

The haunted season had arrived in the Antler Wood.

The sky grayed, the leaves blushed red, and mist coiled through the trees like something alive. Even the pumpkins began to rot and show their true faces.

On these chilled autumn nights, it was best for fox kits to remain near their den on the edge of the wood. There, they could feast on apples that tumbled from high branches. They could hunt for smoky acorns and crunchy stick bugs and juicy mice. And when dusk turned to starlight, the kits could return to their den, tuck under their mother's fur, and be soothed by her heartbeat.

"Tell us a story," the alpha kit said one misty night.

"Make it scary!" the fourth said, yipping and hopping.

"Yeah!" said the third, snarling. "So scary our eyes fall out of our *heads*."

"Please stop biting my face, children," their mother said.

The kits behaved themselves while she smoothed out a bed for the night.

"Let's see," she said. "How about . . . 'Rattlebones'?"

"*Mo-om!*" the beta said, rolling her eyes.

"You told us that story when we were *two weeks*," said the alpha.

"It's *boring!*" said the fourth.

"Very well . . ." Their mom began ripping out roots that had snuck through the den's walls. "How about 'Willoughby Wallaby and the Floating Paw'?"

"*Seriously?*" the fifth kit said.

"That story wouldn't raise the hackles on a field mouse!" said the fourth.

"It's *kit* stuff," said the third.

"Well," their mom said. "Those are the stories I know."

Seven little foxes sighed.

“Sorry to be a disappointment,” their mom said, laying down. She paused and looked at the kits with all seriousness. “But you must promise that no matter what you do tonight, you will not go to Bog Cavern.”

The kits’ ears perked.

“What’s . . . Bog Cavern?” the alpha asked.

“That’s where the old storyteller lives,” their mom said. “If you go there, you’ll hear a story so frightening, it will put the white in your tail.”

The kits stared at their thin, dusty brown tails with wide eyes.

“Wait a second,” the fourth said, looking at the fluffy white end of their mom’s tail. “*You* heard the story?”

“Only part,” she answered. “And I wouldn’t repeat what I heard for a thousand mice.”

The kits gave each other meaningful looks. They didn’t want some toothless story like “Willoughby Wallaby” that could be forgotten with a shiver and some milk and a lick on the cheek. They wanted a story so scary it would prove their bravery and change them forever.

All except the little one, that was. She preferred the sound of her mom’s heartbeat.

Yes, it may have been wise for fox kits to stay close to the den once the leaves began to fall. But the fog and the frost and the old crimson moon had awakened something in their whiskers. And so they waited till all was quiet, save their mother’s snoozing. And then seven little foxes slipped out of their den with a mission to scare some white into their tails.

Seven kits snuck into the night—over the log, around the stone, across the creek, and through the grass . . . into the Antler Wood.

The trees threw up their limbs as if to frighten them away.

The little one slowed at their warning.

“C’mon, sticky paws!” the beta kit whispered.

Seven kits crept through the wood—beneath the bone-white branches, over the broken trap, beyond the den of snoring, past the human bones . . . to Bog Cavern.

Roots dripped over the entrance. Fog oozed from its throat. The kits squinted into the darkness but saw nothing but a pile of bones and skin.

“Is the storyteller . . . *dead?*” the fifth kit whispered.

The fourth kit sniffed. *Snff snff.* “Doesn’t smell dead.”

“Someone go nose it awake!” the third kit said.

“Don’t look at me!” said the beta. “I *like* my nose.”

“*Shh!*” said the alpha.

The bones stirred. Fog slithered from its nostrils. Then it jerked up so abruptly, every one of the kits’ paws left the ground. The little one scurried behind her beta sister.

The bones sat themselves upright, forming a sort of fox silhouette. Its eyes flashed green in the darkness.

“*What have we here?*” the storyteller said with a voice like spilling dust. *Snff. Snffffff.*

“Hmph. Grovelers.”

The beta gave the alpha a nudge.

“Oh, um,” he said, voice cracking. “Would you tell us a scary story, uh, please?”

The storyteller sniffed again. “Too young. Come back when you’ve lost your milk teeth.”

The fox kits clamped their muzzles shut. The little one hoped this was enough to get her siblings to scurry home, but no one budged.

The alpha cleared his throat again and delivered the speech he'd prepared. "We're, um, smart enough to know that stories are as harmless as the wind through the leaves. They cannot pluck our whiskers or break our bones or, um, strip our skins."

A silence grew behind the roots, so complete it seemed it could suck the kits into the darkness.

"Sure of that, are you?" the storyteller asked.

Seven little foxes tried not to shiver. Two of them succeeded.

"All scary stories have two sides," the storyteller said. "Like the bright and dark of the moon. If you're brave enough to listen and wise enough to stay to the end, the stories can shine a light on the good in the world. They can guide your muzzles. They can help you survive."

A cloud slid off the moon, and shadows reared up around the cavern. The Antler Wood seemed darker now that there was light.

"*But*," the storyteller said, "if you don't listen closely . . . if you turn tail from the horror and don't stay till the end, then the darkness of the story can swallow all hope. It can frighten you so deeply, you'll never want to leave your den again. You'll waste away the days with your mother, forever smelling like her milk."

The wind pawed at the leaves. The moon shone on the gray fur of the storyteller's face.

"So. Do you still want to hear a scary story?"

Seven little foxes looked at each other. Only the alpha nodded.

"Come closer then," the storyteller said. "And we'll see which of you makes it to the end."