

How the Fox got its Color

By: DHVinci

“The morning rose, the sun came up, and now its breakfast time, what shall I eat, I hope it’s sweet, and all of it is mine.” Cero traveled down the road, singing randomly as he searched for food. After failing to find berries or fruit, he jumped into the bushes and spotted a grasshopper. He waited, waited, and pounced. He chased the grasshopper a good distance until he finally had it cornered. *“It may not be juicy, it may not be meat, but I’ve worked up my stomach, time for a treat.”* As Cero enjoyed his early breakfast, he overheard a group of people down by the river. Without being spotted by his white fur, he moved in closer and saw an opportunity to hear them. He climbed a tree and walked along the branch until he was directly above them. *“What’s this that I hear,”* Cero said to himself, *“I wonder if they’d mind if I lent them my ear.”* Cero heard how the men were excited about the big feast tonight and how they recently collected pouches of new-found spices they planned to use on their fish and meat. *“Sugar, spice, those all seem nice, with fish and meat, oh that’d be sweet.”*

There were three of them fishing and one had caught a fish. The man struggled for a moment but the other two helped him reel in a mid-size fish that flapped and fidgeted when it landed in his hand. Cero saw the fish and devised a plan. *“That fish is a bit small, will it satisfy you all?”* The men jumped for a moment and searched around for the source of that voice. They looked up and saw a white fox hovering over a branch looking down at them.

“Oh no, no wonder we couldn’t see you from a distance you sneaky fox. What are you doing up there? You’re not getting any of my fish. Get out of here,” one of them said. “Yeah, go away,” said another.

“I mean you no trouble, just enjoying the view; I’m just saying that fish is small for you. If you all fish on the same spot, you won’t get much, spread out some more, and you’ll get a whole bunch.”

The men huddled together and whispered among themselves. They didn't know what was more confusing: that they should trust the fox's word when the village knew all foxes were tricky and deceitful, or that this specific fox was speaking in rhymes. No other fox did that. A few moments later they agreed to spread out to catch more fish. The plan worked and one by one each caught a fish and placed them in a basket next to their feet. However, the men weren't completely fooled, each of them kept an eye on the fox as they continued to catch small to medium-sized fish. Soon one of them caught a big fish. He dropped the fishing rod and with both hands grappled with the fish until the fish gave in. The other two men were amazed as they dropped their rods to watch them wrestle.

"A fish, a fish, so big and vast, what a joyous moment, I can eat at last." When the commotion settled, Cero leapt off the branch, forced his teeth into the fish, and jumped off the man as he headed for the woods. The two men tried to race after him but both tripped over their baskets of fish. All of the fishes began wobbling, some smacking them in the face while the others tried to escape back into the river. The fox had escaped and settled down near a big tree to enjoy his meal. *"I should thank them for the meal, they get several, and I get one, that's not a bad deal."* After finishing his meal, Cero walked around until something interesting caught his eye. He found a row of white foxes hiding in a pile of bushes near the road; he ran towards them and found devious looks scattered across their faces. They explained that they were going into the human village to have some fun. They wanted Cero to be the decoy while everyone else went after the fruits and rabbits the humans gathered. They agreed that they would all share the food once they got it, but Cero saw past their convincing smiles. Cero knew that they would all betray each other and go after the food for themselves, but he had another idea. He agreed to the plan. He jumped out of the bushes and traveled across the bridge to enter the front of the village gate.

The rest of the foxes traveled through the water under the bridge and waited for the right moment. Two young men, each with a bird on their shoulder, stopped Cero from moving any closer. The birds made a frantic noise and several children, women, and men with spears came running.

“What do you think you’re doing here? There are absolutely no foxes allowed in the village.”

“I’ve done you no harm,” Cero said. “Why are we banished from your homes and farms?”

“Don’t give us any of that. You white-haired foxes are always up to something. Stealing our food, tricking our children; you never stop.” The crowd behind them yelled in agreement. “Go away and stay out or we’ll make you leave.”

