

From Mangaka to Maid

By TheSpiralledEye

“I’m sorry.” Mr. Ideyoshi said, not sounding sorry at all. “Your work just isn’t what we’re looking for at the moment.”

Mark grit his teeth, forcing himself to sit still in the hard plastic chair. Even now, after reading his manuscript written in fluent, flawless kanji; Mr. Ideyoshi still spoke slowly using the simplest version of each word. As if there was no way some white guy from Idaho could possibly be fluent in Japanese.

“I hear many people are publishing manga online these days.” He added, “Perhaps that would be a better avenue for you.”

Mark wanted to scream. It was the third time he’d been rejected by CoroCoro, adding that to the list of rejections from Jump, Ran and Big Comic he was now well into the double digits. He stood, taking the draft from the desk and bowing appropriately. If he lost his temper, again, he would achieve nothing. All he’d do was reinforce Ideyoshi’s idea that foreigners were below him. With a few words of gratitude for the opportunity he walked out of the office, not bothering to smile and wave at the receptionist this time.

He resisted the urge to throw the bundle of paper into the nearest recycling bin on the way back to the station. His manga was good, all of them had been good, far better than some of the dreck that made it into all the magazine’s he’d applied to. But because the editors saw a name written in Katakana, a foreign name, they always pushed him aside. After the first six months of living in Tokyo he’d considered changing it but he knew that would just draw more ire. With his red hair, blue eyes and pale as snow skin he’d just look like some try hard dweeb if his ID was a traditional Japanese name.

He’d really thought this was his new start. He’d arrived a year ago with such high hopes, after years of study and devouring manga and anime throughout high school and college he had finally made it to his Mecca. The biggest city in the world was now his home and soon, would be the place where he finally became successful. It had been an adjustment of course but with his excellent grasp on the language it had been less full on that he’d imagined. At first, he had enjoyed the extra attention. Being of average build he’d never really stood out in a crowd before but here, strangers on the street took notice of his red hair and pale skin. Sometimes they even came up for pictures. The novelty had worn off swiftly though, he had long gotten tired of people talking down to him, assuming he was some gawking tourist. Half the time when he went out to eat, they handed him a plastic menu with bold English letters instead of the proper Japanese one; then when he requested the latter, they almost always looked uncomfortable and questioned his order three times to make sure he knew what he was getting.

As per usual, eyes turned when he entered the train. He ignored them, glaring daggers at the copy of Shonen Jump being read by the teenagers across the car. He'd collected every issue of that magazine to be printed since he first discovered it in a bargain bin at his local library as a teen. Growing up in the middle of nowhere, he'd never seen comics like the ones in that magazine. As soon as he learned what manga was, he started buying every volume he could get his hands on, regardless of genre. Once he got internet access, that was it. His days had been filled with everything from 4-panel gag manga to shonen epics. He'd mastered every genre, spent years coming up with ideas and perfecting his drawing only to finally get here and be rejected at every turn. His savings were going to run dry soon, he had to do something. But the idea of becoming one of Japan's millions of salary men just to stay afloat felt crushing. Already he could see it; telling himself it was temporary until he finally got that big break and then with a snap of his finger, thirty years had passed and he'd been worked into an early grave with nothing to show for it. If that was his fate he may as well have stayed in Idaho.

With a sigh he disembarked at his stop, ready to sadly walk the three blocks to his tiny apartment when a poster caught his eye. It was a faded advertisement for holiday packages to Lake Ashi, a cartoon fox dancing around the edge with a speech bubble saying 'welcome!'. It was a silly thing to do, with his money running so low but maybe a holiday is what he needed. He would give it one last shot; mountain air was good for creativity after all. Plus, with all the traditional shrines around perhaps he would be inspired to create something a publisher might actually pick up. Something seeped in Japanese folklore that no layman would ever write. He'd prove he was just as Japanese as his neighbours and that stupid Ideyoshi.

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Lake Ashi really was beautiful; as much as he loved the hustle and bustle of Tokyo Mark had to admit it could get a little overwhelming. After the getting used to the crowds of the city it felt odd to be back in the countryside again. He'd never liked growing up in small town America, away from all the latest trends of the big city but now that he lived in one full time, a little break was nice. Besides, the Japanese countryside was far better than that of the state; less cornfields and more scenic mountains and shrines.

