

# YANAGI: Guardian of the Great Forest



*The world and its contents are built from a flow of energy, a churning whirlpool of souls. Whether a tiny pebble or a mountain, whether a lowly insect or a Deity, this energy is the essence by which they exist. It is said that some places or beings, like natural wonders or ancient trees, have a surplus of this energy, which in turn leads to them being fertile grounds for new life to be birthed or for a Deity to manifest.*

The flea traverses the vast forest of coarse hairs, searching for the best spot to dig-in its needle-like mouth and harvesting the lifeblood of its host: a rat subsiding in the streets of a human settlement. Many of its brethren subsist on the same host, but untold more exist within the brood of the rat. The flea does not know that its life is short, for in its mind is only the thought of passing on its lineage and to that end it seeks to feed and grow. It does not feel the moment that a mop swings down on its host, landing directly onto it and squishing it to death.

*As a life ends, its essence moves on, joining into the whirlpool of souls, before a new vessel is found, wherein it can once again take hold.*

The field-mouse runs through the tall grass. It has yet to grow to full maturity, but it has no choice but to flee its cosy nest alongside its siblings, as a fox has found it and killed their mother. It does not think about the future, for the present is too overwhelming. Like most of its kind, it will live a short anxious life, always fleeing threats, while trying to find a mate and siring its own offspring, so that its kind can live on. For this particular mouse, its end comes in the form of a hawk that has scouted the tall grass for a while. It swoops down with such speed that the mouse does not see it coming.

*The size of one's essence may grow over the course of their life, but it may also shrink. This affects the vessel they are reborn in, for a small essence cannot fill a large cup, nor can a small vase fit a large essence. But there is always a fitting vessel for any essence.*

The shrike has caught a fat larva and is circling in the air, looking for the right kind of bush or tree, before alighting on the branch of a locust, upon which thorny protrusions it impales its prey. To onlookers, its act of feeding may seem barbaric, but to the shrike it is simply the way it keeps its wriggling prey still as it eats it alive. There is no malice in the act, though some might say it is karma, when, upon finishing its meal and preparing to take off, a stray cat leaps from below and catches it mid-flight.

*Some acts, like cruelty or conscious evil, can taint essence and condemn it to a cycle of rebirth into wicked vessels. Likewise, improper treatment by outsiders can mould a vessel's essence and turn it evil. Weapons belonging to killers are tainted by their heinous acts and become malign things that may in turn corrupt a new wielder. However, there are forces of purity and goodness, who possess the skill to heal the malignancy of such vessels and their essences, though in some cases there is nothing that can be done and an exorcism must be performed, whereupon the twisted essence is cast back into the whirlpool of souls, with the faint hope of it healing before it is next rebirthed.*

The black cat saunters down the street between wooden houses belonging to the humans of a great city. It always travels the same path, visiting familiar houses on its journey, where it is loved and adored by people and fed scrumptious meals. At the end of the day, when the sunlight wanes, it has a stomach full to the bursting and returns home to its owners, who greet it with love.

The cat is a rare being who gets to live to the full length of its essence's ability, and when it eventually succumbs to age, its owners comfort their crying children with the fact that long-lived cats

are believed to become Minor Deities known as *Nekomata*, who are distinct due to their second tail and are possessed of great wisdom and mirth.

*Those vessels, who get to live to their fullest extent and die a peaceful death, are believed to be blessed and in rare cases elevated to the status of Minor Deity. Sometimes, the essences of certain places or certain objects are enhanced by being worshipped in the form of enshrinement. Shrines may be great or they may be small, but the act of worship is by itself the catalyst upon which the essence of a place may be condensed to bring good fortune and peace to an area, or elevate an object to become a vessel for a Minor Deity.*

*In the case of the black cat, who was once a shrike, after being a field-mouse and a flea, something very rare happened, as it was elevated to the position of Guardian Deity by a Divine One's benediction.*

*Such Deities, as what its essence has become, are the caretakers and protectors of places of great significance. As mountains and large forests are believed to be wellsprings of essence, they are in need of such Guardians, to ensure that the wellsprings are not tainted and that the places are kept intact from the predations of man, who, in their overzealous drive to expand and march the road of progress, often trample the sacred flowers that keep their essence pure.*

*Bordering a large city, in fact the human capital of this enormous island, is a forest atop a mountain that is known simply as the Great Forest. It is one such wellspring of essence and it is thanks to its presence that the human settlement can thrive peacefully. But that peace has been tainted by the invasive efforts to plunder the Great Forest of its wealth of strong lumber and precious ore beneath its mountainous rock. Those humans, who are attuned to the souls of things and the flow of essence, warned their leaders of the dangers of such devastation of nature, but their warnings went unheeded. To compound the disaster even further, the majority of inhabitants in the capital consider the worship at shrines and of Deities to be a frivolous thing. Many do not see the essence of the world nor do they feel it, so to them it seems a lie spun by priests, but little do they know that their rejection of the importance of worship in turn fuels the degeneration of the bountiful essence that has kept their settlement peaceful.*

*As the Great Forest withers away, and its shrines and temples are ransacked and abandoned, the wellspring becomes tainted and the peace of the humans is disturbed by infighting, struggles for succession, adultery, murder, theft, rape, and more. The capital becomes a pit of despair, while its leaders push forward relentlessly, ever in pursuit of more power and wealth.*

*It is at this time that a Divine One has decided to turn the bountiful essence of the long-lived cat into a Guardian Deity, while those few who believe pray vehemently at the only shrine left intact, atop the peak of the Great Forest.*

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“如何か、神を！大森を守ってくれ！” cries a priest, though one would not recognise him as such from the state of his clothes or his informal language. In the very same moment, the subject of his pleas awakens a soul as the essence of the mountain forest and the essence of a chosen soul flow into it, coalescing into a life within.

The shrine atop the mountain forest’s peak, known to its few worshippers and pilgrims as *Yanagi-Fuji-Jinja*, is renowned for the unique tree that grows there. No one truly knows how old the tree is, though it is believed to be several centuries old at least. The Yanagi-Fuji is a one-of-a-kind tree that seems part Willow and part Wisteria, and it is well-known for its permanently-blossoming flowers. The shrine itself is a simple barrier of wood and the tree is demarcated as a sacred being by a rope tied around its trunk. Around the tree and its shrine a large temple complex was built some generations past, though these days few people make the long trek through the forest and up the mountain to visit it.

The priest, who prays vehemently to it and any God that might listen, is the apprentice to the former Shrine Keeper, who was slain by the guards at one of the mining camps that wreak destruction upon the bedrock of the sacred mountain. The death of the Shrine Keeper is but one of many in the recent months, as the peace of the city that borders the Great Forest has deteriorated.

The pleas are interrupted by the sound of *creaking* and *snapping* wood, as the soul awakens within the sacred tree. With a startled cry, the priest backs away from the shrine and the few other humans who tend the shrine quickly come running at the sound of his voice. The creaking continues, as fifteen humans stand and observe their sacred tree from afar, fearful of what might be happening.

The soul tears itself free from the embrace of the Yanagi-Fuji in the shape of something humanoid. Its arms and legs are thin and weak, its torso is slender, and its head has something that could perhaps be considered a face. The entire body is a mess of overlapping roots dotted with blooming wisteria flowers, and it is unmistakably born from the unique tree. From its appearance it seems vaguely male.

As the Yanagi-Fuji Kodama steps away from the tree, he looks around at the cage of wood that surrounds the tree. He has gained sentience, but does not recall his past lives as a cat, a shrike, a field-mouse, nor a flea. It is the rare few who remember the past lives their essence has experienced, though many yet benefit from the lessons and wisdoms their soul has attained over its long journey.

The Kodama feels a strong urge to leave the confines of the shrine, so he mounts the wooden barrier and climbs atop its short black-tiled roof, staring out over the temple complex he finds himself within, as well as the congregation of faithful.

When the humans witness this clear manifestation of the Divine, they fall to their knees and let their happiness be heard, though the Yanagi-Fuji Kodama does not comprehend their strange words. As he stands atop the shrine, he realises that he is quite a lot shorter than the humans it seems to resemble, as though only a child.

*You have finally awakened, Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama,* remarks a comforting voice in his mind. *I will be your guide you through your tasks as a Guardian Deity, for there is much to learn. To aid you in your journey, a Divine System has been designed to help direct you.*

*By focusing, you will be able to bring up a representation of your strength.*

Yanagi tries to concentrate his newly-formed mind as hard as possible, but he cannot bring forth the thing he is meant to be seeing. As he continues to struggle with focusing his mind, he notices how the world around him is frozen in place. The Divine One who speaks directly to him seems to have tremendous power over the world, but for some reason has called upon him to be the instrument for its power.

Something clicks in his mind and a vision appears before his eyes:

<i>Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama</i>	
<b>GUARDIAN DEITY NAME</b>	<i>Oomori-Yamatsumi Kami</i>

<b>DEITY TYPE</b>	<i>Kodama (Tree Spirit)</i>
<b>INFLUENCE</b>	0
<b>ATTRIBUTES</b>	
<b>GROWTH</b>	1
<b>SPIRIT</b>	1
<b>DOMINION</b>	1
<b>ROOT</b>	1
<b>BLESSING</b>	1
<b>KINSHIP</b>	1

*Your progress is measured by the amount of INFLUENCE you have amassed. With each point of INFLUENCE, you can invest a point into each of the six Attributes available to you and with every point invested into an Attribute, you are given a choice of skills.*

*To begin your journey, I have bestowed a point into each of your six Attributes, but it is up to you to discover how they affect the world and yourself as you pick the skills that they offer you.*

Yanagi struggles to wrap his newfound sentience around this Divine System and how he is meant to utilise it in his role as Guardian. It all seems very overwhelming to someone like him who has only just awoken.

In response, the comforting voice tells him, *You have a lot to learn and discover in your role as Guardian of the Great Forest, but you are expected to learn quickly and adapt even quicker, as time is of the essence. For now, I recommend you fully invest the point in your BLESSING Attribute and pick the HEAL skill. To aid you in understanding how this ability works, as well as its limitations, I will provide you with a Quest:*

*‘The Temple’s Sick and Injured’*  
**BLESSING** Quest

<i>—Simple Task—</i>
<i>Amongst the adherents and worshippers at Yanagi-Fuji-Jinja are many who are stricken with illness or serious injuries, which you alone possess the power to alleviate.</i>
<i>0 / 15</i>

Time resumes and Yanagi follows the advice of the voice, fully investing the point, which promptly rewards him with a selection of three skills:

<b>BLESSING – Level 1</b>		
<b>HEAL</b>	<b>CURE</b>	<b>SANCTIFY</b>
<i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> to heal wounds, broken bones, and internal damage. Effect and scope of the healing effect depends on <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>	<i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> to cure ailments, such as sickness, poison, and contagions. Effect and scope of curing effect depends on <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>	<i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> outward to cleanse an area and sanctifying it, such that the flow of essence returns to normal. May also be used to dispel <b>CORRUPTION</b>.</i>

As instructed, he picks the HEAL skill and immediately feels a sense of calm and serenity flow across his mind, alongside the knowledge of how to cast his new skill.

With a careful hop, the Kodama leaps from atop the shrine barrier and lands before the man closest, the one he remembers praying to him only moments before. It is clear to his observant eyes and senses that the priest carries many hidden injuries, which are obscured beneath his baggy clothing. With a gesture of his diminutive hand across the air, palm-side facing the priest, he casts HEAL and suffuses the priest's body with a measure of his spirit energy.

