

ONE

Commissioner Catrinas Pekrov continued reviewing the report in front of her despite the clicking of heels that denoted a salute. ‘General Niias, I presume you have some news for me?’

‘Yes, Commissioner Pekrov, we’ve located the manipulant and we’re closing in on it.’

Commissioner Pekrov raised her eyes from the report. Niias was standing stiff, almost at attention. She hadn’t asked him to sit. The man was an idiot and an incompetent, so he could stand. He seemed to think a crisp uniform and a ramrod straight back was all that was needed to command. She had a sudden impulse to throw something at him, but there was nothing heavy enough to hand, nothing that would cause sufficient damage anyway. She breathed deep and arched an eyebrow. ‘No news on the professor though?’ she asked, already knowing the answer.

The general stiffened a little more. ‘No, Ma’am.’

Commissioner Pekrov decided not to berate him about the professor again for the moment. The man could only concentrate on one thing at a time and even that seemed to be a struggle. ‘So, do we know where the manipulant is?’

‘Yes, he’s currently somewhere in the Grand East Hub.’

The commissioner took a breath. ‘Somewhere... so he’s been in Metrakis all this time?’

The general's eyes flicked down to meet hers for a second before returning their focus to a point on the wall behind her. 'Er, we don't know that for certain. But we have it now. It will be captured and terminated.'

The commissioner shook her head. She stared up at the general and waited until he was forced to look down at her. 'You and your men will do neither of those things, General. I've decided that since you've proved unable to find the professor I'll persuade one of his creations to have a go. He's been very adept at avoiding all the resources at your disposal for the past three months, so he's evidently as good as you described. Or do you make a habit of creating as well as recruiting incompetents?' She was using and emphasising the 'he' word to rile the general. He refused to grant them any human value or status and constantly referred to them as 'it'. She didn't voice her opinion that if all the general's men were like him, the manipulant's abilities were unlikely to be stretched in avoiding them. But she knew that not all the general's men were like him, because some of those men were working for her.

The general's face reddened, first at the barb over his competence, secondly over his men's competence and thirdly at the decision not to terminate the manipulant. If news of its existence leaked he may be forced to resign his command, or be court marshalled. Either way it would be an ignominious end to what he saw as a brilliant career. Seeing the commissioner's expression of disdain he went back to staring somewhere over her head. 'Is that wise Ma'am? We don't know how stable it might be.'

'Well, we shall have to find out, won't we?'

The general sagged a little, giving in. ‘Do you want my men to hold it?’

‘No, I want him under the impression that this is an alternative, a way out. I will dangle a little hope in front of him to make him more compliant. Now you’re sure the communications are still working?’

The general nodded.

‘Good, that’ll be all, General.’

Commissioner Pekrov watched the stiff back march out of the room. She did have a little sympathy for him, but not much. The manipulants had been a most effective weapon. And needs must in times of war and all that. But when the rebellion had been crushed they should have been terminated immediately. Their existence went against all the strict, agreed codes on the use of engineered humanity. These were laboratory creations. The general had also made the mistake, among many, of placing far too much trust in the professor and his team. What’s more he’d then used those manipulants before they were fully operational and tested. So many mistakes and yet the general was still in office. He’d led a charmed career that the commissioner, despite her best efforts, had been unable to end. And now, when the means presented itself she was forced to use the abominations herself. She slapped the desk in annoyance.

Commissioner Pekrov flicked at her desk, bringing up several views of the east hub. ‘Major.’

Her assistant walked into the room. ‘Yes, Ma’am.’

‘Let’s make contact with this manipulant. What does he call himself?’

‘Bleak, Ma’am.’

Bleak scanned the crowds milling, like mindless insects, around the Grand East Ground Hub, which had been designed to impress with its seemingly too few slender columns supporting the crystal-clear dome some two hundred metres above their heads. The place was heaving. Ever since the rebellion had been put down, those former rebels were trying to prove what loyal citizens they were by visiting the capital world. Or at least their governments were intent on demonstrating their new-found loyalty. Often the visitors were not here by choice – they were picked by lottery for a ‘once in a life time trip’. Bleak ignored them as they wandered around, awed by the imposing architecture. There, by the refreshment stand, were three of his hunters, scanning the crowds by sight and by device. They’d be trying to fit known images to as many people as they could. Not that in his case it would do them much good.

A group of wide-eyed and wide-faced tourists from the outer colonies were ambling between him and the hunters. Bleak dropped in with them, blending looks, mannerisms, gate, gawping at the displays while still keeping an eye on those hunting him. The hunters looked right through him. They weren’t close enough for the scanners to work. Or maybe he was being over-suspicious, maybe they were just scanning the crowds as part of general security, not looking for him. But then Bleak knew better than to believe in coincidence.

He looked around again. This crowd were of no use to him. They’d just arrived and were heading for the exit. He needed to get off-world. He peeled away, tagging on to another group with their

advertising bags of souvenirs from the last-chance outlets, trailing tagging messages in the air behind them; shop here; special offer; one time only. Parents were dragging tired and reluctant kids in their 'I love Metrakis' hats. He straightened, concentrating on what was possible in the few minutes available to him. His face thinned a little, eyebrows raising a few millimetres to the outside. Even that was hard, taxing. He needed food. Several days beard growth was appearing. But this time his clothing wasn't a great fit, something he couldn't do much about. He raised his jacket collar on one side and shuffled a bit more. Sometimes, being the oddball of the group could be made to look less conspicuous. This was more hopeful. They were making their way towards a gate holding area.

The group slowed. There was some sort of hold-up ahead. Bleak peered round, his earlier hopes dashed. Now he was certain they were looking for him. There were two on the gate scanning at close quarters, pulling people to one side for more detailed examination. He was bound to get dragged out – he hadn't had enough time.

'Bleak!'

The voice in his head made him stop in his tracks. For a moment he wondered where it was coming from. No one had contacted him this way since the professor months ago, telling him to run. He could sense eyes on him. He cut out of the group, drifting in and out of three families coming the other way before sitting behind a massive pillar next to a woman holding a baby. She was crooning to it in a low voice. She glanced at him before turning her attention back to the infant. His hand hovered over his SIMPA, Semi Intelligent Personal Aid, ready to break the connection.

‘Bleak. I know you can hear me.’

‘Who are you?’

‘That’s not important at the moment. Just be assured I know you.’

‘So, who am I?’

The voice laughed. Not a pleasant sound. ‘You’re not a who, Bleak, you’re a what.’