There was little money in his account but he decided to stay at a traditional ryokan style inn regardless, he couldn't pass up such an opportunity. He was still getting used to sleeping on tatami mats, having a western style bed back at his apartment, but he was sure he'd get used to it. Now he sat, dressed in his robe at a low table with his pens and paper, ready to create his masterpiece. His first few applications had been with action series; mango focusing on a stalwart medieval knight from England being magically transported into a samurai war. A fantastic premise if he did say so himself and, had he a Japanese name, would already be a best seller. He'd just up the Japanese folklore, add some more traditional costumes based on what he saw in this local area, maybe even have the main character, Marc, arrive at Lake Ashi itself!

Filled with renewed determination he set to writing and drawing; several hours passed in a creative fury but by the time Marc had met the beautiful geisha woman who was to become his wife, Mark's hand had started to cramp. It was a shame; he was really looking forward to drawing that scene but he knew better than to rush things. If this really was to be the perfect manga, he had to get every little detail right. What he needed was a trip to the hot springs, that would loosen all his muscles up ready.

His accommodation had their own hot springs of course but they were artificial; it didn't matter how well they hid the pipes and heaters away behind rocks and fake shrines, he could tell; and he'd come here for authentic inspiration. So instead of indulging in their tourist experience he decided to go walking on the nearby nature trail. He couldn't help but smirk a little as he walked out, still wearing his robe and sandals. The receptionist was probably surprised, thinking he was some western tourist who wouldn't feel comfortable walking around in traditional Japanese clothing.

'Maybe I should dye my hair black' he thought as he wandered along the track, watching the moon ride between the trees. *'Red hair is always a mark of a foreigner here...'*

He tugged at his locks, pulling one of the orange strands down to his eyes and grimacing; he'd hoped the colour would make him seem exotic, maybe even help him pick up a good Japanese wife. It was yet to do anything but mark him as an outsider. Suddenly he was stumbling, so focused on his hair he didn't see a small wooden block sticking out of the path. He collapsed into the undergrowth, wincing as a stone bruised his side and cursing. He grabbed the object and realised it was an old wooden signpost, writing so faded and wood so weathered it was barely readable. The calligraphy was stylised, making it hard to read regardless but after a moment of holding it to the silver light of the moon Mark managed to decipher the symbols;

'Kitsune Bathhouse'

A small arrow pointed off to the left, a few minutes of searching the general area found an overgrown path, half hidden by brambles leading away and up the mountain. Mark felt his heart leap; if there was an old abandoned bathhouse up here, exploring it would be perfect inspiration for his manga! Already he could imagine the interviews, where he talked of stumbling upon an old style bathhouse and how it inspired his greatest and most popular chapter. The interviewer would be dazzled by his grasp of Japanese language and culture, the reverence with which he conducted his research; Mark didn't hesitate to brush aside the brambles to follow the path.

His elation began to fade though when, after almost half an hour of walking, he was yet to find anything but more forest. Night had well and truly fallen now, leaving him stumbling in the dark with a growing concern that he might not be able to find his way back to his hotel. Just as he was about to give up and head back down the mountain a light caught his eye; warm and orange, like fire. It was creeping out of the trees up ahead accompanied by fireflies which seemed to appear from nowhere, beckoning him forward. He pushed aside the final trees and felt his jaw drop as he entered a sheltered grove:

A large, beautiful pool of steaming water was surrounded by paper lanterns and further lit by dancing fireflies; a natural hot spring. There was no sign of whomever lit the lanterns, the only life seemed to be that of the glowing bugs until suddenly, a bush shifted and two warm dark eyes blinked at him. Mark held his breath as a fox with bright red fur stepped out, locking him with an expression he could only describe as bemused. The creature seemed utterly comfortable with his presence, dipping its thick, bushy tail in the warm water and sitting by the pool's edge. Mark took in every detail

so that he could recreate the scene upon returning to the hotel., he wished he could take a photo but he'd left his phone behind.

