

The Yogo Curse Part 1

By Josiah "Duke" Harrist and Katrina Ostrander

Yogo Junzo's father used to say that the Castle of Learning was not so much a fortress as it was a prison for the poor souls and accursed artifacts sequestered there. But tonight, Junzo could only pray that his misguided father was right on that account.

A desecrated heirloom of the Imperial line invited calamity on the one possessing it. As daimyō of the Yogo family and the *shugenja* tasked with the safekeeping of Rokugan's most dangerous relics, it was Junzo's sacred duty to safeguard the heirloom and contain its corrupting influence until such a time as the curse could be lifted.

Yet several of the wards and prayer banners that protected the castle from evil spirits were failing. The Yogo needed to enact a more powerful seal upon the heirloom before it called to nearby servants of darkness—or worse, the oni lords of the Shadowlands themselves—to overwhelm these walls and pillage the artifacts within. For to call upon the other clans for aid and reveal the fate of the heirloom could irrevocably scandalize the Imperial line.

The ceremony began, heralded by the voices of his family's eight most powerful and devoted wardmasters joining in prayer. They stood facing each other in a circle, their simple robes adorned with charms of protection and power. Each of the eight directions was watched over by a *shugenja* who was charged not with keeping evil spirits out, but with keeping the evil spirit within.

At the circle's center—barely visible through the thick incense smoke but for the orange glow of flickering candles—lay the unsheathed, cursed blade. It was Kunshu, the ancestral sword of the Hantei dynasty. What was once a symbol of loyalty had been twisted into an icon of treachery.

Though there was no breeze, the ten thousand paper wards that plastered the ceiling of the basement chamber rustled, shivering in trepidation. From behind his mask, Junzo projected the calm confidence that would preserve the concentration of



his fellow shugenja. Slowly, he approached the blade, though his heart beat faster. He grounded himself with each step, calling to the ancient kami of the earth who served as the castle's very foundation and beseeching the steadfast kami of stone that made up the walls around them.

Above and beside him, paper gods floated in midair, keeping silent vigil over the ritual. These *shikigami* had dutifully served his family over countless generations. They would not fail him now.

He closed his eyes, drew ever deeper breaths, and finally knelt before Kunshu. To discern the precise nature of the curse and how it might be lifted, he would have to commune with the baleful spirit that now dwelled within. What was the strength of his soul compared to a thousand-year-old blade?

But he was not alone. He gathered the strength of the Heavens above and the Earth below, the wisdom of Lady Sun and Lord Moon, and the courage of the Four Cardinal Guardians.

What I do, I do for the Empire, he reassured himself.

He reached for the blade's handle.

Where his fingers touched the grip, hot anger and jealousy flared. Junzo was a young man again, kneeling in the shadow of his lord and father. It could be decades before Junzo inherited the title of daimyō, decades of waiting in the wings to be seen or to matter, even though Junzo had the stronger innate connection to the elements!

Overhead, the sound of tearing paper—wards or shikigami or both—snapped Junzo back to the present. He could not let the unquenchable emotion of the blade wash over him and onto the ceremony's defenses.

Junzo loved his father, even after his fall. His father had taught him everything he knew, had schooled him in the family's ancient secrets and enabled him to become the shugenja he was meant to be.

He called upon the remaining shikigami and felt their power buoying him, enveloping his hands in spiritual armor.

He took hold of the handle with his right hand and gently lifted the bare steel in his left. Searing heat radiated from the heavy sword, and blinding rage threatened to overtake him again, urging him to take the weapon, to strike down his father, to assume his rightful place as heir.

No, came a voice.

Strips of paper fluttered through the air around him, only to land lifeless on the wooden floorboards.

Junzo realized the voice was his own.

No, my father is already gone thanks to the curse on my head. You offer an empty temptation.

The fluttering became a flurry, a cascade of paper raining down on him. He inhaled sharply but deeply, letting the sound remind him of the calm purity of a steady rain.

Within the bloodthirsty churn, Junzo sensed a speck of peace, an eye in the raging storm.



Its grace and beauty would yield, slowly but surely, to the overwhelming hatred around it. Despite the danger, Junzo opened himself to the flicker of peace and offered it a fragment of his strength.

A profound sense of terror washed over him, as piercing as the hopeless cry of a child lost in the dark. Without words, Junzo suddenly understood that the soul of this blade had tasted blood—the blood of the line it was wrought to serve and protect. The horror and guilt of what it had done was consuming the awakened spirit from within. It could not hold out forever.

Realization dawned on him. Only a Hantei could lift the curse. But there were no Hantei left, or at least, none that could easily be found.

