

# Obliteration

## The McKenzie Files

### Book 3



**Barry K. Nelson**

# Obliteration

## The McKenzie Files Book 3



***Barry K. Nelson***

The three reprogrammed Brelac Reploids forming the special team Silencers still faithfully serve the United Protectorate under the watchful monitoring of the Central Intelligence Division. Stationed on Maseklos Prime, Colin McKenzie, Diane Christy, and Kelly Lytton are called to a hostage scene and end up with clues that lead to the elusive Dr. Arthur Trevors. Although initially a traitor who worked undercover with the Brelac, Trevors was in large part responsible for the capture and reprogramming of Colin, Diane, and Kelly so they could serve their current function as weapons for the Protectorate.

The war with the Brelac is not going well, and the Silencers are given an advanced warp-drive ship and sent beyond their home quadrant, Poseidon, to the last known coordinates of a missing ship. Their mission is to locate the missing ship, part of an original task force of five ships sent out to find other human colonies and enlist their help with the war against the Brelac.

As soon as Colin and his team leave the quadrant, they run into trouble, and things go downhill from there. They find themselves in the midst of a war between local factions on a planet far from home and feel obliged to aid the human faction against a clearly superior force that seems to have help from a monster who leaves a wake of death and destruction wherever it goes. The more they find out, the weirder things get, and they end up stranded with no way home, much less any hope of completing their original mission to find the lost task force ship.

This new enemy they face seems invincible, and they wonder if they'll survive as everything and everyone around them is destroyed. Maybe this time not even their Reploid powers will save them. But what other hope does humanity have?

**OBLITERATION**  
**The McKenzie Files**  
**Book 3**

*by*  
**Barry K. Nelson**

Licensed and Produced through  
**Penumbra Publishing**  
*www.PenumbraPublishing.com*



PRINTED IN USA  
PRINT ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1-938758-31-7  
Copyright 2014 Barry K. Nelson  
All rights reserved

Also available EBOOK ISBN/EAN 13: 978-1-938758-30-0

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



# Obliteration

The McKenzie Files

Book 3



*Barry K. Nelson*





## Chapter 1

Colin had that usual nervous feeling stinging in the middle of his stomach while he was riding in the front seat of the new car that the CID had given him, Diane, and Kelly. *Finally we get a vehicle of our own. No more having to depend on shuttles, taxis, or the subway to get around*, he mused. The only drawback to this was having Diane as a driver. Impulsive and bad-tempered, she'd just received her driver's license two weeks ago. Even with the tight safety belt strapped across his torso, Colin was still not feeling secure as he watched Diane jerk the steering wheel to the left and right in order to weave in and out of the four lanes of traffic on the streets of Navarone to reach their destination. Colin imagined that Kelly, riding in the back seat, was feeling the same way – and maybe car-sick too. He looked a little green in the face, not a good color for his blond hair he'd recently had cut in a shorter style. Over the sound of their car's wailing siren, Colin heard Kelly yip as they came up close and fast to another vehicle. Diane swerved at the last moment to avoid a collision.

*I should have gotten my license before Diane*, Colin scolded himself. He looked over at her wearing a black tee-shirt and jeans, with a broad smile on her face. The white sneaker on her right foot shifted frequently from the brake to the accelerator pedal. With the air from the open window blowing through her long black hair, she looked like she was on a joy ride, except for the large laser pistol holstered at her right hip.

"Do you mind slowing down?" Colin asked. "We want to at least get there alive."

"Slow down?" Diane teased with a laugh. "We have to get

there before those Reploid jackasses kill the hostages. You heard the report. Their hour deadline is almost up!"

"I know," Colin replied sourly. *What a way to start the morning!*

Twenty minutes ago, he was sleeping in his quarters back at the military base when he was awakened by a phone call from CID Captain Melony Carter, informing him that Vendetta terrorists had taken several civilians hostage in an office building and were threatening to kill them, then detonate a nuclear bomb that was hidden somewhere in Navarone, unless the government agreed to release Vendetta operatives from the penal moon Taraxis in the Tacoma System. Carter also reported that one of the terrorists was observed using paranormal abilities – Reploid abilities. And that was why he and Diane and Kelly had been called. Their team, the Silencers, was the only defense against Reploids, because they were Reploids too, reconditioned and turned against Vendetta to serve the Protectorate.

After the call from Carter, Colin had less than ten minutes before Diane and Kelly would pick him up, which gave him very little time to throw on some blue jeans, black shirt, and white sneakers, and rush to the base's main gate. By the time he got there, Diane and Kelly were waiting for him in the black car that now sped along the highway, careening and swerving through heavy traffic.

"If we're going into a dangerous situation, I think I'd rather get killed by the bad guys than by a member of my own team," Kelly said. He thrust out his hand between Diane and Colin, pointing at the windshield and shouting, "Car, car, car!"

"I see it!" Diane shouted back.

Colin held his breath as he watched their car make a rapid approach to the rear end of a blue car up ahead. Diane jerked the steering wheel to the right, and the car swerved into the right lane to avoid it. Colin was hoping that during the excitement, Diane would not forget her Reploid strength and accidentally rip the steering wheel away from the column.

Colin exhaled, but not out of a sense of relief. "Diane! Truck up



ahead!"

"I'm on it." She steered the car to the left to avoid crashing into the rear end of a red pickup truck. She mashed her foot down on the accelerator pedal, and the car sped up ahead of the truck, fishtailed in front of it, then skidded toward an intersection. With tires squealing, they made a sharp right turn and headed down the road towards a large crowd. People scattered as their car came to a screeching halt a few feet away, the momentum jerking Colin's body forward.

"We're here," Diane announced.

"We're alive," Colin jabbed. He was amazed that they had survived being passengers in a vehicle with Diane behind the wheel. His heart was still pounding when he looked over at her, but not from a romantic feeling. *And they want to train her to be a pilot?*

Diane punched a small touchpad at the right side of the steering wheel, and the blaring siren quieted. "Okay, let's do this," she said, lunging out of the car.

Colin and Kelly exited the car. Colin took a second glance at Kelly. His blue cut-off denim shorts, green tank top, and black sneakers without socks made him look ready for a day at the beach rather than a hostage situation.

They moved through the crowd of onlookers and came upon a police roadblock. A five-foot-high blue barrier of glowing energy stretched across the road between two black metal poles. On the other side of the barrier, three uniformed police officers stood near their patrol cars with red bar lights flashing. As Colin, Diane, and Kelly approached the barrier, an officer on the other side walked over and held up his hand. "Sorry. The road is blocked off. Police emergency," he told them in a stern tone.

In unison, Colin, Diane, and Kelly reached into their pockets and brought out the black billfolds that held their badges and identification. "We're with the CID. Silencers," Colin explained. "Lieutenant Copeland is expecting us."

"Silencers?" the officer inquired. He pressed the keypad on the small remote attached to his belt and spoke into the microphone attached to his earbuds. "Lieutenant, there are three people here

claiming to be from CID. They call themselves Silencers.” After a brief moment, the officer said, “Understood,” then reached into his pocket and brought out a small black remote. He pressed a key on the remote and a section of the barrier faded away to allow Colin, Diane, and Kelly to pass.

They proceeded until they came upon a cluster of vehicles with flashing red lights parked in the middle of the street – several police cars in front of and behind two large black armored vans with ‘SWAT’ emblazoned on the sides. Several uniformed and plain-clothes officers crouched down behind the vehicles with their laser guns aimed at a building several feet away. The SWAT officers, clad in their heavy black body armor, aimed their laser rifles at the building. Several robotic assault units, black five-foot cylinder-shaped bodies supported by four thick spider-like legs, targeted the building with twin heavy laser guns mounted on their sides, ready to quash any threat that might emerge from the building.

Several feet in front of the police barricade, a chaotic mess of bloody dismembered bodies – civilians and police – lay scattered among demolished vehicles.

“Maybe it would be a good idea to keep our heads down,” Kelly suggested.

