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A Fine and Handsome Fox

The approach of Summer Solstice is the tide pulling at the night time sky this time of year. Its rising surge which pushes the sun farther north of my woods than it will be all year distracts me from sleep almost as insistently as the laughter heard through the trees. And tomorrow the crescent moon, I feel, will be in apogee, far away like the sun.

I know Djidalda will be mourning then, for he loves the moon almost as much as he loves the star Algol of the constellation Perseus. It is a droll whim of his to call Algol his own. Once he had a nymph in the woods, and at his moment of shuddering climax, Algol, his star, was eclipsed by the moon. He played with the notion that his two lovers were fighting for his attention, chagrined by the nymph, and he sent her back into her green pool. He spent the remainder of the night singing consolation to both the star and moon, while the nymph sulked.

I am not hungry tonight, having fed on a nest of young rabbits earlier. My bed of brown leaves is warm and comfortable and there is no real need to roam. But the rise of Solstice nags at my own inner tides which correspond to the shifting of the stars and I can't ignore the power.

“Little fox, let me show you my starry lair.” Djidalda once swept me from my forest into the sky so that I could dance with him in what he considers his real home. He is bound to the earth for all purposes, his mother having been a powerful queen among the earth spirits. His

father, a mere zephyr, did not bequeath to him the power to reign as he would want, among the stars. It is the stars he loves, but her power was greater than the zephyr's.

The witches are deep in the woods tonight, I hear their talk and laughter, wonder what fanciful notion they are indulging. Their noise floats to me like brown leaves in the breezes. I rarely spy upon them because, being ones to act upon every whim, they might find me and want me as a pet. I avoid the witches.

I feel a bit lonely knowing the sun and moon both are surging away from my woods. My fox's soul reflects the sky's movements and when Solstice comes, I feel as though the sun were trying to pull me somewhere I could never follow.

Then I lift my head sharply as I hear an uproar, and automatically I sniff the air.

The witches are screaming in surprise and annoyance and I know that Djidalda and other gods of the forest have disrupted the coven ceremony. It is a favorite sport of theirs to tease the witches who try so hard to learn their secrets.

Eventually the noise dies down and I settle my muzzle upon my paws again. Still, I cannot sleep. I hear the gods laughing now, I think the witches have fled. My senses are keen tonight. I perceive the Erkling lumbering south of me, his hair full of leaves, a slippery army of salamanders tumbling after him. He nibbles bark from the trees and gathers herbs to mix and blend. I know the Hudiken is afoot, a ghastly satyr, a clumsy trickster. He would eat me if he could, awkwardly stroking my rust soft fur, thinking anything he puts in his mouth will be his. And I feel one of the bears dozing nearby. He is invisible though, for in a generous moment and for no apparent reason, a forest god endowed the bears with the magic of invisibility, so that they

can slip unseen through the woods. The bears are sorcerers now, though they are unsure what to do with their new powers; sometimes the gods cast puzzling gifts upon us, and we act grateful for their eccentric generosity though we are unsure how to use these gifts. The gods are playful magicians, half-crazed angels.

I leave my earthy bed and trot through the woods to the hill. I hear a sleepy grumbling from the invisible bear, but that is the only sound; my paws barely touch the forest's brown carpet.

On the hill I can watch the stars, contemplate the mysteries they form with their shifting tides and patterns. The night time sky speaks this way, using the stars as its silent words. It gives lessons, shows us things, tells stories. I can often read the stars, Djidalda showed me how, but each time I grasp an idea shown, some other quadrant of the sky becomes apparent to me, and I must take that into account also and the story becomes impossibly complex. During the day the clouds talk with their slowly moving shape-changing. I read clouds more easily than I do stars.

I hear a distant shriek, then from farther into the woods shoots up a spray of filmy light which goes careening across the blackness. It is two gods, I think, carrying a witch who is screaming and laughing at the same time.

