

ROBERT E. VARDEMAN
**THE GENETIC
MENACE.**

STAR FRONTIER TRILOGY: BOOK TWO



STAR FRONTIERS 2

**THE GENETIC
MENACE**

**ROBERT E.
VARDEMAN**

ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

2010

AUSTIN TX

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THE GENETIC MENACE

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ISBN 978-1-934841-36-5

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vardeman, Robert E.

The genetic menace / by Robert E. Vardeman.

p. cm. -- (Star frontiers ; 2)

ISBN 978-1-934841-36-5 (trade paper : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-934841-37-2 (electronic)

1. Space ships--Fiction. 2. Space warfare--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3572.A714G46 2010

813'.54--dc22

2010001905

For Patty, always

Chapter One

Sub-Commander Pier Norlin sat in the automated command chair of the *Preceptor* and tried to believe everything that had happened. He now captained a Nova Class cruiser, the fastest, deadliest vessel the Empire Service had in space. This command had been his reward for saving the world of Sutton II from marauding aliens' Death Fleet.

He shuddered at the memory of the vicious, bloody battle on-planet.

Norlin turned in his command chair and tipped his head to one side, playing the field of toggles and touch switches on the chair's arm like a musical instrument. The heads-up display flashed once. He blinked several times and brought up the life-size holo image of the spider-like furry-legged alien they had killed on Sutton. The spindly arms and puny hands, the hard carapace stronger than battle armor, the high-domed forehead and large dark compound eyes made it difficult to believe it was a dangerous enemy and not an oversize bug.

This insignificant fragile creature, with its comrades, had devastated planet after human-colonized planet. Their Death Fleet scouts infiltrated a system and sabotaged celestial-

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approach warning sensors, then swooped down and destroyed all planetary life with their devastating radiation cannon and other energy weapons. When life had been exterminated, they landed automated looting devices that stripped the annihilated world of anything of value.

“You’re looking at it again. That’s not good,” came a gravelly voice.

Norlin turned as a large black cat jumped into his lap. He gripped the back of the corpulent feline’s neck to keep its questing paws from touching the sensitive controls. Even though most of the controls were keyed to human fingers, the cat might accidentally find the proper sequence that would damage the *Preceptor* seriously.

“Keep Neutron down in the engine room, will you, Lt. Barse?” Norlin made a face. The cat curled up in his lap and released a cloud of methane flatulence fierce enough to require everyone in the control room to turn away. “And stop feeding him so much protein.”

“He eats what he likes.”

“That’s why he’s so fat.” Norlin hefted the bulky cat and handed it back to his engineer.

“I meant it about not dwelling on that.” The short, stocky woman pointed at the vidscreen where Norlin still displayed the image of the spidery alien. “We’ve shown that we can beat them. Don’t get yourself twisted around worrying about battles we haven’t fought. You’ll start wondering if we can do it again—and then we’ll be blown into dust.”

“*Vaporized* is closer to it,” Mitri Sarov, the tactical officer, said. “Their radiation cannon work far better than anything we have. Our missiles have proven surprisingly ineffective against their heavier ships. They know how to armor and protect, the clever bug bastards.”

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Norlin smiled crookedly. The alien Death Fleet had given up one of their cannon—without knowing it. He and Tia Barse had salvaged the deadly weapon and installed it on the *Preceptor*. Although it caused grave problems when fired, draining their energy reserves to dangerous levels, it had proven itself more than a match for the aliens' top war vessels.

"Know your enemy," he said. "That's what we have to face. Admiral Bendo told us to go after them."

"The man's got vacuum for brains," muttered Chikako Miza, the ship's communications officer. "All he has to do is sit in his buried command center and fling orders around. We are the ones who have to die trying to obey them."

Barse snapped, "If you don't like it, why didn't you stay on Sutton? The admiral said he needed a com officer."

Miza shrugged, her face an emotionless mask. The sensors woven through her dark, stiff scalplock winked on and off as data relayed throughout the *Preceptor's* bulk. Norlin wondered how the woman coordinated all the information flowing through her head and across her com board. He had seen her do the work of six at the height of combat. He wished he had a dozen like her, in spite of her cynical attitude.

"We are ordered," came Sarov's gruff, booming voice. "We obey. We are in the Empire Service. To die for our glorious Emperor Arian is all we know." The trenchant sarcasm in his voice made Miza's seem mild in comparison.

"Enough of this," Norlin barked. "We are all officers. Liking the emperor isn't required for us to do our duty."