Bleak’s shoulders sagged, he was tired. He’d been on the run for too long. He felt like throwing his hands in the air and shouting, ‘I’m here,’ just so it would all be over. The woman with the baby glanced at him again, then shuffled to the far end of the seat. ‘I am a who,’ he said. ‘I live. Somebody gave me life.’ He realised how petulant that sounded, but didn’t care. He felt he needed to say it and hear it.

‘Yes, but it’s a life you weren’t supposed to keep.’

‘I don’t know you. I’m shutting you off.’ His hand moved to the SIMPA again.

‘Bleak, wait! I can help you. Get you out of there.’

‘And I’m supposed to trust you?’

‘Do you have a choice?’ Bleak paused, the other options were looking, well, bleak. ‘Have I given you away to the hunters?’ the voice continued. ‘Yes, I know they’re there. And yes, in case you had any doubts, they are looking for you. Listen to me, Bleak. Go to gate six, there are no hunters there. They’ll let you through.’ Bleak paused, closing his eyes, slowing his heart, giving himself time to be rational. The voice continued. ‘Bleak, you have no choice. You do it this way or I put them on to you. You already know that simply by contacting you, I can do that. If they take you,

Bleak, there will be no mercy. You know that. You can't be allowed to exist.'

Bleak opened his eyes. 'Gate six?'

'Yes. I'm sending you the clearances'

Bleak pushed himself out of the seat. The voice was right, he had no choice. Giving up wasn't an option – the desire to survive they'd built into him was too strong. On the schematic in his left peripheral vision, gate six was highlighted. It was a priority gate. When he arrived, there was no queue. He waved his SIMPA at station security, which didn't give him a second glance. He was through.

The ascension bubble rose through the dome and out into the atmosphere on its slender, sky-piercing pillar. A glance round his fellow travellers and he allowed himself to breathe a little easier. They were all intent on the view. He had escaped the immediate danger. He smiled to himself, escaped to what? But for now at least, his journey was set and he had a few minutes' peace. He joined the rest of the passengers, peering at the expanding view beneath them. The cityscape was spread out below. Claw-like spires breached the city dome reaching towards them. Metrakis was a multi-coloured spiky blot in a sea of monochrome, smooth, curving sand. Further east was the barrier, sparkling and shimmering as it rebuffed the efforts of the raging dust storms that the desert sent to try and bury this alien intruder. The centre of the Confederation was here simply because this was the first planet to be settled in the sector and therefore had a head start over the rest. Somewhere down there, one

of the original habitation domes was preserved as a museum, a testament to those early pioneers.

As they rose higher, into view came the blue waters of Lake Metrak, over a hundred klicks of fresh water. An artificial lake made to service Metrakis, the water sucked from aquifers deep beneath the planet's surface. Surrounding it were blankets of crop species, engineered to withstand the constant battering, and the clutches of growing tunnels for those more tender treats. Not that they could ever grow enough to satiate the ravenous Metrakis. At one end of the lake, Bleak could make out the dazzling Metrakolis, playground for Metrakis. He wondered what it might be like to experience leisure, not something his short life had allowed. He'd seen the advertising, of course – the floating palaces for the rich and influential, and the pleasure complexes for the rest. Whatever credits you could spare, they found ways of accommodating and relieving you of them.

Then just before they disappeared through the thin layer of cloud, a ribbon of green lined the horizon. The globe circling sea that covered three-quarters of this world. Filled with a primitive algae, it was more of an aquatic soup. Life here had never progressed beyond those endless single-celled strings that trapped the sun's energy and processed the chemical-rich waters. However, over billions of years that algae had filled the atmosphere with the oxygen that had attracted those first settlers, who then set about taming the wilder aspects of the planet.

As the clouds obscured the view, Bleak's SIMPA vibrated, reminding him that this was no pleasure trip. A schedule hovered in

front of him. He was booked on a shuttle to one of the satellite orbitals.

The bubble came to a smooth halt. The doors melted into the walls and the synthetic voice wished them a pleasant onward journey. Bleak stood and smiled as it occurred to him that wherever he was going it was unlikely to be “pleasant”. He shuffled out, along with the other seven hundred or so people, to be almost dazzled by the enhanced sunlight. According to the commentary he’d had to endure on the way up, the suborbital station had recently been upgraded. He couldn’t help but think they had overdone it. Everywhere you looked there were life-like scenes of everything the tourist or business person could wish for in Metrakis, Metrakolis and some of the other habitats that were dotted around this world. Walking through one such envelopment, he even ducked as an iridescent, winged holographic creature swooped overhead. There were ‘oohs’ and nervous laughter from his fellow passengers. Then there were yet more opportunities to part with whatever credits people might have to spare – a first or final chance to pick up those must-have souvenirs and travel items. Bleak wasn’t interested. He grabbed a handful of high-energy snacks and, guided by his SIMPA, headed to the designated port.

The shuttle journey out to the Highskyring orbital was scheduled to take thirty seven minutes. By the time he sat in the well-cushioned seat, he was shaking from glucose depletion. Too many changes in too short a time had drained any reserves he’d had. His neighbour gave him a nervous glance as Bleak devoured the bars, one after another, ignoring the crumbs and flakes that his trembling hands liberated down his front. His breathing slowed and his

muscles relaxed as the sugar kicked in. He burped several times and his neighbour leant away from him. Bleak closed his eyes. His tiredness allowing memories he wished he didn't have and feelings of self-pity to surface.

He'd completed a couple of missions before the revolt had disintegrated. He'd been there at the end. One final battle, thousands of ships destroyed, tens of thousands of lives lost to be added to the millions in the preceding decade. His part in it all had helped ensure victory. He had only just escaped with his life, that same life they were now intent on depriving him of.

When they found the escape pod, they'd taken him back to the med unit. After that it was like some cruel joke. They had patched him up and allowed him time to recover prior to debriefing and then, as he now realised, certain termination. The professor had helped him escape. He'd been on the run for one hundred and five days. In total, he'd been in existence for only just over two years – for him it was literally a lifetime. He almost wished the professor hadn't let him go, but the built-in instinct to live, to survive, was strong. So he had kept on running, even if he had no idea where he was going.

In his semi-conscious state, thoughts of the professor took him back to those first few moments. For Bleak they weren't dreams or even normal memories. His mind had simply recorded. Everything was there. It had no meaning at the time. Then, he just was. He didn't question, he accepted, soaking up everything.

'How long, Professor?' The first words he heard. He knows the professor is Professor Morran even if he doesn't know enough to question how he knows it. He recognises the hairless dome of a

head, the surface pattern that he later learns is a reflection of the neural net beneath.