A sound of relief and more words he does not comprehend, escape the priest's mouth, before he begins walking down past the rest of the supplicating figures and repeating the process. Most have their injuries healed, though a few carry such ailments that his HEAL power is incapable of dealing with and

to which it seems obvious that the CURE skill is more aptly suited. There are also two, an elderly man and a young woman, who have more serious wounds that his HEAL can only alleviate the symptoms of, but not entirely deal with.

From the act of helping these humans who have prayed to him, Yanagi feels an immense sense of gratification. As he checks the Quest, he sees that the number has gone from zero to ten, though he has no way to aid the last five with their ailments.

*There are times when your Quests may not be possible to accomplish all at once and will require you to grow stronger before you revisit them, however, you have shown these worshippers that you are indeed a sign of the Divine, and, for this, your INFLUENCE has grown by one. You may now allocate an Attribute point.*

Yanagi does not think much about the options, but immediately puts the new point into BLESSING, so that he can unlock the CURE skill and aid the remaining five humans. This time, however, he is greeted with a new choice where before was the HEAL skill.

<b>BLESSING – Level 2</b>		
<b>BLESS</b>	<b>CURE</b>	<b>SANCTIFY</b>
<i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> to bless the growth and vitality of a plant or animal. Effect and duration depend on <b>BLESSING</b> and <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>	<i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> to cure ailments, such as sickness, poison, and contagions. Effect and scope of curing effect depend on <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>	<i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> outward to cleanse an area and sanctifying it, such that the flow of essence returns to normal. May also be used to dispel <b>CORRUPTION</b>.</i>

However, he remains resolute in his intended plan and picks the CURE skill.

As another point is invested into the BLESSING Attribute, the Kodama feels himself grow slightly more capable of sensing the problems in the humans around him and the way in which they can be resolved. He also gains an rudimentary understanding of the root causes of the worshippers' injuries and ailments, and realises that many are the result of clashes with other humans, no doubt the ones responsible for the ruin brought to the Great Forest.



With a slightly different gesture, with his palm moving down instead of sideways, he casts the CURE skill on the remaining five people and is rewarded with an updated Quest screen:

<p><i>‘The Temple’s Sick and Injured’</i></p> <p><b>BLESSING</b> Quest</p> <p>—Simple Task—</p>
<p><i>Amongst the adherents and worshippers at the Yanagi-Fuji-Jinja are many who are stricken with illness or serious injuries, which you alone possess the power to alleviate.</i></p> <p><b>COMPLETED</b></p> <p>+1 <b>INFLUENCE</b></p>

*For completing this quest, you are rewarded another INFLUENCE point, bringing you up to a total of two. Once again you may invest a new point into an Attribute, but I must warn you that previous points and their associated skills must be picked first, before a new point can be invested. Further, it is prudent to plan ahead at what you wish to accomplish and work towards that goal, rather than investing Attribute points without much forethought.*

Yanagi feels that he is beginning to somehow get a grasp on all the System, but he also feels a powerful desire to explore, and, as such, begins walking across the temple complex, looking for an exit.

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*Ever since the first human set foot on the continent there have been Deities, small and large, who roamed the world. They are rarely seen nor felt by the humans whose civilisations these entities often live on the fringes of, but that is also for the best, as those few Deities that make themselves known often inspire fear in the humans, due to their incomprehensible nature.*

*At times, humans have been known to hunt such Deities, for their bodies are believed to be worth a great fortune and because there often exist rumours of the wish-granting properties they are supposedly imbued with. Whatever the reason, it is believed to be in a Deity's best interest to keep itself out of sight, though, tragically, Deities are birthed most often of the desires and wishes held within human hearts, so they cannot exist without them.*

*There are some Minor Deities that have learnt to hide themselves in plain sight, such as the clever Tanuki and Kitsune spirits, which take on human shape and in this way can live amongst the people from whom they absorb the essence that makes their lives possible. Some Deities, like the Kodama, stride a middle-line and exist disguised as trees within the forests around Wellsprings of Essence or near where humans frequent.*

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“柳藤様！如何か、神社に戻りに為られませんか？其の道は危険で御座いますので！” calls the priest as he runs after the child-sized Kodama, which is walking down one of the roads that leads east from the temple. Behind him are the many worshippers who seem wary of the road Yanagi is travelling down.

There are three roads that lead from the mountain peak, upon which the temple to the Yanagi-Fuji tree sits, but only one of the roads is considered safe by the worshippers, who occasionally have to travel down to the foot of the mountain to acquire supplies such as food and building materials. These roads are circuitous and snake their ways down the forested mountainsides, each branching off as they

go, many of the diverging paths leading to places where once stood proud temples and shrines, but where now rest only ruin and forgotten glory.

The Kodama does not know this yet, however, but he is also more preoccupied by his Divinely-granted role which seems overwhelmingly-insurmountable in scope. The reason he has left his temple is not due to some wish to shirk his Divinely-appointed duty as a Guardian Deity of the Great Forest, but, rather, he wishes to first learn what resides within the territory he is meant to protect.

As he continues down the east-going road, the priest catches up to him, after all, he is a diminutive little Kodama no taller than a child. The entourage of the other worshippers hang back however, having only followed the priest because he is their leader. For a moment, the priest considers grabbing the incarnation of the Yanagi-Fuji's Deific influence, but then he scolds his imprudent impulse into check and instead decides to plead with the Kodama again.

But his words are like random noise to Yanagi, who now has his focus set on a shrine he has spotted in the distance. Wondering if the priest might help him in his task, he halts in the middle of the road and turns to his relentless companion. The man looks down at the Kodama with a strange expression, one which seems at once hopeful and perplexed. When Yanagi points to the shrine that is somewhat visible at the end of where the east-going road branches north, the man follows the guiding finger and then explains in his incomprehensible tongue:

“彼れは送り犬神の神社で御座います。壊れられましたので、送り犬神は怒りで人間を襲っていられます。危険でございますので！”

The Kodama turns away from him and continues down the road. He cannot make out the words, but from the expressions on the man's face and the insistence in his voice, it seems clear that he is trying to warn Yanagi, though the Kodama cannot tell why.

When he reaches the branching path and continues left towards the shrine, which is now clearly in view down a straight dirt path, he notices how the small shrine is broken and missing whatever was enshrined within it. In the same moment, it is as if night suddenly falls, as a swarm of black sparrows begin swirling around Yanagi and the priest. The birds make an ominous sound as they circle around them, sounding like *chi-chi-chi*.

Immediately the priest cries out in fear and runs back the way they came, but then time freezes and the voice returns and tells him, *To deal with a situation like, I would recommend investing your KINSHIP point.*

The Kodama does as he is told and is greeted with a selection of three speech-themed skills:

<b>KINSHIP – Level 1</b>		
<b>RODENT COMMUNION</b>	<b>BIRD COMMUNION</b>	<b>INSECT COMMUNION</b>
<i>Allows for the communication with Rodents, such as mice, squirrels, and capybaras.</i>	<i>Allows for the communication with Birds, such as swallows, ducks, and owls.</i>	<i>Allows for the communication with Insects, such as ants, beetles, and bees.</i>

From the selection, he picks the BIRD COMMUNION skill, which is perfectly suited for this exact scenario. Time unfreezes as the newfound knowledge flushes into his body, and he feels the portion of his head that might be considered a face take on a new shape, as though becoming more refined, but he cannot witness his own face so he does not realise the change has made him appear more human-like.

With the new skill, Yanagi now hears what it is that the black sparrows are saying:

*“Chi-chi-chi, the Okuri-Inu comes for thee! Chi-chi-chi, you best scurry and flee!”*

*“Chi-chi-chi, I am Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama,”* the Kodama tells the swarm, imitating their poetic song. *“Chi-chi-chi, lead this Okuri-Inu to me!”* Although he does not know how to fight, he has an instinctual feeling that he is stronger than his small child-like body may suggest.

Without prompting from the voice, he invests the point in DOMINION, believing the Attribute may have skills to aid him in a fight, as its name seems to suggest power of some nature. Again he is greeted with a selection:

<b>DOMINION – Level 1</b>		
<b>CLAW</b>	<b>INTIMIDATE</b>	<b>WHIP</b>
<i>Shape a hand of your vessel to</i>	<i>Project your <b>INFLUENCE</b> to</i>	<i>Shape a hand of your vessel to</i>

<i>become rending claw with its strength and sharpness based on</i> <b>DOMINION.</b>	<i>intimidate foes, making them unwilling to engage in a fight.</i>	<i>become a dexterous whip with its length and speed based on</i> <b>DOMINION.</b>
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He picks the CLAW skill from the three and is glad to see that, along with the knowledge of the offensive skill, he has gained more mass upon his arms. Before any foe can manifest however, the swarm replies: “*Chi-chi-chi, a Kodama speaks like we? Chi-chi-chi, perhaps a friend you be?*”

“*I am tasked by the Divine to be the Guardian of the Great Forest. I will not befriend those who harm its denizens!*”

The swarm abates and daylight returns, as only a single black sparrow remains behind, hovering in the air with lazy flaps of its wings. Darkness seems to leak from its very feathers, as though it is a being of pure night.

“*Chi-chi-chi,*” says the bird, “*We Yosuzume are no foe to the Great Forest, but it is our duty to warn travellers upon these roads of the Okuri-Inu, for it is angry at the loss of its shrine and in its anger it harms those who come near.*”

“*So you are no foe of mine,*” Yanagi replies matter-of-factly. “*I would still wish to see this Okuri-Inu and speak with it.*”

“*Chi-chi-chi, it will harm and maim you. Its anger is such that it will not rest until its Relic is returned.*”

“*What Relic is this? Where has it gone?*”

“*Chi-chi-chi, it was an object from its life as a guard dog, which was stolen away by a mischievous Kitsune. The Kitsune went further down the mountain to where vandals have disturbed its own shrine. The mischievous fox seems to believe the Okuri-Inu will chase after its lost Relic, but it is too angry to see reason and has remained here, harming anyone who draws near.*”

“*I will retrieve this Relic,*” Yanagi tells the Night Sparrow resolutely, “*Until I return, remain here to warn travellers.*”

“*Chi-chi-chi, may you travel safely.*”

<p><i>‘Stolen for Protection’</i></p> <p><b>SHRINE</b> Quest</p> <p>—Troublesome Task—</p>
<p><i>A Mischievous Kitsune has stolen the Relic of the Okuri-Inu-Jinja, enraging the Shrine Deity and leading to travel along the East Road becoming dangerous. You must return the Relic for the Okuri-Inu to calm down.</i></p> <p><i>0 / 1 Relics returned</i></p>

Before a confrontation with the Guard Dog of the Shrine comes to pass, Yanagi returns back to the fork in the road and continues eastward, while keeping his eyes open for signs of another shrine. The humans that were following him have retreated to the safety of their temple walls, though one of the Night Sparrows seems to follow behind in the air for a while, but returns to its flock after the Kodama travels further down the mountainside and loses sight of the fork in the road.

In the horizon, beyond the edge of the east road, is a sea of trees for as far as the Kodama can see, and though the tall trees that grow down along the slopes of the mountainside make it somewhat difficult to tell, it is clear that the foot of the mountain lies very far below.

Yanagi is unsure why he has been selected for the role as Guardian of so vast a territory as the Great Forest, indeed it seems an impossible task for something of his diminutive size and limited power.