I return to my nest and this time I sleep for awhile, dreaming strangely. The cries of the playing gods follow me into my deepest cavern which is lined with windows looking out into other worlds. There are some I can pass through, some that are barred to me. I see places emitting distant, echoing voices where I think I once lived, and blurred ones in which I will live

one day. Tonight in my lair I curl quietly in my safe corner, ignoring all magic except for the god's laughter.

I waken in warmth and closeness. I feel a dim pang of hunger and a brown mouse darts near my paw as though in sacrifice to my appetite. The paw leaps out and the mouse is mine. I think a spell has been done here during the night for my desire to be indulged so effortlessly. I sniff the ground near my nest of leaves and I know. I detect the faint, musky scent of absinthe and vervain scattered by a gnome's hand. They are from the earth, the gnomes and their leader is Gob. When the planets are aligned to their liking they often creep about their favorite places casting spells of love and prosperity. They are spirits of great humor though, and can play tricks if that is their mood.

The ground is dry and crackling under me as I roll myself fully awake in a spot of sun. I smell vervain on my pelt and wonder that the gnome got close enough to sprinkle it upon my fur without waking me.

My odd discontent lingers despite the spell and with it comes a helpless tingling through my body. And then I am laying still in the spatter of sunlight, but now I am man. The gods are cruelly careless with their powers and Djidalda once whimsically endowed me with the ability to shape change. Except that I do not know yet how to control it completely and I never wanted to shape change anyhow. Still, the gods expect gratitude for their gifts, even those unasked for and unwanted. I can become man by thinking about it, but also I sometimes become man when disturbed or uncertain. I do not like the feeling of it; I seem large and exposed, vulnerable. I know that if Hudiken should pursue me I would not be able to run as quickly as I'd need to, and

that the strange body would not be able to dart through the brambles nimbly enough to evade him.

I stare through colorful eyes at the forest, envisioning myself as fox, sliding silently, agilely among the trees. Then I *am* fox again, and I wish for another mouse, and there he is.

The gnome's love powder has left me hungry for affection and even though I realize the season is approaching Solstice and the moon is near apogee, I seek out Djidalda. He may not be happy today with his moon so far away, but I am his pet. I don't know how I won the love of a god; but it is true that my pelt is sleek and glowing amber, my muzzle is honed to a snowy, pert point and my eyes are bright and deep. The gods are earthy in their love of beauty and I am a fox of svelte shape and rich color.

I find Djidalda lounging among the limbs of a curving oak tree and today it pleases him to take the form of man as I did so unwittingly before. Immediately he descends from the tangled branches to stroke my fur. I curl beside the god and though the uneasy, restless dissatisfaction remains with me and I know he might well be able to locate and assuage it, I dare not make the request. It is a bad day for him and I'm wary of rousing his annoyance. Instead, I flatter him by asking for stories of the sky, his father's abode.

"But I must have told you all my stories a dozen time over, little fox," Djidalda protests, even though I realize he is at that very moment thinking of one to tell.

"I like hearing them again and again..."

Djidalda frowns pensively then says, "Here is one I haven't told you. It's about a friend of mine, a god named Ionid. His mother was a zephyr, his father a fire spirit who lived far up in

the north where the glaciers never thawed and where he was servant to Aurora, goddess of dawn. Aurora was in love with her servant, this fire spirit who added the brightest colors to her sunrises. But when he realized this and tried to approach her to reciprocate, she shunned him since a goddess, no matter how great her love, rarely will lower herself to the elemental spirits. Meantime, the lady zephyr waited upon Boreas, god of the north wind and who was son of Aurora. Boreas loved the zephyr, but like his mother, was too aware of his superiority to show it. It seemed inevitable that when Aurora and Boreas combined their powers with the aid of their spirit helpers, to create the great, dazzling northern rainbow you yourself have seen often, that the lady zephyr and the fire spirit should meet. And meet they did, giving one another the love their masters would not partake of. They consummated their passion in a particularly brilliant myriad of fire colors never again to be seen by earth, and out of this union came Ionid, a god from the moment he awoke and saw the spectacle of light around him. But the next thing he saw was the fury of Aurora and Boreas, both jealous at the idea of their rejected lovers finding happiness elsewhere. Since Ionid was obviously a god they could not harm him. But quickly, before his rapidly blooming power could flourish and oppose them, they hurled him into space to become trapped in that filmy pocket of fire and wind which holds the earth to the sun. ‘You are a god,’ admitted Boreas, ‘but your kingdom will be this zone of fire and wind, which ebbs and flows with the solar tides, which can bear no seeds and hold no ground, but is merely the vapor that shrouds nothingness!’ Since the curse was uttered so vehemently and since Ionid, still awakening from his birth was vulnerable, he did indeed become the god of nothingness.”

