

The Yogo Curse Part II

By Josiah "Duke" Harrist and Katrina Ostrander

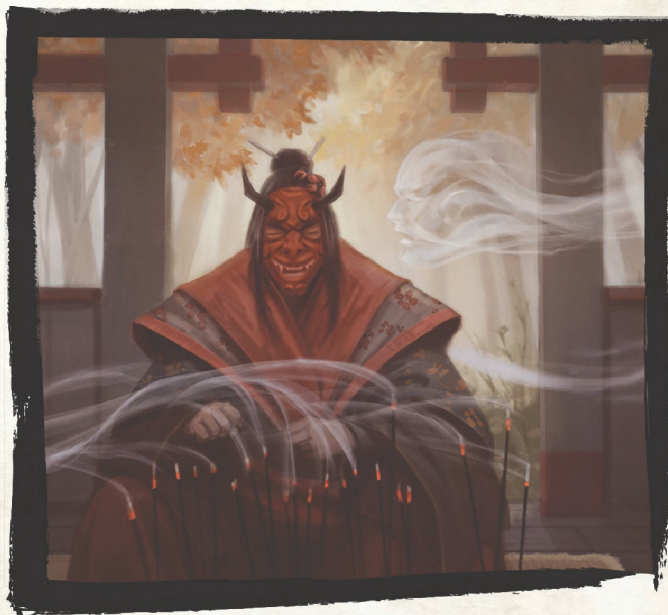
Deep in one of the vaults carved into the bedrock below the Castle of Learning, Yogo Junzo whispered the incantation to unseal the ward protecting the lacquered chest. Within lay his father's research and correspondence—and proof of his father's treachery. The records were too important to destroy and too dangerous to keep among the rest of the family archives, and so they had become yet another entry in the family's prodigious catalogue of forbidden objects.

He set down the oil lamp and began the work of disarming the chest's more mundane protections, sliding the latches in the precise order to disarm the poison needles and access the hidden keyhole. Finally, he slid the key into the lock and twisted. The chest popped open with a faint click, and the scent of cedarwood wafted up for a brief moment before giving way to the mustiness of the catacombs. Peering inside, the documents looked as pristine as they had on the day Junzo had taken them to show to the Black Watch. Even after two dozen years, the enchantments of preservation had held.

It had been tempting to ask the family's librarians to help him pore over the scrolls and letters in search of any mention of Lady Atsuko, but as was often the case, the risk outweighed the time he might have saved. No matter how unlikely it was that a sworn Yogo samurai would intentionally violate their oaths, the curse on their heads was another matter. The family had learned long ago not to share secrets unless absolutely necessary, and even then, not without first preparing the proper contingencies.

Unpacking the chest one piece at a time, Junzo prayed for guidance to Fukurokujin, keeper of knowledge, that his own intuition might lead him swiftly to the clues he sought. He opened the first journal and began to read.

Little of the journals' contents was a surprise. In defiance of the Yogo family traditions that kept parents and children at a distance, Junzo had been involved in most of his father's theological inquiry and ritual experiments from an early age. Now, Junzo could see the wisdom that underpinned those traditions. It was why



he had never married and had no children of his own, and why he would leave it to the family's elders to choose his successor when the time came. He would not repeat his father's mistakes.

Junzo's eyelids were heavy and the oil in the lamp was low by the time he found what he'd been looking for—his father's entries on the Shadowed Swamps and the Masks of Iuchiban. In his log, his father speculated that the creation of the marshes was a result of a path to Jigoku being opened within the Shinomen Forest, in the same way that the Festering Pit in the Shadowlands was a fissure that bridged that hellish realm to the mortal one. Somehow, one of the masks that had been placed in the safekeeping of the Kuni Witch Hunters or the Asako Inquisitors had ended up there. His father had never had a high opinion of the Black Watch's chief allies—and sometimes rivals.

Yet among the list of threats posed by the Shadowed Swamps and the countermeasures the Yogo would need to prepare as part of their expedition, there was no mention of enlisting the aid of one Lady Atsuko. After hours of searching, he had come up with nothing.

But perhaps that in and of itself was a clue.

