



## Head of the snake

BY VA HAWKINS

***“If it's a chimaera alert, we just follow the screams.”***

Jasper FForde

\* \* \* \* \*

Staff Sergeant Redren of the Hammer's Fist stood to attention in the unfamiliar corridor. This was his first time aboard the ISDII Challenge. Even to a trooper like himself, the differences between this vessel and the more familiar VSD Reprisal were marked. The place bore all the same Imperial design traits he had known all of his long life of service to the Empire, and now the Emperor's Hammer; the brutal functionality, the drab grey wall and polished black deck plates; and yet it felt grander, somehow. He inwardly marvelled at the power that seemed to ooze from the very bulkheads. The knowledge that this ship alone could subdue that which would take multiple legions of troopers to accomplish left him in awe.

He had not expected to find himself here. In the year since the Bie'Lek encounter, he had assumed his name was now blacklisted. Despite all he had accomplished during that dark time; the vital data he had helped retrieve, having saved the life of an operative of the Order of the Emperor; he had felt a failure. As a man who prided himself in keeping his men alive long enough to see retirement, the lost all but one of his squad that day had left him a shadow of his former self, at least in his own mind. A glorious career had ended with a vaguely resented promotion to Staff Sergeant, and a lack of drive to become more. He should have been Gunnery or Master sergeant by now, yet here he was, languishing as a staff sergeant. He sometimes consoled himself by reminding himself it had only been a year, but that was of little comfort. Others below him had risen past him.

And yet, here he stood aboard the Command ship of the TIE Corps, summoned personally by FA Pellaeon. He was lost as to why. The Corps were on fleet manoeuvres, he knew that much, blasting away at some reclaimed cruisers that were little more than scrap to begin with, or so he'd heard. Why was he needed to help with that?

After what seemed an age, a small light beside the instrument panel controlling the door blinked on. He understood the meaning – it was a way of signalling that the person inside was ready to receive his visitors. In reality, it was a way of re-enforcing control. You did not ask to come in until ordered to do so. Despite being alone in the corridor, he came to attention, marched smartly to the panel, and pressed the button for attention. As expected, the response was slow to come. Again, control re-enforced. Eventually, a voice invited him to enter.

The chamber beyond was as luxurious and comfortable as the corridor he had just been standing in. It's only apparent difference was size. This was the largest private office he'd ever stood in whilst off world, and was the one signal of status for its owner. FA Pellaeon was sat at his desk at the far end of the office, entering data on a small holopad. To his left, stood a far more familiar face, that of Commander of Operations of the Hammer's Fist, Captain Ken Eode. Redren marched smartly across the room, his armoured boots marking a steady click on the decking as he passed. He stamped to attention before the Admiral, and removed his helmet, tucking it beneath his arm.

“Staff Sergeant Redren, Hammer's Fist, reporting as ordered, Admiral.” Redren stated, setting his tone to be firm, yet respectful. He stared fixedly at a point on the wall behind Pellaeon, but his peripheral vision allowed him to see the admiral continue to type. It's all about control, Redren mused.

“Staff Sergeant Redren,” Pellaeon began, “Since the events that befell you in the Bie'Lek system, you have doubted yourself and your ability to lead men to victory. You blame yourself for their deaths, when their deaths were honourable, and nothing more than their duty expected of them. You have allowed yourself to become unfocused, and doubt almost every decision. Your weakness is a liability to the Fist, and the Emperor's Hammer as a whole.”

Redren was caught utterly off balance. He strained to remain impassive, despite the feeling that his legs wanted to buckle and fall away. He wanted to reply, but Pellaeon continued.

“You are a disgrace to the uniform you wear, but more importantly, a disgrace to those who died at Bie'Lek to ensure Imperial victory. Yifanth, Ikesony, even Hekat, you dishonour their memories and their sacrifices with your self pity. They would look at you now with nothing but contempt, staff sergeant. Contempt.”

The mention of the names of those lost at Bie'Lek caused the bile to rise in Redren's throat. They had given their lives to retrieve data that for all he knew had proven fruitless. The experimental Star Destroyer, the Eldridge, had once again phased away and been lost. Had that krelling data been worth the lives of his squad? He couldn't believe so, despite his Imperial conditioning. A spark ignited inside him. This arrogant Admiral, sitting here, using the names of his squad against him, as if anything he could say would burn worse than the fire of guilt that burned him daily. He would have given his life for his men, for the mission. Instead, he gave the lives of his squad to ensure its success, spending

their lives for the glory of the Empire like they were nothing more than disposable assets. He had played the good Imperial Stormtrooper and secured victory with a heavy payment in Imperial blood.

Redren did not allow himself to react, though he wanted to scream at the admiral, berate him for using those names for whatever krelling purpose he had here, smash the arrogance out of him. His head felt like it was wrapped in a tightening iron halo, his ears rang and the air seemed to hiss colder through his gritted teeth.

Admiral Pellaeon rose from his chair.

“And nothing to say for yourself. I expected the self pity but the cowardice you display here today is beyond contempt. I should cut you down where you stand. Perhaps the death of your men was a boon to our forces. No one who has been led by such a pathetic excuse for a trooper could be of any value to us! I now stand grateful for their deaths! Nothing more than what would be deserved by any who had been associated with such a pathetic excuse for...” Pellaeon's sentence was cut short.

The insult to his lost squad had turned a spark into an inferno. Without any ability to control himself, Redren's hand had shot to his sidearm. His fingers had barely undone the holster's clip when he froze, utterly still. Pellaeon's lightsabre flickered microns from Redren's throat. Redren hadn't even seen the admiral move. Despite the complex containment fields that held the energy fields in place, Redren's skin began to sizzle and blister from the sun-hot blade.

“Good...” Pellaeon growled. He stared fixedly into Redren's eyes, And Redren returned the glare as best he could. The power of the admiral's gaze was overwhelming, and he felt his innermost self stripped bare before it. As quickly as it had appeared, the lightsabre vanished. Pellaeon straightened his uniform, and sat once again. Redren glanced at Captain Eode, gingerly touching the scalded skin on his neck as he did so.

“Good.” Pellaeon continued, his voice entirely matter of fact. “My sources in the Order said you had potential, but it seemed you had lost it somewhere, Staff Sergeant. I am glad to see it isn't entirely beyond salvaging. You will need such fire in your upcoming mission. You are dismissed.”

Redren stood for a moment, utterly bemused. The tightening iron vice around his head had gone in an instant, the very air seemed to have warmed. His bemusement got the better of him for a moment, and he blinked from Pellaeon to Eode. What had just happened? The admiral looked up at Redren. As if in answer to his unasked question, Pellaeon stared hard at him. The vice returned, the fire burned within him once more, and the room around him seemed to chill and darken. And as abruptly, it was gone. Pellaeon's glance was now simply quizzical – implying a wonder as to the continuing presence of Redren. Redren saluted the Admiral, saluted Captian Eode, and turned and marched out of the chamber.

He waited until the hatch closed behind him before stopping his march. He stood, collected himself, and placed his helmet back on his head. The admiral was a force user, and a powerful one at that. Krelling Sith... Redren thought to himself. And, as if from inside his very head, he felt a silent voice whispering...