Djidalda looks down at me, pleased with his own story.

“What happened to Ionid?” I asked. “Is he still there?”

“Yes,” nods Djidalda, “But he is happy there, to the chagrin of Aurora and Boreas. The first thing he saw when his life began was an explosion of beauty created at the very moment he himself was born. This memory followed him into space, though he went mad quite soon (for the solar wind distorted and pummeled him unmercifully). Yet he is a joyous god, reigning over nothing, haunted only by beauty.”

“And what happened to his parents, the zephyr and the fire spirit?” I ask, and see Djidalda quickly inventing something.

“My fox,” he says, “they fled far south to the other cold place, where there are similar colored lights, only these are over icy oceans, barren hard land...”

I rest my muzzle upon Djidalda’s knee and he strokes my fur some more. Then I ask suddenly, “Did you chase the witches last night, Djidalda? I heard them screaming. What were they doing?”

Djidalda laughs, remembering the witches. “They’re preparing for Midsummer’s Eve, my fox. The forest will be alive that night with lights and dancing. My star, I forecast, will be bright then, and both Venus and Mars will be visible.”

Then Djidalda laughs again and nudges me from his lap so he may stand. “You’ve put me in a good mood my little fox!” he cries happily and to reward me, a hundred brown mice are suddenly at my paws, immobilized by the god’s powers, squeaking in terror. I yip happily over them and laughing once more, Djidalda is gone.

I have eaten a lot this morning, so when the god vanishes, I release the mice, who scurry off into the leaves, screeing with fright.

I am lonely again, already. When Djidalda had laughed, I had wanted to ask him to correct this discontentment, knowing he would grant my wish. But the mice were his gift and I'd hesitated too long, afraid to ask for more. And now he is gone.

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The woman was once fox, I see it clearly.

I am on the edge of the woods, crouched flat in the brush. She walks lightly, eyes bright and watchful. When she picks up my scent, not knowing that she has, I see her lift her chin as though to detect its source. She was once fox, and she knows I am near, or the part of her that is still fox knows. The rest of her continues along the road, swinging a basket in one arm, but the fox part yearns toward me, curious and fox-friendly. I see the secrets of the woods still half remembered in her brown eyes and I wonder if she becomes fox in her dreams.

Then she passes by and away, and I slip further back into the woods. I see her pass by often and each time she knows I am there, she detects my scent. I would like to step out onto the road to show her that I am a handsome fox, loved by a god, but I am afraid she would see me with her human eyes only, no matter how powerfully the fox part recognizes me. Other people pass by too, occasionally. Some of them are mostly human, but some are still animal close to the surface. There is a man who was snake and who, without seeing it himself, cringes at a bird's rustling overhead, tingles with panic when a winged predator's shadow crosses his path. He knows, somehow, that he should not be out in the open; his snake wisdom still lurks, warning him of old dangers. There are two children I've seen, a boy and a girl who have been drawn together because they were both once wolf. Each of them, in the past, sensed they were destined to loneliness, for their fierce, independent pride frightened away potential friends. They found

one another one night, both having slipped from their sleeping houses to race with abandon across a field under the full moon, neither understanding the need that drove them. In that moonlit field, they recognized one another immediately, and they are now inseparable. When they laugh together, the laughter is high and prolonged, ecstatically mournful, and it calls to powers no one else sees or hears. They still frighten the other children, but it no longer matters to them, for they are together now, forever.

