

“The Storm After the Calm”

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Chapter One

The sight was a common one on the world of Craci IV. Cracian thumpers, workbeasts that stood on two powerful hind legs and were large enough to carry a humanoid rider, milled around the large pasture. A well-maintained barn sat a short distance away. The grass underfoot was struggling to regain its green-blue color after sitting dormant for the long winter, and the fence line disappeared over the rolling hills that had long ago been formed by glaciers. The last surviving remnants of snow clung desperately to shady areas. A stubborn chill lingered in the air, battling the youthful warmth of the early springtime sunshine peeking through a crack in the overcast sky.

On the outside of the pasture, Darin Stanic leaned against the fence. The seventeen-year-old crossed his arms on the top rail, rested his chin on them and closed his eyes with a small grin and a contented sigh. The sun felt good, and if it wasn't for the brisk breeze and the anticipation of the sunbeam's fleeting nature he would have unfastened his lined vest a bit.

Sure enough, after a few seconds the sun disappeared behind the expansive cloud bank once more. Darin kept his eyes closed but turned some of his attention toward listening to his younger sister's giggles from where she was sitting on the fence's top rail beside him and petting a thumper. The rest fueled his idle mental review of his errands list. Was there anything he still had to stop for? The groceries were in the back of the landspeeder, and he'd gotten the torque wrench, batteries and cleaning supplies his dad needed. What had his mom been saying about the lights in the garage—

Something tickled his left ear an instant before it was assaulted by a soft, wet mass. Darin flinched and jumped backwards. “What—” Opening his eyes, Darin saw the thumper was facing him and very close, closer than he'd realized it had been, but now the animal jerked back at his sudden movement and licked its lips.

Meanwhile, his sister's giggles had turned into laughter. “Darin, Smoky likes you!” Shiori said. The ten-year-old turned back to the thumper and enticed it closer again. “Don't you, Smoky,” she cooed. She ran her fingers through the thumper's shaggy grey fur that was shedding out in patches, and tousled the sparse mane on the crest of its neck. The thumper sidled closer to her, leaned into the rubbing and stood there quietly.

Darin stayed out of reach of the animal and wiped his face off with one of his long sleeves. He made a face when he realized that part of his dark blond hair had been victimized by the slobber as well. He patted it dry as best as he could— it was noticeably cold on his skin there from the stiff breeze— and brushed his bangs to the side before asking, “How do you know its name is Smoky? Did you talk to the owner?”

“No, that's the name I gave him. That's what I'm going to call him when we buy him too. He's the one I want.”

Darin raised an eyebrow and looked from Smoky to the other thumpers in the herd. They

were all varying shades of grey. All similar in size. They all looked the same. They probably all slobbered the same too. “Why him? I mean, he’s just a thumper. How’s he different from those other nine out there?”

Shiori’s frown made Darin feel like he was ignorant of some obvious, common sense concept. “Because he’s the best one,” she said. “See, the others won’t even come over here, but Smoky always comes when we stop. He’s so gentle I bet I could ride him with no problem.”

Smoky’s dark eyes half closed when Shiori’s docile fingers reached its head and stroked its long, pointed ears. Then she reached down and tickled its muzzle and under its chin, causing the animal’s lengthy, muscular tail to twitch.

Darin kept a watchful eye on that tail and took a step closer to Shiori. Thumpers were herbivores and considered very gentle, loyal and trainable, so much so that they were one of the cornerstones of the Cracian economy and essentially the only reason the galaxy at large even knew the remote system existed, but they were still very strong creatures with simplistic animal minds. If one got it in its head to attack for whatever reason, if that tail didn’t incapacitate its victim then the thick claws on its hind legs or even on its short forelegs could finish the job. Just because the claws were used for digging up roots and plants like Shiori had told him countless times, it didn’t mean they couldn’t be destructive to something else too.

Darin decided that he’d have to take Shiori’s word for it that this particular thumper was the same one that always came over for attention when he brought her for these short visits. He wasn’t sure if the barn owner would want them messing with his livestock uninvited like this, but Shiori enjoyed it so much that Darin never had the heart to say no.

Smoky nuzzled Shiori’s arm, then she giggled anew when Smoky began to lip at the ends of her long, curly black hair. Darin immediately shooed the animal’s large teeth away from her, and the thumper obeyed at once.

Shiori huffed at Darin in annoyance. “He’s fine. He’s not doing anything bad.” She stroked the thumper’s long face. “Sorry, Smoky. Don’t listen to him. You’re a good boy.”

Darin let Shiori’s admonishment roll off of him; he wasn’t going to take her word for *that*. The thumper was getting too mouthy for his comfort. He checked his chrono and took advantage of what time it showed. “Come on, we’ve been here pretty long. Mom’s got to be wondering where the groceries are.”

Shiori’s face fell. “Can’t we stay another few minutes?”

Shaking his head, Darin replied, “No, sorry. Let’s go.”

“Okaaaaaay.” Shiori cupped Smoky’s muzzle in her hands and gently pulled its face toward her own. Darin grimaced but didn’t say anything when she kissed the animal directly on its nose. “Bye, Smoky. I’ll bring you a treat next time, okay?” Shiori rubbed the thumper’s pronounced forehead and then let go and looked to Darin.

He took hold of her waist and lifted her off the fence, but instead of setting her on her feet, a spark of mischief made Darin grin, back away from the fence with her and spin in a quick circle.

Shiori’s surprised but gleeful shriek startled Smoky. Darin slowed to a halt but then abruptly spun in the opposite direction.

He only made it around twice before he had to stop and put his laughing sister down. “Okay, you’re officially too big and too heavy to do that anymore,” he told her.

“Aww, no, come on, Darin, spin me again!” She took his hand, moved back until his arm was extended and tried to spin around him using him as a pivot point. When their size difference

prevented that from working without Darin's cooperation, Shiori pulled herself toward Darin and jumped on his back before he could react.

He staggered at the sudden weight and the drastic shift in his center of gravity, but after a few off-balance steps he steadied himself. Shiori's arms were wrapped around his neck and her legs were entwined around his waist. He automatically supported her weight with his arms.

"Thumper ride!" she said in his ear.

"Shiori, you're getting too heavy for me—" Darin began to say. He stopped when she hugged his neck more tightly and nestled her head against his. Blast, she was good at this. "Okay," he relented, "but just to the speeder."

Her head immediately went up, and as he covered those dozen paces Darin bounced and jumped with her just as she liked. Once they got to their speeder parked on the side of the road, Darin let her slide gently off his back. Walking was a lot easier now.

Shiori gave one more wave to Smoky before climbing in the landspeeder, and Darin jumped in the pilot's side. Shiori scooted over to the middle seat directly beside him and fastened her seat restraints.

"Your hands are filthy," Darin remarked while he buckled his own restraints. "Wash them good when we get home."

"Yeah," Shiori said.

Darin lifted his hand to start the speeder but hesitated before doing so. He let his hand fall and looked at Shiori. "Listen, Squirt," he said gently. "I know you really like Smoky, but don't get too attached to him. Mom and Dad can't afford to buy a thumper."

"Don't call me Squirt," was her first automatic, almost absent reply. "And yes, they can," she continued in all earnestness. "They bought you flying lessons."

"That's a little different. Besides, now that I have my license I have to pay for all my flights with my own money. Thumpers are expensive to keep, and you don't have a job yet. You won't for a few years." Something about those words hit Darin in a strange way. First realizing how big Shiori had gotten, now thinking about her getting an apprentice-job in a few short years, it wasn't sitting right with him.

"Smoky won't be that expensive," Shiori countered. "We can fence the backyard, and he can live there. The grass doesn't cost anything. Oh, and the shed can be his barn. Dad can move his tools somewhere else."

Darin couldn't help but chuckle at that prospect, and he finally started the speeder. "I'll let you convince him of that. Good luck." He checked for traffic, then pulled onto the road and headed home.

Shiori leaned against Darin and chattered about thumpers and her group of friends while he navigated the speeder through the streets of their hometown, Merrilan. It was a large but unassuming town with plain buildings that had grown out-of-date a generation ago.

Darin wasn't bothered by the town's slow growth and in fact was grateful for it. When every day looked the same, there was security in knowing what was coming. Every intersection, every curve, every building they passed was comfortable in its familiarity. Any routes and shortcuts through Merrilan that Darin hadn't already known from spending his whole life there had been learned back in his first weeks of work as a landspeeder pilot for a local shipping company. Each turn was expected, planned, and brought them onto the route he wanted in the direction he wished to go. He always knew exactly where he was going and how to get there.

Off to the side a short distance away, the center of town came into view. The tallest

buildings were barely visible over the nearest rooftops. Instead of the skyscrapers found in the large Cracian cities, downtown Merrilan boasted only solid, unadorned buildings standing four or five stories high. In the central and older parts of town, the buildings were crammed together, making parking difficult during Darin's delivery runs for work. Despite their age, many of the buildings he saw and had gone into were sturdy, serviceable and safe, if in need of a new coat of paint or three.

Darin skirted the speeder west around the center of town and ended up in a residential area on the north side. Here the houses were only a story or two high and were on the older end of middle age, but they were a little more spread out and had garages and small yards. Seeing the first few houses always tripped an unconscious, pleasing thought in the back of his mind: *almost home*.

A mere two blocks from the Stanics' residence, they passed the house of Darin's best friend Cohen Nuuren. It had been Darin's second home ever since he and Cohen had both been about four years old and became inseparable. Darin automatically looked but didn't see Cohen, his two younger brothers or his parents. He recalled that the younger brothers were at another friend's house since it was the weekly day off from school, while Cohen and his parents were at work. Cohen would be back in time for their plans that evening though, and Darin brightened at the thought.

Darin pulled into their own driveway soon after and eased the landspeeder into the narrow garage. Shiori unbuckled her seat restraints and hopped out of the speeder before Darin had fully powered it down. "Hey, take a bag of groceries with you!" he futilely called to her back just before she disappeared around the corner of the garage.

Darin shook his head and secured his parents' speeder, then he went to its back storage compartment and grabbed a bag of groceries in each arm. He shifted them a bit, managed to put an additional bag in each arm as well, and then grabbed the handles of the bags containing his dad's supplies in both hands. There. That was all of them.

He awkwardly made his way to the small brown house. Just as he was puzzling out how to open the side door with his full load, it opened and revealed his father on his way out from inside. Jodeco Stanic pulled up short when he saw Darin immediately ahead of him, then he sighed. "For all the snow, Darin, how many times do we have to tell you that it's okay to make two trips?"

"At least once more, apparently," Darin replied with a grin while he handed an armload to his dad.

"You were gone a while. Everything okay?" Jodeco asked.

"Yeah, it was fine. Got your stuff and everything on the lists," Darin said. They walked through the side door of the house into the kitchen. "Did Mom say we need new garage lights? I can pick some up tomorrow after work if we do."

"No, not yet. I think it might be a wiring issue, and I have to check it out better first."

"Okay."

The next thing Darin heard inside was his mother's voice saying, "Shiori, your hands are filthy. How in the galaxy did you do that? Wash up quick before you get dirt everywhere." Then Ginala Stanic walked into the kitchen and smiled at Darin in greeting.

If Darin didn't know that was his mother, it would have been easy enough to believe he was looking at Shiori thirty years in the future; even strangers had made comments to them about their seemingly cloned appearance for years. Ginala had the same green eyes, slim build, and

long, curly black hair that bounced when she walked. Jodeco was average height but stocky, and he had blond hair and blue eyes. Darin always felt like the mutt of the family, having inherited his mother's green eyes and a darker version of his father's hair color. While just a handful of centimeters shorter than his dad, Darin's build fell partway between the two.

Ginala looked at Jodeco while they deposited the bags on the kitchen table. "How many bags was he trying to bring in at once by himself *this* time?"

"All of them," Jodeco replied.

Ginala chuckled. "Figures. Thanks for picking all this up." She gave Darin a quick kiss on the cheek.

Darin squirmed away, blushing. "Mooommm," he protested.

"Not in front of the guuuuyys!" Jodeco imitated Darin's voice with a grin.

A strange look overtook Ginala's face, and then she reached over and gently pulled Darin's head closer to her. "Darin, hold on." She inhaled deeply. "Why does your face smell like grass?"

Jodeco laughed, and Darin jerked back and grabbed a towel. Within moments it was soaked with water and soap from the sink, and Darin briskly scrubbed the remains of the thumper saliva from his face and hair. Hopefully there was nothing contagious in it.

"New cologne?" Jodeco asked through his laughter. "I hear girls go crazy over... *grass*." He said the last word in a breathy whisper.

"Oh, you know we do," Ginala purred. She walked with a slink over to Jodeco and wrapped her arms seductively around his neck. "That's why I can't get enough of you after you do yardwork, Jo'co."

"You just wait'l it warms up a bit more. I'll be mowing the lawn every day for you, baby!" Jodeco pulled Ginala close and gave her a huge, impassioned kiss, and they could only hold the overly dramatic act for another few moments before they both laughed and separated. Darin rolled his eyes. Parents.

"Thanks for just volunteering to do all the yardwork this year, Dad," Darin said.

"Oh no, I didn't say 'all'," Jodeco replied. He stole another, more affectionate kiss from his wife and then turned fully to Darin. "I said I'd mow the grass. That leaves more than enough non-grass-related jobs for you. Besides, I see that your feeble grass cologne attempts are really a plea for a better understanding of the female mind as it pertains to dead vegetation, so this summer I pledge to mentor you in all things girls and grass—"

With a smirk, Darin playfully threw the wadded up wet towel at his dad before Jodeco could get another word out. Jodeco easily caught it, but when he started reshaping it to something more compact Darin regretted providing him with physical ammunition. He kept a wary eye on his dad.

By the time Darin had dried his face with another towel, Ginala had preemptively taken the wet towel away from Jodeco while muttering something about "boys" and had gone. Jodeco now leaned back casually on the table and regarded Darin in amusement. "Wait'l I tell the guys at the shop," Jodeco said with the quirky half-smile Darin saw so often. The unspoken assurance of story embellishment that his father loved so much hung in the air.

"Can you do me a favor and *not* tell it when Boz is within earshot?" Darin asked. His other best friend, Bosko Wanth, worked at the same speeder and droid repair shop as Jodeco.

Jodeco's grin turned teasing and evil. "I make no such promises," he said. He straightened up and began putting the groceries away without another word.

Darin tossed the dry towel on the counter and helped his dad. About halfway through unpacking the first bag, Darin pulled out a box of plain-looking snack cakes. At the store, Shiori had insisted he get this “grown-up version” of the snack cakes for her instead of the colorful ones with flower designs she had liked for years. He stopped and stared at the box, fighting that same unsettling feeling from earlier.

In his peripheral vision he saw his dad pause a few moments later. “What is it?” Jodeco asked.

Darin snapped himself out of it and shook his head. “Nothing.” He put the box away.

“Those snack cakes were just really engrossing in their blandness, huh?”

Darin tried to grin but found it hard to do for some reason, so he gave up. He shut the pantry door and faltered, “It’s just... I don’t know.” He glanced at the kitchen’s entranceway to make sure Shiori wasn’t nearby and lowered his voice. “She’s growing up faster than I expected.”

Jodeco gave a quiet chuckle. “Her? Look at you. You’ve already been an adult for well over a year. You make me feel old sometimes. But yeah, yeah, she is. She won’t be a kid much longer. By the way, my ancient bones are relying on you to intimidate all the boys drooling over her when she gets to be that age.”

That went without saying, even though his dad wasn’t really that old and could still hold his own in backyard donri games against Darin. But while normally Darin liked it when Jodeco lightened heavy subjects, this time Darin brought gravity back into play. The notion of Shiori—his Little Squirt—dating some boy in a few years made things that much stranger. “But... I like how things are right now. Don’t you ever wish things would stay the same forever?”

Jodeco nodded. “Yeah, I have. In fact, I did when you were little. But you know what?” Jodeco asked. “If the universe had listened to me and those wishes of mine, your sister wouldn’t be here.”

Darin resisted the idea. “Well, she *is* here,” he said quietly, looking at the floor. “So can’t it stop now?”

Jodeco smiled sympathetically. “Just enjoy the time, Darin. Yes, things will change, but you’ve got a lot to look forward to with your career plans and life in general. Trust me, in twenty years you’ll look back and realize the days between now and then will have been just as good, if not better, than what you’ve got right now. Life has a way of surprising us like that.”

Darin didn’t reply and simply went back to helping his dad put away the groceries. He didn’t want surprises. Things were perfect the way they were.

The Victory Star Destroyer *Emboldened* sped through hyperspace. She and her fleet had recently passed the Dra System, and it wouldn’t be too much longer before they reverted to realspace and the crews could get this mission underway.

Admiral Kevveton of the Imperial Navy regarded the blue swirling tunnel before him through the bridge’s viewport. While *Emboldened* was the flagship of one of the most remote Imperial fleets in this section of the galaxy, stationed at the base on Lafra in the Outer Rim in the Tingel Arm, he rarely came quite this far. There usually was no need to venture to the Corporate Sector, and it was discouraged besides. Per their charter with the Imperials, the Corporate Sector Authority, or CSA, was obligated to pay an operations tax, a hefty percentage of materials and a

3% yearly stipend to the Empire which generated trillions of credits, but there was no Imperial military presence in the Sector.

He'd raised that exact point when he'd been given his orders, but his superior had said there was a loophole to be exploited and that this mission was necessary. The infraction precipitating it wasn't serious enough to justify the expenditure of so many Imperial resources to nationalize the Corporate Sector, but it did require a little cage-rattling.

Kevveton had obeyed, of course, but that hadn't stopped him from doing a little digging of his own while his fleet was en route. Their target, the Craci System, was located on the outskirts of Corporate Sector space and was used mostly for refueling ships and exporting animals. It was a boring, insignificant system. What had caught his superiors' attention, though, was that it was contractually independent of the CSA. The planetary leaders of the system paid exorbitant amounts of credits each year to the CSA to allow the Cracian worlds to remain autonomous, costs that were then passed down to the inhabitants. Out of curiosity Kevveton had looked up the average cost of living in the system. It rivaled and in some places surpassed that of Imperial Center but was coupled with a much lower standard of living than the capital of the Empire had. That alone had convinced him that every single Cracian was a fool to stay.

And that independence was the loophole: a show of force within this system might not technically be considered an attack on the CSA itself, and the Empire could remind the CSA who was in charge by coming into their territory and setting up shop close enough to breathe down their necks. A heavy-handed reminder, yes, but one his superiors felt was needed.

"Sir, one minute until reversion to realspace," one of his bridge officers reported.

Kevveton straightened up. "Excellent," the white-haired man said. He checked the tactical feed coming through to a display at his command station. A dot on a sector map blinked as they approached: their reversion point was an empty area of space well outside the Craci System. "As soon as we revert, scramble all sensor readings from any civilian traffic in our vicinity and jam all comm frequencies except TacCom One," Kevveton ordered.

"Yes, sir."

Kevveton listened to the countdown of the last few seconds before reversion. When it reached zero, the swirling tunnel ahead dissolved into streaks of white light, which then snapped into the pinpoints of a starfield. His crew immediately went to work.

"Sensors indicate no traffic, only our fleet," the sensor operator reported.

"Comm frequencies jammed. TacCom One standing by," said the communications officer.

"Are the task force ships ready?" Kevveton asked.

"Affirmative, sir," came the crisp reply.

"Tell them to stand by and prepare for their jumps."

The ships of the small Imperial task force the admiral was escorting were powerful military-grade craft, though they had been electronically disguised to appear as ships belonging to pirates and raiders. The task force would move to its own staging area without *Emboldened's* fleet, and at the appropriate time the task force ships would jump into the Craci System. *Emboldened* and her fleet would stay here, hidden well away. The task force would have no problems handling the solitary "threat" of the planetary defense satellites of the two populated Cracian worlds on their own.

Kevveton continued, "As soon as we receive their signal that the defense satellites are destroyed, we'll start the second phase of the mission. If we do this right we can fool the

Cracians and get them on our side, and it'll be much easier and less dangerous for us in the long run. So do it right." Affirmatives greeted him from around the bridge.

At last everything was checked and double-checked. It was time to do this. "Task force: jump," Kevveton ordered. Out the viewport, he watched the ships move away and blink into hyperspace. He nodded, satisfied.

The Corporate Sector Authority really shouldn't have tried to secretly skim even that small percentage of their trillions of credits of profits away from the Empire. Fools, all of them. They were about to find out it would cost them much more now.

Chapter Two

The sun was setting and supper was settled in Darin's stomach when he grabbed an old, stained vest from his closet and put it on over an equally dirty long-sleeved shirt and cargo pants. "Bye, Mom! Bye, Dad!" he called as he eagerly headed down the hall toward the door. He stopped just long enough to grab his boots from beside the doorway and shove them on.

"Bye, Darin. Have fun," his dad called back from the living room over the sounds of a holovid.

Darin took his tool box from the garage, set it in the speeder's storage compartment, then jumped in the pilot's seat. Soon he was off.

Two blocks away, Darin had barely pulled into Cohen's driveway before the front door opened and Cohen stepped out. Like Darin, Cohen was dressed in old work clothes that bore the scars of many lost battles with machinery and associated fluids. He was taller than Darin and bulkier, with a mop of thick brown hair that matched that of his brothers Prilo and Hashik. This evening it was poking out from underneath a well-worn, dark green visored cap sporting the logo and name of their former school's donri team, the Smugglers. Ginala had confiscated Darin's matching cap until it could be washed.

Cohen put his own toolbox beside Darin's and hopped in the front passenger seat. "Hi, Dare," Cohen said with a grin.

"Hi, Co'n." Darin smiled back and pulled out of the driveway. "How was work?"

Cohen rolled his eyes. "We had drama over three misplaced boxes of blank datacards. Can you believe it?"

"Sounds like Rik's back from his vacation."

"Yeah. And it was so nice there these past few days too," Cohen replied. "The kicker is that *he* was the one who put them in the wrong place before he left, but somehow it's our fault for not noticing they weren't where they were supposed to be when we had no pull demands on them during that time. But I'm guessing you had a better day than me since you were off."

Darin raised an eyebrow and glanced sideways at Cohen before returning his attention to flying the landspeeder south through the residential streets. "I did chores and ran errands all day."

"Yeah, you say that like it's a bad thing, but I know you secretly don't mind it," Cohen half-teased. Then he continued, "I'm so glad we're doing ship work tonight. I've been looking forward to this all day. Especially during the drama."

Darin nodded. "Me too. Except the drama part."

"Lucky."

"You won't be stuck at that job forever," Darin reassured him. Stocking shelves at a warehouse was a far cry from what Cohen wanted to be doing. "You know, Tilde's talking about hiring some people soon. I could get you in there by me and flying something." It wouldn't be much, but piloting freight landspeeders would be a small step closer to Cohen's lifelong dream of being a starship captain, and the prospect of working with his best friend was too exciting for Darin to ignore. This would be even better than a couple years ago when Darin had asked his dad to recommend Bosko for the job at the repair shop, which Bosko had ended up getting.

Cohen smiled, and his brown eyes brightened. "Definitely! Let me know the instant I can apply. I'd do it in a heartbeat!"

"You bet. I'll put in lots of good words for you too even though you won't need them."

"I'll take whatever you can give me. Especially if it means getting out of the warehouse

sooner rather than later.”

Darin nodded. It always baffled him that Cohen had gotten stuck in his old apprentice-job like that. Darin was never able to figure out why or how that happened. It shouldn't have. Not to Cohen.

Cohen's mental wheels were obviously in high gear at hearing Darin's news. “What kinds of openings are these? You think they'd start me in the docks like you did for your apprentice-job, or are these the full-time piloting jobs like you've got now?” Cohen asked. “I don't want them to see my warehouse experience and think I want a loading dock job.”

“Full-time piloting,” Darin replied. “I'll make sure that's what you get.”

“Awesome. I owe ya big for this.”

Darin snorted in near derision at the words. “No, you don't.” The notion of Cohen owing him anything was ludicrous.

Before too much longer Darin pulled up to Bosko's house. After a short wait, Bosko emerged from the garage while carrying his own tool box and wearing similar work clothes, and he called an offhanded farewell to his parents inside the house. He climbed into the speeder's back seat with his tool box.

“Hi, guys,” Bosko said.

“Hi, Boz. How's things?” Cohen asked. Darin backed the landspeeder onto the road once more.

“Okay,” Bosko said with a shrug. “I was bored today.”

“So what'd you take apart then?” Darin asked with a glance at Bosko in the rearview mirror.

“My macrobinoculars.”

Darin nodded. “Get them back together?”

“Not yet. But mostly. I'll finish it later.”

Cohen turned to look over his shoulder at him. “Did you actually just say you'd finish tinkering with something *later*?”

“I would have finished them tonight, but we're doing this,” Bosko said, crossing his arms. “Ship work trumps fiddling.”

It surprised Darin a bit at first too, but he could see the priority hierarchy. For as well as Darin knew Cohen, he was still learning things about Bosko.

Bosko was a scrawny guy with very short, dark brown hair and tanned skin whose family had moved to Merrilan a few years ago. Outside of this small group, he was a loner whose strong opinions tended to rub people the wrong way. Most people assumed he shot his mouth off without thinking, but in Darin's experience anything Bosko said that would ruffle feathers was almost guaranteed to be calculated specifically for the person he was talking to for a very particular reason. It could be amusing to watch... when it didn't inadvertently put all three of them in a tight spot. Darin still had a small scar from one such time.

“So you were bored. Did you ever comm that girl? She could've made things more interesting for you today,” Cohen said.

Bosko blinked at him blankly. “What girl?”

Darin sighed. “Pleesh, Boz, the one who was constantly making fawning googly eyes at you the last time we ate at Picoro Heights. She gave you her comm frequency and everything.”

“Wait...” Bosko sounded like he was thinking hard, though Darin couldn't see his expression at the moment due to maneuvering around traffic. “Her? Darin, I thought that was the

girl you were gawking at the whole night.”

Darin felt color flush his cheeks. “I was not gawking at anyone!” he protested. He paused before admitting, “Besides, it was her friend I was interested in. The brunette girl she was with. Not the one googlying at you.”

“Oh.” Bosko shrugged. “Whatever. Doesn’t matter. She wasn’t my type anyway.”

“Can I have her comm frequency then?” Cohen asked.

Bosko didn’t live far from the small Merrilan Spaceport, and the sun’s rays were fading from the clearing sky when Darin pulled into the spaceport and wound through the side access roads while simultaneously trying to follow the continuing conversation. He stopped and secured the speeder in the small parking lot closest to the ramshackle hangar where Cohen’s father kept the Nuurens’ small orbital shuttle *Skybolt*. The hangar walls blocked the wind, but there was no heat inside.

Cohen and Bosko took the tool boxes to the hangar while Darin cut across the spaceport at a jog to the pilots’ lounge. Darin loved going there: the lounge wasn’t about the old, ugly green furniture, or the musty odor, or the peeling paint on the walls; it was about the person he became every time he set foot inside. It was a place for pilots, and it was where he let himself pretend he was already the true starpilot he dreamed of being someday instead of someone who just flew freight landspeeders and had an orbital license rated for small transports and shuttles. That orbital license was a good first step, and Darin still swelled with pride every time he saw the printed photo of himself with *Skybolt* after his first solo flight amid the dozens of other such photos covering the walls of local students’ first solos, but it wasn’t enough.

There Darin greeted the only occupants, two Duro pilots that he’d known since he took his orbital flight lessons. With their permission he borrowed the lounge’s portable music player and brought it back to *Skybolt*’s hangar.

Cohen and Bosko were waiting for him inside. The hangar walls creaked from withstanding a sudden breeze, and a soft whistle, continuously varying in pitch, sounded through a gap in a corner. Darin set the player in its usual spot and turned it on loudly enough to cover up the hangar’s groans. The music player never worked right and only picked up the broadcast of Republic-era music that none of the three friends really had any interest in; however, after all the time they’d spent in that hangar with that player they knew most of the frequently broadcast songs by heart.

“*If IIIIIII start now, I’ll neveeeerrrr stop.*” Cohen belted out the lyrics along with the singer of the first song that came on.

“Pleesh, Cohen, don’t start that again,” Bosko grumbled. “It’s bad enough listening to this stuff without you making it worse. I thought you were going to bring your own player this time so we could listen to real music.”

Cohen shook his head. “Not me. I thought Darin was bringing his.”

“Wait, Boz, I thought you were bringing yours,” Darin automatically replied. They were all lies, an in-joke, part of their tradition.

Bosko dropped the subject and rummaged through the tool boxes. “Let’s get started here,” he said. “Changing the hydraulic fluid on this old bucket is going to take a while.” He glanced up at Cohen. “Assuming she doesn’t belong to someone else, anyway.”

Cohen rolled his eyes. “Because that’s not something really, really big I would’ve thought to already mention? Give me a little credit here. But nope.” He shook his head. “Status quo. Actually it’s been a few weeks since my dad last threatened to sell her. I think he’s in a good

mood.”

“Good,” Bosko muttered, going back to his clang-filled digging. “I wish he’d stop that. We keep *Skybolt* in good shape at no cost to him, plus we pay for all of our fuel when we fly her and the hangar fee. We’re not hurting him. He doesn’t need to flip out on us every week about keeping it.”

“You mean flip out on me,” Cohen countered. “The couple times you’ve been on the receiving end have been mild. Try being the one getting chewed out about the costs every week, especially since we’re the only ones using *Skybolt* and he can focus solely on us.” It was true: Darin had been there numerous times when Cohen’s dad tore into Cohen and Darin as well for the costs incurred by keeping the ship. The worst tirades usually had alcohol-scented words.

“And that’s what has to stop,” Bosko replied, “because like I said, there is no cost to him. Since he doesn’t use it anymore, why should he care if it’s here or not?”

“Because there *are* costs to him. Insurance, inspection and licensing fees, tons of taxes, lots of things like that. They’re not cheap, and they add up,” Cohen said. “It’s hard to defend when he gets in one of his bottom-line moods.”

“So then tell him we’ll all pitch in more for that stuff,” Bosko said. “Or I’ll tell him. Let him try to take it out on me. I’ll dish it right back.”

Cohen gave a short laugh. “Yeah, I’d like to see that. You’re good at that, Boz, but it won’t work on him.”

Darin piped up. “I can’t afford more than I already pay anyway,” he said guiltily. “I want to, but I’d need more hours at work.” The majority of his paycheck already went to helping with his family’s expenses, just like Cohen’s and Bosko’s did respectively.

Bosko sighed. “Fine. But the next time he starts ranting about the costs, Cohen, send him my way. If it’s that bad then he should just go ahead and sell it. If it’s not, then he shouldn’t be such an Esposito about it. Yelling and threatening won’t make things cheaper.” He handed Darin and Cohen several tools each, took one himself and then beckoned them to *Skybolt*.

The Loronar B-7 Light Freighter, all 19 meters of it, looked impressive... from a far enough distance. Its edges were sleek, rounded, streamlined: everything about it said it was happiest when it was shooting through the air with wild abandon, leaving sonic booms in its wake. Up closer, though, the ship’s limitations became readily apparent. *Skybolt* was older than all three of the friends and had fallen victim to heavy use and poor maintenance by its previous owner. Its condition had been the only reason Cohen’s father had been able to afford it in the first place years ago, and his initial plans to refurbish the ship had quickly died away. The single laser cannon usually found on B-7s had been removed before Cohen’s father bought the ship, and a gaping, ugly hole remained in its place. Corrosion ate at seams and fasteners all over the hull.

Skybolt’s soft grey paint had lighter areas where radiation had faded it and darker splotches where any of a myriad of things had stained it. Slight carbon scoring on the nose spoke to a chronic weakness in the forward shields that couldn’t easily withstand the atmospheric re-entries three adolescent boys had subjected it to so often. Next to the hatch on each side of the ship were emblazoned *Skybolt*’s name and a crude, red lightning bolt that Cohen had painted when he was a kid. The paint had faded and weathered over the years, a victim of micrometeorite impacts and general wear and tear.

The interior didn’t fare much better. The seat cushions were ripped and stained, and were generally thin and uncomfortable enough that every time the group flew they wondered why they forgot to bring pillows or better cushions to sit on. The air filtration system rattled when powered

up in flight, and it was good enough for basic life support but never was able to scrub out the sharp smell of fuel inside the ship. Numerous attempts over the years to find the source of the odor had come up empty, leading Bosko to conclude that it wasn't a fuel leak and thus wasn't dangerous, it was just *Skybolt*.

That had become the explanation for too many things, too many anomalies for Darin to even keep track of: a shrug, and the realization that it was just *Skybolt*.

The craft was, to be generous, homely. But Darin didn't care how pretty *Skybolt* looked or how many mechanical quirks it had; he simply loved that rusty old ship and all it had allowed him and his friends to experience over the years.

"Take these access panels off," Bosko said, tapping a few on the hull as he walked past. "I need to find a container for the old fluid to go into."

Darin and Cohen went to work, falling into a silent agreement of how to best accomplish the task together. Darin followed Cohen's lead and kept the bulky panels from falling when Cohen removed their attach bolts. When Bosko came back with a large container and a long hose, he explained how and where things had to be set up to get the old fluid through the hose and into the container, but Cohen was the one who figured out how to rig up an attach point from a hydraulic line to the hose and what each of them needed to do to make it happen.

Songs came and went over the music player while the three friends worked and chatted. It hadn't taken long for them to fall into their normal pattern for maintenance activities: Bosko taught them how to do any new procedures, Cohen coordinated the details and managed the tasks and activities, and Darin quietly assisted and shouldered the work that needed to be done.

There was only one mishap that evening. An accidental break of a hydraulic line caused a small catastrophe as liberated, pressurized fluid gushed out and over everything in its path, such as adjacent hardware inside *Skybolt*, the floor, and Darin and Bosko. After some initial chaos Darin tried to hold the break together and plug the leak while Bosko and Cohen scrambled to shut off the flow to the line upstream. Finally they succeeded, and all three reviewed the unfortunate event with a small part teasing, a large part empty argument. Darin went outside to hose the worst of it off of himself as Bosko and Cohen started the long cleanup process for the ship and the floor. The cleanup and line repair caused a considerable delay to the rest of their work.

Shortly before midnight their clothes and skin were stained with grease, rebellious hydraulic fluid and various lubricants and liquids, but *Skybolt's* hydraulic fluid had been successfully changed. Darin and Cohen were sorting the tools and cleaning up while Bosko continued to fight with a broken bleed valve on the ship.

"Come on, Boz, it's late. Save that for another time," Darin called over the music.

"Hold on. I can get this," Bosko answered.

Darin sighed. He knew Bosko would... eventually... but he didn't want to wait around for it to happen.

"You're working tomorrow, aren't you?" Cohen asked Darin.

Darin nodded. "Yeah. I have to get in early too. Taking a load down to Envira first thing in the morning. Coolant canisters and some landing strut shocks, I think."

"How late you working? You'll be back in time to watch the game, right?"

"Yeah." By Darin's quick count, this was at least the fifth time that night that their favorite sport of donri had been brought up. "Who's playing?"

"The Lyleks and Gharzrs," Cohen replied while he placed the last tools in his tool box.

Darin scoffed dismissively and closed his own tool box. "Them? I was hoping to watch a *good* game. The Lyleks are having a horrible year. The Gharzrs will be all over them."

"Don't be so sure," Cohen cautioned. "The Lyleks always do pretty well against the Gharzrs. It'll be closer than you think."

Bosko joined in from where he was still arm-deep in the bowels of the ship. "Hopefully they won't have the same officials as the Howlrunner/Panthac game did." The Howlrunners were the professional donri team in the nearby large city of Corvallis, the closest place to Merrilan to have one. "Did you guys hear about that awful call they made with the score tied and only ten minutes left on the clock? Nothing against the Howlers, of course, but there's no way that hit by that Panthac player was worthy of a penalty."

"I saw the footage of that," Cohen said with a nod. "If I was a Panthac fan I'd be really mad. The Howlers got lucky."

"We need to go to a Howler game," Darin said. "It's been a while since we did."

"Sounds good to me. Just say when," said Cohen.

"Me too," agreed Bosko. "And—"

They all jumped when the song on the music player suddenly became loud static. Darin went over to first turn it down, then he fiddled with the frequency settings to try to fix it.

"Now you did it, Darin. Broke the player. Gave it its final death knell," Cohen teased.

Darin turned it off when his efforts were unsuccessful. "Bound to happen sooner or later, I guess. I'll leave a note with it back in the lounge. Maybe someone there can get it working again."

"Like they got it working before, right?" Bosko asked.

"Hey, you couldn't fix it either, remember?" Darin replied. "And speaking of that, leave the valve alone for now, okay? I'll ask my dad about it in the morning."

"Good. Give him a heads-up so I can hit him with the details at work tomorrow. Something's messed up with this valve," Bosko replied. He pulled away from it at last and shut the small access compartment.

Darin took the music player back to the pilots' lounge. As expected it was empty at this time of night, so he left a note about the player's operational status. He jogged back to *Skybolt's* hangar just as Cohen locked its door. Bosko handed Darin his tool box.

Together they walked to the Stanics' landspeeder in the dark. Most of the spaceport lights were off due to the low volume of activity and ship traffic. Occasional overhead lights rested high up on the corners of hangars, and the colored ground lights at the landing pads merely outlined the pad perimeters and weren't meant for total surface illumination; however, the lack of lights always made one of their favorite activities easier.

"Etti Light Cruiser!" Cohen announced on the way, pointing at the distant lights of a ship in flight overhead. His breath condensed in the cold nighttime air.

"Pleesh, that was an easy one," Bosko snorted. "How about that one." He pointed to another group of lights and squinted. "Action Four transport, I'm betting."

"No," Cohen said, shaking his head. "Action Six."

"It's a Four. Look at the red dorsal lights: that's the shape of a Four," Bosko countered.

"You're getting them confused again. See the bluish lights just below the reds? That marks the bigger gap between that dorsal cylinder and the top of the rectangular section of the ship. That's a Six."

"I'm gonna look up the specs tomorrow," Bosko said. "Ten credits says it's a Four."

“You’re on. Anyway, it’s gone now.”

Darin had to give Bosko credit for trying to argue against Cohen in this game. Ever since Darin could remember, Cohen had soaked up knowledge about ships, especially capital ships and famous naval battles and captains. Whenever Cohen eventually would go to the CSA’s Merchant Marine Academy like he was planning on, he was sure to breeze through it.

Darin’s eyes searched the night sky, looking for a ship he could identify based on the hull’s exterior hazard and nav lights alone. The clouds that plagued Craci IV’s sky by day were usually nowhere to be found at night, allowing a wonderful view of countless glittering stars and the ships that flew among them.

Those pilots were so lucky. It was the only aspect of his life Darin wanted an upgrade on; flying was something he couldn’t get enough of. One day he would work his way up to flying space transports and freighters within the system. Fly by day, home by night. Someday.

“Traffic’s light tonight. I guess no one needs fuel,” Darin remarked.

They were almost to the speeder when Darin finally spotted something. He zeroed in on it eagerly, but soon confusion grew. He stopped walking and peered at the bizarre light phenomenon. “What’s that?”

Cohen and Bosko also stopped and curiously followed where he was pointing. That area of space was dark now, but nearby it happened again: a bright but tiny flash high in the sky. Pinpricks of light burst out from it and quickly died into nothingness. In another location, the same type of flash occurred once more.

They watched in silence for a moment, then Bosko stated, “Space junk.”

“Space junk does not look like that,” Darin said.

“Yes, it does. If it had any stored charge left in a battery or had a pressurized gaseous system or something when it deorbits, it looks like that when the atmosphere superheats it and it explodes. That’s all it is,” Bosko said.

“There was no ionized trail though.”

“Probably angling away from us so we can’t see it.”

Cohen gave voice to Darin’s skepticism. “And that exact same event just happened to occur numerous times right now?” Cohen asked. “What are the odds of that?”

“Good enough, I’d say,” Bosko said with a shrug. He continued walking toward the speeder.