"Just as well," grumbled Miza as her sensor lights flared all the colors of the rainbow. "He's a fool. He's worse than Bendo. Arian never strays from Earth and his Crystal Throne."

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“If that were all, I could take it better,” said Barse, warming to the criticism of the emperor. Norlin knew she came from a world with strong rebel tendencies. He hoped she kept them in check. He was not going to allow a mutiny on his first real command.

“The genhanced sims he sends out are too much for me to stomach. Look what happened when one commanded the *Preceptor*. He damned near killed us all!”

To this Norlin had no reply. Barse knew he couldn’t disagree, either. The genetically enhanced court surrounding the emperor showed flashes of genius, but it was always an unstable genius. Captain Pensky had commanded the *Preceptor* for a short time and had almost destroyed an entire star system—and them.

“We have our orders. If we’re not doing it for the Empire Service, let’s pretend we’re doing it out of some sense of compassion for billions of other humans,” he said, tired of their bickering. He closed his eyes and shut off the heads-up display for a moment when his first officer came into the control room.

The others in the *Preceptor*’s crew were competent—and all knew it. Gowan Liottey might carry the rank of second in command, but his abilities were clearly the least of those present. His pale-blue eyes looked watery and weak to Norlin. As cruiser commander, he tried to be fair, but Lt. Liottey was not his choice as first officer. Barse or Sarov were better choices from the criteria of ability and knowledge. For all her bitterness, Miza outclassed Liottey, too.

If pressed, Norlin knew he would have chosen the ship’s cat before the sandy-haired, effeminate Liottey.

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“How are we breathing?” he asked, Liottey in an attempt to make polite conversation. His readouts showed the current status of the ship’s environmental systems.

“Life support systems are fully functional,” the lieutenant reported.

“That’s a relief,” Barse said, *sotto voce*. “I’d hate to breathe vacuum and not know it.”

“Engineer Barse, you have work to do. I see the shift engines are at less than one hundred percent efficiency. Mister Sarov, see to the weapons systems. When we shift back into normal space, we are going hunting for aliens. Commander Miza, monitor all com frequencies for alien chatter.”

Norlin gave them busy-work to free up a few minutes with his first officer. “Mister Liottey, step over here.”

The officer moved to a spot in front of the command chair. Norlin flipped a toggle and shut off this area from prying ears. He knew Chikako Miza could listen in if she desired; he had yet to stop her from eavesdropping with her clever gadgets. The impression of privacy was more important than anything else for what he had to say.

“I’m new to command,” Norlin started, forming his thoughts carefully. “We’ve been through a great deal since I came aboard the *Preceptor*. We’ll see much more combat before this ship is decommissioned.”

“Sir, I’m doing my best.”

“I realize that, Mister Liottey. What I want is more from you. I want more than your best. If we don’t work as a completely functioning team on this ship, we’ll never be arguing over whether we’ll end up plasma or dust—we’ll be dead.”

“Sir...”

“Hear me out. More than our lives depends on how well we fight the aliens. Entire colonies must be defended.”

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“We can’t do it alone.”

“And we won’t. We’re doing it together.” Norlin knew he wouldn’t get zero-defects work from his first officer. He wouldn’t even get flashes of brilliance, as he did from the others. The best Norlin could hope was for the first officer not to be responsible for their demise.

“Sir, are we going to engage soon?” asked Liottey.

“We’re almost ready to shift back into normal space,” Norlin said, checking his readouts. “There is every reason to believe the Renfro II system is next for invasion.”

He found it impossible to keep the hardness from his voice. So many planets had been laid to waste—and so many lives lost. He forced himself to think of Neela Cosarrian—as she had been before the aliens invaded, not the emaciated husk she had become because of their attack. It had been for the best leaving her body in the cleansing fire of his rocket exhaust as he left.

“I need time to work on the escape system,” Liottey said. “We can’t get away from the *Preceptor* if we’re hit.”

“What’s wrong with the escape system?”

Liottey looked confused, out of his depth. “I’m trying to find out why the firing mechanisms don’t function on the escape tubes.”

Norlin tipped his head to the left and got a complete readout on the escape tubes. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“I’ve been working on it, sir.”

Norlin had few options open to him but to continue, knowing they had no way of getting free of the cruiser if hit. He tried to tell himself it didn’t matter. The aliens were efficient and hunted down the smallest fragments from an enemy ship to insure that nothing lived.

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“I can’t monitor every system on this ship, Gowan,” Norlin said, trying to keep the anger from showing. “That’s why there are engineers, com officers, tactical weapons officers...and life maintenance officers. If you needed help, you should have asked for it. We have to work together. We’re a crew—a team.”