Colin nodded. *A wise idea.* He crouched down, along with Diane and Kelly, and approached two officers who were kneeling behind a police car. “We’re Silencers, with the CID,” Colin said, displaying his badge. “Lieutenant Copeland is expecting us.”

The officer pointed to the left. “He’s over there. I’ll call him.” The officer pressed a key on the remote attached to his belt, then spoke into his microphone. A few seconds later, Colin looked to his left and saw the familiar sight of Lieutenant Copeland, in his thirties with bushy black hair, carrying a laser gun as he approached in a crouched position. His black suit, grey shirt, and black necktie appeared a bit rumpled – understandable, given the situation.

“Silencers from the CID. I haven’t seen you three since the Mertz case,” said Copeland. There was a wide-eyed expression of

surprise on his face. “The CID sent you to handle this situation?”

“We’re the best qualified,” replied Colin. “What’s going on?”

“A group of eleven male suspects walked into the lobby of the Universal Industries building and killed the three security guards at the reception station. They then proceeded up to the building’s twenty-fifth floor, where they took a number of hostages. Four officers responded to the alarm that the security guards set off, but they never made it out alive. We’ve evacuated the building to avoid any further civilian casualties. So far, the terrorists have the entire twenty-fifth floor under their control.”

“I see that SWAT is here,” said Colin, pointing to the black vans. “Did they try to storm the building and retake the floor?”

“Yeah, but their first attempt was a disaster. One of the terrorists has some kind of energy weapon that we’ve never seen before. Its effect is pretty damn gruesome. I’m sure that you’ve seen the aftermath up ahead.”

Colin raised his head to take another look at the wreckage and bodies. *What kind of weapon could have caused all this damage?* He eyed the wrecked cars. Sections of some vehicles were left intact, while other sections appeared to be crumpled like tin foil. “The cars look like they were crushed somehow.”

“More like imploded,” Copeland corrected. “It’s a hell of a way to die. We lost six officers. As far as we can tell, they’re using some sort of implosion beam weapon. All forms of personal protection we have are useless against it. And we have several witnesses that have stated that they didn’t actually see the terrorist using a weapon, but he was actually using his bare hands. Maybe in all the excitement, they didn’t get a good look at what was happening. You guys think you can go up against something like that?”

Colin was starting to wonder the same thing himself, but no use alarming others by admitting it. “This falls within our area of expertise. Have the terrorists made any other demands besides the one-hour deadline to release Vendetta agents from the prison moon, Taraxis?”

“No. But if we don’t meet their demand, they’ll kill all the hostages and detonate a nuclear device that they have hidden

someplace in the city. We're up against a rock and a hard place here. If you have any solutions, I'm all ears."

Colin could offer Copeland little in the way of a solution. "This doesn't make sense. It seems to me that they're in just as tight a spot as you are. Don't they realize that their chances of pulling this off are slim?"

"It's possible that they do. But it's my theory that they probably care very little about getting the prisoners set free. This is more about striking fear. The slim chance of getting their people back would probably be a bonus."

"How much time do we have before their deadline expires?" Colin asked.

Copeland glanced at his wristwatch. "Twenty-six minutes."

"That doesn't give us much time. Have you tried to negotiate with them?"

"We've tried. But so far, we've gotten nowhere. Our hostage negotiator was speaking to their leader, a smart-ass by the name of Brubaker. He's not bending on his demands."

"Then we'll just have to make him bend until he breaks," Colin told Copeland. He looked back at Diane and Kelly. He was feeling that all too familiar knot in the pit of his stomach beginning to tighten. It always came with the knowledge that the three of them might be walking straight to their deaths. "Ready?"

Kelly looked back at Colin. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Diane drew her laser pistol from her holster. "Lead the way."

Copeland looked over at Kelly, then back to Colin. "Wait a second. You two are going in there unarmed?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that," Colin told him.

Colin took in a deep breath, preparing himself for anything, and was the first to rise. Diane and Kelly rose up and followed him as he walked past the police barricade of cars toward the building. They walked past the wrecked cars and the gruesome sight of the dismembered bodies lying on the ground and reached the building's wide glass doors. The doors automatically slid open, admitting them to a wide lobby with grey stone tiled floor splattered with blood from the twisted bodies of four police

officers. Colin remained tense as he and Diane and Kelly approached the black circular reception station. Colin peered down over the station to find the bodies of three security guards. They were so mangled and bloody, he couldn't tell if they were male or female. "This isn't good," he said in a quiet understatement.

Black elevator doors flanked the reception station. A short corridor led past each set of elevator doors, ending at a door marked 'STAIRS.'

"Are we going to ride up or walk?" Kelly asked.

"I'm not walking up twenty-five floors," Colin answered. "Then again, if we take the elevator, they'll probably be waiting for us."

Diane raised her laser gun and smirked. "Then let's not keep them waiting too long. We don't want anybody up there to get pissed at us."

They approached the elevators. Colin took in another deep breath and pressed the call button. They waited several tense seconds for the elevator to come down to the first floor, not knowing what to expect when the door opened. Luckily the elevator was empty, and they stepped inside. Colin pressed the button for the twenty-fifth floor, and the door slid shut. Colin could feel the momentum of the elevator as it began to rise – his heart rate with it. He watched the small black display above the door, indicating the floor numbers as the elevator ascended. "I wish we had more time to prepare for this," he mumbled.

A sly grin appeared on Diane's face. "Time to prepare? I'm always prepared to kick somebody's ass if they're asking for it. And right now these clowns up there want it pretty bad."

"Don't get cocky," Colin warned. "Remember, we also have to save the hostages too. Their safety is our priority."

"And us coming out of this alive," Kelly added.

"Coming out of this alive would be good. You can take the lead," Colin told Kelly. Kelly nodded.

Colin took another look up at the display and saw the number '25' had now appeared. The elevator door slid open.

Two gunmen stood in front of the elevator, taking aim with

their laser pistols. Kelly raised his hands and created his red shield of deflecting energy. The gunmen both opened fire. Their laser fire was deflected back to them upon contact with Kelly's shield. Struck by their own shots, both men fell to the floor.

*That was easy enough, Colin thought.*

Kelly dropped his shield, and they exited the elevator. Colin looked past the two dead gunmen lying on the blue tile floor and scoped the layout. The twenty-fifth floor was a huge open area with three long rows of grey plastic office cubicles. Glass doors lined the far left and right walls, enclosing offices. Up above, the mirrored ceiling reflected light from long rows of glowing tubular fixtures positioned over the cubicles. Two more gunmen came charging from the cubicles. Kelly took action against them by raising his hand and pointing two fingers. A fiery stream of energy surged from his fingers and struck the two men. Upon contact, their bodies burst into flame and dropped to the floor, reduced to charred skeletal remains.

A noise to the left caught Colin's attention in time for him to see a gunman rushing out of an office. Diane reacted quickly by firing rapid shots at the man with her laser pistol. The gunman dropped his weapon and fell back into the office.

The three of them began advancing toward the office cubicles. Two gunmen emerged from the cubicle at the right. With a swift motion, Colin raised his right hand and sent two bolts of electrical energy streaking through the air, knocking the two men back several feet. Both men lay unmoving on the floor while black smoke rose from their bodies.

*So far so good, Colin thought. We're still alive, and seven gunmen dead. But still no sign of the hostages.*

As they continued their cautious advance through the cubicles, observing the nearly identical desks and computer work stations, another gunman charged out from a cubicle at the left. Before he had a chance to shoot, Diane aimed her weapon and fired four laser bolts into his chest. She rushed toward him and grabbed him by his neck, lifted him off of his feet, and hurled him to her right. The gunman crashed through a cubicle and continued sailing

through the air until he crashed through the glass door of an office.

Still advancing with caution, Colin looked to the cubicles at his left and right. "This is it? And still no sign of the hostages."

"They've got to be here," Kelly insisted. "Maybe they're in the back."

