



WAY OF THE THIEF™

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WAY OF THIEVES

Bayushi Adachi strode purposefully through the streets of the City of Lies. Peasants and eta fell to their knees as she passed, recognizing her armor and swords as the symbols of a samurai. She ignored their fawning obeisance, continuing on her way with a grim expression. As she approached a particular house the two peasant guards snapped to attention at the sight of her. One quickly scurried inside while the other moved forth to bow deeply, blocking her path in a subtle effort to delay her momentarily.

"My humblest greetings, Bayushi-sama," the man said as she drew nearer. "I extend my master's warmest regards from the House of the Gilded Cricket."

Adachi fixed her eyes upon the man and removed her katana from its obi, still in its saya. She drew the blade one inch from the sheath. The peasant looked up in terror at the sound of withdrawing steel and darted out of her way. She returned the sword to its saya and threw open the door with a sneer.

The smell of smoke, rice wine, and sweat greeted her from within the darkened sake house. She nearly choked at the revolting combination but pushed her disgust aside, merely adding it to the many reasons she was displeased to be in such a place. She quickly strode through the main room, drawing many dazed and bewildered looks from the inebriated customers. A few of the more clear-minded ones waited until she passed, then carefully finished their drinks and departed. Adachi had not been in Ryoko Owari long, but already she was a recognized force within the city. They called her the White Mask, named so both for the white face paint she favored over a Scorpion's traditional mask and for her apparent unwillingness to indulge in the corruption and vice that consumed the rest of the city.

To be an honest magistrate in the City of Lies, especially an honest Scorpion magistrate while the city was under Unicorn Clan rule, was not an easy life. In most cases it was a short one, yet Adachi had prospered in her role. In the year since her arrival she had not only survived, but brought two different illegal smuggling cartels to their knees. The local crime syndicates had attempted to remove her on three occasions. Each time they had failed, and the assassins had been publicly executed over the Bay of Drowned Honor by Adachi herself. The criminal underworld of the city whispered that she could not be killed.

These events were well known to Ide Haranobu, master of the House of the Gilded Cricket. A chunk of fish fell from the fat merchant's chopsticks as she entered the room. The old man frowned and gently pushed aside the small tray containing his dinner.

"Magistrate Adachi-sama," he said with a forced smile. "How might I assist you?"

"Send your guards away," she said, not bothering to turn and look at the two budoka that had quietly filed into the room behind her.

Haranobu frowned, hesitating.

"I am a servant of the Emperor," Adachi pressed, seating herself primly on the floor opposite Haranobu's low table. "Do you not feel safe in the presence of one whom Toturi has chosen?" Her eyes narrowed, making it clear that a wrong answer would be taken as a dire insult.

Haranobu quickly waved his guards away. They closed the chamber door as they departed. The merchant smoothed his long white beard over his chest and watched Adachi nervously. "How can I assist you, Adachi-sama?" he said in careful tones.

"I came to inquire as to your recent business dealings," she replied.

"Most specifically regarding the Moment's Edge fireman gang."

"I have no dealings with the Moment's Edge," Haranobu replied, straightening in his seat. "They are thugs, killers, smugglers. An Ide does not consort with such garbage."

"Now, now, Haranobu," Adachi said with a light chuckle. "I am no fool. I know that you are paying the Moment's Edge a share of the profits you make here. I know that you allow them to use the private rooms without charge, to conduct meetings with their clientele."

Haranobu shook his head quickly. "I have done nothing illegal," he said. "I am not the only one who pays tribute to those thugs. A businessman does what he must to survive in the City of Lies."

"And it seems you are doing very well here, all things considered," Adachi said, tracing one hand over the rich Mekhem carpet that covered the floor. "I suppose they must not be cutting into your profits so deeply."

"I do very well, all things considered," the man said.

"But how much more poorly would you do," Adachi replied, "if the Moment's Edge thought that you were supplying me with information about their business here?" She looked at him with a placid, innocent expression.

"What?" Haranobu replied, face paling. "But how could I help you if I know nothing?"

"Of course," Adachi replied, pursing her lips as she nodded thoughtfully. "The firemen gangs are generally known to be rational, reasonable people. If my magistrates visit your house regularly, I am certain they will understand and hold you in no suspicion."

