

狂気

A Nameless King Story

By: Luis Rebellon

THE LATE LORD OF KATSOWARI

The symphony of the cicadas was a fine way to note the winter's end. Miyazaki Hirofusa was quite fond of their music, like heralds of the spring. A reward for enduring yet another year as he teetered on the gates to heaven. Just nearly as rewarding as the playful noise of his grandsons down along the lower courtyard of the tenshu below.

He liked to listen to them from the upper terrace, which overlooked Shinawa Castle and its rolling green hinterlands beyond. The dark cliffs of Katsowari towered not far yonder. Their peaks blanketed in forests and snow, whilst between them scores of little hamlets buzzed noisily in their toil. His eyesight had become quite hazy, but the beauty of his lands never faded to him, even still.

"I got you!"

"Nuh uh! You missed, see?" The sounds of Nobukata and Katsuyori clacking their little play swords brought him to an age when it seemed he still had eternity before him. They bickered about who hit who, and he often found himself giggling, listening to their arguments.

He could still quite easily make out the sky at least. For that he was thankful to the gods. The banners hung from the baileys and towers of black-washed stone, rippling with the cool winds that swept from the north.

The last breath of the winter, he thought, dreading. I'll have to summon court to organize collections for the coming harvest.

"Your legs look better today." Lady Suē was rubbing out the knots from his feet, seated just beside him on the same tatami. The concubine spent a lot of time with him these days. Especially so after his last fall. Grateful as he was, sitting with her had become a chore. The woman had become peevish of late, not at all the mistress that had charmed him so many years ago, even if she still bore that same beauty as then.

"You should tell Sosuke to return to court as soon as you recover," she said. "He plays at being a general too much."

"Take care with that tongue."

"I only say it." Suē had a mousey voice when angered. "Impudent, him. That second born son of yours runs about your domain as though it is to be his!

When you pass, the land must be Gendo's. There is division in the court on the matter, division *you* must crush soon. How long will it be before the Tachibanas set their eyes upon us again? There will not be a second *Battle of Ashimoto*, my love. Your enemies conspire against the House of Miyazaki, I am sure of it."

"Shh!" He waved his spotted hand, dismissive. "I am listening to the boys."

Lady Suē sighed. "You never listen to me these days."

"Oh, please, my dear. You know I love you well." He looked back at Nobukata, laughing after having smacked the bamboo sword out of Katsuyori's hand. Old Hirotada chuckled. Blurry as it was, it was a scene that swelled him with pride and melancholy in equal measure.

"Time is such a thief," he said. He saw his son, Sosuke, in Nobukata, in his manner and motions, and the way he laughed and tutted. His grandson even wore his chonmage just the same as Sosuke when he was a growing child. In those days, he and his boy were as father and son. He smiled solemnly. "I can still remember holding Sosuke in the crook of my arm... It feels as though it were yesterday." He rubbed his eyes. They were wet. "It's funny, some memories are so much clearer than others."

"You still have years left, my love." Suē's hands went on along his gouty knees before the clatter of armor brought that symphony of cicadas and childhood to an abrupt end.

"Dono!" The retainer's sashimono and the top knot of his chonmage was all he could see when he came down on all fours to bow before him. For a moment he was entranced by twin blood diamonds on black. Haunted by the remembrance of embers and blazing winds, the black banners of the clan waving over a thousand yaris and the chanting of those men that carried his standard.

Swift as wind, fierce as fire, those were the words that embodied the Miyazaki crest. The two red eyes in the night made him shudder. *Darker days*, he told himself. *Gone now, gone*.

"A man has come begging for an audience." The retainers always had a grim soldierly manner to them that irked Hirotada. It pulled him from his dreams of the loving grandfather he wanted to be, to the reality of what he was. A warlord of the land. "A merchant, he calls himself. From Zogenoto."

Lady Suē scoffed. “The Daimyo of Katsowari has no need to meddle in the affairs of the merchants.”

“The Daimyo of Katsowari has a tongue of his own,” Hirotada’s tone was sharper than he intended. His concubine trembled and pulled away. He sighed, turning back to the retainer, whose head was still to the floor of the terrace. “Who is this merchant?”

“A man who claims himself in the trade of sake, my liege.”

“Have one of your retainers delegate for you, my love.” Said Lady Suē, annoyed.

Hirotada grunted. “I will see him,” he said gruffly. “Bring him in.”

