

The story of a shapeshifter

BLEAK

The first mission

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Introduction

This 10,000 word novelette is the prequel to my book:

BLEAK

The story of a shapeshifter

Now available on Kindle through Amazon. Also on Smashwords and other major reading platforms.

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*My thanks to all those who take the time to enjoy my stories,
it's what keeps me writing.*

BLEAK

THE FIRST MISSION

Bleak studied the man in the cell. He was well within his abilities, he knew that, yet he was apprehensive. This was the first time. It was one thing knowing what you are capable of, the reality of it another. He had completed all the simulations, the training, but this was no drill. This was a living, breathing, human being.

‘You’re sure, Professor?’

Professor Moran put a hand on Bleak’s shoulder. ‘Of course, Bleak, as you are. But your reserve is understandable. Trust me, it’s as natural to you as growing hair.’

Bleak knew that. He was delaying, fear of the unknown. He knew that as well.

General Niias coughed. ‘I take it he is ready?’

The professor frowned. ‘He’s in the room, General. Why don’t you ask him?’

General Niias raised an eyebrow. ‘Well?’

Bleak picked up the cube. Almost everything the man was, had been, knew, were contained within it. He placed the finger and

thumb of his left hand in the correct positions exposing his adapted nerve endings and opened the gate. As in the simulations he shunted the data into the adapted part of his brain. He could call upon it at any time, use it in exactly the same way as the man himself. When he was ready he would be Major Oldroyd.

‘So?’ General Niias said.

Bleak smiled. ‘It will not be a problem, general,’ he said. It wasn’t an imitation of the Major’s voice, it was the major’s voice.

Bleak entered his quarters and lay on the bed. His chest hurt every time he breathed, his jaw ached and his stomach churned. He forced down as much high protein food as he could without making himself sick, he needed to bulk out. The major was a few centimetres taller and fifteen kilos heavier than his standard form. Having eaten, he slept. Deep, dreamless unconsciousness while his body reconfigured. He woke at two hourly intervals to consume more food. Ten hours later he hauled himself up, wincing as he did so and sat on the bed. There was a ring of bruising around his middle. He opened his mouth, testing. It was uncomfortable but not painful. He tried to stand, but his balance betrayed him and he flopped back down. He tried again. This time he remained upright. He took a deep breath and managed the three steps to the wall which he leaned against. Next five steps, these steadier as his brain adjusted. In the bathroom the mirror panned around his body. Some of the purple bruising was already turning yellow at the edges, testament to his powers of healing.

He focused on the face, now Major Oldroyd’s face, or very nearly. Bleak studied it. The eyes were brown with green flecks, the nose was wider, the lips thinner. It was a mean face, he thought.

As he stood there he delved into the Major's thoughts and personality. Oldroyd had been a career officer before the rebellion. But he'd been turned to the rebel cause early, after his home planet was attacked and his parents killed. Not that he'd seen a lot of them, or bore them much affection. He'd been only too glad to escape from that stinking backwater as he thought of it. However, a brief moment of righteous indignation against the lack of protection the Confederation had given his home world, and other more tangible inducements, had been enough to sway him for that first indiscretion. And once hooked there was no going back. Also, in his own mind, once he was committed to the rebels, why shouldn't he take advantage of the situation to enrich himself along the way. After all he was taking the risks.

Oldroyd was intelligent and emotionally cold, which meant he was careful and good. He'd spent five months in the general's staff undetected. To sustain that situation also required some sophisticated hardware wired into his brain. Hardware the Confederation didn't think the rebels had access to. Hence why they hadn't looked for it. In the end it was personal greed that had given Major Oldroyd away. Stealing secrets is still stealing and once he was in that mind-set appropriating other objects of potential value had become hard to resist.

Two days later Bleak stood in front of the general and Professor Moran. The general walked round him nodding. 'Remarkable.' He turned to the professor. 'The best yet and faster too. And the DNA markers?'

‘Of course,’ the professor said. ‘There would be little point in achieving this,’ he indicated to Bleak, ‘if we didn’t take care of the details. And what about your end, General?’

The general frowned at the implied rebuke in the professor’s voice. ‘Everyone’s been told Oldroyd was on a specific personal errand for me. Only I and my most trusted officers know the truth. So no one has any reason to suspect. If anything it might imply my increased trust in Oldroyd.’

‘It might,’ the professor repeated.

The general sniffed. ‘Fine, well, have him report to my office in the morning.’

‘You can tell him yourself, General,’ the professor said. ‘He’s still here.’

The general turned on his heel and marched out of the professor’s laboratory.

Bleak smiled. ‘I don’t think he likes me.’

The professor smiled in return as he handed Bleak Oldroyd’s SIMPA, Semi Intelligent Personal Assistant, standard naval issue. ‘Oh, he doesn’t like me either and the feeling’s mutual. No, Bleak, he doesn’t like what we represent. But it doesn’t stop him using either of us when it suits him.’

The SIMPA bleeped as it recognised Oldroyd. Bleak watched out of the corner of his eye as it went through its boot-up routine.

‘Everything functioning?’

Bleak nodded. ‘Connected.’

The next morning Bleak showed up at the general’s staff headquarters. Oldroyd’s SIMPA held clearances allowing him into the

generals' inner sanctum. No one asked where he'd been or what he'd been doing, not even the major's closest aides. He sat at his station and went through some of the routine communications that were waiting for Oldroyd. One personal one was from his sister, except it wasn't. He did have a sister and any checks, which would have been done, would confirm every single detail. It wasn't coded as such, that would be too risky. Certain words in a specific order would indicate where he was to make a drop. There was no when, it was whenever he could legitimately be there. Oldroyd didn't know how it worked. In all the time he had been spying he had only met one person, on two occasions. First when he'd been recruited and then when he'd threatened to stop. He'd been left in no doubt that stopping was not an option. He knew nothing about the man he considered to be his controller or the extended organisation. That was Bleak's challenge.