Darin and Cohen followed after a handful of heartbeats, and Darin looked at Cohen to gauge his reaction to the strange event.

Cohen appeared to be lost in thought and was still keeping an eye on the sky, but when he noticed Darin’s gaze he put a grin on his face and gave a short laugh. “I’m sure it’s nothing,” Cohen said. “Just a little weird, that’s all.”

Darin nodded. He could easily tell Cohen was still wondering about the cause of the bursts, but he was downplaying it so he didn’t think Darin should worry. Darin slipped into that familiar dynamic and trusted his best friend to take care of things. He always did. Darin relaxed.

The three of them reached the landspeeder, put the tool boxes in the storage compartment and piled in. Darin slid into the pilot’s seat and started the speeder. When the internal music player came on, it emitted nothing but a stream of static. Cohen adjusted the settings and ran through numerous broadcast frequencies, but the same static sounded over all of them.

“The broadcast relay substation’s out,” Bosko suggested from the back seat. “That would explain it. Probably means the lounge’s portable player still works too.”

Cohen wordlessly turned off the player. Darin put the speeder in gear but uneasily looked at Cohen again before heading out. Cohen's brow was furrowed while he stared at the powered-down player interface and repeatedly tapped one finger against his knee. Then he caught Darin's eye again and said, "Yeah. Substation problems." The smile seemed harder for him to put on his face this time, but Darin couldn't tell if that was because he was simply thinking hard about this or was troubled.

In any event, he again didn't want Darin to worry. It was more difficult this time with the two strange happenings in a row, but Darin put it out of his mind and urged the speeder forward into the sleeping town.

Chapter Three

Early in the morning, the Stanics' kitchen was filled with the aroma of the sizzling muja fruit flatcakes Ginala was cooking on the stove. Darin wished he could stick around long enough to have some, but he was running late as it was. At the table he gulped down his warm cereal mash, which had gotten tons better after Ginala took pity on him and sliced some rakmelon to put in.

Ginala flipped the flatcakes over and turned to him. The thick burgundy robe she wore over her nightclothes swirled as she moved. "Darin, I swear you're going to choke. Slow down."

"Can't, Mom," he said through a mouthful of mash. "I'll be late if I don't make the next speeder bus." He snuck a peak at his chrono, grimaced and chewed faster.

"You wouldn't be running behind in the first place if you hadn't overslept," she remarked. Darin blushed a little. "You knew you had to be in early today. How late were you out last night?"

Darin sighed and swallowed his mouthful in a huge gulp. "It took us longer than we thought when we hit some problems, and it wasn't something we could stop midstream and pick back up later." He shoved another heaping spoonful in his mouth while trying not to get any of the dripping mash on his work uniform. "C'mon, Mom, I overslept *one* day in how long? I didn't do it on purpose, and it won't happen again. What's on tap for today anyway?"

Ginala regarded him for a moment but didn't press the issue. "I've got the lunch and early dinner shift. Dad will have the speeder, and he's dropping Shiori off at school on his way in this morning," she said.

As if on cue, Shiori's sleepy voice came wafting down the hallway. "But Daddy, I don't wanna go to school!"

"Come eat breakfast, sweetheart," Ginala called.

Shiori stumbled into the kitchen doorway, prodded gently by Jodeco from behind. Shiori was in her pajamas, and her worn, stuffed toy thumper was cradled in the crook of her elbow. Jodeco squeezed by her and headed for the dish cabinet. He was wearing a set of his usual work coveralls, which had ingrained grease smudges and worn areas of its own but was much more presentable than Darin's set of amateur mechanic's clothes.

"Morning, Darin," he said. He tousled Darin's hair as he walked past.

"Morning, Dad. Morning, Squirt," Darin said between chews.

"Don't call me Squirt," Shiori mumbled, too sleepy to put any effort behind the protest.

Jodeco inhaled deeply while he set the table. "That smells like the flatcakes at Burke's," he told Ginala. "Do I need to tell them their wait staff is ripping off their secret recipes?"

She playfully smacked his arm with the flatcake flipper. "Like it's any secret that they use bilaberry flavoring in their flatcakes. It says it right on the menu."

Jodeco diverted to get a pitcher of juice out of the refrigerator and glanced sideways at Darin. "Didn't expect to see you this morning. Thought you'd have left for work already since you had to be in early."

"Overslept. Running late," Darin replied.

"Does that mean things went good or bad with *Skybolt* last night?" Jodeco asked as he filled three glasses.

"Good overall. We saw some weird lights in the sky, though, and all the music broadcast frequencies went out. It was strange," Darin answered.

Jodeco's brow furrowed. "That's odd. The broadcasts seem fine this morning."

"Yeah. We're guessing it was a glitch or tech problem or something. Oh, and there's a broken bleed valve on *Skybolt* Boz is going to ask you about today. If you guys can't figure it out at work, could you swing by with me after supper tonight to take a look at it?" Darin asked.

"Sure, no problem," Jodeco said. He took a seat at the table and put the pitcher of juice in the center. "Broken machinery quakes in fear at the sound of my name. Or something like that. We'll scare it into submission."

"Thanks." The half-smile Darin gave his father was obviously inherited.

Shiori shuffled over to their father. "Daddy, do I hafta go to school?" she asked plaintively.

"You betcha." He lifted her up with a grunt and sat her in his lap. "You need to grow dem brains or you'll end up like me." He playfully tousled her hair as well.

Ginala put some bread on a center plate with a jar of jam beside it. Shiori reached for a piece, but Darin smirked and pulled the plate just out of her reach every time she tried to grab one. Finally she sent an annoyed, "*Dar-rin!*" in his direction. Darin chuckled and pushed the plate back to her.

"Now, Darin, no teasing your sister at the breakfast table," his dad chided. "That's what suppertime is for."

Darin grinned at him and swallowed his last bite, though he wished he had more rakmelon. Maybe he'd take some for lunch tomorrow. After he put his dirty dishes in the sink for later, he shoved his boots on, threw on his work vest and checked his chrono. Blast, it'd be cutting it close whether he could make it to the speeder bus stop in time. He downed the rest of his juice in a chug before adding the glass to the sink as well.

"I have to comm that Taun Rin guy back today. Don't let me forget," Jodeco told Ginala while Darin scrambled to get ready.

Ginala's face twisted into an odd expression before she turned back to tend to the flatcakes. "Him again? What's he want?"

"Not sure. Only got a message to comm him."

"I wish he'd stop contacting you. I don't like it when he's around here."

"He won't be coming anywhere near here. Besides, they're simple repair jobs for easy money. Comes in handy."

Darin grabbed his lunch bag, wallet and work ID and headed for the door. He'd fasten his vest on the way. "Gotta go. Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad. Bye, Squirt."

"Have a good day, Darin," Ginala said as he rushed past. Jodeco, his mouth full of a bite of bread, waved.

Darin was already out the door when he heard the mock-indignant reply, "Don't call me—" Then the door closed and cut off the last word of the phrase he heard so often.

Overhead street lights were still on, providing most of the light for the young day. The first hints of sunrise cracked open the cold eastern sky even as the clouds began to form to battle it. Darin broke into a run toward the speeder bus stop down the road.

"Ministers, I'm relieved to see nothing catastrophic has happened to your worlds thus far. I brought my fleet as soon as I received word about your defense satellites. The Empire wishes to

assist you through this difficult time.”

Admiral Kevveton’s voice exuded a perfect balance of sympathy and trustworthy assertiveness. Over the split transmission of the holocom he watched the faces of the two Cracian planetary leaders closely for subtle reactions. Kevveton was pleased to note how bloodshot their eyes looked: the satellite destructions had been timed so that the ministers would get little to no sleep before having to deal with the system’s crisis.

Minister Nilsrik of Craci III was a Pho Ph’eahian, and the Cracians’ decision to allow this... creature... to govern one of their worlds did not improve Kevveton’s opinion of them. Nilsrik used one of his four arms to pat down his disheveled blue fur and turned a wary eye to Kevveton. The Imperial dossier had made special note of Nilsrik’s cheery charisma, but that was conspicuously absent now. “Admiral, I must say I’m a bit... surprised at your rapid response time, especially considering that we have not yet put out a call for assistance. How did you hear of our... predicament?”

“An Imperial merchant ship was passing through the system for refueling and noticed their absence, then found the debris. They notified the Imperial Embassy on Etti Four, who in turn notified me at once,” Kevveton replied. “We’re stationed on Lafra, but we were on maneuvers in a closer system when I was told of this.”

One planet over, Minister Lothair of Craci IV rubbed his eyes and reached for a caf mug. “Admiral,” he said wearily, “we appreciate your concern, but we’re still working this out internally. If we need help, we’ll contact the CSA.”

Kevveton narrowed his eyes and leaned forward slightly. “You don’t want to spend all this time trying to ‘work things out internally’. Haven’t you grasped how vulnerable you are? How vulnerable your *people* are? Whatever raiding or invading group that did this was powerful, and the last thing you want is to be defenseless when they get back at any moment with their reinforcements! Please, let the Empire help. We’re here now, we’re willing. If you contact the CSA, what will that mean? Endless contract negotiations before they even *consider* lifting a finger to sign an agreement to get things in motion to come help you. It will be far too late then. And do you have the funds they’ll want in exchange for their services? You and I both know the CSA will take advantage of the situation and squeeze every credit they possibly can out of you because they know you have few options of your own. The Empire, as you’re aware, is allied with the CSA. By some extension we’re already your allies, but without all that nasty red tape in the way. Consider this a show of good faith. Allow us to help protect you until you can rebuild your defense satellites.”

Lothair and Nilsrik exchanged uneasy glances with each other over the three-way transmission. Finally Nilsrik shook his head. “Admiral, thank you, but we will be sorting this out ourselves—”

Kevveton’s intense voice interrupted him. “Have you ever seen combat, Ministers? Ever seen the results of battle with your own eyes? I have, and it’s the stuff of nightmares. Or what about slave raids? If this raiding group returns while you’re trying to figure out how to handle this alone, those nightmares will be all over your own planets, throughout your own cities. Buildings burning, people dying in the streets, defenseless against invaders who can and will take whatever and whomever they want. How long have you relied on those satellites to keep you safe? Do you have an experienced militia that can withstand battle-hardened raiders? Can you even fight them in space, or will they automatically gain a foothold on your soil? Do you want to be responsible for those nightmares happening to all of the people you lead, for their crying in

terror and wondering why you didn't help when they trusted you to protect them? Or do you want to make the smart decision and allow the Empire to temporarily assist with your system defense?"

A long silence followed, and Lothair's facial muscles twitched. The ministers regarded each other again, and finally Lothair gave a subtle nod. Nilsrik took a deep breath and addressed Kevveton. "We see your point, Admiral. We're not ready to formalize an agreement, but we're willing to discuss this further with you. If you'd care to meet me here at my office on Craci Three, Minister Lothair will also join us and the three of us can talk further in person. My aide will transmit the location coordinates."

Kevveton smiled and gave a small sigh of happy relief, but for different reasons than the ministers would think. "Thank you. I'll come at once via shuttlecraft. Kevveton out."

Captain Jolik seRaj didn't like this. He didn't like this at all.

The commanding officer of the Merrilan group of the Cracian Guard strode through the chaos inside the modest operations and command building. His small full-time staff was trying to organize the influx of reservists who had been called to active duty and were arriving in out-of-breath, scattered waves. SeRaj couldn't believe how long it had taken the Cracian Guard to coordinate their reservists' activations and get them all to report in. The entire chain of command from HQ was sloppy, disorganized. Soft. That was the word. They were probably still dusting off datapads with old manuals and procedures to tell them how they were supposed to be handling this emergency, which no one had ever thought was realistic enough to train for or even consider. Trying to contact people overnight locally had been next to impossible as well, and seRaj was already tired from being up for so long. The long hours of constantly expecting an invasion in the wake of the satellites' destruction and seeing how there would be nothing effective the disorganized Guard could do about it had worn his nerves thin.

The atmosphere was charged: for most of the reservists in those dark green and black uniforms this was their first call-up that wasn't for training or for a natural disaster that had already occurred. This time, the future was unknown and potentially dangerous.

It was mostly that uncertainty that had seRaj on edge. There had been no warnings, no indication that something this big was about to happen. Reacting and going on the defensive were their only options, and it made him feel backed into a corner. All the defense satellites being destroyed at once was huge and could only be premeditated. But why would anyone go through that much trouble to attack this system? Why them? Why now? It made no sense, and he didn't like things that made no sense.

"Move," he growled at a hapless reservist who had accidentally stumbled into his path. The reservist scrambled out of his way with a meek apology. Then seRaj raised his voice over the din and demanded, "And where is that blasted report I asked for?!"

A datapad was placed in his hand, and its donor looked at seRaj plainly and said, "You're snapping again. Take a breath."

His second-in-command Achir was the only one who got away with speaking to him like that. SeRaj grudgingly let it go. He scrolled through the report, still on the move.

Achir was gaunt, and he looked even thinner next to seRaj's tall, broad-shouldered frame. That wasn't the only reason seRaj considered Achir a walking mismatch: Achir had a pale

complexion and dyed black hair that made him look disjointed. He had joined the Guard full-time as a result of what seRaj suspected had been a midlife crisis, and he was dedicated and capable, two of seRaj's favorite traits in a person.

"Latest word is that Imperial negotiators are still in talks with Lothair and Nilsrik," Achir summarized while they walked and seRaj read more of the details on the datapad.

"Our fearless leaders will be earning their paychecks today, that's for sure," seRaj mumbled distractedly. "What are their positions so far?"

"They've both been stalling, saying they prefer to contact the CSA for assistance first as long as there's no imminent threat—"

SeRaj interrupted, "Can't say I agree there's no imminent threat after something like this, but yeah, CSA first. We have to deal with them already anyway. The Empire doesn't need to get in the middle of our affairs too. Don't need no damn love triangle."

"—But the Imperials are reportedly really pushing them hard to allow Imperial ships to temporarily stay here for defense purposes," Achir finished. "They're playing up the 'vulnerable' and 'populace fear' aspects pretty heavily."

SeRaj frowned and handed back the datapad. "The Imperials got here awfully quick. And what are all the experts saying about the ships that destroyed the satellites?"

Achir shrugged. "Only that the lack of lots of ship debris means the satellites didn't destroy any— or hardly any— of the attackers. Their EM signatures were scrambled to avoid distinct identification by the satellites' sensors."

"High-grade ships or something powerful."

"Most likely."

"Skilled crews too."

"Most likely."

"Or our satellites were actually floating pieces of junk that couldn't have killed a firebug."

"Not likely."

SeRaj grumbled. He was liking this less and less.

"The Merrillean police forces are on alert. If something happens they're prepared to respond with us as needed," Achir said. "Chennen is coordinating that on our end."

"Good." The captain's combadge beeped, and he opened the channel. "SeRaj."

"Captain, you need to see this sensor feed right away," said his sensor ops officer. Anxiety made his voice taut.

"On my way." SeRaj closed the channel and looked sharply at Achir. "Get everyone ready to deploy within five minutes. I'm not taking any chances on this."

"Yes, sir." Achir spun and plunged headlong into the chaos. Soon his reedy voice was demanding everyone's immediate attention.

SeRaj didn't hear any more of it as he jogged down the short hallway to the main command room. He strode in. "What's happening?"

"Sir, our sensors indicate there are Imperial landing craft coming down from orbit. Dozens of them. They're spreading out." The Twi'lek sensor ops officer sounded even more anxious in person.

SeRaj's eyes quickly took in the blinking dots on the sensor scope as they expanded and spread over the maps of Craci IV and III. He whirled to the comm officer. "Have we gotten any official notifications from the Guard about this? I thought the Imperials' presence was still being

negotiated.”

“It is, sir! Talks are still in session!” The comm officer was young and had a bit of a waver in his voice, though to his credit he tried to get it under control. “We’ve gotten no official word yet from Guard HQ. There’s lots of comm traffic on our channels now, but it’s mostly confusion.”

The Imperials were being way too overeager and pushy about this. “You let me know *instantly* if any of those landing craft start vectoring toward Merrilan or even look at us funny,” seRaj ordered the sensor operator. “And sound the town’s emergency sirens.” He hit a preset frequency on his combadge. “Achir, status.”

Darin was on his way back from Envira, about thirty minutes’ flight time from the outskirts of Merrilan, when the first “breaking news” report interrupted the music broadcast he was listening to. He grumbled and immediately changed the frequency to another music channel he liked. Listening to some boring newscast of inane things that didn’t concern him wasn’t very appealing.

It only took a few minutes for the same thing to happen on this channel as well. He changed it again.

When it happened a third time a couple minutes later, Darin sighed and left the frequencies alone. Something was apparently pretty blasted important.

“We have just received confirmation that the planetary defense satellites orbiting both Craci Three and Craci Four have been destroyed,” the reporter said. That news was big enough to capture Darin’s attention, and his imagination immediately generated question after question. Those satellites were the Cracians’ primary means of fending off an attack from space, and the system was extremely vulnerable without them. “The cause has not yet been determined.”

“Why not? What about sensor readings? Comm traffic? Witnesses?” Darin demanded of the freight landspeeder’s music broadcaster. “It’s not like any old pirate with a laser cannon and a grudge can destroy those things, especially all of them!”

The reporter went on, oblivious to his questions. “Sources say it happened about ten hours ago, though the Cracian Guard has not commented on the exact timeframe. The destruction appears to be deliberate, and no operational satellites remain. The Empire is currently meeting with Ministers Lothair and Nilsrik and has offered emergency assistance with system defense. All Guard Reservists are being called to report in, and nearly all major cities are on alert at this time. We’ll be back with more news as this story unfolds.” Music began to play once more, though all at once the normal song sounded too innocent, too naive, too nonchalant in the face of the news that had preceded it.

Darin’s brow furrowed. “The Empire?” he asked the landspeeder. “What are they doing here?” He thought harder. Maybe it had to do with their alliance with the CSA, but why would the Empire be helping before the CSA did? The Cracian government should have gone to the CSA first. It felt like it should make sense, but Darin couldn’t get the pieces to line up correctly. Soon he gave up; politics wasn’t his strong suit.

He checked his chrono and thought back. Ten hours ago was around the time he, Cohen and Bosko had seen those odd lights in the sky. Was that what they had been? As soon as he got back to his work he’d have to comm Cohen and ask what he thought.

At last Darin pulled into the enclosed loading dock of Merrilan Transport and Shipping, called MTS for short. After carefully navigating through the controlled chaos inside he parked in the landspeeder's designated spot, powered down the craft, grabbed his datapad and datacards from the delivery and hopped out. Darin went to the closest console and logged the speeder back in along with his preliminary delivery record.

He exchanged greetings with the dock workers and loading droids while he went to the scheduling board. He would have his usual local runs for the rest of the day, and he hoped he had his favorite landspeeder assigned to him.

Darin had just spotted his name and his next delivery route when the town's emergency sirens became audible in the dock from outside. At first the noise was hard to hear over the din, but as more and more dock workers and droids detected it and stopped to listen, it became easier to make out. Confused and concerned questions soon replaced the sounds of crates and boxes being moved.

Darin was infected as well. Nearby he spotted the dock worker he'd gone to school with, and he made his way over to her and asked, "What's going on with the sirens?"

Rosalba shook her head. "You got me. Did you hear about the satellites? Maybe it's something to do with that."

"Probably just a test or something," someone else said.

The deep, gruff voice of the loading dock supervisor, Ander, boomed through the cavernous area. "Everyone inside the main building." The old, dark-skinned man was waving everyone toward the inner doors with as much animation as Darin figured his stiff joints would allow.

Darin followed Rosalba, Ander and the other MTS workers into their main building. Ander led them down a hallway to the break room that held their lockers, some chairs and tables, a refrigerator and a holoprojector. Inside the room were more of Darin's coworkers, including a couple of the delivery pilots, all of the office staff, and his supervisor Tilde D'frent. The plump Togrutan woman standing at the front of the room by the lockers was holding a datapad and stopped what she was saying as Ander's group entered.

"Good, the rest of you are here," she said. "We need a head count, and we need to comm everyone who's out on deliveries. If they're close enough, I want them back here."

"What for?" an office worker asked from where he was lounging in a chair at a table. He scooted over to make room when some of the entering dock workers filled the few remaining empty chairs. "Why are the sirens going off anyway?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I'd prefer to have everyone together while we find out because of what happened with the satellites," Tilde answered.

Ander shook his head and said, "You don't honestly think they're connected, do you? That someone up in orbit destroyed them to come invade us? That's ridiculous. We're seriously not worth invading."

"Why else would someone go through the effort to destroy all of them?" was Tilde's response.

"If something like an invasion was going to happen, it would have happened already," Ander countered. "They said the sats were destroyed ten hours ago. So our would-be invaders just decided to hang back for half a day while we reacted and prepared? How thoughtful of them. Real sporting."

"Something's going on. We're just taking precautions until we figure out what," Tilde

said. "Paid break. Won't take long."

Few workers were willing to argue against a paid break, Darin included. He and Rosalba maneuvered around the back of the crowd until they had a better view of the holoprojector across the room where it sat on a small table next to the large streetside window. It was broadcasting a news report about the satellite destruction. The usual Gran anchorman looked a bit rattled to Darin even though he couldn't hear the report well over the roll call and quiet discussions. Most of the employees, all clad in some version of the MTS uniform, sounded as confused as Darin felt. The defense satellites had been destroyed, true, but why would that make the local Merrilan sirens go off?

Tilde's concern was the only reason Darin could think of, but it was so absurd that he tried to laugh it off. Like Ander said, there was no reason for anyone to attack their world. If they wanted vats of thumper slobber that badly, they were welcome to it.

Nothing about this made any sense.

"Captain seRaj, three landing craft are heading directly for Merrilan," the sensor ops Guard reported nervously.

"You're certain?" seRaj demanded.

"Ye— yes, sir. I'm certain."

"Send their locations and trajectories to Achir and to Chennen for the police. Anything yet?" The last question was directed at the comm officer.

"No, sir. I'm still trying to get through to HQ."

"Try harder! And someone else make a city-wide broadcast for all civilians to get indoors immediately." SeRaj opened a frequency to his second. "Achir, we're going. Plan Tango, full city coverage. Groups One through Four in landspeeders, Group Five mounted for ground and civilian support, Group Six in the air. Watch these landing craft— data incoming— but wait for my next order before doing anything with them."

"Understood, Captain. Deploying groups now," Achir replied.

SeRaj felt sweat trickle down his neck and wished fervently for some official confirmation that the Imperials were friendlies instead of the uninvited guests they seemed to be at this moment. Why the hell were they pushing so hard to get dirtside? He turned back to the comm officer. "Get the designations of those three landing craft and open an audio channel to them."

"Yes, sir." The comm officer frantically worked his console for a few seconds and then said, "Channel open, sir."

"Imperial landing craft, this is Captain Jolik seRaj of the Merrilan Guard," he announced into the microphone in his most authoritative tone. "As military craft, I do not have authorization for you to land. Return to orbit immediately until your presence is approved by the proper channels. I repeat, do not land in Merrilan."

The response came a few seconds later. "Captain, this is Imperial Craft 5378. I have my orders to land there immediately for emergency defensive assistance of the town. I'm not going to waste fuel and wait for whatever authorization paperwork you need to push through on this backwater world. We're landing now."

SeRaj narrowed his eyes, a wasted gesture on the audio-only communication. "Imperial

Craft 5378, I repeat, do not land. You're a non-allied military craft without Cracian authorization. The Imperial military has no legal presence or authority in Corporate Sector or Cracian space. If you continue on your course, you'll be viewed as hostile."

The Imperial reply came quicker this time. "And *I* repeat, we're landing now. Whether you like it or not." They closed the channel.

The comm officer quickly read the display on his screen. "Sir, the Imperial craft are landing uncontested in Corvallis, Legis Bay and R—" He cut himself off, then his eyes widened as he punched another few buttons on his console. "Wait, sir, the Guard in Tannak reports they're in a firefight with Imperial craft! There are casualties."

"The three craft are decreasing in altitude, nearly to Merrilan airspace," reported the sensor officer.

"You have confirmation of that attack in Tannak?" seRaj demanded of his comm officer.

"Yes, sir. Fighting is confirmed."

SeRaj took a deep breath and straightened up. "All right then," he growled. "They just showed their true colors. So will we."

Chapter Four

An explosion sounded nearby. Every single one of the gathered MTS workers instantly quieted. Some, including Rosalba, went to the window to look outside for the cause.

The news report on the holoprojector's feed fizzled and cut out of its own accord, replaced with static. The employee closest to it tried to reestablish the news feed with no success. "What's wrong with the projector?" he asked anyone who would listen. "Hell of a time for the stupid thing to act up!"

There was another explosion, much closer and louder this time. Almost everyone jumped. Frightened, Darin immediately looked to Tilde for guidance, but she was busy attempting to calm the larger group of people who were doing the same thing but vocalizing it. Darin slowly backed up against the wall, trying to convince his double-time heartbeat that everything was fine, even though he'd never heard huge explosions like that in town in his life. Apparently no one else had either.

Ander pulled his comlink from a pocket and fiddled with it, but a moment later he gave up with a grumble. "That's just great. My comlink's nothing but static. Is anyone else's working?" Numerous people hastily pulled theirs out, and Darin reached for his. His dad would know what was happening and what to do.

Tilde cocked her head as if listening to something, then she whipped around toward the people at the window and her voice rose urgently. "Get away from—"

Before she could finish, a quick staccato series of crackling blasts and deafening explosions ripped through the air, each louder than the last. It sounded like turbolaser fire from action holofilms. There were bright flashes outside, drowning out the daylight, and the streetside window exploded inward in thousands of glass fragments. A wave of superheated air rushed inside in their wake. Landspeeder air brakes squealed, preceding sounds of crashes, and deep thrums of airspeeder engines and repulsorlifts flew overhead fast and low enough to make the entire building throb and tremble. In the same moment the electricity fizzled and died, taking with it the lights, the holoprojector and the gentle, soothing hum of all the nearest computer consoles.

When Darin, gasping for breath, recovered enough to open his eyes and lower his arms from where they were reflexively protecting his face, he saw the workers who had been closest to the window were either on the floor or picking themselves up from it. All of them were bloody.

"What the hell was that?!" someone yelled.

"Who's shooting?!" came another instantaneous, panicked shout.

The rest of the confused, terrified calls mixed together and added to the swirl of chaos. MTS employees rushed around, getting in each other's way. Chairs and tables became obstacles, trapping and tripping. Some people scrambled for the door. Others went for the injured. Tilde and Ander tried to sort the panic into order with immediate instructions that no one heard.

For those first few dreadful seconds Darin was frozen. He numbly watched everything unfolding before him as if it wasn't truly happening. Another explosion shattered the air outside. Darin's mind tried to convince his planted feet to run. Somewhere. Anywhere.

"Darin!" He somehow picked his name out in the cacophony. Anchored, Darin blinked and looked. An older coworker, Matias, was kneeling beside an injured Rosalba. "Come help me here!" Matias said.

"Everybody to the conference room!" Tilde directed urgently. "Now!"

Darin's boots crunched broken glass underfoot while he avoided the wild movements of his coworkers and quickly went to Rosalba. The young woman was conscious but dazed, and Darin followed Matias's gestures and helped her stand her up. They assisted her out as fast as possible with the rest of the injured. Darin stared at a large cut on her head and realized he was shaking badly enough that his grip was physically making Rosa's arm shake as well.

Once in the hallway between the break room and conference room, Darin heard footsteps running down the hall from behind, where the front lobby was. Four strangers slid to a breathless, frantic stop amid the injured group.

"You were the closest building!" one gasped out. "There's a fire in the street! I thought my speeder was gonna get hit!"

"We were almost killed!" exclaimed another.

Tilde waved for them to come with the MTS group.

Darin's heartbeat ramped up to triple-time. More ear-splitting blasts from outside made everyone flinch. Engine and repulsor noise saturated the air. Darin's breathing grew ragged as panic clawed at it, shredding him from the inside.

They made it to the conference room, and the first thing Darin heard inside was someone announcing in a terror-stricken voice, "We are going to *die*! Aren't we?! Aren't we!"

Darin missed hearing the immediate replies because the infectious panic blocked out everything in his mind except for that one thought. He was only snapped out of it when Matias pulled Rosa in a different direction and Darin's grip pulled him along after them.

The conference room had a long rectangular table in the center that was ringed with chairs, and more chairs lined two of the walls. It was an interior room with no windows, and although some ambient daylight spilled in from other rooms down the hall, it would have been hard to see had not someone found a glowrod and turned it on.

Matias and Darin helped Rosalba to a chair along the wall and sat her down. "Rosa? You okay?" Darin asked. His voice came out squeaky.

Rosalba stared at the blood on her arms. "What happened?" she asked slowly. Her eyes had a glazed look, and her voice was hardly audible over the urgent but slightly more controlled din in the room.

Tilde came up to them. Like many Togrutans she always went barefoot, and she was stepping quickly but gingerly over tiny glass shards that others' boots had tracked in. She carried a bundle of unused mechanics' rags, and she gave a wad to Matias and another to Darin.

Darin had just taken it when another thundering explosion sounded, one that he felt in the pit of his stomach and through a tremor in the ground. Ceiling tiles fell. He hunched down and turned his wide-eyed gaze in the direction of the sound's source, even though he couldn't see anything beyond the room's walls. Not being able to see what was out there almost made it worse. How could he protect himself against something he couldn't see coming? Panic spiked again, and Darin felt nauseous. He didn't want to die. Would he? Here? Today? *Why*? What the hell was happening?!

A hand took hold of his jaw and forcibly turned his head. Soon his terrified green eyes were fixed instead on Tilde's red and white face and black-and-white striped montral horns and head-tails where she was standing beside him. "*Darin*," she said in a firm tone, like she'd already said his name a few times, "listen. Help Matias stop Rosa's bleeding." She indicated the rags she'd given him. "Can you do that?"

Darin gave a small, tentative nod. "Yeah," he managed.

“Good. I need you to do that.” Tilde let go of his head, turned, and said to someone else, “Get me a complete list of everyone out on delivery runs and their comm frequencies, fast!” She moved to the next injured person.

“Comms aren’t working!” someone else said.

Darin grabbed onto Tilde’s instructions like a lifeline. He fumbled with a rag but soon got it folded up and pressed against the largest cut on Rosalba’s face. With his other hand he separated and folded rags to make more bandages while Matias got a roll of tape and scissors from another coworker.

Before too long everyone was gathered in the conference room except for most of the delivery pilots. The first aid grew more efficient and streamlined as office supplies that had been pressed into medical service were passed around, and someone fetched a medkit for the worst of the injuries. Explosions remained audible around them and punctuated the frightened talk filling the room.

Once all the possible first aid was completed, Darin finally had a chance to do what he’d been itching to do: he grabbed his comlink and entered his dad’s frequency with a trembling hand. Like his coworkers’ comm attempts earlier, it didn’t work. Neither did his mom’s frequency. Neither did Cohen’s personal or work frequencies. The business frequencies for Servo Servicing, where Jodeco and Bosko worked, or Burke’s Inn and Tavern, where Ginala worked, likewise were nothing but static. By now Darin knew it was futile, but he kept trying. Bosko’s personal frequency didn’t work. The same was true of Shiori’s school. Darin’s chest tightened. Blast, what about Shiori? Was she okay?

With Tilde’s previous instructions now completed, Darin’s frazzled mind grabbed onto that question and held tight. He shakily turned toward the door.

Tilde tapped his shoulder. “Darin, help us move the conference table along the wall.”

“But... I have to go,” he heard himself say.

Tilde looked baffled. “Go? Go where?”

“My sister. I have to make sure my sister’s okay,” Darin said. Something else exploded outside, and he turned wide eyes in that direction. His exhausting panic was fueled by too many questions without answers and by sounds that belonged in action holofilms, not real life. “I promise I’ll make up the rest of my shift...” he babbled absently.

“Where’s your sister now?” Tilde asked.

“At— at school.”

“Then she’s with people who will be watching out for her and keeping her safe. You’re not leaving this building.”

“But I have to—”

“It’s too dangerous for you to go,” Tilde said, interrupting his protest. “She’ll be okay. Now come on, help us here.” Tilde pulled her employee toward the table, and Darin didn’t know whether to resist or not. The thundering crack of another explosion made him more receptive to Tilde’s order, though shame bubbled up at giving in to his paralyzing fear when his sister might be in danger. If Tilde wasn’t right about Shiori he wouldn’t be able to live with himself.

Once the table was moved against the wall, Darin had nothing else to occupy his mind except for his coworkers’ worried speculations on who was attacking them and what to use as makeshift weapons if the aggressors should storm the building. Darin huddled underneath the sturdy table for protection along with everyone else, but unlike them he brought his knees up to his chest and buried his face in his arms so no one would see the fear broadcast on it or the tears

welling up. He flinched with every near or distant explosion.

He'd never been so scared in his entire life. All he wanted to do was go home. That was the only truly safe place in the galaxy.

Chapter Five

The explosions gradually ceased, and the air grew deathly still except for the continuing wail of the town's emergency sirens. The MTS workers didn't react for a long, long moment; Darin wondered if they too were expecting the destruction to begin anew at any second.

Fifteen minutes of relative quiet passed before Tilde crawled out from under the conference table, cocking her head and frowning in concentration as she listened. One by one the other workers and the four refugees from off the street slowly came out as well. Darin was one of the last to emerge.

No one's comlinks worked, and the electricity remained off. Another distant sound lifted into the air: sirens of emergency response vehicles.

"No one leaves this building," Tilde ordered.

The workers obeyed and milled around listlessly in the dim light. A few stated they were going back to the break room and the front lobby to see what they could in the street. Another handful headed to the loading dock to power up a speeder and listen for any broadcasts.

Darin tried to busy himself with gathering and putting away the various supplies they'd used for first aid, but he couldn't focus on it and ended up absently going through motions that accomplished nothing. The entire experience and nonstop dread, worry and fear for both himself and his family and friends had left him sick to his stomach and with a pounding headache. What if Shiori had been hurt? His mom? His dad? Cohen? Bosko? Darin had no way of knowing until the comms were back in operation, and every passing minute of that helpless uncertainty dumped more acid into his roiling stomach.

Even most of his pilot coworkers were incommunicado, somewhere out in town or elsewhere on the planet on their delivery runs. A normal, safe day's work might have turned deadly for them, and he'd been very close to sharing in their fate, whatever it was. Just the thought of being out there alone in a freight landspeeder while the world was literally exploding all around was enough to make Darin shudder violently. He gave up on his supply gathering and instead paced incessantly along the far wall. Every few minutes he unsuccessfully tried getting through to someone on the comm again.

Little by little, sporadic information spread through the clustered employees. Dark smoke from numerous locations in the town hung in the dusty sky. Emergency response vehicles were heard in every direction, near and far. The street outside was damaged with great gouges blown into it, and landspeeders that had been parked in the street were destroyed. One was on fire. The Merrillan officers of the Cracian Guard were transmitting a repeating message on all public broadcast frequencies to stay inside until further notice. That same message gave no details of what had transpired, and it was the only thing on the comm waves: personal and business frequencies were still not working.

Two hours later the town's emergency sirens fell silent at last, and excited reports of what appeared to be a couple civilian landspeeders moving down the street spread through MTS; however, Tilde and Ander still did not permit anyone to go.

Darin and a few other employees at their wits' ends were arguing with Tilde for her to let them leave when one of the dock workers jogged over, holding his comlink up. "New announcement!" he said.

That instantly captured the attention of everyone within earshot, and anyone not there in the lobby was soon aware of it through wildfire word-of-mouth and was heading that way.

After a couple minutes passed, the recorded announcement repeated itself: “Attention all Merrillans. This is an announcement from the Merrilan Guard. The emergency reporting frequency is back in operation if you need immediate medical assistance or need to report a life-threatening situation. Be aware we expect a high volume of comms. Everyone is hereby released to go straight to your homes or to a hotel. Schools will be used as emergency shelters. No other destinations at this time are permitted. Public transportation is suspended. Use main roads and marked detour routes as much as possible, and be aware for unmarked road damage and extensive building and utility damage. Everyone in Merrilan is under immediate curfew and is to stay in their homes until further notice. Additional information will be broadcast as it becomes available. Announcement ends.”

“That’s it?” Ander grumbled. “We’ve spent all morning getting shot at, and they’re talking about curfew and ‘extensive damage’, and they’re not even going to tell us what’s going on?”

No one had an answer for him. Those in the MTS lobby remained quiet, taking it in, until Tilde spoke up at length and addressed everyone. “Who usually takes public transportation here, and who has a speeder and can give them a ride home if it’s on the way to your own?”

Soon the ride assignments were divided up, and Darin was sitting in Matias’s landspeeder along with a couple other coworkers, all headed for the north side of town. Personal and business comms were still out, and the traffic on the main thoroughfares was backed up and only crawling along due to the sheer volume of vehicles directed to bring their owners home. The conversation in the speeder was animated and rushed as the MTS employees talked over each other, pointing out building after building that was demolished or damaged and expressing its implications for themselves or people they knew. Wild theories took flight about what exactly had happened based on the visible damage and what the next few hours would bring. Darin alone was silent. He absently fiddled with his full lunch bag while his attention was fixed out the window in horror and disbelief at what he was seeing.

He saw no human or humanoid bodies, but they passed a couple of dead thumpers lying in the street. The bloody animals were still wearing their Cracian Guard riding equipment. Darin stared at them and hoped Shiori wouldn’t see any.

Streets were blackened and had great craters blown in them. Landspeeders were overturned and destroyed; a few were aflame. At least one building down a side street they passed was also on fire with firefighters hastening to extinguish it. Debris of all kinds littered the ground in all directions. Dust and smoke made the air dark, thick and foul-smelling. Traffic signals were inoperative, and nothing that was obviously electric was working anywhere.

The scenes before Darin were incomprehensible, unreal. This looked nothing like the town he’d grown up in, not even anything like the town he’d passed through that morning. Frightened tears welled up, and he discreetly brushed them away before anyone noticed.

“Hey, look,” said Cielblik, the Sullustan coworker sitting beside Darin. They did.

On the far side of the road was a building that had collapsed into rubble. Police vehicles, ambulances and firefighting speeders surrounded it. But the other thing noticeable there was the presence of a few Imperial stormtroopers. Darin’s heart skipped a beat at the unexpected sight of the Empire’s notorious shock troops, so out of place in what had been his sedate hometown, and he reflexively pulled back before he was able to convince himself the troopers wouldn’t do anything to him there in Matias’s speeder. In fact, they seemed more focused on a dirty, redheaded Merrilan Guard who was arguing with them and pointing to the rubble.

The coworkers exchanged uneasy looks. Cielblik squinted and added, “Since when does the Guard not carry sidearms? Especially after an attack? His holster’s empty.”

Darin couldn’t make out that detail, but he had no reason to doubt Cielblik’s report aside from the fact that it didn’t make sense.

“Since when does someone argue with a stormtrooper?” Matias replied.

As Matias’s speeder crawled along, they watched while the Guard seemed to get more agitated and took a swift step closer to the Imperials. The stormtroopers’ blaster rifles immediately pointed at the Guard, who abruptly changed his mind about advancing. He then threw his hands down in frustration, whirled, and strode toward the rubble and the other Merrilan emergency responders. The stormtroopers stayed where they were and lowered their blaster rifles.

A new round of wild theories erupted in the landspeeder that attempted to incorporate this additional information. Didn’t the news that morning say the Empire was negotiating to *help* the Cracians? But Darin huddled in his seat and tore his gaze away, sickened. He hoped there weren’t people trapped in the rubble; it had been a small retail store.

Darin was the second person in the speeder to be dropped off, and the agonizing pace of the traffic prompted him to tell Matias to let him out when he was still several blocks from his house. He couldn’t stand it any longer. He thanked Matias for the ride, closed the landspeeder’s door behind him and at last— at last— took off running for home.