A memory came to Junzo unbidden. Something he had heard long ago, and should not have forgotten. *Whatever befalls Kunshu, so too shall befall its masters.*

A startled cry, and then a terrible ripping sound.

Junzo could not wait for the sword to slowly tear down the castle wards, one by one. There was the safety of even more terrible artifacts than Kunshu at stake.

He rose to his feet, lifting the sword above his head. “The samurai and servants of the Yogo family will protect you!”

The shikigami quivered and paused, awaiting his next command. The shugenja raised their voices until they were shouting, raising a barrier that would hopefully contain the energies that were about to be unleashed.



“By the strength of the elements and the will of the Heavens, be thee sealed!”

The shikigami flew toward the blade like iron sand to a lodestone, enveloping the length of steel in a paper sheath. The razor-sharp edge cut through the paper gods effortlessly, one after another, but yet more shikigami took their place, slowly blanketing the steel and gently lifting it up to float into the air.

It was working. The Yogo would need to bind more spirits to their service

to replace those they were losing, but that they could do, in time.

But it was not working fast enough. Like a wild horse, the wicked spirit thrashed beneath its bridle in a desperate attempt to maintain its freedom.

More tearing sounds, and then the *whoosh* of something cutting through the air. A scream.

Yogo Junzo opened his eyes in time to see a wardmaster clutch his neck, and fall. Blood gushed between the shugenja’s fingers.



A blood-stained ward jutted out from the wooden floorboards, half-embedded, like a knife. Where the wardmaster had fallen, so too had the strength of their protective circle. Junzo surrendered the blade to the care of the shikigami and rushed to fill the opening and resume the chant, dodging a pair of acolytes who pulled the fallen shugenja to the side of the chamber.

Sensing the wound, the shikigami buzzed like insects around the blade. Before they were bound in the Yogo's service, they had been powerful spirits and monsters in their own right. The wickedness of the blade taunted them to seek their freedom, too.

Between the prayers of protection, Junzo shouted, "As your lord, I adjure thee! Be at peace!" The paper gods hesitated, pulsing like a human heart. Now he had to be the calm, be the quietude of the spirit deep within the sword, even as he desperately continued the chant.

The pulsing slowed, and slowed, and then, the shikigami were still. The sword floated gently back down to its stand.

When the sword finally stopped moving, the remaining shugenja sank to their knees, sweat beading upon their brows, as they struggled to catch their breath.

Junzo's heart yet raced. The seal would need to be renewed—at what interval, he did not yet know. He had only bought the Empire more time. Perhaps it would be time enough to find one of the lost princes and return the blade to him.

It was getting late in the small, nameless village, and Yogo Jiro was bored. The young man sucked in his gut as he stood guard, even though no one was around to see him. A smooth, shiny black beetle crawled over a hump of mud at his feet. He pulled down his mask to breathe in the crisp autumn air, baring his smooth, boyish cheeks to the cold. Everyone in this miserable village had already gone to bed. What was the point of standing guard?

"Poor Jiro..." Yasuhide said, far too loudly.

Hoping it was a summons, the young samurai bowed low to enter the house and stepped inside to see the lord, his two courtiers, and the lord's guest seemingly sprawled across the table, red-faced and laughing. Two bottles of sake lay empty on the floor, and Yasuhide held a third uncorked in his hand as he struggled to pour.

"I am disappointed you would let something so paltry as a blocked trade route delay my audience with Yogo Junzo," intoned Yasuhide's guest. She was impossibly thin, with jet black hair and skin so heavily made up it gave her face an almost porcelain look, though the lines on her neck betrayed her old age.

"It is quite paltry. Though my lord thinks otherwise," Yasuhide slurred. He leaned back and smiled at the guest. "I can send my fastest messenger to the Castle of Learning by sundown tomorrow!"

The guest let loose an ugly, nasal laugh, then grimaced.

"It is imperative that I speak with Lord Yogo Junzo in person."



Jiro loosened his collar in the cramped chamber. The woman smiled vacantly as she emptied her cup; she had the look of someone always in want.

“I could escort you to the Castle of Learning,” ventured Jiro.

Lord Yasuhide looked up at him as if seeing him for the first time.

“Ah! Little Jiro!” he exclaimed, then seemed to lose focus. With practiced ease, Yasuhide’s guest poured more sake and slid a cup toward Jiro, nodding for him to sit. The samurai waited for Yasuhide’s permission before seating

himself across from the pair of nobles, armor creaking. He loomed over them like a giant.

“Not so little, is he?” the lord snorted. Jiro’s cheeks reddened.

