

The white fox yawned as he sunbathed in front of the shrine he called home. His name was Shonoshin, and he was a Japanese fox spirit called a *kitsune* that belonged to Japan's many supernatural creatures called *yokai*. Centuries ago, Shonoshin formed a pact with a human family of a nearby Shinto Shrine and agreed to work for and protect the future generations. Shonoshin currently lived as a guardian to the last member of the Ittoku family, a teenager named Otoharu. Shonoshin acted not only as the boy's guardian spirit, but also as his guardian in general. The two had a sibling type relationship, but Otoharu respected the *kitsune* greatly since he was the one that raised him after his parents had passed tragically. Otoharu was a Shinto priest in training, and as the bridge between the human and spiritual world, he and Shonoshin would banish evil spirits and help maintain peace not only on the shrine grounds, but also in the neighboring towns as well. The teen was currently in school and so Shonoshin was free to laze around as he pleased. Despite assuming his human form most of the time, his true fox form was what he preferred best.

His peace was quickly disturbed by the sound of an creature yelping. Shonoshin leapt up and searched for the intruder immediately. He was shocked by what he saw before him. Out of the brush stumbled a strange animal, the creature's fur was sand colored, and its eyes a golden brown. Its ears were folded back, tail tucked between its legs, and it kept eye contact with Shonoshin as it backed away slowly into the brush. The animal's body language made it clear that it didn't want any trouble, but Shonoshin couldn't let it go. He sensed that this wasn't an ordinary animal, it had supernatural qualities much like himself and the other *yokai*. Whatever the reason, this was still an unfamiliar, supernatural, creature on his territory. He couldn't take a chance and have it possibly hurt Otoharu or another human. Shonoshin continued to step forward, flaring his nine tails out wider like a fan. Suddenly, the animal vanished as quickly as it

appeared. Shonoshin didn't let that keep him from searching the area. After a few hours, the kitsune reluctantly gave up. Shonoshin remained on edge the rest of the day until Otoharu returned from school. He assumed his human form and paced around anxiously.

"I've never seen an animal like it before." Shonoshin grumbled with frustration as Otoharu set his bookbag down and took his smartphone out of his pocket.

"Were there any defining features you could think of?"

"It was definitely a canine. Smaller than a wolf, but bigger than a dog."

Otoharu nodded as he typed the description into a search engine.

"What about its fur?"

"It was a mix of brown, white, beige, and black. I've never seen a coat like it."

Otoharu nodded again and scrolled through the countless pictures that popped up. Shonoshin leaned over his shoulder to look as well.

"There! That one!"

The young mystic frowned and tapped the photo to enlarge it.

"It says here that this is a coyote. An animal native to the Americas. What is it doing here in Japan?" Otoharu's mumbling was interrupted by something rustling in the brush at the front of the shrine.

Shonoshin jumped up at once and assumed his nine tails form once again. He shielded his ward behind him and prepared to attack whatever dared invade their home. From the brush came the creature the kitsune had seen earlier, the coyote. Before Shonoshin could lunge at the animal,

it shapeshifted into a human appearance. Wild, and tattered long dark brown hair fell past her shoulders and rested behind the middle of her back. The clothes she wore were foreign and obviously not from Japan, or any other east Asian country. A crimson red shawl that bared her midriff, and a flowy long white skirt adorned with blue runes and high slits that revealed her thick legs underneath. She had golden anklets and no shoes. All her jewelry was gold with the exception of the white tooth shaped necklace she wore.

The woman's eyes were downcast, and her sandy canine ears atop her head folded down in submission yet again towards the kitsune. Otoharu stared at her in wonder from behind his guardian spirit.

Both the mystic, and his familiar were stunned when the coyote woman spoke.

“Canin nicah?”

The two men had never heard such a language before. They were clueless as to from where or what this woman was. The coyote woman seemed a bit displeased at their lack of a reaction, so she bit her lip and tried again.

“Notoca Itzcoyotl. Onitlacat ompa Mexihco.”

Her tail sank lower for just a moment before she stood up and tried again.

“Quen motoca?”

Otoharu and Shonoshin looked at one another, obviously at a loss at what to do or how to respond.

“Are you ok? Where are you from?” Otoharu decided he had to try to respond, so he talked slowly, even though he was sure she wouldn’t understand. Sure enough, the woman sighed and shook her head.

“Ahmo nitlacaqui.”

The coyote woman whined softly but suddenly shook her head yet again and spoke once more.

“Mi nombre es Itzcoyotl. Soy de México. ¿Cómo se llaman?”

Otoharu grinned happily at his new discovery.

