

Scott D. Miller  
Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA  
Copyright 2005, all rights reserved

Final Draft  
2005-12-21

## **Family Matters**

By ScottyDM

Odette finished assembling the green bean casserole and popped it into the small oven, while the turkey continued to cook in the main oven. She was happy to see her daughter, but wished the girl would come home more often than the holidays. Penny had driven up from Ventura and brought a friend to share Thanksgiving with the family. Meeting the friend, who wasn't human, had been a shock....

There was a loud thump and the house shook, rattling the plates. Odette braced herself, but it was over too quick to be an earthquake. She listened and heard Penny and Bobby's voices. He sounded like he was in pain. *It's started already.* "Dammit, Penny!" she shouted. "Are you kickin' your brother's ass?"

Penny shouted back, "Ma, he was tryin' to kill Paris."

Five-foot one and only 96 pounds, that girl was a firecracker. When her brother did something stupid that offended her, she took it out on him physically—and he was almost double her weight. *Those kids are gonna give me a heart attack.* Odette yelled, “Dinner’s in an hour. If I have to take someone to the clinic you’ll both be in trouble.”

“Yes, Momma!” Penny shouted.

Bobby was to take over the farm someday, Akamatsu Ranch. He was protective of the family and of the farm, and Odette could guess what the problem was—Penny’s friend Paris, wasn’t human, but a male humanoid fox and Bobby was probably ‘protecting’ his little sister.

Odette had seen a special on the Science Channel about these foxes. Several decades earlier one of the GenEng companies that had been doing government work went bankrupt. Among the assets the federal government ended up with were two-dozen genetically modified foxes. NASA/JSA latched onto them and hired another company to finish the work. It didn’t surprise her that her daughter brought home a fox so much as it surprised her that Penny had found one in Ventura. The show gave the impression that most of the NASA foxes lived in Houston.

The sound of chatter came from the hallway and the three ‘kids’ burst into the kitchen and gathered around the island where Odette had put out a snack platter of crackers, homemade plockwurst, and smoked cheese.

“Hey sleepyhead,” she said to her son. “Finally get up?”

“Aww, Mom. I didn’t get to bed till four. It’s a long drive from San Francisco, I had to stop and take a nap.”

“Better safe,” she said. “Did Mia make her flight?”

“Yea, she’s on her way.”

Paris asked Bobby, "Who's Mia?"

"My fiancée. Her grandfather passed away and she flew back to Finland to be with her family."

"She's your fiancée and you didn't go with her?" Paris seemed surprised. "Your first duty should be to her."

Odette watched the exchange between her son and Paris. Whatever happened earlier must have been cleared up and she wondered what Penny had said to change her brother's mind.

Penny had called Paris a friend, but Odette wasn't sure what that meant. When she thought of her daughter being intimate with a fox, even a genetically engineered humanoid fox, it made her feel uneasy. She knew the NASA foxes were smaller than humans, but to see Paris next to Penny accentuated his size. He was two inches shorter than her and thinner. But was polite and had a confident manner the led her to believe he was older than Penny's 22 years.

Paris appeared at her elbow. "Hello Missis Akamatsu, everything smells wonderful." He licked his whiskers. "Reminds me of when I was little and my mother would fix a holiday feast."

"Thank you, and you may call me Odette." She noticed his eyes were golden-brown, which contrasted with his black muzzle, and the orange on top of his head was peppered with black. "Pretty markings."

"I'm a cross-fox; it's a color variant."

"Momma, can I help?" Penny asked. She was eating a marinated mushroom.

"Penny!" Odette turned around in time to see Bobby stuffing mushrooms in his mouth. "Get away from that! It's for dinner. In fact it's getting too crowded in here, why don't you kids go out to the orchard and see what your father is doing."

"But Momma, I need to practice. I want to help."

“Okay, honey, you can stay, but you boys clear out now. You can take some snacks with you if you like.” She pointed to the platter.

Bobby grabbed a napkin, placed one cracker in the middle and started piling on German salami and cheese in alternating layers. He folded up the sides, grabbed it and headed toward the door. “Come on, Paris, I’ll show you around.”

“I’ll see you at dinner time, Missis Akamatsu.” Paris followed Bobby out the door. “And it all smells wonderful!”

