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Sample file





Sample file

INTRODUCTION



Kakita Saburashi stands in the classic Crane dueling stance, his sword-hand resting atop the hilt of his katana as he watches his opponent with steely focus. His white hair is tied back in a high topknot, and a few loose strands whip about in the chill wind. Facing him, Mirumoto Kanjo stands in an open and almost casual stance, his swords already drawn and held loosely at his sides. His gaze seems remote... possibly even disinterested.

The two duelists face each other for an unmeasurable moment. Is it a minute or an hour? Occasionally one of them shifts posture very slightly—moving a foot, raising or lowering a shoulder.

Someone in the audience murmurs softly, wondering when the duel will start. Saburashi's lead student answers in a sharp whisper: "It has already begun."

Finally Saburashi slides one foot forward, very slightly, sand crunching beneath his sandal.

Then he is in motion, his sword whipping free of the saya in a silver blur. Kanjo flows forward to meet him, both swords coming up, and there is a loud clang and a shower of sparks. An eyeblink later the two men are on opposite sides of the field, their backs to each other. Glowing sparks still hang in the air between them where their blades met, slowly fading as they drift toward the earth.

Mirumoto Kanjo slowly straightens up and sheaths his swords.

Kakita Saburashi lowers his own blade and stares, unbelieving, at the cut which is staining his left kimono sleeve red. "The perfect strike," he whispers unbelieving. "How... how did you..?"



Welcome to *The Book of Air*, the latest sourcebook release for the Legend of the Five Rings Roleplaying Game, 4th Edition! This book represents a new concept for the 4th Edition line, and is the first in a planned series of five books that will explore the Emerald Empire of Rokugan through the perspective of the five Elements which the Rokugani believe make up all of reality: Air, Earth, Fire, Water, and Void. Each book will add new depth to the world of Rokugan and new mechanical options for your L5R 4th Edition campaign.

The chapters in this sourcebook comprise the following:

CHAPTER ONE: WINDS OF WAR

This chapter deals with those of the fighting arts that are associated with Air. Obviously the most notable of these is the iaijutsu duel, and the chapter devotes considerable discussion to the history, traditions, etiquette, and physical nature of dueling. Other martial topics related to Air are also discussed, including archery, spear-fighting, and the famous Dragon martial art known as Kaze-do—"the Way of Air."

CHAPTER TWO: THE WINDS OF COURT

The world of court and politics is heavily Air-oriented; indeed, it would be fair to say that Rokugani politics is dominated far more by Air than by any other Element. This chapter discusses the methods of those political clans and groups who rely most heavily on the ways of Air—understanding the feelings and needs of others, and using those to one's own ends. It also discusses several notable political groups whose philosophies can be said to be Air-oriented, as well as a number of prominent castles in the Empire whose courts are Air-dominated.

CHAPTER THREE: WINDS OF MAGIC

There is no part of Rokugan more dominated by the nature and characteristics of the different Elements than the study and practice of shugenja magic. This chapter discusses those groups of shugenja in Rokugan who pay

What Is In This Book?

The Elemental Series, of which *The Book of Air* is the first, will explore Rokugan—its culture, its people, and above all its samurai traditions—from the perspective of the five Elements. Each book will view the Empire through the prism of that Element, examining how it influences everything from fighting styles to social interaction to magic and mysticism.





special attention to the Element of Air, and also includes an extensive review of the use and value of the major Air spells. Finally, the chapter offers a detailed discussion of the Air kami themselves, their nature and behavior, and their interactions with the other Elements.

CHAPTER FOUR: WINDS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Samurai are not the only people in Rokugan who study the Elements closely. This chapter reviews those monastic orders (both famous and obscure) whose traditions show a strong focus on the ways of Air. It also discusses the usage and social impact of the major Air Kiho, the strange mystical powers which are a special province of the Brotherhood of Shinsei.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WORLD OF AIR

This chapter deals with a host of different aspects of Air in the lives of the Rokugani, ranging from the mundane—weather, kite-flying, sailing—to the supernatural—Fortunes, creatures, and magical artifacts.

