

Chapter IX - Florinok II

It was a lovely, sunny morning with no sign of even a wisp of a cloud. The sun peeked from above the forest canopy, and its light flitted through the tree branches and trunks, casting shadows every which way. A slight, cool breeze teased the leaves.

All sorts of animal noises could be heard above the leaves' rustling and the gushing Unzayi River. Florinok could identify chirping crickets, singing warblers, and the chattering of what she assumed were monkeys. There were some other creepy sounds she could not tell what animal could be making.

She stood outside her van at the roadside. The road itself led into the Malorawa Forest, and a checkpoint was set up across the entrance. Several police officers stood around the barricade with red-and-pink firearms in holsters. With their immaculate camo uniforms, they might as well have been the army.

"I think it's them," her security guard, Bolho, said, pointing in the opposite direction of the road.

She turned her head and watched as, in the distance, a van wound its way through the surrounding rolling, green fields, the cityscape looming in the background. The Unzayi River, originating from the Great Unzayi Lake, emerged from the forest and snaked its way through the fields to bisect the city into two.

Soon enough, as the van crested a furrow, Florinok could make out the satellite dish on its roof, its red and white body, and the letters in large, bold font — Scope News.

The officers at the checkpoint shifted around, unnerved. That's right, Florinok thought. You are about to be in the news.

The news van pulled up a few feet from the checkpoint. Simultaneously, Florinok, her team, and a couple of police officers started for it.

Promptly, a woman with long brown curls with a headset affixed to her ear got out of the van.

"Ma'am, you need to clear this area," a police officer with a guttural voice and a mop of black hair peeking out of his cap declared.

"This area too?" Florinok asked innocently. "Isn't she outside the forest?"

"You must be Florinok Lephyte?" the reporter said, turning to Florinok.

"Yes, I am. Thank you for coming. And you are?"

"Loress Wenerly, from Scope News." The reporter pressed a button on a device hanging from her neck, resembling an old-fashioned camera. Its lens parted, and a camera drone took flight from inside and hovered in the air.

"Ma'am, seriously, you need to stop with that—" the police officer said, putting up a hand in front of the camera drone.

"It's not on yet," Loress retorted. "So, Ms. Lephyte, you said you are being denied access?"

Florinok fished out a folded document from a pocket in her jumpsuit. She had dressed for the forest in a short-sleeved and thigh-length, lime safari jumpsuit with multiple green

pockets in which she had stuffed an assortment of equipment. She also wore matching boots and a hat.

She unfolded the document and held it out for Loress to see. "This is a lease for a patch in the heart of the Malorawa Forest, awarded to Curavez Pharmaceuticals, signed by the Karomozian Government," Florinok spoke out. "As you can see, there are still five days left in this contract."

The reporter took the document from Florinok's hand and studied it. "However, Quinns Furnishings has seemingly conspired with the Karomozian Government," Florinok continued. "And has already seized control of not only the patch in question but apparently the entire forest with help from local police. According to the contract, they may not commence their operation before the lease is over, but here we are, being unlawfully denied access to the forest."

"Alright, listen, y'all," the other police officer with a pockmarked face and an unkempt beard interrupted. "If y'all don't clear out now, we're gonna have to detain you, simple as that."

Loress handed back the document and pressed another button on the device hanging from her neck. A light on the hovering camera flashed on. "Could you please say that for the camera, officer?"

"Darn it!" the officer with the deep voice exclaimed, looking up the road.

Another news van was inbound, this one blue with stripes in red. The words painted on its body were 'ONN.'

"How many of them have you called?"

"I think there are two more to go," Florinok replied. "I can tell them not to come, though, if you just let us enter."

"Not possible," the pockmarked officer said flatly.

"Please, I need to interview you before those other folks," Loress said impatiently, looking anxiously at the incoming van. Then she turned to face the camera drone. "I am Loress Wenerly, reporting from the Malorawa Forest. Some interesting events involving the Trezonish Pharmaceutical Company, Curavez Pharmaceuticals, and Quinns Furnishings have transpired."

As Loress continued on, the other van pulled up and out stepped two men, holding some equipment, and rushed to Florinok.

"Are you Florinok Lephyte?" one of them inquired.

"You are interrupting my shot!" Loress snapped at them.

"Oh, fantastic! Ms. Lephyte, tell us, what is going on here?"

Florinok showed them the document and explained the situation. Meanwhile, the two police officers went back to the checkpoint and into the sentry's cabin. They emerged a while later and walked up to Florinok and the reporters.

"You can stop this circus now. You may enter the forest, but only under strict supervision and only in a designated area. But no media allowed!"

Florinok did not like one bit having to be restricted to a specific area, but she had already spent the better half of the previous night just trying to enter. She had then retired to the Karomozian branch of Curavez Pharmaceuticals and arrived here in the morning with two of the Karomozian employees. She had also wished to take the reporters inside with her, just to be safe.

This will have to do, for now, Florinok thought. I have to send the raw material back as soon as possible.