Professor Morran turns. There's a swish of a door but the professor tries to ignore the intrusion. 'Not long, General,' he says, returning his concentration to the figure strapped to the vertical bench – him. 'He's conscious. The eyes are open.' The professor consults a panel on which are flickering images before focusing on him again. 'Hello, welcome to the world.'

Am I supposed to respond? It was a thought, a first thought. Too late.

The general strides over for a closer view. 'So is it working?'

'Yes, he's aware,' the professor says, emphasising the 'he'. 'His brain is recognising the world around him, us, piecing it all together, starting to make sense of everything, even at this early stage. Once he's made those first few connections, he'll talk.'

'How long until I can use this one?'

'A few weeks. We don't want to rush him. Remember what happened last time.'

The general frowns, not hiding his annoyance at being reminded that he was at fault for the last failure. 'You were running late and I needed it.'

The professor consults what he now knows is a monitor, and doesn't look up. He speaks to the general. 'I've told you before we can't be exact on how long it takes. Each one is different. You took a tool before it was fully-commissioned, fully-sharpened, and look what happened. I'm sure neither of us wants that to happen again.' The general grunts, but doesn't reply. 'Exactly,' the professor continues. 'Now, we need a name. Can't keep calling it, it,' he says

glancing at the general. ‘Causes confusion. It’s important they develop a sense of identity early.’

‘How do you name something like that? Pick one off a list?’

‘No, it has to be something... appropriate.’

‘Appropriate?’

‘Hmm, I guess we can leave it a little while, until something suggests itself.’ The professor turns to the general. ‘How’s the situation in the Regor Nebula coming along, by the way?’

The general’s neck reddens at the undisguised attempt to rile him. ‘Bleak.’

‘He’s awake again, Professor.’ A young woman’s voice this time. She is standing next to the professor.

‘Thank you, Lois. Good, good, the life signs are all coming along nicely. The conscious mind is starting to take over. See, the eyes are focusing, following us around.’

Lois joins the professor in front of their subject. She taps him on the chest. His first human touch. ‘Hmm, what are we going to call you?’ His mouth opens. The tongue pokes out, rubs along the teeth. ‘Do you think he’s trying to speak?’

‘Early, but possible. The urge to communicate is always strong.’

A low grunt from the back of the throat. ‘That’s it,’ Lois says. She holds a glass of water to his lips. Some dribbles down his chin, which she wipes for him. He licks his lips. The moisture feels good. ‘Come on, don’t give up. Talk to me.’

‘B..., bl...’

‘He’s definitely trying to speak, Professor.’

‘Bl..., Bleak.’

The professor joins Lois in front of him. 'Bleak, bleak?' Lois says.

'There you go,' the professor says, looking up from the monitor. 'He's named himself, Bleak. Rather appropriate, don't you think? Hello Bleak.'

'We can't call him Bleak. What kind of a name is that?' Lois says.

'Bleak,' he says again, feeling the word in his mouth, the name on his tongue.

The professor laughs. 'He obviously doesn't agree with you. Bleak it is. It'll be worth it, if only to see the look on the general's face.'

Bleak woke for a moment, smiling at the memory. It was only later of course he understood the meaning of the word and the irony in the name he'd given himself. He drifted off again.

'Hello, Professor.'

'How are you feeling, Bleak?'

'Good,' he says, although the word didn't seem adequate to him somehow. But the professor appears... pleased?

'Excellent, excellent. Well, Bleak, you've a lot to learn. Yes, yes, a lot to learn.' His eyes follow the professor as he moves to the side of him.

'He's definitely more alert,' Lois says. 'He's not just following you. He's looking around.'

'Yes, his mind is working quicker. Just using simple language is opening countless pathways. He's doing well.'

At that point he tries to raise an arm, then a leg. He can't move, puzzlement, a frown, comprehension, straps?

'Patience, Bleak, patience,' the professor says without looking round. 'All in good time, all in good time.' His eyes close.

'Ladies and gentlemen we'll be docking at Highskyring in five minutes. Five minutes to docking. Please make sure to take all your personal belongings with you.'

Bleak opened his eyes, blinking the sleep away, back in the present. It had taken thirty-seven minutes as advertised. A glance at the screen showed the rotating habitat, thirty klicks across, filled with over two hundred thousand residents at any one time. There followed a promo on everything Highskyring had to offer, from exclusive homes for the discerning space dweller to weightless theme parks where almost any fantasy could be indulged in. They were then told that this was the 'new' Highskyring, the old one having been wrecked during the rebellion. What they didn't tell you was that it had been damaged by one of Metrakis's own, incompetent, fleet captains. Nor did they advertise the thousands of lives that had been vaporised in 'friendly fire'. 'Luckily' for the authorities, the captain concerned was lost in action several months later as a result of being sent on a near suicide mission.

Bleak followed his fellow passengers into the main concourse. He then hurried past more advertising – for some of the attractions he had been bombarded with on the flight just before they had docked. Somehow, he doubted they'd look quite as interesting in real life.

He followed the directions his SIMPA patched into his vision at appropriate moments. He toyed with the idea of ignoring them just to see what might happen, then decided whatever might happen wouldn't be good. He walked past yet more opportunities to part with credits, pushing his way through thousands of tourists intent on doing so. His destination was an OK hotel in an OK area. Not the worst anyway, which was a mildly pleasant surprise given the circumstances. The room was adequate, the bed comfortable. The room bar had four small flasks, two vodka, one whiskey and one brandy, all generic. He poured all four into a glass – fuck it. He was half way through, letting the numbing alcohol roam free, his mind drifting, when the door opened.

He sobered. 'Come in why don't you.'

'Hello Bleak.'

He recognised the voice. 'Who are you?'

'Catrinas Pekrov. But you can call me Commissioner Pekrov, or Ma'am.'

She was a small woman by Metrakis standards with a sharp haircut and dressed in a sharp suit. 'Well, Commissioner,' Bleak said, picking an option he hadn't been given. 'Why don't I overpower you now, or kill you and walk out of here?'

She tutted, smiled and shook her head. 'Oh, Bleak, what do you think I am?' she asked. Then he noticed the shimmer of the field enveloping her. It was a good one – you could only see it if you knew what to look for. And now, in her hand, as if from nowhere, was a small, ugly plasma pistol capable of sending whatever would be left of him through the wall and into the next room. Bleak shrugged and slumped back onto the bed. He'd expected no less.

‘So how are you, Bleak?’

‘What? You mean besides being hunted down by people who wish me dead?’ He paused to glance at her. ‘In that case I’m just wonderful.’

