

The sun hung low against the horizon as the four willows crammed into this tiny house in Sweetbay clamored to get ready for the festivities, bustling with energy. With their companions tucked away into bed, the atmosphere buzzed with anticipation and the need to hurry. They donned the elaborate costumes Orion had spent the last month meticulously piecing together, a task that had kept him hunched over his desk for hours on end, sewing and cutting and constantly adjusting patterns and measurements- Lukas still wonders how he hasn't developed a spinal issue from the hours he spends practically folded in half at that desk.

Tanner fumbled with the buttons of his pristine white jacket, which he had hurriedly thrown over a plain red dress shirt. The tie, a poorly tied knot, hung loosely around his neck, the fabric wrinkled and askew, an indication of his lack of practice in formal attire. Orion sighed from behind a face mask, his eyes narrowing as he leaned down to adjust Tanner's hastily thrown on garments. Orion wore a set of pale blue scrubs, having hesitantly agreed to a matching costume with Tanner. Tanner's a doctor, and he's a nurse. One would assume it would be the other way around, with Orion being the only one with a working, rational thought process most of the time, but oh well.

On the other side of the house, Aiden struggled to pull a silken cape over his broad shoulders, tying it off in the front with a flourish that he hoped was dramatic enough to fit his vampire persona. A long, dark cape with a blood red inside, a Victorian style dress shirt with a flowing jabot, a suit jacket on top of it with dress pants to match, and black leather boots with a rather large and heavy platform. A part of him found it cliché, but Lukas seemed to adore the idea. Lukas was now wrestling with the oversized hunting coat that had been sourced for him, finally getting it to quit falling off. He's dressed in a torn shirt, oversized coat, studded gloves and matching belts

with makeshift stakes attached to them. It's an outfit straight from the pages of a romance novel he had read cover-to-cover at least seven hundred times, likely more. The story was a predictable one, featuring a vampire hunter on a quest to vanquish a feared creature of the night, tracking him down to his home, only to discover that the supposed monster was merely misunderstood, driven by instinct and fear.

He chuckles softly to himself as he thinks about how many parallels one could draw between their situation and the story's plot as he adjusts the neckline of his shirt, glancing back over to Lukas just to see him struggling to fit his talons into the heavy boots Orion had sourced for him. Sighing softly, Aiden makes his way over, heavy footsteps resonating through the house. These boots were going to be the death of both of them, he thinks, they make his already heavy steps sound like a herd of Pinyons stampeding every time he walks and Lukas can barely even get his on. It's not like they needed shoes anyways, but it was all for the aesthetic, you know? Practicality could be sacrificed for a more cohesive look.

They eventually manage to get his talons to quit catching on the furred insides of the studded boots and with that they're both ready, wandering across the house to find Orion and Tanner, who are bickering about something, unsurprisingly. Aiden takes note of the haphazard way Tanner is dressed, and assumes that's the reason, not bothering to ask.

"Is everybody ready?" Orion grabs his bag, and is met with a variance of affirmative noises.

"Alright, let's get going then."

Lukas takes Aiden's hand into his own, mindful of the studs on his fingerless gloves, as they exit the house, having to traverse the swampy area carefully so as to not ruin their costumes. It's a pretty long walk, but Aiden has walked farther than this in a day, Orion and Tanner are used to it,

and years of constantly searching every waking hour he had makes this feel like a brisk walk to Lukas.

When they finally arrived at the event, the sun had dipped below the mountains, leaving the winding path cloaked in the cool embrace of dusk. The air was filled with the laughter of Willows of all types, clad in costumes and bustling about the streets, excitement shimmering in the atmosphere. Ginger spotted them immediately, waving enthusiastically as he called them over to where he and his wife Phoebea stand. Phoebea's eyes glaze between them all, but focus on Aiden in particular. If this were months earlier, he's sure she would have chased him out like the other unwanted, outcasted willows, but with recent revelations and a newfound understanding of his... peculiar ailment, he'd recently been welcome back into the community. While Ginger rattles off to the other 3 about all the stalls and events and games, as well as asking about their costumes, Phoebea steps off to the side with Aiden for a moment

"Have you been readjusting well?" She asked, her voice soft and genuine, a stark contrast to the chaos around them.

"It's been... rough. People here don't forgive and forget very easily." He admits, tail lashing a little "Let me know if anyone gives you any trouble, alright?" Her concern is genuine and evident, it pulls at feelings Aiden long forgot he had.

"..I will, thank you." His voice waivers, but not noticeably.

"It's no worries, really, we're glad to have you back."

Aiden's not used to people being genuinely concerned for him, nor being sincere with other willows, so this is all foreign territory for him. Phoebea smiles up at him, making a playful comment about

his fang-like tusks suiting his costume as the return to everyone else. Lukas takes his hand again, and they're on the move again

"What'd Pheobea want?" Lukas asks him, brushing his thumb over the back of Aiden's hand, the gesture comforting and familiar. "Nothing important. Just wanted to check on me." Aiden huffs, watching Tanner tug Orion ahead of them, towards one of the many games. Seems it's just going to be the two of them for a little, then. "Well.... Let's get something to eat and sit down somewhere, yeah?" Lukas suggested, his eyes bright with enthusiasm.

The two of them made their way to a food stall after looking between all of their choices for a moment, the scent of freshly baked goods wafting through the air. Lukas nearly trips on his coat a couple times, and Aiden is having much of the same struggle with his cape, but they power through it. They picked out a couple of savory pastries, warm and flaky, and found a nearby bench to sit down on. Lukas, at some point, had just let the coat fall down his shoulders. The atmosphere was electric, filled with laughter, chatter, and the distant sound of games being played. They took a moment to catch their breath, savoring the food as they planned their next moves for the evening.

"So, what do you want to do?" Lukas asked, his voice soft, full of genuine curiosity. Aiden had long been isolated from festivities, so Lukas was trying his best to ensure he was having fun.

Aiden glanced around, taking in the sights and sounds, the bright colors of the decorations illuminating the faces of their fellow Willows, some of which he recognized as some of Tanner's friends. "I don't know what half of these activities are," he admitted, his heart racing with a mix of excitement and apprehension. How long had it been since he had been part of these festivities? Too long, he decides, not wanting to dwell on it. He adjusts the collar of his shirt

Lukas grinned, clearly enjoying the challenge. "Well, let's figure it out together! We can just wander around and see what catches our eyes, there's no rush." He shrugs his jacket back over his shoulders as the wind picks up, offering Aiden a hand.

Aiden smiles as he takes it, a feeling he had long repressed tugging to the surface. He felt as if this night, and those to come, were just the beginning of something wonderful—a chance to truly belong once more.