

The Chronicles of Milky Way Galaxy

The Doll

2.4 light-eos from Solis
1 Beo 111 Meo 960 Keo 192 eo

The *Hermes AG12* was one of the latest ships in the exploration armada. While its military capabilities were far inferior to even a modest battleship, its reconnaissance abilities were unmatched. With nearly any sensor available and an AI ready to quickly learn any language before making first contact, the ship's goal, along with the entire *Hermes* armada, was to expand the empire without going to war—a challenging task that demanded a plethora of negotiation tactics tailored to the species they encountered.

The ship's captain, Urlong Beng, had at his disposal a number of diplomats from different species, each with a unique approach. Some employed empathy, while others used fear, and sometimes the only necessity was the removal of a dictator or dictators.

"We are approaching NHB 12/H4. ETA is 0.9 lep," said Jef from navigation.

NHB12/H4 was an intriguing planet—a small rocky world with an abundance of plant life that transmitted obscure signals for as far back as they could see. What made it particularly interesting was the fact that the planet was ancient. In fact, it was estimated that NHB 12 was one of the first red dwarf stars in the galaxy, dating close to the formation of the Milky Way.

"Finally, we will see where those signals come from," said Urlong from the bridge. "It has been centuries that we are receiving them, but although they are clearly created by an intelligence, they never seem to evolve. Always the same patterns in different order."

"We are now deploying six burn-speed crafts to gather, among others, visual data," said Jef. "We will have all the info we need in a few leaps."

"Are those ...?" said Urlong, smiling with excitement.

"Yes, sir," said Jef. "These are cities. Cities in perfect harmony with nature. There seems to be a plethora of androids, but none seemed to be surprised or affected by our passing."

"All the cities look the same. Same size, same architecture. Land one of the crafts in the center of one city. Let's see their reaction," said Urlong.

After the craft landed, humanoid androids began approaching it. Urlong and the crew of *Hermes* were observing the situation. To their surprise, the androids began cleaning and repairing every scratch of the craft.

"This is unexpected," said Jef. "Only the servant bots came to greet us. Where are the inhabitants?"

"There might be no inhabitants," said Ril. She had been analyzing the data received from all crafts. "It seems that pre-tool animals and those androids are the only inhabitants of the planet."

"It's time we go down there," said Urlong. "Prepare for landing. I will personally lead the team."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" said vice-captain Rugl. "I can go first to make sure it is safe."

"No need. It is pretty obvious that there is no need for worries," said Urlong while leaving the bridge.

Upon landing, Urlong exited the landing craft at the center of a city, and its jaw-dropping beauty struck him. "It's different when you see it in person," he said.

Trees integrated with architecture, clean paths around nature and animals roaming around. Small rivers crossing under bridges, and flower gardens groomed to perfection.

"These androids seem to be on autopilot. They are keeping the cities in perfect condition," said Alir from the coms.

"The question is, what happened to the creators of those androids?" said Urlong.

A group of the androids approached the landing site. Some began working on the craft maintenance while others approached the landing party.

Each android began to shapeshift to resemble the person in front of it.

"They can change their appearance at will," said Urlong. "They are magnificently made."

The androids stood in front of each person motionless.

"I think they are gathering information," said Urlong. "Transmit to them our language."

Alir engaged the AI, which began to interact with the androids, and soon it replied to Alir.

"Their security systems are unimaginably well made," said the AI. "It appears as if their AI has been evolving for a very long time, millions of years, in fact. Interaction with their systems is very difficult, if not impossible." Alir shared this information with Urlong.

Soon the androids had enough information to look at the landing party in the eyes. Their bodies transformed to the most beautiful individuals each crew member had seen.

"What do you desire?" they asked.

"Who made you?" asked Urlong in return.

"We were made by the Litons," replied the android in front of Urlong, while changing minor details on its body and face to look even more attractive.

"Where are they now?"

"They have long been extinct," replied the android, whose voice was also slowly reaching a very desirable tone for Urlong's ears.

"How did they go extinct?" asked Urlong. His voice betrayed a worry. Not a worry for his own safety or that of his crew. More like a worry that they would hear something that might lead them to disturb the peace this planet had to offer.

"They stopped breeding," said the android.

"I see. How long ago was that?"

"Approximately at the date of 463 meo."

Urlong's and Alir's eyes opened wide. "This must be wrong," said Urlong. "This date is two-thirds of the age of the universe back."

"Yes," replied the android. "Our creators have been gone for a very long time. There are currently only data remnants of them. Data that we have stored. But all physical evidence has been lost in time."

"And you have been keeping this place like that for all this time?" asked Urlong.

"Yes. Is there anything else you desire?" asked the android again. Its appearance had become so appealing to Urlong that he had a hard time remembering he was talking to an android.

"You have all been alone all this time?" he asked. His question was more emotional than practical, and Alir, who was the only one listening to the conversations, detected that.

"No, there have been many species that evolved the ability to communicate with us over the eons. They all stopped breeding though, and went extinct shortly after. There have also been visitors from the stars like yourselves. They too stayed until they died of old age without any offspring."

Urlong began to piece everything together. With his eyes opening wide, he turned to the landing crew. "Get in the craft!" he yelled. His voice, however, did not sound like it had any effect. The other members of the landing party had switched off their communicators and had already begun walking away with the companion of a few androids. "Alir! Immediately block all access to the data of our landing!" he yelled into the communicator. With his head down, Urlong entered the craft alone.

"Get ready to leave," he said upon arrival at the *Hermes*. "Call for Alir and Rugl to come to my office."

"But sir! What about our crewmembers?" said Jef.

"We lost them," replied Urlong. "Declare this planet a red zone."

Silence permeated the bridge while the captain was skeptical and waiting for his communications officer and vice-captain.

"Sir?" said Alir upon his arrival.

"Who else had access to those communications?" asked Urlong.

"No one! It's protocol, sir. Only myself the vice-captain and the AI have heard and seen the events of your landing."

"Take the files and send them to Thira, then delete the ones here. I ask both of you to never speak of this event to anyone."

"Yes, sir!" they both said.

"Sir?" Rugl said. "What exactly happened there?" It was clear that although he had seen and heard everything, he could not understand the danger.

"Rugl," Urlong said, "You did not understand because you are not of the same species as any who landed. These androids were made to fulfill your every desire. Their sophistication was such that they made split-second adjustments. Nothing escapes their unimaginable service."

"I don't seem to fully understand, sir. Why did we leave the landing crew there?"

"Because after you have reached the fulfillment of every comfort and desire, you can do nothing but look for it again. This place gives it to you over and over."

There is no end to the pleasure. It's a drug that once tasted, you can never leave it. The Litons really messed things when they developed these ... dolls."

"What about you, sir?" asked Rugl.

"What about me?"

"Will you be okay?"

"That, my friend, remains to be seen."