

Warton: from the farm by the weir

By

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“So sayeth the last will and testament of His Lordship Thomas Bartholomew Hartzel; may he rest in peace.” And thus were spoken the final words of a man’s life by a wigged and black liveried solicitor serving out his required duties as set forth by the departed. He spoke these words while standing next to a freshly dug grave within a dismally gray cemetery on the first of November, 1929. There was snow on the ground and his voice brought forth clouds of steam in the crisp air.

“Amen,” replied two other voices... each was as different from the other as they could possibly be. The voices belonged to the only other people who attended the funeral... that is, if you could call it a funeral. There was no cleric present, nor were there any of the trappings of bereavement save a tripod bearing a black wreath. There was not even a proper headstone as yet. There was only the hole into which was lowered a plain pine box; the act of which occurred with the throwing of a lever; much the same as would be thrown for the trap door to a gallows. At the request of the departed, no eulogy was read and no prayers were offered. As if it was the only thing that mattered, a small yet complete last will and testament was read; that all of his worldly possessions were to be passed on to his sole surviving relative. It also specified that the housekeeper and gardener were to carry on as if nothing had happened to him.

The first of the voices, a very old gentleman with hairy ears, bent and took up a handful of soil which he deposited on top of the box.

The second, a very old woman with long wispy hair and a small bald spot on the back of her head, did the same.

Both of them were dressed in black, though the woman wore a white shawl, and the man a tweed jacket which matched the tweed cap he clutched in his left hand.

“What should we do now Your Majesty?” the old woman asked the solicitor.

“Please, Mrs. Fuchs, I am not a Majesty; that title would be reserved for a member of Royalty. You may rightfully address me as... well,” he removed his small white

solicitor's wig exposing his naturally raven black hair, "For now you may just call me Smith."

She appeared puzzled, looking first at the wig in his hands and then back up at his face. "Very good Your... I mean to say sir... Mister Smith... what are we to do now?"

"You heard the reading of the will Mrs. Fuchs. It was the wish of Lord. Hartzel that you both stay on at the estate and continue on with your duties as if he were still alive."

"Does that mean I have to take him his meals in the evening like always?"

"He's dead Maggie," said the old man loudly without turning to her. "Ya don't have ta take him nothing no more." It was obvious to anyone who ever saw him that he was deaf in one ear and couldn't hear well out of the other. He had served honorably as an artillery man during the Great War.

"That is correct Mr. Fuchs," said the solicitor helpfully, and also loudly. "Mr. Hartzel is dead."

The old man glared at him. "He's dead you say?"

"Well... yes Mr. Fuchs. That does happen when a person reaches the end of a long life."

"You're positive now are ya?"

The solicitor cleared his throat. "Yes Mr. Fuchs, I am very sure. I believe it is a proven case that every person dies eventually." With the statement, his arms came up as if he was addressing a jury, and he motioned to the cemetery around them.

"Well don't be so sure," the old man replied gruffly, reminding the solicitor of a defense council he once worked with. "Far as any of us knows, these are all just empty holes with pretty markers. Do ya care ta dig a few of them up to prove me wrong?"

The old woman placed a hand on the old man's arm. "I'll make him a good rabbit stew for dinner. It's his favorite, George. Maybe it will cheer him up just a bit."

The old man turned to her. "He's dead ya old bat... he ain't gonna be eating ever again."

"Of course he's dead dear, Mister Smith done told us it was so... but just in case; let's stop by the green grocers on the way home so I can pick up the fixings."

They turned to go and the solicitor cleared his throat again. "Um... Mr. and Mrs. Fuchs, there is the matter of the new tenants."

They both turned back to him. The old man asked, "What tenants? What are ya on about now?"

“Lord Hartzel’s heir I’m afraid. They will be coming from the United States to live here... I suppose to stay.”

“Damned you say!”

“I don’t like that expression George,” said the old woman curtly.

“Sorry Maggie,” he told her, and then turned back to the solicitor. “Damned you say! What relatives? The old boy never spoke of relatives! I don’t think he has any.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Fuchs, but he does. Two years ago my firm was employed to do an extensive search of his family tree. We found that he had exactly one distant male relative left alive. There was a faction of the Hartzel family that moved to the New World in 1690. They settled in Pennsylvania.”

“In Transylvania?” asked the old woman. “Well I might have guessed that.”

“Pennsylvania, Mrs. Fuchs,” replied the solicitor patiently. “It is one of the United States, originally settled by the Dutch, but absconded by the Crown and given to William Penn. In any case, they have lived there ever since, though never in touch, nor I might add, aware of their own connection to His Lordship.”

“Why should they want to come here?” asked the old man. “No one wants to come here; it’s a God forsaken place where we don’t even properly bury our dead. The Good Lord turned his face away from this land long ago!”

“Yes... I suppose he might have, but that is none of my concern.” Smith was suddenly feeling rather annoyed with the two old people. It would be obvious to anyone watching that they were both totally daft. “I will be leaving this very day to fetch them. They will be here within a month. Please see the estate is ready for their arrival.”

The old woman tugged at her husband’s sleeve. “Come along George. His Majesty is a busy man and we have dinner to think of. You know how His Lordship hates to be kept waiting for his dinner.”

The old man gave the wigless solicitor a final look, and then turned and led his wife away from the open grave. After they walked through the cemetery gate, the solicitor bent down and scooped up a handful of dirt. Letting it trickle out and over the top of the plain wooden coffin, he said softly, “Sleep well sir.” He then turned away from the hole in the ground.

It was a three hour train ride back to London. From there the solicitor would then be off to Pennsylvania. It would now be his job to convince a family he had never met to emigrate back to the land of their ancestors. It was a strange job assigned to him by the offices of Renart, Reinhardus, and Reynard, for whom he worked. He was warned well in

advance that things concerning Mr. Hartzel and his strange requests might seem a bit out of the ordinary. The man had already gone through five other lawyers by the time Smith was finally assigned to him. His Lordship Zacharias Reinhardus personally left his instructions. 'No sticking your bloody nose in like a hound at the fox hole,' he was instructed by the man's secretary. The thin man had been with Lord Reinhardus for years. 'Do not let your curiosity get the better of you, Smith. The details are not your concern; just do the job and be done with things.' And so he would... maybe... for now he would play the game and gather his belongings for the trip to America.

Taking out a pocket watch he checked the time. He smiled when he realized he could still get a pint and some dinner before catching a taxi to the train station.

From the near by bushes a pair of brown eyes watched the man slowly leave. When he walked through the same gate as did the old couple, a brownish orange creature turned and left the area through a separate and much smaller gate.

Frank Vos watched his son Tod through the parish priest's small office window. He was playing in the snow just like any other 'normal' child might. He was small like his mother, and not large like his father who was a well muscled steel worker. The boy was building a snow fort and doing a fine job of it; like any good pretend construction engineer might. Every now and again he would stop and hold up a handful of snow, seeming to explain something to someone who was not there. Frank and his wife Greta listened to the other person in the room as he droned on; reciting the results of the psychological tests conducted on their son. He was a Priest specially trained to assist families of the parish with cases of mental illness. He came highly recommended. Frank was unimpressed, while Greta seemed to hang on his every word.

"... normal in all respects save his insistence that his pretend friend, whom he also refers to as Tod, is real. This is normal enough in children, say, three years younger than your son, but that stage should be long past. He also believes that he literally is a fox. He knows, though, that he must act and socialize as a human in order to get along in the world, but his mental state reflects..."

"That he truly is a fox," finished Frank softly, still looking through the small window. "We know all of that Father. To be precise, he is a Western European Grey Fox. Now tell me something we don't know."

"Frank... you promised," said Greta, shooting the priest an apologetic look.

"There is the Catholic hospital over in Warren. He would be well cared for there, and they could medicate," began the priest, but Frank cut him off.

"No drugs! No hospital! My son is not a basket weaver!"

“Frank...”

“We agreed Greta, he will not be institutionalized. Tod has no learning disability, nor does he have any phobias about being in public or around people. He simply wants to be a fox.”

“He bit that other little boy last month,” she responded.

“And I talked to him about that,” said Frank defensively.

“What did you tell him?” the priest asked in what Frank took to be a probing fashion. He was about to tell him to mind his own damned business, but he had promised to be as pleasant as possible.

“I told him to be a man and make a fist; punch the other fellow in the nose. If that doesn’t work then he’s to kick him in the chops.”

“I see,” the priest replied, glancing at the wife, trying to judge her reaction.

“The other boy was picking on our son because of his small size,” Greta explained quickly. “He was only defending himself.”

The priest raised a sheaf of papers. “I have the report in here. It was forwarded to me by Sister Mary Alice. In my opinion...” He stopped in mid sentence as if his brain had suddenly taken a holiday. He cleared his throat, shook his head once, and then continued, but to Frank’s ears, the voice was just a little different. “I... ahhh... don’t have a problem with boys defending themselves. Normally flight is a better option of course, but when the dogs have you cornered, as Tod was in this case, you are entitled to use whatever means works best to defend yourself.”

Frank raised an eyebrow. “Are you feeling well? That’s the first time I’ve heard a priest say something other than ‘turn the other cheek’.”

The priest looked at him blankly, and then his eyes seemed to slowly come into focus as his mind came back. “I said that? No wait... I did say that... but that’s not... I mean...” He gave an exasperated look to both of them and then offered, “Sounded a bit Irish just then didn’t I? I’ll tell you what; why don’t we schedule Tod to come see me twice a week for a few months. Perhaps he would like to become an Alter Boy. We shall pray for him, and if need be, we can discuss the other options at a later date. Does that satisfy you?”

The Vos family sat in their usual booth at Margie’s Dinner having a late dinner. Their heavy winter outer garments hung on the hooks placed at the end of the booth just for this purpose. They came here often as it was one of Tod’s favorite places, and their son was a favorite with the diner’s owner Marge Uodegis. He loved the chocolate milkshakes she

made especially for him, which he always got with an order of pancakes. He and Marge had an unusually close relationship from the first day they met. She always made his pancakes in a special way; poured out into the shape of a fox and then painted with chocolate syrup. Frank marveled at his son's ability to make some people smile... Marge was one of them.

"So," Frank told his wife from over his coffee cup. "Talk to me. You've hardly spoken a word since we left the parish office."

Tod growled at his food before stabbing a pancake with his fork.

"Stop that Tod," his father said absently. "Sit up and be a good boy for a change."

"I'm worried," Greta blurted out.

"I'm worried too," he responded softly, setting his coffee cup down. "Sometimes I go over the things we might do, and I really don't like our options."

"If he doesn't straighten out and stop all of his growling and yipping they'll kick him out of the Catholic school Frank," his wife told him. "Sister Mary Alice already said so."

Frank almost told her where Sister Mary Alice could put her school, but he bit the words off knowing they would only upset his wife. "Perhaps that would be for the best Gret. We *could* pull Tod completely out of school and beat her to the punch, but then the authorities would come banging on the door wanting to put him in a public school and God knows we've enough problems without that."

She gave him a look that told him this would not be for the best.

"Greta, we've no money left to be doing much of anything. I put in as much overtime as I can, but it's hardly enough to pay for the school and the rent." He cleared his throat, and then said in a softer tone, "I took Fred Murphy's advice and applied for a job with the railroad. It would mean some travel and being away a bit, but the pay is better."

She reached out and placed a hand on his. "We talked about that Frank."

"Yes, I know we did, but I have you and Tod to take care of. I won't have us living under a bridge somewhere, and I damned sure won't let anyone put my son into a mental hospital."

He signaled for another cup of coffee and was surprised when Marge and not the waitress brought it to the table.

"Marge," he began, "If it's about the tab, I'll be by to see you on payday. You have my solemn word on it."

“That is what I wanted to talk to you about Frank,” she said, sucking in on her ever present cigarette. Taking it from her lips she continued talking as she poured his coffee, the smoke rolling out of her mouth as if she were a dragon. “But it’s not to ask for the money like you think. Your tab’s been paid for in full, including tonight’s bill. That fella over there,” she said, motioning with the coffee pot, “Footed the bill. He even gave over a hefty tip. He’s a Brit... my husband was a Brit, rotten bastard. Not like them to tip at all; kinda chary if you ask me.” Margie chose to return to her maiden name after her husband deserted her just to spite him.

The man nodded to them, took a last sip from the cup of the weak American tea he’d been nursing, and then rose. Walking across the restaurant to greet them, he smiled his most disarming smile. Frank got up as he approached but did not extend his hand. A stranger paying his debt out of the clear blue sky was just a little too suspicious.

“My name is Smith,” the man said to them in a sociable manner. Noticing Frank’s demeanor he had not extended his own hand in greeting. This was simple body language and compromise, a give and take instilled into every man from the very beginning of time. “I am a solicitor from London, England. I represent the firm of Renart, Reinhardus, and Reynard. He produced a small business card and placed it face up on the table. “Are you Mr. Frank Vos, father of Tod Vos?” He asked this looking directly at Frank.

“I am,” replied the steel worker, wondering what this was about.

“May I perhaps have a word with you and your family in private?” He glanced in Marge’s direction as he said this.

“I’ll be over at the counter if you need anything Frank,” the restaurant’s owner said pointedly. “Heck... I’ll give it five minutes and then bring everyone a piece of Blueberry pie. I made it fresh this morning just for Tod; that is, if it’s all right with his Lordship here. It’s on me.”

“Pie!” Tod said happily. Blueberry was his favorite, and Marge knew it.

Smith smiled, bent slightly, and tousled the boy’s hair in a friendly manner as he said, “I think that would be delightful.” Tod smiled up at him, and for the moment of a heartbeat, Frank was afraid his son was going to bite the man on the hand.

“You smell like dog,” the child told him.

“Do I now?” asked the tall man in the long black coat. He bent down and sniffed at the boy’s head. “And if I am not mistaken, I believe you smell just like a fox.”

Greta made a small squeak. “I have no idea why he smells like that Mr. Smith. I’ve tried every remedy known. It smells almost like skunk. It’s been one of his problems at school... the other children pick on him because of it.”

Smith smiled at the boy, and then winked at him. Turning to the mother, he told her, “I find it to be a rather agreeable aroma madam. Some of the stodgy old boys back at the firm should smell so pleasant. I’m afraid that many of the men whom I must call ‘master’ smell of five penny cigars and terrible body odor.”

Tod giggled, and then stuck his fork into a sizable chunk of pancake. Holding it up to the man, he said. “Want some?”

Smith took the fork without hesitation, thanked the boy, and popped the morsel into his mouth. “Oh... this is very good. You Americans know so much about simple and yet such very tasty foods; if I could have only had this growing up instead of the bowls and bowls of porridge that were forced upon me when I was just a pup.”

Frank moved a chair over from a nearby table and placed it at the end of their booth. Extending his hand to the man, he said, “Please, join us.” If the man was willing to accept his family as they were, and even more importantly Tod had obviously accepted the man; then there would be acceptance from the father. The solicitor took his hand in a warm embrace, thanked him, and then removed his overcoat, and sat.

They made polite talk until after the pie was served and eaten. Smith rolled his eyes with every bite, and played with Tod in a way that Frank wished everyone would. He seemed to understand the boy in a way no one, except maybe Marge, had done before. To the parent’s surprise, Tod even introduced him to his pretend friend.

“I see,” the man said, while chewing on his pie. “So his name is Tod Fuchs... interesting thing that. I happen to know a George and Maggie Fuchs back in England. I also knew a Tod Fuchs once during the time of my youth. That was in the days before I liberated myself from the pack... hunting and all of that you see. I don’t suppose he might... oh my, that would be so very interesting... might he be one and the same?”

“He wants to know your name,” Tod told him. None of them even noticed the sidestep to Smith’s question.

“What?... oh yes, my name is ‘just’ Smith. Properly it is a good deal longer than that, but I feel this is more of a formality than an actual name. I tell everyone who knows me to simply calls me Smith.” He smiled again at Tod, and then turned to the parents. “My masters all love to yell my name... SMITHHHH GET IN HERE! Or SMITHHHHH GET OFF OF THE SOFA AND BACK TO WHAT YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE DOING!”

“Sounds a bit like they treat you as a dog,” remarked Greta.

“Yes,” the man replied forking up another piece of pie. This was his second helping. “It does sound a bit like that doesn’t it?” Turning back to Tod he gave him a wink. “I hadn’t really thought about it but perhaps I’ve just gotten used to it...” He poked a tickling finger in the boy’s ribs and was rewarded with a giggle. “...but then again I’m not really a fox am I?”

Tod grinned from ear to ear, looking from Smith, to his pretend friend, and then over to his parents. His smile conveyed his little boy relief that someone else might actually understand without question. Frank, for his part, completely relaxed as soon as he found he did not have to hold up the defensive shield protecting his son from ridicule. Greta, too, actually smiled her first real smile in a long time.

When the pie was done, Smith winked once more at Tod, cracked his knuckles noisily, and then turned to the parents. "If you please," he told them, "Might we turn to the business at hand?"

Frank stiffened slightly, and sat up, the fear of the unknown moving its way into his posture. Greta, who was more naive to the ways of the world, simply smiled.

"And what might that business be?" the father asked. "Quite frankly Mr. Smith, I like you, but I don't have a spare penny to my name, so if you're an insurance salesman I'm afraid you've wasted your time and a lot of money."

Smith was sipping at a cup of coffee now... something that was not so palatable to him but not that bad either. He placed his cup back on its saucer, waited a slight second to gain their full attention, and then began his explanation.

"I actually sold life assurance once Mr. Vos, but no... this is not about life assurance. I am a solicitor with a rather old law firm in London, England. Over here you Yanks call us Lawyers. I have traveled to your wonderful city of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania with news of Master Tod's inheritance."

Frank looked at Greta, and she looked at him; and then both turned to Smith. "What inheritance?" they both asked in the same breath.

"Tod says we're going home," their son told them loudly wiggling in his seat excitedly.

"Not just yet son," Frank replied. "Mr. Smith is trying to tell us his business here. We'll be just a short while yet, and then we'll go home."

Tod listened to someone not standing next to him, and then said, "Nooooooo... not there... home to England."

"Not now honey," his mother told him and then stopped, finally hearing his words. She looked at Smith. "To England?"

"That would be quite correct madam, though I don't know exactly how young Tod might have guessed. Perhaps the nice lady who brought us the pie would watch your son for just a short while, and I will explain everything for you in detail, eh?"

Marge was quickly pressed into service, and Smith did explain things to them. There was a very old man who had commissioned a search for an heir since he had no living relatives that he knew of... Smith's firm had researched all of the man's family tree, and came up with the only living male still attached to the branches... and that, of course, was Tod. There were stipulations, of course, but nothing the family would find uncomfortable. They were to emigrate back to England to a small town called Warton, and there live their lives on the family estate, thus ensuring its perpetuity. This was something that was very important to their benefactor. There was, of course, a good deal of money involved, all of which would be in Tod's name, but the parents would not be excluded; to age 18, they would be legal guardians of the estate, and after that they would have a yearly stipend to last for the duration of their lives. Smith was also quick to point out that Tod would have the benefit of the very best education England could offer. He finished the story with the offer that they sleep upon it. He had a room booked for them at the very best hotel downtown, all expenses paid, but they needed to come with him now. When Greta uttered a small protest about their belongings, Smith placed a hand upon hers, and assured her he would personally handle everything. "It is my job to do so madam."

The men shook hands, and then three of them rose, moving to collect Tod. They found him back in the kitchen with Marge happily drawing pictures of foxes with a large red crayon. When he looked up at them, he was all smiles. "We're going home;" he told them cheerfully, "And Tod says there will be lots and lots and lots of foxes for me to play with."

Frank was amazed at how fast things moved. After a wonderful night in the best hotel Pittsburg had to offer, they were brought down to breakfast and treated like royalty. He and Greta felt a bit embarrassed, as they were shown to the best table in the dining room. It was slightly elevated, and had a small wrought iron railing around its area, separating it from the rest of the room.