“I think he is quite handsome,” said the guest.

Yasuhide chuckled and flashed a look at Jiro.

“Now now, Lady Atsuko. Jiro is betrothed. To a Yogo, no less!”

The young samurai’s attention wandered to a corner of the room where another black beetle was crawling on the edge of a lacquer cabinet.

“Yes, Jiro can take you to the Castle of Learning. He has not seen his sweet cherry blossom Yogo Kasume for weeks. I am sure he would be happy to reunite with his love.”

Feeling his cheeks flush, Jiro raised a hand to hide his smile. The thought of seeing Kasume again so soon made his heart soar. The room seemed to grow hotter as he sipped his sake.

“When is the wedding?” Atsuko asked in a sweet voice.

“In less than a month.”

“What joy! I love weddings,” the old woman smiled. Jiro wondered if she was mocking him. It was difficult to discern her expression through her mask-like layers of powder and makeup.

Yasuhide snapped his fingers and asked an attendant to draft a letter of introduction, then handed the sealed scroll to Lady Atsuko. Tottering drunk, he narrowed his eyes at the bottle of sake on the table. “Where did you buy this sake, by the way? It is exquisite.”

“It was a gift,” Atsuko’s lips pursed to a fine line.

A black beetle landed lazily on Jiro’s right knee. The samurai flicked it under the table, then sipped his cloudy, white sake. It was delicious.



The curious letter lay atop the prodigious stack of scrolls on Junzo's desk. The messages had been piling up ever since he had been forced to dedicate so much of his time to creating more shikigami to augment the seal around Kunshu. For every hour that passed without creating new paper gods to reinforce the seal, another ward protecting the castle was ruined. Although he had delegated as much as he could to the castle staff, there were still many issues that required the personal attention of the family daimyō. And apparently his seneschal had deemed that this was one.

He rubbed his eyes and drank deeply of the astringent green tea, which did less and less to compensate for his nights robbed of sleep. How could he rest when all other family shugenja continued to tax themselves to keep the sword safe, even while they still had no leads to go on for locating either of the Hantei heirs?

He fought the dizziness of the fatigue and squinted to read the strangely sloppy cursive of Yogo Yasuhide's letter. "Lady Atsuko begs an audience with the venerable Yogo Junzo, and she will be arriving at the Castle of Learning by sundown tomorrow with Yogo Jiro as an escort," the letter stated. "She claims to have some secret knowledge of the Shinomen Forest that must be shared with the Yogo daimyō—in person. It concerns some threat from the Shadowed Swamps."

The Shadowed Swamps, or the Shadowlands Marshes, as they were sometimes known. He had not heard either name in a long time, not since his late master's ravings—ravings that were his undoing in the end.

Centuries ago, Iuchiban had been the leader of the Bloodspeaker cult that the Black Watch—and by extension, the Yogo family—was dedicated to destroying. Junzo's master claimed to have located one of the lost Masks of Iuchiban that were key to reopening the blood sorcerer's tomb and was intent on arranging an expedition to the Shadowed Swamps to recover it. Such an artifact would be safe at the Castle of Learning, or so he had claimed. But in his efforts to track down the artifact, Junzo's father had become an unwitting pawn of the last vestiges of the cult.

Junzo had somehow believed that familial love would not be strong enough to become the focus of the family curse—after all, that was why his father had disregarded the Yogo traditions that distanced parents from children. But Junzo was forced to betray his own father after finding out about the extent of the man's dangerous obsession with Iuchiban. Junzo had been right to choose protecting the Empire over protecting his father, but even after all these years, his stomach still turned sour at the memory.

As much as it hurt to reveal his father's weakness to the leader of the Black Watch, Junzo had been grateful for the lesson. Thanks to his father, he had learned that not even a Scorpion deserved unblinking loyalty. The duty of the Yogo daimyō was to the Emerald Empire as a whole. And Junzo had the cold comfort of knowing that his curse to betray the one he loved most had already manifested itself.



Could it be that Lady Atsuko offered a hint as to the fate of the mask or a resurgence of the cult? But who was she, this woman who did not offer a family name or clan affiliation?

It was strange timing indeed, given his own divinations that hinted at a shadow approaching from the Shinomen. He would have to see for himself upon her arrival, tomorrow, and ensure that the ghosts of his father's legacy were properly put to rest. Junzo could already hear the soft footsteps of Captain Seppun Masayo approaching to deliver her evening report. In the short weeks she had been in residence at the castle, the member of the Imperial Hidden Guard had already proven herself a valuable addition, both as a soldier and as a shugenja. Shoju had entrusted her with delivering Kunshu to the Castle of Learning, and lacking further instructions from the capital, she had decided to remain with Kunshu.

