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Welcome to

Blood: Path of the Shinobi

...and thank you for letting us into your gaming world!

Pleased to Meet You

Blood is a game of tabletop roleplaying, played with friends - at home, outside, or in your favorite gaming shop. In **Blood** you take on the role of a Shinobi, a motley assortment of ninja freedom-fighters striving to bring even a single ray of light into the dark world of Riku. A world dominated by cruel corporations, authoritarian police states, and a religion of subjugation. For the nine Lineages of the Shinobi, there's no shortage of wrongs to be righted.

We give you the world. You fill it with shadows.

An Elastic World

Unlike many other contemporary roleplaying games, **Blood** is formatted a little differently than what the average experienced gamer may be used to. Instead of cranking out huge tomes of lore for our players to pour through and sort out, we provide a neatly arranged core of a game, and guide you through it with a simple, easy-to-digest process. What other games do in 400 pages, we do in 200! Our goal isn't to create a world where every detail and niche is thought out before hand and delivered to our players as immovable cannon material. Instead, it's an *elastic world*, one where there's a strong and easily understandable base to work from, and you as players and Gamemasters stretch that world out to suit your needs, and tailor it to your whims!

Blood is a short, concise manual that puts you on a path of action, intrigue, and suspense. Our system is designed to be simple and uncomplicated, great for experienced gamers who just want to jump in and play, first-timers who don't want to be overwhelmed, and the all-important Gamemaster who wants to run a game without being bogged down by technicalities, semantics, and min/max'ing (to use some dreaded gamer slang).

This is a world we've built for you, the gaming community. Its stripped down, punk-rock gaming, without lengthy chapters that drone on about content you don't care about. It's just the good stuff.

So come on in, stretch the boundaries of reality, and slather on as much or as little icing on this sword-wielding, guerilla-warring, freedom-fighting cake we've baked just for *you*!

Customize Your Lore

In addition to the core manual provided here, you can also find additional material available through our website and our app! Everything from expanded Lineages, more characters, great gobs of magic, sample campaigns, and loads of gear, equipment and loot!

The Path:

ACT I

Creeeeek...

Arshi winced hard as the loose plank of old wood groaned under his six-year-old foot. The brightly embroidered silk slippers he wore did nothing to spirit away the noises of his clumsy feet, as his grandmother promised him they would when she gave them to him last New Years.

“I bet they make the boards even creakier,” the boy half-thought, half-whispered out loud, *“I bet that’s exactly what they do...what a dirty trick.”*

He held his body still, his breath a ragged whisper of anticipation, waiting, listening, for *someone* to hear the noise and investigate. But in the moments that passed, he heard no evidence that he was in danger of being discovered, and slowly – so slowly – made his way forward through the dark apartment hallway.

As he came to the doorway of his destination, he gently eased it open with the small pads of his fingers, and tentatively peered inside. Arshi could make out the heaving silhouette on the bed, and the room was filled with the rhythmic rev’ing of engine-like snores. The boy rocked back on his heels a few times, rev’ing his own imaginary engine, then fired himself into the shadows, and leapt like a star of track and field onto the soft squat bed, pouncing onto the slumbering mound beneath all those thick covers.

“Nai Nai! Nai Nai! Nai Nai! I can’t sleep! I can’t sleep! I need a story!”, Arshi hollered like a battle cry over and over, bouncing with the sadistic glee of a child.

With a deft maneuver that belied her advanced age, the newly awoken grandmother gripped the thick blanket beneath her grandson’s feet and whipped it out from under him, sending the child sprawling to the bed in a fit of surprise and giggles. *“Perhaps you cannot sleep, my noisy little burglar”*, the elderly woman groaned, her voice still rusted from sleep, *“but I was sleeping just fine until you showed up. I was even having a wonderful dream.”*

“What was it about, Nai Nai?”

“Oh, I’m already starting to forget. It’s funny how dreams are that way, Arshi, the more you talk about them, the more about them you forget. Ahh, I’ve already forgotten most of it, now…”

“Well then you better hurry up and tell me!” the little boy blurted out with piercing excitement.

“Oh, my, no, I don’t think that dream will do at all. How about I tell you about a different dream?”, she inquired.

“What dream is that, Nai Nai?”

The old woman smiled a kindly smile known only to grandmothers and confessors, “This dream is called the Yume, and it’s a dream everybody has had, and everybody has forgotten.”

“What’s that mean?”, Arshi asked, his voice muffled as he burrowed under the covers for a suitable spot to cuddle into with his grandmother.

“Hush up, get comfy, close your eyes, and I’ll tell you.

“The Yume is a dream from long, long ago, even though we don’t know very much about the people who dreamed it in the first place…”

“How come?”, Arshi interrupted.

“Because they lived so long ago that everything they left behind to show us who they were is all gone now – it was gobbled right up by time itself.”

“Oh!”

“Oh, indeed, now don’t interrupt.

“Now the Yume isn’t rightly a proper dream, it’s just what we call the time when those folks were still alive, living their lives, building their world, making friends, making enemies, all of that. We call it a dream because that’s just what it’s like – when you’ve just had a dream, and you wake up, and after a while, you forget the details. That’s what the Yume is like. It was so long ago, that no one rightly remembers all the details, and they all get jumbled up each time someone tells the story.”

“Does that mean you’re going to jumble up the story, Nai Nai?”

The grandmother leaned back into her overstuffed pillow with a mixture of amusement and surprise, “You know what, Arshi, I think that’s what it does mean. I guess it’s not much of a story, after all.”

“So why does anyone talk about it at all if no one remembers it right?”

Nai Nai screwed up her face in cartoonish thought, “That’s also a good point. How old did you say you were again?”, she asked sarcastically.

“Six!”, the boy answered without understanding his grandmother’s tone.

“Bull spit. You’re sixty if you’re a day, and this is a trick,” she smiled wryly, “...and tricksters can just go to bed.”

“No, no! I’m six, really!” The little boy lunged for a nearby shelf in the darkness, and produced a small egg-shaped shell he knew was there. He depressed a small glowing green button on the bottom of the object, and a holographic projection of a woman holding a baby in a hospital, beamed above the bed, as clearly as the smiles on everyone’s faces. “See! That’s me and mom! You were there, you know I’m six, Nai Nai! You know it!”

The grandmother laughed and calmed the child down, nestling him back into his cocoon of blankets, “I know, I know. But let me ask you this, smart guy, how much do you remember about being a baby inside your mama?”

“Uhhh...”

“That was rhetorical.”

“Uhhh...”

“It means you don’t have to answer.”

“Uhhh...”

“We’ll come back to that another time – but I take it back, I don’t think you’re sixty anymore. What I’m saying is that even though you don’t remember being born, it’s important to know about it – what happened, who was there – right?”

“Right!...right?”

“Right. That’s how it is with the Yume. Even though no one who remembers that time is alive anymore, and even though not much of who they were or what they did is around anymore, either, it’s important that we as people try and remember the past. Even if it’s hard.”

Arshi sighed with exasperation and slumped into a pillow, “So what’s there to know about the Yume?”

Nai Nai put her arm around her grandson and pulled him in close, “Alright, for little boys who will grow up into big strong men, what’s important to know that the Yume time wasn’t bad, or good. It was just a time of people from which we all come from. The things they thought and the way they talked are probably the only things they passed down to us, but that’s the mystery, because we don’t even know that for sure. All we really know is that at the end of their dream, it was like waking up for them. There are some stories written

from shortly after that time about a great big something that put an end to the world they knew, and made the world we have now.”

“And what was that great big something, Nai Nai?”

“I told you, we don’t know. But the story goes there wasn’t quite so much water as there is now, and there were many, many, many more people than there are now. And the waters were as blue as the sky, in every ocean and every sea.”

“Blue oceans? You’re so silly, Nai Nai”, the comment came under his little breath, as his little eyes began to droop. “...you’re so silly, Nai Nai.”

“Holy Eight, did you guys just hear what Arshi just said!? He said his Nai Nai’s silly! Holy Eight, what a fucking pussy!”

Arshi’s eyes shot open. He was face down on his school desk, drool pooling around his open mouth. Part dream or part memory, Arshi could still vividly recall the scene of himself snuggling with his grandmother ten years ago, as vividly as he could hear the rising tide of taunts from his classmates.

“Arshi, straighten up,” his teacher snapped from the front of the gleaming white class room, “This is history class, not nostalgic nap time. You can mumble about your silly grandmother on someone else’s time, but not mine.”

The teenager’s face flushed with embarrassment as the jeers of his peers rose then settled back down at the command of his pinched-face instructor – a man who looked like a turtle that had lost its shell. “Now let’s pick up where we left off yesterday, with the beginning of recorded history, or the Ijuu period, the time of the Great Migration.”



CHAPTER ONE

A Tangled Web of Lives

World History and Geography

Those who begin their journey into the realm of Riku do so comforted only by the knowledge they are never alone – for Death is an ever constant companion. It is a journey of a thousand steps, and each step takes one further onto the path of murder, betrayal, revenge, and the true meaning of honor. The life of a Shinobi can be long and legendary, or nothing more than a brief ribbon of smoke in the wind – it all depends on you and your conviction. What is the price YOU are willing to pay for the most precious substance in the world? What would you pay for freedom?

The game of **Blood: Path of the Shinobi** is set on the continent of Riku – a vast and sprawling majesty of millions of square miles, encompassing lush farmlands of emerald fields; stark, frozen canyons slicing their way through mountains peaked with snow of crystalline dust; broad expanses of arid scrublands; and a shore lined with fortress-like cliffs staring out onto a vast violet sea roiling with unfathomable creatures and gurgling geysers of gaseous poisons. Inhabiting this land is a sparse population peppered across the map, hemmed in by inhospitable terrain and two massive city centers that mark the realm of civilization.

The people of this land are condemned to living under the yolk of ideology, bound to either a city of material wealth, or one of zealous dogma. Worse still, both use the same brutal machinery to bind the people to their will – a militarized feudal system. For the people living under these twin regimes, there are few instances of hope to look to. But there is always hope within the shadows.

There *are* brave and bold freedom fighters in the land of Riku, though few in number. This is the path that you as a player are set upon; the path of bloodshed, mysticism, guerilla warfare, and steel where it counts. Players in the game of **Blood** take on the role of the Shinobi; rebel warrior-mystics who battle against the machinations of the powers that be to gain some semblance of freedom, both for themselves and for their people. Hopelessly outnumbered, these ninja use stealth, deception, magic, ingenuity, and the loyalty of true friends to overcome impossible obstacles to achieve this dream.

Using This Section

What Does It All Mean?

This chapter is meant to give Gamemasters and players a strong sense of the characteristics of the land their characters inhabit, and of the four most prominent factions of Riku: the cities of Loha Prasat and Zaibatsu; the various feudal bodies that make up the military arm of the regimes and directly enslave its populace; and the rebel warriors who strive against the plagues and plights caused by these regimes, the Shinobi.

Each section will take you through a descriptive, but relatively concise overview of a given faction, including their way of life, motivations, and basic structure. Cumulatively these four factions make up all the major players in the world of Riku, and will give a Gamemaster some very large building blocks from which to construct their stories, and give players a firm understanding of who their people are, who the enemy is, and how all these wildly varied people will interact in-game. Lastly is a brief lesson in cartography, the chapter delves into the actual lay of the land, and the dimensions and regions of the continent of Riku.

Dive In, the Water's Fine

*Introductions and flowery descriptions aside,
the time has come to meet the people of Riku.*

A Brief History of Riku

To know who the people of Riku are today, it is necessary to know who they once were, both in times past and not so long ago, at all.

For the folk of this land, history is an elusive query – one which many do not even bother to pursue. None the less, though, it does exist. For you the reader the journey back in time will be a simpler matter than for the hapless peasantry of Riku, who are denied their heritage by the same unscrupulous system that denies them their freedom, and sometimes even their basic humanity. As this chapter unfolds you will learn more about the poignant tales and details of ages past, but it will serve you well to know the basic stream of events.

The true origin story of Riku has been lost to time and memory. Only half-remembered tales of a great and turbulent civilization that once spread across land, sea and sky are all that are left, and such tales are as much faerie tale as oral history. All that is known for certain is that this era of humanity came to a catastrophic end. What was the cause of this apocalypse? No one knows – there is only speculation and the telling of tall tales to fill the gaps. All the same, calamity befell the civilization of old, and brought down their order, their way of life, and their entire world.

Yet humans are a tenacious breed. There was a concentrated effort for survival made by some to escape the cataclysm consuming the old world. A small fraction of the population managed to construct one last great wonder, built from the collective successes of that dying culture. It was the zenith of their science and technology – a fleet of great air ships, known as Arcs. These Arcs would house the remnants of humanity and carry them into the sky to wait out the devastation, then settle back to the land below, leaving its occupants the daunting task of rebuilding.

Who built the Arcs, and how they accomplished such a monumental task, are some of the very few questions that the modern inhabitants of Riku still bother to ask. So far, answers are not forthcoming, or if they are, the truth is being tightly controlled by forces who fear its dissemination. Neither is it known how long the Arcs remained in a state of orbital refuge. It is only known that when the time came for the landing of the Arcs, the fleet had split into two factions: one anchored in materialism, the other given over to the power of faith; and both consumed by the systemic corruption of egotism and ambition.

When the Arcs came to rest on the tortured land, the factions chose separate locations from which to build their versions of utopia. These two distinct and separate visions of the future became juggernauts of ideology, crushing any opposition, and raising the two great cities from the scrapped remains of the hulking airborne fleet that had saved their wretched way of life.

What could not be anticipated was that there were, in fact, survivors of the apocalypse on the land. Simple people with a simple way of life, who simply had the will and heart to survive the turmoil. The coming of the Arcs heralded the shadow war that would end their stark and tranquil existence. Much as the meeting of these serene “primitives” would challenge the total and absolute control which the founders of the great cities expected to enjoy. It was a clash of cultures that would spiral into the most epic conflict of the modern age. A conflict kept secreted and concealed, until its boundaries boil and explode in cathartic revolution.

The Shinobi:

Shadow Folk of the Mountains

Beginnings and Endings

Beyond folk lore, legend, and a torrent of oral history, the question hangs in the air of Riku – who are the Shinobi? In the simplest of terms, they are the last of a people forgotten by history and ignored by their fellow man, sentenced to annihilation in the name of progress. Where once they were nothing more than loose bands of proud and simple nomads, they have been forged in the crucible of conflict into a sophisticated culture of guerilla war. Though fragmented into tribal bloodlines and divided by philosophy and politics, they all share a prime directive of survival. To outrun, outlast and outmaneuver their oppressors, and those who would see them ground to gristle by the wheel of fate. The Shinobi are the monkey wrench to that great metaphysical wheel.

The old stories tell little of who the Shinobi once were before the founding of the two great cities. Their people were mountain folk, eking out the most basic of existences far from the reach of civilization. Little was spoken of them for little was known of them, and even the very name of that indigenous culture has been lost to the mists of time. Their reclusiveness kept them safe from the ancient cataclysms that laid waste to the old world, but also marked them for doom, for their simple mountain kingdom was the refuge sought by those aboard the arks. When the great skyships descended back onto the earth, their envoys left no room for negotiation, nor compromise, nor simple humanity. It was a conflict of resources, and the people of the ark would not be denied a second chance at their way of life because a miniscule population of back-woods primitives posed an obstacle.

There was war – brief and brutal. The people of the mountains were cast from their ancient homes, their lives shattered, their bloodlines broken, and the shadow of time swept over them, swallowing their legacy on this world.

Blood Reforged

Modern Shinobi mark the time of their culture beginning from a point known as the Mouth of Shadow – the moment when the Arks landed and scattered the people of the old world. It is in this moment when Shinobi truly feel their people were born. The displaced mountain folk went their separate ways, a few groups who continued to fear pursuit from their tormentors retreated to any corner of Riku they could find refuge in. Others, far too many others, melded with the slim and bedraggled population that had survived the old cataclysms and remained in Riku's interior. As the Arks were torn down and the two great cities rose in their places, the forces of the cities descended into the land now known as the verdant expanse, and began herding the scraps of humanity they found there into camps and villages. They broke them there, like the spirits of wild horses, and turned them to a life of suffering and servitude.

These broken people were consolidated and divided as their new masters chose – some were collected into labor gangs and brought to the cities, while many more were split apart and distributed across a newly fabricated feudal map. Friends were lost, families torn apart, lifetimes and generations of bonds were broken.

Those who fled to the far flung reaches of the continent watched in silent horror, helpless to ease the plight befouling their people, as well as those they had never before met, or even previously avoided. Though separated by leagues of land, each of these newly minted tribes vowed to put an end to their helplessness, and to raise victors out of a sea of victims. New families were bonded. New oaths sworn and allegiances forged. The old tribes were gone, and this was the dawn of the Lineages.

A People's Mark

As the majority of the indigenous people of Riku were subjugated into the familiar class of peasants known today, the first Lineages were coming into their own. They drew from the mysticism of their ancestors to forge new types of weapons and powers with which to combat their enemies with. They developed philosophies of war that guided their every-day life, and would set before them the missions and tactics needed for their survival. As the years eased by, still the forces of the cities pursued them – but each year fewer and fewer of the hunters returned to their cities with prizes, and after a time, few began to return at all. The name shadow folk first arose at this time – and it was whispered in fear. The Shinobi had successfully honed their edge in the deep wilderness, and proved their worth with a mounting pile of victories over bounty hunters, slavers, and militarized bands of genocidal maniacs.

Failure and fear began to guide the decisions of the great cities, and they ceased the expansion of their new “civilization”, and began to focus on protecting and consolidating the great swath of interior they had so far secured for themselves. Hunter/killer patrols for the lost mountain folk ceased all together, and military bodies were reorganized to guard their solidified territories and keep the populations in line. As the cities drew into a tight ball of defensive paranoia, the shadows of the mountains began to slide into their realm. The Shinobi, emboldened by success, began to infiltrate the interior of Riku, seeking out lost friends and relatives. Those they found were largely hollow husks of their former selves, resigned to a life of slavery. But some – some – remembered the old ways, and longed for their freedom. When they encountered these new Lineages, they could not help but be impressed with their evolution, and the first underground connections between Shinobi and peasant were formed.

Soon, very soon, there arose a clandestine network across the land. Old friends and extended relatives of the Shinobi, enslaved in servitude, gratefully provided the freedom fighters with what resources they could spare. Whether it be caches of weapons and ammunition, safe houses for the hunted and beleaguered, or even the spread of misinformation. These first networks would become the bulwark for success for today's shadow folk, and reform the old bonds these separated peoples once shared.

A Price to Pay

The secretiveness of these networks would not last long. Contracts, bounties, and all matter of bribery and temptation led some peasants to betray the Shinobi, turning them over to authorities sometimes for as little as a few handfuls of rice. The blade of betrayal soon became the one Shinobi feared most.

Where some villages could be easily coerced with money, resources, or special privileges, others proved incorruptible by the great cities, and these places bore the full wrath of the feudal military complex. Whole communities were slaughtered, their towns razed, and their land poisoned. Efforts by the powers that be to wipe the Shinobi clean from the slate of history intensified, forcing still more evolution from the shadow folk. The Shinobi reacted by furthering their infiltrations, abandoning the wild lands where they trained and hid in secret, and moved fully into the heart of Riku – onto the front lines of the shadow war.

The divergent philosophies of the Lineages truly began to separate them from one another at this juncture. Some held firm that it was the peasants who they had come to fight for, and it is among them they must stay, in the feudal lands, warring directly with this system of enslavement. Others argued that they must bring the fight to the source of the corruption, and divided themselves between the infiltrating the two cities of Loha Prasat and Zaibatsu. Those who forsook the cities pleaded with their kin not to take such a path, that they would surely loose themselves to their new environments, and corruption would follow shortly. But the city-bound Shinobi were adamant, and their focus could not be deterred. Still other, much smaller, Lineages, fell in under the influence of the larger cliques, and scattered themselves under the respective umbrellas of the major nine Lineages. The price to pay for bringing down their hated foes from within could very well be that they lose themselves to those very machinations.

Dawn of Shadow

Today the war of shadow rages on – a boiling cauldron of magma waiting to burst through a thin and crumbling crust of concealment.

Despite the horrors and atrocities visited upon them by their masters, there are still many within the peasant class that would gladly die or even face torture, if it meant lending meaningful aid to even a single Shinobi. The underground network of support within the lower castes is not as strong as it was in the early days of the war, and betrayal is still a constant threat, but that network still serves as life blood to the war efforts of the shadow folk.

The network is not nearly as strong in the cities as it is in the verdant expanse. The peasantry have largely been assimilated into their new parent culture, and it is a far smaller number that see their new city homes for the prisons that they are. Urban Shinobi must work twice as hard, and be twice as careful, at cultivating these all-important alliances.

Likewise, the rulers of the two cities have adapted their tactics to deal with the shadow folk as well. Soldiers are more prepared to deal with covert operations and counter-operations than they were in those first days of conflict. Technologies to further the extermination of the Shinobi have been rapidly advanced by Zaibatsu, while Loha Prasat draws upon ancient and cruel powers to see the souls of the shadow folk snuffed out.

Shadow Play

The very first of the Lineages once fought only for survival. The modern Shinobi fights for much more – they see a glimmer of hope that the great cities may yet fall. It is unlikely they can be wiped from the map, but their grip can be broken with time and effort. It is not just survival they fight for, but a life worth surviving – freedom becomes the only thing worth fighting and dying for.

The tactics the shadow folk employ to affect this outcome are as varied as the Lineages themselves, and are the foundation for stories told within the game of **Blood**.

Zaibatsu:

Towers of Greed

The city of Zaibatsu is a bustling metropolis on the scale of the ancient cities (or the tales told of them, at any rate), but its vast and complex infrastructure is run by capitalistic enterprises known collectively as “Corp”. This is, however, somewhat of a misnomer. Even though they all share one parent corporation, the giant businesses which run the city compete with one another for influence and profits. However none of these positions of power are static; corporations routinely absorb or depose one another on their climb to the top, and the top five corporations which ultimately run the city often change – too much change is paced and tempered by savvy executives; customers are notoriously disapproving of any major changes or interruptions to their services.

It's Just Business:

The Go

The top five corporations are called “Go”, or sometimes “GoCorp”. Each one provides and controls an important service to the city, and at all costs maintains a vice-like grip on their business; a balance between fending off waves of aggressive up-and-comers, and keeping the customer happy. Each individual corporation is then supported by a network of “companies”, which are smaller businesses that are either contracted out or bought out to serve the corporation. It is the dream of any company to rise up through the executive ranks and join the Go, but like any daring dream, it is often attempted and seldom achieved. More commonly, companies grow in size and importance to their parent corporation, enough so that they may leverage a better deal for themselves. Once incorporated into the core, they often restructure themselves as a “middle-man” corporation, which then oversees the operations of companies they in turn assemble, attract or control at the behest of the parent corporation.

This hierarchy can quickly become nearly incomprehensibly complicated, as different companies and corporations within the same structure constantly shift positions up and down the ladder of power. Positions can change so quickly that charting and deciphering who owns or controls who has become a business unto itself.

At the bottom of this ladder are freelancers. These are individual people who owe nothing to anyone, and are beholden to no corporation. Within Zaibatsu, where city-run services ensures everyone has a career (whether they like it or not), freelancers are viewed with a mix of distrust and envy. It's difficult to trust someone who doesn't neatly fit into the system, and somehow has managed to circumvent it; yet there is jealousy for someone who also is their own boss. Freelancers are the exception that proves the rule that all are gears in the living machine of the city; anyone without a purpose will be given a purpose if they don't find one on their own, and quickly.

<i>Status</i>	<i>Description</i>
Executive Corporation	Chief Member of GoCorp, known as the Chief Executive
GoCorp Board	The other four members besides the Chief Executive (Finance, Operations, Security and Information Officers)
Mid-Corp	Smaller corporation with several companies under it
Companies	Guild-like for profit organizations that serve a corporation voluntarily or involuntarily
Freelancers	Individuals which belong to no company or corporation

Up the Down Corporate Ladder

The corporate ladder is mirrored by the social ladder. Those with the greatest amount of wealth and influence form the social elite, living among the upper-levels of spires and high rises that form their own palace in the clouds. Beneath them, in various shades of economic gray, is the middle class. Depending on the corporation the extent of this class can vary, but a reasonable estimate is that about one third of the city's population fills this economic niche. Like the elite, they live high above ground level (the higher the better – and indicates a level of success), and fill roles from mid-level office jobs to civic workers. At ground level you have a class of working poor. Those who occupy menial or entry level positions, almost always for small companies or the *lowest* level of a major corporation.

Beneath even this social strata is another; those who exist without the benefit of citizenship. These include prisoners, and the otherwise indebted who have been set onto forced labor camps and farms. As well as the psychotic street gangs that occupy the city's subterranean zones. Farms, camps

and prison populations are filled out with those from the lowest level of society, or those from outside Zaibatsu who have been forcibly conscripted. The city releases few from this slave caste, and those that do escape almost never return to their previous life, instead giving into rage and revenge by joining the tribal society of gangs that lives out of sight and out of purview of the highest echelons of the Go.

Highest Level:

The Cloud Palace

The Cloud Palace is the glittering crown high atop the city of Zaibatsu. It is a sleek and shining network of palisades, hanging-gardens, floating avenues, and homes and accommodations that would make a sultan blush. It is also the location of the five most opulent offices in the city, those of the GoCorp. Security here is incredibly high, and all manner of surveillance devices constantly scan and identify anyone traveling through the level.

Mid Level:

Fudan Yun

Fudan Yun, or the “cloud’s burden”, is a broad, economically gray area, beginning several stories above street level, and tapering off near the base of the Cloud Palace. It is home to the city’s middle class, which covers a very broad spectrum. Likewise, the living conditions in this level are equally broad and gray. Typically, the closer one is to the street, the worse off they are for it. Homes and apartments become increasingly shabbier the lower one travels, and as the altitude drops, so does security and police presence. Most of the people who live in Fudan Yun are as morally gray as their economic status – their concerns pivot around their station in the city, and how they can become more upwardly mobile, both literally and figuratively. This level also is home to massive sprawling malls and shopping centers, grocery mega stores and public buildings such as libraries, museums, and galleries. Though restaurants are very popular, the quality of food and general cleanliness follows the economic standards of their particular elevation. In general, Fudan Yun is a more accurate mirror of the mores of Zaibatsu – the chief concern is material and self-centered, and people there are more concerned with helping themselves rather than the problems of others.

Ground Level:

Hard Street

The Garbage Truck:

The shining light of hope on Hard Street rides a garbage truck: the City Sanitation Department. To be a garbage man in Zaibatsu is a very different calling than one might expect. Their job is to take care of the trash, and that's just what they do. Sanitation vehicles are massive armored tanks, hauling convoys of containers for all the various refuse they encounter. More importantly, these convoys are bristling with high-powered weapons and slathered in thick armor plating. Sanitation crews are highly trained combatants, armed with an array of sophisticated weaponry, much of which is engineered by the crews themselves. It's not just their job to pick up garbage, but to keep the streets clear of any signs of the criminal element, too – “trash” is a many faceted word for the CSD. On Hard Street, the thundering rumble of a garbage convoy sends crooks and dregs scurrying for cover. The most coveted apartments, homes and storefronts are those on a main CSD route.



The ground level of Zaibatsu, commonly and collectively referred to as “Hard Street”, is a sprawling open sewer of humanity in some of its worst conditions. It is a terrible ghetto, where the streets are sometimes packed with masses of the city’s poor, shoulder-to-shoulder. The only businesses that manage to keep their doors open are liquor stores and pawn shops. There is little semblance of culture down here, and the people living on this level struggle and scrap just to make it in the city. Crime is rampant, and police are virtually unheard of. In some places, order is kept by small-time gangs that carve out a few blocks of territory here and there, pretending to rob the rich and give to the poor, but mostly organize local pick pockets and drug dealers.

Subterranean Level:

Understreets

For those that thought Hard Street was bad, there's the ever-so-much worse Understreet. Located in the vast network of caverns and sewers beneath the surface of Zaibatsu, Understreet is a cacophony of human misery. Few who call this hell on earth home do so willingly – it is a festering hive of scum and disease. There are few recognizable “citizens” here, and the rule of law completely gives way to tribal gangs who maraud across the underground. Understreet is also the location for a number of city detention centers, though each is typically inaccessible from Understreet, and must be accessed from a higher level.

Greater detail of the Go, their companies and corporations, the people and workings of Zaibatsu, and all its complexities are all prime story-fodder for games based in Zaibatsu. To get a Gamemaster started, in brief, the Go (for now) are as follows:

SynnTech:

Like many of the executive members of Go before them, SynnTech is a management firm, who controls and oversees the city on a big-picture scale. Ultimately, they are the deciding voice in all major city matters, and provide leadership to all levels of the corporation. Counter intuitively, the corporation doesn't really produce or manufacture anything. Instead, it trains and grooms executives who it then inserts as its chosen leadership into all levels of the city. For subordinates, the word of an Executive is law, and their arbitration is usually the final word on a matter. These skilled leaders are typically grounded in the study of law and business, and have a penchant for people and a head for money. However, it's common for executives of all skill levels of also have a basic knowledge of combat (albeit, very basic), which usually focuses on response and resistance to kidnap, interrogation and torture. As the chief member of Go, they are the only Corp with the authority to appoint execs to other corporations, though city law restricts these placement policies to some degree.

Notable Mid-Corps:

Citizens United is the corporation's most popular, but not profitable, branch of service. City law dictates that the people be granted competent representatives within the corporations that will work to provide for the needs of the general population. Citizens United fills this legal requirement, using SynnTech's management training techniques to create business-friendly politicians and lobbyists. Their chief objective is to ensure that the flow of business provides for its work force, just enough to keep them quiet.

Golden Ring Dynamics is by far the cash cow of SynnTech. Here, low to middle management is trained, though not to the strenuous lengths of executives, and placed across the mid-corp spectrum. These middlemen (and women) are trained, most importantly, to not think for themselves, but for the good of the company. They report directly to Executives, and in every instance strive to streamline the revenue of the corporation or company towards the parent, SynnTech.

DynaLife:

DynaLife provides Zaibatsu with its core emergency services: police, fire and rescue, medical treatment. As a result the Corporation must be very diverse, cultivating a system of hospitals which carefully crafts an image of nurturing and protection for the average citizen, a police force which as commonly brutalizes as it does protect the innocent, and a rescue department which responds only to those who can afford their "insurance" rates. The corporation itself contracts all these services out to mid-corps, uniting them under a single umbrella as a tactic to streamline revenue and boost profits.

Notable Mid-Corps:

Ryutora Securities is the principle police force for the city of Zaibatsu. Officer corruption is common knowledge, despite an aggressive advertising campaign to retain goodwill. Despite an open distrust and distaste of the police, their sheer effectiveness makes them the first choice of those who can both afford their services and their integrity. As a result, DynaLife has opened up other security branches which are more "people friendly", to provide lower-income services. At the same time overtly aggressive paramilitary firms were also founded to fill certain needs within the city, and without. Still other "neighborhood" firms fill each shade of gray in between – as long as there is profit to be made, DynaTech provides the people with all manner of security and investigation companies.

Matsumoto Heavy Industry Concern is probably the largest single employer in the city, providing the manufactured materials that support the building, expansion and maintenance of its emergency services. MHIC and its companies build everything from massive cranes and construction machinery, to ambulances and state-of-the-art medical equipment, to weapons and armaments - including the famed and feared mechanized power armor suits, the Tiger and the Dragon.

Zhu Health Services provides the city with a clean and professional hospital system which is second to none. Against common corporate wisdom, Zhu distinguishes little between a rich patient and a poor one. Provided one is a certifiable citizen, a relatively high level of treatment is available to all, payable on a scale based on class and income. Unusually difficult and/or expensive treatments can sometimes surpass the ceiling on this general level of care, in which case, money talks, poverty walks. Their ambulances are particularly dedicated, treating all the way down to ground level (though an ambulance will never come within sight of the actual ground without some form of security escort). This level of care can become expensive, but its calculated. ZHS is a goodwill factory, providing a gleaming face of altruism that the public can focus on when it thinks of “emergency services”, and ignore the glaring defects of other departments.

Marshal Fire and Rescue is the current primary fire department of Zaibatsu, and the only one of any significant size. Fire and rescue is one of the highest risk businesses to be in, particularly considering that even subterranean zones which catch fire can create enormous risk for the upper city, and must be responded to. To counteract this risk, Marshal hedges its bets with insurance, selling indemnities for property. The dubious nature of this practice is frowned upon by the populace, but still commonly made use of as a service. Other rescue departments have attempted to cut into the fire and rescue business, but without the support of major manufacturing to provide equipment have found it difficult.

Hoshi Media Conglomerate:

As the name suggests, the Hoshi corporation creates and controls the content of the city’s media, both for entertainment and education purposes. Like any good conglomerate, vertical integration is their key strategy, minimizing the need for a wide field of executives, which maximizes profits at the top, and restricts opportunities for SynnTech to inundate them with too many of its own execs. Entertainment content is farmed out to dozens of production companies, each too small to command any influence of the parent corp. Even popular programs are controlled by a tight schedule that prevents any one program from dominating the air waves – keeping production companies level with one another and preventing them from gaining influence over the population. Education is treated much the same way, with

many independent schools and learning centers open to public enrollment, but with a tightly controlled curriculum. Only elite institutions are above this educational regulation, and even they are constantly audited by both HMC and SynnTech.

Notable Mid-Corps:

HMC very intentionally keeps any one mid-corp or company from becoming “notable”. If any one production company rises too high in popularity, it is quickly curtailed to prevent a popular groundswell of any sort. Its public school system is so unremarkable, that hardly a single one could ever stand out in a measure of quality and those that do are quickly brought in line. Only its universities and colleges have any sort of shining quality, and each increment of that quality is cost prohibitive, securing higher learning for the most elite. If it wasn’t for the need for a few bright minds among the masses, HMC would shut their doors as well.

Changi Detention and Corrections:

Not sure where you fit in to modern city life? Are you the black sheep of your family, friends, even your culture? Not to worry, the city of Zaibatsu has a place for you. It’s called prison, and if you don’t belong among the working class, the city will determine where you belong in the prison class. Changi is the oldest of the GoCorps, drawing from generations of know-how, and a cycle of slave labor that will fund the corporation to the end of the world. The business is simple: intake prisoners of all classifications, from jaywalkers to arsonists, place the one’s that cannot be easily controlled into confinement, and the rest place into work camps where freedom can be earned though time served. They have both a close working relationship with many security and police firms, but also have their own trained personnel to round up, relocate and re-appropriate work forces as demand dictates. In years past this has put them at competitive odds with Menial Services, which in turn caused unwanted strains on the web of business relations throughout the city. To avert this market shift from reoccurring, the two GoCorps have a standing working agreement; Changi will remove itself from directly owning or controlling any labor initiatives and Menial Services will exclusively draw its work force from Changi. This arrangement created a legal side effect which also keeps the population in line: being unemployed is illegal, and punishable by arrest and conscription.

Notable Mid-Corps:

Changi has used a single model since the days when the cities were young, and through time, has found no need to change it. The prison system is an insulated loop, in terms of business; it keeps few other businesses in its retinue of companies. It prefers to use the resources of other corporations, and a system of self-sustaining “communities”, to keep its own costs down. Barter with other corporations is easy when you have a working relationship that’s so many years old, and a nearly endless supply of cheap labor to offer.

Menial Services, Inc.:

Like SynnTech, MSI does not provide content – it provides training and specialized manpower. It’s the sort of training few view as glamorous, and equally few pursue willingly, or without having exhausted each other reasonable option. Dividing itself into five departments, MSI takes the raw material of men, women and children provided by Changi, sorts them by skill level and capacity to be trained, and provides them with a technical education. Depending on the rating of the “student”, this education can be invaluable for the infrastructure (mechanics and other technically skilled laborers), or training similar to that of beasts of burden.

Notable Mid-Corps:

MSI divides itself into five distinct and fixed mid-corps. Intentionally, little room is left for expansion at the mid-level range, mostly to prevent other corporations from introducing their own departments into what is essentially a public works corporation. Unlike most other corps, MSI and its mid-corps hold themselves to an inscrutable level of accountability. Despite the origins of most of those who come through their doors (and mostly by force), MSI upholds a standard of dignity unique to a corporation, even beyond that of Zhu Health Services.

SteamCorp: No modern city functions without those who know how to keep the gears of that city running strong, fixing and replacing what needs fixing and replacing. The SteamCorp ensures a steady stream of candidates to fill those positions, ranging from general mechanical maintenance to all manner of highly specialized training. Even the elite depend on this job being done thoroughly and competently; as a result, these low-level techs permeate nearly every strata of Zaibatsu.

Zaibatsu Department of Sanitation: It’s been years since any corporation, mid-corp or company ever claimed to serve the city, not itself. In that time, only ZDS continues to make the claim that garbage men are a unique breed – truly. In the city’s history, it has never been recorded that their only task was to clear away the literal trash. Competing directly with security services, the ZDS deploys squads of men and women who combat filth of all natures, both physical waste, moral indifference, and the absence of humanity. They not only manage

landfills, recycling, incineration and power initiatives, but also outreach programs, charity drives, and violent intervention against crime on the part of innocent. Their very existence steps on the toes of every other of the GoCorps, and despite the goodwill they generate, their operations often fundamentally undermine the capitalist efforts of others. Despite this, they seem to be in no danger of replacement; no other corp has the will or resources to handle the magnitude of the ZDS' job.

Blossom Agriculture Alliance: In an effort to “save” as many of Changi’s “prisoners” as possible, the BAA put forward a massive initiative to collect family units and low-level offenders together in rural colonies, separate from the city, where they could stay off the radar and out of the way, in a self-sustaining environ. Immediately, SynnTech took this opportunity to “advance” this concept into forced labor farming, providing the city with its horticultural needs, while freeing up resources inside the city which once served the same, now redundant, purpose. Today BAA farms are a place of dread; overcrowded and overworked prisoners are born, live and die inside an insulated cycle of slavery. Only newly appropriated farm lands are seen as a place of hope, where population densities resemble the idyllic country life the initiative originally hoped to capture.

Bedrock Service Group: For those of truly menial capacity, but lucky enough not to be conscripted into the prison system, there is the Bedrock Group. Training is minimal, supervision is maximum. Here men and women are given the basic training to perform often grueling service work within the city proper. Construction and roadwork is the most common job assignment, though technical proficiency restricts the opportunities for a Bedrock employee. ZDS often combs new recruits of Bedrock, searching for diamonds in the rough that slipped through the cracks of the city system.

General Employment Services: For those who do slip through the net of the city’s ultimate human sorting system, there is GES. Employment Services, quite basically, take individuals with potential, but who have for whatever reasons failed at their previous job, and reassign them to a new position. Best case scenarios for changing jobs is a lateral move, and more commonly, result in a social demotion. Given the option between unemployment and prison, and assignment to a new unknown job from a company that values dignity, most citizens choose the latter.

Fuel for the Fire

Zaibatsu is a stunning city worthy of any civilization's vision of the future, filled with science and technology that far exceeds the grasp of the real world's reach. In Zaibatsu, science fiction is daily reality, and it permeates every aspect of the city, from architecture and engineering, to medicine and military technologies. Every day its citizens are drawing energy to power up their every-day-lives. But what powers all of this? What is the fuel that this amazing city of tomorrow runs off of?

In a word: **Polonia.**

Polonia is an exceedingly rare compound found in rampant abundance in one particular location – the Kuen-lung mountains in the west of Riku. It runs in appropriately termed “veins”, coalescing as a thick viscose fluid, similar to a slick combination of mercury and tar. The substance must be liberated from the earth through means much like mining, as these veins tend to be thin and slow running, and seldom pool or accumulate into large pockets. Instead veins must be tapped and slowly drained, like drawing sap from a maple tree. The process is labor intensive, and because of the depth of the mines in such an inhospitable region of the continent, exceedingly dangerous.