Haranobu scowled. "They will kill me," he said.

"Oh?" Adachi said, feigning astonishment. "Then perhaps I could be encouraged to leave things as they are. Of course I would require some proof that your business is not unduly threatened by your... donations to the Moment's Edge gang. Perhaps my own share of your business here."

Haranobu's mouth fell open in astonishment. "You would blackmail me, Adachi-sama?"

"You are a servant of the Emperor, thus all you own belongs to him," Adachi replied. "I simply choose to collect what is his on his behalf. Consider it your punishment for consorting with criminals."

"This is an outrage," Haranobu replied. "Why me? By all accounts you are a just and honest magistrate, Adachi-sama."

"And if you value your life, you will see to it that reputation endures," Adachi answered. "As the others do. Is that understood?"

Haranobu did not reply for a moment, too overwhelmed to comprehend what had occurred. "Yes, Adachi-sama," he said at last. "I understand."

"Very well," she replied, rising to her feet again. "Then I shall depart before my presence generates too much suspicion among your firemen friends. I shall send an agent to make arrangements. Do not worry, Haranobu-san, my demands are not strenuous. I am, however, very strict that payments be made on time. It is good to have the law on your side, no?"

"Of... of course," he replied.

Bayushi Adachi turned and left the House of the Gilded Cricket, an enigmatic smile on her white painted face. The City of Lies belonged to the Scorpion Clan once. One day, it would be theirs again. The funds Haranobu and so many other Unicorn merchants paid her were funneled toward outfitting Scorpion troops that would, if diplomatic avenues failed, take the city back by force. She found the irony greatly amusing. Her reputation was unchallenged; the city saw her as a pinnacle of duty and honor.

They were right. Sometimes they merely forgot that she was a Scorpion.

THE DARKER SIDE OF HONOR

Legend of the Five Rings is a game built around the concepts of honor and bushido. Player characters are generally expected to be samurai, servants of the Emperor for whom duty is their foremost concern. Where does a book such as *Way of the Thief* fit into such a setting? The answer is simple. For every light there is a shadow, and for every shining example a samurai sets there are those who cleave to the opposite path, those who twist the tenets of tradition to reap personal gain, those who turn their back on bushido for the sake of profit. *Way of the Thief* serves a dual purpose in this regard, a sourcebook on Rokugani criminal organizations and a guide to creating villainous player characters. Whereas books like *Way of the Shadowlands* and *Secrets of the Shadowlands* accurately depict those who have sworn fealty to supernatural evil, this book concentrates more on the mundane sort of villainy — bandit gangs, clandestine organizations, and criminal syndicates.

PLAYING THE BAD GUYS

Playing a group of criminal characters presents numerous problems, but can be quite interesting if approached carefully. Some players may be uncomfortable with the idea of playing an “evil” character, so such an undertaking should always be a unanimous decision on the part of the GM and all players involved. In addition, such a campaign should only be attempted with a group of mature and intelligent players, who realize that, obviously, the actions their characters undertake are not intended to be carried into their real life.

If the GM and players agree to attempt a party of criminals, the first problem a villainous party presents is a rather obvious question — if all of the player characters are underhanded, untrustworthy criminals, why are they working together? Fortunately, the answer to this question is simple in a setting such as Rokugan. Simply make certain that all player characters are members of the same criminal organization. The Empire is a place steeped in loyalty, duty, and tradition. Ironically, crime is no exception to this rule. Though many of the criminal organizations in Rokugan scoff at Imperial Law, they still hold strong ties of loyalty to one another and obey strict rules within their illegal practices.

Members of the same gang, while untrustworthy and dangerous in the extreme to those outside their order, will generally work together with the best interests of their masters in mind. This is especially true for well-organized groups such as the Kolat. This is not to say that a party of villains will be without infighting or competition; such practices are common. However, when the safety of the organization is threatened most criminal player characters can be expected to work together toward a common end. After all, if they fail, two possible fates await them — the Empire’s justice and punishment at the hands of their masters. Both fates are likely to be final; Imperial Magistrates are not known for their mercy and one does not become a leader of the criminal underworld in Rokugan without a certain propensity

for brutality.

