



Lena Knodt (Author), Alessandra Fusi (Illustrator)

## Kitsune 1. Die Magie der Fuchswandler

## Kitsune 1. The Magic of the Fox Shifters

First Published: August 2026 | © Verlag Friedrich Oetinger, Hamburg

All rights available

Akiko is a curious young fox who is fascinated by the human world. When she finds a mysterious mask in the forest and sticks her snout inside it, something incredible happens: Akiko transforms into a Kitsune – a shape-shifter, half human, half fox! She discovers that the Kitsune form a secret organisation that protects humans from the Yokai – spirits from the underworld. And these spirits are dangerous...

- For young readers fascinated by shapeshifters and Japanese mythology – a magical forest adventure steeped in folklore and brought to life through stunning Studio Ghibli-inspired illustrations

For license inquiries please contact: [rights@oetinger.de](mailto:rights@oetinger.de)

**AUTHOR** Lena Knodt, born in 1997, lives among castles and fortresses and writes fantastical children's books. She also works as a teacher, passionately inspiring her students to love reading.

**ILLUSTRATOR** Alessandra Fusi was born in Rome, where she graduated in Illustration in 2006. She is fascinated by mythology and magic, and has a love for fairy tales, coffee, music, dancing — and cats, of course.

Copyrighted material

Lena KNODT

狐  
**KITSUNE**

**The Magic of the Fox-Shifters**

With illustrations by  
Alessandra Fusi



FRIEDRICH OETINGER PUBLISHERS • HAMBURG



## *Chapter 1*

# The Great Green

“Be quiet, or we’ll be found out!” Akiko hissed, resting her head on her paws. She and her sister Suka were huddled in the hollow beneath the dead tree trunk where their family lived.

Suka beside her squeaked. “Maybe it would be better if we didn’t today...”

Akiko nudged her sister, stifling her protest. She heard scratching footsteps above her, and in an instant her brother Luni leaped out of the tree trunk above them. Bright orange-furred paws appeared in the grass right in front of Akiko’s nose and slowly moved away. Then her sister Raya followed. She stopped hesitantly in front of the tree trunk. “Akiko? Suka?” she called, looking around searchingly. “They’ve already gone ahead,” Luni replied. “But Mom said we’re only supposed to

go foraging together. Akiko isn't supposed to be out on her own."

"She isn't – Suka's with her." Luni didn't sound worried at all. "Come on now, or we'll never catch up to them." Without further protest, all eight paws set off.

"That was close," Suka muttered.

"*Akiko shouldn't be out on her own,*" Akiko mimicked her sister Raya's voice. She slid backward out from under the tree trunk and shook clumps of dirt out of her fur. Her sister followed her and then nudged her encouragingly with her snout. "Don't get upset."

But Akiko just whimpered sullenly. Her gaze wandered up and down Suka, who, with her tall build and dark orange fur, was the spitting image of her mom. It was easy for someone who looked as strong as she did to say that. Akiko, on the other hand, was small for her age, with short legs and a narrow snout. Hardly a day went by without her family making her painfully aware of this. Her parents were constantly worried about her. If it were up to them, Akiko wouldn't even be allowed to leave the den alone.

"Let's go," she called, and took off running. Fortunately, the forest around her family's den was deserted, since her entire clan was out foraging. They ran down a rocky slope and trotted into the part of the forest her clan called the *Great Green*. Akiko's heart fluttered with excitement, and she felt a sense of anticipation in her stomach. Here, in *the Great Green*,

the trees were so dense that you could barely see the sky. At the base of the trunks, plants with large leaves formed a green carpet, giving the two foxes the feeling that they were walking through a giant cave. At every turn, there was something interesting to sniff – an unfamiliar herb or a small animal. But today they didn't stop to pick up the trail. The other foxes wouldn't be gone forever, and by then Akiko and Suka had to be back. Or at least close enough to the sleeping den or the gathering place under the fiery tree that they could claim they'd been out looking for food.

Even Suka seemed to be in the mood for an adventure today. Normally, she would have suggested turning back three times already before they even reached the *Great Green*. But today she followed Akiko without a murmur. The two foxes plunged into a dense wall of ferns that tickled their entire bodies. Slowly, the forest thinned out again – they had left the *Great Green* behind. Here they came upon a stream. It originated in the mountains, divided the forest into two parts, and flowed out of the fox territory and down into the valley where the humans lived. They were still within the territory of their own clan, the Aka Clan, which consisted of several red fox families. On the other side of the river, the Shiro Clan made its home. They were strictly forbidden from leaving their territory and entering that of the other clan.

