

This story is set during the Heian period of Japan, an age of powerful aristocracy that lived decadent lives filled with intrigue at every corner.

It was a time when the supernatural was fought off by Onmyojis who were diviners, priests, practitioners of arts to ward off the evil forces in the world. They were like wizards at times for their capacity to use magic.

The young prince and later *Emperor Toba* was raised in Heian Castle, home of the Emperor of Japan during the Heian period. This is his story and the story of his favored consort, *Tamamo no Mae*.

Tamamo

I remembered the day I first met Mikuzume. We were both seven years of age then when she came to recite poetry at the castle. I was shy then and often didn't look others in the eye. This was just how I was, a loner who was afraid of embarrassment and intimacy. But when I first saw her, heard her voice, echo through the halls of the common room, I felt something throbbing in my heart. I froze and quickly turned my head away and faced it straight forward before anyone, especially Mikuzume, could see.

I was afraid of it.

I looked into Mikuzume's eyes and thought I saw something; her eyes briefly turned yellow. I must have been imagining it. Then I remembered my etiquette and quickly turned away hoping she wouldn't notice.

She must have, though. For a moment a trace of a coy smile appeared to morph from her lips and then quickly melt back as I turned slightly to see. That was the beginning of my interest in her. The courtiers sensed an intelligence from her, a creative and fertile young mind, and a face that with time would grow into a truly beautiful one. And so they chose her to become a servant at our palace.

Over the next few years, we were raised and played often together. She would tell the most fascinating stories about the amazing places she'd been to, like far off in the west in the land of the Hindus and the land of the Zhou kings, closer to home. And next to her I would sit, enraptured by her voice and her telling of her tales, mesmerized, looking into her eyes. I knew her very intimately, she was incredibly close to me at that time in my life. When my father died in my fifteenth year, I chose her to be one of my concubines, as I took the throne.

There was something about Mikuzume that started creeping into my thoughts as I grew older. Now her presence was beginning to oppress me. The fact that she shared lodging with me was concerning. Her voice grew deeper and more alluring, her face grew more to match her attitude, wise, and perceptive. When she first put on the multilayered clothes of women of the court, my heart quickened and throbbed madly in her vicinity. I shied away whenever I could. I hid behind columns, I started talking to others as a distraction. I felt something toward her. I was too shy to come closer. The friend I had known since my youth was now a woman and no more the

approachable little girl I knew. I understood that without thinking and in my thinking, I decided that that is how it should be. I decided to keep my distance. She was a new person now, not my friend as I knew her.

And when she would leave my presence, I would get filled with an emptiness that almost made me sick to my stomach. When she was not around, when I couldn't hear her voice or sense that she was near, even in another room, I grew tired and sullen and more reserved. I would fall over to the ground sweating and panting, grasping for any air, trying to think about Mikuzume again, to almost praying for her to return.

As Mikuzume familiarized herself with court custom I felt more and more victim to her cloying charms. She was becoming less my childhood playmate and more and more a woman, who--through subtle gestures and tones of voice--demanded to be possessed. Never saying anything straight, always alluding to her point with poetry; never talking to a man with her face fully exposed, always having it behind a fan or curtain, and taking on a teasing persona.

Whenever I walked the empty halls at night to clear my mind of the duties of a prince and enjoy the moonlight as it hung over the palace grounds, I would think of what Mikuzume would say. In a dark shadow cast by a building in the castle, I would sit down and voice my complaints for the day, then her voice responded to me about the most important issues plaguing my father and what she would do if I was emperor and if she were my empress. The voice reassured and comforted me.

I hid in the shadow because If anyone walked by, they would see me alone, talking to myself. I would go on for hours with these make-believe conversations, in the knowledge that I was alone with the Mikuzume I loved.

Mikuzume had become popular among the court ladies. Whenever I passed their quarters by, I heard them talk about her. Through a paper screen door, I heard shrill, giggling young voices stories of Mikuzume. The ladies-in-waiting spread rumors about her past life, such as her origins from a western land and being a consort to its king, or that she hailed from the land of the Buddha himself even further west and was the same. Impossible stories with impossible origins. They were nothing more.

Life was simple then when those questions were the only ones on my mind.

