

Geist

by Cerine Hero

Petrichor filled the air.

The earth was wet and soft underneath his paws as he loped through the forest, winding between trees and thick brush. The damp air clung to his fur and filled his lungs with every breath, filling him with the sweet smells of the wood. Of rain, earth, moss, and mushrooms. The world was alive and lush now, relishing the downpour of heavy rain the night before. Food was plentiful, and he already had a full belly. Now he surveyed his domain, leaping from root to root with his tail fluttering behind him as he ran the borders of his territory.

Morning sunlight streaked down in lances through the leaves, the long spears of light wiggling and swinging as the breeze caught the treetops. Red fur flashed as the light swept across the jogging creature, nose low to the ground, smelling his way around the wood. He could smell the passage of slugs and mice across the dirt, but the tracks were old by now, and those creatures would be hidden from the light of the sun. His ears rang with the burble of water. The rain was still making its way across the land, gathering into the stream bed and where it decided to go after that was none of his concern. Still, he padded his way towards the noise, curious to see the water.

The stream was full and flowing, running over the worn and smoothed stones in the bed. Grasses rose high and lush on either bank where they were fed by the nutrients from upstream. An old tree had fallen across the stream, half rotted but still sturdy enough to carry some weight. Four dark paws leapt up onto the wood, claws gripping tight into the bark as he made his way across. He stopped in the center and sat down on his haunches, feeling the sun warming his fur from above and below as it reflected off the water. He turned sideways and looked down over the side of the trunk.

The long nose and pointed ears of a fox stared back at him. Ripples and waves shivered through his reflection as the water wobbled over the bed of smooth rocks. He took a moment to stare at his own face, golden eyes peering curiously back at him. Slowly, the fox cocked his head, his ear tilting out to one side. His bushy tail, hanging over the opposite side of the log, slowed to a stop.

Bubbling water filled his ears like white noise, dulling his hearing. His gaze was locked tight on his bright irises, and all other details blurred into washy, hazy gray. He could feel himself being pulled downwards, closer towards his reflection, into his eyes. The inside of his pupils was infinite black, and something within was whispering to him, caressing his thoughts. The sibilant hiss was as soft as feathers, like a lure of light within the darkness. It felt like his nose was plunged deep into the water so that his eyes could very nearly come together with his ethereal "other" beneath the surface. He was floating, adrift, weightless. The sunny sky and warm trees of the wood drew further away from his thoughts. The whispers were pulling him deeper down into the water, away from the wood and the sun and the earthy smell in the air, towards a dark, endless expanse. And he swam downwards, eagerly...

Snap!

Instinct roared back into his brain like a fire. The roar of lowly thoughts, so strong and visceral, drove the whispers and thoughts of sinking into the depths from his mind – to be forgotten all over again. Adrenaline flooded the fox and he stood upright on the log, pointing his ears towards the sound. It was a hare, rushing into the underbrush after seeing the fox leap into motion. If he was hungry, he would have given chase. But he wasn't, and didn't want to waste energy on prey with a head start. The fox sat back down and licked the back of his paw to groom. Below him, his reflection mirrored his every action. Every thought of the strange pull from the eyes in the water evaporated from his simple animal brain.

The fox jumped down from the log on the far bank, stretching and yawning. He had a den not far from here, where he could hole up for a while and nap until dusk, when he would be ready to hunt again and prey would be emerging from their holes. The fox shook out his fur and began to trot into the wild once more when he detected another noise on the edge of his hearing. It was distant but strange.

He stopped, ears perked upright as he turned to listen, every muscle in his body tensing at once with an instinctive need to flee.

Braying of dogs.

Horses, whinnying and trampling the ground with their hooves.

Rattling noise.

Voices.

And finally, the sound of a horn, like a horrific predator announcing its intent.

The fox hesitated too long. The horn had spurred the dogs to run into the brush. He could hear them crashing and howling and salivating, coming in his direction. The fox turned and ran, but they were fast and they were many. The hounds lunged across the stream, heedless to the water, wet paws mulching the tender earth as they caught the fox's scent and gave chase.

What was once pleasant air was now pumping in and out of his lungs as he ran, skipping over roots and squeezing between trunks. But the hounds were relentless, and each one stopped by an obstacle merely fell to the rear of the pack as the others overtook it. They swung out to either side of him, blocking his potential escape routes and fencing him in, tighter and tighter. The fox was fast, but he was surrounded, and his only avenue was up.