CHAPTER SIX: KYUDEN KUROGANE-HANA

The final chapter in this book offers a complete campaign setting themed around courtly intrigue and social interaction—the themes of Air. Kyuden Kurogane-Hana is designed as a “generic” castle which can be placed into any clan’s lands, allowing the GM to easily adapt it for use in any L5R campaign or era.

APPENDIX: NEW MECHANICS

The Appendix includes a variety of new mechanics based on the preceding six chapters, including a variety of new Paths, two new Monks Orders, an array of new Air spells and Air Kiho, and several new Air-oriented creatures.



Air-Themed Gaming: Improvisation

Most role-playing games follow a traditional structure in which the GM prepares an adventure in advance, then runs the player characters through it. The GM will have a specific plan for how the adventure will play out, perhaps with a few contingencies to cover the more obvious alternative paths the PCs might follow. Some GMs will plan out their adventures in great detail, trying to anticipate every possible choice the PCs might make, identify and describe every NPC, and so forth.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with designing such detailed and comprehensive adventures, and indeed a great many successful RPG campaigns have followed this model. Pre-generated adventures and organized convention-based campaigns like *Heroes of Rokugan* also tend to follow this model, since their adventures have to be read and run by many different GMs and many different groups of players. Likewise, certain types of scenarios—mysteries, for example—require much more detailed planning to ensure their various clues and plot elements fit together smoothly. We will examine this sort of detailed planning for adventures in the upcoming books of *Earths* and *Fire*.

However, elaborate and detailed planning is not the only way to run a role-playing game. GMs who feel confident in their creative powers can opt to follow the path of Air and take a more open and free-form approach to their campaigns, using only loose plot outlines and a list of NPCs. The GM adjusts the plot on the fly, and adds (or abandons) plot elements and NPCs in response to the players' actions and choices. This allows the adventure to constantly grow and change in response to both player interaction and new GM ideas.

This option is not for everyone, of course. Some GMs prefer to have the "safety net" of a more detailed adventure design to back them up. In order to run a more free-form game, the GM must be willing to give up that safety net. In return, the GM gains much greater flexibility, and is able to adjust his adventures constantly to the players' actions and choices. This approach can work especially well in a campaign that follows the Open World, Relationship Mapping, or Character Driven models (as described on pages 294-296 of the L5R 4th Edition core rulebook). Conversely, an improvisational game will not work quite so well in an Epic campaign or a Location-Based campaign, both of which tend to require more careful planning. In an Epic, the GM must have a strong overarching plotline that the PCs can follow to their fated destiny, while in a Location-Based game the GM will need to plan out the location and its inhabitants in great detail before starting play.

Reactive and Adaptive Plotting

If the GM does decide to run an improvisational game, one of the aspects of doing so is a willingness to "let go" of plot control. The GM must be prepared to change plots, abandon storylines, and launch new ones at any time, reacting to the players' actions and choices. This means the GM will sometimes have to abandon a storyline he really wants to pursue, or to follow a storyline which he finds less interesting.

This can be frustrating even for the most innovative GM, but there is another side to this problem: just as the GM may be forced to abandon a planned storyline, he is also free to introduce new elements into the story at any time, and this can be a good way of re-tasking ideas that didn't work before. A creative GM can let the players change the plot to solve the original problem, but then send a new problem at them crafted out of the unused pieces of the old one.

For example, suppose the player characters are working as a magistrate's yoriki in a large city. A strange new monk comes to the city, preaching a heretical offshoot of Shinsei's philosophies that condemns the samurai caste's rule as unjust. Soon many of the common folk are embracing the monk's strange ideals and becoming increasingly restive. The PCs face a quandary. If they do nothing, the monk may well incite a revolt. However, the lord of their city is very pious and will not listen to their suggestions that a holy man should be executed for sedition. Besides, if they have the monk killed, they may well trigger the very rebellion they wish to avoid.

However, the players take a creative approach: they have some commoner allies kidnap the monk and dump him on a trade barge headed for another city. The disappearance of the monks takes the wind out of the rebellion's sails and things swiftly simmer down. The GM, who had been planning a whole series of challenges built around growing commoner unrest, silently curses the players' creative approach... but a few months later, the PCs get word from trade ships coming up the river. It seems the monk has raised a true peasant revolt out in the countryside, and his army is headed this way...