“Your words really hurt, I’m not like those guys, and I’d prefer to be honest, not tell a lie. I dropped by to say hi, and I wanted to play, would you at least hear what I have to say?” The crowd muttered to themselves with uncertainty and the guards weren’t budging. *“I made a new story and I want you to listen, tell me what you think, then I’ll leave and go fishing.”* They stood there and listened while the other foxes moved inconspicuously into the village. *“Come one and come all, please give me your ear, and listen to the story of Sweet Abadeer.”* The kids in the village ran to the front gate and the women followed. The foxes scattered, searching all the baskets and clothes for any sign of food. *“Now sweet Abadeer was a precious young girl, she played and laughed with her herd, her birthday came up, and the people knew first, that she made twelve on April the 3rd. For most of the morning she got her hair braided and waited to have some fun, all sang of her name, as they danced and made games for her to enjoy when she was done. She laughed and she played; kites flying, charades, she even swam down at the lake, when nightfall came, she sat down and gained new presents and good birthday cake. Now sweet*

Abadeer was surprised at it all, she didn't know how blessed she seemed to be, when she fell asleep dreaming, she had a great feeling, and loved her family." By the time Cero finished his story, the children were clapping and the adults stood in admiration of his words. The foxes had gathered piles of fruits, vegetables, rabbits, and other small animals they loved and stole.

However, they didn't leave because they were still arguing about who should carry what. Cero saw this opportunity and made his move. *"I'm happy you liked it, but I shouldn't be rude, it appears to me that someone is stealing your food."* The men turned around and saw a large white spot in the middle of their village. They looked closer and began to run after the foxes. With spears in their hands, they screamed at the foxes, assuring them that they would attack if they didn't leave. The foxes trampled over each other running in several directions to escape. None of the men threw the spears, but the threat was enough to make the foxes shiver as they ran. They jumped into the water and swam for the forest.

"On behalf of the village, I thank you for stopping them. Though why would you let us know?" a villager asked.

"I didn't feel right about what they planned to do, so I thought I'd stand up for myself and tell you."

"You did the right thing. As a reward, here's a basket of fruits and berries." The villager tied a basket around Cero's back and the children clapped in admiration. In the distance, the three men from earlier shouted as they approached. "Stop that fox," one cried. Everyone turned their attention to them, especially the villager who rewarded Cero with the basket. "What seems to be the problem? I thought you all were gathering fish."

"Yeah, we were gathering a ton of them."

“But that fox tricked us and made off with one.”

The villager thought for a moment. “Come to think of it, that fox was telling a story right when the foxes were trying to steal our food.” He turned to Cero. “Is this tr-” Cero had already taken off by the time the villagers noticed. “Curse that rhyming fox,” he screamed.

Cero had made it far away from the village and stopped in the middle of a large prairie. He untangled his bag, chewed a few berries, and enjoyed his surroundings. The wind sounded calm and gentle. It reminded Cero of his mother singing to him when he slept. The sun reflected off his white fur and made him visible to everything surrounding him was a majestic quantity of white, pink, blue, yellow, and red flowers. “You seem to be in a fine mood,” a voice said. Cero looked around but the voice was camouflaged with the flowers. It sounded familiar.

“Your words are sweet, and also quite true, Mrs. Hollinger, how do you do?” She emerged from the pile of blue flowers and landed on Cero’s nose. She was the only bird Cero wouldn’t dream of eating. She always spoke the truth and looked after him since he was young. Her blue feathers and comforting tone made Cero even calmer than a sleeping bear. Her tone was so sweet and powerful that she could make a stone wall cry. Cero thought it amazing that she put up with a devious soul like his and he always admired her singing. *“It’s been a long time, I see you’re doing well, what brings you here, do tell.”*

“I’ve been flying around for most of my time. I had a bad wing for a while and the village took care of me. I even have a human companion with me.” Cero yawned and nodded in approval. “I just don’t understand something, Cero. Why are you so proud of this trickery habit? Nearly every animal in this jungle has a human companion to watch, play, and take care of them, but none of

the foxes have one. I know that if you and the rest of your group stop playing tricks on them then they would accept you as a friend. Don't you want one?"

