

ANCIENT WINDS:
Spirit Children

Written by Ted Haas

Edited by Diane Watson

Ancient Winds: Spirit Children
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Author's Note:

In the dialogue of *Ancient Winds: Spirit Children*, I attempt to represent—to some degree—how northern people would speak using English as a second language within their traditional cultural linguistic patterns. This results in some language usage that is unpolished and inaccurate according to present English language grammatical standards.

This book is a fictional account and not intended to be an actual description of the culture or life of any particular individual or group of people. Any perceived likeness or facsimile is completely unintentional.

However, some of the events occurring in the wilderness may reflect the experience of the author who has lived in the western Canadian Arctic wilderness with his family for ten years. Or, there may be an unintentional resemblance of the experience of someone he knew during that time.

- T. Haas
4th Meridian, Canada

~ Meet the Characters ~

Kanti (Singing Woman): mother.

Anakausuen (Worker): father.

Tihkoosue (Short): Chief of the People.

Enkoodabao (Lives Alone): immigrant, lesbian, wise elder,
mid-wife, Woman of Honour.

Alawa (Pea): a young village mother.

Black Ghost: spirit bear.

Strong Life: spirit tree.

Achak (Spirit Boy): boy twin.

Nuttah (My Heart): girl twin.

Sokanan (Born in Rain): village boy.

Pules (Pigeon): village girl.

Megedagik (Kills Many): disabled village immigrant and
recognized Warrior.

Chepi (Fairy): Nuttah's friend.

Kimi (Secret): Nuttah's friend.

Kitchi (Brave): Achak's friend.

Sokw (Sour): Achak's friend.

grandmothers: community members.

grandfathers: community members.

witches: inhabitants of
"Hungry Witch's Point."

Askuwheteau: the shaman.

(He Keeps Watch)

Alsoomsa: the shaman's wife.

(Independent Woman)

Ancient Winds: Spirit Children is set deep in the northern boreal forest of what is now known as Canada. The location stretches from the Great Lakes northward to Hudson's Bay.

The time period is pre-1500 BCE.



Canada's Boreal Forest

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Prelude

Mist is drifting on ancient winds through the pre-historic annals of the far northern reaches of land that will one day be called North America.

The two-kilometre-thick, continent-wide glacier covering this massive expanse is slowly crashing and trickling away. In poetic retreat, it gives way under the influence of changing oceanic currents and atmospheric conditions.

Remaining in its grinding waste lies Grandfather Rock: grey and barren, the bones of Earth.

Sun, wind, and moisture for tens of thousands of days have beaten on this vast expanse of stone, breaking it down into small chips, fine chips, and wind-blown dust while Life impatiently waited her time.

Horsetail, the first plant form to enter this emptiness, nestles in the nutrition-starved scatter of rock dust. Rudimentary mosses spread their fuzzy fingers along the cracks, preparing a base that will, in time, nourish the taiga.

One tiny seed at a time, the taiga creeps over the straggly scatter of moss and lichen. In time, seeds will populate the devastation with a scatter of willows, dwarf spruce, fir, birch and pine trees, various berries and teas.

Smaller four-legged life wanders northward following the expanding food supply. Voles, lemmings, and shrews dig their shallow tunnels and chase each other from end to end. Snowshoe

hares nip the willow twigs and de-bark branches through the bitterly cold winters. Weasels leave their clumped footprints in the snow as they stalk the voles and lemmings scurrying through their tunnels under the snow.

As warmer days struggle northward, birds sail into this foreboding place on southerly winds and build their nests and raise their young.

As foliage satisfies the land, moose wander from their familiar southerly environs to feed on the grasses and twigs. Vacating themselves, they add nutrition to the slowly-building base that supports life.

Then, one summer, caribou appear. Like restless ghosts, they come from who knows where and fill up the land. They pace urgently, like caribou do when they migrate: northern wanderers with distance in their blood. They typically travel with heads low to the ground, swiping clutches of lichen and sedge grass as they hasten.

These uncountable herds are composed of numerous smaller bands that may number from as few as 30 to as many as 3,000 individuals, or more.

They traverse rocky ridges, swim rapid rivers, and stand patiently against the savage winds, bringing to this desolate expanse a dependable resource: themselves. In autumn, they will disappear over the northern horizon and be gone.

While present, they join the moose, deer and elk, the mink and marten, otter and wolves, and the occasional wolverine in giving a measure of life to this place.

Life increases as small red squirrels chatter and scabble across the skinny tree branches, shelling spruce cones for their hidden seeds that fall to the gathering duff at the tree's base.

As these newcomers eat, their scat fertilizes these seeds which passing caribou press firmly into the gathering nourishment, where they take root and grow.

On this barren land, *Life* is the restless spirit linking all these primal relationships that form the building blocks of existence and meaning on a once-lifeless and rocky land buried under a continent of ice.

These relationships continue for millennia, preparing the land ... while far to the south, close to the Five Great Waters, the People begin drifting northward with the warming climate.

Generation after generation follow the meat and fish under the expanding canopy of what will become known as Canada's Great Northern Forest.

