

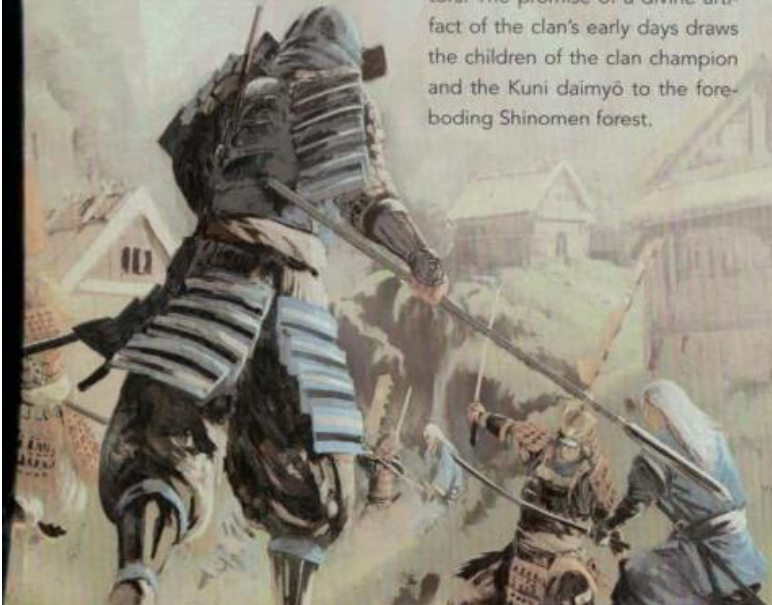
五輪伝

# Rokugan

## An Empire in Turmoil

A land where honor is stronger than steel. Here, the samurai of the seven Great Clans serve the Emperor as warriors, courtiers, priests, and monks. They live—and die—by the tenets of Bushidō.

The Crab Clan brooks no distraction from its stolid defense of the wall, but it honors its ancestors. The promise of a divine artifact of the clan's early days draws the children of the clan champion and the Kuni daimyō to the foreboding Shinomen forest.



## The Kami Hida

In their home in Tengoku, the Celestial Heavens above the sky, Lady Sun and Lord Moon had ten children, who were known as the Kami. In time, Lord Moon turned on his children, slaying one and causing the other nine to fall from their sacred home. Of those, all but one—Fu Leng—touched down in the Realm of Mortals. A dark flame of jealousy and resentment burned within Fu Leng's heart, a beacon to the evil powers imprisoned within the underworld. A sinister fate sent him crashing deep into the earth, all the way down to Jigoku, causing the Kings of Hell to lose control over their wards. The deep wound in the earth where he fell—the Festering Pit—warped the previously lush lands around it into the hellish Shadowlands and unleashed ravenous monsters and demons bent on destruction.

But the other Kami did not know this, thinking only that their brother had been tragically lost. With the peoples of the Mortal Realm gathering about them, the Kami held a tournament to select one of their number as the first leader of a new empire. Hida, the strongest of the Kami by far, smugly challenged his sister, Shinjo. Yet after a brief struggle, the agile Shinjo defeated Hida. Humiliated, Hida berated himself. He had fought clumsily and was unable to bring his great strength to bear. Shinsei, the "Little Teacher" and mentor to the Kami, told Hida that strength, by itself, was insufficient for victory.



## THE BIRTH OF OSANO-WO

In the thirtieth year of the War against Fu Leng, Hida began to despair of the grueling and interminable war against his misguided and wicked brother. At this time, he met a priest of the Thunder Dragon, named Hekima. She spoke with a deep wisdom and powerful conviction, and she offered Hida counsel. From her, Hida drew the courage and determination of the Thunder Dragon: the strengths needed to see the conflict through. A year after their first meeting, Hekima bore a son, whom she named Osano-wo. Not long after, Hekima departed on a pilgrimage. The histories have no record of her return.

Osano-wo was raised by Hida and Mashiko, his wife, amid the turmoil of war. The boy who would one day become the Fortune of Fire and Thunder greatly admired his older brother, Atarashi, and sought to emulate him as a mighty warrior. When the young Osano-wo learned of his brother's death on the Day of Thunder, it is said that he expressed a grief beyond the capacity of mere mortals, and that thunderstorms soaked the lands for a thousand li in all directions. Osano-wo never truly accepted that Atarashi was gone. Years later, he fashioned the armor Kikyo, which he intended as a gift upon his brother's eventual return.