"I'm quite alright now, I don't need their company, I just like pulling tricks, and to us it's funny. Though I wouldn't mind having a friend or pal, it's unlikely one would accept me now. Your concern for me is loving, and one day we will see if there is a friend out there for me."

A girl shouted in the distance, and Cero's ears jumped up like he felt the presence of a predator watching him. Mrs. Hollinger recognized it was her human. "Oh no, Abby's in trouble! Cero, please come help her," Mrs. Hollinger said with nervous eyes and a cracked voice. Cero sprang to his feet and followed her through the prairie. The scream was getting louder, and with that scream was another human yelling. Cero climbed up the tree and after reaching the other side, discovered that two humans were cornered by a poisonous snake. The young boy was frozen behind his teenage sister waving a stick at the snake. Cero thought it lucky to have received several short snacks in one afternoon. Mrs. Hollinger swooped down trying to get the snake's attention but to little avail. Unable to fight off the girl, the snake aimed for the boy's neck and in a split second swung itself toward him. The boy covered his face and Cero dropped down from the tree, successfully biting the snake's neck. He enjoyed swinging his food around before properly killing it. The snake hissed in agony, and its tail created a small dust cloud. At last, it grew numb and stopped. The boy unfolded his hands and was amazed, not at the dead snake, or the fact that he was alive, but at the big white fox up close. It was his first time seeing one up close and he was bewildered. Mrs. Hollinger comforted Abby and she sighed in relief. "Oh, thank you so much, Cero," Hollinger said. "Thank you very much," Abby said to Cero, then changed her attention to her brother. "James, are you alright? You're always getting into trouble when I'm not around. Seriously, be more careful next time."

James tried to look tough. “I didn’t need your help; I could have taken him on.” James blushed and Cero’s tail wagged. Cero was happy to help Mrs. Hollinger and her companion, but he was mesmerized by Abby’s sapphire eyes, warm honey cream skin, blissful brown hair, and gentle voice that he stood for a moment smiling. “What’s a fox doing here anyway?” James continued. “Why don’t you go bother someone else?” Abby pulled James by the ear and told him to apologize and thank Cero. He was reluctant but the pain made him yield. “Hey, your name’s Cero, right? Your fur is strange. Why is it so white? Did you see a ghost somewhere?” Abby sighed, irritated.

“Your teases won’t work,” Cero smiled. “At least in the winter I have a fur coat. We heard someone screaming and came here to assist; we didn’t expect to find a boy with trembling fists. Abby on the other hand seems to know how to fight, you said I saw a ghost, seconds ago your face was white.” Abby burst into laughter. She didn’t expect a fox to rhyme back at her little brother and was caught off guard when he spoke. James looked serious and angry for a moment, but his face twitched, blushed, and he folded his arms and looked away. Cero continued to wag his tail but it stopped when he looked at James again. The snake had bit him, and even though it was a small bite, Cero knew the venom was strong even if the marks were not deep. He looked at Abby. *“You shouldn’t use a stick against an opponent so quick, if you had run past the trees your brother wouldn’t have got bit.”*

James looked confused and his eyes grew heavy. He suddenly felt ill and collapsed to the ground, hitting his head on a rock. With his legs and head out of commission, James laid there unable to move. Abby grew frightened. She moved toward James and put her hand over his head, concluding he had a fever. She looked down and saw that snake bite on his leg was deep. Abby began to panic. *“The bite mark is heavy and the poison spreads fast, if he doesn’t get a cure he*

soon won't last. If he moves too much then he'll die much quicker," Cero raised his voice to Abby, *"Hurry Abby run, now's not the time to bicker. Your village should have a cure, if I'm not mistaken, get it and bring it back; we'll stay here with patience."* Abby broke from her shock and ran like lightning across the prairie to the village. Mrs. Hollinger said she'd stand watch in case she returned and flew into the sky. Cero dragged James by the shirt to the tree and rested his head against the bark. James twisted and turned and Cero knew he felt uncomfortable. With nothing else soft to rest on, he pulled James's shoe until his head touched the ground, went to his head, dug under it, formed a ball, and made himself into a pillow under James's head. James stopped squirming and looked peaceful. The attitude vanished.

