An Empire in Turmoil...

In Rokugan, it is said that honor is stronger than steel. While even the finest blade can bend and break or twist under the heat of the forge, the Emerald Empire’s society has been folded in the forges of politics and war for more than a thousand years, and it has not yet broken. The society of Rokugan follows a divinely ordered pattern set down by the eight Kami, who shared their celestial blessings with the mortal realm. Rokugan is a land of strict social stratification, where an improper look at the wrong time can mean death.

This is an era of sudden change and upheaval in Rokugan, however. Mortal schemes, natural calamities, and celestial turmoil alike have disrupted the political, military, and spiritual equilibrium of the land. Long-simmering rivalries and fresh betrayals ripple through the courts and on the battlefield. The Chrysanthemum Throne is beset by threats from without and within, and the honor of the seven Great Clans—the families descended from the heroes of legend and sworn to rule their lands in the Emperor’s name—shall be put to the test.

The Great Clans

For over one thousand years, the seven Great Clans of Rokugan have served the Chrysanthemum Throne according to their unique strengths and weaknesses. This section provides a thematic introduction to each of these clans.
At the southern border of Rokugan stands a grim miracle: the Kaiu Wall, stretching like a great puckered scar along the landscape, its slate-grey blocks fitted together seamlessly into a structure thirty feet thick and a hundred feet tall. To the south loom the blighted Shadowlands, the domain of the corrupted armies of Jigoku, and to the north lie the lands of the Crab Clan, the Wall’s crafters and defenders.

After the Seven Thunders repelled Fu Leng’s dark army from Rokugan, the first Emperor commanded that a great wall be built to protect the Empire from the evils of the Shadowlands. For centuries, the Crab Clan has carried out that command with dedication. Superstitious peasants whisper that the mortar of the Wall is strengthened with the blood of Crab warriors; although the Crab would never stoop to practicing blood magic—even to protect their beloved Empire—it is an accurate metaphor for their suffering. While others sing the praises of the Thousand Years of Peace, this is at best a false pleasantry to the Crab, who lose troops daily to both the attacks on the Wall and the corruptive power of the Taint. Even when faced with such hardship, the Crab Clan has never wavered, standing steadfast in its duty to protect the border of the Empire.

Stubbornness has ever been a trait of the Crab. The Kami Hida placed the seat of his clan in the great mountains of the south, claiming that anyone incapable of surviving in such a place was unworthy of following him. At the clan’s founding, three men stepped forward to prove themselves and were sent to slay a terrifying demon. Working together, they prevailed and were accepted as the founders of the great families within the Crab. The stations of their descendants still reflect the roles of their forebears within that legendary battle: the Hiruma, whose founder tracked the movements of the beast, now provide the scouts; the Kuni, whose founder studied the demon’s weaknesses, train priests and scholars; and the Kaiu, whose founder forged the blade that slew the demon, have for generations been craftspersons and builders, lending their name to the vast wall they built. Only one family has joined the ranks since then, and under unusual circumstances. The Yasuki family, chafing under the demands of the haughty Crane Clan, broke its ties with the Crane and offered fealty to the Crab, who eagerly accepted. Unlike the other families, who train for battle against the Shadowlands, the Yasuki train as courtiers in negotiation and commerce, an indispensable asset to the otherwise-militant Crab.

To those who look upon the Crab kindly, their strength is impressive and their determination honorable. But to those who do not—those who benefit from the protection of the Wall without knowing the sacrifices it requires—the Crab are impolite brutes, too pigheaded to comprehend the intricacies of court decorum. Regardless of how others might view them, the Crab cannot mire themselves in bickering and intrigue. They present their back to the court only so they may more fully face the true enemy in the Shadowlands beyond.
The Crane Clan

At the dawn of the Empire, after the Kami had fallen from the Celestial Heavens, they found themselves plunged into a mortal world rife with cruelty and war. The Kami Doji—sister of Hantei, the first Emperor—resolved to bring order to this savage realm. The embodiment of elegance and grace, Doji walked among the primitive peoples, calming them in the way fair weather calms a storm-tossed sea. From her, they learned writing so they could record their achievements, politics to govern their affairs, economics and commerce to manage their wealth, and art and culture to lift them from their lives of misery. Those she touched the most became her devoted followers, the first samurai of the Crane Clan. Since that time, the Crane have become both the poets and the poetry of the Empire, at once the swordsmiths and the duelists wielding the smith’s blades. In every aspect of their lives, the Crane strive for mastery in all things, an ideal that the other clans can only hope to emulate.

