

The Other Side

I, Kenji Fujitani, stood in front of Sazaedo with my puppy, Taiko, who sat politely beside me. It was a cool March afternoon. That year there had been light snowfall. It left puddles all around the concrete courtyard. An icy wind carried a cool mist that brushed against my face. My small Tosa puppy stared with me intently at the tower in front of us. There was quiet yet sinister power residing there. It exerted a pressure that made my bones ache. The place was cursed.

In case you are curious, I have chosen to describe my part of this journey because of its meaning to me. I should go back to when I saw the light. I was outside with Taiko on that cold Sunday morning. I had never seen a dog behave with such reverence in my life. Though he was a puppy, he bowed his head the entire time. This was the work of a great spirit. At first I was terrified. As if staring into infinity. I saw all the beauty and wonder of the universe while feeling an endless amount of power and strict justice. Everything good and bad within me swirled into a conviction so mighty it felt as though I was choking. Then, I heard the voice. It told me not to be afraid. It showed me visions, and made me feel strong. One of those visions was of the very place where I found myself later that day. At Sazaedo.

Sazaedo is a temple on the Northeastern side of Aizuwakamatsu in Fukushima. I live near there, not far from Hirota station. I knew the story of Sazaedo and the Boshin war. I knew about the graveyard just over the hill, too. Many young samurai had given up their lives nearby as a result of the war. Kids would often sneak through there at night to catch a glimpse of spirits wandering around. Even still, I had never felt this presence when I visited previously with my grandparents.

Taiko whimpered and I looked instinctively to my right. That was where he was looking. Small things like this tell me that he and I are connected. We both saw a girl closing up the gift

shop. She was beautiful. She had black hair and a thin face with a frail frame. But she was also clearly much older. Our eyes met for a moment, and there was something shared.

She walked over to me, “Do you hear it?” She asked in a serious tone.

“I don’t hear anything. Especially from the tower,” I replied.

“Exactly. I have worked here for a few months now and I always hear something from this place. A creaking in the wood, or maybe the wind blowing through the small windows and cracks in this ancient place. Now there’s nothing. Nobody has been here all day. No children have come by to play, and no tourists have come near here. Just you and your dog, who noticed me immediately,” she spoke in a matter of fact tone that intimidated me.

I turned my head to look at the tower again, unsure of how to respond to her. The three of us stood in brief silence, knowing exactly what we wanted to do, but too afraid to do it. I suppose Taiko lost patience with me. He casually walked up and began climbing the stairs as best he could. I followed, scooping him up into my arms.

“Wait!” Shouted the girl from the shop, “It could be a curse. You may not want to go in there. We should get an exorcist or something.”

“I don’t know if this is the same,” I replied to her.

“Well, I can’t just let a kid and puppy walk in alone. I will go with you,” She stepped up beside me on the first step, “My name is Yu Chiba. You?” She reached out a hand.

“I am Kenji Fujitani. This is Taiko,” I shook her hand and Taiko gave a tiny bark as a greeting.

Together we stepped into the tower. It is difficult to describe, but I will use a description that I was given and hope you will know what I mean. In the tower were two staircases that spiraled like a double helix. This was, a person could be going down while another person went

up and they would never see each other. The stairs were not the kind we are familiar with, but more like split logs nailed into a slanted floor. The inside walls to the right of us were hollowed out and filled with statues of Buddha. Talisman were glued all over the walls. We walked up the stairs for a few minutes before stopping to rest.

“This is bad,” Said Yu.

“What is bad?” I asked

“It should not take so long to reach the top. I think I know what this is,” She said before pulling out a slip of paper with writing on it, and a small bundle of sage with a lighter, “If we use these things to purify the space, we’ll be able to escape.”

I watched as she lit the sage and began to wave it around in order to chase away the curse. Through the small windows on the outside wall I saw that we appeared to be about halfway up the tower, “So, you just have that stuff with you all the time?” I asked.

“My grandmother was a shrine maiden. I live with her and she always sends me out with some. This is the first time I’ve ever used it. Up until now, I never really believed in such things, but this is too strange.”