“Shonoshin, I’m not sure what language she was speaking before, but she mentioned Mexico, so I think now she’s speaking Spanish!”

“Do you know Spanish Otoharu?” Shonoshin asked curiously.

“I don’t but that doesn’t really matter! Because we can use my phone to translate!”

The coyote woman tilted her head and watched the red-haired boy tap away on his phone. It only took her a moment to realize what he was going to do. Her whole demeanor changed as she perked up and her tail wagged happily.

“¡Ah, vas a usar tu teléfono!”

Otoharu fumbled for a moment before handing the phone to her. When she stepped towards them Shonoshin realized just how tall the coyote woman was. She must’ve been at least three or four inches taller than him. The coyote woman repeated what she had said before into the phone’s microphone, and when she was done handed it back to the teenager.

“Ok! Let’s see what she has to say!”

Shonoshin and his ward leaned close to the phone, eager to see if it worked.

“My name is Itsuko iyoturu. I am from Mexico. What are your names?”

The pair were both amazed and relieved.

“My name is Otoharu, and this is my guardian spirit Shonoshin. He’s a fox spirit.”

When the sentence was translated to Spanish, Itzcoyotl’s eyes darted back to Shonoshin curiously.

“¿Dónde estoy?”

“Where am I?” The synthetic voice repeated her words back to them in Japanese.

“This is Japan.”

The coyote woman’s eyes widened in shock as she fell to her knees.

“¿Cómo puedo llegar a casa?”

“How am I supposed to get back home?”

“She’s stuck here?” Shonoshin lowered his gaze sympathetically.

“How did you get here Itsuko?” Otoharu kneeled beside the woman whose eyes began to water.

“E-Era una broma. No lo hice por malas intenciones.”

“It was just a prank. I didn’t mean to cause any harm.”

Otoharu and Shonoshin were silent, waiting for the coyote woman’s response.

“Notah, Sorry, my father and I switched Quetzalcóatl’s tepache with some muddy river water. I didn’t think he would get so angry. He summoned the east wind and blew me far away. I had no idea where I was.”

“Ketsukoatoru?” Shonoshin cocked his head to the side trying to make sense of the foreign name. Otoharu was one step ahead of him and typed the name into a search engine once more.

“It says here that he is a feathered serpent god worshiped by the Aztecs.” The teenager showed images to his guardian and then turned the phone towards Itzcoyotl to show her.

“Is this him?”

The woman nodded vigorously.

“Yes, and father is a god as well. Huehuecoyotl, the trickster coyote.”

The two Japanese men were silent as they scrolled through photos of Itzcoyotl’s apparent father.

“She’s a demigod?” Shonoshin mumbled as his eyes focused back on the woman in front of him.

“Do you not have the power to return home?”

The coyote woman’s ears and tail drooped as she shook her head sadly.

“*My only power is this.*” Itzcoyotl transformed from her semi-human form back to her coyote form and then into a carbon copy of Shonoshin.

“A shapeshifter...” Otoharu paused as he started to think. Surely she could transform into some type of marine animal and swim home. He looked up the distance between Japan and Mexico. It was 5,036 miles. There was no way anyone could travel that distance alone. Shapeshifter or not.

“Shonoshin, I think she should stay with us until we can figure out a way to get her home. She must be so scared. All alone in a foreign land.”

The kitsune’s eyes widened for a moment before darting back to the woman’s sad eyes.

“Yes Otoharu. I believe that is the best course of action.”

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It had been a few weeks since the pair had welcomed the Mexican woman into their home. Itzcoyotl was very grateful, yet the gravity of her situation took a toll on her. She had been holed up in the spare room of the shrine, wrapped in her futon, refusing to eat anything. Shonoshin and Otoharu were distraught over this. They weren’t sure what to do. Shonoshin thought long and hard about Itzcoyotl and the position she was in. He and Otoharu had done some more research into the Aztec pantheon and most importantly the two gods that were involved in the Mexican woman’s current situation: Quetzalcóatl and Huehuecoyotl.

According to what they read, Itzco’s apparent father was a notorious prankster and constantly causing problems for the other gods. It would seem his children were no different as Itzcoyotl’s story sounded like one of the many pranks that backfired on the coyote god. Kitsune’s were also notorious for pranking others, so Shonoshin empathized with the coyote woman. He couldn’t imagine being banished to the other side of the world over a harmless prank. He had never left Japan and didn’t speak any language other than Japanese. The fox spirit wished he

could express this to the woman, but without Otoharu's phone to translate, the wall between the two canines grew ever taller.

One morning, while Otoharu was at school, Shonoshin decided to take matters into his own hands. After speaking to some of his fellow *yokai*, the kitsune decided he needed to get Itzcoyotl out of her room and see if she would open up to him. He knew she was hungry. But he also knew she was probably too anxious to eat.

