

The familiarity of Wind Valley went ignored, as did most feelings of familiarity that Pepper felt through her travels. It was an often unwanted feeling, and Pepper had no time to spend on things that did not make sense, contrary to what others may have believed about her.

She was here on business and business alone, for Piero had asked her to make a detour on her trip to Corriedale. Well, to be more correct, he had called the driver and requested that he take Pepper to Wind Valley to pick up a few jars of moon water for the trip back. Pepper, who was under contractual obligation to do so, did not fight Piero on it, or the driver. Though she wanted to fight the driver at all times.

He was an annoying and talkative prick, and rubbed Pepper the wrong way.

So when he dropped her off at the entrance to Wind Valley, she hopped out of the antiquated riding carriage, and made her way down the cobbled path to a small hut that sat on a raised foundation. There were lanterns lining the cobbled path, and they swayed in the chilled wind, something that Pepper hadn't acknowledged until a Scarfox passing in the other direction had asked her how she wasn't cold.

The house was sparsely populated. Only a few receptionists greeted the visitors as they bundled up and took their jars deeper into the valley. Pepper had never heard of moon water, but could guess what it was based on the name. What she didn't know was why it was so important, and there weren't any signs or posters that made it any clearer. Mostly, it was about reminding visitors to Wind Valley to watch where they were going and to stay on the marked path through the bamboo groves.

"You must be here for the moon water," one of the receptionists said, clasping their hands together earnestly. "Aren't you cold?"

Pepper shrugged. "I have to take some back to my boss is all."

"I see," they replied, nervous to repeat their question. "Well, the jars are free to take. Admission is ten crystals."

Pepper dug around in her backpack, which was comically large and hideously colored. A big circus tent with straps on it, and more pockets than would be considered sane to have. All of them were devoid of crystals.

"I do not have any crystals."

The receptionist barely had an opportunity to respond before a large blue hand shot out from behind Pepper, small pouch pinched between the fingers. The hand belonged to a normal looking Scarfox, navy blue in color and wearing an outrageously complex gold embroidered outfit. He also, Pepper noted, was not wearing a coat, and he winked at her as he coaxed the receptionist into accepting the money.

"I'll cover it, deary."

Pepper blinked up at him. She could barely see his face, considering she was in Mini form and he was easily seven feet tall, with a hood over his head. It was embroidered with the same whimsical and intricate patterns as the rest of his outfit. He had a massive book on his hip, held only by a thick leather strap. She uttered a quick thanks and took a single jar from the counter, hurrying out of the hut and making her way down the lit path.

It had been dusk when she had first arrived, but now it was solidly nighttime, the only sounds were crunching leaves, howling winds, and naked branches rubbing against each other uncomfortably. The path was lined with hanging lanterns that gave off an eerie orange glow and they swayed in the wind, stretched taut against the thin wire that held them aloft.

"Spooky, right?"

Pepper shifted the jar in her arms and turned her head. It was the same Scarfox as before.

"Just because you did me a favor, does not mean you can come with me," she said pointedly. "Leave me alone."

"Still a bit ornery, I see."

Pepper blinked a few times before opening her eyes fully. They were dark, a pitch black hole against her cream colored fur, white pinpoints tracking after Astral, her generous benefactor. Astral grinned at her, but did not leave, even as those white points grew more irritated with him.

"I wanted to check in on you, deary," Astral said. "It's my job."

"I'm fine," Pepper snapped. "Leave me alone."

"You do not sound fine," Astral replied, still staying in step with Pepper. She couldn't kill him if her arms were full of jar. He was safe for now he figured. "Work with me, deary, I went through all the trouble trying to get you here and this is how you're responding?"

"I said I'm fine."

Astral did not push it further. He'd figured he'd given her enough time to adjust to her new life, her second chance, but that was appearing to not be the case. Especially after the Poseidon fiasco that had happened over the summer months. Astral kept calm, but he was seething. He was putting a lot of work into this one, and that fishy personification of madness had the gall to call him out on not doing his job?

Poseidon would have never given this much time to anything that didn't involve himself.

"Well, then," Astral said. "I do have a habit of catching people at a bad time. Occupational hazard, I say. I have three hundred and fifty pages burning a hole in my pocket."

Pepper growled at him, feeling her mist tighten. If she could have jumped on him and bitten him, she would have, but she had to do her job and she was supposed to be a better person this time around. Scarfoxes like Astral made it hard. Scarfoxes like Piero and Hanabi too. Scarfoxes of any shape and size.

"Did you just come here to bother me?"

Astral shook his head, ears flapping wildly. "No, I had another plan just in case you didn't want to talk. I have a date with Yste's Souls tonight as well. Well, not a date, it's about chronicling what happens when they get you. And also I have a story to tell at around midnight if I can find the right campground. How kind of you to ask."

"Piss off."

Astral grimaced but did not respond. Okay, so he really hadn't given Pepper the time to cool off. There was a mental note to write in a placeholder for a few years, but another intuition shoved that aside in favor of a more delicate approach.