The request for an audience with him barely passed as a proper introduction, with only the sloppily written letter from the minor vassal Yogo Yasuhide to vouch for her. She could well be a member of the same cult that tried to ensnare his father, hoping that enough years had passed that the son would let his guard down and fall prey to the same lure of hidden knowledge. He would disappoint her, but their meeting would not be completely in vain.

If she did follow in the bloody footsteps of Iuchiban's cult, then Junzo would be doing a service to the Empire by uncovering and thwarting her schemes. Once they had extracted everything she knew, the Black Watch could use that knowledge to stamp out any stirrings of the cult before it festered and grew.

Returning the records to their box, he allowed himself a slight grin of satisfaction. Although the matter of Kunshu was yet to be resolved, at least he could ensure Rokugan would be safe from the threat posed by Lady Atsuko.

The darkening castle town was quieter than Jiro remembered, as though its residents were under curfew. The sole exception was a storytelling monk leading a handful of peasant children back to their homes by the light of her lantern. As Jiro and Lady Atsuko passed by, the monk made way for the pair and stopped her tale, leading the children in a deferential bow. Though Jiro only caught a handful of the lines as the monk walked away, he recognized the parable of a child-eating demon who had been taught empathy through a trick played on her by the Little Teacher. As a result of her experience, the demon reformed herself and became one of Shinsei's fiercest protectors.

Jiro turned to see Lady Atsuko's face contorted in typical disgust, though whether it was the town, the monk, the children, the tale, or all four that offended her, he could not tell.



Soon, he would be free of her, and free to spend some quiet time with Kasume.

A golden moon lit the way to the main gate, outlining the spindled metal rods, the great fluttering crest of the Scorpion Clan, and the murder of crows perched on the lowest awning. The two-headed crow was nowhere to be seen.

The old woman was uncharacteristically silent behind him, her shawl draped around her knobby shoulders. Before they reached the castle keep, she took his hand and pressed her thumb into the center of his palm so hard he almost yelped in pain.

"Thank you for your help. I hope you are justly rewarded."

Jiro bowed to her and hoped she would let go, but she didn't. The woman's fingernails felt sharp enough to draw blood.

"It was an honor, my lady," he stammered. As if sensing his submission, the old woman let go.

The guards bowed to Atsuko as she handed them the letter of introduction, then they looked approvingly at Jiro.

"Lord Yogo sent word of your arrival. You are expected inside."

The floorboards souged underfoot as they entered the keep. The daimyō's audience chamber was the only room on the floor with solid wood walls; the rest of the halls were ephemeral, changing at the whims and needs of the estate. Today, the paper walls were a plain, blank white.

Emerging from a hidden panel, Yogo Kasume stepped into the main hall. Jiro's heart leapt in his chest when he saw his betrothed, and he forgot himself for a single, sublime moment. He wanted to hold her close and tell her everything about the past month, make her feel safe, but something about her seemed distant. There was a coldness in her affect. She turned away to address Jiro's charge.

"My lord will see you now, Lady Atsuko."

"At long last," the old woman said as she strode across the wooden floorboards toward the audience chamber, barely stirring them under her petite frame. Jiro looked down at Kasume with misty eyes.

"I missed you. Every moment we were apart, I thought of you," he said, though this was not true.

"We will speak tonight," Kasume said coldly.

Jiro followed her to the audience chamber entrance. "All does not seem well." Peering within, he could see the room was lined with guards, and many of the family's highest-ranking *shugenja* were also in attendance.

Kasume led him to a small, dim room adjoining the hall. He touched her hand, and she pulled away, skin prickling with gooseflesh, and gazed up at him from a deep well of anger. "Your mother sent me some of your things before our wedding. Things from home."

The young samurai nodded and sucked in his gut. His mother was always so thoughtful. But inside himself, he felt some vague, heavy pressure build.



"Among them were some letters."

Atsuko's screeching laugh resounded from the audience chamber. Kasume, emboldened, went on. "Among them was a letter addressed to you. Asking you to join the unit at Beiden Pass."

Was that a crack of glass? Jiro's head was swimming. Kasume held out several rolls of parchment, her voice shaking. He tried to speak up, but it was as though a dam had broken, and whatever Kasume had been holding back had burst forth, unbridled.