Tod, was happily oblivious to everything as an eight year old would be, busily interacting with his invisible counterpart, who was obviously just as excited as his real life friend. All eyes were upon them as they were catered to in the hotel's best manner, which must have seemed very strange to the other patrons considering that everyone else present was dressed in what the steel worker would have considered ten times their own Sunday best while their own attire was only what they'd been wearing the night before at Margie's. It was all too apparent they were nothing more than base blue collar. Several not so quiet complaints were aired to the serving staff, but no one made a move to relocate Frank's family to the kitchen. It was hard to miss the people who left their meals uneaten as they vacated the dining room.

Greta felt bad, and her demeanor was one that suggested they, perhaps, were not good enough to be seated in the same room as these American Blue Bloods. Frank for his part

sat at rigid attention, trying his best to show good manners and a smile in straight forward defiance of the disdain his family was being shown.

Smith arrived, just as the grapefruit and juice was being served. Looking around the room, he said loudly, "Good morning Your Lordship. I am so sorry about the arrangements, but it would seem this is the only dining room the hotel has to offer. Would you like me to have it cleared out for you?"

"Er... No Smith," Frank managed. "That won't be necessary. I'm a guest here, and I'm sure these people are as hungry as we are."

Tod yipped, and squealed as Smith buried a finger in his ribs, smiling all the while. "Very good sir. I am sorry the staff didn't have your clothes laid out for you this morning. I would have taken care of it personally, but I had to make some further arrangements on your behalf. The Presidential Secret Service assures me you do not have to travel in secrecy any longer. This afternoon we have a private rail car arranged to take you to New York, where the White Star Line has agreed to keep a ship waiting at the dock for your arrival."

Frank almost choked on a piece of grapefruit when Smith told him this. "That is hardly necessary Smith," he told him.

"On the contrary sir, it is, and they were only too glad to do it. When you are finished with breakfast, I will be at your disposal, and we shall speak of the rest of the arrangements."

When he left them there was a good deal of whispering within the room. There were, however, no more complaints to the staff and when Tod made a special request for a chocolate milkshake, Frank noted that several other tables were quickly brought the same drink for their children, as well as for some of the adults. He smiled to himself, enjoying the moment more than he thought he might have. An errant thought filtered through his brain like a passing motor coach... *'the trickster foxed them'...*

He looked at his son who was smiling at him. "Did you just say something?"

"No," he responded, placing his huge glass back on the table. He had a chocolate milkshake mustache, and Frank found himself loving his son very much at this moment. "But Tod did. He said Mister Smith is like a fox; he's a trickster of the highest order."

"Of the highest order? He said that?"

"Yes."

He looked at his wife. "Well M'Lady. It looks as if we have been tricked into going to England then haven't we?"

Greta smiled back at him. She admitted later that she felt as if she were dreaming... but it was a good dream.

The entire trip to England was like that; a dream come true for all three of them. Tod quickly became a favorite among the ship's staff, and was even treated to a tour of the bridge by the Captain. With a sailor's assistance, he was even allowed to steer the ship. Standing behind the huge wheel dressed in a miniature edition of a British Naval officer's uniform, he had everyone on the bridge smiling.

Time flew by, and before they knew it, the ship docked in South Hampton. From the dock, it was a taxi ride to the train station and then they were sitting in a first class coach bound for Warton.

Almost the whole trip there, Tod had his face glued to the window. When his mother gently asked him what he was doing, he told her that this was the land of foxes. When she informed him there were foxes all over the world, he turned and said, "But this was Tod's home mother. He lived here."

Smith, who was sitting in the coach with them, listened, but offered no comment.

"What is Warton like Mr. Smith?" Greta asked him.

"Please Madam, just call me Smith. There is no need to add the Mister. I find it to be a little more familiar, and I rather prefer it that way."

She nodded. "Very well... Smith...what is Warton like?"

"I'm afraid it is a very dreary place Mrs. Vos."

"Now it's my turn," she told him. "You must call me Greta, and my husband is Frank."

"That's not exactly proper since I am employed by the estate," he told her, but Frank interrupted him.

"Do what must be done in public Smith, but in private it will be first names. You are one of the few people other than Marge to treat Tod in a civil manner. We appreciate that... greatly."

"That, above all, I am gratified to hear," he told the father. "My own childhood was not one of greatness you understand. I owe all that I am today to the fellow I knew as Tod Fuchs... so you see... your son offers me hope."

"How so?" asked Greta... and for the small moment of silence after she asked her question, the noises of the traveling train seemed to grow a little louder.

Smith looked down at his hands. “My friend,” he told them, “Was shot to death. It wasn’t supposed to be like that, but it did happen. Your son’s invisible friend is named Tod Fuchs; this is German for fox... in fact, your last name ‘Vos’ is Dutch for fox, so even in your name, I am reminded of my friend whose own name was actually the same. It seems now as if it was supposed to happen this way.”

“What does ‘Warton’ mean?” Tod asked, turning from the window. All three adults were surprised by the question. Without waiting for a reply, he continued. “Tod says it has to do with the place we are going to live.”

“It does, I suppose,” replied Smith. Looking to the parents, he quickly explained, “I did extensive research into the entire area and its history when given my assignment. The word ‘Warton’ means, *from the farm by the weir*.”

Frank and Greta looked a bit confused, so he explained further. “A *weir* is a dyke or dam built to channel water into a mill rite. Several hundred years ago, a group of people, one of the ancient clans of the area, grew tired of grinding their wheat by hand to produce flour, so they pulled together and built a water powered mill. The town of Warton grew up in close proximity as the mill became an anchor for the surrounding farms. The town then became a hub for the distribution of the wheat that was milled.”

“Tod says the Grand Fox presides over all the foxes of the world at Warton. He’s really really old.”

“I’m sure he is honey,” Greta said. “Why don’t you watch out the window for foxes.”

“I have been,” he replied. “I lost count after a hundred.” He spun back to the window as if his shirt sleeve had just been pulled. “Look... there’s a mother and five kits!” He waved energetically. The parents laughed as they observed this... but Smith did not. He knew about foxes, and a fox would not be seen unless a fox wanted to be seen.

“Warton is not a very cheery place I am afraid,” he told them, “Nor is the estate you are going to... especially at this time of the year.”

“Really?” asked Greta turning back to the solicitor. “It’s not long till Christmas. What place could not be a bit happier for that?”

“Warton,” replied the tall man, suddenly looking somber.

They all drifted back into their own thoughts then as they watched Tod at the window frequently waving, and calling out “Hi Hi... Hello fox!”

A taxi waited for them at the train station. What things they had with them were all neatly packed into three trunks which were not that heavy considering these were their possessions brought from their lives in Pennsylvania. Departure from Pittsburg was accomplished quickly since Frank had no living relatives, and Greta had not seen her own family in many years. They had disapproved of her choice of a mate, and so she and Frank had eloped. Subsequently she had been disowned, and that was that. What furniture they had was all second hand to begin with, and Smith assured them that a new wardrobe would be supplied for each of them... 'dressed from head to toe' was the exact way he had put it.

When Frank had him aside for a few minutes, he asked the solicitor, "Not that I am speaking for myself mind you, but what size inheritance is Tod entitled to?"

"A perfectly legitimate question," Smith replied, keeping his voice low, "But I am not privy to the absolute details. I do know the lands are extensive, but overgrown. They have not been farmed in perhaps a hundred years. The woods are very thick, and quite widespread. I have simply been given an open wallet to see to your comforts, and to pay off whatever notes you might have due."

"That, by itself was a Godsend," Frank replied. "When you found us at the diner, Greta and I were just discussing what we might do in order to take care of our son."

"You had just come from the parish offices," Smith said softly. "I am well aware of the conversation that occurred there."

Frank's eyes grew in alarm, and Smith quickly placed a hand on his arm in reassurance. "No priestly vows were broken, I can assure you. I simply had a very discrete conversation with the parish secretary. A deal of money exchanged hands, and I was given the information I required. She knows all of the where with alls within the parish... but trust me, my lips are sealed. Tod is my ward, and I would protect him with my life."

"Why my son?" Frank asked, still in a whisper. "I am sure there must be other surviving relatives."

"Not a one."

"His grandfather?"

"Died last spring. I will take it then that you did not know." Frank glanced at his wife, and Smith whispered, "Perhaps you should wait until we are ship bound for England to tell her. There is no need for her to go home... there's only a cold grave there, and her mother has remarried. She cares nothing for her daughter's life. I stopped there on my way to Pittsburg to find you."

"Be damned..." was all Frank was able to mutter.

On the ride to the estate, which was a good ways from the town, Tod was finally collared by his father and told to remain seated and look out of just one window. There was a good deal of snow on the ground and the trees were all barren and spooky looking in the coming dusk. Though Tod remarked over and over again about how many foxes he saw, the father saw perhaps only three and four. While Greta and Smith were conversing about the family history, he leaned over his son's shoulder, and quietly asked him to point all the foxes out to him. He was very surprised, when during the course of no more than five minutes Tod was able to show him at least twenty of the creatures. The last fox they saw... one that appeared very ragged and ill kept... caught his eye. The two looked at each other full face on and Frank felt shivers traverse his backbone while the hair on the back of his neck stood up. He was no stranger to this feeling. Working in the steel industry, he had come up against men who had given him the same feeling... and they were not pleasant individuals. Invariably, these men enjoyed working very close to the fires that melted the iron ore to its molten state.

"That was the Grand Fox," Tod whispered as if in awe.

After this they saw no more foxes on the road to the estate.

When the cab pulled into the courtyard of the estate's main house their mood suddenly changed from one of happy expectation to one of almost dread. There was no explanation for this. Even the driver, who had remained silent for the entire trip, acted as if he could not wait to deposit his fare and be on his way.

On the steps waiting for them were a very old man and woman. As the Vos family got out of the car, they came down to greet them. Smith, the first to exit, stood by and made the introductions.

"Mr. and Mrs. Vos, this is Mr. and Mrs. Fuchs. Mr. Fuchs is your grounds keeper, and Mrs. Fuchs is your house keeper and cook. They have been retained in their positions as a requirement of the will. If you deem it necessary to hire more help to run the estate, I will be the one to handle the matters for you."

Mrs. Fuchs quickly took charge of Tod after the formal introductions were made. "Are you hungry my wee kit?" she asked, tickling his ribs as she spoke. Tod giggled, but did not pull back from the strange old woman as Frank expected he would. There was none of the leg clinging bashfulness he had become used to back in Pittsburg. Tod growled, and yipped, and the old woman growled and yipped right back at him.

"Porridge!" she exclaimed.

"Pancakes!" he yelled back.

"Pancakes it is then!" she replied happily taking him by the hand. "It just so happens that I received a perfectly good recipe for the item from a sister of mine over in the New World. This will give me just the chance to try it out." Turning to Frank and Greta, she

curtseyed, suddenly looking much younger than she had when they first came down the steps. "By your leave sir, and madam?"

"By all means," Greta told her, and the pair was off.

The old man made a comment about it being nice to have a child around the house again, and then he hefted the heaviest of the trunks, turned and made his way up the steps.

Frank called to him, but when he didn't turn back, Smith placed a hand on his sleeve. "He's quite deaf sir. He had his eardrums ruptured during the Great War. He stood his post all the same, and received a medal for it. Be sure you allow him to perform his duties," he said motioning to the remaining trunks. "It would be a great insult to him to do otherwise."

"I see," he replied. Thinking a moment, he asked, "Their last name... Fuchs... is it somehow related..."

"Everything in due course sir," Smith replied quietly.

Frank nodded, though he didn't quite understand, and turned to go up the steps. Above the door, he saw some words engraved into the stone and spoke them out loud, "'Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.' What does that mean?"

Smith smiled. "It is the sentiment of the fox, sir, and the house adage from the beginning." He motioned to the door. "Come on, shall we? There is a warm fire on the hearth and dinner will be served shortly. I think a brandy might also be in order, yes?"

"I do hope we are not going to have pancakes," Greta said, and they all laughed.

That night, after Tod was happily tucked into bed, Greta and Frank sat in the large parlor near the warmth of the fireplace.

"It's like a dream come true," she told him, sipping from a mug of tea. Though Mrs. Fuchs had brought her a dainty tea set, she insisted on a mug, trying to explain that she was an ordinary person just like the housekeeper.

"Yes mum, course you are... same as I'm a fox." The old woman smiled a rather disarming smile, and then presently brought out an old chipped mug for her to use. "I dare say this mug is as old as the house itself," she told her.

"If it has a lot of sentimental meaning to you Mrs. Fuchs, I won't use it."

It belonged to my own kit," she said, as if not hearing Greta at all. "His name was Tod, same as your son. It truly is nice to have a child in the house again Mrs. Vos."

“Please, call me Greta.”

The old woman looked at her, and blinked. “Oh, I couldn’t do that mum, but thank you so very much for the thought.” She then smiled. “But you can call me Maggie, mum, and my husband’s name is George. He can be a bit grumpy at times, but I’m sure he’ll warm to you right enough. It’ll just take a little time is all; he’s a bit resistant to change.”

“Yes,” Frank reflected, continuing the thought of his wife’s statement. “It is like a dream. I just hope the dream is not a nightmare.” Staring off into the fire, he was still seeing the harsh face of the Grand Fox, staring at him. “There’s something about all of this that just doesn’t set well with me Greta. It’s all... just a little too quick and convenient.”

“I prefer to think of it as a miracle Frank; maybe a Christmas miracle. The timing is right enough, and just think of all the stories...”

“Reality is molten iron which is turned into steel and which runs the world Greta,” he said cutting off her thought. “Reality is a future you work to obtain; it isn’t handed to you on a silver platter with the pronounced words of, ‘They lived happily ever after.’ There’s just something here I can’t shake... a sense of something... don’t you feel it?”

“Like we’re strangers providing something that’s needed?”

He looked at her in surprise. “Yes, exactly that.”

“Excuse me sir, may I have a word?” The voice was loud, and they both jumped. George was standing in the doorway, his old tweed cap in his hands.

“Certainly,” replied Frank, trying his best to recover from the start. “Please, come in.”

“Can’t sir... you’ll have to come with me. I need to show you some things so you don’t take a tumble in the middle of the night.”

“Tumble?”

“Yes sir; tumble.”

Frank looked at Greta, and she nodded to him. “Go ahead dear. I’m going to peek in on Tod, and then I’ll be in the bedroom. I’ll see you there.”

When the men were in the hallway, George actually lowered his voice to an almost whisper. “There’s things here you need to know sir, it’s not all up front like that solicitor makes it out to be.”

He stopped in front of a large cabinet, and taking a good sized ring of keys from his pocket, he selected one and opened it. Inside was a rack of rifles and shotguns.

“The cartridges are all laid out under the weapon they belong to sir. They’re pretty old, so it’s not so certain they will work, but this is where they’re kept well enough.” He pointed to a carbine. “Carried this one in the Great War, I did. I had this and a revolver, but they took that one back when I was discharged.”

“I see,” Frank told him, not really seeing at all.

“There’s things what happen here sir that guns won’t make a difference with in any case,” the old man whispered to him.

“You’re not really deaf at all are you George?” Frank whispered back.

The old man smiled and winked at him, but offered nothing further that this might be true. Closing the cabinet, he locked it again, and continued the tour. “This door,” he said loudly, pointing to a door on the right, “Leads to the basement where the furnace is.” Unlike the other doors Frank had seen during his first tour of the house with Smith, this one had a large padlock on it. “Don’t ever go down there sir,” George told him without offering an explanation. “If the house grows cold, call for me and I’ll take care of the stoking.”

The next place they went into was the study. It too had a small fire burning in the fireplace. Smith had explained that the house was large and drafty. To augment the coal fired heating system in the winter, fires were generally kept burning in the rooms expected to be used. Those not in use were routinely kept closed and cold. Frank told him it was much the same from where they came from except they had never had more than two rooms to worry about and their fireplace had been nothing more than a gas heater.

George motioned his new employer through the door and then closed it behind them. Going to each piece of furniture, he moved it, carefully looking behind each. When he was satisfied, he looked at Frank and told him softly, “A few things you need to be aware of sir... and I could get into a lot of trouble for warning you.”

“Trouble from who George... from Smith?”

“No sir. He’s nothing more than a dog to his masters, eh? Hush now and listen. If you come into a room and find a lovely young woman, excuse yourself and leave the room immediately.”

“Young woman... really...”

“Yes sir, really. Next, under no circumstances should you or your wife go outside after dark, and you are to keep a sharp eye on the boy. He’ll be wanting to visit with ’em you see, and under supervision that might be all right... but not alone... never alone.”

“Who will he want to see George?” Frank asked softly, feeling a chill creeping up his back.

“The foxes, sir,” he replied in the smallest of whispers.

There was a soft knock on the door, and the old man changed his voice, becoming considerably louder. “If you want a fire started in any of the rooms sir, tell m’wife and she’ll call for me. She can do it right enough, but she’s not good at starting it with but a little smoke... can’t breath in the room for a good twenty minutes after she does it... the flues you see... they’re tricky as an old pea hen. They’ll wait for you to get right under them and then dump a load of soot on your head just to be mean. That’ll about do it sir. Oh... one more thing sir... keep an oil lamp handy at all times. The electricity tends to go out a lot, and always when you need it most.”

Without waiting for a reply, he opened the study door, and motioned Frank he should go first. “Your son’s a cute one sir,” he said gruffly as he passed. “He’ll do Maggie good. She lost her own boy many a long year ago. G’nite sir. Remember my instructions, and this old house won’t be hav’n one over on you eh?”

The next day, Frank, Greta, and Tod dressed warmly and went outside to explore. Smith was away at Warton taking care of some paperwork and checking in with the home office via the only telephone in the area; located at the local exchange. The estate was too far out in the countryside to have been considered for the telephone service even if it had been available. That and, Smith assured them, the previous owner had not liked the idea in any case. He believed it would be too much of an invasion to his privacy.

They had great fun throwing snowballs at each other during the course of their hike down the main entrance road they had come in on the night before. Frank’s eyes were everywhere the further they went. He couldn’t shake the feeling they were being watched. Tod ran ahead of them, and Greta laughed when he tripped and fell down, but the laughter froze in her throat as a fox darted out from behind the tree next to her son and snatched the hat off of his head. It ran no more than fifty feet, turned, and then sat in the snow looking at them. Dropping the hat, it watched as if to see what their reaction would be.

“Tod,” Frank called out, “Get up slowly and come back to us son.”

His son, laughing, did just the opposite. Rising, he bound up to the fox, where he flopped to the snow covered road; sitting right next to the animal.

“TOD!” Yelled his mother. “THAT’S A WILD ANIMAL!”

The fox, ignoring the adults, sniffed at Tod, and then tentively licked a tongue out and kissed him on the cheek. That was when a snowball thrown by Frank hit the animal square on and it ran back to the woods, disappearing from sight.

“Why did you do that?!” his son called to him angrily. “Her name was Gretchen, and she was just saying hello!”

“OK dear,” Frank told his wife softly, “We’ve just slipped into the really weird part of our dream come true.”

Tod picked up his hat, and looked as if he might run off after the fox, but his mother beat him to it. Running up, she grabbed him by the collar. He screamed at her to let him go, but she had him fast by the arm now and was marching him back towards the manor house.

“When you reach 18 you can do as you please young man,” she chastised. “Until that time you will do what your mother tells you to do, and right now your mother thinks it’s time for some lunch.” Turning to her husband, she asked him cheerily, “Are you coming dear?”

“Not quite yet,” he replied. “You and Tod go ahead. I’m going to stretch my legs a bit more. Tod... you do as your mother tells you to do. Don’t make me warm your backside.”

When they were gone, Frank went up to where the fox had been sitting and looked at the tracks in the snow. They were easy enough to follow. For some reason he felt he must do just that... perhaps to apologize to the fox for throwing the snowball. He dismissed that thought as soon as it happened. That was ludicrous. Why would he want to apologize to a wild animal?

The tracks lead back into the woods away from the road. He was a city dweller and certainly no woodsman, but tracking this particular fox was not hard at all. Every now and again, he would see a packed down area in the snow where she laid down... *she’s waiting for you...* flashed through his brain. “Tod?” he asked out loud.

“Tod Fox; be bold, be bold, but not too bold...”

Frank blinked. Looking back down to the snow, he found the fox tracks stopped, and a pair of human footprints began. Whoever it was, they were barefoot.

