

Little bits of grey sunlight filtered through the canopy of tangled leaves and branches high above his head. Brown and green leaves crunched and flattened underneath his feet; the dirt path he meant to follow had long since disappeared.

*No Service*, his phone read, mockingly. He could almost hear what it would say if it could: *No service, no friends, no help*.

He tightened his grip and refreshed his texts again. He had friends, but without service? Without service, he was alone.

Just another wayward soul in the depths of a darkening forest.

A rustle in the weeds. A flash of burnt orange fur.

A fox stood in front of him, brown eyes wide and purposeful. The wind disturbed its fur, but otherwise, it stood perfectly, completely still.

He glanced around. They were alone.

He took a careful step backward.

The fox stepped forward.

He took another step. It did too.

“What, do you—do you want something?” he whispered uncertainly.

The fox jerked its head to the left, as if to say, *come this way, come with me*.

He followed the fox as it weaved through the forest. *If it wanted to hurt me, it would've done so already*, he reasoned.

The branches grew thicker and the woods denser; there was no empty ground, only trees and roots, and there was no empty sky, only sheets upon sheets of leaves. Yet, the darkened air was still warm, the overlapping layers of forest enveloping them like a lush blanket.

The trees obstructed the sunlight, but a warmer, deeper glow gently illuminated all of his surroundings. Perhaps it was the leaves and dewdrops reflecting the sun. Or perhaps the woods had its very own source of light.

He first thought the fox was orange, but here, its fur shone gold—the air shimmered whenever it moved. The fox was no longer still; in fact, he wondered how it had ever been. It moved through the forest so seamlessly that it seemed like a ray of light itself. His own legs ached trying to keep up.

Smaller details emerged as he traversed deeper into the woodland. Bark formed swirls on trees, and water trickled in twisting streams. Multicolored patches of mushrooms sat nestled between weeds.

The fox stopped, and again, it was still.

In front of them stood a great tree, with a thick, thick trunk that wound past the canopy of branches, past all the leaves. He wouldn't be surprised if the forest's entire canopy was comprised solely of this tree's lower branches.

He could see its roots bulging from the ground, slithering through the rich soil.

Mushrooms and bugs and moss nearly covered its dark, swirling bark. Flowers sprouted from cracks, glowing orange.

The fox lowered its head, closed its eyes, and laid down on the base of the trunk.

He hesitated, but tiredness soon crept through his limbs, dragging him toward the tree's soft moss. *I'm tired. Oh, so tired.*

His phone tumbled out of his hand and into the weeds.