Hida understood Shinsei's words and set about learning how to refine and focus his strength with strategy and cunning.

This new understanding served Hida well. As he traveled into the southernmost reaches of the Empire, his reputation as a powerful warrior preceded him. One by one, the warring tribes of this mountainous, inhospitable region swore fealty to Hida, and the Crab Clan was born.

It was just in time. Rumors of terrible incursions and rampaging monsters now rose from the south—from the Shadowlands—along with a stunning truth: Fu Leng yet lived. But the Kami's joy at their brother's survival soon faded, for when Fu Leng came to the Empire to parley, he brought with him a retinue of prideful and irreverent demons. Either unaware or uncaring of how Jigoku had corrupted him, he demanded that he be allowed to contest the rulership of the Empire, just as his siblings had done. The first Emperor, Hantei, accepted the challenge. Hantei's champion, Togashi, as was his right, chose all of the Empire and its peoples as his weapon. Furious, Fu Leng vowed to destroy the Empire denied to him and unleashed a terrible horde from the Shadowlands, the opening assault of what would become known as the First War.

## THE FIRST WAR

Hida, though, had expected treachery from his brother. The great horde rampaged north, until it smashed headlong into defenses prepared by Hida's followers in the Crab Clan. After a ferocious battle, the horde was driven back. So it went for the next decade, the Crab Clan ever standing grimly in the front lines, the Kami Hida and his followers an unbreakable rampart, holding back the seething tide of corruption.

Then, in one battle, Hida and his army saved a seaside village from a horde of Fu Leng's minions. Afterward, Hida met the leader of the village, a warrior named Mashiko. Marveling at her bravery and skill at arms, Hida soon fell in love with her. They married, and Mashiko bore the couple a son, who was named Atarashi.

The war raged on. Over and over again, Fu Leng's hordes attacked and were driven back. Each time, though, they gained ground, while more loyal defenders of Rokugan fell. The horde's numbers were without end, but those of the Empire were not. Finally, after forty-two years, the Empire faced a crisis: those few Crab scouts who had survived their forays into the Shadowlands reported that Fu Leng was marshaling the largest and most powerful army yet.

The grim truth was clear: the Crab, and the other defenders of the Empire, might slow this imminent assault, but they would not stop it. Rokugan would be overrun, its beauty extinguished by corruption and sin. Still, Hida grimly rallied his followers and prepared to face the onslaught. Not a single warrior bearing the Crab insignia quailed before their certain destruction. Gripping their weapons, they faced resolutely south and prepared for the end.

## THE DAY OF THUNDER

As the Empire faced its final defeat at the hands of Fu Leng's hordes, Shinsei came to the Kami with a bold plan. Seven mortals—each a champion of one of Hantei's siblings—would travel deep into the Shadowlands and confront Fu Leng himself. This was, Shinsei declared, the only way to save the Empire. At first, the Kami were doubtful, but they soon realized they had no other choice. Accompanied by Shinsei, the Seven Thunders struck out

into the Shadowlands on their desperate mission.

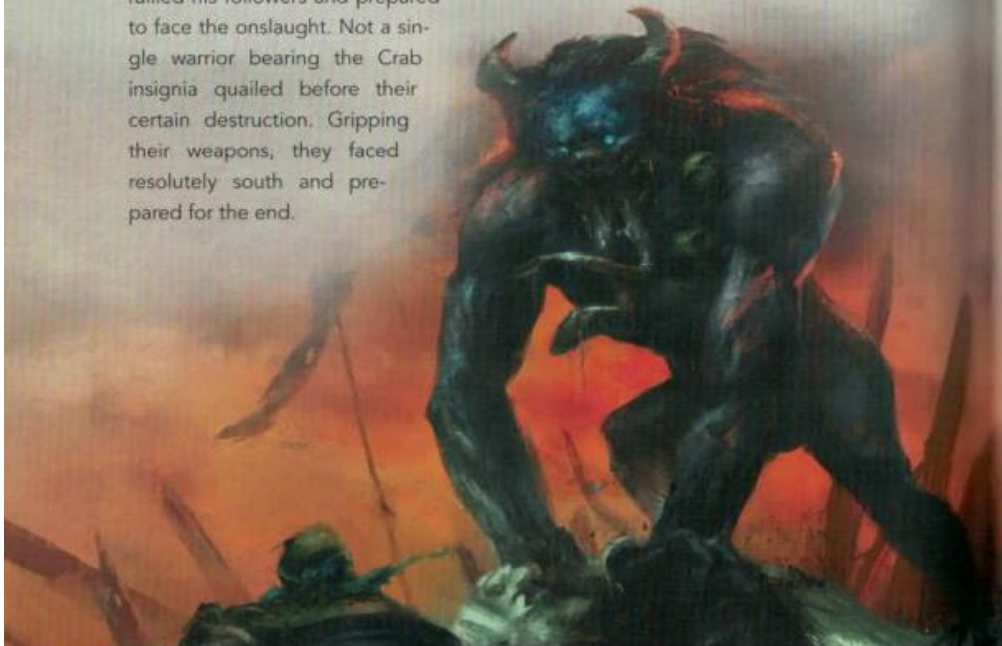
On what would become known as the Day of Thunder, the seven fought Fu Leng in a ferocious battle. The fallen Kami was eventually defeated, but at terrible cost. Twelve Black Scrolls were brought back to Rokugan by the only two survivors of the battle: Shosuro, the Scorpion Clan Thunder, and Shinsei himself. With Fu Leng's defeat, the Empire was saved from destruction.

