

Chapter V - Florinok

Planet Trezon

Florinok Lephyte nervously twirled her hair as they prepared to feed the drug to the rabbit in the lab at the headquarters of Curavez Pharmaceuticals.

She had dressed brightly — perhaps too brightly — in a somewhat subconscious attempt to hide her overwhelming anxiety. She wore a lime, satin top, which brought out the green of her eyes, underneath a dark-turquoise bolero jacket. Her ruffled skirt was canary yellow over translucent, red-brown leggings. She had accessorized with a dark-turquoise choker and lime pumps.

Her thigh-length, raven-black hair, tied into a high ponytail, flowed down like a fountain and swished around as she stood fidgeting and swinging her head around every which way. It was cut into bangs across her forehead, framing her small, green eyes.

Florinok and her team had worked tirelessly to prepare the drug for months — from the initial molecular designing and raw material extraction to the final refining process and mass spectrography.

A lot depended on whether they had been successful. The raw material came from a rare species of plants that only thrived in the Malorawa Forest on Karomoz. The Karomozian government had given them six months to prepare their drug — a drug for a yet incurable epidemic that had broken out on Karomoz and several other planets, including planet Trezon. They only had a week left by now.

If they succeeded in manufacturing a viable drug, a large swath of the Malorawa Forest would be awarded to Curavez Pharmaceuticals. If not, it would instead be awarded to Quinns Furnishings based on Karomoz. Cutting down trees so that the rich can sit and lie comfortably instead of saving the poor's lives, Florinok always thought bitterly.

"You know, you should be the one administering the drug," said Phyl most amiably. He was a middle-aged, spectacled man with graying temples, a thick mustache, and a gentle, wrinkling face.

Florinok knew better than to mistake that as an honor. All the five shareholders were present — Phyl, Rosa, Daffleria, Xemesh, and herself. She was the only one who had in-depth knowledge of the manufacturing process and the drug's mechanism of action. Unlike the others, she never bought her shares but was raised to this position by her dead mentor and former CEO of Curavez Pharmaceuticals, Lavandora Myrtle. Before that, Florinok had worked in various capacities as an employee of Curavez Pharmaceuticals, though always under Lavandora's care.

What Phyl really meant by his remark was that Florinok's place was not with the shareholders but with the lab technicians.

"Thank you, Phyl." Florinok beamed. "But I think I have trained them enough to be able to do their job without me."

"Indeed, she has," Rosa added calmly but with a subtle acid. She had big, olive eyes, and her strawberry blonde hair was in a bun. "They did their job well enough today. That team from Karomoz couldn't find a single flaw in our work environment. Everything was spotless. Do you suppose the spots removed themselves, Phyl?"

Rosa, as sweet as her name, was the only one who stuck up for her. Before she inherited her father's shares, she had been an event planner and had been very inexperienced when Florinok had joined. However, she was eager to know more about the pharmaceutical industry and took to learning about it from Florinok.

Phyl gave an apologetic smile. "I didn't mean any offense, ladies, I just wanted—"

"You mean she scoured everything clean herself?" This was Daffleria, blunt as ever, never bothering to employ diplomacy, unlike Phyl. She had gaunt features, thin auburn hair in curls, and sharp, brown eyes.

"No, I only made the workers get off their butts and do it," Florinok replied, tittering.

The team who had visited them earlier today was from the Drug Regulatory Authority of Karomoz, which worked under their Ministry of Health. They wanted to inspect the working conditions in which the drug was being manufactured. Florinok had supervised the preparations for their visit. The nature of the drug was such that it did not require rigorous hygiene standards as some other medicines did, but Florinok couldn't afford to neglect anything only for the team to raise objections.

Everything had gone well in the end. Nevertheless, Florinok found it extremely unfair that while they had to work day and night to get the swatch of the Malorawa Forest, all Quinns Furnishings had to do was to sit around, wait and hope they failed.

Florinok glanced around at the lab just to distract her mind a bit. At first glance, it looked scarcely like a lab. Several gigantic trunks of a single cashew tree sprung from the center of the room to almost fifty feet. Their thick, long branches radiated in all directions overhead to form the leafy yet waterproof canopy. The branches sagged at their ends and embedded into the ground, effectively establishing the pillars of the walls as well. Lush, intertwining vines connected the gaps between these makeshift pillars. The floor was covered with grass and fallen leaves and cashew nuts. The air was fresh with the rich perfumes of all the vegetation.