The Doji, the ruling family of the Crane, are perfection made flesh, the pinnacle of grace and beauty. With serene smiles, they offer gifts to those who would oppose them, thereby subtly ensnaring their enemies in intricate webs of favors and debts from which there is no easy escape. The Kakita—a family named after Doji’s husband, the first Emerald Champion—craft music, poetry, paintings, and sculptures of such breathtaking beauty that the endeavors of others are, at best, pale imitations. Yet the blur of the sword is the ultimate expression of Kakita achievement, the iaijutsu dueling strike of the katana blending art and mastery in a single blink of the eye. The shugenja of the Asahina family are the pacifist heart of the Crane, mediators and healers who eschew violence and spurn the battlefield. And if violence is inevitable, their delicate tsangusuri talismans protect those who march to war in their stead. In times of conflict, the Daidoji family stands ready, a keen but discreet weapon brandished in the clan’s defense. Besides filling the ranks of the so-called “Iron Crane,” which forms the bulk of the Crane’s standing armies, the Daidoji also clandestinely serve as the masters of cunning maneuvers and deceptive tactics. These covert scouts harry opponents of much greater strength and numbers, wearing them down, confounding and demoralizing them, finally striking only when swift and decisive victory is assured.

To the rest of the Empire, the Crane are a study in contrasts. They are both respected and hated for their achievements, both admired and envied for their elegance and grace. They are the makers of beauty and the beauty itself, devotees of peace and civility who nonetheless wield lethal blades. But if samurai of the other Great Clans agree on anything, it is this: from the Crane’s impeccable garments, which set the standards for style in the Empire, to the sprawling beauty and wonder of their Fantastic Gardens, to their seemingly limitless talent for artistic accomplishment and political dominance in Rokugan’s courts, the Crane don’t simply define what it means to be a civilized Empire—they are the very civilized essence of Rokugan.
The Dragon Clan

In an empire that usually prizes conformity and respect for tradition, the Dragon Clan is an enigma. Inspired by their mysterious founder, the Kami Togashi, the Dragon place more emphasis than most of their fellow samurai on the individual search for enlightenment and expertise. In the centuries since the Kami fell to earth, Togashi’s followers have acquired a reputation for strange behavior. Isolated by the mountains of their northern home and entrusted with watching over the Empire, the Dragon rarely participate as actively in the politics of the Empire as other clans do—and when they do intervene, it is often for reasons others can only guess at. The secret of the Dragon is that they are guided by their founder’s foresight, but even they do not always know what Togashi saw in his visions.

The Dragon are not without their traditions, but even those break the mold formed by a thousand years of Rokugani history. It is said that Dragon shugenja and courtiers are warriors, their warriors are monks, and their monks are inexplicable. Although the Mirumoto family produces some of the best swordsmen in Rokugan, its members practice a difficult style known as niten, or “Two Heavens,” wielding their katana and wakizashi simultaneously. The Agasha shugenja family studies alchemy, which teaches them both to shift between the Elements in their prayers and to create such wonders as specially treated sword blades and the powder for fireworks. These two families often work together, so that Dragon bushi have a deeper understanding of the elemental kami than most of their peers, and Dragon shugenja are a surprisingly common sight on the battlefield. The courtiers of the Kitsuki family also study the art of the sword, and their investigative prowess is unmatched; their training teaches them to piece together tiny clues to form a larger picture in a fashion few outsiders can understand. Finally, the monks of the Togashi Tattooed Order, who are called ise zumi, channel power through mystic tattoos. They follow individual paths even more than their clanmates do, whether that involves seeking enlightenment through hermitage in the mountains or wandering the Empire in search of new experiences.