"I wondered, 'Did Jiro stay behind while Hideo went to fight? In cowardice?' but then I read these." She unfurled several parchments. Each of them the same letter, written over and over, each with minor imperfections but bearing the same hand, and each addressed to Hideo. Kasume turned the original letter over, crusted with red wax.

"And this sealing wax. Did you forge a summons to Hideo?"

"No. No, Hideo—had. I had," Jiro tugged at his collar. He felt suffocated. The young samurai wanted to put on his armor, wanted to look tough, wanted to hide.

"I received the letter—Hideo wanted to fight in my place," he said quietly.

"You are a terrible liar, Jiro."

Kasume's beautiful face was contorted into a look of utter repulsion. Jiro reached to grab the parchment, but she stepped back lightly.

"You sent Hideo to die. On our wedding day, no less!"

A snapping sound, as of a whip, broke the silence. A pained shout went up from the audience chamber. Jiro and Kasume exchanged a wordless look, then turned and burst through the doors.

Despite the fog that clung to the corners of his mind, Junzo sensed the intrusion in the castle's spiritual barriers at the same time as his fellow shugenja, who looked up at him in dismay from their seats to his left and right. Something powerful—and deeply Tainted—had brushed past the castle wards just as Junzo and his retinue were assembling in the audience hall to receive Lady Atsuko.

"What is it?" asked Captain Seppun Masayo. Standing beside him, she gripped her *bisentō*, the glaive of her office, a little more tightly. She was not as attuned to the wards of this castle as she would have been to those of the Imperial palace, but she was sharply observant nonetheless.

"The perimeter wards," Junzo explained. "A Tainted creature approaches."



Although her face was strangely bare in the presence of so many Scorpion, Masayo wore her own mask of courage, and she did not betray any surprise or fear. She asked only, "Will those of us assembled be enough?" She swept an appraising glance over the dozen or so warrior-monks that were posted throughout the hall, holding their *naginata* at attention, and the bodyguards who shadowed the Yogo shugenja wherever they went, their katana ready to be drawn at a moment's notice.

"Yes. The creature that approaches is not so dangerous that it poses a real threat to us or the castle," Junzo assured her. It was strong enough to resist their threshold barrier, but it was not strong enough to have taken the wards down in its wake, as an oni lord would.

However, it was increasingly likely that Lady Atsuko *was* the threat concerning the Shadowed Swamp, as opposed to a mere cultist, although why she would attempt such a forward, obvious assault on the castle was a mystery. It was possible that she had sensed an opportunity, or perhaps she had heard Kunshu's call. Either way, it did not matter.

They would entrap the creature within the audience chamber, and then interrogate it to discover its plans and what it was doing so deep within Scorpion territory. He would lay this ghost of his father's past to rest, at last.

Yogo Kikuyo stepped forward, clearly uncomfortable with what she was about to say. "My lord, our *shikigami* have already directed their complete attention to keeping the heirloom in check. Should we prepare for an 'eastern sunset'?" It was the secret phrase the Black Watch used to refer to the plan for evacuating the most precious contents of the Castle of Learning, though not even they knew precisely what those contents entailed. They did not know that they were guarding a piece of Fu Leng himself: one of the twelve Black Scrolls. That knowledge only ever lay with the Yogo daimyō and the Scorpion Clan Champion.

"No," Junzo waved her off. He was sure Kikuyo did not mean to insult him by suggesting that they would allow such a calamity to befall the castle. Instead, he answered evenly, "That will not be necessary."

Captain Masayo narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but not even she would be able to infer the significance of the phrase without more context.

One of the heralds scurried toward the dais to announce, "She is coming."

The assembled samurai adopted their formal postures and awaited further instruction from Junzo. Luckily, he did not have to warn them to be careful not to engage the Tainted creature in melee, lest they risk contracting the Shadowlands corruption from one of its blows.

As the sliding doors opened, a dark centipede skittered past Junzo's foot before hiding in the shadows of the dais's steps. From the shadowed hall emerged a woman, too thin and frail, her fine robes hanging from her limbs like wilting wisteria vines. He wasn't sure whether he was imagining the stench of rotting flowers mixed in with the scent of hot sake.

