

You have been running for a long time. Twilight turns the sky above you a searing orange, and all around you the trees cast long, slender shadows. You can hear the men pursuing you - their heavy hoofbeats on the frozen earth, voices, the braying of the hounds. The breath of their horses clouds the air. It is late in the autumn, and cold. Already the trees have dropped their leaves in browns and reds on the forest floor, and your ruddy fur blends into their cover. This camouflage allows you a moment to catch your breath. Your legs are shaking from exertion, and your heart beats frantically like a bird trapped behind your ribs. This is the most afraid you have ever been, and the most helpless. You are not a powerless creature. You have sharp teeth. You are swift and clever. But you know that you are no match for a human with a rifle, especially not now, when exhaustion makes your vision cloud at the edges.

The fallen leaves conceal your appearance, but not your scent. Somewhere close to you, far too close, the dogs bellow in their rough, hungry voices, and fear lances cold and deadly through your tired little body. You are up and running again, weaving blindly around trees, over and under deadfall. All you can hear now is your own blood rushing in your ears. The rhythmic pounding of it drowns out everything else, including the crack of gunfire that splits the sky and shakes you apart from the inside.

You keep running. The dogs are quiet now, and you can no longer hear the voices of the hunters. Around you, the forest is becoming dense and dark. The trees crowd closer together, the dead and dying leaning against the strong. Underfoot, roots and brambles tangle and twist. Your body aches. You know that you should keep going and find somewhere safe to hide while you recover from the chase, but by the time you reach the small clearing alongside a stony creekbed, you are too tired to keep going. You lie down in the leaves.

"Hello little one."

Her voice comes from above you. It is a dry whisper of bone against bone, susurrus and haunting, but sweet all the same. You must have fallen asleep. It's night now, and the silence that blankets you is complete. You open your eyes. Above you stands a white deer, her pale fur almost luminous in the dark. Her legs are long and slender, and her sharp black hooves cut into the cold earth. Black inkcaps grow from her flanks, as if she has been still for a long time. Wide black eyes regard you with curious care from beneath a pale brow and a reaching tangle of antler-like branches dripping with hanging moss. You gaze up at her, unable to speak.

"Don't be afraid," she says, "I won't hurt you."

You look around, more aware of your surroundings now than you were when you were running. Around you lies the aged flotsam of human life: wooden children's toys decayed and grown over with moss, a metal bedframe eaten by rust. The creekbed glimmers with broken trinkets, pennies, and buttons.

"Are the hunters still chasing me?" you ask her at last. Your voice rings hollow in your own ears.

"No. They will not find you here."

You sit upright and find that the ache of exhaustion has gone from your body.

"What is this place?"

"This is my forest," the white deer tells you, "where I have made a secret haven for things that have been broken and lost by human hands." She kneels on the cold ground to be closer to you, and though she is skeletal and strange, you find that you are not afraid of her. Even so, a seeping dread sinks into your bones at her words.

"Am I... dead?"

"Not yet," she assures you. "Only almost."

"What do I do now?"

"Now, little fox, you have a choice to make. You may choose to live, in which case you will wake up in the forest of the living, injured and cold. You will have to run again until you find a safe place to hide and get warm, and I cannot afford you any promises on how long you will survive. But you will be alive for a time."

"And my other choice?"

"Stay here," she says, gently and without expectation, "in The Forest of the Lost."

You hesitate. She expects this, and does not rush you. After all, she is beyond time, and so has much of it to spare for you. She leans forward and rests her graceful cervid head on her folded forelegs and watches you. For a moment, a cloud moves away from the black expanse above, and her dark eyes reflect the turning of the stars.

"Is it always this cold here?" you ask after a time, and she smiles.

"No. My forest changes with the seasons like any other."

"Is it lonely?"

She seems to consider this for a moment. Her own loneliness is a vast, endless thing, and her only constant companion. The loneliness of mortal creatures seems, to her, a different feeling entirely. It is not, however, unimportant.

"Perhaps, in a way, it can be. There are other spirits here whose lives were shortened by the interventions of men. But some of them do not want to tell their stories."

You nod. You remember an old fox you knew when you were younger, whose hind leg was terribly injured before you were born. He walked with a limp, and startled easily, but never told you or the other kits what happened to make him that way. Though it was never explained to you, you understood even then that sometimes giving words to such things only makes the teller suffer twice.

"How long do I have, before I must decide?"

"Until sunrise. You will wake then, and I will be gone."

You rise on legs that no longer shake, step closer, and curl against her. Despite the chill that permeates this place, she is warm.

"Will you stay with me, until I've made my choice?"

"Of course, little one. I will be here as long as you need me."