

White Fox

## Author's Introduction

Japan, 811 C.E.

In the northernmost isle of Hokkaido, there lived the native people known as the Ainu. For thousands of years, long before the arrival of the Japanese, their culture was one immersed in the landscape, revering the trees and snow, worshipping the mountains and bears. To them, spirits and gods were everywhere, and in everything.

To the south in the isle of Honshu, there lived the Emishi, a tribal warrior-people whose culture was lost to time. They were driven from their land by the expanding Yamato Empire, and the survivors faced two fates. Some were assimilated into the empire, their skill as horse-archers going on to create the samurai. Others fled north, to face the winters of Hokkaido. All that remains of the Emishi are tales that paint them as cannibals and shapeshifters. Yet their bloodline lives on, both in the modern Japanese and in the Ainu, who linger still in their snow-swept home.

Imekanu pushed forwards another bowl of dried salmon. It was an honour to feed the bear who was also a god. Her father brushed away soot from the central fire, and the flames settled and sighed. Her mother wove patterns into an elm-bark robe. When the bear finished his fish, the three of them guided him to his bed by the east window, where he collapsed onto their softest embroideries. He was a cub, already forgetting his life among firs and frost. As they cleared the bowls, Imekanu glanced out the window and gasped. ‘Spirits!’

Her father narrowed his eyes and shook his long beard. ‘Not spirits. Southerners.’

Two shapes wound their way along the river. She looked closer. ‘What are they wearing? Won’t they freeze?’

‘Southerners,’ repeated her father. Imekanu padded over the reed-mat floor, slipped on her shoes and walked outside. Her mother called her name, her father shook his head, the bear murmured and dreamed. People peered through windows. The southerners drew near: a woman, holding the hand of a boy almost as tall as herself, dressed in too few furs. Ice spirits danced about them, touching and biting. The village stared.

‘Welcome,’ said Imekanu. ‘Please, come inside.’

The boy blinked. His skin was white. His eyes were golden. Mother and son traded a glance. ‘Thank you,’ said the boy. Imekanu smiled. The owl-engraved door watched them pass within.

Her father eyed the foreigners. The foreigners eyed the bear. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘They speak our language,’ said Imekanu.

‘They are southerners. Strangers.’

‘The bear was a stranger before we took him in.’

The bear grunted in agreement. Her father looked to his wife for help. ‘They could be spirits in disguise,’ she said, her voice as soft as snow. ‘It would be wise to treat them well. Besides,’ she looked to the roof and walls, ‘the house does not mind.’

Her father sighed. There was no arguing with the house.

His eyes on the bear, the boy propped his bow by the door, the weapon restless against the wall. Imekanu and her mother sat on the left side of the fire, her father on the right. The southerners sat in between — facing the bear. Her father unwrapped two pieces of dried fish. Their guests looked ravenous, yet they ate politely.

‘I am Imekanu,’ she said.

The boy hesitated. ‘I am Aterui.’

‘We heard rumour of travellers from the southern isle,’ said her mother. ‘Are you the only ones?’

Aterui’s mother wrung her hands. ‘We had companions. After we crossed the water, a storm separated us. I fear we have wandered farther north than we wished.’

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At dawn, her father strode through the village, his knife at his hip. He spoke with the elder whose snowy beard trailed along the earth, and when the sun shrugged off the horizon, he returned home. ‘It is decided,’ he said, laying his knife by the hearth. ‘The southerners can stay. The gods have let them come this far. They have eaten under our roof, so they will remain our guests.’ His face was grim, but then he only smiled on the salmon hunt. The guests bowed.

Imekanu and Aterui sat by the fire, listening to the flames. By the window, the bear yawned. Aterui flinched. Imekanu giggled.

‘It is... a pet?’

Imekanu didn’t recognise the word. ‘The cub is our guest.’

‘Cub? They get *bigger*?’

She nodded. ‘When he’s grown, we will hold a feast, entertain him with singing and dancing. Then we will cook his meat, and he will journey into the sky to tell Kim-un-Kamuy how he was honoured in life.’

Aterui blinked. ‘Is that how you treat all your guests?’

‘Only the most honoured. Don’t worry, Kim-un-Kamuy loves bears best.’

‘Kim-un-Kamuy...’ He turned the name over in his mouth. ‘A god?’

‘The greatest god, the god of bears. Long ago, a woman lost her husband and Kim-un-Kamuy came down from the mountains in the shape of a man. Their son fathered everyone on the island. We are the children of the bear.’

The cub raised himself and ambled over. She scratched behind his ears. ‘A relative of yours?’ asked Aterui.

‘On Father’s side.’ They both laughed, and the house laughed with them, wind beating on thatch. The fire fretted. With reverence, she added another log. ‘This is Kamuy-Fuchi,’ she said. ‘Her hearth is the threshold between worlds. She speaks both with gods and men, and guides the souls of the dead.’ A sombre look came upon Aterui’s face. He gazed into the flames and said nothing.

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Days faded and passed. Her father took Aterui aside, showed him how to make a buck-lure and prepare a trap.

Aterui raised his chin. 'I know how to hunt.'

Her father scowled. 'As proud as a wolf and as thoughtless as an otter,' he said. 'Winter will eat you.'

Yet winter was proving calm and dozy. One mild evening, Imekanu and Aterui walked together by the river. She spoke of spirits and animals. Of how the creator-god told Otter how to make the perfect human, but Otter played in the river and forgot, and so humans are imperfect. Of the flying squirrels who watch over children. Of all the gods that live in the home, the hearth and the beasts.