One day I woke up in a cold sweat one night from nightmares. In them, I was with Mikuzume. We were standing together in a dark void, staring into each other's eyes. She was dressed in her court robes and I was naked and cold. I was shivering in the frigid air of this void and yearned for the warmth of Mikuzume's robes. She continued to stare at me in a blank listless expression as I came closer and closer. I was a few hands away from her and yet I could *feel* her warmth emanating from her body.

The faint sound of a feral growl echoed throughout the void as she, without breaking her stare, put one hand on my shoulder and pulled at her robe with the other. Quickly I did the rest--forcefully and without any respect for

control. I ripped off her clothes, the sound of it angering the unseen beast whose growl now became a roar. She looked uneasy at me, her friend in waking life. I did not care. She was mine. I grabbed her flesh and felt my nails dig into her. I hugged her close to me as I kissed her neck and then bit into her, drawing blood.

I heard her scream in the voice of a wild beast, shrilly and screeching for escape, and then I was awake. There I was in the late hours in the morning, in a cold sweat, panting and tired. I felt something wet in my blankets as I looked down between my legs.

I felt ashamed, thinking that no one must know about this. I could still feel the warmth of Mikuzume's body on mine and didn't want it. I was a prince, nothing more. I needed to release myself from it.

Mikuzume would not leave my thoughts, even my dreams and he didn't understand why. I decided to put on a change of clothes and take a short walk outside in the cool moonlit air, as I did when there was nothing to talk to about in the shadows. I was hot and needed to cool myself down. I needed to forget what just happened and walk away the shame I was feeling.

In the shadow of the Shishinden--the building where matters of governance were discussed, there stood two trees, one that grew Sakura flowers and one that grew Oranges. In the shadow of the blooming Orange tree, her body draped in darkness, and her face shining in the moonlight was leaning Mikuzume. She stood still in the silent air, looking straight at me, too distant to discern her expression. I walked closer, mystified by her. I could now see in her eyes that same cloying emotion, that lingering allure that she always exuded. *No*, I thought. I didn't want the dream to become reality. I held back my reaching hands and came no further.

"What are you doing here this late at night?" I said.

"I woke from frightening dreams, M'lord Toba. I was frightened by something awful.", said Mikuzume.

She was speaking unusually direct for herself, unlike her usual allusions and indirect flirtations, speaking directly.

"What awful thing could have frightened you? As a prince, I can bring an Onmyoji tomorrow. He can perform an exorcism perhaps."

"I don't believe an Onmyoji can protect me," she said with certainty.

"Why not?" I was genuinely and truly confused.

"The average Onmyoji can't protect a girl from a... prince, can he?" she said as her face retreated into shadow.

Her arms felt like twigs as I held her against the tree and joined her in shadow. I asked her if I was truly so terrifying. Was I not her friend and a noble young man? I couldn't see her expression but heard her voice whisper slurred yet unmistakable words. I pushed myself away, back into the moonlight, swearing in my mind that that evil smile flashed across her lips again as he did.

"Get back to sleep. Didn't your parents ever tell you not to be out this late at night?"

"I didn't have parents."

"What?"

"My childhood was spent in a land far away," she said, showing no emotion in her voice. "I was with a king there and told him this story." She said, walking out of the shadow, as moonlight met her hair and her clothes.

She continued, "He was an awful man and I was made to witness such abominable things of which I cannot speak". Her tone was still like stagnant water, smooth yet unnatural.

"When I said 'prince', I meant the demon spawn that inhabited his palace and brutalized everyone in it." She looked at me intensely now.

I could say nothing, unable to respond with anything more than an awkward stare. I Backed away slightly, but remained in the shadow with her.

"The worst of them was his queen." The restraint I heard in her voice was gone now. She was panicked. It was as if the events of which she speaks happened just the day before.

She started to get closer and put her hands on my chest and said, "It was *she* who manipulated him into vile and evil acts that I simply cannot profane your mind with."

But then, all of a sudden, as I was about to put my arms around hers, she ran out of the shadow and into the moonlight, turning back to me. "I am sorry. I must go" she gave a quick bow and ran off.

And so she did. She, then dressed in the heavy clothes of the court all court women wore, then walked slowly away, her perfect gait and masterful posture, matching her story as a consort for another king.

