



The McKenzie Files

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The United Protectorate is under attack by the Brelac, a bloodthirsty reptilian alien race bent on destroying humanity. A dark alliance between the Brelac and Vendetta, a separatist organization trying to bring down the Protectorate, spells doom for the human race – especially when it's discovered the Brelac have created genetically engineered humanoid weapons called Reploids. Reploids are identical copies of real humans captured, killed, cloned, embedded with powerful psionic abilities, and programmed to serve the Brelac. They are untraceable and blend into human society so believably, the Reploids themselves do not know they are clones.

Colin McKenzie, part of a military team sent to a remote planet to investigate and capture a downed Brelac shuttle, turns on his commanding officer in an attempt to protect the shipwrecked crew of Brelac soldiers. But Colin is captured and reprogrammed – along with two other Reploids captured in stasis – to serve the government he was originally created to destroy. When a weapon powerful enough to bring the Protectorate to its knees is about to be unleashed, the Protectorate's only hope of stopping it is this band of three Reploids.

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by
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Penumbra Publishing
www.PenumbraPublishing.com

ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1-935563-61-7
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Originally published 2008 by Leucrota Press 978-0-980033-92-2
Also available EBOOK ISBN/EAN 13: 978-1-935563-60-0

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Prologue

Leon Maseklos felt a painful stiffness in his knees as he walked down the dimly lit corridor of the massive transport. His loss of agility was understandable, considering he had just awakened from a frozen sleep of nearly three hundred years. He drew in a deep breath, his lungs feeling raw as he sucked in the chilly filtered and recirculated air. Briskly rubbing his shoulders, he regretted failing to choose an additional garment to bolster his gray coveralls. But he soon forgot his discomfort as his excitement mounted.

There was only one reason why he'd been awakened from his long slumber – robotic probes launched from the ship had finally discovered a suitable planet for colonization. As the head of this expedition and commander of the fleet of six huge, rectangular transport vessels, it was his duty and privilege to wake first. After he confirmed the probe's findings, he would rouse several key crewmembers from their cryo-suspension tubes. Later, selected individuals from the other five ships, each carrying the precious cargo of sleeping passengers and identical supplies and life-support materials, would be revived. Once they decided on a location for the colony base, constructed a suitable number of habitats and food propagation units, and transitioned aeroponics plants to the planet's soil, the rest of the expedition would be revived. And then the real work would begin to relocate this select human populace from Earth to a new home.

The door to the ship's main bridge slid open. Leon strode past several rows of instrument consoles to reach the data-analysis station. Manipulating the touchscreen, he summoned the desired information in a holographic projection directly before him. The

long-ranged probes had indeed discovered a suitable planet. Its mass appeared to be slightly larger than that of Earth. Its annual trip around its sun would be slightly longer than Earth's, and the axis tilt and rotational angle were definitely different, but they would cope. A global body of water separated several mountainous land formations. The atmospheric composition was within the desired parameters – large amounts of oxygen mixed with nitrogen and a small amount of argon. Present temperature across the globe was well within human tolerance, despite some extremes due to topography and elevation. Soil and water analysis yielded no toxic materials or potentially harmful microorganisms. At least nothing as deadly as the Pandora Simplex.

As Leon studied the target planet's image, he felt a wistful twinge in his chest. The bright side of the orb, illuminated by a star very similar to the sun they'd left behind three hundred years ago, looked much like the Earth he remembered from historical pictures ... a large marble against the black backdrop of space, its vivid swirls of blue and green mixed with white. It would be a good home. *It had to be.*

He rechecked the ship's status and then ran remote diagnostics to test the integrity of the cryo-chambers deep within the belly of each of the transports holding formation in orbit around the planet. Everything looked normal. As he breathed a long sigh of relief, he again noted the scratchiness of his lungs, hopefully just a temporary aftereffect of extended cryo-sleep. The worry flitted through his mind that by stepping foot on this planet, they'd somehow instantly contaminate it. But he dismissed that thought. They had survived against insurmountable odds, and they *deserved* a new home after the senseless and inevitable demise of Earth.

He turned away when vivid memories flooded his mind. The waste and devastation ... the death. Historical reports he'd studied stated the gargantuan mass of jagged metal and ice, measuring more than four miles in diameter, had entered the Earth's solar system in 2189 without any advance warning. The intruder seemed to purposefully speed past Jupiter and Mars on a direct course to its intended target – Earth – impacting with a force that surpassed a nuclear explosion. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and a huge portion

of its metropolitan area were obliterated. The horrendous death toll was too high for anyone to accurately count. Earth's environment was soon plunged into a global-winter effect as tons of soot and debris from the blast formed thick clouds that blocked out the life-giving sunlight.

Nations were plunged into chaos with food shortages and mass extinction of hundreds of species of plant and animal life. The worst came a later when a mysterious viral outbreak quickly spread among survivors. Victims suffered from bleeding blisters, fatigue, and loss of muscle coordination. Paranoia and psychotic behavior soon followed, culminating in murderous violence. The majority of those infected died within days. Others continued long enough to create havoc upon those not affected. It was believed that the viral organism was somehow released into the atmosphere by the icy asteroid. But that theory was never proven. Because of its ghastly symptoms, the pandemic illness was called the Pandora Simplex.