"The Lady Atsuko," proclaimed the herald.



Step by tottering step, she drew closer to Junzo and the others, and then offered a bow that was so deep as to be borderline mocking. After she had risen again, she stared directly into Junzo's eyes and said, "I am flattered to have been granted so large an audience by the powerful and wise Lord Yogo Junzo."

"You cannot fool us, demon," he replied. "We know what you are." The samurai around him shifted, preparing to react at any sign of attack.

"If you indeed already know, then why is it that you've allowed me to enter?" As though she were amused by her own question, she cackled, her laugh rising into a screech.

"Because you have no hope of defeating us in our own stronghold." Junzo reached within his robe for a holy charm that would stop the demon where it stood.

"Ah, is that something for me? And here I am the one who is supposed to be presenting gifts...How rude of me." The old woman's kimono sloughed off her emaciated back as she stood, strange and unnaturally tall, her right arm long and spindled and dark. Someone gasped. With a sudden crack, she whipped her arm out to slash at Junzo, only for Captain Masayo to lunge forward and block the blow with the long haft of her spear. The demon drew back.

"Defend Lord Junzo!" the captain shouted as she took a defensive stance in front of him, leveling her spear tip at the monstrosity before praying to the kami of the earth to fortify them with the sturdiness of stone. Junzo lent his voice to hers, hastening the kami's response.

As soon as the kami heeded their prayers, Junzo flung the holy scripture like a knife at the demon.

The charm blackened and burned away to ash in midair.

No, it couldn't be...

But then he felt it, the bloodthirsty spirit of Kunshu calling out to him, resonating with the malevolent energies of the centipede demon. In the chamber below them, he could feel the paper gods turning, rebelling against his control. He couldn't fight them and the demon at once, not in this state.

Sensing his unease, the rest of the warrior-monks and bodyguards formed protective circles around their daimyō and the other shugenja, as other samurai burst in from the side rooms to respond to the commotion.

A paralyzing fear gripped Jiro as he watched his betrothed charge forward, wielding the short sword of a samurai. When had she retrieved her blade from the entry hall?

Kasume stopped short as the terror of the threat washed over them both. A bruise-colored centipede, bigger and longer than two horses put together, reared back as its lower body lengthened and sprouted dozens of hooked legs. Its huge scything claws brushed the naginata of the Yogo warrior-monks aside like twigs as it lunged for its prey. A hungry maw filled with razor-sharp teeth bit down around a bodyguard's head, severing the head cleanly from its body.



The face Lady Atsuko had worn, heavily made-up and painted like a mask, smirked down at her remaining prey from the center of her forehead.

"You shall never again step foot in Rokugan!" the Yogo daimyō bellowed, and then he was chanting, moving his hands in supplication behind a shugenja clad in Imperial armor, but he seemed to be fumbling over the words and motions.



The Yogo samurai fell back, and Atsuko pressed her attack. One claw pierced the armor of a bodyguard as she brought down the other to cut the shugenja standing behind him in two.

Amidst the cacophony came the wail of a conch shell announcing that battle was being joined in the northeast. A moment later, and another horn blew, this time from the opposite direction.

Were they being attacked from all sides?

"No!" the daimyō exclaimed, the air around him rippling with heat as he stared down Lady Atsuko.

"It is time to pay my master his due," the monster roared in Lady Atsuko's shrill voice.

"I will not fail Rokugan!" the daimyō shouted back in defiance, and the flames of the room's candles ignited into fireballs and rose into the air at his command.

"Oh, but you already have!"

The Imperial guard raised her bisentō as it glowed a bright jade-green and rushed toward the demon. She pierced the demon's chitinous body, and Lady Atsuko howled in pain, but then another scream joined the chorus. A bladed claw sprouted from the Imperial's back. The centipede-demon tossed the woman aside into the shadows.

The daimyō let out a howl of anger and sent orbs of fire hurtling at Lady Atsuko, searing her flesh but also spreading flames across the floor and onto the ceiling. Black smoke billowed forth as the rice-paper screens ignited, and Jiro shielded his face from the intense heat.

