



**The Making Of A Survey Service Captain  
By Gary L.M. Martin**

**First Prologue: Peak Performance**

Ambassador Crodfoller's head fell off his shoulders and rolled off the holoscreen. By the 23rd Century, holography had gotten so precise that objects rendered in it looked real, or nearly so. So when the Ambassador's head rolled off of his shoulders, some on the bridge

of the Survey Service Command Cruiser USS *Relentless* half expected to see it roll onto the floor of their own ship.

As the ambassador's headless body fell to the ground, out of view of the holographic recorder, the crew could see the holoimage of Murshad, his eyes gleaming, his curved sword raised high, with blood dripping from it.

"Blood!" Murshad cried, his eyes gleaming, a wide smile pasted on his lips. "The Great God of Blood has been honored!" He looked out at them, seeking a reaction.

The crew of the *Relentless* looked horrified, and rightly so.

But not its Captain.

If Murshad was hoping to elicit an unguarded reaction from the Captain, he was sorely disappointed. Captain Michael Tiberius Taylor of the United Survey Service had no expression at all on his face. He simply watched, and observed.

"Blood, Captain Taylor!" Murshad said again, feeling frustrated by the lack of reaction.

"I see," said Taylor calmly. Earlier in his career, when he had been an Ensign, or a Lieutenant, or even a Lieutenant Commander, viewing such a scene might have been unnerving. But Taylor was a full Captain now, as seasoned an officer as they came, in the United Survey Service.

"Now release the infidels to us, or I will sacrifice the rest of your embassy staff to the Great God of Blood, one by one, right here, right now, in front of you all!"

They all knew what would happen if Taylor turned the dissidents over to Murshad. He would execute them. The bridge crew turned to look at Taylor. Taylor looked unruffled. He looked around a moment, as if weighing, considering. The crew was startled by his lack of immediate response. Wasn't he concerned for the hostages? Wasn't he worried that a lack of a quick response might mean their deaths?

Murshad grew as impatient as Taylor's crew, perhaps even more so by the lack of response.

"Well, Captain?" he asked, in an annoyed tone, his sword still dripping with the blood of diplomats.

"No," said Taylor curtly.

"No?" said Murshad. "Are you ready to watch the execution of the rest of your staff, one by one? Ahmed, bring that one, the girl, the young one with the big melons. Perhaps that will stir more of a response from the famous ladies' man." A young blonde woman with a gorgeous bust came into pickup range. She had panic in her eyes. She squealed as a Ramadan held her arms behind her back.

"Or... perhaps I will get a different response from you if I blow up your mosque," said Taylor.

"My mosque?" said Murshad. He looked confused. "Which mosque do you mean?"

"All of them," said Taylor.

"All of them?"

"All of them. In two minute intervals, starting now," said Taylor. "Mr. Garrity, lock forward megajoulers on the Laquisha Mosque, on the outskirts of Al Sa-Naa."

The weapons officer toggled his display in stunned silence. And then, "Targeting..." and then, "Weapons... locked."

Murshad's eyebrows furled. "You wouldn't. You couldn't."

"I would. I could," said Taylor. And for the first time he smiled, and his smile had real emotion in it.

The holoimage of Murshad stared directly into Taylor's eyes. "You're bluffing."

"Am I?" Taylor asked. He turned to his weapons officer. "Mr. Garrity, open fire."