They continued to advance past the cubicles until they approached the rear wall with black stone tile. The mutilated bodies of two men lay on the floor between the doorways to the men and women's restrooms on either side.

"If anyone has to go, then now is the time," Colin joked, trying to ease his own apprehension. Diane snickered, and Kelly rolled his eyes.

Colin heard faint whimpering voices and put a finger to his lips. "Then men's room," he whispered. "Sounds like that's where they're keeping the hostages."

Diane looked to Colin. "So how are we going to do this? Do we charge in there, or do we let them come to us?"

Before Colin had the chance to think about it, a male voice called out, "Hold your fire. I'm coming out. I just want to talk."

"You want to talk?" Colin answered, suspicious. "Okay, then. Come out with your hands in the air. No weapons."

After a moment, a young black man dressed casually in blue pants and shirt and black shoes, holding his hands over his head, emerged from the men's room and stopped in front of the doorway.

"Where are the hostages?" Colin asked him.

"They're all inside," the man replied. "They're all safe."

Colin breathed out with relief. "That's good. I take it that you're surrendering?"

"That depends on what my boss says. Brubaker. He's the one in charge."

"Brubaker," said Colin. "I was wondering when we'd get around to him. If he's calling the shots, then let him come out and talk to us."

The man nodded then backed away and returned to the men's room. Colin was still vague as to what kind of weapon these terrorists used to mutilate their victims. But an ominous feeling

was telling him that he was about to find out. "Get ready," he told Diane and Kelly. "Something tells me that we're not going to have a fun time."

A six-foot-tall white man with a long ponytail down to his waist grinned with sinister calm as he emerged from the men's restroom. Wearing a blue shirt and black pants tucked into black knee-high boots, he sported a thick black belt around his waist, with two straps crisscrossing his torso. Several blue lights along the belt and straps drew Colin's eyes to the black disk-shaped device attached to the belt. Even though the man appeared to be unarmed, Colin knew this gizmo indicated some kind of weaponry. Colin cleared his throat and said, "So, I take it you're Brubaker, the guy in charge of this bloodbath."

"The one and only." Brubaker crossed his arms against his chest. "And I take it you're Colin McKenzie. The famous 'Sarge.' Then there's Captain Diane Christy, the ace pilot who can barely fly a kite. And the kid, Kelly Lytton. We finally meet."

"It's nice to know that we have a fan base," Colin comment dryly, trying not to show his alarm over the fact that this man was expecting them and apparently knew enough about them to anticipate their abilities.

Brubaker laughed. "I've been keeping tabs on you three losers. And it took a hell of a lot of trouble to set this up. But I'm glad to see that it paid off. Because now you're here."

Colin scowled, ignoring the knot in his gut. "What the hell are you talking about? You set up this whole hostage thing just to lure us here?"

Brubaker smiled and gave a nod. "Yeah. I admit that it's a hell of a bit more complicated than just calling on the phone or sending an email. But it was also a hell of a lot more fun."

Colin looked over to Diane and Kelly, then back to Brubaker. "So ... okay. Now we're here. What happens next?"

Diane raised her hand to cut in. "And what about the bomb that you're supposed to have hidden somewhere in the city?"

"First off, there is no bomb. We could have had one, but that idea would have been too much of a pain in the ass to try to pull off.



And second, now that the three of you are here, I get the chance to kill you.”

*Here it comes*, Colin thought. “Do you think that you can do the job by yourself? Especially after we took out your crew?”

Brubaker snorted. “Those other guys were just cheap laser fodder. I can get the job done by myself. You three aren’t the only ones that have an advantage when it comes to being a Replod.”

Brubaker raised his right hand. It took on a blue glow, then discharged a beam of energy. Kelly was quick to react. With his hands already raised, he took a step back and created a large square panel of his blue energy shield to absorb the attack. When the beam struck Kelly’s shield he, Colin, and Diane were stunned at the unexpected sight of the shield collapsing from its square form to a small, jagged circle.

*Uh-oh!* Colin took a step back and raised his hand to fire a bolt of electricity at Brubaker. At the same time, Diane opened fire with her laser gun. Both attacks struck Brubaker head on, forcing him to stagger back as a blue aura appeared over his body.

“He’s got a shield harness!” Colin shouted, finally realizing that the glowing belt and straps Brubaker wore over his torso were generating a protective shield that blocked Colin and Diane’s attack. The shield’s glow faded as Brubaker raised his hand towards Colin. Kelly allowed the imploded remnant of his shield to fade away as he extended his hands and fired a crimson beam of energy that struck Brubaker in his chest with enough force to knock him back and through the wall with an explosion of broken tiles, creating a large hole.

It took seconds for Brubaker to recover from Kelly’s attack. He leaped out from the hole in the wall and aimed his hand at Colin to fire a beam of energy at him. Colin ducked into a cubicle at his right. Diane and Kelly both ran into a cubicle at the left. Colin ducked down behind a desk as the deadly energy beam that Brubaker fired swept across a five-foot section of the cubicle’s plastic wall, causing it to collapse on itself with a loud cracking sound.

“You see that? Total implosion,” a gleeful Brubaker shouted.

“A very nasty way to die. Just ask one of these pathetic humans lying on the floor. Oh, wait,” He said, laughing. “They can’t answer. They’re dead.”

Brubaker fired another energy bean to strafe the cubicles at the left where Kelly and Diane were hiding. Large sections of several cubicles imploded under its power.

Still in a crouched position, Colin moved from behind the desk and poked his head from around the cubicle. He saw Kelly moving from the cover of his cubicle to fire a crimson bolt of energy at Brubaker. Brubaker took a step back as the blue aura of his shield appeared over his body under Kelly’s attack. He remained unharmed. Taking a closer look at Brubaker, Colin saw he held a small black object in his left hand and wondered how Brubaker’s shield harness functioned. *His shield is pretty strong, but can this jerk attack while his shield is up?*

Colin decided to test that theory in a most dangerous way. He stood up and stepped from the cubicle to face Brubaker. “Hey, asshole!” he yelled.

Brubaker turned to face Colin. Colin raised his right hand and fired a stream of electrical energy that struck Brubaker in his chest and forced him back against the wall. Colin continued to discharge and hold the stream of electricity on Brubaker, keeping him pinned to the wall.

Kelly stepped out from the cubicle with his hands raised, ready to attack.

“Something tells me that you can’t attack while your shield is up,” Colin told Brubaker. “What’s that in your hand? A remote to your shield harness?”

Brubaker did not answer.

While holding a large metal desk up over her head, Diane rushed out from the cubicle and darted past Kelly. Colin disengaged his electrical attack on Brubaker just as Diane hurled the desk at him. The desk came crashing down on top of Brubaker. Its weight forcing him to the floor.

Even though Brubaker was down, Colin suspected that the fight was not over. It was likely that Brubaker’s shield was still

functioning when Diane hit him with the desk. Colin heard footsteps coming from inside the men's room. Then he heard the frantic voice of the young black male calling out. "Hey out there. Hold on. Take it easy. I'm coming out."

*What's this all about?* Colin wondered. He turned to Kelly as he pointed to Brubaker lying under the desk. "Keep him covered. I've got this."

"I'm coming out. I'm unarmed," the man cried out. Seconds later, he emerged from the men's room. There was a laser pistol in his hand. He dropped it on the floor and kicked it towards Colin, then raised his hands over his head. "Don't shoot. Or whatever. I'm giving up."

"Keep your hands where I can see them," Colin warned.

At that moment the desk began to crumple in on itself until it shattered into small fragments. Brubaker jumped to his feet and aimed his hand at the surrendering man, firing a lethal beam of energy. The man screamed out in agony and folded over when the beam struck him. His torso imploded into a mass of twisted flesh while giving out a spray of blood.