"How bad is it?" Junzo asked as the woman bowed and took a seat opposite him.

"It is not good, Yogo-sama."

Junzo nodded grimly.

"My dreams and divinations are the same. Ill omens and grim portents. Monstrous creatures continue to mobilize in the mountains—ogres, goblins, trolls..."

"As we feared," he replied. It came as no surprise that the Spine of the World Mountains—the range that served as the Yogo provinces' northeast border—were plagued by monsters. The northeast was a permanently unlucky direction and home to one of the two so-called Demon's Gates. It was why their castle had no northeast-facing windows or doors, and why the monks of the ascetic Penitent Order had built their temple to overlook the castle from that direction.

"And in the southwest lowlands, we believe bog hags and *mahō-tsukai* are congregating, too. The castle's scouts have caught sightings of oni's fire in the marshes, and strange shadows that do not work how they ought. Whole flocks of migrating ducks and geese have been found dead in the bogs."

From the southwest marched the horrors of the Shadowlands, which emanated from the true Demon's Gate, the Festering Pit. It followed that other forces of evil would gather from that direction.

For the castle to be threatened on both sides...

Although they had done their best to seal it, Kunshu could still be a beacon to any who could hear its wicked call, faint though it might be.

"Despite blocking the trade routes, some have attempted to use the road regardless. The patrols have found mangled bodies, partially eaten..."

"Poor fools." Junzo closed his eyes and said a silent prayer for the dead. "Captain Masayo, I think it is time we notify the Regent of these dire developments."

The Seppun's eyes went wide, but without hesitating another moment, she saluted with a closed fist over her heart and bowed. "Of course. It will be done."



A shadowy mist rose from the river as Jiro made camp beneath a copse of bare black trees. His breath billowed as white steam in the cold night air, and his legs and back ached from hours of hard riding. Against a nearby trunk that was nearly as thin as she was, Lady Atsuko sat propped up and smiling at him. Sweat beaded on Jiro's forehead as he strung a line to hold up a meager tent, then unrolled the Lady's bedroll. Tonight, he would sleep staring up at the stars.

As he went about making the tent, he thought about the night he had asked Kasume to marry him. He had prepared a picnic under the ancient cedars south of the shrine where his grandparents lay buried. It had been a warm spring night, and she was still wearing black from her mourning, and her face was radiant and flushed from the plum liqueur he had brought. She thanked him for his kindness, and he took her hand in his and held her as she wept, and she said how safe he made her feel, and he told her he would always protect her. The thought of holding her in his arms made him misty-eyed.

"It is too cold," Atsuko jolted him out of his reverie. Jiro took a moment to compose himself, then resumed the placid tone he had learned she would not mock.

"Should we double back for the guest house over the hill?"

"They seemed too provincial to host us."

"I will make a fire, then."

"Just a small fire."

The old woman was very odd. Before they had even left the village, Lady Atsuko's smile soured and she began picking at every misstep Jiro made as if it were a grave offense. When he rode too slowly, he was lazy, and when he rode faster, he was too hasty. It was always one or the other. But perhaps it was only his lack of sleep that made her seem so impatient.

A horrible shriek tore through the quiet. Jiro bolted upright to see Lady Atsuko holding one hand to her mouth, eyes glittering in the firelight. He looked past the fire into the darkness. There was nothing.

"I said just a small fire," Atsuko seethed.

The campfire had grown to a healthy blaze licking at the branches and dead leaves Jiro had fed it. He looked up at her plaintively.

"Put it out. I would prefer to be cold."

The young samurai sighed. He was always being bucked around by the whims of others. He trudged down to the riverside and returned with a bucket of water, brown with tannins. The fire died with a hiss, sending up pillow steam. Overhead, Lord Moon rose beyond a knot of branches, yellow as parchment in the night sky. Tomorrow would be a full harvest moon.

"I think you are too large to be a Scorpion," said Atsuko.

Jiro clenched his teeth. "Thank you for your sincerity."

"I was told that every Scorpion is measured after they are born. The tall ones are shipped down to the Kaiu Wall to become Crabs. Is this true?"



"I do not know what I have done to offend you, Lady Atsuko, but I apologize."

A smile spread over the old woman's thin, white lips.

"Everything about you offends me."

Her words hung in the air for a moment as Jiro considered how to respond, but then the old woman broke into a high, guffawing laugh. For a moment, Jiro felt confused, then broke into his own halting, nervous laugh until she stopped suddenly, wiping tears from her eyes.