“A little detour into enemy territory?” Akiko asked

her sister, a mischievous note in her voice. It was a detour from their actual destination, but she liked to tease her sister a little whenever the opportunity arose.

Suka looked at her with wide eyes. “No! We can’t do that. If they catch us – if they catch us *again* – we’ll be in such trouble with Mom. You wanted to go to the shrine, and if we take a different route now, we’ll definitely be back way too late...”

Akiko laughed. She ran along the bank of the crystal-clear mountain stream, just a paw’s length from the water, letting her gaze wander over the gurgling water. “All right,” she replied. “Not today, then.” She found it amusing how easily Suka got worked up. Even though the clans hadn’t been fighting each other for several years, their hunting grounds were still strictly separated. If a fox was caught in enemy territory, the other clan could demand prey as compensation. Akiko and Suka had already been caught twice. It hadn’t been long since the last time. Akiko slowed her pace when she noticed a movement beneath the water’s surface. She loved fish, but she was terrible at catching them. That’s because you not only had to be fast, but also strike hard with your paw as soon as an animal appeared beneath the water’s surface. She was fast, no question, but she just wasn’t strong enough... Actually, that was quite normal, since many young foxes couldn’t catch fish.

But of course, Suka was even better at it than some of the adult foxes.

Although the mountain stream roared in her ears, Akiko suddenly heard a crack from the other side of the bank. She shot her sister a surprised glance. From her wide-open eyes, she could tell that Suka had heard it too. Instantly, the two stopped and crouched behind a large rock. Was there another fox there? They hadn't often seen members of the other clan. Sometimes adult foxes from the Shiro clan had visited the fiery tree, but they weren't allowed to talk to them, let alone play with their cubs. Akiko didn't care. There were plenty of young foxes in her own clan. But sometimes she wondered how the others lived, whether they knew games different from hers. Her mother had once told them that the foxes of the Shiro Clan didn't sleep in hollowed-out tree trunks like the Aka Clan, but in rock caves. She couldn't even imagine that!

Suka beside her seemed nervous; her ears twitched excitedly back and forth, listening in all directions. Suddenly, a small white head appeared between the trees. Sure enough, it was a fox! But its fur wasn't red like theirs; instead, it was the color of freshly fallen snow. Only its ears and muzzle looked as if they'd been dipped in ash. The young fox sniffed the air, its nose in the air. But before it had left the underbrush,

just as they were able to get a good look at his fur, Suka stepped on a dead branch. It cracked, and the strange fox flinched and vanished. Annoyed, Akiko laid her ears back and furiously shoved her snout into her sister's flank. "A mountain avalanche is quieter than you," she hissed.

They waited a little longer. But the white fox didn't reappear. They continued on their way cautiously, always following the stream, until they had left the *Great Green* far behind them and the trees grew increasingly sparse. This was the spot where they left their clan territory and approached human territory. They became more cautious now, leaping from thicket to thicket, ducking under prickly berry bushes, and crouching in hollows in the ground. Slowly, the sun sank, glowing orange on the horizon. The surroundings lost their colors, but that suited Akiko just fine. That way, it was harder for humans to spot them. Besides, twilight was the foxes' favorite time of day.

Their path to the shrine led them past stone fox statues time and again. Some stood on all four paws, some on their hind legs; sometimes they were old, covered in moss and quite weathered, and other times they looked as if they had been erected only recently. In their mouths, they held various objects: keys, rings, rolls of paper. Akiko loved looking at these figures. The people took such good care of the statues and sometimes placed candles or scented sticks on the pedestals.



They had even draped red coats over some of the statues, as if to protect them from the cold.

Behind a cluster of trees, the sisters paused and pricked up their ears. The sounds of the forest were now overlaid by something new: the tinkling of small bells, heavy footsteps whose vibrations they could feel all the way to their hiding place, and the voices of people. They crept forward to the highest point of a slope and looked down. Before them lay the shrine dedicated to the fox goddess Inari. Next to the largest building – the main shrine – were many smaller ones with walls of painted wood; some buildings were even made of stone with dark green windows. Several red gates, thick and round like tree trunks, stood in a row, through which visitors had to pass to reach the temple. Red ribbons fluttered from the buildings,

and paper lanterns dangled from the peaks of the curved roofs. The stream flowed right through the middle, spanned by numerous bridges. They no longer had to worry about the other fox clan here, for this was human territory – foxes had no business being here. Without waiting for her sister, Akiko crept down the slope and ducked behind a pedestal on which stood a moss-covered fox statue. The soft crackling behind her revealed that Suka had followed her. They didn't have to wait long before they saw the first human up close: he was slowly making his way up to the main shrine. He was holding a lantern in his hand. Humans had fur only on their heads – and some also around their muzzles – so they covered their bodies with cloth to keep from getting cold. How fascinating that humans could have any fur color they wanted – even colors that foxes knew only from spring blossoms. Like a seasonal coat. In general, there was hardly anything more wonderful than watching the humans. Every time, they discovered something new and mysterious! Every time, they returned with more questions than they'd had when they came.