Earth's scientists committed a global effort to find an effective serum against the virus, but without success. Unsuspecting travelers carried the virus to the numerous colonies established on Mars. Within a year, forty-five percent of Earth's remaining population was dead, and the Mars colonies were all but wiped out. The virus and the frigid conditions on Earth threatened to exterminate the human species. Humanity's only hope for survival was to turn to the deep-space exploration program that was then under development. Thousands of healthy volunteers were gathered and placed under strict quarantine aboard orbital space stations. The six fleets of deep-space transports were constructed and loaded with the necessary supplies and equipment to colonize new worlds, and in less than five years, those surviving humans began their mission to find new homes. Each of the six separate fleets of ships disembarked for different destinations in the vast darkness of space. And now the long journey was at an end for this team.

Leon nodded in satisfaction. Humanity would get a fresh start. Once the members of the expedition team awoke from cold sleep and mastered the challenge of establishing a stable colony on this

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planet, they'd continue their mission to explore deep space and claim other hospitable planets for colonization. Perhaps they'd manage to locate and establish contact with the other five teams that had embarked on their own journeys. And humanity would live on...



Chapter 1

“Does it always rain on this damn planet?” Sergeant Colin McKenzie grumbled as he sprinted through the drenched forest behind the other members of his platoon. His dark brown hands maintained a firm grip on his AR-20 laser rifle as he shouldered past wet foliage that grabbed and slapped at him. His combat boots squished in the soggy ground, making progress slippery and difficult. He silently cursed the heavy dark green plastic protective vest weighing down his six-foot frame as if he were carrying an extra field pack on each shoulder. His rain-soaked green camo fatigues hugged his clammy skin, and his matching helmet did little to shield his face and eyes from the perpetual torrent raining down on them. Of all the planets in the United Protectorate, Colin was unlucky enough to be stationed on Meridan, a sparsely populated planet with an environment of weed-ridden fields and swamps infested by hordes of insects and parasites. The climate was always chilly, with the average temperature in the low Fahrenheit fifties, though Colin felt the frequent rains made the climate feel much colder.

Colin’s squad approached their destination. He joined the other troopers as they took cover behind a line of trees and shrubbery, diving to the ground to take his place behind the broad leaves of a tall fern. Lying on the muddy ground, Colin peered around the foliage to detect any movement up ahead, but saw only ivy-covered trees and more tall ferns. Nothing moved. If there was any enemy activity out there, he was certain the noisy rain was concealing the sound of their movements.

Colin glanced over at his comrades. They were all quiet and still, expecting to engage in a raging firefight at a second’s notice.

To Colin's far right, Lieutenant Paul Yates crouched down behind a tree, his laser rifle aimed toward the forest beyond. Colin's voice-activated wrist communicator, a small oblong device with a manual silencer and a display screen, transmitted the lieutenant's voice. "McKenzie, see anything?"

"All clear on my end," Colin whispered. He felt no need to speak louder. The communicator, keyed to his voice, would pick up his words and filter out background noise. But although Colin was confident his response would be picked up by Lieutenant Yates, he knew that not seeing their enemy did not mean that there was no threat. The Brelac were as stealthy as they were brutal – or so he'd been told.

Like most troopers, Colin knew very little about the Brelac, even after the reptilian race had violently encroached on the United Protectorate over a year ago. They attacked with the force of a tidal wave. The Protectorate was overwhelmed by the alien military force, though troopers fought back bravely on both land and in space. However, they had been pitifully unprepared to deal with the Brelac race's ferocity and technology. The Protectorate suffered crushing defeats, losing seven star systems and twelve planets to the Brelac. Many large cities, with their gleaming towers and bustling populations, were reduced to rubble. Now, it would seem that Meridan was next on the Brelac list of places to waste.

Colin was startled when he felt someone touch his right shoulder. He twisted quickly, swinging his gun around.

"Take it easy, pal," Ed Driscoll warned, holding up his hands defensively. "It's just me."

Colin managed a quick smile. Driscoll had become Colin's closest shadow if not friend, seeming to be nearby whenever possible, almost to the point of being a nuisance. Back at their main base on Helios, Driscoll would eat with Colin, help him with weapons maintenance duties, and stick close by him every minute, even off-duty in nearby taverns and recreation halls, all the while denigrating the other members of the platoon. There were occasions when Colin almost felt like Driscoll was keeping him under surveillance. It was no surprise to Colin that the man shadowed him here too, under the threat of impending battle.

“Let’s move out,” Yates whispered through their communicators. Colin nodded to Driscoll and motioned to the men on his left. The troopers began to advance cautiously among the wet trees and foliage toward the squad’s designated destination at the top of a small rocky hill. A black rectangular aircraft rested at the bottom of a rock pile, its nose buried beneath a mound of soil. The broad wings were sheared off. Bits of metal wreckage littered the area, and thick billows of black smoke rose out from the ship’s two damaged engine ports. It was a Brelac shuttle, shot down by a Protectorate fighter patrol. The squad’s mission was to investigate the crash site and see if any Brelac had survived, and to capture any cargo that was found to be reasonably intact.

Yates ordered the soldiers to spread out and descend the hill. Colin kept his eyes on the shuttle as he carefully made his way down, alert for any movement. Yates raised his hand, and the squad stopped twenty feet away from the shuttle. “A type-three enemy shuttle,” he announced after making a brief inspection.

