that Greetings and Salutations? Can you tell the difference?

Challenge:

The PCs are asked by their superior to accompany the son (or daughter, depending on the PC you wish to involve) of a daimyo to Winter Court in a faraway castle. As they are traveling, however, a messenger arrives with new orders. The youth's father has reason to believe that his child's life is in danger, but it would cause a diplomatic incident for him to refuse the host's invitation to Court at such a late date. As such, one of the PCs is asked to serve as a kagemusha, impersonating the youth and serving as a false target for assassins.

Focus:

Fortunately for the group, no one at the Court they are attending has met either them or the youth before. Changing identities is a simple matter of exchanging clothes and traveling papers. The host greets them as if nothing is amiss, and provided they make no mistakes during introductions everyone seems to believe the two are exactly who they say they are.

Strike:

As things go on, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the deception. Either the PC or the youth is called upon to display the skills of their school. A young woman (or man as appropriate) expresses romantic interest in the youth, all the while believing his real name is that of the PC. An older samurai reveals that he once knew the youth's father long ago, and asks the PC for details about his old friend. The more the party interacts with people the more involved the masquerade becomes, and the more dire the consequences for the PC. Not to mention the fact that there might be someone trying to kill him.

Depending on how much of a break you want to give the PCs, the host may or may not be aware that the youth's life has been threatened and one of the PCs is serving as a kagemusha. If he knows that the PC is merely playing a role in order to protect the youth he can help with such

matters as covering up any mistakes the PC or youth might make in their portrayals of each other and watching out for anyone who may seek to do them harm. If the host's involvement in the plot to kill the youth cannot be disproved, however, it may be necessary to keep him in the dark as well. In this case, the party will have to handle everything on their own, and may even need to dissuade suspicions from the host that something is amiss.

Another way you can make things more difficult is by having the youth and the PC who has been selected to impersonate him or her differ markedly in appearance. Details such as height, weight, and build shouldn't matter too much as long as the two are reasonably close in size, but if they are very dissimilar from each other it may be necessary to use disguises. Does the PC have a moustache or tattoo? What if the youth has long, dyed hair or a shaved head? If you're feeling especially cruel, the only party member with the right built to possibly pass for the youth might not even be the same gender!

Another possible approach you can use is to change the reason for the deception. The youth orders the PC to change places with him in order to play a trick on the other guests, or because he wants a break from the pressures of nobility. Although especially serious or honorable characters may feel such behavior is inappropriate, if the youth has high enough social status (or is sufficiently intimidating) they might have no choice but to give in to his wishes, no matter how foolish they might be. If the daimyo's son wants to play a trick on some courtiers it is not the place of a rank and file samurai to disapprove. They must do what they are told and go along with the ruse. If one of the PCs is capricious enough to think the plan sounds fun and go along without coercion so much the better. Or perhaps the switch in identities is entirely involuntary. Some spells and effects can alter a person's appearance, making them resemble someone else entirely. Additionally, having two people switch bodies after bumping heads is a popular trope in Japanese television programs (as well as a power of *Kommei no Oni*). The PC and the youth must do their best to avoid any trouble until some way to restore them to their original appearances and/or bodies can be found. In this case the PC doesn't just have to worry about damage to his or her reputation, but also what might befall his or her body as well.

If you want to provide an interesting role-playing challenge for your group, you can have each of the player characters temporarily take on the identity (or body) of another. The way in which they each portray the comrade whose name (or face) they now wear can reveal a lot about how the members of the party really see each other. How will the Hida react when the Mirumoto makes him look like a crude, loutish brute? How about when the other party members say the Mirumoto's impression of him is all too accurate? Although few people appreciate having their own foibles pointed out by others, sometimes a performance is only convincing because of the ugly truths it reveals. Finding out whether or not the group can deal

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with these truths can be more intense than any battle.

"[Kagemusha](#)" is a great movie, but for a truly in-depth look at the trials involved in impersonating someone you can't beat [Papa to Musume no Nanokakan](#).

Until next time,
-Isawa "I'm not an apothecary; I just play one on the kabuki stage" Nazomitsu

144 - Mission: Winter Court
Greetings and Salutations!

Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to run a Winter Court adventure filled with deception and intrigue. Should any member of your gaming group be caught or killed the author of this CFS will disavow all knowledge of your actions.

Challenge:

As winter approaches, the PCs are called to a special and private audience with their superior. After dismissing all guards and servants, he reveals that he would like them to perform a special task for him during coming Court season. The mission could be intelligence gathering, a delivery, political sabotage, or even an assassination. Whatever the nature of the assignment, though, it is important that it be carried out with the utmost secrecy.

Focus:

Because of the sensitive nature of their mission, their superior asks the PCs that they keep their identities secret. He issues them all traveling papers under assumed names and whatever other items they will need to maintain their cover. He also warns that their mission must not be associated with him in any way, and he will deny any involvement with them if they are discovered.

Strike:

Luckily, no one at Winter Court knows the PCs personally, although it is possible that they may know of them or have heard rumors. Still, a lot of work has been put into crafting their alibis, and as long as the PCs keep their stories straight they should have no trouble keeping their true identities a secret. Of course everyone in Winter Court is going to want to get to know them, so the PCs had better make sure they know exactly what stories they're supposed to tell.

This scenario is best suited for a party full of stealthy types, such as ninjas, less-than-honorable courtiers, and spies. A group made up of Tainted characters essentially has to go through this scenario every time they go to court, hiding their true origins and intentions from the rest of the guests. But honorable samurai may be able to participate as well. Maybe they are called to tell a small lie for the sake of a greater good. Or they might be forced to rationalize their actions. Perhaps they even find a way to complete their mission without actually lying. After all, is saying "If you'll check my travel papers you'll see they bear the name Bayushi Nomen," when someone asks

your name really a lie if that's what the papers say?

The nature of the party's mission should also be chosen with care. Honorable samurai may be willing to operate under an assumed name for a while if it will help the greater good, but will probably have a hard time accepting the theft of important documents or murdering a rival diplomat. Finding evidence of another guest's misdeeds so that they may be brought to justice is a more noble goal. The PCs might be asked to keep an eye on a suspected spy, or even guard a traveling noblewoman without letting anyone know that her husband does not trust the host to keep her safe. Hiding the truth about oneself may be a questionable act, but it is not always dishonorable.

If you have a PC whose honor will absolutely prevent them from participating in such a mission, forcing them to do so may result in a loss of enjoyment. Rather than making them do something out of character, simply allow them to opt out. They may still accompany the rest of the group to Court, even if they are not involved in the mission itself. Their job is simply to complete the illusion that the group is who they say they are by just being there. If they are seen associating with anyone who engages in inappropriate actions, however, they had better be careful. After all, they are using their real name and will not be able to hide behind a disguise or alias if anything goes wrong.

This adventure is similar to last week's in that it requires the player characters to take on new roles and identities. This time, however, instead of impersonating a real person the PCs have to create entirely new identities. Their names and a little bit about their backgrounds may be listed by their traveling papers, or left up to them to determine on their own. What school did they attend? What branch of their families do they come from? Why haven't any of their "clansmen" met or heard of them before? Making their new identities similar to their true selves may help the PCs invent details on the fly, but it also means that they run the risk of people recognizing who they really are by their actions and mannerisms. Not many Bayushi courtiers eat red meat and worship foreign gods, nor are Hida samurai likely to espouse pacifism. Even something as small as hesitating a little too long when asked how many siblings one has can arouse suspicion, so the PCs had best give some thought to developing their new aliases.

One way to make maintaining a cover story especially challenging is to separate the player characters and have NPCs ask them a variety of questions, such as "How did you two meet?" or "Where did your companion get that sword?" or even something as simple as "What is your friend's favorite food?" This is very effective if the PCs didn't think to discuss things and plan the corroborating stories beforehand. You may even want to take players into a separate room to ask these questions if you think the others will be tempted to use out-of-character knowledge to their own benefit. Having a discrepancy between the answers of two different party members arise isn't the end of the world however. Watching the PCs scramble to cover up their mistakes and spin new stories

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to explain the situation can be one of the most entertaining parts of this scenario.

Another good trick is to have one or two people at the Court who actually have met the PCs in passing before. They might not know the party members all that well, but they've crossed paths once or twice and can't shake the feeling that something about them seems familiar. He or she keeps coming around and trying to figure out where they might have met the PCs before, or even asking questions that the PCs might not want to answer. If the PCs are very skilled at coming up with stories and thinking on their feet they might be able to mislead the NPC into believing their lies. On the other hand, the party might decide that the best way to keep their secret is to put a permanent end to the snoop and his questions. It's not a pretty matter, but it's for the greater good, right? You can make the mission even more difficult by having an NPC exhibit even deeper suspicion. Instead of trying to figure out why the PCs seem so familiar, he or she is consumed by the question of why the PCs appear to be so different from who they claim to be. The NPC investigator could start by asking pointed questions, trying to catch the PCs in a lie. Maybe he or she takes to eavesdropping on the PCs in an attempt to catch them with their guard down, or goes through their personal possessions to find out if they are hiding anything. Unless the PCs are able to discover that they are under such scrutiny they may not be able to protect their secrets until it is too late. Even if they do find out that someone is suspicious of them, they will still have to work to keep the meddling NPC from learning the truth.

If your group engages in these kinds of missions often, you can revisit the theme of secret identities and lies in a later adventure as well. Once they've completed their assigned task they are allowed to discard their assumed identities and return home. Things work out smoothly and no one seems to suspect that they and the mysterious Bayushi Nomen (or whatever alias the PC has used) are one and the same. Then, months or even years later, they cross paths with someone they met while at Winter Court. He or she calls them by the name they used for that one winter long before, and wonders why everything about them seem so different now, still believing the lie that the PC told so long ago to be true. This can be especially cruel if the PCs toyed with the NPCs feelings in the course of their mission, as they must now choose whether they will admit what they have done or try to cover things up once again, starting a new series of lies.