Colin raised his hand and discharged a bolt of energy at Brubaker, but it was to no avail, as Brubaker's shield again protected him. Diane charged towards Brubaker while firing her laser gun at him. Brubaker's body jerked back at the impact of each shot while the aura of his shield flashed, but the shots failed to penetrate. She ceased firing at him and charged close enough to him to deliver a punch to his chest. Brubaker's shield aura flashed under the impact of her blow, and he was hurled back into the wall. She pressed her attack and sent another punch to Brubaker's chest, then delivered three rapid punches to his body. She reared her fist back and let out a grunt as she sent another punch to Brubaker's body, but this time her fist penetrated his shield and thrust deep into his chest. The aura of Brubaker's shield flickered on and off while his body was forced back against the wall. For a moment, with wide unblinking eyes, he stared back at Diane. She pulled her blood soaked hand out of Brubaker's chest, and then he dropped to the floor.

Colin and Kelly moved in closer to Brubaker's dead body. A pool of his own blood was now expanding beneath him.

Diane frowned at the sight of her bloodied hand. "What a mess. I need a towel or something."

"I was hoping that we could have taken this idiot alive," said Colin. "There are a lot of questions that he needed to answer."

A male voice called out from inside the men's room. "Hey. Don't shoot. I'm coming out."

"Another one?" said Colin.

"I'm giving up. I don't want any trouble." A young blond man emerged from the men's room. He was holding a laser pistol. "I'm dropping my weapon." He placed the pistol on the floor.

"Keep your hands where we can see them," Colin instructed.

The man kept his hands raised above his head and approached Colin. "I give up," he said in a quivering voice. "You're not going to kill me. Are you?"

"Not unless you give us a reason," Colin told him. "I think we filled our quota for the day. Are there any other gunmen in there?"

"No, sir. I'm the last one." The man looked at Brubaker's dead body then looked at the bodies of his comrades. "I guess everybody else is dead. You killed Brubaker."

"You catch on fast," Colin told him. "So, what about you? What's your story? Who are you? Are you a Reploid?"

"Reploid? You mean a freak like you guys?"

Colin scowled.

"Sorry. Bad choice of words," the man replied. "I'm human."

Colin was relieved to know that he, Diane, and Kelly would not have to deal with another Reploid with destructive powers. "Okay, then. Maybe you can tell me what this is all about. Brubaker said there was no bomb."

The man nodded. "Yeah. That's right. There's no bomb."

"No bomb and no demands. What the hell did you guys hope to gain?" asked Kelly.

"This whole thing didn't make much sense to me either. The boss just said that he wanted us to go out and send you guys a message. I just follow orders."

*The boss*, Colin thought. He got ominous feeling. “Just who is this boss of yours?”

The man hesitated before he answered. “The boss. The thing. Succubus.”

“Succubus! I knew it!” Colin shouted, thrusting up his hands. *Dr. Howard Fenlow is dead, but his insane creation is still alive and kicking – hard.*

“Succubus,” Kelly moaned. “You’re telling me that psychotic computer set this up just to put a scare into us?”

The man turned to Kelly. “Yeah. The boss was also hoping that we could get lucky and kill at least one of you. I guess that was a little too much to ask.”

“We should have completely destroyed it during the battle of Maseklos Prime,” Colin snarled. “Now that evil piece crap is going to keep dogging us until we put an end to it once and for all!” Colin turned to the man. “Where is Succubus?”

“It’s on a Vendetta starbase. I don’t know its exact location. Brubaker was the only one who knew where it is. He was actually there. The regular guys like me were contacted and deployed from a safe house here in Navarone.”

“So ... what? Succubus is running Vendetta now?” asked Diane.

“I don’t know, lady. I’m just a grunt.”

“Where is this safe house?” Colin inquired.

“It’s on the south side, 6380 Park Avenue,” the man answered.

Colin looked to Diane and Kelly. “I think we should pay this place a visit.”

“I agree,” said Diane. “But it could be a trap.”

“Then we should feel right at home,” Colin told her. He turned to Kelly. “Escort our friend here outside. Burn a hole in his face if he tries anything. Diane, go in and see to the hostages. And wash that blood off your hand.”

The nervous lone terrorist kept his hands raised over his head as he walked with Kelly to the elevator. Diane went into the men’s room to wash the blood off her hand and inform the hostages that the situation was now under control, and that they were now safe. Seconds later, several terrified men and women came running out

of the men's room and headed for the elevators. A few of the women recoiled at the sight of the dead bodies on the floor, including Brubaker's. Colin knelt down by Brubaker and took his time searching through his pockets, but found nothing. Diane, her hand now washed clean of Brubaker's blood, came out of the men's room to join him.

"This guy is clean. No ID. Nothing," Colin said.

"So, what now?" Diane asked.

Colin stood up. "I think we should get to this south side address and see what we can find there."

"What about our prisoner?"

"I don't think we'll learn much more from him. The police can handle him now."

Colin and Diane headed for the elevator, and Colin pressed the call button. The hostages and Kelly with the prisoner had already gone down to the first floor, so they rode down alone. When the elevator reached the first floor, Colin and Diane walked out into the lobby in time to see the last of the hostages exiting the building with haste and running for the police barricade. Colin and Diane walked out of the building and headed for the barricade. Kelly stood in front of a police car with Lieutenant Copeland and two uniformed officers. Copeland and the officers had their guns trained on the surviving terrorist prisoner lying face down on the pavement.

"The building is secure," Colin informed Copeland.

Copeland lowered his weapon toward the ground. "I don't know how the hell you guys pulled this off. Especially without weapons. But good work."

"Their leader, Brubaker is dead," Colin explained. "But he told us that the threat to detonate a bomb in the city was a hoax."

"A hoax? Then what the hell was this all about?" Copeland asked, holstering his weapon. "What did they want?"

"To get acquainted," said Colin.

"To get acquainted?"

"Long story."

"Well, I've got the time," Copeland told Colin. "I want to know

why a group of psychopaths would want to come into my city and feel that they can kill at their leisure.”

Colin pointed to the terrorist prisoner lying on the ground. “You’ll have to ask our friend here. Although he probably won’t tell you much.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll deal with this idiot down at headquarters.” Copeland turned to one of the officers. “Get him out of here.”

Both officers holstered their guns. One of them took a pair of handcuffs from a pouch on his belt and kneeled down to grab the prisoner’s arms. As the prisoner was being pulled up to his feet by the officer, he took the opportunity to deliver a final taunt. “This isn’t over, you know. Succubus is still out there. It’s watching every move you guys make. This is nothing compared to what you guys have got coming.”

Copeland approached Colin. “Succubus? Who the hell is Succubus?”

Colin kept in mind the need to maintain a level of secrecy involving the arcane nature of the Silencers’ activities with the CID. He had to give Copeland a believable story. “Succubus is a high ranking figure within the terrorist group Vendetta.”

“A high ranking figure?” Copeland echoed. “The guy referred to Succubus as ‘it,’ not a person.”

Kelly offered Copeland a quick explanation. “Maybe he’s not too well liked by the other members.”

Copeland gave Kelly a long silent stare. “I think there’s been far too much bloodshed involved in this case to have it whitewashed by the usual CID cloak and dagger routine. If there’s something about this case that I should know about, then I’d really like to hear it.”

“Honestly, you know as much as we do,” said Colin, regretting the need to lie. “If any important details about this case come up, you’ll be the first person we come to.”

“That’s very reassuring,” Copeland replied with clear sarcasm in his voice. “Did you find out what kind of weapon they were using to tear these victims apart?”

“It was some kind of implosion weapon,” Colin answered. “Very brutal.”

“Very brutal? Then where the hell is it?”

“We didn’t recover it,” was Colin’s excuse.

“You didn’t recover it?”

Colin conjured a second excuse. “Things were very hectic up there. There was a gun fight. The terrorists are dead. And don’t forget that our priority was to save the hostages. And, speaking of priorities, we have to be someplace else right now. Vital CID business.”

Colin looked to Diane and Kelly. They both returned a nod.

“Hold on. You can’t just walk out of here,” Copeland protested. “After all that’s taken place here, you need to file a statement. And I’ve still got a hell of a lot of questions that I need answered.”

