

Char finished listening to her story. She cares a lot about them, but they can't bring themselves to open the door again. The thought of seeing Fia damaged after the incident was too much for him. Even if Fia wasn't, she was. And they weren't sure they could face her after this. It was their fault. None of this would have happened if Char wasn't so hasty.

Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. It's still too much. Hearing Fia say it wasn't her fault hurt, she didn't know. But before all that... A costume contest? Maybe... Maybe that's what they needed. No pressure to show what's changed, a place to hide. Mom said he should really get out more, before... Yeah. Mom would be happy if she did something for once, it's not cleaning the house but it's better than nothing.

This house was dad's before gifting it to Char. He built it himself, and it was some of the last recent memories she enjoyed. With a shaky breath, Char stepped over some trash and opened the closet door. It creaked in protest, the joints needed oiling thanks to the messes made. If only it would all disappear like... No. No. No.

Deep inside the walk-in closet was a mask and cloak. An old costume that never came to fruition and meant to mimic a Flamake. It would work now, there's no reason to say its not done and back out now. Ugh. What would go with it? Something that would hide as much as possible. The mask, the cloak... Aha. A nice wide-sleeved shirt, it easily hides the extrusions on their arms too. Some pants would do nicely too.

Once the pieces were altogether, Char placed the items on the still warm bed. To make sure he was well hidden, he needed the room length mirror. It was dusty from neglect and bits of paper covered the nearby floor. No that wouldn't do that wouldn't do at all. Where was the broom? Char left the room to find the nice little cleaning item. It was on the kitchen floor from spilling rice everywhere the other day.

At least it was easy, Char grabbed up the broom and took it to the bedroom like star-crossed Willows on a nice night. The thought of just sweeping felt sluggish, but if Char thought about it too hard it would never happen. The stray papers moved easily and without care. Sure it was to the same larger pile of sadness that had spent months growing to that size but hey. It was relegated there now. The mirror was simple too, one of the cloths on the nearby unswept floor by the bed easily cut through the dust coating its surface.

Their reflection was abysmal. His foliage didn't grow back the same, and it took on a sickly green tone that earned a wince seeing it staring back. By Sullow, Char looked like shit. There's no point in hiding from reflections all her life though, she would have to learn to cope with that too.

The clothes still fit, that was nice. The cloak hid their form nicely, and the mask was a perfect cover for their snout. Seeing the masked Willow staring back felt... Kind of nice, for once. The reflection did feel a little alien, especially if Char put on a snide look, but it was good. That meant no one would recognize them. The only step left was to wait until tomorrow. The fall festivities took place at the same area each year, making the location easy at least.

This would be good for them, yeah! As long as nothing bad happens... Everything will be okay.

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The decision to come was starting to feel more like a regret. It was loud and cheerful like every year, but different. Not that the festivities physically felt different, just... Chartreuse was different now. It felt wrong to participate when everything before this felt like the world was ending. Even as the leaves die and fall to retreat before winter, Willows celebrated. Maybe... Maybe Char could at least pretend to enjoy the sights and sounds put on for the night.

Char found herself a spot to sit down for a little while, watching willows pass by to and fro. They didn't pay much attention to the crowd, and were honestly just looking for an excuse to leave by this point. It was loud and overwhelming, the mask was uncomfortable and itchy. It was hard to focus but that's when a clear voice cut through it.

"Hey, are- Are you okay?" By Sullow please kill Char now, it was Fialova. "O- oh! Hi, yes I'm- I'm quite alright. I just needed a moment." The response was met with a hand offered before him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you, you just looked like you were about to cry and we can't have that! It's such a nice night. I'm Fia by the way."

Taking the hand offered, Char relaxed a little. She didn't notice who it was. She didn't notice! That's great news, Char could enjoy this night without being berated with questions or concern. "And you are?" Being pulled up by Fia was rather nice, but also a bit nerve wracking. They would need another name to go by for the night. "O- oh. I'm-" Quick think of something! "I'm Tawny. And you?" Fia snorted and laughed, causing Char to quickly backpedal. "Oh I already- You already told me, huh? Sorry I'm just stupid-"

"Aht. You're not dumb for doing that, everyone does it at some point! Would you like to join me for the festival tonight? I was gonna go with a couple friends but they canceled last minute." Fia looked hopeful, happy to meet a friend. "Oh yeah, I was hoping to make some friends coming here. I'm not very good at it." She smiles wide, her eyes sparkling. "How about you join me in the costume contest? The Companion Contest is tonight, and that's a pretty cool outfit right there!"