My thoughts would focus more and more on Mikuzume and what she was trying to hide from me, leaving me the intent to confront her again and find the truth. She--or rather I--scared me that night. I was unsure if I was truly seeing those sultry eyes as I did.

As the days went by, I decided to visit one of the monks at a monastery. There I learned from one of the monks that each of Tamamo's stories was false or failing that, alone in truth among countless false stories.

The stories were all the same, all of them about an inhuman queen and an inhumane king, so desperately in love with her to commit the worst, most vile acts he could. Each story, they said, did resemble some historical accounts from far off lands. The queen would always turn out to be a Kitsune, a malevolent fox spirit, whose tricks and sorceries were aimed at controlling and manipulating others to evil acts for their own gain.

If she were telling the full truth with no lies or falsehoods, then she was born in different years and different lands as far as the land of the Buddha in the west or the land of Qin. The only truth apparent was that she was lying. I wondered what reason could she have to do so, especially around me. It didn't make any sense.

The laughter I heard from her and the other concubines was deafening. The mystique of her life and her telling of it allured them. I could now see clearly the vain contempt she held for them, the pleasure she felt from twisting the truth and having the others listen intently like flies to rancid meat or beggars to the smallest piece of silver. It was disgusting.

Why could no one else see it?

At night I dreamed again, this time of doing even worse. I didn't even try to stop myself. Why would I have? I'm not bothering anyone with it anymore. There she was, in the void, lying dead in a pool of her blood in the distance. Footprints of dark red looked suspended in the dark void and led from her corpse to my feet. This should have been horrible. I should have been afraid and disgusted with myself. Instead I felt a lustful pleasure at seeing this image.

Only in a world of my dreams would this ever be. Only here could I be *this*. What reason did I have to hide my pleasure.

I walked over to her body, surrounded by the silent, empty void and sat myself next to it. Her body was clothed in the robes of the court, stained with red and torn all over. On her body I could see countless bites and scratches as if by some wild animal. Her face however reflected her usual attitude, beckoning others to pay attention to her. Even in death she was a tease.

Like I did on lonely nights, Mikuzume's voice responded back to mine. It told me that she was an evil Kitsune, nothing more. A vile inhuman creature that manipulates men to do evil things. Good men would never do these things without the influence of things like her. I asked her why she did this. Her voice responded to me with an, "I don't know."

I realized then that it wasn't me making Mikuzume's voice now. I was hearing it from the void around me. I realized that it wasn't even her voice talking to me. I was hearing bestial whines and grunts, that my mind heard as Mikuzme. And then that is when it appeared before me, above Mikuzume's body was a giant nine-tailed fox. The air grew cold again, so cold

I found that my hand had slipped into the bloody puddle she now slept in. I asked if she could ever love me and she answered in a giggling voice, "no."

The moonlight on my face caused it to twitch. What was happening to me? All Mikuzume was a simple girl. Nothing more. There was nothing in her to smoke out such violent temptations out of me, nothing, nothing. There was nothing special about her.

All the others could see a simple perfect girl, the same creature I could. I could only see a simple girl, one it would please me to make mine. One who possessed such allure in her, such vile depraved desires within that only I could make manifest, I knew. Something had to be wrong with me. Hopelessly wrong with me. Was it real that it was me alone that saw her true nature? Or was it just me that saw her nature as true?

Even in the day time now my nightmares of her beckoning to me and opening herself up to me and allowing her body to be defiled by me, dominated my mind. Every day wore on and on. Everything that happened was like a trivial thing, especially compared with the thrill, the pure intoxication of what I wanted to do. Sometimes I would forget that nightmares came at night and were distinct from waking life and had to stop myself from acting.

Mikuzume cut herself occasionally when sewing and I swore that I could almost *taste* the small trickle of blood that came down her finger. The presence of her friends in the common rooms who would laugh and giggle together with her proved irritating. It was not my place to watch them like this.

I needed to control myself. Life in the palace was tea ceremonies, sporting events, the merriment of all kinds, never leaving the central complex. Mikuzume was rather quickly accustomed to being here all this time. Over time I felt myself growing weaker with each day. My skin grew a sickly pallor and the pleasures of life that once held me so came over me like a light mist, nothing more.