“So do I,” Colin said cryptically. Diane and Kelly followed him as he walked away from Copeland and headed for the car.

“That went well,” Diane said. “What now?”

To Colin, the answer was obvious. “Now we head to this south side address and see what’s waiting for us.”

“I still don’t like this,” Diane grumbled. “If Succubus set this whole thing up, then I still say it’s a trap.”

“I guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

“Are we just going to walk into this without any backup?” asked Kelly.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Colin told him. “You saw what happened back there. If there are more Reploids involved, the normal human police won’t be able to handle the situation.” As he, Diane, and Kelly approached their car, he wondered, *If there are more Reploids with second- or third-generation powers involved, will we even be able to survive the next fight?*

\* \* \* \* \*

The drive to the south side section of the city took thirty-five minutes. They had little difficulty finding the safe house address among the rows of houses in the quiet suburban neighborhood. It



was a tense moment for Colin as Diane parked the car in front of the white two-story dwelling with bold black numbers '6380' displayed on the mail box. He took in the scene carefully. Three steps led up to a small grey concrete porch with the roof supported by black metal railing posts. To the right of the front door, a large window had blue drapes drawn closed. He expected to be greeted by a furious barrage of laser fire the moment they arrived. But as he looked out of the car and across the small front lawn to the house, the scene seemed quiet and peaceful. "So far so good," he said. "Nobody shooting at us, no explosions, nothing catching on fire. Not even a bug hitting the windshield."

"Just wait. We haven't gotten out of the car yet," said Kelly. "You know, it's still not too late for us to call it a day and go to the movies."

Colin ignored Kelly's suggestion and got out of the car. Diane and Kelly followed. Diane drew her laser pistol from her holster. Colin took another moment to look over the house. Then he walked toward the porch.

"So, what do we do? Ring the doorbell or kick the door in?" Diane asked.

"Let's try the friendly approach," Colin replied. He pressed the small glowing yellow button at the right side of the door. There was the sound of two chimes. After several seconds of waiting no, one answered. Colin pressed the button again. After more waiting, there was still no answer.

"Looks like we'll have to do this the hard way," Diane said.

A simple bump from Diane's hand sent the door flying off its hinges. With caution, Colin entered first, his hands taking on a blue glow of electrical energy in anticipation of a sudden attack. He walked in, scanning the small living room – tan carpeting, black recliner and black sofa, oval wooden coffee table, and flat-screen TV on the wall opposite the couch.

He and Diane and Kelly remained cautious as they explored beyond the living room. Walking to the left past the television, they found the stairs to the second floor. Going past the stairs, they entered a very small dining room with a black wooden dinette set

to the right. Against the wall from the table and chairs, a six-foot wooden counter supported a large aquarium. Colin approached the aquarium and took a closer look at the school of small red stingray-shaped fish and several larger green fish swimming about. Crawling across the sandy bottom was a small creature with six long spidery legs protruding from a green scallop shell. Colin was surprised to see the creature's shell open up and four thin tentacles shoot out to ensnare one of the green fish that had swum too close. "Nice aquarium," he said, stepping away to scan the room again.

"I'd rather have a dog," Diane quipped.

They passed the aquarium and entered the kitchen. There was nothing remarkable about the white counter and shiny kitchen sink below a small window, and a small white stove to the right of the sink. Above the counter were two black plastic cabinets, and against the right wall stood a black refrigerator.

"Nothing in here," Colin said. "That leaves the basement and the second floor."

"I'm not in the mood for any dark places," Kelly replied. "Let's go upstairs."

They went back to the stairs and made their way to the second floor. At the top of the stairs, a hallway with an open door led to a bedroom on the right. On the left were the doors to a bathroom and another room. At the end was a large window with black curtains.

They peeked into the bathroom with white floor tile and blue shower enclosure, then entered the bedroom on the right, sparsely furnished with a black chest of drawers and dresser with round mirror, an unmade bed with a white blanket, sheet, and pillow, a brown wooden nightstand with a small white lamp. The one window was covered with black curtains.

"Is it just me," Kelly said, "or does this place seem to be a little too modest to be a Vendetta hideout?"

"For Vendetta, modest is the perfect cover," Diane told him. "There's only one bed. I wonder which one of those clowns was sleeping here?"

"Who cares?" Colin answered. "My only concern is finding any

of them still here.”

The room past the bathroom was the only area left to search on this floor. They entered and found a black desk between two windows covered with black curtains. But of particular interest was the computer equipment crushed and scattered all over the desk and floor. Colin knelt down and picked up a fragment of a destroyed computer. “If there was any useful information on any of these, it’s gone now.”

“Unless there’s somebody hiding in the basement,” Kelly said, “it’s a safe bet that this place is abandoned.”

“Or the house could still blow up,” Diane offered.

Colin frowned. “Let’s try to keep a positive attitude.”

Diane put her gun back into her holster. “Okay, then, what do we do now?”

Colin shrugged. “There’s not much that we can do at this point, besides questioning the surviving terrorist and taking these trashed computers back to CID headquarters to see if their technicians can salvage any information from them.”

Kelly picked up a computer fragment and examined it. “I doubt that they can. These things look like they’ve been completely destroyed. I imagine that their memory cores were wiped clean before they were trashed.”

Colin let out a sigh of frustration. “And I don’t think that the surviving terrorist can tell us anything more than he already has. That the entire hostage scheme was just some elaborate ploy staged by Succubus to get us rattled.” Colin could think of no other course of action to take as he looked at Diane and Kelly.

“The house can still blow up before we leave,” Diane insisted.

“Will you get off of that?” Colin groaned. He looked about the small room. Then he looked out of the window at the right wall. Outside was a small square yard separated by a chain link fence. His rough estimate was that it was at least thirty feet in length and width. Beyond the gated fence was a road with a row of trees on the opposite side.

Colin looked back at Diane and Kelly “You know. This is kind of a nice little place. I wouldn’t mind living here.”

Diane smiled. "You're kidding, right? You'd live here? In a Vendetta safe house?"

"Former safe house," Colin corrected. "Every indication says that they've abandoned this place. It would be a shame to let a perfectly good house go to waste."

"He has a point," Kelly told Diane. "This is a nice house, and I'm getting tired of living in that tiny room on the military base. We could live here."

"We?" Diane scoffed. "I've got a place of my own, kid."

"Let's not get carried away," Colin said. "But I do think that staying here is a good idea. Succubus and Vendetta won't be expecting one of us to move in."

Diane shook her head in disbelief. "You two can stay here if you like. There's no way that I'm going to live in a house that's probably set up as one big rat trap."

The thin gold data pad in Colin's left front pocket chimed twice. He took it out and touched one of the screen's multicolored icons to bring up the incoming vid message from Captain Melony Carter, their liaison at the CID. Melony appeared on the screen, sitting at a desk, dressed in her typical blue uniform. Her short red hair highlighted her delicate features. Colin pressed an icon under the vid to boost the volume as Melony began to speak.

"Guys. I was just briefed by Lieutenant Copeland of the Navarone police department. You handled the hostage situation well. Although the loss of life was tragic. Where are you?"

"We're at an address on the south side, investigating a lead," Colin explained.

"Did you find anything?"

"No. Just a Vendetta safe house that's apparently been abandoned. We also found a few computers that were destroyed. Did they get any information out of the surviving terrorist?"

"No. Nothing useful. I've arranged to have him picked up so that we can have a crack at him. Our interrogation techniques are a little more advanced than those of the police. There's a chance that we might get something more. But, in the meantime, gather up those damaged computers and bring them in for our lab techs. Then

there's an important matter that I need to discuss with the three of you. As for the house, I'm bringing up your location through the planetary positioning web. I see that you're currently on Park Avenue. I'm narrowing your location down to address 6380. I'll send a team out to search the place inside and out. We're going to go over it with every scanner that we've got."

"We're on our way back," Colin told her. He pressed an icon to deactivate his data pad and returned it to his pocket.