“Call me Odette.” She watched as his tail disappeared out the door. It was almost as big as he, and was brick-orange flecked with black, with a white tip. She turned to her daughter. “What’s a ‘cross-fox’?”



Penny thought dinner was going well; at least no one had said anything boneheaded yet. When her dad asked Paris how old he was, she held her breath, but he’d only raised an eyebrow when the answer came back, “43.” Paris was telling her dad about his new business venture and his explanation veered into an area he’d only hinted at with her.

“There is one issue I’m still struggling with,” Paris said, between bites. “The duel between instinct and intellect. I’m not supposed to be able to start and stick with anything this involved without a mate at my side. It’s the instinctive wanderlust of the unattached male fox.”

“What will you do?” Penny’s dad asked.

“It’s easy to say I could just find a mate, but available vixens are extremely rare outside of Houston. Or I could try to work within my instinct, as I learned to do with my consulting practice. It’s funny, but I thought I’d conquered that instinct. Then I realized I’d only sidestepped the issue. Who is the very definition

of a nomad but a consultant? Always moving from town-to-town and client-to-client.”

Penny’s mom picked up her dinner roll. “Do you need a vixen, specifically?” She glanced at her daughter.

“Maybe not, but fox physiology is different from human. I don’t know what might trigger the feelings of belonging and stability that I need. It may be triggered by the behavior of having someone to hold and care for, or pheromones, or perhaps a combination of factors.”

Penny’s dad asked, “Why not just go to Houston to find a mate?”

“It’s not that simple. I’d need to find the right mate, someone whom I can give my all to, a meeting of the minds and the hearts. There are less than 800 adult female vulpes-hominis in Houston and most of them are already in domestic partnerships. I’d have to be there most of the year at minimum, not just November through January, and I detest Houston. Plus I’ve been living well north of the 30<sup>th</sup> parallel, so I’m running about a month behind the Houston population.

Bobby stopped chewing long enough to ask, “A month behind?”

Paris put down his forkful of potato. “That’s something about humans that seems alien to me. Human females have no real heat-cycle, but ovulate a dozen times a year and seem to be receptive any time they feel like it. Human males need to be in condition and ready at any time. It must be distracting.”

Bobby looked thoughtful. “The wild foxes that live around here seem to go crazy in February.” He snapped his fingers. “Is that why you’ve not slept with my sister yet? You’re waiting for Valentine’s Day.”

Odette dropped her roll. “Robert!”

“What did I say?”

Penny was shocked. *That noob! Well two can play that game.* Using her sweetest voice she said, "Oh Bobby, when were you planning on making an honest woman of Mia? Have you two set a date yet?"

Odette turned on her daughter. "Penny! Must you copy your brother's worst habits?"

"A wedding, how fun!" Paris said. "Tell me all about Mia, Bobby. What is it about her that sets your heart on fire?"

The mention of Bobby and Mia's wedding distracted Odette, which was one of the things Penny liked about her fox; he was a quick thinker.



Later that evening, the two women were in the kitchen rolling out pastry for apple dumplings. Odette missed doing things with her daughter since the girl had gone off to college, and was delighted to be spending time with her now. Penny finished digging the core out of the last apple and spooned the mixture of raisins, sugar, and spices into the hole.

"Momma, Paris needs me, but I think he's afraid."

*Oh boy, here it comes.* She said, "Many men are afraid of commitment. How long have you known him?"

"Not long, Momma, only three months." She handed her mother the apple. "But it's not that. He wants a family, wants commitment. He seems to be afraid of a physical relationship, that it won't work between us."

Odette was quiet as she wrapped the pastry dough around the apple and crimped the edges. The idea of her daughter paired with a fox seemed so strange. At last she said, "Honey, I don't know..."

"Momma, he's like no one I've ever met before. He's kind and sweet and funny. And he needs me. You heard what he said at dinner."

"He said he needs a vixen."

"No, he said he needs a mate and partner and that he hasn't found a vixen to fill that role. Besides, we're perfect for each other. We have so much in common."

"Penny, honey, this isn't some little girl's game you're playing down by the river. You're an adult now. Think of your future." Odette arranged the pastry wrapped apples on the baking sheet and popped them in the hot oven.

"Momma, Paris taught me a poem that his mother taught him:

"First a shared vision

"Blossoms into friendship;

"Next comes passion,

"Then family with kits."