The small craft had only one way to get inside – the main hatch located underneath the cabin. Since the platoon had no means of lifting a ship of this size, they would have to create their own door.

“Bossar, Craven. Take demo charges and blow the hull,” Yates ordered.

The two men rushed up to the ship and took small magnetic devices from their weapons belts, attaching them to attach them to the ship’s hull. They pressed a couple buttons and then ran to rejoin the rest of the platoon.

“Hit the ground!”

The squad ducked and covered their heads. The devices exploded, their twin blasts potent enough to rip a gaping hole in the side of the ship. Colin raised his head. He watched the smoke clear from the hole. Still no sign of any Brelac.

“Usher, Sealman, Driscoll, Craven,” Yates ordered, “you’re with me. The rest of you stay alert.”

Driscoll placed his hand on Colin’s shoulder. His grip was firm. “Time to go to work, pal. Looks like it’s just you and me.”

Driscoll rose up and joined the other three troopers as they

escorted Yates over to the hole in the ship. Colin felt relieved to be momentarily free of Driscoll's imposing presence. He watched Driscoll and the other men. Yates entered the ship first, the others following close behind. Colin kept his rifle aimed at the ship.

After several tense seconds, the lieutenant relayed their status into Colin's communicator. "So far, all clear. Still no Brelac. Everybody move in, but stay alert."

Colin slowly advanced toward the ship. When he was close enough, he peered inside the hole in the ship's side and caught a glimpse of the shuttle's cargo. There were eight tall, white cylinders standing on what appeared to be a magnetic platform. The platform's strong magnetic field may have prevented the cylinders from falling over during the crash, but couldn't protect them from the damaging impact. Three of the cylinders were cracked, and a bright yellow liquid oozed out, soaking the shuttle's floor.

"Wonder what's inside these containers?" Sealman asked.

"Beat's the hell outa me," the lieutenant replied. "They're leaking shit all over the place. If there are any Brelac here, they might be in the cockpit."

"Let's hope they're dead," Usher muttered. "What about these cylinders? Can you see what's inside?"

"No. Maybe we can break one of them open," Yates suggested. "Driscoll, Craven. Give us a hand. Sealman, Usher. Go check out the cockpit."

Driscoll placed his hand on Craven's shoulder. Craven suddenly screamed and fell backward. The instant Craven hit the floor, his torso shattered. His plastic combat armor easily splintered into minute fragments, followed by his head and arms.

The other men stood in horrified silence. Yates spun around and aimed his rifle at Driscoll. Driscoll delivered a forceful kick to the lieutenant's chest and knocked him outside through the blown-out hole in the ship's hull. Yates fell on his back, splashing down in a large puddle of mud. He quickly rolled and aimed his rifle at Driscoll a second time. Colin spun and aimed his rifle at Yates and opened fire. Four crimson bolts of laser fire easily ripped through the lieutenant's body. The man emitted a painful grunt and lay motionless.

Colin was unsure if Yates was dead or simply wounded, but he didn't have enough interest in the man's condition to check. All that mattered was the mission he shared with Driscoll. It was their job to do everything in their power to prevent the United Protectorate from capturing the cylinders aboard this Brelac ship. And in order to accomplish that aim, Colin was well prepared to use every power at his disposal.

A trooper standing near Yates raised his weapon. Colin moved faster, firing two laser bolts into the man's chest, and the trooper dropped to the ground. Someone pounced on Colin from behind, wrapping a strong arm around his neck in a stranglehold. Colin's entire body rapidly warmed. A powerful surge of energy erupted from him, and he and his assailant were bathed in a flash of light and an explosion of sparks. Blue fire licked at the screaming man on Colin's back, and Colin shrugged himself free. He turned briefly to glimpse his handiwork. An acrid smoke stung his nostrils, the flames on the body already being extinguished by the heavy rain. All that remained were fragments of charred flesh and globs of melted plastic clinging to a blackened skeleton.

Sealman fired his laser rifle at Driscoll. Driscoll staggered back as three bolts burned into his chest, and raised his rifle at Sealman. His wounds slowed his movement, giving Sealman ample time to dive behind the collection of cylinders. Driscoll fired off a volley of laser bolts that burned easily through several cylinders but failed to hit Sealman. Two troopers outside the shuttle opened fire at Driscoll. Driscoll thrashed about as several bolts hit him squarely. He let out a defiant shout and feebly raised his weapon, and then stumbled and fell forward. His riddled body lay halfway out of the ship, his blood-soaked armor pelted by the gray downpour.

Colin glanced down at Driscoll, doubting the man could have survived such an assault, but knew there was no time to mourn. Colin looked around at the multiple hostile targets surrounding him. He moved to act, but was suddenly attacked from behind. Colin felt a sharp and powerful impact jar the back of his head. He collapsed face down onto a mound of mud. Turning his head, he saw his assailant, a baby-faced trooper staring wide-eyed down at

him, with his rifle shaking in his nervous hands, the barrel never leaving Colin's face. Colin grinned, knowing the frightened young man posed a small threat to him. He could kill this trooper as easily as he did the first.

Colin pushed himself to his knees and lifted his hands to attack when four blue laser streaks hit the trooper in the neck and head. The last shot easily split the top of the trooper's helmet and the head underneath. The man fell to the ground, blood and brain matter mingling with the rainwater and wet soil.