This forum posting will self-destruct in five seconds.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

145 - Winter Court Blues
Greetings and Salutations, all you people I don't actually know!

Life is so lonely when you don't have any friends. It's even

more lonely when no one even knows you exist.

Challenge:
The PCs find themselves attending Winter Court in a castle where they have very few social or political contacts. It is a completely different social circle than the ones in which they normally move. Although they may be passing acquaintances with a few other attendees, they really don't know anyone there all that well.

Focus:
As it turns out, most of the other figures present at Court know each other quite well. Many of them share common experiences, and a few were even childhood playmates. Groups of friends congregate together in the common chambers, talking about old times and catching up on recent events. They share jokes that the PCs don't quite understand, refer to people and places that the PCs have never met or been to, and go on and on about things that the PC's know nothing about.

Strike:
Although no one is cold or unfriendly towards the party, the PCs still end up feeling somewhat excluded. The other guests' shared history gives them a bond that unites them quite strongly, while the party members are little better than outsiders. Unless the PCs find some way to break the ice they will have a long and lonely winter to look forward to.

If you've ever been to a reunion between old friends where you didn't know anyone, you probably have a good idea of how the PCs should end up feeling in this situation. People tend to spend time with people they feel comfortable around, and can take a long time to accept newcomers. The tighter the circle of friends, the more time it takes to gain admittance. While the other guests may not be adverse to talking with the party members, they would much rather spend time reminiscing with their old friends. As the odd-men and -women out in this gathering the PCs will certainly need to work in order to make themselves known and gain some degree of acceptance. Should the PCs have a mission that requires them to talk with other guests in an attempt to gain their support or secure an alliance they will have their work cut out for them indeed.

On the other hand, you don't want to bore your players to death by playing through day after day of being left out of conversations and not being invited when everyone else goes out to play kemari. Setting up situations where they have a chance to show off their skills and expertise, make in-roads with the other guests, and slowly work their way into the social circle should keep them interested while still maintaining the challenge. Perhaps one of the PCs happens by as a lady slips on some ice and is able to help her, winning her friendship in the process. Or maybe a trio of courtiers within earshot begin discussing a topic that one of the PCs is particularly knowledgeable about, giving him a chance to join the conversation. A particularly daring PC could volunteer to serve as another guest's personal champion when an old rivalry comes to a head. Putting

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your life on the line for a matter that doesn't even involve you is sure to make a good impression. If the PCs manage to win over enough of the attendees, they may find themselves being treated like just as much of an old friend as any other guest, having been accepted into the group completely.

A political way of playing up the isolation in this scenario is to send the PCs to a Court that is dominated by other Clans. This can be more difficult with mixed-Clan parties, as the number of Clans that other guests can come from may be significantly reduced. For parties where all the characters are members of another Clan, however, this can work quite effectively. A group of Lion in a Court full of Crane can feel very lonely and very, very isolated. Likewise, if the PCs have done something to bring dishonor or shame upon themselves they may be excluded from conversations even if they know the other guests.

Another method is to put the PCs in a situation where they end up brushing shoulders with their social betters. Somehow, they managed to end up at a Court where the upper echelon of Rokugani nobility is spending the winter. For rank and file samurai such as them to simply approach a family daimyo or celebrated general and attempt to make conversation could be construed as a gross breach of etiquette. But if they did manage to make a positive impression on such an illustrious figure they would gain a powerful ally indeed. For parties with higher status, you can reverse the situation, making the PCs some of the most influential figures at Court. In this case, the other guests are likely to avoid them not out of contempt or indifference, but because they are uncomfortable socializing with members of the social elite. It's far better to know one's place than to try and make friends with someone who can have your daimyo order your death, after all.

One particularly sneaky technique is to have one other guest (or group of guests) that is also excluded from the main group attend Court as well. She is in the same situation as the PCs, and can sympathize with their plight. If no one else will talk to them, she'd certainly be willing to spend a few hours in pleasant conversation or engage them in a game of go or shogi. As the weeks pass they might even come to count her as a friend. Which is exactly what an enemy spy (or ninja, or Kolat, or monster in disguise) like her wants them to think. Because there's no easier target than a lonely soul.

Friends make our journeys easier and our burdens lighter just by being there, so don't forget to let your allies know you care.

And, hey, why not tell your friends around the gaming table how much they mean to you while you're at it.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

146 – The Loyal Servant

Greetings and Salutations, friends!

Shifting gears somewhat, this week we take a look at a scenario where the PCs have to learn someone else's secret instead of protecting their own. I'll leave it up to you to decide which is harder.

Challenge:

The PCs are summoned by their superior and asked to undertake a very important mission. Recent developments have forced him to call upon the services of a secret ally, whom he refers to as "the Loyal Servant." For security reasons, the PCs are not told who the Loyal Servant is. They are merely given a message and sent to the Winter Court the Loyal Servant will attend. Once they complete their journey another of their superior's allies will help them deliver the message to its intended recipient.

Focus:

The PCs travel to Winter Court only to discover that the person who was supposed to help them identify the Loyal Servant never arrived. It is possible that his failure to make it to Court is entirely accidental, but it is most likely due to outside interference. Whatever the case, the PCs will have to proceed on their own.

Strike:

In order for the Loyal Servant to do what must be done, the PCs must deliver their superior's message. In order to deliver the message, the PCs must learn who the Loyal Servant is. Unfortunately, there are a number of guests present, and any one of them could be the Loyal Servant. On top of which, there is no guarantee that he or she even knows the PCs are supposed to make contact. Finding the proper person among so many possible choices may take no small amount of skill, quite a bit of cunning, and a great deal of luck.

The identity of the Loyal Servant is up to the GM to decide. Because their superior has a vast network of contacts and informants, the Loyal Servant could literally be anyone at Court, from the heimin who hauls the firewood to the host himself. While you could make the Loyal Servant someone the PCs know or have met before, players who recognize the NPC's name may suspect him as being significant simply by virtue of them having heard of him before. On the other hand, if you think your players are likely to double-guess your intentions, you could make the Loyal Servant someone so obvious that the players discount the possibility simply because it seems like a set up. If you want to really throw the players for a loop, you could make the Loyal Servant one of their servants. Or an ally who always seemed completely unsuited for espionage and intrigue. Or a hated enemy who was only posing as their enemy in order to hide his true affiliation. The again, you could always use reverse-reverse psychology and make the Loyal Servant someone they've never seen or heard of before at all.

Finding the Loyal Servant can be relatively easy or quite difficult depending on the amount of help and information

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you give the party. If they know nothing about the secret ally's identity they may have to investigate every single person at Court. Alternately, you can give them a few pieces of information that allow them to narrow the scope of their search. Knowing that the Loyal Servant has served the party's superior for forty years, for example, can help the PCs focus their attention on older guests. If you want to make things very easy on the group you can give them a password or secret phrase that only the Loyal Servant would know the correct answer to. Of course, you can also point out that with the mysterious circumstances under which their primary contact disappeared it's possible that the password may already have been leaked to the wrong people, just to keep things from getting too simple.

In some cases it may be necessary to remind the players that not only the message, but the fact that the Loyal Servant has any connection their superior is also a secret. If they go around asking other guests if they have any idea who their superior's contact might be or spend too much time talking to him (or her) in public once they do uncover his identity the spy's ability to operate effectively may be hindered. Likewise, revealing the message to each and every guest may be a good way to guarantee that it reaches the ears of the Loyal Servant, but it doesn't do a lot for keeping the information a secret.

If you want to play a more intense game of cat and mouse, you can have enemy agents attend Court as well. They don't know the identity of the Loyal Servant either, or else they would have eliminated him right away. They also don't know that the PCs are the ones who have been asked to deliver the message that they have been sent to intercept. But they do know that someone is trying to make contact with their quarry, and that the same someone might be on the lookout for them as well. So, like the PCs, they are doing their best to discover secrets without giving any away. Both the PCs and their enemies must try to find the Loyal Servant and uncover each other's identities without compromising their own cover in the process, lest the game end in a victory for the other side.

Alternately, you could move to focus of the adventure to delivering a message to the Loyal Servant so that he (or she) can do something about it to having the PCs take over the entire mission themselves. This can be especially difficult if the Loyal Servant would normally have access to skills or resources that the PCs lack. They may have to find another way to get the job done, or do the best with what they have. If the message is in code or takes the form of a riddle, the PCs may need to do some information gathering before they even have a chance of beginning their task at all.

Good help can be so hard to find.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

147 - Presents

Greetings and Salutations, Friends!

The holidays are a time for giving! Remember 'tis better to give than to receive. Receiving can be all kinds of trouble...

Challenge:

The PCs find themselves staying in a Court where most of the guests are strangers. Over the next few days they make introductions, become acquainted with their fellow delegates, and get to know who everyone is. There may be a few individuals that they feel positively or negatively disposed towards, but it is still too soon to call anyone either a friend or a rival.

Focus:

A month or so into Winter Court, one of the PCs opens the door to their room to find a package on the floor outside. The cream-colored paper holds a gift (see below) and is accompanied by a simple note.

A Secret Admirer wrote: "Please accept this small token of my feelings. I hope it will bring you joy.

-A Secret Friend"

There are no other clues to the identity of the person who left the gift. No one they have met so far seems likely to make such a gesture, but it is extremely unlikely that it could have been delivered from outside of Court.