For uncounted generations, they adapt their lives from the meanderings of the moose to the migrations of the caribou. They learn how to have homes, give birth, raise families and live together with sustaining values in this demanding but life-giving place.

These aboriginals, who call themselves "the People", are led for a time by a much-loved and respected Chief who is dedicated to peace among all the People, the long-distant grandfather of the Warrior, Anakausuen.

Prologue

Sun rested below Earth for only a short time but winter still clung stubbornly to the barren land, keeping the mean temperature close to the freezing point. Remaining snowdrifts hugged the rugged contours, shape-changing in the restless wind. It was early June.

A pregnant caribou on her spring migration across the barren arctic landscape felt the birth-pulses of her calf and separated from the herd. Generations of survival instinct guided her to a snow-free rocky ridge where she turned into the unyielding wind. From here, though the wind was incessant, the blood she carried from her ancestors informed her that she had an unobstructed view far downwind; and, she could readily detect the scent of any predator approaching from upwind.

Her calf was born quickly, slipping from the tender warmth of the womb to the hard cold rocks of the barrens, like a tender flower in an unforgiving land.

The wet calf wobbled as she attempted to find her legs, then folded down. Undeterred in her young innocence she tried a second time, but the wind again knocked her down. Again she tried. Three times down, three times up. Life is gritty.

She fought to remain on her spindly legs long enough to find her mother's soft underbelly. There, she nuzzled through the hair until her lips slid over the udder, and she suckled her mother's warm, energy-rich milk. How did she know?

Her energy quickly expended, she lay down on the rocks, exhausted. Her mother lay down beside her, positioning herself as a shelter from the wind.

After a short rest, Mother rose and nuzzled her baby awake. Raising and lowering her head repeatedly, she told her baby: get up and follow me. The calf struggled to her feet and, wobbling unsteadily, followed her mother who was already walking away.

This strenuous activity, after only an hour of life, was life-giving: unused muscles were forced to work; a new heart was compelled to pump; milk was digested, heat generated, life saved.

At first, the herd moved somewhat slower than normal, giving the new babies of the day a chance to find their legs. In the next day or two, the newborns were bumbling along with their mothers and the herd at a faster pace, their long spindly legs working quickly. Astounding energy.

As they moved through the desolation, they carried their heads low, gathering occasional clumps of grass while a number of them voiced a rhythmic *huhh, huhh, huhh*, and their ankles emitted soft popping sounds. Young calves mostly grazed, suckling only a few seconds at a time.

Then, early in the afternoon, those at the rear of the band suddenly broke into a scattered run. The wind had brought an unwanted scent. Looking upwind, they saw that a barren land grizzly bear and her cubs were moving closer.

Bears can move with surprising speed and are agile for their size, but their lumbering pace was no match for the caribou, who easily outran them.

Summer was struggling northward through the great northern forest and across the barrens. As it reached the herd, huge clouds of mosquitoes swelled to life and attacked the cari-

bou. The onslaught was terrible. They buzzed, landed, and bit around eyes and noses, lips, ears and anuses.

Welcome to life on the barrens, little one.

This onslaught proved unbearable for some, and occasionally individuals seeking relief would run. But they couldn't run forever, and when they stopped, their sides heaving from exertion, the buzzing swarm was waiting there and attacked again.

For some, their hair and twitching tails served as protection; but others pushed their muzzles into clumps of grass to hide their most vulnerable flesh and thus reduce the frenzy.

The mosquito hoard began to thin after several weeks as Sun lifted less high from the bottom of the sky; but the warble flies were waiting.

Warble flies didn't attack directly. Rather, they flew around, just off a body then darted in to make a quick landing on a leg to lay an egg on a hair. When the egg hatched, the larvae knew to dig under the skin and work their way upward to the caribou's back.

Only winter's cold would bring respite from the summer's plagues.

As summer moved to its inevitable end, more caribou gathered and the herd's restlessness intensified until the fall migration commenced. Then, untold generations of genetic programming guided them across the barrens on a southerly bent, toward the Great Northern Forest. It is there that some degree of shelter from the blasts of the coming winter would be found.

Rutting and mating season came with the shortened days of the yellow and red-leafed foliage of the grey-skied autumn. Bulls engaged one another, vying for supremacy and breeding rights. Their absurdly enormous antlers clashed and crashed as they engaged one another.

On rare occasion their antlers locked together in such a way so as to make them unable to extricate themselves. Thus, they died a slow death in battle's bitter embrace.

Contrary to plains bison, a caribou herd moves swiftly, often in multiple single files. From a distance, these waving lines might resemble giant serpents slithering their way across the land.

Nothing stopped them. They climbed and descended the steepest of hills, swam across lakes and rivers, and stumbled their way through boulder-strewn streams.

Occasionally, one injured a joint or a leg when a strong river current swept it away and slammed it against a rock.

Injured, it fell behind and the wolves shadowing the herd knew it was time to make their move.

Typically, one wolf circled widely around the wounded one's side, then moved closer, forcing the prey to adjust its trajectory toward those on the other side. One would attack the rump while another clamped its powerful jaws on the throat.

Already weakened and unsteady from injury, the injured caribou succumbed quickly. Once down, the third one tore at its soft underbelly. Such attacks were effective, and death was swift.