But there was one mystery they'd already solved some time ago: People didn't use these houses to sleep in or store their food. They came here to pray to the fox goddess Inari, just as their own clan did at the fiery tree. But while Akiko and her family gathered at the meeting place, looked up at the tree, and

barked their words of thanks into the air, the people did things quite differently. The man calmly walked up the last flight of stairs in front of the main shrine. Akiko crept a little further forward so she could watch him. He bowed before the shrine and tossed something jingling into a small box next to the steps. Then he rang a bell three times. This was followed by more bowing and clapping. Akiko watched the man as if hypnotized. Behind him, other people followed, doing the same.

“Akiko!” Suka nudged her with her snout, snapping her out of her thoughts. “Isn’t that the fox from earlier back there?”

Akiko quickly turned around and followed her gaze. Suka pointed to the other side of the square. And sure enough! On a hill overlooking the square filled with people, she spotted the white fox next to a cluster of flat, equally white stones. In the last rays of the sun, the stone glowed so brightly that the fox’s fur seemed to blend into it. He had rested his muzzle on his paws as if he were resting, but his gaze was fixed on the people. As Akiko and Suka stared at him, he raised his head as if he had sensed them. He looked around searchingly and spotted them. His eyes widened in fright, and he darted up the slope toward the forest.



## *Chapter 2*

# THE SNOW-WHITE FOX

“Hurry!” Akiko cried. “We have to catch up to him.” She was desperate to know who he was and what he was doing among the people. To avoid taking the detour around the edge of the forest, she ran straight across the clearing as if the tip of her tail were on fire. Suka, behind her, howled softly in protest. Akiko’s heart pounded faster as she weaved her way through the humans’ legs. Some of them shouted something and stumbled aside. She was closer to the humans than she’d ever been! She would have loved to nudge their fur with her snout, but there was no time for that now. A human pup next to her started to scream, then she had already crossed the clearing and was sprinting up the slope. The pebbles slipped away beneath her feet, but she was fast and leaped from stone to

stone. The white tip of the fox's tail ahead of her disappeared behind tufts of ferns, but Akiko was more agile than any other young fox in her clan – as long as she didn't have to keep it up over a long distance.

“Just stop!” she called breathlessly, but the white fox didn't react. “I just... want... to talk!” She could already feel herself running out of breath! She heard him rustling in the bushes, cut across, and sprinted off to cut him off. Without thinking twice, she leaped through the leaves. She landed on a pile of moss and felt soft fur beneath her. Tangled together, the two foxes rolled across the forest floor, then Akiko scrambled to her feet. The white one got to his feet more slowly than she did, tucked his head between his shoulders, and sat back on his hind legs.

“That hurt!” he complained quietly. He was a boy, clearly, and just as out of breath as she was.

“Sorry. But you always run off right away!”

“You're from the other clan! I'm not allowed to talk to you.” The fox licked his shoulder.

“Don't be so dramatic,” said Akiko, half out of defiance, half out of guilt. “I hadn't even extended my claws yet.”

“That doesn't make it any better.”

Akiko sat down on her hind legs as well. The fox didn't seem to want to dart off again. “By the way, I'm Akiko.”

“I don't care what your name is. You have red fur, and I'm not allowed to talk to you.”

“It’s too late for that anyway.”

The white fox paused and seemed to be thinking. Then he tilted his head. “I’m Kiubi from the Shiro Clan. My father is the leader. So, if I’m not back in the den by sunrise, the whole clan will be looking for me!”

“Why wouldn’t you be back?”

“Aren’t you going to kidnap me?”

Akiko’s eyes widened. “Kidnap you? What for?”

“You’re red foxes!” he replied, as if that were explanation enough. They sized each other up. Although Kiubi feared being kidnapped, he no longer seemed as frightened as before. His eyes sparkled with curiosity. He looked at her for a long time. “But you’re right – you don’t look like a kidnapper,” he said finally.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Akiko laid her ears back, and she felt her face flush because she sensed what he was hinting at.

