

Flowers of a Dark Forest

No ships may land on our worlds. That was the one condition the strange race of pseudo-arachnids known as the Proliferants would offer in exchange for their entry into the Congregation, and it was one that even a veteran of diplomacy would readily accept, given that allies were sparse. The fact that the Proliferants' worlds were beautiful cathedrals of nature, paying homage to the strange and yet intuitive paradox between the rampant growth of plant life and its alluring symmetry, enforced this term further, as any observer would be eager to declare their desecration with fusion drives a sacrilege. However, this meant that members of the diplomatic corps who wanted to engage in negotiations with the "Garden Spiders" had to display a staggering ignorance to the innate terror of heights most humans harbored deep in their hearts, (along with the one of eight-legged critters, naturally), a predicament which arose from the necessity of deploying them via orbital parachuting, with the only option of retrieval being a balloon ride into the ionosphere.

On the outside, diplomat-attaché-senior Violet An Duun, a woman with a gaze harder than the iridium-clad tips of the Congregation's relativistic missiles, was a definite match for the criterium of fearlessness. Yet she had never fully shaken the tendrils of cold claspings around her heart when the opening of the orbital shuttle's doors heralded the descend into the garden below. Nevertheless, the weight of her mission troubled her more than her fight or flight response, and so she found herself plummeting into the gaping maw of Majorelle's gravity funnel, along with her trusted four-man escort of marines, whose com-chatter suggested they shared her sentiments towards this endeavor and tried to compensate with juvenile screams and jokes. For a second, listening to their stories and joy was enough to divert her mind from the conundrum that was her assignment and she put aside the question of why the Spider was so eager to die along with its creation. For what seemed like a decade, the oblong shuttle above the small delegation shrunk into the size of a star on the night sky, watching them on their way to an event that would either become An Duun's diplomatic masterpiece or a future day of mourning. The negotiator had prepared for both.

Suddenly, as the blooming of their giant ultra-light parachutes synchronized with the parting of a carpet of methane-blue clouds, juvenile screams turned into sounds of admiration upon the sight of the Proliferant's main palace complex: A single tree-like organism the size of a Congregation habitat ship had sacrificed its leaves to grow into the form of a looming spire, surrounded, overgrown and sustained with pseudo-photosynthesis products by an ocean of

flowers and perfectly symmetric bushes, consisting of easily as many species as there were ships in Majorelle's solar system. Made from a highly advanced type of wood, which's parenchyma shared characteristics with carbon nano tube structures, this affront against the laws of gravity effortlessly surpassed the 5-kilometer mark and served as the Proliferant's seat of power. More interesting for the congregation, the facility also housed a complex biomechanical industry. A significant percentage of its operating capabilities was currently tasked with synthesizing a potent counteragent against human cell aging that could extend a human life to the point, where seeing two or three star-systems between one's childhood and eventual burial was nothing out of the ordinary. For a long time and in exchange for a lot of resources, the Proliferant had also promised a genetic cure that stopped ageing entirely, but it had been so long now, that in a recent diplomatic mishap, the negotiator had demanded the cure to be embedded in the form of the flower of modesty: A Violet.

In the light of Majorelle's fate, the loss of was the primary, but not the only factor, that made the diplomat-attaché-senior's stomach continue to revolt, as her squad safely touched down on one of the many massive branches extending from the primary superstructure, still separated from the planets soil by about two kilometers. Accompanied by the marines in front of her, who were carving a path through the lush forest growing on another forest, ever vigilant against apex predators that only haunted space man's yarn, Violet began to sort the ammunition for her Hail Mary assault against the old alien's decision once more. From a rather sparse assortment of ingredients consisting of Congregation dogma, appeals to reason and pleas for mercy, she had concocted a brew of arguments in favor for the Spider's evacuation, along with some of its prized technology, from the doomed world of Majorelle. Even though the planet's gravitational pull was only two thirds as strong as the artificial force created by the habitat ships in orbit, the sinking feeling from the shuttle still had not subsided. In fact, the negotiator thought, it had followed her around ever since she had been informed about the relativistic missile inbound on this solar system. 15 kilometers in length, completely made from a yet to be identified iridium alloy so hard that nothing short of throwing it into a sun would melt it, the projectile had snuck up way too deep into Congregation defense grids. It threatened to annihilate every celestial body larger than an asteroid in Majorelle's larger vicinity by exploding into deadly and almost literally lightning-fast chunks in the system's Oort cloud. It was a hateful arrow shot by ghosts, at 85 percent of the speed of light, from a people that were defeated by the Congregation two millennia ago. Memories from this invisible war always led her to seek solace in music, and soon, with the

