

The Fox in the Garden

by Kyt Dotson

It was 1635. During the time of the Tokugawa, not too many years before the British were expelled from Nippon, Minister Miyoshi no Kyoyuki of Edo decided to indulge in a practice he had heard rumored of the British.

He decided to throw a masquerade and invited into his household all the British merchants who had made him rich.

So when it came that Edward Altham received the invitation he dared not decline. For Kyoyuki had shown him great kindness in paying high prices for his trades of cloth and dye. Edward had taken over his aged father's business and the Minister remained one of their favorite partners.

For the occasion, Edward selected a mask made to look like the face of a tiger, as he had been told tigers were a representation of strength and virility. He dressed himself up in his finest suit, bound his shoes to his feet, and rose immediately to the door when a servant girl told him his carriage had arrived.

Without hesitation, he boarded the carriage and it took him off through the rough streets of Edo to the house of the Minister Kyoyuki and left him there at the gates. Around the outside, orange paper lanterns hung with fluttering scripts tied to their fringes, and the moon rose ghostly above the glistening waters beyond. A servant came shortly to escort him to the master of the house.

As he made his way through the crowd, he noticed a beautiful woman amidst the partygoers. She stood out from the crowd because she wore a dress of pure white; it glowed like the plumage of a heron against a backdrop of blue. When he looked at her, she looked back at him with her dark eyes, and, for a moment, he was transfixed. He had never seen such a beautiful woman before in his life!

She moved with such grace and after a moment demurred and looked away. When Edward attempted to pursue her, he felt a tug at his sleeve. He turned to see who was there and saw that it was the

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servant, but when he glanced back to the woman, she had vanished into the crowd of masks.

"The Master is here," the servant said, and bowed deeply.

"I am your humble servant, my friend, Edward Altham," Minister Kyoyuki said. "It is good to have you in my house."

"I am honored by your gracious offer and entertained that you have decided to bring a tradition from my native soil to here,"

Edward said. "But, I have one question, if I may be so bold, could you tell me who the woman wearing white is?"

Kyoyuki looked around at all of the revelers, but alas none of them wore white.

They parted ways with a gesture of respect, and Edward went on to search the grounds

During his search, he passed into a wing of the mansion that he had never seen before. There, he found a pagoda surrounded by green-painted torii on four sides, and coursed by a glistening stream with fat koi. Orange paper lanterns hung from ropes tied to the mansion and the pagoda, and in their dim light he could make out the form of a woman wearing a white dress standing in an arched doorway.

With the sound of the revel behind him, and the hush of the night in front of him, Edward walked cautiously towards her as he might startled her like she were a wild bird. As he approached, she smiled and receded before him into the pagoda.

"I've been waiting for you," she said.

"Who are you that you wait for me," he asked. Though lovestruck and allured by the perfume of her body, Edward was no fool; he had heard of women who, after seducing a man, would rob him of his coin and perhaps his life. He removed his mask to get a better look at her.

"You are a kind man," she said as she sidled up to him. She brushed his cheek a hand so delicate that flower petals stood a poor comparison to that touch. "Some time ago, when you were very young, your father brought you during a hunt that the Master

Kyoyuki had provided—much as he now provides this masquerade. You saved my life that day and I have been in love with you since.”

Barely listening to her words, for Edward remembered no such hunt—who would hunt a beautiful woman anyway—he dared a kiss from her supple lips, but she deftly moved away from him, yet kept him close all at once.

“It is forbidden, but I will give you this one night...though you may not see me again.”

“I have but only met you,” he said. “You're beautiful. Will you not stay with me?”

“This night, I will,” she said, “but first, I must give you a warning, then we can be together.”

“What is it that you wish to warn me?” he asked.

“In two years,” she said, “the Emperor will seize all of your assets and cast you and your countrymen bodily out of our land. You must invest in your own land so that you are not evicted penniless.”

“I don't understand,” he said. “Do you know the Emperor? Why would he do that?”

“Let's enjoy this moment,” she said, “and heed my warning. Take it as a token of my love.”

Edward opened his mouth to speak again but an emotion crossed her expression that reminded him of sunlight breaking between rain clouds, and he relented.

She hushed him with a finger to his lips, hooked her hand under her robes and slid them from her body, then kissed his lips, there under the voyeur watch of the misty moon. Their passions took them away in the shadows of the pagoda and the moon descended while the sky began to lighten.

In the depth of the most wee twilight, the young man awoke. His head was cradled against sweet loam and colorful flowers tickled his face. A servant prodded him, asking his name and bidding him stand up. Edward sat up with a start. He was in the garden. The woman was gone.

“The woman!” he cried, “Where is she? The woman in white?”

But cry as he may, and search the grounds as he might, she was nowhere to be found. The masquerade had ended hours before, and he stood alone in the garden, surrounded only by the steadily increasing glow of the dawn twilight and the guttering paper lanterns.

It was said that an albino fox had been seen in the garden and the servants had shooed it away.

At the mention of the fox, something the woman had said the night before struck a hazy recollection in Edward's mind. In his childhood, his father had taken Edward for his first visit to Nippon; during that visit, Minister Miyoshi no Kyoyuki conducted a fox hunt for his English guests.

By chance, Edward had stumbled into the place where the cages were kept, there was only one fox. A shivering and lonely creature. He took pity on her and released the latch on the cage; the white fox darted out and vanished among the streets of Edo. The beating he received from his father was one Edward did not soon forget.

Two years later, Edward Altham was expelled by the command of the Emperor and all of his property seized, but he managed to save for himself a wealthy nest egg by investing it in properties in England because he had listened to the woman's advice.

It is said, though, that he had little properly left in Nippon anyway, as he spent the remaining years searching for that woman, the albino fox, or some inkling of how they were related to one another. But now that he had been expelled, he will never know will he?

Hah!