The following evening Bleak headed into Metrakis and down to the lower levels which provided the kinds of entertainment service men were looking for on a night out. Garish light leaked out of bars and clubs bathing the passers-by, giving the street and people an alien feel. Signs floated in the air promising a variety of distractions from the innocent to the less so. A potent mix of smells, some pleasant, some not, competed for attention as Bleaks walked. He watched groups of men, women, and men and women, smiling, laughing, holding onto each other with an unconscious familiarity, some already intoxicated. It was a world he had little experience of as did Oldroyd it seemed.

In the correct street he purchased a noodle dish from the third vendor at the south end for a few credits. He sat at one of the

battered seats and ate out of the disposable container as if he was in no hurry. When finished he wiped his mouth on the small towel provided and shoved that into the pot which he scrunched up, now with a small data cube inside and deposited it in the trash collector. What happened to it after that, how they retrieved it, he had no idea. And as for the cube itself it was useless to anyone except its intended recipient. He didn't even know if that was the man he'd met. If anyone else tried to access the data or tamper with it in any way all they would find was a collection of personal holo's and comms and one or two items that would be enough to get his knuckles wrapped by Niias, but not serious enough to land him in any real trouble.

Bleak was certain he wasn't being trailed, but just in case he followed Oldroyd's usual pattern and headed down the street to a favourite haunt. Inside, light played on swirling vapours above his head making the scene dance before his eyes as he navigated his way across the room and around the mainly all male groups. He ordered a beer and then sat on a stool with his back to the bar looking up at two girls dancing in grav cages, trying to entice clientele up to join them. The undulating colours that fell across their bodies had an almost hypnotic quality, which Bleak presumed was the intention. Any that took up the offer would be charged three times the price of a drink at the bar for the privilege of the girl's company. Bleak guessed similar scenes had been played out for many thousands of years in similar places throughout the human galaxy. He ordered a second beer.

The next night Bleak went through the exact same routine, just five minutes later. It seemed Oldroyd was a bit of a loner and for anyone who might be watching this was what passed for relaxation.

However, for his contact this was code that something was wrong. As he sat again facing away from the bar a man stood next to him ordering a drink.

‘In fifteen minutes go to the ‘Starscraper’ club. The bar.’

The man took his beer and headed back into the gloom, Bleak didn’t see where. Twenty minutes later Bleak was sipping another beer in the ‘Starscraper.’ He didn’t see the man this time.

‘The six moons, thirty minutes.’ Then thirty five minutes later in the six moons, ‘Go to the toilets. On your way out the third booth on the left.’ This time Bleak looked around but he didn’t spot the man. He was good.

From the outside of the booth the arrangement of the lighting and shadows hid the occupants. Bleak slid into a seat. ‘I wasn’t being followed.’

‘We know you weren’t, now,’ the man from the bar said. There were two of them. It seemed they were taking him seriously. The second man reached across and grabbed Bleak’s hand placing it on a pad. He showed the results to the first man who nodded. Bleak’s SIMPA bleeped with annoyance at the forced intrusion.

‘Satisfied?’ Bleak said.

The first man ignored the question. ‘So what makes you think they’re onto you? I thought you’d just come back from a special assignment for the old man himself.’

‘They’re not onto me, but they’re suspicious. The assignment was contrived, it didn’t feel real. I think it was a test.’

‘Did you pass?’

‘What does it matter?’

The second man leaned forward. 'Perhaps you're being paranoid?'

Bleak shook his head. 'I want out before they have chance to confirm any suspicions. And why would you take the risk?'

The first man shrugged. 'Perhaps we just leave you. It might be the safest thing to do. So they know they've had a spy. We're no worse off and you can't point the finger at anything.'

'Except you two?'

'And do you think we haven't thought of that?'

Bleak smiled. 'I have something.'

'What?'

'The plans for Niias's next big offensive'

The first man laughed. 'Yeah, right.' But Bleak could see a flicker of doubt in his eyes as he glanced at the second man.

The second man spoke. 'So how did you get hold of them if they're onto you?'

'I've had them for a while.'

'And you haven't passed them on?'

It was Bleak's turn to laugh. 'Oh, just like that. Don't take me for an idiot. You think I don't know the potential value of something like that?'

The first man sipped at his beer, then pursed his lips in thought. He shook his head. 'I'm not sure I believe you.'

'Well you'll never know if you don't get me out, will you? Are you prepared to take that risk?'

'Perhaps we'll just take them from you.'

Bleak laughed again. ‘An empty threat. You know the hardware you put in here.’ Bleak tapped his head. ‘You try to tamper with it and it’s as if it was never there.’

The first man looked across at the second man, then back at Bleak. ‘The Starscraper, tomorrow. And we’ll be watching you all the way.’

‘So, they bought it?’ Niias said

‘It would appear so,’ Bleak said.

Niias smiled. ‘Well you go along with them. We’ll do the rest.’

‘Just don’t underestimate them, general,’ Bleak said as the general was walking out of the room.

General Niias turned in the door way, his nose wrinkled as if he’d caught a whiff of something unpleasant. ‘And what would you know?’

‘Everything you’ve had put in my head,’ Bleak said as the door closed.

The next night Bleak entered The Starscraper and as he made his way to the bar someone nudged him from behind, he didn’t see who. ‘Captain’s Folly’. Bleak didn’t break step. At the bar he found an empty stool and sat. He made a show of looking around as if searching for someone. When the barman caught his eye he waved him away, got up and left.

The Captain’s Folly was quiet compared to the Starscraper, more the choice for established, or would be couples, not interested in Metrakis’s more basic delights. But for Bleak it was the same routine as the night before. He was told to go to the toilet and then

which table to head for when he emerged. The same two men were sitting sipping beers. Bleak sat and one of them pushed a bottle in his direction.