Lady Suē tutted and rose up from the floor with the retainer, he could hear the samurai’s armor clatter towards the entry to his solar. “*Ohairi kudasai!*”

Suē waited beside the shoji leading out to the terrace of the black keep of Shinawa Castle. She knelt in respect to Lord Hirotada, her eyes to the floor as the merchant entered. His figure was a blur until he paced a little closer, side by side with his retainer. The great lord narrowed his eyes as the man in the grey kosode came down to all fours and bowed.

“Dono,” said the retainer. “This is the man.”

“You may leave us,” he gestured his hand to both his retainer and to Suē, who backed away and slid the wooden shoji shut as Hirotada turned again to this supposed peddler of sake. “Please, raise your head.”

The merchant was silent as he rose. Hirotada still couldn’t make out the stranger’s face. The great lord squinted again, sitting up and sorting his own embroidered haori. “Come closer,” he said. He waved his hand and beckoned the man in grey. “My eyesight has begun to fail me.” The stranger scuffled over. Now he could see him, albeit, some of his features were strange. Familiar.

“Dono,” said the merchant. “I have the greatest respect for you and your clan. I come to you with a gift and the solemn vow to be your servant in my future prospects. I wish to open a warehouse here, so that I may move sake from Zogenoto to be distributed further south. I beg your blessing, my lord, and I bring tribute to honor your vaunted name.”

“Tribute?” That cracked a smile on his face. “Sake, I would presume?”

“The finest in the north.” He turned and brought forth a little box. When he opened the lacquered trunk, Hirotada found himself looking at the man’s face again.

“You say you’re from Zogenoto?” The lord asked.

“I hail from Itsukumi, but my family has passed through Zogenoto many times, Dono. For the summer festivals. Many of us have to pass through your lands to reach Mount Zogeno.”

“Ah! I remember those days,” Hirotada said with a fondness in his tone. “So many pretty girls would pass by. And *pretty boys* too! A shame. I can scarcely leave Shinawa now.”

“You must have seen many pretty girls in your day, then?” The man in grey pulled out the sake bottle and set it aside. “My mother and sister were quite pretty when they passed through your lands not ten years past. *Perhaps you might have known them.* Now... they are gone.” His eyes met his, and while they were a blur, Hirotada could see how dark they were. Two black marbles stark against porcelain.

“Oh... I grieve to hear that.” He looked so familiar. “The famines are a hard thing to endure. Especially so in the north. Yet... life is water, not stone, nay?” He forgot about the tribute. *A curious fellow...* Hirotada thought. “What is your name?”

There was a pause in the man’s motions. Then he spoke. “Katsowari Matsuro, Dono.”

“Katsowari! A queer name, you take the name of my domain, even while you were born in Itsukumi, why is that?” *Matsuro... where have I heard that name before?*

“I only lived in Itsukumi, my lord.” Matsuro explained. “This here is the land of my birth.”

“Oh! How good is that? Though, I do not remember allowing any man to leave my lands? Hm, queer. That would mean you must not be a peasant, peasants have no family names after all, yet you do not wear the top knot of a chonmage. What was your father’s name?”

Katsowari Matsuro smiled and said the name, but Hirotada couldn’t hear his whisper.

Hirostada beckoned the young merchant. "Come closer, my hearing... it is not what it once was."

The man scuffled closer, and pulled something from the black bottle. When he leaned in, Hirostada felt cold.

"My father's name was *Ituhara Matsuro*..." His whisper was sharp, but the blade was sharper. "You killed him, you raped my mother and sister, and this is from them." It was only then Hirostada felt the pain of the tanto digging into his breast, as this supposed Katsowari Matsuro heaved the blade down to his navel. His flesh parted like waves to the bow of a ship.

The Lord of Shinawa Castle made a sound, a yelp. He cried out as the red pain set in sharper and sharper. He felt his blood flow free through his fingers in a score of red rivers, and watched as the man rose to his feet. He was covered in Hirostada's functions. "*You!*" he pointed at the man in grey. The lord struggled to stay sitting up, holding himself as his strength left him with each heartbeat. "You! I killed you and your people!"

Lady Suē's shriek woke him from slipping into darkness.

"*Dono!*" The shoji burst open. A tetrad of retainers unsheathed their katanas, one of them tackling the man who'd just ended his life, pinning him to the wooden floor. "Secure the room!" Said one of the men.