This individualistic bent means that friendships and enmities with the Dragon often operate on a personal level rather than a clan-wide one. Their enigmatic and isolated ways have earned them very few true enemies, and even fewer close allies. Due to the great distance between them, the Dragon have little contact with the Crab. They maintain cordial relationships with their neighbors the Phoenix, with whom they share an interest in religion and mysticism, and the Unicorn, whose foreign habits are likewise an odd match with the rest of Rokugan. The Dragon have more difficulty with the Lion, who view individualism with a skeptical eye, and the Crane, whose Kakita duelists have rivaled the Mirumoto’s since the earlies days of the Empire. Perhaps their most interesting relationship is with the Scorpion: the Dragon seem to understand the Clan of Secrets better than anyone else—much to the frustration of Scorpion saboteurs unmasked by Kitsuki investigators.

Few can truly say they understand the Dragon. Some insist their beloved paradoxes and puzzles are no more than a game, triviality masquerading as depth. To this accusation, the Dragon quote a common saying of the ise zumi:
“What is wisdom?” one asked.
“What is not wisdom?” the other answered.
The Lion Clan

Every samurai who lives in Rokugan measures courage, honor, and duty by the standard set by the Lion Clan. The Lion’s military is unrivaled, as there are no sharper tacticians and no larger armies in all of Rokugan. This proud military heritage has earned the Lion Clan a place as the Right Hand of the Emperor, sworn to protect him by serving as his personal guard and his standing army. In light of this duty, fear means nothing to Lion samurai. The threat of death only serves to embolden them and bolster their courage, for there can be no greater end than to perish in honorable combat. As veterans of countless wars, the Lion Clan knows that those who attack first shall be victorious.

Since the dawn of the Empire, the four families of the Lion Clan have embodied the Seven Tenets of Bushidō. The Akodo family bears the name of the Lion Clan’s founding Kami: Akodo One-Eye, the god of war and the greatest commander to ever live. According to all the tales, for a thousand years no Akodo general has ever lost a battle, bestowing the family with a reputation for invincible generals and brilliant tacticians. The Matsu family are the teeth of the Lion, sharpened every day by arduous training. Each warrior is raised from the womb for war, to wield the katana with fearsome skill and to die for the glory of Rokugan. Having served as the historians of Rokugan since its inception, the Ikoma family makes warriors into legends. History is the key to victory, for samurai learn best from their ancestors’ triumphs. The Kitsu family links the Realm of Mortals with the Realm of Sacred Ancestors, their sōdan-senzo acting as spirit mediums for their honored dead. These powerful shugenja summon the experience and wisdom of their ancient heroes to serve them in the heat of battle, guiding the Lion Clan’s armies to victory against all odds. Through strategy, ferocity, sagacity, and legacy, these families of the Lion Clan maintain the disciplined war machine of the samurai way of life.

As generals of the Emperor’s own army, the Lion view the other Great Clans only in terms of their value in protecting Rokugan and in upholding the revered tenets of Bushidō. The Crab Clan’s fortitude and courage have always earned Lion respect, yet the Lion also know that strategy and discipline serve in places where mere strength cannot. The Lion’s rivalry with the Crane stems from the simple question of what serves the Emperor best: the pampered discourse of Crane courtiers or the ready steel of Lion swords? The Lion pay no heed to the Dragon, viewing them as reclusive and hidden, and therefore useless members of the Empire. Peace means death to the samurai way of life, so the Lion cannot abide Phoenix pacifism. The Scorpion must never be trusted, no matter how sweetly their masks may smile, as their sting is never far behind. The Unicorn’s lack of discipline renders them little more than barbarians, and Bushidō has no place for such wildness according to the Lion.

Above all, the Lion live, breathe, and die for the Emperor and Rokugan. Should the interests of the Emperor and the welfare of the Empire diverge, toward what deadly paths or dishonorable fates would the Lion march?
The Phoenix Clan

The Phoenix is a symbol of contradictions: explosive power and great restraint, vast intelligence and deep humility, immolating self-sacrifice and glorious rebirth. These entwined virtues illuminate the path of Rokugan’s most mystical Great Clan, the keepers of the Tao of Shinsei and caretakers of the Empire’s soul.