Strike:

The gift was left by a young woman named Kimi (or young man, as appropriate) who has a crush on the PC in question. She has been watching him from afar with admiring eyes since the beginning of Court, and would like to get to know him better. Unfortunately, her shyness prevents her from coming forward to speak with him directly, and she would never be able to go through with the proper method of giving a gift without getting nervous and flustered. So she left the gift in the middle of the night with the hope that the PC would find it and she would be able to learn more about his feelings towards her by his reaction.

Because the common ritual for giving gifts in Rokugan involves offering the gift three times and refusing twice, players may not know how they should react to the present they have found on their doorstep. Should they accept it right away? Leave it where it is? Find the giver and go through the customary series of refusals? This confusion is a big part of the charm of this adventure, as it puts the PCs in a situation where there is no clear answer. Indeed, simply letting the players discuss their opinions in-character can be an interesting role-playing opportunity.

The gift itself is left up to individual GMs to determine, and can be almost anything, keeping in mind its origins and intended purpose. Kimi lacks the material wealth and influence necessary to procure a fine katana, nor would she consider one appropriate for showing her feelings. A scarf, fan, or netsuke charm might be appropriate, and she'd definitely be too embarrassed to give something

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more romantic. Unless Kimi has some way of learning more about the PC in question she probably won't know too much about his likes and dislikes, and would be forced to give a more generic gift instead of something that would be absolutely perfect for him. Likewise, she probably wouldn't give a gift that would betray her background, such as the specialty snack or product her home province is famous for. She wants to show her feelings, but she also wants to do so in a way that is safe for her and not liable to put off the PC she is interested in. Thus, care should be given in selecting a gift that the PC will feel positive about, but is within Kimi's capabilities. On the same note, some consideration should be given to Kimi herself. What Clan is she from? She could be from a rival family, or belong to a Clan that has good relations with the PC's own, with both possibilities bringing up new complications. How old is she? If she is much younger than the PC she has taken a liking to her feelings may be nothing more than infatuation. What kind of person is she? Why does she like the PC? More importantly, would he like her once he got to know her better?

If you think that your PCs will be unlikely or unable to look into the matter further, you can make things easier for them by dropping a number of hints, subtle or otherwise. If the PCs have an opportunity to interact with Kimi before or after the gift is given you can portray her as shy or flustered. She might forget herself and steal glances at the object of her affections, or she could try to hide from his gaze altogether, worrying that her expression will betray her true feelings. If none of the party members notice this you can have an NPC comment on it, either indirectly or bluntly, as necessary. Sometimes players can be agonizingly blind to even the most obvious hints, so do what you have to do in order to keep things moving. On the other hand, if your PCs are skilled investigators you may want to make things a little more challenging. Kimi was too shy even to approach the room of the PC she admires, so she asked a friend to deliver the gift for her. He turned the gift over to his wife, who is more knowledgeable in such matters, letting her handle the delivery. After changing the wrapping paper to better suit the gift, she asked a servant to deliver it. That servant asked another servant in turn. Except the second servant will deny having done it, as he was supposed to have been guarding the stables as the time. And so on. Even if the PCs have the necessary skills to get to the bottom of the situation, it will still take them time and present them with an interesting diversion from the affairs of the Court.

Once the PCs discover who the present was sent by there are other circumstances for them to consider. How does the PC in question react to Kimi's admiration? Does he refuse her outright, or try to let her down easily? If he returns her affections, is it because he truly likes her, or simply because he wants to spare her the pain of rejection? Some may even accuse him of toying with the maiden's affections, predicting that he will leave her once spring comes. Remember that whether these claims are true or not, failing to refute them constitutes an admission of guilt. In a feudal society like Rokugan age differences

are less of an issue than propriety and intentions, but there are those who may object to a samurai courting someone so young. Can a mere girl manage an entire household while he is away at war? What does Kimi's family have to say about the matter? Or the PC's family. Maybe they see the romance as unacceptable, or as the perfect chance to propose a potential alliance. The entire incident could escalate out of control quite easily, no matter how Kimi or the PC feel about each other.

If your players are not interested in or comfortable with romance, there are a few other possibilities that can also be used with this scenario. One is to have the giver be someone who wants to get on the PC's good side without letting the PC have a chance to object. This could be a courtier from another Clan seeking allies, a figure of lower social status (such as a merchant or artisan) looking for a patron, or just a sycophant trying to curry favor. Maybe the giver is trying to set up a situation where the PC is obligated to view him in a positive light. Why he might be doing so without making his identity known directly can be the subject of an entirely separate investigation. Another interesting option is to leave a threat or warning instead of a gift. In this case, the PC will want to find out who the culprit is so that he can deal with the troublemaker appropriately. Maybe the item left by the PC's enemy is something incriminating, and the PC has to find a way to hide or get rid of it. Or the "gift" could be something that was taken from the PC's room, illustrating that no matter how safe the PC thinks he is someone can still get to him. Maybe the culprit took something valuable and is returning it... piece by piece, until the PC gives in to his demands.

If you want to eliminate the romantic issues or political side altogether, you can have the gift be given with no special strings attached. While holidays such as Christmas and birthdays are unknown in Rokugan, there are other possibilities. In Japan, the tradition of giving gifts to friends and neighbors in the winter is known as [Oseibo](#), and this custom can easily be transferred to Rokugan. (You can also use Ochugen, which refers to the tradition of giving gifts in the summer, if you want to have this scenario take place outside Winter Court.) A number of Clan delegations give gifts, and the PCs should be no exception. As the PCs are looking through the presents that they have received, however, they find one that bears no mark or name to indicate who it was from. It may have been given anonymously, the giver could simply have forgotten to sign his or her name, or the note may have been somehow lost or damaged while the present was in transit. Whatever the case may be, the PCs are left with a gift from an unknown source. This might not seem like such a big problem, until they are reminded that decorum demands that they give a present in return. If they are not able to find out who sent the mysterious gift and repay his or her kindness in a timely manner, they may find themselves wishing they had received nothing at all.

There's a reason the holidays are so hectic. Imagine how much worse it would be if giving someone socks was

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grounds for execution.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

(Who in their right mind would send cooking oil as an Oseibo gift when they could just as easily have opted for beer or a spiced ham?)

148 – Yobisuke Who?

Greetings and Salutations, everyone!

There's an old saying that everyone gets fifteen minutes of fame. Under Third Edition rules, that works out to 300 combat rounds, which is more than enough time for enemies to get some licks in.

Challenge:

It is announced that an important dignitary will be coming to stay at the same Winter Court as the player characters. This is a point of excitement and anticipation for many of the courtiers who will be at Court that season, because the dignitary is known for his influence and political acumen. Indeed, it is said that nothing goes on at Court without him knowing about it.

The identity of the dignitary is up to the GM, but should ideally be a figure that the PCs have heard of and/or are sufficiently impressed by.

Focus:

Soon after Court opens, word arrives that the dignitary has suffered an injury and is unfit to travel. As a token gesture, he sends a single representative, Yobisuke, his "most trusted aide," in his place. This news causes even more of a stir, for it turns out that Yobisuke is a complete political unknown. No one in the Court has ever heard of him before, or knows anything about him.

Strike:

Courtiers and political masterminds are not fond of surprises, especially when they involve someone with as much power and influence as the dignitary wields. There is a massive scramble amongst the assembled courtiers to find out anything about Yobisuke, where he comes from, and what exactly his connection to the dignitary really is. The PCs will have to decide what they do and how they react in the face of this unexpected development.

What connection does Yobisuke have to the dignitary? Is he a newly discovered prodigy, or an old student who has somehow eluded notice all these years? He could be a spy sent to keep an eye on things on the dignitary's behalf, or maybe a simple courtier who was sent because no one else could be found on such short notice. Is there a reason why the dignitary would suddenly choose a complete unknown as his "most trusted aide?" Perhaps his sudden appearance has something to do with the dignitary's injury and failure to arrive at Court. Or maybe it is just another part of the dignitary's master plan.

With everyone at Court trying to learn the truth about Yobisuke it is helpful to keep in mind that there are a number of ways to learn about someone, and all of them are likely to yield different types of information. One of the most direct is to talk to Yobisuke himself, but this is not the only possible route open to those who wish to find out who he really is. Talking to other guests and listening to gossip is guaranteed to bring some results, even though the accuracy of such stories may leave something to be desired. Those who have connections in other areas of the Empire can conduct investigations into Yobisuke's background, although the winter weather may delay the delivery of messages considerably. Magical investigation is an option for shugenja who have the right spells, and for less honorable types don't forget that a few coins can loosen the tongues of Yobisuke's servants, or even tempt them into looking the other way while one goes through his room.

If the PCs seem uninterested in joining the wild mass guessing about Yobisuke and his connection to the dignitary, there are a few ways you can get them motivated. One is for an ally courtier or superior to elicit their help in his own investigation. Advisors and daimyos need to be informed about notable personages in the Court, and the unexpected emergence of a new figure means that someone has not been keeping tabs on current events as well as they should have been. If the PCs can find out about Yobisuke before anyone else it may give their families an advantage in any negotiations they enter into, either with the dignitary or Yobisuke himself.

