

M.E.T.A.

FORCE

ORIGINS



**Neutron
Girl**

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Free Preview

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"According to the recent District Security Report," Minister Elthion Vi'd-Mlarr announced as he stood before the Galactic Security Council, "Arethah is much closer to developing interplanetary travel than we thought."

The Council Chamber fell silent.

Elthion continued, "According to revised estimates, they could have a gravity-based propulsion system before the end of our next cycle!"

Wide eyes and murmurs filled the room. Everyone knew of the Arethahlings' terrible, warlike nature. 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 planet Cevron gaped. "The last report said it would be twenty cycles before they developed rocket-powered, low-orbit flight. How have they made such gains so quickly?"

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

Grumbles of agreement and disapproval came from all around the oval-shaped table.

"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 developing it are the most warlike of them all."

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

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

"There is *always* war on Arethah," Chancellor Ibbix interjected tiredly.

"Yes," Elthion agreed, "but in the current war, our Arethahling contacts have uncovered pictures of the prototype. They don't know what it is. 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 small, primitive, bell-shaped spacecraft under construction. "This is one of the photos."

"Tell them to destroy it," Marikos suggested.

"They can't. They are at war with the Arethahlings who are building it and it's extremely well protected, under a mountain and behind two armies. The closest they can get is this photograph they took of a photograph their spies found in an office far from the facility. Besides, even if they could destroy it, we couldn't rely on them to do it. All Arethahlings want to travel the stars. As soon as they realize what it is, they will want it for themselves. And even if they did destroy it, they could still learn from the parts or any research that might be left behind. 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!" Marikos exclaimed. "That violates every 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."

Every councilmember understood his implication, but it was so dangerous of an idea that they all sat in silence for long, long moments. Finally, Chancellor Ibbix uttered the grim words on everyone's mind. "Only a simulacrum can do this. 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 skill 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 the chancellors 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, optic sensors, and antennas 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 remember," 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. "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 malfunctions."

"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. 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 this?"

"Yes," Elthion said. "Our Arethahling allies are highly organized and good at keeping secrets. They will appreciate any help we can provide."

"Can they be trusted?"

"More so than their enemies," Elthion tried to sound optimistic. "If we tell them the spaceship 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 hangar wall and watched the silvery, saucer-shaped spacecraft drift into the cavernous building and land. Army Air Corp ground crew 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 the minds of 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 ray gun?

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, appeared to be a typical human woman.

General Smith frowned. "What's this?"

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

"Why is it female?"

Looking at its handheld device and tapping it a few times, the gray said, "I'm not sure. Gender wasn't defined in the specs. You didn't say it had to be male."

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

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

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

"Well, 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 looks 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 we gathered from the specimens you provided."

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

The aliens glanced at each other and the left one fidgeted. "Well," said the other, "things should be OK. Just keep her focused on the mission. As soon as it is done we will collect her."

"'Things should be ok?' What does that mean?"

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

"What kind of problem?"

"Oh, nothing dangerous," the right one 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."

"Remember," the left one looked at its handheld, "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."

"Understood." The general thanked them and turned 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 of documents and a syringe filled with blue liquid. They bid him farewell and boarded their saucer. The gangway retracted and the gravitational warp drive hummed with life. Two ground crew operators 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 disappearing into the starry sky like a shot.

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

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

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

General Smith handed the syringe of blue liquid to Dr. Murphy and said, "As soon as you give her this, she should wake up. So let's see."

*

The door opened with a bang and Dr. Ritter's heart lurched as Oberführer Schwartzhammer goose-stepped into the room. A stormtrooper followed and stood near the door. "Heil Hitler!" the tall, gaunt SS officer announced, saluting with his right arm outstretched. Then, in a slow, cold voice thick with darkness, he said, "Hello, Doctor."

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

Schwartzhammer strode into the room with heavy, measured steps that fell rhythmically like a clock ticking away the last seconds of Ritter's life. His right hand rested on the large ray gun holstered at his hip and his eyes ran over the doctor's workshop, scanning the bizarre machines. Some were operational prototypes, others were still in development. Some were familiar, 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 the 'Transference Machine.'

The components of a strange new device were scattered on the doctor's workbench and on the floor nearby. Schwartzhammer scrutinized the array of vacuum tubes and sensors, claw-like hydraulic arms, and several gallons of a yellow-greenish fluid which had been brewing in a vat for two weeks.

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—one studying the aerodynamics of round, wingless aircraft and the other exploring a gravity-based propulsion system. When complete, the craft would fly faster than a V-2 rocket. It would be agile as a hummingbird 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 said the Führer 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 scattered across Ritter's workbench, "and not on the Glocke that is over there?" His eyes shifted to the spacecraft.

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

Schwartzhammer looked at the device and 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 feeling so 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 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 repulsive 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. 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."

"Not at all! The capsule is very light."

"Hmm, and this was recommended by your 'contacts?'"

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

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

"Yes, Oberführer." Ritter nodded obediently.

Schwartzhammer turned on his heel and marched toward the door. The stormtrooper 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 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. To save my life, I have to keep working. This machine," he indicated the scattered components 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. 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. "Do not disobey me!"

She didn't move.

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

Frowning, she walked back to the office and retrieved a bizarre piece of alien headgear. The very shape of the thing was an abomination of geometry with impossible angles and warped contours. There were bulbous, insectoid lenses, a tiny mouthpiece, and hanging from its crown were tentacle-like tubules of writhing, rubbery, black flesh.

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

Ritter's tired, clammy body heaved and contorted unnaturally and his head lolled to the side, the helmet nearly slipping off. He grunted and clenched the chair with both hands as dreams of scientific madness from the far reaches of space flooded his sickened brain. He struggled to focus, remember, and comprehend the esoteric formulas and otherworldly secrets revealed in the nauseating torrent of mind-bending visions. A moment later he slid from the chair and collapsed on the floor, gasping and unconscious.

★

Victoria opened her eyes and noticed a general, a corporal, a lieutenant, and a medical officer, standing around her. She was lying on a hospital bed, wearing a patient gown. "What's going on? Where am I?"

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