Seeing the familiar, small brown house standing intact was the first good news Darin had received all day, and it neutralized some of the acid still burning his stomach. He sprinted for the side door and resented having to slow down and stop long enough to key in his lock code. The door unlocked, but a lack of power kept it closed. Darin tugged it open, and as he did so he called out loudly, “Mom? Dad? Shiori?”

Darin burst through the door and into the house, and the immediate feeling of safety was nearly tangible. In that next second he’d closed the door behind him, tossed his forgotten lunch on the counter and had just taken another shortened breath to ask if anyone was there when he heard his name called in relief.

Ginala appeared almost instantly in the kitchen’s entranceway from the living room, and she rushed forward and smothered him in a tight hug. Darin returned it with equal strength. He heard soft pit-pats on the hard kitchen floor, and then a small body threw her weight against his and tightly encircled his waist with her arms. Darin released his mom only in order to bend down and engulf his crying sister in a tight hug of his own. Finally he released her too and straightened back up.

“I’ve been so worried about you,” Ginala said. Her voice cracked, and she wiped tears away from red, puffy eyes. “I didn’t know if you’d gotten caught outside in any of that on your way back from Envira, or if something else had happened—” She pulled her son close to her again. Darin didn’t resist.

“I got back just before everything— whatever it was— started,” Darin said. “Where’s Dad? I thought he would have been here by now.”

Darin felt his mom stiffen in her embrace. Puzzled, he tried to pull back enough to talk to her more easily, but she didn’t let go and he was held in place. Darin stayed for another few seconds and then attempted to pull back again. This time Ginala allowed him to, though she moved her hands to his shoulders and then to his upper arms and kept them there. She didn’t say anything, and more tears fell down her cheeks.

“Unless he’s stuck with the speeder in all that traffic,” Darin said. “I guess that’s possible. But you know what? Forget this stupid curfew thing: since the comms are down I’ll run over to the shop or find him on the way to—”

He began to move back to do just that, but Ginala’s surprisingly strong grip on his arms stopped him. Darin broke off what he was saying.

“Darin, listen.” Ginala’s words faltered. She sniffled amid her tears and tried to meet Darin’s gaze but was unable to hold it for more than a couple of seconds. She looked away. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

A chill hit Darin’s gut. Something was wrong. Something very bad was coming. Worry and fear spiked again after the all-too-brief reprieve, and his mind went into overdrive, fueled by all the horrible events of the day. Was his dad hurt? In the hospital? How bad was it? Was there enough bacta after this attack? Would he recover? He had to!

Ginala took a shaky breath and spoke more slowly than usual. “One of his coworkers came by a while ago on his own way home. Dad was at work when the attack started. He was in the back building. Something... happened. They think a laser hit an outdoor tank of fuel or chemicals or something next to that back building. It— it ex—” Her voice hitched, and she hesitated. More tears came. “Everyone inside was killed. Including Dad.” She met his eyes at last.

Darin stared at her mutely, unable to think, unable to move. His mind automatically rejected that information and refused to process it. It wasn’t possible.

Ginala kept her grip on his arms and sniffled again. She waited a short time before adding softly, “They said Bosko was in that back building then too.”

The second hammer blow of impossibility knocked Darin out of his stupefied trance, and he stumbled backwards, his mind reeling. Ginala held on and reversed his direction by pulling him close once more. She wrapped him in another tight hug, though Darin didn’t have the presence of mind to return it or do anything else except stand there numbly. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” Ginala whispered in his ear. Darin felt her tears on his skin.

Darin was dimly and distantly aware of the growing feeling of his world collapsing around him. He started breathing hard and shaking, and then he shook his head adamantly, half-pushed, half-squirmed out of Ginala’s arms and backed away until the kitchen table blocked his retreat.

“No!” Darin said in a raised voice. Shiori hid behind Ginala at hearing the heat in his tone. “Who the hell was this coworker who told you this? And how does he know who was in that building then or if everyone was killed?!”

“It was his supervisor,” Ginala replied, her soft volume absorbing the sharpness of Darin’s voice. “You remember Mr. Almatred. He knew Dad and Bosko were working on a repair in the back building today, and after it happened the... the other employees, himself included, worked to get the fire out and the danger contained. There was nothing else they could do. They got positive IDs on all the... victims and accounted for everyone.”

“They’re *wrong!*” Darin immediately retorted. He belatedly realized the tears he felt on his skin were his own this time. “Wrong about everything! Nothing about this makes any sense, and this is all some big mistake! Dad’s fine! He’s okay and Boz is okay and Dad’s going to... going to...” Darin couldn’t even understand his own words at the end: sobs were beginning to distort and swallow them. He felt lightheaded and reached out for the nearest item of support, his dad’s chair at the kitchen table. Darin collapsed into it while his head swam with desperate,

prolonged attempts at denial.

He hardly noticed when Ginala pulled a chair of her own over beside his and sat in it, facing him. Before he knew it he was unleashing raw sobs into her shoulder and hanging onto his mom for dear life. Shiori and Ginala were crying anew, and Shiori claimed her mother's other shoulder and buried her face in it while her tight grip was wound around Darin's arm.

For the first time he could remember, Darin deeply, truly dreaded and feared tomorrow.

Chapter Six

Achir could remember few times in his life when he'd felt this exhausted. There was a burning sensation behind his eyes, and at times it was hard to focus his vision. The steady supply of caf was the only thing keeping him on his feet, but he kept going. He had to.

The past twenty-three hours were a blur of adrenaline, confusion, and rescue and cleanup efforts, all on top of the little sleep he'd gotten before being called in after the satellites' destruction. He'd only had a chance to check in once with his wife after the battle. When each was satisfied the other was all right, Achir had needed to go back to work.

He pulled the landspeeder to a stop at the next destroyed building. It was nothing but rubble piled a couple stories high, and it made him sick to look at it. One neighboring building was damaged but was still standing, but the building on the other side was missing half of its top floor. A couple other Guard landspeeders parked beside his, and Achir motioned for the ten Guards he'd brought to prepare the site for rescue efforts, even though they knew exactly what to do by now. They blocked off the road and readied the couple small search droids they had.

Achir set up a portable table and spread out his datapads and datacards. They contained everything he could find on extremely short notice about this building's blueprints, hazards, and possible locations of people inside, plus how many may have been in there. He had a disorganized list of the nearest hospitals and how many new trauma patients each could take, updated in real-time. Another showed which buildings were being used as temporary morgues and how much room they had left. An even more haphazard list consisted of reports submitted by Merrilians of people who were missing. Achir hadn't had a chance to cross-reference that with the building's occupant list yet. His last set of datacards was information on the other, lower-priority assignments given to him by seRaj.

His comlink beeped yet again. While Achir answered it he wondered if it had gone five minutes without demanding his attention since the attack.

The comlink had given Achir more peace than his stormtrooper escort had though. The Imperial stuck to him like a white shadow, always watching. Several other stormtrooper escorts were present with the Guard group as well. The more tired Achir got, the more difficult it was for him to prevent his resentment from showing. He couldn't believe the Guard HQ was allowing this, especially under the guise of reconciling with the Imperials for the Merrilian Guard's "abrupt, unauthorized and unfortunate actions" in firing at the Imperials. HQ was wrong. Flat-out wrong. And once rescue and recovery efforts were complete and civilian lives weren't at stake, Achir would be sure to tell them so.

Achir still seethed whenever he thought of the dressing-down he and seRaj had gotten from HQ when HQ had finally gotten around to contacting them and had thrown a fit, ordering them to stop fighting the Imperials, and how could the Merrilians have made such a horrible mistake, fighting new allies like that? Didn't the Merrilians know the Cracians and Imperials were in talks to formalize it?

Never mind that the Imperials had acted aggressively, not only to them but to Tannak as well, and had forced the Merrilians into their defensive mode, Achir thought bitterly. No, never mind that at all.

Guardsmen Tsorila and Melcon walked up to Achir, who quickly wrapped up his comlink conversation. Tsorila, a freckled redhead, sent a subtle look of contempt at the stormtrooper escort and then spoke directly to Achir. "Sir, we're all set."

Achir nodded. "Good. Send the droids in. Have them concentrate on..." He called up the schematics on a datapad, then handed it to Tzorila. "The northwest corner to start with. Melk, is there an ambulance on the way for any survivors?"

"Yes, sir," Melcon said. "ETA five minutes."

"All right."

Tzorila and Melcon had only taken a handful of steps back toward the collapsed building when Achir's comlink beeped once more. He sighed and answered it. "Achir."

An onslaught of words greeted him. "Sir! The Imperials just arrested Captain seRaj!"

"Wait, what? And who is this?" Achir couldn't identify the voice in its excited state.

"It's Prennit, sir! Me and some others were in a meeting with the captain and some Imperials, and the head of the Imperial team arrested him! I don't know what—" The transmission cut off.

"Prennit? Prennit! Are you there?" Achir demanded. Prennit was one of the most unflappable Guards he knew.

Then Achir was aware of a looming presence immediately beside him. He turned and looked up into the blank, soulless face of the stormtrooper's gleaming white helmet. A second presence flanked Achir, and he knew what it was without looking.

He opened his mouth to ask about seRaj but was unable to speak before the Imperial did. "You're under arrest," the stormtrooper said in his emotionless broadcasted voice. "Come along quietly and this won't turn into a problem."

"Under arrest for what?" Achir retorted. "And besides, you have no arrest authority here."

"We do now. Fifteen minutes ago the Cracian Ministers and Cracian Guard HQ granted the Empire emergency control of the system's defenses. Those responsible for attacking us yesterday are impediments to our defense of the system and its cities, this one in particular. That includes you."

The flanking stormtrooper pulled Achir's comlink out of his hand and roughly yanked his arms behind his back. Almost immediately Achir felt binders being placed on his wrists, and he struggled.

"What the hell are you doing?" Melcon demanded as he strode back. Tzorila had stopped several paces away and was watching with surprise. "Let him go!"

Another stormtrooper intercepted Melcon and pushed him to a stop while saying, "Move away. This does not concern you. Yet."

Melcon shoved the stormtrooper out of the way. "You are *not* arresting him!"

Melcon took another step or two toward the stormtroopers holding Achir, but then the Imperial who had intercepted him regained his balance. He took his blaster rifle and swung it overhand into Melcon's back like a club. It hit him with such force that Achir jumped, and Melcon crumpled to the ground. Achir desperately looked for signs of life and was relieved to finally see that Melcon was still breathing.

"And we're arresting you now, too," the stormtrooper casually said to Melcon's unconscious form. He holstered his blaster rifle and unclipped a set of wrist binders from his utility belt.

Tzorila had remained standing still and watching in alarm, and his fingers twitched next to his empty sidearm holster. The stormtrooper who had arrested Achir waved the tip of his blaster rifle at Tzorila and said, "The Guard now falls under the direct control of the Empire. You'd better make your next decision a smart one."

Tsorila's conflicted gaze met Achir's. Achir motioned with his head toward the building's rubble and told him, "People need your help. Do your job."

He saw Tsorila take one slow step backwards toward the building before the stormtrooper turned Achir around and marched him toward one of the landspeeders. Achir told himself this would all blow over soon. This arrest was only a temporary, if terribly inconvenient, situation that would resolve itself once things settled down and got straightened out.

It had to be.

Chapter Seven

The brisk wind of the late afternoon cut into Darin, but he remained standing there on the sidewalk looking through one of the few intact windows on that street. This restaurant had come through the attack three days ago rather well; it even still had electricity thanks to its own generator. Darin figured that was one of the reasons it was packed full of people while many other restaurants were closed or sitting empty. Heat, light and running water were three very large motivators for beings in a cold, dark, damaged town to spend money to stay in there for a while. Not to mention that due to its power, its food probably hadn't spoiled.

Darin's attention was focused on the holoprojector he could see on the far side of the restaurant's interior. He couldn't hear it, but he could see the text across the news broadcast saying that the death toll in Merrilan was estimated at 270 with a higher number expected once all accounts were in.

Darin stared at the number. He would have given anything for it to be 268 instead.

He felt guilty for that and reassured himself that he didn't wish this on those other 268 people either, a couple of whom he'd known as well, but he was too tired to put much effort into placating his conscience.

The news report continued on to a different story. This time the text stated that Captain seRaj of the Merrilan Guard, as well as the captains of the Cracian Guard stations in Tannak, Crevilya, Youni, and a few other cities had been arrested for firing on Imperial craft that were bringing emergency defense troops.

The text and accompanying pictures remained unchanged for a long minute, and Darin couldn't read the lips of the Gran news anchor who was speaking, but he kept watching anyway. Rumors had been flying around town these past couple of days about what had happened and why, and the most frightening ones had come from people who knew someone who knew someone who knew a Merrilan Guard Reservist. While the details were different, they all agreed on one aspect: the Imperials had initiated the conflict and had started firing when Merrilan forces began defending the town. Reports, both formal and leaked, about Imperial arrests of various Guardsmen in the last two days had thrown fuel on the fire. Some people who had publically spoken out against the unjust arrests had been arrested themselves.

Darin sighed. He didn't understand what was going on, but he was certain of one thing: everything had been perfectly fine until the Imperials had showed up. If they'd never come, there never would have been a fight, and that meant...

In the reflection of the window he saw a landspeeder slow to a stop behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and noticed the speeder had Imperial markings. Darin pivoted and backed away from it with a glare comprised of half anger, half fear.

An external speaker on the speeder crackled to life. "No loitering," it ordered. "You need a reminder on the rules?"

Darin swore at it under his breath and strode away down the sidewalk. He heard the Imperials disembark from the speeder and go into the restaurant while loudly proclaiming that the crowd in there was too large and had to disperse. Darin swore again. Damned rules. Damned curfew. Damned Imperials everywhere he looked. Cities like Corvallis that had let the Imperials land uncontested weren't under martial law like Merrilan and the several other "hot spots" were, and Darin resented the Imperial punishment. The Imperials weren't even allowing the Merrilan Guard or the police forces to carry sidearms. Darin considered that a direct reason why some

scattered looters had gotten away in the last couple days. That scared him enough that he'd taken to sleeping with a hydrosponder under his pillow; no looters were going to get past him in his house.

"Yeah, thought the Imperials were supposed to be assisting our government until the satellite replacements are ready, not taking over entire cities," Darin grumbled to himself.

As he walked he passed boarded up windows, hastily repaired buildings, huge piles of debris, and more parked speeders than ones in use. Fuel was at a premium and hard to find in town. Stock levels of necessities in stores were dwindling, and items like candles, glowrods and portable generators had been sold out for two days now. Businesses were in disarray. The spaceport was shut down to civilian traffic, and the Imperials were actively discouraging travel into or out of Merrilan "until things stabilized". Except for the clean-up efforts and the around-the-clock searches for missing people, most beings were staying home either out of fear of the Imperials on the streets or out of necessity to patch up their lives. Darin fell mostly into the latter group.

He'd commed Tilde the other day to ask for leave. Two MTS pilots had been killed in the fight while on their routes and one had been injured, but MTS was shut down and business was at a standstill. Even with those losses Tilde had assured Darin he wouldn't be needed there that week and to take his time returning.

At last he was almost home, but he had one more stop to make. Darin walked up to the Nuurens' front door and pressed the door chime.

Cohen's fourteen-year-old brother Prilo opened the door and grinned. "Hi, Darin." Prilo stepped back to let him into the living room. Even beyond the same brown hair and brown eyes, the family resemblance between Prilo and Cohen was remarkable. Prilo was just a bit smaller and leaner than Cohen.

"Hi, Prilo," Darin replied. Although he wanted to, he didn't have the energy to smile back.

Prilo turned and yelled deeper into the cold house, "Cooheennn! Darin's here!"

A swift motion off to the side made Darin notice Mr. Nuuren where he was sitting in his easy chair. He had quickly lowered a datapad he was reading and glared over it at his son. "Damn it, Prilo, stop screaming."

"Sorry, Dad."

"Hi, Mr. Nuuren," Darin offered.

Mr. Nuuren grunted and went back to reading his datapad. "When's Burke's reopening?" he asked without bothering to look up.

"I'm not sure," Darin replied.

"How much damage they get?"

"The worst of it was their main power conduit was destroyed, and they're having trouble finding a new one that's for sale long enough for them to buy it. Then they have to restock on food," Darin said. For as often as Mr. Nuuren went to Burke's for drinks during lunch or after work, Darin almost expected him to know more news about its operational status than the employees did.

Mr. Nuuren grunted again. "Tell your mother I expect a drink or two on the house next time I'm there if you're going to keep using my son as your babysitter."

Prilo rolled his eyes in full view of Darin, and Cohen came out of the kitchen in time to hear his dad's remark. He had Shiori and his eleven-year-old brother Hashik in tow. Shiori

immediately ran to Darin and hug-tackled him while Cohen grumbled, “Dad, come on. I offered to do this. You don’t need compensation for it.”

“Something happens in my house, it damn well better be worth my while. I lose enough on *Skybolt* because of you two. I don’t need to lose more.”

Darin returned Shiori’s hug but had some problems prying his sister off. Once he managed to, she still tried to cling to him. Darin let her have his arm.

“Thanks for watching my Little Squirt today,” Darin told Cohen when he walked up.

“Anytime. You know that,” Cohen replied. His eyes held a frustrated apology for his dad’s words, but Darin had long ago learned to expect that kind of talk from Mr. Nuuren. The stockbroker was likely even more stressed than normal with the market going haywire. “With their school closed and my work shut down I was home with Hashik anyway. Did you... ah...” Cohen trailed off, glancing down at Shiori clutching Darin’s arm.

Darin nodded. “Yeah, I did.” Like yesterday, today he’d been helping his mom with the funeral preparations and finalizing his dad’s affairs, running errands and going to the bank and any attorneys whose offices were open to pick things up or drop things off as needed. Details weren’t something they discussed in front of Shiori though.

Cohen nodded in turn. “Is it still at 1000 hours tomorrow?” he asked softly.

“Yeah,” Darin replied even more quietly as he looked at the floor. “Small service at the cemetery. They have too many to do to have the larger, normal services for everyone.”

There was a long pause, and then Cohen said, “Remember Boz’s is at 1530 tomorrow too. Should I pick you up?”

Darin heaved a sigh and finally looked back up at Cohen with tired, hollow eyes. “My mom’s coming too and taking me. But... I don’t think I can do two of these tomorrow. I just... I can’t.”

“Yes, *we* can,” Cohen said firmly. “I’ll meet you at each one. If something happens and you end up needing a ride, comm me. Now head on home before curfew starts. Get some rest tonight: you look like hell. You let me know if you need anything else, no matter what it is. Okay?”

Getting rest would depend on Shiori’s not having more nightmares, but Darin only said, “Okay. Thanks again.”

Cohen patted his shoulder and retrieved Shiori’s jacket from the closet. The instant her arms were through the sleeves they were once again attached to Darin. Darin looked down at Shiori and said, “Let’s go, Squirt. Thank Cohen and Mr. Nuuren for letting you stay here today.”

Shiori kept her grip while she said, “Thanks, Cohen and Mr. Nuuren. Bye, Hashik. Bye, Prilo.”

“Bye, guys,” Darin said. The three brothers said their goodbyes as well. As expected, Mr. Nuuren ignored him.

Two blocks later, Darin and Shiori walked inside their own chilly house. To his chagrin Ginala had opened the window blinds to catch every bit of illumination and heat from the setting sun through the cloudy sky. Darin couldn’t wait until the town’s heavily damaged electrical plant was repaired.

Ginala was running related errands of her own and wasn’t home yet, so once they were situated inside Darin wrapped a blanket around Shiori’s shoulders before she disappeared down the hall. He turned on several glowrods and closed the front window blinds to discourage window shopping by potential looters. Finally he dug through the kitchen pantry to find

something for dinner. Most of the good stuff had spoiled already. Of the remaining items nothing looked appetizing and even less was able to be prepared without power, but Shiori and his mom needed to eat something. Darin briefly considered getting their old grill out, but it was dirty and he'd always tried to avoid it as a result. Maybe tomorrow after everything he could clean it up. If anything left could be grilled in the first place.

At last he found a can of spicy seafood broth that could be heated in a pot over an open flame. He loved the stuff, but even that wasn't enough to whet his appetite now.

"Shiori, want to help me light the fireplace again?" Darin called while he gathered a pot, two bowls, utensils, a lighter and a hot pad.

She didn't show up, so Darin went about doing it himself. He lit the fireplace in the living room and poured the broth into the pot while he waited for the fire to grow. When the flames were hot enough— he thought— he wasn't quite sure what to do with the pot, so he simply put the pot on the fire, closed the screen and sat down on the floor to keep an eye on it. The warmth felt nice, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

Darin was pulled back from the brink of dozing off when something leaned against him. He opened his eyes to see Shiori sitting there with fresh tears on her cheeks. He gently rubbed them off with a thumb.

Shiori sniffled. "I want Dad," she whispered.

"I do too," Darin told her softly. He took the blanket that was still on her shoulders and put it around both of them together. Underneath it he wrapped an arm around her.

She nestled into him and sniffled a few more times. At length she asked, "What's going to happen tomorrow?"

"Well..." Darin faltered. "Tomorrow lots of people Dad knew will come to the cemetery with us, and... we'll say goodbye to him."

Shiori buried her face in his shoulder. "But I don't wanna say goodbye."

Darin hugged her more tightly. "Me neither," he whispered.

Chapter Eight

As he was running, Darin plucked the donri ball out of the scoop strapped to his lower left arm and threw it to his teammate Lirs Tuhnyn. It was just in time: one of the opposing team members tackled Darin an instant later and knocked him to the ground.

Darin rolled, pushed himself up off the grass and ran ahead to keep up with the play. Lirs reared back and threw the ball at the raised, vertical goal on the narrow end of the rectangular field. It missed the small hole for the goal but hit the intentionally misshapen goalboard surrounding it. The ball ricocheted wildly in an offside rebound and sailed back onto the playing field.

It was impossible to predict the direction the ball would take in an offside rebound, but by sheer luck Cohen was located near the ball's new trajectory. He dove for the ball and somehow managed to catch it in his scoop. Then he scrambled to his feet and quickly maneuvered for a throwing position.

On the opposing team, one of the three players was covering Lirs. The one who had tackled Darin was several strides behind him and trying to catch up. Darin spotted the third one heading straight for Cohen. Darin narrowed his eyes. That was absolutely not going to happen.

Darin had been playing donri with Cohen since they were kids, usually with Cohen in the primary position and Darin in one of the two support positions, just like they were at that moment. Countless games and even more practices had taught Darin exactly how Cohen was going to maneuver in that situation.

He did, and Darin moved accordingly. At the last second Darin swerved around behind Cohen, almost clipping his heels, and plowed into the midsection of the oncoming opposing player in a solid block. Cohen, as familiar with Darin's tactics as Darin was with his, jumped out of the way and kept going for the goal. Darin valiantly tried to stay on his feet post-hit, which was difficult after the unusual amount of force he'd put into the block, and he pushed himself away from the falling player. Using that flimsy bit of momentum and trying not to trip over his own two unbalanced feet, Darin did his best to reverse his direction and go after the player who had been chasing him before that guy could go after Cohen.

Darin's cleats managed to give him stable footing for one step each, and he took full advantage of it. He dug in and threw himself at the second player as hard as he could.

Both Darin and that player slammed into the ground, a tangle of helmets, facemasks, pads and scoops. It took a bit more effort for Darin to get up this time.

"Watch it, Seventeen," a passing official warned Darin.

Darin climbed to his feet just as a whistle stopped play. Cohen's goal attempt, which he'd opted to throw from his slightly curved scoop for more points, had hit the goalboard and been deflected out of bounds. Darin took the opportunity to raise his facemask and wipe sweat from his face.

Cohen trotted over to Darin. "Hey, bud, ease up a bit. Those last ones sounded pretty hard," Cohen told him.

"You just let me do my job," Darin snapped.

Cohen seemed taken aback, and he cocked his head. "You okay?"

"I'm *fine*," Darin shot back. "You just go out there and don't worry. No one's going to get through to you."

"C'mon, Dare, easy. Relax. It's just a game."

An official blew two short whistles, indicating she was waiting for Cohen so they could resume play. Darin gave Cohen a small push in that direction. "Go. I got this," Darin said.

Cohen uncertainly backed up a few steps, then he turned and jogged to the waiting official.

Darin lowered his facemask while he took his position for the pickup and dug his cleats into the grass. His eyes flickered over to the stands where his mom and Shiori were sitting with Prilo. Darin angrily blinked back sudden tears as he thought yet again how his dad should be there too. And Bosko. This was all wrong, and he would never, ever get used to this.

Their game was one of the first to start that afternoon in the first day back for the recreational donri league after the attack a week ago. These were considered optional scrimmage games due to the circumstances and to make allowances for teams who no longer had enough players available. Darin had only come at his mom's and Cohen's insistence that he go out and do something to get his mind off things. The moment of silence at the beginning of the game had been touching, yes, but it hadn't helped him forget the funerals he attended yesterday or the corresponding empty seats in the stands.

The official's long whistle kicked the game into gear again. Each three-player string was in a line facing the other and separated by several meters, and they all started running forward toward each other. The opposing team's primary reached down and picked the ball up from the ground as he ran past it toward his own goal. The ball had been set much closer to their players' position since it had been Cohen's throw that went out of bounds.

Darin barreled toward his counterpart. That player shied away at the last moment, the memory of the last hit probably fresh in his mind. Darin swerved and tailed him, looking for any opportunity or even an excuse to plow into any of them again.

He found one an instant later. Lirs was covering his own counterpart, but Cohen was tangling with the other team's primary. Cohen's scoop made sharp sounds as he repeatedly hit it against the other primary's scoop, trying to dislodge the ball while they ran. The other primary was attempting to shove Cohen away. He couldn't throw with any accuracy like that, so it wouldn't matter much if Darin's counterpart was left open momentarily. Darin gritted his teeth and took off after the opposing primary. Darin's counterpart shouted a warning.

A string of long, insistent whistles from the officials pierced the air. Darin reluctantly halted and turned around in aggravation to see what the problem was. There had been no penalties. Why was play stopped?

The sight hit him like a punch in the stomach. Two armed stormtroopers were escorting a tall man in an Imperial army uniform to the center of the donri field. Darin could only stand and gape as the Imperials invaded this last little haven of his. Cohen came to stand next to him, but Lirs backed away. The small crowd in the stands murmured uneasily.

"Your attention," the tall Imperial said into a transmitter that broadcast his voice over the public address speakers at the outdoor donri complex. "This activity is in violation of the emergency rules in place in this town. As you are all aware, crowds of more than five people in public places is prohibited. You have five minutes to clear out. Anyone still here after five minutes will be arrested."

The Merrilan spectators didn't need to be told twice. They filed out, though some shouted obscenities at the Imperials while leaving.

Darin wanted to scream. "What the hell?! They can't do this!" he said a little too loudly to Cohen.

Then his duffle bag for his donri gear was shoved into his arms by Lirs, and Lirs repeated the process with Cohen's bag. Lirs's eyes were wide, taking up an unusual amount of room on a face that had grown pale.

"Come on, guys, clock's ticking. Do what they say," Lirs said anxiously. He gave them both a nudge toward the field exit and then quickly jogged out himself with his own bag. The second- and third-string players on Darin's team and all the opposing players were likewise making themselves scarce.

Darin sullenly walked with Cohen off the field and met up with Ginala, Shiori and Prilo. Shiori was crying at the sight of the stormtroopers and ran to Darin to hide behind him. He put his hand protectively on her shoulder. Shortly afterward Ginala coaxed Shiori to her instead, and they all walked to the parking lot.

"I hate them," Darin growled. He took off his helmet and shoved it into his duffle bag on the way, then he ripped his scoop off and shoved it inside as well.

"This'll blow over eventually. It has to," Cohen said, though he didn't sound too convinced of it himself. "They can't keep bullying us when we're not doing anything."

"We weren't doing anything to begin with, and they still decided to bully us," Darin muttered. "Why should they change their minds now?"

While taking his own equipment off Cohen slowed his pace, and Darin automatically slowed his to match it. Once there was a small buffer between them and Shiori, Prilo and Ginala, Cohen lowered his voice to reach only Darin's ears. "The Ministers will sort this all out and get things back to the way they were," he promised. "Once this initial surprise and shock of everything from the satellites to the Imperial attack has time to settle, they'll be able to regroup and work things out more rationally. I don't like this either, but be patient and we'll get through this."

"And what if it doesn't settle?" Darin asked. "What if we wait and it just gets worse?"

"The Ministers won't let it. Dare, I know what you're going through and how hard this is for you. I know how bleak everything looks. But trust me, it can't and won't stay like this forever."

Darin reluctantly nodded. While they increased their step to catch up to the others, he tried to convince himself to inwardly believe it as well. If nothing else, Cohen's reassurances made him feel a tiny bit better.

They climbed into the Stanics' landspeeder, and from the back seat Darin silently stared out the window on the way back. Clean-up efforts throughout the town had made progress, though not all the utilities had been restored yet and supplies were still extremely short, particularly fuel, water and fresh food. There had been numerous reports of fights breaking out in stores when they were able to put out some limited inventory.

At one point Ginala slowed the speeder to a stop for traffic at an intersection, and Darin watched as a group of Imperial stormtroopers tried to disperse a line of people there on the sidewalk. The line stretched for almost a block, and it led to a public distribution station for bottles of water.

"Break it up! No crowds!" a stormtrooper said, though Darin could barely hear him through the speeder's closed window. The Imperial moved into the line of people and started pushing the beings away.

"We're just quietly standing in a line! How the hell are we supposed to get water if you won't let us stand in line for it?!" a Zabrak retorted.

“Not our problem. Clear out! No crowds!” another stormtrooper answered.

“Not your problem?! Of course it is! You’re causing it because you’re not allowing supplies through into town!”

A man next to the Zabrak resisted the stormtrooper’s attempt to push him away, and he shoved the Imperial back. The scuffle grew in scope and intensity frighteningly fast, and by the time Ginala proactively but illegally pulled away from the intersection the Imperials had their blaster rifles out and were pinning four beings to the ground while the rest of the people in line scattered in fear. From the front passenger seat, Shiori began wailing and sobbing.

Darin watched the receding sight with wide eyes, then he wordlessly glanced at Cohen beside him.

Cohen had been watching the altercation as well, and he caught Darin’s eye and then looked away. The uncharacteristic worry was plain as day in Cohen’s shaken expression, and it scared Darin.

A lot.

Chapter Nine

“You’re sure you’re okay to be here?” Tilde asked Darin the next day. Darin nodded.

“All right. Thankfully the Imperials aren’t causing problems over in Weneta and it’s been pretty quiet there, so this shouldn’t be too bad for you. Let me show you a couple things.” She guided him into the MTS loading dock and then to the landspeeder he’d be taking. Tilde opened the cargo compartment door and pointed out a few crates inside. “Those are normal deliveries on your way out to Weneta. But this one,” she patted a small crate sitting by itself, “could be a problem. It was shipped with a Next-Day Guarantee... last week, on the morning of the attack.”

Darin grimaced in understanding, and Tilde continued. “Since we’ve been shut down and have had to ration our fuel and prioritize deliveries so much these last few days, this is the first opportunity we’ve had to get it out the door. The customer and recipient have been in contact with us looking for it. The full shipping price has already been refunded, and there’s an additional MTS credit voucher attached to the crate. You know how to act with the recipients in these situations. If she gives you problems, comm me and I’ll speak to her.”

Darin nodded again, and Tilde pointed to the last items in the cargo compartment. “After you make your deliveries in Weneta, fill up these fuel canisters before you head back. Top off the speeder’s fuel tank too. This will pay for all of it.” She handed Darin an MTS account card. “We’ll need to get fuel this way until the stations here get more in.”

Darin securely pocketed the card. There was something wrong about having empty fuel stations in a town on a refueling planet.

“You’ll have to go through a checkpoint on your way in and out of Merrilan,” Tilde told him. “Show them your work ID, and let them see the cargo manifest and scan things if they want. There shouldn’t be a problem. Okay? Just be careful.”

With one last nod, Darin closed the cargo compartment door and made his preparations. Soon he pulled the landspeeder out of the dock into the steady rain of the morning and turned down the street, past the front entrance of MTS. Like many other buildings on this street the broken front windows had been boarded up, giving the place a condemned look. To counteract that, an employee had spray-painted the words “MTS is open” on the boards.

The smaller roads out of Merrilan had been barricaded off, forcing all of the outgoing and incoming traffic to funnel through the various Imperial checkpoints at the town limits on the main roads. The checkpoint was an unnecessary nuisance and long delay, but Darin’s work ID and cargo manifest got him through, and then he was on his way to Weneta, a suburb of Corvallis.

It was the first time Darin had left Merrilan since the attack, and after this past week of staring at widespread damage it was almost jarring to see that the villages and towns he passed through looked perfectly fine. There was no damage anywhere. Beyond the houses and the highway, the rolling, grassy hills bore only an occasional lone srika tree, no traces of any conflict. The rain clouds made the hilltops hazy where they touched the sky at the horizon. Traffic was lighter than it typically was, but not drastically so. It all looked so completely normal during Darin’s first deliveries that he almost began to doubt the Imperials had really attacked and occupied his nearby hometown.

Unfortunately, the abnormal calm was shattered on his last delivery.

“Where the hell have you been?! This box was supposed to be here a week ago! So much for Next Day service!” an elderly woman screeched at Darin as he brought the small crate to her

doorstep.

The rain had turned cold, almost sleet-like as if it was a last-ditch effort by winter to not give in to springtime, and it came down straight and hard with no wind to deflect it. Darin was cold and wet by the time he reached the door and handed the box to the woman, who stayed inside her warm house. She snatched the box from his hands. Heavy drops from the edge of the woman's roof hit Darin's head and shoulders. "I understand, ma'am, and I apologize for the long delay," Darin replied as calmly as he could. It was hard to care about this woman's delayed package when he'd just lost his dad and one of his best friends.

"You *apologize*?! Your damn apology means nothing! This box is important, and I needed it last week! That's what I paid for! You screwed things up for me!"

Darin forced himself to take a breath and wiped rain out of his eyes. "Ma'am, I'm sorry for your inconvenience. The full shipping charge has been refunded, and there's a credit voucher here for your future use. With the events of last week we were shut down for days, and un--"

"Like I care!" the woman retorted. "You're running a business, and I expect you to be professionals and back up your guarantees, not give sob stories! Were you hoping I'd be so overcome with pity for your own city's stupidity that I'd let this go? No, I won't. You might get other customers all weepy-eyed and forgiving, but someone's got to stand up for them and stop you from taking advantage of them any more! The fact is that I lost money when I didn't have this box on time like *you* said I would, and someone's going to compensate me for it! Maybe I'll take it out of your salary: that might motivate this damn company to stand behind its professional promises!"

Darin bit his bottom lip hard and narrowed his eyes subtly. He tried to remember his mom's stories about how she dealt with impossible customers and how his dad had taught her to laugh off their misplaced blame or unreasonable expectations, but all Darin could think of were the kinds of comebacks Bosko would have had. They were sorely tempting to try out.

"Ma'am," Darin said, "if you have a complaint I'll put you in touch with my supervisor--"

"Don't try to placate me," the woman spat. "I've already been talking to a supervisor, trying to find out where my box was. And yes, I'll be contacting her again until I get satisfaction. Someone's going to pay for this!" She slammed her hand against the inside door panel, and the door closed in Darin's face.

Darin kept biting his lip and forced himself to remain silent until he got back inside the speeder. He'd never wanted to tell off a customer so much in his life, and he was afraid he'd give in at any second.

The instant he slammed the speeder door shut, Darin let loose with his verbal tirade. When he felt a bit more in control of himself he found a few relatively dry areas on his uniform to wipe his face off with, and he took off his vest and draped it over the seat beside him to dry. Like many Cracians he preferred the vests for warmth on the chilly planet as it meant not having to deal with the bulky, lined sleeves of a jacket to impede his work. Darin turned the pilot compartment's heater up, put the speeder in gear and headed back into the streets of Weneta.

Weneta was about the same size as Merrilan but more industrialized to directly support Corvallis. Darin wasn't overly familiar with the detailed layout of this town, and he searched for a fuel station for a few minutes. The first thing he spotted that caught his attention, however, was a grocery store. He immediately pulled into the lot, parked, grabbed his damp vest and went inside.

It was almost a surreal experience. The shelves of the store were full of food. There were

no fights in the aisles. Darin grabbed the nearest empty shopping cart and filled it with liters of water and fresh food. With the power recently restored to the house, it would finally keep again. The water would tide them over until the contamination precautions were resolved.

Once he had everything he could think of that they needed at home, Darin pulled out his comlink and entered a frequency.

“Hi, Co’n,” Darin said when his best friend answered. “Can you talk now?”

“Yeah. What’s up?” Cohen asked.

“I’m over in Weneta, inside a grocery store that’s fully stocked. What do you guys need, and do you know if Boz’s parents need anything?”

By the time the conversation ended, Darin’s shopping cart was piled full. He grabbed several more liters of water for the break room at MTS and got in line at the checkout.

A middle-aged man and woman directly ahead of him were chatting while they waited. The man glanced at Darin when he got in line, then the man stopped what he was saying to the woman and looked at Darin’s Merrilan Transport and Shipping uniform and logo more closely.

“You’re from Merrilan?” the man asked. Darin nodded.

The woman turned to Darin as well. “Oh, how are things going over there?” she asked. “We don’t get many news reports with updates. Your town’s like a media black hole. What happened was so horrible, and I’m so sorry for all of you.”

“Thanks,” Darin told her. It was nice to see some sympathetic faces. “It’s hard there right now. We lost a lot of people, and there’s a bunch of buildings being rebuilt and repaired. Supplies are really short.”

“Hence the stock-up, huh?” the man remarked, nodding to Darin’s full shopping cart.

“Yeah.”

“I imagine,” the woman said. “That’s why we had a food drive at my work. Great turnout, too. We sent over a hundred kilos of food to Merrilan the other day to be distributed. And see, even this store is collecting for another drop-off.” She pointed at a large container near the front doors of the grocery store. A sign on it read, “Merrilan food and supply donations”.

Darin almost missed the last part of what she said; he was busy wondering why that previous food drop-off and distribution hadn’t been advertised in town. He hadn’t heard a peep about it, and he’d been regularly checking the Guard, police and charity assistance news bulletins. Maybe whatever charity it was had kept the recipients private to avoid any brawls or ugliness; after all, it wasn’t like Darin’s family was on the verge of starving, so they wouldn’t have been a recipient anyway.

He snapped himself out of it and offered a tired smile. “Thanks, that was very generous of you.”

“So let me ask you...” The man dropped his voice and leaned closer to Darin, across Darin’s shopping cart. The couple’s turn at the checkout came, but the woman took care of it. “What happened there anyway? Why are the Imperials messing with you guys but not us? We hardly notice the Imperials here.”

Darin recalled the rumors he’d been hearing in town, especially early ones from right after the attack before so many Guardsmen were arrested. The rumors rattled him enough that he mostly tried to avoid thinking about them. “Officially? I don’t know what happened,” Darin replied, following the man’s example and quieting his voice. “I just know there was a big firefight in town between our Guard and the landing Imperials. I’ve heard the Imperials weren’t supposed to be landing, and when the Guard tried to stop them the Imperials started attacking and

firing. Now the Imperials have all these ‘emergency’ rules for us— curfew, no crowds, checkpoints, a bunch more. They were arresting people for standing in line for water. We can’t play donri anymore either, and our Guards can’t carry sidearms.”

The man looked appalled. “That’s crazy! Who do they think they are?!”

Darin rolled his eyes. “You got me. They say it’s for our own protection. Can you believe it? The only thing we need protection from is *them*. No one’s happy about it, but if you make too much noise you get arrested yourself. They’ve arrested a bunch of our Guards already, so there’s not much we can do about it.”

The man shook his head. “It’s ridiculous, and I just can’t see blue. I mean, I appreciate having the defense teams here until we get back on our own feet, but they’re going overboard with Merrillan. I bet the other hotspot cities like Tannak and Youni are going through the same things. They’re media black holes too.”