I decided to walk out again to clear my mind and, expecting Mikuzume there by the orange tree, was disappointed. I was alone with myself there. My heart then began to throb harder, then harder. I must have been going insane then. Without hearing a voice I heard Mikuzume speak. She was in the shadows of the tree I knew.

As I walked closer to it I felt sweat run down my back as the touch of fingers went down with it. I could *feel* the caress of invisible hands on me, becoming me to the shadow of the orange tree. I was going.

This time I managed to control myself. There was a clear reality to my life and I was living in defiance of it by indulging such fantasies.

I decided to confront her again until hearing that it had to wait. Mikuzume was having a ceremony of poetry recital. Her voice was smooth like silk, her intelligence shone like fine silver. Mesmerized was every man in attendance. Even the women were enthralled and helpless to her charms. And there I was, the emperor, watching it all unfold. Tamamo No Mae was now her name, which means “Lady Duckweed”, after the poetry as was custom for women of the court to be named by the court.

My nightmares went on and my complexion grew a sickly pallor. It wasn’t long before the others of the court worried for me, persuaded me from joining festivities, while I would sit there, almost frozen in time with a static wide grin on my face whenever Tamamo was in my mind.

By this point, court physicians were brought in. They thought it right to heal me and cure me of my sickness. Sent by those in my court worried for my health. Bootlickers and ambitious creatures they all were. The audacity of some people! To think they know so much and in reality know so little. They asked me questions, held my hand, looked at my body and felt it with their vile putrid hands. I coughed up more blood and more rushed to my side to tend to me, taking my head and pouring medicine down my throat. Tamamo was there with me then, holding my hand and looking on the verge of tears, gripping it like a child does to their parent’s. Like all the others, she was a parasite, I could see that now.

The physicians stood around my bed, holding quaint little tools made to heal me. Their concerned faces amused me with how closely they touched me, how smart they thought themselves even as they failed to change my condition. I had been living a life not my own, I realized. I needed to decide for myself what made me happy. And if others failed to understand that I wouldn’t care. I needed to send a message to the courtiers watching me, feigning to care for my well being. The ingrates.

And there I would lay, on my back, staring into space, my body motionless and my face emotionless, until something one of the physicians met my ears.

“I assure you, m’lord that you will walk out of this in perfect health.”

Something in me was different then. My heart throbbed, beating like a gong. My face was covered with sweat. I would have taken that statement well and sent him off to mix new medicine for me, but something was different. Tamamo was watching me now. She was always there at my side, even here.

“Only a fool would say such a thing,” I said.

“But m’lord! You need help, you are dying!”

“Hah! You have never lived until you have lived like me!”

Perhaps it was the voice that pronounced those words or the face that stared at them in silence as he did his work, or maybe the presence of my dear beloved Tamamo no Mae, now my consort and always at my side that made the rest of my court worry that this was more than simple illness.

The time for resistance was long since past. I was ready to indulge and do the worst I could. At the same time, I wondered if I could be the one to break the cycle that Tamamo started and with her wet warm meat coming off of her pure white bones, I could stop what was to come.

It wasn’t long before priests came to pray for me and an Onmyoji came to my aid. A great hacking cough impeded me from hearing exactly what they said but allowed the notion that I was the victim of a bad omen. My coughs cleared all of a sudden and Tamamo held my hand in tender love and care as I said that I was fine. In the emperor’s palace, no ill omens are permitted.

The Onmyoji looked at Tamamo as he left with the priests. Tamamo, when they left, turned to me and looked deeply into my eyes. I could see tears welling up in her eyes. She told me that she loved me and that against it all I would survive and live and be with her again to play. Her face was lit in the orange light of sunset while her body remained in the dark shadow of a column.

She walked closer to me and passed through the dark shadows and into the light in front of me.

I was wiser than that though. I knew she was incapable of love. It was all deceit, to make me weakened. It was insidious of her but all too irresistible. I decided to let her play at being my love. For a moment.

I smiled and reassured her. I put my hands on her hands and gripped them tightly, then tighter and tighter and *tighter*. They were bleeding when she struggled and pulled them away. She looked at me again and for a moment had me thinking she was sincere. It was only for a moment though.

