

Nova would be lying if she said she wasn't disappointed by how the fallen autumn leaves fail to crunch satisfyingly under her paws. Unfortunately, recent rain has made the forest floor soggy and cold, and there's a lot more squelching than crunching. The leaves also stick to her paws as though they're glued on, and she often has to shake them off before they somehow migrate up her leg.

It's a lovely night, otherwise. Chilled, but not too cold. The sky is clear and starry, the crescent moon hanging high and bright among them. A few wisps of clouds float by overhead, occasionally darkening the world below, but only ever briefly. The trees around them are all half-bare, the last, stubborn leaves hanging on for dear life just a little longer than the ones already covering the forest floor.

Nova flicks off a leaf that had decided to cling to the tip of her tail, and continues onward. Walking beside her is Oberon, which... doesn't exactly make her feel at ease, to be honest. His white fur is like a moonlit beacon in the night, but she's always gotten a weird sense from him. For her own sanity, she's decided to write it off as a result of his strong magic.

Behind them, Halcyon follows with a lantern hanging from his mouth. Keen eyes keep watch for any strange lights among the trees, aided by the glimmering, purple cat sitting on his head. Its tail sways lazily from side to side, looking very smug at having gotten a ride.

At the very back, her mouth twisted in some combination of a snarl and a pout, Chili makes up the final member of their little party. Why she, who usually loathes the company of anyone who isn't Oberon, has agreed to go wisp hunting with them is a mystery. Still, for all that Nova *kind of* fears for her life when Chili is nearby, she can admit it's nice to have such a fierce protector with them when going to look for possibly angry wisps.

"According to Aquarius, we should be getting close, now," Halcyon says, the words somewhat distorted from the lantern handle held between his teeth. His cat meows in agreement, nodding firmly.

"Be quiet, then." Chili pushes her way to the front when they all stop. Oberon sends her a fond look as she passes him, which she clearly pretends not to see. Now taking the lead, she holds herself proudly; wings slightly unfurled, head high.

Nova snorts, thankfully unheard, and waits for Halcyon to catch up.

So, Aquarius' estimation turned out to be very much correct. Nova almost wishes it hadn't.

Deep within the forest, just off an old, worn path that only sees use by the locals, a strange ball of light dances in a column of moonlight. Its movements are erratic and

unpredictable, a sharp up and down zipping almost like buzzer midges. They'd all frozen at the sight upon coming around a bend in the path, and they watch the wisp flit around with various levels of disbelief.

There's a dull *thunk* as Halcyon sets down the lantern. "Huh. Who would've thought?"

Chili is squinting at the wisp as though she can make it vanish from sheer willpower if only she tries hard enough. "It seems Aquarius was right," she says through gritted teeth.

Nova flicks her tail impatiently. "What are we actually supposed to do? I mean, we know it's here and that there are probably more around, but..." She shrugs. "Can't exactly bring one back to Aquarius for studying."

Oberon's head tilts and his eyes light up in a thoughtful way Nova knows doesn't bode well. "Can't we?"

"Well, we have nothing to keep it in. Are you suggesting one of us holds it in one paw the entire way back?"

Smirking, Oberon looks at Halcyon's lantern.

"Ah."

"I wish I had never met any of you," Chili growls from somewhere underneath Halcyon. The two of them had attempted to corral the wisp into the lantern from opposite directions, but ended up smacking into each other and tripping when the wisp suddenly whipped upwards and out of reach.

Nova cackles at the sight from a safe distance, while Oberon takes a very deep breath. Halcyon's cat hisses at Chili, its back bowed upwards and its claws half-extended.

Hovering above the two tangled dragons, the wisp almost seems to regard them with curiosity, its light winking in a steady beat.

Halcyon yelps and is abruptly kicked off of Chili, who gets to her feet and immediately shakes herself off. The look she sends him is downright murderous.

"Care to let someone else try?" Nova asks, grinning shamelessly when Chili's glare swings around to her.

Halcyon pushes the lantern into Nova's waiting paw without a single word, wide-eyed and trembling in fear. He gets a clap on the shoulder from Oberon, but no more.

With the lantern in hand, Nova approaches the wisp. It hovers calmly in the air, waiting. Oberon goes in a wide circle around it, drawing closer from the back. As she carefully opens the little door in the lantern, Nova winces at the creaking of the hinges. The wisp shivers, its form rippling at the sound.

“Easy, now,” Nova whispers to it, her eyes focused intently on the hovering light. She slowly raises the lantern, the opening turned towards the wisp. The light from the wisp reflects off the glass windows of the lantern, pale and clear. Through the glare, she can just make out Oberon on the other side, closing in on near-silent feet.

Any moment now...

Oberon raises a paw and holds it up behind the wisp. Ever so gently, he pushes it towards the lantern, never making contact but instead simply encouraging it to move. Nova holds her breath as the wisp comes closer and closer, the tense seconds ticking by in complete silence.

And then—

The lantern’s door closes with a soft *click*. Nova exhales.

Inside the lantern, the wisp bobs around as if confused, but it appears otherwise indifferent to its new surroundings. And the light it sheds is *beautiful* from inside the lantern, far stronger than any regular candle.

“Wow,” Halcyon breathes, leaning in over Nova’s shoulder to see.

“Hm.” Chili makes a grudgingly satisfied noise. Even she spares an awed glance at the wisp. “I suppose as long as the job gets done, it doesn’t matter how.”

Back to Aquarius, then.