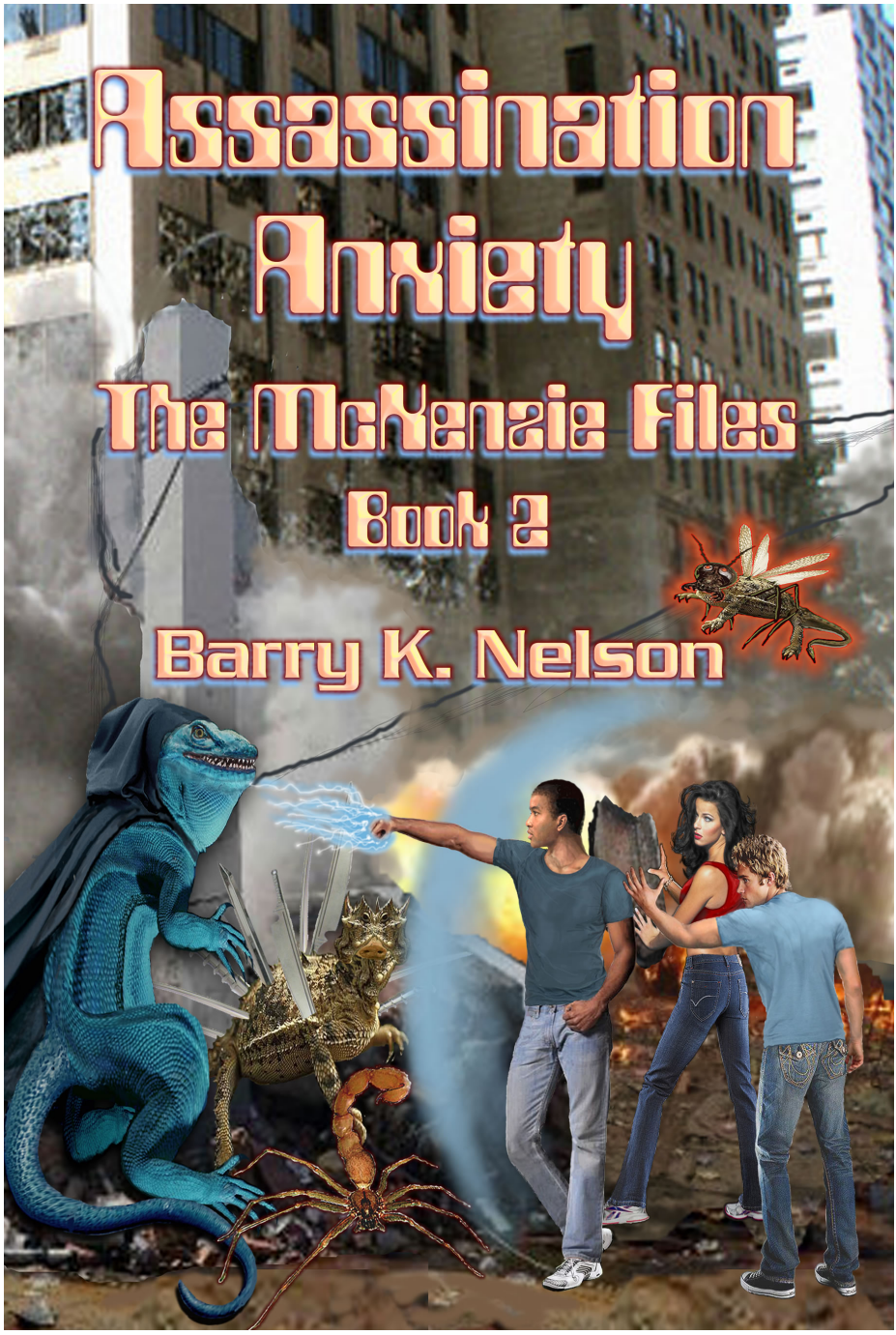
Assassination Anxiety
The McKenzie Files
Book 2
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The three captured and reprogrammed Brelac Reploids have proved their worth to the Protectorate in a fierce battle against the powerful cybernetic weapon Succubus, developed by traitorous Dr. Fenlow. The Reploids, commissioned to form a special unit known as the Silencers under the jurisdiction of the military's Central Intelligence Division, are back on Maseklos Prime, working at menial jobs while the CID keeps a close eye on them. That changes when President Drennan is almost killed in a bizarre assassination attempt.

Colin McKenzie and his team are ordered to uncover whoever's behind the assassination attempt and to find and destroy the frightening weapons responsible for the horrible death and destruction at the President's last election campaign address. After the first attempt on the President's life, it's certain more are sure to follow.

Meanwhile, Colin remains curious and wary about his dark past as a Vendetta operative formerly working against the Protectorate. The more he learns about his previous life, the less he likes it. Even more worrisome is the odd dreams he's been having.

As Colin, Diane, and Kelly chase leads in their case, they realize they may be up against unstoppable weapons – but they are the Protectorate's only hope.

ASSASSINATION ANXIETY
The McKenzie Files
Book 2

by

Barry K. Nelson

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Assassination Anxiety

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Book 2

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Chapter 1

Sharp pain stabbed through Jim Norton's lower back as he squirmed in the hard, uncomfortable seat. Being forced to sit in the small confines of this ship's cockpit with his knees jammed up against the bottom of the control panel so far that they brushed against his hands as he clutched the ship's twin control sticks was bad enough. But the fact that he could actually feel how hard the seat was through the slim padding of his gray space suit made things all the worse. The padding on the inside of his space helmet was hard and uncomfortable, as well. He would have preferred not to wear it, but this mission required that he and the other members of this team be prepared for immediate deployment once they reached their target destination. He diverted his gaze from the large panoramic viewscreen before him to look down at the ship's instrument panel. Two small monitors emitted a blue glow, and below them a row of keys and buttons on a long touchpad also glowed blue. Several of them flickered on and off when they weren't supposed to.

Command has a bug up their ass about how important this mission is, yet they can't be bothered to provide us with a decent ship to fly, or comfortable suits? He shook his head as best he could in the small confines of the cockpit, then turned stiffly, glancing back at his passengers sitting in the rear compartment behind the pilot seat.

Sealed up in his space suit, technician John Baylor was securely strapped to a metal bench-style seat, with a shiny metal briefcase clutched in his lap. Sitting to Baylor's left with his arms folded against his chest was Mike Jamison, another technician.