‘Not interrupting something am I?’ Bleak said making a show of looking around. ‘Two’s company and all that.’

‘Very funny.’ the man Bleak thought of as “man 1” said.

‘So?’ Bleak said.

‘So, we sit and make like we were having a quiet drink.’

Bleak leaned back into the cushioned bench seating, stretching his legs out under the table. ‘And then what?’

‘We wait,’ man 2 said as a girl, one of the bar’s hostesses, approached the booth. She leaned down towards him and the man placed a familiar hand on her bottom. She covered his hand with hers and grinned at Bleak before whispering something into the man’s ear. As she straightened the man laughed and waved her away. With a shrug she smoothed the sheer material of her shorts and moved off in search of other clients. ‘Come, on,’ the man said to Bleak as he rose from the seat.

Outside they weaved their way through the crowds, the first man slightly ahead of the second man who stayed at Bleak’s side, with a hand under his elbow, as if guiding him. Their route seemed to be random, although Bleak guessed it was anything but.

‘Where’re we headed?’ Bleak asked. The only answer was the second man nudging him forward. At the next intersection of narrow alleys man 1 stopped and glanced down both side streets, the first sign of indecision Bleak had seen in them.

He moved closer to Bleak. ‘They’re onto us.’

Bleak felt the second man's grip loosen on his elbow. He twisted away as the blade of a laser knife passed through the fabric of his jacket. Only his enhanced reactions ensured that it grazed his stomach rather than penetrating deep into his chest. The man's eyes widened in surprise and confusion as Bleak's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. As Bleak tightened his grip a hole the size of his fist blossomed in the man's chest, spraying Bleak in blood and gore. A woman nearest to them screamed until a man grabbed her arm and wrenched her off her feet and away. The arm Bleak was holding went limp and the body slumped to the ground. As Bleak turned, man 1 was also on the ground a similar hole decorating his chest and half his face missing. When Bleak looked up other men were already pushing people away, forming a cordon around the grizzly scene.

Bleak and one of, what he presumed were the general's men stood before General Nias who was sat at his ornate desk. Bleak brushed a hand at the dried blood on the front of his jacket, some of it flaked away and drifted to the floor. He was rewarded with a loud sniff of disgust from the general.

'So Tomas?' The General said.

'We judged they were on to him, Sir. We didn't want them to escape.'

Bleak shook his head. 'They weren't on to me. You panicked, blew it.'

Tomas stiffened and glared at Bleak before turning back to the general. 'They were about to kill him, Sir.'

'Only after they'd spotted you and your men,' Bleak said.

General Niias slapped both palms on the desk. 'Enough. At least we got those two.'

'And the rest of the organisation can just carry on,' Bleak said with a glance at Tomas.

'I said, enough! Tomas you may go.'

Tomas saluted and left the room. The general watched the door close before he turned back to Bleak.

'General, I...' Bleak started to say before the general waved a hand.

'It's not important. The main objective of the exercise was to prove you were operational. Something else has come up that we can better use your...' the general's nose wrinkled, 'your unique talents for.'

Bleak stood watching the figure on the bed, the steady rise and fall of the chest. Beneath closed lids the eyes were flickering, the man was dreaming. He wondered what about. The professor handed Bleak a data cube. 'So how did you get hold of him?' Bleak said still staring at the man he presumed he was to become.

General Niias answered from behind Bleak. 'Admiral Koerreg's flagship was badly damaged, the port side batteries were completely destroyed. However a few escape pods did manage to leave as the admiral and the rest of the rebel's rabble navy fled. We picked them up and among them was Captain Davidov Nathaniel, the admiral's nephew.

'Injuries?'

'Minor,' the professor answered. 'A few broken ribs from the ejection, which we've already healed. The rest superficial.'

Bleak glanced across at the professor. 'Then why is he...' he pointed towards the captain.

The general coughed. 'I wanted him kept that way.' Bleak looked back over his shoulder, but the general offered no further explanation.

Bleak turned. 'And how does he return?'

The general grinned. 'They've asked for a prisoner exchange and I've decided to grant it.'

'Why?'

'Why have they asked, or why have I granted it?'

'Both.' The general paused as if weighing how much to tell him. Bleak shook his head. 'General, the more you give me the more convincing I can be.'

The general took a deep breath. 'One reason they've asked is simply that he is the Admiral's nephew, not that they've said as much of course. Also, most of them either don't believe in, or can't afford back-up clones...'

'So why agree?'

'Oh, I'm not a complete bastard you know.' The general paused to smile at the implied joke.

Oh, I think you are, Bleak thought. 'And?'

'It's good PR. A magnanimous gesture. The Confederation showing it still cares for its citizens even if they are a load rebellious ingrates. It plays well at home and might just weaken their support a little. I have made them promise not to return them to active service, not that I expect them to keep to that promise of course. But, then again, most of them are not in a fit state.'

Bleak studied the man in the bed again. 'Except for the Captain here.'

'Exactly.'

Five days later Bleak was cuffed and sitting in the brig of a cutter heading into the declared temporary neutral zone. In another room were thirteen other, more seriously injured, rebels. Many of their injuries could have been treated by the general's surgeons, instead he'd ordered that they be kept stable and nothing more. Yes, you really are a total bastard, thought Bleak. Beside him was a young Lieutenant, his arm in a crude splint and strapped across his chest. Two others of the walking wounded sat opposite.

'We wondered what they were doing with you, Captain.' The lieutenant said.

Bleak shook his head. 'Nothing it seems apart from keeping me sedated.'

'Why? Do you think they were playing with your mind?'

Bleak shrugged. 'I don't think so. And anyway what could they learn from me? I maybe his nephew but he confides nothing to me, why would he?'

The lieutenant nodded. 'You got away lightly, Captain.'

'As did you, Lieutenant, compared to those poor bastards back there.'