Another option is for someone from another delegation to ask the PCs to pry into Yobisuke's past, keep track of his current dealings, or even to spy on him in secret. Because the PCs are not connected with their employer's Clan or family, their help allows him to gain valuable information without anyone else knowing what he is doing. He could offer political favors or monetary reward in return for information, or, if there is someone the PCs are curious about, volunteer to share information of his own. Alternately, you can have Yobisuke ask the PCs for help. Since they seem to be among the few people who are not intent on discovering his secrets, he feels comfortable revealing the truth to them. Until recently he was just a scribe in the dignitary's employ. But the injury that befell the dignitary was no accident. Someone tried to kill him, and very nearly succeeded. Suspicious of his vassals, the dignitary decided to make his faithful scribe his new protegee, and sent Yobisuke out as his new official representative. If word of the circumstances surrounding his promotion were to get out it would weaken his position and his ability to speak for the dignitary in Court. He asks the PCs to help him avoid all the attention he has been receiving and find some way to complete his duties without causing embarrassment or disgrace to his family or the dignitary.

If you want to make life interesting for the PCs, you can cast them in the same role as Yobisuke. Because they are

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acting as representatives for an important person, all manner of people are going to want to know all manner of things about them. What are their likes and dislikes? Do they have any notable connections to other influential figures? What are their political views? What can they offer as potential allies? How can they be swayed in negotiations? What are their weak points? Do they have any secrets? How well protected would their families be in the event that an assassin was sent to murder them in the night? Hypothetically speaking, of course...

Everybody wants to be somebody. Sometimes it's just better to stay a nobody.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

149 – Who Are You People Anyway?

The REAL CFS of the Week #149
(Nazomitsu hates math!)

Greetings and Salutations!

Due to an error in my calculations, CFS #147 was somehow mislabeled as CFS #148. This led to CFS #148 being mislabeled as #149, which it was not. The real CFS #149 is below. On top of which, due to my lengthy hiatus, it's difficult to tell exactly how many weeks this Winter Court should have. I blame November for the problem. Sometimes it has 5 weeks. Sometimes it has only 4. Make up your mind, November!
In any case, in order to make up for these errors, today's installment will offer two CFS scenarios instead of one. Please enjoy!

Challenge:

Through no fault of their own, the PCs end up being assigned to one of the more unpleasant Winter Court venues. It could be because they waited too long to respond to invitations, because their respective Clans were not able to find anyone else who could represent them there, or simply bad luck. Whatever the case, they end up attending Court in a location where there are few, if any, friendly faces.

Focus:

Fortunately, one of the PCs meets another guest from his own family or Clan, who quickly becomes an ally. His name is Tomoichi, and he smiles warmly whenever they meet, invites the PC to accompany him to courtly functions so that the PC is not left feeling lonely, and does his best to support him in any way possible. He is glad to do whatever he can, as the PC and he are relatives and, as he sees it, should do their best to stick together. Slightly disconcerting, however, is the fact that while Tomoichi acts like a close friend, the PC has never really met him before and doesn't know much about him.

Strike:

The relationship between the PC and Tomoichi is an odd one, to say the least. They are not old and trusted friends,

but Tomoichi acts as if they were closer than mere acquaintances. The PC will have to decide how he feels about his new ally and how he wishes to proceed. Will he count Tomoichi as a true friend even after Court has ended, or will he shy away from further contact? The choice he makes could affect his experiences for the rest of the winter.

Tomoichi can be a relative in name only, or have an actual blood connection to the PC in question. He might be a cousin, a more distant relative, or perhaps the two have become related only recently through marriage or adoption. On the other hand, he could be related to the PC quite closely, maybe even being a long-lost brother, illegitimate or otherwise. Maybe he was fostered to another family when he was young and wishes to get acquainted with the sibling he never knew. Alternately, if you wish to have the two be connected in a different way, it is possible that they both studied at the same school, training under the same sensei. Or maybe they served together in the same army or the same court. Maybe the connection between them is more uncanny, stemming from a bond between their spirits that occurred in a previous lifetime. It might even be possible that they share a previously unknown Karmic Tie.

Some players may feel uncomfortable with another character showing overt interest in becoming close to their own character. There's nothing untoward about Tomoichi's intentions, but some might think he comes on a little strong. If you think this may be an issue, feel free to use a female ally named Tomoko instead. Of course, this raises the possibility that her friendliness is misinterpreted as romantic interest. While cousins can marry in some societies, Westerners tend to feel it is inappropriate, so you might want to avoid this route as well. Use your best judgement and try to ensure that all the players in your group feel comfortable, even if their characters do not. It is also possible that some players may be unwilling to trust Tomoichi so quickly. Many GMs have NPCs join forces with player characters and gain their trust only to betray them later. This is a common narrative convention, and can be quite effective if used well. Using it too often, though, can lead players to be suspicious of everyone and avoid connections with other characters out of fear of future misfortune. GMs who intend to have Tomoichi ultimately betray the party should use caution and be careful to keep the players from becoming paranoid. One way to get around this is to have the character's superior assign him to work with Tomoichi in furthering the interests of the Clan at Winter Court. Due to other requirements, the Clan can send only a few delegates. Thus, it is in their best interest to coordinate their efforts as closely as possible. The fact that they are related (or studied in the same dojo, or what have you) is an added advantage, as it means that they should be able to work well together. Or so one would think. Finding out whether that proves to be the case or not is part of the fun of the adventure.

One very subtle way to cause friction between Tomoichi

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and the PC is for Tomoichi to support the PC in all the wrong ways. Even though his intentions are good, his methods may leave a little to be desired. He volunteers the PC to attend the daimyo because he's sure that his newfound friend has the necessary charm and wit to impress such an influential figure. Whenever a contest or competition is announced Tomoichi confidently names the PC as the competitor for their Clan. And he tries to goad a member of a rival Clan into challenging the PC to a duel because he has faith in his cousin's sword arm.

You can also use this scenario to explore the differences between friends, family, allies, and acquaintances. After all, player characters may have many allies, but how often do they actually treat those people as if they were friends? Will the PC spend time with Tomoichi once Winter Court has ended, inviting him to share a bottle of sake or watch a kabuki performance? Or will he only call upon his ally when he needs or wants something? A PC who treats all of his allies that way may reap a number of benefits, but may be disappointed if he finds himself in a situation where he actually learns who his true friends are, or if he even has any...

Now let's look at things from a slightly different perspective.

149 B – Who Are You People Anyway?

Challenge:

The PCs are fortunate enough to be invited to a relatively pleasant Winter Court. They might be at a castle near their homes, in an area where their Clans are held in high regard, or simply lucky enough to have a host who shows excellent hospitality. Whatever the case, they end up attending Court in a location where most of the other guests treat them warmly.

Focus:

Unfortunately, one of the PCs meets another guest from another family or Clan, who seems to have taken a strong disliking to him. His name is Tekisawa, and he scowls whenever the PC comes near, mutters unkind words under his breath, and shows the absolute minimum amount of civility required to avoid an incident. There are even times where his behavior is so harsh that it seems like he is actively trying to start a fight.

Even more disturbing, however, is the fact that while Tekisawa acts as if the PC were his sworn enemy, the PC has no idea who this person is or why he is so angry.

Strike:

It goes without saying that dealing with Tekisawa will be very difficult. Although they are not completely enemies, Tekisawa is nothing but hostile and antagonistic. Finding out why Tekisawa hates the PC so much might be a step towards a solution, but there's also the possibility that nothing can be done to end his enmity. The trouble may end once Court is over, or the two of them could go on to be rivals for the rest of their lives. The choices the PC makes in dealing with Tekisawa could have lasting

repercussions.

Like with Tomoichi, you can substitute a lady named Tetsuko for Tekisawa if you feel a female enemy is more appropriate for the PC in question. Some players may be more likely to settle their differences through violence when a male insults them, so a female rival might have a longer life expectancy. Alternately, some characters might be less insulted by the harsh words of a woman than they would be if challenged by a man. Giving consideration to details such as Tekisawa or Tetsuko's age, background, and profession can help a lot in eliciting the desired reaction from the PC in question.

You can choose just about any reason for Tekisawa's hatred of the PC in question. One of the most commonly used reasons is that Tekisawa simply hates the PC's Clan or family, but I find that a more specific reason for hating the PC personally is more effective. Perhaps the PC, either directly or indirectly, did something that caused him to lose face, look foolish, or somehow caused him suffering. Maybe the PC did something to ruin Tekisawa's life without even realizing it. Tekisawa might be jealous of something the PC accomplished or received. A member of his family or one of his ancestors might have been wronged by a member of the PC's family, and he still bears a grudge over those past wrongs. Or perhaps they were rivals in a previous life, and karma has decreed that they will hate each other forevermore, no matter what the circumstances of their meeting. It could even be something as simple as disliking the way the PC stomps his feet when he walks.

Keep in mind that having Tekisawa torment the PC too much may very well result in one of them dying at the hands of the other. An unforgivable insult or breach of etiquette calls for one to defend his or her honor, and there are times when a duel to the death is the only recourse. Tekisawa hates the PC, but he is not suicidal. Nor is he so insanely outraged that he would attack the PC on first sight. This is not to say that their rivalry may not reach such intensity in time, but that one should be careful not to push the PC to the breaking point too quickly. A good rivalry takes time to develop, and should be savored as long as possible.

One thing you can do if you want to prolong the agony and decrease the likelihood of Tekisawa and the PC coming to blows is to give Tekisawa important allies. Perhaps he is a good friend of the host, or a deputy of the local Emerald Magistrate, and killing him would cause more problems than it would solve. If you want to be really mean, you can give him some connection to an NPC that the player characters have to make a good impression on. Their mission may be to secure an alliance with the daimyo of a certain Clan. That daimyo just happens to be Tekisawa's uncle. This requires the PCs to be on their best behavior no matter how terribly Tekisawa treats them, and he'll be sure to take advantage of the situation as often as he can.