"She sounded pretty supportive," said Diane. "I was expecting her to say something like, 'Thank God you didn't screw up.'"

"I would have told us the same thing," Colin returned. "I guess we'll worry about what to do with the house later. Let's grab what's left of these computers and search the basement, then go see what Melony wants."

Diane and Kelly helped Colin gather the computer fragments. Then they went downstairs and located the basement door, which was at the far right corner in the dining room. The basement lights were already on as they descended the black metal steps and entered a large area with grey painted walls and floor. There was nothing here except for the white plastic sink, washer, dryer, and grey cylindrical water tank standing against the rear wall at the left side of the steps. What looked like a grey rectangular furnace stood to the right of the steps. Next to it was a black, three-foot tall cubical power generator that ran the house.

Colin was relieved that there were no threats lurking down here. With the entire house searched, they went back upstairs. Colin found a clear plastic bag in a kitchen cabinet to hold the computer fragments, then they left the house. As they walked across the front yard, Colin looked to the blue house at the right. *What better way to get information than to ask the neighbors?* Colin headed for the house.

"Where are you going?" asked Diane.

"I just want to talk to these people. It will only take a second."

Colin walked onto the front porch and pressed the doorbell. He heard the faint sound of chimes, and a few seconds later a middle-aged woman with graying black hair tied in a ponytail,

wearing a green house dress and fuzzy blue slippers, opened the door. The woman smiled at Colin. "Well, hi. I haven't seen you in a while. How have you been?"

Colin returned the smile, confused. "Okay. How have you been?"

"I'm okay," she said, still smiling. She looked past Colin to Diane and Kelly. "Who are your friends? Would you like to come in?" She waved at Diane.

*Great. Another person who knows my name, and I have no idea who they are.* "I'm afraid that we don't have time right now. I haven't been here in a while and I just dropped by to see how things were going with the house."

"It's been quiet, as usual. I haven't seen you in a few months. And then that fellow, Mr. Brubaker showed up and moved in."

*Brubaker lived here. I thought so.* "I had to go away on important business, so I decided to rent the place to him for a while. So, tell me, how has he been?"

"He was nice, but very quiet. He kept to himself and didn't have many visitors. Just like you. But a bunch of other guys did drop by a few hours ago. They all left together in a big hurry."

"I hope you didn't get too fond of Brubaker. He won't be coming back," Colin informed her.

"Oh? Why?"

"Health problems."

"Too bad. And I didn't get the chance to know him better. I hope he'll be all right."

Colin felt that nothing else could be learned here, other than the fact that Brubaker was a quiet neighbor who was secretly a Reploid killer. Although he was wishing that he could learn this woman's name without directly asking her and looking foolish in the process. "We have to run. But it was nice talking to you again. Maybe we'll be back later."

"Maybe you can stay a little longer for coffee," The woman told him. "But, before you go, I have something for you." The woman went back into her house. A moment later, she returned with a clear plastic envelope containing a small black data card.

"This is from the nice doctor fellow. He told me to give this to you if I ever saw you again." She handed Colin the envelope.

Colin was confused as he examined the envelope and the card.

"This is from a doctor fellow? Did you get his name?"

"The really old guy. Called himself Dr. Trevors."

Colin almost gasped when he heard that name, but maintained his composure. "Dr. Trevors was here? What a surprise. When was this?"

"Months ago."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. He just rang my doorbell one morning and told me to give you this the next time I saw you. He said that it was very important. This was before Mr. Brubaker moved in."

*Dr. Arnold Trevors, the second person who had a hand in our creation as Reploids – perhaps the creation of all Reploids. This is the only small shred of information we've gotten on him after he disappeared several months ago. Maybe this data card will offer some clue as to where to find him.* "We really must be going," Colin told the woman, giving her a parting wave as he walked back toward Diane and Kelly.

"Doctor Trevors was here?" Diane asked as they walked back to the car.

"That's what the lady said," replied Colin. "One of the most wanted men in the United Protectorate. And this data card is as close as we'll get to him."

"Put it in your data pad and let's see what's on it," Kelly urged.

"I think we should wait and show this to Melony. Given the circumstances, this could be very important," Colin explained. "But whatever is on this card may or may not bring us closer to finding him. No doubt Vendetta probably has him hidden away on a remote starbase someplace. And I don't doubt that he and Succubus are working together. At this point, all we can do now is just bide our time and wait for them to make their first move. Or their first mistake."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was an uneventful ride to CID headquarters in the heart of Navarone. Once Colin, Diane, and Kelly arrived, they were met in the building's main lobby by a blue-uniformed guard who escorted them through the busy corridors to a small conference room. Both Lieutenant Melony Carter and General Verne Larkin were seated at the head of a black oval shaped table. Larkin was an imposing sight, wearing his dark blue uniform with the band of medals on his left lapel, and his officer's cap with the large gold eagle emblem on the front. Colin, Diane, and Kelly snapped to attention and raised their right hands in military salute.

"At ease, people," Larkin said as he returned the salute. "Please take a seat." He extended a hand to the empty chairs at the opposite end of the table.

Colin sat at the head of the table, with Kelly and Diane at either side.

"I'm glad to see you all once again," Larkin said. "First off, I want to tell you how much I appreciate what the three of you have done for the United Protectorate, and for humanity. And I would also like to thank you for the way that you handled the hostage situation this morning. The loss of life was tragic and senseless, but if it weren't for the three of you, things could have been worse."

*If it weren't for us, there might not have been an incident at all,* Colin thought, but nodded solemnly, accepting the credit.

"It's my understanding that another Replod was involved."

"Yes sir." Colin explained, "The leader of the group, Brubaker, was a Replod. But we also learned that he wasn't the boss of the operation. One of the terrorists told us that Succubus was behind the whole thing."

"Succubus?" Larkin exclaimed. He and Melony both looked at each other.

"Yes. Apparently this whole thing was just a scare tactic for our benefit. We asked our prisoner where Succubus is. He told us that it's on a remote starbase somewhere, but he didn't know the location. If Brubaker had that information, he took it to his grave."

Larkin frowned. "This is a serious matter. If Succubus in



involved, there's a strong possibility that we could face more Reploid attacks - even third-generation Reploids like the Enforcers."

Colin shuddered at the thought of his past encounters with those monsters, Poltergeist, Shrapnel, Inferno, and Vosh. All third-generation Reploids were designed to be more powerful than the likes of him, Diane, and Kelly. He would not look forward to an encounter with more monsters like them. He sighed and continued. "I'm afraid there's more. We've got a small bit of information on Doctor Trevors." He brought out the plastic envelope containing the data card. "A woman living next door to that south side address gave me this. She said that Trevors wanted her to give this to me. He didn't give her any other information."

Melony walked over and took the envelope from Colin. She opened it and took out the data card. She pulled her data pad out of her pocket and inserted the card into the side, observing the screen. "This card is encrypted. I guess he didn't want whoever he left this with to access its data. The deciphering apps on my data pad should be able to get through this." Melony tapped her finger on her pad three times, then waited. "It's through the encryption. The data's coming up now."

Melony pointed her pad at the right wall and tapped it again. A large square holographic screen appeared, displaying the video image of an old man with long shoulder-length white hair, wearing a black sweater and sitting behind a desk framed behind by a window with white curtains. Colin recognized the man's face from his past encounters: Dr. Arnold Trevors.

Trevors spoke in a raspy voice. "Silencers, I bid you good evening. First off, please don't waste your time and energy trying to find me. That will be quite impossible. I understand that quite a few people are looking for me right now, both good and bad. As you are watching this vid, I am currently in a remote location, but won't stay in one place for long. I wanted to get this vid to you three Reploids, Colin McKenzie, Diane Christy, and Kelly Lytton, because you are the only ones that I can trust and depend on. After all, I had a hand in creating you.