“That’s not possible,” Frank said to himself.

The tracks lead off, and he was drawn to follow them. Through the trees, snow was beginning to fall, and within moments it was thick to the point that he couldn’t see any more than fifty feet ahead of himself. He was about to stop and go back, figuring he was not exactly right in the mind for some reason, when he saw her standing next to a tree.

She was not much more than a child and her long red hair hung limply down and around her body. She was very pretty, and very very naked.

“HELLO THERE! AREN’T YOU COLD?! COME TO THE HOUSE WITH ME AND WE’LL GET YOU PROPERLY CLOTHED!”

She smiled a shy enchanting smile, and then slowly disappeared behind the tree.

“What the...” Frank began, and then walked towards the tree forgetting to even finish the sentence. This couldn’t be happening... not in the dead of winter. He was fully clothed and cold now to the point of shivering.

When he made the tree, she was just visible on the outer fringe of the falling snow. Looking at the ground, he saw the distinctly human print of a foot. A small amount of steam rose from it still.

“Hello? Don’t be afraid. You can’t last long out here like this.” Every sense in his body and mind was going crazy. ‘There is no way you can leave a human being out in the cold like this’, said the angle on one shoulder. At the same moment a devilish voice was screaming at him from the other. ‘Use your head! No living human being would ever be out in the middle of the woods during a snow storm... especially not naked... get out while you can!’

Frank pushed both voices away, and followed on reckless for his own safety. He wasn’t that far into the woods. If he could catch her, he would physically drag her back to the house if he had to.

She stayed on the edge of his vision, ducking in and out of the falling snow, until she disappeared altogether.

“Shit,” Frank cursed loudly and then knelt down to look at the tracks. He found only fox tracks. In the near white out of the storm, he looked around and saw no trees. It became very quiet... and then he heard an audible cracking sound. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he had a very sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. The crack sounded again, emanating from directly underneath him.

In the blink of an eye, the ice gave way and he was swimming for his life. His head broke the surface and he gasped in freezing air. “HELP MEEEEEE!” he yelled for all he was worth. He tried to swim but had no direction, and every seemingly solid piece of ice he encountered broke into countless smaller pieces.

“HELP MEEEEEE!!!!!”

His ears picked up the note of a strange sounding horn wavering in the air. “Where are you?!” was shouted out... and he was given hope.

“OVER HEREEEEEE...” He splashed, trying hard to move limbs that were fast numbing in the cold. “I FELL THROUGH THE ICE!”

The horn blew again, and there was the sound of a hound on its heels. “KICK FOR ALL YOUR WORTH MAN! ... YOU HAVE TO KEEP THE BLOOD FLOWING OR YOU’LL FREEZE TO DEATH!”

The voice was very near now, and Frank recognized it as belonging to Smith. He tried to yell, but got water in his mouth. He choked and gasped, but did as the man instructed; kicking for all he was worth.

The naked fingers of a tree limb flopped down over his head scratching his skin where they made contact. “Take hold, and stop struggling for a moment!” Smith yelled at him. Though his voice was still loud, it was only loud now to be heard. Under the circumstances it was a remarkably calm voice. “Do you have it sir?”

“Yes,” Frank managed, but his fingers were now numb to the point he was not sure he could hold onto the branch.

“Right then, I am going to pull, and I want you to kick as hard as you can. You are truly not far from the bank. If I can get you in just far enough, then your feet should find the bottom. Do you understand?”

“Yes!”

“Good... now kick!”

Three frantic minutes later Frank made the bank of the lake. Everything became a jumbled blur after that. Someone threw him over their shoulder. His eyes saw trees moving past his vision in an upside look at a snow covered world, but he suddenly did not understand what it meant.

Frank woke up in a soft bed covered with more blankets than he had seen in his lifetime. In the fireplace of the bedroom was a roaring fire, and in an old fashioned rocking chair next to his bed, Greta sat, sound asleep. He managed to partially sit up and found his son curled up on the foot of the bed. Groaning, he lay back down in the bed.

Greta’s eyes opened immediately, and she leaned forward. “Frank?”

“Yes... I’m back,” he managed. “How did I get here?”

“Smith found you,” she said. “He carried you all the way here on his shoulders, then took a horse and rode into town to bring back a doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” he told his wife. “I need a hot toddy and a good dose of reality.”

Tod yipped in his sleep, and changed his position on the bed over top of his father’s covered feet. Greta looked at him and then back to Frank. “He was so worried about you. I guess it runs in the family because I was so very worried too. What happened?”

Frank sighed, still feeling cold even under the blankets. “I followed the fox I hit with that snowball. I can’t truly explain what happened. I can tell you what I thought was happening if you want to hear it.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “What happened Frank?”

“I was following the tracks of the fox. I don’t know why really. Perhaps because of the way it took Tod’s hat and then sat there waiting for him. I don’t know. Anyhow, the tracks stopped being fox and became human... bare feet mind you. I saw her then... she had red hair and was totally naked... wasn’t much more than a child really... snowing and cold; and she was naked. I called out, thinking she would freeze to death if I didn’t get her to shelter... Greta... I don’t know who she was. She ran and I followed. The snow became so hard I could hardly see... and then I was out on the lake and the ice gave way. That’s all I really remember... except... when I called out, I heard a horn. It had a very strange sound; it sort of warbled, if that’s the right word... and I heard a hound. That’s when Smith found me I suppose. How did he come to be there anyway?”

“Tod sent him,” she told him softly. “I didn’t think much of it, you going off in the woods by yourself, but Tod was very agitated. He kept saying that you’d made Gretchen very angry, and that he should be with you or you might get hurt. Smith was waiting for us on the front steps. He asked where you were, and I told him you were off exploring the woods like a little boy. Tod told him that you hit Gretchen with a snowball, and made her angry. He then told him; ‘Go and find father. He doesn’t know about the lake. Find him and bring him back here.’ And the man was off at a run.”

They both looked down at their son who was soundly asleep.

Greta and the doctor left the bedroom together. By the time he arrived, Frank was sitting up in bed eating the chicken soup Mrs. Fuchs made for him. He hadn’t yet felt like eating but she strongly insisted and he simply had no choice. As she left the room she turned and chided him, “Now then sir, there will be no more snowball throwing if you know what’s good for you.” Before he could say a word, she was out the door and gone.

“As far as I can tell, there is no permanent damage done,” the doctor told her. “I think that as long as he remains in bed for a bit he’ll be right as rain before you know it. How is it he ended up in the lake?”

“He was exploring,” she explained. “We’re from the city, and I’m afraid my husband is not so well versed as a woodsman.”

“Take my advice,” the man told her smiling a knowing smile, “And do not let him out of your site. Hartzel is surrounded by woods and they go on for miles. It would be very easy for someone like your husband to become totally lost in its vastness.”

“Hartzel?”

“Yes, that is the name of the estate... called after the owner; Lord Thomas Hartzel. He died a few months ago as I recall. I must admit it’s nice to see a young family here again. I understand your son is the heir?”

“He is, yes.”

“Do him a favor,” the doctor said, his face taking on a serious look. “Buy him a dog.” He smiled again quickly as if he had a thought, and added, “Perhaps you should buy one for your husband as well.”

Tod ran between them, heading towards the kitchen.

The doctor moved back slightly giving him room. Chuckling, he told Greta, “Go; I can find my own way out.”

Greta thanked him, and followed her son into the kitchen, finding him happily sitting on a chair slurping soup. This was nothing short of amazing because her son had never liked soup no matter how cold the day. Mrs. Fuchs was sitting at the table with him, watching his every move.

“Maggie... how did you get him to eat soup? That is so amazing.”

“Fox bowl,” she said glancing up at her. “I used to use them with my own kit, way long ago.”

Tod glanced up too, but kept right on eating.

“Fox bowl?”

“That’s right. I have ten different bowls, and each of them has a different picture of a fox doing something. They’re a wonderful tool for a young mother.”

“How’s that?”

“Welllllll... the kit doesn’t get to see the picture on the bottom of the bowl unless he eats all of his soup. When he sees the picture, then he knows what kind of treat he gets after he’s done.”

With that, Tod finished the last of his soup and held the bowl up for Mrs. Fuchs to see.

“Oh my,” she said, “The fox has caught a mouse. I guess you get a licorice mouse for your treat today.”

Going to a cupboard, she took down a tin and opened it. From within, she pulled a small black thing that actually resembled a mouse, and handed it to Tod.

He was about to run off, when he saw the look his mother gave him. Turning back to Mrs. Fuchs, he said, “Thank you mum, the soup was very good,” and then was off again at a run, stuffing the candy into his mouth.

“Mum?”

“A bit of the old English is all Mrs. Vos. I didn’t think you would disapprove.”

“No... it’s fine, but go easy on the candy please.”

“Certainly Ma’am, I will, but just so you know; I only give him a piece if he’s finished his soup and then only the piece required by the bowl.”

Greta left the kitchen, and was thinking about going outside for some air when she heard voices coming from the parlor. Going to the doorway, she stopped just out of sight and listened to the conversation.

The first voice she heard was that of Mr. Fuchs, and he was being a good deal quieter than she had ever heard him. “You tell Vixen Gretchen that what she did was not funny by half. It almost cost Mr. Vos his bleeding life.”

“Not funny by half of what George?” asked a younger more vibrant voice. “Personally I thought it a bit of an outrageous lark.”

“A bit of a lark might have gotten you shot, skinned, and your hide tacked up on the barn door... or has you forgotten those bad days past eh?”

“Don’t be an old ‘Tory’ George or the other foxes will be thinking you’ve gone soft. He was in no danger if he had but used his head. The water’s not that deep there.”

“Didn’t ya hear the horn?”

“Yes... so I did... so what?”

Greta knocked softly on the door frame, and then stood in its center. “I’m sorry, she said with a smile. “Am I interrupting?”

The old man actually blushed. The young man standing next to him remained unruffled and smiled back. He was dressed in an old fashioned riding outfit of a dark jacket with the same color vest, and white pants which were tucked into long black riding boots. He was very handsome.

Mr. Fuchs, remembering his manners, quickly snatched the cap off of his own head, and held it in his hands, clutching it just a bit too tightly. "Mrs. Vos, this here is Fredrick Fauho," he said loudly. "He's a neighbor of the estate. He was out this morning and stopped for a spot of tea to warm himself a bit; it being so cold out and all."

"You don't wear a hat on such a cold day Mr. Fauho?"

"I'm afraid it blew off during my ride M'Lady," he said bowing slightly. "The wind blew it off and it fell through a broken place in the ice... rather irretrievable I'm afraid. George, are you not going to introduce the lady?"

"Ah... certainly... all well and good I suppose. Mr. Fauho, this is Mrs. Vos." George was sure to put a heavy emphasis on the 'Mrs.' in his loudness.

The young man came forward, took her hand in his, and gently pressed it to his lips. "I am at your command madam," he told her softly. "I had no idea the new mistress of the estate was so very pretty."

She smiled, and then speaking to George, said, "Perhaps we could have tea in the parlor George. Would you please summon Mrs. Fuchs?"

The old man stood where he was, and yelled as loud as he could, "MAGGIE... WE'LL BE NEEDING TEA IN THE PARLOR!"

Greta shot him a look, but the old man seemed impervious to it. "Perhaps Mr. Fauho would prefer his tea in the kitchen," he told her. "That's where he usually takes it just afore he goes to clean his master's stables."

The young man turned and looked at his elder. "Have you gone over to the other side George? Next you will be running with the hounds, yes? You told me the Master of the Estate was indisposed. Perhaps the Lady of the Estate would enjoy a game of Whist. I am sure she is tired from her trials and in need of some recreation."

"I am the Master of this Estate," said a young voice from beside Greta. Both she and Fredrick Fauho were startled. Looking down they found Tod standing next to his mother, but other than his physical appearance, there was nothing youthful in his demeanor at all.

Fredrick, quick to cover his nervous jump, bent down and extended his hand to the boy. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. I am..."

“I know who you are,” growled the boy. “And you know who I am. Take your hand away slowly sir, or I might bite it.”

“Tod,” hissed his mother. “Mind your manners.”

He looked up at her and smiled. “I am mother. This person is an uninvited guest. Under the circumstances, he is fortunate that you are here.” Turning back to Fredrick, he told him, “Tell Gretchen that what she did was not funny at all. You may also tell her there will be a reckoning unless there is an apology.”

The man in the riding britches took a step backwards, and his eyes darted around the room as if seeking an avenue of escape.

Tod reached up and took his mother’s hand without taking his eyes off of the man. Old George repositioned himself, stepping further away from the pair as if he did not want to accidentally come between them.

“I saw the Master Fox from my bedroom last night Fredrick,” Tod told the man. “He was whipping some poor soul to the underworld. That poor soul was not a human Fredrick... but I am sure you are aware of that; it was another fox.”

“Madam,” said the man in the riding outfit. “Your son is very brash.”

“He might be, Mr. Fauho, but it would also seem that what he says makes you very nervous. Is there a reason for this?”

“None,” was the hurried answer.

“The Master Fox saw me watching him Fredrick. Our eyes met. He knows who I am and why I am here... as do you. Tell Gretchen what I told you to tell her, and if I find you here again, there will be a reckoning for that as well.” He nodded to George. “Show the Master Fox’s dog out please Mr. Fuchs... the side entrance will be fine.”

Old George nodded and stepped forward, taking the other man by the arm. “This way sir.”

Fredrick Fauho offered no resistance.

“Do you still wish tea madam?” asked Maggie from behind them. Greta jumped again, and placed one hand over her heart as she turned.

“Tea!” Tod said happily, seeming to be himself again.

“What just happened here?” His mother asked.

“I don’t know,” the old woman replied. “I wasn’t present. George yelled for me to bring tea, and I hurried as fast as I could.”

“It’s all right mama,” Tod told her. Both women looked down at him. “Tod says he took care of what was wrong, and that you don’t have to worry. The Skulk will be in a fortnight, and all the wrongs will be righted at that time.”

“A fortnight?” she asked him, not familiar with the word.

“Two weeks ma’am,” offered Maggie.

“Christmas?”

“That’s when the foxes gather mum,” said Tod. Pointing at the tray Maggie held, he asked, “May I have a scone please?”

Frank stood with George in front of the gun cabinet taking each piece, of which there were twenty, and pulling them to his shoulder to get their field and fit.

That morning, Greta released her husband from the confinements of their bedroom and he had come down for breakfast. He chose to eat in the kitchen; ‘Like the commoner I am’ he explained to Mrs. Fuchs with a smile. She frowned at him and commenced to banging pots and pans a little too noisily. The kitchen was her domain and she was wont to share it even with her new master; who obviously didn’t know his place. After his breakfast was eaten, George politely asked him to come out to the barn so he might have his opinion on what should be done about possibly rebuilding the stall for their only horse. “There’s a lot to consider sir, otherwise I wouldn’t be bothering you,” he explained hat in hand.

When they were alone inside the barn with the door solidly closed the old man directly whispered to him, “Sir, Maggie and me are foxes, same as I s’pect your boy must be.”

Frank might have laughed at the notion except for the seriousness with which the old man was treating it. “What happened while I was laid up George?” he asked him suspiciously.

In short order George explained all that had happened the day before between Fredric Fauho, Frank’s wife, and Tod. “I’m a fox, sir, same as Fredric, same as Gretchen; the one who got you to follow her out onto the ice. The two of us come to the estate long ago for our own reasons and have been in human form ever since. What I saw in your son yesterday sir was un-nerving. Fredrick Fauho saw it too. If the Master Fox is involved in this, then there will be very heavy repercussions. As your son spoke the words about him whipping some poor fox to the underworld, I saw it in my mind clear as if I had been looking out the boy’s window myself.”

The father thought about this and then told the old man, "Show me the guns." Questions about being a fox would be saved for later; right now his family might be in danger, and he needed to take steps towards their protection.

All of the weapons were of a superior grade, and this was duly pointed out by George. The ex-steel worker, however, knew absolutely nothing about guns and readily admitted it. "If nothing else," he told the grounds keeper, "I'll use it like a baseball bat."

"And what might a baseball bat be sir?" the old man asked, checking the chamber of the weapon Frank passed back to him before closing the action and setting it back in the rack.

"A very large club George."

The old man chuckled loudly, "Did that with my carbine, during the Great War, sir. Bashed this bloody German fellow up side the head. Didn't kill him, but I did take him prisoner. Good thing for him I was out of ammunition or I might've shot his nuts off.

Both men laughed.

"Might I recommend one of the shotguns sir," George suggested. His voice was quite normal sounding when the two were alone together. There was no sense in pretending deafness since Frank knew the truth. "It's very effective at close range. You'll hit anything you point it at provided the distance is not too great."

"That sounds like a good idea," he replied. "I rather liked that double barreled thing on the end of the rack," he said pointing. "The one with the... you call those hammers don't you?"

"Yes sir, you do, and might I add it is a very good choice for what you have in mind. It has a shorter barrel length than most being that it was the game keeper's weapon during the years we had a full run estate. He kept it for protection against the poachers."

"It's a people gun then is what you're telling me."

"Yes sir," he replied breaking the gun's breech open, and handing it to Frank for a second examination.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" he asked as he accepted the weapon.

"First thing you always do sir, is look down the barrels to make sure they are not obstructed."

"Why?" he asked, closing one eye and holding the shotgun up to the hallway light so he could view the shiny inside of the barrels.

“Well, let’s say the gun’s keeper were to place an oiled rag in the barrels to keep them from rusting,” the old soldier explained to him. “You come along, load it up, and when you fire it off at a rabbit the shot has no where to vent. All that pressure has to go somewhere sir, so it blows out the breech and takes your head off.”

“That would really happen?”

“Yes sir, absolutely. I saw it happen with an artillery piece during...”

‘The Great War’ both of them said at the same time. Frank smiled, liking the old man very much. The smile was returned.

“We were doing a rapid fire barrage,” the grounds keeper continued unruffled, “Firing French 75’s... this was before we got the heavier Brit guns, you see. The gun next to us apparently had a bad round and it only pushed the projectile part way up the barrel. The breech man is supposed to watch for the recoil... no recoil, and the gun didn’t fire properly. Apparently because of the rapid firing, he missed it. They loaded another round in the now plugged weapon and the gun’s breech blew back killing the entire crew. Bloody mess it was.”

“I can imagine,” Frank replied snapping the weapon closed. It made a solid mechanical click as he did this... it was a sound that pleased him. George gently placed a hand on the barrel and pushed it off to the side and away from himself.

“Second thing they teach you; is to keep the barrel in the air or pointed at the ground at all times unless you mean to shoot something.”

“Right. How old are you George?”

“One hundred and twenty three years old sir.”

Frank looked at the man in amazement. “And all this time you’ve pretended to be a human?”

“Not all of it sir. A fox is a fox is a fox... we all return to our roots from time to time.”

“And you can change? Just like that... no full moon or anything?”

“Yes sir.”

“Show me,” Frank said grinning from ear to ear.

“Oh... I couldn’t do that sir,” George replied, handing him a box of shotgun shells.

“Why not? It’s just you and me here.”

“Then there’d be no mystery anymore would there sir? We can’t have life without mystery. You’ll just have to trust my word. Come on now sir and I’ll teach you how to shoot this bloody cannon.”

Greta was now busy with Maggie in the kitchen baking pies. Four of them were currently in the oven, their aroma filling the kitchen. She had found some cans of blueberry pie filling on a back shelf and decided this would be the thing to do as a family surprise. Maggie told her, as she stood washing a big pot in the deep sink, that she had a letter come ‘special delivery’ from a sister fox in the States the very morning they arrived with a recipe for the pies and a small note telling her it was the favorite desert of her new ward. Naturally she had George go immediately to the village and purchase the ingredients.

“A letter? You didn’t?!”

“I did!” she declared, turning from her scrubbing to look at Greta. “Her name was... lets see now... Marge Uodegis. I believe she owns a restaurant.”

“Margie is a fox?” Greta asked. In the same way that George had explained their being foxes, as soon as the two men had gone out to the barn, Maggie had given the same story to Greta in the kitchen.