“I thought I could handle it myself,” Liottey said sullenly.

“Barse will do what she can to help, if you ask her. See to it immediately. We shift out in one hour,” he said. “I want the system working by then.”

“What’s the difference?” came Chikako Miza’s voice in his helmet. “The aliens blow up even the smallest debris. Their radiation cannon are deadly against unprotected vessels. We’d never make a planet landing in those anodized coffins.”

“Commander Miza, you have work to do—other than spying on me.” Norlin savagely hit the toggle opening the area to full observation. To Liottey he said, “Dismissed.”

Before the first officer had vanished from the control room, Norlin’s headphone crackled with static, and Tia Barse said, “I don’t have time to play nursemaid. I’m going to let Neutron help him. The cat’s a better engineer than Gowan will ever be.”

He slumped in the command chair. Aboard this ship there were no secrets—except from him, it seemed. He had so much to learn about the dynamics of society and command on a ship.

Heaving a deep sigh, he turned back to the controls. Sarov put up several different attack simulations on the vidscreen. He worked through them carefully, noting problems and strengths, trying to evaluate alien psychology. By the time Barse signaled that the engines had started cycling the *Preceptor* back into

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normal space, Norlin had done what he could to program his combat computer with a half-dozen different tactical plans.

“Contact,” came Chikako Miza’s sharp voice. “The Death Fleet is here. They’ve already formed an attack pattern!”

“Contact,” reported Mitri Sarov, an instant later. “Locking on. Plan three in effect.” The tactical officer laid down an array of missiles across a volume of space, some set to explode immediately and others that would lie doggo until they locked onto a target.

Norlin’s heads-up display flared with numbers and images. He kept scaling down until he was able to take in the battle unfolding around them without drowning in details. What he saw filled him with dread. The Death Fleet had followed its standard attack strategy. Scouts crept into the Renfro II system and replaced the sensors on the perimeter designed to detect potentially dangerous incoming space debris. An undetected comet or planetesimal colliding with a civilized world would kill billions.

The aliens replaced the sensors with their own. No alien ship appeared on the controllers’ screens until it was too late to mobilize an effective defense.

In too many cases, Norlin had seen this cautious approach wasn’t even needed. Human defenses took too long to initiate. Too many layers of bureaucracy had to be filtered through to get permission to open fire. The aliens had wiped out humanity on each planet they attacked—until they reached Sutton II. They had been stopped there.

Norlin vowed to stop them here, too.

He checked the *Preceptor*’s sensors and tried to interpret what he saw. Sarov continued to follow the plan he had programmed, but Norlin failed to see the immediate danger. Only

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when the heavy cruiser's warning lights flashed and almost blinded him did he know his weapons' officers instincts had been better than his—or the *Preceptor's* sensors.

“Coming at us from behind our flare,” Sarov said. “I don't know how they positioned so quickly.”

“They monitored our shift,” said Miza. “I got passive checks fifteen seconds ago. They know we're here, and they'll have active probes on the way soon.”

Norlin cursed. Fifteen seconds reaction time? Was that all it took the enemy to detect, position and lock onto them? The *Preceptor's* systems took longer than that to adapt from the precipitous change from shift space to normal four-dimensional space.

“Damage negligible to all systems,” came Sarov's report. “Inertial platforms turning to meet second wave attack.”

Norlin felt helpless. He had approved the computer battle plans. All he could do now was sit and wait and watch.

The speed of light was almost too slow to keep up with the frantic pace of lasartillery firing, of missiles launching, of automatic preparation to use the captured radiation cannon. He shook himself and narrowed the input data stream to his display again, focusing on Chikako Miza's communications reports.

The alien vessel was small, yet it gave them more than their share of trouble. Half a dozen internal systems had failed during the first assault. Norlin ignored the failures and concentrated on the parts that had made it through unscathed. The *Preceptor* still functioned and fought well enough to survive.

“They're not budging,” came Miza's calm, almost mechanical voice. The sensors woven into her tall, stiff scalplock flickered on and off faster than Norlin could focus on them. Whatever information they gave allowed her to keep up with

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the ever-changing conditions both inside the *Preceptor* and outside among the alien Death Fleet.

“The bugs came up right on our tail. They’re locked onto us and firing.”

Norlin switched to the weapons display and saw that the solitary attacking alien scout vessel had changed tactics. As long as their rocket flare pointed toward the enemy ship, missiles locked on easily and were difficult to destroy in flight.