After a few seconds, or perhaps it was hours, time seemed to stand still in this magical place, the fox moved. It dove forward, into the water and fully submerged for a few moments before breaking the surface in a burst of red. But it wasn't a fox anymore. No, it was a woman. Flaming red hair, smokey black eyes and pale skin with eyes like fire. Her long hair fanned out around her in the warm water but did nothing to hide the fact that she was naked; she grinned at him, sharp canines flashing in the firelight. Mark's breath caught in his throat.

"Hello there." She purred, "Not often I see another with hair to match my own around here."

"You're a real kitsune." He breathed.

The fox spirits, thought to be a myth. Japanese history and folklore was filled with tales of these trickster spirits, masters of deception, shapeshifting and cunning. A little voice in the back of his head said to be wary, to not let himself be taken in by her beauty and smile but it was hard to listen; something about this woman seemed so inherently trustworthy, despite her strange appearance.

Pointed red ears at the top of her skull twitched and he watched as that bushy tail swished through the waters.

"Yes, I am." She smiled, "It has been a long time since somebody joined me for a bath."

Mark felt his cock twitch in anticipation but his logic held him back and the woman cooed.

"Come now, I'm only trying to be friendly. I've been up here alone for so long; all I want is a little company."

She leaned forwards, wet breasts shining under the candle light, Mark could feel his resistance crumbling.

"What brings you here anyway, little red?" She asked, leaning back against the stones. Marc could see the outline of her naked body through the foggy, distorted water, there was a small patch of red between her legs.

"I came for inspiration." He said, words spilling forth before he could stop them and the kitsune's eyes lit up.

“Inspiration? You’re an artist? I do so love creative types, tell me, what is it you are creating?”

Before he knew it Mark was spilling everything; his love of Japan, his story, his annoyance that nobody seemed to think a westerner could create great manga; all the while the fox spirit listened attentively, moving to rest her head in her arms at the edge of the pool at his side. By the time he’d finished, his legs were dangling in the warm water and he felt so relaxed. This spirit and her pool had a way of making you feel at home; perhaps he’d been carrying his frustrations around more than he realised, now that he’d finally explained them all, he felt so much lighter.

“My poor Mark.” The woman sighed, placing a hand on his knee, her nails were bright red and filed to points. “Why don’t I help you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll make you Japanese!” She replied, “Then, I’ll even use my magic to give you a Japanese name on all your documents, then people won’t dismiss you out of hand.”

Mark had to bite his tongue to stop the ‘yes’ from escaping. Being Japanese was all he’d ever wanted!

“What’s the price?” He asked, eyes narrowing, “Don’t think I don’t know your reputation, kitsune.”

The woman pouted, floating back to the other side of the pool.

“Can’t a woman do something nice out of the goodness of her heart?” She sighed, “Every time I try to be nice, nobody ever believes me. They always assume because I am a kitsune I must be devious. I just hate when people judge books by their cover, don’t you?”

A stab of guilt passed through him; here he was judging her simply because of her appearance when he’d just spent God knows how long complaining about people doing the same to him. He looked into her brown eyes, they were shimmering slightly with unshed tears and the guilt doubled.

“Every time I think I’ve made a new friend...” She sighed, looking into the water, “I’m so lonely...nobody wants to be friends with a kitsune.”

“I’ll be your friend.” He said suddenly, “Especially if you can help me get my manga published.”

The woman clapped her hands excitably.

“Oh wonderful! Let’s do it, hope into the water and submerge, when you come up, you’ll be the Japanese person you always wanted to be.”

His legs and feet were already soaking in the warm pool, as soon as the words left her mouth, he felt a strange, warm tingle form across his skin and his heart began to beat faster. This was really happening! He slipped off the robe, watching as the kitsune’s eyes raked over her naked form, Mark could tell she liked what she saw. Perhaps after this, in his new body, he could convince her to be more than friends. He slipped off the edge into the pool, finding it surprisingly deep. With one final look to his new spirit friend, he took a deep breath and plunged underneath. The warm water seemed to seep into his very pores, that tingling sensation moved across his skin till his entire body was buzzing with magical energy.