“Yes... of course. We’re worse than gypsies,” the old woman said and then chuckled. “Of course, some of us are gypsies... or at least we pretend to be.”

Tod scurried around their feet playing a game of fox and hound with his invisible counter part, yipping and yelping.

“Tod honey, why not take a time out and relax a bit?”

“Oh let them play,” Maggie said. “It’s good to see, and he’ll be tired enough this afternoon for a nap.”

“I suppose.”

“His imaginary playmate is my kit come back you know,” the old woman told her softly, taking her pot out of the huge sink and drying it with a towel.

Greta stopped what she was doing and looked at her. “He’s what?”

Maggie looked up at her, and then back down to the pot. “My kit was foully murdered one hundred years ago this very night my dear. He was shot to death, and his hide tacked up on the barn door on this very estate. He has unfinished business, you see. He has come back to see things finished so he can rest. It’s just the way of things mum.”

“But why my son? Why pick him?”

She looked up. “I don’t know the answer to that M’lady. A fox learns to accept things as they are. Your Tod and my Tod are one and the same, and I would protect him with my life if need be. It’s why George and I have remained here at the estate all these years. We’ve been waiting these one hundred years for his return. We stole our son’s hide off of the barn door and we both swore a solemn oath to see things through to the end.”

There was a knock at the kitchen door, and Greta turned to it. “Are you expecting someone?” she asked.

“No... not at all.”

“Come on already... open the door... it’s cold out here!” yelled a familiar voice.

“Marge?!”

Greta ran to the door and pulled it open. Standing on the other side, holding a suitcase and wearing the ugliest hat she had ever seen, was the owner of the diner back in Pittsburg. Her usual cigarette hung from her lips.

“Well don’t you look like the cat’s meow,” she told Greta. “Country living really agrees with you hun; you shoulda made the move a long time ago.”

They embraced warmly, the heat of the kitchen flowing out and around them as the cold of the outdoors flowed in.

“What are you doing here?” Greta asked her, but before she could answer, Maggie cut her off.

“Here now,” the old woman yelled, “Close that door before young Tod catches his death of a cold.”

From the other side of the kitchen, Smith walked through the door, holding an empty teacup and saucer. “I do say Maggie... something is smelling very good indeed.” All three women turned to him, and he stopped; looking at the new comer. “My God, you’re the owner of the restaurant where we had that delicious pie.”

“Good to see you again too cookie,” she retorted, and then was startled as a little boy wrapped his arms around her waist in a hug. “Tod!” Marge cried out, bending to scoop him up. “OOOoooo... and how is my little fox boy huh?” She squeezed him tight and pressed her cheek to his.

“I’m good,” he told her. “I like it here. There are lots of foxes.”

“I’m sure there are kiddo,” she replied, pulling her head back enough to look at him, “In spades.”

The gunshot made them all jump.

“What in blue blazes?” asked Maggie.

Smith crossed quickly to Marge, and took the boy in his arms as a second shot rang out. “Everyone into the hallway,” he told them urgently, “There’re no windows there!”

By the time the third and forth gunshots banged out, they were all seated on the floor. Smith produced a set of keys from his pocket. Opening the gun cabinet he withdrew a rifle and loaded it from the box of ammunition kept in the pigeon hole below it.

“Stay here,” he instructed curtly, and then slipped out the front door. Two more shots rang out in quick succession. Pressing himself into the wall of the house, he crouched low and followed the noise. When he came to the corner of the building he sniffed the wind and smelled burned gunpowder. Peeking slowly around the corner he saw George and Frank examining some cans that had obviously been set upon the fence and shot off. Stepping out from where he was, he called to them, “Is it safe to come out, or will you fire upon me as well?”

George’s expression was dour at best, when he yelled back, “And what the bloody hell are you doing with one of the Master’s rifles?”

“You could have warned us before beginning a war in the back yard Mr. Fuchs!” Pulling the bolt of the rifle open, he caught the ejected cartridge and walked to them.

“I was teaching Mr. Vos how to use a shotgun,” the old man said defensively as Smith walked up. “Where’s the harm in that eh? A man needs to know manly things, and a master must have the means to protect his home.”

When the solicitor was next to them, he looked squarely at George and said quietly, “Your hearing is fine Mr. Fuchs, speak in a very soft tone of voice, if you please. I don’t wish the women to hear our conversation. Why, all of a sudden, is there an interest in learning how to use a shotgun?”

“I am afraid for my family,” Frank told him honestly. “I would take them away from this place except most likely that would not be possible, am I correct?”

“Yes sir that would be a correct assumption.”

“Are you a part of what is going on?”

There was a flash of red in the near by bushes and Smith, pushing the bolt of his rifle home, took quick aim.

“Please don’t sir,” George said placing a hand on the top of the barrel and gently pushing it towards the ground. There was a note of pleading in his voice. “There’s been too much killing already.”

Smith pulled the bolt of the rifle open again and caught the second cartridge as he had the first. “As you wish Mr. Fuchs; no killing.”

“Fredrick Fauho came to call yesterday,” the old man told him, continuing their conversation. “It was not a pleasant visit. Master Tod put him in his place, and then kicked him out of the manor. He actually had me escort him out the side entrance as if he was nothing more than a stable boy.”

“Fauho knows who Tod is then?”

“Yes sir, he does. The youngster left nothing to his imagination.”

“Mr. Vos... are you well?”

“What do you mean ‘am I well’?” Frank asked, surprised by the question.

“Your health?”

“It’s fine thanks to you.”

“And your mental state?”

“It would be a bit better if I could fill Fredrick Fauho’s hide full of bird shot. George told me he had his eyes on my wife like she was a rather fat hen ripe for the fetching. That does not leave me feeling very secure.”

“She is a good woman sir. You have nothing to fear on that count. A woman can only be seduced if she wishes it to be.” He gave Frank a knowing look. “The same can be said for a husband.”

“There are only eleven days to the Skulk sir,” George told him matter of factly.

“What exactly is the ‘Skulk’?” Frank asked, feeling like an outsider to something.

“I think,” said Smith, “It would be a good idea if we finished here and went back into the house. We should all take a deep breath, and perhaps have tea. That way we will be better able to concentrate and plan. I have found that A to Z is always the best way to prepare a case.”

“Our case?” asked Frank.

"I'll explain inside... there are too many ears to hear out in the open like this."

As soon as Smith had slipped out the front door, Marge and Greta, sensing a great fear on the older woman's part, sat on either side of her. Maggie held on tightly to Tod, her eyes everywhere; the noise of the gunshots apparently bringing back terrible memories. Seeming to sense her fear, Tod snuggled into her apron as much as he could, holding her around the waste as her own kit certainly would have.

When the men came back inside, and Smith had given his explanation, the old housekeeper rose from the floor and yelled at them. "The least you could have done was warn us you were going to...." She seemed to run out of words, blinked, and then turning, marched back into the kitchen with Tod and the two other women in tow.

"Who was that with my wife," Frank asked Smith softly after the kitchen door slammed shut.

"That would be your friend from the diner back in Pittsburg," the solicitor told him.

"What in blazes is she doing here?" he asked.

"I don't know sir," he replied. "She arrived just before you declared war and began blasting cans off of the fence. Perhaps we should go in and ask her."

George took the rifle from Smith, checked to see it was unloaded, and placed it in the gun cabinet. "I wouldn't go in there just yet," he advised as he did this.

"Why not?" they both asked at the same time.

"Because the old girl is really upset at the moment."

"Maggie?" Frank asked.

"Aye... Maggie... my fault, I shoulda warned her we would be shooting. You go into the kitchen right now and she'll be bouncing a pot off of your heads. You gentlemen should make yourselves comfortable in the parlor. I'll go and get her in a few minutes, and arrange for tea. We just have to give her a little time is all. I believe the other one you referred to sir, is a fox same as me and Maggie, though I have never seen her before now."

"You told them then?" Smith asked before Frank could say anything.

"Yes sir, we did. We discussed it in bed last night and figured it would be best so." He held his hand out for Frank's shotgun.

Fox is in the hen house.....

“This one stays with me from now on George,” he told him looking at the closed kitchen door.

“The Skulk is the gathering of the Foxes, sir,” George said plainly. “It is a gathering of the chosen representatives of all the foxes of the world. It is presided over by the Grand Council of Foxes. In matters of the law they, in turn, defer to the Master Fox, who is their Lord Magistrate. It is how our way of life is governed.”

“What does this have to do with us?” Greta asked. She was seated next to her husband, her hand gently resting in his.

“I’m afraid it’s not so much what it has to do with you Mrs. Vos, as it has to do with your son,” Smith told her softly. “The Skulk is held every ten years,” he continued, taking up where George left off. “On this occasion, foxes from all over the world send their chosen representatives to hold council with the Grand Council of Foxes. For all intents and purposes, the Master Fox is their Lord Magistrate, and presides over any matters of law. He actually holds absolute power over their world until he is superseded by the next Master Fox. His is the requirement of sitting in judgment during the Skulk; where as the Grand Council of Foxes is more of a governing body. Where those foxes are duly elected to their posts; the Master Fox is not, he is appointed to his post by his predecessor, as he will appoint the fox meant to follow him. To do what he must, the Master Fox is granted certain special powers by the Creator, and a very long life if required.”

“As in your human world,” Maggie said as she took up the explanation, “Within the society of foxes true leaders are born. Those who know one of these kits, will observe them as they grew; marking their unusual abilities and reporting it to their leader... who in turn reports it to theirs, who in return reports it to theirs, and again, and again until the Master Fox ultimately is informed. He (or she) in turn, will then mark this kit’s progress, often taking them under their wing if it is felt they have the makings of a true Master Fox. When the time is right, the Master Fox will quietly retire, appointing this fox to the position. The old Fox will then go back to the normal life of a fox and eventually die as all creatures die, their death being marked no differently than for any other animal. In this, the old Master Fox will rest peacefully having done his job as best he could. This has been the accepted practice from the beginning of fox kind.”

“You see sir,” said George over his cup of tea. “Our kit Tod was so marked. He was a wonderful and loving fox. Having the fox gifts occurs for its own reasons, and all foxes are born with at least one of them. Maggie and me had nothing to do with Tod’s abilities. Like every other fox, we came to simply accept who he was. Has nothing to do with the parents, you see... it just happens.”

The five adults sat around the parlor, having their first in depth conversation about why they were all there, while Tod was being watched in the kitchen by Marge. In only eleven days, what this small group wanted to do would have to be in readiness. As their solicitor, Smith was now in charge of putting things together. Their petition to the Skulk would take the shape of a court case... or at least that was the theory. Wrongful death and murder were the same if you were a fox or a human. The petitioners would be George and Maggie Fuchs, with co-petitioners Frank and Greta Vos, representing the interests of their own son. Maggie and George both warned that after the confrontation of Fredric Fauho, Tod was in the same danger their own son had faced.

“Tell us exactly what the events were that lead us here Mr. Fuchs,” Smith told him. “I know the story well enough, and I am aware that this might hurt you and your wife in the telling, but Tod’s parents now need to understand everything to the smallest detail.”

“This is a very unusual thing Your Honor,” George said nodding to Smith and then glancing over at Frank. “As far as my knowledge of our history, no Fox has ever been represented during the Skulk by a human. Quite the opposite actually, as Foxes have long been the advisors of human kind.”

“Let me worry about that George,” the solicitor told him. “You may rest assured it will be, if perhaps not well received; it will be received. We seek justice, and justice will be found.”

“Very good sir, we shall trust your judgment.” He looked down at the cup of tea he held, and said quietly, “Our son was shot dead exactly one hundred years ago. Maggie and me have waited a long time for this.”

There was an awkward silence in the room, and then his wife continued. “We was watching the hunt from our hill top,” she told them in a small voice. “There was one dog way out in front, and him baying like no tomorrow. That was Lord Hartzel’s best dog and you had to admire him for all of that. We knew something happened becuz there was a pause in his yowling, and then he up and takes off in a totally different direction. He crosses in front of the pack and the bunch of them follows him well and away. Oh that was a happy moment because even for a Fox as gifted as our kit was, if the dogs catch you, that’s it; you’re torn to bits... and that’s it, you see.” She paused for a moment, as the words caught in her throat. “We saw our son a second after that. ‘Stay down!’ I’m yelling, but it weren’t no good because he was too far off to hear me.”

“That was when we heard the rifle shot right close to where we sat,” George continued. “It’s not like the foxers to travel armed with anything more than a horse pistol, you see, but it was a rifle sure enough. We heard their voices then and ducked back into the bushes. They rode past us a few moments after, quiet as the ghost riders from wars past. There was only two foxers that day... His Lordship Thomas Hartzel, and one other. We saw the one clearly, but not the other since his horse was on the far side as they passed.”

Greta slipped a hand upon that of Maggie, and the old woman smiled at her in a sad way. "We found his hide salted and nailed to the barn door that night," she said. "Imagine... my child, murdered, skinned... and then nailed to the..." she choked slightly, but recovered. "George and I planned to kill His Lordship in revenge for what he'd done. Mind you it's not like a Fox to bother much with people... not preplanned like that and in their own home, but we were determined. Our son was greatly touched with the Fox talents... he would most likely have been the next Master Fox; everyone said so." She shook her head slightly. "It was such a waste of a life." She sighed, and then continued. "Our plan was simple enough; I was to seduce His Lordship, and then George was to shoot him with the same rifle that was used to kill our son."

"We almost did that too," continued George, but Maggie was a little too good in her seduction. The Old Boy got very drunk and without provocation told Maggie he had made a deal with the Devil that very afternoon. He cried for the soul he was sure to have lost. Seems he'd had a new friend out to the estate... one whom he just met at the pub that very morning; a solicitor from London supposedly on holiday. This fellow had begged a hunt over their beers, and was only grudgingly allowed for it because of the late time in the day. After a certain hour it's not good to loose the hounds, you see. It was this fellow what was armed with the rifle and he had specifically requested they hunt in the area of our home."

"The rifle shot actually took Lord Hartzel by complete surprise," Maggie continued. "For all of his drunkenness, he told us he rounded on the man quite forcefully being that he was fearful his new friend might have shot one of the dogs. That's when he was made the offer... one hundred extra years to live if he but kept his mouth shut about the shooting. It wasn't much of a deal really; being that the counter threat was a painful and lingering death with his soul summoned to hell if he spoke but one word of what happened to anyone. His Lordship said, 'Looking into the man's eyes was like looking into the Devil's own fireplace,'" she finished. "What choice did he have?"

"Did he tell you who this person was?" asked Greta.

"He did ma'am. He told us the man's name was Zacharias Reinhardus... no other than the Master Fox himself."

"That was when Tod come to us, ya see," said George softly, taking his wife's hand in his and looking at Frank and Greta. "It was just for a fleeting moment, but we both saw him. 'One hundred years', he tells us, and we both knew what he meant. He would be back in one hundred years through Lord Hartzel's descendents; the very man who was used to hunt him down. Neither one of us knew why this was to be... but we never questioned it. That's why we attached ourselves to His Lordship, acting as his most trusted servants. At the end of the hundred years, we would see our son again."

As if on cue; Tod came into the room, being chased after by Marge. "Come back here you little dickens," she scolded. She was wearing a flowery apron that was distinctly

American. It was spattered with flower, and her red hair was pulled neatly back into a bun. He ran right to Maggie, and hugged her.

He seemed to listen to a person none of them could see, and then told the old woman, “Tod says not to be sad.” His little voice was quite clear. “He also says I need to visit with the other foxes.”

“No!” Frank said loudly, “And that’s final. No foxes...” he looked at the others in the room, and then half mumbled, “Except for those already present that is.” They were all looking at him and he actually blushed. “They’re a danger to Tod,” he muttered. “Look what’s happened so far...”

Smith was the first to respond. “The child has a good point Mr. Vos. It would be better if he had the opportunity to mingle with the Foxes before the Skulk is officially convened. He is a very special little boy.”

“Just like my Tod was,” said Maggie in a small voice, finally daring to hug the child as her own.

“And he could be killed just as easily,” responded the father, pressing the point, though he knew it hurt the other people to do so.

“He handled Fredrick Fauho in a way that would have made an older fox proud, sir,” George interjected. “I don’t think you have anything to fear on his behalf.”

“Would he be guarded at all times if we agreed to this?” asked Tod’s mother.

Frank looked at her and his expression was one of disbelief. “Greta, have you lost your mind?”

She looked back at him. “Frank... not more than a month ago we were sitting in Margie’s diner and hadn’t a clue what to do. We were at our wits end. This is what Tod was meant to do all along... you know it’s true.”

Frank frowned, and nodded at the shotgun now leaning against the wall. “What will the rules of visiting be?” he asked softly.

“I say we have a party!” Marge said brightly. “The manor is certainly large enough, and I love to cook.”

“Are ya daft you dingy red fox?” huffed George. “We’re staying inside for a reason!”

“And who’s daft,” she retorted, hands on her hips. “The one who hides inside trying to stay out of site, or the one who invites all to come in for to see there’re no secrets?”

“She has a good point,” Smith said sipping his tea. “The Master Fox knows Tod is here. He also knows of all the events that have happened so far, being that he was intimately involved.”

“And he also knows what we know,” said Frank.

“But there are no witnesses to the murder, are there?” asked Smith. “Lord Hartzel passed on some two months back. That was the event that placed us all in this room if I am not mistaken.”

“So what’s the whole point of this petition then?” asked Frank.

George stood. “To give my son a chance to accuse his killer, sir. The Master Fox might wish to stay Lord Justice for all time; but he is not impervious to the very laws he is required to enforce. The other Foxes will listen.”

“So now you know why we need to have a party,” said Marge.

Smith stood. He looked at George, and nodded to Frank. “Gentlemen, there is much to be done. I propose that the party be a formal affair. Ladies, we shall have this reception exactly seven days before the Skulk. This will give us the remaining time to prepare our case, and also time for the Foxes of the Grand Council to consider our grievances.”

“But sir,” George hissed. “Have you forgotten the basement?”

Smith held up a finger, and gave the old man a look.

Frank, from where he was seated, noticed that Marge smiled slightly, but said nothing.

the fox is in the hen house.....

He turned and looked at the shotgun. Shaking his head, he tried to clear it of the thought that had appeared as if by itself... and then of the second thought, which was all his own. Could he? ... Would he? ... He had never killed another living thing in his life, but if anyone were to ever threaten his family...

Smith touched his arm, and he jumped. “Are you well sir?”

“Hum? Oh... yes I suppose so, why?”

The women were just leaving the room, moving past Smith’s back, giggling like school girls and talking excitedly. Tod, he noticed, had hold of Maggie’s hand and looked quite content.

“I said that you, George, and myself should repair to the barn. There is some livery there I wish to view and we can discuss the item of security for Tod. The women are all

repairing to the kitchen to plan the meal. We've six days to prepare for this party... that does not give us much time."

"Can I bring the shotgun? I think I would like to practice a bit more with it while there is still light."

The noise was miniscule, but it was a noise not made by the house settling. Someone was coming down the stairway. The basement was dark except for the soft glow made by the coal fire in the massive boiler. For as big as the heating system was, the room was warm but not excessively hot.

Frank held onto his shotgun, the metal of its barrel pressed against his face as he waited in the shadows. He was purposely positioned on the opposite side of the room from the coal bin. From within the bin came a cold draft of air indicating the chute's small servicing door was not securely closed and latched. The man with the gun, though sleepy just moments before, was now wide awake. Adrenaline stoked the fire in his body just as old George stoked the fire of the boiler at least five times a day to keep the house warm.

The bottom step to the basement creaked as weight was placed upon it, exactly as it was altered to do the previous evening. At the sound, Frank popped out from his place of concealment like a murderous jack-in-the-box. Aiming his weapon, he pulled the trigger. There was an empty double click as the hammers appeared to fall upon dud rounds. The man cursed loudly, pulled them back and pulled the triggers again... clickclick...

In between the cursing and the pulling back of the hammers, a red streak shot into the coal bin, racing up the chute toward the outside and life. It was there soundly caught in a large canvas sack that had been placed over the opening for just that purpose. It had been a trap, and the trap worked perfectly. George and Smith both struggled to hold onto the neck of the bag as the creature inside tired desperately to get out.