It was now, in the Empire's most dire moment, that a miracle happened. Shinsei advocated a desperate gamble: sending a small party of heroes, known as Thunders, to bypass Fu Leng's armies and confront him directly. On the Day of Thunder, these heroes battled and finally defeated Fu Leng. The great horde was scattered, and the Empire was saved.

But the cost was terrible. Only Shinsei and one of the Thunders returned to the Empire. The rest had been slain in the battle against Fu Leng—and this included Hida's own son, Atarashi, who had been the Crab Clan Thunder.

## THE AFTERMATH

The Empire was saved, but there was little joy for Hida. Atarashi was gone, and his clan had suffered grievously, having borne the worst of the fighting. Worse, the threat was not ended. The Shadowlands remained, a blighted realm of nightmares that continued to haunt Rokugan. Hida swore that he would battle the Shadowlands until Lady Sun and Lord Moon themselves fell from the sky. Hantei, the first Emperor, codified this as the Crab's greatest duty to the Empire. Ever since, the Crab have stood as a bulwark against incursions that still rise from the Shadowlands, giving their lives and even their souls in a grim and endless battle against the darkness, that the Emerald Empire might endure.



## Defenders of the Empire

Throughout the First War, and in the centuries since, the Crab Clan has stood between the Empire and the endless nightmare of the Shadowlands. Since the Crab's founding by Hida, it has discharged its sacred duty to the Empire faithfully, albeit at terrible cost.

After the Day of Thunder, the Crab resolved never to allow such a threat to menace the Empire ever again. Under Hida's uncompromising eye, they built a network of fortifications along the Empire's southern border. Later known as the First Wall, these fortresses stood as implacable guardians—formidable strong-points unto themselves, but also bases from which armies could sortie and crush incursions from the Shadowlands. Now, as the clan and its defenses grew, Hida sought out the strongest and most capable of his followers among the Crab to act as his lieutenants. Hiruma, Kaiu, and Kuni each stepped forward, insisting they possessed the strength and abilities their Kami sought.

To test them, Hida sent them to find and defeat the Oni of the First Conflict, a fearsome demonic spirit left haunting the Shadowlands after Fu Leng's defeat. Kuni, who had studied and understood the Shadowlands and its vile inhabitants better than any, knew how to defeat the creature. Armed with this knowledge, Hiruma, a scout and hunter without equal, tracked and baited the oni, while Kaiu, an unparalleled blacksmith and artisan, crafted a sword named Kishu, the oni-cutting sword, to defeat it. When they returned from their quest, Hida named the three his chief lieutenants and advisors, and he allowed each to pass down their names to their descendants. To this day, the character and duties of each of these families—the Hiruma, Kaiu, and Kuni, as well as the Hida family—reflect the skills and temperament of their respective founders.

Later, the Crab were joined by the Yasuki, a family of cunning merchants and politicians that had defected from the Crane. The Yasuki also wage war for their clan, but they do so in the courts and markets of the Empire, gathering the resources so desperately needed in the great and endless war against the Shadowlands.

