

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 traversed 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 species 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 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 fieldmouse 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.

“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.

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 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.

As the Yanagi-Fuji Kodama steps away from the tree, it looks around at the cage of wood that surrounds the tree. It has gained sentience, but does not recall its 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.

The Kodama feels a strong urge to leave the confines of the shrine, so it mounts the wooden barrier and climbs atop its short black-tiled roof, staring out over the temple complex it finds itself 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 it stands atop the shrine, it realises that it 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 its mind. I will guide you through your tasks as a Guardian Deity. For now, have a look at yourself:

<i>Yanagi-Fuji-no-Kodama</i>	
GUARDIAN DEITY NAME	<i>Oomori-Yamatsumi Kami</i>
DEITY TYPE	<i>Kodama (Tree Spirit)</i>
INFLUENCE	0
ATTRIBUTES	
GROWTH	1
SPIRIT	1
DOMINION	1
ROOT	1
BLESSING	1
KINSHIP	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. With every point invested into an Attribute, you are given a choice of skills. For now, you have been given a point in each Attribute, but before you choose skills associated with these Attributes, I will explain what each Attribute represents and what demesne it holds power over:

GROWTH is the Attribute that represents your physical vessel and its durability. As the Guardian Deity of this Mountain Forest, there will come a time when you must repel the harmful invaders that damage your territory and this Attribute decides how much damage your body can take before it falls apart. Additionally, GROWTH governs how effectively you may utilise form-altering skills.

SPIRIT represents your metaphysical soul and its durability. Your soul will not face the same punishment as your vessel, but it is nonetheless important to have a powerful Spirit to survive encounters with the forces of Corruption that plague your lands. Additionally, SPIRIT governs how effectively you may utilise soul-based skills.

DOMINION is the Attribute that is most closely related to how well you may fare in combat and its associated skills are ones most suited for the battlefield, including skills that allow you to alter your vessel's shape and skills that allow you to terrorise the minds of your enemies.

ROOT is the most versatile of your Attributes, as it features a wide spectrum of skills that can assist in both combat, defence, and rebuilding efforts. Some skills may allow you to summon lashing vines from the forest floor, others may allow you to reshape trees to construct large walls or create new weapons for your vessel to wield.

BLESSING is an exclusively benevolent Attribute, which deals with the healing and reforestation of your forest. It may also be utilised to cleanse corrupted foes and areas, but it will mainly see its use in curing the ailments of the forest's denizens and restoring sanctity to ruined shrines.

KINSHIP is a unique attribute only available to a Guardian Deity of the Mountains and Forests, as it involves your connection to the forest itself and allows for the communion and dealing with animals and plants. Some skills simply enable you to converse with certain groups of animals or plants, while others enable you to take on some of their characteristics.

Now, go ahead and choose the skills you desire from each of the six Attributes:

GROWTH – Level 1	
BARKSKIN	POLLEN CLOUD
<i>Reduces mobility in exchange for making a dense layer of protective bark form on the outside of</i>	<i>Releases a massive obscuring cloud that irritates the breathing of any animal or human caught in it.</i>

<p><i>your body, dulling all attacks and increasing vessel durability. Strength based on GROWTH level.</i></p>	<p><i>Cloud size and effect based on GROWTH level.</i></p>
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SPIRIT – Level 1

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

<p>CLAW</p> <p><i>Shape a hand of your vessel to become rending claw with its strength and sharpness based on DOMINION.</i></p>	<p>INTIMIDATE</p> <p><i>Project your INFLUENCE to intimidate foes, making them unwilling to fight.</i></p>	<p>WHIP</p> <p><i>Shape a hand of your vessel to become a dexterous whip with its length and speed based on DOMINION.</i></p>
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ROOT – Level 1