Several stations were centered on the trunks, each with lab attendants busy at work with all sorts of animals — at least they did their best to look like they were busy at work. Florinok could see how they peered over their shoulders at the station the shareholders were standing at when they thought no one was looking. They were curious too.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, ladies and gentlemen." The voice of old Ivado, the lead lab attendant, turned Florinok's attention back to the task at hand. "We are now ready to deliver the drug."

"Finally. We've been waiting forever," Daffleria complained.

"My apologies, ma'am." Ivado grinned. "You there, hold the rabbit."

An assistant moved over to grab the rabbit with gloved hands. Meanwhile, Ivado flicked the syringe he had been preparing to remove any air bubbles.

Florinok looked at the rabbit, its belly rapidly heaving inward and outward, its eyes widened in fear. She hated this part, subjecting these poor, lovely creatures to such horrors. This one had not yet been inoculated with the alleged infectious agent. They wanted to assess the severity of the side effects of the drug first, which, so far, had been nothing less than deadly.

Presently, Ivado injected the drug behind the rabbit's shoulder. Everyone looked on in silence.

"Well?" Daffleria finally broke the silence.

"The side effects usually appear within five minutes," Florinok explained. "The rabbit may begin experiencing uncontrollable seizures and die of asphyxia. If, however, they don't appear by ten minutes, it probably means we have succeeded, and we can move on to the next phase."

"But if they do appear, we have failed?"

"Yes." Florinok swallowed.

"I see."

Florinok did not have to wait for ten minutes — or five minutes. Barely two minutes had passed when the poor rabbit began twitching in a dozen places at the same time. The twitching soon enough gave way to violent muscle contractions and finally to complete spasm. Foam bubbled out of its mouth.

"Muscle relaxant! Now!" Florinok shouted frantically.

The rabbit seemed to be within an inch of its life when they injected the relaxant. In the end, the poor creature survived. She, however, had failed.

They seemed to be talking around her, but she did not hear them. Everything was a blur except for the rabbit's little face with its twitchy little nose and whiskers. Her hard work for the past six months flashed by — locating the plant in the forest, securing the lease for the swath from the Karomozian government, and then the tedious, months-long process of molecular designing and manufacturing for which she had to continually keep an eye on the workers. All those six months had crumbled to dust in mere seconds when this rabbit had almost suffocated to death.

She had been so pleased with the developments up till now. Everything had been going nearly perfectly. Especially today, she had been feeling so hopeful after the team from Karomoz had approved them. Now, she had no idea what to do next — except maybe quit.

"I asked you a question!"

Florinok turned her head to see Xemesh staring at her. He looked like an imp with his big ears, bright-green eyes, and a pinkish face.

"Huh, what?" Florinok asked blankly.

Xemesh rolled his eyes. "I said if this rabbit survived after we gave it a muscle relaxant, why can't we give it to the patient before we administer the drug?"

"According to body mass, the dose we administered to it was half that required to achieve the therapeutic effect. And yet, it almost died. It's just too risky to give it to a patient, even with a muscle relaxant."

"Well, then show's over, folks." Daffleria turned around, clapping her hands. "Let's go and inform the folks from the Karomozian drug authority and congratulate that stupid furnishing company and forget this disaster ever happened."

Everyone turned around to walk away except Florinok and Rosa. As Phyl passed the former, he laid a hand on her shoulder. "Obviously, Lavandora had a... a lot... of faith in you," he said before he went on his way.

Too much faith, you mean, Florinok thought. She had learned not to think twice about anything Phyl ever said, but this time, something about his remark stuck. Lavandora did have a lot of faith in her. Once, Florinok had been nothing more than an orphan stealing drugs for her sick friends from this manufacturing plant. But even back then, Lavandora had seen something in her and inducted her into the company. Since then, not once had she doubted Florinok's capabilities. Gradually, Florinok's coworkers had come to admire her, too, though that also had to do with her demeanor.

In a way, even Daffleria's remark stuck. Florinok silently picked up the vial containing the drug.

"I too have faith in you, Florinok," Rosa whispered. "This may be over, but I know you worked hard and—"

"Not yet, Rosa," Florinok said urgently, walking toward the exit. "I'll catch you later. I have something to do."