“We’re swinging around,” he announced. “Let’s get some hardware into play.” A half-dozen of the *Preceptor*’s missiles blew apart a new wave of torpedoes from the alien scout. “Tia, how’s the radiation cannon?”

“Do we have to use it?” she asked. “It puts us down for too long. We’d need at least a day to recharge. Maybe more, if we’re not lucky.”

Norlin checked the battle’s progress and decided not to use the captured cannon. Miza had detected another alien scout ship less than twenty light-minutes away. It could reach them at sub-light speed before they could recharge and prepare for another assault.

The ship seemed to slide, as if it were a wheeled giant and had slipped in mud. Norlin touched a private com link and spoke directly to his first officer.

“Forget the escape tubes. Get an RRU to work on the hull. We’re leaking like a damned sieve.”

“I’ve already got a robot repair unit at work, sir,” came Liottey’s whining voice. “It’s not working fast enough to keep up with the damage we’re taking.”

“Put another one to work, then. Keep us airtight.” Norlin savagely toggled off. He needed a new second-in-command. Gowan Liottey left everything to chance.

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While Sarov worked on the immediate problem of defeating the alien scout, Norlin turned his attention to the second ship. Communication between elements of the Death Fleet was minimal before an attack to prevent humans from overhearing. During an attack, they coordinated perfectly. He tried to determine if this scout was in contact with any other.

Pier Norlin tapped in a new tactical plan to deal with the distant scout ship, if it bothered to come to its companion's aid. The *Preceptor* shuddered as an array of missiles launched. He blanketed the intervening space with a statistically perfect web of slowly patrolling low-power high-explosive missiles. If the alien joined the attack, it would find itself under attack from all quarters.

Satisfied, he turned his attention back to the current battle. He swore under his breath when he saw how the *Preceptor's* condition had worsened. A missile had penetrated their defensive array and ruptured the hull near the radiation cannon nodule. The weapon was still functional, but reaching it without a spacesuit would be impossible.

"Liottey, get another RRU to work. Put a dozen to work, if that's what it takes."

"Let me do it, Cap'n," came Barse's voice in his ear. "Gowan is making matters worse with his dumb programming. I tell you, the cat can do a better job."

"Let Neutron do it, then. Get those air leaks fixed." Norlin watched nervously as Barse sent her engine room RRUs forward into the damaged area. The control room had its own shielding and air supply and could survive even if most of the cruiser were destroyed. What worried Norlin was losing the capability offered by the radiation cannon.

"Plan three is failing, two sigma probability of defeat within the hour."

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“Recommendation?” he snapped at his tactical officer. Sarov punched in a new program. Norlin approved it after a cursory examination. He had faith in the man’s abilities.

“One strike on enemy,” came Miza’s voice. Norlin checked his heads-up display and saw damage estimates. The alien scout ship wasn’t totally out of commission, but a second direct hit would destroy it. He watched the vidscreen as three of the *Preceptor*’s missiles struck simultaneously.

“Enemy defeated,” came Sarov’s stolid, emotionless voice. “Checking weapons systems in anticipation of second scout ship attacking.”

Norlin ran the battle recording through his tactical computer and made alterations to the expert system program that had guided them originally. Only through continual updating could they hope to defeat the Death Fleet. The aliens had superior firepower, battle coordination and—usually—the element of surprise. That didn’t leave much but innovation as Norlin’s primary weapon.

The *Preceptor* had left the battle in good shape. The other alien ship would prove no more difficult an obstacle.

“Chikako, contact the Renfro Port Authority and warn them of the Death Fleet’s presence. Tell them their perimeter sensors are not to be trusted. Have them go to laser radar and optical observation. The usual warning.”

“Yes, sir, lidar and opticals. Message sent.”

Norlin sank back in his command chair. He adjusted his display to pick up the Renfro II response. His stomach turned over when he saw it. He was already punching in a direct com-link by the time Chikako Miza relayed the answer.

“They don’t believe there is any danger, sir.”

“Just like the other systems,” he said grimly. “How can we make them believe us?”

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“Scout ship on intercept course,” broke in Sarov. “Estimated time for battle—one hour.”

It never changed. Pier Norlin did what he could to convince the Port Authority of their plight. That usually proved to be the more difficult battle to fight.

The Empire Service’s heaviest cruiser barely defeated the smallest scout ship in the Death Fleet—again. Only then did Norlin set course for the space station circling Renfro II and the never-ending battle with bureaucracy.

Chapter Two

We'll all die!"