Commotion behind him caught Colin's attention, and he twisted around toward the shuttle in time to see saw two dark, scaly reptilian Brelac pilots nearly six feet tall barreling through the open hole in the side of the ship. Time seemed to stop for an instant as the barrel-chested, bony-plated creatures with spikes running down their backs, bared long sharp teeth in their pointed maws and, despite having no eyes in their lizard-like heads, surveyed the troopers outside as if they could plainly see them. Supported by muscular, reverse-jointed canine-like legs that ended in three short toes with long curved talons, they thrashed their long tails about as if itching for a fight. Weapons belts strapped around their waists carried holstered pistols, cylinder-shaped grenades, and long gleaming blades. Their clawed hands clutched typical Brelac field weapons. The long-barreled plasma rifles, far more powerful than Protectorate lasers, were notorious for their ability to kill targets from a longer range and could burn through heavy armor easier than lasers.

The clicking of their toe claws against the ship's metallic floor seemed to reset time for everyone. Instantly they fired on any trooper that moved. Screaming troopers scattered as they returned fire. The two Brelacs managed to gun down three troopers before a one man skillfully sent a laser bolt into the closest Brelac's head. The wounded Brelac stumbled backward as his body absorbed the firepower from other troopers' rifles. His Brelac compatriot shot and killed a trooper standing just behind Colin. As the man's body fell to the ground, Colin saw the Brelac now training that plasma rifle in his direction. Colin knew that in the midst of a group of hostile armed humans, the Brelac would not bother distinguish

between enemy and ally. Colin pointed his hand toward the Brelac. A blue flash and a stream of energy flew from his hand, creating a spray of sparks the moment it struck the Brelac. Colin's firepower was joined by dozens of laser bolts as the other troopers concentrated their fire to bring the Brelac down.

Colin tried to stand up but was knocked down by the butt of a rifle slamming into the back of his neck. Colin looked up and was surprised to see that Yates had survived his wounds. The lieutenant stood over Colin, slamming the butt of his rifle into Colin's face, screaming, "I'm gonna kill you, freak!"

Yates used the butt of his rifle to rain down a series of quick blows to Colin's face. He held the rifle over his head and pulled his leg back to send his boot slamming into Colin's stomach. "Son of a bitch!" Yates screamed. "I'll kill you, traitor!"

Colin's face burned with pain as the lieutenant continued to beat him with the rifle butt. Each blow felt as if fragments of his face were being torn away from the inside. Blood and rainwater soaked his eyes. His vision blurred, and he lost sight of his enraged attacker as everything went black.



Chapter 2

Doctor Howard Fenlow walked hastily through the busy corridors of the highly restricted military base of Cerulean, concerned whether his black pants and slightly wrinkled gray shirt beneath his white lab coat would be suitable enough for the briefing he was about to give. He ran a hand through his shoulder-length blond hair, frowning. He'd slept in, was running twenty minutes late, and had no time to make a better selection from his wardrobe. However, distance if not time was still on his side.

Howard's apartment was located in Navarone, the capital city on Maseklos Prime, less than two miles from Cerulean. The planet Maseklos Prime was the center of the United Protectorate, named after the famed scientist and explorer, Leon Maseklos. *A convenient location*, in Howard mused, and one of the reasons why he'd chosen to reside in Navarone. *It also makes last minute commutes on mornings such as this possible.*

Howard approached the entrance to his laboratory, the door flanked by two armed troopers in gray fatigues, their trousers tucked neatly into black knee-high boots. They stood silent, holding their laser rifles to their shoulders.

"I suppose everyone is inside, waiting for me," Howard said, running another hand through his disheveled hair.

"President Drennen was about to send us to find you," a guard replied in a monotone.

Without missing a step, Howard charged at the lab door. With a mechanical hiss, the door slid open to a large room with a row of four long, dark counters. Howard grinned slightly, admiring his workspace, and briefly glanced at the dozens of glass beakers and small metal racks holding test tubes, each containing liquid and

crystallized substances in reds, blues and yellows. The fourth counter held seven jars lined up in a neat row, lumps of pale colored flesh, dissected brains, and small tube-shaped organs clearly visible through the polished glass. At the end of the counter was a large, shiny metal sink and faucet. Three gray metal cabinets lined the left wall, with more shelves supporting glassware, jars of chemicals, and surgical instruments – shiny metal forceps, scalpels, and surgical saws, all sterilized and neatly arranged on black plastic trays. Howard looked toward the end of the room to two tall, gleaming white cylinders. Then, finally, he turned and acknowledged the various people waiting for him.

President Sandra Drennan caught his attention. A middle-aged woman with short brown hair and green eyes, she wore black shoes, pants, and a pink shirt under her black blazer. As head of the Central Commission and Commander of the United Protectorate combined military forces she frowned, appearing displeased with having to wait. Howard managed an apologetic smile as he silently admired Drennan for her accomplishments. She'd been elected president at the age of thirty-nine. While serving a second four-year term, she was cursed with the monumental task of holding the Protectorate together during this war with the Brelac. Howard knew Drennan to be a highly intelligent and articulate person. Her personality was quiet and sensitive, yet strong enough to bear the torment of her people without losing her sanity. She was holding her own for the present time, but he knew that the Brelac were too powerful, and that the Protectorate would eventually lose.

