

WOODY'S ANNIVERSARY GIFT

High Admiral Elwood the Brave stood on the bridge of the Star Destroyer *Challenge* and stared into the vast blackness of space. In the distance he could make out a familiar triangular shapes of other Star Destroyers as they orbited Aurora Prime, the capital of the Emperor's Hammer. The bridge was quiet. It usually was. The *Challenge* was no longer in active service, so the crew existed only of a few technicians and a handful of people to control its movements. Gravity did the rest.

Woody did not like it. The *Challenge* had at one time been the most feared ship in the fleet, and should be restored to its former glory. He had plans, and plenty of them. Perhaps soon it was time to implement one of them. Or two. Or all.

But first he had to survive the next few weeks. Almost two years as Commander of the TIE Corps. Quite a nice run. A small smile formed around his mouth. Yes, the *Challenge* really needed another run.

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Aboard the Star Destroyer *Hammer*, the comm system in the office of Major Berkana beeped. He punched a button and listened. When the comm system fell silent, he grabbed his flight jacket and walked out of his quarters. Down the hall, he ran into General Dempsey, one of the top ace pilots in the squadron.

"With me," he said, and Dempsey turned heel and followed. Curiosity rose in her mind, but she didn't ask. The time of being in the loop was long gone. Berkana would tell her what she needed to know, when she needed to know it.

A few minutes later, they walked onto the flight deck of the Hammer. Berkana pointed at a TIE Advanced starfighter and headed for his own TIE Phantom starfighter. Another minute later, and the two starfighters glided out of the atmosphere controlled hangar bay into the emptiness of space.

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Another 20 minutes later, Berkana and Dempsey gout out of their fighters, now parked in the hangar bay of the Star Destroyer *Challenge*. The TIE Corps Commander was waiting for them. Behind them, a group of transports set down on the flight deck, and disgroged dozens of personnel. Woody smiled.

"You will like this, Dempsey," he said. "You will be flying under *Challenge* colors again."

Dempsey frowned.

"Don't worry, you're not being reassigned. Strictly a one-time operation. Just to make sure people don't forget this ship."

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Several hours later, Dempsey, Berkana, Woody and his second in Command, Fleet Admiral Pellaeon, were sitting in the officer's mess on the upper deck of the Star Destroyer.

"Our objective is very simple," Woody said. "The *Challenge* is being staffed right now, and we will be ready for the jump to hyperspace in an hour. Our target is to Mora system. Intel believes a small convoy will be passing through there shortly. We go in, find our target, and take it down. We'll jump back before their reinforcements can show up to spoil the party."

"The target being?" Dempsey inquired.

Woody smiled. "My anniversary gift," he said. "Amongst the cargo this convoy is transporting, is a supply of neodium. As soon as we are cleared from hyperspace, we will launch. Berkana will fly a TIE Phantom, you will fly that TIE Advacnced. Me and Pell will be using TIE Defenders. When the freighters arrive, Berkana will ID their cargoes, while you engage escort fighters. If there's anything bigger, Pell and I will take it out and join you. If not, we'll be with you from the get go. Once Berkana finds my gift, I will disengage and disable the freighter. Once the escorts are down, you're all free to go after the other freighters and do some damage. Any questions?"

Woody looked around the group, but the mission was obvious. Everyone kept silent.

"Good. Get some rest, we'll be leaving hyperspace in a bit more than six hours. I want you all on the flight deck and in your cockpits before the six hours are up." Dempsey and Berkana nodded, got up, and left.

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Six hours and four minutes later, Dempsey closed the hatch on her TIE Advanced fighter. The pre-flight check took a few moments. "Cyclone Four, ready," she said into the mike. She smiled, it had been over a decade since she had flown under Cyclone's colors. It felt good to be home. Berkana and Pellaeon also checked in, and Woody told them to get ready. Only a few moments later, a soft shudder informed them the Star Destroyer *Challenge* had dropped out of hyperspace. Dempsey flicked a few switches, and her twin ion engines came to life. The soft whine increased in pitch, and a green light on the HUD told her she was ready for launch. On her right, she could see the two TIE Defenders lifting off the flight deck, and she engaged the repulsor lifts. With a slight tremor, the TIE Advanced starfighter came loose from the flight deck. Dempsey pushed the yoke forward, and the TIE Advanced moved forward. Only a few seconds later the sound died as the fighter flew in vacuum. She formed up with Berkana and Pellaeon behind Woody. *And now, she thought, the waiting game begins.*

And wait she did. After more than two hours, she started wondering about the quality of Intel's information. After three hours, boredom really started setting in, and yet another half hour later she pondered suggesting a return to the *Hammer's* hangar bay. The suggestion never made it to her mouth, as only moments later a beep in her helmet alerted her to incoming ships. Only a few moments later, the combat computer showed several blips, indicating craft coming out of hyperspace. She smiled. She ran a final check on her systems, and hit the accelerator. Quickly the fighter leaped forward as it increased speed.