“Well...” said Kiubi, letting his gaze wander up and down her body. “How old are you? You’re not a pup anymore – you can tell by your fur. But you’re the smallest young fox I’ve ever seen. Or are red foxes always this small?”

Yes, it was exactly what Akiko had feared. Now even a strange fox from another clan was rubbing it in her face – how petite she was. That was the first thing he’d noticed. Not how fast she’d chased after him. Not that he’d run into her out here – which showed she was at least as brave as he was. No, it

was always and only about the fact that she was smaller than everyone else.

She heard a crack and a soft bark, and Suka appeared behind them. Nervously, she looked from Akiko to Kiubi and seemed to be wondering whether she should prepare for a fight or a conversation.

Kiubi took a step back. "Obviously, not all red foxes are small. Is that your mom?"

"We're littermates," her sister replied. "I'm Suka."

Kiubi looked back and forth between them. "You... you're pulling my leg, right? It can't be that two from the same litter are so different!"

That was enough! Akiko tensed her hind legs, ready to pounce on Kiubi if he made another stupid comment.

"The biggest difference between me and my sister is that I'd rather punch you in the nose than she would," Akiko growled, continuing to eye him through narrowed eyes.

"What?" Kiubi asked.

"What?" asked Suka.

"You heard me just fine! So, do you want a punch in the face?"

"Are you crazy?" Kiubi asked.

"Are you crazy?" asked Suka.

Annoyed, Akiko looked from her sister to the white fox cub. "He said I'm small!"

"But you are..." Kiubi began, until Suka interrupted him. She stepped between Akiko and the stranger

fox. “You have nothing to fear from us,” she told him. Kiubi glanced past her at Akiko. Akiko knew her sister was right – a fight wouldn’t help anyone, not her, not her pride, and not her plan. It just made her so angry the way he’d looked down on her.

“What were you doing with the humans?” Suka asked.

Akiko was glad her sister took over the questioning, because even though the situation had turned out differently than she’d imagined, she was still interested in the Shiro Clan and in what Kiubi had to say.

“I was just taking a look at what the humans are up to here.”

“Why?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Do you come here often?” Akiko asked.

Kiubi tapped his paws on the ground one after the other. “Every now and then,” he said. “My parents don’t like it.”

“Neither do ours,” said Suka. “That’s why we should head back.”

“We just got here,” protested Akiko.

“Look up at the sky!” Her sister pointed upward with her snout. The clouds glowed red in the last rays of the sun, which could only be glimpsed between the trees and behind the mountains.

“Maybe you should have spent your time

to watch the humans instead of chasing other foxes, Akiko.”

Akiko turned around and looked down through the trees into the valley of the humans.

She heard a rustling sound and spun around, but Kiubi had already disappeared into the underbrush.

Akiko growled. She’d had so many more questions. She hadn’t even figured out yet if he really lived in the mountains.

“You scared him,” said Suka. “And me a little, too. What was going on?”

Akiko lowered her head and growled softly. But what was the point of keeping it a secret from her sister? Besides, she could be sure her sister would understand. “He said I’m the smallest young vixen he’s ever seen.”

Suka circled around her and gently ran the tip of her tail between her ears and along her neck.

“You shouldn’t care what he thinks of you. The only thing that matters is what you think of yourself.”

Akiko snorted. “You sound just like Dad.”

Suka ignored her and continued. “Besides, you may be small, but you’re surprisingly annoying for your size.”

Akiko barked and playfully snapped at Suka’s tail, but Suka dodged her.

“We really have to go now.”

The two ran back along the edge of the slope and crossed the stream by jumping from one slippery rock to the next. Glancing down

toward the shrine, Akiko quickly soaked up as many impressions of the human world as she could. Now that it was getting darker and darker, the humans' lanterns shone all the brighter, bathing everything in a reddish, warm light. She admired the humans for handling the flames as if they obeyed them. She herself found fire frightening. In fact, these confined fires were the only thing she didn't like about the human world.

Akiko's stomach growled as they crept through the gloomy forest. She heard the rustling of small animals, and the scent of prey filled her nostrils. But they had no time! The white night orb was already in the sky. Back home, they would surely get something to eat.

They ran along the edge of the babbling brook until they had almost reached the end of the *Great Green*. Again and again, Akiko caught herself glancing toward the other bank. Was Ki-ubi also still thinking about their encounter and wondering where they were headed? Maybe he was standing on the other side of the stream, peering through the bushes at them?