'And you?' she asked. 'What of your gods?'

Aterui gritted his teeth. 'Our gods have forgotten us.' He fingered his quiver of arrows. 'We have fought the empire longer than I can remember. Longer than my mother can remember. You say we are southerners, but we come from the north of our isle. The empire, *they* are southerners. They marched up from their cities, called us barbarians who live underground and drink blood. We shrugged off their assaults like so many raindrops. We know the secrets of horse and bow.'

'Horse?'

'A horse is a boat that sails on the earth, a gale you can ride. But the empire bribed our clans. They stole our secrets, mustered their own horses and forged strange weapons. My father was a mighty warrior. He rode into battle — he did not ride back. We had no choice but to flee north. When I was young, I thought this island was a myth. The ends of the earth.' His gaze turned inwards. 'The empire says we are not human. They say we are witch animals, shapeshifters. Serpents, spiders. Foxes.' He scowled. 'Decades of war, only to be remembered as vermin.'

'Vermin?' said Imekanu. 'No animal is vermin. Some cause trouble, like Otter, but he cannot be blamed for his nature. Animals are gods. We kill and eat them, knowing we eat the meat of spirits.'

He shook his head. 'Foxes are thieves, not gods.'

‘Foxes are mischievous, but in the way the wind is mischievous. She blows one way, when sometimes you wish she would blow another. She is swift, clever, playful. She howls, laughs and leaves at her leisure, as does the fox.’ The river sang beside them, journeying to meet her sister sea. The newborn stars blinked dew from their eyes. ‘We live on in the stories told of us,’ said Imekanu. ‘When the bones are gone, all that remains is our myth. Vermin, you say? You, the untameable fox-people who vanished into the north?’

Aterui fell quiet. He pondered the river. ‘I suppose we are both myths,’ he said.

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Next day, her father said, ‘We are running low on fish.’ The house fell still. The bear furrowed his brow.

Aterui stood. ‘I can hunt. I will go today.’

‘Are you mad, boy? The storm god is awake.’

‘Storm?’ Aterui laughed. ‘The sky smells like spring.’

‘Father’s right,’ said Imekanu. ‘Dark clouds circle the mountains.’

‘They look far off. The rest of the day should be clear.’

‘But what if you lose your way? You don’t know these woods.’

Aterui looked to his mother. ‘You are as skilled a hunter as your father,’ she said. Aterui’s eyes glinted. He turned to Imekanu’s parents.

‘Please, you have given us such kindness. Let me repay you.’

Her father sighed. He picked up his knife and consulted the blade. ‘I must stay and chop wood before the wind rises,’ he said, ‘but if you wish to spite the storm god, it is your choice. The deer-trail is northeast through the birches.’

Aterui bowed. He pulled on borrowed furs and restrung his bow.

‘Be careful,’ said Imekanu.

‘My family has lived through a lifetime of war. I can survive one hunt. Besides, if I *am* a shapeshifter, I can always grow more fur.’ He smiled. She couldn’t help but smile back.

The house was quiet after he left. The women sat together and wove. Her father paced in and out with armfuls of wood. The hours crept on.

Dusk settled in. Imekanu laid a blanket on the bear and cleaned the hearth so the goddess could sleep comfortably. As she lay in bed, cold clawed through the walls. Snow spirits beat drums on the roof. The wind wailed like a vixen caught in a trap.

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At dawn, when the storm subsided, they went searching. The snow lay deep enough to bury a bear. Imekanu ran ahead along the deer-trail. ‘Aterui!’ she called. She ran until she lost sight of the others and firs eclipsed the sky. The woods were awake, restless and writhing. Birches blushed from the storm’s embrace. The tiny people of the burdocks dashed along the leaves, the demons in the roots raised their heads and growled. An owl cried, an unseen god in the green. A serpent twisted down a trunk — or was it a vine?

She came to a halt. Tried to breathe.

A squirrel poked his head from a birch. She stared. Remembering etiquette, she bowed. He sniffed, all white-grey fur and night-black eyes, and leapt from one tree to another. She edged closer, and he flew to a fir, and then onto an ash, soaring through the woods. She ran after him, her breath coming in sharp clouds.

The squirrel stopped in an elm and gazed at the earth. She stumbled to a halt.

Lying on his back, Aterui did not blink. Did not breathe. A blanket of snow covered his body. A spider scurried across his rigid, half-open mouth. A ray of light parted the branches and caught his golden eyes. Imekanu knelt, shivering, though not from the cold. She did not cry, because the



tears would freeze and make her unable to see him. So they stayed, hot behind her eyes, as she stared at the block of ice lying where there had once been a boy.

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Her father prepared the body. The women waited outside, while the men cleaned and dressed him, Kamuy-Fuchi watching with folded arms. They carried him out on a mat suspended on poles. He wore a white robe. They snapped his bow in two and laid it upon his chest: the god in the bow would follow him to the next life. They bore him south, to one of the open graves dug in autumn in readiness of winter's woes. Aterui's mother wept, tears freezing to her face, while Imekanu and the village women sung their quiet songs.

They cleared the snow and lowered him into the grave. Soon there was nothing left to be seen but soil. The song's words fled her mind; she hugged herself and shut her eyes. The wind whispered in her ear. When she opened her eyes, it was snowing — a faint, gentle snow. And there, in the distance where the dark woods gathered, stood a fox.

His fur was white. His eyes were golden. She took in the smallest breath. He tilted his head and smiled, in the way foxes do. Imekanu watched him run into the trees, into the snow and the mountains, like a warrior going into battle, or a boy disappearing into myth.