As though to alleviate the Kodama’s fears, the comforting voice returns and says:

*The power of a Guardian Deity lays not in its singular strengths, but rather its ability to unite the denizens of its territory to repel those that would destroy and corrupt it. As you help the Minor Deities with their problems, you will find willing allies in them. For example, the Okuri-Inu, once placated, will become a stalwart guard dog that serves as a way to keep intruders from coming at your temple along the east road.*

“There will be intruders coming to my temple?” Yanagi asks in the tongue of the birds, having no other ways to communicate with the guiding voice.

*Yes, even your temple is not safe. It has only remained unharmed because of its location and lack of valuable trinkets to rob, but, as your presence and legend grows, your foes will seek the place where you heart resides. Already, the Great Forest is under attack in countless ways, but you do not sense this yet, however, as your INFLUENCE grows, so too will your awareness of your territory and the transgressions that take place within its borders.*

A sense of urgency takes hold of Yanagi and he continues down the east road with a bit more speed than before.

The east road is like an erratic serpent that trails a ponderous route through the grass and though there are a few branching paths, none of them lead the Kodama to where it wishes to go. Already, the temple and the guard dog's shrine are far above, but the foot of the mountain that the road drunkenly steers towards is yet many-times-further below.

Just when Yanagi is about to give up and return back the way he came, he hears boisterous laughter from below. He walks to the edge of the road and looks over the mountainside, seeing three men sitting around a fire in front of a modest-sized shrine.

As he watches them from above, he feels confident that he can beat them, as the three men seem to stumble around in some manner of inebriation. Though he does not realise it, his past life as a field-mouse taught his essence how to observe potential threats and come up with a plan to deal with them, though, unlike the field-mouse, his plan revolves around driving them away rather than avoiding them.

Before he descends further down the east road, he allocates his Attribute points in three remaining Attributes, hoping to gain additional skills to aid and protect him:

<b>GROWTH – Level 1</b>	
<b>BARKSKIN</b> <i>Reduces mobility in exchange for making a dense layer of protective bark form on the outside of your body, dulling all attacks and increasing vessel</i>	<b>POLLEN CLOUD</b> <i>Releases a massive obscuring cloud that irritates the breathing of any animal or human caught in it. Cloud size and effect based on</i>

<i>durability. Strength based on <b>GROWTH</b> level.</i>	<b>GROWTH</b> level.
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<b>SPIRIT – Level 1</b>	
<b>BARRIER</b>	<b>REPEL</b>
<i>Utilise your soul to project a barrier around you to protect against magical or elemental attacks.  Barrier strength depends on <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>	<i>Build up your soul energy and release a burst of power that repels all nearby foes if their <b>SPIRIT</b> is lower than yours.</i>

<b>ROOT – Level 1</b>		
<b>SHAPE WALL</b>	<b>SNARING VINES</b>	<b>CREATE SPEAR</b>
<i>Call upon the plants and trees around you to create a wall, the strength of which depends on <b>ROOT</b>.</i>	<i>Call upon the roots of plants and trees to entangle your enemies' feet, preventing them from moving.  Snare strength depends on <b>ROOT</b>.</i>	<i>Create a spear from nearby plants and trees, the strength and power of which is based on <b>ROOT</b>.</i>

From the selections, he chooses the skills: BARKSKIN; REPEL; and SNARING VINES. He immediately experiences a change in his height from the GROWTH Attribute, as well as some bulking-out of his torso.

The increase in SPIRIT feels like the energy that flows through the roots of his body has become richer and more potent, and the blossoming wisteria flowers that grow all over his body seem to become a bit more vibrant as well. The increase in ROOT does not, as the name suggest, alter the nature of his root-formed body, but instead it seems to refine the shape of his legs.

As the Kodama considers how each of the Attributes alters his figure, he realises that he can modify his body by selectively progressing certain Attributes, though he instinctively understands that a balance of sorts must be made, especially when his task as Guardian already seems to involve many different aspects, such as healing, defending, communicating with the forests denizens, and rebuilding the ruins of his territory.



He realises that he still has an unassigned Attribute point left and decides to put it into ROOT, as it has offered the most versatile choices to him by far and thus seems the Attribute most likely to offer ways for him to deal with his current situation.

<b>ROOT – Level 2</b>			
<b>SHAPE WALL</b>	<b>SWAMP</b>	<b>CREATE SPEAR</b>	<b>THORN BUSH</b>
<i>Call upon the plants and trees around you to create a wall, the strength of which depends on <b>ROOT</b>.</i>	<i>Call upon the soil to transform into muddy terrain that is hard to traverse. Terrain size depends on <b>ROOT</b>.</i>	<i>Create a spear from nearby plants and trees, the strength and power of which is based on <b>ROOT</b> and <b>DOMINION</b>.</i>	<i>Create a Thorn Bush from the ground to damage foes or block off areas. Plant size depends on <b>ROOT</b> with damage based on <b>DOMINION</b>.</i>

Yanagi is surprised to see a fourth skill appear in the selection and decides to pick the THORN BUSH as it fits well with his other acquired skills. A plan has crystallised in his mind’s eye from the choices he has made and he carefully descends the east road towards where a branching path leads south to the three loud vandals at the shrine. As he walks with silent steps on the side of the dirt road where tall grass grows, he feels how the physical change from the ROOT Attribute has made his legs more dexterous. He knows that if he tried, he would be able to move faster than before, but for the moment he believes stealth to be the best approach.

The acrid stench of smoke is in the air and, though the Kodama has no need to breathe, he feels a natural instinct to steer away from the smoke and the fire that makes it. As he sneaks closer to the trio, he sees that they have become inebriated from drinking an Offering of potent Sake that had been left at the shrine. To a Deity in these lands, their plundering of an Offering to a shrine is a very serious crime and Yanagi feels a righteous anger rise in his body, despite having only been a Deity for short while.

With a gesture of lifting his right hand, he compels the roots in the ground to rise and snare the vandals. In the same moment, he shapes his hand into a CLAW and activates BARKSKIN, the roots of his body *creaking* and *popping* as the alterations take place. The sounds of the transformations draw the three drunken men’s eyes towards where Yanagi yet crouches unseen in the grass, but then, right as

they are about to investigate the sound, vines reach out of the ground below them and coil about their legs.

The three cry out in shock and fear at what is happening to them, with one falling onto his back in a scramble to escape the grasp of the vines. The other two begin desperately clawing at the plants holding them firmly in place, their stupor seeming to fade as adrenaline takes over.

The Kodama performs a gesture of a lifting fist, which summons a thorn bush from the grass between the men and the shrine, before stepping out of the tall grass and imitating the Night Sparrows' song.

*“Chi-chi-chi.”*

Their panic explodes when they behold Yanagi's child-like body stalking towards them, seeming to them like it was birthed from the very ground they have transgressed upon. The largest and burliest of the three men breaks free from his bonds and runs away towards the shrine to escape the ominous figure. He lets out a yelp of pain as he kicks his foot directly into the thorn bush placed in his path, before running back to his comrades and helping them free of their bonds.

All the while, Yanagi is slowly getting closer, still repeating the song of the Yosuzume. His steps are carefully placed, like a street cat menacingly approaching a rival in its path who it seeks to intimidate. He has moved onto the road and circled around their position slightly, such that they are most likely to run back along the path, rather than attempt to leap down the mountainside, which would surely injure them. His intention is to drive them away, not maim them, though he is prepared to fight if it comes to that.

As though they are performers in the Kodama's plan, they hastily run down the path that leads away from the shrine. The very moment they all have their backs turned on him, Yanagi hides in the tall grass and erases the signs of his skills. One of the men looks back and sees no sign of the stalking forest child, which only seems to intensify his fear as he yells something to his fellows and their hasty escape becomes even more frantic.

When the figures are out of sight, Yanagi goes over to the edge of the plateau where the shrine is seated and looks at the pondering east road below, seeing and hearing the men's continued escape from the irate shrine spirit they must surely believe is dogging their heels.

He notes that expending the power to cast four skills was more taxing on his body than he assumed, and it seems clear that his abilities put a strain on his body, especially when so many are used in quick

succession. Though he also has the instinctual understanding of his body to know that the strain will lessen as his Attributes grow stronger. He does wonder why he experienced no exhaustion from the repeated usages of his HEAL and CURE skills at the temple though.

The Kodama goes over to the fire, where the remains of the Offering Sake lay, the fine vessels mostly empty now and stained with dirt. Despite their state, he returns the flasks to the front of the modestly-sized shrine where Offerings are meant to be placed and is glad to see that the Relic enshrined in the box below the pyramid-shaped roof has been left unharmed. However, as he looks around, he sees no sign of the Relic stolen from the Okuri-Inu.

He walks back to the fire, worrying that the vandals might have burnt the Relic, but it is impossible to tell what lies in the centre of the fire and Yanagi is unwilling to get too close to it. He then worries that he may have come to the wrong place, and, since he cannot read the sign in front of the shrine, he has no way to tell.

*Tihi*, something then says from behind the Kodama and he whirls around, seeing the face of a child poking out from behind the shrine. As they look at each other, he remarks that they are of nearly the same height, though she is clearly a human child and not a Kodama like him.

Before he can think much more about it, the child runs towards him, a beautiful red kimono on her body and her silky-smooth black hair flying behind her. She immediately grasps Yanagi by his hands and begins excitedly dancing around on the spot, before moving in for an enthusiastic hug. As the Kodama manages to wriggle himself out of the embrace a moment later, he sees that the girl has become a fox with the same beautiful red fur coat as her kimono.

“*Kitsune*,” he says in the language of the birds, recognising her kind, “*I seek the return of the Relic you stole.*”

*Tihi*, says the fox as she continues to hop around Yanagi. Clearly she does not understand what is being asked of her.

‘*Vandals at the Kitsune Shrine*’

SHRINE Quest

—*Troublesome Task*—

*A trio of Vandals has disturbed the slumber of a young*

*Kitsune by plundering her Offerings and refusing to leave. As the Kitsune is still young, she has few tricks to deal with them on her own. You must drive the Vandals away.*

*COMPLETED*

*+1 INFLUENCE*

Though he has no idea if it will help, Yanagi immediately puts the new Attribute point into KINSHIP and is met by four options, one of which is exactly what he is seeking.

<b>KINSHIP – Level 2</b>			
<b>RODENT COMMUNION</b> <i>Allows for the communication with Rodents, such as mice, squirrels, and capybaras.</i>	<b>GLIDE</b> <i>Channel the essence of the Bird and glide slowly downwards from any height. Efficiency and duration based on KINSHIP and SPIRIT.</i>	<b>INSECT COMMUNION</b> <i>Allows for the communication with Insects, such as ants, beetles, and bees.</i>	<b>CANID COMMUNION</b> <i>Allows for the communication with Canids, such as dogs, foxes, and wolves.</i>

As the Kodama picks the CANID COMMUNION, he feels his face and head change shape slightly, and the Kitsune in front of him takes a step back, tilting her head to the side confused.

Then Yanagi repeats his demand in the fox’s yapping tongue: “*I seek the return of the Relic you stole.*”

The Kitsune spins around twice, then turns back into a human girl. She laughs in the same manner as before, then pulls a little piece of gnarled wood inscribed with barely-legible script from the sleeve of her kimono and hands it to the Kodama.