“I imagine right now you have many questions about me and yourselves. I can answer a few. Why am I in hiding? Because I’m a wanted man. Vendetta wants me dead because of what I know. I’ve become a threat to them. The United Protectorate wants me for my crimes. I threw in my lot with Walter Carnaby, Dr. Fenlow, and the others. They described visions of a bold new world, but all I saw resulting from that vision was destruction, war, and chaos. I wanted no further part in any of it. You three Reploids were created to serve the interests of Vendetta and its unholy allies, the Brelac. And you proved yourselves quite well. You and the other Reploids were put to work committing the most horrific crimes on their behalf. This was not what I intended my work to be used for. So when the three of you were captured, I saw this as an opportunity to put things right. Fenlow wanted me to reprogram and unleash you as a destructive force. But secretly I programmed you to be a force for good.”

Colin was already aware of everything Trevors had said so far, and the man had not revealed anything new. Nevertheless, Colin continued to listen, hoping Trevors would, at some point, give vital information they didn’t have.

“I did not want to be a part of creating more monsters. So that’s why I ran shortly after the battle of Maseklos Prime with Fenlow’s Viperhawk. After the battle, I thought that Fenlow’s monster, our creation Succubus, was destroyed. Unfortunately, somehow Succubus survived, and now this monstrosity lives on to carry out its creator’s work. Succubus has not only Fenlow’s knowledge, but all my data for Reploid programming. It’s increasing its power base and plans to send out an army of third-generation Reploids to create a wave of terror and destruction. You’ve already seen that in the form of the Enforcers. Succubus is also recreating the Deltans to send against you.”

*Then the worst is yet to come,* Colin thought.

“The only thing powerful enough to stop these monsters are the three of you. You are more powerful than you realize. Unfortunately, when I reprogrammed the three of you, the full range of your powers was suppressed. So you are forced to

rediscover your full potentials. And I wish that I could tell you where to find Succubus. All I know is that it's currently residing in a starbase at a remote location. And other Vendetta bases have been abandoned and their operations relocated to new sites. I'm sorry that I can't offer any useful information. And I can't try to find out these things for you because I can't take the chance of having Vendetta trace me. I have to stay off the grid – not only for my safety, but for the safety of my family. They're in hiding with me. The government wants to throw me in prison. Vendetta wants me dead because I can implicate several government officials and Carp Technology executives as operatives of Vendetta. I'm giving you that list of names. I wish that I could do more to expose these criminals. But it's just too dangerous. I have my family to think about – their safety as well as mine. This is all that I have to say. Watch yourselves."

The video image of Trevors faded and was replaced by a list of ten names. Colin looked over the list. The first name was one that he recognized. Carp Technologies' chief executive officer, Walter Carnaby. "I'm not surprised to see Carnaby's name on this list," Colin said. "He's probably the head guy at Vendetta. Too bad the government couldn't have thrown him in prison instead of letting him run loose to play golf while his lawyers fight the charges against him."

"The investigation on Carnaby is still ongoing," Melony added. "But his lawyers are fighting the allegations against him every step of the way. And it irks me that the man has the arrogance to remain as Carp's CEO and not step down. And given his position Carnaby is a very powerful and influential man. He has numerous corporate and political connections. But he's not all-powerful. It's only a matter of time before he faces justice."

"And what about Dr. Trevors?" Colin asked.

"This vid shines a whole new light on Trevors' case," replied Melony. "Trevors is still a wanted criminal because of his past dealings with Vendetta, but if we could find him and get him to give us more information on this list of names, and testify in court against them, then we could strike a major blow against Vendetta."

But right now, all we can do is keep an eye on these people. Chances are, they might not know that Trevors gave us this list of names. If they don't know that we're watching them, it's likely they'll slip up."

"These rats can't hide under the floorboards forever," Larkin grumbled with a tone of resentment in his voice. "At least we're rid of that madman, Fenlow."

"Yeah. But not his creations," Kelly added. "We've still got Succubus and all these freaks trying to kill us."

"We'll have to deal with one impending disaster at a time," Melony told Kelly. "But, in the meantime, we would like to explain the reason why we've summoned the three of you here."

"We're sending the three of you on an important mission," Larkin explained. "This job is going to challenge your unique skills. As you know, the United Protectorate is embarking upon a mission of exploration beyond our home quadrant, Poseidon. There are many who disagree with this effort. But there are more who feel that this mission is of the utmost importance to the survival of the human race. Our war with the Brelac is not going well. They have us outnumbered and outgunned on several levels. This exploration endeavor has two goals. First, to hopefully find potential allies somewhere out in space who are capable of lending us a hand in this war."

Colin pondered that possibility. *That makes sense. One race of aliens contacting another and giving the greeting, 'Hi, we're from the United Protectorate. Would you like to join us in a war against a race of homicidal monsters?'* Colin listened further.

"The second goal of the mission is far more dire. That goal is to find a possible new home for the human race if the situation with the Brelac should grow critical."

Colin considered that grim possibility. He looked over at Diane and Kelly to see the frowns on their faces.

Diane raised her hand. "Sir, is the war really going that bad?"

There was hesitation from Larkin. "Yes. It's taking every effort we have to slow the Brelac advance across the Protectorate. But we just don't have the power or the numbers to stop them completely.

So we either need to find allies willing to help us, or, as painfully as I hate to admit, find a place to run.”

“But we won’t be able to run very far,” Colin pointed out. “The Breloc mission is to wipe out the human race. If we run, they’ll come after us.”

“Agreed,” Larkin replied crisply. “But we have no other alternative. This is the situation that we are forced to live with.”

“Has anybody addressed the issue of the Breloc having a link to humans?” Kelly asked.

“That issue has been addressed,” Melony said. “But given the circumstances, our priority is to win a war against them, not to explore their racial history. The Breloc are a vicious and relentless enemy. There is no negotiating with them. This is a war of survival. But, enough about the Breloc. Let’s get to your mission.”

She took a deep breath. “We’ve sent out six deep-space exploration task forces to different quadrants in space. We are certain that there are indeed other advanced civilizations out there, including other human civilizations. Task Force Five departed from the main assembly point at starbase Omaha in the Charon System and executed a warp jump to the Omega Quadrant six weeks ago. Five was supposed to maintain contact and send back regular reports through a relay network. Last week, we received a distress signal from one of the ships in the task force, the battle cruiser *Perseus*. Most of the message was garbled by some kind of interference. But from what we could make out, it was a distress call. They stated that they were being attacked by monsters. Then all communication ceased. We haven’t heard anything from them ever since.”

*Monsters?* Colin thought. *Not liking the sound of that!*

General Larkin continued after Melony. “This is where your team comes in. We need you to go out to Task Force Five’s last known coordinates and investigate their disappearance.”

Colin suspected that this was what Larkin was going to say. “This job sounds like a challenge. I take it that you’re going to give us a ship and a pilot to get there.”

“You’re correct on one part. We’re giving you your own ship,”

Melony explained. She then hesitated. "But you already have a candidate for pilot."

Colin glanced at Diane. *Now I'm really not liking the sound of this.* He dreaded the answer he was expecting, but was still compelled to ask, "A candidate for pilot? Who?"

"Diane," Melony revealed.

"Diane!" Kelly exclaimed.

Diane leapt up from her seat and let out a joyful yell as she thrust a triumphant fist into the air. "Yes!" She then sat back down.

Melony continued. "We feel that since Diane is already designated as a pilot, then why waste the resource."

Colin and Kelly looked at each other in disbelief after hearing Melony's reasoning. Diane was still smiling.

"Waste a resource?" Colin echoed. "I'd like to remind you that the resource that you're referring to has no real skill or knowledge to fly a spacecraft."

"What do you mean no skill or knowledge?" Diane responded. "I guess you forgot that I flew us from Trillios to Lodestar. And I got us there safe."

Kelly let out a moan of frustration. "Diane, that was a lucky break. And worse, a lucky break that never should have happened. Realistically, we all should have died."

"You're out of your mind, kid," Diane scoffed. "I can do this. Don't forget that I once shot down—"

"Diane," Colin said in a stern voice to prevent her from going through her stale, programmed ace-fighter-pilot mantra.