The Phoenix’s flame burned brightest in Shiba, the wisest and most humble of the fallen Kami. While his siblings sought to secure their legacy and civilize the lands, Shiba sought knowledge and harmony. In the fledgling Empire’s darkest hour, Shiba and the Little Teacher, Shinsei, entreated the priest Isawa and his tribe to join them in fighting the forces of the Shadowlands. While Isawa saw their wisdom, he would not surrender his tribe to the rule of the Kami. When he refused, Shiba bent his knee, swearing fealty and pledging that if the tribe joined the Empire, Shiba’s line would forever serve Isawa’s. With this humble gesture, Shiba established the Phoenix’s deferential traditions and founded a clan in which warriors and priests could exist side by side.

The Phoenix Clan follows Shiba’s example to this day. Guided by the wisdom of the Council of Elemental Masters, the clan’s members tend to the spirits of the land and serve their lords as priests and spiritual advisors. The Phoenix maintain shrines throughout the Empire, teach the mysteries of the Tao, and preserve the harmony between mortals and gods.

Leading the Phoenix is the Isawa family, beloved of the kami and the foremost of Rokugan’s scholars and shugenja. Many of the Empire’s shugenja traditions originate with the Isawa family, and more children of the Isawa are born with the ability to hear the kami than any other family in the Empire. Serving these priests are the Shiba, the Phoenix’s lone warrior family and foremost of the Empire’s yōjimbō. Sworn to protect the clan’s shugenja, these warriors study theology and philosophy to better understand and guard their charges from threats both mundane and supernatural. Leading them is the Phoenix Clan Champion, an exemplary Shiba chosen not through birthright, but by the ancestral sword of the Phoenix itself, Ofushikai. Yet even the clan champion bends a knee to the five Elemental Masters, an arrangement unique to the Phoenix Clan. If the Isawa are the mind and the Shiba are the arm, then the Asako are the Phoenix’s heart. Their compassionate rhetoric can lower any guard, and it is said an Asako healer can overcome any malady. The primary scholars of the Tao, the Asako have a small order of monks to maintain their libraries and keep the Tao’s greatest secrets hidden until the world is ready for its truth.

As the scent of incense wafts unseen to all corners of a shrine, so do the spirit realms overlap invisibly with our own. The Phoenix mediate between both worlds, appealing to the very soul of the lands. Mountains collapse at their whispered requests, dry rivers are convinced to flow again, plagues are banished, restless ghosts are returned to slumber, and crops flourish in previously barren wastelands. Nevertheless, the Phoenix understand that even the purest wish can have unintended and destructive consequences if the elements are brought out of balance. Although others consider the Phoenix too hesitant in their entreaties to the kami, few are foolhardy enough to test the Phoenix’s dedication to peace and harmony.
With six terrible words, the Kami Bayushi set his followers in the newly founded Scorpion Clan on a dark and dangerous path. Enemies loomed beyond Rokugan’s borders, but they also lurked within them. Bayushi swore to protect the Empire by any means necessary. Where the Code of Bushidō tied the Emperor’s Left and Right Hands—the courtiers of the Crane and the mighty legions of the Lion—the Emperor’s Underhand could still reach. To combat the liars, the thieves, and the traitors within the Great Clans, Bayushi’s followers would have to lie, steal, and cheat in turn. The weapons of the Scorpion became blackmail, poison, and sabotage. The Scorpion dirtied their hands so that others’ could remain pure.

Each Scorpion family specializes in a different sort of deception, wearing masks as an overt promise of their duplicity. The ruling family of the Scorpion, the Bayushi, are the charming smile wielding a poisoned blade. Whether amid the clash of battle or the subtle schemes of court, they specialize in getting close to their foes before striking a killing blow like their namesake, the scorpion. The Shosuro, meanwhile, seem but a family of talented artists and actors, and little more. Yet this, like so many things about the Scorpion, is a lie, because from their ranks come the clan’s spies and saboteurs, their poisoners and assassins, and most ominous of all, the sinister ninja of whispered legend. The Soshi, a family of shugenja, have mastered the subtle art of calling upon the kami silently. Some claim the Soshi wield the shadows themselves as a weapon or a shield. Finally, the Yogo, a family of shugenja descended from the Phoenix Clan, protect the Empire from Fu Leng’s influence and punish those who delve into forbidden magics. Long ago, the Dark Kami himself cursed those carrying the Yogo bloodline to inevitably betray the one they love most. From then on, the Yogo could serve only the Scorpion, whom they would never love.

