



NEUTRON GIRL

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A FREE PREVIEW!

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Minister Elthion Vi'd-Mlarr, head of the Arethah Chancery, stood as he addressed the Galactic Security Council. "According to the recent DMTA Report," he announced, "Arethah is much closer to developing interplanetary travel than we first thought." Silence fell in the Council Chamber. "According to revised estimates, they could have a fully functional gravity based propulsion system within just two solar cycles!"

Wide eyes and murmurs of surprises came from all around the room. Everyone knew of the terrible, warlike nature of the arethahlings. If they acquired the technology to leave their home planet, they would bring war to the entire galaxy.

"How can that be?" Chancellor Givox, of the planet Ceveron, gaped. "The last report said it would be at least twenty cycles before they even developed rocket powered, low orbit flight. How have they made such gains so quickly?"

"Someone is helping them, obviously." Elthion said. "Most likely the vril-ya."

Grumbles of agreement and disapproval came from nearly everyone.

"What can we do?" High Chancellor Bogopilu asked the group.

"The lab where the arethahlings are building the prototype is heavily guarded, deep below a mountain." Elthion explained. "And the arethahlings that are developing it are the most warlike of them all."

"How do we know this?" Chancellor Marikos of the blue planet Nanimbi asked.

"There is a great war on Arethah right now-" Elthion began.

"There is always war on Arethah." Chancellor Ibbix of Blantalla interjected tiredly.

"Yes," Elthion agreed. "But in the war that is happening now, our arethahling contacts have uncovered pictures of the prototype. They don't know what it is." he continued. "They asked our liaison to identify it, but he told them he didn't recognize it." Elthion tapped a button on the table and the viewing screen on the wall lit up, showing a black and white image of a primitive bell-shaped spacecraft under construction. "This is one of the photos."

"We should tell them to destroy it." Marikos suggested.

"They can't. They are at war with the faction that's building it and it's extremely well protected, under a mountain and behind two armies. The closest they can get is this photograph of a photograph in a file in a bureau office far from the facility. Besides, even if they could destroy it, we couldn't rely on them to do it. Everyone on Arethah wants to travel the stars. As soon as they figure out what it is, they will want it for themselves. And even if they did destroy it, they could still learn from the parts and any documents that might be left behind or from the engineers that worked on it. No. They must be kept unaware of what it is and it must be completely destroyed."

"What are you suggesting?" Marikos asked.

"We have to destroy it ourselves. No Arethahling can possess this technology. Not until they become civilized."

"We can't launch a tactical strike on Arethah!" Chancellor Marikos exclaimed. "That violates every rule and law of this chamber!"

"I'm not suggesting that." Elthion replied. "Even if we did send a destroyer, it would never be able to blast through that mountain. This has to be a covert operation. We have to sneak into the facility and destroy it from inside. We are going to need the help of our friends on Xyphon."

Everyone in the room understood what he was suggesting, but it was so dangerous an idea that the council members all sat silently for long, long moments. Finally, Chancellor Ibbix uttered the words that were on everyone's mind. "Only a simulacrum can do this." His tone was grim. "It can be made to look like them and have their languages and cultures imprinted on its mind. It can be designed with enough strength and martial training to survive and successfully fight the Arethahlings. It can be implanted with the knowledge necessary to complete the mission. And it can be trusted to do so."

There were groans as everyone struggled to come up with alternatives. No one wanted to do this, but no one could think of a better option. Slowly at first, but then more rapidly all eyes and optic sensors shifted to Chancellor Jord from the planet Xyphon, home of the galaxy's greatest genetic engineers.

Jord hesitated before squeaking, his high-pitched musical voice reverberated through the electronic translator, "We can make one. But we will need some raw materials and data.

"And," he continued, with more emphasis. "This is extremely dangerous. As soon as the mission is over, it must be returned to us for disposal. Simulacrums are unstable and deadly." That was a well known fact, but he said it anyway and everyone nodded in agreement. "If a simulacrum realizes its own true nature; that it is just a biological concoction mixed up in a laboratory, that its memories are false and its own self identity is an illusion taken from other people, it will have an existential breakdown and go insane, likely killing thousands in the process."

"Yes, but it takes a long time for that to happen." Elthion reasoned. "This mission won't take long. You will get it back long before it starts to malfunction."

"We must tell the Arethahlings to hurry with the mission and we mustn't tell them about the simulacrum's nature. If you tell them, they may tell the simulacrum itself; which would be disastrous." Jord stressed.

"Yes." Elthion agreed. "But we will have to trust them a bit, since, although they may not understand the true nature of the simulacrum, they will know it is an alien soldier."

"We will need to rely on our Arethahling allies in several ways." High Chancellor Bogopilu observed. "We need their help in gathering raw materials and data, providing tactical support and oversight for the mission, and returning the simulacrum to us when the mission is over.

And yet we will have to keep the true nature of the mission and of the simulacrum secret from them." He looked at Elthion. "Can we do all this?"