For the common citizen of Riku there is another term for polonia – the silver poison. Polonia is extremely toxic, and even being in a confined space with the compound without protective equipment can yield deadly results. The effects of polonia are similar to radiation poisoning, though polonia is not recognized as a radioactive substance. How exactly the substance is able to affect humans, plants and animals without direct contact is heavily studied and yet poorly understood. Raw, unrefined polonia has a “danger radius” of about ten yards – the more refined the compound becomes, the wider that radius also becomes, increasing in both range and lethal effectiveness.

Citizens of the city, and Riku at large, have known about and grown up with polonia for many, many years. Its dangers are widely known, and children are taught as early as possible about the warning signs of poisoning, and what to do if they encounter the material in an

unrestricted environment. Hospitals treat cases of polonia poisoning daily, and treatment kits can be found next to fire alarms and first-aid kits in nearly every building and every floor of the city.

So why does such an advanced city live with this scourge? Because of the material's effectiveness as a fuel source. A gallon of polonia "fresh" from the mines will eventually be refined and concentrated down to a single ounce of "pure" polonia. The process takes about five key steps, each of which is carried out at a separate facility, and each of which is placed in a key location along a heavily fortified transport route between the mountains and the city.

Pure polonia is then distributed and sold to engineering vendors, who insert the material into fuel cells, or batteries, that can be plugged into or inserted into all manner of devices. Small batteries, typically smaller than an adult person's palm or even fingers, are commonly used by the work-a-day citizen of the city. One of these fuel cells provides enough energy to power a modest family apartment for about a month. Larger fuel cells are paired with reactors all over the city, and make up Zaibatsu's industrial power grid for whole buildings, factories and engineering works. Most vehicles contain reactors that are powered by polonia cells – the larger the machine, the more powerful the battery it requires. Batteries even power energy weapons used by the city's civil defense, such as plasma rifles, gauss cannons, and hand-held lasers. The limit to what exactly polonia can power is limited only by the ingenuity of Zaibatsu scientists, and of course, by the imagination of Gamemasters.

Learning to live with this dangerous substance has been a lifelong pursuit of many city scientists. The sites that refine the material and the batteries and cells that are commonly used and handled by civilians are all heavily shielded. Refineries are heavily guarded and surveyed, while battery cases are plastered with warning signs and are incredibly difficult to tamper with. Most of Zaibatsu's residents feel safe and confident living with polonia, both because they know how to safely handle it in everyday situations, and because the city exhaustively promotes polonia's virtues.

When a polonia leak is discovered, it is not taken lightly by anyone. Typically, only very small amounts of the compound is ever leaked, and usually because of a work-site accident or the collateral damage from urban combat. According to Zaibatsu's safety and wellness procedures, the first step to take when encountering a leak is to immediately leave the vicinity, making sure to assist children, the elderly and pets to do the same. A hotline to contact city services is then usually the next step taken. Because pure polonia is the most common form of polonia to be found in batteries and fuel cells, a local evacuation of about a hundred yards

around the leak is the typical response from city service crews, who then don protective gear to go about the process of cleaning up the leak.

The effects of polonia poisoning vary, based on the degree of refinement, the length of exposure, and the means of exposure. The first symptoms tend to be rapid hair loss and the sudden appearance of rashes and sores all over the body. This is followed by the loss of senses; first with the loss of taste and smell, then vision, then hearing and balance. The cycle of poisoning ends with uncontrolled bleeding, first from old injuries or even scars, then profusely from any number of orifices. Once this sort of hemorrhaging begins externally, it quickly becomes internal, followed shortly by death.

Type	Level of Refinement	Loss of Health (Lethal)	Intervals of Health Loss	Danger Radius of Source
Level One Exposure	Raw Polonia	1	5 Minutes	10 yards
Level Two Exposure	Refined Polonia	2-4	5 Minutes	10-30 yards
Level Three Exposure	Pure Polonia	5	5 Minutes	50 yards

A “PK”, or Polonia Kit, commonly found in offices and households all over the city, usually contains a pair of enormous body suits, made of a thin, metallic fabric, designed to fit anyone of any size, and cover them entirely, a bottle of pills for treating immediate exposure, and a single-use injection gun used to treat ingestion or direct contact. There are a number of brand names that sell and distribute these kits, and generally each is as effective as the next. Donning a protective suit before poisoning sets in, in the first five minutes will typically prevent any toxic effects. Taking a prescribed dosage of the pills while suffering from mild poisoning will arrest polonia’s effects, but hospitalization for further treatment and recovery is often required. Injection is used only in cases of ingestion, and must be used in conjunction with the pills. An injection will reduce the damaging effects of the poison by 50%, hopefully long enough to get them to a hospital where more serious means of intervention can be carried out.

Loha Prasat:

the Steel Temple

To the west of the verdant divide that separates the immediate territories of the two great cities, perched high on the glittering terraced steps of Mt Machapuchure, is the temple city of Loha Prasat, the seat of Riku's most widespread religion, the 8 Fold Paths. The religion is built around the worship of the eight gods who are said to have blessed and protected the city in its fledgling state in the early times. The heart of Loha Prasat was built from the hull of the first Arks in those long generations past. From those old times the city has rippled out and expanded across the mountainous terrain, leaving a thick and shining carpet of market places, tenements, manner homes, snow-capped pagodas, and an innumerable number of side-street shrines.

Between Heaven and Hell:

The Two Cities of Loha Prasat

The Upper City

Loha Prasat is a visually striking testament to the human spirit and its indomitable faith; even its poorest neighborhoods flow with clean and clear fountains, and the white cobbled streets are kept clear of both crime and the normal accumulation of city refuse. It is an impressive sight to even the most jaded of visitors, further highlighted by the truly awe-inspiring structures of the eight massive temple districts that pay homage to each of their gods. The streets form rippling outer rings surrounding each district, and house the city's basic institutions and infrastructure services, all of which are public: schools, hospitals, libraries, parks, water and power stations. It may be a city of faith, but it could not be said it is not a modern city, and there is no lack of public works projects in effect. Beyond these rings, filling gaps between districts or blanketed up and down the terraced mountain sides are all manner of dwellings, from humble clusters of apartments to grand urban estates. Through it all are reminders of the city's origins, as shining ribbons of dark gleaming, steel repurposed from the Arks of history, are incorporated through nearly every temple and every street.

Surrounding the city like the uncountable steps leading to its many temples, are the terraces of Loha Prasat. Like ancient cultures of the past, the city fulfills its agricultural needs by transforming the mountainsides into useable farm lands by carving massive “steps” into the mountainside. Backbreaking labor and sophisticated machinery make this possible, as well as the many aquifers tapping the surrounding mountains for clean and plentiful water. As much refuse as the city can generate is converted into compost, continually enriching the soil, while the rest is broken down to its elemental levels in great furnaces, creating a cycle of constantly reusing valuable materials. Whatever cannot be grown, tapped or manufactured within the city itself is imported from any one of the many feudal fiefs in the verdant stretch of the midlands, below. Each Path maintains any number of fiefs, held by the powerful warlord daimyos. In turn, each daimyo vows eternal loyalty to a Path, and the Path gives purpose and legitimacy to the fiefdom.

The city itself requires a bevy of individuals to serve their community in a great many ways. In order to suss out who is best suited for which tasks, the city has developed a caste system. The system is strict in the sense that once assigned a caste, there is little chance of leaving it. However, the castes are fully integrated and live and interact amongst one another amicably and peaceably. The number and variation of the castes is quite broad, filling every gap the city requires, from doctors to doormen, to sanitation experts to farmers to guardians to artisans to teachers to...well, you get the idea.

The defining characteristic of the upper city is certainly the eight temples which form the layout for the urban districts. However the city is also littered with the shrines to a number of lesser gods and spirits, and Gamemasters and players alike are encouraged to generate their own Paths to suit the needs of their stories or their characters.

Temple Baal Adramelch

The Temple of Baal is a shrine to the ambitious. Any seeking political aspirations, recognition within the faith, or promotion within the city’s paramilitary ranks, can find the hope and inspiration they need to carry on at this shrine.

Temple Babi Ngepet

If wealth is your desire, then an offering made here is probably on your daily to-do list. This is a shrine for those in need of monetary resources, more so than the skills and success needed to generate them in the first place.

Temple Gaki

Self-control and discipline are admirable traits; those who dedicate themselves to self-denial may find themselves seeking the blessings of this temple, or perhaps they seek the strength to engage in such denial.

Temple Jikininki

A common place of worship and offerings for most citizens of Loha Prasat, this is the temple of the dead. It is the most common site of funerals, and the temple itself is said to be a capstone for a deep well of tombs below the mountain, where the departed feast with their gods. The shrine however, extols the virtues of loving the life you live, not living for the memories of the dead.

Temple Mara

Mara is the god of success; where Babi Ngepet offers instant gratification, Mara instead offers the simplicity of enjoying the journey to that gratification, while keeping one's eyes on the prize. For those seeking focus and determination to achieve the success they deserve, this is a key site of worship.

Temple Ninurta

The 8 Fold Paths abhor war, but understand its necessity in reality. Ninurta is the god of war, and is seen in the same light – a necessary evil. The fighting men and women of Loha Prasat each find their way to this shrine, more often than not, asking for guidance and protection in battle.

Temple Onoskelis

The favorite site of moon-struck lovers and the unrequited, for this is the temple of love. A common site of marriages, wedding proposals and commitments of the heart, it is widely regarded as perhaps the most beautiful acreage in the city. It is also a destination of the lonely, who leave offerings and pleadings to their goddess for someone to share their life with.

Temple Rangda

Of the eight districts, it is this place that perhaps comes closest to the “wrong side of the tracks”. This is the temple of magic, and citizens looking to peer into the inky secrets of mysticism come to this place, often seeking the like-minded for clandestine discussion, rather than to pester their dark mistress with petty requests.

What Lies Between:

the Truth

The upper city of Loha Prasat paints a picture of stark beauty and utter tranquility, inhabited by a populace eager to follow the Paths of their gods in order to lead balanced and peaceful lives high in the mountains. What so very few of these good-natured people realize is that their religion is a lie. To say that they in fact follow no gods at all, and they worship at the feet of fiction, would be a kindness. In reality, the gods they follow are very real – but there is no divinity in these entities, only malice and cruelty.

The 8 Fold Paths offer a life of quiet contemplation, tranquility, and safety within the roles and castes of the city. But its purpose is subjugation, pure and simple. A population willing to bend their lives and their will to the demands of their gods is the only population that is tolerated by a hierarchy of power-hungry zealots, and the true faces of the eight known gods – the demons of Loha Prasat.

The Lower City

Beneath the shining city of the mountain are eight separate and distinct strata, each a layer carved out long ago during the city's founding. It is said publically that it was the gods who guided the Arks to the sacred mountain and built this temple city. In reality, it is only known that the eight demons now worshiped as gods were known to be on board the Arks, and that their desire was not the city as it is commonly seen from without, but to build a dark kingdom in the catacombs below.

Exactly who carved out the eight levels below is as much a muddled mystery as who is truly the master of the city. Each demon is served by a cult, and each cult maintains the temples above, and each temple tells its own tale of the history and importance of their “god”. Objectively, if such a term can be applied to the machinations of demons, it seems clear the some of these creatures are slaves to the religion they helped build, some are co-conspirators, and some are true masters of hearts and minds. The relationship between demon-and-cult is tense, strained, and complex – with little cooperation between the factions. The demons are locked in competition with one another, and to the best of their abilities, use humans as their pawns. To what ends, none can say – their theoretical end game is tumultuous, at best.

Baal Adramelch

Lord of Murder

Appearance

Baal Adramelch most often takes the form of a short and stout humanoid, combining the features of a terribly deformed horse with the colors and plumage of an impossibly regal peacock.

Traits

Baal is the dark master of ambition, and of seizing personal power at any cost. His cult exports this virtue to the masses, encouraging the pursuit of personal gains at the expense of those around them.

Babi Ngepet

Traitor of Riches

Appearance

Ngepet's form takes on grim regularity, rarely deviating from the pattern of a massive, battle-wounded boar. He is covered in grievous injuries, and locked in an indecipherable knot of chains. His blood boils and comes alight with flame, while his eyes dance with madness and a terrible knowing.

Traits

There can be no doubt to anyone who has borne witness to the rituals of this cult: Babi Ngepet is truly a slave to his people. His cult locked him in mystic shackles long, long ago, as their only recourse to contain the beast's insatiable appetite to fulfill its every whim and desire. Babi is a demon of want – endless want that rots the mind and leaves only a babbling core of insanity. Proper communion with the demon typically involves a trade – the riches you desire in exchange for allowing the beast to possess your body, for as long as it takes to satisfy his wants through you via proxy.

Gaki

the Starving Child

Appearance

The face and proportions of Gaki change often, but the general theme is always the same – an adorable, heart-wrenching child of nine or ten, clearly in the latter stages of starvation.

Traits

Gaki knows only one purpose – denial purely for the sake of denial. Either through prevention by way of ingenious schemes, or theft by way of brutal violence, Gaki insists members of his cult take from their people, keep taking, then take some more. Whatever they value – be it material or immaterial – Gaki wishes to see it kept from them. Not for itself, mind, but purely for the value of denial.

Jikininki

Eater of the Dead

Appearance

A patchwork corpse; not stitched together like an old movie monster, but a hulking morass of dozens of bodies seamlessly fused together. Its characteristics are always shifting, as it takes on the appearance of its most recent meals.

Traits

Jikininki is a hallmark for the futile mourning of the past; the remorse and frustration that arises from the mistakes of yesterday make up the entirety of this creature's very being. This depression is firmly rooted in greed and selfishness, and a flimsy wish to see itself in a more positive light despite a track record of unmentionable horror. It is a consumer of the dead, desperately erasing the bodies and souls of the departed in a sad and horrible attempt to erase the history of its own evil and atrocities.

Mara

the Death of Spirit

Appearance

Mara comes to his followers in many lights, but most commonly is that of a clearly wealthy and handsome man. Clean, articulate, and utterly charming to a fault.

Traits

the Path of Mara is one that places the focus on attaining material desires. It is not about the desires themselves, nor about their ruthless pursuit, but in the fixation of those desires. That is to say, Mara desires “desire” itself. In the fascination with the material, Mara sees to the consumption of the soul, the rotting of the spirit. As the material world ascends in the heart and mind of a supplicant, Mara is pleased as that supplicant’s spiritual-self atrophies to nothingness.

Ninurta

God of War

Appearance

His armor and weapons change to suit the ideals of those who view him, Ninurta always appears as a massive giant of a man – the ideal warrior of nearly any and every culture.

Traits

Many cults bestow honorific titles upon their demons, but none is needed for Ninurta. Both above and below, he is simply the god of war. bloodshed and battle are the only currencies he deals in. His divine purpose is self-evident. Power. Strength. Dominance. This is all that matters, and the weak who oppose this mantra are swiftly and blatantly dealt with.

Onoskelis

the Shaper of Hearts

Appearance

Like Ninurta, Onoskelis always appears as a single gender, female, and always to such degrees of beauty as to defy understanding and harbor a festering madness. Her trademark, however, are the reoccurring features of a goat, must often her legs and a discrete set of small horns.

Traits

Trust is a flimsy and worthless concept to the demon goddess. The lesson she routinely provides her cultists – trust must be carefully grown within the confines of love, so that betrayal can be sweetly harvested. It is not mere heartbreak which she feeds upon, either, but the ultimate betrayal – to murder the people and things you love best.

Rangda

the Widow

Appearance

Rangda appears as a truly massive old woman, nearly always fully nude, with grotesque pendulous breasts, and an impossibly huge mouth over-stuffed with fangs and tusks.

Traits

Of all the demons, Rangda has the most well-known and fully strategized objective. To ensure that she and she alone is the last and only wielder of magic in all of Riku. Her cultists are all women, and seasoned witches of the blackest and cruelest of intentions. Only a few mind her temple, while the rest scour Riku searching for wielders of magic, so that their knowledge can be collected for their mistress. Once this is done, whatever that requires per the instance, the source of that knowledge must be utterly destroyed to ensure it is never disseminated again. It seems clear to all that inevitably this means Rangda will have to destroy her own cult, as well as the other demons. How this plays out is anyone's guess – and whether or not the demoness truly realizes this herself, or whether this is just a symptom of her insanity, is equally perplexing.

Though many worship at the altar of these “gods”, it is only through direct communion with these demons that a supplicant can truly gain their blessing. Precisely what and how they offer such blessings is a method to be devised by individual Gamemasters, but the described Traits above should provide a good guideline.

How do the Roosters function in the Steel Temple?

The Rooster clan operates openly in Loha Prasat – to the people of the Upper City, they are simply another caste. But to the demonic cults of the lower city, their intentions as Shinobi are all too clearly understood. Why then, are they allowed to exist here, and not met with an extra grisly fate? This is poorly understood, especially by the Roosters themselves. The clan once served the city and its demon masters, but has since splintered and joined the rebellion of shadows. Perhaps they have a key piece of information that keeps them safe. Or perhaps it is the inscrutable will of the demonic eight that keeps them alive. Whatever the reason, though the cults below may plot and hiss, for now, the Roosters are off limits.

The Feudal Lands of the
Verdant Expanse

Iron Clutches

the Feudal Regime of Riku

The feudal system of the developed/civilized portions of the continent provides the bulwark of society's classes and castes. Under its strict and violent hierarchy, the "peasant" caste is subjugated to a life of labor and toil in the fields and rural lands to provide the bulk of the urban zones' much needed raw materials. These materials range from food, lumber and wood products, to mining and drilling operations. The peasantry of each of these divergent resource types bares the burdens of that lifestyle, and of the local warlord, or "daimyo", that rules them. The look and feel of villages varies as well, shifting from range or farmland, with individual families spread out across vast acreages, to concentrated labor camps for lumber and mining, where dozens of families are forced to live condensed and highly controlled lives.

Controlling these operations and ensuring the flow of resources is smoothly transported to the cities are two distinct philosophies. One older and more traditional extolled by Loha Prasat, the other modern and "more efficient" practiced by Zaibatsu.

The Business of Blood

Under the Zaibatsu philosophy, natural resource procurement is treated as a business, and concentration and efficiency is key. Land is systematically cleared in a pattern around the urban zone, and then cultured into suitable farmland. Where possible, aquifers are tapped, and where resources are detected, mines are dug. Transportation is also streamlined by minimizing travel distances and difficult rural terrain through a system of trams and trains. It also allows the population to be more effectively controlled by the ever-looming powers of the city. This system is excellent for the production of food stuffs because of its efficient land use. However, because of its non-exploratory nature, more exotic materials, such as chemical and mineral compounds, are harder to come by. Some corporations exploit this by baring more risk and actively seeking out more rare and lucrative resources; others attempt to substitute or recreate synthetic materials. However, because of the importance of water to any city, aquifers are always given priority despite the risks – risks born exclusively by the peasantry.

The Yolk of Tradition

The more traditional and more widespread variation divides the wild, unclaimed lands up into a spider web of prefectures, of varying sizes and worth. The map is drawn up by representatives of Loha Prasat, who define their culture through the worship of eight deities – to worship such a god in such a fashion is known as a Path, which make up the eight cults of Loha Prasat. The map is fixed, as are the number, size and value of the prefectures. Each Path has “ownership” of a given amount of prefectures, and can award them to individuals as it sees fit. However, because the number of prefectures is set, a Path must choose its daimyos very carefully. Once a Path has chosen a daimyo and assigned him or her a prefecture, the daimyo must then build a headquarters, villages, infrastructure, and everything else they may need to be a success, from the ground up. A “virgin” prefecture is nothing more than a wild plot of land. The most valuable locations were long ago secured when the cities were young, and are held by families who pass down their land through the generations.

What secures the loyalty of the daimyo to the Paths is the same power that secures the loyalty of the peasantry – dogma. The values of the 8 Fold Paths that have been indoctrinated into the generations is that the strong must be compelled by a higher power to subjugate the weak, and repurpose them to a greater good. Because the lives of the weak are inconsequential and without value, their only chance for spiritual and moral salvation is to dedicate themselves to the will of their lord and their faith. In this way, their toil becomes their purpose for living.

This entrenched message of “strength over weakness” also allows daimyo to pull manpower for their paramilitary forces directly from the peasants they rule. To be selected for duty is a great honor, and newly minted soldiers are conditioned from day one to do their part in turning the wheel of the universe, and be the stone that grinds the wheat. They are encouraged to cut all ties from their former life, and become especially cruel towards their former caste.

Daimyos then in turn receive compensation from their Path for whatever raw materials they are able to produce. The oldest prefectures are quite wealthy, organized and supplied. Prefectures with few resources to exploit, or those that are new, are often a shabby, scrappy affair.

Greasing the Wheels of Slavery

A fief does not run on the will of a daimyo, alone, though. It requires truly large quantities of minds and bodies working together under a single goal and directive. So it stands to reason that a fief is not just a daimyo and a handful of peasant workers. A wide cast of characters is needed to make a fief run smoothly, including security (or just thugs), work gang bosses, bureaucrats, office workers and technical support staff. When populating a fief for their games, Gamemasters should carefully consider all the requirements of the operation, and keep in mind that a plantation is more than just a master with a whip.

In the vast expanse of fields, hillsides and deltas running between the two great cities there are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of fiefdoms. As always, players and Gamemasters are encouraged to create and design their own prefectures and their ruling daimyos, customized for their stories and their campaigns. Below are a few examples of some particularly well-known fiefs.

Lords of the Land

Kempeitai Academy

Daimyo: Chang-Yu Lee

The verdant expanse is a truly massive swath of land, with a rich diversity of landscapes and regional rulers – some in conflict, some are harmonious. In order to keep the peace and the rule of law, there must be peacekeepers, and those peacekeepers must come from somewhere. That somewhere is Kempeitai Academy.

The Lee family has overseen the training of thousands of local police, barristers and lawmen, each hailing from their home prefecture and trained in accordance with the wishes of that particular daimyo. In this way, graduates are instilled with the core of success synonymous with Kempeitai, but are most suited to addressing the problem issues of a specific fief. Additionally, this makes the Academy a neutral hub able to work with all daimyos in fulfilling the letter of the law.

The most well-known product of Kempeitai are the Shinsengumi – a specialized caste of militarized police trained and equipped to combat and apprehend Shinobi. These steely-eyed men and women receive joint training and assistance from both cities, and accomplished graduates could expect to be deployed not only within the fiefs, but to stations in or near either city.

In past generations, the Lee's affiliated themselves to the Path of Ninurta, seeing themselves not so much as law keepers but as warriors, subjugating the weak and waging an endless war against the shadow folk. However the current daimyo, Chang-Yu, holds a different philosophy, and much to the dismay of the temple of war, has pledged his prefecture to the Temple of Gaki. Chang-Yu holds that it is not bloodshed that is the underlying principle of his life's work, but denial of the lawless, poisonous aspects of life that infect the hearts and minds of the peasant caste.

Fief of Bells

Daimyo: Nina Pejeng

Both cities of Loha Prasat and Zaibatsu have impressive industrial capacities, but in both cases, those capacities focus on the end product. That is to say, receiving a broad array of refined materials, and manufacturing those materials into the desired product. But that material has an origin, and those origins typically hail from raw, desolate mining camps in the verdant expanse, like the Fief of Bells.

The name is absolutely a misnomer – the Fief of Bells is a gray, razed field of shanties and huts sprawling out from clusters of towering furnaces. Raw ore is brought in from other, smaller, easily subjugated prefectures, and processed down to specifications of various customers and recipients. Safety is an unheard of word, and casualty rates among the peasantry are shockingly high, even by the standards of the bleakest corners of Riku.

Daimyo Nina Pejeng is not particularly religious, but she knows which side of her bread is buttered. Operating a prefecture fief is a privilege, and to maintain that status, her zealous masters must be placated. As such, she pays lip service to the Temple of Mara, as her forefathers before her have done. In reality, the fief's most important customers are the GoCorps of Zaibatsu, who's desperation for rare chemical and mineral compounds for their high technology drives them to pay outlandish prices. Pejeng, like any good daimyo, is a blooded enemy to all shadow folk. In the past, the fief constructed massive bells for work camps, to be wrung as alarms in case of Shinobi. Many of those bells still stand, and many more are made regularly, however now their purpose is to summon the peasants to the site of daily executions of rebels and suspected Shinobi collaborators.

Sakoku Fields

Daimyo: Yoshimune Dejima

Sakoku Fields, as commonly known as the Fields of Isolation, is one of the most iconic of the feudal estates, primarily because it is one of the few not associated in any way to the Path of Loha Prasat. The Fields are carefully planned and exactingly laid out concentric rings of farmland surrounding Zaibatsu. Here, the peasantry actually make a living, rather than just suffering to keep living. All manner of modern farming techniques are employed, powered by the industrial and technological might of the eastern city. The perfect rings sparkle with a rich irrigation systems, and a variety of trams keep everything moving like an enormous, agricultural clock.

Yoshimune Dejima is less of a daimyo and more of a president elected by a board in confidence. However she should not be confused with any other number-crunching suit. Her family's pedigree is well documented, and their management of the land and its people has seen the city through terrible times of drought and famine in Riku's history. This also makes her incredibly popular, amongst both the working classes and the upper echelons of power.

This efficiency comes at a price, however, and the numerous farms that make up the fief are each an Orwellian masterpiece. Local bosses keep tabs on their workers most minute details, and networks of spies and informants pass through the farms like a cloud of paranoia. Surveillance is a way of life, and kowtowing to constant invasions of privacy is a daily fact. Additionally, workers are kept separate from the city, and while they have plenty of room to roam on the farms, they are allowed neither to enter Zaibatsu or leave the Fields – ever.

The Mouth of All Rivers

Daimyo: Ieyasu Kawa

At the foot of Mt Machapuchure, where the mountains surrounding Loha Prasat meet the western foothills of the verdant expanse, is the ancient fief, the Mouth of All Rivers. Part temple, part aquifer, this is one of the first large-scale structures built outside of the great cities since their foundings, and is the lifeblood of the temple city Loha Prasat. Here mountain streams and run off are collected from the western peaks in truly massive sums, then piped along aquatic corridors back up to the Steel Temple, and other points of irrigation in the verdant expanse.

The Kawa family have not only lorded over this fief for generations, they are named for it. Legend tells that the aquifer temple was built first, and the family was bound to it second, chained to the success or failure of the city for all time. The Mouth is said to be a place of ghosts, or “Dim”, and a haunted land. Today’s lord of the land, Ieyasu Kawa dismisses these claims outright as Shinobi propaganda to poison the locals against such a clearly important resource of Loha Prasat, and talk of ghosts is severely punished. Instead, Kawa insists the water is the great equalizer, since all living things are equally dependent upon it. Therefore, within the halls of the Mouth, there must be equality and respect for all. This mantra is easier to justify here, rather than other fiefs – the peasantry of this prefecture are few indeed, and each must be an educated and trained engineer. Even their families, like the Kawa family, are bound to the temple of water, each generation training the next along bloodlines, and each worshiping in secret at the foot of Jikininki, constantly in fear of the Dim and their retribution if displeased. The Mouth of All Rivers is also a common target for envoys from Zaibatsu, who eagerly seek to acquire the land for themselves (often for individual Corps over the city as a whole). Their means are always strictly non-violent and business-oriented, but their persistence is dogged, and their tactics lean increasingly toward corporate espionage.

Momyama Prison

Daimyo: Oda Nobunaga

Surrounded by a tangle of virgin fiefs and butted against the northern most edge of the wild land’s boarder sits the fortress prison of Momyama. Virtually nothing is known about its interior or its workings – those who enter, even the guards and staff, do not see the world outside its walls again. The most common rumor is that it is a gulag, a castle of internment for political prisoners, rebels, and Shinobi. Those rare few people who have gleaned some second-hand information may even be aware that its warden, Oda Nobunaga, is a fanatical devotee of the Temple of Rangda – a man who ceremoniously castrated himself so that he could join the ranks of the female-dominated cult. Of course those who have put that much together also surmise that this facility is the end of the line for captured Shinobi, and this is the place where all their secrets are extracted through methods of sheer madness.

Geography

The World of Riku at Large



As we've already stated, the continent of Riku is a massive plot of land; its longest, continuous stretch of land would measure well over a thousand miles. But it is also irregular, and littered with deltas, marshes, mountain deserts, arid mesas, peninsulas and a healthy smattering of islands all around. Getting to know the major regions goes a long way to understanding the world – both for players whose imaginations will occupy this place, and for Gamemasters, who must build a world worth adventuring in. Having said so, come along on our tour of the continent of Riku:

Pillion Peninsula

Nearly a separate island to itself, the Pillion Peninsula consists of a long and narrow corridor of land leading to a wide, mostly level plot bereft of trees. Once covered with meadow, the land has nearly all been co-opted by its most dominating feature, the towering city of Zaibatsu. Planted firmly on the southern edge of peninsula's head, the corporate city overlooks several spits of rocky outcroppings that carve through the bay's brackish waters, creating a series of inlets ideal for the city's many harbors. North of the city proper is its most important fief, the Fields of Isolation, which cover the land in a network of roads and tram tracks, which efficiently connect the city to its outlying farmlands and to its harbors and ports. The ports themselves largely focus on bringing materials to and from the Verdant Expanse, which lies south of the peninsula, across the shallow bay.

The Verdant Expanse

The beating heart of Riku's agricultural body is an immense delta known as the Verdant Expanse. Making up a full third of the continent's landmass, the Expanse is the heart of known civilization. The territory is divided into many dozens of fiefs ruled by the daimyos, and worked by a conscripted labor caste of peasants – mostly by farmers who make use of the incredibly rich soil here, and the ease of irrigation from the fresh water that funnels in from the western mountains and relieves itself on the southern edge of the region. There are still portions of the Expanse that are considered “virgin fiefs”, and are still mostly wild, but only because they are difficult plots of land to manage for one reason or another. Most of the land has been transformed from wild marshland into a vivid agricultural apron, and the true breadbasket of Riku's people. While a reasonable number of daimyos have figured out through the generations the importance of land-husbandry, and taking care of the very thing you live off of, others seek only to ring their fiefs dry of resources, and strip the land bare, leaving a wasteland that often poisons nearby plots and regions.

Keflavik's Strand

West of the Verdant Expanse, stretching out from the fiefdoms like a slithering limb and into the deeps of the sea to the south, is a peninsula known as Keflavik's Strand. Most peasants have little idea of what lies along this stretch of inhospitable beach, as the authorities of Loha Prasat have declared it forbidden, and pragmatic committees of Zaibatsu have deemed it beyond the city's reach, and in its best interest to respect the sister city's ban. While it appears to be a desolate stretch of wasteland, the northern section semi-encircles a single isle set in a

deep lagoon of toxic purple seawater, commonly known as the Oyster's Pearl. Here the vegetation forms a formidable defense against casual explorers, entrenched with thick brush and nearly impenetrable thorns. Many have spoke of a cavern of subterranean structure located near the center of the island, but none have ascertained unassailable truth to the rumor – only further conjecture and tales to tell by firelight.

The Kuen-lung Mountains

Dividing Riku's two largest continent portions is a shore-to-shore glacier of rock, sliced through with miles-deep slot canyons, and occasionally accented by the sharp summit of a mountain capped in moisterless, dust-like snow. These are the treacherous and nearly impassable Kuen-lung Mountains. The mountains may pose a substantial obstacle, but they are also the chief system of water conveyance, funneling hundreds of miles of rocky watersheds into a stone-shattering network of rivers and canals that deliver fresh water both north and south of the mountain chain. Though the watersheds themselves channel untold millions of gallons of water down to the countryside below, the higher portions are mysteriously absent of water, and the "snow" that blankets the summits is more like frozen sand than anything else. The mountains are also home to the temple city of Loha Prasat. Champions of the city's religion, the 8 Fold Paths, claim that destiny itself brought their Arks to their sacred mountain home, but those outside the religion commonly hold that it was from the beginning a play to dominate the most widely available water source.

The Kappa Swamps

Though much of Kuen-lung's gift of water flows south, a large portion still reaches a plot of lowlands north of the range, and this influx of fresh water has cultivated a wild swampland. The marshes here are dangerous and foreboding, thick with disease-carrying insects, beautiful toxic flowers, bewilderingly colorful and poisonous animals, and terrifying reptiles and amphibians of unusual size. The swamps are mostly uninhabited, though many have made pilgrimages as far as they can into its interior, either in the name of tapping a new resources, or as part of a quest, or even hermitage. In all cases, catastrophe and deadly failure tend to haunt such expeditions, and if there are any success stories, they remain lost in the swamps, either by their choice of the land's.

The Wild Lands

The most northern region is known as the Wild Lands – it is a sprawling desert, peppered with table-top mesas and dry, shriveled conifer thickets. Survival here is difficult on its best day, as none of the precious water conveyed by the southern mountains reaches this arid region. Rumors persist that tribes of reclusive primitives have built a simple society out in the desert wastes, but so far the only evidence supporting such claims has been the occasional long-deserted village or camp found by scouts or explorers.

The Choking Shores

The seas surrounding Riku are not the azure blue oceans we associate with broad open water. Instead, they are a toxic stew of deep, bruised purples, constantly churning and boiling, stirred by underwater pockets of toxic gases that build and explosively release plumes of deadly vapor. Most humans cannot live long on the oceanic coasts, for inhaling even relatively low amounts of these gases results in unconsciousness, and eventually brain-suffocating death. Fishermen do not dare venture out onto the sea, for its only bounty is a horrid fate. Not only do geysers of pure poison spring up at random, but the sea itself is full of swarms of parasitic fish, clouds of deadly bacteria, and unnamable, tentacled nightmares rising from the darkest reaches of the ocean floor. Some, however, have seem to make a go of this unthinkable lifestyle. Commonly known simply as the purple people, a small number of Riku's folk have developed a resistance to the bubbles of poison gas, and choose to live on the shore, where they can be sure they will live in seclusion, unbothered by the wars and politics of the interior. Exposure to the gas and a diet of oceanic fish, however, does turn these folk – predictably – purple.



CHAPTER TWO

System and Character Creation

Blood is a game of daring heroics, bitter betrayals, staggering conspiracies, and the perseverance of the human spirit. Most important of all it is a game, and games have rules and mechanics. In this game those mechanics are meant to be relatively simple and easy to digest. If you can count to forty, then you can play **Blood**!

The first thing you'll need is a twenty-sided die, which is commonly referred to as a d20 (you can also use a digital version if you prefer). Any time you want your character to attempt a task where there is any possibility of failure, or any doubt as to the degree of your success, the Gamemaster will ask you to roll to see how well (or if at all) you succeeded.

Want to punch a guy in the face? Scale a wall? Hack a corporate network? Stare down a demon in a wailing pit of flayed flesh, and make him blink? These are all actions that require a roll to see if this is something your character can pull off, and each is of varying difficulty.

Step 1: *Declaration*

First things first – before anything happens, you need to (obviously) tell your Gamemaster what you're up to. This is called a declaration of action, and it's exactly as easy as it sounds.

Step 2: *Difficulty*

Once you lay out your brazen plan (or not so brazen plan), the Gamemaster will consider the situation, and decide how high of a difficulty to assign your roll. The more difficult the action, the higher the degree of difficulty. The lowest a difficulty can be is 10, and the highest is 40. Climbing a fence might warrant a difficulty of 10, while learning a new sport or game would be a 15. Beheading a cybernetic dragon with a single blow would certainly be a 40, while swimming three miles across rough, open ocean might be a 35. Most rolls will fall in between these two extremes. Talking an informant into working for you; escaping the pursuit of police; seducing a hapless mark; executing a ruthless assassination; these are all difficult tasks that are still within the grasp of any well trained person, and their difficulties could range between 15 and 25, which is the most common range for difficulties.

Step 3: *the Check*

Now that you know what you want to “try” to do, and what your difficulty is, you’re now ready to put your stats to work, and hope the dice rolls favorably.

A “Check” consists of the d20 dice roll, a Primary Stat, and a Secondary Stat all added together. If that total number is equal to or higher than the difficulty assigned by the Gamemaster, then you succeed in your action. Other modifiers include Perks and Karma, but we’ll address those a bit later.

How do you know which Stats to add in to your Check? The Gamemaster will make that assessment before you roll. Different Primary Stats are always used for certain Checks – once you get a feel for the game, a lot of the guess work will be lost. Each Primary Stat has two associated Secondary Stats, and of those two stats, only one can be added to the Check. Which Secondary Stat will be used is up to the Gamemaster, but which stats are used for which rolls will become easier to decipher as you become accustomed to the system.

A Check can never include two Primary Stats, or two Secondary stats, or a “mismatched” Primary and Secondary pairing.

Step 4: *Add It Up!*

Determining the result of your check is simple addition,
just use our handy-dandy chart:

5 (the Base for all Shinobi characters)
+ Primary Stat (1 – 5)
+ Secondary Stat (0 -5) [If applicable]
+ Perk (0 – 5) [If applicable]
+ Karma (Gamemaster’s discretion)
+ d20 roll
= Your Check

The Base

Shinobi are special people; magic and destiny permeate the very core of their being. As a result they tend to have a higher degree of success in all their actions, at least compared to normal folks. Shinobi characters start all Checks with a base number of 5.

Step 5:

Degree of Success

In the game of **Blood**, there's a difference between just barely making your Check's difficulty, and crushing that difficulty by an absurd number. Gamemaster's must take into account how far below, how close to, or how far above a player's Check is versus their difficulty. If the difficulty is 20 and a player's Check is 18, that Gamemaster might consider some degree of partial success (sort of like a consolation prize). Likewise, if a player adds together a Check that is much higher than the difficulty, then the Gamemaster should consider awarding some sort of bonus effect to the action ("Not only do you talk your way out of a parking ticket, but the cop gives you a card that will get you out of trouble the next time you get pulled over, as long as it's a minor offense.").

Let's Talk About Stats, Baby

(or "Points!")

Stats are a simple way to define and describe what life skills your character has, what they're best at, and what they're not so hot at. This is represented on a simple scale of 0 to 5, with a low end representing amateur or novice abilities, and higher scores representing a professional level of ability, perhaps even legendary levels of aptitude.

When you're ready to put your character together, we'll talk about the system for assigning points to each of these stats, but for now, let's just get to know them and figure out what they each do.

The five Primary Stats are: Physical, Mental, Social, Spirit, and Shadow.

You begin the game with 1 point in each of the five Primary Stats, representing that as a living, breathing Shinobi, you have some basic functions in each of these skill sets. Unless magic is involved, your level in a Primary cannot be reduced below 1, and cannot be permanently higher than 5.

PHYSICAL: This stat describes the character's body. Maybe not so much in appearance, but in capacity. Your Physical stat describes what your body can do – how fast you can move, how much you can carry, how much punishment can you take. Any action involving putting your body to work requires using the Physical stat.

SOCIAL: Social defines how well you play with others, as it were; how well you get along with other people, how well other people get along with you, and how you can get others to do what you want through appearance and personality alone. Whether your character is being sincere, intimidating, manipulative, or seductive, your character is being Social.

MENTAL: The mind of a Shinobi is always a vault of secrets, and the steel of that vault is called the Mental stat. This stat covers all things intellectual, from academics to street smarts, from memory recollection to sharp-wittedness. If you're exercising your character's cranial capacity, you're using the Mental stat. It also defines the acuity of your character's senses; how aware he or she is of their surroundings, their sense of balance, attention to detail, and even a sense of intangible awareness.

SHADOW: The stat of Shadow is that intangible quality unique to all Shinobi. It is a combination of heritage and destiny which defines the character's ability to execute maneuvers characteristic of ninja. Shinobi interpret this inner wellspring in a number of ways: favor from the cosmos; genetic disposition; the mark of fate. All are viable explanations for Shadow. More simply put, Shadow is the stat used when a character is attempting any sort of check that is indicative of Shinobi, but does not neatly fall into the other stats. Scaling a glass wall; sprinting across a highwire; blending into the shadows of the night; sleight of hand. These are all actions that *could* be covered by another stat, but as typical maneuvers in any Shinobi's bag of tricks, they more neatly fall into their own category.