## A NEW THREAT

For the next seven hundred years, the descendants of Hida and his lieutenants braved the Shadowlands, discerning its attacks, allowing them to break on their ramparts and fortresses, then massing to attack and defeat them. As long as the Shadowlands incursions remained sporadic and uncoordinated, these efforts sufficed. However, in the eighth century, a new threat arose: a powerful oni lord as the Maw assembled the largest Shadowlands army since the First War

and flung it against the Empire. Most of the Crab lands, and all of those of the Hiruma family, were overrun. The Crab fell back, desperately seeking a new line of defense. Finally, after a feverish effort, they were able to build such a line: the towering Carpenter Wall. The Maw's army broke against this new Wall and was defeated. Once again, the Empire was saved.

In the years afterward, the Wall was expanded, refined, and improved. A new way of waging war, and even of thinking about war, permeated the Crab Clan: a way that focused on strong, linear, fixed defenses against which the Shadowlands hordes would simply break, like waves against a sea wall. When the Wall was finished, it was a grim miracle, stretching continuously across the Empire's southern marches. The Crab soon became like the very Wall they had built: stalwart and steadfast, intent on confronting every threat directly and defeating it outright. Such a sturdy and stubborn defense requires enormous determination and stupendous courage, two qualities of which the Crab have no lack. But it also allows for little flexibility and nuance, and it demands tremendous sacrifice from those who devote their lives to defending the Wall.

## THE DUTY OF THE CRAB

The duty of the Crab Clan is clear: to protect the Empire from the Shadowlands. Virtually every aspect of life among the Crab is shaped by this deceptively uncomplicated purpose. A favorite pastime of Crab children is Defend the Wall, a game in which some link arms and hold a line, while others try to break through

### THE GREAT CARPENTER WALL

When the Maw attacked, its strategic cunning, combined with the seemingly endless horde of monstrosities it commanded, proved more than a match for the Crab. The First Wall quickly failed, and the Maw's army drove on into the Empire. Only the desperate sacrifice of a Kuni shugenja named Osaku stopped the Maw. She called upon the elemental spirits and raised the River of the Last Stand into a rushing flood. Behind the raging waters, the Crab feverishly built a new defensive line, the towering Carpenter Wall. Once Osaku could no longer sustain her prayers to the elemental spirits, the new edifice was ready. The Maw's army broke against the Wall and was defeated.

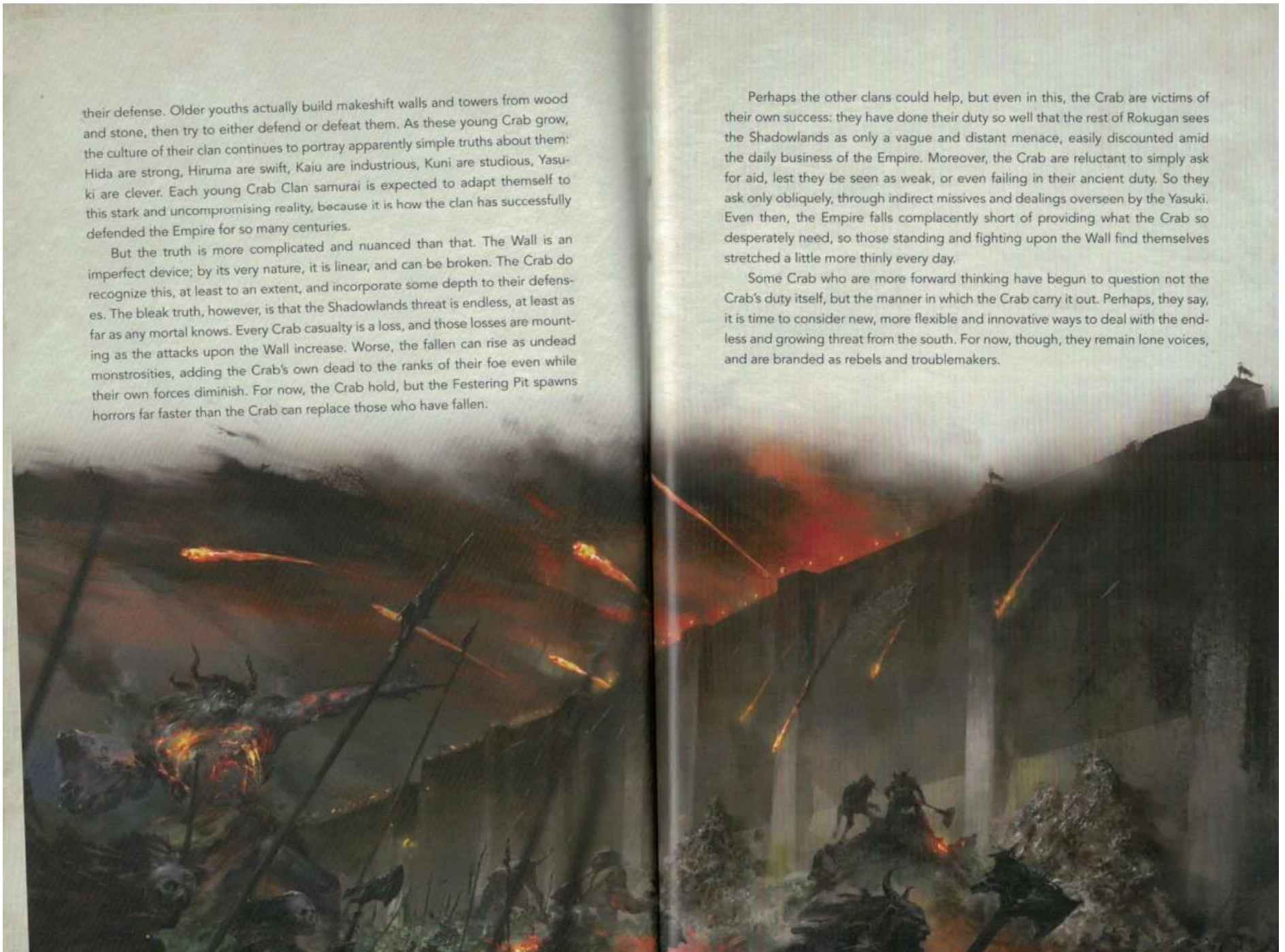
The Wall remains the Crab Clan's first and only line of defense: a contiguous, towering belt of towers and curtain walls. It resists attack after attack, but so it must, if the Empire is to survive.