At that point the woman tapped the man on the shoulder and beckoned to him, and he picked up some of their bags of groceries. “Hey, take care out there, all right?” he said to Darin. The woman gave Darin a supportive smile and nodded in agreement with the sentiment.

Darin grinned back. “Thanks.” The couple left, and it was Darin’s turn to check out.

The large amount of groceries took most of his money, but they were worth every decired. Once he was done, he pushed the shopping cart toward the front doors. On the way he peeked inside the container for the Merrillan donations, and he was touched to see it almost half full. He’d been so isolated with his town and family this past week that the simple realization that other people cared made him smile.

The rain had tapered off to an annoying, insistent drizzle while he’d been shopping. He pushed the cart to the back of the MTS landspeeder and reached for the handle of the back cargo compartment door. Darin stopped in mid-reach when he noticed something at the edge of his vision. A bag from the grocery store was tied to the pilot’s outside door handle of the landspeeder. Darin untied it and looked inside curiously. It was full of breads, jams and snack nut mixes. He remembered seeing some of those things being bought by the couple ahead of him.

Gratitude for their concern and compassion mixed with a flash of defensiveness that rebelled at the thought of accepting charity gifts from strangers when he was perfectly capable of taking care of his family himself. They’d even seen him buying all his own food, so why did they think he needed this? He didn’t!

The knee-jerk defensiveness passed, overtaken by a glaring realization that he was overreacting. Darin made himself shake the negative thoughts loose— they were hypocritical and unwarranted, after all— and swept his gaze around the parking lot to find the couple and thank them, but they were nowhere in sight.

Darin took the bag to the back of the landspeeder, opened the cargo compartment and loaded that bag in first with care. He’d take it to the MTS break room for the other employees, especially the dock workers and office workers who didn’t have the opportunity the pilots had to buy their own groceries out of town while on a shipping run. Finally Darin eagerly loaded all of the groceries and water he’d purchased and continued on his way.

There was a fuel station— also fully supplied— a few kilometers from the grocery store. As soon as the fuel containers and the speeder’s tank were filled, Darin pointed the speeder southeast toward Merrillan. He snacked on his newly acquired rakmelon slices during the trip back. As he did so, his stomach growled a reprimand for not eating much lately.

About forty minutes later he was funneled into the inbound checkpoint at the town limits

of Merrilgan. The rain drummed on the windshield, matching the slight elevation of Darin's heart rate. Darin fished out his work ID again and nervously waited his turn, wishing he could be anywhere else at the moment other than facing Imperials.

When it came, Darin showed the Imperial his ID like before and anticipated being waved through. Instead the Imperial kept his hand raised for Darin to remain stopped.

"Turn off the engine and step out of the speeder," the Imperial army trooper told him. Confused, Darin did so.

The Imperial motioned to the rest of the large vehicle. "You're bringing a freight landspeeder into town?"

"Yes," Darin said uncertainly. "We're a shipping company. I had some deliveries to make outside Merrilgan today. I've got th--"

"And what are you bringing back in?" the Imperial asked as he made his way to the back of the speeder.

"Nothing. Just-- just some fuel for the work speeders," Darin said. He followed.

The Imperial opened the cargo compartment door. "Have a permit for that?" he asked. He peered inside. Water dripped on the back of his uniform.

"A permit? We're a *shipping company*. Of course we have permits to transport things--"

"But not an Imperial permit to import supplies and consumables into this town through lock-down," the Imperial stated matter-of-factly.

Darin stared at him. Tilde hadn't mentioned anything whatsoever about this, and she would have if it was so important. Finally he shook his head and said, "There's no such thing."

The Imperial smirked. "That's where you're wrong, kid. Too bad." He whistled loudly, prompting three other Imperials to come over from their small control center building while they grumbled about the rain. He motioned inside the speeder and told them, "We got another one. Help me confiscate these fuel containers and all this food and water." The nearest one climbed inside the cargo compartment.

"What?! Stop! That's ours!" Without thinking Darin rushed forward, but the Imperial stopped him, grabbed a fistful of the front of Darin's uniform and pushed him back. Darin was caught between wanting to deck the guy and being scared of the blaster at his hip and the possibility he'd use it. Anger began to win out, but Darin's increased struggles only made the Imperial push him backwards into the side of the wet, slippery landspeeder and hold him there.

"You have no right to take any of that! We bought it, and we need it! There are no supplies here in town for us!" Darin snapped, glaring at the Imperial.

The Imperial pressed him harder against the speeder and leaned close to speak. "*We* say when the food and supplies come in, not you. Remember that. It's not like this town is that bad off or anywhere near in danger of starving anyway. You all just have to learn to adjust."

"*Adjust?!?*" Darin gaped.

Before he could say anything more, one of the Imperials inside the speeder called, "Where you want us to put all this? We're running out of room inside the building."

"Already?" the trooper with Darin called back. "Take some to our units then. Leave a fuel container too-- that should save us some room." He turned to Darin and said, "See, we'll let you keep one of your fuel containers. We're not heartless monsters. You said it was for your business, right?" The Imperial smiled with fake compassion, and Darin could only watch as they took away the other five containers of fuel and all of his groceries and water.

"Don't take that. Please, not yet. I'll comm my supervisor," Darin managed at last.

“She’ll get this all worked out with you or whoever—”

“Forget it. I’m not sitting around here wasting my time while you cry to your boss over your screw-up. Now unless you want to be arrested for trying to smuggle illegal contraband into town, I suggest you get back in your speeder and leave. Tell your boss to either get the proper permits or stop trying to bring this stuff in. It’s not welcome.” The Imperial let go of Darin’s uniform, gave him a shove toward the pilot’s door, and let his hand fall close to his holstered blaster. Darin stood there for a moment breathing hard and weighing his options.

The Imperial took one threatening step toward Darin, and Darin jumped back. “Get out of here!” the Imperial demanded.

Darin climbed into the pilot’s seat, hating himself for doing so.

He cursed at himself and the Imperials the entire way back to MTS. He should have stood up to them. He should have done more and not let them get away with taking everything. He was so furious he could hardly think straight.

When he pulled into the MTS loading dock and parked, Ander immediately walked up to the speeder. “You get the fuel?” Ander asked hopefully when Darin got out.

“Yeah, but the Imperials confiscated all but one at the checkpoint!” Darin’s words rushed out an octave too high, and he felt his face flush with shame and anger. “What are these permits we’re supposed to have?! Can the Guard make them stop taking things that aren’t theirs? They threatened to arrest me! I didn’t know what to do! Can we get them back?”

“Whoa, Darin, stop. Slow down and start over.”

“The Imperials confiscated five of the six full containers at the incoming checkpoint! Said it was illegal to bring them in! Said they’d arrest me!”

Ander’s expression darkened. “Pleesh, those damn leaking buckets of Hutt drool! We need those! Come on, let’s hash this out with Tilde.” Despite his arthritic gait, he strode into the main building so quickly that Darin had to nearly jog to keep up.

On the way to Tilde’s office they passed a new area on the wall with holos of the two MTS pilots who had been killed in the attack. Other employees had stuck notes of farewell and fond memories as well as candid pictures of the two at work on the wall around the holos. Darin averted his gaze, unable to look at the reminders. Losing Mira and Kellenth still got to him.

Ander rapped on Tilde’s office door and walked in at her invitation. Darin followed.

Tilde looked up from her computer console while Ander sat in a chair across from her desk. Darin was too wound up to sit but reluctantly did so when Ander pointedly indicated the other chair at Darin’s restless hesitation.

Tilde gave them her full attention and said to Darin, “Good, you’re back. Before I forget, I’m working on the schedules for the next couple weeks. I was already planning on hiring more pilots, but now I need to do that much sooner than I expected. Do you know anyone who might be interested?”

Darin’s stomach hitched, and it dredged up the guilt he’d felt all week at helping Bosko get his job at Servo Servicing a couple years ago. Darin shook his head and looked down. “No, I don’t,” he lied.

“All right,” Tilde replied. “What did you two want to talk about? Did your run go okay today?”

“That’s why we’re here,” Ander said. “We’ve got a problem I think we should report to the Guard. Go ahead, Darin. Tell us what happened. And go slowly this time.”

“You’ve hardly said a word since you got home,” Ginala prodded. Darin’s only reply was another poke at his uneaten supper with his fork. “What happened at that checkpoint wasn’t your fault. You did a good thing, and you should be proud of yourself.”

It was the same thing Cohen had told him, but Darin only rearranged the dried, processed food on his plate. What he *should* have been doing was eating a good, fresh meal with his mom and sister. Eating the food that he’d bought. He’d let them down. His family and his best friend. Bosko’s parents too.

Ginala waited a few moments, but when Darin gave no indication that he was going to speak she changed the subject. “Burke’s commed today. They got power back and should be reopening in a couple of days.”

Darin glanced across the table at Shiori while trying not to look at his father’s conspicuously empty chair. “What about Squirt’s school? Any news on when they’ll reopen?”

Ginala shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Then how are we going to coordinate this if you’re going back to work soon? Who’ll stay with her while we’re gone?” Darin asked. While he’d trust her to Cohen without a second thought, Darin wasn’t too keen on her spending a lot of time around Mr. Nuuren. Maybe she could stay with some of her friends.

“I need to talk to you about that and a few other things later tonight, Darin. We’ll get it sorted out,” Ginala promised. She rubbed her temple tiredly.

“I don’t wanna stay by myself,” Shiori piped up nervously.

“Shhhh,” Ginala soothed. “You won’t be by yourself, sweetheart. It’s okay. Now finish your supper, all right?”

Shiori pushed at her plate with a finger. “Darin’s not.” She turned her big green eyes to him.

Darin suppressed a sigh and hoped the smile he plastered on his face didn’t look as phony as it felt while he choked down food he didn’t want and wasn’t hungry for. But now he had to eat it. Like so many other things he had to do now that his dad was gone.

Shiori offered a tentative, fleeting grin and ate a few more bites of her dinner.

After they had finished the meal and cleaned up, Shiori attached herself to Darin like she had every evening for the last week. Tonight he tried to pry himself away to go relax with some music and spacecraft periodicals in his room and salve his frayed nerves after the rotten day he’d had at work, but Shiori begged him to stay with her. Once again he ended up sitting with her on the living room couch watching Shiori’s favorite silly holovid until it was her bedtime.

“No, Darin, I don’t wanna go to bed!” she said when he announced what time it was. “I wanna stay up with you! Pleeese!” Frightened tears welled up in her eyes.

It was the same thing that had happened every night since the attack. “Come on, Squirt, you’ll be fine,” Darin coaxed. “Nothing’s going to happen to you. We’ll be right here like we always are.”

“No, I’m scared!” Shiori said, crying fully now. “I wanna stay up with you!”

It took both Ginala and Darin to calm her down enough to get ready for bed. At last Ginala tucked her in and kissed her good night, then headed out. Darin turned on Shiori’s nightlight, shut off the room’s main light panel and turned to leave as well, but he was stopped when Shiori said, “Darin?”

“Yeah, Squirt?”

“Stay with me a little longer?”

Darin stifled another sigh; he’d known it was coming. Like every other night recently. “Maybe try for ten minutes to see if you can sleep first, and–”

“Read to me?” she interrupted, pleading. She snatched a datapad off her nightstand and brandished it at him desperately.

Darin took it and glanced at the display, and this time he did sigh. “Shiori, didn’t we talk about this yesterday? I thought that was going to be a one-time thing since you’re too old to be read bedtime stories now.” Another night of her being that younger child he’d told his dad he missed wasn’t worth the reason it was happening.

“But I liked it,” she said in an odd tone that managed to combine defiance and uncertainty. “I want you to do it again.”

“Thenni stories again, though?”

“I still like the Thenni stories! I don’t care if they’re for smaller kids!”

“Okay, okay,” Darin relented hurriedly. He hadn’t expected such an emotional reaction. He pulled her desk chair over beside the nightlight and settled in for what was sure to be another marathon reading session of the simplistic stories he had already memorized years ago when Shiori couldn’t get enough of them. But really, it had been their father whom Shiori loved to listen to when he read aloud. Darin could still picture Jodeco’s animated storytelling, hear his sound effects and the different and comical voices he used for each character...

Shiori’s eyelids finally started to droop about forty minutes later, just about the time Darin was reading aloud how Thenni the Thumper was helping his best friend Sing the Bird to overcome his fear of singing in front of all the woodland creatures. Shiori’s breathing was deep and steady when Darin got to the part where Sing was, indeed, singing beautifully for all his appreciative friends. Darin shut off the datapad and pulled the blanket up farther on Shiori and the stuffed thumper she was clutching before he quietly slipped out of her room, silently begging her to stay asleep and not hear him leave.

The kitchen light was on, and he found Ginala sitting at the table with stacks of datacards and a few datapads arrayed before her. Darin joined her.

“Thank you,” Ginala said in a quiet voice, setting a datapad down.

“She wanted Thenni stories again,” Darin replied, also keeping his voice soft.

Concern clouded Ginala’s face. “She did? I didn’t even realize she still had those, it’s been so long. How many did you go through?”

“Three. It’s getting harder.”

Ginala rubbed her temples and nodded. Darin motioned to the stacks of datacards. “What’s all this? What’d you want to talk about?” he asked.

Ginala hesitated before replying, “There are a couple things we have to go over, like Shiori’s school, but we can deal with all this first. I’ve been looking at our finances now that Dad–” She stopped.

Darin was glad she didn’t finish the sentence. He brought his chair closer and glanced at a couple of the figures on the datapad she’d been holding, but his mother’s face and tone of voice told him a lot more. “It’s not good, is it.”

Her response was immediate. “We’ll be fine, Darin. Don’t worry. A few adjustments and–”

“Mom,” Darin interrupted firmly, “you don’t have to hide this stuff from me. I’m an

adult, and this is my problem too. Tell me what's wrong and let me help fix it."

After a handful of heartbeats, Ginala sighed. "You're right. It's just a hard habit to break, and one that I wish I didn't have to." She absently stacked some datacards in piles. "Darin, listen. I'll be painfully honest with you. With your dad gone our lives are changed forever, and we'll have to make some difficult adjustments and sacrifices. I'll be relying on you for a lot now."

"I know, and I'll do whatever you need me to. I'm not going anywhere."

Ginala tenderly put her hand on top of Darin's for a few moments, and then she placed a datapad in front of him. He quickly looked over the figures on its display while she explained, "This is how things stand right now. As you suspected, they're not good. Dad's job covered a sizeable amount of the expenses. You know we had to take a fair amount out of savings for the funeral costs, which puts us in an even worse spot. Under normal circumstances the life insurance Dad had would have paid for the funeral and also given us payments to help us through; however, that insurance company's funds have been drained by the massive blow Merrillan suffered. They promised to pay us back, but they have no idea when that'll be."

"Is there any financial help we can get from the government?" Darin asked.

Ginala shook her head. "Nothing I'm willing to count on. I tried already. The Imperials aren't just stopping groceries and fuel at the checkpoints coming in; outside money's going through them too. Financial assistance for Merrillans and other hotspots has to be approved by them, and I'll let you guess what their answer is. We're on our own."

"Well, it's a good thing the Cracian government's not letting the Imperials overstep their bounds," Darin muttered.

"So," Ginala continued, "tomorrow I'll be comming my boss to ask if I can work full-time instead of part-time, and more if I can. I'll also be looking for a better paying job. You might not have known this, but you now make the most money per hour."

That surprised Darin, but once he thought about it he realized it was true. His mom's waitressing job didn't pay much; it covered several yearly expenses like Shiori's tuition and had been more of a supplemental cushion for the household once Darin had graduated and started working full time. The implications were a bit overwhelming and scary.

"Because of that, your job and your income are going to be very important, especially until I find a better one," Ginala told him. She pulled another datapad over and glanced at it before turning back to her son. "I know everything is chaotic right now, but I need to hear any thoughts or impressions you have. At MTS, is business going to be hurt by everything that's happening, especially to the point where they might have to let some people go? How secure do you think your job is?"

Darin wondered if all people got this nervous when a heap of responsibility was suddenly thrown on their shoulders. Mortgage payments, speeder payments, heat, water, power, food... he was now the main line of defense keeping his family from going bankrupt and living on the streets. Plus he had to do it while earning less money per hour than Jodeco had.

He chewed on his bottom lip and then said, "Business has really dropped, but it's picking up, especially for transporting stuff like supplies and equipment for rebuilding things here. Tilde's cautiously optimistic that things will eventually get back to normal. There might be some problems if we have to rework our shipping permits with the Imperials since they could decide to change them or deny them to us. Short of that happening and essentially putting us out of business, though, I think my job will be okay."

After Darin's story had spread about what had happened at the checkpoint that day, some

of his coworkers had pulled him aside and related fears of their own about the regular shipping permits MTS– and every other shipping company on Craci IV– had. One speculation had been that the Imperials would find a way to cancel MTS’s permits and deny a renewal to force them to shut down, and then the Imperials would simply acquire the entire company themselves and transfer the employees to their own payroll. That way they could control the company without losing its infrastructure, which was already set up and smoothly doing business with others all over the planet. It seemed far-fetched and an awful lot of effort for the Imperials to go through for no apparent reason, but Darin had learned to stop trying to apply logic to the Imperials’ actions. At the time Darin had vowed that he’d quit before he ever became an Imperial employee; however, now his stomach churned when he realized that quitting wouldn’t be an option anymore, no matter how much he would personally object to working for the Imperials after all they had done and caused. If that happened, he would have to bear it day in and day out for his family’s sake and hope his dad and Bosko would have understood and not felt betrayed.

He didn’t like that realization one bit.

Darin paused, decided not to mention that rumor to his mom as long as it was just a rumor, and then added, “Tilde’s hiring a couple more people soon, and we’re shorthanded without Mira and Kellenth. Plus Jynlli was hurt and won’t be back for another week or so. I’m sure she’ll let me pick up more shifts. It sounds like we’ll need it.”

Ginala nodded. “Good. That’s the next thing I was going to ask you. Are you sure you’re okay with working overtime for a while?”

“Yeah, I am.” Even as he said those words, Darin pictured everything that would mean giving up, and he felt depressed in spite of himself. He wouldn’t have any time to go flying, though the money he’d used to go flying would now be going toward bills. He’d have to tell Cohen that he couldn’t put money toward *Skybolt* until this was all sorted out. It was the same with donri, but with his league suspended it wouldn’t make a difference. And spending time with Cohen and Bos– Darin blinked, amending that to simply spending time with Cohen. Darin knew he would always make time to see Cohen, though, and Cohen would understand and accommodate that. But still, losing all of that was going to be hard.

He bit his lip out of irritation with himself for being selfish in a situation like this. He just had to learn to accept the fact that his carefree life was over, and he sternly reminded himself that his family was much more important than his free time and spending money.

Darin’s train of thought brought him back to an earlier subject. “But if we’re both working full-time and overtime, who’s going to watch Shiori? Will I have to work the night shift or something with staggered schedules? That might be a problem: I’m not sure how they’re doing the night shift with the curfew in place.”

“With any luck you won’t have to,” Ginala said. “This might not work, but I’m hoping our employers will understand and allow us a little leniency due to everything going on. Another thing you need to ask Tilde when you ask about working more hours is whether or not you can bring Shiori with you to work every other day. I’ll be asking my boss the same thing. If they both allow it, we can alternate taking her with us during the day until her school reopens. She’s having a hard enough time that I don’t want to leave her with a babysitter for that long, plus we can’t really afford that.”

Darin tiredly turned that over in his mind but couldn’t see any showstopping reasons why Shiori couldn’t come with him on shipping runs. She’d probably like it, at least at first. “I’ll ask. I think it’ll be all right.”

Ginala swapped out datacards in the datapad she held and showed it to him. “If we can make all that work, we’ll be okay until I can find another job or the insurance kicks in. Then you’ll be able to go back to your normal hours.”

“It’s fine, Mom. Really.” Darin looked at the datapad. It was estimated projections for the full-time income of his mom’s current job plus overtime at his job, minus their monthly expenses, and it did indeed show a small surplus. Things would be tight.

She scrolled down on the datapad’s display and brought up another set of figures. “I also started looking at apartment costs and job openings in Corvallis to get an idea of what to expect for it.”

Darin’s stomach hitched in anxiety. “What? How come?” he asked, though he didn’t want to hear the answer he knew was coming.

“I’m concerned about how safe Merrilan is now. Moving somewhere better is not out of the question.”

“No, Mom, please,” Darin immediately implored. “There’s no reason to drop everything and leave. The attack was a one-time thing. No one’s been in danger since then.”

Ginala gave him an odd look. “Aside from the arrests, looting and general unrest? Besides, I thought you’d be happy to get some normalcy back in a new city. Donri and no checkpoints and everything. You haven’t been adjusting well to this new state of things at all.”

“I’ll be fine. We’ll eventually get donri back. Things will get better sooner or later,” he said. He still didn’t quite believe all of it, but that didn’t matter. It was bad enough losing his dad; losing everything he knew and having to start over in a new place away from Cohen would be devastating, and Darin felt brushes of panic just thinking about it.

Ginala still looked skeptical, and at last she said, “We’ll see. The main thing stopping me from doing it right now is that we wouldn’t be able to sell the house for anything, and we really can’t afford to lose that much money.”

Darin breathed a little easier and silently thanked the plummeting real estate market in Merrilan. “You know, if I’m going to be the major financial contributor now, maybe I can get some say in whether we move or not,” he said more firmly.

“Yes, you will,” Ginala said. “But you also have to realize there are more factors that come into play for each decision now. Other people’s well-being is tied to it.”

“Pleesh, Mom, I know.”

“And the first true taste of the real world can be a bitter one, too. After your first mortgage payment, I’ll bet that an apartment in Corvallis won’t look quite so bad.”

“I know, all right? I just want to be involved with the fate of my paycheck, that’s all.”

Ginala leaned back in her chair and regarded him. “The fate of your paycheck never bothered you before.”

“Yeah, well, it was never threatened to be used to uproot us and tear us away from everything before,” Darin grumbled. “That’ll just make everything worse.”

“Moving away from a dangerous situation will make things *worse*?” Ginala asked with raised eyebrows. “Darin, listen to yourself. You need to take a much broader view of things now. There are protests and arrests every day. We’re under martial law, and the law enforcement on our side can’t even carry firearms anymore. People are unhappy, and they’re clashing with the people who do have weapons. Who do you think is going to win that fight? I don’t like leaving the house, and every single day you go out into the middle of all that on your delivery route scares me to death. Asking you to do that even more is killing me, to say nothing of possibly

having to take Shiori with you. And Shiori— she’s terrified every day that something will happen. Do you want every night from here on out to be an hour of Thenni stories?”

Two could play that game. “And how is suddenly putting Shiori in a new city and a new school full of people she doesn’t know going to relieve any of that stress for her?” Darin countered. His words rushed out, tripping over themselves. “Hasn’t she already lost enough? Does she have to lose her friends and everything else too?” He swallowed a lump in his throat.

“No, that’s the thing— she *won’t* be losing everything else. We’ll still be there, and living in a normal city without supply shortages and weapons and arrests and frightening soldiers will help her heal. Everything in Merrilan is what’s making things worse.” Ginala rubbed her eyes, exhaled and looked at Darin again. “Darin, it’s not safe here anymore, and I just can’t bear the thought of something happening to either of you here. I can’t do it.”

“And I can’t move!” Darin caught himself and reined in his volume. “My job is here. We need the money, and do you think I’ll make anywhere near what I do if I start over somewhere else and lose what little bit of seniority I’ve built up? No.”

“That’s part of the reason I’m checking the job openings first,” Ginala replied steadily. “The option is not off the table, but let’s shelve this discussion for now.”

It was one more argument that Darin had lost that day, and he was sick of getting pushed around and having his reasonable desires trampled on. Darin grudgingly fell silent, but in the back of his mind he kept running through arguments he could use to convince his mom to let them stay... when his imagination wasn’t running away with fearful, lonely thoughts, anyway.

He looked at the datapad again more for a distraction than anything else. Maybe somewhere on it was one little piece of good news, which had been so lacking in this entire discussion. He needed some little ray of hope that he could get something vaguely resembling his old life back at some point.

Darin noticed another table at the bottom of the readout. It looked similar to the top projections with their regular expenses and increased incomes, except in this table an insurance payment was included, he had no overtime, and a significant portion of his full-time income was taken out and placed in another column. The small surplus was gone and they were just barely breaking even. Confused, Darin pointed and asked, “What’s that bottom table for?”

“Hmm? Oh, that.” Ginala shifted her attention to the bottom figures. “Just some numbers I was playing with. It’ll depend on if I can find another job, and then only after the insurance payments start and we pay back our savings from what I needed to take out of it.” She lightly tapped the display where it showed the part of Darin’s income that was set aside, and her voice was still quiet. “Once we’re back to where we were before, I was seeing if we could afford to buy a thumper for Shiori using this amount each month.”

Darin hadn’t expected that. He blinked and stared at her. “*What?* Mom, you know thumpers aren’t cheap! We couldn’t even really afford one before. Why are you considering one now when we’re even worse off?”

Ginala replied, “I know the numbers don’t look good right now, and this isn’t a near-term thing anyway. But this table is the worst-case scenario with my current job. That’s why I’m definitely waiting on getting a new job first and building our savings back up. If we will then have enough of a buffer each month to cover a thumper’s basic care and boarding bills, though, it’s something I’ll consider.”

“But *why?*”

“I think it would be really good for her. It’d be something positive to help her through,

and she needs something like this now more than ever.”

Something about the words and the entire notion stabbed him in the gut. Darin snorted darkly and glowered. “I see. So you want this thumper to be a replacement for Dad.”

Ginala stared at him, surprised and appalled. “Of course not! That’s not at all what I—”

“Oh, sure it is!” Darin snapped. “You want to tell her that it’s okay Dad’s gone because she’ll have a big hairy animal to play with instead! Be happy Dad’s not around anymore ‘cause now you get a thumper! It’s taking his spot! His place in her life! And you’re using my money for it! You know, you can have every credit I make to pay bills. Honestly, I don’t care! That’s fine! Dad’s gone, and I have to step up. I get that! I do, and I will! But after I’m done working overtime for however long and paying all those bills, why can’t I have even *some* of my own money to get my old life back? No, apparently I can’t go flying or play donri anymore because I’ll be paying for a slobbery animal for the next couple decades! Thanks a lot!”

“Darin!” Ginala angrily shot back. “Stop! Just listen for a minute. You’re completely overreacting and missing the point!”

“No, I got the point just fine!” Darin couldn’t make himself stop, and each word became more heated and bitter. “Let’s reward Shiori for losing Dad by getting her a thumper, and punish me by making me pay for it. Nice to see where I stand here. Nice to see where Dad stood, too!” Darin got up and shoved his chair in against the table as hard as he could, then he headed straight for the door. He couldn’t be in there anymore.

“Darin, wait!” Ginala demanded. Her chair scraped against the floor as she stood.

“Leave me alone!” Darin retorted. He grabbed his boots from where they were sitting beside the door and strode outside.

It was dark out, and the wall of chilly air made Darin immediately shiver without his vest despite the heat in his face and mind. He haphazardly shoved his boots on while he stomped down the driveway, but he stopped at the end of it when the completely empty street before him reminded him he was breaking curfew. Fed up, he swore and looked around for a place to go, but his only options were the garage or the backyard shed, though he quickly discounted the latter. He’d never make it to Cohen’s house without being caught. He’d left his comlink in the house too, so coming Cohen wasn’t possible either. Darin felt a hundred times more lost and alone with Cohen inaccessible, and he floundered before finally acting on his sole option.

When he entered the garage through its side door and turned on the lights, they flickered and cut out periodically. Darin wiped away sudden, angry tears. Jodeco had never gotten around to examining the wiring. Damn it, hadn’t he realized how much his family still needed him?! That his son wasn’t ready for this?!

“Fine!” Darin yelled at nothing in particular. He wiped his eyes again and went around the landspeeder to Jodeco’s work bench. Obviously he didn’t have a choice: he *had* to be ready for it, and that was that. Fine then.

Within a few minutes he had a glowrod, the wiring schematics from the light fixtures’ installation instructions on a datapad, some tools he thought he might need, and a heap of leftover resentment. He turned on the workbench’s overhead light and cut the circuit supplying power to the faulty garage lights. They went dark, and the only illumination came from the workbench light isolated on another circuit.

Darin took an access panel off of the garage wall near a light fixture and peered inside through the crazily-cast shadows at all the wires bundled neatly together. He had no idea what he was looking at. But it couldn’t be that hard, and besides, he was now the one who had to do this.

Darin began undoing the bundle ties.

It would be a simple matter, really. All he had to do was take the wires for the lights, go through the installation instructions step by step to make sure everything was hooked up correctly, and if they still didn't work he would find his dad's electrical tester and make sure each wire had a reading. Of something. He'd figure it out.

But there were more wires bundled together than the installation instructions showed. And they all looked identical.

Darin chewed on his lip, narrowed his eyes and plowed ahead anyway.

Ten long, perplexing minutes of work later Darin looked from the wiring schematic on the datapad to the various wire leads that had ended up in his hand. They didn't match. At all.

He bit back a flare of frustration and impatiently retraced a few steps in the instructions and diagrams to see where he'd gone wrong. He couldn't make sense of it. This wiring stuff was too confusing.

Darin stubbornly looked back to the schematic and picked out the two wires on it that he needed to connect together first. Turning to the wires in his hand again, he made his best guess of which two those were. He touched the leads together.

The wires crackled and sparked. Startled, Darin dropped them and jumped back. The workbench light instantly shut off, and the garage went dark.

"Damn it!" Darin choked out. His frustration peaked; he kicked the wall and blindly fumbled for the glowrod sitting somewhere nearby. At last he found it and turned it on, but he could only glare bitterly at the taunting wire ends hanging from the wall. He hated them. So much. Hot tears found their way to the corners of his eyes, but that just made him angrier. He wiped them away. Hard.

They came back. He hated them too. He hated everything.

It took a while for him to expend the worst of his anger and gain some control over himself. Sulking meant he wouldn't have to face his conscience quite yet, but despite his best efforts, holding onto that feeling and that anger took more energy than he had at the moment. Without the distraction of his anger, though, other, cooler, unwelcome thoughts began to surface.

At some point while he was standing there miserably he heard the side door to the garage open behind him and to his right. "Darin?" Ginala asked. "We need to talk. But... great, the lights completely stopped working now? Wonderful." Frustration swallowed the initial softness of her tone, and it was all punctuated by repeated clicks made by the light switch being flipped in vain. The garage lights remained off. Darin couldn't bring himself to say he was responsible, and more tears welled up. He was so blasted tired of them. Like all the others, they left remnants of themselves as they slid down his cheeks.

"What are you doing in here in the dark?" Ginala asked.

Darin sniffled. "Nothing." He didn't turn around to face her.

Ginala sighed, and her footsteps approached. "Please, don't be like that."

"I'm not," Darin said. He sniffled again. "I'm doing nothing. Nothing useful. Worse than nothing."

She came beside him and furrowed her brow as she studied him in the soft light of the glowrod. "Are you okay?" Ginala asked gently, more gently than Darin knew she had any reason to be after the way he'd acted. And hell, it's not like she'd had a good week either. His dad would be so proud of the son he'd raised.

Not looking at Ginala, Darin ran a sleeve across his face. Why did she have to see him

like this? Especially now? “Dad was supposed to check the wiring.” He briefly indicated the problematic wires he’d been working on. “See if it was that or if the lights had to be replaced.” No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t keep his voice from breaking. He was no good at anything, even keeping his voice under control. He hated the stupid wires, and he hated himself. “But I don’t know how to do it. I can’t fix it.”

Ginala drew him into a hug. “Oh, sweetheart, it’s okay. You don’t have to fix the wiring.”

Darin pulled backwards out of her embrace. “Yes I do!” he argued. “Dad’s not here to do it, so *I* have to! I just don’t know how!”

“It’s okay,” Ginala repeated. “You’re not expected to know how.”

“Then what good am I to you and Shiori?” Darin demanded tearfully. “A paycheck, sure, but she’s lost more than that. But how am I supposed to step up when I can’t do what he did? I can’t fix things when they break, and I can’t even manage to do something as simple as get groceries and water here!” He sniffled, crossed his arms tightly, looked at the floor and kicked at it with the toe of his boot. And not only couldn’t he fix things, he just made them worse.

Ginala took his elbow and coaxed him a few steps over with her to the front of the landspeeder. They both half-leaned, half-sat on it, and Ginala wiped his tears away. She put an arm around him and pulled him close, and short of seeing his dad walk through that garage door again, Darin knew that hug was the only thing in the galaxy that could even begin to ease the completely rotten feeling inside of him. He buried his face against her neck to hide from the world.

Ginala spoke softly. “This isn’t easy. Don’t be so hard on yourself. We have to figure all this out together, and it’s just going to take time. And don’t you ever, ever think you’re no good to us. We need *you*, not your paycheck, and I wouldn’t give you up for anything. You’ve helped so much with Shiori and things you never should have had to help with in the first place, and I couldn’t have gotten through this without you.”

Darin resisted the urge to tell his mom that she was wrong, that he selfishly needed her in that moment much, much more than she could possibly be needing him. He indulged himself in that comfort longer than he knew he should, but he couldn’t help it. He missed his dad so much.

Thinking about his dad gradually brought Darin’s thoughts around. Finally he took a deep, shaky breath and forced himself to straighten up; after all, he couldn’t be that scared little kid hiding behind mommy anymore, no matter how much he desperately wanted to stay there securely in that hug and let her take care of him and everything around him. He had people to take care of himself now. It was time to be that protective adult his dad had recently asked him to be. He just wished it wasn’t so damned hard.

Darin averted his eyes and tried to keep his wavering voice steady while he said, “And another thing I can’t do? I can’t even shut up and keep my temper when I know you’re just trying to do something nice for Shiori.”

“It’s okay,” Ginala quietly said for a third time. “I miss him too.”

Darin still looked down. It was a long moment before he spoke again. “I know exactly which thumper she wants.”

Ginala pulled him close once more and kissed him on his forehead.

Chapter Ten

Guardsmen First Class Tsorila drew a deep breath. “Sir, please, there has to be a way we can improve things.”

Captain Ixtiner of the Imperial Army rocked back in his chair and lazily put his feet up on his desk— or rather, Captain seRaj’s desk. Tsorila’s freckled face flushed in anger, and the smirk Ixtiner offered made Tsorila think he’d done that just to get a rise out of the Cracian. Tsorila hated dealing with Ixtiner, but he’d drawn the short straw out of the group of Guards that had banded together.

“I’ll think about it,” Ixtiner said dismissively.

Tsorila dug in. “Sir, I don’t think you fully understand. We’re getting countless complaints each day from Merrillans about how they’re being treated, the harassment, the overbearing rules, the arrests, the lack of supplies, and getting everything confiscated at the incoming checkpoints. People are not happy, and it’s getting worse fast. Something has to give. Isn’t there anything we can do to ease off on some of this?” While the Imperials were the main target of the complaints, many Merrillans were now losing patience at the Guard’s impotence in fixing the problems or even reining the Imperials in. Tsorila wished it was that simple.

“I said I’ll think about it,” Ixtiner replied more sternly. “If they keep complaining then tell them to shut up. They wouldn’t be treated like that if they didn’t bring it upon themselves. But things should get better soon anyway.”

That last sentence offered hope amid Tsorila’s darkening mood. “What’s happening, sir?”

“Because of the unrest I’ve got more soldiers due in. Once they get here we’ll have better coverage throughout town and will be able to deal with problems before they grow. Things will be better then. Safer and quieter.” Ixtiner smiled in anticipation.

Tsorila’s stomach hitched. “Better” wasn’t the word he would use to describe that future. “Sir—” he ventured.

He was interrupted when Grasset, Ixtiner’s second-in-command, strode into Ixtiner’s office... or rather, seRaj’s office. Grasset completely ignored Tsorila, handed Ixtiner a datapad and said, “Sir, here’s the list of hotels and inns where we can accommodate our incoming troops. Merrilan Travel Inn, Burke’s Inn and Tavern, Atland Hotel, and— get this— Merrilan-Inn. Can you believe that idiotic name? Inbred losers, the lot of ‘em. Anyway, each of those, ahem, establishments has been notified that they’ll be providing rooms free of charge to our soldiers for as long as we deem it necessary.”

Ixtiner brought his impeccably polished boots back down to the floor and leaned over to read the datapad. “Excellent work. Make sure all incoming groups are briefed on our new policies for dealing with the locals. We also have to—” He stopped and looked up at Tsorila without moving his head. “Are you still here? Get out,” Ixtiner ordered.

Tsorila left the office and emerged into the main part of the Merrilan Guard operations and command building. Now, however, the offices and cubicles were occupied by Imperials, and the stations were manned by them as well. The Imperials had also installed a lot of their own equipment and brought in numerous droids. Tsorila had never even seen some of the high-tech items they had. The gear covered every available desktop, and network and power cords were a constant hazard. He stepped over the cords, walked past his former cubicle and headed for the small, cramped room in back where all the remaining active-duty Guards now worked.

The couple that were inside looked up when Tsorila entered. “How’d it go?” Crennilis

asked hopefully.

“Take a guess,” Tsorila grumbled.

Ancitel shook her head. “Great. Now what are we going to do? I’m sick of standing by and letting the Imperials do whatever they want to everyone here!”

“Suppose we’d better get used to it,” Crennilis muttered. “Every time I turn around all I hear is support for the Imperials from the ministers and our own blasted HQ. They’re fine with what the Imperials are doing.”

“But no one here is,” Ancitel countered.

Crennilis scoffed. “You think I don’t know that? I don’t like it either! I hate going out there and having to sit and watch while the Imperials take what’s not theirs! And I hate all those accusing looks everyone gives me when I do, like I have a choice about it! But as long as the ministers and HQ are trying to appease the Imperials and keep the rest of the planet happy, they’re not going to condone our pushback here. Hotspotters will always be the bad guys. And that’s why we *need* to get the Imperials to listen to us and ease off on some of their fierfekkin’ rules!” He looked at Tsorila pointedly.

Tsorila got the hint but once again felt powerless to do anything about it. “I know, I know. I tried!” He crossed his arms. “And I hate to say this, but I think it’s going to get much worse. More Imperial soldiers are coming and are being forced long-term on a few hotels in town without compensation for the rooms.” Tsorila watched as Crennilis’s and Ancitel’s expressions mirrored his earlier one of dread and apprehension. “We need to tell the others and work out a schedule because I think we should have a Guard at each of those hotels as much as possible. Either the Imperials are going to be even more harassing in concentrated groups like that, or the civilians or hotel owners will gang up and push back. If Ixtiner won’t listen to us when we try to do things the proper way, then I think it’s time we started being a little more assertive in protecting the people we’re supposed to protect.”

Crennilis smiled his thanks to the waitress when she refilled his cup of caf. The smile she gave him in return was a tired one that was partially obscured by long, curly black hair falling in front of her face and shoulder. She moved off to wait on another table. That’s what he’d always liked about Burke’s: it was old-fashioned enough to still employ living wait staff instead of droids. Sometimes droids just didn’t understand the nuances of customer service.

The Guard had a good view of the restaurant portion of Burke’s Inn and Tavern from the back corner table where he’d been sitting all day with the innkeeper’s permission. The lunch rush was in full swing, and while it was busy after Burke’s reopening a few days ago, it wasn’t as busy as it had been in the times Crennilis had come here before the attack. Only about two-thirds of the tables were occupied, and even at this early time of day the bar in the corner had several patrons. Conversations were muted but calm.

Maybe Tsorila’s information had been wrong. Maybe the Imperials would realize this mistake in advance and fix it. Maybe he himself and the other Guards were overreacting and nothing would happen, and everyone here would go home today in ignorant bliss without any eventful stories to tell.

Fifteen minutes later, Crennilis’s ears told him he was wrong. The numerous heavy bootfalls and odd accents he could make out in the uninhibited voices left little doubt that the

additional Imperial army soldiers had arrived, right on schedule. He groaned softly.