The lieutenant glanced behind him as if he could see his comrades through the walls. 'Yes, Sir.'

Bleak closed his eyes and lent his head back against the wall to indicate their conversation was over.

As the rebel cutter docked with the larger transport the admiral was there to greet his nephew. Bleak saluted. 'Isn't this a risk, Admiral? If they knew you were here...'

The admiral smiled. 'And how would they know that. Anyway, I don't think even that bastard Niias would fire on an unarmed shuttle that was carrying the injured prisoners he'd just exchanged. Wouldn't play well in the Legislature would it?'

'I suppose not, Sir,' Bleak said.

The admiral put a hand on Bleak's shoulder. 'Well, I'm glad to see you back in one piece, my boy. Perhaps my sister will speak to me again now. They treat you well?'

Bleak nodded. 'Better than some, he said as the first of the gravistretchers floated past. 'It seems their hospitality had limits.' He could see the tightness in the admiral's jaw as he laid a hand on the arm of one of the men who was half conscious.

'We'll do what we can for them,' the admiral said. 'What about you? They made us promise you wouldn't return to active duty.'

'To hell with that,' Bleak said.

The admiral grinned. 'My thoughts exactly. And at the moment we need every seasoned officer we have. They're now sending me half trained kids.'

'But we can still win, Admiral?' Bleak asked.

The admiral shrugged. Bleak could see in the man's eyes that he didn't believe they could. Neither did Bleak, nor he suspected did the captain.

After two days in the medical unit Bleak discharged himself and re-joined the Admiral's battered flagship, which was undergoing

hasty repairs. The admiral had released some of his staff officers to take up more senior posts on other ships, officers with experience were a dwindling commodity and all ships were undermanned. Captain Nathaniel was promoted to acting lieutenant commander and transferred from the port battery to bridge command. While the admiral ran the battle he would be in charge of the ship. However, his first duty, as it was for all the experienced crew, was to train the new, green recruits, in the hope that they wouldn't panic at the first sign of action. For Bleak this meant using the captain's considerable experience of active duty to train the new port battery crew. And that meant simulations as the repairs were nowhere near complete. This was a blessing for Bleak, as despite the captain's knowledge and memories when it came to putting theory into practice he needed the sim time as much as anyone. However, the recruits were so inexperienced that if there were deficiencies in his capabilities they weren't going to notice.

A week later The Independence was patched up as best they could, given the limited resources of the rebel shipyard. The fleet now left to take part in full scale training trials. Within two days one vessel had been lost in jump transition as its core stability catastrophically failed and the forces of time and space tore the vessel apart. Over the next few days five more limped back with critical systems' failures. Twelve others needed ongoing attention to bring them up to minimally acceptable battle operating status.

Four days later Bleak was sat in the admiral's conference room with the commanders of what remained of the rebel fleet.

Bleak watched as the admiral's gaze travelled around the table occasionally pausing for a second or two on a young face. A face

that was, even Bleak could recognise, too inexperienced to carry the responsibilities that had been thrust upon it. The faces of men that had been promoted out of necessity. He could see the doubt, the weight of that responsibility in their eyes, and these were only training manoeuvres. ‘Gentlemen, intelligence tells us that the Confederation fleet are reforming and they are expected to leave within days. That means that even if we return now we’ll have a bare week to finalise any repairs that are still needed.’

‘Sir?’

‘Yes, commander?’

‘Sir, that’s... that’s too soon. The men, Sir, some of them have never seen action before. They’re raw recruits. Three out of my six gun crews are barely functional.’ What Bleak could see etched into the lines under his youthful eyes were the fears that he didn’t voice, that he himself was too inexperienced to command. Throughout the manoeuvres the young commander had been hesitant, needing constant reminders of his orders, positioning and tactics.

The admiral glanced down for a second before looking across at Bleak and then back to his newly promoted officer. ‘And what would you suggest, Commander? That we ask them to wait until we’re ready?’

‘Sir, I didn’t mean... I’m sorry... I...’

The admiral waved away the apology, he knew the others were thinking the same. ‘I’m only surprised, Commander, that they’ve waited so long. Perhaps that’s testament to the bloody nose we gave them last time.’ This at least raised a few smiles. ‘When we get back give the men an evening to themselves. But before that we drill them hard, then when they return we drill them again. They

will be ready, understood?’ There were a few ‘Sirs,’ the rest simply nodded.

When they had all left to re-join their ships the admiral turned to Bleak. ‘Nothing to say, Commander?’

Bleak shrugged. ‘Some of them look defeated before we start, Sir.’

The admiral nodded. ‘Then it’s our job to put some fight into them. In normal circumstances many of them would be years away from command, if ever. But we have to use the tools we have at hand, Commander. Also remember, Niias is not in a dissimilar position, although, I admit not as bad as us. Still, the last ten years has robbed him of some of his most able officers. What we need to do is come up with some tactics that can expose their deficiencies while trying to shield our own as best we can.’

‘Sir.’ Bleak answered.

In his quarters Bleak shed his sweat and grime soaked clothes and showered. As the water poured down his body he reflected on those he had been training with. In many ways he was learning with them, the advantage he had, of course, was Nathaniel’s memories and experience. The men were willing and, fired by a belief in the righteousness of their cause, worked until they were close to exhaustion. Finally they were coming to what Bleak believed was a basic level of competence, where their actions would be instinctive, essential in the confusion of battle where hesitation could cost them.

Bleak rested his head on the wall of the cubicle, he too was drained. In his tired state his weary mind wandered over what he’d

been doing and the reality of his task. As his first real mission it was also the first time that he had been thrust together with a body of men on a continual basis. He was getting to know a close knit group of people, rather than relying on the memories and experiences he had been given. He ate with them, laughed and shared banter with them. He was part of their world, their team, which threatened feelings of belonging that were alien to him.