Neither of them had wanted to be awakened until the ship reached its destination, but while Jamison's helmet visor showed his eyes were closed, Baylor appeared wide awake.

The two security agents wearing dark blue space suits, Paul Moyer and Brad Wardell, sat on the bench across from Baylor and Jamison, both holding their AR-20 laser assault rifles on their laps. *What kind of trouble are they expecting, if they think we need these two guys along?*

Baylor turned his head, looking back at Jim, and his helmet speaker barked, "How much further do we have to go?"

Jim looked at the monitor on the left, showing a small black triangle representing their ship as it drew closer to several small black squares at the top. The column of numbers to the right counted down. He turned back to Baylor. "ETA three minutes."

The monitor on the right showed a long black trajectory line across the blue background, with three black circles growing ever larger as they approached. Jim glanced at the forward viewscreen and saw the field of large metallic debris free-floating in space. Many of the huge chunks of jagged misshapen metal were larger than the fragile jet-styled ship that he and the others were traveling in. He maneuvered the ship with care between the debris. A collision with one of the metallic giants would instantly destroy their smaller craft.

One mass of debris drew his attention. The large triangular-shaped hulk with a gaping jagged-edged hole in its side spun slowly counterclockwise. Jim pulled back on the control sticks, slowing the ship's forward momentum until it came to a stop. He pressed four keys on the ship's instrument panel. "We're here," he shouted back to the others.

Baylor unstrapped himself from his seat and headed for the cockpit. He leaned over Jim's right shoulder to look through the forward viewscreen. "Is the signal still coming through?" he asked.

Jim glimpsed at the monitor on the right. The three circles were still moving across the line, still growing larger as they traveled. "Signal's still coming in strong."

"Can we go in? That opening looks big enough for our ship,"

said Baylor.

"You can see that the fragment is spinning. It wouldn't be safe," Jim told him. "We're going to have to stay inside the ship and send the drones in to locate the object."

"The drones? This is a delicate operation. You can't send the drones in to handle this without our supervision," Baylor protested.

"It's too dangerous for humans," Jim insisted. "There could be free-floating debris inside that thing. The drones are expendable." He pressed a key on the panel. "Opening cargo bay hatch." He pressed three more keys. "Robotic drones are activated and deployed to retrieve the target."

Through the forward viewscreen, Jim and the rest of the crew members watched as four spider-shaped robots flew out from their ship. Each drone's eight long legs were folded up under its oval-shaped body. The drones emitted a white glow from the end of their twin cylindrical top thrusters as they were propelled through space toward the spinning metallic mass. Maneuvering with mechanically precise care, the drones entered the mass's opening. For several minutes, the crew watched and waited.

"I hope the object is still reasonably intact," said Jamison. "It's probably been through hell."

"It should be," Baylor said. "Considering the strength of the signal."

"That's not what has me worried," Jim said. "It's the other thing in there." He glanced back at the gun-toting security officers. "That's why Moyer and Wardell are here."

Moyer moved in closer. "You don't have to worry about that oversized tin solder. If there's any problem, we're equipped to handle it." Moyer patted the side of his laser rifle.

An oversized tin soldier? That's not what I've heard, Jim thought. *But you guys know what you're doing. I just get paid to fly.*

Jamison thrust his finger out toward the viewscreen. "There!" he shouted. "They're coming back."

The four robots emerged from the opening in the fragment. Two of them were attached to the left and right sides of a large, shiny metal object, while the other two held onto the top and

bottom portions of the object. The drones' long legs were wrapped around the object as they flew back to the ship, partially obscuring it so that Jim couldn't quite make out its exact shape. The team of robots moved out of view as they flew beneath the ship to enter the cargo bay.

"There you go. Target retrieved," Jim confirmed, as the sensors reported the robots had cleared the bay hatch. He pressed a button on the control panel to close the cargo bay.

"Just like that?" Wardell objected. "I didn't expect the job to be this easy."

"Easy is how command wanted it," Jim replied as he unstrapped himself from his seat and rose to face Wardell. "You itching to use your hardware?"

"As long as there's no trouble, we're happy," Moyer added. "We don't need any wild shooting spree to endanger the unit. Let's get down to the cargo bay and take a look."

Baylor and Jamison turned and headed away from the cockpit with Jim and the others following. They descended a short flight of metal steps and entered a small, dark corridor with several pipes and cables zigzagging across the ceiling. The group stopped in front of the heavy black metal door to the cargo bay. Jim pressed a white glowing button on the wall to the right of the door, and the door rose with a loud hum. Baylor and Jamison ducked inside the cargo bay, not waiting for the door to fully open.

These guys are practically tripping over themselves to get to this thing, Jim thought, laughing to himself. *Bet they'd really piss themselves if this thing isn't really working the way they thought. Doesn't matter to me. Either way, Carp Technologies is paying me a hefty fee for the flight.*

In the cargo bay, Jim and the others gathered around the center of attention. The four robots surrounded the object they'd retrieved from the space debris. They backed away at Baylor's command. A large humanoid robot at least seven feet long lay on the floor, its silvery body marred by black scorch marks. The robot's reverse-jointed legs and three-toed feet seemed to have suffered the worst, as they were completely blackened from

exposure to some form of extreme heat. The same heat damage apparently had affected the large triangular-shaped wings mounted on the robot's back. Its scorched left wing with the long cylindrical thruster mounted on the tip was still intact, while the right wing was missing entirely.

The robot's large ovoid head faced upward, with a thin, black horizontal lens eye slashed perfectly across the upper portion. Jim imagined that the two long, sharp horns on the sides of the robot's head were heavy enough to make moving it difficult during a closer examination. The two accordion hoses beneath its lens eye ran down to a four-foot metal cylinder the robot hugged against its chest with its large, three clawed left hand. Jim was relieved to see that the robot's right arm plasma weapon, the long barrel with the four horizontal and vertical fins, remained inactive as it rested on the floor. But he turned his attention back to the cylinder that the robot was holding. It bore large patches of black scorch marks. On the bottom of the cylinder were four thick cables that looked as though they were severed with a clean stroke.

Moyer and Wardell both stood back from the robot and aimed their weapons as if to fire at a second's notice. Baylor made a slow approach to the inert robot and knelt down to inspect it.

"Well?" Wardell asked, raising his rifle higher to eye level. "Is it dead?"

"It's clearly dead," Baylor assured him. "A shame, too." He ran his hand along the front of the robot's face, almost reverently. "Only three Deltans were made, and this one was the only one that survived. The other two were destroyed during the battle of Maseklos Prime two months ago." He sighed. "But it's the other unit that we should be worried about."