It is important to note and remember that although the results of an action using Shadow may seem supernatural, this stat does not cover the use of true magic. Shadow cannot be used to allow a Shinobi to turn into a log, or run up a building in semi-flight, nor teleport. The stat merely covers actions that are within the realm of possibility, but require a certain finesse that would be unique to ninja.

SPIRIT: Spirit is the stat a character uses to command, control, predict, avoid or just understand the forces of magic. More than any other stat it is the most ethereal, most specialized, and most difficult to understand. It is the stat always used when casting magic or using an Art, but it is also used in dealing with magic in a more general sense, such as communing with spirits, sniffing out standing magical effects, or paying attention to the hairs standing up on the back of your neck.

In support of these five Primaries, each one has a pair of Secondary stats to go along with them. These stats let players temper their general abilities in a more honed or slightly more specific way. A character may have a strong Physical score, and to represent their dedication to the temple of the body, have a strong Vitality score; but that same person may have no Combat score at all, representing that, well, they have no idea how to throw or take a punch. Different people have different aptitudes, and Secondary stats let players define those aptitudes, albeit with fairly broad strokes.

Secondary stats each start at 0, and can be raised with effort and experience to a maximum of 5. It's not uncommon to have 0 in several secondary stats – even a well-rounded person can't do everything.

COMBAT (PHYSICAL) – This is the sole stat modifier for physical conflict, ie fighting. Whether you’re bar brawling, an experienced swordsmen, or a crack sniper, the Combat stat is the go-to skill for kicking ass.

VITALITY (PHYSICAL) – This stat describes just what shape your body is in, or more specifically, how finely tuned your engine is (above and beyond the average engine). A character with Vitality takes special care and training to condition their body to its optimal levels. It could be diet, meditation, exercise, or just good genes. Any way you slice it, Shinobi with this stat are in above-average physical condition, and of excellent health.

ACROBATICS (SHADOW) – Acrobatics describes a level of athleticism, dexterity and flexibility that is the bread and butter of the physical feats that make Shinobi famous. It can apply to actions as straight forward as a series of back flips, or something more subtle, like quietly dislocating your shoulder to slip out of bondage.

STEALTH (SHADOW) – Avoiding detection is one of the primary keys to success for Shinobi. Being able to hide in plain sight, blending in with a crowd, disappearing down a dark avenue, or moving soundlessly through dry brush are all useful and necessary tactics for any Shinobi to master.

FOCUS (MENTAL) – Focus is the stat a character uses to put his or her mental faculties to a very specific use. Whether that’s playing a board game, writing a novel, solving a complex equation, or soldering a circuit board, Focus puts a very particular knowledge held by your character into action. Whenever the Shinobi is “putting their mind to” something, anything, they’re using Focus.

INTUITION (MENTAL) – Intuition can’t be described as a skill as much as a talent. It represents the character’s passive mental abilities; noticing something from the corner of their eyes, recalling a sense of déjà vu, having a sense of awareness of their surroundings, and most importantly, plain old common sense. Intuition is the result of the brain working without having been told to, i.e. instincts, reflexes or a gut feeling.

INFLUENCE (SOCIAL) – Some people have a silver tongue, others the gift of gab. Influence represents how well the Shinobi can actively use their social abilities to get an individual or a group to do (or not do) something. The key word being “active”; Influence as a stat is not exerted with a sly wink or a knowing gaze, or even a mean glare, but instead through proactive means of communication. Most regularly, through speech or writing. Influence can be used to talk down a fired-up mob, or write a heart-changing essay, so long as the act is conscious, specific, and deliberate.

PRESENCE (SOCIAL) – Presence is the culmination of all the social traits that can’t be so easily defined; the “it” factor, or their charisma. It can be as forthright as stunning good looks that literally stun, or a charming swagger so unassailable as to render reason meaningless. Reversely, Presence also aids in vicious intimidation, or brutal war cries.

SENSITIVITY (SPIRIT) – There are elements of the world that eyes and ears alone were not made to sense; this is where a strong Sensitivity can come in handy. This stat goes beyond Intuition, and gives the Shinobi a sense of the supernatural in the vicinity. This can manifest as being able to deal with ghosts or spirits, being aware of ambient magical effects, or to be aware of someone else’s magical proclivities.

FLOW (SPIRIT) – Flow relates directly to one’s ability to directly control magic and move with its currents. Any direct casting of magic or issuing control over magic is often an exercise of Flow – most of the non-spirit-based magic rely on Flow over Sensitivity.

Asking the Right Questions

A Beginner's Guide to Character Creation

You know what each stat does and represents.

You know how to declare your actions and make your checks.

At long last, it's time to make your character! ...But what goes into a character? If your character were just a collection of numbers it wouldn't be much fun to play. So let's talk a little about making more than just a character, and about making a person.

As we've covered in the previous chapter, the people of Riku are widely divergent in their beliefs and lifestyle, and the shadow folk who hail from the land's various regions share that diversity. For you as a player, this grants a broad pallet with which to paint the portrait of your character. Like any good painting, you may use a variety of colors and shading to bring your vision to life. To sort out which tones and hues are right for you, start by asking yourself a few questions:

Where is this character from?

It's maybe the simplest question you can ask, and a good one to start building a character with. Just exactly where on the continent do you want your character to call home? A city Shinobi will have a vastly different perspective on life than a rural one; likewise being from Loha Prasat or Zaibatsu, or a feudal farm versus a wild, coastal island is even more telling of the character's character. This question also opens the door to asking about who and what is waiting at home for them. Do they have a family? A price on their head? A statue in the village square honoring them? Is the character the son or daughter of a daimyo? Do they hail from a family of hustlers and thieves? Do they have a spouse or children? Most importantly of all, what is their responsibility to those on the home front?

What is important to the character?

Maybe your character has strong values, or maybe they're lacking in moral fiber. Either way, there is always something in life to value, and defining what that is for your Shinobi will go a long way to painting just the right picture. Virtue. Revenge. Wrath. Power. Money. Control. Salvation. All are powerful motivations, and giving your character such a vehicle will make it much more easy and fun for you as a player to decide how your character will engage the world around them and what choices they will make when presented with a challenge.

How does your character treat others?

Shinobi may be secretive, but unless your character is a complete and total hermit, social interactions are the bed rock to living in a human society (which the land of Riku certainly is). So when your character sees or meets other people, how does he or she behave? Does charity or cruelty run through their veins? Is it more important to service one's self, or one's community? When others are in need, how much will they give? How much do they take? If those around the character could describe him or her in just three words, what words would they choose?

Who is your character?

Before you move on to assigning stat points and choosing your magic, ask yourself this question above all others. WHO is this person? The more articulately you can answer this question, the more satisfying it will be to play this character. What do they want in life, who do they want it for, how will they get it? ...What will they sacrifice for it all?

Blood is Thicker Than Ink

Once you have a strong sense of your character's personality, it's time for him or her to meet their peers. The shadow folk are divided into nine clans, called Lineages, each holding true to its own proud traditions, and clandestine objectives. As you might imagine, each one is as unique as a clique within a shadow society based around black ops and spellcraft can be. More importantly, each one is a pillar of Shinobi culture and infrastructure, and holds to its own form of dogma. It's important to choose a Lineage that's a good fit for your character and their beliefs and lifestyle (unless of course your character is intentionally designed to be a fish out of water, which can be an interesting story unto itself).

In terms of game mechanics, the Lineage you choose at the time of character creation also determines two important things:

What the character's primary stat is, and what form of magic (or Major Art) the character studies.

Lineage	Primary Stat	Major Art	Perks
Hachi	Social	Mantle	Sea Legs, Lord of the Scrounge
Hebi	Shadow	Ghost	Shedding Skin, Constricting Coils
Inu	Physical	Kami	Companion's Companion, Bloodhound
Kitsune	Mental	Ghost	Path of the Fox-God, Tail of Flame
Mujina	Social	Kami	Storyteller's tongue, Savagery
Neko	Shadow	Kami	Perfect Balance, Purr
Ondori	Social	Mantle	Dawn Calling, Capon Champion
Same	Physical	Mantle	Swimming with Sharks, Shark Skin
Tanuki	Mental	Ghost	Bandit's Mask, Clean Getaway

Putting Up Points

Now that you've painted a vivid mental picture of your character (or a written one), let's move on to adding in the mechanics and bringing the character to life in the world of Riku. One could say we're about to put the ghost in the machine (can we be sued for using that phrase? Who cares, ninjas are thieves!).

Each "point" of a stat is an empty circle on the character sheet that you will fill in (preferably as a solid dot, but an "x" will work as well). As is indicated on the character sheet, every Shinobi begins the game with a minimum of one point in each primary stat. These points are free, and you do not have to purchase them – you just start with one point in each core stat.

When you choose a Lineage, you are designated a primary stat for that Lineage. You will assign 3 points to that primary stat. Added to the initial 1 point you start off with, this means you will start the game with a score of 4 in your primary stat.

Next, you are assigned 3 more points, which you can divide as you wish and place in any of the other four primary stats. You may put all three into one stat, or parse them up as you like – but you cannot add further points to your Lineage's primary stat.

Now it's time to round out your character a bit, and give them a little more specific definition by assigning points to the secondary stats. You'll have 9 points to place throughout the ten secondary stats. Remember, a secondary stat **CANNOT BE HIGHER** than its corresponding primary stat.

As you're assigning points, think back to the questions you answered about your character earlier. Make sure you're giving your character stats that make sense for who they are, and that those stats can be explained by the life your character has lived up to this moment.

Advantage:

Ninja!

The Shinobi have more advantages than what can simply be described with stats and points. These include Arts, Perks and weapon proficiencies. Arts, both Major and Minor, are the magical skills honed by Shinobi over the generations. Each Lineage has a specific Major Art that they practice, and members of that Lineage begin the game with 1 point in the specified Art.

Minor Arts are less dramatic than their Major counterparts, but no less important, and when used strategically, can be no less powerful. Knowledge of these Arts is much less restricted and much more widely known (at least, as much as magical knowledge can be described as widespread). Characters have no restrictions on how many of these Arts they may know, and no single Lineage has a monopoly on any one of these Minor Arts (though it's entirely possible that certain Lineages may indeed have cultivated a Minor Art all their own, and in complete secrecy).

Perks are not so well defined as Arts – they are simply a leg-up a character may have in life, and that advantage may be the result of training, politicking, schmoozing, good genetics, or even the paranormal. There is no limit to how many Perks there are in the world, or what they can be, and Gamemasters are always encouraged to work with their players to design custom Perks for their groups. Perks are, however, divided into two categories – General and Lineage. As the name suggests, General Perks can be held by any character. Lineage Perks are specific to that Lineage, and only members of that clan can ever attain those Perks.

Players determine what combination of Perks and Minor Arts they start off with at this point. A character gains 1 point in their Lineage's Major Art, and may select a Perk from the list of Lineage-specific Perks (not General Perks). They then may select any combination of three General Perks and/or points in Minor Arts. A player may choose to take three General Perks, or three points in Minor Arts, or one General Perk and two points in Minor Arts, or two General Perks and one point in Minor Arts. Points spent in Minor Arts do not need to be spent on the same Art, and can be divided up as the player chooses.

It's important that players use good common sense in selecting Perks and Arts for their characters. Again, hearken back to those questions you asked yourself about your character earlier and decide what sort of Perk best fits them based on those answers.

The Lineages

The Shinobi divide themselves into nine clans known as Lineages, each in honor of one of the nine traditional legends of the tailed beasts. In the legend, each animal figure performs an essential role in the world, and has an important lesson to impart. For the shadow folk's part, the situation is similar; each Lineage takes on certain duties and responsibilities in order to contribute to the whole of their secretive society. Some are better suited to the city than the countryside, while others are more religious than mercenary. Each Lineage has its own sensibilities and proper codes of conduct, as well as a hierarchy of power or leadership. Gamemasters are encouraged to detail and define the specific Lineage members and their preferences and tendencies that will be a part of their game.

These nine clans are the most well-known, but it is likely, and in fact probable, that there are even more specialized and unique Lineages hiding on fringes of Shinobi culture. Additionally, there are a wide variety of Lineage Perks that can be invented by Gamemasters and players alike, and all participants of the game are encouraged to explore any possibilities their imagination brings to mind.

To start with, provided below is a short description of each Lineage, their preferred center of influence, as well as their Lineage Perks, Primary Stat, and specific Major Art.

Hachi

(Weasel Clan)



Summary: The Hachi can be found largely through the country side waterways, traversing the network of natural rivers and man-made irrigation canals that crisscross the borders between feudal fiefs and the wilderness beyond. They mostly stay to waterways on the edges of other territory, forming a network of ferrymen (and women) who know how to take you to where you want to go without a lot of trouble or find a certain special something that one is not supposed to have. The weasels are renowned scavengers of information and treasures, most of which they come by through their smuggling trade but all of which they are known to hoard on their simple ferry boats. This also makes them a popular target for the local authorities, which is all the encouragement they need to stay on the water, always floating from one place to another, as difficult to catch as the gentle drifting currents.

Primary Stat: *Social*

Major Art: *Mantle*

Lineage Perks:

Sea Legs – Hachi are naturals at life on the water, and adapt to this lifestyle quickly and comfortably. They gain +5 bonus to checks involving swimming, fishing, maritime navigation, or any situation involving their prowess with a boat.

Lord of the Scrounge – The weasel clan is unmatched hoarders of treasures and trinkets and every Hachi who begins the game with this Perk starts out with a literal pile of miscellaneous brickabrack. Exactly what's in the pile is up to the Gamemaster, but once or twice per session, a Hachi may go on a digging expedition through their horde of treasures to come up with just the right "thing" for the situation at hand. What this turns out to be is entirely up to the Gamemaster. Additionally, cataloging or organizing the pile is strictly taboo among the clan – when everything has a name and a place, it's strictly defined, but when you have no idea what's within the trove, well then ANYTHING could be in the trove. As a separate consequence, Hachi in general tend not to take stock of their possessions very often.

Hebi

(Snake Clan)



Summary: The serpent clan are as cold blooded as their name suggests. There is calculated stillness in their veins, and this emotionless assessment of life has led them to a singular conclusion. All life ends, it is an inevitability – an inevitability that leads to the forfeiture of property. After all, no one can take it with them when they die. Therefore all property, be it things, places or even people, can only be owned by the living, and the only barrier between a Hebi and someone else’s property is the life of that person. From here there are some divergences in the philosophy. Some serpents strongly believe that nature or fate must be allowed to take its course, and that murder-for-robbery is immoral. Others see this as thin technicality that is easily subverted. In all cases, the Hebi have spent generations cultivating a close relationship with the Dim, and have honed their necromantic capabilities to a fine art. Their most common modus operandi includes either convincing or forcing the ghosts of the deadlands to divulge the whereabouts of their most valued secrets and possessions. Such things need not be valuable on the conventional market (though they certainly can be) – they simply must be valuable to the Lineage, or at least the individual.

Primary Stat: *Shadow*

Major Art: *Ghost*

Lineage Perks:

Shedding Skin – Just as snakes do in nature, a Hebi with this Perk can slough off a thick layer of skin like a cocoon. The flesh beneath will be an entirely new layer of integumentary tissue, and does not leave the Shinobi “thin skinned”. This power can be used to slip bonds, pass through tight spaces, or cast off a skin covered in poisonous chemicals, or even skin-deep injuries (such as light burns, rashes or sores). It’s important to note that tattoos and scars appear both on the cast off skin and the new layer of skin. This power can be used once per session.

Constricting Coils – Though not literal coils, some Hebi seem to have all the strength of the greatest of constrictors. The Shinobi with this Perk gain +10 to all checks involving squeezing, restraint, grappling, or any form of physical constriction.

Inu

(Dog Clan)



Summary: The Inu are some of the most well-known and visible of the shadow folk, dedicating their lives to the protection and enrichment of the lives of a special few. The Dog Clan have a long-standing tradition of selecting a deserving member of their community, or simply a person of import to them, and assigning that person with a “guardian companion”; a member of the Dog Clan who will stay by their side as both friend and protector. Neither the benefactor nor the Inu have any say in this arrangement; the commitment is made by councils within the Lineage by inscrutable methods. Choice is a luxury members of the Dog Clan are quick to forgo; duty, however, lasts until death. Many recipients of this honor have attempted to reject the pairing, but their guardian companion can never be dissuaded for long, and eventually, it would seem nearly everyone relents to the arrangement.

Primary Stat: *Physical*

Major Art: *Kami Worship*

Lineage Perks:

Companion’s Companion – Many Inu find themselves the subject of a particular animal’s friendship. The relationship is often inexplicable, and grows in spite of the wishes of the parties involved. Most often there is something special or intangible about the animal. It seems to understand concepts more complex than an animal should, and is often uncannily empathetic. Equally important, these animals are fierce friends, and always seem to have the physical power to leap to their companion’s defense. Long time companions often develop greater and more dramatic powers, most of which are clearly supernatural in origin, such as growing or shrinking in size, or a bark or call that shatters windows and ears alike. Gamemasters should take care in crafting companion animals, giving them tangible virtues, but also real-world weaknesses.

Bloodhound – A member of the Dog Clan is dedicated to the life of a single person, and the use of this power ensures they can never lose track of that person for long. A player with this Perk can attempt to sense the exact location of their charge through a SPI + Sensitivity check. The difficulty is up to the Gamemaster, but it should be kept in mind that this power’s sole purpose is to ensure that an Inu never loses track of their charge for very long. This tracking sense is supernatural, but is often described through the sense of smell.

Kitsune

(Fox Clan)



Summary: By their own reckoning, members of the Fox Clan are the oldest (and therefore the most honorific) of all the Lineages. They even go so far as to claim they are the progenitors of the Lineage system, and the first Shinobi. This claim is of course rebuffed by nearly every other clan, but nonetheless they each must acquiesce that the Kitsune are a people of ancient origins, and their council should always be considered carefully. For their part, the Kitsune see themselves as, quite literally, the center of the universe. They believe it is their task to be the hub for all the forces and peoples of the earth, and that each in turn must be guided by the clan towards balance and self-fulfillment. Exactly how this is accomplished, however, does not seem to be part of the Kitsune handbook. The Foxes see themselves as priests-of-everything, and take special pride in being both well-rounded and adjunctified. In order to spread their enlightenment, traditionally a singular Kitsune is assigned to a small village or community, and charged with bringing its people to a life of measured balance with all things and beings. As a result, fox folk tend to be socially oriented and extremely well rounded, never wanting to be caught off-guard or unprepared. Although they are just as often noted for their namesakes behaviors, such as trickery, and often an unsettling sense of humor, these are only tools used to reach goals so lofty, even the Kitsune have lost sight of them.

Primary Stat: *Mental*

Major Art: *Boreinoma Hou*

Lineage Perks:

Path of the Fox-God – in the old tales, the story of the nine-tailed fox-god is considered one of the most popular, and the lessons of traversing adversity over and over for the greater good are not lost on the fox clan. With this Perk, a Kitsune can earn favor from the lord of the fox kami, and serve the life-in-balance agenda of the Lineage with the same stroke. The Shinobi must perform nine unselfish tasks for members of the community to which they are dedicated, and each task must test their skill set in a different way. Once this is accomplished, the gods will smile upon the ninja, and grant one day (sun up to sun down) of blessings, where the Shinobi will enjoy +9 to all checks involved with accomplishing a single goal for the greater good.

Tail of Flame – The most dramatic of the Kitsune powers is probably their ability to spontaneously generate a fully formed and functional fox tail composed of golden fire. This power can only be used once per session, but grants the user a number of these tails, each two-thirds the length of the Shinobi's height, equal to the number of Opportunities possessed by the character, to a maximum of nine. Each tail can make its own attack, a sort of sweeping fire strike, causing two points of lethal fire damage. Beyond the combat, the tails are not prehensile, but can be manipulated independently. The fire they create will not burn the Shinobi nor those friendly to him or her, and each produces a large volume of light, comparable to a bright bonfire. Once summoned the tails do not usually last more than an hour.

Mujina

(Badger Clan)



Summary: While other clans pay special attention to the role of key individuals, or the holistic wellbeing of an entire community, the Mujina Lineage has a far simpler directive – to defend and protect the weak and the helpless, particularly among the country peasantry of the feudal lands. The badgers are as much clan as they are militia, organizing and training simple farmers to effectively defend themselves and keep their simple lifestyle safe and secure. Of course, the Mujina are well renowned warriors and combat leaders in their own right, and their continued presence on the map of fiefdoms is an irrepressible problem for the local daimyo. A problem the warlords have not been able to suppress in more generations than can be accurately counted. Additionally, the badgers are farmers and agronomists without peer and keep intimate records of their relationship with the land their people live on, problems they've faced season to season, and the solutions that have arisen to such complications.

Primary Stat: *Social*

Major Art: *Kami Worship*

Lineage Perks:

Storyteller's Tongue – the badger figure from the old stories was a teller of tales and an expresser of epics, able to sway a great many pairs of ears to come and listen to its oration. The Mujina have co-opted this ability for their own purposes, and once per session the Shinobi may make a check to attempt to draw a crowd, mystically drawn to the sound of the storyteller's voice. The badgers do not use this opportunity to tell tales but typically for recruitment or to talk strategy.

Savagery – An equally well-known characteristic of the badger is its short fuse and terrible temperament when it comes to home invasion. Though the Mujina have much more self-control than their animal counterparts, they may draw on the righteous rage of having one's home invaded to aid them in defense of that home. A badger with this Perk gains one additional opportunity as long as he or she is fighting on their home turf, and as long as they are not the aggressor (luring an enemy into your home to ambush them will not cause this Perk to trigger its effect).

Neko

(Cat Clan)



Summary: Where the Hebi see themselves as a necromantic thieves guild, the clan of cats flaunt themselves as a highly stylized and fashionable guild of assassin priests of the urban jungle. Operating almost exclusively out of cityscapes, the Neko see themselves as keen-eyed hunters, able to parse out among the populace who is a boon to the city, and who is a bane. Those who are found lacking are soon found with an extra smile drawn with a blade across their throat (though suffocation and neck-breaking are also very fond methods of execution). The clan is known to be fickle and temperamental, flamboyant and self-absorbed. They have coroneted themselves with crowns of grace, superiority, and unfailing judgment, and deliver their version of grim justice to all those who lack those same characteristics. Something beautiful is worth saving; something ugly can be thrown away. Above all else, the Neko feel they are the supreme critics of what can be called beautiful and what cannot be. To their credit, modern cats, more than their predecessors, have learned an increasing value of inner beauty, and have begun applying a more detailed investigation prior to a swift act of murder.

Primary Stat: *Shadow*

Major Art: *Kami Worship*

Lineage Perks:

Perfect Balance – Just like any cat worth its whiskers, Neko Shinobi with this Perk enjoy a perfect sense of balance. Perfect indeed for racing across rooftops and narrow ledges. A character using this power gains +10 to all checks involving the Shinobi's sense of balance or feats of acrobatics.

Purr – A cat purr's out of contentment, but the Neko have learned to use a mystical version of this vocalization to transfer that level of contentment to another, lulling them into a relaxed state of partial-sleep. The subject is not completely asleep, but in a dazed, dozing state. They are also not in a state of hypnotism, and are therefore not especially suggestible, nor will they enter a dream state. They will however, nod off, eyes drooping, mouth agape – vulnerable and, at the minimum, uncaring to the events that may transpire around them for the next hour or so. However, this power does induce a sleep-related state, and the subject can be awoken by any sufficient commotion or loud noise. This Perk can be used once per day, but the player must succeed in a SPI + Flow check of a difficulty based on the willpower of the subject.

Ondori

(Rooster Clan)



Summary: Even more visible and well known than either the Inu or Mujina, are the Roosters, the Ondori Lineage. Of the core nine, they were the last to join the ranks of the Shinobi, and in fact were originally an order of priests and priestesses among the Paths of Loha Prasat. In those times, the roosters were elite socialites who believed they carried favor from their gods by reveling in the joy of life without regret, often at the expense of the lower class. As time went by they were no longer able to morally stomach this lifestyle, nor could they completely forgo their love of life (and their love of the party). Today's Ondori live with one foot in the world of Loha Prasat and one foot in the shadows of the Shinobi. They truly believe they can affect positive and permanent change through Loha Prasat by improving the lives of its most beleaguered people. They are champions of the poor, but advocate from the top down, continuing an elitist crusade to sway the hearts and minds of the city's upper crust into changing their own lives in order to better those of others. Like true roosters, they are overt and cocky in their methodology, loud and opinionated through their demeanor. They keep some use for the shadows of their folk, but are truly the exception that proves the rule, as they exalt in their crusade in a bright and public fashion.

Primary Stat: *Social*

Major Art: *Mantle*

Lineage Perks:

Dawn Calling – The most iconic image of the rooster is one crowing at the first light of dawn. The Ondori have taken this classic account to the next level with a crowing call of their own. By making a spectacle of one's self, the rooster crows and caws, struts and dances about in a flamboyant and somewhat comical ritual. At the peak of their calls and dancing the Shinobi literally emits the first dim rays of dawn, spreading a thin sheen of daylight to everyone and everything within a few dozen yards (how far the rays reach or how much magnitude they have is up to the Gamemaster). Those caught in the rays of this light are struck by waves of positive energy, dissolving feelings of anger, bitterness or violence, and replacing them with an urgent sense of compassion and empathy. This Perk need not be evoked only at dawn, but it can only be used once per day, and requires a SPI + Flow check from the player, which can be resisted by any truly stout curmudgeons who may be in attendance.

Capon Champion – In the tradition of cock fighting, the Ondori have learned that violence isn't always the answer, but sometimes it is. A rooster with this Perk may enter a burgeoning fight on the behalf of someone weaker than themselves. Acting as their champion, the Shinobi immediately begins to brandish several advantages, most notably is a crest of flame that rises from their head, distracting and intimidating their opponent(s), and long razor-like talons which emerge from the rooster's lower legs, adding 1 damage to their kick attacks, and of course converting them to lethal damage, capable of inflicting maladies.

Same

(Shark Clan)



Summary: Where the Shinobi are traditional shadow warriors, the Same have updated themselves to become corporate warriors, capable of launching campaigns in the board room equally as effectively as on the battlefield. They are true corporate sharks, and wear the badge with pride. The sharks themselves do not publically own or operate any company or corporation; instead they infiltrate, using cut-throat tactics to bully their way to positions of power. They favor championing the causes of companies they see as useful to all the Lineages, and acquiring and liquidating those which may pose a problem to their brethren. Despite the reputation of sharks, the Same are known to be very conscious of their fellow Shinobi, and their risk/benefit analysis' tend to be very considerate of the plights of their brethren. Despite this professional courtesy, the Same are dead-eyed corporate killers, with one eye on the bottom line and one eye looking at a mark through a scope.

Primary Stat: *Physical*

Major Art: *Mantle*

Lineage Perks:

Swimming With Sharks – the Same are well known boardroom bullies, and this is not by accident. Shinobi with this Perk give off a persistent aura around them, infusing those around them with a sense of insecurity and vulnerability. This often leads to the hapless chum giving away their tells or making mistakes out of panic. Difficulties for Same to bully non-Shinobi NPC's are always reduced by 5.

Shark Skin – The skin of a shark is smooth as silk in one direction, and a serrated nightmare when against its grain. Same with this Perk see their winning personalities as their smooth side, and this Perk as the opposing stroke. Using this power a shark can physically transform their skin into shark-like hide, providing two levels of armor and inflicting dozens of serrated-razor wounds to anyone or anything in skin-contact with them. It can even be used to saw through ropes or bondage. The transformation can occur once per session, and lasts only about an hour or so.

Tanuki

(Raccoon Clan)



Summary: If the raccoon is the bandit of the animal kingdom, then surely the Tanuki are the bandits among the shadow folk. Highly adaptive, the Tanuki routinely change up their methods and the structure of their Lineage to succeed in an ever-changing world. After the rise of the two great cities, it became clear to the raccoon clan what the new weapon of choice is in the modern world – money. The Tanuki are part bankers, part thieves (which probably still makes them more like bankers after all). Their financial trickery knows no bounds, and is coveted by nearly every other Lineage. Which is fine with them, since they are so very willing to help their brethren – for a very modest fee. The raccoons not only finance a great deal of the shadowfolks’ dealings (particularly the Same), but swindle money and other resources from just about every group who may oppose the Shinobi. They are supreme financial con artists, and talented financialists. This often seems less glamorous to other Shinobi, but it’s inarguable that without their efforts and skills, the war of the Shinobi would have been lost long ago. Even more devious, the Tanuki are well known for holding court among the Dim, forming long-term and complex financial schemes based on information and collusion from vengeful ghosts, who most often were killed to silence the secrets they possess.

Primary Stat: *Mental*

Major Art: *Boreinomahou*

Lineage Perks:

Bandit’s Mask – Simply by painting a traditional black raccoon mask across their eyes a Tanuki (once per session) may obscure their identity to all but their closest of allies. The effect lasts until the mask is washed away (or one day, whichever comes first), and during the course of the magic anyone who does not have a personal relationship with the Shinobi will only see a fuzzy blur in place of a face or body. This is not ideal for walking down a crowded street, as it will draw attention, but is perfect for clandestine operations.

Clean Getaway – Raccoons are obsessed with water, and anyone who has seen one sitting near a river knows how obsessive they can in fact be with cleaning their most treasured finds. The Tanuki bare an extension of this behavior, but have modified the term “clean”. Once per session a raccoon may enable this Perk; once done, the Shinobi may use simple water, poured, splashed or spilled wherever they have left a trace, and the trail will be cleaned. Finger prints will vanish, trails through the wilderness will naturally fill in, even their digital presence can be cleared from a system hack by pouring water over the machine of entry (though this often ruins the computer).

General Perks

For starters we've provided a list of twenty-five General Perks, but these are far from the end-all-and-be-all of Perks. Gamemasters are encouraged to make their own, and players are likewise encouraged to do the same.

Unlike Lineage Perks, General Perks tend to be slightly less dramatic in appearance, but no less helpful. Most commonly, Generals tend to modify a character's stats in some way with a flat, static effect; as opposed to Lineage Perks, which can often be used as a declaration or action. The advantage to General Perks of course being that their effects are constant and consistent.

Each Perk also has a category it belongs to that coordinates with a Primary Stat. A character may only have two Perks in any one given category of stat (the space for which is provided on your character sheet). The same is also true of Lineage Perks – a character can only have one Lineage at a time, and so can only have a maximum of two Lineage Perks. This may seem restrictive, but remember that you can have a maximum total of two Perks in each category, meaning a total of twelve Perks. That's a lot of modifiers! Of course starting-level characters won't start out with the maximum number – where would be the fun in that? However Perks can be bought and improved just like stats, as the game progresses.

Athleticism (PHY) – You run like a deer and leap like an elk, and look twice as good doing it. Apply +5 to all checks involving running, jumping, climbing, swimming, or any other clearly athletic feat.

Martial Artist (PHY) – You are trained in one or more hand-to-hand combat systems. Maybe you took karate as a kid, or maybe you were a country-side kick boxer. Maybe you're just a highly trained killer. In all cases you have the training and reflexes to always be prepared for a fight. Shinobi trained in the fighting arts gain an additional Opportunity in combat. This Perk may be purchased twice, in the case of true masters of their art.

Pain Threshold (PHY) – You have a very high tolerance for pain, and up to a point you can simply ignore it. Characters with this Perk may ignore negative modifiers caused by nonlethal damage. This Perk however is a threshold of pain, not an immunity, and the character still suffers modifiers caused by lethal damage, as well as the effects of maladies.

Survivalist (PHY) – No matter how bad the situation gets, your character makes the best of it, and finds a way to pull through. Characters with this Perk add +5 to all checks involving a survival situation, either wilderness or urban. This includes basics like building a bush shelter or making a fire, as well as wilderness navigation or being able to last a night on the streets.

Fabricate (PHY) – You’re a natural gearhead, and were probably born with a monkey wrench in your dominant hand. You’re not only good with tools, but you understand how to build what you need from scratch. Add +5 to all checks involving your character’s use of tools or in the building or repair of nearly anything mechanical (provided the level of technology is known to the character).

Politico (SOC) – You’ve spent some time in political circles. Ok, you’ve spent A LOT of time in political circles. You are well known, and have a reputation as someone who gets it done. As a result you have a small circle of political cronies who are willing to help you in such matters, so long as you take care of them. Who these people are and what your collective political agenda is must be detailed exactly by the Gamemaster. With time and effort, both your agenda and your circle of influence could extend to some very lofty heights.

Manipulation (SOC) – You’re one heck of a liar, and you can trust me when I say that, I’m an RPG writer. Well, your song and dance is probably better than mine. Either way, a character with this Perk is one smooth talker, and gains +5 to all checks involving lies or deceit.

Bonds of Loyalty (SOC) – A character with this Perk tends to instill an unusual attachment in his friends and allies. Maybe you’re a born leader, or maybe its charisma, but people tend to listen to you. It doesn’t mean they’ll automatically like what you have to say, but if they are swayed by your words, they quickly become loyal to you and your causes. There is no stat modifier to the Perk, and its effects are entirely up to the Gamemaster.

Sincerity (SOC) – When people listen to you, they know they’re listening to someone honest. As long as your character speaks the truth, all SOC checks are +5.

Seduction (SOC) – With a little effort and attention, you know just what to say and do to charm members of the opposite sex (or anyone who might be potentially attracted to you). In the right situations, you may make a SOC + Presence check to attempt to “charm” a prospective mate. If successful, all your SOC checks against that person are +5 for the remainder of the day or evening.

Meditation (MEN) – You are able to induce a state of calm and relaxation in yourself that allows your mind to become stronger and more focused. For each one hour you spend dedicated to the act of meditation, you may choose one of the following options: +5 to all Focus checks for the next four hours; or -5 to all Intuition difficulties for the next four hours.

Calculative (MEN) – Complex computations and reams of numerical data are your bread and butter; numbers, figures and data all come easily to you, and you likewise easily commit them to memory. You gain +5 to all MEN checks involving mental calculations, but also can store and recall nearly any number-related bit of information that comes to mind.

Wits (MEN) – Whether its keen senses or a sense of nervousness, your mental guard is always up, and your reaction time to danger is impeccable. You gain +5 to all Intuition checks, as well as to your Initiative in combat.

Good Sense (MEN) – Many have said you have a good head on your shoulders, and you aim to keep it that way. You have common sense, a rarity these days, and that sense often keeps you out of trouble. Whenever something “isn’t right”, or you feel like you’re being deceived or something is being concealed from you, your Gamemaster may call for an Intuition check to determine if your Good Sense can keep you out of harm’s way. This can range from walking into an ambush, or being duped by a clever salesman.

Studious (MEN) – You are a natural student; either through keen observation or intensive reading you easily and quickly come to understand all manner of academic subjects once you put your mind to it. With a little effort, commitment and consistency, you can gradually improve your knowledge on a subject by dedicating a few hours each day to the study of that subject. As long as you keep up your study regiment, you may add +1 to all MEN checks involving your course of study for each consecutive week spent studying, up to a maximum of +10. Maintaining your maximum bonus for months can also result in your Gamemaster awarding your permanent points in Focus.

Raw Nerve (SDW) – You are one ballsy ninja. You don’t crack under pressure, nor are you easily bullied. Panic is a foreign word, and there are snowballs in the dead of winter that lose their cool more easily than you. Shadow checks made under extreme duress grant a bonus of +5 for you.

Self-Control (SDW) – You are the master of your faculties, the king of the castle. You have a deep well of willpower from which to draw from in times of uncertainty or temptation. While others may struggle to maintain their composure in the face of certain doom, you do not. All checks to resist fear or effects that induce terror or panic gain +5.

Honor (SDW) – All Shinobi have some version of an honor code that they must adhere to, sometimes out of personal choice, but more often out of the obligations set upon them by their Lineage. True honor, though, is harder to come by. For those with this Perk, they have a concrete code of ethics to guide both minute and macro aspects of day-to-day life. A beat by beat code of honor needs to be detailed with the Gamemaster in order for this Perk to be effective. As long as the character lives by this code, checks made to resist breaking their honor, or striving to uphold it, are done so at +5.

Manifestation (SDW) – You are someone who knows how to make ideas come to life through sheer perseverance. Anything you set your mind to you feel you can achieve. Once per session a character with this Perk can declare a well-defined goal to the Gamemaster. Though this goal must be Gamemaster approved, all checks made in support of this endeavor are made at +5.

Resistance (SDW) – Being stubborn is one thing, but with this Perk you can bully your body into temporarily ignoring the effects of mind or nerve altering substances. This could be alcohol, recreational drugs, truth serum, or even deadly, deadly poison. Despite any chemically-induced fog, you may make a check to resist its effect, no matter the source (unless that source is magical or paranormal in nature). The resistance, though, is always temporary – just how temporary is up to the Gamemaster.

Faith (SPI) – Similar to the Honor Perk, Faith is the result of religious or spiritual tenants that you live your life by and draw strength from in times of trouble or doubt. The regulations of this belief system must be detailed with your Gamemaster, but you gain a +5 to all SPI checks provided you live your life righteously.

Yin (SPI) – You have an affinity for stasis; for building, constructing, and maintaining the status quo. All SPI checks made by you to maintain the grip of Yin are +5.

Yang (SPI) – You have an affinity for chaos; random acts of destruction, explosive bouts of creativity, and the miracle of creation itself are the stuff of dreams for you and a reason for living life to its fullest. You gain +5 to all checks involving spreading the chaos of Yang through SPI.

Channeling (SPI) – For one reason or another you have a powerful affinity for spirits. You find dealing with them comes naturally and they in turn tend to be slightly more open to communicating with you over other shadowfolk. This Perk affects Kami as well as Dim and all difficulties involving these spirits are reduced by -5 for you.

Force (SPI) – Perhaps you were a pyromaniac in a past life, or some sort of lord of destruction; whatever the reason, magical effects that result in the destruction of life, limb and property turn out more effective for you than others. Whenever one of your Arts would deal damage it deals an additional +1 damage for each level of oath you've attained in that Art.

Combat

Violence isn't always the solution...But sometimes it is.

Combat, as the name suggests, is the brutal, bloody affair of fighting in the world of **Blood: Path of the Shinobi**. While it is a key component of many games, Gamemasters need to be careful not to overload their stories with fight sequences. It can make the story drag on with no real resolutions and overuse can take away from a climax of excitement. Even still, it *is* a core part of this game, like most roleplaying games. This version, however, focuses on the rapid pace of combat, the confusion that can arise from a chaotic battlefield and the advantage of a cool hand and a trained mind.

Parts of Combat:

Opportunities

Fights – real fights – are wild, chaotic affairs. Even if all participants are highly trained, there's no compensating for not knowing what your opponent is actually going to do. All you can do is trust your training (if you're lucky enough to have any), and stick to your game plan.

Every second in a fight is an opportunity, then, for a character to make just the right move, or make a terrible blunder. Many turn-based games give players the chance to see what they're opponent is doing, what action they're taking, and react as best they can. In the system of **Blood**, players have almost no time to actually see what they're opponents are doing – they have to anticipate, and act accordingly, just as in a real fight.

An action in this system is called an Opportunity, and characters may have multiple Opportunities each round (only the truly unskilled are reduced to a single Opportunity per round). To determine how many Opportunities your character has, use this formula: 1, plus an additional 1 for each score of 5 you have among your Primary Stats, plus an additional 1 for each score of 5 you have among the Secondary Stats Combat and/or Focus.

The most outstanding of combatants will have eight to ten Opportunities, while most freshly minted characters will start with between one and three (read: most, not all).

Knowing the number of Opportunities your character has in combat is important (which is why it's noted on the proper character sheet). Just how to use those Opportunities will be elaborated on in the next section.

Step 1:

Initiative

Initiative defines how quickly a character or NPC reacts to the sudden outbreak of violence. It represents the upper hand that can be achieved when one party is able to act a split second faster than the other party. In many games it is used to determine the sequence of turns in a fight, but in **Blood** it is used to show the advantage of a combination of surprise and preparedness; the one in a fight who first acts quickly and confidently often gets the edge early on.

