

The Nymphs of Asthamie

By Anna Lugthart

Safely out of the planet's atmosphere, Margot let off the throttle and turned on autopilot. Outside her viewport on the starboard side of the ship, she could see the transport security shuttle following close behind. With an OK over the radio, she turned off comms and leaned back in her seat. What a strange little planet.

The client's security personnel had already been there when she landed and were overseeing the process. Some workers were misting the product with some kind of chemical in preparation of loading it. Saplings, they looked like, but balled up at the bottom, as if the roots were clenched in a fist. They looked strange to Margot, like everything on the planet. The purple flora, the fluttering insects—for that was the only other life she could see—were somehow uncanny. And though she couldn't explain it, the surrounding forest and low-hanging clouds felt more claustrophobic than the cockpit.

Golan, the head security officer, curtly motioned her over for instructions. They sternly reminded her the importance of the product arriving intact, briskly assuring they would take care of any external threats and that her job was solely to take off carefully, land more carefully, and not muck anything up in between. Also, although it shouldn't happen, if the product were to arrive in worse condition than it left, she should expect a significant cut to her pay and even legal action as necessary. Margot nodded respectfully. Even for a Drogan, they were insensitive and rude.

Setting an alarm for her next security check-in, she gazed at the abysmal sky for some time before getting up to stretch her legs. As she moved toward the back of the cockpit, she finally saw it, leaning against the back of her seat. But what was it doing there? The cargo hold wasn't connected on the inside. Had it been put there by mistake? Or perhaps on purpose, as some kind of joke? Surely not. The workers had been very careful in loading them. And yet, there it was, as plain as day. A knobby, purple leafed Asthamian laurel.

When she'd overcome her initial curiosity over the situation, she began to wonder how she'd explain the sapling's presence in her cockpit. Hiding it was certainly a bad idea. When she landed they would count the trees and look for the missing one. From the little information she was given she knew these trees were incredibly valuable. If they found it, the client may think she was trying to steal it. And even if she was upfront about its presence, it might seem like she was planning on taking it and then got cold feet. Still bad. She momentarily wondered if the Drogan had put it there to trip her up. In that case, doing anything about it would be taking the bait.

Inspecting the tree, it didn't appear damaged to her, though she had to admit she didn't know what to look for. She couldn't leave it where it lay—how it managed so well during takeoff she didn't understand, but she couldn't risk it getting thrown about the cabin during landing. Carefully, she lifted the plant and set it in the empty copilot seat, strapping it in gently as if it were a child.

Despite the anxiety of the situation, it was actually kind of comical, the tree sitting there at the controls, its limbs

hovering over the buttons, levers and screens as if ready to take control of the craft. One acquired a strange sense of humor, sitting for long stretches of time with little to do but imagine. After some time, Margot found it entertaining to speak to the tree as if it were an imaginary copilot.

“What’s your name, kid? I can tell you’re new by that look in your eye. Say, that’s some mighty valuable cargo back there, are you sure you’re even qualified for this run?” She smiled and looked onward. “Oh don’t worry, you’re in good hands. I’ll show you the ropes, teach you all my tricks. By the end of this run you’ll be a better pilot than most.”

Margot awoke some time later to her alarm. Looking beside her, she found the other seat empty. Glancing over the ship’s displays, she turned on her comm and connected with the security ship.

“TSS, this is Margo speaking. Cargo is secure and all systems are normal.”

“Pilot, you sound anxious. Are you sure everything is alright?”

Margot looked back at the empty copilot seat. “There is no problem, Officer, I only had a strange dream.”

“Very well. TSS awaits your next check in.”

Just as Margot disconnected, she swore she felt something brush against her shoulder. Gingerly, she turned around to kneel in her chair, peering over the top. There, where first she had seen the plant, sat a spindly alien woman, naked and cowering in the corner. Slowly, Margot connected the pieces in her mind. Crouching, she approached the stowaway

carefully. She removed her jacket and offered it to the woman, who pulled it over her rough purple skin like a blanket. Margot backed up and sat opposite her, behind the copilot seat.

Motioning to herself, Margot uttered her name. The woman mimicked the action and said “Nistha.”

“Nistha,” Margot repeated, and her beady eyes widened. “Nistha, did they—” she pantomimed the spraying motion of the workers. “Did they do that to sedate them? To put them to sleep?”

The woman bared her teeth and pressed herself defensively against the wall.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry. You’re safe here with me, Nistha.”

Margot concluded the woman must have avoided sedation, either by splitting off from the group before loading or more likely, she stowed away for this very purpose: to reveal the horrible predicament of her friends to someone who might listen. At last Margot understood why the client had been so stingy with information. She was transporting slaves.

Immediately her heart told her to turn the ship around. Damn the consequences, she had morals after all. But she hesitated. Losing the pay she could deal with—the money was good, but she could recover it in time. What she feared was what measures the client may take to silence someone who knew what she now knew. Golan mentioned legal action, but she’d crossed that threshold now. She shuddered as she imagined her ship scrapped for parts and her frozen body drifting through the abyss, never to be seen again.

She felt now that she never should have taken this job, but then, what would that have changed? Someone else, in her

place, would be left with the same grizzly decision. She observed her companion once more and pushed her fears to the back of her mind.

Margot pointed aft.

“Do you want me to take you home?” She motioned a ship turning around and landing with her hand. Nistha crawled over and grasped the pilot’s feet, weeping. Margot lifted her up into an embrace. Her own fears were conquered, but she still had to find a way to escape from the transport security ship.

“TSS, this is Margot speaking. I have a problem.”

“What’s wrong?” She could tell it was Golan, and they sounded frustrated.

“My AOA sensors are acting up. The ship is not safe to land.”

“Pilot, we spoke less than twenty minutes ago. When did your sensors start malfunctioning?”

