

Flit had never had much interest in *guiding* anybody. Even after Ganoderma had taken him in, he still felt no ties to the willows; no reason to stay with them or form bonds. It sounded lonely, and maybe it was, but this is how he'd rather live. It made him feel safe— free.

It was a cold and windy autumn day. Flit was sunbathing on a large stone. His eyes were closed as he soaked in the sounds of the rustling leaves and the warm rock beneath him. Sometimes closing his eyes and resting on a day with so much background noise— like those leaves clinging to their branches for dear life— made him feel too vulnerable. Sometimes his skin would crawl, and he would swear he'd hear things approaching, but he knew it wasn't real. He shook his head and decided to focus on relaxing.

But then he heard the distinct crunch of leaves beneath the feet of something larger— a willow.

Flit bolted upright and glanced around. Between the creaking branches, he could see movement. He quickly dove behind the rock he had been sunbathing on and watched closely.

Troph shivered as he wandered through the forest. “Stupid wind,” he grumbled, shielding his face with one hand. The sunlight had always bothered him. *What a great day*, he thought, *perfectly chilly and blinding!*

He huffed and sat on a nearby stone. “So much for exploring...” He was completely lost. He was confident that he could learn the area on his own, but now he had no idea where he was. “Someone will come by soon...” He hugged himself tighter.

Flit flinched as the willow got scarily close and sat, but luckily he hadn't been spotted. He listened and realized they must be lost. He slowly peeked out over the rock.

The willow was facing the other direction, but Flit could see that they had yellow chymos. In fact— it was the same as his, he realized. He tilted his head and continued watching.

They sighed and slumped. “I just need to wait.”

Flit found himself feeling bad for them. He didn't normally care for willows, but this time he did. Something told him they were like him somehow. He cautiously scrambled back onto the rock behind them.

Troph jumped and looked back to find a puptual staring up at him. “Oh— uh...” He looked around awkwardly. “Hi?”

The puptual yipped at him, and somehow he knew it was a greeting.

“Hey, do you think you could help me?”

The puptual seemed to be listening.

Troph sighed. He couldn't believe he was asking a puptual of all things for help, but here he was. “I don't know where I am,” he admitted begrudgingly. “You look like you do, though— right?”

The puptual took off and flew a ways before looking back at him.

“Oh, thanks.” He tried to smile.

The puptual barked back at him as he began to lead the way. His name was Flit.

“I'm... Chemolithoautotroph.”

Flit looked back at him with a friendly smile. Troph was surprised by such a simple reaction. Normally there was more confusion that came with his name, but Flit hardly reacted. It made Troph smile to himself.

It was a much shorter walk than Troph had expected. He was outright embarrassed that he was so close to Sulow Grove and yet so lost.

Flit stopped and looked back at Troph. He barked and stuck his tongue out.

“Wait! You're going?”

Flit stared at him. He looked almost confused— or maybe just curious.

“I just...” He didn't know how to continue. He didn't want to admit that he wanted the pup to stay. “Do you have somewhere to go?”

Flit didn't move for a moment, but then he shook his head. Troph felt relieved.

“Why don't you come with me?” He rocked on his heels. “I have... Books?”

Flit blinked in surprise before yipping and circling Troph. It was a yes.

“Great! This way.” Troph smiled as he led the pup home. He was pleasantly surprised that he enjoyed Flit's company.

They arrived and spent the rest of the day getting to know each other. By the end of the day, they retreated to their own corners to destress. They eventually wished each other goodnight.

As Flit closed his eyes, snuggled into the makeshift bed of blankets, he felt happy to have met Troph. He felt understood. He let himself relax and decided that he would stay here, that Troph was his willow. And as he slept, his jewel began to change.