Each combat sequence or fight has only one Initiative roll at the beginning of the first round of combat, and only the first round. Winning Initiative grants an edge for a character, not a beat-stick to use turn after turn after turn. The element of surprise wears off quickly.

To determine Initiative, each character (whether a player or an NPC) rolls 1 d20 (plus any modifiers they may have). If there is to be a winner, it must be the character who rolls highest, and wins by a factor of 5. This means in order to win Initiative, you must not only roll the highest, but your number must be five places higher than the next highest number.

EXAMPLE, if Bob rolls a 16 and Jenny rolls a 4, than Bob wins the Initiative. If Jenny had rolled between 12 and 15, then there would be no winner.

If no one wins Initiative then there is no effect. However, if there is a winner that character gains that split second advantage, and gets one additional Opportunity during the first round of combat.

Step 2:

Opportunities

Under the **Blood** system, combat is turn based but no one “goes first”; there’s no turn order. Opportunities are declared and then resolve in order, with your actions overlapping your opponent’s actions – hence the importance of anticipation.

At this stage, each player selects an action to take for each of their Opportunities. If Bob has four Opportunities, he needs to declare what action he’s going to take for each Opportunity that round. The actions you can take in an Opportunity are as follows:

Attack – You choose to make an attacking maneuver against your opponent. The type of attack you make is appropriate for your character’s skill level and proficiency.

Defense – You choose to defend against what you anticipate will be an incoming attack. This may be a block, dodge or parry – in all cases success will keep you from being struck with an attack.

Declaration – Maybe you don’t want to do something “traditional”; perhaps you try and psych your opponent out, or issue a battle cry, and valiantly try to end the fight with diplomacy. In such cases, you may make a Declaration which like Declarations throughout the game can be anything your character can accomplish in a short moment.

Magic – Casting magic in combat can be tricky, and not all the Arts are suitable for use mid-fight. If the character has a spell prepared or has an effect they can utilize in a split second, they may choose to use that magic as an Opportunity.

Each of your Opportunities must be assigned one of these actions each round. Although you choose them one at a time, they will resolve at the same time as your opponents, in order, from the first Opportunity to the last.

Checking back in with Bob and his four Opportunities, he has elected to order his as such:

Attack - Defense - Attack - Magic

His opponent, Jenny, has three Opportunities, but is not a trained combatant, and her character would much rather avoid a fight. She orders her three Opportunities as such:

Defense - Defense - Declaration

Step 3:

Resolution

At this stage, all participants begin to make their checks for whatever actions they've decided to take for each Opportunity, one at a time. It can be tempting for a player to plow ahead and roll all their checks at once, but its bad form and bad etiquette – wait and synchronize with the members of your group, and most importantly, the Gamemaster.

Each player then makes their check for the first Opportunity. Each of those actions then resolves and the success or failure of each action is determined. If damage is dealt, it is assigned at this time. Any modifiers this may incur are indeed applied to all further actions and Opportunities. If two or more characters attack at the same time, then their attacks occur roughly at the same time – probably not EXACTLY at the same time, but momentum carries the actions forward once they are committed to.

Though the difficulty varies based on the degrees of difficulty set by the Gamemaster, all Attack and Defense checks are the same : PHY + Combat.

When Bob and Jenny reach this step, their fight will look something like this:

- Opportunity 1:** *Attack vs Defense*
Opportunity 2: *Defense vs Defense*
Opportunity 3: *Attack vs Declaration*
Opportunity 4: *Magic vs No Action*

To resolve checks of Attack and Defense, the system is simple: one check must be higher than the other. The highest check “wins”; if the highest check is the attack, than the attack is successful and damage is applied to the recipient (or any armor they may be wearing); if the defense is higher, the attack fails to land, either because it was dodged or somehow blocked. Likewise, if the difficulty set by the Gamemaster for either action fails, than even if the check was higher than the opponent’s the action itself fails (resulting in a miss or misstep). This same system applies to actions of Magic and Declaration, though the checks themselves use different stats. In the case of Magic the check is always SPI + Flow. In the case of Declarations, the Gamemaster will decide what stats are called for depending on the action.

In the case of a tied check, the result is the Gamemaster’s discretion, though we recommend allowing for partial success on both sides of the check.

Step 1: Initiative	Roll 1 d20 vs opponents*
Step 2: Opportunities	Declare one for each Opportunity: <i>Attack, Defense, Declaration, Magic</i>
Step 3: Resolution	Checks are made for each Opportunity by that character’s player.

*: *Winner of Initiative gains a bonus Opportunity*

When an attack is successful damage is applied to the character. The next section below will detail exactly what that means.

As for our example, let's check in with them:

Opportunity 1: Bob rolls his Attack check – a d20 plus his PHY (5) + Combat (4). He rolls a 10, giving him a total of 19. Jenny chose Defense, and wisely so, she uses her check to defend against Bob's attack. The check is the same for Defense as Attack and for her this equal her PHY (3) + Combat (1); but she rolls an 18, giving her a total of 22. With the higher score, Jenny just barely dodges the attack.

Opportunity 2: Both participants anticipated an attack, but none was forth coming. This is the classic duelist moment when both hedge their bets and take a step back to reset. Both were prepared for something that never came – there's no real reason to roll out the check, and this is a good opportunity for drama on the part of the Gamemaster.

Opportunity 3: Bob now continues with his assault, but Jenny knows she can't stand here toe-to-toe with this guy. She needs a new strategy and this is the moment she's chosen to execute it. Neither attacking nor defending, Jenny has chosen a time-tested strategy – RUN! Bob runs his Attack check again, and this time comes up with only a 15, which in this case was the minimum difficulty set by their Gamemaster. Jenny however makes a different check at the behest of the Gamemaster, PHY (3) + Vitality (5), to see how fast she can break away from the fight and bee line for safety...”safety”. She rolls a 9, totaling 17, narrowly beating out Bob (again, how frustrating!). Though this isn't technically a Defensive action, the Gamemaster decides that because they were both successful Jenny doesn't actually get out of the way of the attack and she takes a parting shot as she flees. This means damage is applied...so let's explain damage.

Step 4:

Damage and Health

Damage is determined by how successful an attack was made against the recipient, plus any damage added by a weapon or magic. Its reduced by the success of the defense – even if the Defensive action failed, it still has some value in softening the blow. The formula is easy and looks like so:

Physical Stat + Combat Check (of the Attacker) + Weapon Damage
- (subtract from)
Physical Stat + Combat Check (of the Defender) + Armor level
= Damage Dealt to Defender

Armor: *Any self-respecting Shinobi knows the value of armor, as do their enemies, if they're smart. Armor has levels ranging from the most meager of heavy coats (Level 1) to the sloped plating of an armored vehicle (Level 40). The advantage is simple to calculate – each level of the armor reduces the damage taken from a single attack by the level of the armor. However, armor wears down and needs repair; each time the armor is used to reduce the damage of an incoming attack, its effectiveness is reduced by one Level. This continues on and on for each attack it absorbs until it eventually yields and breaks, which in turn can be thwarted by repairing it out of combat.*

Threshold: *Everyone has a threshold for pain and shock, but not everyone is built the same, and that threshold is different for each character. How much punishment a character can endure is called their Damage Threshold, and its equal to 3 + their Vitality score. When a character receives an amount of damage higher than their Damage Threshold, they enter a stunned and dazed state of shock and lose the remainder of their Opportunities until the next round.*

Once damage is dealt it is applied to the recipient's health wheel.

On the wheel you should notice an inner red track and an outer green track. The outer track is for non-lethal damage. The inner track is for lethal damage.

Typically, hand-to-hand combat causes non-lethal damage, as does incidental sources of damage like walking into a door or stumbling down a few steps.

Weapons, from katanas to sniper rifles, cause lethal damage, as does most forms of magic.

When a character's non-lethal wheel fills up with damage, further damage is treated as lethal, and is counted on the inner red track.

When a character's lethal wheel fills up with damage they are dead.

Each level of damage marked down on the sheet adds a -1 modifier to all checks made by that character. So a character with five levels of non-lethal and three levels of lethal damage receives a total of -8 to all their checks until that damage is properly dealt with.

Healing: *There are multiple forms of healing in the game of Blood. The most common of which is natural healing. Non-lethal levels of damage that have received proper medical treatment (which only means they've been set and attended to by a knowledgeable person – it need not include a hospital visit) heal at a rate of one level per day of rest. Lethal levels heal in the same way when attended to at a rate of one level per week of rest. There are also technologies, spirits and magics which can heal, and the sources and mechanics for those healing powers are left to be defined by the Gamemaster. Some of these are discussed in other sections, and for the sake of consolidation are listed below.*

Healing Potions – *Healing potions can be created through the minor art of spell-binding. A typical potion heals three levels of nonlethal damage, or one level of lethal damage. More powerful potions are possible to create, but are much more difficult to do so, and can be very dangerous if done so incorrectly.*

Medical Bay – *Any facility with a medical bay (such as a hospital) can use this advanced technology to mend a human body much more quickly than through natural rest. A patient under the care of someone with proper training and access to a medical bay heals at twice the rate of natural healing.*

Spirits – *Although only some spirits have the power to heal, such menders can be found within any category of spirit, from kami to dim to oni (demons). Because the power level of spirits varies so very broadly, it's up to a shrewd Gamemaster to carefully consider the healing powers of a given spirit in his or her game. As a rule of thumb, a modest or moderately powerful spirit can heal at the same rate as a healing potion. Weaker spirits perhaps even less so, but powerful demigods may be capable of miracles.*

Bleeding Out: *Bleeding, both externally and internally is a serious problem. Characters who've received a bleeding wound or malady must seek medical attention immediately or risk eventual death. Until attended to, these wounds bleed at a rate that inflicts between 1 and 3 additional levels of the appropriate type of damage every few minutes. The exact rate is up to the judgment of the Gamemaster.*

Maladies: *Certain types of injury are so severe that marks on a damage chart will not do them justice. If a character loses an arm, receives head trauma, or is set on fire, they may receive a Malady from the Gamemaster. A Malady is a flaw applied to the character until the wound is attended to and somehow resolved. The exact effects are left open to the Gamemaster, but given the brutal and traumatic effects of weapons and combat in the world of Blood, it is highly recommended that Gamemasters make wise use of this option.*

So let's determine how all this effects our two battling NPC's:

Damage needs to be applied to Jenny at this stage. Because the rules of **Blood** are elastic, the Gamemaster is letting Bob get a shot in even though Jenny made a successful fleeing check (if she had made a proper Defensive action with the same results she probably wouldn't be taking damage at all). Because Jenny had the higher score according to the damage formula, she shouldn't take any damage at all, but the Gamemaster decides to apply **JUST** the weapon damage to Jenny, to represent her just barely getting tagged. The weapon is a blade that deals +5 damage, since Jenny still scored 2 higher on her check, it reduces the damage (according to the formula) by 2 more, meaning Jenny takes 3 damage. As an edged weapon, and while not wearing any armor, Jenny marks 3 lethal damage to her back as she turns and runs. 3 damage is not even close to Jenny's Damage Threshold of 8, so she's perfectly conscious and able to continue acting. It is, however, damage from an edged weapon, so until tended properly, the wound will bleed at a very moderate rate (according to the Gamemaster) of 1 damage every five minutes. If there were any further actions or Opportunities, Jenny would suffer -3 to all her checks because of the damage she's suffered. But in this case, Bob is content to leave her with a little beauty mark, and watches his nemesis dash away into the shadows (he was pretty sure his dice were conspiring against him, anyway).

Bob's last Opportunity was Magic, but because his opponent left combat, the action goes unused. Bob isn't penalized or forced to use the spell he was intending to cast – combat just ends, and all Opportunities are removed from the action wheel until the next epic fight.

Shadow Kills

The combat system for **Blood** is every bit as quick and brutal as a realistic street fight can be made to be within a tabletop roleplaying game. These hectic and chaotic encounters can sometimes leave a lot to chance, and both (or all) combatants are putting themselves in grave danger by participating in a wild melee or frantic firefight. The Shinobi have not come as far as they have in this shadow war by standing toe-to-toe with their foe and duking it out.

Because combat can go *so sideways so quickly*, there's a fair amount of advantage to reducing the chance of failure as much as possible, and therefore reducing the reliance for dice. Sneak attacks, ambushes and traps are a Shinobi's best friend. If a character takes the time to carefully set up a killing strike on a completely unsuspecting enemy, there's little that enemy can do to defend against it (unless they are particularly powerful or cunning). A few simple Shadow checks to set up an ambush can greatly reduce the need for prolonged combat during which a character could be seriously maimed or killed. Then again, sometimes the only option is hack-n-slash-guns-blazing, but it's not very ninja.

Enter the *Shadow Kill*. In **Blood**, it's not only possible but encouraged for players to avoid "frontal assaults", or straight-forward combat encounters, and instead approach violence as a ninja would. Using stealth, deception, and the stat of Shadow, characters can set up ambushes and sneak attacks that will mitigate unnecessary dice-driven combat sequences, and hopefully result in a neat and clean assassination. These are called *shadow kills*.

These sorts of maneuvers are largely based on the cunning and ingenuity of the player, who drives their character through the shadows unnoticed and undetected, patiently waiting for the perfect moment to strike their opponent completely unawares. The system-element of this is defined by the Shadow stat, which the Gamemaster must test by providing judicious checks for as the character sets up their shadow kill. Provided a character can set themselves up for success, a properly-orchestrated shadow kill results in the Shinobi striking and killing their opponent unseen and unheard.

This doesn't mean, however, that Shinobi are unstoppable killing machines, just so long as they cling to the shadows (though to be sure, that's just the sort of rumor a Shinobi would propagate). There are at least some dice-related obstacles that must be overcome, demonstrating the character's ability to actually execute such a maneuver, and not simply claim victory because the player declared they hide in a closet and wait to jump out.

Step 1: *the Approach*

First things first, a character must put themselves in a position to strike their chosen target, much like a predatory animal must successfully stalk its prey. Whether the Shinobi is using a blade, a sniper rifle, or a toxic vector, they must get from point A to point B without being noticed. For a shadow kill, this is where the maneuver truly lives, and Gamemasters should take great pains to make these actions as tense and as dramatic as they can. Mechanically, the Gamemaster should present a small series of Shadow checks sprinkled in amongst harrowing acts of misdirection and stealth. The fun of a shadow kill is all in the build-up and the attempt, more so than in the final moment of success.

Step 2: *the Kill*

Once all the pieces of the puzzle are in place, all that is left is the moment of a truth. A single strike to fell the enemy. This means the player need only make a single combat check to determine that they can, in fact, successfully make a killing blow against their target. As long as that target remains unaware of the impending doom hanging over their head, there is no reason to engage in a full combat scene of initiative and opportunities. A single successful check will bring the kill to its conclusion. Of course, should the character miss and give themselves away, a much more hectic scene rapidly unfolds, as the careful shadow kill is replaced with chaotic combat.

Tip: *Avoiding Anticlimactic Disappointment*

Gamemasters should always keep in mind that although the shadow kill is the most viable and most frequently used arrow in the Shinobi's quiver, it should not be the end-all-and-be-all of combat in **Blood**. Some encounters should not be so easily solved with an assassination from the shadows, such as engaging particularly powerful (or perceptive) enemies. Remember that the more sophisticated antagonists of Riku have been fighting Shinobi for generations, and have their own methods and training for detecting the shadow folk. If shadow kills simply allowed characters to run rampantly unopposed through all opponents, it would make for a boring game. Additionally, some enemies may not be able to be taken down with a traditional shadow kill at all, such as materialized monsters, demons, cyborgs, or any other character with enhanced or alternate physiology. Characters should be occasionally challenged with opponents that cannot easily have their throats slit, neatly shot between the eyes, or be brought low by some poisoned beverage. A Gamemaster should be willing and able to produce obstacles for their players that require a mix of tactics to solve, both in combat situations and in general story-crafting.

Understanding Karma

Karma is a sort of global modifier that comes and goes as your character performs altruistic or ill-intentioned acts, and is kept track by the Gamemaster, separately and in secret, for each character. Because it is basically a tracking mechanism for good and evil, gains and losses, it supposes the need for experience points. When a player feels they would like to increase a stat, gain a Perk, or learn an Art, referring to that player's character Karma is a good way to determine if they've used their time in the world to advance that skill or ability. As a rule of thumb, the character should have earned a number of positive Karmic events (positive modifiers) in the general field they would like to increase equal to the level or Oath they would like to increase it to. As always, though, Gamemasters can find their own unique ways to reward and advance characters. This is simply one way to skin the catfish.

Growing Your Character's Stats and Abilities

Karma

A casual glance at the **Blood** system and one thing someone might notice is that there's...**gasp**...No experience points!

Experience points, or XP, are a very common way to keep track of character progress in many roleplaying games. However, in **Blood** there are none. Your character grows through *actual* personal growth and by striving to achieve their personal goals and endeavors. As a character interacts with the world around them, they will accumulate Karma.

Pack Your Bags

The very last step in creating your character is to determine what he or she has to carry around with them on their upcoming adventure. Their equipment. Their kit. Their gear. **Blood** uses a simple system to sort out (within reason) what items and property your character begins the game with – Equipment Points.

A brand new character is given a variable number of these Equipment Points; exactly how many points that character receives is up to the Gamemaster but we recommend 12 points for an entry level character. If Gamemasters want their group to be fabulously decked out or a newer character is joining a seasoned party, then they may make that number much higher. Or if a Gamemaster would like to run a more Spartan game, where characters have very little in the way of material resources, they may start characters with fewer than 10 points.

Below are three lists, dividing the types of gear a player's character may be interested in into three basic categories: Common, Tech, and Mystical. Each one is fairly self-explanatory, but the objects named on that list are each given a short description and a point value. A player simply chooses what items they would like their character to start the game with; the total point value cannot exceed the limit imposed by the Gamemaster.

Weapons are also part of your choices and each has its own damage that it adds to your attacks when used. The damage value for weapons are listed in the item's description, as well as the weapon's general range.

In the spirit of keeping the system simple, many items come in the form of "kits". A kit is a package of multiple "lesser" items bundled together to serve a specific purpose. Exactly what's in any given kit is ultimately up to players and Gamemasters to determine before the start of the game, but the kit gives you a general idea of what ought to be within one. The items and kits listed below are just a sampling of the possible pieces of equipment characters may want to carry. Players are, as always, encouraged to fill out and create their own kits to suit their specific purposes.

Common

(1*) **Outfit:** One complete ensemble of clothing in any number of fashions or styles. *Each character receives one free outfit at the start of the game.

(1) **First Aid Kit:** A basic medical package containing materials to deal with simple wounds or injuries. Bandages, gauze, tape, antiseptics, and some basic medicine are common items for these kits.

(1) **Polonia Kit:** A package of specialized materials used for dealing with Polonia exposure. Common items found in these kits are bottled water, hazard suits, extra sterile gloves, a spongy, absorbent spray foam, exposure pills, and a pre-measured injection of serum for cases of ingestion.

(1) **Survival Kit:** Similar to a day pack, this kit contains basic supplies for a few days in case of becoming stranded or lost in the wilderness. It commonly includes food, water, blankets, a basic tent, and a good multitool.

(2) **Pet:** Exactly what it sounds like. This allows you to start the game with a loyal animal companion, typically one no larger than a briefcase. The exact species and abilities of this pet need to be detailed with or by the Gamemaster. Larger pets with greater abilities can possibly be purchased for a greater point value, if allowed by the Gamemaster.

(*) **Sword:** Every Shinobi begins the game with a sword, typically either a ninja-to or a katana. The exact nature of the sword is up to the player. While the sword is initially free, swords in the world of Riku are not cheap, and a good sword is not always easy to come by.

Katana – Damage 5, Melee Range

Ninja-to – Damage 4, Melee Range; handle contains hidden compartment

(2) **Archery Kit:** Everything someone needs to craft a very basic bow and arrow. The kit usually contains a basic bow, string, and a few simple arrows, but also items needed to care for the set, or repair or replace broken arrows.

(1) **Navigation Kit:** Compass, a few maps, sexton, chalk, and other simple items needed for basic navigation.

(1) **Art Supplies:** Typically this kit favors one particular variety of art but may contain items like paints, brushes, blank canvas, graphite pencils, some simple clay, and a few rough sculpting tools.

(1) **Hand Tools:** Shovels, mauls, wood axes, rakes, pitch forks, and just about any gardening or farming implement one might find in a tool shed. These items can be used as weapons but aren't exactly balanced for the job, and are a bit ungainly.

Hand Tools – Damage 4, Melee Range; Gamemasters add +5 to the difficulty to hit with this “weapon”.

(1) **Burglar's Kit:** A dark body suit, gloves, mask, lock picking tools, glass cutter, and a trusty crow bar are the most common items seen in these unsavory kits. And of course a sack for all that loot.

(1) **Climbing Gear:** Helmet, gloves, several reels of good rope, anchors, clips and pulleys are the most likely items to be found in this kit.

(2) **Hunter's Kit:** Camouflage grease, a few whistles for animal calls, a good sharp knife, and most importantly, a simple but sturdy rifle, with a handful of extra bullets.

Pipe Gun – Damage 7, Long Range; typically a single-shot ammo capacity

(10) **House:** A small, one story house that you can call home. Or call it whatever you like, it's your house. The larger the building and the more elaborate the features or the more furnishings and comforts within, the greater the point cost.

(5) **Livestock:** Rural, agricultural living is still a big part of Riku, and livestock is just as common as modern technology. Typically every 5 points spent on this item grants the character ownership of two large animals, or a moderately sized group of smaller to medium sized animals. Purchasing this item does not include any structures to house the livestock in, or the tools and feed needed to care for the animal – that can be purchased for an added point cost.

(1) **Musical Instrument:** Provided a character can play or has use for such an item, this provides the character with any one musical instrument of portable size and of reasonably good quality. Larger instruments (like a piano or a full sized harp) or instruments of impeccable quality cost additional points.

(1) **Cleaning Supplies:** Mops, brooms, buckets, and all manner of soaps, cleansers and detergents. Whether the remedy is homemade or chemically produced this kit is spic and span.

(1) **Gambler's Kit:** Usually a few assorted games of chance, some of which are modified for cheating, such as weighted dice or marked cards.

(1) **Toolbox:** A sturdy metal box with a good latch containing an assortment of small tools. These tools may be specific to a particular craft, or more generalized, depending on how the box is stocked.

(1) **Intoxicants:** Most often booze in the form of a traveler's bar, this item can be any number of sensory impairing, recreational drugs, in a reasonably small quantity. How "legal" any of these items are depends on the exact city or fiefdom the character is traveling through, and largely up to the Gamemaster.

(1) **Liquid Assets:** Money. There are several forms and currencies on Riku, from basic coins of precious metals, to Zaibatsu's electronic credit system. Each point of this item that's purchased is worth about 1,000 units of a single given currency.

(1) **Tailor's Kit:** Needle, threads, yarn, and some basic fabrics.

(1) **Interrogator's Kit:** Simply put, a torture kit. The exact nature of the items within and their specifications are left to the grisly imaginations of Gamemasters and players.

(2) **Knife:** Not just a simple shank, but a good, solid, dependable knife.

Reliable Knife – Damage 2, Melee Range; resists wear-and-tear more than the average knife.

Tech

(3) **Portable Computer:** Whether it be a laptop, tablet, or a holographic projection interface, this item affords the character their very own computer, with the speed, power and memory to accomplish commercial or professional level projects. They're far from laboratory super computers, but they're powerful enough to get most jobs done.

(2) **Handheld Computer:** These devices are smaller and more limited than portable computers, but come in a similar variety. Handheld computers are best used for communications and organization tasks, though can run a variety of low-powered software.

(3) **Hacker's Kit:** Usually used in concert with a computer of some sort, hacker's kits contain portable servers, pirating software and hardware, wiring, and tools for physical splicing and tapping of networks.

(2) **Engineer's Kit:** The key piece of equipment within this kit is a surveyor's scope, which in itself contains a simple computer for logging, recording, and projecting spatial environments in reasonably fine detail with exceptionally accurate measurements. Other items such as levels, compasses and notepads are also common.

(3) **Pistol:** Whether it's a quarter, half or full bore firearm, this item represents one of any number of handgun styles. The typical magazine for a pistol is six rounds and accuracy beyond a fairly limited range gets dodgy quickly. For additional points the gun may have additional features, such as greater stopping power (damage) or a larger clip for ammunition.

Handgun – Damage 3, Short Range

(4) **Energy Pistol:** Not exactly a ray gun, modern energy weapons in Riku tend to fire “bolts” of energy, which can more easily defeat armor and have a slightly better range and much better accuracy than standard ballistics. The pistol is the smallest package for such weapons and also carries the smallest battery, meaning it has the fewest number of rounds it can fire before needing recharging or replacing – usually ten. Like any weapon, these elements can be improved and more features can be modified for an additional cost.

Energy Pistol – Damage 4, Medium Range; reduce difficulty for ranged shots; reduces armor by 4.

(5) **Assault Rifle:** A heavy, long-barreled combat rifle; tough, rugged, reliable. These weapons can take quite a beating before failing. They come standard with extended magazines, and can fire in several modes, including single shot, three round burst, or fully automatic. When firing in three round bursts, triple the damage and the rate of ammunition consumption when fired; apply the same multiplier to fully automatic fire, but by a factor of ten. A typical assault rifle magazine can hold fifty rounds, and has the same range and accuracy of a hunting rifle. Attributes may be modified for an additional point cost.

Assault Rifle – Damage 5, Long Range; three modes of firing

(6) **Plasma Rifle:** The apex combat weapon on the modern battlefield, these rifles fire bolts of intensely concentrated plasma, as the name suggests and in rapid succession. As an energy weapon, they draw from a battery. A plasma rifle can fire single shots or three round bursts; their battery can typically support 30 rounds of plasma fire. More suitable for urban combat, these rifles aren't known for their range, and because they use a different projection of energy than pistols, don't share the increased accuracy of other energy weapons. Attributes may be modified for an additional point cost.

Plasma Rifle – Damage 7, Medium Range; reduces armor by 7; two firing modes

(4) **Sub Machine Gun:** The compact SMG is a favorite of rebels and police forces alike, and quickly evens the odds in any firefight. It combines the firing modes of an assault rifle with the compactness of a pistol. SMG's can fire in either single shot or three round burst mode, and usually fires small arms ammunition in a twenty-round clip, accurate within a few dozen yards. Attributes may be modified for an additional point cost.

SMG – Damage 4, Medium Range; two firing modes

(10) **Gauss Cannon:** This heavy infantry weapon is a combination of ballistic and energy technologies. It fires an inert heavy metal slug fired at incredible velocities from a magnetic chamber. These slugs are usually solid, letting physics generate their explosive force on impact. The largest of these cannons are mounted to armored vehicles and tanks, but smaller, portable versions are commonly used as infantry support weapons. These cannons also require both a battery or energy source and their specialized ammunition. A typical Gauss battery can support ten shots, while the magazine itself usually only holds three rounds. Unlike small arms rounds, Gauss rounds are effective against heavy plate armor, and completely negate light, personal armor.

Gauss Cannon – Damage 10, Very Long Range; affects heavy armor and negates light armor

(12) **Guided Shoulder Mounted Missile:** Specifically designed to destroy armored targets and whole building, guided missiles are as incredibly effective as they are conspicuous and expensive. Such missiles are fired from a personal-friendly platform, usually over the shoulder, and use a sophisticated targeting computer. The missile cannot fire unless a positive lock is achieved (i.e. a successful to-hit check), and once fired will not miss their target unless electronically interfered with or somehow intercepted. The explosive round is usually either anti-armor or anti-infantry. Anti-armor rounds will deal an additional 20 damage to any soft targets on the inside of any armor the missile breaches. Anti-infantry missiles create a larger explosive “splash” when they hit, and will deal their damage to any soft targets within 20 yards of the point of impact. These weapons are usually fire-and-forget, meaning the platform is only used once; though reloadable models do exist. All models, though, may only carry one missile at a time.

Guided Missile – Damage 20*, Very Long Range; See text

(8) **Demolition Kit:** A bomb-maker’s kit, chalk full of explosives, shrapnel and detonation devices. Bombs can be delicate and unwieldy, and Gamemasters should feel free to make their creation as careful and difficult as possible.

Bomb – 40 Damage, -10 damage for every 10 yards beyond the point of explosion

(2/level) **Body Armor:** There are a great many forms of both hard and soft body armor in the world of Riku, from traditional metal armor to full combat suits. For every two points spent on an armored item, that item gains a level of armor. Armor can wear down and even be completely defeated, and needs to be repaired or replaced as need be. Gamemasters and players should keep careful track of the condition of their armor.

(10) **Force Field:** Modern technology allows for the generation of force fields, or a sort of energy bubble that will repulse anyone or anything for a given duration of time, or until the field is overwhelmed with force. A basic model has an hour of battery life, and provides a field of 20 armor, effective even against energy weapons or heavy weapons for one adult-sized individual. These characteristics can be modified and increased for additional equipment points.

(2) **Welder's Kit:** A portable welding torch and fuel source and safety equipment is about as complete as this kit gets. The torch is capable of both cutting through scrap or welding separate metal components together.

(5) **Personal Vehicle:** Be it a farm truck or a hover car, you own a mode of modern transportation powered by a Polonian reactor. Top speeds vary, but are comparable to cars and trucks of real-world Earth, though greater technological advances and features are available to those willing to pay.

(2) **Forger's Kit:** A series of black market software and hardware patchwork together a kit used for forging documents and identifications. Scanners, printers and cameras are all part of this package.

(10) **Heavy Machinery:** A work vehicle used for a special, large-scale task, such as a crane, forklift, dump truck, bull dozer, or any other piece of farming or construction machinery.

(2) **Comlink:** The basic communication device for Riku, they are usually tied into a local network, but can operate on their own channels and frequencies, as well. A packaged kit like this one usually contains four links that can be tuned to one another's frequency, or any open local channels.

(5) **Medical Bay:** Not so much as a "kit" as an entire office full of equipment, a medical bay is everything a professional doctor needs to conduct their practice with. It includes diagnostic equipment, laboratory items, emergency medicine hardware, and pharmaceutical materials.

(2) **Surveillance Kit:** This kit contains a mixture of classic and modern spyware devices; everything from coded message books to tiny recording devices, to long range surveillance gear and scanners. How imaginative the kit can become is limited only by the inventiveness of its owner.

(5) **Drone:** Robotics in the modern age of Riku has become nothing short of amazing. Drones are semi-self-aware automatons programmed to be completely loyal to a few or just one individual. Typically they are small, light machines, able to hover and move at about walking speed, and carry a basic compliment of communications and surveillance equipment. Combat drones with armor and weapons are not unheard of by any means, as well as any number of specialized models – all of which can be purchased for additional equipment points.

(6) **Stealth Suit:** The technological stealth suit is a part chemical and part mechanical body suit worn to electronically conceal the presence of the wearer from the sensory equipment of machines. Cameras and sensors will not detect the wearer, nor will the targeting or indentifying systems of drones or powered armor and other military hardware. Some models are armored, or incorporated into light power armor suits, while others are advanced enough to provide light-bending invisibility to the human eye. All of which operate off of polonia batteries for varying lengths of time. Likewise, more sophisticated models cost more equipment points.

Mystic

Mystic equipment are items used in Shinobi magic. They're often not necessary for Major Arts, but their use in Minor Arts are often required, or at least make using such magic a little easier. When using a Mystic piece of equipment for a Minor Art's check, the difficulty of that check can be lowered between 1 and 5, depending on the creativity of the player's use and the whims of the Gamemaster.

(1) **Semi-Precious Stones:** This is a grabbag or collection of polished stones with both arcane and monetary value. Specific stones relate to particular spirits or elements, and when the right stone is used with the right spell it tends to help the magic along.

(1) **Augury Kit:** Augury is the art of extending one's senses beyond their particular moment in time; this can include viewing another location, or looking backwards or forwards through time. Different individuals have different methods to accomplish this, from tea leaves, to cards, to the classic crystal ball. This kit may contain multiple items, or be confined to the character's personal preference for augury.

(1) **Séance Kit:** This kit contains items used in easing communication with the Dim. Incense, prayer books, and an alter for making offerings are the most commonly found items for such a kit, but may also include other pieces that are significant to individual Dim.

(1) **Calligraphy Set:** As practical for formal letters as it is for the mystic arts, this elegant pen and paper set provides a character everything they may need to create all manner of scrolls, volutes, scripts, or anything else a scribe may need to write.

(1) **Origami Supplies:** As one might suspect, the key element of this kit is paper – clean white paper of good, heavy stock. This kit is often carried in a small, hard-sided satchel to keep the paper in good order while traveling, and often is paired with a straight edge for clean lines, and a log book for notes and sketches.

(2) **Astrologer's Kit:** While using the stars to determine future events or provide insight into someone's personality is an age old art, the modern kit includes not only books and proper reference materials, but also a compact telescope and journal.

(1) **Tattoo Kit:** Tattooing is not an uncommon profession, and many non-mystical versions of this kit exist. A kit that leans toward the arcane includes not only ink, sanitation supplies, and some form of tattoo needle (often an electric gun), but also special supplies such as specific ingredients for mixing non-traditional inks, and a log or reference book for cataloging symbolism.

(4) **Spellbound Items:** Not every character will start the game with the ability to create Spellbound items, but many will still want to begin with a few magic items of their own. This item allows characters access to objects that they perhaps cannot make on their own, such as spell scrolls, potions, or charms. The Magic chapter provides more insight into just what can be accomplished with Spellbinding, and such items of particular power or strength should come with a complimentary higher cost. Like weapons, this item is not a kit, and each Spellbound item must be purchased separately.

The Path:

ACT II

Mr. Nguyen’s class was always a divisive one – students either loved or hated it, and that went for the teacher who taught it, too. Arshi Gantumur was no exception – he hated Nguyen’s history class, or rather, the version of history Nguyen proposed to his students. Arshi himself had been tutored in history by his mother and grandmother, and had come to a very different view of Riku than the one Nguyen proffered.

“Ok, people,” the teacher began, overtly wetting his cracked lips with his thick tongue, “history is a simple thing, ok? Its static. Its events and dates that are just plain factual. And factual means there’s no disputing them, which means there’s no use talking over them. It’s just what happened and you as students just need to accept it, memorize it, and move on. Ok?”

“Ok, Mr. Nguyen.”, the class droned back in a haphazard chorus. Some students sat poised at their digital notebooks, others smiled condescendingly into the middle-aged man’s face, and most just slumped back into their seats waiting for the hour to conclude. Arshi did none of these things. His cold, black eyes burned into his teacher’s countenance, taking in every detail, every perverse lick of his lips, every bead of flop sweat. He sat in rigid stillness, waiting; not for the lesson to be through, but for another to begin.

“Ok, good, let’s get started – we’re going to move quickly through the overview and cover a lot of time. Frankly, history is more novelty than anything else, people. I teach it to you because the Zaibatsu city board of education says we have standards to maintain, but let’s be honest, none of this is really important. What matters is what you do today, and how you prepare for tomorrow.”

“*That’s a good lesson, Mr. Nguyen*”, Arshi thought to himself, his grandmother’s confessor smile creeping into the corners of his mouth, “*I think it’s the only one you’ve taught me that’s worthwhile.*”

“The Ijuu period,” Nguyen continued with another smack from his reptilian tongue, “it’s what we call the Great Migration. So before this time we had the Yume period, which is ultimately a bunch of crap spouted by old folks, ok? Yume. Equals. Crap. Ok? Why is it crap? Because if the Yume people were so great, why aren’t they alive anymore today? The cataclysm of Riku took them off the face of the world, probably because they were weak or deficient in some way, and we, the stronger more resilient society, would take their place, which is the proper way of the world, ok?”

“Ok, Mr. Nguyen.”

“And we’ve got proof that we were better and more fit to carry on the legacy of the world than them, ok? The Arks. We all know the Arks, ok? We talked about them last week when we covered the history of airship design, ok? So the first Arks were built soon after the cataclysm, and they’re the reason we’re here today. Before we had the two big cities, just yet, the big wigs who would go on to found our city of Zaibatsu built a series of these massive airships that could fit all the important people, technology, art and culture that was worth saving while the surface of the planet was going to pot, ok? And they actually built more ships than they need, ok? Why? Why did they do this, class?”

Dozens of pairs of dead, uninterested eyes stared back at Nguyen. Only one pair stood out from Nguyen’s survey, the simmering angry eyes of Arshi Gantumur, one of his poorest students. “How ‘bout it, Arshi – why?”

Arshi took a slow calming breath to compose himself with, “Because that’s how you start to build a society where you have absolute control. You only take the people that agree with you, and save the things that make you look good. We don’t live in a city, we live in an echo chamber, and that’s not gonna last…”

“Ok, ok, right, Arshi, whatever you say. I wouldn’t take your mom’s homeschooling too seriously, ok? Look where it got her, ok?”

The teenager only nodded and lowered his eyes from his teachers, feigning resignation as his fingers clenched so tightly into his fist a tiny rivulet of blood dribbled between his knuckles.

“But hey, class, let’s get crazy today and talk about Arshi’s little rant, just for a second, ok? Now a few dummies say that there’s no choice in the city, but don’t forget, there is. If you don’t fit in here, you can always go live in Loha Prasat, ok? See, there’s always a choice – you can choose science or you can choose religion, ok? And the best part is that there’s no *wrong* choice – just *your* choice, ok?”

“Now to get back on track, the city engineers built extra Arks just for that purpose, to *save* religion, not just modern science, ok? They sent the Arks as a *gift* to the ministers of the 8 Fold Paths, ok; that was the religion of choice then, and it is now, ok?”

The slender arm of class valedictorian, Yumi Kakoro, shot up into the air from the front row – defiantly enough to visibly irritate the reptilian-like profile of Nguyen. The teacher turned on his heels and leaned fully onto the young girl’s desk, eliciting yet another swipe of his tongue across his mouth. “Yumi?”, he asked flatly.

“That’s *factually* incorrect, sir. It’s been well established that the additional Arks given to the 8 Fold Paths were the product of an arrangement between the two factions, in exchange for access to reserves of polonia ore beneath the religious sect’s proposed colonial site in the mountains.”

“Factual according to *who*, young lady?” Nguyen’s tone had turned sour, and his eyes unabashedly roamed across the teenage girl’s seated figure as he leered over her.

Yumi’s eyes were set upon her teacher’s, unwavering. “The rest of the faculty, Mr. Nguyen. We’ve covered that lesson in our courses on politics *and* science, *sir*.”

Nguyen snorted hard enough to eject a projectile of fluid from his wedged nose, and the combination of his reaction and Yumi’s defiance brought back Arshi’s smile.

“Fair enough, Miss Kakoro. Why don’t you explain to the class how this period came to a close, and we can move forward, ok?” The sentence wheezed from Nguyen’s mouth with an ill mixture of disdain and arousal.

Yumi cleared her throat, turning in her seat to face her classmates behind her. “Well, ahem, once the religious leaders and our own corporate founders distributed passage on the Arks among the proper citizenry, they lifted into very low orbit over the surface, and settled a geosynchronous colony over the unlivable results of the cataclysm below. . . . Until the global effects subsided. Which they did.”

The girl trailed at the end, losing her train of thought as she caught Nguyen staring at her during her response, slavering as usual.

“Very good, Miss Kakoto. Mmm, yes, very good. Ok, let’s move on then, class, to the modern period, or Akarusa . . .”

“No, you’re skipping ahead . . .”. The course growl came from Arshi, to no one’s surprise. “You’re skipping right over the Yami . . .”

Nguyen’s slimy gaze slid back over to Yumi, “Oh no I’m not . . .”

“The *Yami period*, not Yumi, you fucking perverted bastard!”

“What did you just say to me? What did you just say..?”, Nguyen choked on the words, dredging up a mixture of rage and indignity from the back of his throat.