He'd learned of their histories, their fears. Also of those that had families, children, a concept that Bleak could not even imagine for himself. And soon, if his own plans worked, he would be responsible for many of their deaths and the pain that would bring to those they left behind. But even as a hint of remorse entered his thoughts the Prime Directive and the programming that was acting deep in his psyche exerted itself. He believed that while his actions might cost hundreds of lives, they would save thousands and help bring about an end to this bloody rebellion. Conflicting thoughts could not be permitted. He believed in the Confederation, didn't he?' What else was there?

Bleak walked into the empty general mess and ordered a meal from the autovendor, the officer's mess being closed as everyone took advantage of a final night of leave.

'Not going out, Commander?'

Bleak started to rise, but the admiral placed a hand on his shoulder. The gentle pressure telling him to sit. 'No, Sir. I thought the men deserved their night out without the possibility of running into me.'

The admiral raised an eyebrow, at what Bleak knew he recognised as a feeble excuse, but didn't pursue it. 'Mind if I join you?'

'Of course not, Sir.'

The admiral sat and loosened his collar. He stretched his feet out under the table and massaged his neck. 'I'm tired, Davi.'

Nathanial's memories told him that this was a nickname the admiral rarely used for him and certainly not when they were on board ship. But then they were alone. Bleak studied the admiral's face. Nathanial had admired and looked up to the man ever since his father had left his mother when he was young. He'd heard rumours in naval college that his uncle Koerreg, had chased the man off, but his mother had always denied it. Bleak let Nathanial's fears speak. 'Do you think we have a chance, Sir?'

The admiral smiled and patted Bleak's arm. 'There's always a chance Davi, always a chance. And that bastard Niias is a predictable old fool at times. He'll wade in believing that weight of numbers will be enough, unconcerned of the additional losses he might suffer.'

'And will it?'

The admiral hesitated. 'You know, Davi,' he said, changing the subject. 'I've always thought if I'd had a son of my own, I could have done a lot worse than have one like you. Not that I've ever had the time for a family of course.' Bleak's face reddened at the mixture of pride and embarrassment that he knew Nathanial would have felt. Also, perhaps with some acknowledgement of his own, soon to be, role. He didn't hate these men, or the admiral. If anything he admired the man. So, for the moment he would content

himself with the thought that he might be comforting the admiral in a small way, allowing him to voice his feelings. Not that Bleak had much experience of such things.

The admiral paused and stared into the middle distance as if selecting memories to re-live. 'There were, of course,' he smiled, 'women in my life from time to time. Despite what some of them think, the navy has not been my only love. One or two might even have persuaded me to form a more permanent liaison, shall we say. But then, a life that takes you away for many months at a time and from which there's a good chance you'll never return is hardly conducive to a long term relationship.'

Bleak wasn't sure what to say, so said nothing.

After a few seconds of silence between them the admiral focused on him again. 'What about you, Davi? Is there anyone special in your life?'

Bleak shook his head. 'No, Sir.' Bleak knew that to be true for both he and Nathaniel. Although it had, of course, always been true for him.

The admiral re-buttoned his collar and stood, motioning Bleak to remain where he was. 'Perhaps that's as well,' he said as he left the room.

For the next few days, after the men returned all they and Bleak did was eat sleep and drill before they set off for the edge of Rebel space where they expected the Confederation to appear. They knew there would be no pretence at finesse to the Confederation's tactics. This would be an attempt to bludgeon them into submission.

Bleak was roused from deep sleep by his SIMPA. Even given his enhanced powers of recovery he still felt weary and wondered how the men he'd been training were feeling.

'Commander Nathaniel to report to the bridge, report to the bridge.'

As he dressed Bleak knew this could only mean one thing the Confederation fleet had made its appearance. However, there were no calls to station, so at least an engagement wasn't imminent. On the bridge Admiral Koerreg was sat in his command chair eyes fixed on the representation of the sector ahead of them. Bleak took it all in, his SIMPA updating him with the detail. 'There's a lot of them,' he said.

'And more appearing all the time,' the admiral added.

Bleak studied the information for a few more seconds. 'Yet they're still three days out – being cautious?'

The admiral smiled. 'Or they're not in any hurry. They outnumber us three to one and outgun us five to one.' What the admiral didn't say was that most of the Confederation fleet would also have many more battle hardened men compared to their own raw recruits. He glanced across at Bleak. 'My conference room now.'

'Well, gentlemen,' the admiral said to Bleak and the other commanders, whose holographic forms "sat" round the table, 'our time is come. Impressions?' The holographic figures looked at each other, none of them wanting to be the first to speak. They had all seen the data. Bleak could see despair in some of the younger and less experienced faces, resignation in others. Those that had taken part in previous large scale naval actions managed to hide their emotions.

Finally, the newly promoted Commander Darius aired the thought so many of them were thinking. 'Forgive me, Admiral, but the task looks...' the man hesitated glancing to the figures either side of him before continuing. 'It looks...' he shook his head, '...difficult in the extreme.'

The admiral laughed. 'Well put, Commander. I think the word you were searching for though was, impossible.' Admiral Koerreg held up a hand as the anxious young commander leaned forward to add to his words. 'No, that's alright, Commander. You were simply being honest and echoing what all of us are thinking. But engage them we must and therefore we need a strategy.' He glanced around the table before continuing. 'Niias has come with what he believes is an overwhelming force and if I was in his position I would do the same. He will not waste effort on subtlety, he will simply try to overrun us, send everything he has to obliterate us in short order. Nor will he worry about our tactics, believing that sheer weight of numbers will be enough to secure victory.' Bleak studied some of his fellow officers and it was clear in their eyes that they believed the same.