Pier Norlin touched the OFF switch on his heads-up display and glared at Gowan Liottey. The first officer had failed to perform his duties adequately during the battle. Now that the threat had passed and the two alien scout ships were debris floating between the planets, his behavior was even less acceptable.

"Lieutenant!" snapped Norlin. "I'll order your tongue cut out if you don't shut up."

"You can't. Sir, we're losing atmosphere. We'll be dead in an hour." Liottey tore at his hair and dropped to the deck, sobbing hysterically.

Of Barse, Norlin asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"We took a hit in the coolant system. He's sniffed too much CoolinGas."

"Why wasn't he wearing a spacesuit or a respirator? That stuff is dangerous."

The chief engineer looked him squarely in the eye and shook her head.

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Norlin sighed. “Get him to sick bay and let the auto-med go over him. Pump his lungs, scrub his blood, do whatever has to be done to get him back into shape. Don’t let him in the control room again until he’s ready.”

“Does this mean Liottey’s out of the chain of command?” asked Sarov.

“You’re next in command,” Norlin said. “Just don’t think about assassinating the captain to get ahead.” He spoke with a hint of warning. Throughout the Empire Service, rumors were rife that assassination was a common practice closer to Earth and the emperor’s court.

“I will try to remember that you cautioned me,” Mitrì Sarov said impassively. Norlin couldn’t tell if the man’s neutral tone was meant as a joke or should be taken seriously.

He waited until Liottey had been escorted from the control room, then turned on his displays once more. A quick review of the major systems showed nothing seriously wrong. The hull leaks that had sent his first officer into a panic were minor and were being taken care of by a half-dozen RRUs programmed by Tia Barse.

“Coolant system is acting up,” he said, using his throat mike. “I don’t want the CoolinGas getting into the filtration system. We don’t have time to counter its effects—better to keep it out in the first place.” He turned his attention elsewhere, saw that the other officers had finished their repairs and checks and then lost himself in a replay of the battle.

The second scout ship had been easily vanquished. The missile array he had laid out worked well against the overconfident alien. Three of the low-power missiles had escaped detection. As the alien ship rocketed past, they had activated and come in from behind, hidden from easy detection by the alien’s own rocket flare. The maneuver worked as well for a human

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war vessel as it did an alien. Before battle even had been joined, the alien scout ship had sustained too much damage to be a menace.

Sarov had taken care of the vessel with a single blast from their forward lasartillery battery.

“We won’t need much dry-dock time, since repairs will be minimal this time,” Norlin said. “Be sure to watch carefully whoever Renfro Port Authority sends aboard. No one even looks at the radiation cannon without my permission.”

“We are not fools, Captain,” Miza said sarcastically. “Not like poor Gowan.”

Norlin sighed. He had risen in rank too quickly to be able to handle such outright disobedience. He had checked the Empire Service records and found he was the youngest officer commanding a line vessel—such were the pressures of a genocidal war that most of the worlds didn’t even know was being waged. The officers who hadn’t been killed on those worlds where they *did* know had deserted. Norlin was one of only a handful of remaining pilots on the far frontier. A few years experience commanding smaller vessels would have stood him in good stead, but he had to squeeze a dozen years of seasoning into a few weeks.

That the *Preceptor* confronted and destroyed ships in the alien fleet showed he was not entirely out of his depth. The bickering and political maneuvering among the crew lay beyond his control to stop, however. He had learned in the Empire Service Academy that internal problems destroyed more ships than any threat from an enemy, but for too many years the fleet had seen little more than garrison duty, with no real adversaries. The rot that began on some worlds desiring autonomy from the Empire had never been addressed because the Emperor refused to look beyond his court on Earth. Norlin

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had to grapple with both a fearsome enemy and colonial disobedience and could not expect much support from the Empire Service.

“Captain, the Port Authority is refusing us a docking port unless we have authorization from...I can’t make it out.”

Norlin shook himself out of his reverie and tried to understand what his communications officer had said. An Empire Service space station refusing a cruiser immediate docking was unheard-of.

“Send a Class One priority signal.”

“I did. They refuse to acknowledge.” Miza’s sensors flashed all the colors of the rainbow and finally settled on a dull blue that was more menacing than pure red. Norlin wondered what she was trying to do that required so much of her circuitry. He started to ask, then decided against it. Much of what the *Preceptor*’s officers did to perform their duties bordered on the illegal. Tia Barse once had seduced an engineer to get parts needed for repair. Norlin didn’t want to think what Sarov might do if someone thwarted him. The stolid tactical officer was built like a main battle tank and had a mind like a super-speed computer.