“I’m not sure, officer. I may have overlooked them during our last check in.”

“Have you run ship diagnostics?”

“Affirmative. I think there’s something wrong with my hardware. Can you send someone over to look at it?”

“...TSS would like to ask if you can check the sensor yourself.”

“TSS, given the value of the cargo, I request one of your crew examine the sensor so the cockpit is not left empty.”

“...Very well. TSS approaching and sending crew member Volba to examine AOA sensors.”

At length, a tethered figure emerged from the airlock, propelling themselves towards the ship. Margot felt a click as the tether connected.

“Crew member Volba speaking, Left AOA sensor appears intact.” She made her way around the ship. “Right sensor also appears intact.”

Volba appeared in the viewport momentarily.

“Crew member Volba speaking again. Who is the other person in the cockpit?”

“This is TSS speaking. Crew member Volba can you repeat?”

Margot pushed the throttle forward suddenly, sending the crew member hurtling backwards. As the tether reached full tautness, the ship jerked and started towing the shuttle behind it.

“This is TSS speaking. What the hell is going on?”

“Margot speaking. TSS, client has withheld important information regarding cargo. I no longer agree to transport.”

“TSS speaking. That is not a decision you can make right now.”

“Margot speaking. I have.”

“Margot! Stand down or we will open fire.”

“In case you forgot, Officer Golan, this ship is carrying valuable cargo and that may not be a good idea.”

“...TSS crew member Volba, detach and return to the shuttle. I repeat, detach and return to shuttle.”

Margot felt another click as the crew member and shuttle were released. Righting the ship, she sped past them and rerouted autopilot for Asthamie.

“Crew member Volba, return to the shuttle now. Margot, do not go back to Asthamie.”

“TSS, our contract is broken and I will no longer be sharing route information with you.”

“Margot, it’s a trap.”

She switched off the comm.

Landing in a clearing some distance away from the loading dock, Margot and Nistha disembarked. Nistha’s people had been waiting, and she summoned them with a loud call. Margot opened the cargo hold, and one by one they carried away the saplings. Margot, too, they guided into the forest. Reluctantly, she followed.

After several hours of travel on winding footpaths, they arrived at a settlement. Preparations began immediately and Margot watched with curiosity and wonder as food was prepared, garments donned, and songs sung to rouse the sleeping trees.

Three great, round buildings dominated the village, their forms hewn masterfully from the tallest trees of the forest. Smaller buildings swirled out from their centers, with wide boulevards between. Margot knew little about the design of cities, but to her eye, though technologically rudimentary compared to the spaceports of her own people, this place far outclassed them in elegance and beauty. Surely among these people were master artisans, for every structure, from the tiniest shelter to the greatest hall, was built with care and precision. They allowed her to wander somewhat freely, but she was stopped firmly from entering certain buildings.

Eventually, she returned to the center of town, where preparations neared completion.

There, a stout old Asthamian draped a white cloak upon her shoulders and set a purple wreath upon her head. Then, without warning, someone firmly pulled her arms behind her and bound them at the wrist. Heart pounding, she was led into a structure she had not been allowed to enter before. To her abject horror, the floor was littered with skeletons, some Human, some Drogan, some completely unrecognizable. The putrid smell of raw, decaying flesh still clinging to the bones rose up and filled the room. All around her, the Asthamians began a rhythmic chant, and among the crowd, Margot thought she picked out the face of Nistha. The woman smiled, but did nothing else to recognize her captive savior. Beneath the white cloak, Margot discreetly reached for her pilot’s knife.

She was set in the center of the room on her knees, and the chanting, now led by the decorated Asthamian who led her in, grew slowly shriller and louder until, at his swift command, the room fell silent. All beheld her, and sensing imminent demise, Margot hastily cut her bonds. Leaping to her feet, she made a break for the door. The Asthamians did not immediately pursue but allowed her to escape the building before following close behind.

The sun was setting and Margot couldn’t remember the way. Lifting her ship’s key, she set off a distress beacon. The red light glowed on the treetops in the East, and sprinting in that direction she made for the dark forest at the edge of town. The crowd behind her now jumped up and down with excitement, chanting louder still as if they relished in this

unexpected chase. Enveloped by trees, the chanting seemed to fade; after some time she found she could no longer see the Asthamians behind her.

Passing through the bizarre alien foliage and leaving miles underfoot, she wondered if each shrub and vine might awaken and descend upon her. Banishing the thought, she pressed on. After nearly an hour, she reached her ship, boarded hastily, and dropped into the pilot's seat, exhausted. The engines stalled. She tried again, but to no avail. Of course. They had her trapped.

For a brief moment she cursed the forces that had led this to happen. She had only been kind, risked her own skin for the sake of good, and yet now, the very people she had saved pursued her with what she could only imagine was murderous intent. Looking out the viewport, she saw them emerge, slowly, from the forest. She left the ship and brandished her pilot's knife with shaking arms. She vowed to herself, if somehow she were spared, she would never allow herself to be so foolish again.

They did not hurry, for they knew they had her now. Beginning their chant once more, they crept forward into the clearing. At last they came close enough for Margot to see their faces in the waning light. And on each one, she made out that same, horrible smile.

Suddenly the clearing was as bright as day. The shuttle descended, and a fine mist fell over the crowd. Their pace slowed, their joints locked up, and their purple flesh turned to wood. Some were close enough to clutch at her violently with their branches, but at last they all fell motionless. Margot's

attention returned to herself, and she realized she hadn't made it out unscathed. She found deep bite marks on her arms and legs and the ceremonial cloak, still hanging around her shoulders, was soiled with blood. She collapsed.

The shuttle landed across the clearing and Golan made their way through the trees, sighing deeply. "Come on, let's get you fixed up."