The Merrillean Guard turned and watched. From his chair he could see through the wide opening leading from the restaurant to the hotel portion of the business. The front desk was mere meters away from him, sitting between large leafy, potted plants in the small lobby.

A dozen or so armed Imperial army troops had entered from the main entrance off Citron Road and dropped their bags on the floor and lobby furniture, anywhere they saw fit. One looked around the cramped area and said, "Sarge, seriously? We have to stay in this dump?"

The sergeant ignored him and went to the Twi'lek manning the front desk.

"How may I help you?" The Twi'lek had a smile on his face, but his voice was forced and his lekku twitched.

"You should have a room for each of us. Give us our keys," the Imperial sergeant said. He rapped his knuckles on the front desk.

Uncertainty fluttered across the clerk's face. He looked at the group of Imperials and then hastily worked at his computer console before saying, "Sir, I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding. We don't have enough rooms for each of you individually: we'd been told you would have two to a room. We have those rooms already prepared for you, so I'll get the keys and—"

"You've only got half our rooms?" the sergeant interrupted.

"Well, sir, like I said—"

"I heard what you said, tentacle-head, but you didn't hear me. I said we each get our own room."

The Twi'lek's skin turned a paler shade of grey. "Well, sir, I can't do that. We don't have that many available. I'd have to kick out the guests staying in them—"

He stopped when the Imperial leaned in close and growled, "Well, then, you'd better get started. Can't believe anyone's voluntarily visiting this backwards town anyway. They'll be glad to leave. If they're not, I'll make sure they're happy to go." The sergeant patted his holstered blaster, then he straightened up and whistled to get his troops' attention. "Come on, boys, let's get lunch. All our rooms will be ready for us by the time we're done."

The Imperials left their bags in the lobby and came into the restaurant while the Twi'lek scrambled toward the back offices. Crennilis gritted his teeth and stood. So much for hoping the Imperials would be civilized.

The conversations in the restaurant abruptly died down when the Imperials entered. One of the soldiers stopped beside a table where a Pho Ph'eahian and two Rodians were in the middle of their lunch. "That looks good," the Imperial said. He took the plate of half-eaten food from the Pho Ph'eahian and walked after the rest of the Imperials while popping some of the untouched morsels into his mouth.

"Hey! Damn it, give that back!" the diner demanded.

The soldier ignored the protests and said, "Sarge, all our food's free too, right?"

"*Stop!*" Crennilis's commanding voice cut across the quiet room, and the Imperials turned to look at him in surprise.

Finally. He'd had it. He was done lying down. He was done taking this treatment and being forced to helplessly watch others take it too. He should have done this a long time ago.

Crennilis walked up to the Imperials and said, "If you're going to be here long-term, you need to show some basic decency! We are not here to be walked over or to cater to your whims for free!"

The sergeant laughed darkly and strode up to Crennilis. “Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong. That’s exactly why you’re here,” the Imperial said. “You serve no other purpose and have no other value. Besides, you’d best remember that we’re your boss, Guard, and what we say goes. So why don’t you apologize for your attitude and go clear off some tables for us.”

Crennilis returned the glare. Force help him, if the Imperials spat in his face one more time he was going to do something he’d regret. He couldn’t even make his fists unclench. “No chance in hell. You know, things would be tons easier if you’d just try to work with us instead of constantly demanding everything! And for all the snow in a blizzard, give that customer back his lunch!”

The Imperial sergeant sized Crennilis up. He didn’t appear too intimidated by Crennilis’s Guard uniform and empty sidearm holster. Then he looked at the soldier who had taken the food and motioned to him.

The soldier deliberately walked back to the table with the plate of food. “Here. I’m supposed to give you your lunch back,” the Imperial muttered to the Pho Ph’eahian. Then he threw a smirk at Crennilis and smashed the plate of food over the diner’s head.

Darin paused for a few gulps of caf before unloading the final crates at this delivery stop onto a hovercart. At last the speeder was empty, though it would be loaded up for his afternoon run when he went back for lunch shortly.

He pushed the loaded hovercart into the back storage area of the building. Damage to the structure had been hastily patched, and the storage items were moved out of the way and partially rearranged. Darin knew where most of the individual crates in his load went, though, and took an extra couple minutes to put them in the correct spots with the help of the resident droid.

An elderly man watched from a chair near the wall. “Thanks, kid,” he said with a yellowed smile. “Been waitin’ for those– you’ll make lots of people happy here today.” He was squat and bulky with a wheezy, husky voice, and he waddled when he walked over to return the datapad with his signature of receipt for the shipment.

Darin grinned back and pocketed the datapad. “You’re welcome.” His route brought him to this building often, but for some reason neither he nor the man had ever learned each other’s names. The man only signed the company’s name, not his own. At this point it was like a game to them. “What are they?”

“The important ones are electrical parts to fix the lighting and heaters in the offices. Everyone’s been miserable working inside since the attack with the power busted. This’ll cheer ‘em right up,” the man said.

It was a small matter, probably insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but lately Darin had needed to take his victories wherever he could get them. He privately relished the feeling of even indirect assistance and then pointed to the damage visible in the storage room. “How long before this gets permanently fixed up?”

The man shrugged. “Oh, who knows. Could be a few months yet. Who knows. Hey, didn’t you have a girl with you yesterday? Cute little thing?”

Darin chuckled. “Yeah, that was my sister. She’s with my mom at her work today.” And she was probably getting doted on by all the waitresses too. She always loved going to Burke’s.

“Nah, she was too cute to be related to you.”

“She tells me the same thing each day.”

The man amiably clapped Darin on the shoulder. “She’s a smart one. I’d better get this stuff logged in before the boss starts asking for it. Take care, kid.”

“You too. I’ll see you later,” Darin replied.

He took the hovercart back to the speeder and jumped in. The confines and controls of his favorite speeder were a comfort that made him smile a bit. Once he put his caf thermos in its holder he yawned, put the speeder in gear and headed back to MTS. Darin opened a window to catch the unseasonably warm breeze and tried to think about his upcoming lunch instead of how many more hours he would still be working. It had only been a few days, but already the double shifts were taking a toll.

Soon Darin pulled into the MTS loading dock where he passed a couple droids siphoning fuel. The speeder with the largest fuel tank was flown to a nearby city, fueled up and flown back here where the majority of its fuel was siphoned to the rest of the fleet before it was sent out again for the same purpose. Until the fuel crisis in town abated or the Imperials allowed fuel canisters brought in, Ander had made this a standard practice. Plus, any delivery pilot caught wasting fuel on a run was immediately disciplined.

Darin parked his speeder in its usual spot and went to the nearest console to log in his delivery data. He was almost finished when Ander walked past behind him while talking to a dock worker. “I mean, how much longer is this going to go on? It’s way out of hand! My wife’s scared to death. She’s stuck in the building until they reopen Citron to traffic.”

Darin’s brow furrowed: Burke’s was on Citron Road, and his mom hadn’t said anything about detours or road work that morning. “Ander, wait,” he said. “Why’s Citron closed?”

“My wife said there’s tons of emergency vehicles and they’ve got it blocked off at all intersections. Word is there was a pretty bad shooting or something there.”

Darin’s blood ran cold. “Where? Where on Citron?” he demanded.

“She thought it was up by Burke’s Inn, but it was hard for her to see exactly,” Ander replied.

All the color drained from Darin’s face. Without thinking, he spun and jumped back in the landspeeder, gunned it to life and took off, leaving Ander’s baffled calls of, “Darin, wait!” in the dust.

He was shaking by the time he left the loading dock and swung out onto the road, and he was barely steady enough to enter his mom’s frequency on his comlink. Darin recklessly wove in and out of speeder traffic as the long seconds got longer. She wasn’t responding.

“Mom, come on, answer!” He throttled up, broke a few more traffic laws and tried to contact Burke’s instead.

There was no answer on the business’s frequency either. Darin switched to the frequency they’d recently gotten for Shiori but got the same results, and there was absolutely no reason Shiori shouldn’t answer. He went back to trying Ginala’s frequency and pushed the large, ungainly transport faster amid angry curses that it was still too slow. The fear was suffocating. He tried to tell himself that everything was all right, that there was a mixup or misinformation, that his mom and Shiori were both safe and merely waiting on a customer, that in twenty years he would look back on how much he was overreacting now and laugh.

He couldn’t make himself believe it, though.

At long last he made the final turn before the intersection of Citron Road but had to slam on the brakes. The transport fought its forward momentum and glided to a stop less than a meter

before it would have impacted a stationary speeder in front of him. Traffic was backed up from where Citron was barricaded off by police and Imperial vehicles. From this spot Darin didn't have a direct line of sight to Burke's Inn, but in a couple new windows of buildings along the opposite side of the road he caught reflections of flashing lights generated by stationary emergency vehicles.

Traffic was at a standstill. Darin cut the engine and jumped out of the speeder, then he sprinted down the sidewalk. Ahead of him a crowd of pedestrians had gathered at the intersection's barricade and was looking down the street. Several police officers and two Guards were trying to keep them back, and two Imperial army troopers walked up. "Break it up! No crowds!" one of the troopers ordered in a harsh voice, his hand on his blaster.

The people had just begun fleeing from the Imperials when Darin skidded to a stop in their midst. Now he had a better view down Citron, and sure enough, numerous emergency vehicles surrounded Burke's Inn two blocks away. Pure panic enveloped him. Darin breathlessly dodged through the dispersing crowd, ducked under one barricade and squeezed around another, and took off running down the sidewalk of Citron.

He hadn't gone far before he was pushed into the wall of the building beside him. He slammed into it, off-balance, and tried to regain his footing, but someone was following his movements and momentum and grabbing him. Darin fought to pull out of the person's grasp, but the person pushed him against the wall again and forcefully dragged him to a stop.

"Hold it!" It was one of the Guards. "You can't be back here!"

"My mom! My sister!" Nearly screaming the words, Darin kept struggling and turned his terrified gaze to the Guard. He tried to point down the road. "They were in there! At Burke's! What's going on? Are they okay?! I can't reach them on the comm!"

The Guard hung on with difficulty and kept Darin put. "Come on, you have to get back behind the barricade," the Guard said. "I'll comm in and see what I can find out. What are their names?"

"No, let me go! I have to make sure they're all right! My sister— she's only ten! My mom! I've got to find them! Why isn't she answering?!"

The Guardsman resisted Darin's frantic struggles but not enough to easily force him back toward the roadblock. The two Imperial soldiers came over. "What's the problem over here?" one asked.

The Guard holding Darin shot a scathing look at them. "Back off!" he snapped. "I've got this."

"Civilians aren't allowed past the barricade. A good stun bolt and binders will solve this," the other Imperial said. He drew his blaster.

It was immediately swatted aside by the second Guard who came up and interposed herself between the Imperial and Darin. "Damn it, haven't you caused enough damage with your blasters today?" the Guard demanded hotly.

The Imperial got right in her face. "Now you listen, you little—"

That was all Darin heard because then it seemed like the Guard holding him was distracted, and Darin dug deep and put an extra effort into breaking free. Startled, his Guard forced Darin back hard enough that Darin lost ground.

"Kid, come on, don't give them a reason," the Guard said in his ear.

"I don't care!" Darin choked out. "I have to find them! Let me go!"

"Listen, listen, we'll find them," the Guard told him firmly, still pushing Darin back. "If

you get behind the barricade, I'll see what I can find out, okay?"

Darin shook his head adamantly and protested, but the Guard had footing and momentum on his side now. When they finally made it to the roadblock a Merrilan police officer opened it enough to let them through, then the barricade was back up and blocking Darin from getting to Burke's or to the emergency vehicles he could still easily see surrounding it.

Breathing was difficult, and Darin was soon compelled to stop resisting when he began to hyperventilate. He stumbled back from the sudden dizziness and lightheadedness and fought to stay on his feet.

"Easy. Breathe. Just breathe," the Guard said, changing his grip to stabilize Darin's balance. "Relax. Everything will be okay. Listen to me. Focus on me. Breathe. Slow. Breathe."

Darin trembled, with his imagination running more rampant with every second spent watching those emergency lights flashing in time with his wild heartbeat. Frightened tears welled up, and he looked imploringly to the Guard. "Please, just tell me they're okay," he pleaded in a strangled voice.

They had to be.

Chapter Eleven

He remembered laughing.

And it scared him.

It had been a laugh completely lacking in humor or joy, generated instead by nerves and a sort of hysteria at the utter absurdity and complete incomprehensibility of the galaxy. Although it had started small it had soon grown large and loud, and he'd been powerless to stop it. After three days of running on fumes, operating in a daze, being emotionally exhausted and getting no sleep, all it had taken was a simple, stray thought to set him off: *I don't have a family anymore.*

Luckily it happened after the funeral, not before. By then, all of Ginala's friends and coworkers had gone; the shaken parents of Shiori's friends had taken their tearful daughters home; everyone else, including friends of Jodeco's, Shiori's teachers, Bosko's parents, and Darin's coworkers, donri teammates and even ex-girlfriend had left. Mrs. Nuuren had taken Prilo and Hashik to get the speeder. Only Cohen was there to witness Darin's purge of laughter at the foot of the graves where his parents and sister lay. Several other new graves that dotted the cemetery's landscape held other Cracian victims of the Burke's shooting.

Cohen had supported Darin's weight when his drained muscles had made him stagger, and, alarmed, Cohen had turned Darin away so the fresh graves were no longer in view. It had taken a long minute for Darin to stop and catch his breath.

Once he had, he hadn't uttered another sound.

Now, an hour later, he heard a quiet knock on the door. "Dare?"

Darin didn't answer. The door opened, and from the doorway Cohen took in the scene and softly said, "Dare, c'mon. You were going to change fifteen minutes ago. We need to go pick up my dad."

Darin never looked up from where he sat cross-legged on a cot in Cohen's room. His chin was cupped in his hands, and he stared blankly at the far wall with eyes that he suspected would never lose their red rims. It took all the energy he could summon simply to shake his head, and he spoke at last in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. "You guys go. I'll stay here." Finding enough energy and motivation to stand up and change out of his dress clothes was simply impossible.

Cohen's head shake was much stronger. "Not happening. I told you, I'm not leaving you alone." He walked into his room and picked up Darin's duffle bag from where it sat in a corner. "We can drop by your house on the way to the hospital if you want to pick anything up."

"Don't need anything."

Cohen rifled through the bag. "And you haven't unpacked this yet. Once we get Dad settled in we'll do that."

"Don't want to unpack."

"It'll help, buddy. Trust me."

"Nothing can help anymore."

Cohen put a shirt and pants on Darin's cot but looked uncertain. "I know it's bad, but we'll get you through this," Cohen said. "Maybe getting out of the house will be a good distraction for you. Come on, all right? I'll give you a few more minutes to change clothes." He left.

Darin sat there for half a minute more, then he fell onto his side on the cot and pulled the blanket over him completely. It was the only thing he'd wanted to do lately. He just desperately

wished it would hide him from the perpetual, gut-wrenching pain inside.

Soon he heard the door open again, and then a sigh came from Cohen. “Dare, c’mon.” Cohen pulled the blanket back, and then took Darin by the shoulders and pulled him to a sitting position. “I know how hard today’s been for you. But I need you to function a little again, all right? Enough to get to the hospital with us and back? One thing at a time, and this is the one thing I need to you focus on now, okay? Please?”

“Don’t want to.”

“Please? Just this one thing, then we can stay in for the rest of the day. Okay?”

Darin heaved a sigh and reluctantly did what Cohen asked him to do. The dynamic was a familiar, comfortable feeling, and it had been the only thing that had felt normal to Darin since the shooting. With difficulty he climbed to his feet and shuffled toward the door.

Cohen was immediately beside him. “Good, good,” he encouraged with a smile. “You want to change first? You’ll feel better.”

Darin shook his head and kept walking. “Don’t care.”

They made it down the hallway and into the Nuurens’ living room where Mrs. Nuuren, Prilo and Hashik were waiting. Mrs. Nuuren immediately came over and smoothed out the largest wrinkles in Darin’s clothes. “Are you doing okay, Darin?” she asked in concern. She tenderly straightened his dark blond bangs that had gotten a little unkempt under the blanket.

Darin was so tired of everyone asking him that question in the three weeks since the day of the attack, and especially in the last few days and at the funeral. He didn’t answer and simply tolerated her brief fussing over him. He also tolerated Prilo’s attempts to engage him in conversation and cheer him up on the way to the hospital.

They soon arrived and left their speeder in the parking garage. At the sight of the hospital across the street, though, Darin hesitated. His heart pounded while he stared, and he wondered if he could find a way to tell Cohen he’d wait in the speeder without having to tell him why. But then Cohen was there with his encouraging grin and patient urging for Darin to come with, so Darin followed.

Once inside the hospital, the overwhelming smell of bacta, bandages and bleach made Darin flinch, just like the other couple times he’d been here with the Nuurens visiting their father. The flood of mental images it triggered made his breath shorten.

Trying to ignore the mental invasion, Darin sat on a chair in the waiting room with Prilo and Hashik while Cohen and Mrs. Nuuren checked in and started the paperwork to have Mr. Nuuren released. He’d been one of the customers at Burke’s and had been injured in the shooting, and Darin hadn’t yet been able to bring himself to ask for a first-hand account of what had happened in that chaos. Since he’d been at the bar at the time, Darin wasn’t sure how much he would trust Mr. Nuuren’s eyewitness testimony anyway.

Darin’s eyes were involuntarily drawn down a long corridor, at the end of which was the wing for the emergency room. He only remembered bits and pieces of staying there all afternoon with the Nuurens on the day of the shooting while they waited to see if their dad would be all right, but there was one part he recalled vividly. At some point early on a small group of beings had walked in with superficial but bleeding wounds. They spread the story of how news of the Burke’s shooting had sparked a protest and scuffle in the streets by Merrillans against the Imperials, and these people had been on the losing side but had fled before being arrested.

Something about the sight of them had hit Darin hard. That sight wasn’t supposed to exist there. He had thought about all the Merrillans who had entered this hospital bleeding since the

Imperials had first landed. Casualty numbers ricocheted around in his mind, as well as imaginings of what the last moments must have been like for each of them before they were forcefully and violently deprived of their lives. How many of those last moments had been in a place where the person had previously felt safe? How many had taken place within these very walls? How much blood had been spilled in Merrilans and in this exact building because of the Imperials?

And even more had been spilled now. That train of thought had been too personal and too much for Darin to take, and he'd spent the next half hour getting sick in the closest refresher.

Every bandage, every whiff of bacta reeled those thoughts back. Darin tried to calm down and distract himself while he waited for Mr. Nuuren to be released, but twenty long minutes later he was getting worse instead of better. Deep breaths backfired when all they did was fill his lungs with the odors he was trying to ignore. He forcibly exhaled and shakily got to his feet. Cohen and Mrs. Nuuren were still over at the check-in desk discussing something with a nurse, so Darin turned to Prilo. "I need some air. I'll be outside," Darin said.

Prilo stood as well. "We'll come with you," he said. Hashik jumped up beside him.

The three of them passed the hospital's unarmed security guard and went out to the sidewalk, and Darin immediately felt better. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply several times. The cool air was cleansing. Funny how bacta was worsening the wound inside him instead of being the miracle cure it was supposed to be.

"Hey, Darin?" Prilo asked. "How long are you going to stay with us?"

Darin opened his eyes and half-heartedly shrugged. "I don't know. Until I get back on my feet, I suppose."

"Mom said he's staying with us for good," Hashik told Prilo.

Prilo grinned. "I hope you do," he said to Darin. "Stay with us for good, I mean. Not that I like the... circumstances, but I always liked it when you've stayed before."

"Thanks, Prilo, but I'm not exactly good company anymore," Darin said.

"That doesn't matter. Besides, I have to put up with my dad each day, and you're nowhere close to him. Not even in the same galaxy."

Darin fell silent; the last thing on his mind had been the length of time he'd be staying with the Nuurens, but he'd have to give it some consideration eventually. However, planning and sorting things out took too much effort and generated nothing but questions he wasn't ready to answer, so he sighed and turned his attention elsewhere.

The buildings he could see on this block, mostly support buildings for the hospital, were almost back to normal. Across the street was the parking structure, and on the outer wall of its lowest level Darin could barely make out small, torn remnants of fabric, canvas, flimsi, and anything else that was good for making large banners. Homemade signs of support for the recovering victims of the Burke's shooting were constantly being hung on that wall, and they were just as quickly being torn down by the Imperials. Darin hadn't been near Burke's since that day, but he'd heard the same thing was happening there at an even higher rate.

The shooting had outraged Merrilans, but the Imperials had soon squelched the increased and heated media coverage. A few more protests had flared up since that first one, and each one made the Imperials push back harder. Curfew started an hour earlier now despite the vitriolic complaints from Merrilans. Previously-legal weapons were being confiscated from homes, even if the Imperials had to break in to do it. None of the Stanics had owned a blaster, but Darin couldn't imagine how frightened Shiori would have been if Imperial soldiers or stormtroopers

had burst into their house. The hydrosponder under his pillow would have been useless.

Just as useless as he'd been the day of the shooting. The one time his little sister had really, really needed him to protect her, he hadn't even been there.

Darin felt it all getting to him again, and he bit his lip hard and paced up and down the sidewalk in an attempt to expend his emotions in the form of physical energy. Life was so damned unfair. He didn't know what to do anymore. He didn't know what to think. He'd never hurt so much in his entire life, and he had no idea how to make it stop. Blast, he needed to make it stop.

Prilo and Hashik went back inside, but Darin continued to pace listlessly and tremble. Subdued Merrillans, in pairs and singles, passed him on the sidewalk. Some held flowering plants in decorative pots or other get-well gifts.

Cohen left the hospital and walked up. "Gonna get the speeder and bring it around for my dad. You coming with?"

"I'll stay here."

"Okay. Meet us at the main door." Cohen jerked a thumb back toward the door he had just exited and headed off.

Darin took more pacing steps: anything to keep his mind grounded on something inane and light and away from everything else.

He was trying so hard to focus on his footsteps that he almost didn't notice when an Imperial passed him on the sidewalk. But when he did notice it, it consumed his full attention with a surge of anger and hatred.

Darin whirled and shoved the Imperial as hard as he could. Off-guard, the Imperial stumbled and fell. The only thought in Darin's head was that he wished he'd been more in control so he could have shoved the Imperial into the street instead of just farther down the sidewalk.

The Imperial's uniform wasn't a combat one like Darin had seen, and he had a sidearm but he wasn't reaching for it. At the moment the Imperial was too busy trying to untangle himself and get to his feet. "Ow! Watch—"

"Are you happy?!" Darin yelled at the man.

"The hell are you talking about?! Happy about what?" the Imperial answered as he stood.

"Murdering people's families!" Livid, Darin immediately gave him another hard shove, but the Imperial stayed on his feet this time though he staggered. Darin's raised voice hit a higher octave. "Do you have *fun* shooting ten-year-olds?!" Darin swung a furious, wild punch at the man's face, and the stab of protest in Darin's hand after partially connecting was the only good pain he felt.

The Imperial fell again, and this time as Darin kept advancing the Imperial focused more on scrambling backwards and fumbling for his holstered blaster rather than getting to his feet. "Stay back! I'm warning you!" the Imperial shouted fearfully.

Darin never slowed. "Go ahead!" Darin's shouted words caught in his throat. He hadn't planned them or anything of the sort, but he didn't stop them now either. "Make it a perfect four-for-four! Why not?! I don't c—"

Something rammed into him and drove him sideways, away from the road and the Imperial, and for the briefest of instants Darin almost felt like he was back on a donri field. Five paces later, Cohen straightened up from forcing Darin back and stopped but kept him put with strong, painful grips on Darin's upper arms.

“*Darin!* Stop it! What are you doing?!” It was odd hearing such fear in Cohen’s voice and seeing it on his face. Before Darin could respond, Cohen whipped his head around to look back over his shoulder at the Imperial, and his grips tightened even more.

The Imperial scurried to his feet. He held his blaster in a shaking hand but didn’t raise it. “You stay the hell away from me! One step and I shoot!” he shouted at Darin. Apparently uninterested in testing Darin’s obedience of his command, the Imperial hurried away.

Cohen turned back to Darin and demanded, “Blast it, what were you *doing*?!”

“Nothing, all right?!” Darin retorted. He yanked his arms out of Cohen’s too-tight grips and felt some despair that the overwhelming hurt inside was still present. Even for those short few seconds, the prospect of relief, an escape, had been more welcome than he cared to admit to himself.

“That wasn’t nothing! Darin, what were you thinking?! If that had been a trooper you’d be dead or arrested by now! You’ll get yourself killed!”

“So what?! I don’t care anymore!”

“*I’d* care!” Cohen’s heated words were a sucker punch to Darin’s gut, and the pure terror buried beneath the anger in them momentarily snapped Darin out of his downward spiral.

“And it’s not just you!” Cohen continued without so much as a hesitation. “You *trying* to start another Imperial shooting? Prilo and Hashik are here! My parents too! You trying to get them killed?!”

“No! Of course not!” Darin shot back, hurt.

“But that’s exactly what could have happened!”

“I didn’t– I didn’t mean–” Darin struggled to take a breath but only half succeeded, and finally he blurted out, “No one was supposed to be hurt! Only the Imperial! They can’t keep getting away with this!”

Cohen’s voice was stern. “That’s not for us to deal with. That’s for the Guard and the Cracian government to do. All right?”

“But they’re not–”

“Okay, Darin?” Cohen interrupted.

“It’s not–”

“Darin. Okay?” Cohen cut him off again.

Frustrated, Darin opened his mouth to try once more, but he hesitated before speaking. Finally he bit his lip, looked down, kicked the ground and gave a small nod.

“Good.” Cohen sounded cautiously satisfied. “Now c’mon. You’re coming with me to get the speeder.”

Chapter Twelve

Captain Ixtiner raised his eyebrows expectantly. “So what do you think?”

On the other end of the communications frequency, Captain Oka considered it for a moment before he spoke. “You realize what a resource drain this will be for my troops.”

Ixtiner nodded. “I do, but if this works— and I’m sure that it will— it’ll ease the immediate drain on mine and I can send some of them to supplement your forces. Overall it will make things much safer for our entire area if this little hotbed of Merrillean can be smothered out once and for all.”

Ixtiner’s comm screen showed Oka perusing a couple datapads on the desk in front of him. Ixtiner figured one contained the details of the plan he had sent Oka, and perhaps the other one showed details of the troop strength under Oka’s command. Ixtiner let him compare the figures and work things out in his mind.

Oka looked up at last. “So... checkpoints in Corvallis and all its major suburbs: Weneta, Harleq, Nerriss, and River Crossing. And a nightly curfew. That’s all?”

“Yes. It’s not very harsh in the grand scheme of things, but it will inconvenience those citizens quite a bit. That will be enough for them to generate anger and focus it on the Merrillians when we ‘let slip’ that they’re the reasons for these sudden changes and restrictions. Like I said, all we need to do is turn as many other Cracians against the Merrillians and other hotspots as possible. Once we isolate them from any external support, the fire loses fuel and becomes much easier to snuff out. After that happens, we’ll be their only option if they want to continue eating and working, and they’ll have no choice but to give in. They need to learn to rely on us and *only us*, and we can’t have true control until they do.” Ixtiner gazed earnestly at Oka, trying to convince the Imperial Army captain in charge of nearby Corvallis of the validity of his plan through sheer force of will.

At last, Oka nodded. “All right. I suppose this will be easy enough to discontinue if it doesn’t work. I’ll get it underway immediately. If you have ideas for the related media propaganda, I’ll pass them along to my people to work on.”

A smile blossomed on Ixtiner’s face. “Thank you. I’ll have them sent along at once. Ixtiner out.”

Mr. Nuuren looked up from his breakfast when Darin shuffled into the kitchen in his MTS uniform. Mr. Nuuren’s injured leg was propped on an adjacent chair laden with pillows, and his crutches leaned against the table. That was the visible injury; unseen was the broken rib and the lung it had punctured that had required surgery. The damage to his knee had been extensive, and the prolonged “natural” recovery time due to the acute shortage of bacta in Merrillean and the likelihood that his knee would never regain full functionality as a result had put him in an even crankier mood. “So you finally making yourself useful and going to work today?” Mr. Nuuren asked.

Darin only nodded lethargically. He was primarily going because Cohen had asked him to try it, just once, but the clinching reason was to get away from Mr. Nuuren for a while. Two and a half days of being in that house with the recovering man were more than enough.

Mrs. Nuuren, however, shot her husband a disapproving look while she readied Hashik

and Prilo for their first day back at school. “Adrik, leave him be,” she said.

“He’s free-loaded off us long enough,” Mr. Nuuren replied sharply. “We’re not exactly rolling in credits here since I can’t work until I get off these damn meds. The medical bills are going to kill us as it is.”

“You can have everything in my paycheck left over after I pay the mortgage on our house,” Darin said blandly. Selling the speeder had covered the brunt of the funeral costs, and with all the utilities now disconnected at the Stanics’ house the mortgage was the only imminent expense Darin had to cover. The house, still full of all their belongings until Darin could go through them, was for sale now, but the real estate agent hadn’t been optimistic. No matter, though: Darin was happy to cling to the house.

“Good,” Mr. Nuuren grumbled. “And the sales ad for *Skybolt* is starting its run today. I can’t wait to get rid of that credit drain, especially since you skimmed out on paying your part these last few weeks and we won’t be getting anything from the Wanths. The write-up you and Cohen did for the ad better work. Every day the ad runs and the ship doesn’t sell, I’m losing money.”

“We did the best we could on it.” Actually Cohen had. Darin had tried to help but couldn’t bring himself to actively assist in losing something else he cared about. Once *Skybolt* was gone, all the memories of enjoyable times with Bosko and fun adventures with the ship would be gone with it. He’d taken his first solo flight in that ship. First the speeder, then his house, then *Skybolt*... everything was disappearing.

Mr. Nuuren grunted and turned back to his breakfast.

Cohen joined Darin for breakfast shortly before Prilo and Hashik left for school. They climbed on the school’s speeder bus, and Mrs. Nuuren watched them go with worried eyes.

It wasn’t long after when Cohen and Darin were standing at the public speeder bus stop down the street. Darin’s bus came first, and as he got on Cohen told him, “I’ll meet you at MTS after work, okay?”

Darin nodded. Spending time with his best friend was the only positive part of his days now, and it would be something to look forward to during this first hard day back at work. At least it was only one shift for now.

When Darin arrived at MTS, he felt an immediate transformation in atmosphere as soon as he walked into the break room. Conversations from the other employees quieted. Some awkwardly tried to smile at him while others uncomfortably occupied themselves. Tentative greetings and shallow small talk met him. Darin returned the small talk in kind and went to find Tilde as soon as he’d stashed his lunch in his locker.

“Darin. Hi,” Tilde said in slight surprise when he knocked on her office door. “I didn’t think you’d be in for a while longer.”

Darin shrugged unenergetically. “Trying it out today.”

“How are you doing? You look tired.”

“Do you have a route I can take?”

Tilde shook her head, making her long, striped head-tails sway. “Not a local one. They’re all covered and already out on their runs. If you want to get some hours in, we can find a spot for you to help in the loading dock.”

“What about a non-local one?” Darin asked.

“I don’t want you on a non-local one yet with what’s happening. I’ll comm Ander and ask where he wants you in the dock.”

“Tilde, I want to go on a run,” Darin said firmly. He crossed his arms. “Not be stuck in the dock all day doing mindless loading and giving my thoughts a chance to wander. The whole reason I came today was to avoid doing more of that. Isn’t there *any* run you can put me on?”

Tilde looked dubious. “You’re positive?”

“Yes.”

“On one condition then.”

Darin exhaled in relief. “Anything.”

Tilde pulled out her comlink and entered a frequency. When the recipient answered, she said, “Matias, have you left yet?”

“No, was just about to.”

“Good. Hold up one minute and wait for Darin. He’s coming with you to help.”

“Okay.”

Tilde closed the channel and looked back at Darin. “Stay with Matias. It’s his run, you’re just there to help out and get your sea legs back. Be careful and don’t push yourself. I don’t think you’re really going to like it out there.”

It was a whole lot better than nothing. Darin forced as much of a grin as he could muster, which was hardly anything, and said, “Thanks,” before going to find Matias’s speeder. He wasn’t sure what Tilde thought he wouldn’t like now; he’d ask Matias on the way.

“Seriously?” Darin asked en route to Weneta. The outgoing Imperial checkpoint had taken twice as long and was twice as thorough than before, and on the highway beyond it Darin could finally talk to Matias uninterrupted. “I haven’t had much of a chance lately to see the news reports, but I don’t remember them saying anything like that.”

“Because the local reports aren’t saying anything about it,” Matias replied while he piloted the cargo landspeeder. “The Corvallis area is under restrictions now, and the news journals there and some people I’ve talked to there say it’s because of the unrest in Merrillan. They’re afraid of it spreading to the surrounding areas. The Imperials are saying it’s a security measure for the people’s own safety, and the way they’re spinning everything, the people are taking it to mean Merrillans have become these dangerous, bloodthirsty terrorists. Honestly, Darin, it’s probably best if you stay in the speeder when we get there. No reason for you to deal with this ugliness now.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Darin argued. “Other Cracians won’t turn on us just because the Imperials told them to.”

Matias gave him a rueful glance. “If you honestly believe that, then I’m going to insist you stay in the speeder.”

Darin spent the rest of the flight in silence, watching the scenery speed past. Under the cloudy sky the lone, split-bottom srika trees were beginning to open their new buds of leaves. More new grass had sprouted as well. Out here he still saw the planet he remembered, the planet without the scars, the planet he grew up on. The other beings from this same planet would remember their kin and side with them over a dangerous, occupying force. Anything else wouldn’t make sense.

The checkpoint going into Weneta was new since the last time Darin had been there, and the traffic on the road leading to it was backed up for nearly a kilometer. During the long wait the

speeders trying to get into Weneta sounded their horns impatiently, and their pilots yelled at the stalled traffic in front of them as if the backed-up mess was their choice.

Darin heeded Matias's instructions to remain calm and stay quiet when it was finally their turn at the checkpoint. The Imperial trooper manning the post drew his blaster and spoke into his wrist comlink when he looked at the company's name on the side of the cargo speeder. Three more Imperial army troopers emerged from the checkpoint's support building.

"Merrillans?" the lead trooper asked Matias through the speeder's open window before he ever read Matias's proffered ID.

"Yes," Matias answered neutrally.

"Out of the speeder. Both of you. Slowly."

Two of the troopers were on the passenger side next to Darin, and one took Darin's ID out of his hands while he slowly slid out of the speeder, mirroring Matias's actions. Darin wasn't surprised to see that trooper scanning his ID into a portable reader, but Darin didn't expect the second one to push him against the speeder and pat him down. He fought down a flare of anger. When all the Imperial found was Darin's wallet, he rifled through it, gave it back and then stuck a handheld scanner in the speeder's front seating compartment.

Another trooper opened the speeder's back hold and went inside. A couple minutes later he came out and said, "Their cargo matches their manifest. Scans confirmed the contents. Nothing hazardous, no weapons."

"Good," the lead trooper replied. Darin heard a series of electronic beeps, and then the lead trooper put a palm-sized device on the speeder's dashboard. "Here's your tracker. You have one hour. If you so much as breathe wrong we'll be on you, got it?"

"Yes, sir," Matias answered. "Come on, Darin."

Darin defiantly grabbed his ID back and climbed into the passenger seat. He waited until Matias had pulled well away from the checkpoint before saying, "The couple speeders ahead of us didn't get patted down or get one of these trackers. Are they monitoring us just because we're from Merrillan?"

"Yup," Matias said. "Remember, to them we're the bad guys who are stirring up trouble and have to be watched at all times. If we're not checked out of Weneta in an hour they assume we're up to no good and probably respond accordingly."

Darin had fully planned on helping Matias with the deliveries, but over the course of the next half hour he realized he couldn't trust his reactions if an Imperial came along so he took Matias's advice and remained in the speeder to update the paperwork and delivery records. Whenever they were stopped for a delivery, pedestrians would give the speeder a wide, nervous berth.

When Matias returned to the speeder after the final package was delivered, Darin said, "There's a grocery store down the road. Do we have time for me to run in for some rakmelon?" He wished he could bring groceries for the Nuurens, but he knew better than to try that again.

Matias hesitated. "We have time, but I don't know if we should."

"It'll be fine; I've been in there before. And rakmelon's nonexistent in Merrillan now. Please?" Darin's stomach conveniently growled. Rakmelon was one of the few things he actually had an appetite for lately, and Cohen had made him promise to try to eat more of anything after skipping so many meals in the past week.

"Okay." Matias gave in with a sigh and pulled the speeder out into traffic.

Very soon they turned into the parking lot of the grocery store. Darin hopped out, and

Matias joined him.

The food donation box for Merrillean that had been beside the door was gone. It was disappointing but not unexpected based on what Darin had seen in Weneta that day. Matias declined Darin's offer of buying any snacks for him and simply followed as Darin went directly to the fruit section, picked out a small container of sliced rakmelon he could eat before getting back to Merrillean, and went to the checkout line.

When it was Darin's turn to pay, the Twi'lek cashier reached for the rakmelon to ring up the sale but hesitated upon seeing their MTS uniforms. The cashier shifted her weight. "Sorry, I—I can't sell this to you." She pressed something on the side of her sales console.

Darin blinked. "Why not?"

"Management said we're not allowed to do business with Merrillians. Sorry. Next in line, please." She looked toward the person behind Darin in line as if she wanted nothing more than to will Darin away.

"Wait, why? That's ridiculous!" Darin didn't move.

"The Imperials don't want us doing it."

"But—"

A customer waiting in line behind them elaborated on the Twi'lek's answer. "Because we want nothing to do with you Merrillians and we're hoping you'll get the hint and stay away!" The man's voice was icy. "Our problems are all thanks to you! Your actions caused the Imperials to crack down on *us*! Now we've got curfew, checkpoints and searches because of you! Just because we're close to Merrillean and this is the next logical place for you to spread your unrest! We're not going to let you. So get out."

"Anything the Imperials are doing to you is caused by the *Imperials*, not us!" Darin retorted. He resisted Matias's attempt to quiet him and push him toward the door.

"No, they're responding to *your* unrest in *your* town. *Your* protests. We've heard how bad it's gotten since that shooting! The Imperials are trying to keep us safe by preventing our city from being infected by you," the man shot back. "They've asked people and businesses to help them by discouraging you from being here and keeping you from getting whatever finances and supplies you need for your mob protests. There's nothing here for you. Find somewhere else to cause problems!"

Darin took a breath to argue more, but before he could get his next word out he sensed a large figure looming directly behind him. Turning around, he looked upward into the massive bulk of the store's armed security officer. Darin didn't remember seeing any of these the last time he was here.

"I'm going to help you leave the premises," the security officer told Darin pointedly. "If you refuse my help, I can get the Imperials here in ten seconds flat to assist me."

The end of Darin's shift came at long last. He trudged out of the break room and down the hall with his mostly full lunch bag tucked under an arm. Cohen was waiting in the MTS lobby while studying various notices on a bulletin board. He looked over when he noticed Darin.

"Ready?" Cohen asked. He sounded miffed, and the lack of a greeting was strange.

Darin nodded, and they headed toward the speeder bus stop.

"How'd it go today?" Cohen asked offhandedly.

“I got thrown out of a grocery store,” Darin grumbled. He fully expected Cohen to laugh or tease him or ask for more details of such an odd anecdote, but Cohen simply nodded. Darin hesitated; he needed to talk to Cohen about Weneta’s treatment of Merrillans, but Cohen didn’t seem to care about the cause of Darin’s troubles. Maybe he’d finally gotten tired of always being the one getting those troubles unloaded on him recently. Darin couldn’t blame him if he had.

Things were quiet while they waited for the bus, but once they got on and slid into a seat Cohen finally spoke up. “I noticed some piloting job openings posted in the MTS lobby. They’ve been there for a while. I thought you were going to tell me about them and help me get a job with you.”

