

Severing Ties

by FA Plif

It was a dark and stormy night on Aurora Prime, capital of the Emperor's Hammer and home to the planetside headquarters of the TIE Corps. Officers of the Corps spent far more time in space than they did on the ground, but sometimes the administrative duties involved in keeping the fleet running were best done face to face with the businessmen and politicians that were integral to the process. Fleet Admiral Plif found joy in these excursions where he could, using his status as a high-ranking official to attend gatherings of the rich and powerful at their grandiose events. The liquor was about the same as what he could obtain for himself through military channels, but the food was unlike anything served aboard ship.

The catering wasn't what that Plif was looking forward to this time, though. Rather, it was the prospect of confronting the defense contractors that he knew weren't only supplying their benefactors here in the Aurora system. He'd been made aware of their dealings in the Greeop Sector, and his sources said it wasn't with the pirate organizations that operated in the area. He'd be taking the opportunity to remind them of where their loyalties should lie, at least as much as those only motivated by credits could understand the concept.

The next day was clear and perfectly lovely. Plif would be attending a party that evening, so he wrapped up his paperwork a bit early and set to work making sure his dress uniform was immaculate, his boots polished, and his hair coiffed precisely. He took his role representing the fleet very seriously and took the time to look his best when he'd be in public. When he was ready, he called for an official transport to one of the tallest buildings on the planet. Tonight's event would have guests from the very highest echelons of society including the planetary government, dignitaries from other worlds, and executives from many of the largest corporations. Plif was sure to find Barrfred Gropett among them. Gropett was the president of the very shadiest military supplier that he'd been informed about, and was just the man he wanted to see.

The party was as elaborate as any he'd ever seen, the room glittered with elaborate decorations reflecting the status of its guests, who were adorned with the finest fashions clearly intended to extol their wealth and access to the most exclusive designers. Even an admiral's uniform couldn't compare to the gaudiness of some of the outfits Plif saw, which was a small comfort. He'd recently been awarded the Grand Order of the Emperor and walking around with an ornate dagger was new to him, not to mention its companion medal hanging from his neck.

Across the room, Plif saw his target. Barrfred Gropett stood in a group of people that included a senator, a pair of executives from other large conglomerates, and a junior member of his own company. Plif excused himself from his own group of pretty but unfortunately vapid guests, crossed the room with a pleasant but focused expression to deter any unexpected interruptions along his path, and stepped into the cluster that included Gropett. All of them turned to face the

new arrival. One of the executives had been speaking but let his sentence drift away as he recognized the admiral.

Gropett was the first to speak. "Admiral Plif," he said, "it's a pleasure to see you again. May I introduce you to..."

"Maybe some other time," Plif interrupted. His expression hardened. "Right now, we need to talk about who you've been supplying."

"Why, your fleet, of course. If there's been any problem with..."

Plif interrupted again. "The problem is that we're not the only ones you've been providing military hardware to."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Perhaps we should discuss this privately in..."

"No, Gropett, we'll be discussing this right here. You've been hiding your relationship with the Rebel Squadrons for far too long already."

Plif noticed that the rest of the room was now watching them with rapt attention.

"The R-Rebel Squadrons?" Gropett stammered. "Why would I have anything to do with them?"

"That's an excellent question. I was sure that someone who'd been treated so well by the Emperor's Hammer would focus on us exclusively. But greed is a powerful motivator, especially when someone thinks they could get away with it. And you did for some time," Plif said, "I congratulate you for that," he added sarcastically.

Plif stepped forward to put his face a few inches from Gropett's, but still spoke loudly enough for the rest of the room to hear him. "But now you'll be putting a stop to it. And you'll be doing it exactly as I instruct, or soon you won't be doing business at all."

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Out in deep space, Red Dagger Squadron was on patrol. They and all the other squadrons had received a new major version update for their scanners that boasted a 15% increase in overall range and 10% increase in sensitivity. Those kinds of numbers were incredible, most software loads didn't have anywhere near those kinds of boosts. To test it out, each squadron had made separate jumps to remote areas of the sector.

Lieutenant Commander Gavin Devearoux was getting Red Dagger into formation after the jump when suddenly every display and indicator in his cockpit went dead, his engines went out, and his ship began drifting. He called out to his R4 unit and there was no response. He turned to

look at the droid and it looked just as dead as everything in the cockpit. Out the canopy, Devearoux saw that the other Red Dagger fighters were also adrift.

After a few minutes of frantic attempts to restart the system and establish comms with the other pilots, the central display popped back on with just a command prompt. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Devearoux entered a few commands. He keyed in "access system". "Access denied" appeared on the screen. "access failsafe". Access denied. "access main power". Access denied... and...

The screen filled with a repeated line of text: YOU DIDN'T SAY THE MAGIC WORD!

As the phrase engulfed the entire display, a cartoon drawing of a TIE pilot appeared on screen with a hand up and an extended index finger shaking back and forth, as if to admonish the pilot for being so foolish. A sound bite began playing from the cockpit display's tiny speaker, "Ah ah ah, you didn't say the magic word." The clip repeated itself over and over, tauntingly.

"Please!" he exclaimed, but yelling at the screen did no good. It would be several hours before the fleet would discover what happened and be on their way to rescue them. In the meantime, all they could do was sit in their fighters, drifting in space, unable to communicate with each other and hoping they didn't run into anything.