Through the smoke, he could make out the form of Lord Junzo who gurgled and spat blood as several long, sharp tendrils pierced him through the heart. His eyes went wide as the tendrils retreated, and he clutched his chest as blood pumped out beneath his palm.

Kasume had dropped Jiro's letters on the floor. As Kasume raised her sword in frantic desperation, a long trail of venomous ichor dripped from the demon's mandibles.

In that moment, Jiro's path was clear. He dropped to his knees, gathered up the papers, and shot one last, fleeting look at his betrothed.

Atsuko had already pierced Kasume once through the belly, and she was flailing, opening



and closing her mouth, staring at him in wordless agony. Whimpering, he turned and burst through the door into the cool and crisp night air.

"Lord Junzo has fallen. Help him!" he shouted to where the guards should be, but there was no one there to hear.

He had escaped the chaos of the keep only to discover that the keep was under attack from without. Illuminated by the flickering light of the guards' braziers, goblins, ogres, and terrible monstrosities he had never seen before were attempting to scale the walls and, failing that, trying to tear down the main gate. Flying horrors swooped down from above, tearing the helmets from the samurai and then gouging out their eyes with razor-sharp beaks.



He could only stand and watch as the Yogo samurai fell before the horrific onslaught. If the Yogo daimyō had fallen, what use would he be in this fight?

A terrible scream from behind him reminded Jiro of the mortal danger still posed by Lady Atsuko, and he forced himself to move. He had to escape, had to survive this waking nightmare. He ran to the stables in search of a horse, but before he could mount one, a young woman clad in black and red grabbed him by the wrist. The crest on her robes wasn't that of a Yogo, but a Soshi.

"Come!" she commanded, and before Jiro could react, the woman took the letters from his arms and stuffed them in the saddlebags beside ancient scrolls wrapped in black cloth.

The young samurai looked around, dazed. The castle had erupted into chaos and flame. Guards shouted from the watchtowers as soldiers strung their bows with black-feathered arrows. Their attention was split between fending off the assault from without and stopping the slaughter from within.

"We feared a doom such as this. We ride for Otosan Uchi to deliver these directly to the Regent—at any cost. As a Yogo, this might be your final duty to your family."

The woman mounted a horse of her own and then gestured to a cadre of soldiers on horseback in black coats. The leader of the soldiers looked down at the young samurai with a stern expression and strung his half-bow. Jiro wanted to ask what was in his saddlebags, but then thought better of it. His head was pounding. He had brought ruin to Yogo Junzo. Others would read his forgeries and he would be punished. He had lost his future; he had lost Kasume; he had lost everything. If he could complete this one task, maybe he could redeem himself.



From high atop the blazing keep, there came an unholy, bone-chilling hiss, followed by Atsuko's familiar shrieking laugh. Dozens of soldiers loosed arrows at the massive, coiling form of the oni as it emerged from one window, smirking.

Heart hammering in his chest, Jiro offered a quick nod of understanding and mounted the horse. With a shout, they charged into the night.

After a night of riding under the unwavering eye of the moon, the riders stopped at a nameless village hemmed in by dilapidated fences. The leaves had fallen from the trees and lay in dead piles on the muddy road. It was cold enough, and early enough, that no one had stirred yet as dawn approached.

As the sun pierced the veil of morning mist, a rooster crowed.

Jiro looked around while the riders dismounted and tended to the horses. There was no movement in the hazy morning air, save for a large, fat beetle that landed on a nearby stone wall. A pair of crows stared at him from their nest in the naked tree branches.

The rooster crowed again.

Jiro's nervous gaze fell on a wretched-looking willow tree. Two figures stood in front of Jiro and the crowd of soldiers, staring at him with brilliant blue eyes.

Jiro did not hear the third rooster crow as the figures moved closer, leering at him from where they hovered over the muddy ground. It was Hideo and Kasume, their hands intertwined. Kasume's belly was riddled with wide, bleeding gashes from where Lady Atsuko had pierced her through. The samurai Jiro rode with were nowhere to be seen, but it would have been the same had he been surrounded by them. These two figures had come for Jiro, alone.

Kasume's ghostly mouth gaped as she whispered in the stillness.

"Poor Jiro," she mouthed. But he knew she was mocking him.