The commissioner gave him an innocent smile. ‘Wish you dead? Bleak, you should never have existed. Haven’t you got that yet?’

Bleak fingered the glass of alcohol. ‘I didn’t ask to be... born.’ Commissioner Pekrov raised an eyebrow. ‘Fine, created. But I’m here. I feel, I think as much as any of you bastards.’

‘Oh, Bleak, Bleak, you poor tortured soul, just listen to yourself.’ The commissioner shook her head again, this time in mock sympathy. Her look hardened and she held the gun higher, pushing it towards him. ‘Let’s get something straight from the beginning. I don’t give a shit about any rights you think you might possibly have, were promised or think you should have. I’m not interested, never will be. As far as I’m concerned you don’t have any. Get used to it. You’re a manipulant. You know that your existence is illegal by virtually any convention you care to mention.’

Bleak put his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. ‘That’s right, fill me with hope.’

Commissioner Pekrov pulled out the room’s only chair and sat at the foot of the bed. She crossed her legs and her tone softened a little. ‘Come on, Bleak. To most of those who are even aware things like you continue to exist, you’re an abomination. To others, you’re an embarrassment that at best would end political careers, at worst could spark revolt all over again. Are you getting the picture, Bleak? She tapped his foot with the gun. He stared down the length of his

body at her. ‘You should never have existed,’ she added, emphasising each word.

‘I should never have existed,’ he repeated in a monotone voice.

‘Exactly, but you do. And lucky for you, I can use you. So this is a business transaction. You are the best,’ she hesitated, taking a deep breath, ‘person for the job. Succeed and there’s a chance you might be allowed to live. You might die in the attempt, of course, which I would regret only because I’d have to find another solution to my problem.’

Bleak propped his head up on one arm. ‘Or you might simply hand me over.’

She hit his foot hard with the weapon in her hand. He flinched. ‘For God’s sake, Bleak, stop feeling so fucking sorry for yourself. This is your... your life, for want of a better word, for as long as it lasts. Listen, if it puts you at ease, I have no intention of handing you over. And, as you may have guessed, I don’t do sympathy. Think about it. I’ve spent time and energy tracking you down at some personal risk. To me, Bleak, you are a finely-honed tool that I find I have a use for. Why would I give you up? It took me long enough to find you and I’d be unlikely to find another.’

Bleak flopped back down, once again studying the cracks in the ceiling. ‘Great, I’m a tool, a weapon to be used.’

Commissioner Pekrov smiled. ‘Finally.’

‘What about the others?’ Bleak asked, again peering down the length of his body at her.

‘Like you, you mean? A few, I don’t really know and don’t care. I guess there may be three or four left.’

‘And I was the lucky one?’

‘If you like.’ The commissioner scowled, shaking her head at Bleak. ‘Frankly, it doesn’t matter to me what you think. Now enough of all this crap. Down to business.’ She threw Bleak a data cube. It landed on his chest. ‘Have a look at this, then we’ll see just how good you really are.’

Bleak picked it up, pressed his fingers to the sides and integrated. ‘This Vikor is just some small-time gangster, a pirate.’

‘A particularly troublesome one.’

Bleak grunted. ‘But surely the normal authorities could deal with this?’

Commissioner Pekrov sighed and shook her head. ‘I don’t know why I’m doing this. Let’s just say he’s also potentially embarrassing in some quarters. Anyway, think of this as a test. The main show awaits, if you pass. If you fail...’

Bleak ignored the threat. ‘So you want him disposed of?’

‘Hallelujah, it’s getting the message.’

Bleak grunted.

‘So,’ Commissioner Pekrov said, as she rose from the chair and advanced towards him with a small cylinder in her left hand. Bleak sat up and shrank back. She waved the plasma pistol, just to remind him. She pressed the cylinder against his neck. He felt a sharp sting.

‘What’s that?’

‘Just analysing the DNA tracer I know is there in case you ever thought of doing a runner. I want to tune into those little beacons.’ She smiled. ‘Now your body could be spread over half a planetary system and we’d find every last bit of it. If we wanted to.’

‘That’s comforting,’ Bleak said. What Bleak knew was that in his body those tracers could only be detected over a short distance,

which is why the general's men had struggled to find him. It was something the professor had shown him, but apparently not them. So, yes, she could find the bits but it'd take some time. He smiled, it was a small comfort.

She rose and leaned over him. He felt a tingle from her shield. As she leant a little closer, the tingle became uncomfortable, like thousands of needles pricking his skin. She smiled and tapped his SIMPA with a manicured nail. 'Meet me here, tomorrow 10am.'

Directions flickered in his vision. Commissioner Pekrov left. He glanced at the address, but it meant nothing to him. He also noticed a small amount of credits had been deposited to him. He downed the rest of the alcohol, then went looking for something to eat.

He wandered out through the glitzy tourist areas. The upgraded orbital was impressive – he would give them that. Walking down the wide main boulevard you could almost believe you were on the surface, only the slight discernible curve of any longer view gave it away. Bright signs flickered in front of him promising the best food, the cheapest drinks and 'out of any world' experiences. He ignored them all, instead heading for the muted tones of the trading quarter. Here the streets were narrower, the floating advertisements fewer and more basic, simple messages. The bars were smaller, darker and functional, catering for a working clientele – the service staff, shipyard workers and those who worked in other military-based industries. People who were not interested in the full 'Highskyring experience'. Bleak walked into the fourth bar he passed. He considered four his lucky number, although for no good reason he could remember. Inside, the furniture was functional rather than

decorative. He glanced around for a table where he could watch but not easily be seen, an old habit. He found a corner that the lighting struggled to cover. He sat and ordered from the table, his mind drifting back to Professor Morran.

The third time Bleak opens his eyes his arms are free, unrestrained. Extending one, he brings it level with his face. He turns his wrist and inspects the back, stretching each of the fingers in turn. Then, palm facing him, he wiggles the fingers, first individually then all together, clenching and unclenching them. He smiles. The professor is there, he's smiling as well and nodding. 'That's right, Bleak, you have control of all motor functions. Now step forward.'

'Step forward?' he says. 'Yes, step. I can do that.' He hesitates, it's as if the foot is reluctant to move. He thinks about his foot, his leg and what it takes to move it. He tries again and succeeds in placing one foot in front of the other. Then he stops, unsure.

'That's right,' the professor says. 'One after the other, Bleak, one after the other. Come on, follow me.' The professor turns, leading the way into a connecting room. He hesitates. 'Come on, Bleak, you'll soon get the hang of it.' Taking a deep breath, Bleak shuffles his left foot forward, then wobbles. He moves his right foot to stop himself falling, then grabs the bench for support. He grins. It feels... good. Those few steps seem to shake the stiffness out of his limbs. The movement has lodged somewhere in his brain, it feels natural. He stands, flexing his arms and bouncing a few times on his legs before stepping over to the door with more confidence.

