

Troph was wandering in the woods near Sulow Grove. Normally, he wouldn't find himself in these woods, but today he was hunting for conglomerates. He tried to get more information on where they might be, but everybody was hush-hush about it; so, he was on his own. And since this was one of the nearest—mostly—uninhabited areas, that's where he decided to start.

He had no luck, though. The sun, even faltered by the thick foliage above, beat down without issue. Although Troph's oversized hat protected him from its rays, the forest around still collected the heat and held onto it with an unwavering fist.

He sighed, wiping his brow. *Maybe today isn't the day*, he thought as his shoulders slumped. He adjusted his glasses, tucked his journal beneath his arm, and began to turn toward home before a sound caught his ear.

All that could be made out were unintelligible words, but there was definitely something there.

Troph began approaching, and something about that voice irked him. He pushed back the bushes, and his ears pinned back as he understood why.

Before him, on a dusty path he easily recognized as one of Sulow's many, stood a familiar black, white, and purple arroyo.

"But you see, this token once belonged to a legendary willow forgotten by time." Crimson's wings were spread dramatically and in one pair of claws, Troph could just make out a shiny piece of metal. He scoffed.

"Who?" some unfamiliar siberian with white and gray fur, and tufts of turquoise that matched their chymos asked, drawn in by Crimson's antics.

"Their name is long lost to history, but..." Crimson began spinning his tale.

Troph watched, one eye twitching. What was this thief up to now...?

Until suddenly he was grabbed. He yipped loudly and began thrashing as he was lifted by the scruff from behind.

"What's that?" the siberian asked.

"Hm?" Crimson turned in the direction of the disturbance. The bushes were rustling violently. He waved his paw dismissively. "That's just my partner. Notice how he's gone now?"

"Partner? Gone from where?"

"He was leaning on that tree over there a few moments ago— You didn't notice?"

The siberian turned. "No, I didn't..."

"Well, anyway," Crimson continued.

"Who are you." The voice was threatening, making Troph pause his struggle. He tried to turn, but he was helpless. "Answer me," they growled.

"Let me go!"

"Are you sure everything's okay over there?"

"Psh, 'course it is! Now c'mon, listen closely.

"Answer me!" they barked.

Troph withheld a whimper. "I don't have to tell you anything!"

Troph was turned around so quickly that he lost his bearings for a moment.

"You do." The stranger's teeth were bared. His left eye was blue, and his right was orange. Both were narrowed in a snarl. Troph was stunned to see such a scary expression. It left a pit in his stomach. Troph tried writhing out of his grip again, only for it to tighten.

"Ow!"

"Why are you here?" he demanded.

Troph couldn't answer, he just stared at the stranger. His fur was a deep chocolate with white freckles scattered sporadically. Impressive, orange antlers sat atop his head, and around his neck was a worn, cobalt collar with an orange buckle.

The stranger shook Troph, bringing him back to the moment.

"Stop, stop!"

"Then answer me."

"I was just passing by— Let me go!" Troph cried.

"Boys, boys..." Crimson's voice cut through the tension. "There's no need to fight."

Tears pricked Troph's eyes at this point, and the stranger huffed.

"That means put him down, Lee-lee."

"Oof!" Troph fell much farther than he expected. He looked up at the two arroyos towering over him and panic forced him to scramble a few feet away and to his feet. Crimson, even being a giant himself, was dwarfed by... Lee-lee? *That has to be a nickname. There's no way...*

Crimson looked around. "Where's your little monster? I would've expected him to attack us already."

Troph was still in shock, but he tried to hide it. He scoffed. "**Flit**," he emphasized his pup's name, "is doing his own thing today."

"Oh, so it does have a name."

Troph growled. "**He—**" He began to shout but was silenced by the antlered arroyo giving a warning glare.

"So, what's yours?" Crimson stepped forward, paws on his hips. Troph hated the way he flinched back— but it only made him more determined to... What exactly was he trying to achieve here? *Stop Crimson's... Whatever he was doing here*, he decided.

Crimson snapped in Troph's face. "**Hel—lo?**" He looked back at the other arroyo. "You didn't hit his head, did you?"

"I'm fine!" Troph snapped.

"Then what's your name?" Crimson raised a brow.

"Why should I—" Again, the other arroyo glared at him, this time accompanied by a low growl "Chemolithoautotroph," he spat, crossing his arms.

"Chemo-lethal-what-off?" Crimson snorted.

"Troph! Just Troph is fine." He was more irritated than afraid now.

"Okay, 'Troph'." It looked like he was still trying not to laugh. "This baby boy here is Lee-lee." He motioned to the other arroyo.

"Leon," he corrected, expression unchanging as he stared at Troph.

"Lee-lee." Crimson smirked.

"Right..." Troph cleared his throat. "Well, I've got notes to take, so I think I'll be taking my leave now..." He began shuffling backward, not wanting to deal with Crimson's bodyguard, but, as expected, escape wasn't going to be so easy.

“Nuh-uh.” Crimson leaped into the air and landed in front of Troph, who recoiled with a look not dissimilar to disgust.

“What.” His voice was sharp, but he regretted it as soon as he realized his back was currently turned to Leon. He side-shuffled and turned so he could see them both. Thankfully, Leon hadn’t moved an inch—it didn’t make Troph any more comfortable, though.

“Why was Leon after you?” Crimson asked after giving Troph a weird look for moving to the side like he did.

“I don’t know,” Troph answered sassily. “I didn’t do anything!”

“He was spying on you,” Leon cut in before falling silent once more.

“Spying?” Crimson looked back to Troph. “Aw, did you miss me that much?” He leaned over Troph with a smug smile.

“I was just in the area, bird brain!” Troph snuck a nervous glance at Leon before continuing. “And then I heard an annoying voice and decided to investigate.”

“Wow... You’re just as charming as you were the first time!” His smile widened sarcastically. Troph rolled his eyes.

“I’m leaving now.” Troph turned to leave.

“What were you doing here in the first place?”

Troph threw his head back and groaned. *Can I just go home already?* “What? Am I not allowed to be here?”

“No, it’s just that you seemed to come from the woods, not another path, and that’s **kinda** weird...” His head tilted.

“Well, what were **you** doing here.”

“Business!” Crimson replied with a simple smile.

“Scammer...” Troph muttered.

“Now,” Crimson poked his chest, being oh-so-gracious as to ignore Troph’s comment, “you still haven’t answered me.”

“Why should I?”

Crimson raised a brow and slowly looked over to Leon. “Lee-lee, darling—”

“I was looking for conglomerates, okay!?”

“Huh.” Crimson looked a little surprised.

“I’m going now!” Troph stormed off before he could hear Crimson’s thoughts on that.

“Do you know each other?” Leon asked as he watched the willow scamper.

“Unfortunately.” Crimson turned back around to face Leon. “Met in the market a few days ago.”

Leon continued staring where Troph used to be. “Do you want me to catch him?”

“No, no.” Crimson started walking and passed Leon, patting his shoulder as he did. “That won’t be necessary.”

Leon stood still a few moments before following.

Crimson was chuckling to himself. “Made a pretty penny today selling garbage to that Syren back there.”

“How much?”

“Just five hundred amcorns.” Crimson turned back with a mischievous grin.

Troph was grumbling as he made his way home. What an absolutely **phenomenal** day. He kicked a stone, imagining it was Crimson. *What a... What a... Ugh!* He kept stomping his way home, driven half insane by that thief having wasted his time **again**.