Darin fought to suppress a flinch at the frosty words. He’d hoped Cohen would never see those, but he should have known better. He looked down. “Sorry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Don’t want me working with you?”

“No, it’s not that at all. I’d love it if I worked with you. Honest.”

“Then...?”

Darin couldn’t look his best friend in the eye. “They... it was right after the occupation started when those were posted.”

“So? You’ve had lots of time since then to remember and tell me. You know I hate my job. I was counting on you,” Cohen bit out.

This time Darin did wince. “Sorry, Co’n. I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I... couldn’t. Not right after we had two of our delivery pilots killed on the job. And not right after Boz... After the job I helped him get...” Darin trailed off.

Cohen sighed, and after several heartbeats his tone became more normal though still a bit strained. “Okay, I didn’t think of things like that. But Dare, you can’t blame yourself for what happened to Boz. He wanted a job like that so badly that he would have gotten it with or without your help. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Darin didn’t answer.

Cohen pulled a small datapad out of a vest pocket. “But all that MTS stuff won’t matter anymore here soon.” He handed the datapad to Darin and added, “I filled out as much as I could for you, but I need you to do the rest.”

Puzzled, Darin looked it over, but when he saw the header he recognized the application to the CSA’s Merchant Marine Academy on Bonadan. Cohen had been talking about going for years. Darin’s knee-jerk reaction was complete dread; he’d always known Cohen would leave one day to go there, but the sudden imminence hit him like a bucket of ice water.

He expected Cohen to have handed him that application to finish inputting whatever was needed to list Darin as a reference. Because of that, he had to look twice to realize that Cohen had actually filled it out as if Darin was the applicant. His brow furrowed. “Why did you fill one out for me?” Darin asked.

“So you can come with.” Cohen’s eyes brightened, and his voice grew earnest. “With everything going on now, I’m not putting this off any longer. I’m sending in my application. We can join together, do all the classes and training together... We can even arrange it so we’re assigned to the same ship after graduation. Can you imagine how awesome that’ll be? How great of a team would we be in command of a transport together! You’ll get to pilot a starship just like you’ve always wanted. If we like it there we can stay for as long as we want, or we can use the experience to fast-track into the Picket Fleet. This is everything both of us want all wrapped up in one single package, plus it’s away from all this danger with the Imperials.”

It made perfect sense, and Darin let himself get caught up in the picture Cohen painted. It *would* be awesome, and excitement began to build within. Almost as suddenly, reality snapped back in his face and kicked his feet out from under him. The emotional whiplash shook him, and Darin closed his eyes and pressed his hands to his knees to make them stop trembling. Life had suddenly gotten suffocating, and it was hard to breathe. Finally he shook his head. "I can't go," he said in a small voice.

"*What?!*" The sharp word stabbed into his gut. "Yes, you can! Give me one good reason why you can't!"

Darin fervently wished he could crawl into a hole and die. His answer had hurt Cohen even more than the MTS job postings had, and the very thought made him cringe with guilt. "You won't understand," he managed.

"You'd damn well better give me the chance to."

Darin opened his eyes but obsessively studied the toes of his boots. "Co'n, I know you want to go. You should. You should go. I know finances were always the problem in the past, so I'll stay here and replace your paycheck with mine. Your family won't lose money while you're gone and won't have trouble getting by like they would've otherwise." Darin couldn't bear to think of staying here without Cohen, but this was the only way it would work.

"No. *I'll* worry about my family's finances. Darin, *listen to me* and get this through your thick skull: I want you to come! I want you to do this with me! Now tell me why you won't!"

"Because I made her stay!" Darin blurted out. He blinked back sudden tears, and his words rushed out. "I told my mom I wouldn't move to Corvallis so she put off leaving Merrilan, and she and Shiori are dead 'cause I kept us here so I can't go anywhere now 'cause then they'll have died for nothing!" Darin looked out the window beside him so Cohen wouldn't see the tears still filling his eyes. He couldn't win against all of them.

A silent pause hung in the air. Finally Cohen said, "That doesn't make any sense at all. First Boz, now this? Why are you heaping so much guilt on yourself for things the *Imperials* did? You're really starting to scare me here, bud. It's not your fault, and you don't have to stay here because of it. That's all backwards."

Darin didn't respond to that and simply kept his gaze plastered out the bus's side window. It was one of the few times he could remember when Cohen just didn't— couldn't— understand. Without looking Darin handed the datapad back to him and said, "You should go." He tried to wrestle his breaking voice under control before it could follow through on its threat and make him break down completely. "I mean it. You should. But I can't."

He was silent for the rest of the bus ride. Nothing he could say would fix all the problems he'd just caused Cohen. Likewise, Cohen kept quiet. He was probably sick of dealing with Darin and all his issues, all the trouble they made. Darin was acutely aware how unfair it was to Cohen, but try as he might he honestly couldn't think of how to fix it or make it better. It wasn't like Darin was doing this intentionally.

The walk back to Cohen's house from the bus stop was similarly silent. When they got there Cohen greeted his family like nothing was out of the ordinary. Darin hunched his shoulders and tried to make himself invisible while he shot straight for Cohen's room. Mrs. Nuuren asked Darin about his day as he passed, but he simply mumbled an inarticulate answer and kept going.

Darin quickly changed out of his work uniform and went outside to sit on the back doorstep by himself. A breeze and somewhat warm temperatures heralded a front coming through, and the clouds were unusually broken today, allowing some dimming blue of the sky to

peek through while the sun lazily sank toward its slumber. Darin hugged his knees and buried his face in his arms.

He thought about Weneta. He thought about Bonadan. He thought about his dad, his mom, Shiori. He thought about Bosko. He thought about Cohen.

All he wanted to do was scream for the galaxy to make sense again.

After a while the door behind him opened. “Dare?”

Darin sighed. “What?” His voice was muffled.

“C’mon, you’re missing the game.”

It took Darin a moment to wrangle his thoughts back to the normalcy required to understand what Cohen was talking about. He debated saying no. In his mind he quickly played through that scenario until it ended in yet another argument with Cohen. That was the last thing Darin wanted. “Who’s playing?” Darin asked instead.

“The Doashims and the Riptides.”

Darin hesitated. Finally he raised his head but didn’t look at Cohen. “Riptides aren’t having a good year.”

“They’re on the upswing. Getting better.”

At last Darin climbed to his feet and followed Cohen back inside to their living room. The donri game was already being displayed on their large holoprojector, and Prilo sat on the floor watching it with a bowl of chips he was snacking on. Prilo grinned at Darin and Cohen as they came in and offered them the bowl. The two of them sat down on the floor beside him and helped themselves to chips as they settled in. Directly behind Cohen, Hashik sat cross-legged on the couch working on his homework.

“If you boys eat all those chips you’re going to ruin your appetite for supper,” Mrs. Nuuren called from the kitchen.

“Okay, Mom,” Prilo called back. He grabbed another handful.

Gradually the normality of the situation began to overwhelm and override everything else on Darin’s mind. Countless afternoons and evenings had been spent exactly like this in that exact spot: the floor for their combined chair and table; Prilo providing– and eating most of– the snack food; all of them watching and reacting to and commenting on the game. Even Hashik’s intermittent requests to Cohen for help with his homework were normal. Familiar. Comfortable. Safe. Little by little Darin let himself go and allowed himself to be immersed in that mindless, ordinary, enjoyable feeling.

“Oh! Oh!” Darin and Prilo both raised their voices in excitement while they watched a Riptide first-stringer throw an impossibly long shot from his donri scoop neatly into the goal. Broadcasted cheers from the crowd rose to a frenzy. “That was awesome! Did you see that?!” Darin exclaimed.

Cohen jerked his head around from where he was pointing something out to Hashik in his homework. “What? What’d I miss?!”

“Watch, watch! They’ll do a replay!” Prilo said, pointing at the holo.

They did, and all three of them whooped and hollered. Even Hashik, who had never been into donri, said, “Wow!”

From his bedroom down the hall, Mr. Nuuren hobbled on his crutches into the living room with difficulty. The couch was the closest piece of furniture to him, and he glowered at Hashik and batted at him with a crutch. Hashik quickly gathered his datapads and moved out of the way to the other end of the couch. Cohen scooted over on the floor as well, causing first

Darin and then Prilo to move sideways. Mr. Nuuren sank heavily into the couch, more of a fall than a sit.

“Will you three shut up? Don’t have to be that loud for a stupid game hundreds of kilometers away,” Mr. Nuuren growled.

“Sorry, Dad,” Prilo answered. They quieted.

“Cohen, go grab me an Ebla beer.”

Cohen shook his head. “Can’t, Dad. Your meds can’t be mixed with alcohol.”

Mr. Nuuren’s voice turned dangerous more quickly than Darin had ever heard before. “I don’t give a damn about that. I haven’t had a drink in days because of these stupid injuries. I want a beer. Now.”

“How about a synthehol? You can take your meds with that.”

“Useless spit. Lacks the one ingredient I need. Go get me a beer already.”

Cohen met his gaze openly. “Dad, I can’t. It’s dangerous to mix them.”

In frustration so acute that it made his face flush red, Mr. Nuuren flung one of his crutches at Cohen. Luckily the crutch was large and awkward enough that it couldn’t gain any real momentum from the way he’d thrown it sideways from his seated position, and the broadside of the crutch banged dully off Cohen’s reflexively raised forearm before it clattered to the floor. Prilo, Cohen and then Darin scrambled to put their feet under them and prepared to move away quickly. Darin had been witness to and victim of many verbal tirades from Mr. Nuuren over the years, but he’d hardly ever seen firsthand the cause of the bruises Cohen occasionally got and told other people were from donri. Darin wasn’t sure how to react: this was the first time he remembered Mr. Nuuren flipping out while sober. His first thought was to take all the brothers to his house like he’d always done before, and he opened his mouth to make the offer.

He was preempted. “*Someone* had better get me *something* right now!” Mr. Nuuren said in a raised voice. He caught sight of Darin beside Cohen and directed his venom at him. “Like you! This morning didn’t you promise me some money?! Something to help keep us afloat while you free-load off us and make the credit-sucking ship cost me even *more*?! I’m sick of dealing with the problems you’re causing! So either get me the money or get me a beer so I can forget how damn sick I am of all this!”

“Leave Darin alone,” Cohen said sternly. He stood and crossed his arms. “He’s not doing anything wrong.” Darin stood as well, more tentatively, and sidled behind Cohen somewhat.

Mr. Nuuren’s ire refocused on Cohen. “He’s not doing anything right, either! If your pal can’t cough up some money, maybe I’ll just take it out of you instead! I should’ve sold that damn ship ages ago, but I held onto it because of you! I should make you pay that all back! Thousands, hundreds of thousands of credits! All wasted! You’re just a credit drain who can’t even get me a damn beer!”

Cohen reached down and picked up the nearly empty bowl of chips. Instead of throwing it at Mr. Nuuren like Darin wanted to do, Cohen simply turned off the holoprojector and jerked his head toward his room. “C’mon, guys. We’ll finish watching in my room.” Prilo and Hashik didn’t need to be told twice. They scampered down the hallway, out of sight. Cohen gave Darin a gentle push that direction and kept him moving away from the onslaught of harsh words that followed in their wake. An argument between Mr. and Mrs. Nuuren began shortly after. Cohen’s face was set as hard as carbonite, and he didn’t let Darin stop until Cohen’s bedroom door had closed behind them.

All four of them sat on Cohen’s bed while he entered the correct broadcast channel on the

small holoprojector on his dresser. Once the game was back up Cohen insistently tapped Hashik's datapads, and Hashik hastened to open his homework once more. Cohen made some pointed comments about the donri game to Prilo and Darin, and it didn't take long for Prilo to grab on and run with it. Cohen handed the bowl of chips back to him. Soon it was like nothing had ever happened.

Except that it had. Darin stole a glance at Cohen. His best friend's expression was still frozen in that mask of stern neutrality, what Darin privately thought of as Cohen's "suck it up" face. The one he used when he was feeling or thinking something that, for whatever reason, he'd be damned before he let show.

Darin waited until Prilo was engrossed in a big play and the cheering crowd washed out most of the ambient noise before he quietly asked Cohen in concern, "You okay?"

Cohen glanced at him as well, and Cohen's expression softened just a bit. He snatched the bowl of chips from Prilo, eliciting a protest, and shoved it into Darin's arms. "Pretty awesome play just now, huh?" Cohen asked. "Think that was a fluke, or is that something we could practice and learn how to do?"

By the time Mrs. Nuuren called them to supper, Darin was again absorbed in the donri game and was having a lively discussion with Cohen and Prilo about the strategy of a particular play. Cohen looked like he was almost back to normal himself too. Prilo and Hashik left for supper, and Darin hung back with Cohen while Cohen turned off the holoprojector.

Darin exhaled slowly. The reprieve from reality had been refreshing and very much needed, especially after what had happened that day, though some of those same events also made the reprieve completely undeserved. When they began to follow Cohen's brothers, Darin softly said, "Hey, Cohen? Thanks."

Cohen waved the words away. "Anytime. You know that."

Chapter Thirteen

Just over two weeks had passed since the Burke's shooting. The majority of Merrillans were now aware through firsthand experience or one rumor mill or another of just how isolated their town had become and of the blame and hostility of nearby cities toward them for new, undeserved restrictions the Imperials had enacted elsewhere. Merrillans responded the only way they knew how: they grew more fiercely independent and took out their anger of the perceived betrayal on the only targets they had available to them, the Imperials. It was a vicious cycle as the Imperials retaliated locally with many more arrests and crackdowns, even some beatings and violent, disproportionate crowd control techniques. That fuel thrown on the fire sparked protests, which became a daily occurrence and yet another excuse for the Imperials to grind the Merrillans down. Each protest made cities like Weneta and Corvallis even more standoffish.

Darin was becoming afraid to leave the Nuurens' house. Doing his local delivery route scared him half to death at times, especially the couple instances when he'd had to wade through the beginnings of a protest to make a delivery.

But at least then he'd had a cargo speeder nearby for protection and escape. Its absence made him nervous now. Some of the long, diluted shadows stretching across the ground from the sinking sun behind the clouds seemed to reach out in an attempt to snare Darin and Cohen. Other shadows pointed the way to the nearest speeder bus stop on Restor Street, urging the pair to hurry and get on a bus before curfew started. Three-story buildings were packed closely together in this older part of town, with fences across most of the grimy alleys between the walls. The narrow alley Darin and Cohen were briskly walking through was one of the few that was not blocked and as such was a shortcut they'd learned years ago to reach the bus stop.

"You'll probably hear the whole argument at supper tonight, but Mom's trying to talk Dad into moving near her sister," Cohen said. He shifted the bag he carried of supplies his dad had sent them out to get at the last minute. "Of course Dad hates my aunt and says Trennis City is too far away to move to. Mom's really not liking Prilo and Hashik going to school in all this craziness though."

"Yeah, I don't blame her," Darin said. He was even reconsidering the Merchant Marine Academy and wondered if he could get in the same classes with Cohen if he got his application in before they finished processing Cohen's. They had to be almost done by now.

"If we do move, you're coming with us and we won't take no for an answer. And I heard this morning that the Imperials are taking over most of the private hangars at the spaceport here for all the vehicles they're bringing in. Dad told me to find a ship broker in Corvallis we could take *Skybolt* to in case we get evicted from that hangar before she sells."

Darin sighed but didn't comment. He'd known it was only a matter of time before *Skybolt* was gone, one way or another.

In the distance a siren from an emergency response vehicle began wailing. Within moments others joined in from other directions, including from somewhere behind Darin and Cohen.

Cohen grimaced. "Great. Something's happening." They both picked up their pace. The sirens got louder.

Ahead of them in the sliver of Restor Street they could see at the end of the alley, landspeeders were stopped in the road. "Maybe an accident?" Darin guessed.

Then he heard a dull din from somewhere nearby. It sounded like voices, but the short

canyon of buildings dampened and distorted them, and echoes made the origin hard to pinpoint. Darin and Cohen exchanged uneasy glances and searched for the source of the noise.

They found it when they turned the corner from the alley onto Restor Street. A block or so ahead of them was a large, restless crowd filling the entire width of the street. Darin figured there were easily two hundred people there, and he wondered how the crowd had gotten so big; it must have grown incredibly fast to have not been dispersed already, and indeed more beings were arriving on foot from down either side of the street and adding to it every second. Some incoming landspeeders were turning around and departing well before they got to the part of the street that was blocked by the people, while others stopped in the road and disgorged their passengers, who joined the group on foot. Landspeeders trying to leave were having considerable difficulty maneuvering around the ones that were haphazardly parked in the street.

The crowd's focus was on a group of five Imperial army troopers who were surrounded in its center and waving their blaster rifles to keep the people at bay. Townspeople yelled increasingly angry sentiments toward the troopers, who shouted back in anxious defiance. A couple of Merrillean Guards desperately tried to break up the crowd and send people away, but there were just too many. People were ignoring them at best and resisting at worst.

Darin took a nervous step back. "Cohen, we should leave."

Cohen looked around. "Yeah, but where? We have to cut through there to reach the bus stop. If we go around the block we'll miss the last bus and get arrested for breaking curfew."

About ten people eagerly ran down the road from behind toward the growing crowd. "Get down here as soon as you can!" a young man said excitedly into a comlink as he ran past. "We're finally gonna give it to 'em!"

The multiple emergency vehicle sirens were still growing closer from all directions. Darin shook his head. "I don't care. I'd rather break curfew than go through that!"

"Yeah. C'mon." Cohen looked frightened as well, and he jerked his head back toward the alley they'd just come from. Darin quickly ran through alternate routes to the bus stop in his head.

Down the alley, an Imperial army landspeeder screeched into view and barreled toward them, lights flashing and siren wailing. Old boxes and trash containers along the alley's walls were sent careening into the air when the landspeeder impacted them, unable to maneuver around them in the tight space. Darin and Cohen hastily retreated back onto Restor Street.

The other sirens were nearly on top of them now. Shouts from the crowd grew urgent and anxious. Some people started moving away from the concentrated group.

And then a fist-sized rock hit one of the surrounded army troopers in the head.

The other four Imperials immediately opened fire into the crowd.

Darin didn't know what happened next. Suddenly reality was nothing but terrified screams, the crack of blaster rifle bolts, a running mass of people, breaking glass, and the army landspeeder sliding to a stop at the end of the alley mere meters away and spitting out running Imperial stormtroopers. Darin turned and tried to run in a blind panic, but he couldn't get through the chaotic, fleeing surge of beings. They ran into him, pushed him. He was separated from Cohen almost instantly.

Sirens and the whines of repulsorlifts closed in from both ends of Restor Street, trapping the panicked crowd in the middle. A hail of blaster bolts still sounded from the surrounded Imperials, and now the reinforcements near Darin opened fire as well.

"Cohen!" Darin shouted desperately. He couldn't see above the heads of most of the

beings, and it was hard just to stay on his feet.

Several quick, successive metal crashes down the road to the left met his ears. Civilian landspeeders parked in the road were being forcibly shoved aside and one or two even flipped into the air while another Imperial speeder heedlessly plowed through them toward the crowd. More people shrieked and ran from the speeders coming crashing down around them.

A couple of Rodians swung at the windows of the first reinforcements' speeder by the alley with something small and solid they each held. A man tackled the nearest reinforcement and tried to wrestle the blaster rifle out of his hands. The half-dozen reinforcement stormtroopers still on their feet sprayed blaster fire at their attackers and wherever else they saw fit. A series of painful and dying screams and cries cascaded through the crowd.

One scream in particular made Darin's blood run cold. That specific sound was something he'd never heard before, but it belonged to a voice he knew all too well.

"*Cohen!*" Darin plowed into the mob toward the sound's origin. A few wild elbows caught him in the ribs and made him stumble.

He passed some townspeople who had just jumped into a foolish fistfight and brawl with the armored stormtroopers. One of the Imperials kicked his assailant backwards and raised his blaster, then several cracks of light later the brawlers were falling down dead. Another bolt caught a Duro right next to Darin, and she fell with a cry. The next blast grazed Darin at an angle in the left upper arm.

He yelled in pain and doubled over, grabbing the scorched, blistering wound with his right hand and barely noticing the man near him who fell after taking the majority of the same blaster bolt. The injury cut through every sense and consumed Darin for an agonizing moment. When he was able to pry his watering eyes open, his hazy vision caught a partial glimpse of Cohen face down on the ground a few meters away. Darin ducked his head, gritted his teeth and pushed forward again.

Within a few steps he was stuck in a crosscurrent. People fleeing to the left to escape the Imperials were clashing head-on into people fleeing to the right. Frightened, scattered reports from the latter said Imperials in riot gear had blocked the street to the left and were heading this way. Darin was buffeted from both sides by people looking for an escape route but finding none.

Darin finally reached Cohen and dropped down beside him. "Cohen! You okay?!" A knee hit Darin in the side of the head when someone tripped over him, and both Darin and that person were sent sprawling to the ground. Darin ignored the person and clawed his way back to Cohen. More glass broke, and down the street a parked landspeeder exploded in a brief ball of flame amid cheers. Some defiant, rallying cries pierced the air, spoken with Cracian accents.

Darin draped Cohen's left arm over his shoulders and staggered to his feet. Fighting for each step, Darin half-carried, half-dragged Cohen toward the far side of the street. "Cohen! Say something! Stay with me, buddy!" Darin pleaded frantically. No response came.

The closest available place he could see with any sort of cover was a shallow doorway. The crowd in the street was gradually thinning as dead, wounded or stunned bodies increased in number on the ground. The faint odor of smoke swirled in the air from flames lapping at building windows near the exploded speeder. Grenades dispensing some sort of slithering white gas were making people fall to their knees, incapacitated by coughing fits. Imperial shouts and commands were becoming more prevalent. Darin unsuccessfully tried to catch his breath, and a mere whiff of the gas from a nearby grenade momentarily wracked him with deep coughs before he was able to continue.

They reached the doorway at last. The door was locked, so Darin sat Cohen down in the doorway as gently as he could. Cohen's face was scraped and dirty, and blood ran from his mouth, split lip and broken nose. There were dirt and bootprints on his clothing.

In attempting to stabilize Cohen's balance against the doorframe, though, Darin found the worst damage. A warm dampness on Darin's fingertips and a growing stain on Cohen's dark vest led Darin to something he wished he could erase from his memory and from existence: a large blaster wound from where his best friend had been shot square in the back. None of Darin's rudimentary first aid skills would help in the slightest. Everything else in the galaxy, including the riot behind him and his own injury, was instantly relegated to second priority.

Darin's scrambled, panicked mind tried to remember which direction the hospital was, but before he could think of it Cohen coughed and slowly opened his eyes.

"Cohen! Cohen, listen to me, just hold on! I'll get you to the hospital, okay?"

"Darin?" There was no strength in Cohen's quiet, dazed voice, and he struggled to focus his vision while his ashen face twisted in pain. "I... can't... feel my legs," he gasped out on shallow, rapid breaths.

"That's okay, we'll get you fixed up!" Darin told him desperately. "You'll be fine! They'll make you better! They've got bacta! Come on, I'll get you help!" Darin moved to lift Cohen again.

"No," Cohen mumbled as his gasps grew weaker. Shocked, Darin stopped and stared at him while keeping his right hand on Cohen's shoulder to balance him. Cohen's fingers wound tightly into Darin's bloody left sleeve, and that action seemed to sap the last of his strength. Almost inaudibly, Cohen said, "I—" Then he stopped, his eyes became unfocused and unseeing, and his whole body relaxed as he exhaled. He didn't inhale again.

Darin stared dumbfounded at him for a moment before he yelled, "Cohen!" He frantically checked for a pulse but found nothing. "No! Cohen! Don't do this to me! *Please!*" Through tears Darin wildly looked around and screamed for help at the top of his lungs, but the sirens and shouts from the riot drowned out his breaking voice. When his fumbling hand finally managed to grab his comlink and tune it to the emergency frequency, Darin got nothing but an automated tone that indicated all channels were currently in use. Out of time and options, Darin unsteadily stood to go find help, but as soon as he was on his feet, his knees buckled. He sat down hard, all his reserves depleted.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there staring at Cohen's body before he looked down and saw Cohen still had hold of his sleeve.

With Darin's last bit of energy he squeezed his eyes shut, wrapped his uninjured arm tightly around Cohen's neck and refused to let go.

"Hey, you okay?" Ferrule Seekins knelt on the floor of the holding cell next to a young adult, tapping his shoulder and trying to get him to respond. Like the six other people crammed into this one-person holding cell, Ferrule had left him alone for a while but had finally gotten concerned enough to check on him. The person hadn't moved the entire time he'd been there and was just sitting against the wall with his elbows propped on his upright knees, his blood-smearred fingers entwined tightly in his dark blond bangs and his face buried in his hands. Actually, the only way Ferrule could tell he was even alive was that he hadn't stopped trembling.

Ferrule fidgeted. He didn't want to get in the middle of whatever was mentally wrong with this guy, but he did want to make sure this person didn't require some kind of medical attention beyond the sloppily applied bandage and dressing on a wound on his left arm. Dried blood stained that sleeve. Ferrule shook the person's right shoulder. "Come on, kid, you're starting to scare me. Are you all right?"

He gently parted the other person's hands to lift his chin up and see his face. Ferrule didn't encounter any resistance, but he was more than a little unnerved by the vacant green eyes looking at him without seeing him. "Whoa. Hey, snap out of it." He lightly slapped the person's cheek a few times while trying to avoid the fresh bruises on it.

The young adult blinked. Then he blinked again, and again. He slowly started moving his eyes to look around in apparent confusion.

Ferrule leaned back and waited. The other person focused on him at last and squeaked out, "What?"

Ferrule offered a tentative smile. "Good, that's better. What's your name?"

It took a few moments for the answer to come. "Darin."

"Are you okay? Did you hit your head or something? You've been out of it for quite a while."

"I'm... okay." He still seemed sluggish to Ferrule, but the older man didn't press it. "Where am I?"

Ferrule thought the answer was rather obvious, but he simply blamed the question on the fog that still seemed to be enveloping Darin's mind. He gestured back at the other people in the holding cell with them and said, "You're spending the night in the Merrilan Penitentiary with the rest of us rioters. Just from what I saw, they arrested enough people to fill at least five other cells like this." He tried to tell himself he should be grateful that the damn Imperials had even put him in a cell so he could move around a bit; the small jail was overflowing and he'd caught a glimpse of one side hallway where people had been handcuffed to any available solid object, presumably due to lack of available cell space. The situation in this town was spiraling out of control.

"I'm not sure how long they're in for, but this cell is just for the overnights: the ones who were unlucky enough or slow enough to be caught at the scene but aren't accused of doing anything worse than just being there," Ferrule continued.

He stopped when he noticed that Darin's face had become frighteningly pale and his shaking had worsened. "Riot?" Darin asked in a strangled voice. "No, no, no..." He looked like he was going to be sick, and he hugged his knees tightly and buried his head in his arms.

"Listen, Darin," Ferrule said quickly before he lost him again, "they're allowing us to contact someone to pick us up in the morning. If you need to—"

"No." Darin's muffled reply interrupted him. "No. I— can't."

"But won't you need a ride when they let you out tomorrow?"

"No," Darin repeated, distressed. "I can't."

He fell silent and wouldn't respond to any of Ferrule's subsequent attempts at communication. Finally Ferrule gave up and left him alone.

When the morning curfew ended at 0800 hours, Darin and the other beings in his holding

cell were given back their belongings and released. Darin couldn't bring himself to comm the Nuurens for a ride, so he stood outside the Merrilan Penitentiary for a time, not knowing what to do.

Numb and exhausted, he gazed out at the first new morning of a life he didn't want and never thought he would see. Losing Bosko was hard, but going on without his family and now without Cohen was too daunting of a task to contemplate and one he had no desire to even try to accomplish.

At last Darin started trudging back to town on foot even though the penitentiary was on the southwest outskirts. On the way he wondered where to go. Definitely not the Nuurens' house. Not his house either. Not the Wanths' place. Maybe work? Yes, work. He was supposed to be at work this morning anyway, but he couldn't make himself care enough to even turn on his comlink and tell Tilde he'd be late.

After about an hour of walking down the road Darin saw a familiar fenceline paralleling it. He paused, studying the fence, and then went over to it. There was the grassy spot on the side of the road where he'd always parked his parents' speeder. There was the spot on the fence where he'd always lifted Shiori up to sit on. There a short distance ahead was the thumper barn where Smoky lived.

The pasture was empty now though. He couldn't remember ever seeing it like that before. Squinting, Darin could barely make out a large sign on the side of the barn that invited clients to visit the thumper ranch's new location in Legis Bay due to the unrest in Merrilan. From what Darin had heard, Legis Bay was a safe, quiet place on good terms with the Imperials.

Darin leaned against the fence and let it support most of his weight. He crossed his arms on the top rail, rested his chin on them and heaved a sigh that expelled what little was left of his soul. There was no sun, just clouds for as far as he could see. His arm hurt and was stiff from not moving it much overnight in the cell. Alone, he stared desolately at the vacant pasture.

He stood there immobile for what felt like a very long time, and he would have stayed even longer if a landspeeder hadn't pulled off the road and come to a stop behind him. Darin heard its door open and close, and then Mrs. Nuuren's shaky voice asked, "Darin?"

Darin flinched and didn't turn around. His heart pounded and he wanted to run away, but his ravenous apathy argued against expending the energy for it and so momentum kept him put.

Mrs. Nuuren walked up to him, and when she was beside him on his right she exhaled. "It *is* you! We've been so worried! Are you okay?!" Darin tensed when she hugged him, but she stopped as soon as she felt the dried blood on his stiffened left sleeve and pulled back. She moved to his left, and her eyes grew wide while she took in the sight. "We need to get this looked at right away!"

Darin shook his head. "No. I don't want it looked at," he said in a small voice. He kept his gaze directed steadily out to the pasture; he was too afraid and ashamed to look at her, and he would have given anything for the ability to disappear into a hole.

"Darin, you need to. You're hurt. Please, tell me what happened!"

Darin detected a deeper question in her words than one simply wanting to know how he'd hurt his arm. Instead of answering, he buried his face in the crook of his elbow.

A long, silent moment passed before Mrs. Nuuren spoke again in a halting, ragged voice; Darin could tell she'd had a hard night. "When you two didn't make it back before curfew yesterday... We heard about the riot near where you'd be. The hospital commed us last night about— about Cohen. They didn't have any information on you, though, and suggested I try the

prison. I was on my way to pick you up there now. I came as soon as I could after curfew ended, we just had a lot to sort out this morning. Did you walk all this way?"

Darin again didn't answer. Mrs. Nuuren took a deep, shaky breath and asked once more, "Darin, please, what happened?"

A lump formed in Darin's throat, and at last words trickled out. "I'm sorry," he squeaked. "I'm sorry. It never should have been him. Never. Never."

That was all he could say. No words would ever change things or make it right. No words would ever bring back his lifelong best friend or the oldest son of the woman standing beside him. No words could ever tell her how sorry he was that he couldn't trade places with Cohen.

No more words came. Only a hurt that the tears couldn't wash away.

Chapter Fourteen

Minister Lothair was certain he'd lost at least ten kilos of weight since his aide had first awakened him with the news that Craci IV's defense satellites had been destroyed. From that point on, his incoming communication frequencies were always full, and he'd needed to buy another receptionist droid to sort through the constant onslaught of electronic messages to determine what was important and what was not. He was also certain that he and his office staff had contributed greatly to the rising stock price of his favorite caf brand.

The final thing he was certain about was that he was about to lose even more weight and gain an ulcer or two.

He scrambled around his office, looking for all the datacards he'd need for his imminent meeting with the CSA representatives. There were just too many everywhere now to keep track of.

Lothair looked up when a presence loomed in his open doorway. "Admiral Kevveton. You're early," he said, barely breaking stride in his datacard search. He found one and shoved it in his pocket before continuing to look for the rest. "We're meeting in the conference room down the hall."

Kevveton chuckled. "Why do you look so flustered? I'd think you'd be used to dealing with CSA reps."

"I am, and that is exactly why I'm flustered," Lothair replied. "And normally they're not angry enough at me and Nilsrik to call an in-person meeting."

"Angry? Why could they possibly be angry at you?" Kevveton asked.

"For this!" Lothair's irritable arm gesture encompassed the entire room, building, and planet. "For our System's agreement with you for defense. For not going to them instead. For the refueling disruptions they're saying are happening in the rest of the Sector because of it, which quite frankly I have no idea what they're talking about. And your presence is really threatening them. They keep spouting off the CSA-Empire charter to me, no matter how many times I tell them I have more pressing local concerns than a charter I'm not even obligated to abide by. They say I am, that I have to. Contracts and creds, they can't get it through their heads that dealing with our local hotspots and getting our defense satellites back up ASAP are my top priorities."

"Don't let them dissuade you from the path you're on," Kevveton said. "Think about it: it's been weeks since you lost your satellites, and only now does the CSA begin to care about your system. And not for the right reasons, might I add. This just shows how long the bureaucratic and contractual process takes. If you'd asked them for help back then you'd probably be getting your first proposal quote now, and it would be arriving on a destroyed, defenseless world. You did the right thing, Minister. And— you know, I'll tell you what. I don't like seeing the CSA bullying you and Minister Nilsrik during such trying times. Let me do most of the talking and any necessary negotiating in this meeting. The CSA reps can't intimidate me or play power games against me. When I told you this system was under Imperial protection, I meant it."

Lothair stopped his frantic datacard search and looked up at Admiral Kevveton in surprise. The tense knot inside his chest began to dissolve away at the offer. Once again he silently thanked whatever forces had sent him Kevveton as an ally. "Thank you," Lothair said sincerely. "I... probably shouldn't... It's my responsibility after all, but..."

"Oh, no worries," Kevveton said with an easy, dismissive wave of his hand. "I know

exactly how to play this game. You don't reach my position in the Imperial Navy without such skills and knowing how to help superiors maintain appropriate appearances. I'll make sure it's clear that you and Minister Nilsrik are still the responsible authorities. I'm simply your defense advisor for this meeting."

Lothair smiled in relief. "All right then. Thank you."

"Certainly. And I have all the information we need for this meeting with my droid, so there's no need to continue looking for datacards as I presume you're doing. I was hoping to talk to you about another matter briefly, though, which is why I came early in the first place."

Abandoning his search, Lothair gratefully gave Kevveton his full attention and motioned for him to continue.

Kevveton nodded once in acknowledgment. "I have to admit it's a bit embarrassing for me," he said slowly, as if measuring each word. "I'm not often in the habit of asking for help myself, especially from those I'm currently assisting. But I do want to assure you that this will not affect my ability to defend your worlds whatsoever."

Lothair furrowed his brow in concern. "Please, go on," he encouraged. "You know our situation here isn't the best, but if there's any way we can help, we will. You've done so much for us."

"Well," Kevveton said as he drew an extended breath, "with our fleet and forces here, that has put a small strain on Imperial forces elsewhere, such as at our base on Lafra. My superiors are looking around for potential recruits to help refill our ranks. Now, before you worry that we would be attempting to snatch away your best and brightest, we're not. We would welcome them if they'd volunteer, certainly, but the Empire has a long history of making productive soldiers out of people who are otherwise nothing more than troublemakers. We give them the discipline and order that they're lacking and turn them into valuable contributors to society. It can be a win-win scenario for both governments. So if you think of any way like this that you could help, please let me know. It would be a great benefit to us, and my superiors and I would be quite happy."

Lothair smiled. "I believe we could be of assistance, Admiral."

Chapter Fifteen

Darin decided it would be a miracle if he ever slept again.

For the fourth night in a row, nightmares about the riot had broken his tenuous hold on sleep and convinced him it wasn't worth seeking out again. Plus the couch wasn't very comfortable to sleep on, but it was Darin's only option since he'd been unable to bring himself to go into Cohen's room since his death. The Nuurens' living room was dark and mostly quiet at this late hour; the gathering of mourning relatives that had filled the house earlier in the day after Cohen's funeral was now absent, and only after the last extended family member's departure did Darin allow himself back into the Nuurens' house. Prilo had sought out and spent some time with Darin at one point during the family gathering, partially, Prilo claimed, to temporarily escape it himself, and partially to try to convince Darin to come join them. Darin had refused.

Now in the shroud of nighttime, the only thing breaking the silence was the occasional clinking of glass from where Mr. Nuuren had shut himself in his den with a few bottles of alcohol. He'd gone in there immediately after the last relative had left that evening and hadn't come out since. Darin was fine with that; Mr. Nuuren had been more cold than usual to him ever since Cohen had died, and Darin avoided him as much as possible. Everyone else was asleep.

At least, that's what Darin had thought until Prilo's bedroom door opened and he quietly slipped out. "Darin?" he whispered. Prilo sat on the other end of the couch, and Darin felt some defensive walls come up inside. It was a strange feeling, but he didn't resist them.

"It's the middle of the night, Prilo. Go back to sleep," Darin whispered back. He was so blasted tired. His mind felt ragged, and the backs of his eyes burned.

"I can't."

"Well, what do you expect me to do about it?" Darin grumbled.

"Nothing. I guess... I just... I really miss him," Prilo finished at last.

Darin didn't respond.

Prilo continued, "And as awful as it is without him around now, I... I don't think it's really hit me yet that I won't ever see him again for the rest of my life. And I don't want that to hit me."

Again Darin kept quiet and mentally withdrew behind those newfound walls of safety as much as he was able. Everyone he cared about died at the hands of the Imperials. Prilo would be next if Darin wasn't careful. Or maybe even if he was. He pulled back even farther.

"Mom's insisting that we go live near my aunt now— you remember her from today. Maybe even move in with her for a while until my dad can start working again and we get his income back."

"Was that how you were going to work things financially when Cohen was at the Merchant Marine Academy?" Darin asked. "The short-term effects would have been the same: no income from either your dad or Cohen."

"I don't know what Cohen and Mom talked about, but they never got to the point of finalizing any plan. Didn't need to since he never applied."

Darin furrowed his brow and finally looked at Prilo before saying, "What? Yes, he did. He had it all filled out for the next available term and was going to submit it a couple weeks ago."

Prilo shook his head and said, "Thought you knew. He never sent it in. Changed his mind— said he was going to stay here with you for now. You know he had an interview at MTS

the day before the riot, don't you? He was waiting to hear back from them about a piloting job."

Darin missed most of what Prilo said next because he was too busy sorting out that news. He didn't like the mental path it was leading him down.

A loud clanking of glass from Mr. Nuuren's den and then equally loud cursing snapped Darin out of his thoughts. "Prilo! Hashik!" Mr. Nuuren bellowed in a slurred voice. "One of you get in here! Now!"

Prilo grimaced and stood. Darin whispered, "We've been quiet. How does he know you're awake?"

"He doesn't. He doesn't even know how late it is. Even if he did, he wouldn't care," Prilo replied. He walked over and opened the door to the den, which connected to the living room. It was nearly as dark in there as it was in the rest of the house. "Yes, sir?" Prilo asked in the same kind of deferential, nonantagonistic voice Darin had heard Cohen use many times in the same type of situation, though Darin couldn't remember one that sounded this bad before.

"My bottle of Cortyg brandy's empty. Make your damn self useful an' gimme another!" Mr. Nuuren demanded.

"Yes, sir." Prilo quickly retreated to the kitchen where Darin heard him rummaging through Mr. Nuuren's liquor cabinet. It continued for longer than Darin expected.

"Hurry up!" Mr. Nuuren shouted.

Prilo rushed back, a bottle in his hand and dread on his face. He slowed and hesitated before moving into the den's doorway. "Dad?" he ventured. He took a small step backwards. "We don't have any more Cortyg brandy, so I brought you a bottle of your Ebla beer instead—"

Prilo suddenly backed up several steps quickly, and a moment later Darin saw Mr. Nuuren lunging forward using one crutch; he'd left the other behind in the den in his haste to get up. The man's balance was awful but his furious expression indicated that his motivation was more than able to compensate for it. Mr. Nuuren steadied himself against the door frame for a brief moment and then pushed himself off it toward Prilo. He let the crutch fall and grabbed Prilo's collar with one hand and the bottle of Ebla beer with the other.