rhythm of her tactical boots slamming on the surprisingly soft wood below and the regular hissing oxygen infusions from her rebreather, her rehearsals turned into songs, melodies washing away the images of crumbling planets and imploding habitats.

She was about to present her melodic interpretation of the second “stanza” of the standard Proliferant Greeting Appraisal to her muted com system, when the marines’ squad leader’s voice tore through her rhythm: “Ma’am, we are approaching the perimeter. Our sweeps have reported nothing out of the ordinary around the entry zone. With your permission, we will begin preparing orbital reentry.” Before unmuting herself to grunt an approving order, An Duun sighed with relief. Some part of her had expected the door to the human-sanctioned zone in the sanctum to be locked, but the living airlock, decorated with methane breathing Lavender, stood as wide open as ever. Past the hissing of the oxygen valves and liberated from her tactical gear, rebreather and onsetting migraine, Violet began her ascend towards the conference room. She was perfectly on time, as always.

When initially observed, the room looked more like a parliament: Desks of Terran wood were arranged in a C shape with a view into the much larger den of the Proliferant. Normally a battalion of diplomatic corps members would now man these desks and overextend their payload maximum with an arsenal of gadgets and documents, like an army of dwarves confronting a giant monster. Today, An Duun would have to fight alone, by decree of the Goliath. As she put her digital folder on the suddenly highly imposing desk and got ready to recite the greeting appraisal, Violet almost bit her tongue in surprise. Caught between routine and the tangle roots of dark thoughts, she had not realized her adversary was already looking into the room!

Seemingly oblivious to the stark breach of tradition and protocol, the palace’s master calmly pinned her with his four eyes, black milky mirrors which were as large as standard diplomatic corps dinner plates. About six meters in height, the Pseudoarachnoid was one of the smaller members of its species, a fact which did not hinder the aura of authority emanating from its attentive posture and the massive crown-like ornaments growing outwards from its head. In a recent research-article it had been hypothesized that the complexity and length of these chitinous insignia were an individual “calling card” for every Proliferant. However, Violet had always been under the impression that, like the rings of a tree, the interwoven ornaments denoted the age of its owner, in which case the Spider would have probably been laying the ground stone for this garden when Varus’s legions were destroyed in Teutoburg Forest.

Just as An Duun was about to raise her voice to recite the greeting formula in a desperate attempt to restore protocol, the alien's four razor sharp mandibles opened: **“Good morning, Ambassador. I assume, my wish that you are only here for a final goodbye is in vain?”** Despite the size of the regent of Majorelle, its voice was not the booming and demanding voice of a tyrant, but a melody that hypnotized its listeners with a strange allure of deepness and symmetry. Unfazed, the Diplomat responded: “If my commander would hear this, they would be very unhappy, warden. It took us 500 years to understand even the basics of your traditions and language. How come, it is wasted now?” She was surprised about the sharpness of her words, blaming it on her onsetting migraine. The Proliferant added a mix of amusement to its tone: **“I have been conducting my own studies on human traditions and language and I would hate to see them wasted. And given that time is running out, your ... faster... way of communicating, albeit a bit vague, seems advantageous”**

Violet was barely able to contain a snort. Calling the human languages faster was a euphemism so insolent, that saying space was “a little bit on the bigger side” was less inaccurate. Because they usually spent their entire lives alone and thought in their own times and patterns of growth, their communication, which usually was only to themselves and ill fitted to actual interaction, was so elaborate, even saying “Hello” in Proliferant was a complex operation that took an average of 4 hours. This one however, seemed to have learned the gist of human interaction within a week. For what reason? An Duun brushed the memories of all the arduous hours spent in chasing eureka's about Majorelle's regent with the commander aside and dared her first attack: “Warden, about your time. You have done so much for the Congregation and its citizens with so little in return, I am still baffled that you will not allow us to take evacuation measurements. Even though we are technologically incapable of stopping the missile, we have seen so many of our planets and habitats being incinerated that our evac protocols are near perfect. We can assure you-”