Once the wolves feasted they carried meat back to the pups, who were waiting at their den. There, they feasted on the fresh meat, and what their mother regurgitated for them.

In time, amidst the scruffy trees of the taiga, this herd met the Warrior, Anakausuen, and the People, the aboriginals of the Great Northern Forest, who called this rugged and impossible land home.

The People's lives were deeply interwoven with this herd. It was the main source of their meat and clothing, scrapers, needles

and other tools, sinew and skin for thread, fishing spear points and hooks, as well as many other inventive uses.

As well, the marrow and fat helped to warm and strengthen them for the rigors of winter.

The People recognized the caribou as a gift from the Creator and taught their children to respect them, and to have a sense of community with them. They taught their children that not only did they live in relationship with them, but that part of the People's heart was carried by the caribou, and part of the caribou's heart was carried by the People.

To the people of the Great Northern Forest, the caribou were life.

CHAPTER 1

Anakausmen's Heroic Hunt

The People's desperate search for meat had begun.

“**A**nakausuen, we will starve,” Kanti exclaimed to her husband as she prepared yet more thin rabbit soup for their second meal of the day. “Snow covers the land and we have no meat.” Her voice betrayed her deep concern.

“It is a bad time,” responded Anakausuen. “We must cover the land like the trees until we find meat. Chief Tihkoosue will call a council. Then we will go.”

Later that day, word passed through the village that Chief Tihkoosue wanted to meet with all the hunters to discuss the dire situation.

After much talk it was agreed that they would travel by twos in different directions from the village, looking for moose and elk, deer, or the most favoured caribou. Their areas would be defined by landmarks known to all.

Throughout the next day, the hunters drifted out of the village in pairs; Anakausuen and his partner headed northwest, toward the usual migration route of the caribou.

The People's desperate search for meat had begun. Those whose sacrifice supplied the People with strength and warmth for the winter were nowhere to be found.

Fish and rabbit were abundant, but they lacked the fat needed to nourish the People through the harsh winter. They needed the rich marrow, inner organs and the fat of the larger animals. Situation tense.

Anakausuen and his partner found that not even the small bands of caribou who usually precede the main herd had begun passing by. There were no tracks at all.

The question no one wanted to ask wiggled into their minds like an unwanted spider: Had the caribou, upon which the village depended for centuries, changed their migration route for some unknown reason?

Twelve days later, all but two hunters had returned to the village. When they arrived the following day, they carried only one small deer. That night, an early winter storm blew in from the barrens. It snowed for three days. Heavy. Wet. Deep.

The last night of the storm, Anakausuen tossed restlessly through a dream. In it, a mother caribou and her yearling calf came to him. She showed him where in the taiga on the edge of the barrens he would find meat. The dream showed him landmarks with which he was familiar, and tracks in the snow. He could see that they came from across the barrens far to the Northwest.

This region was an area hunters hesitated to go to alone, but Anakausuen would follow his guide, even to the barrens, if necessary.

He believed the dream was telling him to rely on the caribou's traditional migration pattern, but that it had shifted farther to where Sun comes to work, and that they were coming much later this year than they ever had before.

The next morning he told the Elders of his dream.

"That land without trees, Anakausuen, is a bad place. There is no shelter," the old men counselled. "No trees. No good that you go alone."

He heard their words respectfully but, over the years, he had learned to trust his dreams and inherited instincts, and his ability to survive in harsh conditions. He was, after all, strong and in the prime of his life. They understood and gave him their blessing.

The morning of his departure, Kanti loaded his bag with dryfish, pemmican, drymeat, and fire stones, and Anakausuen selected his best arrows.

As he put on his caribou-skin clothes, tied his knee-high moccasins on with the skin thread that Kanti had made, Kanti (Singing Woman) watched him forlornly. "I will be sad without you. I know you are strong, but I want you back in our lodge. I want to sleep next to you at night."

Anakausuen (Worker) loved his wife very much and reassured her, "I want to come home to you, Kanti. I will watch, but we will starve without meat. You know that. My dream will guide me."

When he was ready, he slung his fringed moosehide bag over his shoulder, embraced his wife, and once again reassured her, "I will come back to you." Kanti stifled a sob, and whispered, "I will not sing, my Warrior, until you return."

"I will be, perhaps, half a moon. Then you will sing again, and eat meat," her Warrior responded gently. Then he lifted the flap and stooped through the lodge's opening into the frosty air.

He retrieved his snowshoes, bow, and arrows from the rack, and left the village, moving to the northeast.

As he walked to the edge of the village, he passed other hunters who were preparing to go farther south, outside the boundary of their traditional hunting area.

With the departure of the village's hunters, the women and older children who remained had extra work to do. They, along with a few of the able old men, busied themselves with additional chores from before first light until darkness blanketed the village. No time for idleness.

There were fish to hook through the ice, rabbits to snare, and skins to tan. There were moccasins and clothes to stitch, lodges to keep in order; thieving dogs to be chased; wood to be gathered; fires to be tended; fresh spruce boughs to be gathered to cover their floors; infants to be nursed, changed, and kept warm; food to be prepared; and ... friendly gossip to keep up on.