Jamison stepped in closer. "Amazing how the Deltan rescued the central processing unit. It appears to have protected it from harm during the battle. That explains how it got damaged."

"Okay, so we got it," said Wardell. "What the hell do we do now?"

"We need to run a full diagnostic on the unit to see if it's still intact," Baylor replied. "Command wants to make sure that the unit

is still able to function after all it's been through."

Jim Norton's attention was still focused on the Deltan clutching the cylinder. "That's after we pry the unit loose from its big brother here."

Baylor stood up. "That shouldn't be a problem with the Deltan deactivated."

Moyer lowered his weapon to his chest. "All this trouble making us come all the way out here to get a piece of junk off another piece of junk. Why not just build a new one?"

Baylor laughed. "Because this unit is unique. And the guy who built it is dead. So, it's one of a kind. That's why Command is so anxious to get it back intact." Baylor gave the Deltan's leg a slight tap with his foot. "Getting the big guy here too is a bonus. I could spend days in the lab going over these two. This is amazing technology."

Jim imagined gleeful boyish grins on Baylor and Jamison's faces behind their helmet visors. Two science geeks in tech heaven as they worked over the prize of a lifetime. He turned to Moyer and Wardell, still holding their rifles in anticipation of a firefight. "Are you guys gonna stand down, or what? It's just a pile of junk now," he said, pointing a finger at the Deltan.

Baylor turned to face him. "This pile of junk, as you call it, once had the firepower to bring down a fully shielded battle cruiser with a single shot. It's a remarkable piece of machinery. Just like its little brother here."

"All I know is, if the big ugly one gives us any shit, we shoot it," Wardell responded. "But for now, I'll take your word that it's dead."

Wardell lowered his rifle, pointing the barrel to the floor. Moyer also lowered his gun.

Jim stepped closer to the Deltan, his attention focused on the cylinder it cradled in its arms. "So, what's the story? You think this thing is okay?"

"It appears to be," Baylor replied. "We won't know for sure until we run our diagnostic on its systems. But if it's able to transmit a long ranged distress signal across space, then I'd say that it's in good shape." Baylor knelt down again and ran his hand

along a shiny cable running from the bottom of the cylinder to the Deltan's chest. "I wonder what this is for."

"If the unit is still functioning, then maybe we can try to communicate with it," Jamison suggested.

"Communicate with it all you want," Jim said, heading for the cargo bay door. "Now that we've got this thing loaded onboard, I've got to transmit my report to Command. Then we're out of here." He headed for the door.

He walked back up the steps and returned to the cockpit. Sitting sat down at the instrument panel, he activated the communications system and said, "This is pilot Jim Norton, reporting to Command. We have located and retrieved the central processing module from the debris field, along with the inactive Deltan unit. The Deltan was no threat. Technicians Baylor and Jamison are planning to run diagnostic tests on the unit to confirm that the module it's still intact. After they've concluded their tests, I'm returning the ship to base. Norton out."

Once Baylor and Jamison to finish running their preliminary diagnostic tests on the unit, they could return to the Vendetta starbase, where a team of scientists and technicians employed by Carp Technologies would take possession of their prize. And Baylor and Jamison could play all kinds of geek games with their new Deltan toy and the central processing unit.

Jim checked the ship's status and noticed the cargo door indicator flashing. *Why the hell are they closing the door?* He left the cockpit, descended back down the steps, and approached the cargo bay door, which was now shut. He pressed the button at the right side of the door. Nothing happened. He pressed it again. There was still no reaction from the door. *What the hell's going on?* He tried a more basic approach – pounding his fist three times against the door's metal surface. "What the hell's going on?" he shouted, hoping that the men on the other side would hear. "The door won't open."

He pounded three more times against the door, then pressed the button again – still with no reaction. *System malfunction,* he told himself. He was no technician like Baylor and Jamison. He hoped

one of them would be able to find some way to override the controls from their side and get the door open. Otherwise without being strapped into seats, the four men were going to have a bumpy ride back to the starbase.

Jim was about to turn away when the cargo bay door began to open with its usual noisy hum. He expected to face Baylor and the other three men in the cargo bay, but was instead greeted by the Deltan, now standing instead of lying inactive on the cargo bay floor. The Deltan's left hand was still clutched the control module cylinder. Its thin lens eye, formerly black and dead, now glowed bright red. The same red glow radiated from the barrel of its plasma gun arm rising to meet Jim Norton's face.

Shocked at the sight of this monster standing before him, Jim staggered back as his heart fluttered with panic. *What the hell is this? They said this thing was dead. Where the hell are the others?*

Loud thuds came from the Deltan's feet as it took two steps toward him. The tip of its plasma weapon hovered inches away from Jim's face as he heard a deep, gravelly voice order, "Stop!"

The Deltan did not move, but kept its plasma gun aimed at Jim's face. Jim was too frozen with fear to even think about looking for the source of the mysterious voice.

The voice boomed out again, "We have need of this one."

The Deltan lowered its plasma gun and took a step back. Looking past the mechanical monster, Jim saw the bodies of Baylor, Jamison, Moyer and Wardell lying on the cargo bay floor. Streams of black smoke rose from large holes that were burned though Moyer and Wardell's helmets.

The voice blared out again, this time addressing Jim. "You will not bother to return to your base. I'm giving you a new destination."

Jim's first theory was that the voice was coming from the Deltan. Then he realized that its source was the cylinder that the Deltan was carrying.

The cylinder continued to speak. "Your current mission has reached its conclusion. Now I'm giving you a new one – to aid me in the final destruction of the United Protectorate."

Chapter 2

Standing on the wooden stage plastered with posters displaying her smiling face and that of her running mate, Vice President Paul Zona, United Protectorate President Sandra Drennan stood before the podium, giving her campaign speech to residents of Kendridge on the planet Tacoma Three. Vice President, Paul Zona, a youthful looking man with blond hair, smiled behind Drennan as she spoke into the twin tubular microphones on top of the podium, her crisp voice booming from the six-foot-tall speakers at either side of the stage. She gripped the podium with authoritative energy, her red dress bright against the backdrop of the requisite dark suits and shades worn by Secret Service Agent Mike Stevers and five others scanning the multitude of faces in the crowd.