"Your fur is so soft," he whispered. Cero wagged his tail in response. "Sorry for making fun of you." A few minutes went by, neither speaking to the other. James broke the silence. "Why do you do that?" Cero looked at him. "I've never heard a rhyming fox before. Why do you do that? It sounds so funny."

"When I was young my mom sang to me, she had the richest words, and the sweetest melody. I liked when she sang and never stopped since, I've been rhyming and can't stop, or so I insist. I still can't remember the words to that song, I'm sure I'll remember, but it has been so long."

Cero and James continued their conversation until Abby returned with the medicine. Both mentioned how they had played tricks on their friends and loved to move around and explore the jungle. James said that he was ten years old and liked exploring old ruins with his sister.

"There was this one time," James told "when I played a prank on my sister. One day she told me that I wasn't helping out enough in the village. So she told me to go and collect some eggs for the next day's breakfast. So I did. That night, I overheard her talking with her friend

saying that she wished she had something besides soap to wash her hair with. She wanted it to ‘smell like the morning berries that grow near the river’.” Cero paid close attention as James told his story. “So then the next morning, I got a big bowl, collected those berries she liked so much, and mixed the egg whites and berries together.”

“That sounds yucky and gross, then again who am I to boast. I’ve had those berries, ripe and sweet they were, so what happened next, did you give it to her?”

James continued. “So then the next morning, I followed Abby to her favorite spot to take a bath. While she got in the water and walked over to the waterfall, I went around and climbed to the top. I waited. When I saw her step a little bit out from under the waterfall, I poured the bowl down the flow of water and it landed,” James clapped his hands together, “right on top of her. Some of it even slid down her hair. A perfect shot.”

Cero burst into laughter. *“A stroke of genius, that plan made me think, good timing, good aiming, and I bet it was sweet. You’re good at trickery that I can approve, so what happened to Abby, was she amused?”*

“No, actually,” James said, twiddling his thumbs. “She chased me down for about 2 hours. She said she was going to decorate me with bananas and feed me to the monkeys or throw me in the deepest mud pit she could find and not help me get out until it was time for dinner.”

They shared a look and laughed in unison. *“For a good trick to work you must not get caught, you have to run like the wind, or at least like a fox. How did she find out? How did she know? How did you escape? How did it go?”*

“Okay, so I hurried back to the village before her to make it seem like I was gathering eggs again. She went to our mom and I could hear mom chuckling as she picked out the seeds from the berries. When I walked into our tent about 30 minutes later, she was standing there, glaring at me. I didn’t realize it but when I looked behind her, I could see the egg shells and little blue marks under my bed. I looked back at her, and she had some rope and a bunch of bananas in her hands. I took off running.”

Cero and James exchanged stories until they heard Mrs. Hollinger shout that Abby was returning. During that time they developed a bond and Cero enjoyed it. *So this is what it’s like, Cero thought, to have a person whom I like. To share these stories and laugh out loud, to sit under a tree and watch the clouds, to help someone in their time of need, and to be there for each other, and share the bad deeds. I think I understand what Mrs. Hollinger said, about human companionship, and the friendship they led. Maybe, just maybe, I can be his friend in time, but would James want to be a friend of mine?*

When James asked why he of all the foxes didn’t have a partner, Cero didn’t respond. James said that his mom told him that even the foxes had human companions a long time ago. But when the foxes started pulling tricks on them and making a mess of the village, they didn’t want them anymore. James saw the sadness in Cero’s eyes but didn’t mention it.

Abby returned with the medicine and behind her were two men from the village. Abby knelt beside James and poured the medicine into the bite marks on his knee. James's face was so peaceful. Despite being at the head, Cero could nearly hear James's heartbeat, or at least that’s what he thought. It was tranquil and smooth, like a waterfall. James opened his eyes to look at Abby and smiled. He turned his sights toward Cero. His orange eyes showed gratitude and