That was when I saw something over her shoulder, just up and around the corner. A fly had buzzed by. It’s form flew in and out of sight like a flickering shadow, and around the corner began to grow. At this point, Yu could see I was terrified by something and turned around to see for herself. The fly had changed form into something like a large man, but he was black and hairy like a gorilla. On his head were two large red bulbs on the left and right sides with a hexagonal pattern across them. Between the bulbs was a nose like a bat, and a long mosquito-like beak.

“Akuma!” Screamed Yu. She threw the sage at it, but the beak shot an arrow of fire that burned it up immediately.

The spirit moved toward us as if to intimidate us, and the light from the sun outside turned red. Through the mesh was no longer a view of the Aizuwakamatsu that I knew, but a valley of fire with a dark sky.

Taiko whimpered and tried crawling into my underarm. I hugged him tighter and grabbed Yu’s hand, “Come on!” A surge of strength hit me and I pulled her along as the three of us ran quickly down the stairs.

I looked back only once to see the large beast awkwardly following us. He did not appear to be in a hurry and the distance between us never grew. That led me to believe that our worst fear might be true. The tower would not let us leave.

I do not know why I did this, but in my mind I spoke as if trying to talk to someone in my mind, “Please, let us find a way out,” I said, and I heard a reply. It came from the same voice I had heard before when that light entered my mind, “I have heard your cry. My servant is on his way. Lower your heads.”

Confused, I did as it said. Yu looked at me with great confusion and began to ask what it was I was doing, but I stopped her by pulling her to the floor. A glowing creature burst through the outside wall just down the stairs. It flew overhead like a missile and crashed into the monster chasing us. It toppled down against the ramp.

“Now, run!” Said the voice to me, and I obeyed, pulling the others with me to the opening left by the flying light.

We continued down the stairs, leaving the spirit behind. The walls around us waved like seaweed as we approached the hole. Space itself was warping around us. It felt as though we

were walking on the wind. We could see the courtyard just ahead of us through the opening, but the wall kept getting further away. I was ready to stop when I heard that voice again, “Keep going!” as the bright glowing bird flew past us. Yu was breathing heavily. Our eyes met. Hers were filled with steadfastness. I pushed myself onward and soon our world came rushing at us.

We ran out, exiting by the entrance to the tower, ran across the small courtyard, down a larger set of stone steps, and down a small path until we turned left over a small bridge. On the other side of the waters is where we stopped to catch our breath.

“What was that?” Shouted Yu between gasps of air, “How did you get us out? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I replied as I released Taiko to the ground, “I heard a voice. It told me what to do, and I think that’s what saved us.”

Yu simply looked at me. I could tell she was unsure of what to think until she said, “Was it the voice from earlier? Did it speak to you again?” In a fascinated and excited tone.

For a brief moment I was excited to share everything and ask her many questions, but those thoughts and feelings were cut short by a rumbling. Whether we triggered it or not, something horrible happened. We both looked up to see large rivers of yokai flowing from the windows and doors of the tower, flying through the skies all over Aizuwakamatsu. Large Oni appeared at the doors of the tower too. The spirit we saw inside did not appear however, but a large fly landed on the post of the bridge rail near us. From Yu’s reaction, she heard the same voice I did when the fly spoke.

“You have seen something you should not have. For that, I will destroy you!” It screamed at us. Taiko then ran after the fly and leapt into the air, “Wait, stay back!” It screamed as it tried to escape, but not before Taiko was able to bite him. My puppy’s head started bouncing. He tried to

chew the fly, but yelped after a little bit and spat it out. The fly flew away. It landed on the bridge and stumbled into the river before Taiko could snatch him up again.

Yu looked at the sky as kappa, kitsune, amabie, and yurei fell down all over the city, “Such a brave boy,” She knelt down and scratched Taiko’s head, “I don’t think a normal exorcism will fix this.”

“I know,” I replied, “I don’t know what to do.”

That was when we heard the flapping of wings, and turned to see a small owl land on the red railing of the small arched bridge. He had long feathered eyebrows and bright orange eyes. His feathers were all different colors of brown so that he looked like tree bark. A voice from him spoke in my mind. It was deep, like my fathers, “children, forgive me if I have frightened you. I see you have met with a terrible fate. As has all of Japan. Devilish spirits have come to replace humanity. They are guided by a terrible evil. But the light who spoke with you has sent me to guide you and help protect you. My name is Sabael. Together, we will save this city.”