“*I said YAMI!* After the surface settled down, after the Arks landed back on the ground, and the two cities started to get built. You *skipped* it. Maybe because that’s when the Arks started to exterminate the people they found surviving on the ground after the cataclysm. Because they didn’t fit into their little world plan. So they just *wiped them out*, and shitty teachers like you don’t like to tell us stuff like that, because then we wouldn’t have the kind of hard on for the city that you’ve got for half the girls in this class!”

The class room went deathly silent – many of the young women stared at the floor with flushed, angry cheeks. Even the boys stifled their sophomoric giggles, their stunned faces glued to the scene unfolding in front of them. Except Yumi; she simply sat, politely, hands folded neatly in her lap beneath her desk.

Nguyen narrowed his dark, puffy eyes at the insolence of Arshi, “That’s exactly the kind of propaganda I would expect from the whelp of a bitch-Shinobi woman, and that’s exactly why your dog-of-a-mother is holed up in some cell under the city… and she’s not getting out, ok?”

Arshi jammed his hand into his desk’s compartment and clumsily retrieved the blade he’d hidden there. It was a *ninja-to* – a thin short sword with a heavy reinforced handle, laden with immaculate etchings and inlays. It was old – generations old, and sharp – sharp enough to cut through centuries of bullshit. He gripped the sword in its scabbard, not drawing just yet, and spastically kicked his desk to the side. If all the eyes of the room weren’t on him before, they were now.

“I wasn’t finished!” Arshi roared as Nguyen now reeled back against the front wall of his own class room, recoiling at the weapon in his student’s hand.

“Because after your beloved dick-sucking city founders tried to murder all those indigenous people, it came back to bite them in the ass, because the SHINOBI stood up from out of the night, and took revenge. They stood up to fight those bastards, and they’re still fighting today! Just like my MOM!… and just like me…”

Nguyen stuttered and rolled away from the boy along the wall, “T-that’s just history, Arshi, I told you, history doesn’t matter, ok? What m-matters is what you do today, ok? So is that what you’re going to do today? Murder *me*? …What about tomorrow? What’ll happen then? You’ll be right there next to your mother, and the two of you can fight your little revolution from the inside of prison! Because the Shinobi aren’t anything more than a bunch of eight-damned terrorists fighting a war they lost a hundred years ago!”

Arshi spit, trying to seem older and more intimidating than he was, “You’re finally right about something – *we’re* still fighting the war. So I guess it’s not history. So I guess it *does* matter.

“But you’re wrong about it being murder. It’s not. It’s revenge.” The honed razor edge of the *ninja-to* slowly came into the light, glinting in the harsh classroom lighting, the grip soaking up the small bits of blood still staining Arshi’s hand. But Arshi’s hand was stopped by a small voice.

“No, Arshi, it’s not. It’s not revenge.” Scarcely anyone noticed Yumi even stand up to face the two men. This made the concussive shock that exploded from Yumi’s extended arm all the more confusing.

“...Because it’s *my* revenge.”

The quarter-barreled handgun smoldered with the discharge, a tendril of smoke blowing back towards the shooter in the air conditioning, wreathing Yumi in a portrait of vengeance. Though it was her father’s pistol that she had stolen that morning, she had certainly made it her own, now.

A tear rolled down Yumi’s apple cheek, but caught in the corners of a broad smile of relief. The bright and shining white walls of the classroom highlighted the grim painting of blood spattered behind Nguyen, as the pathetic lurch dropped to one knee, promptly followed by his face. The boys of the class, shocked and confused, began to stampede for the door, tearing at one another to be the first out of the room. Arshi only stared, uncomprehending of what was unfolding – of his ill-considered plot evaporating in the face of true revenge.

The same girls who had been facing the floor moments earlier now stood and filed around their heroin, ringing Yumi in a circle of supportive embraces. The valedictorian’s voice could scarcely be heard, but the words rang clear, “He won’t do what he did last year. Not to us. Not to our sisters. He won’t touch anyone ever again...”

It was in this moment that Arshi understood everything his mother had tried to teach him. History did matter. The war was not over. The revolution had not begun – it was already in full effect.



CHAPTER THREE

Magic and Mysticism

What is Magic?

Chi. Energy. Life. Magic is all these things – and less – and more. For the Shinobi, magic is nothing simpler than an expression of purpose. It is an extension of themselves which reaches from their inner core to the surrounding world, and makes necessary changes to existence itself; and so turns the wheel the fate. As it is with the body or the mind, magic can be strengthened with exercise and training, but its initial existence is part of the miracle of life. Though science has fairly (and often, unfairly) attempted to duplicate its results, and artificially recreate its essence, the energy of magic originates from the birth of a soul, not some cold formula.

Of course, there *is* something to be said for the “miracle of science”, and its capacity for wonderment never ceases to amaze. The difference is that science must be fueled, and requires the careful allocation of resources. Magic requires no such infrastructure – it simply is, as are the wind, the birds, the clouds and the very blue of the sky.

Though the most powerful of magic seems to be exclusive to the Shinobi, there are a few “minor” forms which are accessible to anyone with an open heart and mind. These variations can be very useful, and surprisingly strong, but overall lack the raw power available to the shadow folk. This seems to confirm magic as part of the wheel of fate – an agent of change available to all, but largely reserved for the few whose destiny demands its use.

A Style for Every Occasion

Pillars, schools, arts are all ways to describe the various styles and philosophies of magic. Of these there are three primary arts known and practiced by the Shinobi Lineage, and three minor arts practiced by the few people who remember the old ways and traditions. Yet this initial set of magic only describes what is commonly practiced. Many, if not most, of the lesser known Lineages practice a wide and strange variety of their own arts, both major and minor.

There is also another set of divisions in magic – the difference between real and not-real. In fact, there are a multitude of false magics, such as sleight of hand, cold reading, illusions and curses, all of which are more thoroughly discussed further along.

For now, the focus will be on the three most common major arts, and the three widely known minor arts.

As the Wheel Turns

The reality of magic and its power is simple and stark – what goes around comes around. Perhaps more than any other aspect of life, magic is slavishly chained to the dogma of karma. One cannot use magic in a vacuum. Once brought into the world through conscious effort, there are repercussions for its user. Simply put: use magic for good, and good things will happen for the Shinobi in life; use magic for ill, and misfortune will follow.

The strength of magic determines the strength of the karmic reaction in other ways, too. The system mostly applies to Major Arts, which are the most dramatic forms of magic. Minor Arts that are more commonly practiced seem to be less connected to the turnings of the wheel, and have far less severe repercussions when used. In fact, karmic rewards and punishments for minor Arts could be fairly described as downright trivial, and might more effectively be used by Gamemasters as flavor for their story, or a bit of comic relief. Keeping track of every tiny instance of spellcraft can easily slow down a story and steal away its thunder.

In game terms, this system of checks and balances is largely monitored by the Gamemaster. Each spell has a level, and the level of a spell is a good guideline for just how much benevolence or malice the universe shows to the Shinobi for using that magic. In simple terms, the Gamemaster may use these levels on either a point system which temporarily modifies a Shinobi's stats, or alternatively to describe a number of positive or negative events which will befall him in the future.

For example, if a level one Art is used to save a child from drowning, the Gamemaster might award an immediate karmic reward of +1 to the player's next Physical check that involves water. Or instead of instant gratification, the Gamemaster may instead note the incident, and later in the game provide aid or a solution to a water-based problem (the character may need to cross a raging river, and finds a sturdy old rope bridge hidden amongst some trees).

Where the negative use of magic is concerned, karma punishes instead of rewards. A character who uses a Level 2 spell to rob a relatively innocent man may suddenly find himself the victim of theft the next day, and gallingly again the next day. Or perhaps the Gamemaster may simply levy a -2 penalty to the player's next check that requires someone to trust him.

Whether a modifier or an event is appropriate is entirely up to the arbitration of the Gamemaster. In sessions where spells are frequently being used and cast about, the modifier system might work better. Consistent use of magic will cause numbers to stack up in a hurry, either for or against the character, perhaps forcing them to change their habits, or encourage them to collect as many statistical bonuses as is reasonable, for the coming challenges ahead. For games that center more around story than action, events are a perfect way to not only guide the plot of the story, but keep players on track, and reward them for advancing the storyline.

Most important is that karma can be a powerful thing, and a Gamemaster should never use this system to tightly control his players. Karma is meant to curtail the abuse of magic, but when used by a ham-fisted Gamemaster, it itself can become abused.

The Major Arts

The three Major Arts are the three branches of powerful magic most commonly known and practiced by the Shinobi. There is some debate about whether or not a Shinobi has a choice in which field to study, or whether the choice is made for them by the fickle hand of fate. Either way, once a Shinobi begins down the path of any given Major Art, they cannot learn any other. In rare instances some Shinobi have sought out a way to change their course of magical study. In such cases, stories surrounding these Shinobi seem to indicate that the former path must be forsaken, often with terrible karmic blowback. Worse still, the initiate must start from scratch with their newly chosen Art, and find advancement more difficult than with their original Art. The option, however, is tempting, especially given the variety of Major Arts practiced by lesser known Shinobi Lineages.

Minor Arts are less restrictive. In fact, a Shinobi may learn any number of them, though begins the game with only two. Those outside the Shinobi often have a more limited capacity for magic, and typically only practice one such Art (though there are always exceptional exceptions).

As the Shinobi grows in power along the path of their chosen Art, each spell in turn becomes more powerful as well. For each level of spell beyond the first, he gains an enhancement to the previous level of spell. These enhancements become even stronger should the Shinobi reach the level of Master.

Oaths

When it comes to advancing a character's prowess in the arcane arts, power comes through being rewarded for roleplaying and gamecraft. A Gamemaster keeps careful track of how a player uses their character's magic, in the same way they keep track of karmic effects. As karma builds through use, and the player demonstrates a greater understanding of the magic, and how to use it in clever and interesting ways, a Gamemaster may grant growth in that character's Art by awarding the next "level" of spell in that Art's line of progression. Typically these awards are granted after the player has clearly demonstrated the desired qualities, and after a bulk of their karma has been resolved. Note that whether or not the karma is positive or negative does not matter – what matters is that the magic is consistently used in an intriguing manner.

These "levels" of spells are called Oaths, and as the title suggest, they are marked by swearing allegiance to a new and increased set of responsibility and duty. Typically the magic becomes tantalizingly close after the character has been awarded the new oath, but does not take effect until some form of ritual and ceremony by their Lineage is performed, and some sort of training by a learned Shinobi can be imparted.

All Shinobi begin an Art at the rank of Novice; then moves to the rank of Monk (which often comes with the title of Brother or Sister). The third rank of Master is where most Shinobi crescendo, but a rare few excel to true greatness, and achieve status as a High Master.

Listed below are the three Major Arts most commonly practiced, the spells that make them up, and the game systems that govern how they work. As discussed in the previous chapter, all magical mechanics are determined by a Spirit check, the difficulty of which is determined by the spell being used, and modified by the Gamemaster. Unless otherwise noted, the direct effects of a spell last for one hour per level of the Art possessed by the Shinobi. Other effects (such as damage or injuries inflicted) are not affected by this time frame.

Boreinomahou

(Ghost Magic)

In Ghost Magic, a Shinobi learns a basic spell when they reach a given Oath, starting at a Novice with Ghost Sight. When that character ascends to the next Oath, a new level of their previous spells becomes available to them, representing a greater mastery of their abilities, and a stronger sense of duty that fuels their belief in themselves. Therefore, the spell of Ghost Sight becomes stronger at each successive Oath – from Novice, to Monk, to Master, to High Master, each “rank opens up a new ability that the spell can generate (as well as still being able to function as past versions of the spell – the spell does not “evolve” and make earlier iterations unavailable, it “expands” generating new uses for the magic).

Naturally, because each new spell is gained when a Shinobi reaches the proper level of Oath, spells do not have levels for Oaths that are beneath their station. Ghost Sight offers four levels of expansion, because it is the first spell, and it is present for all successful rises in Oath. However the next spell the Shinobi gains at the Oath of Monk will only have three variations, because the basic level of the spell already exists at what would be the second level. And so on, and so on.

So higher level spells are in fact much more powerful than lower level spells, but they do not grow or expand much. Lower level of spells can be far less dramatic at first, but can grow into new and interesting designs. There is therefore a great respect placed on the humble Novice level of spells among the shadow folk, as in the hands of a Master, something simple can become incredibly powerful and effective.

Oath	Available Levels
Novice	1
Monk	1, 2
Master	1, 2, 3
High Master	1, 2, 3, 4

*Novice***Borei Shiriyoku (Ghost Sight)**

The basic power of ghost magic is the capacity to see, sense and communicate with the dead. Ghosts do not properly reside in the traditional realm of the kami (commonly known as the spirit world), but are instead in between states of being, spiritual and physical, alive and dead. This transitional state of being is called by those familiar with the dead, the Dim Land.

A character possessing this introductory power can detect the dead, and initiate communication with them. Because of their “trapped” status, ghosts themselves are restricted in their actions. In order for them to be able to speak with the living, they must have a bond with that person – a strong memory or emotion; the same applies to locations where the ghost wishes to travel. They may go or exist anywhere they have such a connection, but nowhere they do not. As such, a Shinobi begins by speaking to friends, family, loved ones, even enemies that have passed, and does so at locations familiar to both themselves and the ghost.

It is important to know that just because someone is dead does not mean they have left behind a ghost. In fact, most people do not, either because they have lived a life without powerful emotional bonds, or because those bonds eased the passing of that soul, instead of causing turmoil that would hinder their crossing from life to death.

Though some souls are fully and completely trapped in the Dim Lands, many more are merely fragments of souls. They represent unresolved remnants of desire, or otherwise “unfinished business”, left behind by the departed. These versions of ghosts are far more common than complete souls who are trapped, but are likewise incomplete as people. Having only shards of their former self to draw from, their personality and memories are not much more than strong emotional fragments.

Later a Shinobi may grow this power to gradually include more and more unfamiliar ghosts. He may be able to exert influence over them as well, even by pass conversation and instead directly share thoughts, memories and information telepathically. Masters of this power can even “borrow” a ghost’s familiarity with a given location, and travel through the “in between world” from wherever they are to that location, effectively teleporting (though the destination is pre-determined).

Ghosts can also be convinced to carry out actions on the Shinobi's behalf, but once again their status hampers their effectiveness. They have very few powers; typically soft and short whispers and moving the lightest of objects are all they are capable of physically doing. They can however pass through solid objects, and in the right situation make excellent scouts or spies. A few powerful ghosts are capable of inhabiting the living, and either coexisting in their body or directly controlling it. Some such beings prefer to inhabit physical objects instead, imbuing that object with a measure of ghostly power and giving the ghost some or total control of that object. If fueled by rage and anger, all ghosts are occasionally capable of physically harming the living, either through use of an object or directly attacking their flesh. Sadly, such power comes only in the fits of raw anger, and so far has only caused harm.

Mechanics:

Level 1: Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs 20

The Shinobi gains the ability to speak with the Dim, and can sense them with the five basic senses. He may sense any ghost within normal sensory range, but may only speak or be spoken to by those whom he had a strong connection to in life. He may commune with the dead of any power level, but is unlikely to curry favor with any but the weakest of ghosts. Bargaining with a more powerful Dim may require roleplaying, or a Social (+ Influence) check.

Level 2: Enhancement: Passive

The Shinobi now exhibits an aura of influence over ghosts; weak ghosts will obey him nearly without question, and more powerful Dim are much more likely to be persuaded by him. He is now also able to speak with unfamiliar ghosts, and no longer requires an emotional bond to communicate with them.

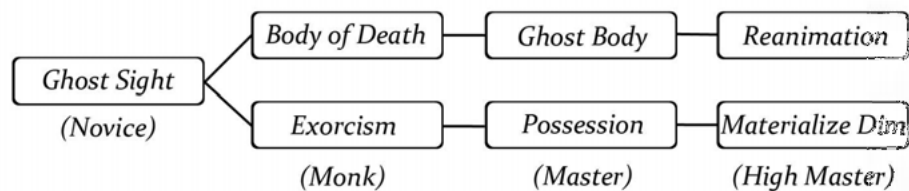
Level 3: Enhancement: Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs 20; vs 25 to empower a Dim

Verbal communication is no longer required for the learned practitioner of ghost magic. Words are now replaced with thoughts, and the Shinobi can hold conversation with multiple Dim at once, provided they are in range of his basic senses. Abstract concepts, images, memories and dreams can now seamlessly be shared between the two, eliminating many of the obstacles posed by communicating with the dead. In turn, the dead can draw strength from the memories and emotions a Shinobi may care to share with them. Typically this translates into a more loyal Dim, but sometimes can literally empower the ghost, giving it previously unpossessed powers.

Level 4: Enhancement: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 10 +10 for every 10 miles beyond the first mile

Through mastery of telepathy with the Dim, the master of Ghost Magic gains the same powerful bond to physical locations held by individual shades, and use that bond to slip from the land of the living into the shadow of the Dim Land, and instantly reappear back in the physical world at the location in mind. This trick only works, however, with locations that have a ghost emotionally bonded to it.

The second stage of Ghost Magic is a fork in the road. The Shinobi must choose one of two paths; choosing one excludes the shadow folk from learning the other. One is a mastery over one's own living body, imbuing it with the powers of death. The other is mastery over the spirit, guarding against and revoking the intrusions of other beings, as well as being able to possess others



Monk

Shitai (Body of Death)

By infusing herself with the essence of death itself, the Shinobi can take on the aspects of a corpse for her own advantage. Breathing, heart rate and metabolic functions slow, even possibly are suspended entirely. The light goes out of her eyes, and her flesh becomes cold and gray. Besides being able to pass as a corpse, the practiced Shitai Shinobi is fully animated and ambulatory, losing no physical abilities at all. While in this state it is much harder to physically injure her, as her body temporarily has no need for its vital functions. She may sustain a certain amount of damage without feeling pain, move underwater without need to breath, or temporarily become immune to disease, poisons and toxins. As master's of deception, the most common use of this power is used to "play possum" or a similar ruse used to fake the Shinobi's own death.

Mechanics:

Level 2: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 20, + 10 for each full day of duration

The Shinobi may slow down her core vital functions to such a degree that she appears dead. Very careful attention to her (such as an in-depth medical examination) would reveal she is not dead, merely boarder-line coma. In this state she has little need for food, drink or air. She still has the *need* for such things, but in drastically reduced quantities. Poison and disease spread much more slowly through her body, as well, increasing the time they may take effect by ten or twenty fold (at the Gamemaster's discretion), and decreasing their overall effectiveness by the same value. Most dramatically, with effort she may make herself ambulatory while still maintaining her faux-corpse state. Because she is still technically alive, she takes damage as normal, but ignores all effects inflicted by pain. Additionally, she is slow and sluggish, capable of only bursts of frantic movement every few minutes. The rest of the time her movement speed is halved, and her eye-hand coordination is comical at best, and inept at worst.

Level 3: Passive

With effort and practice, the Shinobi is able to shake off her zombie-like restrictions, and move about without any physical encumbrance .

Level 4: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 25, +15 for a full day's duration

The shadow folk is no longer quasi-dead; she is DEAD. She completely suspends her need for any of her vital functions. Her muscles no longer get tired, her body no longer needs any resources to operate at full capacity. She is completely immune to toxins or disease of any nature, organic or synthetic. She completely ignores pain, as before, but also ignores even the most grievous of mortal wounds. Additionally, she does not bleed or harbor infection, making healing any wounds much easier once she returns to life. Lastly, and most dramatically, her strength is greatly increased, adding +5 to any Physical check involving brute force. In all stages of Shitai, however, injury must be treated seriously, as its effects will immediately return after the spell has faded, potentially with deadly consequences.

Master

Boreinojinshin(Ghost Body)

Once the Shitai is mastered, the mysteries of the Ghost Body soon unravel. The Shinobi can now go beyond suppressing her life force, and can now transform her body completely into the immaterial form of a ghost. While in this form she is restricted exactly as a ghost might be:

she floats above the ground, but cannot fly, but *is* able to pass through solid objects. She cannot be seen by the living, but likewise has trouble seeing them unless she has some kind of bond with them. Clever Shinobi have learned to plant objects of great importance to themselves on marks or targets before they use this power, allowing them to very quickly find and identify them later. Also, they are incapable of physical interaction with the world. With great effort, they can however, enter a sleeping person's dreams and influence or control that dream. In the throes of rage (sometimes purposefully instigated) they can even hurl or break large objects, or attack the living directly. However, the Ghost Body is distinct from being an actual ghost. Chiefly, the master does not actually enter the Dim Land, and curiously (unless the Body of Death is used first), she appears to be living to those who are able to sense and interact with her (despite notably being semi-transparent and floating a foot off the floor).

Mechanics:

Level 3: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 30, +2 for each ten minutes of duration beyond the first hour

The Shinobi continues to exist in the land of the living, but is imperceptible to anyone who doesn't love or hate her, or has their own method for detecting the ethereal (other Shinobi who practice ghost or kami magic, priests, mediums, or even experimental technologies). Whether or not she is perceived at all, she makes no tracks of any sort, nor leaves any clues to her passing. She may pass through solid objects with ease, and can float above liquids, but cannot enter fluids as she did when she was solid. She is also effected normally by gases of all varieties – she needs air to breath, is effected by air-born agents, fire and even lasers. The Shinobi is unable to transfer this power to other people or large objects, but her clothing and whatever can fit in a reasonably sized pocket does transform with her.

The ability to dream-walk or cause physical harm to another while under the effects of this spell are far from guaranteed, though with a little risk and a lot of effort are possible.

In order for the Shinobi to enter the dreams of another (who need not be human – the Shinobi have long been aware of what most only suspected: animals and spirits dream, too), she must be present over the intended target's sleeping body, then physically enter the target, typically through the various orifices of the body. Naturally, this is only possible while actively in the Ghost Body – use of this power in this manner is not possible while in a solid state. The player then makes a check for Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs the sleeper's unconscious resistance, Mental (+ Intuition). The higher score is the victor, with a tie going to the sleeper. If the Shinobi succeeds, she gains full control of the immediate dream she has entered. She may make a wide variety of changes to her environment, but cannot change the fundamental nature of the dream (i.e. she may not turn a dream into a nightmare or vice versa). Neither does she have

access to the rest of the sleeper's mind, but she can interact with their subconscious self, though such interactions are typically less than lucid, given the state of mind of the sleeper. If instead the sleeper wins the contested check, then the master becomes the student, and is at the mercy of the dream she has entered. Most individuals are unable to decipher an intrusive Shinobi from the rest of their dream, but those with a trained mind just may. Although she cannot be physically harmed, she is trapped for the duration of the dream, and is forced to abide by the "laws" of the dream (for which there are no real limits at all). Once the dream is over she is expelled from the body, and will be unable to enter the subject's dreams for one lunar month.

Harming someone while in the Ghost Body is even more difficult. Firstly, the Shinobi must be emotionally compromised. She must be in a state of total rage or uncontrollable delirium, with little to no available self-control. There is no "acting" one's way to this emotional state, like crying on cue. The master must honestly come by these feelings, though some risk-takers ingest all manner of drugs to induce this state. Once in a sufficient mind-set, the player must make a Shadow check as an attack, with a damage range of 20-30. These attacks are typically frantic, inefficient, and more often than most would care to admit, misdirected. Following the outburst, the Shinobi gains a narrow window of time (a few minutes at most) where she is able to once again interact with physical objects as if she were solid. A shrewd shadow folk uses this time well, but given their emotional state, most squander all but the tail end of their opportunity.

Level 4: Spirit (+Sensitivity) vs 30, -10 if located in or at a Dim haunt

The great high masters are capable of taking this spell one more step forward. While incorporeal, she may actually become a variation of Dim, and enter the Dim Land. There, she may move about freely, unfettered as true ghosts are. To other shades, she is one of them, as far as they can tell, and may freely interact with their version of society with little fear of being discovered as one of the living. Then either at her whim or after about an hour, whichever comes first, she may rematerialize in the physical world. As it turns out, this rematerialization process is something of a gory affair, where blood, bone, tissue and organs slowly pour out from the Dim Land and assemble into the living Shinobi – a process which usually takes a few minutes; interruptions at this point have been known to cause serious and lasting maladies.

High Master
Kyonshi (Reanimation)

Even among the Shinobi, the Lineages struggle with the morality of exercising power over death itself. The debate is necessary from time to time, as the High Masters of Ghost Magic are in fact quite capable of such an astounding feat. The effects of this power, however, have been somewhat exaggerated by myth and legend.

The power of Kyonshi has a narrow window of opportunity in which it can be used. Only the recently deceased can be affected by the spell (the subject cannot have died more than a day from the time of use, and absolutely cannot have been given any sort of funeral or burial rites). Beyond a day of death, or after a proper funeral has been given, the soul is as prepared as it can be for what is to come, and cannot be coaxed back to life (at least not through this particular spell).

Under the Shinobi's care a proper candidate may have their soul touched by the living essence of death which resides within the High Master, and that essence may be used to infuse and empower the soul, filling it with a surge of life. Properly administered, the newly revitalized soul spreads back through its once living body, rejuvenating the systems of the body, and reigniting life itself. The effects of disease, poison and injury, including fatal ones, are mended through this process, and the subject awakes at the peak of health. Lost limbs and other missing body parts do not regenerate, however, and it is important for the deceased to be as completely intact as possible before the spell is enacted. This fact also precludes from Kyonshi those whose bodies have been dissolved or otherwise reduced to particulate matter.

The effects of Kyonshi last until the following dawn. Then, because the soul has been touched by the essence of death itself, it instinctively wishes to follow that path on to the end, and attempts to leave the living body. The High Master must then administer a second rite – one which either guides the soul onward, or keeps it bound in place. Some Lineage feel that such a choice cannot be left to anyone who does not possess the wisdom of a High Master, while others feel that the choice of the individual matters most. In either case, a soul which leaves the body leaves behind a corpse without hope of further reanimation. A soul which remains, though, has been touched by death, and taints its living body, shortening its natural life span. Some even say those who have been reanimated no longer possess free will, and instead become unwitting agents of death itself.

Mechanics:

Level 4: Spirit (+ Flow) vs half the age of the subject, rounded down (minimum of 20)

Simply stated, this spell brings the dead back to life for up to one day. The dead subject intended for resurrection cannot have been deceased for more than one day already, cannot have been given any variation of funeral rites, and must be largely in one, intact piece. With a single successful check the risen dead is fully restored to life, typically with no memory of their time while deceased (although they are usually aware that they were in fact dead – but not always). Their health wheel is fully restored, however they may gain any number of maladies if they are reanimated without having their body been properly reconstructed, where reconstruction was needed. I.E., missing limbs or organs that have not been replaced by the time this spell is used will not regenerate.

The effects of the Kyonshi spell last until the next sun rise. At this point the subject's vitality rapidly degenerates until death once again claims their soul. The process takes only a few minutes; if nothing is done the subject dies and the soul leaves the body, and further Kyonshi becomes impossible. Alternatively the Shinobi who originally performed the spell may administer a second rite which "binds" the soul in place, keeping the subject alive. There is no need for a second check to verify this, though the Gamemaster ought to require some roleplaying to recognize the event. If the subject continues to live after the first dawn, their natural or fated lifespan is reduced by half, and the likelihood of misfortune in life dramatically increases. There is no system to determine these effects, only the discretion of the Gamemaster. If the subject dies again, they can still be the recipient of yet another use of this spell, though the negative consequences of living beyond the dawn a second time arithmetically increase.

Monk

Akumabarai (Exorcism)

Alternatively to Shitai, the Shinobi may learn the power of exorcism. She may expel ghosts from their possessions, either gently or with enough force to injure or even subdue the ghost. With great practice she can learn to turn this power against other magical objects, stripping them of their supernatural energies and powers. Masters of this spell can subdue ghosts while they are still within their possessions, controlling them like a puppet. A ghost who is removed from its inanimate habitat is not destroyed, but instead is ejected back into the Dim Land. The process is often injurious and traumatic for the target (and in the case of powerful Dim, for the exorcist as well), though the exact nature of how this effects the dead soul is up to the Gamemaster.

Mechanics:

Level 2: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 10/20/30;

A fragmented remnant may be a simple 10, a weak but self-aware ghost would be a respectable 20, while a dangerous geist with its own powers and retinue of ghosts could be a 30. Should the Shinobi encounter a Dim requiring a check difficulty of 40, perhaps he should simply consider running.

With a successful check the exorcism is considered complete, and the Dim is instantly removed from its possession and relocated into the Dim Land, usually to the place of the ghost's primary haunt or home. Shinobi who are exorcised are ejected into the immediate vicinity of the host, and Shinobi who are using a Dim to possess another who is exorcised immediately lose control of that Dim.

Level 3:

The spell works identically as it did at the previous level, except that the Spirit check may now be applied to magical items. The only difference is that once the magic is forcibly removed from the item, it immediately dissipates and ceases to exist.

Level 4: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 10/20/30, +5 for each hour of control beyond the first

The high master's variation of the spell follows the same formula as the novice's, with the base difficulty increasing with each consummate "level" of the Dim. The Shinobi may then exert direct control of the Dim. In the absence of stress or distraction this is a simple matter of concentration, but under duress the Gamemaster may require a Mental (+ Focus) check of subjective difficulty. Provided the spell checks are all successful, commands are issued by

thought, and carried out to the best of the ghost's abilities and understanding. Simple Dim may not be able to understand complex orders ("Calculate pi!"), and those that do may be restricted by their possession's limitations (a possessed infant is unlikely to win a physical confrontation with a feral dog). It's important to note that the Shinobi is unable to rifle through the possessed's mind, and is granted no special knowledge regarding their thoughts, memories, desires or emotions. It is simply a shell he is able to control through a Dim – but a shell that both ghost and Shinobi have an intuitive sense on how to physically manipulate.

For example, so long as the shell is dexterous enough, the Shinobi could cause him or her to walk a high wire, even if the subject is afraid of heights. However, the Shinobi would be nominally unaware of why the subject is acrophobic. In the same way, he would be unable to duplicate the subject's speech patterns or physical nuances (how the shell walks or carries themselves). This applies similarly to inanimate objects; the master understands how the mechanics of it work, and can easily cause moving parts to engage "on their own", but gains no special information about who made the object or where it's been. Of course in both cases some careful study can be valuable – a man could be surveiled in secret as the tailing Shinobi learns how he walks and talks, or a machine can be likewise researched to understand its purpose.

No matter the Shinobi's stage of training, once this spell is learned she unconsciously learns to mentally and spiritually defend herself from possessions, making her increasingly difficult to take control of. Attempts to possess her by Dim and other Shinobi increase +5 for each level of the spell she has learned.

Master

Miko (Possession)

As the Shinobi learns how to protect against and remove possessions, she naturally learns to make possessions of her own. Inside a possessed body or object, she is immune to physical harm; her new shell will absorb that damage until it is destroyed. She not only has total control of the body, but intuition of how to use it as well, drastically cutting back the learning curve for how to move in a foreign body. Likewise, she has complete mental command of the subject; she may choose to make the mind carry out orders, or subvert it completely in favor of her own personality becoming dominant (a teenage Shinobi girl could possess a

constable, and either make that law man act as if on his own accord, or replace this thoughts with her own, making for a girl in a grown man's body). While possessing objects, she has total control over that object, but cannot make the object do something it could not normally do (a possessed doorbell could ring incessantly, even strain to make its tones sound like a human voice, but it could not make its wires shoot out of the walls like tentacles). Like a Dim, when a Shinobi inhabits anyone or anything, she becomes incorporeal, and for all intents and purposes is absorbed into the fabric of her new host.

Mechanics:

Level 3: Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs a resisted check of the victim's Mental (+ Focus)

While any master of Boreinomahou may attempt third-party possessions through the perfected use of Akumabarai, Miko is much more direct and far more effective. As when she is controlling a Dim who is possessing a person, object or animal, the Shinobi has an intuitive understanding of the subjects physical capabilities. However, her understanding reaches far deeper than that; she is not simply pulling the strings of the puppet, but inhabiting the puppet completely. Every thought, feeling and memory the victim has (or has had) is now the purview of its new master. The Shinobi fully becomes them, right down to the very nuances of their personality, except that all thought and action are under the control of the master's dominant personality. Like flipping a switch, she may toggle between "riding" the victim, acting the part of the victim, or subsuming the victim.

Riding simply means the Shinobi chooses to possess someone or something, but does not exert control. Instead, she's just along for the ride – like riding a horse and dropping the reins. In this state, the host has no idea they are even being possessed, or really that anything is wrong at all. Often the subject gains an air of a false sense of security, which is sometimes a clue to others that something is up.

Acting is where the master taps into the host's core being, and exhibits herself – exactly and flawlessly – as that person. She knows everything the host knows, and acts exactly as the host would, but ultimately is the controlling force.

Lastly, the Shinobi may subsume the victim's persona for her own, overriding everything about the host and replacing it with her own elements (save actual physical appearance). This is the only state of possession where the Shinobi may use her own magic while inhabiting another body. It is also only possible to use this state on other sentient, intelligent beings (humans, and perhaps a rare selection of mammals, such as great apes, elephants, dolphins and whales).

While in her host, the Shinobi is immune to damage or injury of nearly any sort – however once the host is killed or destroyed, she in turn is immediately ejected and instantly returns to her physical form (this can be troublesome if the host drowned in a vast sea or fell into a volcano).

Level 4: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 10, x2 for each “doubling” of size

Possessing people, animals and objects is one thing – possessing places a whole other. The power to enter and actually control the very land itself is a rare gift possessed by the High Masters. Not only literal land may be subject to this Miko, but also especially large objects (like entire buildings) or even empty space. The High Master may enter reasonably small spaces, perhaps the size of a jail cell, with relative ease (a Spirit check versus a meager 10). A larger space, like a ball room, may be against a 20. Even larger, like a house, against a 30. Acres of estate, a truly over-the-top feat, would face a difficulty of 40, and maybe several other impediments imposed by the Gamemaster.

Once the Shinobi has possessed the space, she may exert all the intuitive control she could as she did with objects. She may even exert some amount of force or control over objects and people in that space, but not with the same level of power that comes from direct possession. For example, she could make a chandelier in a possessed ballroom sail about the room, or compel the guests within to dance. She could not direct every step of that dance, however, and the chandelier’s animation would be limited to simple feats. A built-in wall safe could be easily unlocked and its door flung open, but she would have limited control over its contents, perhaps at most flinging them to the interior of the room. If possessing actual land, the Shinobi could command a tree to pull back one of its bows and then release the stored energy (with a mighty twang) on an enemy – but could not make that tree wrap its limbs around that same enemy like a wooden octopus, or uproot itself and chase after them. Notably, possessed space grants the Shinobi “omni-sense”, which is to say all her basic faculties are simultaneously aware of everything that occurs in that space, building or land.

High Master

Shinkyoku(Materialize Dim)

For the High Master of Ghost Magic, there is more than one way to bring life back to the dead. The practitioner of Shinkyoku has trained hard to be able to transform her living body to emulate the dead. Now she is capable of just the reverse, and transmogrifies the

immaterial Dim into a living body. The Dim need not be a willing participant in the spell, and likewise is under no control of the Shinobi, and will act accordingly.

Once given material form, the Dim is considered to be alive, even if the internal systems of its new body do not obey the natural laws of anatomy or biology. Life is granted through force of will and magic, not the scientific method. The Dim loses several of its basic powers as a ghost, but also is free of any former restrictions. Like any living body, it may go where it pleases, sense the world around it as normal, and interact with others – situations that can quickly overwhelm an unprepared Dim. The ghost otherwise retains its mind and personality, even if that mind is fractured and incomplete (as many Dim are); Shinkyoku does not grant the body they left behind, or replace what has been lost through the process of death.

Mechanics:

Level 4: Spirit (+ Flow) vs 20/30/40, modified by the Dim's overall power level

Dim who are given a new living body appear in the physical world through the same process of Shinobi who rematerialize from the Dim Land – a grotesque funneling of blood and organs into the shape and form of a living ghost. The strength and relative power level of the new body is determined by the corresponding elements of the Dim, not through any decisions made by the Shinobi casting the spell.

A weak, fragmented remnant of a soul will likely appear much like their former body at their time of death, with modest core stats and few if any secondary stats – their possession of perks would be even more unlikely. As they were in death, these Dim have few if any powers, are lacking in very much conscious thought, and typically are drawn to repeat or act out what little they seem to recall of their days among the living. Those with a little more presence of mind can at least hold conversation, and may be of some greater use to a Shinobi, but still they possess no more resources than any other human who lacks magic. Still, clever Shinobi find a great deal many uses for such Dim, acting as staff, retinue, spies, servants and employees.

More powerful shades of course make better allies – they possess stats and perks similar to a mid-level Shinobi, and best of all retain their ghostly powers. Living Dim of this level of power may use powers up to the third level of Boreinomahou, and often possess a number of supernatural perks which describe all manner of abilities unique to individual Dim. A ghost who could closely bond with animals retains that power under Shinkyoku, ranging from simply being inexplicably likable to animals, up to telepathic control over them, or anything in between as the Gamemaster sees fit.

The most powerful of Dim are also the most dangerous to bring into the living world. Their level of power may greatly exceed the Shinobi, even a High Master – think along the lines of the end of the movie “Ghost Busters”. *“What did you do, Ray?”*

In all cases, provided the Dim is capable of free thought in the first place, it retains its own will and psyche. It will act accordingly, and a shrewd Shinobi considers this before enacting this spell.

There are some restrictions and laws that must be obeyed, regarding this powerful magic. Firstly and most important, the spell of materialization has a limited duration unless drastic compensation is made. A Shinobi may cast the spell without ceremony or recompense; however the living Dim cannot exist in day – not merely daylight, but day itself. Once the next sun rises, the spell is broken, the living body decays in a matter of moments, and the Dim returns from whence it came. To avert this course and make the spell more permanent, some form of ritual sacrifice must be performed. A life for a life is called for – a human life for a human life. The exact ritual does not matter so much as the quality of sacrifice. An otherwise unremarkable person can be sacrificed to create a permanent materialized weak shade, but ever “greater” people are needed to bring forth ever more powerful Dim.

Living Dim must obey certain laws of life, the first of which is that though their new body may be more long term, it is not truly permanent. It receives injury and has its own health wheel, even ages and heals itself as normal. Also, Dim bodies may have odd characteristics granted at the time of materialization. It may constantly shed tears of blood without risk of exsanguination, for example, or have a massive belly wound that never heals, but does not otherwise function as an actual injury. More powerful Dim may have truly strange forms, which could never be confused for anything even approaching “human”, but always are flesh and blood (a Dim will never appear as a cloud, for example).

In most cases, when a materialized Dim dies, it returns to the Dim Land and resumes its existence as a ghost. In rare and magnificent cases, its actions during its second life redeem or resolve the issues that bound it as a ghost in the first place, and soul moves forward in the cycle, and breaks the stasis.

Kami Worship

The Kami are the spirits; mystical representations and manifestations of objects, places, abstract concepts, animals, gods – just about anything, really. They range greatly in power and ability, shapes and appearance, attitude and character, but each falls into one of ten categories, collectively known as the Pantheon, and an eleventh caste of sinister outlaws known as the Oni. An initiate of the kami first learns these basic concepts about them through ceremony and ritual, summoning or inviting them to speak with the Shinobi, and bargain for favors. Unlike ghost and mantle magic, the path to greater power does not lie with the Shinobi, but with the kami themselves. The greater understanding and respect the character develops, the greater trust and power the kami will bestow on him in the form of “favors”, or acts of spirit magic carried out on his behalf. At first, the Shinobi may only gain the favors of small, relatively weak kami, and over time is granted favors from ever increasingly powerful kami. It is even possible for the Shinobi to build real and lasting relationships with individual Kami, gaining spirit friends and allies. Of course, the reverse is also true, and an enemy without a physical form and equipped with an array of bizarre mystical powers is a dangerous enemy.