"O-oh... Is it really that good? I never finished it." Char smiled weakly behind the mask. "Of course it is! Mine is based on my friend's Puptual, it was also last minute. Pretty cool, huh?" Fia was as friendly as ever, she's always been good at that. The both of them continued down the path as Fia excitedly spoke about all her cool adventures. He missed hearing them, even the ones she's told before or even the ones with Char herself in them.

Speaking of, it was a pretty good costume. A green Puptual with bright orange chymojewels. It was a hoodie and cloak, fake black bat wings attached at the back. Another set of wings attached to the cloak. A pair of stuffed little nubbin arms hung from her hoodie, just like an actual Puptual! There was a distinct eye marking on the right arm as well, where did that come from?

Eventually the duo landed in a line. "Hey Tawny, I know you're not entirely comfortable being here... I didn't want to get carried away, especially now that we're in line. Are you sure you want to join the costume contest? There would be a lot of eyes on us you know..." Char

quickly nodded. "Yes! Yes! Of course! I would love nothing more than to spend time with you- I mean... You're really cool. I don't- have many... Really any friends. I don't think I could go on stage without you, Fia." She patted their shoulder.

"I wouldn't have either, honestly. Sure my costume is killer, but I've got a little stage fright myself! There's only so much confidence I can put on before my nerves get to me." She hummed, rocking back and forth. "You know, you give me similar vibes to my bestie. I told you about her already! Chartreuse. She's always such a good listener, with great advice. Just very unsure of herself, not that it's a bad thing! We all have monsters to face. Sorry if that was heavy, I just... I'm sad she couldn't make it."

Fia had since looked down, posture tightening as the rocking slowed to a halt. A firm hand placed itself on her shoulder. "I don't know much about your friend-" That was a fat lie. "But she cares about you too. She might just be worried about a harsh reaction..." The silence after was palpable and thick. Did he say too much? Did Fia catch on yet? By Sullow that was too much to think about. Nodding soon followed. "You know, you're right. I just- can't help but worry, you know? I- I haven't seen Char since... I haven't seen her in months. It's been really hard on me, too."

Shoot. Char fucked up, Fia seemed okay!! Was she not? She seemed totally fine until now! Fia caught on quick, Char hadn't even realized the way their hand had tensed up until she put her hand against theirs. "I didn't mean to make it depressing, we're here to have a good night! Eat good food, and have fun. Alright? No more drama!"

And look at that, they were next in line for the contest application! The clipboard wasn't as full as Char had first thought, maybe some people got in the wrong lines or something? Who knows. Putting their names on the clipboard as a duo wasn't complex in the slightest, and soon they were directed behind the stage. There were a few goodies on the table, candied apples, toffees, hard candies, that all looked so good. It was a shame the mask was so restrictive and Char's face had such a distinct shape, or else she would eat. There were a good chunk of other Willows waiting as well, and some bags left to be watched on chairs as their owners explored.

Now the anticipation was rising, and soon there would be many eyes on everyone here at some point or another. Fia kicked her legs happily, with no regard for anyone who could be walking by. "I'm so excited! We get blueberry baskets for participating too, and I'll have plenty More to make more pies! Did I tell you I bake? My specialty is apple-blueberry pie, I'll bring some if I see you again, Tawny."

"That sounds great, I'd love to have some of your famous pie then! I bet it's delicious the way you've talked about it." Char made a little heart with his hands. "I've already talked about them? Wow I must be totally scatterbrained today, but hey! They're just that good, and it's always so satisfying getting to see the reactions when people realize how good it is! The secret is love and flamake scales, by the way... Fufufu!" Char couldn't help but let a little laugh slip through, that's what she'd always say. It's not like Fia could help it either, her companion is always up to trouble.

The next... What felt like five minutes, came to an end as more Willows filtered in and into the seats facing the stage. The contest started, and an announcer came to introduce well costumed groups one by one. Char couldn't remember half the costumes, heart too busy pounding in his ears to focus on much. Fia was quiet too, just watching the performances people put on as they were behind the curtains. Just out of sight due to the sheer height Of the stage.

That's when the fated words were spoken. "And up next are Fialova and Tawny!" That's right, they didn't make a cool stage name. "Come on girl! Let's go!" Char was so absorbed in thought she didn't realize Fia was tugging on her arm until then. The duo stumbled up on stage and Fia took the offered microphone to address the audience. "Hello Festival-goers! Are we all having a good evening of food and fright? Yeah? Awesome! This is me and my friend's first year in costume, and here's to many more! Thank you all!"

It was so seamless, Char almost forgot to strike some poses. The way the crowd cheered as Fia spoke, as if she was a famous singer in a band, it was mesmerizing. They were all cheering? For them? By Sullow and all they did was strike a few poses! This wasn't so bad!