A window at the lower floor servant's quarters opened, and Maggie stuck her head out into the cold. "What are you doing out there old man?!" she yelled at the top of her lungs.

"Close the damned window old woman!" he yelled back. "I'm doing my bloody job! The house was cold, and I'm stoking the boiler!"

There was the sound of the window sliding shut again and both men, holding tightly to the bag, dragged it to the back stairway where they climbed the steps one at a time; deliberately letting the creature in the bag bounce off of each step as they climbed. When they reached the kitchen door it was thrown open by Frank. He was still holding his shotgun which was now broken open exposing dual empty chambers.

"Spot on, sir... very good call on your part," Smith whispered to him smiling. "To catch a fox, you have to think like a fox. If there is a means of escape, they will always take it

unless their family is threatened or they're cornered. For only those two exceptions will they fight to the death; always a good thing to remember."

"Let me out of here," yipped a small voice from the canvas bag. It was distinctly American.

"I'm beginning to think you're more Fox yourself, sir," said George just a little louder than Smith had been. "I didn't see anything yesterday that might have suggested she was a spy. You even knew where she go to snoop. Good job... If I were a younger fella, and it was daytime so I wouldn't be waking the house, I'd give you one hell of a 'huzza'."

Frank motioned them through the door without responding to their praise... nor was he smiling. When both men were within, he closed the door and followed them into the middle of the large kitchen. "Marge," he said softly. "I want you to listen to me very closely. You've always been good to Tod and that means a lot to me, but I want some straight answers or you're not going to get out of the bag alive. You're a fox so you know I am perfectly capable of doing this with no threat of any law being broken. No one in my world is going to care if one more chicken stealing fox has been put down."

"I never stole a chicken in my life," she said defiantly from within the canvas bag.

Frank placed his shotgun on the kitchen table and picked up a broom. Motioning for Smith and George to hold the bag up he took a full swing, hitting the bag with the straw end. It did no damage to their prisoner but it made a very dull whump of a sound which was very frightening to a small animal.

The creature in the bag began yipping loudly.

"Who are you working for Marge?"

As Frank watched, he saw the form of a fox thrashing about inside the bag. They had discussed how to handle the interrogation but he had a few notions of his own; and they were not very pretty. A Fox would fight to the death to protect their young... well... he was fighting for his son. With a spy in the house, the next step would be all too obvious. Tod Fuchs had been killed for who he was; Tod Vos would be next. He swung the broom five more times with the same results. Finally, taking the bag from Smith and George, he instructed them to leave the kitchen. Their reactions were very different. Smith asked no questions, and simply did as he was told. The old grounds keeper gave him a worried look.

"Remember your son," Frank told him softly. "Justice will be served George, nothing more, nothing less."

The old man nodded to him, and then followed Smith from the room.

Dragging the canvas sack to the kitchen's largest sink, Frank positioned the stopper in its place and opened the cold water tap.

"Marge... I'm very sorry to have to do this but you leave me no choice. Tod is my son, and I would die for him. The person you are working for would kill him without a thought. You are a direct link to this person and if I have to kill every Fox working for him... working towards my son's death; then I will kill as many as I can and more."

The Fox in the bag stopped yipping. "Pleaseeeeeee....." she whined. "I'm sorry... I really am.... I had no choice. He'll kill me."

"Then you have a choice," he told her, placing the bag down into the icy water filling the sink. "Be killed by the Master Fox... or be killed by me. Tough decision isn't it?"

The creature in the bag went crazy. The bag deformed into all sorts of shapes as it was submerged in the water. Frank tried to steel his heart. He was not normally like this... he was a loving person, and had never harmed a living creature in his life.

Foxes only kill to eat... it's natural... killing to only kill is wrong... think what you are doing... there is no road back once the deed is done...

Flashes of Marge smoking her usual cigarette and laughing as she served his son fox shaped pancakes covered with chocolate syrup came and went... chocolate milkshakes... cigarettes and smoke rings blown for his child's delight... endless refills on his coffee... and never a question about his tab.

The water in the sink was now almost over the top of the bag, and the creature's struggles were slowing. Frank pulled the bag out of the water and walked back to the kitchen table. Setting the bag gently on the floor, he sat heavily on one of the plain wooden chairs that was there. Placing his face in his hands, he silently cried for what he had almost done. In a moment, a small, wet, red headed fox peeked out of the bag and looked up at the man.

"Go on Marge," he told her as he wiped his eyes. He was having trouble controlling his voice. "Get the hell out of here before I have a change of heart."

"You're not going to kill me?"

He shook his head. "I'm not that cold blooded. If that's what it takes to be a Master Fox, then I think I would have to pass on that kind of power." He looked away from her, continuing to wipe his eyes with his fingers. When he was finished he picked up his shotgun and closed the empty breach with a click.

The chair across from him squeaked softly as its legs scraped the floor and someone sat on it. Looking back, he found a very wet Marge sitting there looking at him. The clothes she wore were thoroughly soaked, and her expression was one of absolute sorrow; as if her best friend in the entire world had just died.

“Go ahead,” he told her. “The door’s open. No one’s going to stop you... no tricks.”

“I can’t leave,” she told him.

“You can’t exactly stay either now, can you?”

“I would never hurt Tod; I love that kid as if he was my own.”

“Then why were you going to help Reinhardus? It’s one and the same thing Marge. You might not actually be pulling the trigger, but you sure as hell are helping him put the gun to my son’s head.”

“He only wanted me to find out what you were up to.”

“That’s not all of it,” he told her. “I think he’s not that stupid to simply want to know what we’re up to. Once you reported to him, he would have had something else for you to do. My son is a threat to him, the same way Tod Fuchs was... for whatever reason.”

“Who was Tod Fuchs?” she asked in a small voice.

“George and Maggie’s kit. From what I understand, he might have been the next Master Fox except for one thing.”

“What?” she asked him.

“Reinhardus shot him, and then had Lord Hartzel skin him out and nail his hide to the barn door like some sort of sick trophy.”

Marge placed both hands over her mouth in horror.

“To tell you the truth,” Frank continued, wiping at his eyes again, “I’m confused as hell. I’m still having a hard time trying to figure it all out. I mean... one minute I’m a normal human being living in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, with a semi-normal human being family. Our only flaw was the fact that our son thinks he’s a fox. The next thing I know I’m in England talking with foxes as if it were the most normal thing in the entire world.”

She placed a hand on his, and bent a little lower in order to look up into his eyes. “It is normal hun... you just never realized it before now. At least it’s normal if you were to see it from fox eyes. Not all of us choose to intermingle with the human world. It’s a calling to help. It’s one of the fox gifts you might be born with.”

He looked at her. “But I’m not a fox Marge.”

“Don’t kid yourself Frank Your last name is Vos... that’s Dutch for Fox... and you sure have been thinking like one of us; at least as far as I can tell you have been. You had me

figured out quick enough, friend or not. It is possible that your family tree has some Fox blood in it. It has been known to happen. That could have been the catalyst in Tod's case."

"Yeah, and if Smith hadn't shown up when he did, I would be dead at the bottom of the pond... I believe I was the one foxed that time, so who has fox blood huh? I've just been lucky so far. I am so worried for my family Margie."

Marge sighed, and slumped back in her chair. "Gretchen told me she was very sorry about that. She thought it was only knee deep where she led you. She was actually very terrified for your safety."

Frank looked at her and then rose and went to the closet where the towels were kept. Pulling one out, he brought it over to her."

"I'm sorry," he told her. "You can't even begin to know how sorry I am... I was actually going to drown you."

"It's ok... you were no worse than the fellow Reinhardus sent. I think he was a werewolf. They like to kill, and I have a suspicion that this guy was real good at it."

Frank sat back down as she began to towel off her hair. "Tell me about him."

"He came into the diner right at closing the same night Smith found you. I was the only one there. He was all snazzed up... wore one of those wide brim hats, and had spats on his shoes like he was one of Dutch Shultz's boys. His coat was back, and I saw a nickel plated revolver in his waste band, but he didn't even bother with it. Without a word he just grabs me by the hair and changes. Next thing I know, my neck is in his mouth and I'm waiting to move on to my next life. That's when he backed off and gave me my marching orders. He was real upset that Smith found you before he did. I think your family staying in that fancy hotel screwed his plans up. He said the diner would get torched with me in it if I refused to help... so I'm on the next train to New York and a ship to England all expenses paid; and me not even invited to the Skulk. I'm just a common old Red Fox don't cha know."

"Help me beat this guy Marge," Frank told her softly. "I don't have much to offer, but if you want, you can stay on here with us when it's all over."

She looked at him in an odd way. "You know... it's a good thing for you you're already married, or I'd be..." her voice trailed off. "Tell me what you need me to do. What the hell... living in fear is not really living is it?"

"No it's not."

"You'll trust me again?" she asked.

It was a hard question for Frank to answer considering all that had just happened. He looked at her as she continued to dry her hair. The rest of her clothing and body was still soaked, and her braless breasts were highlighted through the thin material. She had a good figure.

“Yes,” he told her. “When we’re at the Skulk, and we call you as a witness?”

“I’ll tell the truth,” she replied simply.

Rising, he went to the kitchen door and called softly for Smith and George to come back in. It was late, but one more piece of the puzzle had just fallen into place. Having a living witness for their side was very important.

The ‘party’ was held exactly on schedule; seven days prior to the Skulk. It was to be formal with the invitations being taken care of by Marge. Specifically, she disappeared the morning after the terrible time of the night before and when she came back she simply said, ‘All taken care of’.

Frank felt dreadful he’d sunk to the level he had. What brought him back? He seemed to remember so very little of the exact details; and yet other parts of what happened stood out like bold print. It was like being in a dream; and he couldn’t figure out if it was a good dream or a nightmare.

Maggie, now dressed in a server’s outfit, cleared her throat to get his attention. He was standing just on the inside of the kitchen door daydreaming and she needed to get past. The suit Smith had tailored for him during their voyage from the states made him look fresh and well heeled. He had dinner with the Captain in this suit, and when he stood next to Greta also dressed in her finest, they looked better than the bride and groom on top of a wedding cake.

“Why aren’t you out being seen by the guests?” the housekeeper hissed at him when she had his attention. She was holding a full tray of pastries. These particular pastries had whole mice baked into them. George caught them the day before out in the fields, which was a real feat for this time of the year. Frank and Greta both passed on actually trying them, but they were a big hit among the guests.

“I don’t know,” he told her. “I just don’t feel comfortable I guess. “

“Comfortable has nothing to do with it,” she hiss whispered as he held the kitchen door open for her. “Like it or not, they’re your relatives. Get used to them because you’re going to be spending the rest of your life among them, and you know that.”

“We’re not related!” he hissed back as she slowly moved past him. “I’m not... they’re...”

“Foxes?” she finished for him.

“Well... yes.”

Maggie no sooner left when Greta came looking for him. Her beauty was enough that he fell in love with her all over again. Marge had spent hours on her, helping to prepare. ‘Woman or fox’, he had thought to himself, ‘makes no difference... the females just have to groom’. Smith helped him when it came to what he was going to wear, but that only took about ten minutes tops.

“I was wondering where you were. Everyone is asking for you... especially one certain vixen by the name of ...”

“Gretchen,” they both said at the same time.

“Marge warned me she might come,” Frank told his wife. “Is she wearing clothes this time?”

“Actually,” Greta said smiling at him, “She’s not... but she is dressed in her fur, though she is presently partly human.”

“Meaning?”

“She looks like a fox, but is standing upright, has arms and hands, and speaks just like us... albeit with a rather fetching German accent.” She smiled at him. “She’s just a little girl Frank. It’s no wonder she’s so taken with Tod... they’re the same age.”

Without waiting for her husband to respond, she grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out of the kitchen. “Where did Smith go off to?” she asked as she did this.

“I sent him on an errand,” he told her, which wasn’t exactly the truth but wasn’t exactly a lie either. He had discussed the party with the solicitor, and both decided it might be best if he stay out of sight. It would be much better for them if his presence was more intimately first known at the Skulk. “Who’s with Tod?”

“George is dear. Maggie and Marge are both extremely busy in the kitchen.”

Frank looked over their guests as his wife walked him into the room. There were foxes of every form, shape, and apparent nationality. He saw one man with bright red hair wearing a kilt. On his arm was a human looking vixen wearing a kimono. She had a completely white painted human face and nine pure white tails that seemed to sprout from behind her. There were tuxedo wearing foxes, some women in evening gowns and yet others who appeared completely blue collar like himself. Besides those in human form, there

were also plain looking regular foxes lying all over the expensive furniture like contented dogs. Every one of them was well groomed and dressed in what would have been their best attire for such an occasion.

Greta hesitated next to Maggie as she roamed the room with her tray of pastries. Snatching one, she told Frank to open his mouth. He had just caught the eye of one very old and stately looking human gentleman when she did this, and so responded exactly as she asked. She popped a pastry into his mouth and he began to chew automatically. It was just a little crunchy.

“That’s good... what is it?”

“One of those mouse things. I tried one earlier and I thought exactly the same thing. Amazing isn’t it?”

Frank almost choked, but kept chewing, swallowing three times before he could get it down. Snatching a glass of champagne from a tray held by a human-er looking fox dressed as a butler; he swallowed it down without a breath. When he looked back to the old gentleman, he saw him smile a laugh. The man then turned away, back to the conversation he was having with the small group gathered around him. Frank tugged on Greta’s arm until she turned and was looking at him. “Don’t ever do that again,” he whispered.

“It was good wasn’t it? Admit it...”

He pulled her into a hug, and from over her shoulder saw George. He was wearing a dress uniform from the Great War and had three medals hung on his left breast. He looked every bit the old soldier. Next to him was Tod, dressed in the naval uniform given to him on the voyage over. He was a perfect match for the ancient grounds keeper, who also appeared as a proud father, which made sense in a way; where Tod was, then too was his own son; if only in spirit.

“Doesn’t he look wonderful?” asked Greta, turning to look at the pair.

“Which one of them?” Frank responded, speaking the simple truth as he saw it while not even considering exactly what his wife had meant. She pinched him on the side, and then steered him to a corner of the room where one particular fox was waiting to meet him. When they approached, she knelt. Frank recognized her immediately, even though she was in human form except still a fox.

“I am so sorry for what happened the other day,” she told him without looking up. Her Germanic accent and light tones made her voice sound musical.

Frank felt the hair on the back of his neck rise as he realized that every eye in the room was upon him. His mouth suddenly felt like it was full of cotton. “Um... yes... I’m rather sorry it happened too.”

His wife pinched him again... hard.

"I mean about hitting you with the snowball. That was just rude of me. At that time I had no idea what to expect. I think I am a little more... ummmm... understanding of fox kind now."

A small shape in blue ran past his legs and into Gretchen's arms, hugging her tight. After the hug she looked up at the father. "Tod knew. He would have told you," she said happily licking his son on the neck as a loving sister might. She then stood and passed him back to his mother. As she did so, Greta grasped her hand. "Welcome to the family," she said softly.

Applause broke out from the foxes who had gathered close to see what would happen. Frank actually found himself blushing. That was when Maggie seemed to materialize next to him, pressing a glass of champagne into his hand.

A toast," called out a fox that Frank recognized as Fredrick Fauho. He was dressed in the same riding outfit George had described for him. He also remembered the warning, 'He's a bad'n sir'. Frank reluctantly held up his fresh glass of champagne. Thinking on his feet, and not wanting Fauho to make the toast, he said loudly, "Here is to 'Tit for Tat', and then to forgiveness." It was an open admission that what he had done was wrong, and that what Gretchen had done in return was also wrong... but it was all better now. There was a volley of 'Here, here', and everyone who had a glass drank. Frank found himself wondering exactly how this toast would fit into what they had planned for the Skulk... that was when he looked in the direction of the Master Fox and found that he was not drinking to the toast.

"I propose," began a new voice, and all eyes went to the speaker; the white Japanese fox of nine tails, "That we grant this human, Frank Vos, a lifetime honorary appointment as a fox with full privileges as such." Her voice had the sing song accent of the country from which she came. As Frank looked at her, she smiled, and then lowered her eyes just slightly in the subservient manner of the women of her country.

"Second," said another of the guests, a stately looking younger human who appeared to look very much like Smith. He also smiled as he raised his glass.

There was a hushed moment as all eyes went to the Master Fox. He in turn looked around the room, his eyes seeking each fox out in turn. Some of them nodded to him in deference... others only smiled as if happy for the occasion. None openly challenged his authority.

"All those in favor?" he asked gruffly.

There was a chorus of 'ayes'.

“All those opposed?”

There was a series of ‘no’s’.

The Master Fox smiled a wicked smile. Looking directly at Frank, he said, “Though you are a most gracious host, it would appear that we have a split of opinion among the foxes present. Therefore; my requirement as Master Fox is to cast the deciding vote. It is within this solemn duty that I...”

“Wait!”

He stopped in mid-sentence, stunned that someone would dare interrupt him. All eyes went back to the Japanese fox. She bowed low, and stayed in that position, as she said, “Most Honorable Master Fox, there is one fox present who did not cast her vote.”

“Eh? Who? This fox had better speak quickly, or face being sanctioned for not performing her duty as required!”

Greta, holding her son close, said, “I vote aye.”

Frank was stunned. As the room broke into applause, he just stood looking at his wife... she smiled back an embarrassed and apologetic smile.

Maggie, materialized at his elbow again and before he could say a word, she was tugging on his sleeve. Bending down, he gave his ear, and she whispered, “You must come sir, there is an urgent matter in the kitchen which needs to be attended to.”

Frank stood next to Marge, reading the note that had been passed to her by Fredrick Fauho. It said, ‘Find an excuse to bring the child to the barn’.

“Is it action stations then, sir?” asked George, looking over his shoulder.

“I’m afraid so,” he replied. Crumpling up the paper, he stuffed it into his pocket. “Marge, I’ll need five minutes to change. Then you’ll go and get Tod from Greta. Tell her I said it was time for his nap. She’ll understand.”

Turning to George, he asked, “Where’s my shotgun?”

The old man smiled. He was heading into combat once more... something he never thought he would have to do again after the Great War was won. Crossing to the broom closet, he opened the door and removed Frank’s weapon along with a longer barreled version.

“Both loaded as planned?” the younger man asked.

“Exactly as planned, sir.”

Frank turned and found Maggie holding a maid’s uniform and a wig. “Blow his balls off, sir,” she told him and then smiled.

Frank nodded to her, taking the uniform, but didn’t respond verbally... he had no words to use; he was very angry. Someone was trying to kill his son.

Maggie began helping him off with his suit, and then on with the maid’s uniform. There were no jokes about how good he looked as a woman; it was all business now. Though they had no idea what form the attack would come in when it happened; they were just very sure that it would happen. Frank guessed it would be the wolf. Foxes, as a rule, could not attack another fox. In his case, even as an honorary fox, the rules didn’t actually apply since his family was in danger. He was free to do what he needed to do.

“Go and get my son Marge,” he said as he pulled up his last stocking. “George, I want you to wait for me to enter the barn, then you’ll move out to the back. If I’m successful, I’ll come out the front doors. If I’m not... well... my guess is the other fellow will come out the back. I want no heroics. You shoot first without a question or a command to halt.”

“Will do sir. Good hunting.”

“Same to you,” he responded as Maggie placed the wig on his head. Opening the breach of his shotgun, he took the cartridges out, looked down the barrels for an obstruction, and then reloaded the shells, closing the receiver with a click. “No offence,” he said to George without looking at him.

“None taken sir. You have your spare shells?”

“Just regulars, but a total of six in the pocket under my apron. You?”

“In my coat pocket, sir. Regulars; same as you.”

“Makes you look a little lumpy,” Maggie offered, trying to jiggle the lump under the apron down a bit.

“It’ll have to do.”

With that, he took a broom and held it next to his weapon so the straw end covered the stock and the stick blended with the barrels. As soon as Marge appeared in the kitchen with Tod he was out the back door and down the icy stairs. Trying to look as feminine as possible, he crossed the distance to the barn, the snow covered ground crunching under his feet louder than he would have liked. Opening the door just enough, he slid inside and then pulled it closed behind himself. The barn was dark and looked a mile long. The empty stalls appeared like unexplored caverns. Death was present... he could feel it.