"You deaf?!" Mr. Nuuren yelled. He nearly lost his balance but hauled himself upright with his hold on Prilo. "Can't you do anything right?! If I wanted this fierfekkin' piss water I'da asked for it, but I didn't! What good is *this* gonna do me?!" He waved the beer in front of Prilo's face.

"Dad, I'm sorry!" Prilo said desperately. He kept trying to back away but couldn't escape Mr. Nuuren's grip on his shirt. "I—"

Mr. Nuuren cut him off with a hard backhand to the face with the hand that was still holding the bottle. "Shut up!" he commanded.

Darin was on his feet in an instant. He grabbed Mr. Nuuren's bottle-wielding right hand, yanked it behind the man's back and tried to pin it there. He didn't expect Mr. Nuuren to let go of Prilo's collar and suddenly back up, limping, at a pace that was fairly quick for someone so drunk. Behind him and off-balance, Darin was forced backwards until his back hit the wall. Mr. Nuuren's own off-balance momentum slammed Darin between the larger man and the wall, and the tender injury on Darin's arm was smashed rather painfully. Darin unsuccessfully tried to jerk away and lost his grip on Mr. Nuuren.

"Damn it, Cohen, I swear I—" Mr. Nuuren started to bellow as he spun around and pinned Darin to the wall with his offhand. He stopped when his mind finally seemed to process whom he was looking at, and his dangerous eyes became slits.

Equal parts of fury and terror allowed Darin to glare back. "Leave Prilo alone," he growled.

Mr. Nuuren's face flushed deeply enough for Darin to detect in the dim light, and the man raised the bottle like a weapon. Darin ducked and reflexively threw his arms up to protect his head. Mr. Nuuren's wrist was blocked by Darin's forearm on the downswing, and the sudden stop caused him to clumsily drop the bottle. It shattered on the floor.

Mr. Nuuren was still holding onto the front of Darin's shirt below Darin's raised arms. The man released his grip but bent his arm, twisted his torso and drove his elbow hard into the side of Darin's head underneath Darin's defenses. Darin staggered a couple steps sideways from the blow while pain shot through his head, then he stumbled away from Mr. Nuuren over glass shards and a puddle of Ebla beer until a piece of furniture blocked his retreat. The stinging scent of alcohol from the spilled beer and from Mr. Nuuren's breath and clothes made Darin's head throb a bit more. He put one hand to the area where he'd been hit and the other to the wall behind him to steady himself. Even though he knew he should, a large part of him couldn't really comprehend what had just happened.

"*You* do not order me around in *my* house!" Mr. Nuuren yelled at Darin. "Why are you even still here? You do not live here! Get out! Now!"

Soft whimpering sobs sounded from the bedroom Hashik shared with Prilo, and farther down the hall another bedroom door opened. Mrs. Nuuren cautiously stuck her head out. "Adrik, what's going on?" she asked, fear in her voice.

"I'm finally gettin' rid of this murderin' deadweight! You stay out of this!" Mr. Nuuren shot back.

"Dad, no! You can't kick Darin out!" Prilo exclaimed, holding a hand to his own sore face. He circled closer to Darin while staying well away from Mr. Nuuren.

"Now *you're* ordering me around too? It's not enough that he killed my son, now he has to turn my other son against me?!"

Something inside of Darin snapped. Without thinking he yelled at Mr. Nuuren, "I did *not* kill Cohen!" He'd never heard such venom in his own voice before, but he didn't try to ease it either. His entire life was going down in flames; he might as well follow it down. His fingers tightened into a fist. "Don't you *dare* say that I did!"

"You did! If it weren't for you he'd still be here! You put 'im in that riot! You didn't get 'im out in time! You didn't save 'im! You killed him!" Mr. Nuuren shouted back, just as enraged.

"We didn't mean to be there! We got caught in it and couldn't get out! We tried! The Imperials are who killed him!"

"An' yet *here you are!* You came back but *my son* didn't! Why is that?! He was better 'n you an' he still had us! His family! But you? Who'da missed *you?* Your whole damn family's dead already! So tell me why it's not you in that grave instead a him! You don't deserve to be here, takin' his spot!" Mr. Nuuren strode with a limp to the front door, picked up Darin's boots from where they were sitting next to the Nuurens', and flung them viciously at Darin, who jumped out of the way. They thudded against the wall and fell. "Take whatever curse you got around you an' get out!"

"Fine!" Darin shouted while trying to choke back a lump in his throat. The accusation was too raw, hit too close to his own guilty thoughts these past days, and so while he shoved his boots on he directed a retort at Mr. Nuuren that would have been more at home in Bosko's mouth

than Darin's. "And if you'd given us more time to get those supplies you wanted, we might not have had to cut through Restor Street to reach the last speeder bus to begin with! Were your damn supplies worth it?!"

Mr. Nuuren's glare could have melted durasteel, and Darin was pleased to see the words hurt as much as he'd intended them to. Mr. Nuuren swiftly limped toward Darin and roared, "Get out!"

Darin skirted to the side and tried to keep the couch between them while he headed for the door.

"Dad, wait! He'll get arrested for breaking curfew!" Prilo said desperately.

"Good! Maybe the Imps'll finish the job this time!" Mr. Nuuren snapped. "Maybe I'll call 'em an' report 'im myself!"

"I don't care, Prilo!" Darin shot at his friend. "I'd rather get arrested than stay here with him for one more second!" Darin slapped his hand against the door panel and strode out. The door shut behind him.

The wind had picked up drastically; a gust of chilly night air instantly slammed into him and cut through his nightclothes. But Darin didn't turn around. Not to get his vest, his wallet, his comlink, his duffle bag of clothing and small belongings, anything. Besides, the cold was a good distraction.

Behind him, the closed door muffled the continuing shouting match. Before him, the conspicuously empty suburban street was like a wasteland. Anything on it would be instantly visible. One of Craci IV's two small moons was nearly full overhead, and its dim yellow light cast a soft glow on the town, making it that much harder to hide. Even the moons were turning against him.

Part of him didn't care anymore. Part of him wanted to tell the galaxy off in words that would make a Hutt blush, and let the consequences be damned. There was nothing left that mattered, nothing left that could hurt him any more. He was over the edge and could only wonder dispassionately what it would feel like when he finally hit.

Another part of him, however, appealed to his stubborn streak and wouldn't permit him to let something happen to himself now. That would just make Mr. Nuuren win. If Mr. Nuuren won, that meant he was right about Darin. About his worthlessness. About everything. Even about being responsible for Cohen's death.

Regardless of what Darin thought himself, he'd be damned before he proved Mr. Nuuren right.

Shivering, Darin walked gingerly on tender feet to the neighboring house's back yard. Maybe he could stay quiet enough that the house's occupants would never know he was there. He softly stepped around shrubs and lawn furniture on his way to the next yard over.

Darin cut through one back yard after another to stay out of sight of the main road while heading back to his own house. He was almost halfway there when he climbed over a tall fence. After a few quiet steps across the lawn he heard a frightened squeal nearby. Darin froze, and a blurred motion of bluish light caught his eye in the yard. Three pet Duroon bouncebeasts, glowing blue, were curled into balls and bouncing hard against the back door of the house whose fenced yard Darin was in. He swore at himself for forgetting about them. They emitted more frightened whines and crashed into the door again and again.

Interior lights came to life and spilled out through the windows. A fearful voice followed them. "They must see a looter outside! Comm for help, quick!"

Giving in to a burst of anger, Darin picked up what felt like a small food bowl at his feet and flung it sidearm at the glowing targets. He wasn't sorry to hear one yelp. "Damn animals!" Darin growled at the bouncebeasts as he ran through the yard, aided by the lights from inside the house. Once over the opposite fence and in the next yard, though, the lights were blocked and he was once again fumbling in moonlit darkness. Rattled, Darin moved as quickly as he could but kept stumbling over things. He just had to make it down one more block.

Three back yards later, Darin saw an airspeeder circle in the distance and then come directly toward him. If that was an Imperial speeder coming to check things out— and based on its exterior hazard lights and the curfew, it was— he'd never make it through the rest of the darkened back yards in time. He swore and quickly slunk back to the street. Once he was on the sidewalk, he sprinted for home.

He made it just before the airspeeder would have had an easy visual or sensor read on him. Darin skidded when he turned up the driveway and threw himself at the side door. Muscle memory made his fingers fly through inputting his lock code. The panel's happy beep of recognition while the door unlocked was the most welcome sound to meet Darin's ears that day, and he gave a hard tug on the door. He squeezed through the instant there was enough room for him to do so, and then he pulled it shut behind him and hit the lock. The airspeeder's engines thundered low overhead but kept going. Breathing hard, Darin leaned with his back against the door and slowly slid down it to sit on the kitchen floor. Taking the weight off the cuts on the soles of his feet was a relief after the run.

The kitchen was cold and dark with the power to the house turned off; however, Darin's initial reaction was still one of overwhelming safety. He knew every silhouette in this room. In this house. He didn't need light to know what was in front of his eyes here.

But then the cold darkness began to emphasize how devoid of life the house was. Empty. Everyone who had made it warm and bright was gone forever. Now there was only Darin, sitting in the dark. Alone.

All because of the Imperials.

Acute hatred bubbled up inside strongly enough to make Darin flinch even amid the bitterness and fury still swirling in him from the fight with Mr. Nuuren. He pulled his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them and buried his face. He hated the Imperials. He hated his life. He had nothing left; even his former dreams of a simple life flying space transports had crumbled into the dust of the hopelessness and apathy of an existence made pointless without anything he had cared about. Nothing mattered anymore. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Darin thought for what felt like hours, with time made hazy by lack of sleep. It had been years since he'd felt so completely lost at such a fundamental level, and he had no one to calibrate his direction. Every option he could think of was immediately discarded once he realized he would have needed to depend on Cohen or his parents to help him do it. The only thought he couldn't discard was how much he hated the Imperials for doing this to him, but that was only a statement, not an option. The Imperials had destroyed his life. He only wanted to destroy them in return.

That realization made Darin stop. He chewed on the thought, turned it over, poked at it in morbid curiosity. It almost sounded like an option. He thought it over some more. Yes, it definitely *was* an option.

Darin grabbed onto it and refused to let go.

Chapter Sixteen

Darin didn't notice when grey light began to seep into the kitchen around the edges of the closed window blinds. He didn't notice when the grey light turned into the fiery orange and red of sunrise and gradually shifted to the yellow hues of early morning, then dimmed as clouds overtook it.

He did notice all the boxes of plates, glasses and kitchen appliances he had managed to pack so far by the light of a glowrod.

Darin put his newly-filled box on the stack of others near the door. He wobbled as he straightened up; his exhaustion was catching up with him and was making the world feel even more unreal than usual. He rubbed his burning eyes and shook his head hard before turning back.

He grabbed another empty box he had brought down from the attic and went to the last cabinet, which contained the Stanics' holiday dinnerware. Darin barely even glanced at the items as he darkly packed them all in the box. The memories connected to the dishes and cups belonged to a life that was gone forever, and the sooner he could get rid of all the reminders that constantly told him it was, the better. Besides, none of this would matter where he was going.

He couldn't be the only Cracian who despised what the Imperials had done and were doing. He was certain of it, so certain that it founded the basis for his new plan, one hammered out of his hazy exhaustion and bitter hate in the late hours of the night. Somewhere on Craci IV there had to be a resistance group that was working to make the Cracian Ministers see reason. See what a mistake it was to allow the Imperials to stay. One that was finding ways to allow Cracians to defend themselves again and take back what the Imperials had stolen. Darin would find that group and join them.

But such a group wouldn't be found in Merrilan. He hadn't heard anything about one here, and the town was under too much Imperial scrutiny for the scope this group would need. Corvallis, however. It was much larger, with less Imperial oversight. In Corvallis Darin was positive he would find something.

Darin finished packing the box of holiday dinnerware, stacked it with the others, grabbed a new box and walked to the living room.

Tasteful decorations representing his parents' likes and lives stared back at him like defiant ghosts. The media cabinet containing all four family members' favorite holovids stood next to the holoprojector, its door slightly ajar like always. Some of Shiori's datapads and toys were tucked in the corners of the couch where she had last put them down.

Darin didn't hesitate. All the decorations, all the holovids, all the datapads and toys, everything was dispassionately taken down and boxed. He just wanted it gone. Out of sight. All of it. He'd hurt too much to feel anything anymore.

While he knew he would find this group in Corvallis, Darin wasn't sure where on Craci IV they would ultimately be operating. One of the larger hotspot cities? The capital? Elsewhere? Whatever the location, that meant he'd have to cut ties with Merrilan and leave none of his affairs open, but that was all right. He didn't want to be here any longer. Not when he couldn't look at a single building in town and not see some piece of his past painted on it.

Not having anything to worry about or tying him down here would free him up to go and do what the group would need wherever they needed it, and he would. If only he'd been able to make this decision to leave Merrilan earlier he could be with Cohen on Bonadan or even with his mom and Shiori in Corvallis right now. But he hadn't.

His insides roiled, and he shoved a few more things in the box. Closing all the doors and sending his past up in smoke would have to take the pain and guilt with it too.

The living room was nearly packed when Darin ran out of boxes. Feeling a bit dizzy, he instead moved on to the next set of preparations.

He was ready the minute curfew ended: Darin carried a bag of his MTS work uniforms out of the house. On his way to the speeder bus stop the Nuurens' oncoming landspeeder made an illegal sharp turn in the street, cutting through the post-curfew rush hour traffic, and pulled up beside Darin. Angry horns from the unappreciative pilots of the surrounding landspeeders blared as those speeders pulled around the parked one.

Ignoring it all, Prilo jumped out of the pilot's door and ran around the speeder to Darin. There was a large bruise forming on Prilo's face. "Darin! Blast, I'm so sorry about last night—"

"Not your fault," Darin interrupted in a grumble. Any thoughts of his altercation with Mr. Nuuren brought a swarm of negative emotions that fed into his new mindset. "Aren't you supposed to be going to school?"

"I'll be back home in time to catch the bus. Mom let me bring you your stuff first. It— We're trying to convince Dad to let you back—"

"Don't bother," Darin said. "I'm fine at my house. You said you have my stuff?"

"Yeah." Prilo opened the speeder's storage compartment and handed Darin his duffle bag of clothes and another bag of the items he'd brought over the course of his stay.

"Good," Darin said while he slipped his vest on and put his wallet and comlink in his pocket. He picked up his bags and started walking. "See you later."

"Okay. Comm me when you get home from work. I'll help you go food shopping or something. Let me know if you need anything else." Prilo's words were sincere but uncertain, and they grew even more puzzled when he realized he was speaking to Darin's back while Darin continued walking. Prilo stepped back around the speeder and soon flew off. Darin went on his own way.

Once on the speeder bus, Darin dug through the bags Prilo had brought. He pulled out the work uniforms he'd taken to the Nuurens' house and put them with the others. He also fished out his work ID.

Darin felt very little when he walked into MTS and went directly to the break room. Again there was an immediate shift in atmosphere from the other arriving employees when they noticed him. Some of his coworkers tried to sympathetically smile at him and ask him how he was. Darin hid behind his new defensive walls and didn't reply; instead he went to his locker, set down his bags and wordlessly removed the bits of his past life he had stuck on the inside of the locker door: printed pictures of his family, Cohen and Bosko; ticket stubs from Howlrunner donri games; sales ads for space transports he had fantasized of buying one day. He turned to throw the frivolous items away, but something inside him rebelled sharply at the thought. Darin couldn't tell what was different between these things and everything else he'd been packing up in the last several hours, but he couldn't get past it. He gave in, tired of fighting with himself, and placed the items carefully in his duffle bag. Darin then threw out the work schedules, bus timetables, and everything else in his locker he deemed to now be trash without an issue. Once his locker was empty he picked his bags up again and headed out, followed by the questioning gazes of his coworkers.

Darin rubbed his bloodshot eyes and knocked on Tilde's office door.

"Darin," Tilde greeted him with a smile after she called him in.

“Hi, Tilde.”

The Togruta’s smile faded to a look of concern as she ran her gaze over him. “You look awful. And have you lost weight? Are you all right? We’ve all been really worried about you. Have you gotten our comm messages?”

Darin placed the bag of his work uniforms in a corner of her office by the door, then he set his work ID and a datacard with Mrs. Nuuren’s name and address on Tilde’s desk. “My uniforms are in that bag, and here’s my ID. Send my final paycheck to that address and put it under that name. I quit.”

“What?” Tilde stood and came around her desk to block him after he had picked up his other two bags and turned to walk out. “You’re quitting?”

“Yes.”

“Hold on a minute, Darin. You’ve gone through a lot lately, so I want to be sure you’re not making a rash decision here. Do you have another job already lined up? Why are you quitting?”

“I’m moving to Corvallis,” Darin told her simply. He wondered where on the planet he would ultimately end up. He didn’t need to share that musing with anyone else though. Just in case. The group had to have some amount of secrecy if it didn’t want to get its members arrested by the Imperials. Besides, he knew they were secret because he hadn’t heard anything about them directly in the news or in any rumor mills yet.

“Oh. Well, I can certainly understand that. I’ve considered it myself more than once since the occupation started here, though Corvallis has gotten lower on my list since its curfews began and that ugliness started. When are you moving?” Tilde asked.

“Really soon.”

Tilde nodded and looked at him sadly. Darin tensed when she gave him a brief hug, and she said, “I hate to lose you. I wish we’d had more warning so we could have put together a send-off. Put me down as a reference for anywhere you apply. And here.” Tilde snatched a business card off her desk, scribbled something on the back and gave it to Darin. “All my contact info is on there, both here and at home. I want you to comm me if you need anything at all: help, advice, a shoulder, anything. You take care of yourself, all right? Come by and visit next time you’re in the area.” She offered another sad smile and stepped back.

“Thanks for the job, Tilde,” Darin replied. He left.

News of his empty locker had already made the rounds, and on his way out Darin was stopped by Matias and Rosalba in the hallway. A surge of annoyance bubbled up at the delay. “Darin, what’s going on?” Matias asked with a furrowed brow.

“I’m leaving,” Darin mumbled evasively. “Bye, Matias. Bye, Rosa. Bye, Ander,” he added when the dock supervisor joined them then. “Been nice working with all of you.”

He didn’t care enough to answer their confused questions and walked off. They still had their old lives; they wouldn’t understand. At last he headed out through the front lobby where the damaged window from the initial attack was still boarded up.

Hopefully some day soon the Imperials would be gone for good and he’d be able to come back and see his workplace again, maybe even resume his job. For now, though, Darin was glad to leave it behind. All that remained was a mockery of what he’d had. He stepped through the door’s threshold for the final time.

Darin tossed Tilde’s business card into the first trash can he passed on his way to the speeder bus stop. Cut all ties. No loose ends. Hide behind the walls.

He was surprised to feel a small protest in the dark recesses of his mind, one that was still trying to cling desperately to anything and everything familiar. It stubbornly mourned the huge loss he had now inflicted on himself, and a few tears even dared to attempt venturing forth. However, Darin instantly squashed those protests when he spotted an Imperial speeder down the road. They were the ones doing this to him. It was their fault. Any sadness he felt immediately transformed into anger and sheer determination.

And as long as he didn't look back at MTS, his feelings had a chance of staying that way.

Chapter Seventeen

The past week had gone quickly. Most of Darin's time had been spent ruthlessly cleaning out his family's house and stubbornly refusing any help the Nuurens offered for the task. He managed to sell some of the items, but in the interests of expediency most had been donated to charities where Merrillans could buy things at inexpensive prices to replace what they'd lost in the attack and subsequent destruction of the occupation. Now the house was clean and empty. The only things in its echoing rooms were Darin where he sat on the kitchen counter, a scribbled comm frequency and a few special items in his pockets, and the duffle bag sitting beside him.

The duffle bag, which was originally used for his donri gear and still had his number 17 stitched on it, contained everything left of his life that no amount of detachment could ever allow him to let go of. A few sets of clothes protected the real treasures inside: datacards full of holos, the ceremonial water flask from his parents' wedding, Shiori's favorite thumper figurine, and Darin's donri scoop, ball, ticket stubs, one ship sales ad, pilot's wings pin, datacards with his favorite novels, and his Smugglers hat. Darin felt the bag should be mobile enough to not cause problems where he was going.

He stared out into the house he'd lived in his entire life. Darin gripped the edge of the countertop, feeling his resolve to see this new plan through starting to falter again. Today was the day. And it was going to be damned hard. If he didn't leave soon, he was going to give in and convince himself to stay. He knew it. It would be so easy to do: stay in the familiar, lose himself in it and never come out. The more time that had passed during the week, the stronger those thoughts had gotten. He'd kept going by reminding himself of how good it would feel to go through with this and make the Imperials pay for what they'd done and force them to leave. Blaming the Imperials for forcing him onto this path, where he'd also had to give up his job, house and hometown, added self-righteous fuel to the fire and drove him forward.

He tried to remember all that now, but those thoughts were crowded out by others and left only an ache inside. Scrapping this whole plan could ease part of that ache, but not the important part. And if he was truly honest with himself, he knew he was past the point of no return. He couldn't stay.

Darin took a deep breath and slowly slid off the counter. He slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and silently said one final goodbye to his house, to all the memories of his family it contained that he was scared to death of forgetting once he left. Maybe when the Imperials were gone he could buy it back and keep it forever.

He walked out and locked the door behind him. Now the house was the property of the bank as part of the bankruptcy claim he'd filed a few days ago. Given his new plan, trading his short-term financial future for the erasing of the large debt seemed like a good choice. Darin had withdrawn some of his savings to use, but other than that the little remaining funds his family had owned had gone to the bank. He had little money, but no mortgage either. No debt. No financial obligations. Cut all ties. No loose ends.

With that, the only "home" Darin really had now was the tiny apartment in Corvallis he'd rented earlier in the week. The apartment was empty and unfurnished, but he didn't anticipate doing much with it anyway. It was only meant to be a temporary place until he could find the resistance group and join them. One month's rent, the security deposit and his permanent address change forms were the only things he'd put into it so far.

Refusing to look back at the house, Darin walked down the sidewalk on the first leg of a

route that had become sadly familiar. One speeder bus ride and a few more blocks of walking later, Darin arrived at the cemetery. Like every time he entered it, he couldn't help but notice how many graves had been dug in the last seven weeks.

Too many.

Bosko's grave was his first stop. Grass had begun to sprout in the turned dirt, giving it a stubbled appearance. Over the weeks Darin had already said most of what he'd wanted to say to the headstone, so after a minute of silence he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small combination fuel tester/wrench/screwdriver that they'd learned to proactively use often on *Skybolt* after one particularly memorable day involving an emergency landing at a spaceport on the far side of the planet. Darin set it against the headstone and said, "There, Boz. Thought you might need this wherever you are. Told you I was never going to let you live that down. And hey, if I end up being able to use a speeder or something where I'm going, do me a favor and keep it in good shape for me from your side, will ya?" Darin took a breath and straightened up. "Thanks. I- I guess I'll see you later, huh?" He slowly walked toward his next destination.

This grave was the newest and had ended up being the hardest for Darin to approach in recent days. Each step toward it was a battle that Darin lost as often as he won. He didn't have the option of losing today, though, so Darin used every mental trick he had learned since the first funerals to get himself there.

The sight of Cohen's name on the stone marker always wrenched his gut and made Darin pray to wake up from the nightmare he had to be in, but every time that didn't happen Darin felt a little more of himself slip away. When he finally reached the side of the grave he hesitated. There was so much to say to the person who had known everything, and Darin didn't have the words for any of it.

He distracted himself by digging in his pocket, and he brought out a small engraved medallion with a clasp. On one side was the logo of the West Merrilan Smugglers, his former school, and on the reverse was written the year their donri team had made it to the playoff semifinals and their win-loss record. Every member on the team had gotten a medallion like this. Bosko, a third-stringer/substitute player, got one. Cohen, the captain and first-stringer, got one. This one was Darin's. They'd received it a couple years ago after their elimination from the playoffs, but that season and those playoff games had been some of the best times of Darin's life. He'd carried his medallion in his wallet with him everywhere since then, and its surface bore the battle scars of constant wear and proud handling.

Darin nestled the medallion in the dirt at the base of Cohen's headstone and choked out a chuckle. "Simpler times, huh?" He took a strained breath. "Co'n, I hope you know that in every one of those games I did my best to watch your back. Not just because that was my job as support for you as the primary. But because you're my best friend. Always have been. But you know that.

"And I hope... I hope you know that I always tried to do the same off the field too. I know you always did it more for me, but I took every chance I got to return the favor. I tried on Restor Street. I screwed up then, and I hope you know how sorry I am. If I- if I could- well, you know."

Darin paused before continuing. "I really wish I could talk to you again. Just once more. To say I'm sorry for- for that. For letting you down the one time you really, really needed me to come through. And for messing everything up for you with Bonadan. And if by some miracle you were still willing to talk to me after all that, so I could ask you about this new plan of mine. My decision. I'm... really scared, Co'n. I've never done anything like this. I've never been on my own like this. I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to be doing. You have no idea how much

I wish you were here.”

He straightened up. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to come back to visit, but I imagine you’ve got your starship to captain so you’ll be plenty busy while I’m gone. So... um... Damn it, I’m not going to say that. So I’ll be back when I can, okay?” Darin spun, putting the headstone out of his field of view as quickly as possible. After a few deep, steadying breaths, he wove between headstones to his final stop.

Darin’s last name was etched deeply into the dark grey stone. It stood there stoically, willing to face and endure everything that happened in Merrilan for the rest of time.

Darin sat down in a barely controlled collapse beside it. He set his duffle bag down and restlessly fiddled with anything in reach while he worked up his nerve. He brushed loose dirt off the headstone, absently traced the carvings on the grave marker, and pulled dead leaves off the flowers he had planted there— his mom’s and Shiori’s favorite kinds in his dad’s favorite color.

His mind wandered, bouncing between his family and the Nuurens, and he idly wondered how things might be different for him if he had an extended family to go to like the Nuurens did. Darin’s parents were both born during a particularly expensive time in Craci IV’s past, and because of that each of them was an only child and they’d been born late, when their parents were older and had more money saved. The planet’s economic status had improved somewhat since then, though many families today still spread out having multiple children by several years to ease the monetary burden.

In any event, Darin had never really known his grandparents. Jodeco’s parents had died in a landspeeder accident when Darin was very young, barely old enough to have any recollection of them whatsoever. Darin knew next to nothing about Ginala’s parents: there had been a messy divorce while Ginala was a teenager, and she had rarely spoken of her parents to Darin, even when he’d asked once or twice before learning to drop it. All he knew was that he’d never met them and they weren’t in the Craci System anymore. He wasn’t even completely sure of their names, and he wished he knew enough to at least be able to notify them of their daughter’s death.

Whether it was because of the loss of their parents or in spite of it, Jodeco and Ginala had focused all their attention on their own family and instilled its importance in their children.

“You did too good a job of that,” Darin said softly. He brushed away another clump of dirt.

Any kids Darin might have would never know their paternal grandparents. They would never know their aunt on his side of the family. They wouldn’t have that extended support structure, just like Darin didn’t have now without grandparents or aunts or uncles or cousins.

The overwhelming loneliness crashed into him again.

Darin herded his thoughts and took a deep breath. “I hope you understand,” he said. “Why I’m going. And why I just essentially threw away the house and our savings and everything you worked so hard for so long to get. I didn’t want to, but I had to. I’m doing this *for* you. Because it’s the only thing I can think of now to do that. I wish I could talk to you about this because there’s so much I need to ask you, but... well. I really hope you understand.”

From his pocket he produced one of Shiori’s thumper toys and a palm-sized crystalline statue of a sunrise over the waves of an ocean that his parents had bought on their honeymoon. He placed them securely at the base of the headstone between the flowers.

Darin glanced around but didn’t see anyone else nearby. Only then did he pull the final thing from his pocket, a tiny snip of his own dark blond hair. He dug a few centimeters into the loose dirt of the grave with his fingers, then he put the lock in and buried it. He felt a bit silly on

the surface but somehow comforted deep down. Now no matter where on Craci IV he'd go, some part of him would always be here with them. "Yeah, yeah, go ahead and laugh, Squirt."

His breath shook while he soaked up one last long look of the headstone. "I miss you all so much," he whispered. "I'd give absolutely anything to see you again. Until then, though, I love you and I'll be back as soon as I can."

Darin grabbed his duffle bag, stood and wiped his eyes, then he turned and left the cemetery, feeling like he was somehow betraying and abandoning everyone he cared about. But at least this plan wasn't permanent— that was one of the only things making it bearable. It would only last as long as it took Darin and the resistance group to drive the Imperials off his world.

He spent the next bus rides in silence and stepped off at the Merrilan Spaceport. Darin walked to *Skybolt's* hangar and saw most of the Nuurens were already there. The Loronar B-7 Light Freighter had been towed outside of her hangar to the tarmac. Prilo was in the cockpit prepping her. Darin grumbled under his breath at seeing an Imperial symbol and signs warning against unauthorized entry on the door to the hangar where *Skybolt* had resided.

Mrs. Nuuren immediately came up to Darin and wrapped him in a warm hug. "It's good to see you. I've been worried about you," she said. She stepped back and held him at arm's length. "Are you sure about this? Moving to Corvallis?"

"I'm sure," Darin said.

"You don't have to, you know. You can come with us to my sister's. I don't like the idea of you being alone, especially out in Corvallis. Do you have a job there?"

"I've got something in mind," Darin replied. "I'll be fine."

Mrs. Nuuren scrutinized him. Concern was etched so deeply in her face it might never find its way out again. "I want to believe you, but..." She sighed. "The way you've been talking, and especially with what you *haven't* been saying, I got this feeling that we won't be seeing very much of you."

Darin looked down. It was hard to evade questions from someone who had done so much to care for him over the years at what he considered his second home with Cohen. "No. Probably not. At least for a while."

"Then promise me you'll comm if you need anything at all. Promise me you'll take care of yourself and be safe. I'd hate for anything to happen to you too. You know you're always welcome with us, no matter what."

"I'll be fine. Really," Darin said.

"Then since I don't know when I'll see you next, I want to give this to you now." Mrs. Nuuren rummaged in her purse for a moment. "Cohen would have wanted you to have it." She produced a datapad that Darin recognized instantly. It was old, one that did not access data off of interchangeable datacards but instead had its information loaded permanently onto its hard disk. It contained a collection of stories of past naval battles of worlds of the Republic, including some rather obscure ones, and Cohen had found this datapad in a neighborhood sale years ago. It had been one of his most treasured possessions, and in his quest to learn as much about captaining a ship as he could, he'd read it so often that he'd practically memorized the entire thing.

Darin hesitated and searched her face. "Are you sure?"

Mrs. Nuuren nodded. "Positive."

Darin accepted it gingerly, as if afraid to touch it. He held it at the edges and swallowed hard. "Thank you."

"Anytime. You know that," Mrs. Nuuren replied with a sad smile.

Darin swallowed hard again at the words and packed the datapad carefully into his duffle bag. “Is Mr. Nuuren there already?” he asked.

“Yes, he went to the Corvallis Spaceport with a friend who drove him. All the paperwork for the ship brokers will be signed by the time you and Prilo arrive with *Skybolt*. Prilo will come back here with them.”

Darin nodded. Just like they’d planned. *Skybolt* hummed as Prilo began to power her up. “All right then. Well, I guess I’d... better go,” Darin said.

Mrs. Nuuren nodded, then gave him an even tighter hug. Darin returned it. She kissed him on the cheek and let him go. “Is there anything else you need?” she asked. Tears threatened to overflow from her eyes.

Darin shook his head. “No. Thanks for everything, Mrs. Nuuren.”

He passed Hashik on his way to the ship’s hatch. Darin ruffled Hashik’s hair and then gave the boy a quick hug. “Bye, Hashik.”

“Bye, Darin.” When Hashik let go, he immediately ran and hid behind Mrs. Nuuren.

Inside *Skybolt*, Prilo was just about ready to start the engines. He glanced up when Darin slid into the copilot’s seat. “Hi, Darin.”

“Hi, Prilo.”

“You all set?”

“Yeah.”

Prilo gave a soft sigh and nodded, then waved to his mom and Hashik outside. Mrs. Nuuren waved back and took Hashik a safe distance away beside the hangar. Prilo tried to start the engines a couple times, but they sputtered and squealed and refused to engage. Darin almost grinned. Quirky old ship.

He looked over when he felt Prilo’s questioning gaze on him. “Hold down the engine ignite button while you feather the throttle three times and then jam the throttle in,” Darin said.

Prilo nodded, and once he’d followed the instructions the engines roared to life. From there it was a simple matter for Prilo, who had never been as interested in flying as Cohen and Darin had been, to engage the repulsorlifts, receive clearance from spaceport control, and move to their assigned launch pad. There was a brief delay as an Imperial inspector came aboard to check the inside of their ship in a modified version of the landspeeder checkpoints, but before too long he had cleared them and left. Prilo sent *Skybolt* streaking toward the sky.

Darin silently watched out the viewport. Merrilan spread out below him in the familiar aerial view and grew smaller as the ship pulled away. He could easily make out the scars from the attack. Every road, every prominent building had a name he knew, a significance to him. Firsts and lasts and memories swirled in his mind.

Much too soon, the first wisps of clouds appeared under the ship. They intertwined and thickened, obscuring the town below in soupy grey tendrils and feathers until a few seconds later *Skybolt* was engulfed in solid clouds and Merrilan was lost from sight.

It only took another half minute for *Skybolt* to ascend further and break free into a dazzling blue sky. Darin blinked against the brightness and the glare off the cloud bank below them. Prilo leveled out. There was a break in the clouds to the north, and Darin was barely able to make out part of the coastline near Glacier Bay. How many times had he and his friends flown up there to go swimming in the ocean for a day, usually at Darin’s insistence? How many times had his family taken their landspeeder there for the same purpose?

“Darin?”

Darin reluctantly brought himself back to the present. “Yeah?”

“We’ll hit Corvallis’s airspace any minute now. Um, would you...” Prilo indicated the flight yoke.

“Sure.” While Prilo had his license, he hardly ever flew and had always been intimidated by going into Corvallis’s much busier airspace. Darin took the copilot’s flight yoke, let one glance at the sensors and navigation computer tell him exactly where they were, and punched up the correct comm frequencies.

It was the first time Darin had flown since before the attack, and the void it filled inside of him emphasized how much he had missed it. He felt almost whole again. If the reasons for this flight had been different and hadn’t been such a dampener, he would have been ecstatic at being airborne once more.

Darin easily followed the chaotic approach and landing instructions and vectors from Corvallis Control, and from the corner of his eye he saw Prilo flinch a bit when Darin confidently inserted *Skybolt* into his slot in the pattern between two massive, lumbering starships that could have swallowed their entire freighter in one engine. They descended, passing through the cloud layer again to spot the skyscrapers in downtown Corvallis and all the smaller buildings radiating out around them for kilometers, turning the rolling hills grey with ferrocrete and civilization.

Once they were hovering high over the ship broker’s landing platform at Corvallis Interstellar Spaceport, Darin returned control to Prilo. The B-7 lowered and settled into a fairly gentle landing. On the edge of the landing platform Mr. Nuuren was watching with two men, datapads in hand. He pointed to *Skybolt*, and Prilo powered it down.

Darin unfastened his restraints and stood to leave the cockpit, but was stopped when Prilo said, “Darin?”

“Yeah?”

Prilo hadn’t paused in powering down the ship. He took a deep breath while he continued to flip switches, then closed his mouth and shook his head.

“Make sure you tell the ship broker about that little trick to get *Skybolt*’s engines started,” Darin said. “Don’t want him having problems with it and accusing you of selling him a bad ship. She’s not.”

Prilo nodded, his eyes still on the cockpit consoles.

Darin grabbed the strap of his duffle bag with a shaking hand and walked to the midsection of the ship while wondering if there was anything he could do to delay the inevitable. His eyes roamed *Skybolt*’s interior, drinking it up for the last time. With his back to the cockpit, he patted the nearest bulkhead affectionately, then on an impulse quickly kissed it. “Take care,” he whispered. “If your new owners mistreat you, they’ll have to answer to me.”

He stood there for another few seconds, unwilling to take his hand off the bulkhead. He only did when he heard Prilo’s wavering voice pierce the air behind him.

“When am I going to see you again?”

Darin turned to see Prilo standing in the entranceway to the cockpit, arms crossed tightly, brown eyes peering intently at Darin. His face was set hard, but minuscule twitches betrayed his lack of total control.

Darin heaved a sigh and rubbed his face with one hand. “I don’t know. Probably not for a while.”

“Why not?” Prilo demanded. “You’re going to come visit, aren’t you? And it’s not like we never come to Corvallis. We could meet up.”

“I hope so,” Darin said sincerely. “I want to.”

“Then you’d better.” Prilo took a deep breath. “And soon.”

“You’ll be the first person I comm. I promise,” Darin said. He hesitated. “You take care of yourself, Prilo, okay?”

Prilo nodded. “You too.”

“I’d better leave all of you to the negotiations and transfer and stuff.” Darin tried to smile while he added, “Thanks for the ride.” He raised his hand in a brief farewell gesture to Prilo, who returned it, and then Darin walked out of the ship’s hatch. As he stepped out, he reached over and let his fingers lightly trail down the red lightning bolt that Cohen had painted on the hull so long ago, and then one more step took him out of reach.

Darin nodded neutrally to Mr. Nuuren and the other two men as they passed each other. Then Darin took a deep breath of his own and walked through the doors into the spaceport.

Time to see what his new life was going to be like.

Chapter Eighteen

Darin was forcibly funneled to a checkpoint along with all the other beings arriving in that terminal of the Corvallis Interstellar Spaceport. Security droids directed everyone, without exception, into a large room where signs in several languages instructed the occupants to get in any one of the lines leading to small booths and to have their identification ready. Complaints about delays and missed connections due to the long lines and questions for the reasons behind this went unheeded by the droids.

Darin did as he was told and watched while he waited in line. A spaceport security officer manned each booth, and they were checking each person's ID before allowing them to pass and go on their way through the spaceport. Several uniformed Imperial army troops milled around beyond the booths. Darin narrowed his eyes at them and gripped the strap of his duffle bag tighter. He missed Prilo already.

In the forty minutes it took for Darin to reach the front of the line, he caught grumblings and snippets of conversations from the beings around him. According to the talk, this checkpoint had been instituted about a week ago.

Two short, furry Tynnans ahead of Darin had their identification cards scanned and checked by the security officer, and then they were waved through. The officer tiredly motioned Darin forward.

Darin handed the officer his ID and waited while he scanned it into the system. Both of them jumped, startled, when the computer emitted a short but piercing beep. The noise drew the brief attention of nearly all the beings within five meters, and the officer became more alert and peered at his computer screen.

"What was that?" Darin asked. It was the first time he'd heard the beep in that room.

"It—" the officer began to answer. He cut himself off when three Imperial army troops strode up to his booth.

"What've we got?" one of the troopers asked, all business. The other two rested their hands on the weapons slung around their shoulders and watched Darin, who gave them a brief glare in return.

"It picked up a flag on his ID," the security officer replied.

"What? Why's my ID flagged?" Darin asked. He hadn't told anyone about his plans, so there was no way the Imperials could have found out about it already.

The trooper read the computer screen over the security officer's shoulder and nodded. "I see. Give me his ID." The security officer handed it to the Imperial, and then the trooper looked at Darin. "Come with us."

"Where? What's going on?"

"We have something we need to clear up with you in that side room over there." The trooper indicated a door beyond the checkpoint booths.

Darin didn't budge; isolated with Imperials was the last place he wanted to be. "I'd rather do this out here."

"Too bad. Now are you going to come, or are you going to cause a problem?"