<p>SHAPE WALL</p> <p><i>Call upon the plants and trees around you to create a wall, the strength of which depends on ROOT.</i></p>	<p>SNARING VINES</p> <p><i>Call upon the roots of plants and trees to entangle your enemies' feet, preventing them from moving. Snare strength depends on ROOT.</i></p>	<p>CREATE SPEAR</p> <p><i>Create a spear from nearby plants and trees, the strength and power of which is based on ROOT.</i></p>
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BLESSING – Level 1		
HEAL	CURE	SANCTIFY
<i>Project your SPIRIT to heal wounds, broken bones, and internal damage. Effect and scope of the healing effect depends on SPIRIT.</i>	<i>Project your SPIRIT to cure ailments, such as sickness, poison, and contagions. Effect and scope of curing effect depends on SPIRIT.</i>	<i>Project your SPIRIT outward to cleanse an area and sanctifying it, such that the flow of essence returns to normal. May also be used to dispel CORRUPTION.</i>

KINSHIP – Level 1		
RODENT COMMUNION	BIRD COMMUNION	INSECT COMMUNION
<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>

Yanagi-Fuji struggles to wrap its newfound sentience around all the options it is greeted with and is struck by decision paralysis.

In response, the comforting voice tells it, *You may delay your decisions for now, but as the Guardian of the Great Forest you are expected to learn quickly and adapt even quicker. For now, I recommend you pick the HEAL skill from the BLESSING Attribute. To aid you in understanding how this ability works, as well as its limitations, I will provide you with a Quest:*

<p><i>‘The Temple’s Sick and Injured’</i></p> <p>BLESSING Quest</p> <p>—Simple Task—</p>
<p><i>Amongst the adherents and worshippers at Yanagi-Fuji-Jinja are many who are stricken with illness or serious injuries,</i></p>

which you alone possess the power to alleviate.

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Yanagi-Fuji follows the advice of the voice and picks the HEAL skill. As the Attribute point is invested, it feels a sense of calm and serenity flow across its mind, alongside the knowledge of how to cast its new skill.

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

A sound of relief, and more words it does not comprehend, escapes the priest's mouth, before it walks down past the rest of the supplicating figures and repeats the process. Most have their injuries healed, though a few carry such ailments that its 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 its HEAL can only alleviate the symptoms of, but not entirely deal with.

From the act of helping these humans who have prayed to it, Yanagi-Fuji feels an immense sense of gratification. As it checks the Quest, it sees that the number has gone from zero to ten, though it 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-Fuji does not think much about the options, but immediately puts the new point into BLESSING, so that it can unlock the CURE skill and aid the remaining five humans. This time, however, it is greeted with a new choice where before was the HEAL skill.

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

However, it remains resolute to its intended plan and picks the CURE skill.

As another point is invested into its BLESSING Attribute, the Kodama feels itself grow slightly more capable of sensing the problems in the humans around it and the way in which they can be resolved. It also gains an innate 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 its palm moving down instead of sideways, it casts its 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>BLESSING 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>COMPLETED</p> <p>+1 INFLUENCE</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-Fuji feels that it is beginning to somehow get a grasp on all the information, but it also feels a powerful desire to explore, and, as such, it 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.

“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 are wary of the road Yanagi-Fuji 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, no it is instead more preoccupied by its Divinely-granted role which seems overwhelmingly-insurmountable in scope. The reason it has left its temple is not that Yanagi-Fuji wishes to shirk its Divinely-appointed duty as a Guardian Deity of the Great Forest, but, rather, it wishes to first learn what resides within the territory it is meant to protect.

As it continues down the east-going road, the priest catches up to it, after all, it 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-Fuji, who now has its focus set on a shrine it has spotted in the distance. Wondering if the priest might help it in its task, it halts in the middle of the road and turns to its relentless companion. The man looks down at the Kodama with a strange expression, one which seems at once hopeful and perplexed. When Yanagi-Fuji 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. It 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-Fuji, though the Kodama cannot tell why.

When it reaches the branching path and continues left towards the shrine, that is now clearly in view down a straight dirt path, it notices how the small building 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-Fuji 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 the Kodama stays where it is and quickly puts its KINSHIP point into the BIRD COMMUNION skill.

KINSHIP

BIRD COMMUNION

*Allows for the communication with Birds,
such as swallows, ducks, and owls.*

As the newfound knowledge flushes into its body, it feels the portion of its head that might be considered a face take on a new shape, as though becoming more refined, but it cannot witness its own face so it does not realise the change has made it more human-like.

