

**Bridge**  
**Hoa Pham**  
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Every day the messenger of Inari would face the east and watch the dawn. The sun would creep up and spill light onto the waterways, the boats tied up to the wooden pier, and then spread onto the dark brown wooden houses in the Japanese quarter. This dawn Kitsune lay in the long reeds next to the river. Her tail switched from side to side when she grew restless. Underneath her the banks were damp. She thought longingly of her woman form and the softness of Hoi An silk. But no woman would stay and watch the night, not without male patronage.

The bridge across the waterway was almost finished. It joined the Chinese quarter of and the Japanese quarter of Hoi An by a covered walkway. The structure shone of polished brown wood and the guardian statues were veiled with rough canvas, two monkeys on one side, two dogs on the other.

Summer was almost over and soon it would be time for Kitsune and the traders to go back to Japan. But first she had to ensure that the bridge was finished and the monster killed.

Humans here took so long to do things. They had no fear of the Emperor at this Vietnamese trading post. Traders were already a toughened people, any men brave enough to leave their countries in sailing ships were used to being their own. And the mixing of all the different foreigners led to some very strange practices indeed. Kitsune thought of her paper walled house and the perfection of sushi with rice wine. They would be going home soon. Through her paws she could feel slight vibrations. Footsteps.

She looked up through the reeds. A Chinese woman was approaching the bridge. Puzzled the messenger looked at the sky. The markets opened this early to beat the heat. But why would someone approach the Japanese quarter at this time?

Stealthily she stalked through the grass to get closer to the woman.

Perhaps it was a servant. But her silk clothing betrayed her higher status. Her skin was white, not the brown of laborers. The cut of her yellow cheongsam was Mandarin in style.

The woman stopped at the foot of the bridge and looked at the monkeys. She too glanced at the lightening sky and seemed alarmed by it. Then she looked over to the Japanese quarter.

The messenger cocked her head to one side. Perhaps the woman had a Japanese lover. It would explain her nervousness.

Then the woman turned and stared directly at the messenger.

“Come out.” The woman uttered in Cantonese and the messenger’s hackles rose.

A messenger of Inari did not take orders.

Slowly Kitsune transformed from fox to woman.

She styled herself in a purple kimono with silver cherry blossom embroidery to outshine what the stranger was wearing and stared across the river at her.

The Chinese woman did not react at her appearance. The messenger was surprised.

Perhaps the woman was not human.

“Fox fairy.” The Chinese woman said.

“I am a messenger of the goddess.” Kitsune replied haughtily.

The woman smiled knowingly.

“I too am a fox fairy.”

The Chinese fox fairy, Le, looked at the Japanese spirit and her ornate kimono standing elegantly on the banks of the river. She was warned that there may be trouble when the bridge opened.

The Japanese had stayed on their side of the river for years. Was this spirit the precursor of the Japanese traders marching across the bridge to take the Chinese quarter? There were suspicions. The Japanese were too willing to help construct the bridge.

“So which goddess do you run messages for?” Le asked.

“Inari. The goddess of rice and dawn.”

“Do you have a message for me?” Le let humour creep into her voice. The Japanese spirit was constricted in its ornate kimono with the impractical silk silver obi and cushion tied around its waist. Its’ black hair was coiled, decorated with lilac orchid flower combs. And it was smaller than she was.

“Yes. Inari will bless the bridge and the opening. She blesses the work of our two peoples and will strengthen our attempt to stop the Cu.”

Le smiled and Kitsune smiled back gracefully.

“Perhaps we can watch the dawn together.” Kitsune offered a token gesture of friendship. This was the message her goddess wished to send.

The sky had lightened to indigo and the edge of the summer heat drifted on the breeze. Kitsune stood on the opposing river bank to Le. In between them was the river, eerily calm and still in the early morning.

Their conversation shuttled back and forth over the river.

“Which goddess do you serve?” Kitsune asked.

“I do not serve a goddess.” The Chinese fox fairy said.

Kitsune produced an ornate black fan from her kimono and fluttered it gently. A common animal spirit perhaps? But then the Chinese and Vietnamese did not have the same gods and goddesses.

“Summer ends soon. Then I will return to Japan with the traders.” Kitsune told the Chinese fox fairy. Often when you disclosed information about yourself, others would do the same. This worked even with foreigners.

“Are there many of you?” Le asked.

“Only a few spirits travel.” Kitsune replied.

“The Cu is troublesome.” The Chinese fox fairy mused. “It causes earthquakes when it is unhappy.”

“It affects us in Japan. That is why we have dedicated so much work to the bridge.”

“The Cu affects you in Japan?” The Chinese fox fairy was surprised.

“Yes. We have many earthquakes from the spine of the mountains. If we build the bridge here, there will be no more earthquakes when we sail home.”

The Chinese fox fairy looked away to the mouth of the channel. The Cu lived underneath the earth. The bridge pinned it down. So far the monster had appeared not to notice. Perhaps it was still asleep.

“Then less people would die.” Kitsune said softly.

The Chinese fox fairy met the gentle dark eyes of the Japanese spirit. Her features were softer, as if painted with a more delicate brush, and her skin white as porcelain.

“My name is Kitsune.” The Japanese spirit introduced herself.

The Chinese fox fairy inclined her head. Kitsune was open without the saving face upper lip that the Japanese traders affected with all the Chinese and Vietnamese traders. Were all the women like this too, Le wondered. Or was it just the spirits that had no fear and by their very being were sacrosanct?

“Le.” The Chinese fox fairy replied.

Le and Kitsune listened to the clatter of humans rising and muttering under the cover of their boats. Birds were beginning their dawn wake up call as the heat began to rise. Kitsune looked back at the bridge. The statues would be unveiled on either side of the river in a few hours and then people would cross the bridge. The top trading families would cross first with gifts and wares to trade.