Leaping, the fox dug his claws into the bark of a tree. Teeth snapped closed just behind his tail as he scabbled his way upwards, raining pieces of bark down on the howling dogs on the ground below. They were too uncoordinated to truly climb, and were doing little more than make noise and rip the bark from the bole. The fox pulled himself higher, panting and trembling from stress. He flicked his tail left and right to keep his balance as he reached out and pulled himself onto a hanging branch thick enough to hold his weight. The branch trembled as he hunkered low, ears flat, trying not to look at the howling hunters barking at him from below. He hissed back at them, baring his fangs, but he was frightened, and he looked for a way to escape. This tree was isolated; there were no other branches he could leap to from here. Even attempting that was risky. He was no squirrel. But neither could he stay here, pinned in place.

The fox barely registered the voices coming closer, or the clatter of hooves on dirt from huge, strong animals. There was another horn, now very close. The dogs began howling as one, leaping on their hind legs and braying at the fox. Many figures came into view below the tree. They were humans, wrapped in weird pelts made from grass or other animals. They were painted with the colors of the earth, and they held long sticks tipped with shiny points that brought pain and death. Several of them were mounted, sitting on unfamiliar animals with long hair and covered in draped, colored pelts like the humans were. Their hooves dug deep into the mud around the tree, leaving clear tracks.

The leader of the human pack was a man with graying, receding fur on his head, who wore a soft, clean pelt of berry red on his shoulders. He looked up at the pinned, frightened fox and sighed wearily.

“Is that all?” the human said, his words rustling like meaningless wind in the fox's ears. He reached forward and pat the flank of his mount with his hand. “I thought they had found something more interesting.”

A second human, wearing boiled cow skin over green pelts, stepped forward. He had a long stick in his hand, pulled tight with tension by a string running between its ends. “Apologies, my lord. We can call back the dogs.”

The old human raised his hand and waved it dismissively. “No, no. I was merely hoping for something... exotic.” He sniffed in thought. “Besides, I can think of a place for it. I need a prey animal for the display. The hippogryph is due to be finished this week, and it needs something to hunt.”

“Yes, my lord,” the hunter replied. He took two more steps forward and signaled to another human mounted nearby. That human held a gold horn and blew two short notes. Immediately, the howling dogs relented, walking away from the tree and returning to the houndmaster.

The fox was too high, and panic scrambled his thinking. He yapped at the hunter down below,

but he was too afraid to move. Fluffing his fur and baring his teeth, he made himself look more menacing to the human to try to scare him away. But it didn't work. With a steely, steady hand, the hunter pulled a wood branch from a pouch on his hip and placed it with the long stick in his hand. The fox's sharp ears heard the creak of wood as the stick bent backwards.

"Mind not to damage it," the old human reminded him. "Behind the foreleg."

"Yes, my lord."

There was a *twang* and a sudden burst of motion. That was enough to finally jolt the fox into moving. He pushed with his paws and leapt from the branch, but it was too late. The arrow pierced his ribs, and the world whirled in circles as he plunged towards the ground. Everything faded into red first, then dark. He didn't feel the pain. The hunter was skilled.

He just felt cold and never struck the ground.

An eternity passes in silent dreams.

The fox opened his eyes again, as if waking from a long and cold winter. He was someplace else. It was no longer daytime in the woods, nor was he surrounded by the comfortable sights of his home forest. But neither was it dark, for a dull twilight washed over him. His body was stiff and rigid after laying for so long, but he pushed his paws underneath his body and righted himself. A blunt ache in his side, right behind his left foreleg, gave him trouble, but it was nothing more than an echo now.

The land around him was gray and dead, with dusty sand beneath his feet and high rock walls on either side of the winding path before him. The air was still, and the fox realized he wasn't breathing. Nor did he feel hungry or frightened. He simply... was. Above him churned clouds rolling in a spiral pattern, glowing from within with a nimbus of pale blue soul-light. There was no sun, but a silver moon hung ominously beneath the clouds, moving slowly across the sky. The terrifying unnaturalness of it did not shake the fox. He simply stared, confused, and then turned away. He looked behind himself, expecting to see, perhaps, the mouth of the trail he was set to follow, the winding chasm yawned ever further backwards behind him. He saw his tail and hips in his vision. The redness of his fur had bled to ash, matching the melancholy of the world.

The fox put one paw in front of the other, leaving a long line of tracks in the sand. He walked for what felt like forever, listening to the howl of airless wind in his ears. Beyond that constant, muted hiss, there was no sound at all. The sand did not crunch beneath his pads. His heart did not push blood through his veins. It was all stillness and quiet and terrible peace.

He walked more, feeling no fatigue or hunger. It could have been days he wandered alone, following this path, but there was no way to tell time. The moon wandered the sky overhead in no sense of rhythm or pattern, and no feature ever stuck out from the rocky walls on either side of his narrow road. The fox receded into his head, letting his paws trudge on without thinking, hanging his muzzle low towards the sand.