In addition to the Secret Service team, Drennan had protection from a kinetic repulse shield generated by four flat cables on the stage floor. The protective energy configuration resembled a cube of thick blue glass. The shield would provide her with a large degree of protection against small arms fire and would have limited strength against explosives. In spite of this added security measure, Agent Mike Stevers felt that this was a bad location to hold a campaign speech – at the edge of a park, across the street from a federal courthouse. Drennan was completely out in the open with only a few trees behind her. The courthouse and a row of other buildings provided a tempting sniper perch. Still, they tried to cover all the bases.

Earbuds allowed Mike and the other agents to keep in touch with each other and receive security status updates. Small remote

keypads on their belts enabled them to switch channels and communicate with different parties. Mike watched the huge crowd, observing their cheers and applause to Drennan's address. He felt confident no one here would present a threat to the President's security. Everyone attending this rally was walked through a tight security checkpoint. Everyone underwent a full physical scan for any weapons, as well as chemical and biological agents. All bags and accessories were searched. Electronics were scanned to determine if they could be disguised weapons. Both sides of the street leading to this area were blocked off by the police. The airspace over the entire city was restricted during Drennan's visit, and patrolled by police assault shuttles. Mike watched as one of these shuttles made a slow pass several feet overhead, its long black tubular body ending in a sharp point. The cylindrical engines mounted on the sides had broad triangular wings attached to them. Mounted underneath each wing was a long-barreled laser cannon and a large rectangular launcher that carried six Hellstrike missiles. Protected by thick armor and a deflective energy shield, this was one of five police shuttles that patrolled the airspace while at the same time keeping a close watch on the ground with their scanners.

Police and Secret Service agents strolled through the crowd, on guard for anything that appeared to be suspicious. The President's security was so tight that Mike had joked she would need a tracheotomy to breathe. *What kind of fool would even think about challenging these security measures to try to threaten the President?*

A female voice addressed him through his earbuds. "Stevers, Sector Zero. What's your status?"

Sector Zero was his assigned area where the President stood. He pressed a button on his keypad and responded via the microphone built into the earbuds. "Stevers, Sector Zero all clear." He listened briefly to the background chatter of status reports coming in from agents handling the other sectors. So far, all clear.

As Drennan spoke, the crowd responded with roaring cheers to her words of defiance against the Brelac and victory in the war

that they waged against humanity. She spoke of her vision to bring greater prosperity to the United Protectorate as it expanded to colonize new worlds. Mike caught few of Drennan's words. His focus was on the diversity of faces within the crowd. Mike would like to think that a majority of the people here were good and loyal citizens of the Protectorate. But the mandate of the Secret Service dictated that he and the other agents be aware of any potential threat to the President's safety. Lurking among this boisterous crowd of supporters could be one or more Vendetta agents waiting for a chance to strike.

Looking to the sky again, Mike watched the police assault shuttle make a slow pass high above the heads of the crowd. Then it banked to the left and flew over the roof of a gray brick apartment building. Then to Mike's surprise, the rear section of the shuttle exploded. Mike froze, helpless as he watched the now flaming craft spin out of control on its descent toward the street. Screaming people on the ground fled the area before the shuttle slammed into a parked silver car. The flaming explosion shattered windows of a nearby building and momentarily drowned the crowd's panicked screams that rang through Mike's ears.

What the hell's going on? What could have taken out that armored, shielded shuttle with such ease? The once peaceful rally turned into a chaotic mob of screaming people scurrying in different directions to escape the area. The state of disorder became even clearer to Mike as he listened to the round of male and female voices through his earbuds. "Johnson, Sector Three, to Sector Two. Do you see anything?"

"Mitchell, Sector Two, reporting. We didn't see any shooter. We're still looking."

"Romans, Sector Five, reporting. No shooter in sight. Repeat, no shooter in sight. Everybody stay sharp."

A stern male voice addressed Mike over his earbuds. "Command to Sector Zero. Prepare for the President's evac. Repeat: prepare for the President's evac. Sectors One and Two are falling back to your position to get the President to her limo."

As Mike expected, Command was taking no chances. "Stevers,

Sector Zero. Understood. We're standing by." At the first sign of trouble, the President was to be driven out of the area with an armed escort. It was the job of Mike and fellow agents here in this security sector to keep everyone back until the agents in Sectors One and Two arrived and formed an armed human shield around the President while they escorted her to her limousine parked at the side of the street, just a few yards to the left of the stage. Along with the five other agents, Mike drew out his Tempest 9 laser pistol and focused his attention on the crowd. He listened to the excited voices over his earbuds.

"Donegan, Sector Six. I'm moving through the crowd. I don't see anything – too many people."

"Ortez, Sector Seven. I see a light."

A second later, Mike heard a man's voice screaming in agony.

"This is Donegan. What is that? Get those people out of here!" Several other agents joined the chatter, shouting orders or questions. Sector Seven, where Ortez had reported seeing a strange light, was located to Mike's right, further down the street and past the courthouse. *It's got to be a weapon,* Mike thought. *Might be what took down the police shuttle.*

While shoving panicked people away from the stage area, Mike looked to his right and saw dozens of people running away from a bright red light. The light seemed to grow in size and intensity. Cars parked at the side of the street caught fire and exploded within the light's aura. Horrified, he watched people caught within the light burst into flames. There was nothing that he could do to help them, as his duty was clear – remain at his position with his fellow agents at all costs, and protect President Drennan with his life.

Mike received a message over his earbuds. "Sector Zero. Get ready for the President's evac. Repeat: get ready for her evac."

Mike was relieved to see a group of ten men and women in black suits rushing toward his position. The agents of Sector's One and Two had arrived, each toting a laser pistol. Mike looked back to the stage and saw Drennan, still encased within the protective energy cube, crouched down behind the podium as she watched

the chaos. Mike took a small remote keypad out of his suit pocket. He pointed it at Drennan and pressed a key. The energy cube surrounding her faded away just as the group of agents stormed over the stage. “Move! Go! Go!” Mike shouted, pointing to his left toward the waiting limousine.

The agents surrounded Drennan and escorted her off the stage. Just then, the building in front of the police shuttle crash site exploded. Huge chunks of flying masonry and broken metal beams hammered the area. Mike and the five other agents ducked down, raising their arms to protect their heads against airborne brick fragments. Mike caught the sight of a large metallic sphere being hurled into the air by the blast. It was heading for the stage. Mike dove down as the sphere hit the ground with a loud thud near the left side of the stage. Mike jumped back to his feet. In the distance, he could see the group of agents running with the President as they reached her limousine. Two red police cars with white side stripes, parked in front of the limousine, headed off with their light bars flashing. In the air above them, three of the police shuttles converged hovered in a triangular formation.