"Yes," Elthion said. "Our allies are highly organized and good at keeping secrets. Anything we can do to help them will be greatly appreciated."

"Can they be trusted?"

"More so than their enemies." Elthion said optimistically. "If we tell them it is a dangerous weapon that must be destroyed, I'm sure they will help us. They will do anything to defeat the Nazis."

*

General Smith, Corporal Irving, and Lieutenant Donovan stood near the wall and watched the silvery, saucer-shaped spacecraft drift into the airplane hangar and land. Army Air Corp ground crew members pushed the huge hangar doors closed as the spacecraft's gangway lowered and two short, gray aliens disembarked. The one on the right raised its three-fingered hand in greeting as the one on the left read from a handheld device.

Three months had passed since General Smith helped these aliens gather the 'data' they needed from two dozen American soldiers and civilians. The grays would use it, they said, to train a special soldier for a critical mission here on Earth. Now they had returned and Smith was both anxious and worried. What sort of creature would this otherworldly soldier be? Robotic? Monstrous? Equipped with body armor and a laser rifle?

The alien on the right waved its hand and a third gray came down the gangway pushing a two-wheeled dolly with a humanoid figure strapped to it. The figure was trancelike, motionless, breathless, and as it neared, Smith noticed it appeared to be a typical human woman.

The general frowned. "What's this?"

"Your super soldier," the gray on the right answered.

"Why is it female?"

The alien looked back at his handheld device and tapped it a few times. "I'm not sure. Gender wasn't defined in the design specs. You didn't say it had to be male."

"I just assumed it would be, since we were talking about a soldier!" he snapped.

"Is that a problem?" The one on the left asked.

"Women aren't soldiers." General Smith stated decisively.

"Well, I assure you she is the best soldier on this planet. She may look normal, but she has the bone density of a deluthian monspurner, stronger than steel. Her flesh may look human, but it's bulletproof and fire resistant. Her immune system protects her from every known

disease in the galaxy. If she does actually get hurt, her wounds will heal twenty times faster than yours. All of her memories and training are derived from the data you helped us gather."

"Yeah, about that... a lot of those people aren't right any more. Some have reported flashbacks and memories of the procedure. We've had to isolate them, discredit them, and keep them quiet."

"Really?" said the gray on the left. "Only very strong wills can resist the memory wipe."

"Well most of those people were elite soldiers or very driven and dedicated civilians. You said you wanted 'strong stock' to work with. We selected the most dedicated, hard working, and gifted people we could find. Of course those people are going to have strong wills."

The aliens exchanged looks of concern and the one on the left fidgeted. "Well," the one on the right said, "things should be ok. Just keep her focused on the mission. And as soon as it is done we will collect her."

"Things should be ok?" the general asked. "What does that mean?"

"It's nothing for you to worry about." The gray on the left waved his hand dismissively. "Over a period of time, it could cause a problem, but not in the short time that she will be active here."

"What kind of problem?" The general was increasingly alarmed.

"Oh, nothing dangerous." The one on the right assured. "If her psyche becomes unraveled, she might cease functioning."

"So we don't have a lot of time." the general noted. "We'll need to hurry."

"Precisely." the one on the right said.

"Remember," said the one on the left, looking at his handheld device. "She believes she was raised in Kansas, spent some time in China, and joined the Army on her eighteenth birthday. Don't let her think any differently or she will have a... problem."

"I understand." The general thanked them and said to his men, "Take her to the infirmary."

As Corporal Irving and Lieutenant Donovan wheeled the zombie-like woman through a door, the aliens handed the general a packet that contained several documents and a syringe filled with blue liquid. They then went back aboard their saucer, retracted the gangway, and started the engines. Two men pushed the hangar doors open and the general watched as the ship hovered for a moment before drifting slowly out of the building and then shooting into the black sky like a bullet.

Minutes later General Smith joined Irving and Donovan along with Dr. Murphy in the infirmary. They had unstrapped the woman from the dolly and laid her on a bed.

"A 'super soldier,' sir?" Lieutenant Donovan asked, looking at the woman skeptically. "She's barely five feet tall."

"And she sleeps a lot!" Corporeal Irving joked.

General Smith screwed a hypodermic needle onto the syringe and removed the cap. "Well, as soon as we give her this, she is supposed to wake up." He reached for her arm. "So let's see."

★

The door opened with a bang and Dr. Ritter's heart lurched as Oberfurer Schwartzhammer goose stepped into the lab. "Heil Hitler!" the tall, gaunt SS officer announced, saluting with his right arm. Then, "Hello, Doctor." he said coldly.

"Ah, Oberfurer, how nice to see you." Ritter struggled to be polite.

Schwartzhammer's eyes ran over the doctor's workshop, scanning the array of alien machines. Some were complete and operational, others were still in development. Some were familiar to him, like the device responsible for his own enhanced genetics, the hyper-sapien inducer which stood on the left side of the wide room. Others were more mysterious, like the large, square machine against the far wall, equipped with a huge bank of data tapes, two oversized computers, and an ominous gurney. Whenever Schwartzhammer asked about it, Ritter said it was a tool necessary for other projects and called it a 'transference machine.'