Embracing Player Input

A creative GM should always be looking for chances to incorporate the players' actions, ideas, and choices into the storyline of his campaign, but this is especially important in an Air-type improvisational game. In an improvisation-driven campaign, the GM should be actively seeking ideas from the players and freely adding them to the story whenever possible. Indeed, in a properly run game of this type, the players will often be contributing just as much to the storyline as the GM himself.

One of the temptations which the GM should avoid in an improvisational game is the urge to protect key plot-

lines or NPCs by “cheating” on their behalf in various ways—giving a villain extra Wounds or disallowing an action that would defeat him, for example, or creating a plotline that will advance to where the GM wants no matter what the PCs might do. In a planned campaign where the focus is on a relentless plotline and carefully developed dramatic confrontations, these sorts of tricks can be justified to some extent in order to make sure all the GM’s careful work does not go to waste. (Though even in a planned game, using GM fiat to save NPCs and maintain stories should be done carefully and sparingly—otherwise the players will quickly grow frustrated with a game in which they are little more than spectators.)

But in an improvisational game, this sort of manipulation should be avoided as much as humanly possible. The whole point of an Air-type game is that the players can change the plot as easily as the GM, so a GM who wraps his NPCs in “plot armor” is violating this. This means the GM cannot always rely on some of the conventional methods of story development and player motivation, such as a recurring villainous mastermind who perpetually thwarts the PCs’ plans. In an improv game, the PCs may well be able to catch and defeat the villain in his first plot! But the counterpoint to this problem is the huge advantage that the players get *themselves* invested in the game as they see their ideas and choices becoming part of the game-world.

Sometimes this approach can add quite unexpected depths to the GM’s campaign. NPCs in particular can develop in unusual and exciting ways if the GM is willing to embrace the players’ contributions. For example, suppose the GM has a minor NPC in his court scenario, a quirky artist whose only intended role is to add flavor to the game. In one scene the GM has this NPC speak to another, more prominent NPC who is opposing the player characters. Suddenly the players become convinced that this little artist is actually the villainous mastermind who is responsible for all their troubles. In a normal game, the GM would ignore this distraction and the players would eventually forget about the little artist and track down the *real* villain the GM has been planning for them to fight. But in an improvisational game, the GM can embrace the players’ idea and retask his seemingly harmless artist as the author of all the PCs’ woes.

To take another example, consider something that happened in one of my own campaigns. The players were run-

ning through an adaptation of the classic L5R adventure *Night of a Thousand Screams*, originally published by AEG in 1998. During one scene, the player characters (pursuing the trail of a rampaging oni) meet a minor NPC, a half-senile old man who is the retired father of a prominent Crane nobleman. The old man asks the PCs for a game of Go, and in the course of the game he reveals an important clue—which he apparently found by accident. The PCs are left wondering if he is truly senile or is actually a cunning and perceptive old samurai.

In the original adventure, that’s the end of it—the PCs move on and the old man, a “throw-away character,” is forgotten. But we were running a more improvisational campaign, and the players kept going back and visiting the old man over and over again, playing Go with him, trying to figure out how he had found that clue that everyone else had missed. Soon they became convinced that he was actually far more than he seemed, perhaps a retired Harrier who kept his old ninja gear hidden in his room. So, eventually, I decided that was in fact exactly what the old man was, and introduced a new set of plotlines based on his covert past coming back to haunt him. An entire storyline emerged from this NPC, solely because the players became interested in him and wanted to add depth to his personality and backstory.

A skilled GM will embrace such contributions. Even in a highly planned game, the GM should not be afraid to let some Air in to play, to let the players and the creative impulse of the moment take the game in exciting new directions. His campaign will be the better for it.





Chapter One

WINDS OF WAR

10



WINDS OF WAR

Sample file

Daidoji Kirasi strode into the clearing with her arms outstretched, showing empty hands and peaceful intentions. The young Crane's white-dyed hair was noticeably disheveled, while dirt and dust stained her light armor, but the simple daisho at her belt was clean, its hilt wrappings pristine. Kirasi stopped a few feet inside the clearing and called out in a clear, calm voice: "I am Daidoji Kirasi, yoriki to the honorable Emerald Magistrate Shinjo Kobara. I am here to speak with the ronin called Hojaro, who was once known as Kakita Hojaro."

