

## Throwing a Pinecone in the Machinery

"How many are we up to now, Mistle?" I was pacing, nervous, shaking my hands to try and calm myself down. I didn't want to let Grove down, but any answer to her question would be unsatisfactory.

"None, Grove. We have none. I haven't been able to find anyone suitable for the job. I thought maybe the local vegans would be up for it, but they don't want to get tied down. So then I tried the college campus, but a bunch of the volunteers were just doing it to write it down on their resumes." I sat down on the moss in the corner of the room and grabbed a fistful of leaves. "How do you even pitch what you need to people?"

"I would think offering them the sacred mission of protecting one of the oldest forests would entice them right away." Grove brought herself down to my level, tapping her cheek with a hand on her chin.

"Not in this day and age. Hell if I tell them there's a spirit in the forest I made a deal with that looks like a pretty lady from the waist up but from the waist down is effectively a branch covered in vines like a weird plant lamia they'd call me crazy." I wasn't exaggerating when I described Grove that way. She had a layer of thick bark covering her torso, like a bustier, from which the rest of her grew, her skin green and covered in stretch marks, her hair like willow branches, and her eyes like ponds one could drown in. And instead of legs? A thick branch connecting her to the walls inside her tree home, a branch that widened at the point from which she grew.

"That is a problem, I need guardians to watch the forest as I'm-"

"Bound to this tree and cannot leave it as this tree was the first to grow and you grew from it, I know Grove, I know, I'm trying to help as best as I can but there just isn't anyone that I can think of who'd give up their life for a chance to be a plant girl and the duty of keeping this forest healthy." I had stood up again, and I approached the exit, resting my hand on it as I sighed.

"We don't have much time, Mistle. Mrs. Woodsman's family is almost done selling the forest to the logging company, and she was the only one keeping them at bay." Grove held my shoulder, and I gave her hand a gentle pat.

"I know. I'll see if there's anyone left I hadn't asked." And with those words, I left the tree, flying off on my skateboard that I had left outside.

I should probably tell you a little bit about myself before we continue. My name is Mistle Thyme, I'm a college graduate with an arts degree and I'm trans. Oh and also my Mother was a Fae and my father smelled of alchemical reagents. Hence why winter was one of my favorite seasons: I could wear a hat to more easily hide my pointy ears. Right, one more thing, I'm a witch. Still in training, but it was enough to let me enchant wood for flight and also to get hired by a forest spirit.

With that out of the way, let me continue with the story. I descended at the edge of town, right behind the Denny's, kicking the skateboard into my hand. It was less suspicious than a broom, and sturdier in case I needed to use it for self defense. After that, I made my way over to the library, to have a calm place to rest and think on my own. The librarians there were doing their best to keep it going, but the town wasn't helping much. As I walked in and past the bulletin board however, something caught my eye, a familiar tricolor. I stopped and looked at the poster. "Oh I'm an idiot. Why didn't I think of it sooner." A quick photo of the poster later and I was running out of the library and towards the motel I was staying at.

The trans support group had claimed a room in the library fit for twenty but only housed three when I walked in. The atmosphere was tense, none of the three people there had muttered a word yet, all were just sitting there and fiddling with their thumbs. With a sigh, I sat backwards on a chair, resting my arms on its back. "Hi, my name is Mistle, I use she pronouns and I've been trans for ten years." Was my attempt at breaking the ice. "All of you too young to have experienced AA?"

"Too introverted." The youngest looking one of them spoke up, couldn't be more than eighteen. Baggy hoodie, ripped jeans, black hair barely brushing past ears, gave me flashbacks to middle school. "I'm trying out Maggie and she/her pronouns, I don't know whether I'm actually trans though." She answered, and I gave her a nod.

"Well, good luck on your exploration, you're allowed to change your mind or figure out other stuff. What about you, you a fan of Madoka?" I asked the pink haired twenty year old looking one.