Little beast...

He slowly raised his head. The words had touched him, splashing his mind with water after years of drought. The whisper felt achingly familiar and yet unknown to him. A part of him, deep down, knew he had heard their grace upon his thoughts before, but never so clearly. The fox stopped walking and looked about, but nothing had changed. Sand, walls, clouds, moon... the world was eternal gray.

Then the flutter of wings finally broke the silence. The fox looked up to the top of the cliffs hanging above him as a bird settled onto the ledge, wings held outwards from its body. It had a craned neck tucked tight against its collar, and eyes that glowed with the same light as the clouds above. A vulture, feaster on the dead. The carrion bird slowly tucked its wings down, eyes fixed on the fox below. But it made no move. It merely watched and waited. The fox stared back for a while, perfectly still. When nothing happened, he began to put one paw in front of the other again, resuming his march. The whisper left a tingling sensation in the back of his mind, however, and the more he thought about it, the more he could feel it reaching back to him again, piercing through the dull gray.

Hear our call, little one. Little thing, lost to us...

He stopped again, listening to the empty sound of the whispers inside his ears. The words came from nowhere, but they brushed across his mind and warmed him from within. More fluttering of wings echoed down from the top of the cliffs. He looked up and beheld more of the vultures appearing as if from the air itself, joining the first in their silent vigil. Their stoic gazes grew more menacing as they watched his every move. Was he to walk this endless road? Was that his lot? The vultures offered no explanation or guidance. They merely watched from above, blue eyes piercing the gray.

They want to take you from us. Do not follow them. Hear us, little one. Listen to our voice.

The fox took a step backwards. Above, the eldritch vultures ruffled and hissed, fanning their wings in agitation. They knew. The fox tried to ignore them, leaning his head down and folding his ears back. The voice... he listened to the voice.

Come to us, little one. Come back. Return to where you belong.

The fox wanted to go back. The vultures were closing in, circling overhead. Their angry hisses filled the air, shattering the everlasting silence of this place. Several landed around him, looming high above the small fox. He did not realize how large they were, so far above. They towered like humans, long beaks emerging from folded cloaks of darkness. Icy, dead eyes peered through his body. They wanted to take him towards oblivion. He didn't want to go. The fox listened to the voice and their promises.

Little beast, do not fear. You are one of ours. Come home.

The sand around his paws began to swirl, sucking him down. The fox did not fear. The voice in his mind was soft and reassuring. He could not resist it. The sand pulled his legs and tail down into its depths. This sinking feeling felt so familiar, so natural. He had done it before, when the whispers had been quiet and distant. But now, free from the shackles of his old mind, he followed them downwards. The vultures hissed again and thrashed at the sand with their claws futilely, but the fox was gone. He vanished beneath the surface, and the flowing sand grew still again.

He drifted down into the lightless depths, away from the grayness and emptiness. Pressure squeezed his body on all sides, holding him still. He couldn't move or breathe see, but he could tell he was sinking deeper. He was going someplace *other*. Towards an endless well that spiraled downwards in an endless staircase of night. The fox sank deeper, his mind becoming one with the darkness until all the lights of thought and feeling went out.

Welcome back, little thing... Oh, how we missed you...

He couldn't move. He couldn't see. His body felt dull and stiff. His mind raced with alien thoughts like wildfire. Why? Why was he thinking? Why could he feel? He was numb, sensation slowly awakening in his limbs. Primal instinct grated against his thinking. Part of his mind wanted to gnash and bark and flee, but this other part wanted to know what he was trying to flee *from*. He couldn't see! He wanted to see!

The world was a stabbing blob of light and color, unfocused and blurry. The fox squinted his eyes, pushing his will into his face in a mental demand that his vision focus. Slowly, shapes resolved. He squinted more as a black beak appeared in his view, open and lunging towards him. An instant reaction of fright and panic welled up from his primal brain, but he pushed it down. The beak wasn't moving. It was frozen in place, just like he was. Behind the beak was an animal not unlike the ones that the humans had ridden before, but its feet terminated in the curved talons of a bird. Feathered wings were spread wide behind the creature as it swooped down to attack. It was held aloft by strings and wooden rods propping up its body, and its eyes were glassy and unfocused.

It was very dead. But it didn't smell of rot.