“*Thank you,*” says Yanagi, taking the Relic carefully into his hands. He feels the essence that flows from the object and knows it is the Relic he is seeking.

“*You smell nice!*” replies the Kitsune child. “*I’m Emiko and this is my shrine! What’s your name?*”

*“My name is Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama, I am the new Guardian of the Great Forest.”*

*“Yan... Yanna... It’s too long!”*

*“You may also call me Yanagi,”* the Kodama says.

*“Yan-Yan!”*

Yanagi does not know how to feel about the reduction of his great name, but he supposes that Emiko might have an easier time referring to him in this manner, so he nods simply.

*“I am returning this Relic to its rightful place. Would you come with me and apologise to its owner?”*

*“Okay! But... Pochi is a bit scary.”*

*“Pochi?”*

*“That’s the name of the Okuri-Inu. It says so on that Relic.”*

Yanagi looks at the gnarled piece of wood, but, even knowing what the script on it is meant to say, he finds it impossible to read. It seems that Emiko, with her ability to become a human, is also capable of reading their text, which makes the Kodama wonder about something.

*“Emiko, do you speak the language of humans?”*

*“Yes!”*

*“Why did you not tell the vandals to leave your shrine?”*

Emiko looks at Yanagi, who is only slightly taller than her, with her big black eyes and says, with great sincerity, *“They were very scary!”*



*As most Deities live apart from humans, they do not possess the ability to communicate with them, despite however much they might desire it. The Tanuki and Kitsune are outliers to this, as they possess the ability to take on human forms and imitate their speech. However, for most Deities, the wishes of their worshippers are difficult to grasp, though at the bigger temples, the humans have invented an Offering that contains their wishes within. Such an Offering is known as an Ema and consists of a wooden plaque upon which a human writes their wishes, such that the Deity to which it is offered may comprehend it.*

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*“Chi-chi-chi, a mischievous girl returns with thee.”*

*“I have dealt with the vandals that disturbed her shrine and she has come with me to apologise to Pochi the Okuri-Inu.”*

Emiko looks at the Kodama with her big eyes, before asking, *“Yan-Yan, you speak with the birds?”*

Yanagi nods once then continues down the path and the Night Sparrow follows along in the air behind them. For some reason, Emiko is holding on to his left hand and refuses to let go, but the Kodama does not hate the feeling of her warmth against its root-formed body. After all, it feels just like what KINSHIP ought to exemplify.

The grass is tall on the sides of the dirt path and at the end lays a small shrine. The shrine itself is smaller than Emiko’s, but has a similar shape: a wooden box with a pyramid-shaped roof. The interior of the box is empty and the little panel meant to lock it away has been pried open.

When they arrive in front of the shrine, there is no sign of the Okuri-Inu, but then Yanagi hears the warning call of the Night Sparrow and turns around to see a large hound charging towards them from the way they came. It is dark-grey of fur and its yellow eyes are wide in rage, but the Kodama understands how to placate the enraged Spirit and raises the Relic in front of himself and Emiko, as though a mighty shield.

The Okuri-Inu comes to a skidding halt, spraying dust and dirt all around, then growls and says, “...My...Relic.”

“I have come to return it,” Yanagi explains, imitating its gruff speech.

The hound does not seem to believe his words, but stays put, perhaps worried the Kodama will break the Relic.

“Emiko, as you were the one who stole it, you ought to be the one to return it as well.”

“Okay!” she replies cheerfully, though Yanagi detects a sense of unease below her mirthful exterior.

The Kitsune girl takes the gnarled inscribed wood from his hands and carefully places it within the shrine interior, before sliding the panel into place in front of it and closing the simple lock.

Yanagi steps towards the hound. “See?”

The Okuri-Inu huffs, but then lowers its head and replies, “Thank you, little Kodama.”

<p><i>‘Stolen for Protection’</i></p> <p><b>SHRINE</b> Quest</p> <p>—Troublesome Task—</p>
<p><i>A Mischievous Kitsune has stolen the Relic of the Okuri-Inu-Jinja, enraging the Shrine Deity and leading to travel along the East Road becoming dangerous. You must return the Relic for the Okuri-Inu to calm down.</i></p> <p><b>COMPLETED</b></p> <p>+1 <b>INFLUENCE</b></p>

“Phew, I thought it would eat us!” remarks Emiko.

“Don’t forget to apologise,” he reminds her, pulling her forward by the sleeve of her kimono.

Emiko immediately transforms back into a fox and yaps, “Sorry, Pochi.”

“My name is Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama, I am the new Guardian of the Great Forest,” Yanagi says.

**“I see. That must be why you smell so nice,”** the hound replies. **“With my Relic returned, I will resume my guard of the east road.”**

**“Take care that you do not harm the worshippers and pilgrims who come here to pray.”**

Pochi huffs and remarks, **“All humans are evil and cruel.”**

**“Not all of them.”**

**“I cannot smell the difference of their intentions, so they all smell the same. They bear the stench of fire and smoke to my nose. It seems an evil stench.”**

*“Maybe you can give them trinkets, so Pochi and I can smell who is good?”* Emiko suggests. *“I like trinkets!”*

*“A good idea,”* Yanagi replies. *“I will return to my shrine and do just that.”*

*“I will come with you!”* the Kitsune says excitedly and transforms into a human girl, before grasping the Kodama’s left hand again.

**“I will remain here, but seek me out if you require my aid or protection,”** says Pochi.

Yanagi looks around from the Night Sparrow and its flock, but they seem to have moved on, though he is certain that he will encounter them again.

As Yanagi walks back towards his shrine temple with Emiko holding his hand, the Kitsune remarks, *“I’ve never been inside your temple before, but it’s very pretty!”*

He looks at the eastern temple gate and realises that in his haste to explore the mountain, he failed to fully appreciate the temple built in his honour. The gate itself is made of sturdy wooden beams of a wooden sort that does not grow this high up, meaning it has been transported here specifically for the construction of the temple. The walls are comprised of dense rock that has been stacked into neat patterns, with a narrow and arched wooden roof running along the top of it. The gate too has a roof and a large door that seems very defensible. In a way, the temple is like a fortress made to repel intruders, though Yanagi doubts such intentions were the basis of its foundation, but he is still glad for its sturdy nature, as it will no doubt be a boon in the future.

As they pass through the gate, the Kodama takes in the sight of the dividing wooden walls and the various buildings placed around the temple courtyard: there is a large main building, wherein it seems the worshippers and pilgrims sleep and eat; a large bell of cast iron stands under a roof of its own and has a large wooden beam suspended horizontally in front of it on ropes, allowing for its sound to be



cast far across the mountain; and there are also many smaller buildings, such as a toilet which stands in the far corner and a bathhouse where steam is emerging through holes just below the lip of its roof. The temple mostly consists of black or red-dyed wood, though there are many colourful embellishments that resemble the flowers of the wisteria all over the place, as well as blossoming flower beds and carefully-pruned trees, not to mention a little Koi pond with a narrow bridge crossing it and a Zen Garden with swirling patterns raked into the white gravel.

“Wow!” says Emiko, amazed at the sight of the inner temple.

At the southern end of the complex, furthest from the three gates to the roads that lead off the mountain, stands a large Torii gate before the wooden barrier around the Yanagi-Fuji tree, with the wall behind it shorter than the rest, allowing for a fantastic view out over the treetops of the Great Forest below.

“*You have an amazing shrine!*” she remarks excitedly.

At the sound of her voice, the priest and worshippers come running. They seem very on edge, but at the sight of Yanagi they all collectively release a sigh of relief. In the same moment, the Kodama realises that the strain from driving away the Vandals has washed away upon entering the temple grounds.

To explain what he has just realised instinctively, the comforting voice tells Yanagi:

*This temple and its shrine are your heart, and its grounds are a sanctuary where you will not incur the strain upon your essence from casting your skills. However, your sanctuary is also your weakness, so it is paramount that you ensure its safety.*

“柳藤様！無事で御座いますか？僕らは心配で御座いましたので、” says the priest as he comes over.

“*Do you understand him?*” he asks Emiko.

“*He says he was worried about you.*”

“*Ask him what troubles the temple and Great Forest face, I wish to know how to heal my territory and aid its denizens. Time is of the essence.*”

Emiko scrunches her face in contemplation, then asks the priest: “このいい匂いヤンヤンくんは大変事についてを知りたいだから、言ってくれよ。”

Judging by the surprised expression on the priest's face, Yanagi is certain that Emiko is not the best interpreter for his many complex questions and demands, but he has no other way to communicate with the humans, so he just hopes she can get the main point across.

“付いてください、” the priest tells the Kitsune girl.

She turns to the Kodama and says, “*He wants us to follow him.*”

The priest brings the Guardian Deity and disguised Kitsune with him to an area near the Yanagi-Fuji tree, where two red-dyed wooden beams have been hammered into the ground and hold up a wooden rack upon which hang dozens-upon-dozens of wooden pieces inscribed with ink.

“この絵馬は皆さんの願いを書いています、” explains the priest to Emiko.

“*He says that everyone's wishes are written on these Ema,*” she tells the Kodama, pointing at the wooden plaques.

“*Make sure to thank him. If you could also ask him his name, I would appreciate it.*”

“*Okay!*”

Emiko looks back up the priest, who has been watching their exchange of yapping inhuman sounds with something bordering on fear.

“ありがとう、おじいさん！ところで、名前は？”

“「おじいさん」と。。。僕は三十二歳ですよ。” The priest pinches his nose ridge, which makes the Kodama worry that Emiko has said something weird. “僕はもと神社長の弟子の康介と申します。お嬢ちゃんの名前は？”

“あたし、ヤンヤンの親友の笑子だ！”

Emiko turns back to Yanagi as the priest walks away with a puzzled look on his face.

“What did he say?”

“He said he isn't an old man, but that he's twenty-four-years-old, and that his name is Kousuke. Oh, and also, he's the former Shrine Keeper's apprentice!”

The Kodama is unsure how she arrived at such a reply and shares the confusion of the priest, but is glad to finally have a name for the leader of his worshippers.

As he turns towards the Ema and is about to ask Emiko for help translating them, he realises that he can understand the wishes imbued into the wooden plaques, despite the fact that he cannot read the script drawn onto them.

*You have found the Ema of the worshippers and pilgrims of your temple, explains the comforting voice. These contain simple wishes, such as someone wanting to have an easy winter or a good harvest, but they also contain wishes about things that you can solve directly. You will be able to instinctively feel which of the Ema contains a quest and you can inspect the tasks before you pull one from the rack, such that you do not end up with a quest that is too difficult for you. Please do not take any Ema from the rack unless you intend to complete them, as such an act may have adverse effects on the person who wrote it or, in certain instances, it may reduce your INFLUENCE.*

The Kodama is both pleased and a bit apprehensive about this, but the Ema seem a boon, as he understands that seeking out temples or shrines that need help is difficult if he simply has to wander around and chance upon them. He steps up and grabs the closest one that feels like it has a quest:

<p><i>‘The Obstructed Northern Road’</i></p> <p><b>ROOT</b> Quest</p> <p>—Simple Task—</p>
<p><i>A recent summer storm has damaged a bridge on the top part of the north road and also caused a mudslide across the path, both making travel along the road impossible. You need to utilise your mastery of the elements to fix the bridge and clear away the mudslide.</i></p> <p><i>0 / 2 obstacles cleared</i></p>

As it seems easily doable, he takes the Ema from the rack, before looking for another in the same area, as he believes it to be a good idea to bring more than one quest, such that its INFLUENCE can grow quicker. He looks through the many plaques until he finds one that seems fitting.