Kitsune herself would cross the bridge.

Perhaps she could meet Le for tea. There were not many fox spirits she could talk to in Vietnam.

Suddenly the birds fell quiet.

Le and Kitsune exchanged glances.

Kitsune burst into a run towards the bridge all dignity forgotten.

The ground shook. The bridge was swaying from side to side. The river rippled in larger and larger waves.

Behind them families were yelling and jumping out of their boats fleeing from the shaking ground.

“The Cu!” Le shouted. She reached the bridge first. Ignoring all protocol she ripped the canvas off the statues. She grabbed the giant sticks of incense lying at their feet. Kitsune saw what she was doing and copied her. If they officially opened and blessed the bridge ahead of time, then the Cu couldn’t move.

She pulled a comb from her hair and struck the steel against the stone paving. Friction sparked and the incense lit. She put the smoking incense in the mouth of the statue.

Kitsune looked through the darkness of the bridge and saw Le bowing three times to the dog statues. The shaking began to subside as the incense smoke spiralled into the air. Under the roof of the bridge Kitsune heard a loud moan.

“I can feel spirits. You are my kindred. What are you doing to me?” A deep voice echoed through the bridge.

Kitsune stiffened. The Cu spoke in archaic Chinese. She stepped back from the bridge. The Cu was powerful. Not tiny like herself or Le.

On the other side of the bridge Le stepped onto the wooden floor boards. The ground stilled as if she had stepped on a snake. Kitsune saw her and followed suit. The bridge was firm again and stable. Then she placed her comb back in her hair.

“I’m lonely down here. So lonely. Now I cannot move so I will never meet anyone again. How can you do this to me?”

Le kept walking towards the middle of the bridge. Her sandals tapped against the wood. Kitsune joined her. Together she and Le could make the Cu stay still.

“You are destroying houses and killing people.” Kitsune said. “We must consecrate the bridge.”

Le nodded. In the growing morning light Kitsune could make out the features of Le and her silhouette through the shadows.

“No one will talk to me. I am lonely.”

Kitsune and Le looked at each other.

“You are fox fairies. People love you and give you offerings. No one gives me offerings. I will die of boredom trapped here.”

Le raised her eyebrows. Was this a trick?

“You have been here a long time. Have you always been bored?” Le asked, using his archaic dialect.

There was a silence.

“I see the fisher people floating in the river. I watch the merchants sail from this port to Japan. I follow them and feel the ocean lap against me.”

Kitsune reluctantly felt sympathy for the Cu. She too watched the merchants cross the ocean. But she could move around the ships and on the earth. The Cu was too big. And when he moved humans died.

“You have consecrated the bridge.” The voice was weaker now. “Now I cannot move. I’m trapped. I will always see the same part of the channel now. You have done this to me fox spirits. Now you must come and visit me and keep me company.”

Kitsune opened her mouth in denial then closed it again. Not even a monster like the Cu could hold a messenger of Inari. Her duty was to her people. But the ground had been quiescent for only a short time. Could the Cu ripple if he was annoyed enough?

“Inari deems that you must lie beneath this bridge, for your movements kill our people. But she did not say that you must be lonely. We can build an altar for you and people can give you offerings.” Kitsune improvised.

Le drew in a breath. Kitsune seemed certain of what she was doing. Perhaps she had the confidence of her goddess.

“I will clean the altar for you and tell the humans about the shrine.” Le said. The Japanese fox fairy could not be allowed to do everything.

“No one has given me offerings before.” The Cu sighed.

Kitsune and Le nodded to each other.

Kitsune returned back over to the Japanese quarter and Le to the Chinese quarter.

The two fox fairies returned from their respective merchant houses with candles, incense, flowers and plates of fruit to make up the shrine. They found some discarded wood and built a platform with their hands. They arranged the fruit on plates, the purple orchid flowers in porcelain vases and the red candles in the correct manner. The humans around them were too busy trying to recover from the earth tremor, to notice the comings and goings of two more women.

Le provided the incense and Kitsune lit the sticks with a striking of her orchid comb. Together they bowed three times to the altar and the bridge shivered gently.

“Thank you fox fairies.” The Cu said and there was silence.

Le and Kitsune straightened up and Le smiled.

Kitsune joined her.

The Chinese fox fairy was beautiful when she was relaxed.

The sun emerged from the horizon and the heat of the day was just beginning. The bridge was covered in the soft gold of the morning light, glinting off the silver in Kitsune’s kimino.

“I would like it very much if we could have tea together.” Kitsune said.

“You may come over to my house if you wish.” Le invited formally. “And perhaps we could meet every year on the anniversary of the bridge to see the Cu.”

After the Cu, Le felt she could trust Kitsune. Perhaps all Japanese were not conniving like merchants. Kitsune had a higher calling like herself.

Kitsune bowed her head.

“I wish that I could.”

Le’s eyes widened. The Japanese spirit was refusing?

“I will join you for tea today. But when we return to Japan it will be for the last time.”

Kitsune’s voice lowered.

“The Emperor has decreed that Japan is to close all its borders to foreigners. The merchants have been recalled.” Kitsune did not look at Le. It was not for her to question what the Emperor had decreed.

Le touched Kitsune's hand in sympathy. Around them humans began to return to their boats. Some of the wealthier merchants had come out of their houses disturbed by the trembling of the earth. All attention was on the river and no one paid the two fox fairies any heed.

A crowd was gathering of fisher people, merchants and children exclaiming at the bridge and the unnatural stillness of the earth.

"Shall we have tea now?" Le asked.

Kitsune nodded and let Le invite her into the Chinese quarters for the last time.