He listened to the byplay between Miza and the Renfro II Port Authority. Gradually, he understood the problem, accessed the ship’s computer and got the sketchy information about the Renfro system.

He had assumed wrongly that the planet was densely populated. The single flag it carried in the data bank showed an ammonia-and-methane atmosphere unfit for direct human colonization. The rare earth mines on the planet made Renfro II worthy of all the attention that could be lavished on it. Yttrium, necessary for constructing superconducting ceramics, was plentiful a half-kilometer under the planet’s rocky crust.

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“We understand that the planet is off-limits,” he cut in. “We are requesting only space station docking and the opportunity to speak with the planetary governor or stationmaster.”

“Why?” came the sharp question.

Norlin began to lose his temper. “This is Empire Service Cruiser *Preceptor* on a mission of highest priority. I demand to be given a berthing assignment immediately.”

“Demand all you want. We’ve got lasartillery that can hold you off.”

“Have they mutinied?” asked Sarov. “No one refuses a cruiser. We can blow them out of the sky in ten minutes—in less than a second if we use the radiation cannon. I’ve got a lock on their defensive system. We can slide past, and they’ll never know what happened.”

“Port Authority...” Norlin began.

“Wait a microsec, can you? I’ve got some music on and want to hear the end of the piece.”

Norlin’s finger almost touched the switch that would have launched a missile at the space station. He held back, fuming. The Port Authority controller was annoying him purposely. He wanted to know why.

“Are you aware of the Death Fleet’s scouts at this system’s perimeter? The main body of the alien invasion force might arrive at any time.”

“Death Fleet? You’ve been watching too many of the emperor’s vidramas.”

Norlin left open his com-link as he spoke to his tactical officer. “Mr. Sarov, prepare a low-destruct array. Take out the controller’s office. Try to leave the rest of the space station intact, as much as you can. But don’t waste too much time on that.”

“What of their lasartillery?”

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“Counter-measures, as necessary,” Norlin said. To be sure the controller understood, he asked, “Are you remaining in your office or have you left?”

“I’m still here.” The cockiness had vanished. “There’s no way you’d fire on this station.”

“Give me docking permission, or you’ll find out. I say again, this is Empire Service Cruiser *Preceptor* on a mission of grave importance to you and everyone in the Renfro II system.”

“We’ll send out a tug to pull you into port three.” A long pause filled with static from a building solar storm, then: “Would you have fired? Really?”

“Stand down the missiles, Mr. Sarov.” Norlin made sure the missiles his tactical officer had prepared were put back on safety. “All hands, prepare to dock with the station.”

He watched with grim satisfaction as the small space tug came out and attached magnetic lines to steel towing plates mounted in the composite hull. Within five minutes they were berthed, and in ten he and Tia Barse were swimming down the space station’s zero-g central axis toward the commander’s office.

“There’s no reason to get upset, Cap’n,” said Barse. “You just ran afoul of a petty bureaucrat. You know now how it feels.”

He glared at her, refusing to answer her oblique charge. The station’s spin tugged at him and gradually he felt the centrifugal force pulling his feet to the outer wall. He found it difficult to stalk angrily in low-g, but he did his best. He didn’t even slow down when the human secretary tried to ask his business.

He shoved through into the commander’s office. A thin, almost emaciated man sat behind the desk, his eyes bright.

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Norlin recoiled at the sight of such feverish intensity. The translucent hands fluttered constantly, like dried leaves trapped in a high wind. But the eyes held him. The deep, dark pits were touched with madness.

“You wouldn’t have blown up the Port Authority controller’s officer, would you?” asked the skeletal man.

“Yes, dammit, I would have. The controller in charge should be disciplined immediately. He was endangering the entire space station.”

“I was in charge. I’m the controller.”

“What?” Norlin glanced at Barse, who only shook her head. “The station commander acts as controller, too?” This was unheard-of, even on frontier worlds where humans were scarce. The jobs were different, and each too demanding for one man to deal with alone.

“No, but the station commander is...elsewhere.”

“Get him here. I must talk to him,” Norlin said.

“Who are you to come jetting in here and demanding to see him? *Who?*”

Norlin stepped back from the thin man and wondered at the rage pent-up in him. More than simple anger radiated from the controller; Norlin felt an insanity like a palpable force.

“Cap’n,” muttered Barse. “Is he genhanced?”

“*Him?*”

“He looks it. Remember how Pensky got just before he did something really demented?”

“Yes,” the gaunt man shouted. “I am genhanced and proud of it. I’m Emperor Arian’s third cousin.”