In addition to this extra work, they also carried concern for their husbands and uncles, sons and nephews who were in a winter landscape that had thus far proven to be empty of life-sustaining meat. They had plenty to deal with.



The cow who had given birth on the barrens that summer had also had a calf last summer. The birth occurred, as usual, in mid-June, and although no one knew or cared, it happened to be on the same full moon in which, twenty-one years earlier, Anakausuen was born.

Anakausuen had been an active child, even while inside his mother. He was born beside the trail in the Moon of Long Sun as his parents were moving to fish camp.

As a young child he kept his hands busy. This was a source of frequent cautioning by his mother, because the things she placed here or there in the family lodge he moved to what he thought of as a better place, including sometimes outside.

This behaviour was a source of entertainment for the neighbours who enjoyed watching him rearrange—with good intentions—what his mother had put away. In his young mind he was trying to clean up and help, albeit his way!

When he did this, the neighbours teased his mother, saying, “He thinks he knows better than his mother.” Then they all laughed and Anakausuen’s mother would respond, “You wait, he will make a good husband for one of your daughters, and we need those, so don’t be jealous.” And they laughed more at the thought of the old women among them having children.

Although young Anakausuen’s restlessness would occasionally disturb those nearby, it later came to be appreciated by the People as he developed into a responsible boy who frequently helped the elders.

They appreciated that he gathered wood, snared rabbits, or brought fresh fish to them. As well, he helped monitor the young children.

In his tenth year, he tried making his first caribou bone knife, like the Warriors used. The knife was functional, but a bit odd to handle, lacking the balance and angles of one made by more experienced hands.

Anakausuen’s busyness made his body lean and taut, and his mind clear and precise, and he grew to be tall, straight, and well-defined.

He and Kanti began noticing each other, and often danced next to each other. This was noticed by the old people whose eyes twinkled when they smiled their silent support and nodded their

heads to each other and said, “I want them to join and have their own lodge. They will be good for the People.”

In time, the wishes of the elders were fulfilled, and they joined as a couple and built their own lodge. However, after many moons they still had no children.

Now, Anakausuen was leaving on a long and dangerous journey—alone—and in that harsh environment there was no certainty of his return.

Even though Kanti was naturally concerned for her Warrior’s safety, she also trusted in his vision and his wisdom of the forest.

Like all the hunters, he knew how to find his way without a compass, using the natural signs of the sun, stars or moon, the lay of the land and moss on trees, types of foliage, the flow of water, and the soundscape. Hunters could find their way through unfamiliar terrain, and back, as well as the animals they hunted.

But the Great Northern Forest could be cruel and dangerous. The People’s history held many stories of accidents and burns, freezing and drowning, that occurred in a moment of misjudgement by experienced Warriors.



Just two years earlier, Kanti’s old uncle had gone on an early spring moose hunt by canoe as soon as the water began to flow. He longed for his life as a young Warrior, and was hoping to kill one more moose close to the river where he could handily load the pieces into his canoe. This would be easier for an old man than carrying the pieces from far back in the forest as he had done so many times previously.

But something went wrong. Disaster found him and he hadn't been seen since that day, nor had his canoe and equipment. The rushing waters of spring swallowed him and the People named that river "No Man River".

On another occasion, when Kanti was a young child, an experienced Warrior was walking across a snow-covered lake in the Moon of Thickening Ice. The clouds were low and heavy. It was difficult for him to read the snow and he accidentally walked across a melt-hole* which gave way, and he fell into the water.

Fortunately, this young man was carrying a primitive safety device—a pole about twelve feet long. Carried horizontally, it would support him if the ice gave way, which it did. Then, using the pole, he was able to leverage himself out. When he climbed onto his knees in the snow, he rolled away from the hole and the snow soaked up much of the excess water from his clothes. He then followed his tracks back to shore and gathered moss and twigs to start a fire and dry off. The young sapling saved his life.



The forest through which Anakausuen snowshoed lay silent as a snowfall; only the squeaking of the webbing against the frames of his snowshoes, and the snow swishing through the webbing, interrupted the silence of the forest which lay between his lodge and the distant Land of Little Sticks (taiga).

His lonesome journey carried him over and through just about every type of habitat the forest had to offer: tangled willow bogs, eskers, black spruce, and tamarack lowlands. It also took

* A melt-hole occurs when an unusual amount of heavy wet snow falls on new thin ice and presses it down. This causes spots on the lakes where melt-holes form but remain covered by the thick blanket of snow. The ice surrounding the hole, which itself is quite small in size, becomes too thin to carry a person's weight, and when someone walks by it, it breaks.

him over higher elevations of white spruce and across frozen streams and lakes and rocky ridges.

The southeast wind blew incessantly and covered his trail. But his dream energized his pace and his mind was honed to a sharp edge. Resolute. Patient.

Each night as Sun went to rest, Anakausuen made fire. Then, using his snowshoes, he piled snow nearby for a shelter. Once the freshly piled snow firmed, he dug a hole out of the side and lined the bottom with soft boughs.

The shrubs and snow piled around him reduced any breeze and, coupled with the caribou-skin parka Kanti had made for him, the caribou-skin mat, and rabbit-skin robe he carried, Anakausuen rested well at night.