Mike turned his attention back to the thing that was hurled out from the explosion. “Stevers, Sector Zero. We’ve got something here.” He moved past the other agents to get a closer look at the object that had embedded itself halfway into the ground as it landed. It appeared to be a large ball of metallic debris. Long, pointed shards of shiny metal covered the object. Mike rough estimate was that the object was five feet in diameter. And it also appeared to be moving. Mike jumped back when he saw a blue stream of energy burst from the object. His heart racing, he saw several more streams of energy shoot out from the thing like small electric arcs. The word *bomb* flashed through his mind. “Get down!” he shouted to the other agents.

He ran and dove to the ground. A second later, a deafening blast went off near the stage. Sharp pain stabbed his left side. He was unable to move his left leg. He glanced down and saw several metal shards from the object embedded in his leg, back, and left arm. He groaned, feeling his blood soaking his clothes. Wearily he

pushed up on his good arm and looked about to see that the other agents in the area were still on the ground. To his far left he saw a mangled body penetrated with shrapnel.

A report came in through his earbuds. "We've got the President aboard. We're heading out." He heard more screams, and a woman's voice cried out, "It's coming! Look out! Shoot it! It's coming!" Looking to his left, Mike saw the flashing blue and red lights of the two police cars leading the President's motorcade down the street, away from the area. As the black limo and three black utility vehicles carrying Secret Service agents sped away, three police shuttles flew overhead to deal with threats in the air or on the ground. Mike shuddered as pain charged through his body. *At least the President is safe.*

Trying to get a grip on the situation, he looked back toward what was left of the stage ripped apart by the blast. Thick black smoke rose in the air from the shattered remains. Behind the debris, he saw something moving – long, dark, and squirming, like a snake or a tail. He glanced at the exploded building partially obscured by a cloud of dust and smoke. Metal and stone debris littered the area. Through the dust cloud he saw something move, something that looked like a large person – very large, close to eight feet tall, wearing some sort of long flowing cape or a robe. The figure emerged from the dust cloud, brandishing thick, muscular arms with hands balled into massive fists. Behind it, a long tail thrashed from side to side.

A tail? Instantly Mike recalled the other tail-like appendage he'd spotted near the wreckage of the stage. "Brelac!" he cried out. He repeated that word into his microphone. "Brelac! We've got Brelac in the area!"

Mike's instinct was to open fire at this alien threat, but his hands were empty. He'd dropped his gun. Quickly he searched the ground and found it lying a foot in front of him. He reached for it as a shrill, continuous scream to right caught his attention. He turned and saw a man engulfed in flames running toward him. Already in pain, Mike yelped, horrified as the man collapsed just a few feet away. The heat and greasy-sweet stench of burning flesh so close

by made him want to vomit, but that reaction quickly passed as he looked past the burning body and saw that strange red light. Another vehicle near the light exploded into flames. A police assault shuttle soared in and hovered over the area. The twin laser cannons on its wings fired crimson bolts down on the vicinity of the light, but the light kept moving toward Mike. Lying helpless on the ground, he could do nothing except scream out in pain under an intense heat as the sickening odor of burning flesh came from his own body.

Chapter 3

Colin ran through the street littered with loose bricks and twisted metal beams that had fallen from the bombed-out buildings. The thundering booms of explosions behind him drowned out the rapid crunching of his black knee-high boots as he ran through debris. Cool drafts fanned through the holes torn in the knees and right shoulder of his green camouflage fatigues.

An explosion went off to his right, hurling large chunks of rocks and dirt into the air. He ducked but kept running toward his target up ahead – a four-foot-tall rough triangular remnant of what used to be a gray brick wall sitting among a pile of stone rubble. It was the only semblance of cover, and hiding there might grant him a few more seconds of survival.

Reaching the wall, Colin made a sharp right turn and skidded to his knees, sliding on his back as he fell in behind it. Instantly he saw he wasn't alone. Diane Christy crouched behind the wall, wearing knee-high black boots and green camouflage fatigues like his, only without the holes torn in the shoulder and knees. She brandished a large laser rifle, its two-foot-long barrel pointed skyward. A strong gust of wind blew a cloud of dust past her, lifting her long black hair in billowing tendrils. Colin found himself momentarily mesmerized by the sight of her until a loud explosion nearby shook the ground beneath him. He flinched, but Diane remained steady.

"Glad you could make it, Sarge," she said, smiling. "I wouldn't want to take on the entire Brelac army by myself."

Colin said nothing as he looked into Diane's eyes. She reached out and grabbed hold of Colin's shirt, pulling him close, with their

faces just inches apart. Colin watched, entranced, as Diane's lips parted. "One last kiss before we die," she rasped, closing the distance between them. Their lips touched.

* * * * *

Colin yelped and sat up, startled awake in near total darkness. It took him a second to realize he was on his cot in his quarters and not back there ... with *her*.

Breathing heavily, he swiped at the dampness on his brow and grumbled, "Another one of those crazy dreams."

As a sergeant, Colin was given the privilege of being assigned a private six-by-ten room in the back of the barracks building at the military installation on Maseklos Prime. There were no windows, and even keeping the door wide open provided no additional light. But light would shed no illumination on his personal dilemma. He sat in the darkness, stewing about the dream that had shocked him awake. *I haven't seen Diane in about two months, now here I am, dreaming about her. Romantically. Again.* So far, this was the third time this week he'd dreamed about her. He was beginning to long for the nights when his dreams would be reruns of his day's activities. This new pattern was disturbing. Maybe his subconscious was trying to make up for her absence in his life. But did he actually did have a subconscious mind like a normal human? Did he have a true mind at all? As a Reploid, his entire thought process was a part of a complex computer program – a program that was still a huge mystery to him. It was already clear that the program was designed to rerun images of his past activities while he slept – the Reploid's equivalent to dreaming. But now the program and its dream sequences were starting to become creative. Too creative. This was a problem.

Colin considered trying to go back to sleep, but knew his chances of success were slim, because he was now wide awake. He turned to his right and glanced at the small clock sitting in front of the lamp on his nightstand. It was so dark, he couldn't see the lamp or the nightstand. All he could see was the numbers on the face of

the clock glowing bright red, declaring it was 4:47 in the morning, two hours before he had to report for work as assistant supervisor at the military supply warehouse.