When beginning a villainous campaign, the activities the player characters will be expected to perform should be laid out well beforehand. Are the characters simply dishonorable samurai? Bandits? Kolat agents? Entrepreneurs seeking to establish a new gang and claim their share of the Empire’s underworld? There are many sorts of criminals in Rokugan, and some players may be less comfortable playing some than others. One player, for example may have no problem what-soever playing a corrupt magistrate who uses his position for personal gain, but may shy away at playing a Kolat agent bent on the eventual downfall of the samurai caste system. In a normal *Legend of the Five Rings* party, even characters of vastly different backgrounds and conflicting goals can be encouraged to work together via their mutual duty to the Emperor. In a criminal party, even this is not a given. The GM must be extra careful to find some means by which to link the characters together so the players have a reason to participate in adventures together.

Ultimately the largest problem for a villainous party is the risk of punishment. Rokugani law is not particularly forgiving, and serious crimes are punished severely (specific punishments are described in detail later in this chapter). While the risk of death is always a concern in a land as violent in Rokugan, it is even more prevalent in a criminal campaign. Normally, the player characters are in service of their lord, and thus in turn receive the protection of their clan and the Emperor. A criminal has voluntarily denied himself such protection, and can rely only on his masters, his brethren, and himself.

Rokugani’s strict attitude toward crime can create several problems. If the party is too blatant in their activity and swift punishment is not forthcoming, it may ruin the players’ suspension of disbelief and make the setting seem less genuine. On the other hand, if the party’s every exploit leads to a character’s capture and execution the players may begin to feel useless and frustrated. This demands a delicate balance from the GM. The special considerations a criminal campaign demands can be extremely demanding, but the intrigue, danger, and sense of forbidden adventure such a campaign offers can be very rewarding if done well.

HONOR AND GOLD

Rokugan is a land steeped in the precepts of honor and nobility. Though many samurai can trace their bloodline to the divine Kami, even samurai are only human. Vice and corruption find their way into the heart of every clan, though some do a better job of concealing their less honorable kin than others.

While it is true that samurai, and to a lesser extent even peasants, are provided with whatever they require to fulfill their duties this does not prevent criminal activity from being commonplace. What an individual’s lord feels he requires and what that same individual desires are not always the same. Greed and ambition can take root in the heart of even the noblest samurai. Peasants, even those who are well provided for, may tire of a life in the shadow of wealthy samurai and aspire to something greater. With no legitimate avenue to fulfill their desires, a life of crime is inevitable.

A desire for upward mobility is the most frequent motivation for criminal activity in Rokugan. Simply put, crime is a



matter of power; wealth is merely a means to obtaining that power. In such a strict social system, promotions are very rare. A simple samurai might never become a daimyo through his own legitimate actions, especially during times of peace. Those whose talents lie in trades generally considered illegal or dishonorable might gather influence normally denied to them by amassing wealth. Though samurai are expected to spurn monetary wealth, money provides an advantage that cannot be denied. Koku can provide finer weapons, swifter steeds, and foreign luxuries. It is, in fact, the ease with which dishonorable men can use wealth to control the honorable that causes so many samurai to spurn koku — though its value is undeniable.

Lower ranking criminals may simply seek wealth for its own sake, stealing to feed themselves or their families, but any who survive long in Rokugan's criminal underworld soon realize that information is a far more valuable commodity. The Empire places a great deal of value on face, the way one is seen by others in society. Secrets become powerful tools, as threatening the way an individual is seen by his brethren effectively grants control over that person. With wealth, a dishonest man's loyalty might be bought, but what worth is a dishonest man's loyalty? All men have secrets — find out an honest man's weakness and he will do anything to conceal it from his enemies. It is for this reason that all criminal organizations of respectable size readily maintain a network of spies and informants who indulge in the exchange of information. All secrets are valuable, and all have their price.

As the samurai caste system represents ultimate power in the Empire, many criminal gangs emulate the samurai in some manner. More than one criminal mastermind

has noted the irony that a warrior, skilled at slaying dozens of enemies on the battlefield for a cause he might not understand is hailed as a hero while a common thug who kills a merchant to steal the money he needs to feed his family is branded a murderer. This rationalization falls apart quickly when one considers that the samurai's enemies were warriors, prepared for battle. To the darker half of the Empire's society this difference means little to the dead. Criminals view themselves as warriors of a sort, and Rokugan is a land that celebrates its warriors.