At her right stood Secretary of Defense, John Crane, a thin black man in a dark gray suit. He impatiently ran his fingers through his thinning hair. Three members of the Central Commission were also present, part of the legislative body that helped Drennan govern the Protectorate. Joining them were four generals, among them Major General Verne Larkin, dressed in his dark blue uniform with the band of medals on his left lapel, a dark blue cap with the gold eagle emblem worn proudly on his head.

Howard maintained a relationship with Larkin that could best be described as tolerance. Months ago, a commissioner had informed Howard that Larkin considered him too arrogant and

demanding to be sitting out the war in the safety of a lab. However, Howard attributed the bulk of Larkin's disdain to the general's distrust because of Howard's long employment with Carp Technologies. Carp, a large corporation that owned laboratories and factories on seven planets throughout the Protectorate, was the leading producer of advanced electronics, biotechnology, and hardware for military use – their goal being to hold the lead in the race for human advancement.

Seven years ago, a movement had evolved on several colony worlds to break away from the central government on Maseklos Prime, despite the fact that the majority of citizens did not agree with this quest for independence. Under the support of a new political group called Vendetta, the movement had been able to gain thousands of supporters. After growing weary of spouting demands to Maseklos Prime that went unheeded, Vendetta took a drastic step and directed the rebel planets to declare their independence. A civil war then erupted within the Protectorate. For two years, vicious battles were fought in space and across each rebel planet. The cost was the loss of thousands of lives and massive property damage. The growing market for weapons led to Carp being charged with reputedly selling arms to both sides. But the result was the eventual defeat of Vendetta's forces, and order was quickly restored throughout the Protectorate. After the war, Vendetta's activities became more covert. The more fanatical members of the group waged a war of terror against the Protectorate. Their tactics included bombing vital government installations and assassinating key political and military figures. Their activities were gradually curtailed by the Protectorate's military intelligence internal security operations. Most of Vendetta's major resistance cells were eliminated. Their high-ranking leaders retreated into seclusion, taking with them any hard evidence that may have linked Carp Technologies to Vendetta's activities during and after the war.

Now, seven years later, General Larkin still remained suspicious and hostile toward Carp Technologies. And that meant Howard got the same treatment, although the doctor paid little attention to Larkin's resentful attitude. He considered the man to

be a small component within a larger machine. And Howard's rightful place was at the controls of this machine. Larkin would have to choke on the fact that he and his superiors needed the products and services that Howard and Carp Technologies provided.

Two men in white lab coats stood at the rear the group. Howard frowned slightly at his assistant, Dr. Blair Vandorren. A muscular young man five-foot nine inches tall with cropped blond hair, he wore white sneakers, blue pants, and a gray sweatshirt beneath his starched lab coat. Blair dressed more casually than Howard would have preferred for this occasion. Howard's second assistant, Dr. Arnold Trevors, was an accomplished computer scientist whose work was regarded as ingenious. A man of seventy, with a face mapped by wrinkles and framed by thinning white hair hanging past his shoulders, he wore black shoes and a gray suit and tie. His white lab coat made him appear as an undead specter in search of a decent grave.

"I hope we didn't tear you away from anything more important than this little meeting," President Drennen said, breaking the silence with a tone dripping with sarcasm.

"I apologize for my tardiness," Howard said quietly. "I slept a bit too late this morning." He expected to receive no more than a harsh scolding. Being the Protectorate's top scientist in the fields of electronics, bio-chemical engineering, and genetics did earn Howard a certain level of leniency.

"As long as you're not too relaxed to sleep through the war," Larkin said, his eyes narrowed.

Drennen held up a hand. "We didn't come here to listen to banter between you two. I assembled this group, Doctor Fenlow, to learn what progress you've made with this new project I've heard so much about."

"I've made great progress," Howard confirmed proudly.

"Then, please, Doctor Fenlow. Don't keep us in suspense."

Howard cleared his throat and felt his cheeks warm slightly. "I'll make this as brief and clear as possible. At the beginning of the war, we knew very little about the Brelac. But, in time, my research has resulted in the discovery of some startling facts about our

mysterious enemies. Extensive examinations performed on several dead Brelac specimens have revealed that, on a basic genetic level, they are quite similar to humans. I've run genetic scans on twenty specimens and picked apart every segment of the Brelac genetic sequence. My scans revealed that each one was genetically identical to the other. This suggests that the Brelac have employed an advanced in-vitro organism replication technology to bolster their forces. In fact, their entire race could be composed of what I call *Reploids*."

"That makes sense." General Larkin nodded. "They do have us vastly outnumbered. They could artificially produce an army quicker than we can recruit and train our troops."

"It gets worse," Howard continued. "Since the Brelac have such advanced biotechnology at their disposal, we must assume they can use it to reproduce other forms of life to suit their purposes. I bring to your attention the recent wave of terrorist activities that have plagued us of late."

"And it could not have happened at a worse time," President Drennen said bitterly. "Military facilities being bombed, officers kidnapped or killed outright. Just last week there was a shooting on the street near the capital. Twelve dead, nine others wounded. And all these acts were perpetrated by seemingly harmless citizens or military personnel. We think that Vendetta has picked this time to make a resurgence."

