

## A Final Offering

This place never seems to change. The same trees that embrace the mountainside, the same trails that have been carved out through the many decades of human exploration, even the same wooden signage announcing the entrance to the small tucked away village. The brown paint was chipped and peeling from years of exposure, desperate for a fresh coat. Growing up, I'd spent the better part of my summers here in Japan. My grandparents owned a simple cabin nestled inside the small mountain village, and my visit today was a way to say goodbye since they passed away last year. The land that my family had owned for generations was sold; too rural for convenience, and too backward-minded for my modern parents. So, today would be the final trek through this wooden paradise I adventured in as a young child. I smiled at the nostalgic feeling that coursed through me as I took in a deep breath of damp earth and summer breeze, stepping away from concrete civilization and into the wilderness.

The path ahead was well worn. An obvious direction to take when one is just wanting a leisurely stroll—well, perhaps not in this part of the forest. No, this path was more likely made with the intent of a hurried jog, as not to be surrounded by the eerily gnarled trees. The exposed roots resembled tentacles, giving them a fluid appearance, like at any moment they would contort themselves into a new sinister pattern. Although, I knew this was due to the forest floor being composed mainly of volcanic rock, making it difficult for the vegetation to penetrate further below the surface. Though, I completely understand why someone would feel uneasy surrounded by these Kodoma. Hmm... Yes, that's a fitting description, trees that are inhabited by spirits. Superstition outweighed science in these rural parts, and I grew up listening to all the ghostly tales of yōkai and demons.

I mentally tallied the many frightening bedtime stories that were told to the children in the village—the adult's way of keeping their curiosity and mischief in check—when I was suddenly

distracted by a flash of red as I rounded the slight bend of the path. The young woman's shirt was such a contrast against the mind-numbing verdant green and earthy foliage that littered the ground. After the initial surprise wore off, and I annoyingly dismissed the flash of childlike fear of monsters, I observed the woman more closely.

She was just standing there, staring out into the densely packed trees that lay off the beaten path. She had short black hair that hung just above her shoulders, and she wore a traditional tenugui wrapped around her head, the fabric bandana was so big on her small stature that it shadowed her features. Her red shirt, black monpe pants, and leather boots were well worn and splattered with dry mud as if she had just gotten back from working the fields. It was still common for the villagers to wear this kind of outfit and I remembered my grandparents gifting me with my own when I was younger so I could help them in their garden.

"Anything of interest out there?" I rang out, scanning the trees to see what she was looking at. There are plenty of birds, deer, and even an occasional bear in these parts. Maybe that was what she was watching.

I was close enough now to see that she had kind brown eyes hiding under the oversized bandana, and just like her clothing, her round face was smeared with dirt. She gave me an easygoing smile as she spoke in a thick Japanese accent. "Hmmm... Are you from the village? I don't remember your face."

*The question works both ways,* I thought to myself as my eyebrows knitted in confusion. The small village I spent my summers in didn't see many visitors or even new residents for that matter. It was a place that generations of families grew up in and eventually died in, leaving the younger generation to carry on the tradition. My family was the first to leave in who knows how long and I'm pretty sure I've never seen this woman before.

I didn't have time to dwell on it further because the woman continued to look at me with a calm intensity, so I felt I had to give her an answer to end the uncomfortable silence. "Well, my grandparents were from the village, but our family no longer owns the land. I'm just visiting one last time."

"I see. My family used to live in the village too." She answered as she turned back to the direction she was staring at before. "I came to find someone to give an offering to the shrine. The people in the village are getting old and I'm afraid they might have forgotten." A flash of worry etched her face, but it's quickly replaced with a gentle smile as she looked back at me with her bright brown eyes. "Since you were part of our village, will you visit the shrine one last time? It's been a long time since an offering has been placed."

When she mentioned the shrine a flitting memory of my grandparents leaving in the middle of the night to pray popped into my mind. It was always on the first day that I arrived, and I was never allowed to join them. This didn't bother me so much back then. I was usually more interested in sleeping at that hour than walking in the woods, but now, since this was my last chance to visit, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. I scanned the area to see if any trails could be seen but it was nothing but a jumble of roots and underbrush. "It would be an honor, but where's the trail?"

