

A Tale of Koi and Lotus



ong ago, the Lotus Court was the most venerated of all the spirits of earth and air, renowned for their grace and beauty. And of this exalted coterie the Lotus Prince was the most glorious of them all, for his regal bearing and poise gave him an unearthly, unattainable air.

As befitting sovereigns, the Lotus Court wore the finest of silks dyed in the most vibrant hues – and their prince was no exception, for he wore as a symbol of his station a magnificent gold and crimson *hanten* which was the talk, and the envy, of his subjects.

Each day the glade where the court made their home and held council was filled with admirers wishing to pay tribute and marvel at their colorful pageant. One day, a pale white koi from a nearby pond happened upon the court as he was sunning his scales. “Such beauty,” he mused as he gazed at the still, silent prince in his vibrant robes. “And such finery! Had I as rich and radiant a coat, I would surely command respect as well.” And it was with this thought and the glimpse of the Lotus Prince’s face that the koi retreated to the water’s depths to dream and plan.

The next day the koi approached the Lotus Court in the glade, carrying with him a gift of small pearls and sand-polished stones from the bed of his pond. As a creature of water, he neither knew nor cared for the politics and niceties of the surface world, and so didn’t recognize the shocked expressions of the courtiers as this pale, sorry creature with a handful of pebbles strode past them to address their prince in the privacy of his palanquin.

“Since I laid eyes on you from the shores of my pond I’ve thought of nothing else,” said the koi as he bowed, presenting his tribute. He smiled warmly as he sought the startled prince’s eyes. “It would please me greatly to have an audience with you alone.”

The court’s attendants hid their scorn and amusement behind their sleeves. What made the pallid commoner with his paltry offering think he was worthy of their consideration? The prince, however, was intrigued by the koi’s confidence and careless nature. It had been too long since someone spoke to him so unguardedly. Yet he knew that if he accepted the youth’s proposal here and now, he would subject them both to gossip and shame.

Instead, the prince smiled softly in return and nodded in acknowledgement. “To entertain such a request here, before my court and guests by light of day, would be most unseemly,” he said in a measured, careful voice. “But I thank you for your attention and your generous gift.”

The koi looked at the prince in confusion. He hadn't anticipated being refused. Hadn't he made his intentions clear? Hadn't he given the finest treasure his pond had to offer? He considered the prince's answer a moment, then lowered his eyes in acceptance. "As you wish." And with that, he turned on his heel and left, with only a scattering of pearls and stones at the foot of the royal palanquin as proof of his visit.

So the day passed and, inevitably, the sun faded from the sky, leaving behind the stars sparkling in its wake. And when the moon rose, full and the color of persimmon against the night, the silvery koi returned to the now-empty glade like a ghost. And there in the twilight stood the Lotus Prince waiting for him. Alone.



For seven nights the two of them shared each other's company, talking, laughing and laying in each other's arms with only the moon to bear witness of their meeting. But on the eighth night, after they had taken their pleasure, the koi drew away from the prince's touch. This sudden distance between them confused the prince, who had come to care deeply for his newfound consort. "What is it that troubles you," he asked in his soft, searching voice. "For if I have wronged you in some way, I would make amends."

"You wrong me with moonlight, Majesty," the youth sulked, turning his back to his lover. He spat out the title as if it were something sour. "For why else would you only see me alone, under the cover of night if not out of shame?" The koi wrapped his arms around himself, sheltering his pale body from the cold, from view. "I have not forgotten the eyes and whispers of your court – and neither have you. Though you are their prince, you fear your subjects' judgment. And so you hide this plain, pathetic commoner with whom you keep counsel from their sight."


Suddenly, he felt a weight upon his shoulders. When he lifted his eyes he saw that the prince had enveloped him in the splendid silk of his ceremonial coat. Stunned, the koi turned to ask what he had done to deserve such generosity, but faltered at the sight before him.

With only his thin white dressing gown to protect him from the night's chill, the ruler of the Lotus Court never looked so fragile, so vulnerable as he did now. And yet the prince was at ease, possessed of a confidence, a strength of purpose that only love can give. He pulled the youth into his arms and held him close, kissing him tenderly.