their defense. Older youths actually build makeshift walls and towers from wood and stone, then try to either defend or defeat them. As these young Crab grow, the culture of their clan continues to portray apparently simple truths about them: Hida are strong, Hiruma are swift, Kaiu are industrious, Kuni are studious, Yasuki are clever. Each young Crab Clan samurai is expected to adapt himself to this stark and uncompromising reality, because it is how the clan has successfully defended the Empire for so many centuries.

But the truth is more complicated and nuanced than that. The Wall is an imperfect device; by its very nature, it is linear, and can be broken. The Crab do recognize this, at least to an extent, and incorporate some depth to their defenses. The bleak truth, however, is that the Shadowlands threat is endless, at least as far as any mortal knows. Every Crab casualty is a loss, and those losses are mounting as the attacks upon the Wall increase. Worse, the fallen can rise as undead monstrosities, adding the Crab's own dead to the ranks of their foe even while their own forces diminish. For now, the Crab hold, but the Festering Pit spawns horrors far faster than the Crab can replace those who have fallen:

Perhaps the other clans could help, but even in this, the Crab are victims of their own success: they have done their duty so well that the rest of Rokugan sees the Shadowlands as only a vague and distant menace, easily discounted amid the daily business of the Empire. Moreover, the Crab are reluctant to simply ask for aid, lest they be seen as weak, or even failing in their ancient duty. So they ask only obliquely, through indirect missives and dealings overseen by the Yasuki. Even then, the Empire falls complacently short of providing what the Crab so desperately need, so those standing and fighting upon the Wall find themselves stretched a little more thinly every day.

Some Crab who are more forward thinking have begun to question not the Crab's duty itself, but the manner in which the Crab carry it out. Perhaps, they say, it is time to consider new, more flexible and innovative ways to deal with the endless and growing threat from the south. For now, though, they remain lone voices, and are branded as rebels and troublemakers.



## Jade and the Shadowlands Taint

For over one thousand years, the horrific spiritual corruption known as the Shadowlands Taint has plagued the Empire. Those afflicted suffer abominable mutations, ever-deepening madness, and eventual, painful death. Even worse, dying while Tainted stands to imperil the very soul of the corrupted, consigning them to torment in the underworld.