The fox eyed the wooden rods holding the other creature in place. They were tied to the animal with twine, propping up its forelegs. He pulled against them, but he was firmly fastened in place. Spinning his eyes around in their sockets and struggling to twist his head, the fox took in his surroundings. He was inside a human building, which he had only ever seen from a distance. The walls were painted forest green, and leather-covered chairs sat facing a hearth with a crackling fire. He was mounted on a platform on one side of the room, as prey for the larger, deadlier animal beside him. There were other creatures lining the room, on stands, on the walls, on the floor. They were all dead.

What was this? What had they done to him? Pain ached in his left side. He remembered. They killed him. The old man. The man with the weapon. It was the last thing he could remember.

They killed me, he thought. *They killed me!*

An alien sensation began to flood through him. He felt hot; sweltering under his fur. It was like a pounding ache that slammed into him over and over, a phantom feeling of blood pulsing through veins. But nothing beat within him. His body was cold and still. The fox struggled, fighting against the stiffness of his body and the restraints pinning him into this position of vulnerability and fear. He wanted free. He wanted to howl. He wanted to rip and tear and gnash and shred! This feeling was raw and it was overwhelming, seething from inside out.

The whole room shivered and creaked. The fire in the hearth flickered, pulling inwards for a moment before puffing back against the brick wall and rolling up the chimney. Waves of thick pressure slammed through the air, knocking objects from the walls. The windows rattled in their frames. Unseen power grasped the room like the hand of a giant and began to *squeeze*. Walls buckled and wooden trim split and fragmented. The splinters of wood whipped around the room like a hurricane, embedding themselves in the walls and the other animals.

Emotion rushed forth from the fox like a flooding river after a deluge. He was boiling. He twisted and pushed, breaking the restraints holding him to the display. The joints of his legs didn't listen to him, and he stumbled, falling face-first onto the fake grass under him. He planted his paws and stood, forcing his body to listen. Something within him was ready to burst as the trophy room shivered in twisted, the wooden beams splintering and plaster cracking and falling into pieces that whipped across the room as if carried on a storm.

The fox threw his head back and howled, feeling the explosion of emotion ripple outwards from him like a wave.

Anger!

Wrath!

Rage!

Mounted ducks ripped from their places and flew across the room. A hulking bear was torn in half and the sawdust filling its pelt whirled around in the storm of rage. Thick beams from the ceiling

sheared in half and fell, bursting through the floorboards. The room tore apart at the seams in a chaotic maelstrom of debris. Flaming logs from the hearth were whipped from the bricks and landed among the room, catching the carpet and furniture alight.

The fox still felt a cold fury in his chest as he let his howl fade. The half-collapsed room was aflame, the patches of fire spreading up the walls and consuming the displays. The destruction made him feel better. How dare they put him in here! The fox jumped down from the display stand, stumbling slightly as his body tilted awkwardly. He could feel his pulse in his body like a fleeting memory, and as he walked, he could feel a grinding in his joints. What had they done to him? That arrogant old man. The hunter... All of them. He could see their faces in the flicker of flames around him.

The room was filling with smoke and the fire was spreading. A sudden flash of insight told the fox to keep well away from the flames. His animal brain, laying dormant beneath his newer, stronger thoughts and this wellspring of furious anger, feared the fire, too, but this was more than that – a sense of peril that felt intrinsic to what he was. His eyes watched as the flames eagerly consumed the mounted animals in the room – the *other* mounted animals. The fox turned to the door. It was closed; impossible for him to open. But he needed out.

Something touched his mind, brushing across his thoughts and focusing them forward. The caress felt familiar and comforting, and he followed it. The unfocused power destroying the room swirled in tune with his thoughts, flooding forward and wrapping itself, invisibly, around the door. The fox wanted the door *open*. So he grabbed it with this force and he began to pull. The door shivered in place, tied tight to the wall by metal hinges and locks. The fox bared his fangs, pressing his anger into his will. More... *more*... He wanted the door *open*!

Purple light shimmered within the fox's eyes, and a substance like translucent, swirling, violet liquid wreathed about the door. The wooden frame of the door bent and cracked, the wooden planks bursting as it collapsed inwards upon itself. Metal hinges squealed and buckled, the rivets holding them to the wall pinging free and flying into the distance. The fox tore the door from the wall and threw it, smashing it into the brick hearth behind him.

There was a hall with arched supports on the far side of the portal. Smoke poured forth from the open doorway as several humans came to investigate the noise. They stumbled backwards in shock as they realized the building was aflame, and some were ready to run for help with another of their number cried out in alarm. Within the billowing smoke was a pair of glowing purple eyes, low to the ground. Slowly, the figure of a fox stalked forth, head and tail held low as he emerged from the smoke. Then, in his wake followed a number of firebrands – objects licked with both raging orange flames and the shimmering purple glow of unnatural power – floating in midair, as if carried by the spirits of the dead. The fox looked left and right and threw the flaming pieces of wood across the hallway, spreading the flames as he kept walking.