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Another possible focus of this scenario is examining whether or not the PCs take responsibility for their actions. If the PC in question did do something to cause him harm, Tekisawa may have a legitimate reason for his anger. Some players see NPCs as nothing more than nameless extras or cannon fodder, thinking that they are the only individuals in the world who matter. Needless to say, NPCs do not think of themselves this way, even if they are all played by the GM. If the PCs come to see Tekisawa as more than just an obstacle to be dealt with their interactions with him and other NPCs are likely to improve, adding another layer of enjoyment to your campaign.

You can also use both of these scenarios at the same time, modifying the description in of Court given in the Challenge section as desired. Of course, if you use each scenario with a different character it's possible that one PC may be fortunate enough to find Court welcoming while another has to suffer an unpleasant winter. But I find it can also be effective to inflict Tomoichi and Tekisawa's attentions on a single player character. This works especially well with characters that are not accustomed to Court or socializing, as it forces them to interact with people instead of just sitting around while the courtiers and diplomats do all the talking. Maybe Tekisawa's animosity has something to do with the PC's new ally. Is there some reason why he would be hostile towards anyone who associates with Tomoichi? Or perhaps Tomoichi's interest in helping the PC is because of the feud he has become involved in. Does he seek to get on the PC's good side simply because he too dislikes Tekisawa?

If you want to build tension between player characters, you can modify these scenarios and apply them to different PCs who are attending the same Winter Court. One method is to combine Tomoichi and Tekisawa into a single NPC, with different views towards different player characters. One PC's new ally views another PC as a hated enemy. The resulting tangle of emotions can be very interesting and exciting to watch. Who do the PCs trust? Who do they support when a fight breaks out? Who do they forgive and who do they seek vengeance on? The story could end well, or in tragedy, depending on the actions the player characters choose to take.

Another option is to increase the number of NPCs who show sudden interest or hostility towards each PC. While one member of the party is suddenly beset by new friends, another finds himself getting the cold shoulder. Any PC who has to watch another character receive preferential treatment while he or she is being received coldly is sure to feel at least a little resentment. How does this unfair and unequal treatment affect their relationship with each other? If the popular PC had to choose between his new allies and the rest of the party, what would the answer be?

Assuming my math is right (and I double-checked this time), our next instalment is CFS of the Week #150. As far as I know, no eyeball pears will be included, but you never know...

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

150- Winter Court #150

Greetings and Salutations, one and all!

This adventure marks the sesquicentennial installment of CFS of the Week! While 150 isn't quite as round a number as 100, it's still quite a milestone. I almost can't believe I made it this far...

Continuing in the vein of Winter Court scenarios where the PCs find themselves surrounded by new faces, this week's adventure puts the party in a situation where they have to make friends and influence people. Hopefully they'll be able to do so without too much difficulty.

Challenge:

The Empire is in a turbulent state.

The current political climate looks unstable, and competition for control of the Courts is fierce. While several Clans wield considerable influence, none of them has yet managed to achieve dominance. Markets are in flux, and both luxury items and basic supplies are in high demand. Although harvests were bountiful, for a long time it appeared as if a famine loomed on the horizon. After living frugally for many months, many families are now looking for ways to spend their spare koku, and prices have yet to stabilize. On top of all this, there are a number of old feuds and new arguments raging between the leaders of various families. It is even possible that, with tensions so high, the coming year will see armed conflict between two or more Clans.

Because of these recent developments, the PCs are sent to Winter Court with instructions from their superior to seek out and secure allies from other families. If rough times are ahead, it would be in their best interest to be ready for whatever may come.

Focus:

Unfortunately, information on who would be attending Court with the PCs this year was not available. This could be because the host wished to avoid an incident in light of the current troubles, or simply because their superior's diplomats were busy with other matters and were not able to get word about the guest list to the PCs. In any case, the PCs arrive with almost no information about who will be in attendance. They will have to engage their fellow guests in conversation to learn anything about their motivations, goals, and resources. In essence, the success of their mission hinges not only on their ability to win the best possible ally to their side, but also their skill in determining exactly which guest would make the best ally.

Strike:

Although it may not be readily apparent to the PCs, many of the delegates have access to skills or resources that could be of great benefit. One Crab has an uncle who crafts fine swords. A Dragon used to play shogi with the

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head of a major temple to Shinsei regularly. The Unicorn explorer has detailed maps of every province in the Empire. A mysterious ronin is privy to forbidden knowledge. Every guest has something to offer, and any of them can be won over if the PCs play their cards right. Only after the PCs get to know their fellow guests will they have a chance at making an informed decision about which they would do best to approach and how they should go about doing so. While meeting people and forging relationships is always a large part of Winter Court every year, this year it could be absolutely vital in determining how well the PCs and their families will fare in the coming seasons.

A list of NPCs that can be used in this scenario is provided below, with both a male and female guest from each faction included. Because it would not be feasible to include a complete biography, personal history, and list of likes and dislikes for each guest here, only the basic elements of their character and personality have been listed. Additionally, details such as family name, school rank, and position within the Clan have been left deliberately vague so that GMs can fit the above NPCs into their campaigns as they wish. The influential figures Michie's siblings and Yoshiko know, for example, will differ for different eras of play. In some settings, Toshiro and Satsuki might just be ronin of dubious honor, while in others they could actually be members of the Spider Clan. If the Mantis are still a Minor Clan, Akira and Yuu might settle for less than they would as representatives of a Great Clan. Taking the time to fill in these details will not only make this adventure run more smoothly, but it will also increase the enjoyment that you and your players get out of it.

Each NPC has several pieces of information listed, which can be learned by putting in various amounts of effort. Information included under the heading "First Glance" is readily apparent to anyone who sets eyes on the NPC in question or watches them for a few minutes. No investigation or questioning is required.

Information listed under the "Introductions" heading is likely to be provided by the NPC when he or she meets a PC for the first time. You will probably also want to include information such as a family name for the NPC and possibly more specific details about their school or duties within their Clan here as well. If a PC wishes to gossip about other guests, this information will be readily available from anyone who has met or talked about that NPC.

Information listed under the "Getting Acquainted" heading includes the type of topics that the NPC is likely to bring up in casual conversation. Of course, whether or not this information actually comes up depends on what is being discussed at the time. Few guests are vain enough to derail a conversation about the weather to start giving details about their own personal lives. If the PCs make an effort to ask the NPC about himself or herself, however, they will be able to learn these facts without much trouble. It is also possible for a PC to glean this information by asking some questions and keeping his or her ears open

around Court as well.

Information listed under the "Growing Familiarity" heading requires much more effort to learn. The PCs will probably have to speak to the NPC in question a few times over the course of several days in order to reach a point where they can learn more personal facts such as these. Trying to learn too much about someone before they have gained that person's trust has the potential to go quite badly. If a PC wishes to learn this information indirectly, such as by asking others what they know about the NPC, a number of attempts may be required.

The information listed under "Good Relations" shows the benefit that the NPC in question can offer a potential ally, and will really only be revealed once the NPC feels comfortable talking with the PC. Note that even after the PCs have learned this information, they still have to win the NPC over to their side completely, which may take further conversation and negotiation. Simply learning what the NPC has to offer does not mean that his or her support is guaranteed.

From the Crab Clan:

Kikuchiyo

First Glance: A large, muscular man. His hands are rough and calloused and he looks out of place in a Courty setting.

Introductions: Kikuchiyo works under the direction of the Kaiu Engineers.

Getting Acquainted: Kikuchiyo is looking forward to relaxing this winter. He and his crew worked on a number of construction projects over the last year. They finished several projects in a short time, so now he just wants to enjoy some sake and unwind.

Growing Familiarity: His specialty is defensive fortifications. His last project was installing retractable spikes on one section of the Kaiu Wall. While the area was considered a weak point before, it has had no trouble repelling monsters since they finished.

Good Relations: Given time, Kikuchiyo has the skills and know-how to defend just about any area against attack.

Kinuko

First Glance: A proud, self-assured woman. She is pretty, but seldom smiles.

Introductions: Kinuko patrols the borders of the Crab, turning back interlopers and ensuring that Shadowlands creatures do not escape into the rest of the Empire.

Getting Acquainted: Despite not serving on the Wall, Kinuko believes in keeping her skills sharp. She practices in the dojo every day, no matter what. Each day, she uses a different type of weapon.

Growing Familiarity: Kinuko has an extensive collection of fine weapons of various types, which she keeps in her room. All the weapons are made in the same style and marked with her personal mon. The weapons were made especially for her.

Good Relations: Kinuko's uncle is a famous weaponsmith and he can create more fine weapons similar to the ones he crafted for her.

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From the Crane Clan:

Katsushiro

First Glance: A younger samurai who often dresses in expensive and ornate robes. He carries a finely crafted blade by his side.

Introductions: Katsushiro is still studying at the Kakita Kenjutsu Academy.

Getting Acquainted: Unfortunately, his sensei was killed in a duel recently, leaving him without a teacher. He considers himself to be on a *musha shugyo* to find a new teacher. As such, he leads a simple life, and does not seek material comforts.

Growing Familiarity: Despite thinking very little of wealth, Katsushiro still has quite a lot of it. Rather than amassing *koku*, he tries to spread his good fortune to others. There have been many occasions where he attempted to give away money, only to have peasants repay him with lavish clothes and gifts that he could not refuse.

Good Relations: His extravagant lifestyle is thanks to the support of his great aunt, who is quite rich. The monthly stipend he receives from her is much more than he can spend by himself.

Yoshiko

First Glance: A mature yet stylish woman who carries herself with poise and grace. She treats everyone she speaks to politely.

Introductions: Yoshiko serves as a liaison for guests to Kyuden Doji.

Getting Acquainted: Yoshiko has entertained a number of guests, and she prides herself on her hospitality. Over the years she has perfected her skills with numerous visitors. Now, she greets the most esteemed visitors to the Crane lands.