Throughout the centuries, Rokugani scholars have been studying the Taint, desperate to understand it. This is a deeply perilous undertaking. Simple exposure to the Taint is enough to risk contracting it, and the Rokugani know of no way to remove it from a person who has become infected. Still, despite the terrible danger, scholars—especially among the Kuni family of the Crab Clan—have braved the Taint to learn whatever they can about it, so that the Empire will be better prepared to confront and defeat it.



## The Tragic Tale of the Nezumi

Imperial historians know that a number of civilizations flourished before the Kami fell from the Heavens and founded the Empire. This is viewed as little more than a curious fact; between the long passage of time and the natural wariness of Rokugani toward outsiders, little effort has been made to study these lost peoples. Those few Rokugani who are aware of the existence of the ratlike nezumi would never associate them with the advanced civilizations of the time before the Kami.

Until the Kami fell, the nezumi had a sophisticated civilization occupying much of what is now the Shadowlands. When Fu Leng plummeted from the Heavens, he fell upon the greatest city of the nezumi, destroying it and leaving a gaping crater, the Festering Pit. This catastrophic devastation, and the inexorable spread of the Shadowlands Taint that followed, twisted and corrupted the nezumi's lands. Plunged into a postapocalyptic nightmare, the survivors desperately fought merely to survive, until only vestiges remained, scattered into much-reduced tribes. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all is that, on some level, these remnants of the nezumi remember bits and pieces of their glorious past. They were once much more, they know, but that time is long and irretrievably gone, and this furtive existence on the edge of survival is all they have left.

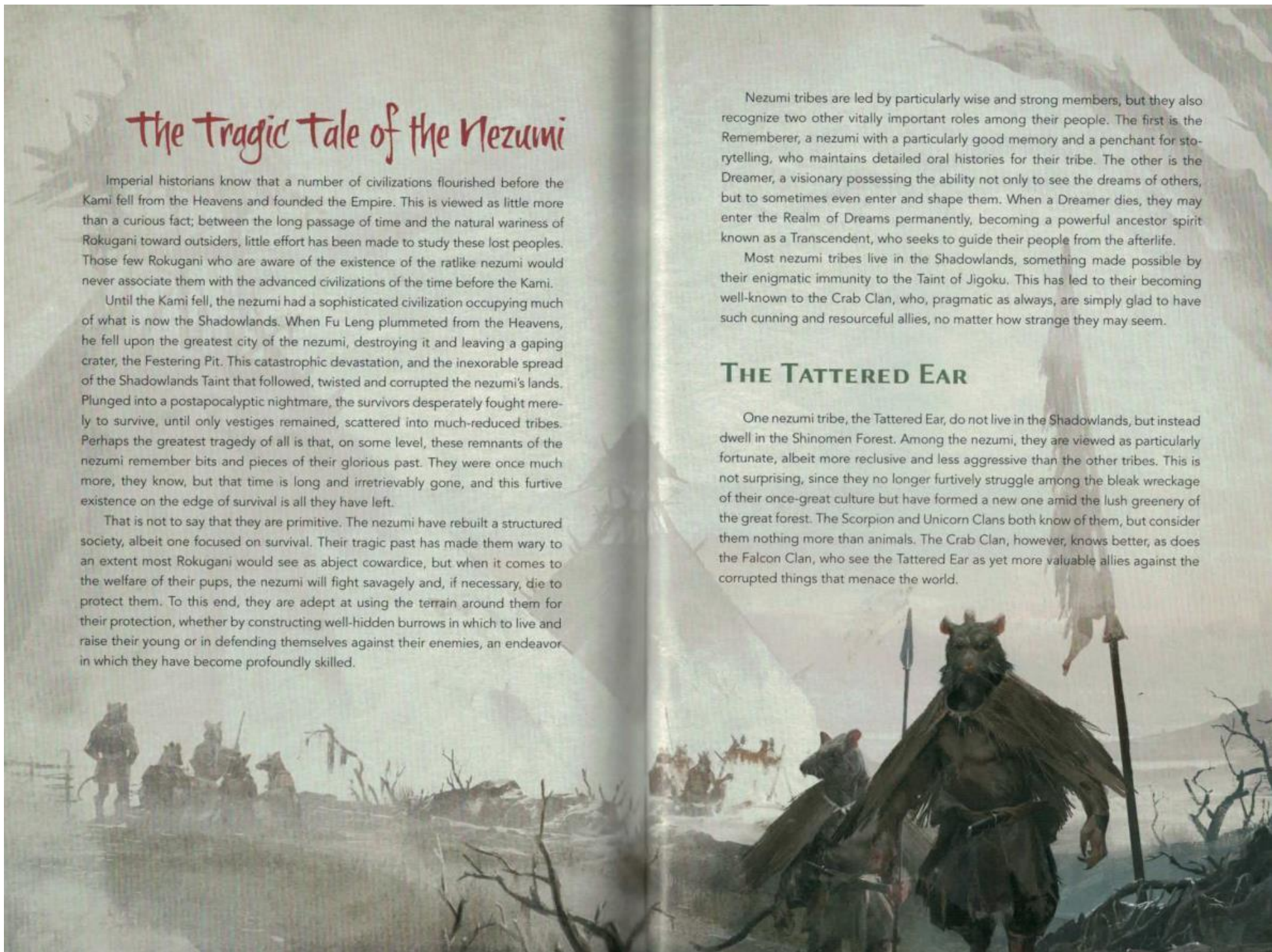
That is not to say that they are primitive. The nezumi have rebuilt a structured society, albeit one focused on survival. Their tragic past has made them wary to an extent most Rokugani would see as abject cowardice, but when it comes to the welfare of their pups, the nezumi will fight savagely and, if necessary, die to protect them. To this end, they are adept at using the terrain around them for their protection, whether by constructing well-hidden burrows in which to live and raise their young or in defending themselves against their enemies, an endeavor in which they have become profoundly skilled.