However, as he moved into the taiga the trees offered smaller, knottier boughs and sleeping became less comfortable.

As he trudged onward each day, snow frequently whispering through the trees, he watched for something to eat—a porcupine or rabbit, grouse or ptarmigan. This, and spruce needle tea maintained him on his journey.

Though he was alone—in a precarious land at a perilous time—he felt no fear, for he was of the forest and the forest was of him. In his solitude he found companionship.

One afternoon when Anakausuen had paused on his journey, a wolverine appeared unexpectedly from around a rocky outcropping. It was as surprised to see Anakausuen as he was to see it. Anakausuen quickly reached for his knife, but fortunately, after it growled at him the wolverine scampered away.

Wolverines are solitary animals and extremely strong, making their fur difficult to get, but it was desired as trimming for parka hoods because it never frosted up regardless of the temperature.

In spite of the fat sunshine that blazed off the snow, Anakausuen was cold the day he arrived at the place of his dream. The wind had been cutting across his face for three bitter days, and the grind of the journey was penetrating his strength.

He arrived at the edge of the barrens as Sun began to drop behind the scruffy trees that surrounded him. There, he made camp, and rested his weary body.

The next morning, he gathered dry moss, wood, and spruce twigs for the fire in the days ahead and rested. But the dream was on his mind and he needed to be alert for signs of caribou. He was also concerned that the wind still blew from the southeast, thus carrying his scent to any approaching caribou. He needed it to change, preferably to the north or northwest.

Later that afternoon, when he woke from a nap, he noticed the wind had calmed. *This is good*, he thought and, as the sun fell to the edge of Earth, he snowshoed toward the northwest, farther into the Land of Little Sticks. Once there, he noted the wind picked up again, but now it blew from the northwest. He was now downwind and there, far in the distance, on a rocky ridge, he saw what looked like small clumps of willow bushes.

Experience told him to watch the hazy, indecipherable blotches carefully. They moved. *Eiyee! Caribou!* It was a small band of eight, and they were slowly moving toward him, the wind on their rumps.

Softly, he whispered, "Come to me."

Anakausuen moved to the edge of the taiga, and carefully chose a place behind a low bush and next to a small tree to make a snow blind.

From this vantage point, he watched as the small band meandered toward him, hoofing away the wind-swept snow to get the sparse lichen and grass beneath. Gradually, they moved

up the ridge where small clumps of grass waved in the wind. Anakausuen's heart beat stronger.

The distance between herd and hunter narrowed slowly as the shadows lengthened. In the waning evening light, only the hunter knew he was there. He waited.

Although his heart was happy and beating strongly, his body was deeply chilled. But discipline borne from the difficult life he and the People lived enabled him to remain rock-still. Then, he notched an arrow to the string on his birch bow and waited patiently.

The sun continued slipping to the edge of Earth. The few clouds in the sky slowly churned from pastel gold and pink flames to sunless grey. Two cows and one yearling wandered away from the others and toward him, pawing away the snow and taking one or two mouthfuls of grass as they approached.

He noticed that the yearling, though smaller, was fat, and her antlers were not much smaller than the cow's. Anakausuen thought, *I will kill the young one and carry her back to the village.*

Keeping his body as still as he could in the cold, he adjusted his position in anticipation of the one shot he needed, and waited for the yearling to offer herself to him. He had taken his one mitt off and tensed his body. His breathing, determinedly slow and deep, controlled his shivering.

"I need you," he whispered.

Then, as he knew she would, the yearling turned sideways and Anakausuen drew his bow taut, steadied his rippled arm as he had done hundreds of times since he was a young lad, and released the arrow to its freedom. The bow snapped and the arrow hurried silently and eagerly through the half-light to its target.

Before he could reach another arrow from his quiver, the yearling felt this one slice behind her shoulder and go deeply into her lungs. She gave a slight jerk and groaned *huhh!* then stood

stupidly still. The other two cows lifted their heads and looked at her, then continued pawing snow and eating.

The second arrow then snapped into flight. This one found an artery in her neck. Seconds after it sliced her throat, she took three stumbling steps and dropped onto her front knees. Feeling faint, she rolled onto her side, blood flowing from her neck. The two cows continued moving away slowly, uncovering grass to eat. They, as yet, had nothing in their genetic composition to cause alarm for this.

Anakausuen moved quickly from his hiding place; the two startled cows ran off. He drew his bone knife and approached the yearling in such a way so as to avoid any latent thrashing of hooves or swinging of antlers. Then he slit her throat.

Her red blood melted into the white snow that lay on the barren land and froze, painting a crimson image, not of death but of gift, in the evening's closing light.

Anakausuen was thankful for this kill and reached into his bag for his tobacco pouch. He opened it, offered a prayer of thanks to the yearling's spirit, saying, "I am sorry to take your life. But I am in need and my family is hungry. It is winter and we must have your marrow for warmth. Thank you for your strength. You will keep us from starving."

He then took his bone knife and cut the tendons and sinews that connected some of the joints, and severed her head.