“Speak nothing of that now Violet, please. I would hate the last hours we have and the culmination of my research on humanity culminating into a big fight. Although you are the better word-fighter.” The Proliferants' ineptitude to grasp the concept of conflict, which also showed in their language, had long baffled the diplomat and her commander, given they seemed to thrive in cosmic warzones. Despite this fact, the negotiator felt her rage finally grow, thinking about what would happen if the main production source of aging counteragent should dry up and humans would be reliant on the horrors and dangers of generation ships again, doomed to trade in the few joys of life for an existence behind steel walls, travelling

through nothing. **“I have agreed to our meeting, An Duun, because I would like you to be the last thing I remember of humanity before my garden withers away.”** Further reasoning was suppressed by Violet’s outbreak of rage: “How dare you simply give up? We have learned so much from each other! You are the living example that inter-species cooperation, even in this cosmos, is possible! Are the countless hours we spent, here in this room, stumbling over cultural borders nothing to you? What we could still learn from each other!” For a second, it seemed as the calmness in the black seas of the Spider’s eyes was disturbed by a ripple. *Was it sorrow or rage?* A small part of Violet, now buried in anger, wondered, as she continued her assault: “I spent more hours on this planet than I spent with my DAUGHTER! And now, you manage to ridicule my struggles, my efforts, by achieving optimal communication in a NIGHT?” A thousand years of studying the fine art of diplomacy were annihilated in an instant, as the former negotiator snapped up her digital folder, and with the force of ire, threw it right into the web of crowns protruding from the Proliferant’s head. A terrifying crack echoed among the main chamber, as the chitin fractured. The all-encompassing symmetry of Majorelle was brought to its knees by a single act of violence and its crown jewel laid in ruins. For a second the world stood still around the woman, as she realized what she had done, and her eyes widened. *Failure. No allies anymore. No more “10.000” candles on birthday cakes.* “Warden, I...”

With the raising of its coral-colored claws, longer than Violet herself, the regent stopped her attempted apology. It looked much like an Egyptian god now, human in posture, but otherworldly in every other regard: **“It is I that should apologize, Violet. I have caught you in my web and severed your connection to the other members of your species in my arrogant pursuit of understanding your kind. With that I have strayed far from the laws of this universe, in which beings like us either kill each other or lurk in the shadows, cursed to an existence of being prey animals. You see, I have no choice but to stay here, for the very fate of my species does depend on it. When the Iponian’s wrath hits my planet, the impact will transform a significant part of Majorelle’s mass into debris so fast, it will exit this solar system. When that happens, many of these fragments will carry this Garden’s seed into the vastness of interstellar space, guided to new worlds by me until the very last second of my existence in this room. And in 20 million years”,** the Proliferant explained, **“, there will be sixty Majorelles, with sixty Proliferants on them.”** The diplomat grinded her teeth as she realized that another thousand years of her life and research about the Spider’s nonviolent way of success in a universe of violence, and

with that also about a way out for humanity, were just made obsolete. The Spiders had simply learned to take the hit and use its force for their advantage.

Dismayed and defeated, she sat down on the floor directly in front of the scarred monarch. Her arsenal of words and psychological strategies laid in ruins, defeated by an opponent she barely was able to understand, that she would think of as her only friend until her death, whenever that may be. Her almost royal posture, poison against normal humans and imposing even on six-meter-tall monsters, shrunk into a cowering. An Duun's work had shaken the foundations of Exobiology, and yet nothing would remain of her heritage. Her words became songs again, as she bitterly recited the watchword of the last remnants of her species:

“In a dark forest, the Congregation stands watch, lonely among the stars, until the lights fade away forever more.”

A single sound, barely not rasping and barely not clicking, suffocated the echoes of her melody. It was the “warden's” attempt at a chuckle. **“Now, now, diplomat attaché, do you want to hide in the bushes forever, ignorant of what reward your steps into the clearing of the cosmos yielded?”**, the Garden Spider asked playfully, as it gave a tiny purple flower to the sobbing woman.