



## CHAPTER FIVE

### FIRST CELL ON THE LEFT

Colonel Mark Schueler paced the length of his cell. It did not take long. His patience was wearing thin, but he knew he must endure this incarceration. The time for action would come, and soon. All he need do is wait. Outwardly, he appeared calm, simply stretching his legs to pass the time as he remained locked in the brig of the Resurgent Class Star Destroyer Curia. Inwardly, he was seething. He accepted that anger. In his mind, it was being channelled, shaped and re-wrought into something he could use. He pictured it as a kyber crystal, a thing to be carefully honed until it could be housed within the hilt of a lightsabre. He would hone this anger into something he could use, a conduit for his force sensitivities. He recalled the events of the previous hours, letting the bitter sting of defeat and capture wash over him.

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#### *18 Hours Earlier*

With a juddering clang, retrieval hooks attached themselves to the dorsal hull of the Imperial Landing Craft Theta One. The vibrations staggered both Schueler and his passenger, Fleet Admiral Pellaeon. Schueler grabbed his pilot's service blaster as Pellaeon ignited his light sabre.

Ever since their vessel had been disabled, having been caught in a carefully laid out trap, they had been expecting such an arrival. The forces ranged against their comrades of the TIE Corps had been overwhelming, and it was all but miraculous that so many of their fellow pilots had escaped with their lives. Retreat was ignominious, but death was an ignominy there was no coming back from. The pilots of the Corps would yet redeem themselves, neither the Colonel or Admiral had any doubts about that. Until then, they would have to deal whatever happened next on their own.

The sound of an atmospheric seal being established against the hull above them was unmistakable. Whoever their captors turned out to be, they intended to board them, rather than tow the ship back

to the colossal Star Destroyer that hung in the nebula-strewn space off their port bow. If they imagined they would come without a fight, then they were about to learn a harsh lesson.

With a deafening screech, the las-cutters of the docking umbilical began to slice through the hull. Sparks rained into the room, droplets of liquid hull alloys causing the plush, executive carpet of the transport compartment to smoke and burn. A choking smoke filled the room. Schueler, in his pilot's flight suit, was unaffected by the smoke, but Pellaeon was in his standard uniform. Schueler went to hand him a portable rebreather, but the admiral dismissed the offer. He stood, face grimly set, ignoring the effects of the thickening smoke through sheer will.

In moments, the cutters completed their work, and a round section of hull dropped to the floor, the melted edges forming misshapen rivulets as they rapidly cooled.

Schueler raised his blaster as Pellaeon took on a fighting stance, ready for whoever came through the freshly cut hole.

However, as a small, spherical device dropped through the hatch, it became clear these were no reckless amateurs. Both Pellaeon and Schueler's hands shot up, fingers stretched towards the device. Both focused their minds, willing the sphere to rise, both trying to bring their force sensitivities to the fore. Yet, the sphere remained where it was. The momentary shock of their force abilities failing was all the shock grenade needed to do its work. It burst open in a blinding flash, a deafening explosion and arcs of ionised energy that flickered over the hull and between the bulkheads. Even within the protection of his space suit, Schueler felt the full effects of the grenade, and fell to his knees, wracked with pain. Through eyes streaming with tears and blinded by flashing after images, shapes moved before him. For a few moments, he desperately fought his convulsing muscles, ordering them to raise and fire his blaster, before a flash of blue light engulfed his consciousness, and all became black.

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Schueler could almost taste the bitterness in his mouth. He, Theta, the TIE Corps, had failed to safely deliver Admiral Pellaeon to Aurora, the home world of the Emperor's Hammer. It was a hard pill to swallow.

And yet, he still lived. Whilst that was true, it wasn't yet over. His hand absent-mindedly reached across and gently rested on a section of the opposite forearm where, concealed beneath the sleeve of his flight suit, was a curious mark – that of a member of the Dark Brotherhood. He was sure it would have been noted during his capture, but when he had awoken, he remained in his flight overalls, although all other equipment had been confiscated. It may have been missed. This was supported by the fact that, as best he could tell, the prison guards were standard naval troopers – no match for anyone with even an iota of force sensitivity. He could, essentially, escape from his cell at his leisure. But now was not the right time.

Soon, Schueler knew, the response from the Emperor's Hammer would come. The battle would be bloody. What little he knew of this new class of Star Destroyer he now found himself on told him it was more than a match for any two of the Star Destroyers currently on active service. The Sovereign, a Super Star Destroyer under EH control, was still all but mothballed. And, if his senses and the conversations he had been able to catch as people passed his cell door were to be believed, the Curia had left the Aurora Nebula and rendezvoused with a small fleet elsewhere within EH space, including at least one more RSD, the Penitent. Schueler understood the tactic. The Aurora nebula was surrounded by the forces of the TIE Corps. He assumed they were now in one of the more

distant systems under the Hammer's control, closer to the galactic core, and reinforcement. It was without doubt that the fight to drive the First Order out of Emperor's Hammer space would result in heavy losses. Despite their power, and track record thus far, Schueler was confident the First Order would be ultimately defeated, any survivors sent scurrying back to the galactic core.

Schueler had carefully analysed this knowledge, and allowed his mind to drift along the threads of the future revealed to him by the dark side of the Force. He had determined the optimum time to make his move would be just as the battle began. When the alarm sounded, the ship would become alive with bustling activity. Once out of the cell, he could slip in amongst the flood of crew members moving to assigned posts without needing to battle along every step. It offered him the highest probability of reaching the Admiral, affecting a rescue, and finding some way off the ship.

The only unknown was how the First Order had been able to nullify the force sensitivities of both he and Pellaeon. Clearly they had known of it, else how could it have been nullified at all? He guessed that the First Order were aware of Pellaeon's association with the Brotherhood, but not his own, else he had no doubts he would either already be dead or far more heavily guarded. This gave him an advantage, as long as he could eliminate whatever method or technology they had available to deprive him of his force abilities. He may simply have to cross that bridge when he arrived at it.

All he need do was wait.

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