“Everyone is related at the Earth court,” Norlin said with distaste.

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That the scientists played with genes didn't bother him unduly. It irritated him that the failures were shipped to the frontier—and caused situations such as the one he now faced. With genhanced genius all too often went instability and outright insanity.

"I am the emperor's favorite cousin. Really, I am. He sent me to Renfro to watch over the others."

"The station commander?"

"Yes! I spy on Delamier and his slut sister. They aren't fit to run an on-planet whorehouse, much less this fine space station."

"Where are they?" asked Barse.

"You're with them. You're in league with them to kill me!"

Norlin shrugged and twisted his forearm slightly. A small laser pistol dropped into his grip from a hidden spring mechanism. The weapon had little stopping power, but a few quick bursts might cut off the controller's legs, if it came to that.

"No, no, we're not," soothed Barse. The heavy-set woman moved to the far side of the room, drawing the controller's attention. Norlin shifted slowly to get behind the genhanced man. Killing him might not be necessary if he could be subdued quickly.

"You're tricking me!" the controller shouted, jumping with unnatural agility over the desk and landing on all fours in the center of the floor. "You and Delamier and Trahnee are jealous because I'm related to Emperor Arian and you're not. I'm his favorite. He told me!"

"Jealous, no. Envious, yes," said Norlin, moving back around the desk. "Tell us about him. Tell us about the Crystal Throne. What is it like? Is it as grand as everyone says?" He worked to keep the man's attention on harmless topics. If he couldn't grab the controller, Barse would.

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“Die!” the genhanced shrieked. He grabbed for something hidden inside his ill-fitting lime green tunic.

Norlin reacted swiftly. He raised his small laser and fired—and shrieked in agony as the weapon exploded in his hand.

“Damper field in the office, Cap’n,” said Barse. “I don’t know how they hid it. I didn’t detect anything when we came in.” She rested her hand on a small instrument pack at her hip.

“I need medical attention,” he said, grimacing. Two of his fingers hung by strips of flesh. Blood gushed from a severed artery and turned him weak in the knees. He sank to the desktop. Even this didn’t provide enough support.

“Live by the sword, die by the sword,” cackled the controller. The man jerked free from his tunic a tiny black box with a single display light winking on the side. “You’re all going to die—because I command it!”

Barse started for him, then stopped when his finger punched down hard on the contact. The light flashed faster, then went out.

“What is it?” she asked, grabbing the skeletal man by the throat. She lifted him easily from the floor until only his toes brushed the metal surface. “What did you activate?”

“I’ll never tell!”

“You’ll be dead before anything happens,” Barse warned. Norlin tried to speak. He could only clutch at his damaged hand and try not to pass out.

“He’s dead *now*,” came a cold voice.

A sharp crackle of electrical discharge was followed by the controller’s gasp. He went limp in Barse’s grip. She dropped him to the floor and faced the man and woman standing in the door.

THE GENETIC MENACE

“We’ve already summoned an auto-med unit for your captain.” The tall woman appeared unruffled by the blood pooling on the floor. Her grey eyes were fixed on the controller. A brief expression of contempt touched her thin lips before they shifted into an insincere smile. “You did well with Kortani. He had a spark of...genius.”

“He was a vacuum-brained—”

“Barse,” groaned Norlin. “Never mind. What happened?”

The tall woman drifted closer, her eyes flickering across his wounds and then coming back to lock with his light-violet ones. “Kortani made the mistake of believing himself superior.”

“He was genhanced,” gasped out Norlin. He stiffened when the silent auto-med unit clamped his wrist firmly and began tending to the severed fingers and wildly pumping artery.

“He made that claim,” the woman said. “Perhaps he was. I doubt he ever saw the Crystal Throne or had even been to Earth. He was definitely not Emperor Arian’s cousin.”

“How do you know?”

“Bo and *I* are the emperor’s favorites.”

“Bo?” Norlin strengthened as the auto-med unit clicked and whirred and worked medical miracles on his hand. Feeling returned to his fingers. He flexed them and experienced a twinge of pain that faded quickly. He tensed them and balled them into a fist. Even the severed artery had been repaired by the efficient medical robot.

“Bo Delamier, the station commander.”

The man who had until now stood silently behind the woman bowed deeply. For Norlin’s taste, the action carried too much arrogance. He had seen such superior airs before in members—or would-be members—of the emperor’s court.

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“I am charged with guarding the mines below us. Perhaps poor Kortani was too instilled with zeal to perform this noble task.” Delamier’s words carried more than a hint of mockery.