Nezumi tribes are led by particularly wise and strong members, but they also recognize two other vitally important roles among their people. The first is the Rememberer, a nezumi with a particularly good memory and a penchant for storytelling, who maintains detailed oral histories for their tribe. The other is the Dreamer, a visionary possessing the ability not only to see the dreams of others, but to sometimes even enter and shape them. When a Dreamer dies, they may enter the Realm of Dreams permanently, becoming a powerful ancestor spirit known as a Transcendent, who seeks to guide their people from the afterlife.

Most nezumi tribes live in the Shadowlands, something made possible by their enigmatic immunity to the Taint of Jigoku. This has led to their becoming well-known to the Crab Clan, who, pragmatic as always, are simply glad to have such cunning and resourceful allies, no matter how strange they may seem.

## THE TATTERED EAR

One nezumi tribe, the Tattered Ear, do not live in the Shadowlands, but instead dwell in the Shinomen Forest. Among the nezumi, they are viewed as particularly fortunate, albeit more reclusive and less aggressive than the other tribes. This is not surprising, since they no longer furtively struggle among the bleak wreckage of their once-great culture but have formed a new one amid the lush greenery of the great forest. The Scorpion and Unicorn Clans both know of them, but consider them nothing more than animals. The Crab Clan, however, knows better, as does the Falcon Clan, who see the Tattered Ear as yet more valuable allies against the corrupted things that menace the world.



## The Shinomen Forest

Much of the western border of the Empire is a sprawling, primal wilderness: the vast woodland known as the Shinomen Forest. Trackless and mysterious, the Shinomen Forest has a fearful reputation. Those who live in its shadow agree that it is intriguing, even alluring, to see it from afar, but that it is a place to be avoided in every other way.

At one time, scholars believe, the Shinomen Forest was part of a far larger forest, one that covered much of the world. Over time, this world-spanning forest receded, first because of changes in the land and the climate and, later, due to the encroachment of the Empire and the civilizations that preceded it. Now, only a few remnants of that immense, original wilderness remain: the Isawa Forest in the lands of the Phoenix; the Kitsune Forest, which borders the lands of the Crane; and the Shinomen Forest, larger and more wild than the others by far.

The scholars who study these ancient forests note that while they differ in detail, they all have a similar character. They are enigmas, haunted by spirits and gods, and are profoundly dangerous places. Some speculate that this is simply the nature of untamed lands: that without the stabilizing influence of mortal settlement, they attract otherworldly strangeness that otherwise has nowhere to flourish. Thresholds in the forest between the Mortal Realm, the Realm of Animals, and the Realm of Mischief allow dangerous supernatural beings to exert their cryptic influence. Other scholars, though, believe the reality is even more sinister. Remembering the time when the forest covered the world, they say, the remaining verdant enclaves are bitterly resentful of what has been lost. Now, the forest's simmering anger is expressed in myriad dangerous phenomena to punish those mortals who dare to pass beneath their eaves.