"Right here." She pointed in the direction I was just looking at. "It's hidden, but if you look closely, you can see it." I scanned the area in front of me again, and sure enough, there's a small path that anyone could have mistaken for a deer trail. It was odd though; I swear it wasn't there before. "If you stay on this path, it will take you right to the shrine. You can't miss it."

I didn't have much to offer except a few onigiri I had packed in case I became hungry on my hike, but if it's been a long time since a visitor came to the shrine, I'm sure the food would be more than enough to appease the spirits. This final offering would be a perfect goodbye to my

childhood here in the mountains of Japan. I gave the woman a quick wave goodbye as I headed down the trail in anticipation of seeing the obscure shrine.

It was an easy trek, and the pleasant songs of birds and chatter of small rodents as they scurried across branches and under gnarled roots soothed my adventurer's soul. Occasionally, I would stop to watch the birds fly through the branches or take a closer look at the random flowers and mushrooms that littered the forest floor. I became so lost in my surroundings that it took me a while to realize that I had been walking for quite some time and there was still no shrine to be found. Not only that, but now the forest around me seemed to become eerily quiet, the birds and small creatures had disappeared, and the silence that surrounded me was deafening. A panic squeezes my chest, even my now labored breathing seemed to be sucked in by this void of silence. I felt it pressing down on me, taking every last molecule of oxygen from my lungs and my flight response was starting to kick in.

The anticipation of visiting the shrine was no longer aforesight and now all I wanted to do was turn around and leave these woods behind. Except when I turned to retrace my steps, my heart sank to my knees because the trail was no longer there. Turning back to the direction of the shrine the trail was still clearly visible, but before I could decide on what direction I should go in, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and the prickling of goosebumps covered my body. I could feel the trees closing in on me, and I was too afraid to look back behind me. All I could picture was their sinister branches reaching for me as their tangled roots twisted and warped along the rocky terrain, inching closer and closer, readying for the killing blow. Hysteria bubbled and caught in my throat and the choking fear sent me racing along the only visible path and in the direction of the shrine.

Tears pricked at my eyes as the hysteria boiled over and I could no longer hold in my whimpers of anguish. I had to close my eyes as tunnel vision further deformed the ominous-

looking trees and made my head spin. My mind was no longer in charge, I was completely running blind and on autopilot, until my foot caught one of the devious roots and I tumbled to the ground. I hissed in disapproval as sharp rocks and debris pierced my exposed skin, but it was that heated pain that brought me back to reality. I stayed face down on the ground, taking this moment of clarity to calm my breathing and relax my body that was still screaming for me to escape. When I felt like I was completely in control of my body again I got back to my feet, picking the embedded splinters of wood and stone from my palms. I took my time readjusting my pack on my shoulders and brushing the dirt from my face and clothes—an attempt at mustering up enough courage to look behind me.

*The trail will be there*

*The trail will be there...*

Finally, when I had built up enough courage, I turned around. My body slumped and my legs almost buckled under the relief that washed over me. *Oh, thank goodness! It's there!* Now, as the adrenaline that was coursing through me moments before started to wane, I became increasingly more annoyed with myself. Of course, it was so quiet. The trees are so packed together that a breeze wouldn't be able to get through to rustle the leaves, and my freak out just now probably scared away all the animals within a mile's radius. I kept internally kicking myself as I turned in the direction I came. After all the excursion, I was not in the mood to continue any further today.

I had only taken a few steps when the soft sound of humming rang in my ears. It was a familiar tune, something from a lullaby that was sung to me as a baby, but the words would not come to light. As much as I wanted to end my trek through these woods, my curiosity got the better of me and I followed the soothing voice. Her song was like a beacon in the night, breaking

up the unearthly silence of the forest around me, and the moment I saw the flash of red between the trees I knew who it was.