Growing Familiarity: The last visitor she hosted was the Otomo daimyo. Before that, she organized a banquet for the Emerald Champion. Her favorite guest is the Captain of the Imperial Guard, as he always has interesting stories to tell.

Good Relations: Yoshiko has quite a bit of influence with people of status and power.

From the Dragon Clan:

Kyuzo

First Glance: A slim, serious bushi who speaks very little. He can be found practicing *kata* in the gardens every morning.

Introductions: Kyuzo intends to follow in the path of Mirumoto, dedicating himself to mastering the art of the sword.

Getting Acquainted: Kyuzo has just completed a *musha shugyo*. He faced numerous opponents in both duels and combat during his travels. Seeking to study with the best kenjutsu teachers in the Empire, he learned quite a bit about different styles of combat.

Growing Familiarity: His most recent teacher is a hermit who denounced his heritage to seek perfection in the art of the sword. Under his tutelage, Kyuzo was able to make great progress towards reaching his full potential. The

fighting styles he learned from the hermit are unlike any others in the Empire.

Good Relations: With Kyuzo to vouch for them, others would also be able to study under his sensei, learning numerous advanced kenjutsu techniques.

Hiroko

First Glance: A level-headed samurai in plain and simple robes. She speaks plainly and without undue elaboration. **Introductions:** Hiroko is the magistrate for a village in the foothills of the Dragon lands.

Getting Acquainted: Hiroko loves to play shogi. She began playing shogi as a way to pass the time, as the village where she is stationed is quite dull. One of the monks who used to live there taught her the rules and strategies of the game.

Growing Familiarity: Hiroko's prized possession is an ornate shogi set. The set was given to her by her teacher before he left to care for a larger temple. He was the eighth-ranked player in the Empire, but he is better known for his theological ideas.

Good Relations: Her teacher is now the master of a major temple to Shinsei and has many followers in the Brotherhood, and she still maintains ties to him.

From the Lion Clan:

Kanbe

First Glance: An older samurai, still in his prime, who has seen more than a few battles. He speaks thoughtfully, and acts with honor.

Introductions: Kanbe fought with the Lion armies in a number of skirmishes. He now holds stewardship over a small village named Shinmei.

Getting Acquainted: Kanbe likes Shinmei village because of its peaceful atmosphere and good weather. The surrounding countryside is a welcome respite from the many battles he has seen. The peasants are friendly and the village enjoys bountiful harvests almost every year.

Growing Familiarity: Bandits were a problem once, but it has been several years since any raiders ventured into the area, and the village prospers. Nonetheless, Kanbei believes in being prepared. He makes sure the village is always ready for siege or famine.

Good Relations: Under Kanbe's direction, the village has maintained large stores of rice in addition to its normal needs, which he could share with allies in need.

Maiko

First Glance: A proud, strong woman with a melodic voice. She often punctuates her words by gesturing with a fan.

Introductions: Maiko serves as an aide to a general in the Lion armies.

Getting Acquainted: Maiko gained her position when her commanding officer was killed in battle. She prevented her squad from routing and instead rallied them, turning an impending defeat into victory. It is a feat she has repeated on two other occasions.

Growing Familiarity: Maiko believes that good morale is the most important factor in pursuing victory. She makes it a point to treat the soldiers under her command well. As a

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result, she has gained their respect and their devoted loyalty.

Good Relations: Maiko has a squadron of footmen and a unit of spearmen at her personal command, whom she could lead toward any endeavor she chose.

From the Mantis Clan:

Akira

First Glance: A swarthy man with tattoos of fish along his arms. He favors more casual and comfortable styles of clothing.

Introductions: Akira is the captain of a kobune in the Mantis fleet. His ship, the Stickleback, patrols the waters along the Crane coast.

Getting Acquainted: Akira has many years of experience sailing. His duties commonly include transporting troops, supplies, and material from place to place. He has been to many different ports of call throughout the Empire, and considers the sea his second home.

Growing Familiarity: Even in rough weather, he has never lost a vessel. This has made him a trusted figure in the fleet. In addition to his own ship, he commands three smaller skiffs, and can procure the services of additional vessels if necessary.

Good Relations: Akira would be able to coordinate any naval operation or sea voyage with great ease.

Yuu

First Glance: An exotic woman, with skin tanned by the sun and clothes cut in a foreign style. Ivory bracelets adorn her arms.

Introductions: Yuu is an explorer, and she has accompanied her father on several ocean voyages.

Getting Acquainted: Yuu has a slight accent, which shows when she speaks quickly or gets excited. She speaks three foreign languages, which she learned while traveling. Most of her childhood was spent either at sea or abroad.

Growing Familiarity: In addition to traveling, her family also maintains a collection of gaijin artifacts. She has a number of foreign trinkets with her, including a compass, an ornamental teacup, and a kaleidoscope. She has more treasures at her home, the most impressive of which is a large harpsichord.

Good Relations: Yuu can get access to a wide variety of (legal) gaijin items from different nations.

From the Phoenix Clan:

Heihachi

First Glance: A small, smiling bushi. He often carries scrolls with him to read in his spare time.

Introductions: Heihachi trained as a bushi and now serves as a guardsman in Isawa lands.

Getting Acquainted: Heihachi likes reading stories about the past. Historical records, myths, and legends are among his favorite topics. The scrolls he keeps with him were borrowed from the library he guards.

Growing Familiarity: The library is vast, and has information about almost any topic imaginable. Scholars

and researchers visit regularly, seeking knowledge. However, not all are allowed entrance.

Good Relations: Heihachi is one of the few people who are allowed full, unlimited access to the records in the library.

Akiko

First Glance: A petite, bright-eyed young woman. She usually dresses in colorful gowns.

Introductions: Akiko studied magic and spellcraft at Kyuden Isawa.

Getting Acquainted: She was the top student of her teacher. Akiko seems to have a natural ability for understanding the way the kami think and communicating with them. Although she has completed her gempukku, she remains at Kyuden Isawa, helping her teachers.

Growing Familiarity: While she has not been conferred the title of "sensei," she is basically responsible for the education of a group of students. The students who follow her are skilled shugenja in their own right, with command over magic of all five elements. Akiko favors a non-traditional teaching method, often taking her students out of the classroom and presenting them with a variety of challenges to overcome.

Good Relations: Akiko and her students could provide significant magical support in any endeavor if she so wished.

From the Scorpion Clan:

Gorobei

First Glance: A big man with short hair. He has a large smile, and a voice to match.

Introductions: Gorobei is the yojimbo for a Shosuro family noble.

Getting Acquainted: Gorobei is somewhat of a daredevil and a gambler, and he commonly looks on the humorous side of life. He enjoys testing his luck, even when the stakes are high. Once, instead of sounding the alarm upon discovering a ninja spy, he let the intruder go, secretly trailing the ninja back to his lair and slaying the entire cabal.

Growing Familiarity: In order to protect against assassins and spies, Gorobei has had to learn many of the same skills as those he opposes. He has few qualms about putting his life on the line if the situation strikes him as interesting, and seems to get a thrill out of facing long odds. In addition to the incident with the spy, he has carried out a number of other dangerous and daring missions.

Good Relations: Gorobei would be able to use his skills to stage a covert operation, or thwart one.

Michie

First Glance: A stylish woman with a love for fancy clothes. Her kimono are always of the current popular style and she rarely wears the same outfit twice.

Introductions: Michie entertains guests who come to Court in the Scorpion lands.

Getting Acquainted: Michie likes to talk, and always knows the latest fashion trends and gossip. She is very well

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informed about the most recent events in many areas of the Empire. Very little that goes on in court is a surprise to her.

Growing Familiarity: She mentions that she stays in touch with courtly goings through her siblings. One of her sisters serves in the court of the Crane, while another sister lives in Lion lands. She has two cousins who live in Ryoko Owari, and a brother who married a minor Otomo functionary.

Good Relations: Her siblings are spread around the Courts of different Clans, giving her ears in all the major courts of the Empire.

From the Unicorn Clan:

Shichiroji

First Glance: A slim, handsome samurai. He often plays a shamisen in the evenings.

Introductions: Shichiroji serves the Unicorn by escorting and guarding merchant caravans.

Getting Acquainted: Shichiroji is married, but he travels often and doesn't see his wife much. He staves off loneliness by trying new foods and talking to new people. Whenever he visits a new city he learns a local song, and his repertoire is extensive.

Growing Familiarity: Shichiroji has been to many different cities and villages in the lands of all the Great and Minor Clans. He has been to most of the Empire, and keeps extremely detailed maps of all his travels as souvenirs. He also knows all the best travel routes.

Good Relations: Shichiroji's maps and knowledge would be extremely useful for anyone who needed to travel around the Empire.

Rio

First Glance: A slender, athletic woman with long hair.

Introductions: Rio commands a unit of Unicorn scouts. She moves with effortless grace, almost like a dancer.

Getting Acquainted: Her horse is renowned for its speed, as is she. She has won several races, often by quite a large margin. Before she became a scout she served as a courier.

Growing Familiarity: Was often called upon to deliver messages across enemy lines, and did so with ease. Now she specializes in tracking troop movements. Her scouts can get into or out of almost any area quickly, regardless of obstacles or opposition.

Good Relations: Rio's scouts could serve either as a reconnaissance force or couriers.

From the Spider Clan (posing as Ronin):

Toshiro

First Glance: A quiet man with dark eyes. He dresses in grey robes and avoids large groups of people.

Introductions: Toshiro is a yojimbo, currently looking for work.