There are ten variety of kami, and each variety grants a different set of favors. Additionally, the kami pantheon is not united, and in fact factions are often opposed, though there are as many alliances as adversaries. When a favor of one type of kami is granted, a favor of one of the opposed schools will not be granted any time soon, and the Shinobi may have to plead his case to the opposing sort of why any further favors should be granted. In practical terms, a relatively minor favor from a Sun kami will mean that a Moon kami is unlikely to help at least for a day or two after the Sun kami’s favor has resolved. This “freeze out” period can be extended indefinitely as kami rise in rank, power and unpredictability.

The level of favor a Kami is willing or able to grant corresponds directly with the Oath of the Shinobi. Because of the truly wild diversity of Kami, it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive list of each and every favor available. For introductory purposes, a set of example favors are provided for each level of Oath, and for each caste of the Pantheon.

Within each faction of the Pantheon, individual Kami collect themselves into groups known as Retinue. Retinue can be a small and simple affair, or truly massive enclaves. In each of these groups there is a spirit of the greatest power and magnitude, known as the chief. Lesser spirits tend to constantly surround the chief, attending to any given whim or desire, and

carrying out the chief's will. Certain Kami tend entire courts, and may in turn be absorbed by other even more powerful chiefs. These courts often span across whole territories in the spirit land, and usually correspond to an apt location in the physical realm (a court of war, for example, may exist near or on a historic battle field in the physical plane). Courts are most often ruled by a god or deity; a Kami of truly awe-inspiring power. Again, the scope of possibilities for Kami, Retinues and their courts is far too expansive for a proper introduction, but some examples are given. As in all cases of magic, Gamemasters and players are encouraged to develop their own repertoire of Kami for their unique stories and adventures.

Contacting and interacting with the Kami is governed by a Shinobi's Oath, with a universal check of varying difficulty: *Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs 10 +10 for each level of favor beyond the first (which can be lowered or even circumvented in the case of friendship).*

Novice: An initiate may only interact with the spirit world with great focus and effort. Typically only after proper ceremony honoring them, complete with meditation, prayer and/or sacrifice, requiring many hours of dedicated focus. Even then the novice Shinobi is only capable of asking the Favors of lesser spirits, who in turn are beholden to their own chief and retinue.

Monk: A more learned Shinobi gains a measure of respect from the Kami, but still may only contact them through carefully crafted ritual. However, the necessary ceremony can be less involved (but not so much that it comes off as lazy or uncaring), and the Kami, though still only of modest power, are more likely to become involved and lend a greater degree of aid.

Master: The master has developed enough of a rapport with the Pantheon that no ceremony is needed, only a light state of meditation. Interaction with individual spirits transcends conversation, and is surpassed by telepathic communication.

High Master: The high master may take the ultimate step in communion with the spirit world – he may enter it. He may dematerialize his physical form, and directly enter an actual spirit court, take place in its proceedings, and be respected as an equal.

The level of the character's oath determines the strength and power of the favor willing to be granted, as well as how the Shinobi is able to interact with the Kami courts.

In all spirit matters, regardless of Oath or the level of respect earned, a bargain must be struck. Kami do not grant favors for free, and there is always something they want. For minor issues or relatively low level powers, sometimes the ceremony of honoring the spirit is itself enough. With increasing power levels comes increasing demands. A Shinobi who wishes for the spirits of the Sea to grant him the ability to breathe underwater, a Kami may demand a demonstration of mastery of the sea by catching twenty fish; or perhaps he must act to guard the sea, and burn twenty boats. The duration of a spirit favor is at the Gamemaster's discretion, but an hour is always a good ballpark figure to start working with.

Sun Kami

Generally seen by most Shinobi as the most altruistic and ultimately positive members of the Pantheon, these spirits represent that which is good. Like the sun itself, they see themselves as the guardians and overseers of the world, lording above mortals and the Pantheon with a mixture of well-intended nurturing and elitist condescension.

Examples include kami of sunbeams and the northern lights, as well as dawn, dusk and noon. They are allied to Agriculture, and opposed to Moon and Oni.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Light*; the Kami provides a certain amount of pure sunlight – perhaps only a beam, and perhaps filling the land with golden rays.

Monk: *Repulse*; as the natural enemies of that which is dark or demonic, the Sun courts have a certain amount of power over their ancient foes, and with either a shimmering aura or a grand barrier can bar such entities from passing through a given area.

Master: *Blindness*; “don’t stare into the sun” is sage advice. But the act of foolishness is not required for a vengeful Sun Kami to burn out one’s retinas. The severity of the blindness can range from a persistent case of vision-obscuring sun spots to complete neural destruction of the eye.

High Master: *Solar Flare*; it’s not a party until a building-sized arch of radioactive star fire seers all life from the area. At their most terrible, Sun Kami can conjure such an effect, unleashing the full force of their fiery energies.

Moon Kami

It is not by accident that the very word “lunacy” is derived from the moon itself. Spirits of the moon are beautiful and insane – and above all, deadly. Many Shinobi feel an innate connection to these spirits, believing that they must most closely resemble their very souls. This kinship does not make dealing with them any less dangerous.

Wild and unpredictable, these unstable polymorphic figures of silver and shadow take any number of dark, seductive and maddening forms.

They feel the most strongly towards Sea, Sun and Earth Kami, emotions that swing wildly from infatuated love to undying hatred. It is said that some powerful Moon Kami, in the throes of madness, have even conspired with the Oni, but this is yet only rumor.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Darkness*; though the moon itself is lit with silver, it dwells in night, and revels in draping itself in shadow. The least of the Moon Kami grant this favor on a whim, overwhelming natural light sources with a cloak of darkness. This does not snuff out or extinguish these sources, only negates the light they produce (fire will still burn, for example). There are supernatural sources which can contend this darkness, most notably the works of Sun Kami.

Monk: *Seduction*; moonlight has interesting effects on the human mind, and the human heart. A Shinobi under the effects of this favor radiates that intangible quality which inspires romance, making his advances more often than not well received.

Master: *Shadow Dance*; a Moon Kami may grant a simple truth upon a favored Shinobi – that shadow unbroken by light is all and entirely a single swath of fabric. The absence of light creates a connectivity to all things unburdened by the harsh definitions brought on by the light. A Shinobi who understands this is worthy of the favor which allows him to meld with shadow, and pass through all within that shadow as if they were all one homogenous substance. He may pass through any solid object untouched by light, and move in three dimensions within the veil of shadow. Any amount of light breaks the effects of the favor, or at least creates an impassible obstacle.

High Master: *Madness*; sanity is weakness – there is freedom when the grip of reality is loosed, and servants of the Moon revel in spreading their own brand of liberty. The great silver deities can do so much more, and more directly, by ravaging the human mind with utter and total insanity. The touch of madness varies based on what the spirit arbitrarily decides is best, ranging from an abnormal tick to gibbering lunacy.

War Kami

Ranging from coldly tactical commanders to hyper aggressive psychopaths, these spirits never pursue peace, and only know what it means to either conquer or be conquered. They are very capable in assisting in combat, but grant no immunity to violence – they are instead defined by it.

Example War Kami might appear as samurai, violent mythic beasts or endless tides of blood.

They are allied to Yang Kami, and opposed to Wisdom and Balance Kami. They are not directly allied to the Oni, but cannot conceive of a reason to be opposed to them.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Boot Camp*; a War spirit may directly enhance a Shinobi's preexisting capabilities in battle. This usually translates into a bonus modifier for a Physical (+ Combat) check, ranging from +1 to +10.

Monk: *Reload*; Some battle spirits contend that a superior weapon is one that never needs reloading. Others support this claim in a different way, by ensuring their supplicants never need to reload in the first place. This favor may replenish the magazine of a firearm, the battery of an energy weapon, or even the chi of a magical weapon.

Master: *Berserker*; pain is weakness leaving the body. When the body feels no pain, it knows no weakness. This favor grants the gift of uncontrollable blood rage, rendering the Shinobi unable to feel pain, or be encumbered by his health wheel or any subsequent maladies – it may even grant him the capacity to stave off death itself for the duration of the battle. Faster, pussy cat! Kill, kill!

High Master: *War Machine*; blood calls to blood, and war kami call to implements of war. Any matter of weaponry, from a simple shank to a fully operational Dragon Mecha, can be brought to heel under the control of the most powerful spirits. The machine may turn on its operator, destroy itself in a sudden shrapnel burst, or even be wielded by some unseen hand, all on behalf of the Shinobi.

Agriculture Kami

These spirits represent humanity's drive and desire to feed and support itself; generally, these kami just want to help people be happy, healthy and well prepared. Oddly, they also strongly support a coexistence with the wild, and abhor wanton destruction of land or deforestation. Shinobi favored by these kami are always sure to find themselves well fed and rarely wanting of basic supplies. These spirits not only support farming prosperity, but control its despair as well. Some darker Agriculture Kami command plagues of vermin, and other implements of crop destruction.

Agriculture Kami may appear as a wizened old farmer, a loving dog by the fire, or a plague of vermin.

They are allied to Sun, Yang and Yin Kami, and are opposed to Moon and Oni Kami. Their relationship with Sea Kami and their command of the weather is always a turbulent one.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Sack Lunch*; a simple favor that provides the Shinobi or his party with some much needed basic supplies, usually food, shelter or first aid. This might be a no-frills bento box, or a hundred-pound cache.

Monk: *Happy Home*; a Kami of the hearth and home may bless a house with a sense of well-being. Those under its roof become calmer, contented, less likely to suffer emotional disturbance, and more likely to want to help those around him who share the home.

Master: *Bloom*; a spirit who governs the cycle of growth may command a sudden and dramatic vegetative explosion. Grass and reeds may spring up to impressive heights, crops will suddenly be ready for a bountiful harvest, flowers will flower and trees bear fruit for acres around.

High Master: *Strange Fruit*; just because these spirits watch over the cycles of natural growth doesn't mean they're slavishly bound to it. Chiefs and deities may cause plants and trees to bare bizarre fruits; apples which can cure or curse the consumer, aggressive and ambulatory fungus, or pollen that transforms people into honey bees.

Yang Kami

Representing Yang Kami are highly energetic, passionate and chaotic forces of the natural and unnatural world. They are a part of humanity, but also tied intrinsically to the acts of creation and destruction.

Yang Kami always appear as men, though in a shockingly wide variety, from giants to little green men with insect wings.

They are allied to War Kami, and opposed to Balance, Wisdom and Oni Kami. Their relationship with Yin Kami is...complicated.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Pick-Me-Up*; for the slow, sluggish or unmotivated Shinobi, the smallest of Yang spirits can provide a sudden revitalizing burst of energy. This rarely translates to physical rejuvenation (though in cases it has), but more often snaps him out of a daze, or keeps him focused during a period of monotony.

Monk: *Radiance*; some folks simply seem to carry an aura of vivid charisma around with them, and the Yang Kami know how to turn that light on and off like a switch. Those blessed with an aura of radiance seem to be more likable and attractive to those around them, even entire crowds. The extent of how much the aura effects the Shinobi's social influence varies – too much of a good thing can lead to a manic, hyperactive Shinobi who may not be in his right mind.

Master: *Dancing Spirits*, Spirits inhabit every object we see. When a Shinobi can communicate with the Yang spirits in an object, they begin to move the object. This can be used to move small or light objects a reasonable distance, so long as the Shinobi can maintain focus on the yang spirits surrounding and within the object.

High Master: *Random Acts of Change*; sometimes it's not a specific change that's needed in a given situation; it's the very act of change. This crap shoot favor gives the chief license to enact some completely random transformation upon the physical world. A vehicle may turn into a mechanical elephant, an enemy may be reduced to a pile of flowers, or everyone's senses in an area may turn topsy-turvy ("why does everything taste like purple all of a sudden?").

Yin Kami

Spirits which represent Yin energy are static, they resist change where they can, and promote stasis where able. Yin Kami prefer stability and predictability above anything else. Their favors often give protection or a degree of immunity to forces of change or chaos. Their tendency for predictability also gives them insights into predictions and premonitions.

Complimentary to Yang, they usually appear as women, often beautiful women, but seldom are they flashy or outstanding in any other way.

They are opposed to War Kami and Oni, and allied to Sea, Balance and Wisdom Kami. They seem to be able to take or leave Yang Kami as they please.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Clockwork*; Spirits of Yin are able to help resist the ravages and wear-and-tear of time; this is particularly a common favor among even the least of these Kami, granting longevity and good working order for machines which perform frequent or repetitive tasks. Watches always keep time, guns never jam, vehicles won't break down, etcetera.

Monk: *Resist Forces of Yang*; as the natural counter-balance to random chaos and instability, Yin Kami are capable of reinforcing the very fabric of a person or object's innate yin, and thus their resistance to forces of change. The favor doesn't go so far as the grant immunity, but the subject of the favor will grant a sort of armor, both reducing the effectiveness of changes made against them/it and increasing the difficulty of enacting such changes. This can range from receiving damage, to magic resistance, to the progression of natural phenomenon, such as disease or mutation (or even time). This resistance is effective against harmful changes, but also stymies positive ones.

Master: *Restoration*; what has been done cannot be undone, but it can be repaired or replaced. Unwanted changes can be reversed; an injured body can be made as it was before harm befell it, as can material objects be repaired. Magic can be unwoven and uninvited spirits expelled, as well. The extent to which a body or object can be restored is subject to the power of the Kami and the discretion of the Gamemaster.

High Master: *Stasis Field*; sometimes enough is enough, and the forces of chaos must not be merely inhibited and their works reversed, they must be stopped, and stopped in a truly cosmic sense (at least within a very specific area of geography). The deities of Yin hold the power to designate a sort of bubble within reality that completely renders all matter and energy within it inert. Gases become suspended particles, liquids transform into harmless gels, and the potential energy within solids is revoked. Time, space and the functions of life are all paused within this limited continuum, suspended without any awareness of the passing world outside

their bubble. If the field is lifted, that within it will immediately continue on as it did at the moment of its inception. Fire will reconstitute its heat and continue to burn, a bird in flight will resume its mid-air course, and drops of rain will once again splash to the ground. People, animals and spirits who are capable of sensing and recognizing the passage of time will be clueless that there was even the slightest pause in their reality (at least until presented with evidence to the contrary).

Balance Kami

Closely related to the forces of Yin, Balance spirits seek peace and serenity, but are unconcerned if the status quo is altered – so long as proportion and tranquility are kept intact. For them, life is meant to be well ordered and everything kept in its proper perspective. This doesn't mean stasis, just that actions have their proper reactions, which can be decidedly “unpeaceful” at times. They grant any favors which pursue the proper order of the cosmos and karma, but carefully dole out such power as to not further upset the balance.

Typically they appear as loving, trustworthy figures in the Shinobi's life, and just as often do not appear at all, existing as disembodied voices that guide the supplicant along the path of balance.

They are allied to any Kami that support this balance, and likewise oppose the rest. They support peace and diplomacy to figures of the pantheon that ought to be harmonious, such as Sun and Moon, Yin and Yang, Earth and Sea.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Tightrope Walker*, at times a sense of balance can be a perfectly literal thing. A Shinobi granted this small but ever so useful favor becomes imbued with perfect equilibrium. He finds navigating the narrowest of paths to be second nature, and is unlikely to slip on even the most unstable of surfaces.

Monk: *Neutrality*; blessings and curses can be quite unfair, so why not remove them both? Balance Kami of sufficient strength are known to do just that, removing statistical modifiers of a character, both positive and negative. This is not any sort of restoration or healing, but a temporary negation of frailties and boons which takes the form of removing any plus or minus modifier currently being applied to the character's stats.

Master: *Expulsion*; comparable to a Yin Stasis Field, the favor of Expulsion is not so severe, or all-encompassing. In order to level the playing field, the Balance Kami removes all the players – as well as the ball, the coaches, the fans, maybe even the grass on the field. Expulsion creates a zone from which all within are suddenly and forcibly thrown from, and anyone is prevented from entering (like a force field with nothing inside). These fields are

usually not terrible large, perhaps the size of a bedroom – but realms of exclusion the size of entire villages have been witnessed. Usually it is only people, animals and spirits that are removed, but it's possible to include plants, objects and even magic.

High Master: *Shadow Boxer*; an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth is an ancient code for justice and social balance. The great Kami of Balance can expand this concept to include acts of violence as they actually occur. The subject of this favor cannot be struck in combat without his opponent receiving the exact same strike. A Shinobi under such a condition could be shot with ten bullets by ten gunmen, and each would receive a jolt of Kami magic which mirrors the force of the bullet they fired (though it is unlikely the Shinobi would survive ten gunshot wounds). However, since this is an act of Balance, the same is true for every attack made by the subject – he in turn will receive the beat downs he doles out.

Wisdom Kami

These spirits seek only to spread knowledge and understanding. By this virtue, they encourage learning and dedicated study, as well. The state of affairs in the world means little to them provided humanity demonstrates a willingness to assimilate information and knowledge into a plan of success for themselves. Knowledge which leads to prosperity is their hallmark.

These spirits appear in a wide variety of forms, but most often they are calm, serene and elderly, and often are associated with wealth.

They are allied to Balance, Yang, Yin and Earth Kami, and opposed to Oni and War Kami.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Quick Study*; the capacity for learning is more innate in some humans than others. Even the smallest of Wisdom Kami seek to bring out this, the best, quality in humanity (at least in their opinion). Beneficiaries of this favor find their minds temporarily more focused and able to absorb information like a sponge. This accelerated learning curve is often all too brief, usually just long enough to cram for a test or enjoy the benefits of an eidetic memory.

Monk: *Sage Advice*; Wisdom Kami love nothing more than to be petitioned for advice; well and truly they exist for nothing less. This is usually not so much as a favor as an enlightening conversation. The spirit palavers with the Shinobi for a time, and concluding their discussion, the less wizened of the two walks away with an idea, notion or concept that he didn't previously possess. In some ways this can be the key to unlocking the secrets of the universe, but more often is a sorely needed solution to a pressing problem.

Master: *Step Ahead*; a wise man can reasonably predict the future because he has a firm grasp on the past. Likewise, the recipient of this favor receives two visions: the first a glimpse into the distant (or not so distant) past, the second a premonition of the future which results from the past event. While the past is static, the future is not; ideally this gives the Shinobi an understanding of how and why something is going to happen, and the conceptual tools of how to stop or facilitate it.

High Master: *Oracle*; the greatest form of wisdom is omniscience, a concept which eludes not only the wisest of Shinobi, but the most revered Kami. However a fragment of that power is achievable – a Shinobi granted the Favor of the Oracle may travel through time and space within his meditations, scrying distant locations and long-lost eras. What cannot be discerned is the distant future, and the attempt can be mind altering, as the Shinobi is bombarded with visions of infinite possibilities.

Earth Kami

Simple, patient, direct. This most succinctly sums up spirits of the earth. They are representatives of the living planet, spanning from its molten depths to the flourish of life on its surface. Endurance, strength of both body and of character, and robust health are the favors they offer to Shinobi, but are always unwilling to share such powers with those who are reckless or inconsiderate.

The appearance of earth servants ranges from anamorphic elementals to all the creatures of the wild, typically those which are ground-dwelling or celebrated burrowers.

As the world houses all spirits, ultimately, Earth Kami wish to be peaceful with all spirits, but find the others too complicated to understand. Sea Kami are by far the most alien and tumultuous, but only the Oni are considered unforgiveable.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Strength of Character*; the modern world can inundate a Shinobi with innumerable influences on his heart and mind. This favor grants stoic resistance to such influences, helping him in a small way to shut out any supernatural effects which might cause him to act in a way contrary to his nature. This effect can be a basic buffer or an unbreakable barrier to outside commands.

Monk: *Robust Health*; the Shinobi's vitality experiences a supernatural surge under the effects of this favor. In game terms, the character gains a variable number of extra non-lethal health levels, perhaps as much an entire extra wheel.

Master: *Stoneskin*; like the Earth itself, this favor is as straight forward as it sounds. The Shinobi granted this favor has his skin transformed to stone. It still functions as flesh would, sweating under exertion and bleeding when broken, but it is obviously much more difficult to penetrate. Just how much armor is granted is up to the Gamemaster, as is how much physical weight is added to the character's frame (a thoughtful Kami might grant stone that is no greater burden than his skin). Likewise, the Shinobi's bare-handed strikes are much "weightier" as well.

High Master: *Earth Swim*; at its core the earth is liquid – chief Kami of the deep realms understand this perfectly, and grant a Shinobi the bizarre ability to move through solid ground as if it were a thin liquid. How fast the character can move through the "fluid" is based on his athleticism rather than supernatural speed. Additionally, the earth only functions as a liquid for the Shinobi – it is as dense and solid as it ever was for anyone not blessed by this favor. The Shinobi can even control how the earth reacts to him, allowing him to stand where he chooses and swim where he wishes. As long as the Shinobi is subterranean he has no need to breathe, either, being one with the earth and suspending the limitations of his human body. He can, however, be harmed, such as by the shockwave of nearby explosives.

Sea Kami

Deeply connected to Moon Kami, Sea Kami share their unpredictable temperament, but manage to draw the line at outright lunacy. Like Earth Kami, the ocean spirits take a very long view of the world, and subscribe to patience and an ideal that "everything comes, goes, and comes back – the way of the tides". While they are concerned with the vast array of life that lives in and on the sea, they have no concern for life on land, and see it as a sacred duty to constantly test the resolve of those creatures with fits of weather and the occasional disaster. Because they believe and prefer a world where everything happens eventually, good and bad, they seldom offer favors, preferring to grant them on their own time, usually without having been asked to do so.

Sea spirits often take on an aquatic appearance, either as animated entities of pure water, or something less strange, like the guise of the animals that live in and on the water (such as fish, sea birds and aquatic mammals).

They are closely allied to Yang, Balance and of course Moon Kami, and carry on a rocky relationship with Earth and Agriculture Kami. They have no strong opposition to anyone, though, except the Oni.

Example Favors:

Novice: *Ebb & Flow*; as the tide comes and goes so does everything else. The smallest of Sea Kami can apply this notion to the Shinobi or any other subject, and more importantly, to effects of magic and technology that affects them. Any spell, magical object or cutting-edge tech which grants a positive or negative modifier to a character's stats can be reversed. Goggles that enhance perception can thereby suddenly hinder it, or a spell (even a Favor) which gives the user mystic armor becomes soft and susceptible. Typically this applies to effects that give an actual numerical plus or minus to a stat.

Monk: *Water Breath*; Sea Kami yearn for communion with kindred spirits, but are halted in how close they can get by a silly barrier called breathable air. With this favor these Kami allow surface creatures to breathe underwater, much like fish, but without the gills. Strangely, the most common recipient of this favor are wild creatures, like diving birds and aquatic mammals, who Sea Kami view as putting in a respectable effort.

Master: *Out of Whack*; water has long had a mystical connection to raw emotion – both are fluid and changing. Sea Kami tap into this connectivity, and use it to alter the emotions of creatures and beings that have them. This can range from minor alterations (a man feeling blue starts to feel at least a little better), to massive swings (a savage bear suddenly becomes as friendly as the family dog). This favor has no bearing on the subject's actual thoughts, just their feelings; though certainly a change in heart can effect a change of mind.

High Master: *Tempest in a Teapot*; an extremely dramatic and direct implementation of the sea is control of the weather itself. With this favor a Kami may direct any number of weather effects into an extremely localized area. This can take the form of sudden and extreme drops or spikes in temperature, mild or wild variations of precipitation, and violent eruptions of wind and lightning. Any or all of these effects can happen simultaneously, and in contrast to one another (though two extremes of temperatures will probably balance out, a combination of frostbite and lightning is not so mutually exclusive). Most impressively this magical weather can occur nearly anywhere, and do not require actual clouds, or even the sky (an underground rainstorm could fill a reservoir, for instance). Thus a house could freeze solid while the neighborhood swelters in summer heat. However unless the ambient temperature is changed, that house will thaw eventually. Typically lightning strikes are random, unless the Shinobi has made an arrangement which causes more accurate and aimed strikes, in which case they are treated as a combat opportunity for the Kami.

Mantles

One of the most ancient traditions among all cultures of mankind is the wearing of masks. Nearly every civilization through time has long honored the very idea that one could don the trappings of someone, or something else, leaving their former identity behind to completely become the new element.

The Shinobi embrace this idea as well, however, their mastery of their malleable inner shadow has allowed them to elevate custom and folk lore to the heights of a Major Art.

In Riku there are several versions of mantles – the most well known are the Mantle of Beasts and the Mantle of Deception. However players and Gamemasters are, as always, encouraged to generate their own Mantles (such as the Mantle of Elements).

In practice, a Mantle is one part magic, and one part physical embodiment of that magic – to wit, a literal mask. Such a mask must be used in any instance of Mantle magic, without exception. If the mask is somehow removed mid-spell, the effect dissipates into shadow. The Shinobi need not create the mask with their own two hands, but they must bond with the mask in a sacred ritual which includes days of fasting and meditation. Once performed, the effects of the rite are permanent, and the Shinobi may channel the magical effects of their Mantle mastery at will (though they are still required to make any Checks the spell may call for).

Each version of a Mantle (be it Beasts, or Deception, or a creation of your own) is treated as a separate Art with an Art. When a character with Mantle for a Major Art begins the game, they must choose which Mantle they will use, and are excluded from the spells and effects of the other Mantles, unless they study and commit themselves to that other Mantle in the exact same way they would any other separate Major Art. In other words, each instance of Mantle magic is treated as its own Art, in terms of accessing its spells, content, and improvements.

Mantles, as harbingers of some of the earliest forms of shamanistic magic used by the progenitors of the shadow folk before the Shinobi even formally existed, are likewise much simpler than other arts, like Ghost Magic. Mantles do not have levels. They have a single spell effect for each level of Oath, and that is all. However, a Shinobi can learn several forms of

Mantles, and therefore can attain a wide variety of spells by studying a wide variety of Mantles (though each version of Mantle magic must be started and studied separately). Depending on the player and their intentions toward Mantle magic, Gamemasters should feel free to make it easier for a character to study several forms of Mantles by way of reward for sincere roleplaying and character development. Players who are only trying to maximize their character's stats by expanding into Mantle magic as a cheaper alternative to starting a new Major Art from scratch, should likewise *not* enjoy a Gamemaster's blessing.

Mantle of Beasts:

Considered to be the most ancient of all the Major Arts, the Mantle of Beasts harkens back to the days of primitive mankind – before humanity mastered the elements or their potential for deception. The Mantle is a reflection of the Shinobi's roots in bygone shamanism, harnessing and channeling the many and varied powers of all the creatures that live on the planet. From ants to aardvarks to zander to zebras, the shadow warrior gains the power to first communicate with the animal mind, and eventually actually become the animal.

A Shinobi's first mask is dedicated to the Mantle of Beasts, as a whole. As before, this is accomplished through the act of meditation, but many Shinobi physically create separate Mantles for each sort of beast, as tradition dictates, with each Mantle artistically resembling the creature in mind. Because of this elder convention, many younger Shinobi ignore the tradition, finding it too time consuming to create so many redundant Mantles. Others, it is said, have expanded beyond complex organisms, and create Mantles for all manner of zoology, including flora, fungus, bacteria and even viruses. In game mechanics, there is no difference between one Beast mask or another – a single mask dedicated to the Mantle of Beasts will work sufficiently for any animal. There is, however, a discipline in how the community of shadow folk may view individual who prefer short-cut's to the time-honored ways of the ancestors. Additionally, the Mantle of Beasts does not work equally between simple and complex organisms, or flora and fauna. A Shinobi must choose whether their Mantle honors large animals, plants and fungi, or single-celled organisms. The following powers describe the very traditional Mantle of the larger, more well-understood Beasts, such as mammals, birds, reptiles, fish and arthropods.

Novice: Koutsuu (Communication) – *Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs 25*

This power functions essentially exactly as the spell of the same name used for Elements. It allows telepathic communication with animals of the chosen species. More importantly, it allows the Shinobi to piece together the scattered fragments of animal-thought

and form a coherent conversation. This power does not actually change how the animal's mind works, however, it only allows the animal to communicate through thought with the Shinobi. A tiger is still a tiger, thinks like a tiger, and acts like a tiger – it may be surprised by the spell, spook, or attack. For this reason, true novices first learn to use this spell on tame, domesticated animals, often pets or familiars. Masters who develop a true rapport with beasts learn the subtleties of body language and animal ken that allow them to easily banter with newly met “acquaintances”. Certain animals are especially intelligent, and therefore are much easier to talk to (like great apes, whales, dolphins and elephants). Others have scarcely any intellect at all, and require a great deal of patience to interact with (such as snails, slugs, sea cucumbers, etc).

Monk: Shoukan (Summon) – Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs 15 + 1 to 5 per group size or reaction

Any competent beast master worth his salt learns not only to speak with the animals, but to call them to his side. It's easiest to summon one animal at a time, but very possible to call entire groups. The character starts with his Spirit check of 15, and the Gamemaster may add increments of up to 5; each increment either roughly doubles the size of the group (starting with a single animal), or increases how positively the animal(s) will react to the Shinobi once they arrive. If no adjustment is made towards a favorable reaction, the Shinobi must rely on his charisma and koutsuu to gain any favor with them, and most likely they will simply act as any typical animal of their species might. Additionally, such a summoned creature is not selected for health or temperament, and may possibly be diseased or even rabid – as such, most Shinobi invest at least one increment into “quality control”.

Ill-mannered beasts notwithstanding, animals that have been called with shoukan will make a conscious effort to aid the Shinobi to the best of their abilities. They are limited to the actions they can perform by their natural inclinations and their level of intelligence. A rat cannot pick a lock, but a raven might be able to. A horse will gladly carry a rider, but a water buffalo might object. A hungry tiger probably can't be trusted to watch over the Shinobi's wounded and unconscious friend, but would make an excellent ally in combat. With increasingly greater increments of difficulty added to the check, even these natural inclinations can be gradually overcome. However, such checks can rapidly grow out of achievable reach as the Shinobi attempts to summon larger and larger groups of more qualified beasts. There is typically a tradeoff between quantity and quality. The number of animals summoned when increments are used to increase the size of the group also depends on the size of the animal. Small animals, like rodents, birds and arthropods, can be summoned by the dozens, while relatively large animals are called in much smaller increments. Huge beasts, anything as big as or bigger than a horse, may cost reflectively huge increments to call by the herd.

Master: Zukeishifuta (Shapeshifter) – Spirit (+ Flow) vs 20, +5 for ea. halving or doubling of size

While there exists one spell of greater effect beneath the Mantle of Beasts, the Master who can shapeshift is seen as the embodiment of the Art. Used as often for meditation and serenity then for practical applications, this spell allows the Shinobi to mold his human body into that of the chosen animal. It is first simplest to learn this spell by changing into animals roughly of the same weight and size as the master (such as deer, large wolves, small bears, giant tortoises, and the like). For each increment of 5 added to his check he may become an animal up to roughly half or twice his relative size. Therefore, becoming a horse or a fox is tough, but not impossible. Becoming a bee or whale would be impossibly impressive – though there are tales of assassin spiders and ship-wrecking leviathans. Whatever the form, the Shinobi gains whatever abilities or stat modifications that the Gamemaster feels is appropriate. As a bird, the Master innately knows how to fly, as a fish knows to swim (and breath water). A snake may have venom, a rhino has massive strength and thickly armored hide, and a wolf an amazing sense of smell and ever-so sharp fangs.

The duration of this spell, however, follows its own rigid course. The Shinobi cannot dictate how long he must remain in his new skin – he will revert back to his human form at the next sunrise or sunset, whichever comes first. There are rumors that other Shinobi Lineages have expanded on this spell, and may cast it upon others, cursing or blessing as the situation warrants.

High Master: Shoukankaiju (Summon Strange Beast) – Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs 30

The final spell of the traditional Beast Mantle is both awesome and bizarre. It is the ability to summon a creature of myth and legend – once thought lost to time or to have never existed at all. The High Master is fully capable of dispelling both such notions, and brings a creature of fantasy to vivid life. Exactly *where* this creature actually comes from is poorly understood, and the beasts themselves keep quiet on the subject. However, materializing from the ether, come they do. Once a part of the Shinobi's world, the high master loses any control over the creature – it acts exactly as its nature commands it to, though very often these beasts are unusually intelligent (often more so than most humans), and there is a sort of unspoken agreement that, at a minimum, the creature will not turn on the Shinobi or actively hinder him. However, among the many weird and strange denizens of legend, typical behavior is quite atypical.

Of all the fantastical creatures, by far the most popular to summon are dragons, mostly due to their innate sense of honor and duty, their core benevolence, and their unrivaled wisdom. A close second, and close to the Shinobi's heart, are the Nine Tails – humanoid fox wizards with nine flaming tails of gold. Still others include Bakeneko, the shapeshifting cat; Basan, a fire-breathing rooster; Tengu, ninja warriors who are half shadow and half crow; Hibagon, a sort of bigfoot; Isonade, a venomous fish monster; Otoroshi, a hairy homunculus which avidly defends sacred grounds; and so very many more – more than can ever be listed here (*see our site for expanded list*).

Each of these creatures is incredibly powerful in its own right, and should be given a creative listing of stats and powers by the Gamemaster. Creatures of even greater power, that which may rival great kami gods, can also be summoned, but the check becomes nearly impossible to achieve, and their intentions increasingly volatile.

So far, no High Master has achieved the ability to actually transform himself into such a creature, except within the annals of Shinobi lore. As figures of legend themselves, it is thought possible to actually summon one of these ancient Shinobi while in their mythic guise. So far, any such results from such a dramatic undertaking have not been recorded for posterity.

Mantle of Deception

Although each of the three Major Arts have been practiced by the Shinobi since before the shadow war began, the Mantle of Deception is by far the youngest. Somewhat counter intuitively, it is considered by some to be the most “honest” of all the Mantles, since it channels what its practitioners call a Shinobi's inner shadow. Unlike its sibling Mantles, Deception is less overt and much more subtle, as the title implies. It allows for easy covert operations and infiltration, and is favored among those who avoid unnecessary confrontation – perhaps more so than most shadow folk already do. However it would be a mistake to assume this magic is no less dangerous than its counterparts. To the contrary, it is possibly because of this Mantle alone that the Shinobi not only survive to this day, but succeed as they do.

Novice: Kagemusha (Impersonate) – *Spirit (+ Sensitivity) contested by the subject's Mental (+ Intuition)*

Kagemusha literally means “shadow warrior”, which while appropriate, the term more commonly refers to any impersonator. Through this spell the novice may take on the appearance of any person he has previously met at least once before. Upon meeting a new

acquaintance, or catching up with an old one, the Shinobi may enter a light state of meditation and attempt to “catalogue” the essence of the subject’s aura, spiritually and mentally copying it and storing it away inside the Mantle for later use. The subject is consciously unaware of such happenings, but subconsciously will resist being scanned for duplication. The Shinobi need not actually have a conversation with his subject, but he must be within close proximity (an arm’s length). Both must make their prescribed check, with the highest score winning. If the Shinobi is successful, he gains the ability to disguise himself for approximately an hour or so as the subject. If the Shinobi fails, the subject immediately becomes uneasy and distrustful of him, though they likely do not understand why. Still, such people will follow their instinct and act accordingly.

The impersonation is only skin deep, however, duplicating the person’s appearance, voice and even scent. It does not arm the shadow folk with any knowledge of the subject’s personality, thoughts or affectations. A Shinobi may “store” a number of these disguises at any one time, forgetting ones that are no longer useful to make room for new ones as he chooses. His maximum allotment of potential disguises is equal to his Mental plus Focus divided by five, rounded down. Additionally, the Shinobi must never have a face to face encounter with the subject while disguised as them – the spell will immediately fail, and all other stored images will be driven from the Mantle by the broken spell.

Monk: Azamuku (Deceive) – *Spirit (+ Flow) contested by the subject’s Mental (+ Intuition)*

The seat of Deception is the perfect lie. This spell brings the Shinobi closer to that flawless idea, one falsehood at a time. The caster must first tell the subject one truth – which may be anything from “grass is green” to “I slept with your sister”, so long as it’s true. The magic within the Mantle then contests the person’s ability to separate fact from fiction, and the contested rolls are made, with the highest score being the winner. If he succeeds, the Shinobi may then begin telling a string of lies, each one becoming more convincing than the last. He must still make a Social (+Influence) check to tell each lie successfully, but he adds +5 to his score for each lie told in succession. These bonuses continue to stack to a maximum of +40, or until he at last tells one truth (failure to tell a lie successfully does not negate the bonus, but nor does it continue to add to it), which then breaks the spell entirely. The effects of the broken spell are up to the Gamemaster, and can range from the subject accepting the lies they’ve been told as truth until proven otherwise, to the victim becoming instantly aware that they have been beneath a spell of manipulation and vow bloody revenge.

Master: Mienai (Imperceptible) – *Spirit (+ Flow) vs the subject’s Mental (+ Intuition)*

Commonly confused with invisibility, the Master of this Mantle does not actually become transparent or bend light in any fashion. Instead, he drapes himself in his inner

shadow, cloaking himself not in darkness or the absence of light, but in the very fabric of thought – the inability to be perceived. In this manner he is not invisible, but he cannot be seen, heard, smelled or felt by animal, man or machine. From his perspective, he seems as he always does, but from the perspective of others, he doesn't even exist. This is more than the human mind willfully ignoring the subject – it is an alteration in reality that renders the Shinobi immune to the thoughts and senses that render perception.

Even so, the spell is not perfect and can be pierced by a sharp mind – or because of a weak Shinobi spirit. The Shinobi must make a contested check against the most intuitive mind in line of sight that would otherwise be able to perceive him, with the highest score winning. If the shadow folk prevails, he and any of his possessions on his immediate person cannot be detected. If the opposing mind wins the check, than that mind is once again able to see and hear the Shinobi. He must then make another check against the next strongest mind, and so on, and so on, until he wins a check or there are no more minds to deceive. This “tree” of checks is only needed if the Shinobi fails – it is intended to determine a threshold for the strength of a mind that would be capable of seeing through the spell. The master may even extend Mienai to other people, animals or large objects (no larger than a full grown man). To do so is a simple act of will (a declaration by the player), but the Shinobi must subtract 10 from the total score of any of his contested checks via this Mantle for each subject beyond himself.

While under the effects of Mienai, the Shinobi's actions can have strange effects on the world around him – rather, the world around him might explain the consequences of his actions in strange ways. People may not be able to sense *him*, but they do perceive the results of his actions. If the Master fires a gun, the muzzle report will go unnoticed, but the target being struck may be quite obvious indeed! As a result, witnesses will come to the most logical conclusions – if a man is shot by the Shinobi, people will still jump to the conclusion that he was attacked by a gun man, and may even try to ascertain the direction of the shot. They may even well succeed in doing so, but the Shinobi himself will go unobserved. In other cases, such as a clumsy shadow folk knocking over a priceless vase, witnesses may blame whoever was nearest, and in the absence of anyone else, be certain they have just had a paranormal experience with a ghost. In all cases, even if the event is recorded, no one who sees the scene will think of the Master as the culprit.

High Master: Co-Location – Spirit (+ Sensitivity) vs20 +5 for ea. additional copy

While most forms of this Mantle ultimately are meant to avoid physical confrontation, the final and ultimate use of this magic makes the Shinobi a combat monster. The High Master draws forth his inner shadow and fashions from it a shadowy copy of himself. This copy is a nearly exact facsimile, however it is still a darkened silhouette, and is unable to speak (though

it can pantomime). The shadow has the same intelligence, personality and motives as the original, but it does not possess free will, and does whatever it is bid by the High Master. The shadow is also equipped with whatever the Shinobi has on his person, but again these are dusky replicas. Despite being a shadow, the copy has all density and mass of the forerunner, existing in three dimensions like any other person or animal.

However the magic is fragile, to an extent – a wound that would be mortal to the Shinobi suffered by the shadow causes it to dissipate, as does straying from the line of sight of the progenitor. However, the Shinobi may create multiple copies at a time, adding 5 to his check for each copy he'd like to create beyond the initial one. He may also use this power multiple times in a row, creating entire swarms of shadow figures; the number of times he may use this spell in a given day is equal to his Shadow divided by two, rounded down. Although the figures have all the stats and perks of the original, they do not have magic of their own, and are even incapable of wielding magical items or weapons (such as mantles or the creations of minor Arts). The figures need not be solely used for martial purposes, either. Though they lack speech, they are quite capable of writing, and because they possess the same intelligence and memories of the Shinobi, can make excellent intellectual contemporaries.