—Written by Kristoffer Pauly (土星 Dosei)—

*'Temple of the Serpent'*

TEMPLE Quest

—*Dangerous Task*—

*Hakujya-Tera on the north road is beset by a malignant corruption caused by the cruel bandits that have taken up residence within its walls. It is up to you to drive away this foul corruption and restore sanctity to its halls.*

*0 / 1 temple cleansed*



*The balance of good and evil is with some Deities a struggle to maintain, and there are those Deities who are naturally viewed as evil, and thus, with just a slight push, can find themselves become corrupted and cruel. Of such Deities, the snake spirit is one often known to become a malignant evil in times of turmoil in the human realm.*

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Before he leaves the temple through the northern gate with Emiko, Yanagi goes up to each of the humans that inhabit the place and gives them a simple piece of bark from his body, upon which he has drawn a simplified image of the tree he was born from. Though they seem confused by the gift, they all accept it willingly and begin talking excitedly amongst each other.

Emiko insists that she should receive one as well, so Yanagi gives her one as they walk through the gate. She laughs excitedly, admiring the inscribed bark in the sunlight, before putting it away in the sleeve of her kimono.

Unlike the east road, the northern route down from the mountain peak is less circuitous and erratic, not to mention that it is wide enough for two carts to pass each other with little issue, whereas the east road is far too narrow in many parts for more than one cart to traverse.

With the waning sunlight, the trees along their path are cast in an amber light. In the air flows the song of birds and the incessant chirping of insects like cicadas. Though Yanagi comprehends the speech of the birds, there is little information to be gleaned from their sounds, but he is amused to realise that many of them are talking about his and Emiko's passing, warning other birds to be wary.

After some time the pair reaches a part of the road where the road that snakes down the sloping mountainside is fully blocked by a hill of loose dirt and errant stones.

*"This must be the first obstacle blocking the road,"* he remarks.

With an enthusiastic leap, Emiko transforms into a fox mid-air and lands on the pile of dirt and begins digging. Though her attempt is spirited, she makes little headway and he knows that it would take her days to shift all the dirt away from the road.

For a moment, as the sounds of Emiko's digging, the chirping of cicadas, and the warning calls of the birds is all that he hears, he contemplates how best to deal with the situation, given his current set of skills.

With a lifting fist, he awakens the roots and plants in the ground and compels them to shift the dirt. Despite the apparent simplicity of the SNARING VINES skill, he has the suspicion that all of his skills are only limited by his own inventiveness.

Letting out a surprised yelp, Emiko jumps away from the shifting dirt mound and runs behind Yanagi for safety. Like an extension of his root-formed body, the vines move around below the enormous mass of earth, slowly moving it closer to the mountainside from which it had fallen loose.

He notices how, with the sustained effort of manipulating the vines, his body is drained of energy, so the Kodama moves the last bit of earth in a single powerful swipe of the roots that obey his will.

At the end, the road is mostly cleared, though he believes he can shift it entirely and vows to return after he has fixed the bridge and been to the snake temple.

*"You're really strong!"* says Emiko in awe.

Yanagi notes with satisfaction that the quest has updated and counts this obstacle as cleared. He walks to the edge of the road and looks over the side of the mountainside. In the distance below he sees a few bridges that traverse part of the mountain where a long drop below has made the construction of a dirt path unfeasible. Yet he cannot see the Hakujiya-Tera, which has him worried about how far he needs to descend. Even though he has not been told it directly, he is aware that his mountain peak is far safer than the foot of the mountain where the large forest spreads out like a sea of green.

*"Are you okay, Yan-Yan?"*

*"I'm merely thinking on the enormity of my task as a Guardian."*

Emiko has transformed back into a girl and takes his hand. *"Don't drown in the possibilities of the future. Focus on the present for now,"* she says wisely and he lets her take him down the road, past the mound of shifted earth.

They pass over two bridges before they reach a third where half the planks are broken or missing. At first, he wonders if he can retrieve the missing and broken pieces and tie them back together using SNARING VINES again, but then he realises that those planks are too far below and likely not simple to repair.

Though he wanted to save his INFLUENCE points, he inserts his available one into ROOT and is greeted with a selection of four skills:

<b>ROOT – Level 3</b>			
<p><b>SHAPE WALL</b></p> <p><i>Call upon the plants and trees around you to create a wall, the strength of which depends on <b>ROOT</b>.</i></p>	<p><b>SWAMP</b></p> <p><i>Call upon the soil to transform into muddy terrain that is hard to traverse. Terrain size depends on <b>ROOT</b>.</i></p>	<p><b>CREATE SPEAR</b></p> <p><i>Create a spear from nearby plants and trees, the strength and power of which is based on <b>ROOT</b> and <b>DOMINION</b>.</i></p>	<p><b>STINGING NETTLES</b></p> <p><i>Create a patch of Stinging Nettles from the ground to damage foes or block off areas. Those stung by the Nettles will experience a weak poison effect that induces panic. Plant size depends on <b>ROOT</b> with damage based on <b>DOMINION</b>.</i></p>

Yanagi decides to select the SHAPE WALL ability, as he has the belief that the definition of a wall is something he can easily bend using his will. As he reads through the new option that replaced THORN BUSH, he comes to the realisation that each Attribute seems to have specific categories within them, as the skill that replaced SNARING VINES is a similar terrain-altering and movement-impairing skill, while the STINGING NETTLES is like an alternate version of his THORN BUSH. It makes him wonder about his KINSHIP skills, as he noticed on his second level up that BIRD COMMUNION was replaced by an ability that seemed to imitate the movement of birds.

His desire to accumulate more INFLUENCE and further explore the options of the powers available to him only grows with his imagination of how each of the six Attributes will process as he continues to invest points in them.

*“Emiko, help me gather some sticks and plants.”*

*“Okay!”*

After some minutes, they have a little pile of leaves, branches torn from trees in the same storm that ruined the bridge, and a bunch of weeds that the Kitsune proudly collected.

With a wafting gesture of his right hand, Yanagi awakens the power he has just learnt and the planks of the bridge that yet remain, as well as the pile of plants and wood, come together to form a long flat board that seems sturdy enough for them to stand on, though he is unsure if it can hold up the weight of a cart passing over. Utilising his SNARING VINES, he lifts the board onto the horizontal rafters of the bridge and then use the vines to lash it to the structure. Unfortunately, this seems yet another thing he may need to revisit, but the quest notification still appears:

<p><i>‘The Obstructed Northern Road’</i></p> <p><b>ROOT</b> Quest</p> <p>—Simple Task—</p>
<p><i>A recent summer storm has damaged a bridge on the top part of the north road and also caused a mudslide across the path, both making travel along the road impossible. You need to utilise your mastery of the elements to fix the bridge and clear away the mudslide.</i></p> <p><b>COMPLETED</b></p> <p><b>+1 INFLUENCE</b></p>

“We did it!” the Kitsune says excitedly, while hopping around.

He nods. “Now to find Hakuja-Tera.”

“I know where that is!” Emiko reports, then immediately transforms into a fox and takes off, running across the newly-repaired bridge, which squeaks slightly in protest.

Yanagi runs after her, the shape of his legs having been refined even further and allowing him to catch up to her after a moment, she laughs and picks up more speed.

The north road’s slope eases slightly as they reach a plateau. From here the road diverges west and becomes almost entirely straight until it hits another plateau further down where, from his vantage point above, Yanagi spots a collection of houses.



On the first plateau however, Emiko takes a right turn and leads them east. As he runs after her, he sees that they are further down the mountain now than he has been before and the realisation makes him uneasy, for reasons he cannot fully explain, though the Kitsune seems to harbour no such worries.

From the plateau they reach a narrow and treacherous path that hugs the mountainside on one side and has a straight drop-off to a slope hundreds of metres below on the other. The path is fortunately short, as it emerges into another plateau that is impossible to see from the first nor from the north road above. Here they pass through a Torii gate of stone, upon which is inscribed two symbols that Emiko says is pronounced “*Hakuja*” in the human tongue and which translates to “*White Snake*”.

From the Torii is a small graveyard with a view out over the forest below, as well as a single house that now lays abandoned. After these two points of interest is a wooden temple with a large smoothly-curved roof that overhangs a small porch-like entrance. The porch is accessed by three wide steps of a staircase and at its end is a closed-off sliding door that leads to the shrine within.

Light illuminates figures moving around inside the temple and the pair hide behind the abandoned house, trying to figure out how best to deal with the temple intruders.

“*It smells like blood here,*” Emiko remarks, worry in her voice.

The atmosphere of the temple is quite ominous, though the waning daylight is no doubt to blame, although his fledgeling sense of the essence in the air tells him that something is wrong with this place of worship.

With a whine, the sliding door is opened and a man saunters out. He wears a simple grey yukata that is stained and threadbare, and on his hip is a sheathed blade. The bandit walks casually over to the graves, then begins relieving himself onto one of the stones.

Emiko begins to growl and Yanagi understand the outrage she is experiencing, as he too feels a righteous fury at the disrespect shown to the dead. Without a second thought, he activates both CLAW and BARKSKIN as he charges the temple intruder. The bandit just has enough time to turn as he hears the *creaking* and *popping* of Yanagi’s body, before the Kodama brings him to the ground, using his claw to tear the sheathed blade from the man’s belt and scratching him along the face.

With a kick, the bandit pushes Yanagi off him and scrambles to retrieve his blade. Just as he gets his hands on its hilt, the Kodama barrels into him, sending him stumbling backwards to the edge of the temple plateau, before his feet slip on the loose earth and he falls backwards with a scream.

Yanagi compels the roots in the earth to catch him, but the sound of his voice quickly draws the remaining four men from within the temple interior. They all come running out of the open door with their blades drawn. The metal of their weapons has an unsettling feeling to them that, despite himself, Yanagi is terrified of.

He builds up his soul-energy before they can reach him and releases a powerful burst of his REPEL. The impact of his SPIRIT meeting theirs makes two of them drop their weapons in surprise, with all four freezing in their steps.

As they stand there, Emiko leaps at the nearest man in her fox form and latches onto his ankle with a bite, immediately pulling the bandit to the ground. Meanwhile, Yanagi compels the SNARING VINES of the earth to lift up the remaining three, but only manages to catch two, as the last man cuts through the encroaching vines with his blade, before coming straight for the Kodama.

With a downwards chop, the bandit's sword connects with Yanagi's claw and cuts through two of the fingers, sending them tumbling to the ground. As the blade meets the roots of his body, the Kodama feels a burning pain shoot through its entire soul, as though the strike managed to damage the very essence of its being.

Yanagi takes a step back, when the bandit tries for a follow-up slash, but this time he uses his reinforced legs to kick the man's wrist and send the sword flying, then he leaps forward with a downward strike of his three remaining fingers, which catches the front of the bandit's yukata and carves two lines through the fabric and into the skin of his torso.

As the man tries to retrieve his weapon, Yanagi sends another set of roots from the ground to seize him and lift him into the air.

Suddenly, Emiko yelps in pain as the remaining bandit kicks her away and makes a break for it. However, as the man tries to run across the narrow path away from the temple in the low light of the evening sun, he slips and quickly tumbles down off the side before Yanagi can catch him with his roots.

The three men lifted into the air struggle against the vines that hold them there, while the man who is dangling off the side of the plateau is pleading to be saved.