The admiral continued. 'This, gentlemen is also his weakness.' At the word 'weakness' a number of the younger commanders sat up a little straighter, a sliver of hope having been dangled in front of them. 'It will be our job to deny them that quick victory. Our port and starboard wings will play hit and run with them, harry them then withdraw. You will sting them, annoy them and frustrate them. You will drive wedges into their tight, over confident, formation. And then when they are in sufficient confusion, and the time is right, our centre will move in and take out their flagship, The Pride of Metrakis

and Niias along with it.’ The admiral looked round the table. ‘Any questions?’ then just as one of the more senior commanders seemed about to speak, admiral Koerreg concluded. ‘No? Thank you, gentlemen, your detailed orders will follow.’

When the final figure had winked out the admiral took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Opening them again he stared at Bleak. ‘Well, Commander?’

‘You didn’t give Willan chance to speak.’

The admiral smiled. ‘You noticed that?’ The smile faded. ‘Willan is a wily old fox and I’m sure whatever he was going to raise I wouldn’t be able to answer. He knows that and will understand.’

‘And can it work?’

‘Do you have a better idea?’ the admiral snapped back.

Bleak straightened his back. ‘No, Sir. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to imply...’

The admiral’s smile returned and he patted Bleak’s arm. ‘No, I’m sorry, Davi. The books speak of the loneliness of command, they don’t know the half of it. Can it work? Perhaps. Niias has always been able to ignore tactics in favour of overwhelming fire power. That’s lazy thinking. Maybe this time his over confidence will come back to bite him, what do you think?’

Bleak nodded. ‘But whatever happens the Pride of Metrakis will be heavily defended. The chances of even getting close will be...’ Bleak’s voiced tailed away.

Then admiral ran a hand through his greying hair. ‘Well, he’s certainly not going to make it easy for us. So?’

Bleak returned the admiral’s smile. ‘So, I think whatever the outcome we will make them pay a high price.’ As the admiral left

the room, he gave Bleak a fatherly pat on the shoulder. As the door swished shut Bleak reflected that it was his job to try and minimise that price.

The Confederation fleet seemed in no hurry to meet with their enemy, as if they wanted to give the rebel's plenty of time to see the number and might of their ships, to contemplate the force that dwarfed them and the potential fate that represented. As if by doing so they would weaken, perhaps even hoping that the rebel fleet would surrender without a shot being fired. But if anything it had the opposite effect. Bleak could see, even in the youngest recruit, a growing resolve. A belief that the shame of giving in without a fight would be worse than dying. One thing Bleak was certain of was that many of them would die.

As the two sides closed on each other it appeared the admiral was right, Niias had no clever strategy planned. His ships lined up in traditional formation, the lighter armed and more manoeuvrable vessels on the wings and all his heavy armour in the centre, which he would no doubt hold back until, what he considered the last possible moment. Then at a time of his choosing he would unleash what he believed to be a devastating barrage, annihilating the heart of the rebel fleet. Battle over, surrender taken and a hero's reception back on Metrakis.

When the two fleets were a day apart Admiral Koerreg sent his two wings ahead. Leaving his centre exposed he was gambling on General Niias's unswerving belief that he could just roll over the rebel fleet and dispose of any remaining vessels at his leisure. The Confederation fleet stayed in tight formation. To begin with even

when the rebel wings made contact nothing changed, as if the general either chose to ignore their presence or thought they would be like flies to a dog, a mild irritant but nothing more. However, these insects carried powerful stings. They harried and raked the exposed Confederation ships. It wasn't long before some of those ships at the extremities of the fleet were sustaining considerable damage and had to drop back.

In the first hour, for the loss of two of their own vessels the Rebels had destroyed or incapacitated seven of the Confederation ships. In terms of their numbers and the balance of power it was meaningless, but it gave the rebels something to cheer. Sensing this, or perhaps it was wounding their pride, the wings of the Confederation fleet were released. In response, Admiral Koerreg ordered his ships to return towards the main fleet. As they did so they were to harry, and occupy the Confederation ships as much as they could without fully engaging them. Even so the rebel losses started to mount.

Eventually the admiral called the wings in to protect the flanks of the heavily armoured rebel cruisers which were now coming under attack from the Confederation frigates that had escaped the retreating ships. Sensing victory the Confederation centre made its move. In response the rebels drew up in a thin line concentrating their heaviest fire power around Admiral Koerreg's flag ship. However, as the Confederation tried to flank the admiral it was the rebel centre that started to buckle and give way. Two of the outer frigates which had come under particularly heavy bombardment peeled away. Seeing an opportunity The Pride of Metrakis and its personal escort sprang forward to try and engage the admiral.

However, Bleak knew this was part of the admiral's plan, one of the oldest in the book he'd told him. The aim was to draw Niias's flagship and its escort on with the aim of isolating it. Then ignoring everything else the rebels would concentrate all their efforts on those, relatively few ships, regardless of losses. The admiral argued that if they could remove the head of the snake then its body, the rest of the Confederation forces, would lose impetus and be thrown into confusion. Bleak could see the admiral's plan working, the rebel centre were under heavy fire which seemed to encourage general Niias to over commit his flagship and immediate covering vessels, putting him in danger of becoming isolated. Bleak knew it was his time to act.

With the admiral's full concentration on the critical moments of his plan, which were now unfolding, Bleak undid his battle harness. As the ship was being buffeted by the colossal forces being released around it he staggered to back of the bridge and deactivated the blast doors. Entering the corridor, above the muffled din of multiple concussions that shook the fabric of the ship he heard the admiral shout, 'Commander!'

The immediate corridor was deserted with all the ship's crew at battle stations. He had just reached the drop tube that would take him down to engineering when an explosion on the port side pitched the ship sideways. It lifted Bleak off his feet, throwing him into the bulkhead, then onto his back. Rolling to his knees he caught his breath before entering the drop tube, just hoping they didn't take a direct hit when he was in it. He knew that would, in all probability disturb the field, causing him to plummet down thirty floors, coming to a very sudden and terminal stop. To his relief he exited at

engineering alive and with his sidearm at the ready. Three ratings and the chief engineer were strapped into their harnesses, monitoring the fluctuations and compensations the ship was making in reaction to the elemental forces that were distorting the space around it. The nearest to Bleak turned and opened his mouth, but Bleak put two slugs in him, exploding his chest, before had uttered a word. The other two suffered a similar fate before they had time to register what had happened to their comrade.