So it is that beyond the fact of its existence, the Shinomen Forest remains almost entirely unknown. Few expeditions have dared enter it, and fewer still have ventured far. Such expeditions have reported only a few generalized facts. The northern and eastern portion of the forest is rugged, apparently riven and shaped by whatever forces gave rise to the Spine of the World Mountains to the north. The trees there are fit for the rocky highlands: conifers such as pine, spruce, and hemlock dominate, their dead needles forming a thick carpet over the porous rock. To the west and south, the ground drops, becoming flatter, the soil deeper. This region has more hardwoods, such as oak, maple, and beech, interspersed with softwoods including cedar, birch, and yew. Many of these trees grow to colossal size, towering improbably tall for their species. Farther south, fruit trees such as apple and cherry become more common, but mortals must beware of eating from them; those who consume things from the forest often suffer strange effects. They may lose weeks, months, or even years of time, or they may simply



vanish altogether. Even more puzzling are the forest's ancient ruins: strange towers and walls of stone, with smooth ramps taking the place of stairs. That a civilization was able to make a home in the forest is remarkable, but the fact that it now exists only as overgrown ruins is ominously telling.

For such is the danger of the Shinomen Forest. A multitude of spirits lurk among its shadowed groves and remote glades, glad for a chance to confuse, trap, or even kill mortals who presume to enter their realm. The forest's lowest-lying areas are among the most dangerous. Although most water drains into the numerous creeks and streams or into the great River of the Sky—a vast watercourse that repeatedly vanishes into huge underground caverns—the forest's low areas still have become trackless, waterlogged swamps. The worst of these are the Shadowed Swamps, which were Tainted by ancient battle and shift their location without warning. These bleak swamps are an especially vexing threat; some travelers never encounter them, while others find themselves suddenly mired in their midst.



## SPIRITS AND MONSTERS

Even a short distance within the borders of the Shinomen Forest, the civilized world suddenly seems a distant, almost surreal thing. Here, in the deep silence beneath the towering trees, lie pathways to other realms. The elemental spirits that inhabit all things are more restive, while strange beings from the Realm of Animals and Realm of Mischief stalk the wilderness. These otherworldly beings are not evil, but they are unpredictable and dangerous, particularly to mortals. Perhaps none embody this as much as the *onikuma*, a colossal bear that embodies the untamed, destructive potential of nature—the storm or avalanche, the earthquake or wildfire. Just as these terrifying phenomena cannot truly be confronted or defeated, so the *onikuma* can only be avoided or—perhaps—survived.

There are many more subtle things that lurk within the Shinomen Forest, however. Spirits watch from the gloom among the lush foliage, waiting for an opportunity to prey upon mortals in ways that conform to their nature. Some are essentially harmless, if unnerving, making strange sounds or appearing as distant lights. Others delight in playing tricks or making trails shift and change, confusing and confounding their mortal targets and taking great joy in their discomfiture. Still others have sinister motives, seeking to draw mortals away into remote places, leaving them stranded or lost. And for some, their hatred of mortals is so intense they seek to harm or even kill those who intrude into what they see as their realm.

It may seem, then, that the beings from the Shinomen Forest and those from the Shadowlands are not too dissimilar; their origins may be different, but they both are dangerous. They are very different, though. The Shadowlands monstrosities infused with the powers of Jigoku are truly evil—they are dedicated not just to the destruction of the mortals they hate, but also to the corruption of their very souls. From the lone goblin to the towering corpse-construct called the *gashadokuro*, these Tainted beings essentially exist for the purpose of destroying all of the Mortal Realm. The presence of Tainted Shadowlands beings in Shinomen Forest makes it even more dangerous; as if the myriad wild spirits were not enough peril for those who enter the forest, the Tainted powers of the Shadowed Swamps add a far deeper and more terrifying aspect to the vast, primal wilderness.

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### THE MYSTERIOUS NAGA

Recently, the Empire has become aware of the *naga*, an enigmatic race of serpent people who were the apparent architects of the strange ruins found in the Shinomen. Remarkably, some yet live and have been encountered by Rokugani samurai. They remain elusive, so their numbers are unknown. The presence on the Empire's border of an alien and apparently advanced race, with unknown strength and motivations, is a cause for even greater vigilance over the Shinomen Forest.