A quick flick through the list of targets indicated a Corvette and a Bulk Cruiser on either side of the convoy. Nine freighters of various types, all armed to the teeth.

"Watch it folks," came the voice of Woody. "That Cruiser is launching fighters. Pell, take the Corvette then join me on that Cruiser. Dempsey, get those X-wings. Counting eight already, they probably have another eight standing by."

Nothing new, Dempsey had already tagged the X-wings as targets and was moving in to intercept them. She switched to activate the warhead launchers and linked them up. Two missiles would take out an X-wing without a hitch, even with full shields engaged. Enough missiles to take out four, and then it would be four to one. The enemy didn't stand a chance. A small glance at the computer told her the nearest X-wing was only 3 clicks away. Play time.

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Pellaeon's attack run was a straight line. The Corvette was dead ahead, and its gunners were already taking shots. Pellaeon smiled. With seven clicks between the Corvette and his TIE Defender, there wasn't a chance they would actually hit. The counter rolled down, and as soon as it rolled below six clicks the targeting computer beeped to signal it was acquiring a lock. As soon as the signal's pitch indicated it had achieved a lock, Pellaeon hit his firing button. Once, twice, thrice. Six torpedoes started on their path towards the Corvette, and Pellaeon veered off. It took him a moment to locate the Cruiser, and soon he headed towards it. In the distance he could see another few torpedoes moving through space, on their way to the Cruiser. He glanced sideways, and saw the explosion on the Corvette's flank as the first two of his torpedoes hit the deflector shields. A few seconds later, another explosion showed in about the same place, and a moment later the third pair of his torpedoes slammed into the Corvette's outer hull. The Corvette's hull plating sheered off, and fire erupted as its atmosphere vented into space through the openings in the hull. Then the Corvette broke apart, and as the cockpit and engine section fell apart, a violent explosion destroyed the engine section. The violence of the explosion threw metal shrapnel in all directions, and many of the fragments sliced straight through the cockpit section. Soon, there was nothing left as the lights died.

Pellaeon turned his head back towards the Cruiser, which was now also showing flames where Woody's torpedoes had destroyed her hull. Pellaeon switched to his laser cannons and pressed the fire button. He cut back on the throttle and strafed the Cruiser. With no more deflector shields, each laser impact on its hull clearly penetrated the Cruiser. The targeting computer showed the ship's integrity was quickly deteriorating.

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On the other side of the convoy, Berkana was quickly flying past all the freighters. So far, nothing interesting showed up. But, as he approached the last of the freighters, he smiled. His computer indicated the freighter, a heavily modified bulk freighter, the computer indicated its cargo consisted of several metallic ores. One of which was neodium. He tagged the freighter as the primary target. He moved off and increased the distance between his fighter and the freighter. With the turbo laser batteries that had been fitted, a TIE Phantom wasn't the best craft to be in at close range. He signalled the TIE Defenders. They were better suited for the job anyway.

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Woody and Pellaeon saw Berkana's signal. They swooped in, and started their attack runs. A hail of red laser bolts strafed Pellaeon's shields, and he veered off. He quickly looked around and noticed the lone X-wing on his six.

"Dempsey, where are you?" he said into the mike.

"Right behind you sir," Dempsey replied. A mere moment later, Pellaeon saw the X-wing behind him disappear from the computer's display.

"All X-wings down, sir," Dempsey said. "I'll start working on the other freighters."

As Woody and Pellaeon approached the freighter, Woody noticed the transport that had been launched from the *Challenge*. *Good*, he thought. *Best not to wait until we take her down. Save a little time.*

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Fifteen minutes later, Woody exited his TIE Defender, back aboard the *Challenge*. To his left, the transport had touched down as well with his prize. He punched a key on the wall comm panel. "TC-1 to bridge," he said. "Get us back to Aurora Prime."