With the new skill, Yanagi-Fuji 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,” the Kodama tells the swarm, imitating their poetic song. *“Chi-chi-chi, lead this Okuri-Inu to me!”* Although it does not know how to fight, it has an instinctual feeling that it is stronger than its small child-like body may suggest. However, it still picks the CLAW skill from the DOMINION selection and is glad to see that, along with the knowledge of the offensive skill, it has gained more mass upon its arms.

DOMINION

CLAW

*Shape a hand of your vessel to become
rending claw with its strength and
sharpness based on **DOMINION**.*

It also chooses the BARKSKIN skill from GROWTH, feeling its torso bulk up and its overall height increasing slightly.

GROWTH

BARKSKIN

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 durability. Strength based on **GROWTH** level.*

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 Yanagi-Fuji, 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-Fuji 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-Fuji 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>SHRINE 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-Fuji returns back to the fork in the road and continues eastward, while keeping its eyes open for signs of another shrine. The humans that were following it have retreated to the safety of their temple walls. 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-Fuji is unsure why it has been selected for the role as Guardian of so vast a territory as the Great Forest, it seems an impossible task for something of its 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-Fuji 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-Fuji and it 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-Fuji is about to give up and return back the way it came, it hears boisterous laughter from below. It 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 it watches them from above, it feels confident that it can beat them, as the three men seem to stumble around in some manner of inebriation. Though it does not realise it, its past life as a field-mouse taught its essence how to observe potential threats and come up with a plan to deal with them, though, unlike the field-mouse, its plan revolves around driving them away rather than avoiding them.

Before it descends further down the east road, it allocates its Attribute points in SPIRIT and ROOT, picking the REPEL and SNARING VINES skills.

GROWTH

REPEL

*Build up your soul energy and release a burst of power that repels all nearby foes if their **SPIRIT** is lower than yours.*

ROOT

SNARING VINES

*Call upon the roots of plants and trees to entangle your enemies' feet, preventing them from moving. Snare strength depends on **ROOT**.*

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

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

It realises that it still has an unassigned Attribute point left and decides to put it into ROOT, as it is the most versatile Attribute available to it and the one most likely to offer ways for it to deal its current situation.

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

Yanagi-Fuji is surprised to see a fourth skill appear in the selection and decides to pick the THORN BUSH as it seems to fit perfectly with its other acquired skills. A plan has crystallised in its mind's eye and it carefully descends the east road towards where a branching path leads south to the three loud vandals at the shrine. As it walks with silent steps on the side of the dirt road where grass grows, it feels how the physical change from the ROOT Attribute has made its legs more dexterous. It knows that if I tried, it would be able to move faster than before, but for the moment it 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 the air, it feels a natural instinct to steer away from the smoke and the fire that makes it. As it sneaks closer to the trio, it 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-Fuji feels a righteous anger rise in its body, despite having only been a Deity for short while.

With a gesture of lifting its right hand, it compels the roots in the ground to rise and snare the vandals. In the same moment, it shapes its hand into a CLAW and activates BARKSKIN, the roots of its body *creaking* and *popping* as the alterations take place. The sounds of the transformations draw the three drunken men's eyes towards where Yanagi-Fuji 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 coils about their legs.

The three of them cry out in shock and fear at what is happening to them, with one falling onto his back in a scramble to get out of 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-Fuji'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-Fuji is slowly getting closer, still repeating the song of the Yosuzume. Its steps are carefully placed, like a street cat menacingly approaching a rival in its path who it seeks to intimidate. It has moved onto the road and circled slightly around their position, 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.

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 it, Yanagi-Fuji hides in the tall grass and erases the signs of its 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-Fuji 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.

It notes that expending the power to cast its four skills was more taxing on its body than it assumed, and it seems clear that its abilities put a strain on its body, especially when so many are used in quick succession. Though it also has the instinctual understanding of its body to know that the strain will lessen as its Attributes grow stronger.

The Kodama goes over to the fire, where the remains of the Offering Sake lay, the fine vessels mostly empty. Nonetheless, it 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 it looks around, it sees no sign of the stolen Relic from the Okuri-Inu.