He reached out and clumsily felt along the thin metal stem of his lamp to find the switch, figuring he might as well get up, get dressed, and have breakfast early before he headed off to the warehouse. Before he could touch the light switch, a powerful arm wrapped firmly around his neck.

Startled, Colin started to create a jolt of electric current to incapacitate his assailant, but felt a sharp pain in his neck. Suddenly overcome with grogginess, he barely realized his attacker's hold around his neck had grown stronger. Dizzy and unable to concentrate enough to create an electric surge to defend himself, Colin fell limp and faded to unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Colin awoke to something hard and cold pressing against the right side of his face. He opened his eyes and lifted his head, but he didn't feel so good. *What the hell happened?* Dazed, he slowly sat up and looked around to find he was no longer on his cot in his dark quarters but now sat in a chair at a dark round table. He moved his hands, resting in his lap, and realized he wore his typical civilian attire – blue jeans, black tee-shirt, soft cotton socks, and comfortable white sneakers.

How did I get here? Feeling dizzy, he forced his mind back to the last thing he remembered ... being in his room, awakening suddenly, and then–

I was drugged. Kidnapped!

Fear charged through him as he glared straight ahead at the black wall and black metal door of what appeared to be a small rectangular room. *A holding cell? Interrogation room?* He looked up at the four bright circular lights shining above his head, but quickly diverted his gaze from their intensity.

As the bright spots cleared from his vision, he looked to his left and saw that he was not alone. Kelly Lytton, another Reploid he

hadn't seen in quite a while, sat nearby at the table with him. Dressed in an oversized blue shirt and black pants, he was slumped over the table, face down – just as Colin himself had been moments ago. Standing next to Kelly was General Verne Larkin, another person he hadn't seen in a while. In that dark blue uniform with the band of medals on his left lapel, his narrowed eyes shaded by the dark blue officer's hat with the gold eagle emblem, Larkin gave off an imposing aura. Colin spotted a large brown envelope in Larkin's hand and started to rise to his feet and stand at attention, but he was still feeling dizzy.

Larkin raised his hand. "Remain seated, sergeant. You've been through a lot."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Colin raised his right hand to the side of his head, giving Larkin a salute. "What happened? How did I get here?"

"We brought you here," a female voice answered from behind.

That voice sounds familiar. Colin turned to see a woman with short red hair, dressed in black knee-high boots and a gray camouflage fatigue uniform. "You..." Colin said, surprised.

Captain Melony Carter of the CID – Central Intelligence Division – took a step forward. "I can't exactly say that I haven't seen you in a while, Sergeant McKenzie," Captain Carter said. "Considering the fact that I practically see you every day."

"You see me every day?" Colin asked. "I suppose that means you and the CID are still keeping me under surveillance."

Captain Carter smiled. "Of course. And not just you. Don't forget your two pals, Christy and Lytton. You certainly didn't think we were going to allow the three of you to run around without any kind of a leash, did you?"

General Larkin stepped forward and raised his hand. "That situation could change, which is the reason why the three of you were summoned here. And I apologize for covert and harsh manner in which you were brought here." Larkin frowned as he glanced over at Captain Carter. "I would have preferred that you weren't drugged and dragged here in the middle of the night. That does seem like overkill."

"We needed to keep the situation under the radar, sir," Captain Carter replied. "We used the quickest and quietest means to secure our three subjects with little or no outside attention."

Securing us as quickly and quietly as possible? That doesn't make me feel any better when you send some thug to nearly strangle me and jab me with a needle. And who dressed me? Colin quickly discarded that last thought. "Couldn't you guys have just sent me an email? It probably would have been less trouble. Especially when you're dealing with Diane."

Diane. Colin immediately heated at the thought of her and his latest dream involving her. *I wonder why she's not here.*

As if on cue, he heard a loud commotion outside the room and could make out the voices of two males and one female. The female voice sounded familiar. *Diane? It has to be.*

A loud boom accompanied the heavy impact striking the metal door from the other side. The door buckled. Captain Carter moved to the door, then stepped back just in time to avoid being struck by the door as it flew from the wall with another loud boom and sailed over the table, barely missing Kelly. General Larkin dodged back in alarm, but Colin knew the black boot that kicked the door off its hinges belonged to Diane Christy. Dressed in her gray camouflage fatigue uniform, she barged into the room while dragging two men in black masks and uniforms by the back of their necks. She hoisted both men into the air and tossed them over the table to join the mangled. Their bodies bounced off the wall with a loud thud, then dropped to the floor.

Nobody can make an entrance quite like Diane, Colin observed, grinning broadly.

A faint moan came from Kelly as he raised his head from the table. He sat up and blinked his eyes rapidly as if trying to regain his bearings. He looked about the room, then turned to Colin. "What happened? Where am I?"

Diane, upon seeing General Larkin, stood at rigid attention and raised her right hand in a military-precise salute. "General Larkin, sir. I didn't see you here. I had to deal with these two clowns. One minute, I'm in my bed in my quarters. The next minute,

these guys are trying to molest me."

"That's not what they had in mind," said Captain Carter.

Diane glared. "They told me to bring them here. What's going on?"

Carter walked over and stood next to Larkin. The two men Diane had 'delivered' groaned in pain as they rose to their feet. "Their orders were to have you secured and dressed appropriately for your meeting with the general and myself, and deliver you without incident."

"A stupid way to ask somebody to a meeting," Diane grumbled. Quickly she added, "No offense intended, General Larkin."

"But it was effective," Captain Carter returned. "You're all here."

Kelly glared at Carter in wide-eyed panic. "Why? What do you want? Are we in trouble?"

General Larkin stepped forward. "Nobody is in trouble. And I apologize for the use of such drastic measures to bring you here. But the point is, that you're all here, and we have some very important matters to discuss. Captain Christy, please take a seat."

Diane walked over and sat in the chair next to Colin. Colin smiled briefly, then turned his attention to Larkin, willing himself not to think about the details of his very embarrassing dream.

Larkin waved his hand at the two masked men. With slow, stiff movements they both exited the room. Larkin continued. "The three of you have been brought to this room in a sub-level beneath CID headquarters here in Navarone. We wish to inform you that you're being reactivated."

Colin was confused. "Reactivated?"

"Silencers. Your group is being reactivated and put back into service." Larkin opened the envelope that he was holding and brought out a white paper document. "Here is your copy of the executive order signed by President Drennan, officially putting Silencers back into service. The President is fully aware of your efforts to save not only her, but the entire city of Navarone on Maseklos Prime during the incident involving Doctor Fenlow. Your

government is most grateful."