The Scorpion have both united the other clans against them in righteous anger and kept the other clans divided so that no one coalition can overpower the Emperor. This has earned them no few enemies over the centuries. The Lion and Crab are the most common victims of the Scorpion’s treachery. The Crane and Phoenix pride themselves on refusing to stoop so low as the Scorpion, even though they often find themselves on the same side as the Scorpion clan in the courts. The Unicorn confound the Scorpion with their unpredictable ways, but the Clan of the Wind has brought the Scorpion many new tricks and useful techniques from the lands beyond the Burning Sands. Not least of these is the opium that enriches Ryoko Owari, the greatest and most prosperous city in all the Empire.

Yet, in spite of—and perhaps because of—the clan’s fearsome reputation, there is none more loyal than a Scorpion. In a clan of deceivers and manipulators, trust is a hard-earned treasure to be cherished and guarded. Betrayal is punished with swift retribution, the souls of the treacherous forever bound into the horrific limbo of the place known as Traitor’s Grove. Such fierce loyalty is a small consolation, at least, given the dangerous but vital role the Scorpion have played in the Empire from the moment their Kami spoke his fateful words “I will be your villain, Hantei.”
A thousand years ago, the Ki-Rin Clan rode out of Rokugan, seeking to discover enemies hiding beyond the Emerald Empire’s borders. Their journey was arduous, and they found many strange and powerful threats. In defeating each one, the clan learned, changing its fighting styles, magical practices, and even philosophy. To survive, it was forced to adapt—and overcome. After eight centuries of wandering, the Clan of the Wind returned to the Empire as the Unicorn Clan. Their hordes entered Rokugan through the Shadowlands, punching a hole through Crab defenses and making their way past the Kaiu Wall into the heart of the Empire itself.

They wear fur, speak foreign tongues, and wield strange weapons. Although they still revere the Kami Shinjo, they have drifted far from the traditions and ways of the Emerald Empire. Whereas other clans beseech the elemental kami for their blessings, the Unicorn command the kami in a form of sorcery known as meishōdō, or “name magic.” Shugenja of other clans see these practices as barbaric at best or heretical at worst.

Of all those that left countless generations ago, only a few families have returned. The brave Shinjo family leads the clan, claiming descendancy from the Kami herself. The Utaku follow, fierce battle maidens and youths trained in acrobatic styles of horsemanship and war. The diplomatic Ide have quickly relearned the dangers of the Emperor’s court, while the samurai of the Iuchi family defend the clan with strange and powerful foreign magics. Lastly, the exotic, brooding Moto horde joined the Ki-Rin Clan during its journeys and had never set foot in Rokugan until the clan returned in the ninth century. All of the families care for the clan’s large herds of horses, which are the finest in the world.

The Unicorn Clan may seem at first to be a series of yins and yangs: the patient Ide countering the reckless Utaku; the airy, mystic Iuchi contrasting with the dark, dour Moto. Though these disparate winds might blow in different directions, they all swirl around the clan’s heart, the compassionate and courageous Shinjo family.

Yet the Unicorn Clan’s homecoming was not without difficulties. Even with proof of their heritage, the Unicorn were greeted as barbarian invaders, not returning heroes. They charged past the defenses of the Crab and then overcame the resistance mounted by the Lion, leaving both clans scattered in the wake of Unicorn cavalry. Reintegrating into Imperial society has been a challenge—and a deadly one at that. Still, there are lights in the darkness. An ancient treaty with the Crane was honored, providing the Unicorn a strong ally within the Empire. The Phoenix watch Unicorn magic with equal parts interest and concern. The Dragon perceive the wisdom of Shinjo’s children, and the Scorpion see the advantage in a pliable ally. Yet, all of Rokugan marvels at the speed and might of their magnificent steeds. Perhaps they are, finally, where they belong.