No matter how sincere the tears, or how loud her weeping in front of me was, I knew that inside she was depraved and reveled in it and dreamed, like me, to flay my skin. She remained close. My hands were weak but could fit tightly around her neck and end it and then I would see that coy, teasing smile of hers as I committed the worst acts to her.

“There, it will be alright, My beautiful Tamammo.”

“My love.”

And for a moment I thought that I could see that coy smile once again.

It was at that moment that the Onmyoji returned and proposed something. A special ritual called *Taizan Fuku No Sai*, a ritual that would surely heal me of my illness. Its effect was unknown to me, though Tamamo recoiled slightly into me. I was bemused, wanting to see the wonders this ritual would perform on me. The Onmyoji said that Tamamo was to perform part of the ritual.

She was afraid, I could tell.

“I know not what this entails. What if it will hurt me in some way, m’lord?”

“Why would it hurt you, Tamamo? Do you sincerely believe that you are an evil spirit?” A smile flashed on my face. “*Do* you?”

I could see a sincere smile. She was amused at that notion. “No, my lord. I can trust you?”

“With your life, Tamamo. I will ensure that this ritual will be as safe as possible, so you needn’t worry.” I put my hand on her shoulder.

I sensed fear in her again. She sensed something wrong with me, looking straight into my eyes like an animal does when they are about to be hit with an arrow. She tried to say something, but I interrupted her.

“Should it heal me of my sickness, your standing in the court will improve my dear.” I put my other hand on her shoulder. “You will be the woman who saved me from death. Is there a greater honor than that?”

I brought my face so close I could feel my breath flow back to me from her face, as I stared into her eyes in silence for a moment.

With resistance, she said, “Yes, M’lord. I... will.”

The next day the Onmyoji brought Tamamo inside my chambers and I could see her dressed more beautifully than on any other day. I could now see the *Taizan Fuku No Sai*. Holy words came out of Tamamo’s mouth as she moved and danced divine motions that pleased the eye. In her hand was a holy staff, presumably given by the Onmyoji. She moved it around and chanted, again and again, the holy words.

I was instructed to remain silent throughout the entire proceeding. I abided, content to simply have my eyes follow Tamamo as she went about her motions. I watched as she performed every step perfectly. Every movement, despite her just having learned each the day before was done in perfect step with no sudden corrections, slips, or repetitions.

It was either that she had known the *Taizan Fuku No Sai* from some unimaginable time in the past or she truly was a spirit of some sort. I could see the Onmyoji watching and nodding his head at her every move as well. He watched with the countenance of a teacher just about to scold a student but waiting for them to finish their pitiful recital.

After a point, her movements became erratic, still in keeping with the flow of the dance, but faster and far more forceful as if she were angry now.

The Onmyoji indicated with his hand that she was to bring down the staff of my head. She hesitated. The Onmyoji motioned her to do it again and still, she hesitated. For the third and final time, the patient Onmyoji requested that she complete the *Taizan Fuku No Sai*. For a moment I thought that I could see steam rising from where her hands met the staff. Her hand was burning. I could now see embittered tears stream down her face.

“No,” she whispered.

It was then that a cloud of smoke appeared from Tamamo’s body and filled the whole of the room. As it blew away, I could see she had disappeared.

There I sat, surprised, but not confused. The Onmyoji explained to me that he had suspected Tamamo to be the cause of my illness and therefore possibly a malevolent spirit. He devised a plan to get her to chant holy words and complete a holy ritual to coax her out of her human form. No evil spirit would be able to complete it.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I felt myself at ease for the first time since the nightmares began. I thanked the Onmyoji and set him on his way. My happiness was not to be though. Despite Tamamo being gone, her memory continued to entice me, and soon what desires and depravity I had in mind for her were set on the others of the court, the others in my nation. My sleep remained restless, my life became a light breeze passing me by. The only things I wanted to do were to Tamamo and now that she was gone, I planned out what should now take her place.

I was in my throne hall, planning out my life, then filling with a dark void without Tamamo in it. The air was cold and even dressed in my full imperial regalia, I was cold. It was then that one of my guards barged in bringing with him a courier, delivering a message from a noble who ran the villages nearby. The message was a request for men.

The courier read it out to me saying, "The villages around the plains of Nasu have been plagued."

The message had my attention. I thought that I was free to live my life in peace and able to rule as I wished without incident.