Perhaps the most chilling side effect of this spell, however, are the effects of it should the original Shinobi perish while he has one or more shadows active. One might suspect that the death of the father would yield the same result for the sons, as it were, but this is tragically and bizarrely not the case. To the contrary, the shadows persist, suddenly infused with their own independent will. Many, realizing that they are still only an offshoot of the core, dedicate their existence to tidying up the deceased unfinished business, or watching over family and loved ones left behind as a sort of deadly guardian angel. Others stay with the departed High Master, keeping his tomb under the watchful eye of a shadowy honor guard. Regardless of what choices they make, they live on indefinitely, possessing no truly living body to get sick or grow old. However, should they sustain what would normally be a mortal wound, they do slowly dissolve back into nothingness – from there it becomes a question of whether or not a soul passes to the other side, which is a question that remains unanswered.

Minor Arts

Minor Arts can best be described as simple magic. They are representative of channeling the limited spirit and energy possessed by most humans into ritual and ceremony, culminating in basic and common forms of mysticism. Though they typically do not display the same level of power as the Shinobi Major Arts, they still offer a myriad of benefits to the shadow folk who take the time to study them.

Their greatest strength, however, is in their diversity. There is no limit to just how many Minor Arts a Shinobi can learn, other than available time and effort. Because of this they are quite popular, and a broad array of these minor magics can be found throughout both Shinobi culture and amongst the nominal populace.

This form of magic does have some drawbacks, though. Other than the obvious discrepancy in comparative power levels from the Major Arts, the Minor Arts are much more time consuming to enact, typically requiring a lengthy ritual or some form of preparation to first be conducted. Often, this ritual prepares and stores the magic in some way, allowing it to be either slowly doled out over a period of time or released in a single burst.

No matter the variation or use, Minor Arts tend to be subtle, practical and far less dramatic than their counter parts. Their effects can sometimes go unnoticed by witnesses at all, or at least not recognized as actual magic. Of course, there are still many cases where their use easily identifies themselves as supernatural. However because the Minor Arts are not uncommonly practiced by a wide swath of humanity (especially in the rural/peasant zones), they are not always so quickly associated with the Shinobi.

The most important element of Minor Arts for both Gamemasters and for players, is that there is no limit to their variety. It is not only fair practice, but *encouraged* that players create their own Minor Arts, and Gamemasters develop a repertoire of these minor powers to distribute among their more ritually-minded non-player characters.

Here are just a few examples of such Arts, just to get you started!

Kuji-kiri

Also known as the nine cuts, kuji-kiri are gestures or configurations of the hands and fingers. These dactyl positions date back since time and memoriam, and are hallmarks of the Shinobi. As such, their use in modern times can be quite dangerous, as they immediately identify an individual as part of the shadow-conspiracy. None the less, they are still widely practiced, usually as part of daily mediation or during training exercises.

To draw power from one of the nine hand sigils, one must first have the dexterity and necessary digits to place their hand into the specific configuration. It is still a local custom among the more brutal majordomos to cut off key fingers of suspected collusionists.

Once an individual has the hand positioned correctly, she must hold it for the duration of either a full day of meditation, or ten back-to-back meditations at dawn *and* dusk, or one sparring session where blood is drawn, she wins at least one bout, and loses at least one bout. Of course, kuji-kiri is still used without these strict prerequisites, but when done so it is for ceremonial benefit, and does not provide any actual magical effect (though a person may believe otherwise).

As long as the individual meets these requirements, she may tap into the specific hand sigil's power each time she configures her digits correctly. The effects last for as long as she maintains the hand sign, and can be used and reused for as long as she maintains her regiment. However, she may only have access to one cut at a time – if she wishes to use the power of another cut, she must start her regiment all over with the new hand sigil.

Rin – Power, Strength of Mind and Body; the sigil of Rin grants +1 to Physical and Mental checks. The effect stacks up an additional +1 for each successive day its maintained, to a maximum of +3.

Pyo – Direction of Energy; the gesture of Pyo increases the efficiency of the users body and spirit, adding +2 to Combat and Flow checks.

Toh – Harmony with the Universe; Toh allows the individual to more easily achieve a state of serenity. Checks to enter meditation (even under duress) or smooth out social unrest are at a -5 difficulty.

Sha – Healing of Self and Others; Sha empowers practices, both magical and non-magical, that aid in mending a living body (including plants and animals). It itself is not a spell of healing, but adds +3 to any check involving an attempt to render medical aid.

Kai – Intuition, Premonitions of Danger; Kai heightens a person's animal instincts when danger draws near. What constitutes "danger" and how early it can be sensed are discretions of the Gamemaster. Characters using Kai should be granted greater opportunities to "get a bad feeling" when trouble is imminent. However, Kai only provides an instinctive response – chills up the character's spine, hair standing on end, and other typical fight-or-flight responses.

Jin – Awareness, Sensitivity to the Thoughts of Others; sometimes confused with a mild form of telepathy, Jin is more accurately described as *empathy*. The user of this sigil is more in tune with the thoughts and feelings of others in a social context, and makes any such checks at a reduced difficulty (-5).

Retsu – Understanding Dimensions of Time and Space; of all the cuts, Retsu requires the most investment, and its rewards must be used shrewdly, but can be invaluable. Retsu can only be activated through a full day and night of meditation, and by no other means. When used once, it cannot be used again until another full regiment of meditation has been completed. The user of this power gains one bonus Opportunity in the next combat of their choosing.

Zai – Creation, Control of Nature; supplicants of Zai can be said to have a green thumb and animal ken. In general, plants under their care seem to grow a bit healthier, and animals are less wary of them. They are even more resistant to natural poisons, and are less likely to be attacked by animals. Users of Zai gain a +5 bonus to checks of resisting natural toxins or warding off potential animal attacks (either through kindness or intimidation).

Zen – Absolute Enlightenment; individuals who make use of Zen find their thoughts flow more clearly, and can maintain a cool head in the most stressful of situations. They gain a +2 bonus to checks using Stealth, Acrobatics or Focus.

Origami

Origami is the craftwork of folding paper into shapes and figures, such as geometric shapes and animals. It is an art that has persisted in this world's culture since there was paper to fold, and continues today, practiced widely by young and old of all walks of life. The most common figures are birds and flowers, which are crafted by the hundreds for weddings and other milestone celebrations, as a measure of good fortune.

Long ago, however, mankind discovered that there was magic inherent in the actual paper itself. Paper is an amazing and wonderful thing – the emptiness of a blank page is merely limitless potential, waiting to be transformed; waiting to store the most complex of thoughts and the most powerful of emotions. It is something most take for granted, but paper is powerful magic, indeed.

Like the very origins of origami, it is under debate about who or when the first man or woman learned to tap into the inert mystic qualities of paper, and use it to cast the first origami spell. Most at least can agree it was before the time of the Migration, and alas, the truth has likely been lost to antiquity. Thankfully the tradition persists, and no government, corporation or religion has been able to stifle the practice.

There are three primary variations of spellcraft for origami. Each one must be learned separately, but their practice and methods do not clash in any way. A character may learn any or all of these methods, although a single sheet of paper can only contain a single spell, and once folded to such a purpose, cannot be reused for another spell (even a different version of the same spell).

Familiars:

This spell plays off of the most common form of origami, the folding of animals. With this method the individual learns to create a paper companion – a small folded animal which she then breathes life into, albeit for only a short while.

Paper is fragile, and these familiar don't tend to last very long. While they do, however, they are willing and eager to carry out the wizard's commands, and typically have a short list of their own unique abilities, often depending on what sort of animal they represent. The familiar is capable of understanding their creator, and following basic instructions. Otherwise, they have limited communications, capable of only rough pantomime.

Origami familiars are just paper, at the end of the day. They gain no additional mass or toughness while animated, and unless otherwise noted are very susceptible to fire and water, or just being torn or crushed. They have no health wheel, as nearly any amount of damage breaks the spell and snuffs out their little life.

The most common variation is a bird or winged insect, capable of flight and making an excellent scout or spy. Other examples include a frog, who along with fish origami give their paper bodies an immunity to “lethal” water; a raccoon capable of picking pockets or picking locks; a poisonous spider (though its bite is rarely deadly to humans); an elephant that never forgets, equipped with a dexterous trunk and the gift of writing and drawing; a giant beetle with massive pinchers to either carry or attack; an octopus with perfect camouflage; and a giraffe with a telescoping neck.

The most impressive forms are dragons, which are extremely difficult to craft, but have several powers, including flight and usually some degree of elemental creation or control.

To create a familiar, the character must first be able to artistically craft the folded figure. The paper itself must be completely clean, devoid of any marks, tears or folds. A tiny shrine must be erected to honor the paper animal, and the figure must be meditated and prayed over, a process of several hours. Once complete, the figure does not become a living familiar until the character wishes it so, and once brought to life, will remain so for twice the duration of time the character prayed for the familiar at its shrine.

Gardening:

Very similar to paper familiars, paper gardening is creating a small plant from paper and then bringing it to life. Despite being made of different material, the origami plant is chemically identical to its natural counterpart. A rose will smell sweet, a carrot can be eaten, belladonna will cause hallucinations and hemlock is poison. Otherwise, the process is the same as with animal familiars, except that the plant will last for one day for each hour it was prayed to at its shrine.

Duplication:

Once again the character must create a small shrine and engage in at least an hour or more of prayer and contemplation, but the resulting origami is neither plant nor animal – but mineral. With this spell the caster may produce an origami that has been folded into a simple geometric shape, and upon activating the magic, the form will again take shape, duplicating the nearest physical object of the same approximate size as itself.

Because the new shape has no inherent life to sustain it, the magic is more short lived than with animals or plants, lasting a mere quarter hour for each hour of prayer invested at its shrine. Additionally, the object being copied must have no moving parts (this does preclude holographic images or digital encodings).

Otherwise, the duplication is nearly perfect; both a brass skeleton key and a magnetic key card will open the locks they are intended to; a bullet or battery will load into and function with the device they are meant for; a diamond ring will be just as valuable, not fugazi. The object may have any number of materials, chemicals or alloys, provided that none of them are moving parts. After the magic has run its course, the object will irreversibly revert into a crumpled wad of paper – an origami rock.

Spellbinding: Charms, Scrolls and Potions

One of the most common forms of magic throughout time and through nearly all cultures is the imbuing of small objects with a minor but persistent form of spell or magic. Among the wizards and shamans of Riku, this Minor Art is known as Spellbinding, wherein a sample of practical magic is applied to a trinket, poultice, drought, or written words of power. In some cases, the spell is permanently attached to such an object, and grants whoever carries it a very small measure of magic. In others, the spell is consumed, able to be used only in a single instance, but grants a slightly greater mystical effect. There are and can be any number of variations of such objects, but there are also some very general categories that most of these items fall into. Of course, whatever isn't covered here can easily be supplemented by a crafty Gamemaster and their players.

A character learns each variation of Spellbinding separately – because she knows how to write magic-imbued kanji does not mean she innately knows how to craft charms. Like Origami, she may learn any number of these spellbinding variants without restriction, other than time and effort.

To create a Spellbound object, a character must first learn the spell that is meant to be placed in the item. This can be something of their own devising, or something trained and passed down from a teacher or mentor. The source is not as important as the careful and considerate process of crafting the magic.

A ceremony or ritual must be performed over the item, which lasts from dawn till dusk, and includes constant mantras, prayer or meditation. In the case of charms, the object must be ritually purified; for potions, very specific ingredients must be gathered and treated and

prepared; scrolls, like origami, must be free of tears or errant marks. The intense focus of the ceremony culminates with the character making a Spirit (+ Flow) vs. 25 check. Success indicates the birth of a Spellbound item; failure is often marked by the sudden and rapid deterioration of the object.

In each of these variations of Spellbinding, there is a process for creating the common version of the item, and a hint that more powerful versions are possible. Any one of these spells can be enhanced beyond the traditional limitations – the format of its creation remains the same, but the character “invests” an extra part of themselves into the magic, weakening themselves to create something of extraordinary power. Such a character loses one lethal level from their health wheel, hindering their health and constitution. Additional levels can be subtracted at the Gamemaster’s discretion, depending on the context of the situation. These levels are not permanently lost, and usually are recovered after a year, provided the character does not sacrifice additional levels to continue creating objects of unusual power.

The object itself does not gain any supernatural durability for being a charm; it can be broken just as easily as its mundane counterpart.

Charms:

Charms are items that have a spell of minor effect stored within them. Whoever carries the charm gains the benefits of the spell. Most often these objects take the form of jewelry, an article of clothing, medicine pouches, figurines or precious and semi-precious stones.

A charm grants a minor increase to a fixed secondary stat, and applies that bonus only if the possessing character already has at least one point of their own in that stat – it enhances what’s there; it does not gift what isn’t. The bonus is a static +1, and creating lesser charms more powerful than that is incredibly difficult. The secondary stat to be enhanced is determined by the creator of the charm at the time of the actual spellbinding, but can be any one of the ten secondary’s. Multiple charms can be worn, but they do not “stack”, which is to say that a single stat cannot be boosted by multiple charms. A character could, however, carry several charms, each increasing a different secondary.

Potions:

Potions are liquid or semi-liquid compounds that are ingested (usually orally, but not always) by the intended recipient of the magic. Their effects can last a variable amount of time, but usually not more than a few days, at the very most. Their magical benefits are often stronger and more flexible than those provided by charms, but there is almost always a side effect of equal magnitude.

The most common form of these draughts are healing potions, or some form of curative medicine. Still others can provide a burst to a secondary stat in the same way as a charm (with a slightly larger bonus), instill visions of spirits or things to come, and most famously, inspire amorous emotions.

Healing potions rarely have the power to mend lethal wounds entirely, but can quickly restore non-lethal levels on a character's health. A single potion can restore three levels of nonlethal health, or one level of lethal health. Versions which are meant to slow the processes of disease and poison are usually more effective, and quite adept in keeping an otherwise doomed subject alive until a proper cure can be found. Still other versions can manage pain, even temporarily eliminate it entirely.

“Love potions” do exist, but they do not typically draw members of the opposite sex to the character, but enhance their skills in seduction.

Still other “potions” are aromatics, taking the form of incense or smoked plant material. These are much more commonly used for individuals attempting to undergo a vision quest, or gain the favor of spirits. Their effects over spirits can be easily measured by lowering the difficulty of social checks with said kami. Vision quests or spirit journeys are much less tangibly demarcated, and the effects are best left to the Gamemaster, and often can be the centerpiece of a session, or a great jumping off point for an entire story.

Enhancement medicines do exist, and provide boosts to secondary stats that are about three times strong than charms, but only last about a day. In the same way as charms, multiple potions can be taken for different stats, but the effects do not “stack”. Additionally, as a side effect, after the potion has run its course, the character suffers what he gained as a bonus in reverse, subtracting the same amount from their stat for the following full day and night.

Scrolls:

Similar to Origami, scrolls tap into the inherent magic of paper, but add to it the mysticism of the ancient and often forgotten symbols and words of power. Unlike charms or potions, scrolls do not directly enhance or detract from stats. Instead, they issue a command, a sort of supernatural proclamation, pulling the strings on a hidden world of magic to affect an outcome on reality. These commands can be subtle or overt, and the strength of their direction is dependent on the level of investment at the time of their creation. Basic versions can be compelling, but are not irresistible, and a resisted check of Mental (+ Focus) can be made by any character attempting to overcome the magic. Enhanced scrolls can make such resistances

nearly impossible, or instead increase the effects of the magic itself for truly impressive outcomes.

The magic of scrolls is by far the most esoteric and the least concrete of all the Spellbindings. These “commands” of reality can stretch quite widely; they can bar entrance or egress through a specific door, compel a crowd to gather around the character, ban anyone of a certain name to carry or pick up a weapon, encourage local flora to grow rapidly, or local fauna to become irresponsibly ravenous.

The context of the desired affect must be carefully considered by the Gamemaster, and they should keep a few things in mind when weighing the desires of their players. The command must be within the power of the subject to obey. People cannot be commanded to fly, gravity cannot be commanded to fail, time cannot be commanded to reverse, animals cannot be commanded to transform into a completely different species, and so on. Commands can also not change the basic nature of their subject; a loyal soldier will not suddenly mutiny, an upbeat person will not commit suicide, a wolf will not try and eat itself. Lastly, while people, kami, plants, animals and basic elements (even urban elements) can be commanded, massive forces of nature ought to be left out of the command’s jurisdiction. Forces that govern physics, atomic structure or geologic powers are too vast to be ordered about by a magical piece of paper.

Another version of “scrolls” has less to do with the paper, and focuses on the power of the written word. Kanji and other mystic symbols are commonly used for soothsaying – the casting of bones, the reading of tea leaves, or the laying of cards, all methods used to attempt to divine the future. While possible through the use of Spellbinding, and downright common, the success of these attempts is often clouded with fudge and cryptic responses from the universe, and should be creatively contrived by the Gamemaster.

Spirited Magic

Shinobi aren't the only one's slinging magic around; Demons, Kami, and Dim – these are all variations of spirits in Riku, and all have magic of their own. Because these characters tend to be NPC's, the system that governs their mystical powers is much more simplified than magic for player characters. Each spirit has a list of powers; some of this magic is described in other sections, such as for Kami, while others are only hinted at. In this section we'll talk a bit about what magic feats spirits are capable of, and how they're able to accomplish their spells.

In general, all spirits benefit from worship; simply put, this is the respect, fear and adulation gained from human followers who worship them as gods. In the old times, it was the Kami that were worshiped, and around which great religions were built. But as time moved on, so did the popularity of other faiths, and today it is the demons of the 8 Fold Paths that are revered and worshiped. Both types of spirits draw enormous strength and power from their status as deities, although not *all* spirits do. Dim, as ghosts, aren't typically worshiped (though they could be, technically). For them, they gain power and energy from simply being remembered, either by loved ones, or in the case of famous ghosts, by those who choose to remember them in a romanticized fashion.

For the humans who worship either Demons or Kami, there are benefits from doing so, as well. Most people find that the religion itself offers its own validations on its own merits, and don't engage in worship for the sheer transactional benefits. However for those with a more direct connection to their gods, such as Shinobi who practice Kami Worship, or cultists of Loha Prasat, devotion provides very tangible and practical benefits.

For spirits and their worshipers, this is where the rubber meets the road. The mechanic that governs the power of a spirit in the game of blood is simple – each worshiper that prays or makes offerings to a particular god provides that spirit with one “worship” point. A worshiper can only provide their god with one such point a day, no matter how reverent they are. So a thousand people worshiping at any given temple of Loha Prasat provides the respective Demon with a thousand “worship” points per day. For Dim, the mechanic is basically the same, save that their points come from acts of remembrance, not reverence.

So what exactly can spirits do with all this power they seem to accumulate? That is a detail largely left up to the imagination of Gamemasters. There's an endless list of powers, spells and abilities that spirits can potentially possess. This section provides Gamemasters and

players with hints and some of the broad strokes about the sorts of powers individual spirits may wield, but the exact nature of such abilities and their limitations are left to the discretion of Gamemasters. After all, spirits are ethereal creatures, and should not be hampered or limited by a narrow list of spells. In general, each Demon or Kami follows a rough guideline for the forces of the universe it represents, and such guidelines should provide players with enough foundation to flesh out spirits on their own.

For powerful, godlike spirits, the sky is the limit for what their powers can accomplish. However, they must maintain the loyalty of their followers, lest they lose their meal ticket, as it were, and so must not take any action that would dissuade people from continuing to worship them. Gods must, in fact, also be shrewd politicians.

Minor spirits, however, which have a much more limited supply of energy, and most likely are gifted their worship points from their court or demonic host as an allowance. Because of this, the point cost of their powers is much more important, and the cost of their powers must be more carefully considered by their creator. While gods can hurl magic about on a whim, their spiritual servants must conserve their powers for when they're most needed or effective. Lesser spirits may indeed have one or two spectacular powers, such as hurling lightning bolts or possessing a living body, but more likely have a series of more subtle abilities with much lower point costs.

Kami

For the ancient Kami, who were once heavily worshiped by the population of the old world, their historical relationship with mankind means that they've stored up vast caches of energy, or worship points, over many generations. However in modern times, very few people still worship them outside Shinobi culture. This means that although they hold onto a horde of power, they must regulate its use carefully, since there is so little incoming energy to replace whatever they expend.

Kami have another advantage that proves to be problematic in the modern age. Any Kami is capable of expending some of its points to create a brand new Kami that will serve in the parent-spirit's court. Although the new spirit is a faithful and loyal servant, it's very creation depletes the host, and with only so much worship to go around, it's also "another mouth to feed", so to speak.

Greater detail on the types and sorts of Kami that exist and are most common or popular can be found in their own section in the Magic chapter.

Demons

The Demons of the 8 Fold Paths are the modern gods of the day, each basking in the worship of hundreds or thousands of praying supplicants each day. However, in a historical context, this is a more recent trend of activity. While the Kami have had decades and centuries to accumulate power, the Demons are much younger, and their success as a religion only dates back less than a century. Still, the daily intake of worship is quite high, and their stocks of power are piled deep.

Cultists who worship the demons directly, as opposed to their godly facades, often gain blessing and favors from the dark lords, similar to the gifts given to Shinobi by Kami. However Demons are cruel and selfish creatures, and their blessings always come with a steep and twisted price. The section on the Demons themselves reveals greater detail about the scope of their abilities and the sorts of favors they tend to encourage.

Like Kami, Demons are able to create their own servants from their well of energy – however these creations are not exactly spirits. Where Kami create slightly lesser Kami, Demons create monsters, known as *guaiwu*. These horrifying creatures are the stuff of nightmares, and are real flesh and bone. However, they are aberrations of the natural order, and cannot exist for long in the material world. The size, strength, and abilities of these monsters, both physical and magical, are dependent on the strength of the Demon that created them, and how much energy was invested into their creation. Likewise, how long these creatures can last in the physical world is also determined by the investment of worship points – a typical *guaiwu* may consume as much as a hundred points per day. As a result, these monsters are short lived in this world, and are only constructed as need dictates.

Dim

Unlike Kami and Demons, Dim are not worshiped as gods – a rare few leave a famous legacy, and are well remembered by the population. Others are lucky if even a few family members come to visit their grave once a year. But whether this remembrance is a trickle or a gush, it is the stuff that feeds the very essence of ghosts. A Dim that is remembered by no one quickly fades away into nothingness, or ends up enslaved by a necromancer able to feed it just enough remembrance to keep it around for his own ends.

Famous Dim are often folk heroes or those enshrined by the established powers that be, and while are remembered by many, are often not remembered accurately. They are seen as portraits and caricatures of their living selves, and sometimes forget what they used to really be like, or reversely, cannot forgive their hero-worshippers for failing to remember them properly.

In either case, they are much more powerful than most Dim, and can affect the world of the living and its inhabitants in ways appropriate to the sort of character they once were. The Dim of a war hero may be able to inspire the living to great deeds and feats of courage, or cause weapons to either fail or operate well beyond their mechanical abilities. The Dim of a great teacher may cause a thirst for learning in the students of their former school, and produce great minds for the future.

The vast majority of Dim, however, are not so well remembered. They are lucky if their loved ones are able to provide them with more than a few points a month, or even in a year, and their powers tend to be weak, or at least subtle. They may cause the temperature to drop in a room, be heard by the living as a faint whisper, or manage to draw a few characters in the dust. Some Dim, though, are old enough and remembered enough to have a bit more power, and may exact some of the more dramatic abilities attributed to ghosts, such as telekinesis, possession, or the creation of illusions or dream intervention.

A Tale of Two Demons

Observant players will notice that in this game there are two sorts of demons – Oni, and the Demons of the 8 Fold Paths. So why the distinction and what's the difference? It's simple – the eight Demons who make up the 8 Fold Paths are in fact Oni, but they are younger than the old gods, and struck out on their own, leaving the proper courts of the Kami behind. Proper Oni of the courts represent the necessity of evil, for without it, good cannot exist. Demons of the day's religion are rogue elements who have splintered away to form their own powerful faction. As one might hazard the guess, the two DO NOT get along.

As for how and why the Eight left the courts, that is a story for another time.

Psychological Magic

The power of magic and spellcraft is not always based in reality. The power of belief is equally strong, and can be equally effective. A Shinobi does not need to apply a spell of Possession in order for their target to believe they are possessed. One need only to prey upon a victim's willingness to believe that what is happening to them is a supernatural act, as opposed to a skillful illusion, self-fulfilling prophecy, or subconscious suggestion.

The truth is that there are more charlatans than magicians. The world shows no shortage of mediums, psychics, witch doctors and healers whose only real power is that they can convince others that they indeed have any power at all.

A shrewd Gamemaster will confront his or her players with a myriad of supernatural situations, with no clear distinction between what is real and what is imagined. A cunning player knows when to conserve the energy and resources of their character, and rely on cold reading and psychological manipulation.

The most common forms of psychology masquerading as magic are curses, hypnotism, cold reading and sleight of hand. All of these skills can be extremely useful, but likewise they all rely on the power of the mind, not the spirit.

In hypnotism, a character implants a verbal suggestion into the subconscious mind of the recipient. Most often this suggestion is placed while the target is in a state of trance or meditation, even sleep. These commands work best when the subject believes that they are in a dream state – if they think they're only dreaming, they're much more likely to act in ways they normally would never consider. However core elements of the mind present certain insurmountable obstacles. Chiefly, a person's will to live and sense of self-preservation will override any command to the contrary. Through hypnotism, a person can relive past memories, act out in bizarre or clownish ways, or overcome limitations imposed by their own mind. However, such a suggestion cannot make a person kill or hurt themselves, or act contrary to deep emotional bonds. A spouse cannot be made to divorce their true love; someone who isn't mentally ill can't be made to commit suicide or self-inflict serious wounds.

Curses may be the most ancient form of psychology of all time. The key is to put on a show – the one inflicting the curse must truly terrify their victim, scaring them into believing that a horrible fate is in store for them. Pseudo-rituals involving elaborate alters and bloody sacrifices are the most common, as are dramatically enacted incantations, and of course, dreaded pictograms that foretell of doom. Once sufficiently frightened, the victim’s mind will eventually begin to manifest the symptoms of the “curse”. Psychosomatic conjuring’s of illness, nausea, migraines, rashes, hair loss, weight gain or loss, all come and go as the victim believes they will in the deep recesses of their mind, alleviated only by appeasing the one who laid the curse in the first place. Truly, there’s almost no end to what the human mind can imagine is real, and what the subconscious can make real for the body. To this end, not only curses can be laid, but “healing” as well. Many faith healers are quite successful merely by encouraging the mind to overcome its own limitations.

“Cold reading” is the most widely used technique among those disguising themselves as mediums or psychics. The process can take quite some time to master, but essentially a person simply asks vague questions, and uses the supplied answers to imply that they have answers they couldn’t have possibly known, except via the supernatural. For example, a “medium” speaking to a client/mark might ask or say, “You’ve recently lost someone”

“Yes, that’s right”

“And their name started with a ‘p’, or a ‘j’?”

“Papa! I lost my papa!”

It takes time and skill to be able to learn what questions to ask which type of person, but with effort and study, the faux-psychic can develop the knack for being able to guess what a given person wants to hear or is most likely to respond with. A lone person who looks sad might have gone through a change in their relationship or family; an elderly person is likely to have lost a peer by sheer statistics; and so on.

Sleight of hand may be the only variation of false magic that does not rely as much on psychology, but dexterity – though distraction and misdirection play an important role. Sleight of hand, sometimes called legerdemain, is the skill of concealing and revealing objects on one’s person in such a way as to make them seem to disappear, reappear, or materialize from “nowhere”. The shell game, the coin behind the ear, the rabbit in the hat, and countless card tricks are only the beginning. All are great ways to make some quick and easy money, or foil nosey onlookers. Being able to hide an important object in the palm of your hand, in “plain sight”, while constables are searching your person, can be an extremely useful skill.

The stats required for any of these skills and the difficulty of their checks is all up to the Gamemaster. There need not be a rigid system in place to oversee their mechanics – their applications are as broad and varied as the intellects of the players making use of them, or trying to see through them. Having players make certain formulaic checks can too easily reveal whether an event is or is not magic, while falsely having to make familiar checks may convince individuals something is what it isn't. This is a game after all, and the fun is in the deception.



CHAPTER FOUR

A Guide for Gamemasters

Telling Tales - How to tell a Story
in “**Blood: Path of the Shinobi**”

Don't be scared.
Don't be intimidated.
Don't be off-put.
BE UNDAUNTED!

Every great game begins with the same great obstacle – and that obstacle is *running that great game*. It can be a challenge, but in every group of gamers there's always one individual with the imagination and vision to bring a story to life and bring his or her friends along for one hell of a ride! That individual is you, right?

In **Blood**, the one in charge of creating the story and delivering it to the players during the course of a session is called the **Gamemaster**. It's a fun job, but it's a job that comes with a lot of responsibilities. These can sometimes seem overwhelming, especially to folks new to the system, or those new to tabletop gaming altogether. But take our advice – everyone should try their hand at running a game. The rewards that come from entertaining your friends with a bold and imaginative story, or a rapid, action-packed session, are most gratifying.

Remember, above all else, and when all else fails, *have fun*. Having fun is more important than being right or “winning”, especially in a social game like **Blood**. If you're enjoying the hell out of the session, so too will your players, as long as you're having fun with them, and not at their expense.

Creating a Story 101

If this is your first time running a roleplaying game, you're probably full of questions on just what to do first. If you've already got a few campaigns under your belt, you're probably ready to skip ahead of this section and brush up on some of the other finer points in this chapter.

There are innumerable ways to start a story for your game, but the best way is to ask a few simple questions. Sit down with a notebook or at your preferred device and actually write down these questions, and every other question you can think to ask, and literally start trying to answer them. The more you think through your story, the stronger it will be. So the more detail you can give in your answers to these questions, the better off your game will be.

Where is my game set?

Your game can take place anywhere in Riku, but Riku is a big place, so it's best to start by narrowing down the field. Do you want this to be an urban story, or one set in the countryside? Do you want to stick to a limited location, like a city, or even a single building, or will there be travel involved? Once you choose a general location, it's also easier to look at that location and determine just what is there to hang your story on.

Who's my cast of characters?

Make sure of one of two things – either your story is right for your player's characters, or your characters are right for your story. A mismatch of who's in the game and what they can do, versus what the characters are expected to do, or what they need to do to succeed, can be the death knell for any tale. If you want to run a violent, bloody campaign of revenge, make sure the characters in the story can mechanically handle that much combat – otherwise it might be a very short game. Likewise, if you want to run a “pickle jar” session, where the characters are trapped in a small space and have to figure a way out, a group of combat monsters will not only be wasted, but maybe unable to ever escape their predicament.

What's the objective of my story?

At the end of the day, a very critical element of your story is the *point* of your story. What is the group trying to accomplish, and how long will it take them to accomplish this goal? Is the goal something concrete, like rescuing a group of hostages or prisoners? Or is it wider in scope and harder to define a solution towards, like ending poverty in a single village, or raising an army from the dregs of society? Not only does your story need an objective, you must consider how simple or complex that object should be, and very importantly, that it's an objective your players will enjoy pursuing.

What are the important details?

Once you figure out what you want the objective to be, you must also carefully detail how your players can accomplish that goal. What's the "win" condition? You need to figure out ahead of time what sort of questions your players will ask about the situation they're in, and then have reasonable answers for them. This in turn then extends to other questions and complications your players may run into, such as the resources available to them, other nonplayer characters that they may encounter, and any other circumstance you could consider having a reasonable possibility of arising.

Who's the bad guy?

Every story needs an antagonist – someone, or someone's, or something, must be in opposition to the group and opposes their progress towards their goal. Who or what is that thing? What tactics will they use to stop the group? What resources or information do they have at hand? What is their methodology, and what level of threat can they pose?

Also, consider that the antagonist may not be the literal "bad guy". Shinobi may be freedom fighters, but that doesn't mean they're always altruistic. Is the party itself the villains in the story? Is this a game about the bad guys succeeding? It's a valid question to ask yourself or your group.

Know Your Audience

At its heart, being a Gamemaster is a little like being a performer, and any performer worth their salt will tell you that the most important thing to remember is to *know your audience*. For the Gamemaster, that means knowing a bit about the group you're playing with. You might be playing with friends you've known for years, or a group of like-minded roleplayers randomly assembled at a game shop. In either or any case, a good Gamemaster will take some

time to talk to their players, and gauge a few elements before starting their game – often times, the earlier you complete this little task, the better.

The most important thing is to remember that you are not the audience – you’re the performer. Sometimes it’s easy for a Gamemaster to build a world or story entirely around their own likes and dislikes, but if your group of players doesn’t share those same aesthetics, then the game becomes about pleasing the Gamemaster, and not providing very much for the players.

Put the players first.

It sounds simple, even overtly obvious, but be sure to **make everyone comfortable, and avoid making them uncomfortable**. This is the heart of “knowing your audience”, and makes covering your bases with new faces at the table all the more important. No one wants to sit at a table feeling off-put or out-of-sorts. Keep off-color jokes or remarks to yourself. As a rule of thumb, keep religion and politics off the table, too, except the fictional kind. If you wouldn’t say something in front of your sweet, kindly *nai nai*, don’t say it in front of new gaming-buddies.

Set a rating for your game. Again, this usually requires knowing who you’ll be playing with, but also reflects your own sensibilities. Setting a “movie rating” to your games before the session starts is a good way to set the tone in a universal way. If you say your game that day is going to be “G”, “PG”, or “R”, pretty much everyone knows what that means and what to expect, and more importantly, how to conduct themselves.

Setting a Theme

Whether you’re running an epic campaign, or a lazy-afternoon one-shot session, having an overall theme for your game is a huge boon. Not only will it help to guide you and keep your story consistent, but picking the right theme for the right group of players means that those players will get the most enjoyment out of the game.

First-time Gamemasters will likely want to stick with a single, overall theme, just to get their feet wet, but more experienced Gamemasters can mix and match to the delight of their devious minds. The following is a short list of possible themes, and is by **NO MEANS EXHAUSTIVE**. You are limited only by your own imagination, and nothing else.

Adventure: Your game centers around a fast-paced objective, where the story hurries the party along and keeps the plot moving. There's not much time to stop and smell the roses, because time is of the essence, and there is a feeling that something bright and amazing is just ahead of you, and something dark and destructive is just behind you.

Dungeon Crawl: This is the classic tabletop game scenario. Here, story is put on a backburner in favor of a more "board game" type of feel. In these sessions a Gamemaster often maps out on paper a large enclosed space, like a cave, building, or literal dungeon, and marks traps and encounters with antagonists at different points on the map. The objective is typically very concrete, like breaking into a vault or rescuing a hostage, and the game ends when that objective is met.

Hack 'n Slash: If the dungeon crawl is too concrete, but your group still craves near-mindless violence, the hack 'n slash route may be for you and yours. These stories center around combat, and feature it repeatedly as the session's mainstay. There's often a loose story to guide the players, but it's mostly about encountering hordes of enemies that need to be cut down with brute force.

Mystery/Suspense: These are intellectual games, where the plot of the story is king, and excessive action or adventure takes a back seat. In these games the Gamemaster provides the players with a problem, and that problem requires a solution, and it's up to the players to come to that conclusion. The dice rarely do the talking in these games, and it falls on the group to figure out real answers. This is often accompanied by a pervasive sense of dread and paranoia, as the best mysteries include characters who each have secrets to keep hidden, and a story that is constantly trying to forcibly unveil that information against their will. These kinds of stories usually make much better campaigns lasting multiple sessions, than they do short-lived sessions.

Puzzle Solving: If your players are the sort who enjoy thinking through their problems and coming to specific, concrete solutions, than a puzzle solving game might be up your ally. Puzzles are unlike mysteries, because a mystery is about the unknown, while a puzzle is about a question or problem, and that question has one single, definitive answer. Like a math problem or a riddle, there's only one solution to a puzzle – these make great games for subterranean temples, computer hacking a corp, or placating the spirits.

Political: Political stories are a combination of social elements and mystery. They revolve around plot points like "who knows what, and when did they know it", making *intrigue* the

most key component. They can be challenging, because the story depends on characters being able to sort through fact and fiction, and that means the Gamemaster needs to be a good liar – or rather, able to play non-player characters who are good liars.

Watching the Clock

Time is an important factor in any game. The hours can get away from you when you get wrapped up in a good session. There are some helpful tips to assist you in managing your time, both in the short term and long term of the game.

Is this a one-shot story for a few hours, or is it a lengthy campaign that goes on for weeks, or is it even a regular game that goes for months or years? Knowing upfront how long your story is going to take to resolve itself is very helpful for you as a Gamemaster to control the pace of the session, and for your players so they know what to expect session-to-session.

One of the best mechanics to control how fast or slow your game runs is a simple one. When you construct your story, set a beginning, middle and end for each session. It's just that easy. A definitive starting point means you can start your characters wherever and whenever you want them, either skipping over periods of preparation or that are explanative, or allowing players to play through the set up. A middle point means you have a half-way marker to track the pace of the story from. If the story is dragging you can skip ahead to that point, or rush the players to it. If it's going too fast and you've passed that point too soon, you can always toss in some filler to slow down the characters with. Of course, having a definitive ending means you always have a guiding star to steer towards through the course of the story, and as a Gamemaster, you should always be directing your group towards that end.

Setting limits on how long individual sessions will run is also a good idea. Sitting in one place or position for long periods of time isn't very smart – it's bad for you and your players both physically and mentally. Make sure your group isn't too cooped up, is moving around, and taking breaks as necessary. Those breaks for eating, drinking or just getting air can make a big difference in helping players to digest the story as it rolls along, and think through what their characters are doing or about to do.

What time limits work for you and your group is a matter for individuals to decide, but for first-timers, four to five hours is usually a good ballpark figure for how long a session of “medium length” might run. When you account for breaks, table chatter, and just socializing, it's not surprising then to learn why so many gamers make a day of roleplaying. As a

Gamemaster, it's always good to keep your eye on the time for just this reason. As we've already said, time can get away from you.

A very good tip for not only **Blood**, but any game at all, is to make sure your game ends before your players get bored. If a single session just goes on and on and the end is a long ways from sight, your group is less likely to want to continue playing through your story, because the last thing they'll remember is being bored. So if your story is going longer than expected, be aware of the pace and the clock, and find a good point to take a break, or end the session, and pick up the story on another date. For this reason, ending your session at a point of suspense, or with an unknown outcome, is always a good idea, because it gives your players something concrete to look forward to, think about, and get excited over the outcome. Cliffhangers are a Gamemaster's best friend. That and notebooks.

Setting the Mood

Roleplaying is a strange and wonderful concept. You're inhabiting the skin of someone or something completely different from yourself, in a completely different world. It's a game of imagination, but for those new to the experience, it can be a self-conscious event. Making sure you understand everyone's level of comfort with the scenario is a big part of being the Gamemaster. You sort of have to play party host, making sure all your player's gaming needs are seen to. Talk to everyone in your group one on one before the session, and get a report with them, if you don't have one already. Break the ice, if there is any ice, and it will pay dividends in the level of trust your players will have for you through the course of the game.

A particularly effective way to set the stage and the mood for a game is a good playlist of music. Don't let the music in the room become the focal point or be overpowering (unless for story purposes, it's supposed to be), but having the right song play at the right moment in the story can really pick up the intensity and level of enjoyment for you and your players.

For Gamemasters' Eyes Only

Sample Stories

The March

The March is a larger-scale scenario, better suited for a group that's looking for a longer running game lasting multiple sessions. There are many devices and plot twists available to clever Gamemasters willing and able to take advantage of a turbulent scenario of politics and powerful personal beliefs.

