

# The Boy and the Fox

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Ren looked out the window. It was the beginning of dawn. From his house at the edge of the town, he could see the sun as it slowly rose to bask the rims of houses and cherry trees in a beautiful warm light. There was not a person in sight, all of the townspeople were still sleeping. As Ren was taking in the view, he heaved a sigh. Today marked the day of his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday which meant that in a week, the town elder who had happened to be his grandfather was going to appoint him as his right-hand man. Ren had been dreading this moment for ages. Taking care of the entire town came with huge responsibility, and the little boy was worried he wouldn't fit the role and might disappoint his grandfather. Ren directed his gaze to the sky. More than ever, he longed to talk to his parents. His father had died long ago when he was very young, so he only remembered him a little. His mother on the other hand passed away five years ago after she fell ill. How he would do anything to be with her. He wished he could see her face again. He missed the feeling of her warm hand stroking his soft black hair. He could use a bit of advice and guidance from her now.

The higher the sun rose in the sky, the more nervous Ren grew. He wished he could lose himself in his thoughts a little longer, but he knew his grandfather was going to call on him any time now. “Ren!”. And he was right. His grandfather’s thundering voice pierced his ears. Ren stood up, took in a deep breath, and left his room. He slowly walked to the entrance hall. He saw his grandfather sitting on his cushion cross-legged. After hearing Ren’s footsteps, the old man looked up and cracked a smile at the sight of his only grandson. It was the first time Ren had seen his grandfather this happy. He was a sturdy man, and as the elder of the town, he had to maintain a strong image, one that everyone could look up to.

“Ren my boy! Come and sit here,” his grandfather began. Ren complied. The elder continued, “First I would like to wish you a happy birthday. You’re a grown boy now.” Ren nodded silently.

“I suspect you already know that in one week you’re going to help me watch over this town. I’m growing old, and I need

someone I can count on to take care of the townspeople after I'm gone. I hope you won't disappoint me. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, grandpa," Ren mumbled.

"Good." The grandfather let out a small chuckle before he dismissed his grandson.

Ren walked slowly to the outside. The tranquility of the town from earlier had been replaced by the buzzing noises of the villagers. He looked around. Merchants yelling out their prices, little kids playing around, older people gossiping... In just a week, he was going to become their leader. As he began to stroll between the houses, he could see people turn their eyes at him and hear them cheering.

"Master Ren is all grown up now!"

"He sure does look like his grandfather when he was younger."

"He'll make for a great leader. I know he will."

Ren hurried past the gush of compliments, not wanting anyone to see the fear on his face. It was too much for him to

handle. After running for a while more, he came to a little spot by the very edge of the river that flowed in town. Few people came here, so this was his secret hiding spot. He sat on a little boulder and reached out for his pocket in his kimono. Out came a little flute, one that his mother had given him when he was a kid as a protection token. Ren's eyes softened at the sight of it. It made him feel a presence of his mother by his side. He held the instrument close to his mouth, closed his eyes, and started playing a tune. The music was so beautiful that even the river seemed to have stopped flowing for a while to listen. The cherry trees ceased their swinging as if to hear better. After Ren hit the last note, he let out a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes only to be met with a surprising sight. In front of him stood a fox. Not just any fox. It was a glorious white fox with intricate red markings on its face and paws. It had not one, but five tails branching out behind it, each with a hint of red at the tip. Its eyes were a beautiful shade of yellow and its gaze was powerful enough to leave the admirer in absolute awe. Ren could not help but gasp.





It was the prettiest thing he had ever seen. He rubbed his eyes and looked back up again. The fox was still there. It was silently staring at him. After a few moments of quiet, a voice broke the silence.

“Well, this is getting a little awkward.”

Ren screamed so hard he almost fell to the ground.

“Y-y-you can speak?” Ren quivered, his eyes wildly scanning the animal.

“Why of course I can,” the fox replied. Ren couldn’t believe his ears. He must have been dreaming. He rubbed his eyes even harder this time. To his surprise, the fox was still there.

“W-what are you?” Ren started.

“I’m a dragon. What do you think I am? I am a fox, kiddo. Don’t tell me you’ve never seen one before,” the fox teasingly scoffed.