Getting Acquainted: His last assignment was to protect a minor dignitary from the Dragonfly Clan. He was rewarded with an invitation to Court. He worked as a mercenary before that.

Growing Familiarity: Toshiro sold his skills anyone who would hire him. He served on both sides of the law over the years, but avoided serious trouble. Has quite a bit of familiarity with criminal gangs, smugglers, and bandits.

Good Relations: Toshiro once served the criminal lord Kurushii, and still has contacts within the underworld.

Satsuki

First Glance: A plain woman with pale skin. She has the strange habit of holding eye contact longer than is usual.

Introductions: Satsuki is a wandering shugenja without any permanent home.

Getting Acquainted: She was given an invitation to Court after helping a courtier from the Sparrow Clan. The courtier had some trouble with kansen, but Satsuki was able to intervene and send the evil spirit away. The ritual she used was one of her own design, and she has found it extremely effective.

Growing Familiarity: Satsuki spent quite a bit of time in the lands of the Kuni. She displays knowledge of oni, mahotsukai, omens, and ghosts. There are many times where she gives the impression that she knows more than she says but is holding back out of consideration for social conventions.

Good Relations: Knows quite a bit of forbidden knowledge, which she could put to use for a variety of purposes.

Feel free to cut some of these figures or to add other delegates to this list as desired, although care should be taken to avoid overlapping areas of influence. If everyone has only rice or troops to offer the PCs will simply choose the ally who has the most rice or the best troops. Giving them a variety of options to select from will not only force them to think about the value of a potential ally, but also to examine what type of aid will do them the most benefit. It is possible for the PCs to arrive at Court looking for military aid only to decide later that a single blade in the right place or a kind word in the right ear might be of much more value to their cause.

Keep in mind that the NPCs listed above aren't likely to make everything about themselves known right off the bat. Katsushiro's first words upon meeting the party should not be "Nice to meet you. Do you know my great aunt? She's very rich. She gives me lots of money, and there's no way I can even spend it all. I guess I'll have to find some allies to share it with." Not only would this be strange and unnatural, it would also make the adventure incredibly simple and boring.

Alternately, just having the players make Courtier skill rolls until they get a high enough total and then simply giving them a piece of paper with the above information on it isn't much fun. The PCs will still have to talk to people and ask the right questions. That interaction is part of what makes role-playing fun. Of course, you don't want to penalize players who invested a lot of character points into giving their character a high Courtier skill rank by making their skills absolutely useless. My personal preference is to give players who role play their conversations with NPCs well bonuses on their social skill

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rolls, but this approach may not work for all play groups. One good compromise is to give characters who roll particularly well when using such skills to interact with NPCs more information than they would otherwise receive. Another option is to allow the PC to learn information that would otherwise require a closer relationship with the NPC, in essence shortening the amount of time required to go from being acquaintances to trusted friends. You could also adapt the responses that NPCs give in conversation according to the result of the PC's social skill roll. PCs who roll well will find the NPC they are speaking with offers information more directly, while those who roll poorly have to work harder and ask more questions to get the answers they seek. There are a number of possible ways to integrate role-playing and dice rolls, and your exact approach will vary depending upon the play style that you and your group prefer.

In all but a few cases (Toshiro, Satsuki, and Gorobei being the most notable, due to reluctance to speak openly about their shady pasts until the PCs have gained their trust), it is entirely possible that a PC might ask the right combination of questions in a single conversation so as to learn exactly what special skills or hidden resources a particular delegate has to offer. In speaking with Hiroko, for example, a PC might learn she likes shogi, ask if she has a shogi set, inquire where she got it, ask what became of her teacher, and finally learn what rank her teacher holds within the Brotherhood, all without any prior knowledge of the situation. This is perfectly fine. A large part of this adventure hinges on talking to NPCs and getting to know them as individuals, and PCs who take the initiative in doing so deserve to be rewarded. Sometimes people just click, and forming such a connection with one of the NPCs can have the potential for great rewards when it comes time to negotiate. Alternately, it is possible that the PCs might never ask the right questions. They might somehow get the idea that Shichiroji could help them get ahold of Unicorn steeds, or that Katsushiro knows someone who could teach them iaijutsu, even though neither of these rumors have any basis in truth. Or maybe they become fixated on the idea that good allies should be able to provide military support and overlook any other types of aid that various delegates might be able to offer them. If this seems to be a problem you can deal with it in a number of ways. If you are feeling generous, you can have someone (either the NPC or another guest) steer the PCs back towards the right track. Alternately, if you are feeling cruel, you can let them labor under their mistaken impressions. Hopefully they will manage to stumble their way through at least one negotiation before spring comes and they find themselves without allies.

Another consideration lies in determining how best to propose an alliance to the delegate the party decides has the most to offer them. PCs who approach everyone and say "I'm looking for allies. What do you have to offer me?" will be seen as overly direct and boorish. Some of the NPCs listed here would be very interested in helping those who share their goals, but others will need some

encouragement in order to convince them that it is worth their while. Different approaches may be necessary for each one, and getting to know what type of person they are dealing with will definitely help the PCs make better choices when the time comes to get down to business.

Remember that unless the other delegates are actively looking for allies they aren't going to come right out and tell the PCs what they have to offer. Even if they do want to form an alliance with the PCs, they will approach the topic circuitously rather than coming right out and announcing their intentions. Being direct is neither appropriate nor respectable in Rokugan, and those who do not have the patience for lengthy negotiations will not do well in Court. Also, keep in mind that most alliances in the Empire involve either military support, political assistance, or trade. If the PCs ask their fellow guests what they have to offer they're likely to get an answer that involves one of these three factors. Shichiroji isn't likely to consider his map collection a bargaining chip for securing allies, and Michie has very little reason to mention her many siblings during negotiations. If the PCs negotiate well they might even receive access to such resources freely.

Of course, if the PCs make their decision solely on the basis of who can offer them the most troops or rice, that's their choice.

Talking to the various NPCs and getting to know them is a major part of this adventure, but you can also play up the issue of having to work at building a good relationship in order to secure an alliance. Different delegates are sure to have different outlooks, and what may work for making a good impression with Heihachi may not be the right approach for someone like Rio. Some information on winning people over can be found [here](#), but this is another area where fleshing the NPCs out and thinking about their individual personalities and preferences can add a lot to the adventure.

Whether or not delegates from the same Clan can be approached together or individually is up to each GM to decide. Kyuzo and Hiroko might confer with each other before offering their help to another Clan, or each may decide who they will ally with on their own. If Shichiroji and Rio come from different families within the Unicorn they might seek allies independently of each other or possibly work together for the overall benefit of the Clan. You can also incorporate choices that are relevant to individual PCs as well. Perhaps one of the PCs is looking for someone to teach him advanced kenjutsu techniques. Forging an alliance with Kyuzo would definitely be in his best interest, even if it is not the type of aid that his Clan needs the most. Will he choose according to what will benefit his family, or what he personally desires? What if one of the PCs falls in love with another delegate? Can the PC put aside his (or her) feelings and focus on duty? An alliance would be the perfect chance to make an offer of marriage, and there may be others who would be all too willing to do so in the PC's place should he choose otherwise.

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Another thing to think about before running this scenario is whether or not delegates will show any favor toward PCs who happen to be from their own Clan, or if they will bear any hostility towards members of Clans that have less than positive relations with their own. Gorobei might be willing to offer a fellow Scorpion whatever help he can give, so long as they approach him and ask. Yoshiko might be less than cordial towards Scorpion and Lion PCs, demanding more in exchange for her help, or even refusing to ally with them at all. A possible twist you can add is to introduce hidden elements about which guests would be willing to become allies of the PCs, or what conditions must be met in order for them to consider such an agreement. Toshiro may seem friendly enough, but a little bit of investigation reveals that he hates honorable samurai. Yuu has a history of accepting payment and then failing to live up to her end of the bargain. Hiroko might only help those who agree to further the spread of Shinseism in the Empire, while Maiko could demand that those who seek her support stand with her against her enemies. It is even possible for individual NPCs to make decisions based on personal quirks. Michie may not like being considered second best, and could reject PCs who approach others with offers of alliance before talking to her. Kikuchiyo might be willing to help anyone who joins him for a drink of shochu. The individual outlooks of each of the NPCs has been left up to the GM to determine according to the political climate of his or her individual campaign, but it is something that bears careful consideration in any type of negotiations such as these.

This can be an interesting adventure to run with a party of ronin or Minor Clan characters. Because they have limited resources, giving gifts to every single delegate simply isn't feasible. They will have to give some serious thought to who they will approach before they make any solid choices. And not only do they have to put some thought into picking the best ally, but they will also have to consider which delegate will be most likely to find such an alliance acceptable. After all, they can't really afford to give a gift if they're not likely to win any favors in return. This added element of pressure can force the PCs to play up the social aspect of the adventure quite a bit, which is always a good thing.

If you like intra-party conflict, you can also introduce an element of competition. The political situation in the Empire has become so turbulent that each and every family needs as many allies as they can find. As such, each PC receives orders from his or her superior to win over as many delegates to their cause as possible. Instead of working together, the PCs must now try to outdo one another and secure the best alliances for themselves. Because the players are each working toward their own goals and may be operating independently, this approach can be a lot more work on the part of the GM. There may even be times where players insist on keeping their actions secret from other players, which can cause a lot more demand on the GM's time and attention. Even without pitting the PCs against one another, you can

still introduce some element of competition. Perhaps one of their rivals is also looking for allies, or trying to sabotage their efforts. It is also possible that the NPCs may try to negotiate for allies amongst themselves. This can make things very difficult, as the PCs must try to broker alliances while at the same time trying not to step on the toes of the delegates they are trying to court to their side. What will they do if they have managed to gain a good relationship with Kanbei, only to find out that he is competing with them for Yoshiko's favor? Will they risk drawing his displeasure by continuing to offer her gifts, or will they decide that having his support is worth limiting the number of allies they pursue? The answer can have a profound effect on the situation they face next year. This approach requires some extra work in order to keep the different alliances and rivalries straight, but it will certainly make your Court seem like a living, breathing environment.

