

“Legends about ghost lights are common in both primitive and modern societies. These phenomena are called by many names, including will o’ the wisp, oribi (or demon fire), ignis fatuus, St Elmo’s fire, and the candles of St. David. Folk tales attribute the floating globes to spirit activity, as they disregard the natural laws of physics.”

—The Book of Living Myths



Kōhaku Narukami

The Folklorist

THE LIGHT BOBBLED OVER THE path as if dancing.” Kōhaku Narukami paused, leaning back in his armchair and sipping his tea. “I observed it for a full five minutes, testing wind speed and direction, and I’m quite confident that this was no natural phenomenon. This observation was confirmed when it circled my head like an excited dog eager to play.”

Murmurs spread across the library where the members of the Arkham Historical Society had gathered for their monthly tea. A few of the more aged, stolid members had drifted away during his story, their scorn evident in curled lips and rolling eyes. They would believe nothing they did not see for themselves and even then, Kōhaku was certain they would explain away all but the most incontrovertible phenomena. Where he saw possibility, they perceived only threat to their safe opinions on reality. The poor fellows.

But a few members still hung on, cautious but considering. Sitting across from him, Mandy Thompson pushed her glasses down on her nose, looking at him over the frames. Some of their colleagues dismissed her as just a pretty face, but he’d always found her to be more open-minded than the rest of them. It was rather refreshing, if he was being honest.

“And you say you saw this thing in Arkham Woods?” she inquired mildly.

“Indeed I did,” he replied. “Just this last Saturday, at around seven in the evening.”

“And what did you do with this playful ghost light of yours?”

He threw his head back, letting out a booming laugh.

“Why, I played of course. I wanted to see what it would do. It didn’t appear to have any understanding of verbal speech. I tried to instruct it on the rules for hide and seek but when I covered my eyes, it simply hovered next to me, and it followed me when I attempted to hide.”

“Suggesting that it lacks the intelligence of a human child.” Miss Thompson tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Did you try something simpler?”

“Rubbish.” One of the lecturers from the university stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets and fixed

them both with a glare. “The purpose of this tea is to discuss matters of historical significance to the town of Arkham, not to spread superstitious claptrap about floating globes.”

“Ah, but this is a matter of historical significance,” replied Kōhaku in mild tones. “Arkham has a deep-seated history of unexplained phenomena. It was one of the deciding factors that led me here to complete the *Book of Living Myths*.”

“Hmph,” replied the lecturer, whose name Kōhaku kept forgetting. No matter. Miss Thompson was a much more pleasant conversationalist. Kōhaku turned back to her, smiling behind his thick beard.

“Now where were we?” he asked, topping up his cup with the pot on the side table. “And can I offer you some more tea?”

“Please. Sugar and milk.”

“Just how I like it myself.” Kōhaku continued his tale as he prepared the cup. “Now as you so intelligently suggested, Miss Thompson, hide and seek may have been too complicated of a goalpost for our floating globe. Perhaps instead it has the intelligence of, say, a dog. In that case, it would respond to simple one-word commands with the right stimulus.”

“Ah, but what is the right stimulus?” Miss Thompson asked, warming to the theory. “With a dog, we know what it wants. A sliver of beef is enough to encourage it to sit, and once it makes the connection between action and reward, it will respond to the command in the hope that it might earn a treat.”

“Precisely!” Kōhaku beamed. “And what does a ball of bobbing light want? I offered the contents of my pockets, but it exhibited no interest in them. There was nothing else to do but follow it.”

“Follow it?! Follow it where?”

“It led me deep into Arkham Woods. By this time, it was growing quite dark, and I did not want to risk turning my foot on the uneven ground, so I took extra care.”

“Where did it take you?”

“I do not know its intended destination.” Kōhaku paused, resisting the urge to shiver. “Our trip was interrupted.”

“By...?”

"As we crested a ridge, there was a figure off in the distance. By this time, the sky was quite dark, and I couldn't see it very well. I am beginning to wonder if my eyesight is going. Perhaps if I'd had spectacles, I could have seen more."

He shuddered, overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of revulsion that he could not explain. Miss Thompson fixed him with a concerned look but he waved it away.

"My apologies," he said. "I am prone to dyspepsia."

"Can I get you anything? A digestive perhaps?" she offered.

"You are too kind but thank you, I'll manage. As I was saying, it was a person in some sort of flowing yellow garment. Whether it was a dressing gown or a cloak or something else different entirely, I cannot tell you. All I could see was a smudge against the landscape. A yellow man."

Miss Thompson went perfectly still, hands locked around her cup. The aggravated university lecturer, who had continued to glower, sloshed tea down the front of his suit, his hands suddenly shaking.

"I should—"

But he never got out the rest of the sentence. Instead he turned on his heel and fled for the washroom. Kōhaku swallowed, his dry throat clicking.

"Your ghost light..." said Miss Thompson, as white as a sheet. "Did it flee?"

He jerked upright.

"How did you know?" he demanded. "What was the... the yellow...?"

But he couldn't force the words out. His throat would not cooperate. The more he thought about the mysterious figure in yellow, the more his heart raced.

"Leave it alone," said Miss Thompson, standing hurriedly. "Focus on your witch lights and forget you ever saw... that other thing."