As Jiro collected himself, he saw a slight luminescence. Down at the riverbank, maybe fifty yards away, a human shape stepped languidly ashore. Jiro rubbed his eyes. It glided closer, flickering in the moonlight. Without a word, the samurai stood and placed one hand on the grip of his katana. Next to him, Atsuko stood up with arms crossed, and stared into the dark. When she caught sight of the pale figure, she flashed a wicked smile.

"Are you afraid?"

Too distracted to reply, Jiro stepped forward. The figure gave off a ghastly incandescence and walked as if through water. A pair of piercing blue eyes glowed in the thing's pale, thinly masked face as it approached inexorably. His breath caught.

"Who is that?" Lady Atsuko drew her shawl tightly around herself, more curious than afraid. Jiro asked her to step back, lit his torch, and held it high.

The silent figure stood just feet away. He wore Scorpion armor with a long black cloak, and his belly was pierced through with arrows. Pale fire licked the edges of the phantom, as if he were a burning scrap of parchment. What was visible of his once-handsome face was set in a cold, dead stare.

The torch trembled in Jiro's right hand as he passed it through the spirit. The flames wavered as they licked at the apparition. Sweat ran down Jiro's brow.

"Leave this place," Jiro said in his most threatening tone. His voice sounded soft and boyish in his own ears. Sucking in his cheeks, Jiro drew his mask over his nose and mouth, hoping the leering fangs and tongue on the design would seem more intimidating. Still, the shade stepped closer, bearing a scroll with a broken seal. He pointed at Jiro, widening his mouth to an eerie grin. His loose jaw hung by a few rotted tendons and his blue-white skin had wasted away to expose a perpetual smile framed by swollen, drooping lips. It looked, from the movement of his tongue, as though he was trying to say something.

The young bodyguard drew his katana, then cut a sharp crescent. The phantom's eyes, flickering like tongues of fire, suddenly winked out as the apparition disappeared.

There were no footprints, no marks in the mud where it had approached from the riverbank. A wave of dread washed over Jiro, settling in his stomach. He sheathed his katana and turned back to the campsite, where Lady Atsuko sat against her tree.

"Your ghost was burning."

"That was not my ghost."



“He seemed to have eyes for you alone,” Atsuko smiled.

Jiro sat down and made a small fire, then cupped his hands over it for warmth.

“If you let the fire grow too big, I shall rub your face in it,” the old woman said.

Setting his teeth, Jiro stared at her. She reminded him of his aunt, who had passed away two years ago after stepping on a nail. He hoped the same would happen to Atsuko.

“I did recognize the ghost.”

“No,” she mocked.

“He was my childhood friend, Hideo. When the moon is full, he appears. He never says anything. He simply watches me.”

“How did he die?”

“In battle.”

“Not every soldier becomes a ghost.”

“He was to be married, but then a summons from the provincial daimyō sent him on a dangerous mission into Beiden Pass. He was killed on his wedding day.”

“Oh, that is horrible.” The old woman let out a high-pitched, obnoxious laugh. “And I am sure you are too poor to pay for a thorough exorcism.”

The samurai pulled his mask down to breathe again. Although the phantom had disappeared, he felt its numbness, and a gnawing hunger.

“I like your mask,” said Atsuko. “Because when you wear it, I forget how much you resemble a large, ugly baby.”

“I am not the only one who wears a mask,” Jiro snapped.

Lady Atsuko’s eyes went glassy as she stared at him from the darkness.

“What did you say, boy?”

“I-I meant nothing.”

“You lack discipline,” Atsuko cooed as she began to file her nails a comfortable distance from the fire. “I imagine that is why you have not gotten very far in life.”

As they reached the final leg of their journey, Lady Atsuko fell blissfully silent, and they met no travelers. Storm clouds pressed ahead of them, darkening their way as though the sun had never quite fully risen.

In the west, however, the clouds didn’t quite reach the horizon. The sunset cast the rooftops of the Castle of Learning in a dull ochre glow as they approached from the southwest. Around them, snow began to fall. Jiro reached out to catch one of the first snowflakes of the season, but saw that it was only ash.

The dismal cawing of crows startled him, and he looked around for the flock. Yet perched on a nearby leafless tree limb there was only one bird, with two heads—one black and one white. Their *caw, caw, caw* grew louder and louder, as if in warning.



“Come on, boy,” Lady Atsuko insisted, and quickened her pace. They pressed on to the castle town, leaving the crow behind. With the onset of night, a thousand amber lamps were lit and strung between the turrets, keep, and walls like a ghostly web.

A feeling of breathless anticipation gripped Jiro as they approached the main gate. He would see Kasume soon.

