



CHAPTER FOUR

FIRST TRIAL

Sweat beaded upon Fleet Admiral Pellaeon's forehead, before running in long streams down his face and neck. His breathing was heavy, and his head hung low onto his chest, the weight of a mask-like contraption dragging it down. Every time he tried to concentrate, focus his mind and his supernatural force abilities, powerful electric shocks were administered in a dozen random locations across his face and scalp, at unpredictable intervals. With his eyes covered, and a cacophony of white noise played unceasingly into his ears, he was all but totally disorientated.

Pellaeon struggled against the metal restraints pinning him to an interrogation slab, his body tipped slightly forwards in order to maximise discomfort. The constant pain and sensory bombardment tore at his ability to focus his mind in order to bring his force-sensitivity to bear. Whoever was responsible for this outrage, Pellaeon's reputation as a powerful force-user had reached them.

After what seemed an eternity, a jolting movement gave Pellaeon's tortured consciousness something to focus on. The interrogation slab shifted back, allowing him to fall back and find a moment's respite. Metallic fingers played at the catches holding the unwieldy headgear onto Pellaeon, and he felt its weight lifted away. The audio devices and blindfold were also removed, bringing the overwhelming disorientation crashing down. Pellaeon struggled to open his eyes in the sudden glare of the chamber, and he was able to get his first good look at his surroundings.

Through watering eyes, he saw he was being held in a multi-sided chamber – probably aboard a starship judging by the bulkhead walls. Each wall held a sealed panel, blinking bio-monitors arrayed beside each panel. Pellaeon surmised that they must hold other prisoners, perhaps in some form of stasis. He glanced towards those who had released him from his torment; a pair of humanoid droids. Pellaeon grimaced. No mind control tricks to persuade them to release him, then.

"I assume you know who I am?" Pellaeon asked the nearest droid. It seemingly ignored him, and continued adjusting the bio-monitor attached to the interrogation slab. Pellaeon sighed. No use

attempting to intimidate or bargain with them either. He assumed the removal of the sensory deprivation devices heralded an impending interrogation. He was not disappointed.

Somewhere behind him, Pellaeon heard the sound of a door opening, followed by a clicking step.

“Don’t be scared ‘Admiral’... the judge for all of your crimes is here.”

A figure moved into Pellaeon’s view. Despite himself, his lip curled in surprise and disgust. Despite being covered in a cowl of thick, crimson fabric, the figure appeared female and human, or, at least, had been so at some point in the past. The cowl bulged with unnatural, angular shapes, giving only the vaguest sense of a feminine form. The face that looked out from beneath the deep hood was almost entirely mechanical, the flesh raw and red where it joined metal. Less than a third of the human face remained, but it was enough to reinforce the impression that this person has once been a human female.

Pellaeon gathered his thoughts, focusing his attention. Without the constant distraction of the sensory overload he had been subjected to, his mind swam back towards clarity. If this was truly a human, then he should be able to influence them. He concentrated.

“You will release me, and escort me back to my ship.” His voice was calm, but firm. Yet, that was all. Pellaeon frowned – mind manipulation was a well-known trick by almost all force users. Even the Jedi of old had lowered themselves to using such an invasive practice, justifying it as a peaceful alternative to violence. Those who followed the darker arts saw it for what it truly was – the irresistible supplication of the will of another, perhaps the truest expression of power. However, as he heard his own words, there was an absence of that irresistible authority within the tone.

“Will I now?” The figure replied, moving to slowly circle the room. “I think I would rather not. Especially after we went to such trouble to bring you here! What would you think of us if we expended all that effort only to let you leave without the opportunity to more thoroughly enjoy our hospitality?”

If mental manipulation would not work, then physical would have to do. Pellaeon tried to focus his mind once more, visualised whatever passed for a throat beneath the cowl beginning to crush and compact. Again, all he felt was a deep absence. The momentary look of confusion on his face was not missed by his apparent captor.