“Where’s the kid?” growled a voice.

“There was a problem,” he replied in a falsetto he was sure would fool no one.

“What problem?”

“Our master had a change of heart. He requires you to come into the house.”

A glowing pair of eyes appeared in the darkness three stalls up from where Frank stood. The distance was yet a little too far. A shot at what he could not see would be risky.”

“I think you’re lying,” said the voice. “I think you’re not doing what you’ve been told to do crumb cheeks... and you know what that means.”

Be bold, be bold... but not too bold...

“It’s the truth!” Frank told the unseen person, trying to let an edge of panic come into his voice. This was not a hard thing to do, as he stared at the eyes. “Our master wants you to come to the house. He’s had a change of heart. There is no need to do what was planned.”

“Eh?” asked the eyes coming a little closer. “And what was planned? I don’t think you know, do you? You were only to bring the boy and then you was gonna go back into the house like a good little girlie.”

The shadowy body of a large creature now moved out into the center transit area of the barn away from the dark stall in which it had been hiding. Frank now had a clear shot, but he wanted to know without a doubt who had sent his adversary. Dropping the broom, he aimed the shotgun, and cocked both hammers back.

“Who sent you?!” he demanded.

“OOOOoooooooo....” said the creature, not seeming afraid in the least. “Lookie here... we got us a girlie boy all dressed up nice like.” He swept his coat back with his right hand, exposing the gleam of a nickel plated revolver tucked into his waste band. “I’ve got one of those too. What say we both go for the draw, and see who kills who.”

Before Frank could even yell for the creature not to do it, his hand was on the butt of the revolver, and it was being drawn... he pulled the first of the dual triggers. The resulting muzzle blast lit up the room like a camera flash, while the explosion almost deafened him. The creature was a wolf, dressed and standing as a man. The facial image frozen in Frank’s mind was of a half sneer, half surprised look... just before the body was tossed backwards like a rag toy. It bounced off of the straw littered floor once and did not move.

Frank crossed to the body and nudged it with his foot as he kept the barrel of the shotgun pointed at the creature. It didn’t move. He swore, and then kicked the wolf with enough

force that it rolled over. “YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO TELL ME WHO SENT YOU!” he screamed at the body. He cursed three more times, and with each curse, kicked the body.

Walking quickly back to the door of the barn, he pushed it open and half ran back over to the house, the shotgun hanging loose in one hand. He was in and through the kitchen before anyone could even say a word to him, banging through the door leading to the dining room. Every conversation stopped as the gathered foxes looked towards the disturbance. Reaching up, Frank swept the wig from his head and threw it to the floor. Locating Fredrick Fauho, he crossed the room quickly and smashed him on the side of his head with the stock of the shotgun before he could even react. The fox / man dropped like a rock and Frank had the barrel of the shotgun stuffed right under his nose where he could smell the burned gunpowder.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t blow you head off right now?!”

Fauho could utter no word.

Looking up to the room, Frank saw all the other foxes staring at him. There was a moment of complete silence.

two wrongs never equal a right... ..

Frank slowly stood upright feeling the tension seep from his body as he eased the tension off of the shotgun’s remaining cocked hammer. Opening the breach of the shotgun with a click, he looked up. “A short moment ago this fox gave my servant Marge a note instructing her to find an excuse to remove my son from this room. She was to take him to the barn so he could be murdered.” There were gasps from among the foxes. Frank took the remaining shell out of the shotgun’s breech and opened its crinkled front with a finger. Turning it over, he dumped the contents out onto Fredric Fauho’s chest. There was gunpowder, cotton batting, and thirteen small silver coins.

“Tell whoever you work for that his killer wolf is dead. They may retrieve the body whenever it is convenient for them, but I will nail the tail to the barn door in the same manner Tod Fuchs’s pelt was nailed there one hundred years ago.”

Turning to the Master Fox, the father said loudly, “At the time of the Skulk, Your Honor, I would like to request an inquest into this incident. In front of yourself and all the foxes who have graciously come into my home, I accuse Fredric Fauho with the attempted murder of my son. I demand that justice be done.”

The Master Fox looked straight into Frank’s eyes, and he found that what Thomas Hartzel had said was true... it was like looking into the Devil’s own fireplace. “Justice will be done Mr. Vos,” he growled. “I can assure you... justice will be done.” Nodding to two other foxes who were also in full human form, he said, “Please take Mr. Fauho into custody. See that he is properly incarcerated until the Skulk.” To the room at large, he

said, "Under the circumstances, I think it would be best to allow the Vos Family time alone."

There were mumbled words of agreement, and slowly the room cleared as the foxes, in all shapes and forms, left. Frank remained standing where he was until the last fox left... that fox was the Master Fox. He turned before walking through the door, and their eyes met again. This time the look was an appraising one; it reflected the thought of underestimation on his part... but there was no fear.

Later that night, word was brought to the house that Fredric Fauho had regretfully escaped captivity, and was found down by the pond, where he had hanged himself.

"Why didn't you tell me?!"

They were lying in the bed, but falling back to sleep seemed not to be an option. After the news about Fredric Fauho both had tossed and turned, and eventually a conversation developed. Until now, Frank had not broached the subject... he had been afraid to. Until this evening he thought he was married to a human being. Married to a fox... as much as he tried to reason this out... he had been totally unaware.

"Because I fell in love with a man, and that man fell in love with me, and I didn't think anything else mattered," Greta rolled over to face him, "And would you have believed me if I had told you? 'Hello Frank Vos, I love you more than life, I want to have your children, and by the way I'm not human, I'm a fox.' The risk was simply too great."

Frank looked at her face which was shadowed yet lightly highlighted by the moonlight coming through the window. He had never been more in love with her, but he was scared. He reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face.

"You foxed me," he said smiling slightly.

She smiled back. "I suppose I did."

"Tell me something," he continued, placing a finger on her nose. "Does this happen all the time?"

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Every match is special, and perhaps for a different reason. Not every fox is good, but not every fox is bad, and not every fox has the ability to change into human form. That was the gift I was born with. Then again, humans do not look kindly upon cross species mating no matter what form it takes. In our case... well... you tell me, is it wrong?"

For a response, he pulled her close and kissed her deeply. "I would have no other," he whispered when the kiss broke.

She pulled him to her, and they kissed again. “Nor would I,” she whispered back. She pulled the sheet off of them and then kissed him lightly again.

Frank felt something tickle his cheek. Thinking it was an insect, and not even considering the time of the year, he absently waved a hand at it. The tickle persisted, and he finally looked. He was about to curse the insect but his words stuck in his throat as a large bushy tail wiggled in front of his nose. His wife giggled, as he slowly reached out and touched it. He let his fingers trace the tail back to her body, and then it wrapped around his head and he was pulled into her, and they made love as they had never made love before.

Later, shortly after dropping back into sleep, Frank’s eyes opened. He had no idea what woke him, but he couldn’t close his eyes. It was a feeling more than anything else; but lately feelings were paid close attention to. Listening as intently as he could, he thought he heard something. Rising quietly from his bed he crept to the door of their bedroom, picked up his shotgun which was leaning against the wall, and opened the door just a crack. He stood silently listening and found the sound to be a little louder. It was coming from the direction of his son’s room. The sound was almost like a guitar being plucked, but it had a quality that sounded totally alien to his ears. Letting himself out of the room, he closed the door softly and followed the music. In front of Tod’s room, Marge was reposed on a chair in the hallway fast asleep. He gently shook her but she did not wake.

Cocking back the hammers on the shotgun, he turned the doorknob to his son’s room and gave the door a gentle push letting it swing inward. In the pale light coming through the window he saw the many tailed white fox sitting on the floor quietly playing a long guitar type instrument. Tod was sound asleep in his bed. Keeping the weapon aimed at the floor, he whispered, “What are you doing here?”

She looked up at him but did not stop playing. “I am granting good dreams,” she replied softly. “Do you always walk the house naked while carrying your weapon? You remind me of the Samurai.” She sniffed the air. “And I smell love... I am happy for you.”

Frank paid no attention to her words. “Leave that and come with me,” he told her, “I’ll see you out the front door, and then I expect you will stay out.”

“I am actually here to see you,” she said rising in the most graceful way Frank had ever seen. It was almost as if she floated up from the floor. “I listened at your door first, but with the sounds... well... it is not polite to interrupt something so lovely.”

“Nor is it polite or *safe* to simply walk around another’s home as you please,” he told her, now feeling a bit self-conscious.

The white faced fox smiled a smile that could have meant anything at all. Reaching into her kimono she removed two shotgun shells and kneeling, placed them on the floor side by side. Looking up at the man, she said quietly, “I placed a sleep spell onto your house first, but I have come to understand that one should not rely on unreliable spells.”

Frank broke the shotgun open and found the dual chambers empty. He cursed under his breath. "Who are you?" he asked.

She bowed very deeply to him. "I am Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto. Kitsune are the magical foxes of far off Japan. The amount of our tails you will see indicates the level of magic we possess, nine being the greatest amount." She looked up at him from her bow. "I am also the Fox Lord of the East, one of the four of the Grand Council." She stood, and tucked her hands inside the kimono. "You may call me Fujisan when we are alone like this. In public, it would be proper for you to address me as Fujitosama. We four of the Grand Council together can overturn a judicial decision of the Master Fox."

"And have you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He owns the Lord of the North. This fox has been his staunch ally since the death of Tod Fuchs."

Frank sighed. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be delightful," she told him, and smiled.

The following days were a whirlwind of strange happenings. Tod had non-stop visitors... all foxes, and from all levels of the fox world. He had the most fun with those who were children like himself. Some of these brought him presents in the form of mice and such. One particular fox, however, acting very much like a human child, brought him a favorite blanket... an over sized rag found and brought to the den by her parents for warmth. Though it was her favorite thing in the entire world, the little vixen presented it to him. Marge, who had become Tod's constant companion told Frank this story with tears in her eyes. Tod, seeming to listen to his invisible friend for a moment, responded by rising and fetching his favorite toy... a little boat given to him by the Captain of the ship they had come over on. He presented her with this and they had played until they both curled up together and fallen fast asleep.

She also reported to him that the Lords of the Grand Council came to visit, dressed in their official vestments. They asked many complicated questions, all of which Tod answered, asking more than a few questions of his own. Three apparently agreed that Tod would be the next Master Fox. The fourth, however, strongly disagreed; pointing out the obvious fact that Tod was human. 'The reincarnation of a dead fox is nothing more than rubbish!' he told them. The other three pointed out the fact that his mother was a fox. Without rebuttal, he simply gathered his robes about himself and left.

It was now the day of the Skulk, which would convene after sunset. Fujisan told Frank that his case against Fredric Fauho would be scheduled but now that Fredric was dead she saw nothing the father could do to gain justice since he died without a word to anyone about who had given him his instructions. Frank, for his part, offered nothing on what he had planned... this was mostly because he didn't know what he had planned himself.

Smith, who had been away since before the reception, was being apprized of all that had happened over breakfast. He nodded his head as he listened to Frank, all the while eating as if he had not eaten in a week.

"Pity about Fauho," he told Frank spreading butter on a slice of toast. "We damned well could have used his testimony."

"He never said a word when I had him down on the floor. I'll give him credit for having guts," Frank replied, sipping his coffee. It had been specially prepared for him by Marge... American style.

"That or he was more afraid of the person who sent him than of the death you posed," the solicitor pointed out. "That fox would have been standing not more than a few feet away. Quite obviously it was the Master Fox. If he had lived and we summoned him; then he would have to testify, you see... quite cut and dried that."

"What makes you think he would have cracked under testimony? Are you really that confident in your abilities?"

"We could have compelled him to speak by simply requesting it through the Master Fox." Smith dunked his toast in the left over egg yoke, rubbed it around and then took a bite of it. When he had swallowed, he took a sip of tea and then continued. "I have been doing my research for a long time, sir. The Skulk is nothing like a human run court. The Master Fox, unlike his human counterparts, may demand the truth and the fox being questioned has no option but to answer."

"But what if he won't?"

"He has no choice, he must. He cannot stop it. You may call it magic if you wish for lack of a better explanation, but when a Master Fox demands it, you speak. It's as simple as that."

"That would explain the suicide."

"Quite so... although I doubt very much that it was a suicide."

Frank placed his coffee cup on its saucer, and Maggie was there filling it again before he could even tell her he had had enough. "Then we are in agreement on that," he told the other man.

“Yes sir, though by his involvement, he has given us a very good hammer with which to crack the nut. Marge will testify that Fauho at least gave her the note.”

Frank felt doubtful. “Perhaps you could explain things to me in detail so I might know exactly what your tactics will be.”

Smith dipped his toast again, and took a rather large bite. “I think that might be wise sir,” he told him in an uncharacteristic moment of talking with his mouth full. Frank suddenly wondered if the man was going to lick his plate clean. “Tell me, sir, did you nail the wolf’s tail to the barn door as you threatened?”

“No... the body was gone when we went back to check it.”

“Capital!” he exclaimed, beginning to pick up the plate. Looking up at the man across the table from him, he seemed to recall where he was and smiled sheepishly. Leaving the dirty dish lie, he wiped his lips with his napkin, took one more sip of tea, and rose. “If you will follow me sir, I think I can explain things to your satisfaction.”

Both men left the dinning room and went into the hallway, stopping in front of the basement door. There Smith took a key from his pocket and unlocked the padlock. Leaving it dangle, he led the way down into the basement, taking the time to light a lantern that hung on the wall. This he took with him even though he flicked on the ‘new fangled’ electric light.

“This basement has been my home for a long time, sir,” he said as they descended the stairs.

“You are the reason for the padlock on the door?”

“In a manner of speaking; yes. I cannot maintain my form as long as an actual fox. The most I can make is a solid fortnight, and then I have to find a quiet place for a time. It’s much like a swimmer who inhales and exhales several times before diving. For that reason, I have old George lock me down here so I can’t get out and run. I dare say there haven’t been any fox hounds around the estate since shortly after the death of Tod Fuchs... except for me of course; I was his favorite. My master gave up the practice of foxing as barbaric.”

As Smith walked his form began changing shape. In the same way that Frank had found his wife with a bushy tail, Smith, by a somewhat slower change, shrunk down, divesting himself of his clothing as he went until he was part dog - part human. He still had hands and arms and walked on his back legs... but he was now fully a dog.

“My bed is back here sir... behind the boiler. Should Marge have made it this far, I am certain she would have smelled me out and probably panicked... not that you didn’t do a

exceptional job of scaring her to death; but for a fox to smell a hound... well sir... it is a rather inbred sort of alarm system.”

As he said this, they arrived at a small dog’s bed, and the man/animal hung the lantern above it. Frank found that he had to stoop a bit to be back in the place.

Smith looked at him and smiled, holding out a hand to shake as if they were meeting for the first time. “How d’ya do sir... my name is Smith’s Best Boy Bartholomew. Smith was for the dog handler, you see, and then I was named Bartholomew in honor of my master Lord Hartzel. I was... or rather still like to think of myself as being the best Fox Hound ever born. I could out distance the pack by a league if I fancied, and I damn well could track a fox even if he was walking on water. It’s not bragging if it’s a fact,” he said and then winked.

“Pleased to meet you also,” Frank told him, squatting down on his haunches. “Are you going to tell me how you became like this, or will it all remain a mystery?”

“Tod Fuchs, sir. He did this for me at my very own request. You see,” he said, sitting down upon the bed. “On that fateful day one hundred years ago, me and the pack were called out for a hunt. I was just a youngster then... but I was special, and I knew it. I used to love the hunt,” he said wistfully. “I would run all day and well into the night if the dog handler would let me. Well anyways... there I was way out ahead of the pack and I came across a trail that was different from all the rest...” He touched his nose for emphasis. “I could smell it, ya see. This was no ordinary fox. Well... I chased him down and got him holed up. That was when I sprung my plan on him. It’s always good to have a plan, sir.” He paused to scratch, smiled, and then continued. “‘Grant me a wish, and I’ll lead the pack away,’ I told him. ‘Done,’ he replies. ‘Tell me the wish and it’s yours.’ So I tells’im, ‘I want to be a fox.’ and off I runs. Now... before you judge a dog who wants to be a fox, sir, understand that I was doing this for my master. It’s all for the master, you see... always. What better way to serve him then, but to be a fox so I can better understand those I am to hunt?” He chuckled. “Seems I didn’t really know what I was asking for.”

“So you have been a fox all of these years?”

“That is a truth sir, but all of this will end tonight at the Skulk.”

“Because you have a plan?”

“Yes sir, I do. I know that old bastard Zacharias better than he knows his own shadow. I’ve been hunting him a long long time, you see, just waiting for the precise moment when what I do will count for the most. Zacharias Reinhardus is the sole surviving partner of Renart, Reinhardus, and Reynard, the firm I am employed by. I knew all of them. Renart and Reynard passed on when it was their time, but not Reinhardus. A Master Fox is granted longevity by the Creator when it is required, sir, but I believe he has crossed over to the darker side of things. I believe he has killed them all. That’s why there have been no new Master Foxes; though Tod Fuchs is the only verifiable case I

know of, but in that case, the loop hole would be that he was never fully verified as having all the talents, sir.”

Frank nodded his understanding, and then asked, “How is it you were able to stay with the firm for so long without being detected? Didn’t your never ending youth raise an eyebrow or two?”

“When it came time that a human must retire, I would change my shape and my name. I would then hand the firm a fresh resume that I was sure to approve before leaving the firm in my old form. I was hunting, you see. Though my master never hunted another fox, I never stopped because I was going to make what was wrong right again... for his sake. Thomas Hartzel was a good master, sir. He was an unknowing and unprepared man forced into an unfair dance with the Devil. I intend to see that the maestro of the band receives his rightful payment for playing the music.”

Frank had a sudden thought. “You don’t intend to live through this do you Smith?”

The dog sighed, and sat back a little further in the small bed. “You are the fox himself sir... no... I do not. You have to understand. I am very old. This does bring on certain... well... sir... sometimes being old is not so much fun. Ask George. He may be a fox, but he has arthritis to the point of not being able to walk sometimes. He covers it well enough. That aside, for myself there is a more pressing issue... my master is dead. For a dog, this is devastating. I have outlived my purpose for living. We... the two of us... worked towards this plan of bringing Reinhardus to justice. I proposed it to him when his will to live began to fail; excluding my death mind you. The plan was more to brace him up than anything else. It was all supposed to happen on the hundred year’s anniversary, but he couldn’t hold on any longer. He left me a note, sir. It simply said, ‘What’s the bloody use? I shall meet with my maker and take my lumps. Perhaps he will forgive me... perhaps he won’t. Zacharias Reinhardus be damned and I will see him in hell if that is where God wills me to go.’” The dog looked up at the man, and his expression was so very sorrowful. “He killed himself with the very shotgun you now carry, sir... so you see; your choice of weapon was more than ‘just’ a sign for me. I shall do this for my master sir, and in my death, join with him no matter where his soul was sent... but I will need your help to do so.”

Frank reached out and rubbed the area behind the old dog’s ears. “What do you need me to do?”

“Take your shotgun to the Skulk, sir. A man can shoot a fox fair enough, so the old bastard will not want to see it in your possession all loaded and cocked. He will ask for it, and you are to place it on his desk close to his hand.”

“But if you attack him, as I am sure you will, he is free to shoot you... you are a dog.”

Smith smiled and changed again... this time into the form of a red fox. “Used to be a dog sir... used to be. Remember I wished to become a fox. It is absolutely forbidden for one

fox to kill another. The consequence is immediate banishment from the society of foxes. In doing the deed, old Zacharias loses his position, and all of his powers... magical, spiritual, and judicial. Finally, he will be shunned by all foxes everywhere. The old bastard will be dead inside of six months, broken and miserable; the same way my master died. If he is lucky, the dogs will get him. My job will then be done. Justice... sir... shall have been served.”

Frank nodded, but he did not smile. “It’s drastic, but it is sound.” He held out his hand to the fox, and Smith grasped it in return. “I’ll help,” he told him.