It 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-Fuji is unwilling to get too close to it.

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

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

“*Kitsune*,” it says in the language of the birds, “*I seek the return of the Relic you stole.*”

Tihi, says the fox as it continues to hop around Yanagi-Fuji. Clearly it does not understand what is being asked of it.

<p><i>‘Vandals at the Kitsune Shrine’</i></p> <p>SHRINE Quest</p> <p>—<i>Troublesome Task</i>—</p>
<p><i>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.</i></p> <p>COMPLETED</p> <p>+1 INFLUENCE</p>

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

KINSHIP – Level 2			
RODENT	GLIDE	INSECT	CANID

<p>COMMUNION</p> <p><i>Allows for the communication with Rodents, such as mice, squirrels, and capybaras.</i></p>	<p><i>Channel the essence of the Bird and glide slowly downwards from any height. Efficiency and duration based on KINSHIP and SPIRIT.</i></p>	<p>COMMUNION</p> <p><i>Allows for the communication with Insects, such as ants, beetles, and bees.</i></p>	<p>COMMUNION</p> <p><i>Allows for the communication with Canids, such as dogs, foxes, and wolves.</i></p>
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As the Kodama picks the CANID COMMUNION, it feels its face and head change shape slightly, and the Kitsune in front of it takes a step back, tilting its head to the side confused.

Then Yanagi-Fuji repeats its 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-Fuji, taking the Relic carefully into its hands. It feels the essence that flows from the object and knows it is the Relic it 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-Fuji,” the Kodama says.

“Yan-Yan!”

Yanagi-Fuji does not know how to feel about the reduction of its great name, but it supposes that Emiko might have an easier time referring to it in this manner, so it 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-Fuji looks at the gnarled piece of wood, but even knowing what the script on it is meant to say, it finds it impossible to read. It seems that Emiko, with her ability to become a human, is 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-Fuji, 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.

“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-Fuji nods once then continues down the path, the Night Sparrow follows along in the air behind them. For some reason, Emiko is holding on to its 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, this 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-Fuji hears the warning call of the Night Sparrow and turns around to see a large hound charging towards it 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 itself 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-Fuji explains.

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

“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-Fuji detects a sense of unease below her mirthful exterior.

The Kitsune girl takes the gnarled inscribed wood from its 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-Fuji 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>SHRINE 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>COMPLETED</p> <p>+1 INFLUENCE</p>

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

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

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

“I am the new Guardian of the Great Forest,” Yanagi-Fuji tells Pochi.

“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. They all bear the stench of fire and smoke to my nose.**”

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

“*A good idea,*” Yanagi-Fuji 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.

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

It looks at the eastern temple gate and realises that in its haste to explore the mountain, it failed to fully appreciate the temple built in its 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 wall is 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-Fuji doubts such intentions were the basis of its foundation, but it is still glad for its sturdy nature.

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.

“*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 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 the other worshippers come running. They seem very on edge, but at the sight of Yanagi-Fuji 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 it has just realised instinctively, the comforting voice tells Yanagi-Fuji:

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?” it 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-Fuji is certain that Emiko is not the best interpreter for its many complex questions, but it has no other way to communicate with the humans, so it 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 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-Fuji 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.”

The Kodama is starting to understand why the priest looked so confused now. As it turns towards the Ema to ask Emiko for help translating them, it realises that it can understand the wishes imbued into the wooden plaques, despite the fact that it 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. You will be able to instinctively feel which of the Ema contains a quest and you can inspect the task before you pull it from the rack, such that you do not end up with a quest that is too difficult for you.

This pleases the Kodama, as it understands that seeking out temples or shrines that need help is difficult if it simply has to wander around and look for them. It steps up and grabs the closest one that feels like it has a quest:

<p><i>‘The Obstructed Northern Road’</i></p> <p>ROOT 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>

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

<p><i>‘Temple of the Serpent’</i></p> <p>TEMPLE Quest</p> <p>—Dangerous Task—</p>
<p><i>Hakujya-Tera on the north road is beset by a malignant corruption caused by the 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><i>0 / 1 temple cleansed</i></p>