The clearing seemed to spring to life as two ronin scrambled up from around a nearly-spent fire. One snatched up a spear, pointing it menacingly toward the young yoriki, while the other hurriedly pulled his sword from its saya. Their eyes darted between her and the small tent set near the fire.

After a few moments the tent flap opened and an older man in a soiled blue kimono stepped out. He looked to be well into his fourth decade, but his long hair was still black except for the old remnants of white dye on the final six inches or so. His face was seamed with dirt and grime, and contempt twisted his features as he looked at Kirasi. Finally he chuckled. "I suppose I can talk to you before we kill you, girl." The other two ronin looked at each other uneasily, but stepped back and lifted their weapons.

Kirasi bowed slightly, as a samurai would bow to one of lower station. "Thank you for your consideration Hojaro-san. I have come to take you into custody so you may face charges of banditry and the murder of clan samurai. I prefer to do so peacefully, but if it must come to a contest of arms, I am willing to stand against you."

"Do you hear that boys, she wants me to come along peacefully." Hojaro grinned broadly, showing strong yellow teeth. "As if this little girl could make me come along any other way." The other bandits continued to look uncertain, their gazes wavering from their leader to the Crane samurai-ko to the edges of the clearing. Hojaro snorted at them derisively and turned back to Kirasi. "All right, strippling. You want me to come with you, and I don't want to go...obviously. How about we settle this the old fashioned way, the Crane way? You and me, a single draw, winner lives, loser goes to see her ancestors."

Kirasi nodded slightly, her face set and serious, and sketched a shallow bow. "As you say. A duel, then." She stepped back and set her right hand on the hilt of her katana, widening her stance slightly, her eyes narrowing as she tuned out everything but her opponent.

The older man sneered as he moved to stand in front of her, his own hand on his sword-hilt. "Very pretty stance. Did you learn that in the dojo last week? It won't save you." His thumb pressed against the tsuba, loosening his sword in



its saya. "When I killed the last magistrate they sent after me, I thought for sure I was safe from then on. Maybe they'll stop wasting lives after they get your corpse back."

The young yoriki said quietly, "And when my predecessor killed all of your men before you ambushed him, we thought you would go to ground for a long time. I suppose we were both disappointed."

The two duelists faced one another for a long moment. At an almost imperceptible signal, both of them drew, blades flashing silver in the afternoon sunlight. In an instant they were past each other, their swords still held in the final pose of their attacks.

Hojaro's grin held for a second. Then his face went slack as he fell to the leaf-strewn floor of the clearing. Kirasi staggered a moment, then dropped to her knees; a long gash creased her left leg, blood soaking through her blue hakama. As she dropped, the other two ronin stepped forward, one raising his spear to strike.

A hiss cut the air and an arrow flew from the trees in a flash of yellow and green. The shaft buried itself in the ronin's throat. The bandit fell to the earth, thrashing wildly, gurgling his last through bloody lips. His comrade looked around fearfully, waving his sword as though to ward off ghosts. Then he froze as a knife touched his back. A man in a simple black kimono and mask stood behind him, resting the point of his tanto over the bandit's kidney.

The man in black tilted his head toward Kirasi. "I told you entering the clearing alone was foolish."

Daidoji Kirasi tore a strip of cloth from her kimono sleeve and began wrapping it around her wounded leg, staunching the bleeding. "Maybe, but he wouldn't have dueling me if I hadn't. He'd have fled again, and this time we might not have been able to track him."

A young man stepped out of the trees, holding a bow lacquered in yellow and black. "I don't think so, Kira-san. I'd have killed him before he could run."

"Regardless, it worked," the young Crane shrugged. She turned to the single living ronin. "For all I know you've done nothing except to choose the wrong man to serve. We know Hojaro hasn't performed any acts of banditry since recruiting you. You may go, ronin. Run. And remember, if you follow your master into a life of banditry and murder, you will meet the same fate as he. You cannot outrun justice."

The ronin nodded, gulping, as the Scorpion bushi stepped back and sheathed his knife. The former bandit fled the clearing as if wolves were chasing him, barely pausing long enough to snatch up a bundle of clothes.