Hirostada coughed, the blood pulsing from his mouth as his retainers rushed to him, doing all they could to staunch his bleeding.

"*DONO!*"

"Kill him!" He tried to muster, gurgling on his words. Then gathered all the strength that remained to him. "ITSUHARA MATSURO!" He felt his body on the floor, and the warm wet that fast surrounded him. To the dark he went, and the end of his symphony of spring cicadas.

狂氣

KYŌKI

PART ONE

~The Children of Amaterasu~

The following events transpired after the sixteenth of Janus of the first year of our lord, Imperatore Zarkonios Finnead Augoustos. The first of his name, Megas Basileus and Autokratōr of the lands directly subject to the rule of the serene capital of Zarkoniopolis. Overlord and Suzerain of The Kingdom of Catar, the Kingdom of Mortland, the Principality of Burza, and Protector of the Confederation of Deinan Republics.

- *Valentinus Lucinius Sophus,
scholar and historian of Basileía tōn Zarkonidōn*

ONE

When she woke from slumber, she could have sworn she heard something crawling. Like the legs of an insect, or a spider, but that was impossible because Kogarasu Fumiko was deaf. She was dreaming before she got up, and chalked it up to that, but for the life of her she couldn't remember what she'd seen. Only the hints of noises, and a faceless man warning her. As to what the warnings were, she couldn't say. The memories of such vistas vanished as quick as she uncovered herself and rose up from her embroidered tatami.

Good morning, highness. Her handmaid helped her up as she yawned, the sun was shining by then and the cool breeze from the window was pleasant.

Seabirds flocked the cloudless sky beyond the westward wall. Maybe a few scores, or a hundred. She couldn't hear them in the heavens, but she liked to imagine how the birds sounded. She tried to emulate them, resting her arms on the windowsill.

She sometimes dreamed of the way birds sounded. She could hear them then, but she questioned whether her dreams were an appropriate representation. The only time she didn't question the way something sounded, was when she dreamed of fire, and of late Fumiko dreamed much of a fire rising in the west.

“Caw!” she cried in a high tone. “Caw! Caw!” She likely sounded silly, and not at all what a bird probably sounded like. Nonetheless, she enjoyed imagining she did okay, and for all Fumiko knew, she probably got her imitations right once in a while.

Down below from her window, a few children played in the courtyard. Two or three chasing after one another with wooden sticks they pretended were swords. Not far, a few palace guards were smiling, watching from across the yard, cheering on one kid or the other. It was times like these that made Fumiko smile, when all seemed well in the world, even if they weren't.

She stepped down from the window and turned to see her handmaid folding Fumiko's sheets. *The morning's pretty today,* Fumiko signed. *Will you help me into my dress? I promised Meiji I'd meet him in the garden at noon.*

Nishimiya Aneko was a mousy girl with a pretty smile. She nodded and helped the princess dress.

After getting herself into a kosode of red silk fringed in gold and pink thread, Fumiko and Aneko made out of her apartment in the Ten'nō's Tenshu. She

brought her journal and stick of lead, just in case she would need to speak with someone who couldn't sign. Aneko dressed more humbly but not un-prettilly, in a plainer kosode of red and white wool. Both had a habit of wearing the same hairstyles when they were out, too. Their hair tied up into neat little buns pinned together with gold kanzashis.

Lots of seagulls today, Aneko signed to her. Must be the ships come sailing from the west.

I think so too. Fumiko looked to her handmaid and grabbed her hands, giggling. So how goes things? Did they say anything of my paintings down in the districts?

Well, I showed them to some of the merchants and artists, admitted Aneko. Your painting of the River Tora got some praises, but none seemed so concerned as much as they were of the coming of those western galleys.

Fumiko groaned. Of course they care more about that, she signed angrily. It seems it's all anyone talks about these days.

Aneko made a comforting face, rubbing Fumiko's arm as she signed. You'll have better luck soon, I know it. It's just the winds of war, you know what they say these days? 'When the Horseman sneezes, the continent catches a cold.'

There was something quite dreadful about that thought. Not to mention that her little brother Meiji had developed a concerning admiration towards this... rising prince in the west. *It feels like the whole world is being forced to give attention to this **Zarkonios**, she thought, dismayed.*

(Not the end of the chapter, just had to fit the standard for the subreddit, thank you for reading:))