After cutting out her tongue and eyeballs he opened her belly from her breastbone to her genitals, reached inside and removed all her bowels, lungs, and other organs, being careful not to slice the bile sack. Then he separated the kidneys, heart, and liver and laid them on the snow beside the tongue.

Rolling her onto her back, Anakausuen then severed the tendons at the knees of each leg and cast them aside in the snow. "For you, Wolf; for you, Raven." He wished to get through the

skull to extract the brain, but the evening's cold was penetrating his body. Instead, he sliced some warm liver to eat.

Anakausuen's movements were quick and skillful, and he completed the majority of the work before total darkness consumed the land. Time to rest.

But before settling in, he laid extra boughs on the snow and carefully arranged the carcass on its side in a slight curve to better fit around his shoulders the next morning.

Then he started a fire with the moss and twigs he had gathered earlier, roasted some meat, and lay down on his rough bed in the hollowed-out pile of taiga snow. Exhausted. Cold.

He wrapped himself in his rabbit-skin robe, whispered a prayer of thanks to the Creator and for Kanti to sing, and went to sleep.



As the half-moon slid across the sky, a fox yipped in the forest behind Kanti's lodge. A dream came to her.

In the dream she was walking by Mother Water. Mist drifted across the lake toward her. As it reached the shore, a fox ran into it from a nearby bush and disappeared. The mist continued toward her until it enveloped her.

She heard her name called and waited silently. The voice called again. She replied, "I am Kanti, the woman you call." A light wind began swirling the mist and a silhouette in the fog presented itself to her, its voice gentle.

"I bring you good news, Kanti. You will be mother to twins. Your children will be gifted; they will do high work for the People. The People will always remember them and find strength and protection. This will give them hope in hard times."

Kanti's heart sang at the news of children, but a seed of concern also was carried to her mind.

While the mist-shrouded voice spoke, Kanti saw a large bear pass nearby, partially hidden by the mist. He turned his head and looked at her. She whispered, "Brother Bear." Then she turned to go back to the village, the vision playing in her mind.

Where the trail entered the forest, she saw a tree beside the path that had not been there when she approached the lake.

She stopped and looked at it. She could see that it was growing taller and she knew she was in the presence of the sacred. She dropped to her knees, extended her hands in honour, and raised her head.

As she did, she heard the voice in the mist speak again, "The success of your children will require a gift deeply held by you and your husband."

Kanti whispered, "And what is that?"

The mist answered, "Your children."

The words stabbed at Kanti's spirit. Uncontrollably, she sucked in her breath and groaned. Then lowered her hands, bowed her head, and remained still. A wind stirred around her.

After a time, she rose and slowly walked back to her lodge, the dream tucked secretly in her heart.

Then, Kanti awoke and stared at the darkness surrounding her. She saw a hummingbird come to her and sleep finally overtook her.

CHAPTER 2

Anakausuen Arrives Home

“My Warrior, you come home. I dreamed for you.”

The next morning, Anakausuen started for home. It would be another long and demanding trudge of at least five nights, its difficulty compounded by the burden pressing down on his shoulders. But he knew from many other difficult journeys that he needed to do only one thing: take one more step. He chose, once more, to be strong.

His path took him to a long ridge thickly covered with willows. If he circled around the long ridge, the way would be easier, but almost a half day longer.

It was a vital decision for Anakausuen because, in the far reaches of the North, where the sun shines at very low angles from autumn to spring, willows grow profusely on north-facing slopes, making such shortcuts a difficult choice. Decision made, he took the shorter, more difficult, way.

The thick brush frequently snagged his arms and the caribou he carried. However, he tracked as straight uphill as

he could—an arduous ordeal—and finally crested the top. Heart thumping. Lungs pumping. Legs aching.

Pausing to rest, he lowered the frozen carcass and propped it against a willow bush, drew a piece of frozen tongue from his bag, and sliced it into edible pieces. Only one kidney remained.

Lungs ready, legs strong, he grunted the carcass onto his shoulders and continued across the top of the ridge and down the other side, snowshoes swishing and creaking through the snow.

Autumn had been unusually wet, and much water had collected at the bottom of the ridge and in the shallow bog and thick stand of red willows. Branches reached out across Anakausuen's path, making it necessary to manoeuvre his snowshoes carefully through the tightly woven thatch that waited to trip him in any misstep.

He didn't see the broken branch that protruded into his pathway under the snow. It tugged at his snowshoe and he should have hesitated and cleared it out. But in his determination to get home, he forced his foot forward and the branch tripped him, ripped a hole in the webbing, and sent him sprawling, hard against the frozen willows.

The carcass he carried pushed his face into the snow. His legs were twisted and a hole was torn in his skin pants just above his knee. Snow found its way through it. But no stick scratched his eyes.

Struggling to his knees, he unwound his legs and snowshoes and cleared the snow from his face while whispering, "I curse these willows!" Then, he staggered to his feet.

He cleared the snow from himself and, with stubborn resolve, lifted the carcass once more to his shoulders, gathered his balance, and continued on the last leg of his eleven-day journey.

As Anakausuen neared his home the carcass felt heavier, his steps got shorter, and his back more bent.

But he remembered the gift of royalty flowing through his veins and he thanked his grandfathers for their strength.