warmth which made Cero happy to have helped even more. James wanted to ask Cero to be friends with him but was too embarrassed to ask in front of his sister. When the two men caught up with Abby the first thing they noticed was the white fur under James' head. They admired the coating and thought it was dead fox skin, but when they moved closer to feel it, Cero jumped a little which startled them. It was then that the men realized it was the same fox that had tricked them at the lake. With a blind fury, resentment, and complete disregard for James, the men gathered the surrounding rocks and readied their position to strike. Cero didn't want to move for fear of injuring James further. Abby jumped in front of them with a scream and covered James's head. Cero took that moment to wiggle free and made a run for it but took a moment to look back at James. Both the men threw rocks and one landed on Cero's back, which made him turn around to climb up a hill. Abby screamed for them to stop, and the tone of her voice was more piercing to their ear than hearing bones crack. They dropped their rocks, grabbed James, and walked to the village. Abby called for Cero to return but Cero didn't hear and disappeared into the woods. James's eyes were barely open as he saw Cero run. *Wait don't leave, come back*, he thought and drifted back to sleep.

It was nearing dawn. Every villager was getting ready for the big festival. Several small fireplaces were being set up, meat was being lined up, fruits were placed in smaller baskets next to the older women, and men were readying their drums, flutes, and other musical instruments. When several men rolled out the pouches of newfound spices, the crowd cheered in excitement. With everyone together, they waited for the sun. Each villager called into the wild for their animal companions. In seconds the village was populated with birds, bears, monkeys, raccoons, squirrels, beavers, hedgehogs, rabbits, and many more. James was still asleep with Abby by his side in the middle of the village. Abby tended to James as best she could but the only thing

James continued to say in his sleep was Cero. “Cero, don’t leave, we’re friends, right?” His words were sluggish and near a whisper but Abby knew what he was saying. Abby sent Mrs. Hollinger to find Cero but she didn’t return to her.

The chief of the village announced they were ready to begin. Abby expected to hear cheers from people, music from instruments, and many animals perform their signature sounds. What she heard instead was someone shouting “fox, fox.” She assumed the best and ran out of the tent hoping to find Cero. What she found instead were several foxes that had enter the village making a mess of things. They yanked away food, knocked over children, splashed in the fruit bowls, and pulled covers off tents as they tried to escape the grasp of the men chasing them around. Abby ran around screaming for Cero but no one paid attention to her. The village chief was so drawn by the confusion that a fox tripped him, knocking over a basket of the new found spices. The spices dropped in a fireplace and sparked in every direction like fireflies. Soon the fire hit another pouch of spices, then another. It jumped on top of the tents, and before anyone noticed the colorful smoke that appeared, the fire quickly spread, setting the village ablaze..

Animals ran into the river and headed straight for the forest, some of the bears carried the younger women and children while the men tried to put out the fire. However, the incense from the spices was so overpowering that they slowly fled the village, looking for fresh air. Abby inhaled so much of the spices' incense powder that she wobbled in confusion trying to find James's tent. The voices around her began to echo and she dropped to the ground clinging for air. She found herself lifted off the ground by a man holding his breath, headed out of the village. “Stop,” she screamed. “No, James is still there, James!”

Cero, who was sleeping in a burrow, heard a cry but it was too faint for him to remember the voice. He stretched and went out to find the source of what he heard. It astounded him to see a big cloud of smoke that seemed to be coming from the village. He walked toward the smoke having a bad feeling about what was happening. He picked up speed and saw fire passing trees. *James*, he thought, and started running. Passing the trees he maneuvered around the fleeing animals and people, he looked for James but didn't see him. As he continued to run, Mrs. Hollinger spotted him from the sky and joined him as they raced for the village. When they reached the top of a hill, Cero saw the entire village in a beautiful blaze of fire. Cero could smell nothing but spices.

Abby signaled to them and they all met up in front of what was left of the bridge. After catching her breath she explained that a hurdle of foxes caused a commotion and knocked the spices into the fire which caused this mess. Cero tried to get under Abby's arm and carry her farther away from the fire but she pushed him away. She begged Cero to go and save James who was still in there. Cero hesitated when he looked into the abyss of flames. But without a second thought he ran over the bridge and approached the main entrance. However, something exploded on the other side and the impact of the explosion sent Cero into the water. Just then the ground began to shake and to Abby's surprise, the chief returned to the outer layer of the village riding an elephant and behind him even more elephants. Their movements were organized and unified. They stood side by side, sucked in some water with their trunks, raised, and fired into the flames making it look like rain was falling from the sky. Cero jumped out of the water and landed in mud, which covered his stomach, tail, and his ear. When the elephant hosed a path into the flames, Cero followed it, only to have the path behind him close up. It was unbearably hot, and with the scent of spices surrounding him, Cero couldn't trace James's scent. It was agonizing.