Aloud, she said, "As you say, officer."

She got back into her van along with her team, which included Xemesh, Ivado, the security guards, Bolho, Kez, and Alvoak, and field scientists from the Karomozian branch, Clarine and Merel. The barrier was raised, and they were made to follow a black pickup truck with black windows into the forest.

The road was broad initially but soon narrowed down as the dense trees around them pressed closer. Malorawa Forest was a natural forest as much as an artificial one. While most of the flora grew on its own, an ancient emperor was said to have planted some centuries ago. Numerous quaint and exotic trees, shrubs, vines, and bushes were to be found.

They passed the rainbow dragon trees with their broad, flat canopies and barks speckled with multicolored dyes. As the road became a dirt track, these gave way to slender wisteria with their beautiful, lavender leaves on branches that overhung the trail forming a tunnel of sorts. When they emerged out of this tunnel, giant redwoods awaited them, lining the track like tall sentinel towers.

The track soon turned into a hiking trail, too small for the truck and the van to traverse, and they had to set out on foot. They grabbed camping supplies while Kez stayed behind with their van. Two men sharply dressed in black suits and black shades got out of the pickup truck. They look like some super-secret agents, Florinok thought. She reluctantly handed them her map that had the locations of the groves of Maloran nimtrees marked — the tree whose sap she required. The men in suits led the way and motioned for them to follow.

The vegetation pressed close as they walked on a carpet of bluebells straight out of a fairy tale. Strange, gnarled trees sprang out of the ground covered with bright-green moss and some flowering vines with brilliant red flowers. Some mundane, crooked rosewoods and

broad-canopied Karomozian beech stood grimly between all the exotic vegetation, their thick roots threatening to trip them up.

Sunlight danced between the branches and leaves and lit the carpet here and there. Overhead, warblers and hornbills chirped and sang in the treetops. Florinok closed her eyes and savored the sounds and smells of the Malorawa Forest. She had waited for hours to enter, and the wait was worth it all.

They had not walked very far when the men suddenly stopped. "That's as far you can go," one of them said. He had a smooth, round face with thinning hair.

Xemesh spoke up, "We have not reached any of the groves yet."

"We heard you kicked up quite a ruckus out there," said the other man with a firm jaw and a buzz cut. "You should have stayed away. Now you are going to be held up here for an indefinite period of time until it is deemed appropriate to release you."

Suddenly, the two men pulled red-and-pink pistols from their jackets and aimed them at Bolho and Alvoak. "You two," the one with the smooth face said. "Hand over your weapons."

Bolho and Alvoak nervously eyed one another and then the weapons at their hips.

"Please do as they say," Clarine shrieked, her jet-black eyes widened in fear.

"This is not legal!" Florinok exclaimed. "Quinns Furnishings has no right—"

"Weapons! Now!" the man growled. "Drop them and kick them over here. Slow and steady."

"Why are you so interested in these trees being cut?" Florinok demanded. "Don't you care for poor, mer lives?"

"Silence, please," the man with the buzz cut replied.

Meanwhile, Bolho and Alvoak slowly unhooked their weapons from their belts and let them drop to the bluebell carpet. Then they gave them a kick each and sent them clattering toward the two men in suits.

"You don't know what you're doing!" Florinok said as the men walked up to them.

"Empty your pockets, all of you!" the man with the buzz cut said.

"This here," Florinok said as she reached into her pocket and produced an object. "This is what will save all of us!"

The man with the buzz cut stopped short. "Put it back—" he started to say just as Florinok removed the cap.

Florinok jammed the syringe into the man's arm and injected every drop of the fluid inside. The man yelped in pain and staggered back.

The other man let his jaw drop and aimed at Florinok. A forest-green root crept up at his feet and sprang up violently to snatch his feet from right beneath him. Behind her, Alvoak's hand glowed forest green while Bolho shot vines from his hand to restrain the man.

Meanwhile, Florinok's victim collapsed to the ground and began writhing uncontrollably. He rolled from side to side, screaming as if being stung by a thousand Honaxee bees at the same time. For the first time, she saw the effects of a full dose of the adulterated drug on a mer.

Florinok frantically reached into her pocket and produced another syringe filled with muscle relaxant. She bent down and struggled to inject it into the man's flailing arm. Then she released rose-pink, healing pollen dust from her hands and sprinkled it all over him.

The man stopped writhing, but in the end, he died anyway. Florinok slowly got up to her feet, dazed.

"Florinok, what have you done?! What do we do now?" Xemesh exclaimed nervously, his hands over his head.

I have taken a mer life, thought Florinok, horrified. But I just saved our lives and the drug. "We just carry on and collect the sap we need. Alvoak," Florinok said, her knees trembling.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Take that man back to the van," Florinok said, motioning toward the alive, bound up man Alvoak had propped up. She felt anything but calm, but she tried her best to sound so. "The rest of us, let's find a grove."

Do give me your feedback about this chapter, and if you enjoyed it, please consider dropping a vote. Have a great day!