Bleak then entered the secondary bridge area. This was in the heart of the vessel and allowed full control of the ship in the event that the main bridge was destroyed. Inside were his, as commander, second in command and a skeleton crew. The man had just started to salute when Bleak shot him and the other three who were manning the secondary helm, shield and master weapons controls. Bleak pulled his number two out of his harnesses and sat himself in the command chair. A quick scan told him that the ship was in the thick of the battle. However, it had only sustained minor damage on the port side, as it was still being protected by its own escort, although they themselves were under heavy fire. For the moment it seemed they were giving as good as they received. A more detailed examination of status revealed that when he'd entered shield energy was being directed towards the number one starboard engine which had sustained a glancing blow causing power fluctuations. The ship was now decreasing that engines power output while compensating with the number two starboard engine. Those on the main bridge would hardly be aware of the changes.

Bleak took a deep breath and entered his commander's override, diverting all control to the secondary bridge and cutting off the

automatic overrides as he did so. Red light now bathed the room and alarms would be sounding all over the ship. He could imagine first the confusion and then panic on the main bridge as they realised what had happened. In the few seconds that it took for them to react he had shut down the number two starboard engine, diverting all power to the defective number one engine. What had been minor fluctuations well within operational parameters now cycled to extreme levels. New alarms added their voice to the cacophony. The comms erupted with the admiral's voice. 'What the hell is going on down there!' Bleak ignored it.

The ship bucked like a wild animal under attack. Having not wanted to waste precious seconds fastening the harness, Bleak was flung across the room, slamming into the door he'd entered by. He heard a crack as his shoulder took the force of the impact. Agony flamed down his left side. Shutting down the pain and using his good arm he hauled himself up the now canting deck. The ship bucked again and Bleak heard a deep grinding and renting howl as the ships superstructure failed to contain the wildly varying forces being exerted on it by the now out of control engine.

As the vessel fought to right itself Bleak, holding his left arm across his body, made it to the exit doors and the corridor that led directly to the escape pods. These were situated as close as possible to what would normally be a last resort of ship command. Somewhere beneath his feet a vibration shuddered through the ship. The floor buckled. Smoke and the smell of burning power lines drifted out of the nearest ventilation duct causing him to cough. As he neared the escape pods Bleak heard the crack of a projectile weapon. A split second later he felt the agony of a slug slicing

through his leg. It was only the fact that he was twisting and dropping to the floor that saved him from a second slug hitting him in the chest. Instead it grazed a path along his ribs. As he fell he aimed his own weapon at one of the ratings that he'd shot when he first arrived. The injured man must have dragged himself along the corridor and was now slumped against the door to the nearest pod. As Bleak's finger closed on the trigger the gun dropped from the man's fingers. Bleak hesitated and then as he hit the floor agony shot through his leg followed by a second jolt as he landed on his broken shoulder.

He must have blacked out. He hoped it had just been for a second or two. When he opened his eyes the corridor was filling with an acrid smelling smoke that could only be burning between deck insulation. He dragged himself across to the pod door which, sensing him, opened. He checked on the rating who was unconscious but still breathing and ignoring the pain that seemed to flow in waves through his body he dragged the man with him into the escape pod. As the door closed he smacked a hand on the eject button and then cried out as he was pinned against a wall by the force of the ejection. Battling against blacking out again he disabled the detection beacon. Then he lay on the floor next to the rating while the pod picked its own route out of the battle zone. He'd done everything he could, he just hoped it was enough. As his vision clouded and narrowed he gave up fighting to stay conscious. As his eyes closed he trusted his fate to the belief that with the violent mayhem playing out around them the last thing anyone would be looking for was a single escape pod.

When he came too he tried to sit, then flopped back down as agony again racked his body. As he recovered he studied the man lying next to him. He was unconscious but at least he was alive. Taking a slow, shallow breath and preparing this time Bleak hauled himself, using his good arm, onto one of the pod's seats. He sat for a few seconds doing his best to damp down the spikes of pain. When he thought he could cope he opened his eyes and checked the displays. They were now more than a hundred thousand clicks from where they'd started. Bleak nudged their direction towards where the Confederation fleet had first appeared and changing the distress call to Confederation codes he activated the locating beacon. Finding the medi-pack Bleak injected himself with painkillers then immobilised his shoulder which would allow his bodies enhanced healing properties to get to work. The bleeding from the wound in his leg had stopped. It was deep and had severed muscle, but had avoided any major arteries. He slapped an emergency dressing over the congealed blood. Turning his attention to the unconscious rating, the sensor told him the man was weak, but stable. It suggested putting him into deep coma, so that's what Bleak did. He then consumed half the emergency food supplies. His body needed the energy to heal.

Three days later he was picked up by a Confederation scouting vessel. After a brief examination Niias had him transferred to The Pride of Metrakis where he was taken to the medical unit. When the doctor had left the room Bleak noted the guard outside and security that meant there was no way he could leave without permission. An hour later Niias appeared.

‘I’m honoured, Sir,’ Bleak said. The general frowned, trying to decide if Bleak was being sarcastic or not. With the relaxation of his features and the half smile he presumed the general was accepting his remark as genuine.