I laugh often at an old woman who was once frog! I see her on the road pausing by a small pond along the way. She carefully looks to make sure no one is watching. Then she pulls off her shoes and stockings and stands in the pond, old head thrown back as she revels in the feel of her toes curling and flexing in the warm mud. How she would love to leap full body into the silty pond but of course she cannot – She is a respectable old woman! Why would she do such a thing?

How I want to ask for Djidalda's help, but I am not sure what exactly I need. I know that my restlessness abated for a moment as the woman drew near to pass... Still, as human she would not be satisfied with me, may even be frightened of me. And another thought: Djidalda is jealous, I am his pet. If I asked him to make her fox again, he might be angry with me.

I am hungry again and wish I had saved some of the mice. But the gnome's powder must still be strong upon me, for I catch a rabbit easily.

I sleep in a new nest I find of amber leaves that match my fur. Faraway I hear the birds jumbling noisily in the tree tops, the rustling of whispering forest... I dream of her as fox and when I waken I realize that my dreams have straightened out my muddled thoughts; I now know what to do. I will go to her as man and will bring her to the forest so that she will remember its

secrets, become bewitched again. If I am brave, and if she consents, I will ask for Djidalda's help in making her fox again. Should I lack this courage, then I will stay man and be with her that way.

Now my discontent is gone and I alternately play and nap all day in the woods. The night comes again and the wolves are heard singing to the moon, calling to their huntress. Hudiken is far away and that always makes me happy. A flock of nymphs croon sweetly to their own reflections in a dark glassy pool, awaiting some lover to walk among them. Then they will fight over him, battle prettily for his affection. I approach their luminous green glow, let them fawn over me. One of them bites my paw with small white teeth; they are sensual creatures and if something looks and feels enticing, they must taste it as well. I let them kiss and taste me until Djidalda arrives in a spray of milky light. Then they forget me and run to him, touch and caress him. He is in human form, still, which they love; he's beautiful tonight with golden hair and they all want to be his. He endures their clinging embraces, but I see melancholy in his face; his sun and moon are faraway and he is bound to the earth, can only visit them. I understand how he feels, remembering her, imagining her as fox. How Djidalda wants the stars! How I want her, as fox!

The laughter of some other god is heard from deeper in the woods and some of the nymphs run eagerly in that direction. They stumble comically over an invisible bear who then lumbers confused and angry off into the woods. Annoyed, the nymphs shriek and then giggle, chase after the laughing god again.

I roll in the grass, yapping in glee and Djidalda sweeps me up and suddenly we are flying into the stars.

“Where are we going?” I gasp breathlessly.

“To Perseus!” he cries, “To star Algol!”

And we spin through the night, past fire after fire, close enough at times for me to glimpse the blazing, steaming rivers of flame coursing across the surfaces. Then we enter Perseus, a sea of blinding torches.

“There!” shouts Djidalda, and his golden hair has become a flaming cascade of fiery color, sparking behind us like a comet’s tail.

We sweep around Algol letting its heat reach out and snap at us, but he goes closer still, and I cringe against him, growing frightened; unlike Djidalda, I am totally of the earth, am wary of fire’s dangerous splendor. I do not belong here.

“Look...” he tells me, and fearfully I peer from the folds of his cloak, my muzzle barely poking through. Then I see her. She is a fire queen wrapped in flames. She walks beside a bubbling, burning river of blue, its fiery waves crackling at her feet. She is beautiful, with skin as pale as my snowy muzzle, hair redder than the fire she dwells in. Then I see her lift a white hand to Djidalda and her brown eyes are wistful and melting in the heat. A gentle contraction of pain crosses her face briefly and, since she is Algol’s queen, I see in the distance a black mountain tremble and shudder in response to her sorrow, and begin spraying forth stinging red lava from its crater.

Then we are leaving the star, ascending into space again. And looking back, I see something that breaks my fox’s heart a little. With the red lava exploding around her, she herself

flies like a meteor into the sky to try and follow us. But the fire, her heart's element, pulls her down again and she sinks resignedly back into its glow.