*"Are you okay?"* he asks Emiko after coming to her side.

The Kitsune nods, though it is clear she has been bruised badly.

*"It was a mistake to bring you here,"* he says with regret.

*"It's okay, I wanted to help,"* she replies.

Yanagi nods, then turns to view the bandits it has captured, wondering what it should do with them. Part of it wants to throw them off the mountain, but another wants to let them free.

Before he can make a decision, a pair of glowing red eyes light up in the doorway of the temple, and then a massive white serpent slithers out from within. The three men all cry out in fear, while Yanagi quickly considers if he has enough energy left to subdue the enraged temple Deity.

Then he recalls the wording of the temple quest and puts his newly-acquired INFLUENCE point into BLESSING.

<b>BLESSING – Level 3</b>		
<b>BLESS</b> <i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> to bless the growth and vitality of a plant or animal. Effect and duration depend on <b>BLESSING</b> and <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>	<b>SOOTHE</b> <i>Release an aura of calmness and serenity that may dispel anger or fear in those it touches. Aura size and effect is based on <b>BLESSING</b>.</i>	<b>SANCTIFY</b> <i>Project your <b>SPIRIT</b> outward to cleanse an area and sanctifying it, such that the flow of essence returns to normal. May also be used to dispel <b>CORRUPTION</b>.</i>

Yanagi immediately picks SANCTIFY and then begins casting it, as the enormous white serpent opens its maw and prepares to devour the bandits suspended mid-air. Starting with his two hands together, he builds up his remaining energy and releases it by spreading his palms out towards the Hakuja and its temple.

The wave of his energy washes over the white snake and its temple, and the malevolent glow of its eyes dim. In the same moment, Yanagi stumbles and falls to the ground, utterly depleted of energy. As the magic holding the men aloft begins to falter, he quickly flings the pleading bandit hanging off the edge back onto the plateau, while his comrades all fall down as well.

For a moment, it seems as if the four men might pick their weapons back up and fight back, but then the Hakuja slams its massive tail into the ground and lets out a threatening hiss, and they all abandon their vile swords and take off down the treacherous path that leads away from the temple.

The giant serpent slithers closer to where Yanagi is seated, but then Emiko quickly jumps in front of him, yapping as menacingly as she is capable of. It pauses for a moment, then lowers its head to the ground and just stays there.

“*What do we do?*” Emiko asks frantically.

“*I can't speak with snakes,*” he replies, “*But it seems to have calmed down.*”

The Kitsune transforms back into a human girl and helps Yanagi stand. As they stand there, holding on to each other and facing the enormous Deity of the temple, he says, “*I am Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama, the new Guardian of the Great Forest, I have driven away the bandits that intruded upon your temple and I have cleansed your temple of their taint.*”

It is impossible to tell if the serpent understands him or not, but then it lifts its large head and slithers back through the open door of its temple.

“*Maybe it wants us to follow,*” Yanagi tells Emiko, and though she seems reluctant, she helps him walk up the steps and through the open sliding door. As they cross the threshold, the quest updates:

<p><i>‘Temple of the Serpent’</i></p> <p><b>TEMPLE</b> Quest</p> <p>—<i>Dangerous Task</i>—</p>
<p><i>Hakujya-Tera on the north road is beset by a malignant corruption caused by the cruel bandits that have taken up residence within its walls. It is up to you to drive away this foul corruption and restore sanctity to its halls.</i></p> <p><b>COMPLETED</b></p> <p>+2 <b>INFLUENCE</b></p>

## 五

*Tsukimono is the name given to objects into which a spirit has settled. Though humans do not realise it, their attention and treatment of their possessions is capable of producing a condensed essence that may eventually coalesce into a soul.*

*An Object that is treated well and has great emotional attachment may become the seed that births a Minor Deity, which, when enshrined, can take on form and manifest its soul outside its vessel.*

*Those possessions that are treated poorly or which purpose is evil and morally corrupt may manifest a different sort of essence. Such a foul essence can turn into a corrupting spirit that taints those that come into contact with it, just like it itself is tainted by whoever handles it in a malevolent manner.*

*This latter type of Tsukimono is most commonly seen with weapons, as the very impetus for their creation is rooted in the purpose of conflict and spilling of blood. To pure and just beings, like the Deities who represent hope and goodness, the contact with such objects is harmful and corrupting.*

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Yanagi takes a look at his updated System information, as he contemplates whether or not to invest his new INFLUENCE points:

<i>Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama</i>	
<b>GUARDIAN DEITY NAME</b>	<i>Oomori-Yamatsumi Kami</i>
<b>DEITY TYPE</b>	<i>Kodama (Tree Spirit)</i>
<b>INFLUENCE</b>	7
<b>ATTRIBUTES</b> —2 Points Uninvested—	

<b>GROWTH</b>	1
<b>SPIRIT</b>	1
<b>DOMINION</b>	1
<b>ROOT</b>	3
<b>BLESSING</b>	3
<b>KINSHIP</b>	2

He wonders if investing another point in KINSHIP will offer him the ability to commune with serpents, but after the fight with the bandits he also contemplates putting points into DOMINION and GROWTH.

Seeing that she is still suffering, Yanagi uses his HEAL to alleviate the pain of Emiko's bruises. He feels incredibly regretful that she was harmed because of his recklessness. He also tries the skill on his own injuries, but it has no effect. It seems that his missing two fingers will not regrow *that* easily.

After almost eating the bandits, before Yanagi managed to subdue it, the Hakuja has vanished to somewhere inside the temple. Where he and Emiko are sitting is a side-room next to the shrine and worshipping area by the entrance. Fortunately, the bandits did not disturb the Relic, which is a bone-white snakeskin, but Yanagi cannot help but feel that something is still not right with the temple and its Deity, so, after recovering some more of his energy, he wanders around the temple interior, trying to locate the serpent.

He eventually finds a room that overlooks a gravelled area with large stones dispersed throughout. Unlike his own, temple where such a Zen Garden is carefully maintained by the priests and worshippers, the Hakuja's garden is littered with leaves, and careless feet or maybe just the passing of time has disturbed the pattern that might once have been drawn into it.

Not knowing what else to do, Yanagi climbs down from the open room that overlooks the Zen Garden, and begins using his hands to make a simple swirling pattern, after removing the leaves and errant pieces of nature that has marred its white gravel.

When he finishes, he climbs back up and looks over his work, nodding with contentment, before continuing his search of the temple.

After some more tidying up of the mess left behind by the bandits and lack of maintenance on the temple, Yanagi returns to where he left Emiko, having been unable to locate the white serpent. He finds her curled up in a ball, the beautiful coat of her fur looks so soft and inviting that he almost reaches out to pet her. He ends up sitting down next to her, watching for a while as she sleeps, though he himself feels no need nor desire to rest.

Though the energy of the temple is weak compared to his own, he does feel that his exhaustion is alleviated slightly faster within its embrace. As he sits there, watching the Kitsune sleep, he contemplates the root cause of what has led so many temples and shrines to be vandalised and trespassed upon. It is clear that the humans have lost their respect for the Deities that inhabit the mountain and he wonders how much worse it must be at the foot of the mountain, where the great sea of trees stretch far into the horizon. He has thus far only seen a tiny fragment of the territory he is meant to protect, but with his growing INFLUENCE he is starting to be able to sense the discord and tainted essence that befouls his realm.

Then he remembers the weapon that tore from him two of his fingers and decides to go dispose of the swords the bandits left behind, so that they do not continue to corrupt the Hakuja's temple.

As he leaves the out of a side door of the temple, he is greeted by the dark of night. Yanagi is able to see some of his surroundings, but beyond a few metres it is pitch-black. The light from inside the temple spills through the translucent sliding doors and simple windows, but it does little to push the darkness away. In the air is only a rare few calls of the birds in the treetops, and even the cicadas have quietened. Although he does not realise it, his past lives as a cat and field-mouse have made him comfortable in traversing the world at night, so he is not put-off by the sounds of creaking trees swaying in the wind or the sudden sounds of the Great Forest's denizens that pierce the stillness.

After searching blindly for a bit, he spots a sword when the sparse light from the temple reflects off its metallic surface. He searches around some more until he has located three blades. Two of them he throws off the side of the plateau, wanting to toss them far away from the forest, but really only managing to send the problem further down the mountain.

He holds the remaining sword by its hilt as he walks back towards the temple and sits down on the steps that lead to the main entrance. In the light that spills through the sliding door, he inspects the weapon carefully, wondering why it is letting off such a foul aura.

With a careful prod he touches a finger against the metal and feels a jolt of pain shoot through him, as though a fire travels through the inside of his root-formed body. He tries to use his SANCTIFY on the weapon, but he is either too weak to cleanse it or its inherent essence is a malevolent thing that cannot be purified, for it retains its foul aura.

When he realises that he cannot purify it, he throws the weapon off the plateau as well. He is about to return to the temple where Emiko sleeps, when a white owl alights onto one of the gravestones next to him. Its reflective eyes seem to glow as it stares at him. At first, he thinks it is a Minor Deity, but then realises no such aura emanates from it.

*“A poacher has stolen my young,”* the white owl says. *“I require your aid.”*

He briefly wonders how the owl knows he is able to help it, but then realises that its kind is renowned for their wisdom.

Yanagi nods. *“I will help you.”*

<p><i>‘The Poacher and the White Owl’</i></p> <p><b>KINSHIP</b> Quest</p> <p>—Troublesome Task—</p>
<p><i>A poacher has taken the offspring of a White Owl, killing its mate in the process. Follow the White Owl and rescue its young.</i></p> <p><i>0 / 3 owls rescued</i></p>

*“Follow me,”* it says and immediately takes off down the mountainside.

Yanagi hesitates for a moment, but then remembers one of the KINSHIP skills it unlocked after taking the BIRD COMMUNION and invests a point into the Attribute:



<b>KINSHIP – Level 3</b>			
<b>RODENT</b>  <b>COMMUNION</b>  <i>Allows for the communication with Rodents, such as mice, squirrels, and capybaras.</i>	<b>GLIDE</b>  <i>Channel the essence of the Bird and glide slowly downwards from any height. Efficiency and duration based on <b>KINSHIP</b> and <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>	<b>INSECT</b>  <b>COMMUNION</b>  <i>Allows for the communication with Insects, such as ants, beetles, and bees.</i>	<b>BLOODHOUND</b>  <i>Channel the essence of the Canid and unlock your sense of smell, allowing you to see scent-trails in the air. Efficiency and duration based on <b>KINSHIP</b> and <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>

Although the BLOODHOUND skill seems to have a use in this situation as well, Yanagi selects GLIDE, and, as his KINSHIP grows to three, he feels its face and head transform even further. With no time to waste, he uses the new skill and feels his arms take on a different shape, becoming like the wings of the owl.

Though his sight is still suppressed by the darkness, he sees the white owl gliding through the air below him, as though its feathers give off light by themselves. With a flap of his new wings he leaps off the edge of the temple plateau and dives down towards where his guide awaits.

By twisting his wings, he manages to slow his descent and settle into a glide, as the white owl continues ahead of him. Away from the cover of the trees, he can see more of the world below, as the light of the moon casts everything in its silver light. The feeling of air flowing around his body and the sight of the vast forest below excites him, though, as he follows the owl towards the edge of the mountain, he feels a sense of foreboding. Part of him wishes the comforting voice would return to assure him that he will be safe outside his mountain, but it never appears as he continues gliding across the treetops.