‘Excellent.’ the professor says. He waves an arm at the room. ‘This will be your home for the next few weeks, Bleak, while we get you fully up to speed as it were.’

He looks around. He recognises some of the things in the room – a bed, two chairs, a holo. Then there are other small objects he has no words for. One half of the room is filled with... equipment. An idea forms in his mind – some of the equipment is for physical exercise. The idea appeals.

He forms the word. ‘Exercise.’

The professor nods. ‘The exercise is important. We can then use the enhancers to build your fitness rapidly, but they need some physical stimulation to work.’

He looks down at his body. There are patches dotted all over it – the enhancing equipment. If he concentrates, he can feel a slight tingle coming from each of them. Another thought takes shape. He turns to the professor and frowns. ‘I’m naked.’

The professor reaches behind him, touching a panel on the wall. A section of the wall slides forward, a drawer. Then he turns and hands Bleak something, underwear. He nods as understanding continues to spread through his brain, sparks igniting in the shady places of his mind. Questions form, he pushes them to one side. He puts on the underwear. The professor hands him a one-piece. After only a momentary hesitation, Bleak steps into it and inserts his arms in the sleeves. It seals itself, contracting, hugging. Bleak notices his reflection in a mirror. He smooths both hands down his body. ‘Better,’ he says.

The professor smiles. ‘Yes, not very exciting but it’ll do for now.’

Bleak continues to stare at his own reflection. He rubs a hand over his features, his jaw, a sharp nose and wide mouth, then through his brown, shoulder-length hair. He likes what he sees. He then becomes aware of a new sensation. His lower half feels warm, wet. He looks down. There is water on the floor. 'I'm... leaking?'

The professor laughs. 'Don't worry, Bleak, its normal. Well, just not in polite society,' he laughs again. 'At least it was only that.'

He searches his... memories, and understands. He feels his face flush. 'Yes,' he says, laughing. Laughing feels good.

The professor points to another door. 'That's the bathroom. You might want to go in there and clean up.'

In the bathroom, he removes his clothing, opens a section of the wall marked 'laundry' and puts them in there. 'Yes,' he says to himself, 'that's where they go.' In one corner is what he recognises as a shower area. As he steps in, warm water sprays over his body. He watches as it flows across the floor and is sucked away. After a few minutes, the water is replaced by warm air. Feeling more confident in his movements with each step, he walks out of the bathroom. The professor throws him more clothes. He catches them and dresses. 'I'm hungry,' he says.

Just then, his food arrived.

'A credit for them.' A girl is standing in front of him with his order.

Bleak shakes his head. 'Sorry.'

She smiles. 'It's just a saying. You looked like you were somewhere else.'

Bleak smiled in return. He'd almost forgotten that people actually did that, smile at one another. 'I was.'

She put the plate down and left. Bleak picked at a couple of the deep-fried pieces. He nodded to himself. It was better than the decor might suggest. He was draining the last of his beer when a hand, quick and silent, shot towards the SIMPA on his wrist. But he was quicker – he would always be quicker. He turned to see the shock, then pain in the widening eyes of the hand's owner as Bleak squeezed his wrist. The small device that would have hacked the clasp fell from outstretched fingers. A little more pressure and the wrist would break. The would be thief also understood that, and behind the agony was an expression of pleading. To his credit, he made no noise. He didn't want the attention any more than Bleak did. Bleak studied him closer. He was little more than a kid, poorly-dressed and scrawny. A sky rat, a homeless leftover from the revolt. The authorities were supposed to be taking care of them, but many didn't want the sort of care on offer. Bleak couldn't blame them. He released the wrist. The kid clutched it to his chest and ran, hugging the shadows, out of the bar.

T W O

The next morning Bleak breakfasted in the hotel. Most of the 'food' was reconstituted. You asked for what you wanted and some approximation of it appeared in one of the service slots a few minutes later. The few other diners looked equally as unimpressed as Bleak. The coffee was half drinkable so, with time to kill, Bleak lingered over three mugs watching the news feed. It was all happy pictures of conquered people rebuilding their lives, grateful for the benevolence of a forgiving Confederation. Domes were being constructed, and fields were being cultivated and harvested. There was no mention of the pockets of resistance still fighting on, or the billions starving on decimated planets and habitats. You needed to trawl the underground networks for that and they were not for hotel consumption. But there again, they were all peddling their own agendas, everyone had an angle. Eventually he'd had enough of the coffee and manufactured news, so he set off for his appointment via a circuitous route before getting lost and referring to his SIMPA's directions.

The building was only three blocks from the main square, the other side from the quarter where most of the tourist bars and tacky stores were situated. It was nothing special, but neither were those either side. Uniform grey with greyed-out windows. Unimaginative architecture for people who preferred to remain anonymous. The main door had no distinguishing marks.

'Stand still and state your business.' His approach had been noted. Before he could do either, the door slid back. 'You are cleared to enter.' The scan had picked up his clearance. A good job, he thought, he wasn't sure how to describe his business. He stepped through and the outer door closed. From the inside Bleak noted the heavily armoured secondary doors, that those outside the building would never see, and the field. He couldn't spot the weaponry that he knew must be there. An inner door opened, then closed behind him. No one was getting in without someone's say so. It also crossed his mind that no one was getting out either. A man dressed in grey, Bleak wasn't sure if it qualified as a uniform or not, approached.

'You're on time,' the man said, as if he hadn't expected it. Not getting a reply, he continued. 'Follow me.' Bleak followed him through grey corridors and past grey doors.

'Grey the in-colour?' Bleak said.

'What?'

'Never mind.'

'Fine,' the man said, as he waited for Bleak to walk through an open door ahead of him. Commissioner Pekrov was standing with her back to him. She was wearing a similar suit to the night before. Bleak wondered if it was the same one, but thought probably not. She was staring at a man in a cell. The grey man left.

'Is he actually there?' Bleak asked. He glanced around the office, all very functional, not personalised in any way.

The commissioner turned, motioning Bleak to sit in front of a plain desk. She sat behind it. 'You mean is he here? In this building?'

Bleak nodded.

The commissioner glanced at the man. 'Yes. But he doesn't know he is, if you get my drift.'

'Where does he think he is?'

'On a penal ship,' she paused as if consulting something over Bleak's left shoulder. 'Now holding around Cyrus V.'