‘I thought I should tell you, that your mission was a success. Of course only a handful of people know you were there, or even that you exist.’ The general grinned as he remembered. ‘It was really quite spectacular. As it spun out of control one of the starboard engines exploded, destroying half of Koenig’s ship and taking out two of the escort with it. The debri from the resulting explosions then destroyed five other vessels. The subsequent confusion made it easy for us to punch through the rebel line with devastating results. What was left of the rebel fleet then scattered. I now have squadron’s quartering the sector, mopping up any pockets of resistance they come across. If I had my way we’d simply destroy every ship we encounter, but it seems our Lords and Masters want to negotiate their surrender.’ The general was about to say more, when it was as if he realised who he was talking too. Instead he fixed Bleak with a look that made him feel uncomfortable. He could almost see the man’s mind working, wondering what to do with him.

Bleak’s thoughts went back to Admiral Koerreg and the other men he had trained and lived with. But as regrets surfaced, they were difficult to hold on to, drifting away like smoke on the breeze. He presumed that was his Prime Directive asserting itself. As the words entered his head he again believed that his actions, though costing the lives of thousands had saved many more. He relaxed. ‘What about the rating.’

‘Recovering. Why did you bring him with you?’

Bleak shook his head, he wasn't sure. 'It seemed the right thing to do.'

The general grunted in response, then turned to leave.

'Your holding me prisoner,' Bleak said, a statement not a question.

'For your own good,' the general said as he left the room. Somehow Bleak suspected it was anything but.

As soon as they entered orbit around the Metrakian system's gas giant, Tritoron, Bleak was transferred to a shuttle. For the journey to Metrakis and then on the planet itself Bleak saw no one other than the two guards that accompanied him. Having said he saw even them was stretching it. Whenever they were with him they were armed and in fully body armour complete with visors that were opaque from the outside. On Metrakis he had no idea where they were taking him. The compartment of the vehicle they travelled in had no windows. The guards told him nothing, other than when to get to up, where to go and when to sit back down. It was with some relief that the first thing he did recognise was Professor Moran's suite of laboratories. As they entered the professor was waiting for them.

'You can leave,' the professor said to the guards, who hesitated as if thinking about it.

'We'll be outside,' one of the guards said.

'Lie down, Bleak,' the professor said as the door closed.

'What's hap...' Bleak started, stopping when the professor pressed a finger to his own lips.

The professor then turned to a display. 'That should do it,' he said when he looked up, 'but we haven't got long.'

Bleak sat up. ‘What’s going on, Professor?’

Professor Morran busied himself with what Bleak recognised as a scanner that the professor had used on him in his early days. ‘I used the excuse that I need to run diagnostics on you to get you back here. That understanding what effects the mission might have had on your mind might be important. Whether it, together with the Prime Directive, had raised any conflicts as it did with the type twos.’

‘And the real reason?’

The professor nodded towards the door. ‘To get you away from them. To help you if I can, although I’m not sure what I can do, Bleak.’

Bleak registered the concern in the professor’s frown. ‘I’m sorry, professor, I don’t understand.’

The professor looked up and put a hand on Bleak’s arm. He gave him an apologetic smile. ‘Of course you don’t, they’ve had you shut away. Since you were taken on board Niias’s ship the Confederation have been negotiating the rebel’s surrender. Final settlement is expected any day.’

‘Surely that’s good? But I don’t see what that has to do with me.’ As he said it he could see the lines deepen on the professor’s face, the sadness in his eyes.

The professor sighed. ‘With an end to the rebellion, they won’t need your special services, Bleak. He hesitated and took a deep breath. ‘They won’t need you, Bleak. Worse than that, you’ll be a potential embarrassment just waiting to happen. They’ll want to deny that you, or anything like you ever existed. They’ll want to terminate you.’

Bleak shook his head as if it would help clear the confusion that was fogging his mind. ‘Surely, no, professor. I...’

‘Bleak, you have to believe me. Remember you’ve been engineered to perform specific tasks. That engineering extends to your mind, your thoughts, your beliefs.’ The professor took hold of both Bleak’s shoulders. ‘This is no lie, Bleak, no trick.’

Bleak could see in the professor’s eyes the truth of what he was telling him. He felt his heart beating faster in his chest, a reminder of a life that they now aimed to deprive him of. He had believed, that when it was over he would be given a life. That there was a future for him, that his continued existence was a given. It had never occurred to him to doubt it. But it seemed those false beliefs had been burned into his mind along with everything else that made him function. After all, how could they rely on him if he had any concerns that that would not be the case.

Bleak stared at the professor. Even though logic, and the events of the last few days, told him it was true, the idea was like water in his hands, impossible to hold on to. He shook his head trying to block out the denials that kept returning to his thoughts. ‘So what now?’

The professor shook his head. ‘I’m not sure, Bleak. My plan, such as it was, didn’t go much further than finding a reason to have you brought back to me. Now, I must go and report some of my findings, along with further reasons to keep you here. When I come back we’ll try to think of something.’

Bleak nodded in numbed response. When the professor had left the room he lay back on the bench, the conflict still raging in his mind. He tried to focus on the professor’s words. He was the only

person he had ever really trusted, or was that an implanted belief as well?

‘Bleak, Bleak!’ Bleak woke, for a second unsure where he was. Then the reality of everything the professor had told him came rushing back. ‘Bleak!’ It was the professor’s voice in his head. It was a communication method that hadn’t been used since his first forays into the world outside the laboratory on his own. When the professor had used it to guide him through any social situations that he was having difficulty with in those early day.

‘Professor?’

‘Bleak, you have to leave. The rebels have signed their surrender.’

‘Professor, how, I...’

‘Bleak, there are guards on the door you entered by. However, there’s a service door at the back of the room. I’ve disabled the security for thirty seconds, any longer and they’ll notice.

‘But, Professor...’

‘Just run, Bleak. Run!’

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Ian Martyn lives in Surrey in the United Kingdom. Following a degree in Zoology he spent thirty years working in the pharmaceutical industry. On leaving to become a consultant he was determined to complete and publish those science fiction stories that he had started and were rattling around in his head. You can find more about Ian Martyn and his writing on his web site: www.martynfiction.com.

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