

THE RETURN OF AN OLD FRIEND

As the nav computer on the *Andromeda* started beeping, High Admiral Anahorn Dempsey pulled back the lever and decelerated her ship to sublight speeds. It took her eyes half a second to adjust, and then she saw her target dead ahead. She could make out the familiar wedge shape of an *Imperial-II* class Star Destroyer berthed near the shipyards high above Aurora Prime. Her targeting computer showed a flurry of smaller ships orbiting the shipyards, too many and too small to see with the naked eye at this distance. Far behind, on the edge of the system, the immense hulk of the once mighty *Sovereign*-class Star Destroyer *Sovereign* remained in orbit, but Dempsey knew it was only for show. The once almighty *Sovereign* would never return to active duty.

A crackle of her comm system told her that at least one person was paying attention to the long range sensors in the system.

"Unidentified transport, you have entered Imperial space. Identify yourself or we will be forced to take lethal action against you."

Dempsey smiled. Whoever that was obviously hadn't recognized the specs of her ship. If he had, he would have recognized them. And know that even a TIE Defender would have a hard time taking it out. Especially with Dempsey herself at the helm. She pushed a button and waited while the signal travelled to the waiting officer. Even at the speed of light, it would need a few seconds to actually get there.

"Admiral," the voice came back. "We were not informed that you would be coming here. I'll get someone to set up quarters for you here immediately."

"Don't bother," Dempsey said. "I'll not be wasting any of my time. Just get the main hangar bay ready for me."

"Admiral, the main hangar is not ready to receive ships at this time!"

Dempsey shook her head. "Then you'd better make sure they get it ready by the time I get there. I think you have about 10 minutes. Dempsey out."

She keyed the comm system off, not interested in another response or more excuses. If she was going back into the saddle as Commodore of a Star Destroyer, it would be on her terms.

10 minutes and 35 seconds later, Dempsey maneuvered the *Andromeda* through the main hangar bay's energy shield. She frowned. Never before had she seen the hangar bay in such a hopeless mess as the sight that greeted her. She quickly scanned around for a place to set down, and noticed a red flashing light in a small clearing. Someone had decided not to get on her bad side on the first day. She smiled.

She slowly moved the *Andromeda* to the clearing and touched down. She shut down the computer, keyed in a few security systems, and walked to the rear hatch. As it lowered, she tucked her uniform straight, and brushed her hand against the familiar feel of her lightsaber. She wouldn't be needing it, but it couldn't hurt to let the crew know who they were dealing with. Assuming she would see any today.

One man stood at attention as she walked down the ramp onto the deck of the Star Destroyer. "At ease... Major," she said.

"Welcome aboard, Admiral. I do apologize for the lack of welcoming committee, but everyone is busy getting the ship to battle readiness. We're on a tight schedule and can't really afford to take a break to officially welcome you aboard."

Dempsey nodded. "Good, Major. The sooner this ship is back to its former glory, the better."

As she walked towards the main turbolift, the Major followed.

"I'm afraid we won't be able to go that far, Admiral. We're awfully short on parts."

Dempsey stopped and looked at him. "Major, we're standing in the main hangar bay of what once was the mightiest Star Destroyer in the fleet. This was the Command Staff's flagship for years!"

"In.... in name only, Admiral," he stammered. "Ever since the Command Staff officially set up shop on this ship, we've seen them here maybe two or three times. A few days at a time. All in all, at least one member of the Command Staff has been on board this ship for less than 30 days. And that's a combined total over the years of all of them."

Dempsey pondered this. She couldn't say she was very surprised. As TIE Corps Commander, you couldn't be tucked away on a ship away from the fleet, the pilots. Oh well.

"Very well, Major. By this time tomorrow, I expect this ship to be able to go to wherever I want it to."

She saw the major's eyes grow larger than she thought possible. "That's.... that's impossible. The hyperdrive is offline, the shield generators, we haven't even started on those yet. There's no weapons systems. Unless you count the blasters in the armory. We don't even have a skeleton crew!"

Dempsey turned on her heels and stared the man in his eyes. "None of which you just told me matters, Major," she hissed. "At noon tomorrow, this ship will fly into hyperspace and come out of it where I want it to, even if you have to go outside and push. Do you understand me?"

The Major gulped and nodded. "Yes, Admiral."

Dempsey turned and stalked off. "Don't bother showing me around," she said. "I know this ship like the back of my hand."

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A few minutes before noon the next day, Dempsey stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge of the Star Destroyer. She looked around. Where there should have been a good number of officers at their stations, now there were only 3. Of course, without shields or weapons, the officers responsible for them wouldn't need to be there. The tractor beam area was empty as well. Two people were manning the navigation station, where there should have been at least a dozen. This wasn't going to be easy.

"Helm, set a course for the Lyarna system. Prepare to make the jump to hyperspace on my mark."

"Yes Admiral," a squeaky voice said. For a moment, Dempsey let out a sigh.

"What's that? I couldn't hear that. And if everyone who's supposed to be here was actually here, neither could they!"

She heard a slight cough, and then the same voice replied in a strong - but still nervous - voice. "Yes, Admiral!"

Dempsey smiled.

"Three, two, one.... mark."

For a moment nothing happened. Dempsey wondered if perhaps the hyperdrive was still offline, or whether or not the reactor core could muster enough power to feed the hyperdrive. But then the ship shuddered, it creaked, and the stars turned to lines as the Star Destroyer leapt to light speed. Dempsey quickly planted one leg behind the other to prevent tumbling over. The inertial dampeners weren't calibrated yet. Obviously.

An hour later, a claxon sounded on the bridge of the ship, and a few seconds later it reverted back to realspace. Dempsey stared outside through the transparisteel viewport. In the distance, she could spot the shape of another Star Destroyer. An Assault Frigate was much closer, and she could already see its response to their unexpected arrival. It was visibly altering course and speed.

"Their shields are up and they're powering weapons," a voice said.

"I didn't expect any less," Dempsey responded. "Hail that Star Destroyer and open a comm channel."

"Imperial Star Destroyer *Hammer*, this is High Admiral Dempsey of the Emperor's Hammer TIE Fighter Corps. Is that any way to welcome an old friend?"

A few seconds of silence followed, and then the familiar voice of Elwood the Brave boomed across the empty bridge. "Dempsey, don't you know it's a capital offense to impersonate a High Admiral... Last I checked you still had general's bars on your uniform."

She smiled. "Ah, but that was the day before yesterday. Today, I am wearing my old High Admiral's uniform again."

"Good," came the response. "Now where did you find that piece of rust."

"Don't insult my ship, Admiral," she responded in jest. "After all, I grew up on this. This is my home away from home. And finally, I am back."

"You're kidding!"

"No I am not, Admiral," she said. The *Imperial-II* class Star Destroyer *Challenge* is back."