‘Why’s it there? Not the best place to hold up.’

‘It’s waiting for you.’ She smiled. ‘Officially it has jump drive problems and is stopped for repairs. You know what those old tubs are like. Anyway we’re getting ahead of ourselves.’ She pointed at the subject. ‘Well?’

‘Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem. The visual basics are fine. Height one-eighty-seven and weight eighty-three are within my scope. Just take a few days. You have a full download?’

‘Of course.’

‘I need to see him on the move. It’d help if I could hear him talk for a while as well.’

‘You want to speak with him, see him in person at some point?’

‘No, not a good idea for him to see someone looking more and more like himself. Tends to freak them out.’

The commissioner laughed. ‘Yes, I suppose it might. So when?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Good. You’ll stay here. There are rooms on the top floor.’

‘Sure,’ Bleak said. ‘It’s all the same to me. I’ve a bag over at the hotel though.’

Commissioner Pekrov raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh?’

‘We do have personal items you know,’ Bleak said. Then added: ‘Just a few clothes and things. I find I’ve been travelling light lately.’

The commissioner ignored the attempted humour and pursed her lips as if thinking about it. ‘I’ll send someone over. Is there anything else you need?’

‘You mean besides a private cutter out of here and to be left alone?’ The commissioner crossed her arms. ‘In that case, just high-protein food and lots of it.’

The room was little different to that in the hotel, except there was no alcohol and no window. Not that there was anything to see. Bleak sat at the cheap polymer desk that merged into the wall, turning the download cube over and over in his hand. Inside it were the man’s memories, or at least most of them – his psyche, his likes and dislikes, his phobias. He still found it hard to believe that almost everything that a man was, was in there. It wasn’t perfect, but it got you most of the way. Then you would learn, by being that person. How they’d react, the nervous tick, the funny smile, annoying habits. Bleak pressed the forefinger and thumb of his left hand either side of the cube. He concentrated, aligning his specialised nerve endings with the cube’s receptors. The download took ten seconds. Not much, he thought, for a man’s entire being. It was now lodged in an equivalent of the datacube within his brain. He could absorb it later, gradually picking over the important parts, separating them from the dross, of which he suspected there might be copious quantities. He could get inside the man’s head, Rayeb’s head. As he did so he would set up an alternative personality, separate from his own. Although what was his own he wasn’t sure, whatever he’d been given he guessed. Best not to dwell on that. Anyway, it allowed him to be that person while still being aware of who he was and what he was supposed to be doing. He could also then refine the Rayeb personality when he saw the man, heard him talk, watched his movements and body language.

With little else to do Bleak lay on the bed drifting in and out of sleep, letting his subconscious take care of the physical changes. It was always a tiring process.

His SIMPA woke him, it was two hours. He sat up and consumed some of the high-protein food bars. They didn’t taste of much, but he wasn’t eating for pleasure. He needed to bulk up a little this time, thankfully not too much. He lay down again, but sleep wouldn’t come. His thoughts were back in the laboratory, that first week of innocence.

Knowledge, experience, how to behave were all downloaded into his brain. Unrelated facts, words and feelings would piece themselves together into coherent pictures. He would sit and marvel as revelation upon revelation opened up to him. He remembered the wonder of finding out that outside the two rooms that defined his existence, there was a society with billions upon billions of people living on hundreds of worlds, moons and habitats. That those people lived by thousands of rules, some written, some unwritten. As he understood them, he understood how society functioned. He also understood how he would have to function out there with those other people.

The exercises and the enhancers changed and shaped his body. He was hungry all the time. At first he just craved food, calories. Then he wanted different food, to explore taste. He watched the holos when exercising or just relaxing. He learnt to distinguish between what was real, news, and what was fiction, entertainment, although some of it seemed to be both and neither at the same time. He absorbed it all. It was interesting, exciting. His empty brain craved more, to soak up everything and anything that it was exposed to. He couldn't wait to see what was next. But that changed when the man in green returned.

'How's it doing?' the man in green asks. Bleak now knew the man was wearing a military uniform and recognised him as a high-ranking officer. He also understood the negative implications in his use of the word 'it'.

'He, General, he.' The professor lets his annoyance show. 'Bleak is doing fine, ahead of schedule.'

The general frowns. 'Bleak?'

'Yes, Bleak,' the professor answers with a satisfied smile. That's his name, Bleak.'

The man in green stares at Bleak, looking him up and down, before turning back to the professor. 'What kind of name is Bleak?'

The professor shrugs. 'He named himself. Anyway we're stuck with it.' The professor glances at Bleak. 'It seems sort of apt don't you think?'

'Hmm,' the general says. 'Well I don't really care what you call it.'

'Him,' the professor corrects. 'He is in the room and he does understand.'

'Alright, him. I still don't care. How soon will, he,' the general emphasises the word 'he', making it sound worse than "it", 'be ready?'

'I still need a couple of weeks. A few more days in the unit and then ten or so outside to make sure he is fully functional. I can only cram in so much learning at a time and we need to know it's all aligned and he will respond appropriately in social settings.'

The general nods. 'Talking of function, does he know what he is? His purpose, what he's capable of, what will be expected?'

'No, not yet.' The professor glances at Bleak again. Bleak understands enough to see the sadness in the man's eyes, although the professor tries to hide it. 'The next day or so and we'll start introducing all that.'

'And the Prime Directive?'

'Yes, of course, you know very well that's there from the very start. It underpins everything.'

'Good,' the general says. 'I want no mistakes this time. If this one works well enough, we should be keeping you busy, Professor. If not, we might have to abandon the whole idea, terminate the project. Don't let me down, Professor. I've gone out on a limb on this one, against plenty of opposition.'

The professor stares at the general but says nothing. The general turns on his heel and strides from the room. Bleak waits for the professor to explain, but he seems reluctant. 'Professor?'

'All in good time, Bleak. All in good time.' The professor leaves. The general had mentioned his purpose. Bleak hadn't thought about having 'a purpose' before. He just 'was' and had been content with that. But now it

was if there was a hole inside him waiting to be filled, his purpose. As he replayed the conversation in his head, the professor's expression froze in his mind. It was the first time Bleak had been apprehensive of the unknown.

Bleak woke, the feelings of remembered apprehension spilling over into his conscious mind, leaving a sense of unease. He lay there wondering, as he had done many times, what it was all about, what he was all about. When they created him, they built in that strong desire to survive, so that's what he did. Which meant that if all that was left to him was to run, then he'd run, and run, and run. 'One day at a time, Bleak,' he said to himself, a mantra he'd repeated many times, 'one day at a time.' To occupy himself and prevent more unproductive thinking he reviewed some of the data the commissioner had given him – know your prey.