Larkin placed the document on the table in front of Colin. Diane raised her hand. "In all due respect, sir. If everyone's so grateful for what we did, then couldn't they have showed us sooner, rather than have us rot in these lousy jobs?"

"Regrettably, it took a while for us to sort things out," Larkin explained. "After all, the three of you are unique."

"Unique is putting it mildly," Captain Carter added. "No offense, but we found it difficult to imagine the three of you, with your unusual abilities and backgrounds, being successfully integrated among the regular troops. To be blunt, we need you and your abilities to do things that regular humans can't. So, the question was, what to do with you? The solution to the problem came to us a few days ago."

Captain Carter took a small black remote out of her pocket and pressed a button. On the wall straight ahead a large, blue square appeared. Carter pressed another button on the remote, and a vid image appeared, accompanied by sound, showing the chaotic scene of a mob of screaming people running in different directions. In the background, three cars burned. The scene shifted to the right and showed a large group of people running from a bright red light. Several of the people seemed to spontaneously burst into flames as the red light approached. The sound of their agonized screams filled the room. The scene panned left and showed a building exploding. The image froze.

Captain Carter cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. "This vid was taken of President Drennan's campaign rally two days ago in the city of Kendridge on the planet Tacoma Three. The rally was attacked by assailants of unknown origin and description. We're assuming that the purpose of the attack was to assassinate the President."

"Unknown description?" asked Colin. "Nobody saw these assailants?"

"From what we understand, nobody got the chance to take a good look at them. At least, nobody who lived." Captain Carter pressed a button on the remote again. The vid returned to the

scene with the red glow. “That bright red light you see appears to be an energy burst of extreme heat. Generated by what, we don’t know. But anybody or anything caught within the vicinity of this light instantly burst into flames.”

Captain Carter engaged the remote button again. The images of charred human bodies littered the scene. Several blackened skeletal remains were almost camouflaged, lying on the black scorched ground. Captain Carter pressed the remote button again. A different scene appeared, showing three heaps of blackened ash lying in rough human form. Mingled among the ash were black fragments of bone.

“Judging from the extreme damage to these bodies,” Carter said, “we’re assuming that these individuals were at ground zero, right in the path of whatever it was that generated this lethal power. They were literally burned to ash.”

Colin studied the images of the human remains. “Could some sort of weapon have caused this?”

“We’re not sure,” said Captain Carter. “Before all this happened, a police assault shuttle exploded in mid-air and crashed. We thought that some sort of thermal cannon might have been responsible. But there was no evidence of any sort of beam or projectile weapon. This was just an aura of extreme heat.”

Diane leaned forward to look over at Kelly. “An aura of heat. That sounds like a power similar to yours, kid.”

“Maybe,” said Kelly. “But I’ve never used my power on people. This sounds like something that’s beyond my capabilities.”

“We do have one clue,” said Larkin. He turned to Captain Carter. “Show them.”

Using the remote, Captain Carter switched the image from the burned remains to a grassy field with a close-up view of what appeared to be a trail of blackened three-toed footprints burned into the grass. As the footprints progressed toward the street, they faded into an expanding black area that burned away the green grass.

“Tracks,” said Larkin. “We’re assuming that whatever made them was responsible for the burning deaths. But there’s no

description of the thing that made them. As we've already told you, nobody was able get close enough to get a good look at it and survive. But not all the victims were burned to death. There were a few other strange deaths."

With that, Captain Carter pressed the remote once again. A new image appeared of a man in a black suit lying face down on a grassy surface. Several shards of metal had pierced the man's back and legs like long, shiny swords. Captain Carter explained, "This man was Secret Service Agent Robert Smith. He died of severe lacerations caused by these metallic fragments. When we went to the scene to investigate, we found these fragments all over the place. One of the survivors, Secret Service Agent Mike Stevers, reported that these fragments were hurled by a round metallic object that flew out from an exploding building and landed near the stage where President Drennan was speaking. Four people died from the shrapnel, and ten were severely injured. These things are razor sharp, designed for killing."

Captain Carter pressed the remote to summon the image of a wooden stage. The left half of the stage was torn apart by the aftermath of a powerful explosion. "Now here's where it gets really weird." Again Carter pressed the remote. The next image was of a silvery metal table. On top of the table was a metal object. It appeared to be three feet long, one foot wide. Half of it was flat, ending in a sharp point. The other half of the object was twisted into a corkscrew shape and ended in a jagged edge. "This object was taken from the body of Agent Roberts," Carter said. "Look."

Everyone watched as a man wearing a white lab coat and thick, black gloves picked up the object and turned it over. The vid view zoomed closer to the metal object. On the flattened end, a column of raised letters read 'Black Ice,' followed by a large letter S set within a diamond symbol.

"What are we looking at?" asked Diane.

"This," Captain Carter replied. She summoned the image of three cars parked along a city street – a blue delivery vehicle, a small black sporty job, and a white utilitarian passenger carrier. The different types of vehicles all had one thing in common: they

were missing long strips of metal from their hoods, sides, and roofs. The vid view moved in closer to the sports vehicle, and Carter said, "This auto model is a Sierra Black Ice. As you can see, it's been torn apart like the other vehicles here. That metal object you saw previously had the words Black Ice embedded on its side. The same words and logo were on the sides of this car. We suspect that somehow the piece of shrapnel with the words and logo were taken from the vehicle you see here. All of these vehicles have suffered the same damage – strips of metal removed from their bodies. But the metal wasn't torn or burned off. It was all removed cleanly, without leaving jagged edges or burn marks."

Kelly raised his hand. "Those shrapnel pieces that you found. Did you run any tests on them?"

Captain Carter explained, "We ran several extensive scans to try to find traces of explosives, DNA, chemicals, energy signatures. We found nothing."

"Seven cars were all damaged in the same way," Larkin added. "This happened within the security zone during the President's speech. Three Secret Service agents who were supposed to be in that area were found dead in an alley a few streets away. And apparently even they died under strange circumstances. An autopsy revealed that they all died from respiratory failure caused by exposure to a postsynaptic neurotoxin."

"A neurotoxin?" Colin asked.

Larkin nodded, and Captain Carter summoned up the image of a white male cadaver lying face down on a metal table. A close-up view of the body revealed a large puncture wound in the middle of a reddened, swollen lump on the left side of the man's back.