This meat is hard as the stones on the shore, he thought. This year the caribou are too far from the village. The winter will be hard.

In spite of these challenging days on the hunt and the cold lying heavily on the land, Anakausuen's heart was driving him home to Kanti.

As he rounded the far side of the ice-covered lake that lay near his village, thoughts of soon being home with his beloved Kanti lightened his heart and increased his pace in spite of his weariness.

At the fork in the trail, he turned toward the village. *I smell smoke.* He smiled, even though his body was almost broken and his energy almost stolen by the cruel and callous spirit of the Northern winter.

At the first lodge by the trail an old dog was curled up, partially covered by the falling snow; his nose tucked under his tail.

A dream that frequented his sleep came again this night. He was among his own in the days of antiquity; those mostly grey, long-legged creatures with yellow eyes who trailed through the forest as silent as smoke on the wind: smoke dogs. In his dream he was a young and wild, patient, lean and strong northern wolf. His senses were incredibly sharp and he ran with his ancestors in the time before any man walked on two legs through the shadows of the forest.

In this dream, the smoke dogs ran free as the ancient winds, patrolling a borderless area of trees and rivers, hills and ridges, killing when they needed to eat and feed their young.

Their resiliency was demonstrated in their fluid lope that often carried them through the forest until the sun dropped. Then, often in an open forest meadow they would join their voices, noses lifted to the crystal-flecked black sky, and sing of their loneliness.

Swish, creak, swish, creak. The old dog's ears twitched involuntarily and he was brought back to himself. Lifting his head he sniffed the air and his ears pointed toward the sound of rhythmic crunching on the trail.

Hearing the hunter's song sung softly, he knew the one coming belonged to the village and there was no need to sound an alarm. Replacing his nose back under his tail he ran once more with the ancient smoke dogs.

Anakausuen passed by him as he entered the village, coming from where Sun comes to work in the Moon of Moving Ice. In the dull glow of the half-moon that had found a sliver of space in the clouds to shine through, his shadow slid across the community fire circle as he headed to his lodge.

As a young man, Anakausuen was always popular with the girls, and two of the lodges he passed housed young wives who would welcome him to go on a picnic far from the village when their husbands were away.

One of them occasionally teased him with her eyes and whispered invitations when they passed by each other. But his heart was only for Kanti, Singing Woman.

Then, as he passed Chief Tihkoosue's lodge, he saw his own, the faintest thread of blue smoke still lifting from the smoke hole, and his heart sang.

Outside his lodge, he hung his snowshoes and bow high on the stand, safe from wandering dogs. Then, he lifted the bear-skin flap, stooped and dragged the carcass in with him. The last of the glowing coals were dying in the fire ring.

He heard movement. The rabbit-skin blanket stirred, and a head slid out.

Softly Kanti said, "My Warrior, you came home. I dreamed for you."

Quickly, Anakausuen slipped under the rabbit-skin blanket next to Kanti's warm body. She rolled close to him, embraced him tightly, and felt the pulsing of his breath on her cheek, the pounding of his heart through his powerful chest, and she knew the last day of his long trip home was without stopping for fire, and that he ate only the frozen meat he carried, and drank of the glistening snow through which he struggled.

In the dark, Kanti smiled. Her Warrior was safe and she knew she was deeply loved.

Her Warrior's hand warmed as he caressed her hair and cheek.

As Anakausuen welcomed being warm in his lodge once again, Kanti sang softly, like the gentle stirring of dry leaves, a love song. Then sleep, sleep.

CHAPTER 3

Achak and Nuttah Are Born

“Welcome, spirit children”.

It was the Moon of Falling Leaves in the Great Northern Forest, time to make dryfish for the winter. Kanti joined in the work as best she could, but this year her belly was large and her back painful. But she was not a quitter, and she worked as best she could.

“You rest. Go back to your fire,” the women told her. But for Kanti, whose spirit was strong as well as gentle, that was hard to do.

Her belly was so large that her feet pointed slightly outward; to balance herself she leaned slightly backward. Pure discomfort.

Her usual quick smile and gentle songs were hidden under her discomposure. “It is hard to kneel and rise, and to make fire and cook,” she told a friend.

Enkoodabao had told her there were two inside her. Kanti's discomfort was increased because one of the spirits was restless—kicking and turning, never resting. Sleeping was hard.

"Biibiins (baby), come," Alawa called her daughter of eleven years. "Aunty needs help. Work with the women to cut fish for her. Go visit her. Help her cook. But take her with you for wood; lying down too much will hurt her. Her time is soon, it may be she will ask you to stay."

"Mother, people say she carries two spirits."

"Yes, Biibiins. They are a gift from the Creator. They will have special work to do. When they get their visions, the People will know."



Many smokes, like a gathering of spirits, hovered in the early evening air, filling the village with a sweet blue fragrance. Women were cooking fish in clay pots hung from willow tripods over fires, or making fish soup. Some flavoured their soup with a handful of cranberries or blueberries; others roasted fish or rabbit on a rock next to their fires.

The soft background sounds of village life attended the cooking: voices murmuring, children's feet scuffling, wood being broken and crackling in the flames. Occasionally a burst of laughter lightened the air, or hungry children scrapped, or a dog barked at an unknown presence in the nearby forest. The dance of life in the still northern forest.

