



ILLUSTRATION BY RANDY BROECKER

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HEAD HAUNTER

From the Tales of Shintaro Oba

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A CHILL wind whistled through the narrow street, sending fallen leaves dancing into the darkness. The autumn moon stared down from the overcast sky, struggling to pierce the grey clouds drifting across its face. From the arched roof of a potter's shop, an owl hooted. A black cat slipped around the corner of a weaver's hut, the dripping husk of a large spider clenched between its fangs. Bats fluttered around the lanterns that illuminated the lane, snatching the moths drawn to the light.

The samurai shifted the armour he carried in a bundle slung over his back. He'd hoped to reach the village of Yukari-do long before nightfall, but had been delayed by a washed out bridge. Now it seemed as if the place was making an extra effort to make him feel uneasy. He smiled at the thought. It would need more than such creepy overtures to disturb a man whose sole purpose in life was to hunt demons.

Shintaro Oba kept one hand on the carved grip of the longer of the swords he wore. He'd made the journey to Yukari-do because a traveller claimed the village was plagued by a demon. Details were scant, but the man said he could find out more by visiting The Blissful Ox, Yukari-do's only inn. Oba had been tempted to ignore so sketchy a story, but the village was only a few hours from the town where he'd recently vanquished the savage oni Yagihebi. It would cost him little to take a look and there was just a chance he might be able to free the inhabitants from a fiendish monster.

Paper lanterns flanked the bamboo sign that proclaimed a large, rambling structure as The Blissful Ox. Oba should have guessed it was the right place even without the sign. In a village like Yukari-do, the biggest buildings were always the inn and the storehouse, and he'd already passed the former. Laughter and the melody of a shamisen greeted the samurai as he walked to the main door and pushed it aside. Within he found a large common room with several rough-clad farmers sitting around a few low tables drinking sake. A little wooden platform provided a stage for the young woman plucking at the shamisen. A counter of lacquered bamboo ran along one wall, behind which an older woman was preparing a tray with cups and bottles to replenish those already being used by the patrons.

The moment he stepped inside, every eye turned to Oba. The laughter faltered and conversation among the farmers faded. The musician continued to play, but a troubled expression flashed across her powdered face. The old woman gave him a wary look before emerging from behind the counter.

Oba was accustomed to such reactions. The common folk regarded samurai at the best of times with a mixture of frightened respect and smoldering resentment. They depended on samurai to protect them from bandits and other threats, but that dependence came at a price. Samurai expected complete deference from the commoners and often would abuse those who failed to show them proper respect. As he felt their eyes studying him, Oba knew the farmers were trying to gauge whether he was in the service of their daimyo or some other clan, or if he was a masterless ronin to whom they owed no submission. Though a ronin was technically still of a higher caste and could do as he liked, he would quickly be brought to task by the lord who governed Yukari-do if he were to abuse the daimyo's subjects.

Oba made a slight bow to the farmers, not so low as to pay them undue respect but neither so slight that they would take it as a gesture of insult and arrogance. It was enough to appease their worries and the men slowly resumed the conversations his arrival had interrupted.

The samurai shifted the bundled armour and walked over to the counter. He caught at the old woman's sleeve as she started to pass him. "I would thank you for some sake. I've travelled far and the night is cold."

The patroness gave him a closer scrutiny, her gaze lingering on the swords he wore. She set the tray down and stepped back behind the counter. After a moment, she set a small bottle and a clay cup before Oba. When he reached into his kimono to get his money, she waved him aside. "No need for that. It's already been paid."

"How is that?" Oba looked around, suspicion in his eyes.

"You were expected," she answered, nodding at the swords he wore. "I was told to watch for a samurai bearing a sword with a hilt of bone." She gave Oba a brief smile. "Truthfully, I am relieved that you've come. I don't want *it* in my backroom any more."

Oba shook his head. The innkeeper's words were only deepening the mystery rather than revealing it. "We get ahead of ourselves," he said. "First, who is it that told you to expect me?"

"Your friend," the woman said. She lifted her eyes and stared at the ceiling. "The priest. He's taken a room upstairs." Now it was her face that showed traces of suspicion. "He is your friend, isn't he?"

The samurai took a sip of his drink. "I'll know that when I see him." He motioned for the innkeeper to lead him up to the room.

The Blissful Ox only had three guest rooms and the one occupied by the mysterious priest was at the end of the narrow hall. As soon as the proprietress pointed out the room to him, Oba told her she could go. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he was certain she'd been told something other than the truth. His "friend" might prove to be quite different. An agent of the Shogun or some bounty hunter seeking the price on his head. Or it could be a minion of the demon he was looking for. Many among that infernal breed were cunning enough to use mortals as their pawns. A man who hunted demons always had to bear in mind that they were also hunting him.