"Honey, I don't see..."

"It's something that every fox learns: how to select a mate. Momma, we have a shared vision. We both love the sea and the natural world, and did you know he majored in environmental engineering? I can even help him in his new business venture—my minor is marketing and I graduate soon. Momma, do you know what we do on dates? We pick up seashells at the beach or catch frogs in the slough; we hike through the hills and pick wild mushrooms; we study the tracks of animals; we stargaze. Momma, we went camping in Los Padres to get away from the lights so we could see the stars better. We stayed up all night, just snuggling and talking, counting the shooting stars. He's become my very best friend."

Odette smiled. Penny had described herself perfectly. How could she deny her daughter's dreams? "I don't know what to say.... Do you love him?"

"I don't know, Momma. I'm not really sure what love is, real love. I used to just want him, but now I know I care for him and want him to be happy."

*And that's a very good start. "Honey, I think it's just a matter of time. February is not that far away."*

*"And I'll wait, but there's something more. He said he tried it with a human woman before, in college. He didn't give any details, but I got the feeling it ended in disaster."*

*"Oh. Then don't be pushy. Be subtle but open and let him feel like he's taking the lead. Sometimes men are frightened by an aggressive woman. But what will you do if it doesn't work out?"*

*"What will I do if I don't even try? Momma, I want the fox and he needs me. I must try. What can I do?"*

*"There is one thing... my mütter taught me." Odette got a fresh apple from the bowl. "It's from the folklore of my village. Tell no man of this, do you promise?"*

*"Yes, Momma, a secret. I promise."*

*"Take this apple. Tonight when you go to sleep, put it inside your nightshirt, under your arm. Tomorrow feed it to your lover and if he eats it, he will be yours."*

*"Umm, eww." Penny scrunched up her nose. "But does it work? It seems so simple."*

*"27 years ago I had rivals for your father's attention, one other girl even seemed to be his favorite. I asked my mütter what to do and she told me this. A year later we married. It works." Odette handed her daughter the apple. "Honey, be certain he is the one. If you change your mind later, you'll break his heart."*

*"I am certain, Momma." She took the apple.*

*There was a clamor outside the kitchen door and a moment later William came in followed by Paris and Bobby.*

Odette kissed her husband. "Hey, Liebhaber, how was your walk?"

"Good. We ended up in the orchard by the river, and Paris has an interesting idea on how to control the mice." He turned to the fox. "How late can you and Penny stay tomorrow? Can you help with the mouse moat?"

"We can stay an extra night, but we have to leave by noon on Saturday."

"A mouse moat?" Odette asked.

"It's just a little one." William held his hands less than a foot apart. "You'll see." He turned to Paris. "Come to the den and we can sketch some plans. I need to know how many cans we'll need. Then we watch the game." The three males trooped out of the kitchen.



It was early Friday evening. Odette and Penny were preparing a thick turkey soup with spaetzle for supper when Paris came in from outside.

"Where are the others?" Odette asked.

"They're putting things away so they sent me in early." He held his hands out to her, palms up. They were covered in blisters.

"Oh no! Penny, grab the medical kit. It's in the downstairs bathroom." She watched her daughter go then turned back to the fox. "Paris, honey, why didn't you wear gloves?"

"My hands are too small, none of the gloves fit. After that I didn't think about it until it was too late."

Odette turned on the water and started gently washing his hands. When Penny returned with the med kit, her mother applied an antibacterial compound to his hands then unwrapped a sterile scalpel. She expertly slit and drained each blister while Penny stood by and fretted. Finally, Odette applied some HealFast

salve and wrapped the fox's hands in gauze. "There, but if you can't hold a spoon Penny may have to feed you supper."

Paris gave her a weak smile.

Odette leaned over the sink and looked out the window. "Where are the men? Penny, could you see what's keeping them?"

"Yes, Momma." Penny grabbed a light jacket hanging near the kitchen door and ran outside.

Odette turned to the fox. "Paris... I almost feel I should call you Mister Fabre, you're nearly my age."

"Paris is fine." He squirmed.

"Oh relax, this isn't the Inquisition." Odette smiled at him. "The age is of no concern."

"But?"

"But. I was wondering if you'll be calling me 'Momma' soon."