“Admiral, I am insulted.” She began, her voice electronically rendered, “How incompetent do you imagine us to be? Do you truly think we would have captured such a prominent member of the Dark Brotherhood and not be prepared?” she walked over to one of the panels in the wall, and depressed a button beside the bio-monitor. The panel slid out from the wall, revealing not another prisoner as Pellaeon had suspected, but a small lizard-like creature. It dangled from a nest of metal protuberances, electrodes and fluid cables spilling from various points on the small, part furred-part scaled body. Its eyes were vacant; its breathing shallow. Pellaeon knew the creature, although he had never seen one in the flesh; a ysalamir – a creature who had evolved the ability to create a force-nullifying field, a natural defence against the force sensitive predators that roamed their home world of Myrkr. His captor gestured to the many panels around the room, the servos and hydraulics of her arm clicking as she did so.

“We made sure we had enough to counter even your formidable abilities, *Admiral*.” Again, she spoke the rank as if it were an accusation rather than an honorific. Pellaeon resisted the urge to slump into his restraints, instead coming as much to attention as it were possible.

“Fleet Admiral Pellaeon, Commander of the TIE Corps, 5402.” His response effected a strange, electronic crackling noise from his captor. It took him a moment to realise it was laughter.

“Pellaeon, Is that all you can think of to say, after all this time?” She asked.

He could not help glancing again towards the strange figure. He had never knowingly met an officer of the First Order in person, and he was sure one such as this would have remained in his memory. His captor saw his examination of her, and twisted her head slightly, revealing a little more of what human flesh remained on her face. When that gained little more than another look of vague disgust, Pellaeon’s captor made what could only have been a sigh, and extended her right arm towards him. It was an unnatural gesture – the arm extended out from the cowl to an unnatural length, as metal slid over metal. At a point half way up what could best be described as the forearm, there sat a small patch of preserved skin, red and swollen around the bare, steel hooks holding it in place. Upon the skin was an unmistakable mark – that of an initiate of the Dark Brotherhood.

Pellaeon returned to his attempt at attention.

“A traitor to the brotherhood, then.” He spat.

“I am not sure I can be a traitor to a brotherhood who expelled and abandoned me. Rather the other way around, I suspect.” She moved to stand before Pellaeon. “You do not remember?” She raised her arm, and a digit of her mechanical hand twisted like a tentacle, tracing the line across her face where metal and flesh met. It ran from the cleft of the chin, up through the right-most corner of her mouth and through the right eye, which glowed and spun mechanically within its socket. The full left side of her face was prosthetic, and unnaturally angular. No attempt had been made to recreate the appearance of the original face. The mismatched bionic eyes studied Pellaeon carefully.

“*You* do not remember?” She asked again. Pellaeon’s eyes narrowed. A dark memory stirred.

“Jancas Jansgar...” He muttered. The barking, coughing sound Pellaeon was forced to assume was laughter burst from the audio box mounted near the throat of his captor.

“Ah, so you do remember! It is Prosecutor General Jancas Judicis, of the First Order, now. Times have changed, have they not?” More of the barking noise.

Pellaeon searched his memory for all he could recall of the Dark Brotherhood novice he had known so long ago. His lip curled at the memory. The last time they had met was years ago. She had been a headstrong, promising candidate for the Brotherhood. Her family had been freighter crew during the time of the Rebellion. She had left her family to seek a more adventurous life in the Imperial Academy. Before the end of her first year, a Rebel raiding party had launched a hit and fade attack run against a convoy of freighters that included her family’s vessel. It had been carrying munitions destined for an Imperial resupply depot – a prime target for the rebel fighters. The freighter was lost with all hands. Jancas Jansgar had all but flown off the rails. Her anger burned fiercely, and it led to numerous disciplinary hearings. It was this that fully brought her to the Brotherhood’s attention. Brotherhood agents within the academy had already identified her as having the potential for force sensitivity. The anger now consuming her was the raw material they needed to re-forge her into a weapon of the Emperor. She was accepted as an initiate into the order.