Scene:

Deep within the southern, marshy acres of the Verdant Expanse, tucked away inside a hollow of virgin fiefs, is the Fief of Hardlots. Ruled by the Mei family, the territory was originally established as a rice plantation, but the land proved too tough to tame. The Mei's used brutal methods and forced labor to clear and drain the land, managing to construct an impressive palatial pagoda, and a handful of outbuildings, ringed by a modest stone wall complete with a central guard gate. The family's agricultural ambitions were slowly dashed over the generations, though, as sustainable crops proved impossible to cultivate in the primeval swamp that constantly pressed up against the fief's walls.

As the generations passed, the Mei's gave up on their plantation of slaves, which each successive generation of daimyo granting more and more freedoms to their servants, and in their isolation, becoming more and more spiritual, hermetic, and enlightened. The last daimyo, the incredibly aged Mei Wu, with no children and no successors, signed a pact with her servants that after her death, their freedom would be granted. Mei Wu was quite young when she made this promise, and led a life making good on her word, transforming the fief into a loose monastery, isolated in the dark southern marshes.

In the story "the March", today is the day of Mei Wu's death – a solemn and celebrated occasion for the now free peasant slaves of Hardlots. The granddame was said to have passed away in her sleep, and the signed pact of her word of honor hangs framed in the main hall of the pagoda.

The newly freed farmer-monks of Hardlots now have a whole series of choices they face. There's a funeral to plan and a beloved leader to mourn. At the same time, new leadership must be chosen, and a new order must be established for the Fief.

Objective:

The players in this game begin as an established collective, their characters already knowing one another and work cohesively together. Their reason for being in the territory could be of any number, and should be decided by the Gamemaster in advance. Are they there to guide and uplift the peasants into independence, or seize the opportunity to control a fief of their own? Answering this question will determine exactly what the group's objective truly is.

Of course, the peasants have an objective of their own. Though they have both a funeral to host and new leaders to choose, they are also emboldened by their newly found freedom, and intend to evangelize the politics of their dear departed leader. There's talk of a march – a march of the freed slaves of Hardlots, across the dense wilderness, to the fiefs beyond, where they hope their presence and their story will inspire peasants to demand their liberty, and daimyos to grant it.

Obstacles:

The Funeral – The first major scene of the game is the evening after Mei's death, at her own funeral. Here the peasants gather to pay their respects, but also to begin courting positions of leadership. Many of the peasants feel that whoever the crowd turns to for guidance during the funeral will be Hardlots' next leader. *A Gamemaster should build a small handful of NPC peasants attempting to curry favor from their people, and give each one their own motivation and style.*

In addition to the group of Shinobi characters, there is another stranger at the funeral – the son of the closest daimyo, Lu Bei. Bei claims he is there to pay his respects, and that the two families have always been close, but older members of the fief don't seem to recall any sort of relationship shared between the two. *Bei's presence can be interpreted by a Gamemaster in a couple ways. The most obvious choice is that he is there to seize leadership of the fief, perhaps by pledging considerable resources to improving the monastery, or perhaps because he has a group of fighting men waiting in the marsh lands for the command to attack. The least obvious choice is that despite appearances, Bei is telling the truth, and his family does support giving peasants their freedom. This instance is appropriate for a game in which the characters are attempting to take the monastery for themselves, and their opposition is a young, charismatic and altruistic nobleman.*

Choosing Leadership – The day after the funeral is a day for the people to put aside their grief and make the hard choice of who will lead them now. *If Bei is going to make a political or military move, now's the time he would do so. If the Shinobi group is going to do the same, or back a candidate of their choosing, today is the day they need to make sure that candidate is met with overwhelming approval.*

This day can go any number of ways – it might be a bloody massacre, with soldiers driving frightened survivors out into the swamps; or it might be a peaceful transition rife with political intrigue, driven by the aspirations of carefully crafted and motivated NPC's. How the characters act and react, and the choices they make to further their own agenda determines the final leg of the scenario, the march itself.

The March – There are a few different ways this march can begin.

If there is a violent invasion or insurrection during which refugees fled into the wilds, it falls to the group to find the survivors and lead them to safety. This could mean launching a counter assault to take back the monastery, or it could mean a survival trek through the swamps, in hopes of finding a safe harbor, be it another fief, or a nearby virgin fief they may squat in secret in.

If politics prevail, the chosen leadership will have the biggest impact on the march. A totalitarian leader may try to quash the march, and it's up to the group to see that his mind is changed or deposed. However, if it is the group who are the underminers of freedom, they may need to figure out a way to sabotage the march themselves.

Depending on which way the wind blows, the march itself is either an odyssey of survival, or a display of optimism and conviction. If the peasants are scattered to the wilds, then there are the dangers of the marshes to face, including exposure, disease, poisonous animals and insects, predatory swamp creatures, perhaps even deranged hermits. All of which need to be overcome or avoided to bring the peasants to safety – safety that the party must engineer. Reversely, if the march goes forward as planned, as a demonstration of freedoms-for-all, there's the matter of what the neighboring daimyos will do in response. Will they send a force to attack them on the road, or have a trap waiting for them at the fief when they arrive? Can the leaders or the Shinobi themselves somehow convince them the errors of their ways, and spread the freedom found at Hardlots?

Conclusions:

This scenario ends when the party meets its established objective. Either the monastery is saved from the clutches of its neighbors, or delivered to the clutches of the group.

Zoomania

Zoomania is an exciting, action-based scenario, with lots of potential to be balanced out with elements of mysticism, clever problem-solving, and some good-old-fashioned ghost busting. Though this scene of mayhem at the zoo can be chalk full of combat opportunities, there are also always ways to find non-violent solutions to the obstacles at hand, depending on how a Gamemaster wants their story to go.

Scene:

Not far from Loha Prasat, snugly nested in the rolling foothills of the Kung-lei mountains, crisscrossed with a dozen streams and brooks flowing like ribbons of crystal, is the temple-village of Emerald Gates. The town is small, and dedicates itself wholeheartedly to the pursuit of the 8 Fold Paths. It is made popular in the region for two reasons – first, the town itself is surrounded by an impressive acreage, one of modern Riku’s very few zoological gardens. All manner of animal and critter from across the land can be found here, some run wild, like peacocks and monkeys, while others are safely locked within enclosures. Second, and much more somberly, while the town is ringed by the gardens, the gardens are ringed by the largest cemetery in the Kung-lei mountains. There are miles of gravemarkers in every direction beyond the gardens, and it is said that the spirits of the ancestors protect the town, because the town nurtures the gardens, and the gardens honor the ancestors. At least, that’s the tale.

The Gamemaster will find it useful to roughly map out the town, as well as the layout of the zoo. Note any shops, merchants, or non player characters that may be useful or important to the task at hand, and leave as many creative solutions and clues for the players as you can manage.

Today in Emerald Gates, though, is a dark day. Quite literally. The normally clear sky, swept clean by persistent winds from the mountains, is now dark, pregnant with storm heads, and the air is stiff and stagnant. The waters in the streams run low and muddy, and everyone in town seems to be nervous and on-edge. This is when the screaming begins. Shrieks of terror and panic shoot through the town’s central square, echoing from all over the zoo grounds.

Something is horribly wrong. The eyes of the animals have become wide and milky white; their claws are drawn and their teeth are bared. They savagely assault the visitors, tearing them apart where they are able. Their calls and cries are rich with malevolent voices from beyond, and their auras radiate with a palpable dark energy. This is the work of the Dim, and these are signs of murderous possession – on a scale never before witnessed in Riku.

Objectives:

Perhaps the characters in this scenario already know one another, or perhaps they are all simply traveling through Emerald Gates on separate business. But now, today, there is an overwhelming common enemy, and whether strangers or an established group, the Shinobi must rise to the occasion.

The player group must decide what it is they intend to do about all of this. If their only concern is themselves, then the game becomes one of survival-horror, as the party struggles to escape the gardens of death. If they are more altruistic, they must devise a way to save as many innocents as they can, and get to the root of the evil at work.

Obstacles:

The greatest threat to the party isn't a complex web of plot lines and intrigue – it's the sheer volume of bloodshed and panic they are surrounded by in the zoo. Everywhere animals are going mad, swelling up with dark and demonic energy, and savagely assaulting anyone they can reach. They display problem solving skills of their own, using deception to lure people into ambushes, or freeing themselves from their cages – their intelligence seems to be nearly human. Some animals also show special abilities, able to float or levitate, hypnotically control the minds of humans, or pass through solid objects. Whether for themselves or anyone they can save, the group must first establish a refuge from the gore and madness. *Gamemasters should note the size, strength, and special abilities of as many of the animal-monsters they care to use.*

Once the characters find a place to hide and catch their breath, the Gamemaster should introduce an explanatory NPC. Whether it's a temple priest, a watchman from the cemetery, or even one of the characters themselves with special knowledge. Whoever it is, this character can explain what's happening and advance the story – malevolent Dim have risen up from the cemetery and are inhabiting the animals through violent possession.

The characters must then be given some idea about what to do or how to stop it. If their only goal is to flee and escape with their lives, then the objective is simple. However, if they have a shred of courage, then the solution must be established. The same mechanic or character the Gamemaster uses for exposition can also point them in the right direction.

Cultists from one of the Paths not particularly popular in Emerald Gates were seen performing unusual rituals at the temples in the heart of town. This leads to the obvious conclusion that a rival sect are performing a mass act of necromancy to drive the ghosts of the ancestors mad, and attack the town they love.

This in turn leads the characters to their next move.

They may choose to fight the possessed animals, slaughtering as many as they can (though a particularly cruel Gamemaster may give the Dim the power to resurrect the corpses as undead).

They may choose to sneak and avoid confrontation, knowing the animals are not in control of themselves, and not wanting to further dishonor the ghosts by slaughtering their beloved garden residents.

The party may attempt to free the Dim from the cultist's spell, currying ghostly allies who may further aid them. The Gamemaster should certainly allow this valiant effort, but restrict it to individual encounters, lest the horror and danger be needlessly invalidated.

Whatever choice they make, the party (provided they are not running scarred), must make their way through the garden to the center of town, and disrupt the cultists ritual and break their spell. The Gamemaster ought to rely on their map of the zoo's gardens to provide antagonist animals, each one having their own flavor of danger, and way to be defeated or circumvented.

The cultists in town should provide their own danger, and be prepared for the eventuality of intervention. The demon-worshippers might set traps, or have hired mercenaries to protect them while they enact their spell. They may even have one or several demonically-created monsters to do their bidding.

Conclusion:

The conclusion to the game is when the spell over the gardens is broken. This could be as simple as killing all the cultists, or it could require something more specific. This might be a counter-ritual; or a specific ingredient or condition, such as a new-born lion must be birthed on the altar of the spell. Completing this scenario as heroes, saving as many as possible and restoring the natural order, can yield friends and rewards for the group, if part of an on-going campaign. Gamemasters should be crafty when determining who such allies may turn out to be – maybe a new animal companion, or a grateful family of Dim, or perhaps a cultist from another Path, eager to aid the enemy-of-their-enemy.

Death Rides a Garbage Truck

For those groups who are less interested in adventure and more keen on body counts, this scenario is for them. “Death Rides a Garbage Truck” is a full-on hack-and-slash game for players with an insatiable bloodlust.

Scene:

On the cold streets of Zaibatsu, ground-level offers little in the way of hope for the average citizen. Crime is more than rampant, its virtually the law of the land. All that stands up to an ever rising tide of anarchy and destruction are the unfathomably brave men and women who took the oath of the City Sanitation Department to rid the ground level streets and gutters of trash and refuse – both literal and figurative.

Every morning, every day of the year, the CSD sets out teams of heavily armed convoys on their patrol routes, collecting garbage and confronting those who dare to break the peace. Their multi-truck tanks form veritable trains, with sections dedicated to common trash, recyclables, hazardous materials, human incarcerations, ammo dumps and heavy weapons hard points. Not only are the trucks slathered in plate armor and bristling with massive weapon systems, trashmen themselves are trained combatants, equipped with ballistic-cloth armor and a compliment of urban weapons – from shotguns to gas grenades.

Although CSD convoys patrol daily (“early and often” is their motto), those patrols are preset and static. Once the route is decided on by command, it cannot be deviated from. CSD convoys are not response teams – they don’t come calling. They travel predetermined routes which are set to maximize efficiency and best serve the needs of the department and the citizens they serve. These routes are indeed designed each day to confront gangs who try to establish territories on main city drags, but the department’s non-pursuit policy only keeps the gangs at bay.

A certain few CSD convoy captains can sometimes feel like their hands are tied by the department’s policies, and for the greater good, sometimes those rules need to be broken.

Today, that certain someone is captain Yuri Dahwan, a decorated officer of the CSD, and a known “loose cannon” to his superiors. Dahwan’s route for the day has his convoy pitted up against a gang he personally has a long adversarial relationship with. He’s become tired of engaging with the gang, pushing it off his route, only to watch them retreat and come back

when the route has changed. So today is the day the Dahwan reaches out to a group the city considers urban terrorists – the Shinobi – for help for hire.

Yuri Dahwan is paying the player's group of Shinobi a relatively reasonable price – one that can be determined by the Gamemaster ahead of time, or one that can be worked out in role playing as part of a negotiation. The job is to join his CSD convoy on its daily patrol, one which will pit them against an ultra-violent drug gang known as the Dim-zao-lung.

Objectives:

As the convoy moves through its route, it will encounter Dim-zao-lung's fortified positions on the street, and attack them with heavy weapons, drawing their fire. It falls to the Shinobi to infiltrate these positions during the fire fight, and ensure that none of the gang members are allowed to retreat. This is not a mission to rack up arrests – this is a black op's mission of extreme prejudice. The group's job is to terminate named and known targets, the fighting gangsters under that target's command, and to capture equipment and intelligence from each position before its destroyed by the convoy's heavy gun emplacements.

At each location the group will have to battle through an increasing number of bad guys and find their leader. No prisoners are to be taken, but they should confiscate or salvage as much captured gear and equipment as they can. Any drug stashes are to be destroyed, and Captain Dahwan will pay a bounty for each cache so destroyed. When a leader is killed, he or she will be found with a piece of intelligence that will help the group proceed against the next location – the number of gangsters at the next spot, the sorts of weapons they have, ambushes or booby traps along the way, etc. Having this intelligence becomes more and more important as each location becomes more and more dangerous. If the leader is allowed to get away, so does the intelligence they carried.

Unbeknownst to the Shinobi group, or perhaps known as secret information that can be used as leverage during negotiations, Captain Yuri was once a member of this gang, and his younger brother has clawed his way up their ranks to become one of their bosses – a captain in his own right. Unable to stop his brother's actions or change his heart, and unable to do the deed himself, the final objective of this mission for the group is to kill Boss Dahwan.

For this scenario the Gamemaster should design an urban map which displays the convoy's route, and where each gang holdout is located. These holdout's are the points where the convoy will direct its attention and its firepower. While the building is under fire, the group must enter it, then find and kill the leader of that squad of gang members.

Obstacles:

To keep things interesting, the Gamemaster should add in twists, traps, ambushes, and misinformation. One section of street could be covered in explosive traps, and the convoy must clear them at a painfully slow rate; the good Captain may use this opportunity to send the Shinobi ahead and keep the gang from slipping away from its next location before the convoy gets there. At another location, the leader may have given his intelligence to a runner, forcing the group to track down and kill him without any idea about where he went or what sort of traps may be waiting for them. And of course, each location the Dim-zao-lung grow in numbers, are carrying better equipment, and use smarter tactics – all in preparation for the final showdown between the Dahwan brothers.

The most visceral weapon at the disposal of the Dim-zao-lung is RED, the mind-altering inhalant the gang illegally sells on the street. RED is a liquid that becomes a gas when exposed to the air, and is usually inhaled through the nose and/or mouth. Its effects are an intense euphoria, a false sense of immortality and indestructibility, a complete lack of inhibitions, and an uncontrollable streak of rage. Most low level gang members will have access to this drug, and its use creates a total lack of judgment in the imbiber, but increased strength, courage, and an unbreachable threshold for pain. Due to the long term effects, high level gangsters and leaders don't touch the stuff – they know better. But they also know that the drug can be used as an aerosol, turning the group's friends and allies into shrieking murder machines. Horrifyingly, this tactic will also work if large doses are tossed into a crowded city street...

This scenario is all about building a combat map, or urban battlefield. Gamemasters need to consider distances, hard and soft cover, angles of attacks, and points of entrance and escape for all buildings and positions. It's also important to keep track of the convoy's armor levels and ammunition supplies. For more difficult versions of this game, a Gamemaster can try lowering the convoy's over all armor and ammo, possibly exposing different vulnerabilities of the convoy as they move forward from position to position along the route. The fight would become much more interesting and much more difficult if the convoy began losing sections of its tank-train in battle.

Conclusion:

The scenario is over when Boss Dahwan is dead. For that to mean anything, though, Captain Dahwan must survive. It's only the Captain's sense of honor that protects the group – as long as he lives, the group will be paid and will have made an important contact with the CSD, a relationship that will be kept discrete. If he dies, the city will likely find out about the

clandestine deal, and certainly brand the Shinobi as the cause of their hero's demise. That kind of heat is something no city-Shinobi needs.

The Great Tram Robbery

For Gamemasters who are maybe looking to eliminate variables from their game, they might try this “pickle jar” scenario (or a scenario that all takes place in a single location, more or less). This game provides a much more confined atmosphere, and may be easier for players to make more black-and-white choices, and rely less on the “open environment” of traditional scenarios.

Scene:

Stitched into the countryside shoreline of the northern Verdant Expanse, like a gleaming monolithic thread, is the Palace Line – a shining, metallic hover rail line that reaches from Zaibatsu to Loha Prasat. The line is the host road for the system of hover trains that convey people, products and commerce between the two great cities, and to several points between. Although some trains ferry only passengers, and run non-stop between the cities, the most lucrative locomotives transit cargo, carrying technological goods from Zaibatsu, which are exchanged for raw polonia and other rare minerals from beneath Loha Prasat. Said material is then brought back to Zaibatsu, with stops at each of the refineries along the way. Both coming and going, these trains are stuffed to capacity with exceptionally valuable cargo, which changes depending on what's been exchanged at the most recent stop. The goods on board such trains could go a very long way to helping fund and fuel a war of shadows waged by ambitious Shinobi...

...If only there was a way to make such goods their own.

Wait! There is! ...Steal it...

Objectives:

The group's objective is to liberate as much of the goods and money on the train for themselves and/or their cause. That much is obvious. Knowing what goods will be available and where they're located on the train is much less so.

While the highlight of the scenario is the train heist itself, heists don't just plan themselves. The group must engage in careful planning – learning the train's schedule, where the desired cargo is located and at which juncture is loaded or off loaded, and most importantly, who and what is guarding that cargo at any particular leg in the train's trek.

The train's simplified schedule has it leaving Zaibatsu loaded with professional passengers and technological goods, as well as commercial supplies. On the train's way to Loha Prasat, it off loads a variable number of personnel and said commercial supplies at each of the five polonia refinery stations along the route (personnel and supplies needed to keep the refineries humming at peak efficiency). When the train at last reaches the Temple City, it turns over its cargo of technological wonders (which are difficult or impossible for the Steel Temple to produce itself). The train is then reloaded with raw materials such as timber, ore, and rare compounds mined from the region (which likewise do not naturally occur anywhere near Zaibatsu), as well as the odd passenger seeking transit back to the eastern city.

What the group wishes to get out of this robbery and how they intend to use the loot is entirely up to them. Cargo traveling to Loha Prasat includes polonia batteries and reactors, armor, weapons, medicine, and all manner of commercial and professional grade goods from the city of science. Goods coming back to Zaibatsu can be food stuffs, timber, minerals, and religious art and iconography. Of course in both directions, passengers who work the rails, refineries, and the transit system as a whole, are almost always present – and there is always value to workers with special engineering skills or knowledge.

Obstacles:

A train is not a slow, lumbering tortoise, idly laboring along its tracks. It is a roaring juggernaut, blasting across the hovertrack at over 100mph, and capable of reaching speeds of 200mph. From the outside looking in, each car of the train looks identical (a purposeful piece of engineering), and is reasonably well armored, since Shinobi raids are nothing new. A car could contain passengers, cargo, or very possibly, excess polonia being transported outside the pipeline (legally or illegally).

The train as a whole has its own dedicated security team, who mostly check passenger and cargo manifests, and make sure there's no one hitching a free ride or making trouble in one of the cars, and that the right goods are loaded and unloaded at the right locations. However, it is particularly a common practice for Zaibatsu corporations to hire security details to guard their materials on specific cars. Sometimes these teams operate cooperatively with one another, but more often they are concerned only with *their* job and *their* cargo. These teams are much better equipped and ever-so-much better trained than the rail's general "security" teams.

For a Gamemaster to succeed in running this scenario, they need to identify and detail a number of key ingredients for this recipe of larceny.

How long is this train? IE, how many cars make it up?

What, EXACTLY, is in or on each individual car, and where is it scheduled to be dropped off at, and when?

How much time does the group have in between stops along the route?

How bad are the bad guys? Are they a cybernetically enhanced crew of mercenaries, or a bumbling lot of part-timers with their fingers on a big red alarm button, in case something really goes wrong?

What is the group's exit strategy, IE, how are they going to get away with the loot? Do they have a chase vehicle that they plan to offload on, mid route? Are they going to make a break for it at the next stop? Maybe they intend to load everything into the last car on the train, then break the coupling and wait for pickup.

What's the security team's plan for a Shinobi raid? Do they stop the train and fight them off in the middle or nowhere? Do they radio ahead for backup then charge full steam to the next stop? Is there a team of reserves that can be deployed directly onto the train, maybe from an interceptor vehicle?

If there IS polonia on board, is the group prepared to deal with exposure in case of a spill (after all, it's not hard to defeat a safety seal when it's been breached by a stray stream of bullets from a gun fight in the next car over)?

Conclusion:

This scenario's conclusion is obvious – it ends with either a clean get away, or a group of Shinobi hanging from the end of ropes on a rail line in the middle of nowhere.

The Path:

ACT III

Raw sewage. Chemical runoff. Rotting who-knows-what. These were the smells that wafted up and around Arshi as he squatted inside a partially flooded sewer pipe. He had managed to bribe his way past the local gang boss that controlled the streets directly above him, crawled through what seemed like miles of subterranean pipelines, and now sat inside this last section, up to his waist in shit and worse, waiting. Waiting in front of a magnetically sealed bulkhead. A bulkhead that fed directly out of the Zangzung Detention Facility, half a mile underground, beneath the humming heart of Zaibatsu. A bulkhead which was normally sealed, but could be remotely opened, and a friend of a friend of a friend *should* have made the proper arrangements to have it opened at just the right time. That was an nearly an hour ago.

If this were another mission – some other run – Arshi would have smelled a trap, and like smoke, he'd be in the wind and gone. But this mission was this mission. There was no contingency for scrubbing the run. No second chances. He'd have to wait, and hope for the best.

In the meanwhile, now was as good a time as ever to recount his inventory, as little as it was. He tilted the handle of his ninja-to upwards, carefully, as he opened the secret compartment in the pommel. He withdrew a few paper-printed photos – screen grabs from the prison's recently-hacked security feed provided clear identification of the guards he could expect to encounter, and more importantly, the level of threat they posed. Basic body armor package, a few non-lethal chemical deployments, and a half-barrel sidearm. A standard compliment for any dungeon captor. What was not standard was the key card. Only the lieutenant would have that, and he was not on any of the surveillance footage. Instead his office was blacked out from surveillance, but it was at least marked on the map. He knew from sign-in logs that the officer and his required key would certainly be there, beyond that, though, he knew little of what to expect from him.

The photos had been rolled tightly around several small paper packets, about the size of a deck of playing cards, each. The paper was clean and dry, the sharp creases that made up its folds crisp and sharp, and they needed to stay that way – most importantly, dry.

Nai Nai had taught him to create the origami objects, plain and uncomplicated as they first appeared. “Paper is a funny thing, my clumsy little burglar,” she had told him as a boy, “it’s a blank slate, capable of becoming anything, so long as just the right thing is written on it. Or its folded in just the right way.” Now he hoped and prayed that all the finger cramps and paper cuts would pay off.

In the bottom of the hidden compartment there was a bit of a rattle, and Arshi shook out the last two objects tucked away within it. The first he expected – a plain, clear vial filled with plain, clear liquid. Nai Nai had cooked this up special for tonight, “Take this when you expect to die before your time, Arshi, and you will.” Suicide was not part of Nai Nai’s code of honor, and Arshi could only guess the purpose, but he had a reasonable idea.

The second object he did not expect – it was a small, pale, plastic egg, with a pulsing, glowing, green button on the bottom. This had Nai Nai’s finger prints all over it. He knew the image that would fill the watery pipe if he pressed that button. The woman he would see, and her child, and their smiles, twenty three years gone by.

He knew just as well that that had been the last time his mother had held him in her arms. That the minute after that image was captured, Nai Nai tearfully had taken Arshi out of the hospital with her in secret, and a minute after that, Zaibatsu police arrested his mother while she was still recovering from childbirth. If she hadn’t been a prolific author, a doctor of history, and published in every language spoken in Riku, leaving a library of knowledge for her son to draw from, he might never have known his true calling. She was his first teacher, and he was her last student.

Arshi knew as well that after those long twenty three years, raised by his grandmother, raised to be a Shinobi of the Inu Lineage, like his mother before him, that the slimy, filth-encrusted and magnetically locked bulkhead in front of him was the portal into the limbo where the corporate powers that be had thrown his mother to languish. He knew this because their Lineage had not forgotten her. The Shinobi clan had kept close tabs on her and her condition, but until now the confluence of events had never allowed them to put an operative on the inside, and get her out. Until tonight, and tonight that operative was her own son.

“Twenty-three years…” Arshi whispered, “Twenty-three years.” The number had become his rallying cry to focus and persevere, to succeed without fail. To accomplish that one unassailable…

Plunk

The sound made him sick. It was the sound of a holoegg, containing the only images he had of his own mother, dropping from his hand into a pipeline of raw human waste. He could hear Nai Nai in his mind, “Clumsy little burglar.”

He stifled the reflex to dive after it; he'd probably only wet his origami, and besides, those eggs were fragile, and like paper, useless once wetted. It was gone.

A moment later, almost exactly one hour after the agreed upon time, the red light above the sealed bulkhead flipped to green, and the seal hissed, disengaged, and rolled open.

Arshi made one final prayer to the Kami of War, the battle spirits he had bargained with to give him strength and prowess in combat. He had made no idle arrangement with invisible forces of pure belief, either. No, he had knelt in the courts of the war kami, sworn oaths of allegiance to gods and deities of battle, and he knew their very tangible blessings. It was the Art of his Lineage, the Inu, to worship the kami, and the accords they struck with them were very real, indeed.

One last calming breath. Inhale the shadow he would become, and exhale the clumsy little burglar. With that, Arshi was through the manhole, and into a stark, concrete bunker-of-a-hallway. The lighting was sparse, with lanterns caged into the ceiling, spread out over distances great enough to test the edges of the light. Spotty shadows were a Shinobi's best friend.

Under normal circumstances, an intruder at this point would immediately be detected by half a dozen systems, but according to his hacker connects, those systems should have been offline upon his entrance from the bulkhead. The bulkhead that opened an hour late.

Irrelevant. For Arshi, there was no way but forward. "Twenty-three years..."

Arshi slid through the darkened corridors, expecting to see the familiar faces he'd been studying. The faces he'd been mentally prepared to drain the life out of with well coordinates attacks and surgical strikes. But those faces were absent; in fact there were no faces at all.

The young man quickly found the cellblock he sought. He needed no map. The sixth sense of the bloodhound was a gift he'd inherited from his Lineage. He was destined to protect one life, for the remainder of his, as were all Inu, and he could find that life no matter where she went. It was a scent in his mind's forefront that could never be lost.

Still, no guards.

The cell doors were windowless, marked only by sparsely painted white numbers. There was not even a grate or hatch for food. The corridor wrapped around the cellblock, and on its opposite side, *should* be the lieutenant's office. Arshi expected at this point to find it vacant, but he might get lucky and find a suitable key.

Arshi crouched low at the corner just before the office doorway, hidden by the amply cast shadows. There was a difference between getting lucky, being too easy, and being a trap. He edged his field of vision around the corner with one eye, when the bullet struck the concrete wall just above his exposed eye, sending shards of rock into the ocular cavity.

It came to his mind to scream as the blood poured out of his head, and the vision of that eye blurred to a smeared pallet of reds, but the war kami held his tongue, stymied his shock, and numbed the pain of the injury. The intervention bought him a precious moment to comprehend what he'd seen around that corner before losing the eye – a Tora.

An eight-damned Tora. A Tiger-class cybernetic combat suit. Built for one purpose, and only one purpose – to kill Shinobi. That's why the lieutenant was never on camera – to never give away the asset's presence. That's why the guards are all gone. To keep them out of the shit-storm of lead that was about to rain down. And that's why everything ran an hour late.

“Yeah. Trap.”

He didn't just hear his own whisper, though, but the booming voice of his combat master, his mentor in shadow warfare, the Inu Shinobi Jojak.

“A good Shinobi knows the value of his sword. And he also knows its limitations. A sword will save your life more times than you will EVER learn to count, but it can't bust through walls, it can't mow down a platoon, and it can't bifurcate a Tora.”

Arshi hated guns. Hated explosives somehow even more. Accidents waiting to happen, he thought of them. Not as controlled as a sword, he always figured. In this moment, he hated Jojak for the advice he always gave that Arshi never took. For right now, there was another one of Jojak's gems that *did* need to be heeded.

“DUCK!”

The young Inu dodged backwards into the shadowy corner out of the cyber-suit's aim, as the corner he used for cover disintegrated in a torrent of deafening cannon fire. Fully automatic fire raked through the hallway, the shadows melting away before the dragon fire of muzzle flash.

True to their word, the war spirits granted Arshi an edge of strength and courage that guided his body out of harm's way, bullets stitching his silhouette as he engaged every evasive trick he could manage. The Shinobi darted down another turn of the corridor, keeping to the shadows, though he knew full well that the Tora's targeting and tracking systems reduced it to a useless effort. There was a screaming hiss, then, as a javelin-class rocket screamed up the hallway riding a column of fumes, then burst into the far wall of the hallway Arshi had just dashed down. Shards of shrapnel and concrete peppered him as the concussive blast hurled him down the hall like a heap of rags.

His hand reflexively went to the grip of his ninja-to – the blade passed down through his family of shadow folk, generation after generation – but it wasn't the blade he intended to draw. It was Nai Nai's vile – Arshi gripped it tight and burst open the cap with his bloody fingers, swallowing every drop of liquid he managed not to clumsily spill.

His body began to seize and spasm, the life draining from his complexion, leaving a pale, dried husk twisted on the floor. His last sensations were the mechanical vibrations of the Tora's footfalls as it strode down the corridor after him.

The steel-plated hulk at last reached the corner of its rocket blast. The lieutenant within peaked around the corner with the snub of his gun-mounted camera, when he spied the remains sprawled across the floor. At a glance, it looked like the result of a javelin rocket breaking a man's body with its shockwave. With a sweep from his suit's scans, the kill was confirmed. Satisfied, he reengaged his weapon's safeties and prepared to call in the cleanup team, when a solid, wet *thunk* struck the helm of his Tora. The officer realized then he could not force his neck piece to move. A fraction of a moment later his armor was peppered with these wet-sounding contacts, and in turn each of his joints and limbs seized to a halt. Internal diagnostics immediately read that the actuators had been jammed, and needed to be manually cleared.

Arshi was on his feet again, albeit still a bit wobbly and unused to the sudden loss of an eye. The kami had given him one last gift of true aim, and he'd used the opportunity well.

Nai Nai's potion had worked perfectly, creating the perfect illusion of death, though for only a few moments. Time, enough, though, for Arshi to employ his origami. The lesser Art of Duplication had always been a favorite of his. The simple paper packets had been imbued with properties that would make any blank slate proud – once Arshi activated the magic with a simple intensive touch, the paper would become a material identical to whatever compound was closest. Arshi had flung the origami like spit wads against the Tora, jamming them into its joints as the magic took on the properties of a solid wads of reinforced, proprietary armor. They may as well have been welds, for as far the lieutenant was concerned, for they had the same effect. At least, they would for the next ten or fifteen minutes, or until the Tora's pure strength finally wrenched them free.

Time, time enough.

Arshi raced back down the hall, end running the enormous Tora as it struggled. As he leapt past the war machine he used his very last origami packet of duplication and swiped it across the Tora's gauntlet, where he knew the magnetic key to be on this particular model. The paper molded itself into a magnetic key card, and swiped easily across his mother's cell door. The heavy door drew back on a track of clanks and clatters, exposing the dim light from the hall into the gruesome scene in the darkness within.

The dirty light of the prison spilled onto the cell's floor, dankly illuminating the fetid corpse of his mother. There was no telling how long it had been there, but the ripe stench that attacked his senses gave clue enough.

Blood poured down one side of Arshi's wounded face, but twice as many tears rolled down the other.

There was a shiver in the corner of the dark cell, and with a flick Arshi's blade was drawn and in-hand. He recognized the face that stepped into the light – he could never forget it.

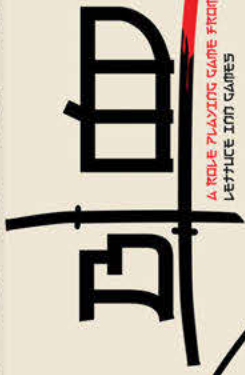
Yumi Kakoto.

It had been seven years since he'd seen her last. The day she shot down the molester, Nguyen. The day she saved him from his own petty intent for murder, and showed him what it meant to stand up for what was right, when it was right to do so. She had been sentenced without trial, and now here she was. It was clear from the look on her face that she didn't recognize Arshi with his Shinobi garb obscuring his face. That garb could not disguise one thing, though, for Arshi could still strongly sense the blood scent of his Lineage. All these years, he had not been tracking his mother at all – he had been tracking her.

Yumi looked less like the strong young woman Arshi might have expected to find, and more like a broken child. Though, how could Arshi look anything like the boy she left behind seven years ago, either?

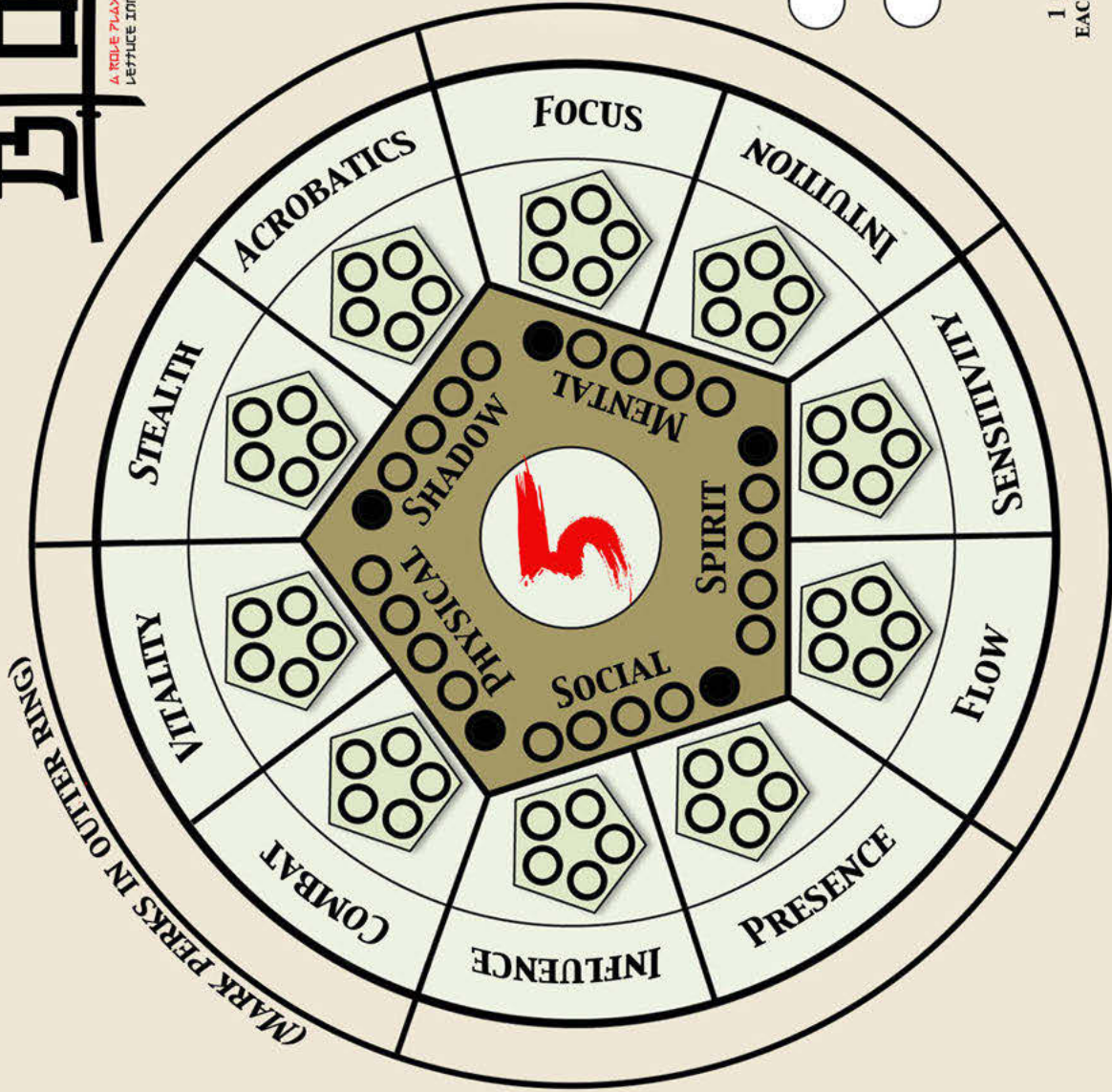
"T-they said she was a teacher," she stuttered, her face twitching with sobs, but dehydration had robbed her of any more tears, "...a-a-and that I needed to be taught a lesson."

Arshi loved his mother – the mother he had scarcely ever met. But he could not carry her and his new charge. His duty was clear. There would be rest for his mother someday, but tonight, there must first be rest for Yumi.

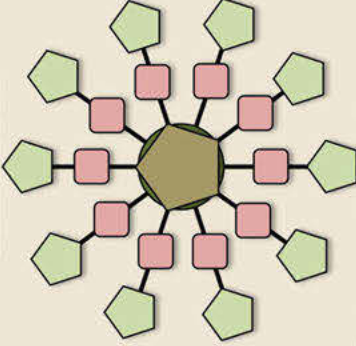


PATH OF THE CHARACTER NAME _____
 SHINOBI™ PLAYER NAME _____
 LINEAGE _____

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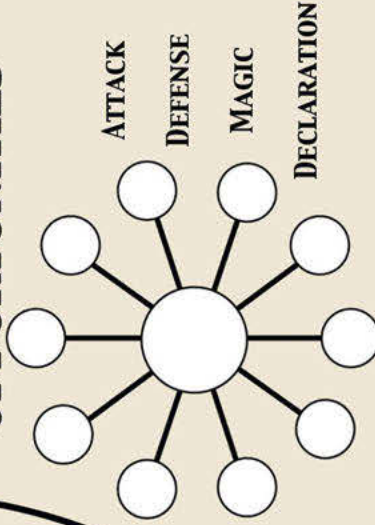


HEALTH



LETHAL IS INNER (RED) WHEEL AND
 NON-LETHAL IS OUTER (GREEN) WHEEL

OPPORTUNITIES



1 + (1 FOR EACH 5 IN CORE STATS) + (1 FOR EACH 5 IN COMBAT, ACROBATICS AND SHADOW)

LINEAGE PERKS

KIT (EQUIPMENT)

MAJOR ART

Oath: _____

MINOR ART

WEAPONS / ARMOR

MALADIES