As he crashed away through the trees, the young archer called after him with laughter in her voice. "You also can't outrun my arrows!"



Air and the Ways of War

The Element of Air is fickle and unpredictable. It can be as soft and subtle as a child's whispered prayer, or as loud and violent as the bellow of a hurricane swallowing a coastal village. Typically, when one thinks of samurai who best exemplify the philosophy of Air, the tendency is to think of courtiers. Those who serve in the courts do indeed embrace the ways of Air, and their methods and approaches are discussed in Chapter Two of this book. However, while the way of Air can be the way of subtlety and stealth, it can also be of swift decisive action and, at times, irrevocable destruction. Thus, warriors from those clans who closely follow the philosophy of Air are often discounted and underestimated. They tend to show restraint until the

time is right, quietly restraining themselves and subtly affecting the perceptions of those around them, friend and foe alike. Then, when the time comes for decisive action, they sweep across the battlefield in a tempest of violence, blasting aside all who stand in their way with ferocity and finality.

The duelists of the Crane and the stealthy warriors of the Scorpion best exemplify the philosophy of Air on the battlefield, but there are groups within every clan who follow the ways of Air in one manner or another.

The Crane Clan

"One man, one sword, one strike. All other styles are false."

—KAKITA FURAGAMI

The Crane philosophy of Air owes its origins to one of the clan's founders, the man called Kakita. When he married Lady Doji and joined the nascent Crane Clan, he brought with him a unique philosophy of life and of battle, a philosophy he refined and perfected throughout his long life. He articulated most of his views in his treatise *The Sword*, and Crane warriors have pursued his philosophies and methods ever since.

The modern Crane are the acknowledged masters of the art of iaijutsu, the style of dueling which the samurai of the Empire use to settle questions of honor. Iaijutsu dueling is in many ways the epitome of the martial philosophy of Air, but it is not the only way that Crane bushi are taught to follow the way of Air. Even as children, Crane samurai are taught to pay attention not only to what they perceive but also to what they feel about the things they see and hear. They are told to use both perception and feeling to construct a complete picture of the events around them. This unity with their own feelings means that many Crane warriors are also artists. They channel the intensity they feel on the battlefield into other pursuits when combat is not in the offing. There have been many famous Crane warriors who were as well known for their poetry or painting as they were for their prowess on the battlefield.

Of course, this sort of training can be a double-edged sword. Hyperawareness of what they think and feel about everything sometimes leads young Crane samurai to indulge in anything that lets them feel more intensely—an obsession with art or music, for example, or a series of passionate romances (even embracing the un-Rokugani notion of falling in love), and so forth. There is a reason why Crane figure more prominently in plays about romance and loss, and it is not just that more playwrights are themselves Crane. Inevitably, those of less firm and honorable character sometimes follow their urges into unhealthy and shameful actions such as drinking, opium abuse, or gambling.

Thankfully, such excesses are rare. Most Crane samurai use the skills they learn in childhood to become assets to the Empire and their clan. Their study of meditation and iaijutsu focuses and disciplines their feelings, allowing them to maintain their intense awareness of their surroundings and react with nearly inhuman swiftness. This sensitivity is not solely limited to duelists, of course; it also helps make the Daidoji some of the best yojimbo in the Empire, and helps Doji courtiers sense the flow of court and negotiations faster than their counterparts. Crane archers are also known for their devotion to the perfect awareness that comes with an intense devotion to Air. Dueling, however, remains the most essential and basic way in which the Crane follow the path of Air.



The Scorpion Clan

"Do not look at my sword, fool. The blade you do not see is the most deadly."

—BAYUSHI AKUSAI

The Scorpion Clan follows the philosophy of Air closely, in large part because it meshes quite well with the direction given to their founder, Bayushi, by his brother Hantei. The Scorpion Clan was to do what the others cannot do, thereby keeping the Empire safe. Bayushi himself said, "Historians will some day write great tales of Akodo's bravery and Doji's charm, while we who lurk in shadows will be the villains in their stories. Tricksters and liars: those will be our roles." Lurking in the shadows, quietly flowing through the world unseen, exemplifies the Scorpion approach to the philosophy of Air. While the Crane exemplify the intangible awareness and sudden violence of an unexpected wind, the Scorpion exemplify the quiet and stillness which are also essential parts of Air. Just as it is impossible for the Rokugani to create a vessel which is completely airtight, so too is it impossible to keep the Scorpion from learning any secret they might set their minds to discovering. They are the Empire's undisputed masters of stealth and guile, and this is reflected not only by their courtly activities but also by the way their warriors learn to fight. Where other Rokugani samurai might assault their foes with the raging fury of an unchecked