In areas where the law is not heavily enforced, such as Ryoko Owari, criminals might even be celebrated as heroes. Members of recognized criminal gangs flaunt their power and relish the fear and respect they generate. Much like a samurai, these gangs often become quite protective of those they prey upon. Should someone outside their organization begin committing crimes in the area, retribution will be swift and deadly. While this serves to ward off unwanted attention from the law that might be generated by incompetent competitors, it is also a twisted reflection of the samurai social contract. Those who pay the gangs for protection or offer tribute in the form of stolen goods are, in turn, protected by those gangs.

Many peasants, already conditioned to obey powerful samurai, have little difficulty transferring this unquestioning loyalty to local crimelords. In some areas this strange loyalty is not so surprising. A local crimelord might be no less brutal than the local samurai, and perhaps is a more visible member of the community than a distant daimyo. In many cases these crimelords do more to protect the populace from bandits and other threats. A peasant forced to pay protection money has no illusions what will happen to him should he miss a payment, but so long as he makes his payments he is actually protected.

Gangs that operate in such a manner place an honest magistrate in a peculiar position. Should a magistrate seek to topple a well-established crimelord he will face opposition not only from the criminals who serve him but from honest members of the local community as well. Even if a the crimelord is toppled and his organization punished, what happens now that his agents are no longer protecting the people from less organized, predictable crimes? The sudden explosion of criminal activity as lesser criminals seek to fill the power vacuum may make the magistrate appear incompetent.

Because of this, some seasoned magistrates might come to accept a well established gang as a lesser evil and do little to remove them so long as they keep their illegal activities discreet and do not bring excessive harm to innocent members of the community. These gangs might also provide useful information or offer their thugs as temporary deputies to remove a competitor, creating a strange sort of partnership between the local police and organized crime. Of course many magistrates would refuse to make such a dishonorable compromise, seeing it as the first step to inevitable corruption. In large cities, however, it is almost inevitable to find at least a handful of magistrates who have secretly allied themselves with a local crimelord. In the seedier cities of the Empire, this corruption might grow to the extent that the local police are nothing more than another gang feeding on the community.

OFFICERS OF THE LAW

Almost as long as there has been an Empire there have been those who stand to enforce the Emperor's laws. For those seeking to begin a criminal campaign, these individuals will likely be the party's main antagonists. For more a party of magistrate characters, this section should help illustrate the powers and responsibilities of such characters in greater detail.

PEASANT ENFORCERS

The lowest ranking law enforcement officials in Rokugan come from peasant backgrounds. The officers are known as doshin, while their deputies are referred to as budoka. These officers often have other professions as well, working as farmers or craftsmen when their services as lawmen are not required. In larger villages, doshin and budoka are sufficiently busy that they have no other profession but work full time maintaining the peace, usually in the service of a magistrate. The power these peasant lawmen have is very limited, usually extending only to their home village and perhaps a small surrounding area. Doshin are selected by the local governing samurai or magistrate. Some reliable peasant families have a tradition of serving their samurai lords as doshin, though the office is not necessarily inherited. Budoka are selected by the doshin, and while most have some martial training some are simply peasants pressed into service on demand.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Their authority extends only toward crimes committed by peasants and eta. It is their duty to resolve crimes committed by the lower classes so that samurai officials need not waste their time dealing with such trivial matters.

CIVIL DISTURBANCES

Peasant enforcers deal with minor crimes involving the peasant and eta classes. Drunken brawls, theft, assault, and other such minor concerns fall within their purview. More serious matters, including murder, riots, kidnapping, or extortion must be brought to the attention of samurai officials. Any crime that involves a samurai likewise falls within a magistrate's jurisdiction, including territory disputes (as all land belongs to the Emperor first) or theft of property a peasant has crafted to be used by samurai.

PATROLS

It is usually the duty of peasant officers to keep a lookout for crimes as they transpire, and bring them to swift resolution if possible. If a crime occurs that involves a samurai, it is the peasant officer's duty to fetch a magistrate to resolve the issue as swiftly as possible.

