

The fox tore through the woods, its slender body a streak of red against the shadowy backdrop of ancient trees. The forest, usually a sanctuary, felt alien tonight. The moon, veiled by clouds, cast faint silver streaks that struggled to pierce the dense canopy, while the chill of the wind carried whispers that seemed to call its name. The fox's heart pounded in its chest, and its paws thudded against the damp earth, scattering leaves and pine needles. Behind it came the rhythmic thud of a staff hitting the ground and the low hum of a voice, chanting words the fox couldn't understand but felt in its bones.

It didn't dare look back. The wizard was there, following, relentless.

The fox had seen him only once—a figure draped in robes as black as the deepest night, his eyes aglow with a pale light that seemed to pierce through the trees. His staff, twisted and gnarled, glimmered faintly, as though drawing the light from everything around it. The fox didn't know why the wizard had appeared or what he wanted, but the air around him had felt thick and heavy, like the calm before a storm. It had been enough to send the fox fleeing without hesitation.

The forest, once familiar, now conspired against the fox. Roots seemed to rise from the ground to trip its feet, and branches reached out to snag its fur. The air grew colder with every step, and the trees, instead of offering shelter, seemed to loom over it like silent sentinels. The chanting grew louder, the wizard's voice no longer just a distant murmur but a pressing presence, crawling under the fox's skin.

Desperate, the fox veered sharply to the right, skidding down a slope toward a stream it had often used to mask its scent. Its paws splashed into the icy water, and for a moment, the world was filled with the rushing sound of the current. It paused, chest heaving, ears swiveling frantically to catch any sign of pursuit. For a heartbeat, there was only silence.

Then, from the shadows of the trees across the stream, the wizard stepped into view.

The fox's fur bristled as it backed away, snarling, but the wizard didn't falter. He raised his staff, and the glow intensified, bathing the clearing in an eerie, unnatural light. "You can't run, little one," the wizard said, his voice smooth but sharp, like a blade wrapped in silk. "The forest has already spoken. You belong to me."

The fox bolted again, leaping over rocks and darting through underbrush, its limbs burning with effort. The air around it felt alive, crackling with unseen forces that tugged at its fur and whispered at the edges of its mind. The wizard's magic seemed to stretch the forest, twisting paths and folding space, making every step feel like a struggle to move forward.

Just as the fox felt its strength waning, it saw a glimmer of hope: a break in the trees where the forest ended and open fields began. Summoning its last reserves of energy, it sprinted toward the opening, ignoring the sharp sting of thorns and the pull of the

wizard's magic at its heels. The moment it broke free of the woods, the air seemed to lighten, and the pull of the wizard's presence faded.

It didn't stop running, not until the forest was a distant shadow behind it. Even then, the fox glanced back, half-expecting to see the wizard waiting at the tree line. But the edge of the woods remained silent and still, as if nothing had ever happened.

The fox collapsed in the tall grass, its chest heaving, its fur damp with sweat and dew. It was free—for now. But the wizard's voice echoed in its mind, a sinister promise that this was far from over.