Oba set down his armour and drew his uchigatana before he reached for the door. The long sword was an ancient heirloom of the now destroyed Sekigahara Clan, a blade endowed with enchantments that made it lethal to demons. Koumakiri was also quite fatal to mortals who provoked the samurai who carried it. Man or demon, Oba was prepared for whoever waited in the room.

The door slid back and Oba found himself gazing down at a plump priest with a shaven head. He was sitting on the floor, a candle burning beside him and a bowl of rice set before him. When he saw the samurai, eagerness drew his face into a broad smile.

"Oba-san! My messenger found you!" the priest beamed.

Oba stepped inside and slammed the door closed behind him. There was fire in his eyes. The priest was no stranger, but neither was he anyone the samurai would call friend. "Takuji." The name dripped off Oba's tongue as though it were poison. "I told you when we parted ways in Blackbriar that you'd be wise not to cross my path again." When he moved towards the priest, Takuji scrambled back, his hands raised in appeal.

"I ... I wouldn't have ... have sent for you if the need weren't dire," Takuji whined. His gaze was fixed on Koumakiri's gleaming edge.

"There are simpler ways to commit seppuku," Oba snarled at the priest.

Takuji managed to find some measure of courage and tear his eyes away from the uchigatana's menace. "Hear what I have to say," he told Oba. "I think you owe me that much. I saved your life, after all."

"And I spared yours," Oba snarled back at him. Just the same, he motioned for Takuji to continue. "The man you sent to find me said a demon was prowling Yukari-do." He arched an eyebrow. "He didn't say anything about you being here."

"Would you have come?" Takuji prodded him. "Of course not. Any mention of me and you'd never have come here." He bowed his head and averted his gaze. "This village is in grave peril, Oba-san, and you're the only one I know who is brave enough to save it."

"I've been in many villages threatened by demons," Oba retorted. "These people didn't strike me as living in fear of a monster in their midst."

Takuji nodded. "That's because they're unaware of their peril ... so far. The thing that must soon prey on them has so far only taken a few chickens and a goat. But it will eventually claim human victims. One night, it will do that."

Oba noted the guilt that tinged Takuji's tone. "What have you done? What sort of demon have you set loose this time?"

The priest stiffened at the accusation. "I've brought nothing to Yukari-do that wasn't already here," he protested. His voice dropped to an anxious whisper. "And it isn't a demon, but a ghost that menaces this village."

Oba scowled at Takuji and held his sword so that the priest had a good view of it. "Koumakiri is enchanted against demons. It has no power against ghosts."

Takuji grovelled at the samurai's feet. "Please, Oba-san, you're the only one who can help these people before it is too late! Help me undo the evil I've unwittingly brought on them!"

The samurai returned his sword to its scabbard. "What have you done, Takuji? What is it you've set against this village?"

The priest looked up, tears in his eyes. "Believe me, Oba-san, I didn't expect things to go so wrong! My intention was only to honour the final request of a brewer who recently died. He was an old man and wanted his ashes interred beside those of his wife, who'd preceded him by several decades." Takuji paused and gestured at the window. "Yukari-do has not used its old cemetery for twenty years, ever since it became haunted by a kubikajiri."

"What manner of spirit is that?" Oba wondered. He knew many of the types of demons that stalked Mu-Thulan, but his knowledge of ghosts and phantoms was limited.

"The kubikajiri is a headless spectre that devours the heads of others while it searches for its own." Takuji paused and tried to repress the shudder that ran through him. "I've seen it kill. A sickening sight. It sets upon its victim with clawed hands and rips the head from their shoulders. Then it presses the decapitated head to the stump of its neck and its body draws it down as though the stump were some horrible mouth." His fingers ran through the prayer beads hanging around his neck. "It was all I could do to keep from fleeing the village after watching the kubikajiri kill."

Oba paced the little room, mulling over the priest's tale. "The ghost no longer stays in the old cemetery does it?" He waved aside Takuji's effort to explain. "I can tell from your guilty tone that you did something to rouse its ire. For twenty years it has haunted the old cemetery and kept itself there. The villagers were content to leave it alone and bury their dead elsewhere. That is, until you came along."

"All that you say is true," Takuji confessed. "I thought I could carry out the brewer's final wish and bury him beside his wife. But my efforts to exorcise the kubikajiri only made things worse. It doesn't stay in the cemetery now, but each night roves the village and kills the first living thing it finds. It will only be a matter of time before it takes human victims." He fixed Oba with an imploring gaze. "Unless you help me lay the ghost to rest."