He wanted to demand answers. After all, exploring the source of legends was his job, the purpose he'd come to Arkham for in the first place. But his rebellious voice would not cooperate. He could only sit there in mute silence as Miss Thompson took her leave, mentally screaming questions he could not force out.

"Inside, I found rudimentary cave drawings in the figurative style, portraying a ring of worshippers around a central idol. The object of worship is blurred, possibly due to the selection of a yellow paint of surprisingly shocking vibrancy. Tragically, this priceless historical work has been vandalized. Some modern day visitor has scribbled over it in red. La! La! The watcher in mist approaches!" That night, as I prepared for sleep, I found my hands inexplicably coated in wet red paint."—author notes for The Book of Living Myths

A STICK CRACKED UNDER KŌHAKU'S foot as he made his way into Arkham Woods. He had come better prepared this time, with a knapsack containing various wilderness essentials including water, a compass, and trail markers. He set off earlier too, determined to find the cave with the drawings again while it was still light. He'd sworn he'd sketched out the contents in his notes, but all he'd found were blank pages blotched with red paint. It was just another entry in the series of inexplicable events that had plagued his project ever since he'd arrived in Arkham.

He paused at a large boulder, frowning thoughtfully. Had he gone up the hill here or veered down along the stream? He couldn't remember...

Then, inexplicably, it was nighttime.

He still stood at the boulder, his joints stiff with immobility. He blinked, looking around. He had to have lost at least six hours. He checked his watch but could barely make out the hands. Had he fallen asleep on his feet? The explanation failed to quell the nervous roll of his stomach.

He had best get home. Unfortunately, he wasn't exactly sure which way to go. Three distinct paths branched out before him, and he didn't see the stream anywhere. But this was the same boulder; it had a very distinct shape. Had he carried it with him? He couldn't even lift it!

When he looked up, one of the ghost lights hung in the air just beyond the boulder. It

burned like blue flame, a small orb about the size of a quarter.

"I need to get home," he said. "But I think I'm lost."

It made a quick loop around his head before darting off down the path, just as before. Limp with relief, he followed it. The ghost light would lead him to safety once again.

Leaves crunched beneath him as he tried to keep up, but the light was much less patient this time. It bounced in place, whirling around him until he grew dizzy. If he didn't know better, he would have said it was panicked.

Then he smelled it. A stench like things long dead and rotten, sickly-sweet. Beneath it was a spicy tang, its fragrance somehow communicating a sense of inexplicable age. Before him, the ghost light froze its frantic bobbing, its light dimming. His stomach heaved and would have emptied itself if it had held anything to purge.

The slow sound of enormous flapping wings filled the air, like some monstrous saurian creature had clamored out of the annals of history, rotted and stinking, to hunt. The creature – no, *creatures* – let out screeches he felt but did not hear. They shivered through his bones, sending all of his hair on end, and pierced at his eardrums. Crying out, he clapped his hands to his ears, but that accomplished nothing. The non-sound wound its way into his brain. Moisture trickled onto his clasping hands and he could smell the coppery tang of his own blood.

The ghost light flickered out. The wing beats grew closer, the creatures emitting another of their horrid cries.

Kōhaku ran. It was the panicked pell-mell flight of a desperate man. He did not pick a direction; his only thought was to get away. Branches tore at his skin, but he did not slow. The creatures closed in, the air around him stirring as they beat their mighty wings. He looked up into



the impenetrable darkness but could see nothing. An enormous wrongness filled the space above him.

He tripped, his forward momentum launching him airborne. His head struck something hard, and then he felt nothing.

BIRDS CHIRPED IN THE PLEASANT MORNING sunlight. Kōhaku awoke on the ground next to the boulder, his head throbbing. Disoriented, he clapped a hand to his temple and sat up, groaning.

"What happened...?" he muttered.

His bag lay open next to him, white shreds dangling from it like confetti. The wind blew a handful of them onto his face and he pulled them from his beard. They looked like...

"No!"

All of his notes had been shredded. Pieces of them hung from the branches; a clump stuck to the side of the boulder. Only a single page appeared to have survived; it sat on the ground just a few feet away, fluttering in the breeze. As he watched, it flipped over, threatening to take off entirely.

He launched himself at it, grabbing on before it could fly away. It was the note about the cave drawing that had led him back to the woods in the first place. Over his crabbed handwriting, someone had drawn the yellow figure from the cave drawing. It was clearer this time, and its lines wormed their way into his brain, gripping onto his spine. He fell back into the leaves, gasping for air. The sky whirled above him, threatening to whisk him away once again. He realized for the first time that he could be stuck next to this boulder forever in an endless loop, waking for only a few minutes before losing himself again. Would anyone come to look for him?

Desperately, he threw himself at the paper as the world pitched and yawed like a boat on the deep, stormy sea. He tore it to shreds, shrieking.

The world stilled. The air cleared. But the woods around him sat silent and waiting, ready to retaliate if he tried to pierce their secrets once again.

Cowed for the moment, he collected his bag and set off down the stream toward town. Notes could be reconstructed. He would be back.

There were tales still left to be told here. Warnings that needed recording.