Vikor had been a commander in the rebel navy and had been decorated several times, having emerged victorious in a number of engagements, seemingly against the odds. He was no coward, but after one disastrous battle, when his squadron had been decimated, it seems Vikor had realised just how futile their situation was becoming. So he'd taken advantage of the confusion to do his own running. It had taken rebel command some time to realise that he had neither been destroyed nor captured, and by that time they were far too stretched to send ships chasing after a rogue captain. So, armed with an ageing frigate, Vikor and his crew headed for the edge of the known galaxy and took to piracy. Cross-referencing with Rayeb's memories, it seems those who didn't agree with this change in role were straight out of the airlock. Rayeb being the main proponent of that particular solution. It emphasised to Bleak what a charming man he was to become.

The next morning Bleak dragged his weary body out of bed. He ached all over. In the bathroom the mirror panned round his head. The first few times he'd changed, it had shocked him. It was one thing knowing that it was something you were capable of, designed to do, but it was another seeing it happen – the realisation that he could wake up with a different face. But now he wasn't sure what his real face was. He looked at both sides, then from front on, studying himself again. He didn't much like this one. It was a cruel face – no surprise there. Narrow eyes and a lopsided grin that hinted at the malicious mind behind it. The mirror showed him the rest of his body, complete with red marks and purple bruising where the greatest changes were taking place. He wasn't keen on that either, a bit flabby for his taste. He took a deep breath, what he thought of the man didn't matter. Time to get inside his psyche and find out what made him tick.

The physical adaptations may be the most amazing for those who witnessed the change, but that had to be backed up by assimilating the personality. Bleak was a late type four, and after the type twos this was where they had made the most improvements. It wasn't perfect, but he guessed it never would be, unless you could somehow download every single neuronal link in the man's brain. It was enough though, and if you looked the part, most people would ignore a few minor behavioural imperfections. Analysing the download confirmed his first superficial appraisal. A cruel and malicious nature. A person that would inflict pain and enjoy it. In the mirror, Rayeb's face stared back at him. He liked it even less now that he'd delved into the mind that shaped it. Rayeb was motivated by self and selfish interest. He would take orders, even be loyal if he thought it would profit him. But he would have no qualms in shifting allegiance if he felt threatened or thought his own ends were better served elsewhere. For Bleak, that made it easier. This man trusted no one and in turn no one really trusted him. If he got into that mind-set the rest would follow.

Bleak dressed and made his way back to the Commissioner's office. Commissioner Pekrov was waiting for him. As he entered the room, she turned. Her mouth opened but she seemed lost for words. She stood and walked over to him, her eyes locked on to his face as if studying every detail. She touched his cheeks, nose and jaw with her fingertips, as if not trusting what she saw. 'That's amazing. I've never actually seen it first-hand.'

'Glad you like it.'

'I didn't say I liked it. But I can appreciate it's... its artistry.'

'Yeah, well be thankful you don't have to live with it.'

The commissioner smiled, or at least her mouth twitched. 'Safe there. I wasn't created for it, like you.'

Bleak breathed out. 'No.'

'Does it hurt?'

'What do think? My whole body is being pulled about. He tugged up his shirt to show the purple bruising that ran all round his midriff.'

The commissioner ran a finger over his stomach smiling as he flinched. 'How do you live with it, Bleak? The knowledge of what you are, what you can do? How does it feel when you become someone else?'

'I thought you weren't interested.'

'I'm not, not really. Just a little intrigued.'

Bleak shrugged. 'At first you have an optimism, a belief in purpose. You think you can make a difference. It's only later that you understand that at least some of that has been programmed into you – the Prime Directive. There's also the belief that you could have a life afterwards, that somehow it will all work out. Then you realise that maybe that's been programmed in as well. But, programmed or not, it's still there.' He shrugged. 'I am what I am, I've never known anything else.'

Commissioner Pekrov pursed her lips as she studied his face. She gripped his jaw and moved his head, first to the left, then to the right, before letting go. 'Well, I guess you can't hit even creatures like you with the truth all in one go. Shit, it wouldn't do for you to wake and immediately go into mental meltdown.'

Bleak smiled. 'The first type ones did just that.'

'What happened to them?'

'Disposed of.'

The commissioner grunted. 'You're not going to flip on me are you, Bleak?'

'No, Bleak said, smiling. 'But then you never know.'

The commissioner frowned.

Bleak shook his head. 'I'm a type four.'

She tapped him on the chest and then wandered over to the screen. 'Ah, yes. A type four, eh. Lucky me.' In front of her, Rayeb was sat eating, with his back towards them. 'So, what now?'

'As I said, I need to see him moving, talking, reacting, interacting with someone. I need to get a feel for the things the integration can't give me. I can then use that to refine the personality.'

'Now?'

'Sure, why not?'

'That'll do,' Bleak said a few hours later, stifling a yawn.

'Is that it?' The commissioner asked. 'You have everything you need?'

He stretched out his legs and threw his arms above his head. 'Yeah, I can't be bothered to watch, or listen to the boring, narcissistic little shit anymore.'

'That scientific, is it?'

Bleak smiled, then yawned again. 'With this,' he said, pointing at his own face, 'you can get away with quite a bit. Any imperfections in looks or behaviour I can put down to the treatment from you lot. That should give me plenty of leeway.'

'Yes, thank you,' the commissioner said. 'You might do well to remember that.'

'You can never get it all anyway.'

She nodded. 'What next?'

'I need him knocked out.'

'Why?'

Bleak raised his hands in front of him. 'Prints. Most basic security still relies on them.'

'And the less basic?'

'I can do cellular markers and even DNA markers. That takes care of most things.'

The commissioner whistled through her teeth. 'You learn something every day. They certainly did a job on you.'

'Well, what's the point of producing a tool that fails at the first serious challenge?'

'True, true.' Commissioner Pekrov spoke to the door. 'We need him unconscious.' Seconds later, Rayeb slumped to the floor, banging his head on the edge of the table on his way down.

Bleak entered the room and pulled Rayeb over so he was lying on his back. Straddling him, he spread the man's arms wide, then splayed each finger. He placed his hands over Rayeb's. Bleak's flesh became soft, pliable, flowing over every millimetre, into every pore, of Rayeb's. 'Hmm, no cellular markers,' he said.

As Bleak sat there, he was aware of the commissioner staring at him. 'Won't that imprint the wrong hand?' she asked.

Bleak's head sagged a few centimetres before he looked up at her, raising one eyebrow. 'What do you think?'