Captain Carter explained, "This man, like the other two, was injected with powerful venom, a postsynaptic neurotoxin that's chemically similar to the venom found in the Meridan Seddrax."

A seddrax? Colin conjured the image of the small eight-legged insect with a large mobile tail with a stinger on the end. Native to the planet Meridan, the seddrax's sting could be lethal.

"Each victim had enough venom to kill at least ten people," Carter said. "Given the size of the puncture wounds, we're

assuming they were either injected with the venom by some sort of weapon, or they were stung by something big."

As big as a human being? "I don't think I'd want to run into a seddrax large enough to make a wound like that," Colin said. "But if some sort of weird giant insect creatures were running around, didn't anybody manage to get a look at one?"

"No one who lived to tell about it," Larkin replied grimly. "The total casualty figures are twenty-two civilians dead, twelve wounded. In addition to those numbers are thirteen Secret Service agents dead, six wounded. Whoever or whatever staged this attack moved fast and struck hard. And their power was described as awesome. Right now, the best witness that we have is Secret Service Agent Mike Stevers. He was stationed at Sector Zero where the President was standing. He saw everything that took place before he was wounded by several pieces of the shrapnel that we showed you. He also suffered serious burns caused by the strange light. Stevers also stated in his report that he saw a Brelac."

"A Brelac?" said Diane. "Were there any others spotted?"

"No. Stevers claimed that he just saw the one, although he didn't get a very good look at it. He could just make it out through the smoke and dust of a nearby building that exploded. He described it as a reptilian creature around eight feet tall, with a long thrashing tail and wearing what he described as a long cape or a cloak of some kind."

"A cape?" said Kelly. "That doesn't make sense. The Brelac aren't very big on fashion."

"And the Brelac all come in a standard size. Six feet tall," Colin added. "Unless they've started to crank out versions of themselves that are bigger. But this Agent Stevers claimed that he only saw the one? Seems to me that if the Brelac were trying to kill the President, they would send a whole battalion out in the open to get the job done."

Larkin nodded. "I agree with your doubts, but Stevers swore quite vehemently that this is what he saw. Whether it was one Brelac or one hundred, they demonstrated a show of power that was far beyond what the President's security force could stand up

to. This entire incident is strange beyond measure. And that's the reason why the three of you are here. President Drennan wants Silencers to become a special task force to investigate and deal with threats that are paranormal in nature and above the ability of normal forces to handle."

Colin pondered this idea. "Hold on. Doesn't the CID have a covert section to deal with paranormal cases?"

"We have. Section Blue," Captain Carter replied. "Our so-called secret paranormal investigation and research division that's been featured in more news reports and macronet web sites than I care to mention. Section Blue does have the ability to investigate strange cases like this assassination attempt on the President. But they have their limits when it comes to dealing with threats like this."

"Silencers will be working under the jurisdiction of the CID," Larkin added. "You will also be affiliated with Section Blue and have full access to their resources when needed. And I'd like to point out that this is a probationary program. A trial run for the three of you. Your performance in this case will determine whether this will be permanent in the long run."

"Putting it bluntly, don't screw up," said Captain Carter, almost pleading.

"There is one other thing that we'd like to show you," said Larkin. "It's unrelated to this case, but you might find it interesting."

With that, Captain Carter used the remote to summon the image of a silvery table that held a large black laser rifle with a cylindrical barrel that appeared to be about two feet long. On the top of the weapon was a foot-long, rectangular scope. On the side of the weapon was a metal disk with a black cable inserted in the middle.

Larkin explained, "What you're looking at is a new innovation brought to us by the Brelac. This gun was captured three weeks ago on the planet Margolis. A team of commandos staged an assault against a Brelac heavy artillery base. Two Brelacs that they killed were carrying these weapons. It was reported that half the team of twenty men were cut down by this weapon. It's powerful beyond

measure, and the Brelac have been putting more of such weapons into the field. Our technicians took it apart piece by piece and couldn't find a battery pack or other power source. We suspect that these weapons are somehow powered by a form of psionic energy. The cable on the side of the gun was connected at the other end to the side of the Brelac soldier's head."

Colin studied the image of this strange Brelac weapon. "Psionic energy. That's the basis of our powers. It looks like the Brelac are trying to come up with their own super-powered soldiers."

Larkin nodded. "Yes. But not quite on the level of you three. At least not yet. Our troops in the field have called these things psycho-guns, and the Brelacs who use them psycho-gunners. It's a well deserved name. This weapon is powerful enough to single-handedly take down a fully shielded battle cruiser. If the Brelac are employing more of them in the field, or even larger variations of this weapons technology, then we're in trouble. This war is already going badly for our side. But if the Brelac are sending more of these psycho-gunners at us, or an army of super troopers like yourselves, or even more ships like the Viperhawk, then there's no way we can survive. And this psionic weapons technology is currently beyond our ability to reproduce."

Colin turned his eyes back to Larkin. "Especially without Doctor Fenlow's help. But what about Doctor Trevors?"

Captain Carter stepped forward. "Still missing. We think that he's holed up in some Vendetta safe house on some outer planet or moon. Or a hidden starbase. We know that Carp Technologies has a few. We're still looking for him, assuming that he's even still alive."

Colin pondered the details of everything he had heard so far. *An assassination attempt on the President, new Brelac weapons, and the missing Doctor Trevors, who worked closely with Fenlow. How do we even begin to deal with these problems?* "Sounds like we'll have a lot to keep us busy. I suppose the best thing to do first is to interview this Agent Stevers."

"I was about to suggest that," said Larkin. "You'll find him in the First Veteran's Hospital here in Navarone. But first we have to

take the three of you upstairs to get processed for the proper identification."

Diane raised her hand to speak. "We'll be carrying badges?"

"Correct," said Larkin. "As government agents, you're going to need them. You will also be given your own office space."

Diane raised her hand again. "Are you going to give us a ship?

Kelly raised his hand while looking over at Diane. "Are you going to give us a pilot too?"

The cheerful banter between Diane and Kelly, Colin thought. *Something I haven't missed.*

Larkin hesitated before replying. "Let's just take this one step at a time."

Colin picked up and read over the presidential order that Larkin had placed before him. *Silencers.* He, Diane, and Kelly were now a special investigative and response unit. *And of all the people in the galaxy, the President herself is depending on us.* That notion alone was overwhelming. He felt a knot tighten in his stomach. Then he looked up at Larkin. "Let's get started."