Overall there are a lot of different things to consider in forming alliances, and you can include as many or as few of them as you like. Getting to know the NPCs involved in this adventure shouldn't feel like a chore for the PCs, but it is an important factor in their ability to find the best ally. If you make things interesting, the social interactions that are required for success can be one of the most enjoyable parts of this scenario. Plus, as we'll see in future months, the alliances and rivalries they make here at Winter Court can form the basis for an entire year of adventuring afterward.

Have a great time at Court, everyone!

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

151 – When in Rome...

Greetings and Salutations, amigos!

Making friends and representing your Clan in a castle far from home can be hard. But at least you don't have to worry about which fork to use when everyone eats with chopsticks.

Challenge:

The PCs are sent to attend Winter Court in an especially distant area of the Empire that none of them has ever been to before. An area controlled by a Clan that none of the characters belong to is best, if possible. Otherwise, a remote estate that sees a minimal amount of traffic, far away from any other population centers, will also work.

Focus:

Due to its isolated location, the Court follows a number of customs and practices that are different from those player characters are familiar with. Upon arriving the PCs may find their clothes, the gifts they have brought, their manners, and even their ways of speaking violate the local standards of polite behavior.

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Strike:

Failing to adopt the customs of the Court will reflect badly upon the PCs, even if they are quite different from those observed by the rest of the Empire. Not only must the player characters find some way to discover what the proper local customs are, but they must also do their best to adhere to them in their dealings with other guests.

Because the Unicorn and Mantis are known for their foreign and exotic ways they might seem like a natural choice for playing the hosts in this scenario. There are, however, ways to adapt it to work with just about any Clan. The Crab are not known for social graces, and might hold Court quite differently from other Clans. The distant and remote mountains of the Dragon or the deep forests of the Phoenix could be home to groups that practice strange and esoteric customs, and there might be areas in the lands of the Lion and Crane Clans that still observe ancient and outmoded traditions. In Scorpion lands, the entire thing may just be an elaborate hoax to put visitors off guard and weaken them in negotiations. If you want to make things really hard on the PCs, you could even send them to a Naga city or Ratling warren for Winter Court.

This can be a great adventure to throw courtiers and socially adept characters off balance. While they may be comfortable negotiating the Courts in other areas, putting them in a situation where they are unaware of what is and is not appropriate can make the deals and negotiations they usually engage in a lot more challenging. Characters who are not so skilled in etiquette and the ways of the court, on the other hand, may find that the playing field has been leveled in their favor. After all, they already make plenty of mistakes when they go to Court, so having to deal with an entirely new set of rules is less of a hardship and more of a continuation of their previous level of performance.

If you think it might be difficult for your players (or their characters) to adapt to the new rules of etiquette and social customs they will encounter you can make things a little easier on them by having an NPC give them some advice. Perhaps he or she was an outsider like them once, struggling to make sense of new mores and taboos, and only learned through experience. On the other hand, he or she could also be a local who has had the privilege of traveling in other areas of the Empire and came to realize that not everyone does things the same way as they do at his or her home. In either case, having someone to warn the PCs about potential trouble spots (or explain what they did wrong after they mess up) can be a big help. At the very least, the PCs should feel less lost than they would if they were completely on their own.

Some possible strange customs the PCs may encounter include:

- Certain colors of clothes being limited to those of certain social standings
- Different names being used for hours, months, and days than normal

- Everyone being required to wake up, start meals, meditate, and/or go to bed at the same time
- Being required to eat everything on one's plate, including skins and peels
- Guests being required to appear happy and grateful in all situations
- Refusing any offer of hospitality being considered rude
- Being required to wait to be called upon by the host before speaking in his presence
- Being required to state one's name every time one speaks
- Not showing one's feet/hands/hair/teeth in polite company
- Differences in how polite or blunt one can be when speaking
- Differences in the amount of personal space people allow
- Differences in pronunciation of certain words
- Using special euphemisms for some words or phrases
- Women, children, and/or the elderly being shown decreased or increased respect

Remember that travel is not easy in a society like Rokugan, and not everyone is aware of the current trends and fashions in the major cities. If contact from the outside world is cut off or becomes inconsistent communities may change in unpredictable ways, either clinging to old traditions or developing new ones. Even today with technology making travel and communication much easier and faster it is still quite easy to find differences between people from different geographical areas within the same country, and there are still places where people cling to old traditions even after being exposed to new ways. It's also possible that the variations in customs and etiquette are not due to geographical factors or local preferences, but to the whims of the host. He was always somewhat eccentric, but recent years have seen him make a number of unusual declarations about proper manners. The members of his Court have done their best to abide by his increasingly random demands, to the point where they are now able to adapt without trouble. After all, it is his castle and his domain, and he is well within his rights to decide what kind of behavior he will condone or allow. But as each day goes by it becomes more and more difficult to keep up with exactly what the host deems acceptable anymore, and even he seems not to remember exactly what rules he has imposed.

Impressing people is never as easy as offending them.

Until next time, adios amigos!

-Isawa "I don't actually speak Spanish" Nazomitsu

152 - Winter Court Chaos!

Greetings and Salutations!

Court can be exciting, but being cooped up all winter is bound to make attendees at least a little restless. Sometimes even cultured samurai and courtiers need to find some way to let off a little steam.

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Challenge:

As the PCs make their way into Court one morning they notice that a number of people seem to be looking at them quite strangely. Courtiers whisper to one another behind fans, while bushi watch them with wary eyes. If they listen carefully the PCs may hear pieces of conversation, such as "Who..." or "... don't know..." and "I've never seen..." as they pass by.

Focus:

If the PCs try to talk to anyone about the unusual behavior they have noticed they receive an even bigger shock. Everyone they speak to reacts as if they know nothing of the player characters. Servants are properly differential, but admit that they have not seen them before in their lives. People they have talked to every day for the entire Court season ask them their names and react with surprise when the PCs claim to know them. Guards may even ask to see their invitations and ask them how they entered the grounds without being seen.

Strike:

The PCs have been chosen as the victims for a practical joke by a rather inconsiderate shugenja. He has used Air magic to alter the appearances, voices, and even the words of the PCs so that others do not recognize them. He and a few other guests that are in on the prank are having a great laugh at the PCs' expense, watching as they become more and more agitated. Depending on how the PCs react, they may reveal the joke after a few hours or continue it for as long as possible. The PCs will have to decide what they will do in the face of this unusual situation, and how they will react to being toyed with once it has ended.

If you want to remove the mystical aspect and introduce a more mundane challenge, it is possible that the entire Court is in on the prank. Everyone, or at least the majority of the guests, has agreed to act as if they have never seen the PCs before and see how they react. While the Courts that host more illustrious and refined guests may not see such behavior, smaller gatherings with more jovial attendees are not above playing pranks on guests. Winter is a long time to be cooped up without any entertainment, after all.

You could also change the reason why everyone is acting strangely from a joke to a matter of discipline. Maybe the host has taken a sudden dislike to the player characters for some reason, and has decided to pointedly ignore them. The other guests might follow suit because they also disapprove of the PCs, or simply to stay on the host's good side. If things are especially dire the PCs could even have had their names stricken from the family histories overnight and not been notified of it. No one will speak of the matter beyond saying "I do not know any (PC's name here)," and the party must find some way to learn what has happened and make things right or risk being expelled from the castle by force.

Alternately, the strange behavior of the other guests might be due to a more malicious cause. Maybe everyone but the PCs has fallen under the thrall of an enemy force that can control their very thoughts. Perhaps a rogue baku has started to eat their memories. Or a nezumi shaman may have taken the player characters' names for his own use. Everyone in the entire Court could be part of a gigantic conspiracy that has set its sights on driving the party members mad. What if the PCs' memories were implanted by hypnosis, and the other guests really *haven't* met them before? How can they discover who they really are?

One way to make your players really nervous, while still remaining true to the way in which such jokes often play out, is to have the number of people who are affected start quite small. Maybe only a few members of Court claim not to recognize the PCs at first. When the PCs go to ask others about this strange course of events they are met with reassurances. Some people remember them, and react normally. Later, as word of the joke spreads (or the shugenja strengthens the enchantment he has placed on the PCs), they may find the very people they confided in no longer recognize them either. This can give the player characters the impression that a vast conspiracy is unfolding around them, slowly but surely cutting them off from any sources of aid.

A very cruel twist is to choose only one PC to serve as the victim for this joke. While the target is elsewhere, the shugenja alters the perceptions of the other party members. Similarly, while the selected player is away from the table (or whenever you have a chance to speak to the rest of the group in private), let the other players know that they should act as if they have never seen their comrade before. If you wish, you can even offer bonus experience points for particularly good performances. Then, when the player returns, you can let the fun begin. This has the added bonus of making the character and the player paranoid, as normally reliable sources of information (the other players) suddenly turn against them. Plus you may find that players enjoy subjecting people to mental torture just as much as Game Masters do.

Sometimes being ignored can hurt even more than being cut with a sword. Or, at least it hurts in a different way.

Even though winter snows can make travel difficult, there are still some places in the Empire that are worth visiting. As such, we'll see the beginning of a new trend for CFS of the Week next month. What is it? You'll just have to wait and find out.

Until next time,
-Isawa Nazomitsu

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Winter Court