She reddened. 'No, of course not,' she said as Bleak rose from the floor. 'Finished?'

'I need to wash my hands.'

'The water makes it permanent?'

Bleak looked at her again. 'No, he's none too clean.' She frowned. He could see by the lines on her face that it was an expression she used a lot. He really would have to watch the sarcasm.

'So that's it?'

'For now. I'm going back to eat and sleep. Tomorrow we can discuss how you're going to get me in,' Bleak said as he shuffled towards the door.

'You mean we'll tell you how that's going to happen,' the commissioner snapped back.

Bleak paused, taking a deep breath before turning. 'No, we'll discuss it. You may own me. But if you want this to succeed, you'll listen to me. I've done this before, you haven't.' The commissioner sucked on her bottom lip but said nothing.

'Have a good evening,' Bleak said as he continued with his shuffle. Sometimes he couldn't help himself.

As Bleak shuffled out, Major Harandell wandered in.

'Did you see him?' the commissioner asked.

'Yes, scary isn't it?'

She nodded. 'But you've got to admire the workmanship,' she said, bringing up a recording of the last few minutes. She froze the image, rotating it.

The major watched with her. 'Do you think he knows about those DNA tracers?'

'Their limitations you mean?' The major nodded. 'Oh, I'm sure he does. We mustn't underestimate him, Major. It's not just the physical attributes the professor engineered into them, there's also an enhanced neural overlay in there. So don't forget the intelligence, the reactions and the quick thinking. It's the whole package that makes them such a potent weapon. But what he doesn't know is that with a specific signal those little machines will coagulate, boosting their signal, making him visible over a much, much greater distance.'

'And does he know we intend to send him after the professor?'

She shook her head. 'No, not yet. He knows Viktor is just a test. But he doesn't know what for. And at the moment he doesn't need to.' The commissioner could see the doubt on the major's face. He'd been with her for eighteen months and had proven himself an able assistant, so she tended to give him greater licence than most of the others. She knew that behind her back there were whispers about him being her favourite – and perhaps more. But let them whisper, it was good for her image and kept them on their toes. Also, sometimes it was useful to have someone to bounce things off. She raised an eyebrow. 'You have doubts?'

'Aren't we taking a big risk here, Ma'am? We only have second-hand knowledge of what these things are capable of. With all due respect, the general is... is...'

'An idiot,' she finished for him.

The major smiled. 'I was going to say, possibly of questionable reliability.'

Commissioner Pekrov smiled back. 'Beautifully put, Major. As I said, an idiot. But yes, you're right, we are taking a risk. But I'm not doing this lightly. I've studied them and I believe Bleak is the best chance we have. We know the professor has fled to one of the isolated rebel groups that's still holding out. Even if we knew where and we waded in, in our usual fashion, it would be a bloodbath that might unite those isolated groups and stir things up again.'

'And we don't want that,' the major said.

'No, quite. Bleak might just be able to do the job with the minimum of collateral. If not, we should get a better idea of where the professor is and then we can wade in in our usual fashion and to hell with it.'

'Sorry, Ma'am, but...'

The commissioner looked at the young man. 'Go on, Major, ask.'

'Do you think you can control him?'

She smiled. 'I don't have to, Major. His Prime Directive will do that for me.'

'Prime Directive, Ma'am?'

'Yes, Major. One thing the professor and the general did do was to make sure these things couldn't change sides half way through a mission. Their Prime Directive was welded into their psyche. They have unswervable belief in the Confederation and that no matter how many lives their missions cost, success will always save more. Kill a hundred, save thousands. Kill thousands, save hundreds of thousands. That way they wouldn't hesitate, you see. They believed in their missions and would have no doubts over their validity. After all, they're not human, and we mustn't lose sight of that either.'

'No, Ma'am.'

Bleak returned the next day as agreed. 'So what's the plan?'

Commissioner Pekrov tapped her nails on the table. 'We'll take you out to the penal ship. Our man is supposed to be in solitary, so there's no problem getting you in. After that, the jump drive issue will become more serious and we'll have to ship you all down to Cyrus V while repairs are carried out. There will then be an escape. We know Viktor operates in the area, so it'll be up to you to make contact with what you know from Rayeb.'

Bleak stroked his bruised jaw. 'What about the other prisoners?'

'What about them?'

'Do any of them escape with me?'

The commissioner thrust her head towards him, furrows of annoyance this time creasing her forehead. 'No, why would we want any of that lot on the loose?'

Bleak, leaned back and shook his head. 'It would be good to have some of them with me. They'll provide cover, confusion, if nothing else.'

The commissioner leaned back, tapping a finger on her lips. 'Hmm, we'll think about it.'

Bleak decided for now not to push it any further. 'Who knows about this?'

'Just some of my guys who have been placed on the ship.'

'How many?'

The furrows were returning. 'That's for me to know. Why?'

'And I thought you lot were the professionals,' Bleak said. The commissioner tutted, before Bleak added. 'Because the fewer, the better.'

'Look, these are men that have worked for me for years. I trust them.'

'Good for you,' Bleak said. 'I trust no one. It's safer that way. I take it the locals don't know?'

'Not at the moment. I have a couple of agents on the ground I was going to brief.'

Bleak shook his head. 'No.'

The commissioner's furrows were deepening. 'No?' she repeated as if that was not a word she was used to hearing.

Bleak was beginning to wonder what he was getting into. How professional were these people? Then he reminded himself he had no choice, he needed to make it work. 'This has to look genuine. And as I said, you may trust them, I don't. Anyway, if it works out they can deal with the others.'

'OK, Mr Expert, so, how according to you, do we guarantee you get away?'

'We'll be cuffed, yes?'

'Sure, standard neuro.'

Bleak nodded. 'Just make sure mine aren't working, or at least only enough for show. After that, it's up to me.'

'What if you get hurt, injured?'

'I won't.'

The commissioner looked as if she was going to challenge that assumption, but then decided not to. 'And others, guards?'

'No promises.'

The commissioner paused, studying Bleak's still changing face. 'So what you're saying is I have to trust you?'

Bleak smiled, a small victory to be celebrated. 'I guess so. But then I can hardly do a runner with the tracers you've injected, can I?'

It was now her turn to smile, thinking of what Bleak didn't know. 'And of course there is your Prime Directive.'

Bleak stiffened. Just the mention of those two words sent shock waves through his mind. He knew it was there, at the seat of everything he was. But most of the time he managed to push that knowledge into the background and at least give himself the illusion that he acted from his own free will. She had reminded him that nothing could be further from the truth. 'Yes, there's that as well,' he said.