"You've still got a bit of a trek ahead of you, deary," Astral said, slowing down. "I have no intention of going to fill a moon jar, since Yste would have my head if I did, but! I thinking you'll have a nice time. Might learn something."

"Go away, Astral."

"I'm going, I'm going." He slowed down even more and waved to Pepper's retreating back, pulling the threads just enough to remove himself from the equation again and reminding himself that it would all be worth it in the end. Another time for sure.

Raincheck, so the saying went.

Pepper continued her trek, a little dazed by the hypnotic lights that marked the path. Crunching leaves underfoot gave way to a particularly blustery gust of wind that made her ears flap around her head like fleshy ribbons. She hefted the jar a few times, but didn't look back when she heard movement in the bushes, and ghostly wails through the branches.

There was nothing to fear as far as she was concerned. Anything that would jump out at her would have to face down the bottomless pit of hatred that boiled just under the surface of her fabric body. She didn't believe in ghosts or ghouls, and especially not draculas. All the stories she had heard from other foxes at the hut.

Climb down into the valley, dip the jar into the moon-touched ponds, tighten the lid, and take it home. That was all she had to do. Or, in this case, she would have to get it back to Piero as soon as she could. Which would probably be a few weeks if nothing else got in her way. No more detours.

At the end of the path, the lights abruptly stopped, though the path continued into the darkness like a winding serpent, its final destination unknown. Pepper stood at the last lantern post, which was stronger than all the previous lanterns by a significant margin. It was rooted to a thick post and barely bent to the wind. Pepper squinted, trying to make out anything along the path. Maybe another lantern further in, or the ponds that were supposed to be moon-touched.

Just beyond the end of her line of sight, Pepper could make out a tiny glow, the reflection of the pale moon on a gently disturbed body of water. At least, that was what it looked like from where Pepper stood. So she turned to look back at the path she had just taken and marched into the darkness without further hesitation.

Just as she had suspected, there was a pond with the reflection of the moon dancing across the ripples. Sometimes it disappeared as the wind gusted. She wasted no time in dipping the jar into the water to fill it with water and as soon as she screwed the lid back on, the water turned a milky white, and let loose a similar faint glow as the rest of the pond.

It was cool to the touch.

Pepper placed her comical backpack on the ground and opened it up. Piero had given it to her as a gift for her travels and it had a lot more space in it than it looked on the outside. It had been made for a Scarfox much bigger than her, but Pepper hadn't complained because the bag was light. She opened the largest pocket and slid the jar in, where the bag made a horrendous sucking noise as it fell into the depths of whatever magic bound it together. Pepper shuttered. She hated the sounds it made, and was quick to tie the pocket shut again and make her way back up to the hut.

As she hoisted the bag back on, she saw movement from the edge of the pond. Funny, the feeling was familiar in a way. Standing at the edge of the water, the songs of Wind Valley cascading around her as she stared at the reflection of the moon. The urge to jump in was intense, scary. If the water had been rushing, the air colder, it might have even scared her a little, even if she had originally wanted it to.

The water rippled more and the whole of the lit pond was ripped away by snarling shadows and crashing teeth. The moon, once a bright reminder of the season, was cloaked in malice that curled together on the surface of the water, pulling all the sticky horrors of the night together into a ball of mist that was an undulating mass of blacks and purples. The teeth formed into neat little squares, and eyes opened and closed within the bubbling growth.

Pepper was transfixed and for a moment, hadn't realized that what she was seeing was real. This creature gurgled and groaned and spat as it came into being, and it lurched through the air like a tackle on a fishing line. It was unlike anything this reality should have contained, and Pepper felt the urge to run.

Not away from it. Not even toward it.

Her legs were small, and even though her body told her to run, she remained. The globule of corrupted mist streaked after her, and she heard other voices scream in the distance. As the mist wrapped around her, she realized that the screams were her own. Screams from a different life. The corrupted mist filled her entire being, and the initial shock of the freezing water that jolted her wore off after mere moments.

There was a lot of anger that flashed before her eyes. Unfamiliar anger. Hatred and rage. All from a source that was not hers. Pepper welcomed it in a way, though she did not totally understand it, her mind simply would not let her. It clouded her mind, and she carried herself back up the path to the brightest lantern to mark the start of her journey back up to the hut.

She did understand the hatred, though. Left alone to deal with the impossible. The depth of the pain that came with such an impossible task. The numbness to the world outside of the self. Pepper could not understand the intent of the feelings that radiated from her tiny body, but she could understand what it felt like to stew in an emotional slurry.

When the feeling had passed, Pepper felt no different. The cold, however biting, did not pierce her. She merely made her way back up to the hut, unchanged. Or at least changed in a way that wouldn't make sense to her for a long time.

Astral sat at the hut, cloaked in a dark brown poncho, face concealed, voice low and unlike him. "Absolutely genius, I'd say."