"If you say so," she heard Rosa say behind her.

Florinok strode out of the makeshift doorway of the lab — some vines hanging between two of the cashew tree's branches — to alight outside in the warm, Trezonish sun. She strode down the gnarled, wooden steps encircling the lab. The grass continued out on the ground, and tall, lush green trees surrounded the entire facility. There were flower beds in every corner and lining every path with corsage orchids, camellias, poppies, magnolias, chrysanthemums, and other flowers native to Trezon, coloring the fields like a mosaic painting. The offices and other buildings sprung up from the ground like so many mushrooms — half organic, half inorganic — with ivies and flowery vines twisting and wrapping around them.

Only one building loomed ahead in stark contrast to all the greenery, its whitewashed walls bearing a cold and sterile look. At the far end of the facility, a high fence and paved ground surrounded the manufacturing plant to drive all the vegetation away. Florinok liked this place the least, and yet she knew the plants could not be allowed to creep up on it, lest the purity of the drugs being manufactured inside became compromised.

She hurried over to the building, casting a sideways glance at Phyl and Daffleria in the distance, walking back to their offices. Soon, she crossed the fence and arrived at the main entrance. She entered the antechamber where she discarded her shoes, pulled her hair into a bun, and donned a mask, cap, gown, and pairs of gloves and safety shoes. Then she headed to the operational unit set aside to manufacture the drug they had been testing in the lab.

The unit was deserted, and the equipment lay idle. Florinok made her way to the spectrograph at the other end of the room.

She poured a few drops of the drug into the sample inlet. Then she sat in front of the touch screen next to it. A few minutes later, the results were in front of her.

As Florinok examined the peaks and troughs in the image, she felt her head spin — from both shock and relief. The results were drastically different from when they had last

analyzed the drug before the rabbit trial. One of the drug's chiral centers had been flipped, something that could never happen to the drug spontaneously. Someone deliberately exposed it to radiation, she realized.

Just as she wondered who could have done it, Florinok heard footsteps behind her. Her heartbeat started racing as fear took hold of her. They've come to kill me! She spun around and formed forest-green seeds in her hand. Catching a glimpse of a figure standing next to the equipment, she shot the seeds at them. The seeds exploded in forest-green and rose-pink dust.

The figure collapsed to the floor, coughing violently. As the dust began to settle down, Florinok froze in her place, realizing who it was.

"What... is wrong... with you?" Xemesh managed between his coughs.

"It was you, wasn't it? You tampered with my drug!" Florinok shot back fiercely. Then she snorted. "You realize you can't get away with killing me? Everyone will know!"

"Have you gone utterly mad?" Xemesh clenched his teeth. "Of all people... you ruined your drug yourself, you idiot! Don't you realize?"

"What's that even supposed to mean?"

"It was the team from Karomoz who did it! The very team you allowed so eagerly into our facility! We were set up!" Xemesh was getting up now.

Florinok was taken aback. He's lying. He must be. "That's... impossible! What makes you say that?"

"While you were wasting your time here, I pulled out the CCTV footage. It's hard to notice, but once you realize what's going on, it becomes obvious," Xemesh said, breathing heavily. "Come, I'll show you. I summoned Rosa too."

Moments later, they were in the guard's office, with the CCTV footage paused at a certain point. A few representatives from the Karomozian Drug Authority stood in a huddle around the vats that held the prepared drug, while others conversed with the workers.

Presently, Xemesh asked the guard to zoom in on one of the representatives — specifically on the pen he was holding.

"See? That's an ultraviolet source!" Xemesh exclaimed, pointing toward the pen.

The room fell in silence for a moment as everyone watched the screen intently. Now that Florinok saw it, the object in question indeed looked unusual for a pen. Moreover, the cap was still on, which tapered into a transparent projection like a bulb.

Florinok looked away. Never in her life had she felt any stupider than she did now.

"Well, we've got to manufacture the drug again!" Rosa said, clasping her hands.

"We've got too little time and too little raw material left," Xemesh replied. "We'll never—"

"Not if I buy time and get the raw material," Florinok cut in. "I'm going to Karomoz!"

"What?" Rosa asked incredulously. "And what will you do there?"

"Take the battle to Quinns Furnishings and the rest of those corrupt Karomozians," Florinok said resolutely. "We have been a tad too patient."

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