Norlin held up his repaired hand to cut off Barse’s irate reply. He knew such effrontery sparked deep-seated anger in her. She made no secret of her rebel leanings, even as she worked as an Empire Service officer on the cruiser.

“I’ve ordered my communications officer to transfer full data on the impending invasion of the Renfro system. With it are photos and depositions covering the Death Fleet’s action on Sutton II and other worlds.”

“Death Fleet?” Delamier’s words had been dipped in the acid of sarcasm. “How melodramatic, isn’t it, Trahnee?”

“The aliens are advanced technologically but depend primarily on surprise in battle. We can defeat them. We did on Sutton. Full details—”

“Never mind such nonsense. What is it you want on my station?” asked Delamier. “We might comply if it isn’t too outrageous, then you can go about your mission.”

“My *mission*, Commander, is to protect Empire Service colonies. Renfro is next on the alien invasion schedule, though I cannot imagine why, since the atmosphere is poisonous.”

“The minerals we mine on-planet are rather important,” Trahnee said.

Norlin stared at her. At first he had thought she was somewhat plain. Now he wasn’t sure. She had a tall, regal carriage and an air of elegance. He couldn’t call it beauty—not quite. But he felt something approaching excitement when he stared into her grey eyes. They pulled him inward, downward into her very soul.

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He shook this strangely intimate feeling off. “We destroyed two scouts after they replaced your perimeter sensors. We have full combat data, if you want to see it.”

“Impossible,” scoffed Delamier. “It’s not possible to tamper with my sensors. I would know it instantly.”

“They replaced your detectors with their own. The Death Fleet will arrive and position itself before you know you’re under attack.”

“Not likely,” said Delamier. “You have been in space far too long. Perhaps we can show you a bit of recreational amusement to put the edge back on your skills.”

“Commander, the alien fleet is real. Examine the data.” Norlin touched the com-link on his belt. Chikako Miza transferred the full data package into the space station’s computer banks. “It’s available. We may not have much time.”

“We have all the time in the world,” said Trahnee. “That’s one of the drearier aspects of being on the frontier. There is so little to do to interrupt the boredom.”

“It’ll get a lot more interesting soon,” muttered Barse, her jaw set and her eyes cold. “Cap’n, let’s get the hell out of here and let them be blown into dust.”

Norlin almost agreed with his engineer when he saw the insolent sneer Delamier gave them. The space station commander thought they were nothing more than stupid colonials. Only someone from the emperor’s court could possibly show such disregard for the facts.

His attention went from Delamier to Trahnee. He shook himself. She seemed so much more attractive than the first time he had seen her. Not beautiful. Not that, but...appealing.

“Do run along, you two. I can manage the station quite well without your opinions on system defenses.”

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“The aliens will arrive. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but soon. They never deviate from their established battle plan. Check your perimeter sensors—now.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Delamier waved them away. Trahnee watched with cool, pale eyes that probed Norlin’s emotional depths.

Norlin started from the room, glad to be away from the uncomfortable examination. He halted when his com-link beeped. He turned to Delamier and said, “Don’t bother with the sensors.”

“Oh?” Delamier lifted one eyebrow in a superior expression. “Recanting your wild tale of murderous aliens?”

“No. My weapons officer just picked up the Death Fleet’s braking radiation. Fourteen hundred warships just shifted into normal space and will be here within a day. You’d better prepare for immediate evacuation and escape to another colony.”

Trahnee went to a terminal and saw confirmation of Norlin’s claim about the Bremsstrahlen. Every x-ray detector on the space station’s hull had gone wild. She shrugged, as if saying, *What now?*

Delamier laughed as if he had heard the finest joke ever told. “Evacuation? Don’t be absurd. We’ll fight. This will be the most delightful diversion we’ve had since arriving at this miserable place. Trahnee, let us devise a devastatingly clever defensive scheme to defeat these...aliens. We fight!”

Norlin shuddered. Delamier was another of the emperor’s genhanced court who had slipped over the border between sanity and madness.

TITLE: *The Genetic Menace* (Star Frontiers 2)

AUTHOR: Robert E. Vardeman

GENRE: Science Fiction

PUBLISHER: Zumaya Publications LLC

IMPRINT: Otherworlds

RELEASE DATE: February 2010

ISBN: Paperback: 978-1-934841-36-5; ebook:
978-1-934841-37-2

FORMAT: Trade paperback, perfect bound;
\$14.99; 236 pp.; 5x8; ebook, \$6.99

Available from independent booksellers and online at Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Ebook coming soon to Fictionwise, eReader.com, and Kindle.