Howard nodded. "That's what I would have thought too. Until I received a report on an incident in the Hollander System. It seems a police officer took several hostages inside his precinct, and then set off a bomb that destroyed the entire building. None of the hostages or the officer survived. Then I read two other reports of terrorist activities where police managed to kill the perpetrators. The terrorists involved in these incidents perfectly matched the physical description of the police officer on Hollander Three. I took the liberty of examining two of their bodies. They were both identical, even down to the genetic level."

"That's unthinkable!" Drennen's eyes widened. She turned to stare at the others in the room before looking back at Howard. "You mean to say that the Brelac are somehow able to replicate humans

and use them against us? If that's true, then they could strike us anywhere."

"There's one more detail that could make the situation a whole lot worse," Howard said slowly.

"I came here in hope of hearing some good news," Larkin said. "Instead you're giving us all bad."

"It's not entirely bad," Howard assured him. "Follow me, and I'll explain."

He led the group over to the two white cylinders at the back of the room. "A week ago, on the planet Meridan, a Brelac shuttle was shot down near Helios base. A squad of troopers investigated the shuttle and found a large group of cylinders just like these. They are incubation units containing human Reploids. During their investigation of the crash site, the troopers were attacked by two Reploids posing as members of the squad. It was reported that one Reploid killed a trooper by freezing him to death."

"Froze the trooper to death?" Drennen asked.

"With a touch of his hand," Howard said, wiggling his fingers. "The trooper's combat armor and flesh were rendered so brittle, they shattered like glass. The second Reploid somehow generated enough energy to incinerate another trooper. The first Reploid was killed, the second captured. During the melee, several of the other cylinders in the shuttle were severely damaged, and the Reploids contained inside did not survive. Only these two remained intact."

Howard turned and hurried over to a table on their left and returned with a small plastic dish. Inside the dish sat several tiny transparent envelopes. Howard picked up one of the envelopes with great care and held it up for the group to see. The envelope contained a small, silvery disk-shaped electronic component no bigger than a dime. "This was one of the weapons that the Reploids used to kill the troopers. My assistant, Doctor Blair Vandorren, aided me in performing the autopsy on the dead Reploid. I'll allow Blair to explain our findings."

Blair stepped forward and nervously cleared his throat. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He steadied himself and tried again. "During ... during our examination of every Brelac specimen, we found components similar to these embedded deep

within the brain's frontal lobes and occipital bones." He licked his lips. "Each Brelac had ten of these components embedded within its brain. As you know, the Brelac have no physical eyes. These components are a form of psionic implants. Apparently, they're designed to increase and focus the brain's level of psychic activity. This is how the Brelac are able to see. Psychic vision."

"So they don't need bifocals," Larkin joked, dismally shaking his head. "What does this have to do with the two human Reploids? And how can we use this to our advantage?"

"These components were taken from the slain Reploid," Blair explained. "They're more advanced than the standard Brelac implants that we've examined. They're designed to boost the brain's level of psionic power to a much higher degree. It's our theory that the Reploid's freezing ability was psychic in nature – a mental ability that was somehow created by these implants. Imagine if every Reploid infiltrator had such a deadly psychic ability – or every Brelac soldier. The power to read minds from a distance for vital information, as well as the power to kill in an unlimited number of paranormal ways..."

The distressed look on Drennen's face made it clear she was not pleased with the research results of Howard's team. "It would be impossible to fight against such a covert threat backed by this technology. Is there any way we can use these implants for our own troopers?"

"I'm afraid that these implants are useless to us," Howard said, almost regretfully. "We've already tested them on chimpanzees. The sudden massive increase of psionic energy quickly burned out their entire nervous systems. But the Reploids apparently have a special cellular adaptation that allows them to completely regenerate damaged nervous tissue at a rapid pace. This would effectively counteract any injury inflicted by the psionic energy surge. We're studying tissue samples taken from the live Reploid that's in our custody, trying to isolate the gene that enables his neural regeneration. But..." Howard paused dramatically, eyes flicking to the faces of each listener. "In the meantime, the captured Reploid and the other two currently in stasis can be put to work for us."

Larkin's face, already a bright red, turned a shade darker. "What are you saying, Fenlow? How can we make these creatures work for us? What do you plan to do, bribe them?"

"No, *reprogram* them." Howard crossed his arms proudly. "We have discovered the Reploids' brains also contain six implants that act as memory-access chips. Apparently, the Reploids' programmed memories are stored in these chips and downloaded into their brains as they first awaken. Since the two in stasis arrived in an unconscious state, I believe that their programs have not been downloaded. This gives us the opportunity to program them to serve *us* instead of the Brelac."

"And what about the captured Reploid that was already functioning?" Drennen asked.

"That Reploid is under heavy sedation," Blair stepped up to explained. "I can surgically remove the memory chips from its brain. Doctor Trevors can then delete the chip's current data and enter his own programs."

With a stiff stride, Dr. Trevors stepped forward. "It won't be an easy job. In order for the Reploids to blend in as humans, the Brelac had to program them with every aspect of an intelligent human mind. They simulate emotions. They have different attitudes and memories of past experiences. Each Reploid is a unique individual. I believe that I can reproduce these highly intricate programs, imitating every aspect of a normal, mature, human mind."

"We believe that the Brelac abduct human victims and replicate them," Howard explained. "Somehow, they copy as much data as they can from the minds of the originals and program the data along with programmed instructions into the Reploids to act against us. The originals, having served their purpose, are probably destroyed."