We sweep through the stars again and feeling a dampness wet my paw I look up to see that Djidalda, my beautiful god, is crying green tears. I nuzzle helplessly against him as we fly, wishing there were some way I knew to comfort a god.

“I'm sorry, Djidalda,” I finally say and idly he pats my fur, his tears ebbing already. But I know now, why it is with such irony that he calls Algol his own; he will never have its rich fire, just as she, its queen, will never meet him in the forest's beds. I wonder if she bitterly calls earth her own...

We hover over our woods soon and I see through the thick tree tops the green glow of the nymphs like fire flies chasing whatever lovers they spy. A blaze of light deeper in tells me the witches are back again to try to complete their rituals without the interruption of gods' play.

“The summer will be a revel!” Djidalda cries joyfully, to forget his sorrow. “We soaked ourselves in rain on the first of May for luck throughout the season!” he reminds me. Occasionally it amuses him to participate in some of the queer superstitions of the witches. “Midsummer's Eve is approaching, then in July we will see the Milky Way cascading across the sky! Lammas after that! And I will not miss a single glimpse of Mercury this year! I have charted out in my head when it will show before sunrise in the east and after sunset in the west.”

Djidalda is greatly influenced by Mercury, no doubt because of his zephyr father, and he chases its elusive course across the sky with mad fervor.

“And look!” he commands me, pointing my muzzle toward the correct quadrant of the sky. “Venus has been with us in the evenings since January, but soon we’ll have to look for her in the mornings.”

“Why, Djidalda?”

“The greedy sun claims her for a time,” he says, “but will send her back again...”

He settles us comfortably in the arms of a tree. We see a dryad peek out from her door in its trunk, for she feels every breeze that passes through her home. Djidalda looks down at her with interest and I know where he will spend the night.

“Djidalda,” I ask, because my curiosity makes me brave. “Why did you show me the fire queen?”

He is silent for a long time and I’m afraid I’ve annoyed him. Then he sighs and strokes my fur again.

“Mercury teases me,” he says. “Venus will leave soon for a spell. But my moon is returning and so will they all, eventually. They will leave again and return again. Most of the things I love are stolen from me and brought back again by the same fires and winds that bewitch me. I am a happy god because the tides always return to me and all I must do is wait for them. But I’ll never have her, the queen, even if I were to give up all else to live on her star with her. The earth never relinquishes that which is born of it, the same way fire burns forever that which it has claimed. I am a god, but I was created by the elements and they are my masters.”

Again Djidalda sighs, and I am saddened by his gods’ wisdom.

“Why did I show her to you?” he repeats my question. “It is a terrible thing to love something and to know that powers greater than yourself will never let you have it. But to love something and have it within your grasp! Now that is a wonderful thing! You, little fox, have cause for jubilation for you’ve fallen in love with your own element and no fire or wind will hold you from it!”

I stare up at Djidalda, amazed. But of course, he is a god and knows all that goes on within the earth and its spirits. And he is not jealous!

Then, before I begin yipping with elation, I remember my problem.

“Djidalda...” I begin.

“I know, she is human,” he interrupts, then looks at me sternly. “Don’t you have a god as a friend? Bring her to me, little fox. I would never deny love to you.”

Then I do yap with happiness and pounce ecstatically upon Djidalda, nearly toppling us from our tree. Below, we hear the dryad bustling about in her home, confused at the tumbling above. Djidalda smiles to himself and I know enough to say goodbye. He sets me down on the forest carpet and I scamper into the brush, leaving him to his dryad.

* * *

I will go to her as man so as not to frighten her, and I’ll bring her into this leafy cavern, into Djidalda’s spell. We will crouch together in the woods and I’ll whisper secrets to her and soon she’ll remember. I will nip at her sleek neck and tell her how we will revel with the various tricksters and visiting wraiths on Midsummer’s Eve.

I will tell her about the forest and warn her of that spot she must never set her silky paw, for Satan himself once copulated there with some earth spirit, creating the satyr, Hudiken.

I will show her the beauties and terrors of the forest.

We will spy upon the witches and together tease the Erklings...