

Troph had ventured through Sulow Grove many a time on his quests for knowledge, but he had yet to grow accustomed to its bustling world; especially now.

Sulow Grove was the epicenter of willow society, and yet, the influx of creatures drawn in by the festivities astounded him.

Temporary stalls had been set up and decorative lanterns were strung between every available branch. Willows guffawed loudly together and friendships bloomed. It was a warm sight to see, and the chatter floating lightly through the air was a comforting drone to the ears.

Troph swallowed and held his bag tightly to his chest.

Something landed on his shoulder and yipped.

"I'm alright, Flit," he assured the puptual. In response, Flit lifted off again and took his place hovering beside his willow.

And still, Troph hesitated.

Days before, Troph had been helping with an excavation in the City of Sweetbay, where he had remained a few nights. He hadn't intended on partaking in the festivities, but it just so happened they began the day before he was set to head back home to Brittlebush—sweet, arid, home-y Brittlebush...

But now, Troph was stuck here, in the middle of the most populated city, in the middle of one of its largest festivals. Of course, there had been another route that skirted Sulow Grove, but it had been long abandoned and became unkempt in favor of the vast trail systems provided by Sulow Grove.

*Although maybe the treacherous trail would've been worth its trouble,* Troph thought now that he was face-to-face with the festival.

Flit chuffed, bringing Troph back to the present.

"Right," he took a deep breath, "let's get this over with."

And so, Troph began his journey. He was forced to pardon himself every few seconds as he tried to force his way through the crowds. The amount of times he'd said 'Excuse me', or 'My apologies' was starting to get on his nerves. He just wanted to be home already!

"Argh!" He clenched his fists and stomped his foot, a few willows glancing in his direction.

*This is such a waste of time! I have research to do!*

Flit pushed himself into Troph's face and gave him a stern glare that said 'Calm down. You will be fine.'

Troph scoffed, crossing his arms and looking away, but he knew Flit was right; his research wasn't going anywhere...

But as he was pouting, he noticed something:

An arroyo willow looked back and forth with a sly smile before plucking fruit from a basket and casually strolling away.

Troph was shocked, but he quickly gave chase.

"Hey! You!" He pushed past willows, this time without excusing himself—which was somewhat satisfying.

The arroyo continued moving at a relaxed pace, making catching him that much easier.

"You!" Troph exclaimed, grabbing the willow's feathered arm. "You can't just steal that!"

The arroyo looked down at him with that same smile, his brow lightly raised. He was taller than Troph realized at first.

“Steal what?”

“Those!” He pointed at the arroyo's arm's-full of stolen goodies.

“These?” He held up one of the fruit.

“Yes!” Troph would have long lost his confidence if it weren't for Flit growling quietly at his side. “Give them back!”

The willow looked Troph dead in the eyes as he bit into the fruit, juices spraying to the ground. “Whoops, looks like they've been tainted. ‘Spose I can't return them anymore.” He looked even more smug.

And Troph simply gaped at him. *The audacity!*

“You—” He was at a loss for words. What should he even say? The arroyo snickered.

“You're so uptight.” He bent down so that they were eye-to-eye. “Do you have connections to the pinyon or something? Did somebody shove a stick up your— **Ow!**” The stranger was cut off when Troph kicked his shin. He dropped most of his goods, and Troph dove for them, shoving them into his bag.

He quickly rose to his feet and turned to run away when his wrist was grabbed. He was spun around and held up by claws digging into his arm

“Those are mine.” Troph swore he heard a growl in the stranger's voice—except his expression didn't match his voice; he was still smiling, and it made Troph's skin crawl.

Troph looked at Flit, who seemed to understand.

“F-fine.” Troph feigned a struggle before pretending to give in. “Tell me your name and I'll give them back.” The goods were still safely stowed away in Troph's satchel which he had a tight grip on.

The arroyo was confused, it was obvious even though his expression remained mostly the same, but he complied.

“Crimson.”

The moment the name left the arroyo's mouth, Flit bit his nose as hard as possible and Troph was released, falling to the ground. He quickly found his footing and dashed away while Flit kept Crimson distracted.

After a moment, Flit hurried to Troph's side again.

“Are you kidding me?! But those looked **so** good!” Troph could hear Crimson whine.

Troph grinned to himself as he ran. Now he could report that thief! He made sure to catalog his appearance: Tall, two tails, purple chymo...

And then Troph realized he had lost track of which stall the fruit had been taken from. And now he was the thief.

He stopped in his tracks and face-palmed.

Troph *really* hated festivals.