Cero felt burnt all over. The only thing he could hear was the sound of flames. The intense hissing, crackling of burnt wood, and hot aura drove Cero mad, scaring him. He ignored the pain and continued to search. In an effort to stay alive, he leaped and leaped to avoid as much fire below his feet as he could. As he jumped through the fire, the ashes from the spices stuck to his wet coat. At last he was able to find James who had made some attempt to escape. He pushed him to see if he was alive but he didn't move. When he licked his face several times, James began to groan. Still coughing, James opened his eyes and, as if a divine creature stood before him, saw something more beautiful than heaven. Cero was encased with orange, white, and black fur. Cero sparkled in the flames to James. He crawled under James and made a speedy run out of the village, keeping him balanced on his back. The flames grew louder than when he first came in. After taking several leaps, he landed in a spot that was surrounded by the dancing flames. He didn't know which direction to go and for the moment they seemed trapped. The flames were too high to jump over and Cero began to feel numb.

He lay on the ground feeling even heavier, like he was carrying several humans that continued to pile on top of him. Cero couldn't believe that the last thing he would see was this beautiful fire soon to engulf both James and him. He started to cry, feeling that he couldn't save the one human who showed kindness towards him without being suspicious. In moments he thought to himself how happy he was being with James even as they were about to enter the silent white light past the hissing yellow, red, and orange flames that danced around them. Just as Cero was about to accept death, five words came to his ear. "Cero, we'll always be friends." Just with those words, Cero's eyes popped open, his four legs balanced him on the ground, and he stared at the dancing flames with a horrifying look. His snarl became a growl and he let out the strongest roar he could summon from within. It was so powerful that when he leaped into them,

they scattered, opening a path to the outside world where he landed in the dried-up dirt. He mustered enough strength to swim across the river. He turned around and as he legs trembled under pressure, he collapsed until morning.

The sun appeared on the horizon and Cero still lay unconscious. He felt a slight push and a whisper. "Cero, Cero wake up, we made it." Cero opened his eyes and saw the smile on James's face. He tried to smile back but his face didn't move, he only signaled his happiness with his bushy tail waving back and forth. Slowly Cero stood but he began limping as he walked.

"Cero, what did you do? Your fur it- it changed colors." Cero was never struck with more confusion in his life. He turned around to see his reflection in the water. His eyes flapped and he tilted his head when he saw orange patterns around his face. He moved closer and closer until his entire body was in the water. "Wait, what are you doing, Cero?" Cero got out of the water and looked behind him. His entire back was still orange and the only white left was under his stomach. His feet were black but the tip of his tail was still white. Cero didn't know what to do and he looked at James with concern.

"It's okay, Cero. In fact, I kind of knew you'd look good in orange." He shook the water off, spreading some on Cero. He smiled. Not only did he save James and escape the fire, but his fur was beautifully colored. He leaped on James and began to lick him, shortly forgetting that he was in a small bit of pain. James chuckled and Cero lay beside him. "I heard your shout. When did you learn that?" Cero tried to speak but no words left his mouth. He tried again but he was still silent. He started to whimper but James hugged him.

"It's okay; you can talk when you're ready. I can wait." James smiled as he came up with something. "You saved my life twice, you had so much to endeavor, we're alive and happy, and

we'll be friends forever." Cero closed his eyes and his tail continued to wag. Just then Abby, Mrs. Hollinger, and a few villagers found them. Abby and Mrs. Hollinger fell to their side while the villagers gasped at the color of the fox's fur.

They asked if he was alright and what happened. "We're fine, and I found my friend," James said. Abby smiled and looked at Cero sleeping peacefully. She whispered in his ear, "I want you to look after my little brother from now on. You're always welcome to our home."