"Ahh."

"How do you feel about my daughter? Let's see... how did you say it earlier? 'What is it about her that sets your heart on fire?'"

"Well, she's an amazing young woman. I've never met a human like her; she even acts like a fox sometimes. She's almost perfect."

"Almost... and if she were a fox?"

"If she were a fox I would've already asked her if she would have me. And we'd probably be house hunting by now."

That surprised Odette. "So soon?"

"Well, we fit so well together, common interests and goals. She's become my very best friend. She's wonderful." Paris paused. "Did Penny tell you about Nonny?"

"The human girl?"

"No. Nonny was my betrothed. We were 17, almost 18, and were going to become life-partners and go to a university together. But she was fickle and by the time I knew there was another, they had already signed a domestic contract. It felt like she'd torn out my heart and gobbled it up. Stupidly, I went to college by myself that fall. Since then I've been wandering. 25 years and I've not accomplished any my dreams, living as if my life is for rent. Penny is everything I've dreamed of, except..."

"She's not a fox."

Paris nodded.

"Do you love her?"

"I want to. I hope so. But I would never do anything to hurt her."

"She told me your little poem, about how to select a mate. But I have a question about the last line."

"Then family with kits?"

"Exactly."

"We both want a family and little ones, but that's impossible. I guess we'll just have to adopt."

Odette patted his arm and smiled at him. "I'll work on my William for you." She peeked out the window. "I wonder where they are?"

"Thank you." Paris stepped toward her, tilted his head up and touched the side of his muzzle against her cheek, then stepped back.

"Oh!" Odette touched her face. "That was nice."

There were voices outside the door. It opened and the rest of Odette's family trooped in. William stepped up to his wife and kissed her. "Hey, Lover. That

smells great! I'm starving." He pointed to the fox and announced, "He's a hard worker. He'll do all right."

"You're dirty," Odette scolded. "Get cleaned up then I'll feed you supper."



After supper, Paris and Penny were chatting with her mother while her father and Bobby were playing chess at the other end of the room.

The three of them were talking about and comparing Paris and Penny's childhoods. The subject turned to the summer when Penny was nine and she rescued a sick vixen. Bobby had told him part of the same story earlier that day, when there were out in the orchard digging holes. *So little Penny had been a 'sister' to a wild vixen?* Paris was fascinated, it explained a lot about her: some of her mannerisms, that she knew not to grab his ears, her fox-like greeting the day they met, her self-taught wood lore, and the games she played with him. He also noticed she had become quiet. He turned to her. "Are you okay?"

"Umm, I just have to go..." She pointed toward the kitchen. "Get that... for Paris, Momma. Be right back!" She jumped up and scampered off.

*What's that about?* He turned back to Odette and noticed she had an odd smile. The same funny little smile Penny got when she was up to something. In build and coloration Penny resembled her Japanese-American father, but when it came to mannerisms, she was a reflection of her mother.

He tried to get Odette to tell him more about Lil' Vixie, Penny's name for her 'sister', but she changed the subject and made small talk.

Penny returned and walked over to where Paris was sitting. She got down on one knee in front of him and held up a plate in both hands. On it was an apple, sliced into perfect eights, and arranged as an eight-pointed star.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's for you, of course," she replied.

"Ahh, I see."

"Did you suddenly stop liking apples?"

"No, I love apples." *But there's something odd about his one.*

"It's my apple and it's for you." She smiled at him, that funny little smile that meant she was up to mischief.

It certainly was her apple. He didn't have to pick up a piece to know her scent was all over it.

"Now you'll hurt my feelings. Your ears are down. They tell me, 'I'm not sure about this.'" She gave him a pleading look. "You know I'd never do anything to harm you. Will you devour my apple?"

*No fair! How can I resist when she does that?* He picked up a piece and ate it, then another and another. With each piece he ate her smile broadened and with the last bite she sighed. He noticed that Odette was watching, and she wore the same mischievous smile. He asked Penny, "What's going on?"

"It's simply an apple a day... for your happiness."

He studied her face and drank in her scent. She had pale, luminous skin and short black hair, and her natural perfume was familiar, comforting. But it was her dark-brown eyes that captivated his gaze. He'd always thought she was pleasant to look at, but he'd never considered that she might be pretty—until now.

End