Silent up to this point, Secretary Crane cleared his throat. "Sounds dangerous. This whole idea of trying to use these walking weapons could blow up in our faces."

"It can't hurt to try," General Larkin said, slowly nodding. "We could certainly use anything to help turn the tide of this war. God knows that we're sending everything we've got against the Brelac,

and we're still on a crumbling defensive. But if these Reploids are going to be any good to us, then we'll definitely need more than just three. Is it possible that we can produce our own Reploids? As well as these psionic implants?"

Howard frowned. "At present, Carp's research into advanced cloning is limited. We can only produce cloned children through surrogate host mothers. These Reploid creatures are created through an advanced in-vitro process we have yet to understand. Inside these cylinders, the Reploids are immersed in a highly concentrated nutrient liquid and fed through an intravenous mechanism. It's possible that the Brelac can produce these creatures full grown and fully developed in a matter of weeks. As for the psionic implants, we're just beginning to understand how they work. It will be some time before we can reproduce this technology. The research section back at Carp's main starbase has put our top people to work on both problems. I'm confident that a breakthrough will come in a few months."

"At what cost?" Larkin demanded. "I doubt that Carp is willing to sacrifice their corporate bottom line for the sake of the war."

"The cost for this project will be determined when Secretary Crane negotiates with our board of directors." Howard sighed, growing tired of Larkin's animosity. "Our costs for manpower and materials for our research and development demand that we be fairly compensated. Even so, Carp is fully committed to the United Protectorate's war effort."

"We don't doubt your company's commitment to our cause, Doctor Fenlow," Secretary Crane said quickly, obviously hoping to defuse the tension. "And General Larking would have to admit that Carp has made several significant discoveries that have placed us on better ground with the Brelac."

"Perhaps Carp *has* been useful in reproducing captured Brelac technology for our own use," Larkin admitted, looking away. "Some of which I'm still getting used to. Like the hyperspace technology you introduced a few months ago. But I'd still like to see Carp try to be a little charitable during these tough times."

"We'll have time to bicker when things improve," President Drennen said. "Right now, I have to decide on whether to approve

this project. And, to be honest, I like what I've been hearing. Are there any objections?"

"I'm still leery of the idea of experimenting with enemy Reploids armed with dangerous abilities," Crane replied. "Especially here on our home world. Something could go wrong. Perhaps it would be safer to transport them to Starbase Lodestar until all tests are complete. Located out in deep space, it's the ideal facility to develop this project."

Drennen nodded. "Any objections to the idea, doctor?"

"I can live with it," Howard said.

"Then it's settled," Drennen declared. "I just hope that this will be worth all the time and effort involved."

Larkin took a final glance at the two cylinders. "If there's nothing else, I'd like to get back to the war."

"Have the Reploids transported to Lodestar as soon as possible, doctor," Drennen ordered. "Keep me posted about their development." She turned to the door. Larkin was already rushing out of the room, the other generals and commissioners behind him.

* * * * *

Howard returned to his apartment building late that evening. He approached the door and entered his personal identification number on a small glowing keypad at the right of the jam. The door slid open with a faint hiss. He slipped in, and the door closed and quietly sealed behind him. He reached for a small, two-button panel mounted on the right wall. He pressed the top button, and four long, white bars mounted six feet apart on the ceiling emitted a glow that illuminated the entire room. As he walked through the small, modestly furnished living room, the lights reflected off the back of his dark brown simulated leather sofa and recliner. His footfalls fell silently on the matching brown carpeting. A small round glass-top table with metal legs sat beside the recliner facing a large holo-vid mounted on the wall. Howard approached the far left corner of the room that merged into a small kitchen with white tiled floor, black countertops, and gleaming polished metal utilitarian interfaces. He strolled past the refrigeration unit and on

through the open doorway to his bedroom.

On the right side of the room sat a sturdy worktable. The wooden desktop held several beakers and test tubes filled with various chemical solutions, and a computer interface sat next to a small stack of jumbled papers. The interface constantly emitted a chorus of loud beeps, indicating it had recorded a subspace message received through its uplink. Howard looked longingly in the direction of the bathroom, but decided to take a moment to watch the message, hoping that it would be short. He sat in the high-backed cushioned chair in front of the interface and pressed a holographic key symbol to enter his security code.

The interface projected an image of a middle-aged blond man in a dark suit sitting behind a desk with his hands folded in front of him. Howard frowned. It was Walter Carnaby, the Chief Executive Officer of Carp Technologies – and Howard’s immediate boss. Under Carnaby’s leadership, Carp Technologies had become the largest corporation in the United Protectorate. He had initiated several successful takeovers of smaller rival companies, absorbing their key personnel to strengthen Carp’s position as a corporate leader. Still, Howard often wondered if the man was indeed worth the eighty million credits in salary and stock options the company paid him. But Howard was a scientist, devoting little time in the boardroom, to instead focus on research and development – as long as Carnaby continued to foot the bill.

“Howard,” Carnaby greeted buoyantly. “I was trying to contact you earlier, but I guess you were out. I just met with the board of directors. We’re concerned about the Brelac stepping up their aggression. Protectorate forces are falling back on several fronts. This means that we’re forced to advance with our own plans. I’m making the preparations for Operation Broadaxe. I need you to step up your efforts in the field so the plan can go through. I’ll be expecting a report from you soon. Perhaps we can trade good news.”

