

Chapter 107

Thick branches coiled around the waistlines of every thug who fled. Those who got a knife from their back pockets and stabbed the branch had another branch slap the blade away before their arms were restrained as well. Yellow flowers grew and exuded foul smells at their faces, making them curse and choke.

"You know," Toby - all smiles for the first time in human territory - pulled Sush's attention away when he spoke to the queen. "Call me crazy, but I kinda miss the forest."

Sush was so enthralled by the autonomy of something that was known to stay rooted that she didn't see Millicent, Kenji and Patterson coming up to her when Patterson took bated breaths as he asked, "What... is... that?"

Blinking while trying to look past the part of his body that matched the color of a car seat, Sush groped for the right words before ultimately saying, "I'm told it's called the Forest of Oderem."

Kenji questioned, "Why did we even bother driving? Did you know its roots practically made us turn back?" His right hand seemed restless, moving about frantically like it was trying to get a word in, so Kenji shoved it aside with his left hand as he uttered in annoyance, "Oh, hush."

"What?" Sush's brows rose, not sure whether she was asking about him talking to his limb or the fact that roots made the deployed troops turn back.

Millicent explained, "We were on our way up north. Then, these large roots started appearing out of nowhere like it was creating a barricade, and we were led back here."

"Was anyone hurt?" Sush asked.

Millicent gave a slight shake of her head. "Though we were a little... spooked." A stem grew from the ground next to Millicent, making her flinch while a beige flower with red polka dots in their inner petals bloomed to steal the show.

As Greg joined them with an arm around Sush's shoulder, he nodded to the flower and explained, "Speaking from observation, you're expected to pick it off the ground, Chief. It's befriending you. And the forest doesn't take rejection well."

A short distance away, Millicent witnessed the other duke of the kingdom doing just that with the exact same flower as the king gave him a pat on the back, biting back an amused smile that Millicent didn't quite understand.

Mind-boggled, Millicent turned to Sush, who gave a half-nod, half-shake of her head, signifying that it was up to her, and Millicent - mind completely blank - gently plucked it off the ground, then paused like she was waiting for a detonation that was never coming.

"Fucking sticks!" Hazel exclaimed and continued struggling, the branches around her waist tightened as three yellow flowers sprayed - not just foul odor - but also pollen at her face, making her sneeze and choke.

"Told you," Greg whispered into Sush's ear. "Doesn't take insults well."

When Hazel thought the ordeal was over and began taking a lungful of air, the flowers sprayed into her airway and her suffering continued until Pelly placed her hand on one of the branches nearby and gently told the forest, "That's enough."

Hazel took quick breaths as mucus flowed from her nostrils, and her eyes teared from coughing, eyeing Sush in nothing but pure rage - seeing her as a target missed, a task that she failed, a trophy that she

didn't collect.

"What is this? Side project?" she exclaimed. "The defense ministry is going to have it easy dismissing you when they find out you have ties with a supernatural forest!"

A branch tapped on Pelly's back shoulder, making her look away before the yellow flowers sprayed Hazel in her face again when Sush remarked sardonically, "Sure. Because being dismissed is my main concern right now."

As Pelly looked back in confusion before realizing the forest's trick of making her look away just to get back at Hazel, she tapped her fingers on the branch and eyed it like she would a creature who pranked her.

"Fucking flowers!" Hazel hollered.

"Hazel," Sush began in a voice so low that it was almost a snarl. The betrayal didn't just cut deep, the wound from the cut flared when they found the cottage, the incineration heated her chest when her family confessed to murdering her mother, and the sheer anguish of trusting her, believing that she was a friend - for years, has now left an indelible mark on her heart, in her mind. Challenging her deputy's glower with a fiercer one of her own, the gold rims in her eyes appeared when she said, "I could nail you to the ground and choke you for everything you did ."

The muscles of Hazel's airway stopped working like she was being choked. Hazel's eyes grew wide and she was willing herself to take in air - a forceful endeavor that was proving to be fruitless.

Sush hadn't realized what she was doing to Hazel yet, and thought that Hazel was in one of her psychotic acts, so the Chief Octopus looked past her deputy's state and continued speaking, "Concocting zahar? Sabotaging our borders' defenses that we work so hard to make impenetrable? Wiping out the archers while killing the handful of

chameleons and octopuses - our friends? The depth of shit you created for us gives me every reason to kill you in the slowest possible way. But since I'm not doing that yet, why don't you cherish the remnants of your luck in being kept alive and SHUT THE HELL UP!"

Hazel's lungs gratefully accepted air at the words "being kept alive", and although she struggled in the forest's hold once more, she spat out words that no one could hear, not even herself, and Mrs. Robinson watched her daughter in dismay, her own mouth blocked by a thick branch. Muffled sounds came out from the old woman until Sush unintentionally muted her as well.

"Alright," Pelly began, waving through the air as the branch that tapped her shoulder now extended in front of her like a table. Five flowers of different colors and patterns grew in place, attracting everyone when Pelly continued, "Sush, right? How do you want to deal with them? We have..." she began gesturing through the row of flora like they were items on sale in a market "...nasal infection, instant dehydration, internal bleeding, brain damage, and skin rash that'll spread to the internal organs within a month." When the only response Pelly got was a shock-stunned Sush, the empress added, "Or just good old-fashioned strangulation by the forest, if you like."

"Uh..." Sush blinked, still processing the innocuous-looking flowers as the branch holding them left Pelly and came toward her, giving her a closer look of them.

Looking through the options over Sush's shoulder, Millicent began pondering before Sush did. "Probably not instant dehydration. Too easy," the Chief Archer deduced. The white flower with droplet-shaped petals dotted in blue wilted away.

Sush turned to Millicent, brows raising like she was asking, "You're actually thinking about this?"