Jansgar had shown initial promise, but it soon became clear she was becoming increasingly unable to harness and control her anger. It was what the Jedi had always failed to understand. Anger, hate... These emotions did indeed lead to the dark side of the force. What the Jedi, and Jansgar, failed to understand was that whilst wild, uncontrolled anger and hate would lead to nothing but ruin, by

taming those emotions, harnessing them to your will, they could act as a lens to focus and strengthen a person's abilities with the force. The hatred of disorder, the anger inspired by insurrection – if embraced and used as allies, could fuel both ambition and power. The Jedi, in their nativity, refused to accept this, or failed to understand it. Jancas Jansgar had equally failed.

Her downfall finally came during duelling practice with Pellaeon himself, by then a well-established member of the Brotherhood and powerful force user. Pellaeon had goaded her, taunted her for failing to protect her family. He stoked the flames of her anger as the duelling masters attempted to guide her towards focus, help her to forge the swelling rage into a finely edged blade with which to defeat Pellaeon. But to no avail. Her attacks became wild, furious, and uncontrolled. In a mindless, headlong charge, she tripped on the edge of a training mat, and fell face first into the star-hot blade of Pellaeon's rising light sabre. The wound was horrific. Her face fell away, a seared lump of flesh and bone. Her convulsing body had dropped at Pellaeon's feet. She stepped over it, and left her to the ministrations of the duelling masters and their lackeys. He had felt no remorse for her, only frustration that a promising candidate had fallen, both literally and figuratively, to her own failure to heed the teaching of the Dark Brotherhood. He had not spared her another thought since that day.

Yet, here she now stood, the 'judge for all his crimes'. Pellaeon could guess a crime that would stand high within her list. His curiosity warred with his need to maintain the dignity of his rank and position – a conflict that did not go unnoticed.

"I was not left to simply die after... my injury," Jancas began, "You could say I was fortunate. I had, shall we say, 'befriended' one of the masters. She did not wish to see me die, but could not fully restore me within the Order's medical facility as my 'failure' required I should indeed be left to die. She did what she could. I retain the new face she gave me in honour of that service." She gestured again to the metallic, prosthetic face, its poor approximation of humanity now making sense.

"I regret to say I did not view it as a service at the time," Jancas continued, "and I soon served justice against the woman who had subjected me to this new appearance. Alas, once I calmed myself I saw it for what it was – a miscarriage of justice. As punishment, I removed this arm myself." She held her left arm up, allowing the crimson sleeve of the cowl to fall back. The arm was dull metal and hydraulics all the way to the elbow. "I commissioned a replacement in keeping with my new identity," she went on, flexing her clicking fingers, "and rededicated myself to ensuring punishments were metered out on the deserving. I have done so ever since. I established myself within the First Order, and for my efforts have been recognised as Jancas Judicis, Prosecutor General of the First Order. Which is why you find yourself here before me."

"I hold no blame for your injury," Pellaeon spat, his own anger now rising against the pettiness of it all, "You failed to control your own anger. The only crime committed that day was your own failure."

That barking, crackling laugh echoed around the room once more.

"My dear Pellaeon," Jancas laughed, "The First Order does not think so *small*. You are here to answer for the crimes of the Emperor's Hammer. Namely, your refusal to accept the Galactic Law as laid down by the First Order. Your pitiful fleet still think themselves a force to be reckoned with. We will show you how flawed that view is. And you will for the crimes of political negligence, and insurrection against the First Order." She moved closer to Pellaeon, so the spinning, glowing sockets of her bionic eyes were level with his.

"When I realised it would be you who would be answering for these crimes," she whispered, "Well, I just had to come myself." She turned, and moved away from Pellaeon.

“I will leave you to consider your plea,” She turned to the two droids, who had stood idle for the entire meeting. “Make him... comfortable.” She strode out of the door, and was gone.

Pellaeon felt the interrogation slab shift forwards once again, his weight pulling against the restraints. He watched, helpless, as the head gear that had been removed mere minutes ago was brought forwards once again, and strapped in place.

He awaited the inevitable pain.

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