The two other troopers flanked Darin. Suddenly he felt very trapped, and he didn't know what to do. It was one thing to privately hate them from a distance but quite another to openly stand up to them within arm's reach, in public, alone. One of the troopers gave him a hard nudge toward the side room. Hot anger rushed through him; Darin caught his balance, planted his feet

and tensed his muscles to shove the Imperial back, but with difficulty Darin clamped down on the outburst. He reluctantly went with the three Imperials.

The door to the small room shut behind them, and inside there was only a desk with a computer console, a chair, a table and what looked like a large storage bin. One of the Imperials grabbed Darin's duffle bag and quickly rifled through it, then he set it on the far end of the table out of Darin's reach. The other held a fuming Darin back during the bag search and then rummaged inside the storage bin.

The lead trooper turned to Darin and tapped the ID card against the palm of his hand. "Good thing we ran into you. Your notice was sent to your address. You're required to respond with confirmation but haven't yet, which is why your ID was flagged. So we'll take care of your confirmation right now."

Darin really wasn't in the mood for these games. "What notice? What are you talking about?"

"Your conscription notice."

Darin blinked. He hadn't heard that right. He couldn't have. "Conscription notice?"

The Imperial looked annoyed. "Yes. You're on the list to be conscripted into the Imperial army. The notice was sent to your address at..." He stepped to the computer console, scanned the ID and briefly input a few commands. "Beca Street here in Corvallis a week ago."

"That's... that's my new address. My new apartment. I haven't even finished moving in yet. Tonight was going to be my first night there. I haven't been there to get any notice you supposedly sent."

The Imperial shrugged, almost bored. "Not our problem. That's your address on file with the Cracian government. It's your own fault for not checking."

"And... but..." Darin stammered. He couldn't wrap his mind around this. It couldn't be happening.

And then he decided that it *wouldn't* happen. Everything the Imperials touched turned him into a victim. Well, no more. His own life was the only thing he had left, and they wouldn't take that too.

Darin found his voice again, and his words rushed out, heated. "*Conscripted?! No!* After everything you Imperials have done to me, you're not going to draft me and make me one of you! You're *not!* I won't!"

"Oh, you will," the trooper replied. He looked at the other two troopers and grinned. "It's funny how they think they have a choice." Turning back to Darin, he continued, "Look, if you have an issue with this, take it up with your planetary leader. He's the one who agreed to the conscripting *and* to the criteria we're using for it. Not our fault if you fall into the group he doesn't mind sending away in exchange for all the services, protective and otherwise, we've been providing to this system in your time of need. You're really doing it for your planet."

"What group is that? What criteria are you talking about?" Darin couldn't get a mental foothold anywhere in this conversation.

"Human males who both have no dependents and also have a criminal record," came the reply. "And even though you're a bit too young by our standards, you're close enough that since you're legally considered an adult in this system we can accept you on a waiver."

Darin barked a short, dark laugh. "Oh! Well, there's been some misunderstanding then. I don't have a criminal record, so I don't fit your criteria. I'll take my bag and ID and go now."

The trooper shook his head. "Not so fast there, kid. Says here you've got a record. For--"

He glanced back at the console screen. “–Rioting?” He turned a dark glare on Darin, whose stomach bottomed out. “You’re one of those sick crinks who’ve been rioting and endangering us? I oughta bust your head open right now. I hope they break you in Basic. Beat all the obstinance out of you and make you see how wrong you are.”

Darin’s mind was reeling too much to respond. How could– Why– He wasn’t–

Someone grabbed his left wrist from behind and fastened something snugly around it before he could react. When Darin was able to pull his arm free, he saw a thin metal band with soft flashing lights wrapped around his wrist. His first reflexive attempts to pull it apart or otherwise get it off were unsuccessful. There was no obvious release button or latch.

“It’s just a tracking band, since we don’t trust resistant people with a criminal record to show up like they’re told without more persuasive motivation and a way to find them,” the Imperial said. “You’ll get it off once you reach your training facility for Basic if you behave. You and the rest are leaving tomorrow morning. Report to the main Imperial office here in the spaceport by 0800 hours, ready to go. Too bad you supposedly didn’t get our notice– you would have had more time to prepare and settle your affairs first, if you even have any. And just a word of caution: you are *required* to report. It’s not an option, and trust me, you won’t like the consequences if you don’t show.”

Darin’s heart beat faster, and he narrowed his eyes at the trooper. “I don’t care. I won’t go. You can’t make me. I’d still *have* dependents if you hadn’t killed them!” His voice broke, and he advanced on the Imperial.

He stopped in his tracks after only two steps when one of the other troopers immediately hefted his weapon and stepped forward to intercept Darin. The Imperial warily stopped when Darin did. Conversely, the lead trooper hadn’t moved and didn’t appear too concerned about Darin’s intentions.

“Still not our problem,” the lead trooper said. “And yes, I think you’d be surprised at just how easy it is for us to make you do this. A good stun bolt does wonders. We can toss your unconscious body in a holding cell right now and haul you over to the recruits’ transport in the morning.”

The two other troopers took a couple menacing steps toward Darin, and he quickly retreated backwards, out of reach. The lead trooper laughed and said, “Thought so. You’re not so brave when you’re not flapping your mouth, are ya. Report at 0800 tomorrow. Don’t make us track you down.”

The lead trooper held Darin’s ID out to him. Darin hesitated, warily watching the two other troopers. When they didn’t make a move toward him, Darin reached forward and got just close enough to snatch his ID card out of the trooper’s grasp. He immediately pulled back out of reach again.

One of the other Imperials tossed him his duffle bag. Darin caught it awkwardly in his midsection and clutched the bag to his chest like it and it alone was capable of anchoring him in this madness. With the press of a button the door opened, and Darin numbly stumbled backwards out into the cleared section of the large checkpoint room. The Imperials remained in the small room, and the door shut again.

Oblivious to all the beings around him, Darin stopped about five paces from the Imperials’ door, turned his back to it, slung his bag on his shoulder and stared stupidly at the tracking band around his wrist. Darin picked at it, then pulled on it, then tugged, then yanked. It wasn’t coming off. Irrational, overwhelming desperation made him claw at it. It still didn’t come

off. He pulled as hard as he could and tried everything he could think of to rid himself of the Imperial control.

Nothing worked.

Shaking, breathing hard and on the verge of hysterical tears, he finally stopped. Darin tried to think a thought that was even halfway coherent.

At last he succeeded. He needed to find a hardware store. And he needed to move his timetable up. Way, *way* up.

Biting his lip, he hastily exited the checkpoint room and plunged into the Corvallis spaceport toward the public ground transportation.

His tiny third-floor apartment on Beca Street was still. Considering that there was no furniture to absorb any noise, the stillness would have translated to deathly silence in a normal room. There was no power and no light aside from the muted daylight shining through the bare window and the blinking lights on the wrist tracking band Darin was concentrating on.

After a few experimental positions, Darin had found the easiest way to do this without furniture was to lie on his stomach on the floor near the window. He leaned heavily on his left forearm to keep it pinned as steadily as possible against the floor. Then he squinted and raised the manual metal saw he'd purchased on his way here from the spaceport. Darin held it over the tracking band and angled it in a slightly different way than last time, one that would hopefully not nick his skin yet again.

Once he was satisfied with the new angle, he carefully lowered the saw until the teeth touched the tracking band. Some tentative play with the saw told him it was only in contact with the tracking band so far. Slowly, cautiously, he began to cut.

The saw slipped a few times, but Darin was satisfied with the angle so he kept trying until he created a groove deep enough to guide the saw blade in place. Darin increased his speed and shifted his attention from preventing slips to making sure he didn't cut too deeply.

The band's lights started to flicker erratically, and Darin knew he was cutting through circuits. He was getting close.

The lights died, and instantly a shrill whistle sounded from the tracking band. Darin jumped, dropped the saw and scrambled back, but the band, still around his wrist, came with him and brought the screeching. Darin covered his ears against the constant piercing sound with his right hand and left shoulder. Whatever this thing was doing, it was loud enough to probably be heard for blocks.

With a sinking feeling, Darin realized that meant the band probably had some sort of tampering alarm. And he'd just triggered it. Something like this would likely also have a comm transmitter sending an alert and his exact location to the Imperials now so they could come and deal with him.

He'd lose time by staying to finish removing the band, but there was no way he could hide anywhere with this thing blaring out his location for light-years. Darin mentally braced himself and then grabbed the saw again, opening his ears to the deafening shriek. Wincing at the sound, he threw most of his caution to the wind and hurried through the rest of the sawing.

At long last the sound warbled and died, and the cut groove in the metal band was deep enough for him to drop the saw and break the last thin sliver holding the band together. It

snapped with a satisfying crack. Darin immediately pulled the band apart as far as he could get it and wrestled his wrist out of it.

Finally free, he jumped to his feet. He stopped just long enough to look out the window, and dread consumed him when he saw an Imperial speeder in the distance, its emergency lights on, hurrying down Beca Street toward his apartment building. Darin ran across the empty room, barely even paused while he reached down and grabbed his packed duffle bag, then bolted out the door for the nearest staircase.

Chapter Nineteen

It felt strange to be out in the evening, but the beginning of Corvallis's curfew was much later than Merrilan's. It was his only option, though, since he couldn't go back to the apartment again. Not when the Imperials would know it was his and that he was trying to escape them.

The first thing Darin had done was to throw the remains of the tracking band in a dumpster near his apartment, then he'd attempted to lose himself and the Imperials in the cramped city streets. About an hour later he'd found a public comm station and had stayed just long enough to make a brief call to the special frequency he'd brought with from home. For the next few hours Darin had kept moving through unfamiliar alleys and side roads, anywhere he thought there wouldn't be Imperials around to spot him. He was far enough away from his apartment now that the Imperials probably wouldn't be actively looking for him in this part of the city, but it wasn't a risk he was totally willing to take.

He had no financial accounts for them to track, only the credit chit with all of his money loaded onto it in his pocket, but his identification was certainly flagged in every electronic system by now. Living off the grid long-term would be impossible, but with any luck he wouldn't have to endure it for long. Not if the next part of his plan panned out like he hoped. He'd find out shortly, though he wished he hadn't had to rush it so drastically.

Darin made his way to the tavern and stepped up to the door at the appointed time. In his earlier comm call, this place had been chosen as the meeting location. Darin clutched his duffle bag against his body protectively, took a deep breath and walked in.

The tavern was loud. It was dark. It stank. It was full of cigarra smoke and other types Darin couldn't identify, though they all stung his eyes equally badly. Droid servers rolled from table to table, and with every movement they creaked from poor maintenance. Women in skimpy outfits were passionately and seductively running their hands all over males of various species who slipped credit chits in the women's clothing.

His parents would have killed him if they'd ever caught him setting foot in a place like this.

Darin shifted his weight and looked around, trying to peer through the smoke and shadows. It all felt too much like some bad holodrama.

At last he spotted someone who looked like the man he was meeting. Darin walked over slowly, trying to more definitively match this man's features with his vague and fleeting recollections of him. At last Darin saw the distinctive jagged cut to the middle-aged man's long sideburns and knew it was the right person. When he reached the man's table, Darin asked, "Mr. Rin?"

Taun Rin looked up from a mug of something emitting fumes that were probably strong enough to get Darin drunk. The chubby man ran a rough sleeve across his lined face. "Yeah, that's me. You the one who wanted to meet?" Darin nodded. Rin appraised him and gave a small scowl. "Look pretty young."

"I've got credits."

Rin kicked an empty chair out from the table. "Take a load off."

Darin sat in the sticky chair, and Rin leaned back in his seat. Ginala had never liked the man, and Darin had always gotten the impression it was because she thought he did some things of questionable legality. The few side repair jobs Jodeco had done for him were straightforward enough and on the up-and-up, and no matter how many times Jodeco told Ginala that Rin was

simply picky about the work and Jodeco had been recommended to Rin years ago by a friend of a friend, she'd never let go of that suspicion. Darin was caught between not wanting his dad to have been wrong about it and now hoping his mom had been right. At the moment, Rin was Darin's only potential lead into a more underground way of life, the only person he knew of who might have some contact who would know where to find the Cracian resistance group.

"So, kid, what's all this about?" Rin asked.

"Well, ah..." Darin hesitated. "It's a little sensitive."

"I can do sensitive. I'm a sensitive kind of guy."

Darin felt more and more out of place with every passing moment, and he decided to get it over with and get out of there. He leaned forward and made sure to keep his voice down to prevent eavesdropping. "I'm looking for the Cracian resistance group against the Imperials, and I'm hoping you can help me find them. I can pay you for getting me in touch with them."

Rin's face screwed into an odd expression. "Cracian resistance group? What the hell are you talking about? And what makes you think *I* know anything about it?"

"The group working to make the Imperials leave Craci Four," Darin reiterated earnestly. "I thought you might have connections. You know, know someone who can help."

"Sorry, kid, I don't know anything about whatever this... group is you're talking about. And word of advice, it's not the smartest thing to run around accusing people of knowing about things like this. Things the Imperials won't take kindly to. Might want to be a little more careful before the wrong people overhear *you* asking about it too. They've arrested people for much less."

Darin told himself to not be discouraged; the bad holodrama connection had stuck in his mind and he followed the formulaic script playing out. Of course Rin wouldn't admit to anything of this magnitude to a stranger. Not yet. But if there was one thing that bad holodramas had taught Darin it was that credits, especially in the Corporate Sector, made anything possible in the shadier areas. "Mr. Rin, I was hoping not to meet with you blind like this and so suddenly, but I don't have much time to find them. I can pay you for the rush job though."

"Blast, I told you— wait, why are you in such a hurry?"

"I... uh... got my schedule shortened with some conscription nonsense from the Imperials, and since I cut their tracking band off I have to ma—"

"What?!" Rin got to his feet with a speed that surprised Darin. "The Imperials will be actively looking for you now, idiot! They might already have a bead on you, watching you and listening to you, and now you come in here and say I can find some nonexistent resistance group against them?! Or maybe they traced your comm call before and have me pegged as assisting you! I don't even know you! If your moronic actions get me in trouble with the Imperials, I swear you're going to regret it! Now get out and leave me alone!"

"But I—"

Rin's hand went to his side and gripped what Darin belatedly noticed was a holstered blaster. Darin's heart jumped, and he scooted out of his chair.

He clutched his duffle bag and fled into the cool Corvallis evening.

Chapter Twenty

Darin huddled into the damp, dark corner between a dumpster and a wall, pulled himself and his duffle bag as far into the shadows as he could and sat there shivering in the foul-smelling, cold, late-night air. The last several hours had not provided him with any new ideas of what to do now. Leaving Corvallis meant he'd be arrested at an outgoing checkpoint. Staying meant he'd eventually have to use his ID or run out of money, and any hits on his name would probably bring the Imperials right to his location. He didn't know where to get a fake ID. There was also no way to avoid coming across a random Imperial, and who knew how easy it would be for them to realize they were after him? In the middle of the night especially, they'd take him in for breaking curfew and soon find out he'd done something much worse.

His stomach growled. He was so very tired but dared not go to sleep for fear of an Imperial stumbling across him. Darin considered prospective places in Corvallis where he might be able to go and hide for a long enough period of time to come up with some sort of plan. Minutes came and went but brought him no closer to knowing what to do.

He didn't realize he was dozing off.

"Hey, kid."

Darin jerked awake in a bolt of panic. Someone was standing right in front of him and blocking his only escape route. Darin froze, which was fortunate because at his initial sudden movement the being immediately put its hand to a holstered blaster on its hip. Darin squinted in the darkness; enough indirect light was spilling on the being for Darin to recognize her as a Trianni. Her fur and feline features were a dead giveaway. A closer look at her uniform showed she was a member of the Cracian Guard in Corvallis.

Her prehensile tail twitched as she watched him warily with eyes that glowed in the dimness. "It's after 0200. Way past curfew," she said. "You need to make yourself scarce and get home fast before the Imperials find out and insist I arrest you."

She backed up a couple steps, an obvious invitation for Darin to climb to his feet in the buffer she gave him, but he didn't. Why bother when he didn't know where else to go, where else to hide? Floundering around now in the deserted streets looking for a new hiding spot would only draw the Imperials' attention.

So this was it; he hadn't even made it one night. In the morning he'd be on his way to Imperial boot camp where they would force him to fight for the organization he hated. There was no way out of this, not with the Guard there. He was in over his head and desperately needed guidance, but there was no one left to help him. He was completely on his own for the first time in his life, and would be for the rest of it.

He was doing such a great job of it, too.

The Trianni's tail lashed back and forth. "Kid, come on. Go."

Darin rubbed his burning eyes and finally asked softly, "Is there a shelter or anything around here that's not run by the Imperials?"

Her tail slowed to a halt, and she twitched her ears and cocked her head before crouching down in front of him. "Don't you have someplace to go?" she asked. Darin shook his head miserably. "Where you from?"

Darin wasn't sure if he should answer that, but he did anyway. Since he was already in trouble, how much worse could it make things get? "Merrillan."

Something changed in the Guard's expression, and the volume of her voice lowered.

“What in the galaxy are you doing out here then?”

“I– I had to leave. I came here because I thought in the city I could find... I wanted... but when I got here the Imperials said I was conscripted and put a tracker on me, but I got it off and it set off this alarm so I ran, and the person I was hoping could help me find the group that I want said he couldn’t and then he got scared off by the cut tracker band, and now I’m stuck here and I don’t know what to do!” He honestly hadn’t meant to say so much, but the words rushed out before he could finally stop them.

“What kind of group were you looking for?”

Darin bit his lip and looked down.

The Trianni partially bared her fangs in what looked like a smirk. “Someone from Merrilan looking for a group he won’t name to a Guard officer and on the run from the Imperials. Unless I’m way off, it’s not too hard to figure out the basics here.” Darin looked up fearfully, but she wasn’t reaching for her blaster or wrist binders. “I understand the sentiment, but are you really sure about this? Have you thought through what you’re doing?”

“Yeah. I– I just thought the Cracian resistance group would be able to make some sort of stand against the Imperials and make them leave.”

“Cracian resistance group?” A puzzled look crossed her exotic features. “Thought you meant something else. Kid, there is no such thing. What you’re looking for doesn’t exist; it would be all over our internal Guard briefings if it did. I know Merrilan and the other hotspots see things differently, but honestly, the rest of the planet isn’t really bothered by the Imperials. Relations are fine between them.”

Darin shook his head hard, unwilling to believe that. “The group is secret. They have to be out there. There has to be a way to make the Imperials leave.”

“All indications are that the Imperials aren’t planning on leaving anytime soon,” the Guard said wryly. “They’re entrenching themselves pretty deeply in everything, and I’ve heard they’re interfering– subtly, of course– with the Guard’s attempts to build or purchase new defense satellites. Until the day comes when those satellites are orbiting again, the citizens here will want protection. The Imperials are that protection. That’s not going to change, even if there was such a thing as a resistance group. Actually, a resistance group here would probably make the citizens more fearful and want the Imperial protection even more. They’d also blame it on the hotspots and the resentment would climb. Really, what did you think this would accomplish?”

Darin resisted the words and buried his face in his hands. He hoped the Guard wasn’t in range when he finally snapped, a notion he dimly felt was coming.

After a pause, the Guard continued. “It’s best if you just put this whole notion behind you. Forget about it.”

He kept his face buried while he shook his head stubbornly. “I won’t. I can’t.” His words were muffled by his hands.

There was a longer pause. “In that case,” the Guard said carefully, “if you want another option, comm this frequency. He can help you.” Darin slowly lowered his hands to see the Trianni scribbling numbers on a small piece of flimsi. She handed it to Darin.

He took it hesitantly. “Another option?” Then he couldn’t help but ask, “Why?”

The Trianni bared her teeth again and seemed to know what his question meant. “Because I have no love for the Empire. And I can assure you that he doesn’t either.” With a claw she tapped the flimsi Darin held. “He’s probably still awake since he goes on Galactic Standard Time. Now be careful, okay? I can’t help you if the Imperials spot you out here at this hour.” She

stood and walked away.

Darin held the flimsi with a death grip. “Thank you,” he said softly but sincerely.

A twitch of the Guard’s tail was the only acknowledgment his words received as she disappeared into the late night.

Chapter Twenty-One

Standing in the lit public comm station on the sidewalk of the dark, totally deserted street sent Darin's paranoia into overdrive. Every second that passed was one more second he berated himself for his impatience when he really should have waited until curfew was over to make the comm. He tried to squeeze into the thin shadows in the comm station booth while he listened to the accented voice on the other end of the frequency and scribbled down the information it gave him. "That's the address. You know how to get there?" the voice asked.

"Um..." Darin racked his tired brain for the locations of the streets he knew in Corvallis. This one didn't sound familiar. "Is it near a landmark or a major street?"

"Not really. That would kind of defeat the purpose. Where are you coming from?"

"I'm at..." Darin searched for an address marker or street sign. "East Highland Street and..." He squinted through the late night, trying to make out the words on the nearest cross street's sign. In doing so, he saw an Imperial landspeeder move slowly down that street through the intersection. Darin froze.

The landspeeder halted abruptly, then quickly flew backwards until it was once more in the intersection. It spun to point down East Highland Street toward Darin. Darin swore, disconnected the comm and sprinted out of the booth. Behind him, the landspeeder's engines roared and a siren pierced the air.

Darin cut down the first narrow alleyway between buildings that he came across, too narrow for the landspeeder to fit through. He stumbled over trash in the dark, but there was enough light from the intermittent streetlights and building lights that he could make out the largest silhouettes. He jumped up on some trash cans to fling himself over a fence, then turned the next corner around the building. Darin ducked under a staircase, tripped through a small potted shrub, and kept running while looking for another turn he could make with shadows to hide in.

Heavy, booted footfalls echoed down the narrow alley after him, and the siren peeled away, probably to try to cut him off at another end it could access.

Darin's next available turn looked like it would take him in the direction the landspeeder was going, but he didn't have much choice if he wanted to stay ahead of the Imperial— or Imperials— running after him. He took it.

The long, narrow passageway took him between two buildings and emptied out onto another sidewalk and road, one that wasn't lit well. Once on the sidewalk, Darin turned the direction opposite of where he heard the siren in the distance. He skidded a bit on some loose gravel, but once he had his feet solidly under him again he ran for all he was worth. He adjusted his duffle bag slightly so it was slung more in the center of his back, out of his way.

The heavy bootfalls came inexorably after him, and now a faint voice accompanied them, presumably reporting locations. Then it raised to a commanding shout: "Stop!" Blue stun bolts whizzed through the air, missing Darin by a much smaller margin than he preferred. Adrenaline-fueled panic gave him an extra burst of speed, and he veered down another road at the next intersection.

A new set of sirens wailed from farther ahead of him in this direction. The new Imperial landspeeder came into sight a moment later, flying down the road toward him. Darin turned into another alley.

By now his breathing was labored; he was getting out of shape since their donri games

and practices had stopped. Darin stumbled, and he heard the pursuit on foot steadily gaining on him. Another stun bolt came much closer this time, and its blue flash lit up the brick walls Darin was running between. He forced himself to keep going.

At the end of this alley was a street. Darin turned down it and looked for the first possible place to hide. There was another intersection coming up quickly.

Turn left.

The words materialized in Darin's mind, unbidden and unthought. But he obeyed them anyway. Maybe his subconscious knew something he didn't.

Down this new street he passed two alleys, both lit by fixtures high up on the buildings. Beyond them the contrasting shadows deepened; in the immediate vicinity Darin couldn't even tell if he was passing dark alleyways or solid walls. There had to be a good hiding spot around here somew-

Something large slammed into him from the side nearest the street, tackling him. Darin's instincts kicked in, and Darin tried to tuck and roll. The person had hit him at an almost ninety degree angle with enough force to knock Darin sideways a couple meters, right into where he thought a building or an alley beside him must be. The person had also grabbed Darin and rolled with him.

When they didn't impact a wall Darin knew they had to be in an alley, but the chaotic tumbling with his assailant on the pavement snapped him further into panic mode. He frantically tried to push himself away, but the person was at Darin's back and had a strong hold around his upper body and upper arms. The person smoothly rolled to his feet at the end of the last tumble, hauling Darin with him, and backed into a large doorway in the alley. The door quietly whooshed open, and then they were inside a pitch-black room. The door closed again, there were a few muted beeps, and then the person moved beside the doorway and pressed his own back to the wall. He kept Darin pinned solidly against him.

Darin struggled to free himself. "Let--"

His mouth was immediately covered by a coarse, cool hand exerting noticeable pressure. Pinpricks of claws rested on Darin's cheek.

Be quiet. Keep still, and no harm will come to you.

The words appeared in Darin's mind again. Confused but still scared, he gradually lessened his writhing in panic. Then he heard the Imperial sirens coming closer, and except for his gasping for breath, he froze.

It sounded like the sirens were coming down the street Darin had been on when he'd been tackled by this guy. He squeezed his eyes shut, praying that they'd pass by.

The sirens got even closer, and then they changed slightly in pitch and moved away. Darin listened until they grew so faint they were hard to hear, and then he slumped in relief.

The person was still holding Darin in place, but he slowly removed his hand from Darin's mouth, taking with it a faint musky odor. When Darin had gotten his breathing more even and under control, he whispered, "Who are you?"

I am called Tran-Zor. I work with Pren. You just contacted him, yes?

"Yeah," Darin whispered. "But... you're telepathic?" he blurted out.

Yes.

Darin stiffened. This was a new one.

Be at ease. I can only communicate. I cannot read your thoughts nor invade your mind.

That allowed Darin to relax somewhat. He hoped Tran-Zor was telling the truth; the

notion made him distinctly uncomfortable. “So... well... thanks for helping me get away from them. How did you know where I was or that I was in trouble if you can’t read minds?”

Our friend in the Guard told us where you were and that you might need some assistance if you contacted us tonight. The abrupt end of your comm confirmed it. Pren listens in on Imperial frequencies, and he is a very good spotter for me.

Tran-Zor finally let Darin go. Darin took a couple steps away to shift his bag and check it for damage after the tumble and getting sandwiched between them, then he worked his elbow a bit. It was sore; he must have landed on it during the tackle.

“What do we do now?” Darin asked, still softly.

You would like to meet with Pren, yes?

“Yes. I was told he might be able to help me.”

Then come. This way.

Darin hesitated. He couldn’t see a thing. “Which way?”

Ah. Apologies. I forget. There was a quiet rustle, and then Tran-Zor switched on a glowrod.

The initial sight of him made Darin step back, startled. Tran-Zor had a smooth, hairless, sloped head with black, pupil-less eyes. The creepy part was his mouth: he had no lips, and it looked like he had no lower jaw, just a top row of teeth, visible and exposed like something out of a nightmare. The odd shadows cast on his face by the glowrod made him look even more frightening. His skin was scaly and a purplish-grey, at least as far as Darin could tell in this light. Tall, solid, and muscular, he wore a vest, simple pants, and an elaborate metal belt. A blaster and a vibroblade were also slung around his hips. It was the first time Darin had seen a being like him.

It took a few moments for Darin to realize he was staring. He blushed and looked down, whispering, “Sorry.”

Tran-Zor dismissed it, saying, *I had a similar reaction when I saw my first Human. Now come. Follow me.*

It didn’t take long to move through the network of rooms and underground access tunnels, but Darin was nearly asleep on his feet when Tran-Zor led him through the final door. The room they entered was lit, sparse, windowless, and underground if Darin had followed their progress correctly. Darin blinked against the light.

Someone was waiting for them inside. He was half-sitting, half-leaning on a table in the center of the room, facing the door with his arms crossed. He was lithe and short, maybe 1.4 meters tall if he stretched to his full height, and it took Darin a few bleary seconds to recognize him as a Lafrarian, not a human. He had a prominent nose and sharp features, with a wispy crown of hair that joined a short beard. His skin was light grey. He wore a light, airy tunic that billowed out above his belt, and fingerless gloves. Darin felt a bit more comfortable; Lafrarian pilots passed through this system often, and he’d always admired, sometimes even envied, the avian-descended beings.

The Lafrarian smiled and stood when Darin and Tran-Zor entered, and he extended a hand. “I’m Pren. We spoke on the comm.”

Darin shook his hand and replied, “I’m Darin. Thanks to you both for helping me back

there.”

Pren’s smile turned a little feral. “Ah, think nothing of it. It was our pleasure. Sounds like you’ve had quite an eventful day.”

Darin nodded and rubbed his burning eyes.

“Well, let’s talk a bit, see if we can do business, and we can hash out any details after you’ve gotten some sleep, all right?” Pren said. He motioned to a chair at the table, and after Darin gratefully sat and put his bag on the floor at his feet, Pren and Tran-Zor took the other two chairs. “I just swept the room, and we’re free from listening devices and prying eyes. So tell me what you need, and maybe I can be of help.”

At this point Darin was too tired to wonder much if this was a trap or if it would end the same way it had with Taun Rin. These people had helped him once already, and they looked to be Darin’s final non-Imperial option. He said, “What I really want to do is find the Cracian resistance group. The people working to get the Imperials to leave the system.”

Pren and Tran-Zor exchanged looks. Darin could interpret Pren’s as puzzlement. The Lافرarian turned back to him and said, “I’ve never heard of any Cracian resistance group. If one existed, trust me, I’d know about it. You’d only find people with that mindset in the hotspots, not the system at large, and no such thing in the hotspots would survive long enough to do anything before the Imps would find it and snuff it out completely.”

Darin tried not to let his crushing disappointment show too much. He’d been half expecting this ever since speaking to the Corvallis Guard, but a flicker of hope had stubbornly held on. He buried his face in his hands. A couple short, hysterical laughs bubbled out of him before he managed to strangle and smother them.

Pren sounded confused. “What’s wrong? I didn’t think that was why you came here anyway.”

“If the resistance group really doesn’t exist, then I just threw my *entire life* away for *no reason*.” Darin bit his bottom lip hard. He couldn’t face the implications. He just couldn’t deal with this right now. He hated this new life so much.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Darin finally pulled his hands away from his face. “Well, I guess that means I’m stuck here dodging Imperials.” He felt lightheaded. “Any chance I can buy a fake ID from you? Mine’s no good now unless I want to get arrested and drafted.”

Pren crossed his arms and shook his head. “Darin, no. Listen to me. Which hotspot are you from?”

“Merrillan.”

“Thought so. Now, you don’t want a fake ID. You know why? Because that means the Imperials would be taking the most important thing away from you: yourself. Your identity. Who you are. You want to be you, not live the rest of your life pretending to be someone else. Someone fake.”

“Of course I don’t,” Darin said, cutting into Pren’s impassioned words. “But I don’t have any other choice!”

“But that’s what I’m trying to tell you. You *do*. You came in here wanting to fight the Imperials, to join a resistance group. You have another option, and we can make it happen for you.”

Darin furrowed his brow. He’d thought the fake ID was the other option the Guard had mentioned. “What is it?”

“You can join the Rebellion.”

Darin blinked. “The Rebellion?”

“Yes,” Pren continued earnestly. “The Alliance to Restore the Republic.”

Darin blinked again. He’d heard occasional stories and rumors about them, but not much. Not enough to make him think they were any real threat to the Empire they were fighting. More the opposite. “But I don’t care about the Republic,” Darin protested. “I care about here!”

“But you’d be helping this world by joining the Rebellion,” Pren countered. “Think about it: the Imperial ships stationed here now are from the base on Lafra. They have no logistical Imperial support in the Corporate Sector. It’s going to be hard for them to justify staying if there are other, more pressing needs elsewhere. The stronger the Rebellion gets in Imperial space, the more the Imperials will have to consolidate their forces. This little group out on the extremities will be one of the first ones brought in to where they’re needed more. They’ll leave this system. You can help make that happen.”

Darin stopped to think about that. It seemed to make sense in his bleary mind. There was one phrase that bothered him, though. “You said the Rebellion has to get stronger in Imperial space.”

“Yes.”

“But I don’t want to go to Imperial space. I want to stay here. Can’t I do something here?”

With a shake of his head, Pren said, “No. If you stay here and do something to antagonize the Imperials, all they’ll see is that there’s a problem here they need to stay and deal with. You’d be making things worse.”

Tran-Zor’s telepathic voice appeared. *You could also allow the Imperials to conscript you, and use your inside position to gather intelligence to pass back to the Rebellion. However, I do not believe that is a life you would be suited to or would enjoy. The Imperials would also not permit you to remain on this world; they would station you somewhere far away.*

“No. There’s no way I could ever do that,” Darin replied. He sighed. After a pause, he asked, “So what would this all involve? The Rebellion? How much would I owe you to do this, and where would I be going?”

“I’d take care of all the arrangements, and I couldn’t tell you much in advance because of security concerns,” Pren said. “Basically I’d take you to my contact who acts as something of a gatekeeper. If the contact clears you, they take it from there.”

“And if they don’t take me?”

“Then I’ll sell you that fake ID.”

“And the cost for all this?”

Pren waved his hand dismissively. “I think you want a couple hours of sleep before we talk that, though don’t worry: it’s affordable. But what do you think? About joining?” A hopeful gleam in his piercing eyes accompanied the excitement permeating his words.

Darin hesitated. All he could think of was how much he wanted to ask his dad for help and advice on this. Or his mom. Or Cohen. Or Bosko. Or even Shiori. He missed them so much.

A long moment passed. Darin blinked back exhausted tears and was surprised to find his voice was steady when he softly asked, “This is the best way to make the Imperials leave here?”

“Yes.”

“And I’ll get to fight the Imperials? Directly?”

“Oh, yes. Absolutely. As much as you want.”

Darin fully met Pren’s gaze. “Then I’ll do it.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Darin jerked awake. When he got his bearings, he immediately noticed the hum and vibration from the ship's engines. That had to be what had awoken him; the ship had been silent and still last he remembered.

The protests and cramps in his muscles told him he'd been cooped up in the dark, tiny smuggling compartment for a considerable while, though it hadn't taken him long to fall asleep even despite the uncomfortable accommodations. He'd been in there ever since Pren and Tran-Zor had literally smuggled him inside their ship at the Corvallis spaceport. With the activation of the engines, they must be getting ready to launch.

The constant, dull ache inside sharpened at that thought. Soon he'd be leaving his homeworld and heading for who-knew-where, and he'd never even left Corporate Sector space before. He wondered when he'd ever get back. The very notion of leaving it behind terrified him.

After about fifteen minutes of engine noise, their volume increased to a dull roar which echoed slightly in the metal smuggling compartment. Darin recognized the subsequent small lurch as the sign that the ship was airborne. He squeezed his eyes shut. "Bye," he whispered softly to his home.

Even without windows, he knew exactly what the sight looked like outside. In his mind's eye he saw Corvallis getting smaller before it was swallowed by clouds. The mental image continued, rising higher and higher until the curve of Craci IV's horizon became visible. Still the image climbed. It showed the dazzling sun, the two small, rocky moons, numerous ships coming in for refueling as if it was just another normal day. A bluish speck of light in the distance was Craci III. The stars surrounding them comprised all the familiar constellations Darin had stared at longingly his whole life.

Long minutes passed, and Darin could barely feel the ship's course changes. A different pitch and a new vibration rose dimly within the ship, and a second lurch made Darin guess they'd jumped to hyperspace.

And just like that, everything he'd ever known was gone.

Darin sighed, glad for once that there were no more tears left in him. He fluffed his duffle bag as if it was a pillow and shifted around to put his head against it, then closed his eyes. With any luck he could sleep away most of what Pren had said would be a very long trip.

Pren wouldn't tell Darin the name of the planet they'd landed on. It was hot, sticky, humid, and miserable, and the lack of wind made it stifling. Darin felt like he'd been drenched with sweat the instant he stepped off the ship. The sun was so bright it was hard for Darin not to squint. Gravity felt lighter. The area where they'd landed and the town they were walking through was set on the lower portion of cliffs and mountains: narrow, twisting streets wound through rock outcroppings, and small dwellings—Darin didn't know if they were houses or stores—were carved into the rock walls, one level atop another. Over all this rock a veritable jungle grew. Green foliage and vegetation, mostly leafy fronds and thick vines, sprouted out of every single crack and crevice and wound its way so densely over the carved walls that it was sometimes difficult to see the rock underneath. It was difficult to get used to the surface of the road: it was like a cobblestone street with woven vines filling the gaps between stones. Darin had

never seen anything like this in real life.

Not many beings were outside on the streets, but the air was filled with a cacophony of what Darin guessed were insect and wild animal sounds. The screeching, buzzing, whistling and squawking was loud enough to hurt his ears as it echoed off the cliff walls.

Due to the overwhelming sounds it took Darin a minute to realize it was just him and Pren. He looked around and gripped the strap of his duffle bag tighter. "Where's Tran-Zor?" he asked as quietly as he could.

"Watching our backs to be sure we aren't followed," Pren answered softly, nonchalant.

"Oh. Okay." Darin paused. "I've never seen someone like him. What species is he?"

"Draethos," Pren said with a small grin. "There's so much of the galaxy out there. Only a small fraction has ever passed through your tiny corner of the Corporate Sector. You'll experience so much this way."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's good. Very, very good."

The small Lafrarian led Darin down a maze of streets, sometimes doubling back on them. Darin was soon hopelessly lost. At last Pren stopped at a crude, innocuous door, knocked in an odd sequence, and walked in, waving Darin along with him. The cool air that met his skin from the far side of the door was a lifesaver.

The inside looked like the tiny waiting room of a travel agency. Holograms all over the walls advertised luxurious star liner cruises and adventurous outings. Every location was exotic, every city looked classy. Darin suddenly felt quite boring and backwater.

A female Zeltron receptionist sat at a desk that took up most of the cramped waiting area, and she smiled at the two new arrivals. "Right on time for your appointment, I see," she said. "We're ready for you. Second office on your left." She pointed toward a door in back. "I'm sure we'll be able to offer you a competitive vacation package."

"Thanks," Pren said with a smile of his own. He led Darin to the room she had indicated.

Pren gave a short, sequential rap on the door, then he opened it to reveal a small office and a woman standing behind a solid desk, from where she was cautiously watching the door. At seeing Pren she relaxed slightly and smiled, but a dash of wary suspicion returned when she glanced back to Darin.

Pren ushered Darin in and pointed him to a plush chair, a relief after the hours in the bare metal smuggling compartment. Pren sat in the adjacent seat and raised his eyebrows at the brown-skinned woman. The office door closed.

"Good to see you," the woman said to Pren. She tied her long black hair into a ponytail and stepped out from behind the desk. It was only then that Darin noticed the two blasters she wore over her dressy business attire. She sat in a third chair, facing the new arrivals, and said, "We've swept for bugs, and the jammer is active. We're clear."

Pren nodded in satisfaction. "Good. And it's good to see you too."

"It's been a while, but I'm willing to forgive that since you brought me someone." Her voice was light and teasing when she spoke those words to Pren, but once more, the instant her eyes went back to Darin there was a cold, appraising look in them. Darin shifted, uncomfortable with the way she seemed to be analyzing everything about him. "So who's your friend?"

"Go ahead," Pren encouraged Darin. "Tell her about yourself and what you want to do. She's your gatekeeper. You can trust her."

Darin looked back at the woman, at the blasters she wore which marred an otherwise

perfectly normal outfit. He thought of the special codes and communications jamming which intruded on what would be an otherwise perfectly normal business office. And that was only the tip of the iceberg. The secret preparations and the sheer cost of performing them just to get this far made him anxious. Either it was overkill or it was actually needed to protect them against the Imperials. That would be a thousand times worse.

If this meeting was any indication, nothing about this new life would ever be “normal”. Any normality on its facade would be blemished below the surface by weapons or distrust or secrecy or hiding.

But that was okay. His normal life had died back on Craci IV.

It was time to see what this new life of his was going to be like.

He took a deep breath and steadily met the woman’s calculating eyes. “My name is Darin Stanic. I’m almost eighteen standard years old. I love flying, I’ve got ground transport and shipping experience, and I know how to fix a few things.

“After they attacked my homeworld, the Imperials killed my family and two best friends.

“And I want to join the Rebellion.”

The End