"Diane will be piloting in a trainee status," said Melony. "And she will be co-piloting with a flight instructor mech unit. Diane will be getting the very best hands-on experience during this mission. The mech will give Diane three days of basic flight instruction. Then, after that, it's the real thing. Time is of the essence. We'll need you to get out to Task Force Five's last coordinates and try to find them as quickly as possible. Any questions?"

Colin felt no comfort in the thought that they would be riding in a ship flown by Diane and a robot. *Which one is going to get us killed first? We're going to die before we even leave orbit.*

Diane raised her hand. "Will you be giving us any other support for this mission?"

Larkin answered, "Regrettably, no. Our resources are stretched thin, and given the arcane elements of this mission, no humans we might send would be able to deal with what's out there."

This was one detail of this mission that Colin could agree with. "To be honest, sir, any humans that you send with us would probably get in the way."

"Then it's settled," Larkin declared. "Diane will undergo her flight training period. After that, on Friday, 0600, you will depart. We're wishing you the best of luck in this."

"I'm just wishing that we all come back alive," Kelly grumbled.

Colin took a moment to meditate on the details of this mission. *They would board a spacecraft under the control of pilot trainee Diane and a flight instructor mech. Go out into deep space to try to locate a missing exploration task force that reported that they were attacked by monsters. Deal with that situation without getting killed. Then try to get back home alive. Yeah. They're not asking for much.*

"Within the next three days, if you have any questions or needs, see Melony or me," Larkin said.

Melony rose from her seat. "I'll escort the three of you to the airfield in the back and show you your ship. And you'll meet Diane's flight instructor."

*I'm not looking forward to this,* Colin mused as he, Diane, and Kelly stood and gave Larkin a final salute. They followed Melony to a rear exit of the building. The metal door slid open, and they stepped out onto the small airfield behind the building with a long runway and two bright red strips. Several different small ships were parked at the left and right sides of the runway. They followed Melony across the airfield until they came to a black oblong-shaped vessel resting on four thick metal legs. The ship's rear section sported two broad wings with vertical fins and two engine ports. Four additional smaller engine ports were mounted on the underside of the ship. Between them was a lowered metal

ramp allowing access to the ship's interior.

Melony extended her hand. "Here she is, the *Black Raven*, the newest of the light-cruiser class ships that we've acquired. It can house a crew of up to eight and has long-range and hyperspace capabilities. It's offensive capabilities include four plasma cannons and two fusion torpedo launchers housed within the forward section, as well as two torpedo launchers housed in the rear. Defensive capabilities include two Vulcan heavy shield generators and Skyblade auto-targeting defense turrets to deal with incoming enemy missiles and fighters. There are two turrets housed on top as well as underneath the ship."

Colin looked over the *Black Raven*. "It's very impressive," he said while thinking, *We're all going to die in this thing*.

Diane smiled. "I like it. I can't wait to get behind the controls."

"Yeah. And I can't wait until you graduate from your flight training," Kelly added.

A loud metallic clanking came from inside the ship. The group watched as a white, five-foot-tall humanoid robot supported by two thick legs and large round feet emerged from the ship hatch. It had a thin, cylindrical body with four thin arms attached to the sides, each arm ending in metal hands with three long fingers. Its spherical head featured a single large lens eye that glowed with red light. The robot walked down the ramp and approached the group. It stopped in front of Diane and greeted everyone in a crisp female voice. "Hello. My name is Valarie, Flight Instructor Mech Unit 460. Feel free to call me Val if you like."

Melony walked over and stood at Val's side. "Val, these are the people I told you about. Colin, Diane, and Kelly of Silencers."

"I've downloaded your full files into my memory," Val stated. "It's a pleasure to finally meet all of you in person." Val stepped closer to Diane and extended one of its metallic hands. "Diane Christy, I'm looking forward to our working together."

"Captain Diane Christy," Diane corrected as she shook Val's hand. "It's nice to meet you too."

"This is the perfect opportunity for everyone to get acquainted with the ship," Val said. "This will be our home for the



extended period of the mission.”

The group followed Val up the ramp and into the interior of the ship. At the top of the ramp, a metal post supported a small touchpad with three keys. *The ramp controls*, Colin surmised. Once inside the ship, he surveyed the entryway and a long corridor lined with hardened grey plastic panels on the floor, ceiling, and walls, brightly lit by two long tubular lights running along the length of the ceiling. Down the corridor were several closed doors.

“At the left and right are vacant rooms that can serve as quarters,” Val explained. “Past those are areas designated to house the ship’s supplies. The ship’s toilet facilities is at the end of the corridor.”

Colin walked over to inspect one of the rooms at the left. He touched a key on the small glowing blue touchpad at the right side of the door. The door slid open with a faint hiss. Colin looked inside. The small room’s only furnishing was a thin plastic slab extending from the wall at the left corner. The slab had a thin white cushion. There was a tubular light running along the ceiling.

Colin looked back at Melony. “These rooms have no other furnishings?”

Melony smiled. “You’re more than welcome to personalize your quarters as you wish,” she informed Colin. “But I don’t advise bringing in too many breakables.”

*I’m not looking forward to sleeping on that cold hard excuse for a bed*, Colin thought.

Val led the group to the far end of the corridor and pointed to a metal ladder attached to the right wall, which extended down through a small square opening in the floor. “This leads down to the ship’s engineering section, allowing full access to the ship’s engines.”

The group followed Val to the opposite end of the corridor and stepped through an open doorway to enter the ship’s cockpit. It was a small cramped space mounted with four tall seats with thick safety straps. The pilot and copilot seats with twin control sticks faced a glowing blue instrument panel and a small monitor mounted above with red and green glowing keys on a touchpad.

The entire cockpit had a large panoramic window that would allow every seated person a full view of the outside.

Val approached the pilot's seats and then turned to the group. "And here is the heart of the ship, its cockpit. This is where all flight, combat, and communications will be managed. The small console at the left grants access to the ship's communications systems. The console on the right grants access to the ship's computer for data storage and analysis, as well as the ship's scanners. Data from the computer can be transferred to the pilot and copilot's stations for possible use in a combat situation. The pilot and copilot both have full access to the ship's weapons and shields when needed."

Melony ventured closer into the cockpit, looking about at the controls. She then looked back at Colin, Diane, and Kelly. "Well guys. What do you think?"

Colin took a second look around the cockpit, then gave a nod. "I have to admit. This is very impressive."

Kelly also nodded. "The plastic slab beds will take some getting used to. But I like this. I just hope this thing holds up during the mission."

"A ship is only as durable as its pilot," Melony returned.

Colin suppressed the urge to laugh at that comment – considering who their pilot was supposed to be.

"You depart for the mission in three days," Melony reminded. "I suggest that the three of you take the time to make whatever preparations you need. Val will give Colin and Kelly instructions on how to work with the computer and communications systems. And Diane, I suggest that you work with Val and study hard." Melony walked out of the cockpit, then turned and delivered a parting comment. "Don't screw up, people."

Colin grinned. "Now that's the Melony Carter that I know."

Diane was still smiling as she looked about at the controls before her. She sat down in the left pilot's seat and grasped the control sticks. "I'm ready to get started. Who wants to fly with me?"

"Diane, don't get cocky. You still have a lot to learn," Colin advised her.

“Don’t worry. Diane will receive the best training that I can provide,” Val told Colin.

As Colin looked back at Val, he felt little reassurance. “No offense, Val, but a student is only as good as her teacher.”

“Ignore these two idiots,” Diane told Val.

“We’d better get started,” Val said. “You all have a lot to learn.”

Colin took another look around the ship’s cockpit. He then looked out through the window and up to the sky. Beyond the blue sky sparsely dotted with wispy clouds, the vast unknown gulf of deep space awaited - and the unknown future that they would face when they embarked on this mission. That nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach was not destined to leave him anytime soon.