"A killer is about, bodies have been found mangled and gored out in the nearby mountains and on the outskirts of villages. Men, Women, Children have been found missing and then found dead, in such a horrible state in the surrounding mountains. The bodies found are scratched and show bite marks as if by some bestial jaws."

I got up at that, I knew what that meant. It was Tamamo, I knew. I just knew.

"Bring out the army, Eighty Thousand, I will lead them personally," I said.

"But, my lord! You are ill!" were words ignored over and over again as I rode off with my forces.

"M'lord, you are still ill! Wait in the palace and command from your throne hall! We shall handle this in your stead!" one of my retainers practically begged me as I, in full armor and riding my horse, escaped the cumbersome walls of Heian castle and led my army to find Tamamo.

The first places we searched were farming villages of rice, meat, and oranges set aside for the castle nearby. We searched them and interrogated their people for missing crops, dead livestock, anything that can link to an evil spirit's presence. Anything that can link to Tamamo.

Each village we interrogated that yielded nothing we set to the torch, each of them helping the vile spirit. The smell of the human meat cooking in the fires would have been almost appetizing if not for the screams and whimpers spoiling it. My men looked at me in confusion when the order was given, but carried their flames all the same and did not resist when I commanded that no villager escape. There was no dispute among them, so we moved on.

Those who set us on the right path did so after presenting their dead to us, torn to pieces. An old couple clutching their daughter, two boys standing over their mother, a young man dead on the streets all alone. These villages told us more, that they had seen a massive fox always in the distance, always at the end of a trail of blood and entrails.

While I commanded the eighty thousand to chase the fox in the other village, I searched the forest nearby. I had a feeling that Tamamo would be here. It wasn't long before I came by bloodstains leading me to the corpse of a child, torn, bloodied, and carried in huge jaws. The rest of the creature was covered in the shadows of the tree above it.

She was the full size of a grown man or two, crouched on the ground like a real fox, growling wildly yet restrained lest she gets the attention of my army. She was simply hungry. It seems that after bathing in the blood of countless human beings, Tamamo found its taste irresistible.

In between bouts of coughing, I said to Tamamo, “Never have you looked more beautiful than you do today, my love!”

The fox growled back in response, coming closer, dripping blood from the child that I could now see was still alive, just breathing rapidly, unable to even scream.

Panting heavily in excitement, I fought Tamamo with my sword. She had the advantage of the fox’s vision in the dark. I had the first move. I could see her leg limping along as she charged at me, it looked burned. In one swift motion, I slashed at it and drew blood. She vainly charged at me again and rammed me into a tree.

I coughed up blood and lost my breath. I couldn’t breathe then. She pushed harder with her good leg and pierced my armor with her claws, Trying to let in air hurt more than her claws did. I noticed her front leg was still too hurt to pin me. The hand carrying the staff in the ritual. In my last stroke, I slashed at it. She drew back in pain as I quickly slashed at her neck. And then again and again and again.

As she lay dying, she dropped the child, already dead from blood loss to the ground. Tamamo before my eyes transformed back into her false human form and looked into my eyes with her still yellow fox eyes.

Seeing her helpless and bloodied body I staggered to have it at last, helpless and alone with me. All mine. I fell to my knees and then onto the forest floor, immobile and tired.

Tamamo spoke her last words to me, coughing up blood, barely alive, the last words for me to remember as we both died.

“I am an evil Kitsune, nothing more and nothing less. A vile evil spirit who can commit and think about nothing but murder and death. Human lives? Motes of dust to me on an endless beach of sand. It matters not to me what I build up with that sand and how each little grain screams in pain or begs for release.”

“But you. What kind of human are you? It is my nature to murder and to maim and manipulate? What about you? What compels you to choose to be like a demon? I never manipulated you. I am telling you the truth! All of you humans are just so awful, every one of you!”, said Tamamo no Mae to no one in particular.

“In the furthest west I have learned of dharma and other strange teachings, that we will all die and when we do, we will live again miserable lives for the evils we brought into the world. I wonder what I will be next for me then, after as many years as I have had. I wonder what *you* will be in the next life.”

She laughed and laughed and laughed until she became the last of two corpses piled up on the forest floor under the orange tree.

And that was the end of the story