The fox spirit rolled up his sleeves and got to work in the kitchen. Once he had made enough food, he packed them in Otoharu's old bento box along with a pot of tea, and some early childhood Japanese learning books he used to teach Otoharu how to read and write. Shonoshin called out to Itzcoyotl before opening the screen door to her room. There, he saw her completely wrapped in the futon with only her fluffy tail peeking out from under the covers.

“Itsuko, I brought you food.”

There was a slight shuffle as the woman freed herself from her cozy prison. She looked exhausted, pale with heavy bags under her eyes. She sniffed the air before meeting the fox's gaze.

“*No gracias. No quiero comer.*” Shonoshin had no way of communicating with her without the help of Otoharu's smartphone. So he decided to take things into his own hands. Literally. The kitsune crouched down beside the woman and extended his hand out to her.

“Come with me.”

Itzcoyotl looked at his hand, and then at his face. Shonoshin gave her a warm smile and gestured for her to take his hand. She reached out and accepted it. Shonoshin helped her up and led Itzcoyotl out of the shrine with a picnic basket in hand.

“I’m going to take you to my favorite spot. Not even Otoharu knows about it so you should feel special.” The way Shonoshin smiled and laughed made Itzcoyotl do the same. Even though they didn’t understand each other, body language spoke louder than words. They stopped in the center of the woods. The way the sunlight filtered through the trees was breathtaking. Shonoshin could tell Itzcoyotl was enjoying herself as she looked at her surroundings with admiration. The kitsune took this opportunity to lay out a blanket and began to unload the contents of the basket. He then reached for the brunette’s hand again and helped her sit. She stared in wonder at the spread laid before her. Foods that she most likely had never seen before Shonoshin assumed. He took a seat across from her and picked up the first item.

“*Onigiri.*”

Itzcoyotl tilted her head curiously and Shonoshin repeated himself once again, this time holding the food up to emphasize.

“*Onigiri.*”

“*Onigiri.*” The kitsune was surprised to hear almost perfect pronunciation from the foreigner. He smiled and handed one to her. She sniffed it curiously before taking a small bite.

“*¿Arroz con pescado al dentro? ¡Que rico! ¡Me encanta este onigiri!*” Itzcoyotl happily munched on until it was all gone. Shonoshin smiled and poured some freshly brewed jasmine green tea into the two cups he had brought. He handed the Mexican woman one.

“*Ocha.*”

“*Ocha.*”

Once again she sniffed the liquid before taking a sip.

“*¡Té!*”

After finishing the cup, Itzcoyotl took the initiative and began to point at the other items.

“*¿Qué es esto?*”

“*Dango.*”

“*Dango.*”

The woman took the skewer carefully and bit one of the dumplings attached. She closed her eyes and her tail wagged happily.

“*¡Delicioso! ¿Y esto?*”

“These are *inarizushi*. My favorite food that Otoharu usually makes after we go on a mission together. I’m a good cook but it doesn’t really compare to the ones he makes.” The kitsune laughed and handed the box over for Itzcoyotl to try. She nibbled it slowly and smiled again, revealing her prominent canine teeth.

“*Gracias por la comida Shonoshin. Y gracias por su hospitalidad. Japón es un país muy bonito. Nunca he salido México en toda mi vida.*”

The blond man looked at her expectantly. He was trying to understand something, anything. This was difficult for him as well since Shonoshin had never left Japan before. He didn’t speak any other languages besides Japanese either. But his little gesture seemed to have

cheered the coyote woman up. She was smiling and talking more than she ever had since her arrival. Shonoshin thought now was the perfect time to try and teach Itzcoyotl some basic Japanese since she was being more talkative. She watched him set the books in front of him, obviously intrigued. The kitsune scooted a bit closer to her before opening the first one.

“*¿Me vas a enseñar japonés?*” The woman let out a small laugh. “*Voy a ser la única en mi familia que sabe cuatro idiomas: jnáhuatl, español, inglés y ahora japonés!*” When Itzcoyotl met Shonoshin 's eyes her ears drooped, and a light pink dusted her cheeks.

“*¿Ah, pero no entiendes nada de que lo digo verdad? Que oso Itzco.*”

“I know we don't understand each other completely, but hopefully these little lessons can help with that. You're already showing lots of promise with your pronunciation. I know it must be scary to be so far from home, but Otoharu and I hope you can enjoy your time here with us. I'd like to know more about you and your home as well.” The kitsune tapped the first page of the book.

“Ready to start?”

“*¡Hagámoslo!*”