“Buckshot should do the trick nicely, sir.”

“Then buckshot it will be.”

The Skulk was held in what was left of the old mill next to the weir which fed the empowering water to the miller’s huge stone. It was the exact place where the village of Warton took its name. There wasn’t much left of what was, but that hardly bothered the foxes who attended... some one hundred and fifty three. All but the Fox Lords and the Master Fox were in full fox form. These five, though in fox form for the main intent of the Skulk, changed to their human form for the purposes of the ‘special’ inquest into the attempted murder of Tod Vos and the actual murder of Tod Fuchs one hundred years earlier.

Wigged, robed, and seated as the Judicial Head of the assembly was Zacharias Reinhardus. To his left, also wigged and robed, were the four Fox Lords of the Grand Council. Business, however, was business even among the foxes of the world, and this took time. Important matters had to be addressed and taken care of before anything else. Over the course of ten years much to be discussed and voted upon had taken place. The foxes were now into the third long night of the Skulk, and because of the near freezing temperature Frank’s group of petitioners had been asked to wait at the house until they were summoned. This turned into a tense time of nervous preparation, during which Frank found himself sitting at the kitchen table, cleaning and re-cleaning his shotgun.

Finally they were called for and instructed to wait just outside of the old mill’s ruins until the Skulk was reconvened. This was much like waiting in a courtroom’s ante chamber except that it was a crisp and cold night. Every one was dressed as warmly as possible, maintaining their human forms, though they would have been much warmer as full foxes. Smith had suggested this as a show of solidarity. He also pointed out that word was brought to him by a special messenger, and out of respect for their group, the Master Fox and Grand Council of Foxes would do the same to varying degrees.

Frank stood alone while the others seemed to pair up for warmth. Marge stood with Smith, George with Maggie, and Tod with his mother, holding on to her hand in an easy and relaxed way. As they waited, many foxes filed past them, returning from a much

needed break in the meeting. All were polite, and many smiled at Tod as they passed. Some took the time to give him a hug, while placing their snout next to his ear and whispering something.

When the Skulk had been recommenced, Frank knelt down and asked his son what had been whispered to him.

“ ‘May the dogs never find you,’ ” he replied. “It is a fox expression as old as their existence, and a way of wishing your son well.” His voice sounded so childlike and small. “They also asked that he remember them when he becomes the Master Fox.”

Frank looked up at his wife, who had also heard this exchange. She bent down, and whispered, “Tod, honey...”

“It’s ok Vixen Vos,” he told her. “Tod is with me, but we will now be together until after the Skulk. Your son is fine... he understands and agrees to what must be done.”

“Agrees to what?” asked Frank.

The boy looked right at him, and in the shadows created by the moon he appeared as a completely different child... a true fox child... one capable enough to indeed become the Master Fox. “To what you have planned,” he replied in his small voice, and then offered no more.

Frank felt a cold knot form in the pit of his stomach. Standing, he broke open the shotgun, removed the shells, and held it up to the fullness of the moon so he could look down the barrels.

“All is well sir?” asked Smith, who was standing a short distance away.

Frank sighed. Replacing the shells, he closed the gun with a click. “Yes, all is well... just strange in a very upside down sort of way.”

Smith looked dapper in his black robe and smaller Solicitor’s Wig. He held a briefcase in his left hand which contained all of the papers he would need to plead their cases, or so he said. Marge stood next to him, leaning in slightly as if to keep warm. She was scared to death. Frank was about to say something to her, but instead, walked a short distance from the group and stood by himself. This was precautionary on his part. If he said anything to her there might be a noticeable change in him that she would pick up on. They needed her to believe she would be standing before the Master Fox testifying to the truth of his evilness. Her presence was meant to keep Reinhardus on edge. This would serve as the smoke screen for Smith’s plan. Looking towards the moon, he wondered, not for the first time, if he was actually dreaming.

That was when he heard a quiet voice say, “Will you follow me please.”

With a banging of his gavel, bringing the assembly to order, Lord Zacharias Reinhardus announced loudly, “We shall handle each of these two incidents separately. The petitioners are the family of Vos and the family of Fuchs, represented by solicitor, The Honorable Mr. Smith.” He placed his gavel back onto its stand. “The petitioners shall maintain their places in front of the bench, but over there, if you please,” he said, pointing to the area where he required them to stand. “Mr. Smith, you may approach. I will remind you and your petitioners at this time that the proceedings taking place here are never to be discussed with the outside world.”

“We understand and agree to this stipulation Your Lordship,” he replied, removing a paper from his briefcase and handing it up to the Master Fox. The full wigged and robed old fox took the piece of paper and held it closer to his lantern so he might decipher the words. He was seated behind a large wooden bench of office, much as he would have been if seated as a judge at the Old Bailey; an elevated seat, symbolically placing him above those seeking his judgment. Seated at a similarly elevated yet longer bench to his left were the four Lords of the Grand Council of Foxes. They were also fully wigged and robed in their official vestment. Fujitso was among them, but gave no hint she was familiar with any of them on a personal level. All around, where ever they might be comfortable, were seated every fox who had been invited to attend the Skulk as a representative of the foxes from their part of the world.

“What’s this? The Master Fox asked, looking back to Smith.

“It is my resignation M’Lord. I was, until this moment, employed by your law firm; Renart, Reinhardus, and Reynard, of London, England.”

“Indeed. And at what date were you first employed, may I ask?”

“February 8th, 1850.”

“That’s preposterous.”

“It might seem so M’Lord, but it is all very true. In time I will explain the circumstances to the court.”

Frank cocked the triggers of his shotgun back, and each made an audible double click. He then eased them back down to half cock.

“Do you have to do that?” the old fox asked looking up and scowling at him.

Frank cradled the gun in the crook of his left arm. “Sorry your honor, but I am a little anxious still for my son’s safety. If someone was cowardly enough to hire a wolf to kill him in my own home, I think a gathering of foxes would hardly stop them.”

“I appreciate your anxiety Mr. Vos, but please understand; you and your family are perfectly safe here since you are under the protection of the Skulk.”

“Thank you M’Lord, but that is hardly an assurance.”

“What do you mean by that?!” he bridled.

“M’Lord,” interjected Smith. “My client has expressed to me his fear that the one responsible for the death of Tod Fuchs is the same responsible for the attempted murder of his son. Since that fox is in attendance at the Skulk...”

“That’s preposterous...”

Frank cocked the triggers back while looking right at Reinhardus. The old fox stopped in mid sentence and their eyes locked. The distance between them was no more than twenty feet. Smith took a large step backwards as if wanting to stay out of the firing line.

“Mr. Smith,” he said to the solicitor without taking his eyes from the man. “You will instruct your client to surrender his weapon or...”

“Or what?” asked Frank loudly. “You’ll rescind my rights as a fox? I was drawn into something of which I had no part, but since it concerns my family, I will do everything I can to protect them. If that means shooting a wolf... *or a fox*... then that’s exactly what I will do; *wherever I have to do it*. You have no hold on me sir; my title of fox is honorary. You, however, gave me your word that justice would prevail. I intend to hold you to your word sir.”

Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto, Fox Lord of the East, cleared her throat. When Reinhardus looked up at her, she said, “A moment, My Lord to speak with the other Council members.”

“Granted,” he said grudgingly.

The four Lords of the Grand Council put their wigged heads together. Their collective white hair moved back and forth as they discussed the problem, trying to think of a way to defuse the situation. When they were done, the Lord on the farthest end got down from his seat and walked over to Reinhardus, standing to the side of the bench. The Master Fox leaned down enabling this fox to whisper into his ear. For one split second he smiled in an evil way, as the ploy the Grand Council agreed upon was explained to him. The old fox quickly caught himself and his expression became as blank as a good poker player’s.

When the Fox Lord had retaken his place, he nodded to the nine tailed fox, and she stood, addressing Frank directly. Her accent made her appear even more doll like than she appeared to the eye.

“Mr. Vos; to address your fears, and to alleviate the problem your weapon presents, it has been the Council’s decision to offer you something never before offered to a human. The final decision would have to be completely yours since the effects will not be reversible. You must understand that the acceptance of what we offer will be entirely upon your shoulders.”

There was a murmur of voices among the foxes in the gallery. Lord Reinhardus picked up his gavel, and banged it down once. The murmur subsided. “Mr. Vos?” he said, looking to the man with the shotgun.

“I understand M’Lord. The decision will be on my shoulders; I find this to be fair. What is the offer?”

Reinhardus nodded to Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto, and she continued. “It is within the ability of the Skulk, through the powers of the Master Fox, to change you fully into a fox Mr. Vos. This would mean you would be a full fox in all aspects of the name and that you will no longer physically be a human. You will then enjoy the complete safety of fox society as set forth by the Skulk. Do you wish this to be?”

Frank heard his wife gasp behind him, but did not turn to look at her. He bowed slightly to the Fox Lord of the East. “Yes.”

Zacharias Reinhardus triumphantly banged his gavel once. “Done!” He said strongly. “By the power vested to me by the Skulk, the Grand Council of Foxes, and the Creator Of All Things, I here by grant Mr. Frank Vos the physical change to...” He paused and then said in a lower voice, “What sort of fox do you wish to be Mr. Vos?”

“A European Gray Fox M’Lord.”

“I here by grant the physical change of Mr. Frank Vos into that of a European Gray Fox.”

Frank appeared faint, swayed slightly but did not pass out. To the members of the Skulk it was obvious he was fighting the effects of the change. Slowly his struggle subsided as the lightheadedness left him. When he looked down, he found that; where his hands came out of his coat sleeves, it appeared as if he was wearing gloves. Holding one up to his face, he stared at it in the lamp light and then looked to the kitsune fox. She returned his look and nodded... there was the smallest of smiles on her face.

Glancing at the Master Fox, Frank found him wearing an expression of surprise. This expression quickly disappeared into a blank expression that gave none of his thoughts away. “Mr. Vos,” he said loudly, reflecting a new seriousness. “You will bring your shotgun over here and lay it upon my bench.”

Frank appeared to fight the command, but it was all too apparent that he couldn’t. He was now drawn to do exactly as the Master Fox commanded.

“It’s OK dear,” he heard his wife say behind him. “We’ll be fine.”

“NO!”

“Come, come, Mr. Vos,” the Master Fox said as if chastising a child. “Do not make me sanction you so early in your life as a fox. Place the weapon here,” he said patting a place next to him on his bench. “And then we will get on with your petition in an orderly fashion.”

Frank shook himself as if trying to adjust to his new body. He looked up and their eyes met again. The old fox had a smile on his face that he would have dearly loved to slap away, but there was no fighting it... nor did he truly want to.

“It’s OK sir,” whispered Smith from where he stood. “All is well. You may leave the rest to me.”

The new fox nodded to the black robed solicitor, and without fighting the feeling further walked forward to Lord Magistrate’s bench. Reversing the shotgun so the stock was facing the Master Fox, he gently laid it down being very careful not to bump it too hard as the hammers were deliberately still at full cock.

Going back to his wife and son, he embraced them both and the whole area erupted with applause. Frank looked up, and waved to all the foxes feeling somehow a much larger part of the world. The applause went on longer than pleased Reinhardus and he began banging his gavel. In short order, the area was again silent.

“We shall commence now with the cases of Tod Fuchs, and Tod Vos. Mr. Smith... as I understand it the case of Tod Fuchs is one hundred years old. I find this too out dated to be considered.”

“Not so M’Lord,” Smith replied in his courtroom voice, moving smoothly into his hunt for justice. “The one touches the other and I intend to prove this... not only that, but I will also prove that the fox who perpetrated the first murder is one and the same as the one who ordered the second.”

There was a very low sound of ‘oooo’ from among those foxes watching, and Reinhardus banged his gavel again. “That’s a very bold statement Mr. Smith. Very well, is there a defendant to be named, or will you keep us guessing?”

“Indeed there is M’Lord Fox, but I would like to request the Skulk’s patience in order that I lay a proper foundation.” He walked to the bench, and again picked up the paper he had first given the Master Fox. “I believe we should begin again at this point M’Lord.”

“With your resignation?” Reinhardus growled.

“Yes M’Lord, from your law firm, with whom I have been employed some eighty years under different names and forms. The first year of my hire was back in 1849.”

“I take it then that you are not a human as was supposed?” the old fox asked, taking this in stride.

“That is correct M’Lord. I am a fox.” The man did a form change in mid-sentence, changing into a fox of the same size and shape as his human form.

“And you never disclosed this fact to either myself or my partners, who were also foxes... why would that be Mr. Smith?”

“I had my reasons sir.”

“Very well,” he replied. “Your resignation is accepted and you are here by discharged from my firm’s employ. I do hope you can carry on in a more direct route... Smith,” he said, deliberately leaving off the Mr. “We don’t have all night.”

“Indeed I will sir,” the solicitor told him. Turning to the Skulk in general, he again addressed all the foxes present, making his voice as loud as possible without yelling. “Dog Foxes, and Vixens, Lords of the Grand Council of Foxes, and lastly... Your Majesty and Master Fox Zacharias Reinhardus... one hundred years ago, I was granted a wish by a young fox destined to be the next Master Fox. This fox’s name was Tod Fuchs. I regret his death to this day. My wish was to be a fox, but not for the obvious reasons of which you might think... it was a reason far more ominous. I wished to be a fox so I would better understand those whom I was to hunt down for my master.” As he spoke these words, his form changed smoothly into that of a Fox Hound.

There was a loud outcry from all the foxes present which took a long period of gavel banging by the Master Fox to quell.

“MR. SMITH IS THERE A PURPOSE TO YOUR INSANITY?!!” demanded Reinhardus in his loudest voice. “I HAVE A GOOD MIND TO TOSS YOU AND YOUR PETITIONERS OUT ON YOUR ASSES THIS VERY MOMENT!!”

“I DO HAVE A GOOD REASON!” Smith yelled back just as loudly. “I HERE BY CHARGE YOU ZACHARIAS REINHARDUS WITH THE MURDER OF TOD FUCHS, AND THE ATTEMPTED MURDER OF TOD VOS!”

The old fox was stunned to silence. No fox had ever dared speak to him in such a manner. Before he could recover, Smith smoothly changed back into the form of a fox and turned to address the Grand Council. “Lordships of the Grand Council... as the solicitor representing these petitioners, I here by invoke my rights as a fox to have the defendant questioned under the authority of the Master Fox, whereby he cannot lie.”

“THAT’S PREPOSTEROUS!” yelled Reinhardus.

“If I am not granted this right,” Smith continued calmly, approaching them and placing his hands upon their bench and looking at each in their turn. “If you do not allow me this right, then the Skulk is forever null and void, having been displaced by a dictatorship. All foxes everywhere will then have only one direction to run when those of my kind chase after... the direction that Zacharias Reinhardus sends them in... and you can believe me when I tell you that he will send the dogs to exactly where the ones who oppose him... or might replace him... were instructed to hide. He has done this before...” he turned and looked at the old fox, “Because that is exactly what happened one hundred years ago... I was there.” He slowly approached the Master Fox’s bench, changing again into the Fox Hound. His teeth were bared, and his words took on the sound of a hunting bray; a sound so welcomed by the hunters... a sound, that when heard, they themselves yelled after; ‘Tally Ho!’

“You met my master in a pub that day,” he said forcefully, staring up at the Lord Magistrate while placing his hands upon Reinhardus’ bench. “You poured ale into him until he agreed to take you on a hunt, and then when you were saddling your horse, you told him where to send the hounds. I was there sir! I heard your very words; how else would I know where to go in order to out pace my pack?!” He smiled evilly, “You will remember me sir, because I pissed upon your boot.” He sniffed, and then sneered, “You can still smell it upon you sir. You were marked by me... one hundred years ago.”

Reinhardus banged his gavel several times. “YOU ARE OUT OF ORDER SIR!”

Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto stood. “Fox Smith!”

Smith stood as close to Reinhardus as he could, baring his teeth and growling, willing him to pick up the shotgun. He didn’t move, as their eyes locked, and he actually saw what he was hoping for... the fear of a quarry being run down. In the corner of his vision, he saw Reinhardus’ right hand inching towards the shotgun. Fear makes people do incredibly stupid...

“FOX SMITH!” Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto yelled as loud as she could.

Reluctantly... ever so reluctantly... the solicitor turned back to the Grand Council of Foxes. “Yes M’Lord?”

“You will be seated with your petitioners! We will take a short recess to discuss these... these... very unusual developments. When we return, the Grand Council of Foxes will make a determination as to how things will proceed.”

Smith, returning to his human form, bowed. “Yes M’Lord.”

“Fox Reinhardus,” she said next.

The old fox looked up surprised that he would be addressed in such a manner. “Do you forget your place Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto? I believe I am the Master Fox am I not?”

She bowed low to him, showing deference, and he smiled triumphantly... a smile that quickly vanished when she straightened from the bow and made her reply. “You are the Master Fox, Zacharias Reinhardus, but as you stand accused of murder, you can hardly be the judge during your own trial. As the highest ranking among the Grand Council, I will sit in Judgment’s chair. You will remain where you are during our recess while we discuss how to proceed.”

She then nodded to the fox who acted as Bailiff, and he gave the command for all Foxes to rise in respect of the Grand Council. All but the Master Fox did so.

The other three foxes of the Grand Council then rose and followed the pure white fox off of the bench and out of sight. None of the other foxes of the Skulk left their seats. All of the conversations that began as soon as they were gone, were held in the quietest of whispers.

The Skulk was only a bit noisier by the time the Grand Council returned, the voices remaining hushed and whispered the whole time. All of this stopped immediately upon their return. Franks ears began to twitch as if acting on their own, and he was hardly even aware of this. As soon as the Grand Council had departed the area, a long bench was provided for them by the bailiff so they might sit. Smith had come back to them and collapsed heavily on the one end. Emotionally, he was completely drained. He had been so close to obtaining his goal. He had faced and embraced Death, only to be pulled back and told to live by the kitsune fox. This was a hard thing to deal with, and he was openly weeping. Only Frank understood why this was. Marge came and sat next to him, pulling him into a cuddle while George and Maggie stood behind. Each had a hand on one shoulder. Though no one but Frank knew of the hunting dog’s plan, there was an unspoken feeling among them that the battle had been engaged, and all of their ammunition quickly expended. Now they were to face the enemy empty handed.

In this, the Grand Council of Foxes was about to deal them another blow.

“All Rise!” cried out the Bailiff as they came back to their bench. As before, the only one who did not stand was Reinhardus. For the duration of the recess, he simply sat in his chair doing nothing more than stare down at his desktop, occasionally playing with his gavel.

Three of the Lords sat, while Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto remained standing. She addressed them formally. “Would Fox Reinhardus and the parties of Vos and Fuchs please rise.”

All of them rose, this time including the Master Fox. All eyes were upon them, and upon the Lords of the Grand Council.

Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto spoke in a voice that carried to the far corners of the Skulk. "In the matter of Vos and Fuchs versus Zechariahs Reinhardus, we, the Lords of the Grand Council, consent to the questioning of the accused under the auspices of the Skulk, whereby the defendant will be held to tell the truth when questioned. This cannot be done under the 'invocation of truth' since only a Master Fox has this ability. Therefore, the following four requirements will apply, each a separate requirement set forth by the Lord who pronounces it."

She sat, and the fox sitting on the very end of the bench rose. "The Lord of the North requires that Master Fox Reinhardus be spoken to in a manner befitting his rank and title. Judgment will be obtained without the invocations of threat or of anger."

Frank noticed the small nod that this Lord gave Reinhardus just before he again sat.

The Lord on the opposite end of the bench stood. The Lord of the South requires that a sufficient case be built whereby guilt is established beyond a reasonable doubt." Frank found his eyes being sought out by this Lord, who nodded to him ever so slightly. He then sat back down and adjusted his robes.

The Lord sitting next to the kitsune stood. He took the time to look about at the entire Skulk. "My brethren," he began. "The Lord of the West requires equality among all foxes. M'Lord Reinhardus," he said, looking directly at the other fox, "In fairness to fox kind; for the duration of this inquest the Grand Council has agreed unanimously that, though you will be addressed as 'Your Lordship', you are to be treated as any other fox would be treated under such circumstances. If you are found guilty of the crimes for which you have been accused, you will be removed from office and your punishment decided upon by the council."