“I have. But not like this. And definitely not one that speaks. I thought you existed only in legends and myths and the sort.”

“Fair enough. Alright, I am no ordinary animal. I am a spirit fox. I am here to guide you. You can call me Akira.”

Ren was baffled. He shook his head in absolute disbelief as he was trying to take all this in. A talking spirit fox named Akira was here to guide him. How could that even be possible?

Guide him for what? Ren had so many questions, but he was too stunned to think deep into this.

“Where do you come from?” Ren asked, his big brown eyes still fixated on the magical beast. “Why I come from the realm of spirits! Us spirits live in hiding, looking over you humans,” the fox replied. Ren’s eyes widened.

“A realm of spirits?”

“Indeed, yes. It is a bit far from here I suppose. But it’s an incredible sight to marvel.”

Ren paused for a second before he blurted out, “Akira, you said that the spirits watch over us. Do you think they’d be willing to help me with something?”

“Why don’t you come with me and ask them yourself?”



Ren stood up so fast even that Akira was taken aback. His heart jolted forward against his chest in excitement. Maybe he could ask the spirits to give him power so he could live up to his granddad's expectations.

"I would love that!" Ren blurted out. Akira chuckled and pointed his muzzle in the direction forward.

"If you want to get there as soon as possible, we better start moving now, kiddo. We've got a long way to go."

"But wait!" Ren gasped as soon as the fox took off.

Akira turned around. "Is something the matter, kiddo?"

"My grandpa," Ren sighed. "He'll wonder where I am and probably send the whole village looking for me. What am I supposed to do?"

Akira chuckled. "Don't you worry, little one. I may not be able to teleport, but I can still come in handy as a spirit. I assure you that with my magic, the whole town shall forget about you until you return home. A little bit of sorcery and

mischievous never hurt anyone.” He winked at Ren who was smiling.

“Ok, then. Lead the way, Akira!”

And that is how the pair took off on their journey to the realm. The road ahead was a tedious one, but the two had grown so close that they didn't seem to mind it. They passed through places Ren had never been to before. They laughed, played tunes as they pranced through the forest on their way, and chatted day and night. Akira taught Ren how to eat and act like a fox for fun, Ren told his new friend crazy stories about the townspeople in his village. The last time Ren had enjoyed himself this much was before his mother died.

One night, the two were lying on the lush grass to rest before moving onward the next day. The moon hung over them in the clear dark sky casting its light onto the world ever so gently. The pair was counting stars and trying to find constellations.

“All my years in the town, I never realized how beautiful the outside world was,” Ren uttered with a twinkle in his eye. “I

also can't remember the last time I've enjoyed myself this much. It's nice having a friend as awesome as you, Akira." Touched at his words, the yellow-eyed creature responded, "it's nice having you as a friend too young one."

There was an abrupt silence between the two, and the only thing that could be heard was the soft night breeze caressing the grass.

"Akira," Ren continued, "do you think the spirits will really be able to help me? Maybe grant me a vessel of unlimited courage and confidence or something?" The boy turned his head excitedly to his friend.

"I...I cannot promise you that, Ren. Who knows? Maybe. Why don't we wait and see for ourselves tomorrow? Judging by our pace and the distance we still have left, we'll be there in no time. Now you go and rest. I'll watch guard for the night." As Akira muttered his last few words, Ren had already curled up beside his furry friend. Akira smiled softly, his tails clutching the little boy tighter to keep him warm.

The final day of the expedition had finally come upon the pair. Ren trailed behind Akira as he led the way. The two strolled until they came to a place covered by smog. “We’re here!” Akira exclaimed. Ren stared at it, bewildered. All he could see was a thick gray fog lurking before him. Akira vanished through the fog and egged his friend on to follow him. Ren took a deep breath and, trusting his friend, walked through the fog. What awaited him on the other side was a sight like no other. A whole new world unraveled before his very eyes. His mouth agape, Ren looked around him in fascination. He was there, in the realm of spirits.

It was better than anything he had ever imagined. A soft blue and purple light emanated from the trees and ground. The whole place was surrounded by a haze, not like the one that had shrouded the entry, but rather a soft and sparkling mist. Sacred statues of spirit animals were scattered across the place. Emerging from the ground were small flowers that gave off a tender glow. Some had formed a path that lit up in front of them the deeper they walked in. Ren noticed small sparkling orbs floating above them.