The image disappeared, and Howard gave a tired sigh. *Advance operation Broadaxe so soon? Is Carnaby insane? Perhaps the Brelac are starting to worry Carnaby and the other stiff suits back at Carp’s starbase headquarters.* Whatever the reason, it was

Howard's job to help insure that Operation Broadaxe was a huge success, and advancing the plan now would force him to take some extremely drastic measures.

But not now. Howard was more concerned about going to the bathroom, then eating the slice of lemon pound cake in the refrigerator. He headed for the bathroom door.

* * * * *

Howard was not enjoying his stay in the desert region of the planet Talos. He'd expected it to be hot, but actually having to endure the smoldering heat exceeded his expectations. His hot-weather attire of a thin blue short-sleeve shirt, denim shorts, and sandals provided him with little comfort. The heat seemed to penetrate every pore of his skin. He swiped beads of sweat from his brow, knowing he would repeat the process in the next minute.

He peered through the heavy long-range binoculars hanging around his neck. He made a quick visual scan of the north and saw nothing of importance. Just a bleak scene bathed in the red glare of the sun. Nothing but miles of sand, rocks and hills. The east revealed the same image. Looking to the south, he saw moving figures in the distance, nearly a mile away from his position. A small group composed of humans and Brelacs.

Howard turned and walked toward his all-terrain motorcycle. He sat down on the black seat, uncomfortably hard and hot, and started the small fusion engine. He held a tight grip onto the handlebars as the engine revved. This was the first time that he had ever driven such a vehicle, and losing his balance and falling over was his greatest fear. The motorcycle performed quietly, but its enlarged wheels with thick, cube shaped treads provided a bumpy ride. He gunned his motorcycle forward at top speed, churning up huge clouds of dust in his wake.

Drawing rapidly closer to the target area, Howard saw the group more clearly without the aid of his binoculars. Two troopers stood near what appeared to be a small transport shuttle. The troopers had rifles trained on five Brelac soldiers kneeling on the ground with their clawed hands folded behind their heads. A third

trooper lay against the shuttle with a bleeding abdominal wound. His vest had been removed to expose a blood-soaked shirt tied crudely around his torso, and his face was soaked by water dripping from a rolled up wet rag placed across his brow. Howard could only imagine how they were sweltering under those gray, bulky armored vests and gray camouflage fatigues tucked into those knee-high boots. Their sweat soaked faces turned to him as he approached.

Howard stopped his cycle a few feet from the group. He waved his hands in the air to try to fan away the dust cloud that his motorcycle had produced. As expected, one trooper aimed his rifle defensively toward him. Howard smiled cheerfully. "Good afternoon. My name is Howard Fenlow. I'm a doctor from the Ninth Medical Corps out from Starbase Horizon, stationed over Planet Keldorn. What happened here?"

The young trooper aiming his rifle squinted as beads of sweat rolled down his face. He seemed to be in a jumpy state. "Our squad set up an ambush in the hills for a gang of these bastards. We killed three of them before the group scattered and ran off. Fortunately we were able to capture these five. The other members of our squad are out trying to take down the rest of them."

"You say you're a doctor?" another trooper asked. "Baker there could use your help."

Howard quickly dismounted and walked over to the injured man. Baker was unconscious. Howard examined his wound. "This is serious," he said. "Your friend needs surgery as soon as possible if he's to survive. In the meantime I've got some medical supplies in my cycle's storage compartment. I can try to stop his bleeding and keep him stable until we get him to a proper medical facility."

"Do what you can for him, Doc."

Howard strolled to the back of his motorcycle and opened the storage compartment. The trooper pointing the rifle kept his gaze locked on Howard. His lips were pulled tight, almost in a sneer. "Just what are you doing out here, Doc?"

"I was part of a medical team just arriving to this planet," Howard replied without looking up. "We were being transferred to Norcross Base in Sector Eight when our ship was forced down by

Brelac fighters. We survived the crash and had to scatter when Brelac troops chased us. They're relentless monsters, you know. I was damn lucky to shake them off. I hope your squad returns soon. If the Brelac should pick up my trail, we'll definitely need some extra firepower. Which way did they go?"

The trooper turned his head to a group of hills on the horizon. He motioned toward them with his chin. "Over that way, about two hours. It shouldn't take them long to track down the rest of the Brelac."

It only took a second for Howard to take the laser pistol hidden in the cycle's storage compartment and squeeze off a shot at the back of the trooper's head. The laser bolt burned a large hole through the top portion of the man's skull, killing him instantly. The second trooper looked on in shocked disbelief as the body dropped limply to the ground, the dead trooper's head smoking. Howard quickly fired four laser bolts into the second trooper's chest. The man stumbled back and fell. Howard glanced at the wounded man lying against the shuttle, half-turned away, and then sent a bolt through the pale forehead.

Howard turned and approached the five Brelac prisoners, listening to their heavy, hoarse breathing. He held his pistol out in front of him. He casually let the weapon slide out of his fingers and drop to the ground in a small plume of dust. He brushed his hands together and put on a sly grin. "Let me introduce myself again. I'm Doctor Howard Fenlow. I was wondering if you could help me make a house call."