Unable to wait he tried to open his eyes but found his vision obscured by bubbles and eyes stinging from the heat. Only able to keep them open long enough to see a swath of hair float past his face; it was black. Soon his lungs began to burn and he burst back through the surface, gasping for air, he could only hope he’d stayed under long enough. He wiped his eyes, skin still buzzing and held out his arms in front of him. His once pale skin had taken on a darker, almost olive tinge and a wide smile broke across his face only to falter a second later when he realised the colour of his skin wasn’t the only thing to have changed. His hands themselves looked different, skin smoothed and darker yes but also the fingers had lengthened, his nails now neat and curved white, they looked almost dainty.

“You look just perfect; all you need is a name.” The kitsune smiled from across the pool, she placed a finger to her pink lips in thought before snapping her fingers.

“I have it! Akiko, it suits you perfectly.”

Mark blinked.

“Isn’t that a girl’s name?”

The kitsune’s grin took on a sharp edge.

“Why yes, it is.”

Perhaps it was his imagination, but the water in the hot spring suddenly felt very cool. His eyes slid back to where his splayed palms were held out in front of him, now that she'd mentioned it, they did look very feminine. His hands moved up to the nape of his neck and pulled forth a great handful of shiny, black hair, far longer than his had ever been. His heart thundered against his chest, his suddenly much heavier chest. He leaned back against the stones that framed the hot spring, letting his body float in the water to get the best view possible. Out of the water, wet and shiny in the moonlight, where two breasts. Round and perky, well sized but not overly huge. The nipples were blush pink against his light brown skin and Mark felt himself begin to panic.

"This-This isn't what we agreed!"

"I made you Japanese, isn't that what you wanted?" The kitsune pouted, "I never said you'd stay a man. Besides-"

She swam right up to him, practically crawling into his lap so that their breasts pressed together.

"You're so much prettier now." She cooed, "Even if I do miss the red."

Mark was stunned in place; the feeling of her nipples pressing against his own made his brain short circuit and then a second later she was gone, back to the other side of the pool with a coy smile. She hoisted herself out of the water and with a sweep of her tail, all the lanterns were snuffed out. He blinked, rapidly trying to adjust his eyes to the sudden darkness but by the time they had, he was alone, playful laughter echoing on the wind.

For a moment he slumped against the stones, the hot spring was rapidly becoming cold, the kitsune must have heated it with her magic, even on a warm night like this he was likely to catch a cold if he stayed much longer. This wasn't what he planned at all and what's more, it had happened so quickly, how was he supposed to process it all? Mark decided he had to break it down, first step was getting out of this cold water and back to the hotel. Then he could think of a plan.

He climbed out of the water, feeling his ass and breasts sway with the movement, the sensation was so unfamiliar and yet not entirely unpleasant. It was hard to see with just the moon but Mark could see his new body silhouette in the darkness, the gentle curve of his hips, the slope of his shoulders and at the right angle, a mound of dark curly hair between his legs. More than that though, he could feel the difference, the cool air brushing against that hair made him shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. Moisture clung to his skin and lacking any towel, he threw on the robe and began the confusing trek back down the mountain, making sure to mark his trail with a stick and mud across the tree trunks so he could find his way back to the Kistune's spring. He'd come back tomorrow night and force her to reverse this spell.

By the time he reached the ryokan his feet were aching and he was so tired he was ready to skip dinner and go right to bed. The front attendant looked up in shock at his late arrival and rushed to his side.

“Miss Kimura! We were beginning to worry you’d gotten lost!”

It took Mark a second to realise she was talking to her. With none of the slow, over enunciation he was used to.

“I did.” He said finally, ignoring how strange his own voice sounded, “But I’m fine, I really just want to go to bed.”

“Are you sure, Miss? You haven’t even had dinner yet.”

“I’m not hungry, I’ll have breakfast late tomorrow, thank you.”

If he heard that woman call him ‘miss’ one more time he may just scream. It took what little brainpower hadn’t been drained with shock and exhaustion to realise she was even referring to him. He flopped down on his futon only to wince as his now much larger, more sensitive chest ached; guess he wouldn’t be sleeping on his stomach tonight. He settled under the heavy blanket, shifting constantly as he tried to get comfortable. His body just didn’t lay the same way anymore, his hips were fractionally higher thanks to the extra roundness of his ass, and his long hair tickled his chin and shoulders. Surprisingly though, despite the newness of his body, he found the futon infinitely more comfortable than the last time he tried one.