The old fox's jaw dropped, but it was only for a second. He postured for a protest, standing straight on the platform behind his bench. "You can't be serious! See here... this is totally uncalled for. These creatures in front of me... the Vos family and their supposed solicitor... they are not even foxes... were not even foxes," he said correcting himself hastily. "We have one actual Fox Hound, one fox, one whelp who is half fox, and one who was human... all have just lately come to this area, and nothing more!"

Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto banged her own gavel, the effect of which could not have been greater had she physically struck Reinhardus over the head with it. "Without the invocation of anger," she said sternly, quoting the first Council member. The Master Fox gave her a sour look and sat back down.

The Lord of the West sat, and Fujitso stood to give the final stipulation. "The Lord of the East requires that the petitioners not be represented by Fox Smith." There was a murmur among the Skulk as she continued. "Though we agree that he truly is a fox, and this

through exceptional circumstance, the Council has found his feelings towards the accused to be a blinding issue. We, the foxes of the Grand Council seek only a clear truth, as fox kind has from the beginning of our peoples. The petitioners shall now be represented by Fox Frank Vos.”

She demurely sat again, carefully smoothing all of her tails. There were murmured voices in the Skulk as all the representative foxes discussed what had just transpired. The Master Fox was well known, and had many friends among them.

Frank slowly stood, nodded to the Kitsune, and then turned to his small group. Each in their turn smiled at him and nodded. Smith, who was still seated and being held by Marge, looked as if he was close to a complete breakdown.

“Tally Ho, sir,” he muttered softly. “I am sorry I failed you.”

Frank patted him on the shoulder. “It’s not over yet friend,” he told him. Turning to Greta, he embraced her, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. In her ear he whispered, “Be surprised by nothing and know that no matter what happens to me, I will always love you.” Before she could answer, he bent down and ruffling the fur on his son’s head, gave him a smile.

“Tod says you can do this,” the boy whispered before he could say anything.

“Which Tod?” he asked.

“Both of us.”

He smiled. “A fox will fight for his family,” he said softly. You and your mother have always been my reason for living.”

Straightening, he turned back to the Grand Council. Stepping forward, he nodded to them. “I’m ready M’Lords, though I will ask that you bear with me as I am not a legal sort. As a human, I made steel for a living. It was a job that I always thought brought me close to the fires of Hell, but I was wrong... the fires of Hell can be found all around us every day. I think I would be better suited to a round or two of bare knuckles with His Lordship the Master Fox, but I will give your methods a go. May I request a short recess to prepare? Perhaps one of you could lend me a moment of your time so I might ask a few questions. That way I can perhaps understand better how I should fight this fight.”

They put their heads together, and conferred for a moment. When they were done, the Lord of the North stood. “There shall be no recess, but we will answer any questions you have before we begin. Justice is the single goal of this inquest. Your group has openly accused the highest fox of committing the crimes of murder and of attempted murder. I personally find this to be a slap in the face. The only reason you are here at all is the fact that this same fox gave you, Frank Vos, his personal word that justice would be served... otherwise we would not have even entertained such a notion. Through the questions you

will ask of the foxes you call upon as witnesses, the Grand Council will decide if sufficient weight has been given to your accusations for us to render a verdict.” Having finished, he sat back down.

What he had said left no doubt in Frank’s mind as to which side of the fence this one sat upon. “Thank you,” he responded to the Lord of the North, nodding politely. “My first question would be, ‘what is the invocation of truth?’”

The Grand Council again put their heads together, and Frank almost laughed as he had the sudden impression that they might actually be playing ‘rock, paper, scissors’ to determine who would answer him.

The Lord of the South stood. “A Master Fox has the ability to invoke another fox to tell the absolute truth. One so suited is the only fox able to do this.”

“If I ask Master Fox Zacharias Reinhardus a question under this invocation, will he, as Master Fox, have to tell the truth?”

“HOW DARE YOU QUESTION MY HONESTY!” yelled Reinhardus, standing at his bench and pounding his gavel. There was an immediate and loud murmur throughout the Skulk. No fox had ever before dared question the idea that the Master Fox might not tell the absolute truth... but Zacharias’ loud protest raised more than one eyebrow. If there was no truth to the allegations, then why should he be concerned?

“YOU WILL REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THE SKULK IMMEDIATELY!” he yelled further, continuing to bang his gavel until he found there was an echo to the banging. Turning, he found Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto banging her own gavel. He stopped, and she banged her own three more times before addressing him.

“M’Lord Reinhardus you will give up your gavel to the bailiff and you will retake your seat. One more outburst like that and you will be censured. We will then conduct this inquest without you! Further, so there is no mistake, you will remove your wig and your robe!”

The Lord of the North stood. “I protest!” he began.

“Sit down and shut up!” the kitsune snapped at him.

“But!”

“Fox Reinhardus is not the Master Fox during these proceedings,” she told him forcefully. “I am the senior Lord on this Council, so I will preside... now sit down, or you too will be censured!”

The Lord gave a sidewise glance at Reinhardus, and then sat.

Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto turned back to Frank, and gave him the answer he required. “Only a Master Fox has this ability Fox Vos. It is one of the things that qualifies him as a Master Fox, and its gift comes directly from the Creator Of All Things. The Master Fox does not come from among the Lords of this council, nor is he elected to the position... he is found by the residing Master Fox as the one who has all of the powers required, and not just a few. That fox is then appointed by him to assume the position when he deems them to be ready. Usually this happens during the Skulk. During the ceremony, the residing Master Fox resigns from the position, relinquishing all of his powers; becoming a normal fox in all the meaning of the word.” After explaining this, she sat back down.

Frank looked directly at Zacharias. “And you have not found another fox capable of being the Master Fox in a hundred years?”

“In over one hundred and fifty years,” he replied flatly. “And no I have not.”

The Skulk’s bailiff came forward to the Master Fox’s bench, and waited quietly until he was handed the gavel, the wig, and his robe. Zacharias, shooting the Council a dirty look, changed into a fox; but one with human features. He appeared younger, muscular, and very handsome. Turning back to Frank, he said calmly, “Might we be on with this nonsense so we can get back to the business of being foxes?”

“Presently M’Lord. I have but a few more questions.”

“Fine,” he replied, sitting. “I shall try to contain my impatience then.”

Frank looked back at his family. Greta smiled at him, and his heart felt so much love for her. Tod smiled too, while old George and Maggie nodded. Marge wore a fearful yet determined look. She hugged Smith a little closer, and the solicitor gave him a ‘V’ sign.

Frank turned back to Reinhardus and found the fox staring at him. Their eyes met, and Frank felt the pure will that was focused upon him... a very malevolent will... *‘You made a mistake... apologize to the Grand Council and leave.’*

Blinking his eyes as the thought washed over him, he turned and addressed the Council. “I believe I have no further questions you’re Lordships. I would like to begin please.”

The kitsune arched an eyebrow, but said nothing to him. Raising her gavel, she struck it once. “Fox Vos, you will make your opening statement to the Skulk, after which, Fox Reinhardus, you will do the same. Please remember Fox Vos that the ‘burden of proof’ is upon your shoulders. You will have only until just before the sun comes up to prove your case. Finished or otherwise we will have to make our decision then. If the Grand Council is not absolutely convinced of your claims, we shall find for the accused.”

“I understand,” he replied.

“You may begin.”

Clearing his throat softly, Frank looked around the area. In the light from the numerous lanterns lighting the area, he found more foxes than he had ever seen in one place in his life. Some sat quietly in groups, and some sat alone, but they all had their eyes upon him. For a moment, he couldn't speak...

you're the one...

Frank turned to the whispered voice which sounded to be right at his elbow... but no one was there. He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise up.

“Fox got your tongue?” Reinhardus asked sarcastically in a quiet voice so just Frank would hear.

Frank was about to say something he learned during his days in the steel mill, when he had a feeling as if something had just pulled him on like a pair of trousers. “Tell Balsabar of Hades hello for me when you see him later,” he replied in an equally quiet voice. The odd part was not that he had said this, but that he actually knew who and what Balsabar was. Reinhardus' jaw dropped open. Before he could say a word, Frank turned and addressed the assembly.

“Dogs and Vixens, Honorable Lords of the Grand Council,” turning he bowed to Zacharias. “M'Lord the Master Fox Reinhardus...” and so it began.

Frank called as his witnesses, first old George, and Maggie. They told their story, with Frank's questions highlighting the details. Zacharias was equal to the task, however, and pointed out Lord Hartzel's intoxicated state when he confessed to the killing. Even though they both testified to what the man told them, the old fox pointed out that it was, after all, a human and not a fox who had spoken the words... an intoxicated human at that. None of them, including Smith, who positively identified the Master Fox as being the one ‘in human form’ who convinced Lord Hartzel to go on the hunt in the first place... none of them had seen the actual shooting of Tod Fuchs. For all anyone knew, this could have been done by Lord Hartzel and then blamed on the other man who had been present. It could possibly have even been a poacher taking a quick shot of opportunity from the cover of the trees, and then scared off by the riders.

Marge was next, and though it was clear she was scared to death, she recounted everything about her encounter with the werewolf in minute detail; including the wolf's naming of the Master Fox as the one who sent him. Zacharias called upon his ‘invocation of truth’ *‘for clarity of the details’*, and it was found out that the wolf did not actually use his name, but had spoken only initials. He was then quick to point out that the initials used could have represented anything or nothing. It might have been that this particular wolf was hired solely to implicate the Master Fox in something of which he had no part.

At the end of his presentation of witnesses Frank looked to the Grand Council; he did not get a good feeling. He gave himself at most a 60/40 on the weight of testimony.

It's not over yet...

Again he turned looking for the whispered voice that now sounded to be all around him; but there was no one near. Looking up at Zacharias, he found the fox smiling at him; his small eyes squinted as if in amusement.

He suddenly became very angry and yelled at the fox, "WHO AM I?!"

The Master Fox looked down at him and sneered. "You are nothing but a human changed..." His voice failed him as if cut off. He swallowed, and spoke again. "You are a human changed..." He stopped again and upon his face was a look of true puzzlement.

you are a fox...

"You are a fox," he said clearly.

you have always been a fox...

"You have always been a fox."

The area became totally quiet. Zacharias looked over at the Grand Council, and they, in turn, looked at him, but neither offered anything more than their look of surprise over what had just happened. The Master Fox's look quickly turned to one of fear.

ask him... now...

Frank gauged his distance from the other fox, mindful of the shotgun still sitting on the bench. "Who are you?!"

Now there was no reserve in answering. The words flowed from Zacharias as if of their own accord. *I am the Master Fox Zacharius Reinhardus...* "I am the Master Fox Zacharius Reinhardus."

"Someone ordered my son to be killed. Fredrick Fauho delivered a note to my friend Marge telling her to take him to the barn where a wolf was waiting to do the deed. You remember this incident don't you?"

Yes ... "Yes."

"I killed the Wolf before he could tell me who he worked for. Who did that wolf work for Zacharias?"

The Master Fox stood on shaky legs. It was very apparent that he was struggling... resisting. *He worked for me...* “He worked for me.”

There was a disturbing collective gasp from among the Skulk and a buzz of voices. Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto banged her gavel for quiet.

Zacharias’ body distorted, the shoulders growing a discernable hump, and he grew physically taller. He abruptly stood, and the chair he was sitting on noisily slid off the back of his bench. His face distorted in a snarling rage.

All around the Skulk was the sound of astonishment. Even for foxes, what was happening was very out of the ordinary. Frank would have smiled, had he not felt changes within his own being. His body felt lighter, and his head was slightly dizzy. He had no idea where his questions were coming from... only that he was supposed to ask them.

“And who do you work for Zacharias?”

Balsabar of Hades... “Balsabar of Hades.”

Rienhardus’ body continued to distort, growing larger until he hardly even looked like a fox. He snarled; the snarl was loud and wolfish.

“Why were you afraid of my son?” Frank asked him while moving to his left, a direction that placed him away from his family.

he has the abilities of a master Fox... “He has the abilities of a Master Fox.”

The creature Zacharias had become glared at Frank and the look was bone chilling. “WHO ARE YOU?!” it roared at him.

Now it was Frank’s turn at being compelled to speak the truth... Reinhardus was still the Master Fox and this ability had never left him.

“I am Frank Vos,” he responded loudly. “And I am a fox.”

The creature pointed at him and snarled. “YOU ARE HUMAN! I DID NOT GRANT YOU THE TRANSFORMATION!”

“That’s right... you didn’t!” Frank responded loudly, and then his own anger boiled over, and he yelled, “TELL THE SKULK WHY YOU LIED!”

if there was no change, I could have safely ejected you from the Skulk claiming the Creator had not allowed it.....

“IF THERE WAS NO CHANGE... I COULD HAVE...” Reinhardus struggled not to say what he must say... the truth. “SAFELY EJECTED YOU FROM THE SKULK...”

CLAIMING...” His face distorted in rage. “CLAIMING THE CREATOR HAD NOT ALLOWED IT...”

Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto stood and banged her gavel. “FOX REINHARDUS... YOU WILL CHANGE BACK INTO YOUR FOX FORM, AND YOU WILL TAKE YOUR SEAT!”

“PISS OFF!” he yelled back at the Lord. Picking up his gavel stand, he threw it at her, striking the kitsune in the body. She was knocked back to her seat.

“YOU HAVE NO HOLD ON ME!” he screamed, pointing at the Grand Council. “THE SKULK MEANS NOTHING TO ME! ... YOU ARE ALL NOTHING MORE THAN SOULS TO BE EATEN LIKE MICE! ... BALSABAR WILL HAVE HIS FOOD AND I SHALL HAVE MY REWARD FOR GIVING YOU TO HIM!”

“ZACHARIUS!” Frank yelled. “I’M OVER HERE... I’M THE ONE YOU WANT! TELL THEM THE TRUTH... TELL THEM WHO I AM!”

The now monstrous hulk spun back to Frank. His eyes were burning red and it was as if Frank was looking directly into the kilns that melted the steel back in Pittsburg,

“YOU ARE THE ONE WHO WOULD REPLACE ME ... AND YOUR SON AFTER YOU!” He looked down at the shotgun sitting on the bench, and snatched it up. “TOO BAD NEITHER OF YOU WILL LIVE TO DO SO!”

Laughing a loud and chilling laugh, he pointed the weapon at Frank and pulled the trigger. The resulting blast was deafening...

The Master Fox’s headless body stood on the bench for a full second, before dropping from sight. His very symbol of high office now hid the grizzly sight from view.

“Just like that French 75 back in 16!” George exclaimed loudly in the following silence. “Ya foxed him... ya did... ya packed the barrels with mud didn’t ya?”

Frank turned, and smiled at the old fox, but he offered no comment.

The funeral for Tod Fuchs was attended by better than two thousand people/foxes. A small head stone was erected next to the larger stone belonging to Lord Thomas Bartholomew Hartzel. Both had a mound of flowers in front of them. Below the Lord’s name had been inscribed; ‘Forgiveness is found in the hands of the Creator’.

This time, George and Maggie were able to drop a handful of dirt each onto a child’s coffin that had been lowered into the ground. It contained the stolen pelt of their son, but for them it was representative of so much more. Their child’s soul was now at rest.

After the service, and after the many condolences were offered, those who attended left quietly through both the large gate and through the smaller concealed gate. Out of respect for the families only the small party of petitioners was now left by the grave as was proper. All were in human form.

George extended his hand to Frank. "Thank you sir. Our son would also thank you if he were able. If it wasn't for you none of us would have found their peace at the end of the fox run, eh?"

"It was nothing George," the man replied softly, at a loss for anything else to say.

"Damned you say!" Maggie said, moving to him and giving him an enormous hug. "It was everything... absolutely everything."

"That is a simple truth sir," said Smith. Marge was on his arm looking prettier than she ever had. Frank and Greta had asked her to stay with them, as they had George, Maggie, and Smith. "I'm still amazed at how things turned out," he continued. "I mean... all my years of being a fox and my plan was still so dog like... charge straight in and die in the doing. You were so clever to have done what you did. I'm still curious about something though, if I might ask sir."

Maggie let go of him and went back to stand by her husband, once again taking up his hand.

"What's that Bart?" Frank asked the solicitor warmly, using the shortened form of his proper name.

"You never told anyone that you were a fox, not even the missus, and she never told you either. When they had that vote to make you an honorary, they knew she was a fox right off... but they never even considered you. How was that possible?"

"I don't know," he answered, "And truthfully... I didn't know I was a fox. All I really know was that from the first day I can remember; I had feelings. I was adopted, and I remember that my mother was very patient with me. She was a full blooded Iroquois, and always insisted that I never ever tell anyone about my feelings; especially my father who was a very simple and religious farmer. So... I made her a promise and kept them to myself. That's why I was so concerned for Tod. I understood exactly what he was going through, but I couldn't exactly tell anyone I had gone through it myself. Unlike me, he at least had Tod Fuchs as a playmate. It was as if..."

"It was meant to be," George finished for him. "It had to be."

"It certainly seems that way doesn't it?" Frank responded. "Until that single moment during the trial; I never actually realized I was fully a fox."

“Born fox and raised human,” said Marge. I seen lots of people in the restaurant that were at least part fox, but I never pegged you. Greta, sure... I knew she was a fox same as she knew I was right off the bat. We became like sisters with a secret... but I never ever saw it in you. I wanted to encourage Tod as much as I could without actually seeming to do so, because there’s something sad about a fox whose lost himself... ya know what I mean? I didn’t want that to happen to him.”

“But what about the Hartzel inheritance Bart?” Greta asked. “I’m still confused about that. I mean... you came looking for my son. Was it a legitimate claim, or was it just a ruse to bring us here?”

“It was quite legitimate. I did the research myself. He is the rightful heir to everything. My master didn’t want the family name to be lost. At that point, I was still working for the firm, though I actually finagled my way into the position of Lord Hartzel’s advisor. At that time I had no desire other than to fulfill his final wishes. I am still a dog, after all, and a dog always wishes to please his master. Off hand, I would say it was simply an incredible co-incidence.”

“It was the Creator who willed it so,” said a soft and accented voice. They all looked, but none of them saw anyone. Then, as if by magic, one white tail appeared as if it were floating in the chill air... and then another, and another, and another; until there were nine white tails floating in front of them. Faintly at first, the form of Lord Kitsune no Fujitso Armaruto appeared, and then slowly became solid.

The Kitsune bowed very low to Frank. “My Lord Master Fox,” she said, holding out a small scroll tied in a scarlet ribbon.

Frank was as surprised as anyone. “Who?”

“I think she is referring to you sir,” Smith told him.

Hesitantly he reached out and took the proffered scroll; but he did not open it. “Why would you call me that?”

“Because Zacharias Reinhardus, the previous Master Fox, named you as his heir.”

“He did?”

“Most certainly! We all heard him do so just before he dispatched himself to the underworld. I am sure that by the time of the next Skulk, or perhaps the one after, your son will be ready to follow in your footsteps.”

They all looked at Tod quietly holding his mother’s hand. He had remained very still all through the service.

“May I go and play now?” he asked them.

His mother glanced quickly at Frank, and then asked her son, "With Tod?"

"Nooooo... Tod is sleeping now." He turned and pointed to a small fox who was patiently waiting a short distance away. "With Gretchen."

"Tell her I said not to take you by the pond," his father told him with a smile, and they all chuckled.

Tod quickly changed into a full fox and scampered over to Gretchen. The two of them jumped and yipped around each other in a fox dance, and then disappeared into the underbrush.

"Forgiveness is a wonderful thing," Marge said softly.

Frank looked at her. She smiled, and then looked at the ground.

"You know Marge," he told her. "What say we all go back to the farm by the weir and you can make us some good old American style coffee."

"And pie," she told him, looking back up with a smile. "Don't forget the pie."

They all laughed.

From the near by bushes a pair of brown eyes watched them leave. When they had walked through the large gate... the human gate... a brownish orange creature turned and left the area through a separate and much smaller gate... one that lead to a very bright light.