After a while, the owl stops in the air and Yanagi lands on the crown of a tall tree next to it. In the same moment he touches down, his arms transform back into their normal shape and he already feels the drain on his essence from the transformation.

The owl hovers next to him as it says, “*The poacher hides below in a hut, but when the sun rises, he will go to a nearby village to sell my young.*”

“How do you know this?” Yanagi asks at the owl’s certainty.

*“It has happened before, but this time the poacher killed my mate, so these are the last children I will birthe.”*

Yanagi nods. *“I will return to you your young.”*

With a sound of *creaking* wood, his hands transform into claws and he uses these to scale the tree he has landed atop of, reaching the bottom after a few moments. Not far away lies a little wooden hut and already from this distance Yanagi can sense the foul essence of the place. He understands that much suffering of the Great Forest’s denizens can be traced to this hut and the poacher within.

While walking towards the hut, he contemplates how to approach the situation. He wonders if he should slay the poacher or merely punish him, though he yet has no clue which solution will have the best result long-term. Further, he is worried that he will become corrupted by the act of murder, even if it is in defence of his territory and its sanctity.

*“O guiding voice, what am I to do?”* he asks the Divine One that brought him here.

For a moment, he thinks no response will come, but then the comforting voice answers: *There is no telling what future an act will bring. The tapestry of history is woven from the countless threads of lives, but one cannot see what shape it will take, if a thread is cut short nor if a thread is allowed to continue. The choice and its consequences lie ultimately with you. There is no doubt that you will make mistakes, but this too is part of your task, for in making mistakes you will learn and grow.*

Yanagi frowns at the response, but understands the wisdom in the words. It seems that even the Divine cannot predict what the future will look like, which is exciting, as it allows for it to take any shape possible, but, at the same time, there is a comfort to be had in knowing the result that an act will manifest.

By the time Yanagi reaches the door to the poacher’s hut, he has decided what path he will take. Imitating the voice of Pochi the Okuri-Inu, he lets a growl build in his mouth as he uses his claws hands to tear apart the flimsy wooden door.

The lone human within, as well as many caged animals, all let out sounds of distress at Yanagi’s terrifying display. Before the poacher can find any weapon to fight back, Yanagi stomps across the floor of the tiny hut and grabs him by his legs, dragging him out of his house, as all the animals he has caught watches him, letting out sounds of excitement and joy at the display of their abuser being treated

this way. For a moment, Yanagi almost lets their cries for revenge shape the punishment that he has decided upon, but then he snaps out of it.

As he crosses the threshold, he throws the poacher a few metres, then awakens the roots in the earth to reach up for him, purposefully manipulating them in a way that they only try to grasp him, but do not actually restrict his movements as he runs away from his hut.

The white owl comes to hover next to Yanagi, as the darkness of the forest swallows up the screaming poacher in the distance.

*“I would have seen him die with his eyes pecked out,”* says the owl.

*“Maybe that will end up his fate,”* remarks Yanagi, *“but not by my hands. I will defend the Great Forest and its denizens, but I will not taint it by shedding blood of those who may yet repent their wickedness.”*

The owl does not reply, but instead just follows behind as Yanagi returns to the hut and looks around at the many captured animals. They are all in cages of metal that let off a foul aura, though not as strong as the swords of the bandits. Using his claws, Yanagi wrenches upon the many cages, releasing small canids, rodents, some boar piglets, a few swallow hatchlings, and the three young white owls. He feels the repeated burn of the cages’ metal, but does his best to ignore it for the sake of the animals within.

Most of the animals, except one of the canids and the hatchlings, leave the hut quickly, seeming to know how to return home without needing guidance. Yanagi scoops up the four hatchlings and they quickly nuzzle up against his neck, gripping on to the roots of his body instinctively.

The white owl embraces its young with wide fluffy wings and looks to Yanagi with its serious eyes. *“Thank you,”* it says simply.

*‘The Poacher and the White Owl’*

**KINSHIP** Quest

—*Troublesome Task*—

*A poacher has taken the offspring of a White Owl, killing its mate in the process. Follow the White Owl and rescue its young.*

COMPLETED

+1 INFLUENCE

Yanagi leaves the hut with the four hatchlings, while the canid follows behind him. It looks like a racoon with its pattern, but it walks more like a dog.

*“You smell nice,”* says the racoon dog. *“Can I come with you? I don’t have a home.”*

Yanagi stops and looks at the animal, feeling a weak aura flowing from it. *“Are you a Tanuki?”* he asks.

*“That’s right!”* it replies, something like a laugh in its voice. *“My parents named me Yasaburou!”*

*“I am Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama, the new Guardian of the Great Forest. You said you don’t have a home, where are your parents now?”*

Yasaburou looks down at his paws. *“...They were eaten by some rich people in the capital to the north.”*

*“Eaten!?”* Yanagi exclaims in outrage, the four hatchlings hanging onto his shoulder and neck trembling in fear. He quickly puts a hand to them, so that they know they are safe. *“Why would anyone wish to eat Minor Deities like Tanuki?”*

Suddenly, Yasaburou transforms into an ugly fat man, whose yukata barely contains his enormous belly, then says, *“Tanuki are delicious!”*

He transforms back into his animal form immediately after and continues, *“Many of the people of the capital do not fear the wrath of the Deities anymore, and especially the rich love to show off their captured Deities, with some, like the ones who ate my parents, showing off their power and influence by eating the manifestations of the Divine...”*

*“This is deeply troubling,”* Yanagi replies.

*“The poacher you just drove off is but one of many who steals away the animals and Deities of the Great Forest. He only managed to capture me because I was taking a nap by a nearby lake, after searching for my older brothers for days. The three of us escaped the capital together, but then we got separated when we ran into one of those evil logging camps.”*

*‘Yasaburou’s Brothers’*

**KINSHIP** Quest

—Complex Task—

*After escaping from the Capital to the north, Yasaburou was separated from his two older brothers, but believes they may be hiding in the Great Forest somewhere. Help Yasaburou reconnect with his remaining family by using your connection with the Denizens of the Great Forest to find clues of their whereabouts.*

*0 / 2 Tanuki found*

*‘The Evil Logging Camps’*

**CORRUPTION** Quest

—Extremely Dangerous Major Task—

*A poacher has taken the offspring of a White Owl, killing its mate in the process. Follow the White Owl and rescue its young.*

*0 / 4 Logging Camps destroyed*

Yanagi frowns deeply. *“Yasaburou, you may come with me to my temple. I will help you find your family, but in return I may also need your help. Are you able to speak with humans?”*

*“I most certainly am! I’m something of a poet, even! I’ve never seen a creature like you before though, where is your temple?”*

Yanagi turns around and, with a hand still sheltering the hatchlings, points to the peak of the great mountain behind him. As he points towards it, he realises just how far away he is. It will be a long walk back.

“That’s very far!” Yasaburou says. “Maybe I can find a home somewhere closer to the foot of the mountain.”

<p><i>‘The Homeless Tanuki’</i> KINSHIP Quest —Troublesome Task—</p>
<p><i>Yasaburou the Tanuki is homeless, and though invited to stay at your temple on the mountain peak, he has declined, preferring to stay closer to the ground. Help Yasaburou find a suitable place to stay.</i></p> <p><i>0 / 1 home found</i></p>

Yanagi nods. The request makes sense to him, as it is perhaps a bit much to expect a Tanuki to live at the crest of the mountain, when he prefers to stay closer to the forest at its foot, not to mention, his proximity to the forest will help in his search for his brethren.

As the Kodama contemplates all the quests it has discovered from this chance meeting, he once again contemplates the heavy burden of his role.

*“Before I help you find a home, we must first return these swallows to theirs.”*

Yasaburou gets closer and sniffs one of the hatchlings, then says, *“Follow me! I can smell where they came from!”*

As the Tanuki sets off towards the mountain’s north road, Yanagi runs after him, making sure the young swallows do not fall off from where they are perched on his shoulder.

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*The intentions of an act greatly influence how that act alters the flow of essence. When a bird kills and eats a larva, or a fox chomps down on a rabbit's throat, those acts leave a minor stain on the flow of essence, but they are soon washed away by the flow of time, for such acts are part of the natural order.*

*However, when a human murders another human, whether out of anger, desperation, or driven by some foul cause, it leaves a powerful stain on the ambient essence that is no simple thing to wash clean by time's natural flow. In the worst cases, such a heinous act may lead to evil beings manifesting out of the corrupted ambient essence or it may cause the spirit of the slain to rise as an apparition.*

*To the flow of essence in the world, there are no acts more detrimental than the act of murder.*

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While chasing after the Tanuki Yasaburou, Yanagi decides to unlock the BLOODHOUND skill from the KINSHIP Attribute on a spur-of-the-moment, and when he adds one of the two available points to it, he is greeted with the selection:

<b>KINSHIP – Level 4</b>			
<b>RODENT COMMUNION</b> <i>Allows for the communication with Rodents, such as mice, squirrels, and capybaras.</i>	<b>REPTILE COMMUNION</b> <i>Allows for the communication with Reptiles, such as snakes, lizards, and turtles.</i>	<b>INSECT COMMUNION</b> <i>Allows for the communication with Insects, such as ants, beetles, and bees.</i>	<b>BLOODHOUND</b> <i>Channel the essence of the Canid and unlock your sense of smell, allowing you to see scent-trails in the air. Efficiency and duration based on <b>KINSHIP</b> and <b>SPIRIT</b>.</i>

He is excited to see that the REPTILE COMMUNION has appeared where GLIDE was before, but picks the BLOODHOUND skill nonetheless. He almost puts his remaining point into KINSHIP to get the ability to speak with the Hakuja and other reptiles, but then manages to restrain his impulsive action before it ends up hurting him.

While the transformations of his new Attribute investment take hold, Yasaburou breaks away from him and leaves his line-of-sight. Although light is starting to return to the world from the rising sun in the horizon to his left, the racoon dog easily blends into the busy understory and densely-forested area near the mountain's foot.

Figuring that this serves as a great introduction to the utility of the BLOODHOUND skill, Yanagi channels the essence of the canid and feels the front of his head, particularly the area below his eyes, elongate and take on a pointed shape.

When the effects of the skill take hold, the Kodama is overwhelmed by the discovery of a world hidden from him normally, as hundreds of coloured bands of particles appear before him, somehow visible to his eyes as his newly-formed snout registers them. From the height, density of particles, and unique colours, Yanagi is somehow able to immediately discern which one belongs to Yasaburou. Further, he is able to notice the scent the four hatchlings give off, as well as a faintly-blue trail left behind when they were taken from their nest. The trail they left behind is old, but not entirely erased, as the particulates have managed to stick to the bark of trees and the tall grass of the understory.

Yanagi picks up speed and quickly reunites with Yasaburou after only a few moments. The Tanuki looks at him with surprise and remarks, *“Your face changed a lot, Yanagi-Fuji, and you have hair like a human now.”*

*“Hair?”* Yanagi wonder and runs his ruined right hand over the top of his head and feels a weird sensation as the sensitive roots of his hand touch something soft and ephemerally-thin.