"You are no shameful secret," he said, "but a treasure which I have hoarded from prying eyes." The prince then carefully arranged the coat upon the koi's shoulders, as his attendants had painstakingly draped it upon him in the past. "As proof of my devotion, I ask that you accept this as my promise that I shall always be with you...and that without your happiness, my title means nothing."


Smiling, he eased his consort onto the soft grass, cradling him with his body. “Now lie beside me and rest. For come the morning, all of the Lotus Court shall know of my love for you.”

But when the dawn came, and the courtiers, consorts and courtesans returned to the glade, all they found was their prince asleep in his dressing gown on the cold mist-covered ground. Alone.

eneath the waves of his pond the koi rejoiced in his newfound prize. Like a child he twirled, delighting in how the silks of the prince’s coat fanned around him. Even here, in these deep waters, how the gold and crimson sparkled against his scales! One might think he was a monarch himself in so fine a garment...

Unbidden, the image of the prince’s face rose in his mind. The memory of his trusting eyes and kind words twisted in the pit of his stomach, briefly. “It was a gift,” the koi reasoned. “And wouldn’t he want me to take pleasure in his gift? Besides, had I stayed, we both would have suffered the scrutiny of that tiresome court. Doubtless, he is grateful for my discretion.”

Satisfied that he had settled the matter, and his stomach, the koi danced through the currents like a flame, eager to display his newly-bestowed colors to his brethren. And as he predicted, his dazzling coat drew the eyes and attentions of many admirers. What the koi did not anticipate was how it captivated the eyes of the knife-beaked herons that soared in the skies overhead. For even at such a distance, the koi’s fiery scales blazed like a jewel in the water, and the herons had an appetite for sparkling things.

n the glade of the Lotus Court, the prince continued to hold council in his white dressing gown, refusing to wear anything else. Though he never spoke of the twilight meetings with his beloved koi, his dishabille and melancholy told volumes to his watchful attendants. Before long, all of the court and its subjects were abuzz with rumors of the spurned prince and the changeable lover who charmed the clothes from his back.

One day, a small nightingale entered the court, bringing news of the herons’ siege on a nearby pond. “Day and night the herons raze the waters, filling their gullets with fish. Though I am told that there is only one that they seek – a koi with magnificent gold and crimson scales.”

And with those words, all of the court knew the truth. For no lowly water creature could ever possess such finery...unless it was bestowed upon him.

But the prince paid no heed to the furtive whispers and clucking tongues of his subjects. Instead, he rose from his throne and decreed that he and his legions would leave the safety of the glade to come to the aid of the embattled pond-dwellers.

At this, his attendants lifted their voices in disbelief. “My lord – the soil of this land is all that we have ever known. And yet you would have us abandon it all for the sake of this fickle lover?”

When next the Lotus Prince spoke, it was with the steel and authority of a monarch. Though his voice was low, the ground trembled with the power it commanded. “Though I no longer wear my coat of colors,” he said, “though my love may be misplaced, I am still your ruler. And none shall keep me from honoring my vows.”

And with that, the Lotus Court humbly left the safety of their home and followed their prince into the unknown waters of the pond. And as the court sank their roots into the depths of the water, their robes fanned out over the pond’s surface. Beneath this canopy of silks, the pond-dwellers were hidden safely from view, leaving the herons no other choice but to abandon their search in favor of clearer, more plentiful waters.

Days passed. And before long, the prince was visited by his vagabond lover once more. “Why?” the koi asked, bewildered and remorseful. “It was karma that my betrayal would be my end, but you abandoned all that you knew to save me from it. Why?”

The prince smiled at the frustrated youth and drew him into his sheltering arms. “I made you a promise that night,” he said, “that I would always be with you.”

To hear such kind words and to meet the gentle eyes of the prince were more than the koi’s conscience could bear, and his cheeks flushed with shame at how he had wronged this noble creature. “Then,” he said haltingly as he lifted his eyes to his lover’s, “if you will still have me, then I’ve no choice but to stay by your side. Besides,” he smiled, falling into the prince’s embrace, “to have you chase me all over creation would be most tiresome, indeed.”

And forevermore did the koi dwell beneath the sheltering fronds of the white lotus, for all of creation to see.

The End