"Of Astolfo, actually. Their confidence in their presentation is really inspiring. Right, um, Alysia, she/her, I've known I'm trans for four years." Alysia scratched at her cheek, blushing a bit. "Is this how we're really doing introductions?"

"It is, cause you all were incredibly quiet. Okay, what's behind door number three." I turned to the last one present.

"A butch trans woman in her 30's that tried to organise this thing but couldn't think of any topics to talk about with folks I'd have babysat when I was in high school." She crossed her arms and shook her head. Alysia gave her a good look over.

"I think you might have babysat me? I remember being babysat by a punk rocker." She tilted her head to her side, while the butch hummed.

"Hmm, could be. Right, name, it's Sasha. Where do you live Alysia." Sasha turned to look at her.

"14 Hill Street." She fidgeted with her thumbs, but Sasha jumped out of her seat when she heard that.

"Holy shit I did babysit you! I knew I liked you for a reason kiddo!" Within seconds Alysia was swooped up in a hug and smiling. And honestly it was heartwarming to see, made me almost feel bad for asking what I was about to ask.

"I'm glad to see you two reunite after I don't know how long, it's sweet, but uhm, I have a proposition. A request if you will. An offer." I drummed my fingers on the back of the chair, waiting for them all to look at me. "Would any of you be interested in becoming plant girls."

The confusion was clear on their faces, it was Maggie who spoke up first. "Why did you say it's an offer? I think it could be neat to be one, but it's not like you can be one." Alysia and Sasha nodded in response, muttering 'yeah' and 'same' respectively.

"Okay. Hypothetically if you could be plant girls, at the cost of having to protect the nearby forest and being bound to it, would you do it?"

"I guess?" Said Maggie.

"Easy transition, I suppose." Said Alysia.

"It's not like I move around much anyway, and I do like that forest. Shame Mrs. Woodsman passed away, her cabin was always a safe space for me to be me. Yeah, I'd be in." Said Sasha, after which I breathed a sigh of relief, pulled off my beanie to reveal my ears and manifested a will-o-wisp in the middle of the room.

"Okay thank fuck because hi I'm a fairy and a witch magic is real the forest has a really pretty tree lady in it and I made a deal with her to find some folks to

protect her from the logging company which used to be Mrs. Woodsman's job." I caught my breath for a couple seconds after getting all that out.

"That is extremely specific and a lot at once, *but* there's possibly three of us and one of you if we decide to go along." Alysia spoke up, and Sasha shrugged.

"Worst thing that happens, we have a nice hike in the forest with an elf. I can break you in half if you try anything." Sasha said while going back to her seat.

"Oh my Sasha, are you threatening me with a good time? We've only just met!" I stood up, fake gasping, which earned me an eye roll from Sasha. "Well, if you'd all follow me so I can introduce you." And with those words I was out the door and on my way.

The annoying thing about being able to fly everywhere is when you can't fly because you have people following you. All I did was slowly hover to make sure I was in their line of sight. Maggie was walking next to me at the time. "Hey, uhm, Mistle? Why the skateboard?"

"I really liked Treasure Planet growing up." I know she probably wanted to know the sensible reasons I described already but tell me you didn't want that flying surfboard Jim had in the movie's opening.

"Treasure Planet?" Maggie was genuinely confused.

"Oh, yeah, you were probably not born yet when it came out plus Disney buried it. I'll see about bringing you a copy later." I stopped, and the other ones stopped, and I knocked on the tree in front of me. "Grove! I got some people!" I called out, and the tree opened up like a cut off branch to let us in. I ushered everyone else in first, if only to enjoy hearing them gasp as they saw Grove descend to them.

"At last, I can imbue you all with my power and you can protect this forest, here." Grove held out her hands, in which she held three seeds. "Eat, and you will transform into forms fitting for your station."

I waited with baited breath for them all, as one by one they took the seeds. I figured the transformation wouldn't be instant, after all seeds need time to grow, but as far as I was concerned my deal with Grove was done. What was the deal?

An Immortal Christmas Tree.