*“It suits you,”* Yasaburou compliments him, *“Although your face is starting to look a lot more human, although your nose is weird, almost like mine.”*

*“Normally my face is noseless, but I am channelling the essence of canids right now to enable me to follow scent-trails like you,”* he replies, tapping his snout. *“And perhaps it is a good thing that I am becoming more human-like in appearance. What did I look like before, I wonder?”*

*“You were like a bald menacing bundle of roots with a not-quite-face pretending to be human, maybe? Although it's still not quite human, but at this rate you'll be better at pretending that me.”*



“*I doubt that,*” he replies, knowing that he still needs a lot more points invested into his other Attributes to have a balanced appearance, after all, he is still no taller than the Tanuki and Kitsune. “*It would be handy to have your ability to transform my appearance.*”

“*It takes a lot of concentration to maintain a transformation for me,*” says Yasaburou, “*and if any of those scary people are around, I lose the ability to do it.*”

Yanagi stops, forcing the Tanuki to halt as well. They are only a few metres from the north road now. “*What do you mean by ‘scary people’?*”

“*I’m not very good at reading the humans’ writing, but they’re these terrifying soldiers who wear all-black armour with five symbols drawn in white down their backs. All of their members are very different, but they’re all really scary.*” Yasaburou lowered his head in grief, before adding, “*One of them caught my parents.*”

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘The Scary People’</i> <b>CORRUPTION</b> Quest —<i>Extremely Dangerous Task</i>—</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Learn more about the ‘Scary People’ that Yasaburou have told you about. They are known by their black armour and the five white symbols on their backs.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>0 / 1 information gathered</i></p>

“*I will find a way to deal with them,*” Yanagi promises him.

The sun has fully risen above the distant mountains to shed its light across the Great Forest by the time Yanagi and Yasaburou make it to the swallow’s nest. Yanagi’s BLOODHOUND skill has worn off a while before they reach the particular tree they are searching for and, when they get close, two swallows aggressively swoop around them, until Yanagi says:

“*I have come to return your stolen hatchlings.*”

Upon hearing the Kodama’s words, the adult swallows calm down and alight upon his shoulder, next to their peeping young. Yanagi is filled with a sense of triumph from aiding the swallows, but also

a deep justified fury at the mistreatment of his forest and its denizens. He understands that hunting and animals subsisting on one another is part of nature, but he will not permit thieves stealing away his wards for some twisted purpose. He vows to hunt down all poachers in his realm, such that none of his denizens become the playthings for cruel humans.

<p><i>‘The Abducted Hatchlings’</i></p> <p><b>KINSHIP</b> Quest</p> <p>—<i>Troublesome Task</i>—</p>
<p><i>A poacher has taken four hatchlings from a swallow’s nest.</i></p> <p><i>Help the distressed birds reunite with their children by tracking down the poacher’s hut before he is able to sell off the hatchlings.</i></p> <p><b>COMPLETED</b></p> <p><b>+1 INFLUENCE</b></p>

Yanagi nods with satisfaction at gaining more INFLUENCE while also alleviating the corruption befouling his territory. He looks to Yasaburou, then says, “*Let us find you a home next.*”

The area near the foot of the mountain, where they found the swallows’ nest, is populated by many tall trees, wherein live birds and squirrels in great abundance, with seemingly only minor squabbles between the two animal kinds.

As they are making their way up the mountain, Yasaburou suddenly asks, “*Do you smell that?*” His voice carries a dangerous tone.

Yanagi activates his BLOODHOUND skill to try and discern what the Tanuki is referring to, but, as soon as he initiates the ability, his senses are flooded with a singular stench. It is so profoundly-powerful that he wonders how he did not notice it in the forest below, for it is the clear and unmistakable scent of death.

With all his strength focused into his legs, Yanagi lopes up the mountain road, following his nose, while Yasaburou bounds after him on his shorter legs. The crisp earth and wood mulch that make up the roadway crunches under his root-formed feet. Every few metres the scent grows, and, to Yanagi's scent-vision, it is as though a gossamer veil of crimson is coating all his surroundings, hanging onto trees and grass like the web of a corrupt spinner.

He begins to pick up the warning trills and calls of the birds in the trees above, which, along with the way the scent is unfolding to his senses, lets him know he is near the scene of the crime.

After bounding up another stretching slope and reaching a plateau with pruned trees and scythed grass, Yanagi finds himself staring straight at a hut, from which, unmistakably, the scent of death flows forth.

A few moments later Yasaburou catches up with him, wheezing and sputtering in exhaustion. With a spin, his raccoon dog form transforms into the large figure of a fat man with only a little bit of clothing around his reproductive organs, whose drooping rolls of fat seem greatly exaggerated. In his weirdly-obese human form, Yasaburou sits down on the carefully-maintained grass and lets out a deep sigh of air. Then he transforms back into a Tanuki a moment later.

*"What was that for?"* Yanagi asks.

*"Sorry,"* Yasaburou replies, *"It's a joke me and my brothers share."*

Yanagi is not sure what to say to that, so he says nothing, and instead begins walking towards the hut. He notices that, not far from the hut is a strangely-shaped mound of dirt with an opening in the bottom.

*"A charcoal burner lives here,"* Yasaburou says upon noticing the mound as well.

When he focuses a bit, Yanagi is able to smell the remnants of the smoke that must surely have welled forth from the large mound in the past. It is a part of the human activity in his territory that he instinctively understands must be allowed, for he somehow knows that the humans require the charcoal for their homes, particularly during the merciless winter months. Though, being a Kodama, he is not fond of the smoke of burnt wood.

Together, they walk up to the open door of the hut. They do not have to search long before they find its former occupant, slain by a wound to his stomach. It seems his few belongings have been rifled through as the hut is a disorganised mess around the decaying corpse.

*"Who could have done this?"*

*“A bandit, no doubt.”*

Yanagi frowns, then leans down to pick up the corpse.

*“What are you doing!?”*

*“We need to bury him.”*

*“Leave that for someone else to do, you’ll be corrupted by handling the dead!”*

*“Yasaburou, there are no one else. As the Guardian of this forest, this is surely one of my duties.”*

The Tanuki is very uncomfortable with the situation, but seems to realise that it is futile to argue and as such runs out of the hut and picks a spot next to a tree, where he begins to dig into the ground with his claws. The ground is soft and malleable, so the Tanuki quickly has a hole prepared, but when Yanagi walks out of the hut with the corpse in the arms of his short frame, it is clear that it needs to be much bigger.

Without letting go of the deceased man, Yanagi invokes the vines in the earth and manipulates them to widen the hole, as well as deepening it, such that the animals of the forest do not attempt to dig up the corpse and become tainted in the process.

With a hole large and deep enough, Yanagi manipulates the roots to carefully take the body and lower it down into the grave, while the Tanuki watches from the side, cleaning his dirty paws. When the body lays at the bottom of the grave, Yanagi bids the roots and vines fill the earth back in, such that, when finished, a tiny mound of disturbed earth is the only trace left.

He looks around for a while, before finding some stones that he stacks atop one another at the head of the grave. Though Yanagi is clearly no priest, he hopes that he has followed something close to a proper ritual, but, just to be sure, he uses SANCTIFY on the grave, hoping that it will keep the spirit of the slain man from becoming corrupt.

The energy seems to drain from him and he is forced to sit down in the grass next to the grave, while looking at the blood that has stained the roots of his arms. The repeated usage of his BLOODHOUND skill, not to mention the strenuous usage of the SNARING VINES, has utterly drained his reserves.

*“What now?”* Yasaburou asks, looking at the grave with an uncomfortable look in his beady eyes.

*“What are you gonna do about the hut?”*

Yanagi turns his head to look back at the open doorway to the murder scene. Though his BLOODHOUND ability has run out of its duration, he can still sense the *wrongness* emanating from the hut. He knows that he must cleanse it, but he needs to recoup his energy first.

<p><i>‘The Slain Charcoal Burner’</i></p> <p><b>BLESSING</b> Quest</p> <p>—Very Troublesome Task—</p>
<p><i>A Charcoal Burner was brutally murdered in his hut and the foul act has left behind a corrupting influence that must be exorcised, before it can coalesce into a malign spirit.</i></p> <p><i>0 / 1 corruption cleansed</i></p>

After resting for a while, Yanagi rises from where he is seated and goes to the hut, before performing the SANCTIFY gesture and attempting to cleanse it like the Charcoal Burner’s grave. As his benevolent power washes over the tainted essence gathered in the hut, it seems as though it pushes it away, but then the power dissipates and the corruption blossoms back into full.

The comforting voice returns and tells him: *You are currently not strong enough in neither SPIRIT nor BLESSING to drive away corruption of this magnitude. After all, murder is the act that impacts the flow of essence the most, and, as such, requires tremendous power to be purified.*

Yanagi frowns at this news. The thought of leaving the corruption to fester is one that does not sit well with him, but then he has an idea, although it requires him to return to his temple. But first, he has promised to help Yasaburou find a home.

“Let us find you a place further up the mountain. I do not think you should be near to this place.”

The Tanuki nods vehemently in affirmation.

The peak of the mountain is still very far away, when Yanagi and Yasaburou chance upon another hut, though this one has merely been abandoned. It does seem to have been ransacked as well, but at least there are no corpses within. The hut also lies off the main road, where it branches off into a narrow west-going path through a copse of trees.

“*It’s no palace,*” Yasaburou remarks.

“*I do not believe we have any palaces on the mountain,*” Yanagi replies soberly.

“I was attempting to be humorous,” says the Tanuki awkwardly.

Yanagi nods, “*I see.*”

“*Still,*” he continues, having briefly turned into a tall muscular man with a flimsy moustache and knocking on the wooden walls, “*This sure is a fixer-upper.*”

The Kodama looks at the wall the Tanuki has brought attention to, noticing that part of the wooden panelling is missing, allowing for plants and insects to invade the interior. With his damaged hand on the wall, Yanagi invokes his SHAPE WALL skill and the wood obeys his command, stretching to become one piece void of holes.

“*Woah, how’d you do that?*” Yasaburou exclaims in awe, having returned to his Tanuki form and already made himself at home next to the pit in the floor where meals might be cooked over a fire.

“*I must return to my temple on the mountain’s top,*” Yanagi tells him.

“*I see,*” Yasaburou replies, sounding somewhat sad. “*Don’t be a stranger, right?*”

Yanagi nods, “*I will make sure to visit. Hopefully I will be able to reconnect you with your family soon as well.*”

After walking out of the hut, the Tanuki calls out to him, “*Hey, Yanagi!*”

The Kodama turns around and regards him, as he stands on the threshold of his new home.

“*Thanks for saving me!*” Yasaburou says with a pointy-toothed grin.

‘*The Homeless Tanuki*’

KINSHIP Quest

—*Troublesome Task*—

*Yasaburou the Tanuki is homeless, and though invited to stay at your temple on the mountain peak, he has declined, preferring to stay closer to the ground. Help Yasaburou find a suitable place to stay.*

COMPLETED

+1 *INFLUENCE*

“Goodbye for now, Yasaburou.”

Yanagi has only just turned around and begun to walk back along the path to the main north road, when he feels the effect of attaining ten INFLUENCE points. As though an immense surge of energy rushes through him, he realises that he has gained an increased sense of his nearby territory, as well as further understanding of its vast intricacies.

Further, he feels overcome by newfound power and then a message from the Divine System tells him:

*Unique Ability Attained!*

*INFLUENCE: 10*

ROOT OF RETURN

Channel your *INFLUENCE* as the Guardian  
Deity of the Great Forest to return to the  
Yanagi-Fuji tree within your temple at the top of  
the mountain.