As soon as they stepped down from the stage, a familiar Willow told them to wait for the contest results and take a seat. The blueberry baskets would come after the votes. Not bad! Fia was practically jumping up and down. "I hope we get first!" It was Char to get them back to their seats, compared to how Fia had initially picked them out. "Actually I dunno, everyone's costumes are so cool! I can't wait to see who wins!" In most situations she would be considered loud, but she was whisper shouting right now so it wasn't so bad.

The waiting was killing Char though, it was so hard to just sit next to Fia without feeling uncomfortable. Knowing that everything Char had built up was a lie, and that Tawny didn't exist. It was fun at first but since they talked in the line this nagging feeling in the back of his mind nibbled away at more and more of Char's rational mind. It was only a little while longer. Just be Tawny and everything will work out tonight.

"Are you okay? You look a little stressed out." Damn it. Char tried so hard to keep that hidden, was it that obvious? "Yeah- I'm just starting to get a little worn out and-" And I'm Chartreuse, is what she would say if she wasn't worried about this fragile moment shattering like an empty glass and a Flamake being in the same room unsupervised. "And I'm a bit nervous, did we do good enough? It feels like we did nothing at all." A half truth Char would stick by, to ease Fia.

The sigh and sudden weight on his side seemed to agree with that. "We did more than nothing. Going out on stage like that was a big accomplishment. With all those people staring at us... Did they like us? Who knows." That's true, it was more than nothing. Neither of them would have done this without each other either. Not flaking out like that too was tough. "The audience clearly liked you more though, they really enjoyed cheering for you." A tired-out laugh was earned in response. "Was it really that good? I don't even remember what I said."

Really? Wow, that must've been a lot on Fia too. The thought never crossed Char to think that Fia could get nervous on stage like that. She was Fialova! She never got scared in the

spotlight, and she only said she couldn't go up alone to make Tawny feel better about herself. "You're a natural at it. How... How do you look so fearless? It seems so effortless for you." A hum vibrated through Fia before answering.

"Well, I haven't always been good at it. It's scary, but if I pretend I'm not scared then it's easier to be able to let that feeling pass by on its own. It's always going to be scary, and that's okay. Being scared is part of the fun." Fia stopped briefly to upright herself. "Nobody's going to die if you stutter or mix up your words, right? And nobody is going to ever make the perfect speech either, and there's a good chance no one will remember it either."

It felt oddly reassuring to hear that, to know that deep down that someone he had looked up to for so long felt the same fears. Fia was also just a Willow at her core too, not some super-novan that was perfect in every way. Char hadn't really noticed that until now, after some time apart. Fia was different now, but still the same. That's why it felt so surreal to see her.

That's when there was a considerable boom from the audience on the other side of the stage. A group just passed by too, the winners of the costume contest. "Aw shoot, we didn't win. That's okay! Next time we'll win, right?" Fia playfully nudged Char. "Yeah... Fia, I can't wait to meet up again. N- not that we're leaving now but, you know." No she doesn't know, Char. She doesn't know this is just a facade.

"Hey that's chill, I was thinking about visiting one of my friends before heading home for the evening too. Like... Soon, you know?" Char gave a nod of understanding. "Where do they live? I could help walk you there."

"Just down in the Grove, what about you?" Fia's tail flicked as she leaned forwards. "Up in Blissful Mountain, kinda like your friend."

With wide eyes Fia quickly got up and ushered Char to do the same. "Ooh that's quite far. Let's get you a head start before it gets too dark. Did you need some light? Here-" With that she handed him a basket of blueberries, as well as a jar of fireflies from her hoodie pocket. "You take those, okay? And don't worry about the jar, keep it. You should really start going home, I know I'm being an ass but seriously." She closed Char's hand over the jar. "It's not safe to be out that late without a light, and even with one it's still very easy to trip and fall. Ruining your super cool costume right after a great night sucks!"

"A- are you sure about all this? It's not a big deal I promise." Fia gave a speedy reply without room for more words. "Positive! We've been out for so long, and it's a new moon tonight. So once you leave it's going to be extra dark. I know the sun was already setting when we met up but... It's pretty dark out now. Waiting any longer would be a disaster, at least go home now while there are still other Willows out. It's safer that way, girl. And- I have a question before you go..."

"Yes?" Despite being practically dragged out of the festival grounds it didn't feel forced or without reason. Fia just cares, even if it's almost a complete stranger. "Will I see you tomorrow? We could meet in the middle if you don't want to meet here!" Char's stomach dropped, knowing that Tawny and Fia would probably never meet again. "I can't guarantee it

but I really want to come tomorrow!" She clapped, all giddy again. "Awesome! I can't wait to see you then Tawny. Have a good night!"

"Goodnight Fia!" And with that, Chartreuse disappeared into the night. If only Fia knew there was no next time.