AN EXCERPT FROM THE SWORD

To observe without moving the eyes, to sharpen the mind as well as the body—the enhancement of the sixth sense should be practiced and refined in order to gain full control of one's mental attitude. In both peaceful times and at war, one's attitude should be the same—refined, noble, and disciplined. Ascertain the truth from the outside in—take in the broad viewpoint, and sharpen the mind until you find the truth within all things. Even when the body is at rest, the mind should be controlled and in a state of concentration. Walk the path of various arts and skills, broaden your knowledge of the world and do not be deceived. If your mind is strong then your spirit will never be hampered by your physical condition, even when you are exhausted or in pain.



wildfire, the inescapable menace of a tsunami, or even the unstoppable force of a crashing avalanche. The Scorpion approach battle with the quiet subtlety of a soft breeze.

It is said by philosophers that a single movement of a butterfly's wings can cause a breeze that will build and build until it becomes a typhoon. It is this subtle manipulation of minor events that make Scorpion courtiers so effective, but Scorpion bushi also follow this philosophy. If they can quietly arrange for the death of an opposing general before they must face him openly, they count it as victory, even though there was no battle. If a Scorpion bushi seemingly misses a step as he advances on a foe, it is most likely the first of many subtle actions designed to deceive his enemy, leading eventually to total victory. Their adherence to the subtler philosophies of Air is what makes Scorpion bushi so very difficult to assess in combat—and so very dangerous. Like the wind they emulate, it is impossible to know in advance which way they will blow.

The Other Clans

While the Crane and Scorpion are the Great Clans who most exemplify the philosophy of Air, there are families and schools among many of the other clans whose adherence to the way of Air is almost as complete.

THE CRAB CLAN

The Hiruma schools of the Crab Clan combine a fighting philosophy of lightning speed, one some might consider more characteristic of the warriors of the Crane Clan, with an understanding of the practical necessity of stealth that

is closer to the Scorpion Clan. While the warriors of the Crane clan use their amazing swiftness to try to fell their enemies with a single perfect strike, the Hiruma prefer to strike their foes many times, wearing them down the way the wind and water slowly but inevitably wear away at stone until it falls to pieces. In the early days of the Empire the Hiruma were sometimes called (somewhat derogatorily) Hummingbird Warriors because they never seemed to be in the same location or to strike from the same place when in battle, instead moving continuously and striking whenever they saw an opening, no matter how small.

Modern Hiruma have been forced to embrace Air even more closely due to the loss of their original school for over three centuries and the develop-

ment of its replacement, the Hiruma Scouts. The Scouts follow the philosophy of Air even more closely than their predecessors. They flow over the Shadowlands like a quiet breeze, disturbing little but making a big impact in the battle against the forces of Fu Leng. The Hiruma scouts also strike swiftly and unpredictably, but unlike the Hummingbird Warriors they also seek to fade away between each strike, never giving their foes a target to attack. Like the wind, they seek to slip through their foes' grasps and return to fight them again and again.

THE MANTIS CLAN

An archer must trust the Air so much as to let his weapon float upon it, to be aided or at times hindered by its power. Moreover, not only do archers entrust their missiles to the wind, but the very art of archery in Rokugan is largely a matter of instinct. A Rokugani bowman does not aim his shots as a gaijin does, but instead pulls and releases the bowstring in an almost continuous motion, instinctively aware of when he must release the arrow in order to hit the target.

No family in the Empire embraces the way of the bow more closely than the Tsuruchi. The master archers of the Tsuruchi family trust their own instinctive reflexes, their awareness of the way the wind is blowing, of how far the arrow will drop over a given distance—these and innumerable other factors that can affect the flight of an arrow are all sensed and responded to instantly, without the need for conscious thought. In its own way this exemplifies the philosophy of Air as perfectly as an iaijutsu strike.