The woman that I had met earlier was now crouched down before me with her chin resting on her knees. She continued to hum, seemingly unaware of my presence, as she picked the petals off the wildflowers that lay along the trail like a child would pluck the wings off a bug. As disconcerting as it was watching the colorful flowers wilt with each tug of her fingers, I was relieved to not be alone anymore.

“Hey!” I called out. “How did you get here without passing me?” I looked around for any other hidden trails that could have brought her here without us crossing paths, but it was still the same straight trail. Honestly, it seemed like I was walking in a never-ending tunnel. The environment around me never seemed to change. The humming stopped as she pulled a flower from its roots and stood up. She gave the plant in her hand a reproachful look before crumpling it and tossing it to the ground like a piece of garbage.

“You made it.” Completely ignoring my question, she finally turned to face me, and I was taken aback at the sight before me. This was definitely the woman who told me about the shrine and pointed me in the direction of the path, but now she seemed sickly. Her hair was completely disheveled like it hadn’t been brushed in days, and her face seemed to have been drained of all color. Her now protruded brown eyes sat atop of dark circles and the sharp outline of her cheekbones gave her an emaciated look.

“Are...Are you okay?” Racing thoughts kept me tongue-tied as my mind tried to logically come up with an explanation of what I was seeing. Did she always look like this? I mean, the sun can’t really penetrate the canopy of branches and leaves so maybe the shadows are playing tricks on me.

“It’s just up ahead.” The woman said, pointing in the direction beyond her. I could now see that the small path opened into a grassy clearing. I had finally made it to the shrine, but my adventurous spirit had long since disappeared and I hesitated, wringing my hands as the same invasive fear from before started whispering in my head.

“I, uh...I think we should head back. You don’t look so well.” I glanced back for only a moment, just to make sure the trail hadn’t disappeared on me again, but when I returned my gaze, I jumped back in surprise. In the mere seconds I looked away, she had already put a great amount of distance between us. She didn’t look back to see if I was following her and her voice pulled at me as she started humming the song from before. My mind was still desperately trying to remember the lyrics when she disappeared from view as she entered the clearing. There was a moment of going back and forth on whether I was going to leave her here and forget I ever met her, but I just couldn’t with good conscience. As her melody started to soften with the distance between us, the ever-disturbing silence of the forest wrapped around me, and with a bit of reluctance, I all but ran to catch up.

The Tōrō were the first things I noticed as I entered the clearing. The stone lanterns were erected on either side of the clearing’s entrance so visitors and spirits alike could find their way. A few feet past them stood the simple Hokora shrine nestled inside a thick grove of trees. The knurled roots and branches seemed to have enveloped it in an eternal embrace. It was a makeshift shrine, made up of three slabs of rocks pieced together to form a square structure with an open side. The gabled roof seemed to be the only thing decorative about it as it was etched with an artistic pattern of swirls, aged, and covered in a thick layer of green moss. The weathered roof protected the many melted candles and coins that have been used for offerings over the years.

The woman continued her resonant melody as she kneeled facedown before the shrine in prayer, but something felt off about it. She was too still. Too small. Her clothes seemed to be puddled on the ground rather than resting on a healthy body. My heart pounded in my chest with every inch closer I came to her. Alarm bells started ringing in my head, mixing with the woman's humming, and producing a new, ghostly tune. The song abruptly ended the moment I stood next to her, and I was flooded with the superstitious memories of my childhood when I realized what it was. My mind had finally caught up with the instincts of my body, and that nostalgic feeling I had when hearing her melody had now been replaced with fear as the words came to me.

*Yurei, Yurei, don't come and prey.*

*Our home is shared with you.*

*Please stave the pain until the day*

*The ones that leave come to you.*

There was no woman praying before the altar. Instead, the crumpled, leathery body of what once was the woman lay before me. She was like a perfectly preserved mummy, eyes closed in eternal sleep, her mouth slightly open as if she was ready to talk at any moment. Silent tears fell down my cheeks as I felt icy fingers wrap around my neck and body. A grip so chilling that it prevented me from moving, or even screaming. Followed by a whispered breath in my ear...

"Thank you for this offering."