The closer he looked, the sooner he realized that those weren't any orbs. They were fairies. Their childish giggling and wing flutters echoed through the place.

“Follow me.” Akira guided Ren forward where they reached a large willow tree giving off a blue luminescence. The tree seemed to be the heart of the realm. Akira gave Ren a little nod, one that signaled that this was what he had been searching for all along. Ren signaled back at the fox with a little grin. He centered himself in front of the tree, took out his flute, shut his eyes closed, and uttered, “Spirits, I have come here seeking courage.” He then proceeded to play the flute. Halfway through the tune, a blue light encircled Ren. The boy stopped playing. He opened his eyes and a single tear rolled down his cheek. “Mother,” he choked.

A spirit taking the form of Ren's mother appeared before him. She hovered slowly above the ground. Her lips curled into the warmest grin at the sight of her son.

“Ren, you've grown. I've missed you dearly my beautiful boy,” she cried.



Ren reached out to hug her. “I’ve missed you too, mother.”

The mom scooped her son’s face slowly in between her hands and ran them through his soft hair. The little boy wept in her arms as he told her everything.

“What if I’m not fit for a leader? What if I disappoint everyone? I really want to look after the people and stand by grandpa, but I’m scared. So extremely scared. I wish you were still there,” he sobbed.

His mother knelt to him and began, “Ren, listen to me. I am so sorry for having left you alone this early, my dear boy. I know how hard it’s been for you. I, too, wish I could stay by your side forever, holding you into my arms and protecting you from the world around you, and yet there’s nothing we could really do about it.” She paused a little bit, looked at Ren with a pained and teary smile, and continued, “on the bright side, I have always been watching over you in spirit. I’ve seen you blossom into a wonderful young boy full of passion and love and kindness. Being a leader at such a young age is no easy task, and one must have a lot of heart to watch

over an entire village. I know you're scared, dear Ren. We all have something we're scared of. And yet, I can feel it deep in my soul that you are going to make for an amazing leader, one that every person in the village, big and old, can look up to and admire. You don't need a vessel of power to show your true worth and courage. It was right here all along." She lifted her dainty finger and pointed at Ren's chest.

"In me?" Ren exclaimed, confused.

"Yes in you!" continued his mother. "You hold all the power and strength in the world in your big heart of yours, Ren. You just have to learn how to find it and use it for the good. You are the vessel, my dear boy. And I think your new fox friend knew that all along." She turned over. "Isn't that right, Akira?"

The fox smirked and shook his head in agreement, his eyes welling up with tears.

The mother fixed her gaze on her son. "Promise me that you will believe in yourself and become a good leader who knows his true worth, son."

“I promise,” Ren replied with a determined smile. The mother took one long look at her son before she disappeared.

The boy rushed to his friend. “We did it Akira! The vessel of courage was in me all along- Akira?”

His new companion had begun to fade away. “Not you, Akira,” Ren called. “I don’t want to lose you too.”

The fox snuggled his muzzle against the boy’s nose.

“My purpose was to guide you when you were in need, Ren,” he whispered. “Now that you longer need me, I shall go.”

“But I do need you! You’re my best friend,” Ren sobbed.

“You’re my best friend too, kiddo. But as a spirit, I cannot go back to your village and live among the mortals. So now that you’ve found yourself, I must go. I can assure you that you are going to accomplish great things, young man.,” the fox comforted, his body disappearing bit by bit. “I will always be with you, Ren, even when you don’t know it.”

“Always?” Ren giggled.

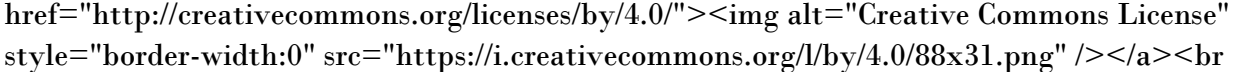
“Always,” Akira replied.





With one last hug, the beast faded away completely. Ren wiped away his tears. As he got out of the realm and looked out into the horizon, he felt something he hadn't felt in the longest while. Hope. Overridden by joy, Ren wrapped his hands tightly around his flute and skipped back home. He couldn't keep his people waiting any longer.



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