The human servants finally broke and ran, rushing to evacuate everyone from the building.

The lord of the manor was not home that evening, but when word reached him of smoke on the horizon in the direction of his manor, the old man and his entourage swiftly rushed to their mounts and rode back to the estate. The black column of smoke stood stark against the darkening sky as he and his retainers rode hard across the countryside, racing the fading light. Slowly, most of the smoke vanished into the night sky, save for where it glowed an angry crimson.

The mounted riders neared the final bend on the hill towards the manor when a maid from the house came running back in their direction, swinging her arms and screaming. The lord tugged his reins and drew his horse to a halt in front of the woman.

“My lord!” she gasped, pointing backwards towards the manor. “There is a demon! A demon in the house!”

The lord was stunned, but only for a moment. The woman was mistaken, he was sure of it, but

his house was under attack, and he would not idly sit by and watch. He threw back his cloak and grasped the sword hanging from his hip, pulling it loose with a hiss of steel against leather. Behind him, several of his armed retainers followed his lead.

“Move aside!” he shouted, rearing his horse on its back legs. The woman threw herself aside from the road and laid on the side of the hill, allowing the riders to pass and head towards the manor. The lord rode out ahead, teeth gritted and cloak flying from his shoulders. As he passed the bend, he could see his beloved manor completely engulfed in flames. The eastern wing was all but cinders and the western side of the house was a blazing conflagration. There was nothing left to save. The lord commanded his horse to turn and slow, bringing them to a halt on the road as he watched the house burn to the ground. His face twitched in irritation. So much... lost. His collection. Trophies. Paintings... all naught but ashes now. He saw the servants huddled by a stand of trees on the far side of the lawn surrounding the bonfire that once was the manor house. He would deal with them later.

Because his eyes were fixed on something within the flames. A dark shadow, perched on a rise of earth between him and the fire. It was small, sitting down like a dog, and within its dark silhouette wreathed in raging flame were two points of violet light, almost entirely swallowed up by the brightness of the fire around it. The demon fixed its gaze on him, and even from here, he could feel the unfathomable depths of anger behind those eyes.

I have come for you, they said.

The lord's bravado fled him as easily as the grip of his sword slid from his fingers. The sword landed on the dirt beside his horse's hooves. With trembling hands, he gripped his mount's reins and pulled, yanking the animal back around and spurring him down the road. He rushed past his retainers as they galloped to catch up, spooking the horses and filling the night with the sound of whinnies and hoofbeats. He fled, away from the fire and the dark spirit that had come to punish him.

The retainers, in their confusion, turned and looked towards the place where their lord had previously been staring, but there was nothing there but empty lawn and burning house.

He threw another log onto the fire. Sparks and embers flew upwards on the updraft as the campfire burned merrily. The hunter wiped his hands and returned to his things. It was getting late, and night had fallen completely. He strung up the day's hunts on a rope looped around a tree branch, so nothing would be encouraged to come eat them on his behalf. Then he removed his bow from his shoulder and unstrung it, laying it down beside the rock and stump he had arranged to be his seat by the fire.

The hunter settled down on the rock and produced his knife from its sheath on his thigh. In his other hand, he set a brace of arrows and began to sharpen their points. It was a calm night, insofar as he was aware. The woodlands around him and the dark sky blocked his view of the raging fire and column of smoke a few miles away, and even if the wind carried the scent to him, he would think it from his own campfire.

The night stretched on, and the stars slowly spun overhead. The hunter's eyelids grew heavy. He set his last arrow down and jabbed his knife into the stump beside him so he could reach up and rub the palms of his rough hands against his face.

Something moved in the woods nearby. The hunter sat upright on instinct, listening to the sound. He stood, drawing his cloak in both hands and holding it wide. He looked towards the sound and made himself appear larger and dangerous, stalking forward to try to frighten off the beast. Nothing else moved. The hunter looked around, squinting. He peered towards the day's kills, swinging loose under the tree branch...

But they weren't there.

The hunter spun around, returning to his camp and thrusting a hand out to grab his knife he had left on the stump, but his fingers grasped nothing but air and dry wood. His knife was gone. The hunter's heart was racing. He ran his hands all around the stump, searching for it. Where could it have

gone?

He felt more than heard the presence behind him, like an itch against his scalp. Slowly, the hunter turned around, looking backwards over his shoulder. On the very edge of his vision, the glow of firelight washed over the intruder to his camp, and the hunter let out a sigh of relief, laughing quietly to himself for getting so worked up over so little.

It was just a fox.

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