Akiko shook her head and ran along the old red-fox trail toward her den. The forest wasn't as dense here anymore. The scents of her family members filled her nostrils. Akiko's heartbeat quickened; she braced herself for trouble once again. Her parents thought she and Suka had also been out in the forest, but it was quite likely

that it would soon come out that no one from the clan had seen them anywhere out there.

“Are you ready?” Suka asked. Her sister took a deep breath in and out.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Akiko noticed a light – a bright red glow. Ignoring her sister’s fearful gaze, she turned around and crept cautiously toward it. She was curious, but she still felt a slight twinge of unease: the light looked almost like fire!

“Come with me,” she whispered to her sister. Suka seemed to hesitate, but it only took a few seconds before Akiko heard her footsteps behind her.

They entered a small clearing, and Akiko stood rooted to the spot: the glaring light of the white night orb illuminated a tower just like the ones they had seen among humans. It was made of angular stones stacked on top of one another, almost as tall as a tree. There was no grass around it, only bare earth. At the top of the tower, a lantern glowed with a fiery hue. They had been traveling through this forest since they were little puppies who could barely stand on their own two feet. But they had never seen this tower here before.

“What is that?” whispered Suka.

Akiko’s breathing quickened involuntarily. She carefully placed one paw in front of the other, as if afraid that this sight would vanish if she approached it too quickly.

Something white lay at the foot of the tower. She made eye

at her sister and then nodded in the direction of the object. Suka just looked at her with wide eyes, but she, too, crept slowly toward the tower.

Akiko felt as if a spell had been cast over the clearing. No sound penetrated from outside – not even from the fox den. Even the wind in the



treetops and the babbling brook had fallen silent.

She stood cautiously at the foot of the stone tower, her gaze searching for the white object. She was startled when she looked into a face! The object was flat, made of wood, and painted white. Eyes and a mouth were drawn on it in paint as bright as blood. However, it was not a fox's face—rather, it resembled a human face.

She turned to her sister, but her sister had stopped some distance away.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” Akiko asked.

At first, Suka didn't seem to want to answer, let alone look at the object. But then she blinked twice and took a step closer.

“I... I think so! I once saw people using it to cover their faces.”

Confused, Akiko looked first at the wooden object, then at her sister, and wondered if she'd misheard. Why would anyone do that? Although... if people were already covering their entire bodies with artificial fur, why would they leave out their faces?

“Do you think there have been people here? So close to the fiery tree? So close to our home?”

“Definitely not,” her sister protested. “We would have been able to smell them from miles away.”

Akiko knew her sister was right. The whole thing was very mysterious. She was no longer afraid, and her curiosity was growing. She sniffed,

but there was no scent in the air – neither human nor animal.

Carefully, she lifted a paw, and before Suka could protest, she nudged the object. Because it was leaning against a higher rock, it tipped to the side. They could now see inside – the inside of the curved face.

Akiko's heart skipped a beat. Was this her chance to carry a human object herself? She had always dreamed of trying on a changeable coat!

The longer she gazed at this wondrous object, the stronger the desire grew inside her to stick her nose inside it. She took a step forward, lowered her head...

"What are you doing?" Suka shrieked. With her powerful body, she threw herself sideways against Akiko. Akiko fell over, but immediately jumped back to her paws and shook the dust from her fur.

"What's the matter with you?" she hissed.

"That thing could be dangerous!"

"But it doesn't look dangerous," Akiko replied.

"Not dangerous?" Her sister spun around in a circle, which she always did when she was nervous.

"Have you even looked at that thing? I bet they painted it with fox blood."

Akiko snapped. "Mom and Dad put that idea in your head. Not all humans are cruel – just like not all foxes are cruel."

“But humans have nothing to fear from us foxes.  
The other way around, though!”

“I think we should try them on.”

“Never!”

Akiko narrowed her eyes and looked at her sister critically.  
“I want to try it.”

But Suka pushed her aside and stood between her and the wooden object.

“You’ve already talked me into going to the humans today, and then you almost started a fight with a member of another clan. That’s enough! We’re going back to camp and hoping our parents will let us off with a warning when they realize we weren’t out hunting at all.”

Akiko tensed her hind legs and peered past her sister to figure out the best way to overpower her and still get to the humans’ object. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance!

But Suka stood before her, unyielding as a rock.  
“Let’s go now. I don’t want to get in any more trouble with Mom.”

Akiko sighed and let her shoulders slump. How could Suka not find the whole thing fascinating?

But Suka was just Suka.

“All right,” she relented. “Let’s go.”