Schwartzhammer scrutinized the components of a strange new device scattered on the doctor's workbench and on the floor nearby. Ritter had been working on it incessantly for at least two months and Schwartzhammer suspected even longer than that. The device included dozens of strange tubes and sensors, two claw-like hydraulic arms, and several gallons of a greenish-yellow fluid, which had been brewing in the chemical lab for a week.

At the far end of the room was a project Schwartzhammer knew well. It was the reason for this and every other visit he had made in recent weeks. The bell-shaped capsule, roughly fifteen feet high and ten feet in diameter, was the culmination of two separate research projects that had been going on for ten years, one studying the aerodynamics of round, wingless aircraft and the other exploring a gravity-based propulsion system. Neither technology had been perfected, but it was believed that marrying the two would offer solutions to many of the existing problems with each one. When complete, the craft would fly faster than a V2 rocket. It would be as agile as a butterfly and capable of carrying one man and one heavy infantry weapon into outer space.

"Tell me of your progress with the Glocke. Have you been working on it?" Schwartzhammer eyed the doctor suspiciously.

"Of course! Of course I've been working on it. You've made it clear the Fuherer wants it done as soon as possible."

"Yes. So why do I see you working here on this other machine," he looked at the collection of pistons, gears, and hydraulics spread out on Ritter's workbench, "and not on the Glocke, that is over there?" His eyes shifted to the far end of the lab.

"Well, my Oberfurer, I have to work on this first. What I'm doing here," the doctor indicated the strange, alien contraption on his workbench, "is necessary to finish the Glocke."

Schwartzhammer looked at the device on the workbench then back at Ritter. "You still look sick, Doctor. How is your health?"

Ritter smiled weakly. "Oh, I've been feeling better."

"Are you certain?" Schwartzhammer looked critically at the doctor's red rimmed eyes and noted his yellow pallor. "Perhaps we should get someone else to lead this project?"

"No! No. I'm fine. I am actually feeling much better. The new medicines are doing wonders. I'll be back to my full health in no time. I'm sure." He smiled as confidently as he could.

"When will the Glocke be ready?"

"I still don't know. It could be a few more months before we get the propulsion system working. I'm still trying to figure out the operating parameters. Red mercury is a strange substance. I'm not sure the Repulsine engine is configured correctly."

"That's what you told me last time, Doctor." Schwartzhammer leaned in, crowding Ritter's personal space. "I don't see that the Glocke is any further along than the last time I was here. But this other project you keep working on; it is progressing." He looked more closely at the machine on the workbench. "What is the tracked chassis for? Even I know the Glocke doesn't need that."

"It's for transport; to move the capsule to the launch pad." Ritter explained.

"It is too small for that." Schwartzhammer noted.

"Oh, not at all! The capsule is very light."

"Hmm. And this was recommended by your, 'contacts?'"

"Oh, yes. Most certainly!" Ritter affirmed. "They said that is how it should be constructed."

"Hmm." Schwartzhammer said again. "Well, just make sure you are staying busy on the proper project, Doctor."

"Yes, Oberfurer." Ritter nodded obediently.

Schwartzhammer turned on his heel and marched toward the door. The storm trooper with him opened the door, followed him out, and slammed it as they left.

Ritter slumped in the chair, exhausted from his effort to appear fit and cheerful. "Hilda, bring me some water." he yelled.

A young, heavysset woman with dark hair emerged from the office with a mug. "You lied." she said as she handed him the water. "I heard you. You aren't doing well at all. You shouldn't be working! You should be in bed!"

"I can't rest. Not now. I have to work. If I am to save my life, I have to keep working. This machine," he indicated the parts on the workbench, "is the only thing that will save me. I can't stop now." He sipped from the cup before adding, "Bring me the helmet."

She hesitated.

He gave her a stern look.

"No." she said. "You are too sick. It will give you another attack. When you feel better, you can use it again."

Anger flashed in his eyes, darker than anything she had ever seen before. "Do not disobey me!" he growled.

Still she didn't move.

"Bring me the helmet!" he roared, slamming the mug on the desk, spilling the water.

Frowning, she obeyed, walking back toward the office and opening a locked cabinet with her key, she retrieved a bizarre piece of alien headgear. Like something from a Lovecraftian nightmare, its very shape was an abomination of geometry with impossible angles and warped contours. It had bulbous, insectoid lenses and a tiny mouthpiece over the face and hanging from its crown were tentacle-like tubules of rubbery, black flesh.

She placed the hoary device on his head and backed away, frightened and sad.

★

The first thing Victoria saw when she awoke was a general, a corporal, a lieutenant, and a doctor, all standing around her. She was lying on a hospital bed, wearing a patient's gown. "What's going on? Where am I?"

To be continued...

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