

The long-awaited Frosthaven Faire had finally commenced, a festive event that marked the heart of the winter season. Although the air in Sulow Grove turned crisp, the town remained free of snow. But, in Blissful Mountain—the event’s vibrant epicenter—was a different scene entirely. A thick blanket of pristine, white snow covered the ground, painting the landscape like a winter wonderland. Each structure on the mountain, from cozy cabins to festive stalls, shimmered with twinkling lights like stars, creating a warm and inviting glow against the cold backdrop. Icicles hung gracefully from the eaves, glinting in the afternoon light, while snowdrifts gathered in the trees and along the streets. The comforting and friendly aroma of freshly baked pastries was ever-present, mingling with the crisp scent of pine and the faint sting of woodsmoke to combat the creeping chill. Stalls lined the treats, packed with all sorts of treats and goodies such as spiced apple cider and rich hot chocolate. While many of Willanova’s events are jovial, the Frosthaven Faire carried a unique energy; one of gratitude and merriment—a distinctly warm atmosphere, unmatched by any other recurring event.

It was truly a wonderful place to be.

And yet, despite the cheery atmosphere, Troph found himself at an event he rather wished he wasn’t attending. But alas, Ezekiel had begged him to come, and for some reason, he had let her drag him along. He wondered why, but whatever— It was much too late to leave now.

He was sat on a bench near a bustling plaza lined with snow-covered brick paths, crossing his arms against his chest in a futile attempt to ward off the cold. His gaze was on Ezekiel, who was running about, her laughter a familiar song as she played with other willows her age. He watched her with careful eyes.

Face decorated with a radiant smile, she looked happy— she always did, Troph supposed— but she was always alone, too. Up until now, he’d never seen her spending time with other willows. Well, maybe there was an exception: There was an arroyo her age that hung around her shop quite frequently. He always came alone, no older siblings or friends or parents in sight. Troph had a feeling the two of them were in the same boat.

So Troph wondered why now of all times she would allow herself time off. She seemed to spend every day in her shop, trying her best to sell the carvings and figurines she’d spent so much time on— So why was she playing now when she normally kept herself so busy?

His thoughts drifted to the last time he chaperoned her. He had ended up meeting those three troublemakers. Although nothing bad had happened, Troph felt deeply unsettled by the idea that they might have harmed Ezekiel. He felt responsible for her now, especially since it turned out she had no parents of her own. Maybe that was why he had come with her. And maybe he was the reason why she let herself be a kid.

Seeing her spinning and dancing around the plaza, a warm sense of ease began to wash over him, and attending the event was starting to feel worthwhile. But just as he was beginning to relax, he caught sight of three familiar faces to his right. No way. He couldn't be more unhappy to see them. Well, he supposed Zip wasn't so bad once you actually talked to him, but the other two... Mothra was a dirty cheater, and Draven was just Draven—enough said! Her mere presence meant trouble. Bad things were bound to happen with them around...

Troph scowled, continuing to eye them suspiciously until, suddenly, he and Mothra made eye contact. He looked away as quickly as possible, but the damage had been done. He dared to glance at them again and next he knew, Zip was waving at him enthusiastically, beckoning him to come over.

Troph plastered an awkward smile on his face and cast another look toward Ezekiel, who was blissfully unaware of his suffering. But he could hear Zip's voice ringing out above the boisterous crowd, calling for him. Defeated, he dropped his head into his hands before raising himself from the bench. He hurried over to the trio, not wanting to draw any attention via incessant Zip's shouting. He kept his watchful eyes on Ezekiel all the way.

"Hello..." Troph started, forcing a smile, turning his attention to them more fully. "Is there something you need?"

"Well, we—" Zip began, only to be interrupted by Mothra.

"It was all him," Mothra interjected, pointing to Zip.

Zip continued, looking back to troph with an eager sparkle in his eye, "We noticed you sitting there looking all sour and thought, 'Hey, maybe he could join us!'"

"Uhm..." Troph hesitated, glancing back at Ezekiel once again. While he would love to get out of there— maybe not exactly to join them— he felt he had to stay with her. He looked back again, specifically at Draven. As much as he disliked Draven, she was known for being crafty, and after all, she had created the conglomerates; the very things he longed to know about so much... The potential to learn something from her was tempting—but he couldn't justify leave Ezekiel. "I'm sorry, I'm a little—"

"Troph?" He nearly jumped out of his skin when someone called his name from behind.

"Ezekiel!" He spun around, startled. "What are you doing here?" She moved fast when you weren't paying attention...

"Well, I went to get you to tell you I wanted to go do something else, but you weren't there. I could still hear you, so I just followed your voice," she explained.

Troph let out a resigned sigh and turned back to the other three, adjusting his glasses that had nearly fallen off in his surprise. “Look, I really need to take care of her right now, so—”

“Why don't you bring her with you?” Draven suggested, speaking at last.

He shot her a glare.

“With?” Ezekiel's eyes widened curiously. “Where to? What are we doing?”

“I don't think—” Troph tried to interrupt but was cut off.

“Oh, can she? Can she?” Zip bounced on his heels, thrilled at the idea of another willow joining them. He turned to his siblings with pleading eyes that even Troph might've had trouble saying no to... But no matter— Whatever their plan was, it couldn't be good, Troph decided.

“Please, Troph, please?” Ezekiel begged.

“I don't see why not,” Draven said, a mischievous grin beginning to form. Troph was getting a bad feeling.

“The more the merrier!” Zip piped up.

“What are we even doing?!” Troph shouted, exasperation spilling over. The group fell silent, all eyes turning to him. He shuffled, a bit embarrassed.

“You're either in and you know what's happening, or you're out and you'll find out in a few hours,” Mothra said, crossing his arms. It was almost threatening. Troph wouldn't be surprised if his feeling that way was exactly Mothra's intention.

Troph looked down at Ezekiel and facepalmed. He couldn't believe this was happening again. “Fine, sure—we're in.”

“Yes!” Ezekiel cheered, hopping with excitement.

How had this happened again, Troph asked himself.