Although the dogs were always hungry, they knew to keep a safe distance from the food; that if they got too close they would be the target of a stick or a stone, except for an old, skinny, one-eyed dog.

An old woman saw him staring at a fish baking on a rock beside her small fire. He slinked three steps closer, head low, tail down. Fish, not stones, consumed his mind until the old woman yelled, "Eeah!" and threw a stone through the evening's half-light.

It hit him on the ear of his blind side. Skinny blind dog yelped and scampered behind a lodge, his ear oozing blood.

On the other side of the village, Anakausuen burst out of his lodge, calling, "Enkoodabao, Enkoodabao, come now. The time is here."

Two old women were cleaning fish together. They looked up from their chores and smiled. The one said, "Anakausuen, his mind is outside him." The other responded, "A man is no good now," and they both laughed.

Enkoodabao was roasting a rabbit on a spit over her fire. Hearing Anakausuen's uncharacteristically frantic cry, she quickly pulled the spit off the fire and threw it toward a skinny dog with a bloody ear that was standing at the back of her lodge.

The dog sprang into action. He grabbed the half-roasted carcass and slipped behind the lodge, hoping not to be followed.

From her lodge Enkoodabao gathered her quill-decorated beaver-skin bag that held her primitive midwife utensils, lifted the small water pot from the floor, and rushed out to Anakausuen, spilling some of the water.

She found Kanti lying on a caribou skin laid over two reed mats which covered the fragrant balsam fir boughs that Anakausuen had brought two days earlier.

Their fragrance added a sense of sweet comfort which Kanti welcomed in her delicate condition. But her face was strained and she was breathing deeply. Holding her belly, she

sighed the groans of childbirth and whispered to herself, “I will not scream! I will not scream!”

Before Enkoodabao entered their lodge, she sent Anakausuen to get two more women. “Tell them to bring water and moss. I need balsam branches.” Then she entered and opened her beaver-skin bag, laid out a small assortment of clay cups, pots, and bone knives, and washed them and her hands in the pure water she had drawn from the nearby spring that flows into the lake. After drying them with the moss she had recently gathered from the forest floor, she was ready.

Then, the twins decided to rest from the adventure of birth and remained in their mother’s soft warmth a bit longer.



Enkoodabao’s skin was toughened like hide from many years in the sun and the challenging weather of the northern clime that was her home. Her kind face carried the lines of bark; her hair was the hue of moonlight.

But her hands and spirit were gentle from many years of escorting life into the world. Enkoodabao was both gentle and strong.

She came from a village far too where Sun comes to work. No one, including herself, knew her age. As a child, she became aware that she was the only woman of two-spirits in the village.

Her lodge was near Kanti’s. They visited frequently and had become good friends. One day, when Enkoodabao felt her relationship with Kanti was secure, she said to her, “Perhaps, Kanti, you know.”

“What, Enkoodabao, do I know?”

“That I am not as you are.”

"I know you are not of this village, and I know having a man is not important to you." Then, quite candidly, Kanti said, "You are a woman but you carry a man's name. I think you are a two-spirited woman. Is that what you mean?"

Enkoodabao shifted her eyes past Kanti to the grey jay that had just flitted to a nearby branch, and responded, "Yes, that is what I mean."

"Does it matter, Enkoodabao, if you are two-spirited?"

"I know it is good here with you and the People. In the other village it was bad."

"I am sorry for them," Kanti replied. "They no longer have a Good Woman to help them. Here, we teach our children that to live in harmony there must be balance between the woman way and the man way. It must be so within the individual, in the families, and in the village."

"We are all made better when two-spirited people are accepted among us. All of us are made better when we are free to be our truest selves."

The women of Enkoodabao's home village had not been kind to her. They didn't respect who she was or what she was. They thought she should be like they are and have a husband. But ever since she was a child, Enkoodabao knew that her affections were not to be shared with a man, but with another woman.

The women didn't understand this, so they teased her constantly and called her Enkoodabao, a man's name meaning "One Who Lives Alone."

However, some years later at an inter-village festival in the Moon of Long Sun, she met three women from Chief Tihkoosue's village. As they talked, they came to understand her "differentness" and that she was unhappy in her home. They said that did

About the author

This story is supported by the author's ten years' experience living in an isolated bush settlement in Canada's Western Arctic, around the geographic coordinates of 67°34'52.50"N / 134°46'21.95"W.

There, he traveled by dog team from October to May, slept in tents at -40 degrees Celsius, cut wood to heat the house and for his wife to cook with, hunted caribou in the Richardson Mountains and netted fish from the Peel and Mackenzie Rivers to feed his family and dog team. His wife made dryfish to keep for the winter months.

He felt the hot sun in July as it circled constantly above him, driving the thermometer to 30°C. He felt the south wind blow constantly for weeks in winter when the temperature rose from -60°C at night to a daytime high of -40°C, and a dim light brushed the southern horizon for only three hours a day.

Such rich, extensive experiences—coupled with the gentle ways of the people—are the intoxicating foundation on which he builds *Ancient Winds: Spirit Children*.

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