

“Aspect Ratio”

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Dead Poets’ Society Challenge

"You must strive to find your own voice because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are going to find it at all."

Flight Officer Darin Stanic was getting desperate. The X-wing simulator around him powered down after he failed in the dogfight yet again and his virtual fighter ended up as nothing more than an exploding fireball comprised of ones and zeros. He leaned back in the sim’s ejection seat, raised his helmet visor briefly to tiredly rub at his burning eyes, and pulled out the datapad he’d stashed next to the seat. He called up the next file on it.

The datapad contained recorded simulator runs from each of the other Corona Squadron X-wing pilots that he’d downloaded from the simulator’s database. He’d been spending the whole evening studying each one and then trying to replicate it in the sim on his own. Darin didn’t even want to think about how late it was, but he had to keep going. He had to figure this out.

Somehow.

Before he got himself or someone else killed.

The frustration and the pressure started to get to him again. The eighteen-year-old closed his eyes and chewed viciously on his bottom lip. If only the Coronas’ Executive Officer, Lt. Steen Weas, had accepted his transfer request the other day, then Darin would no longer be in this position. After a couple particularly rough missions, he’d told Weas that these few weeks of being in his first combat squadron had shown he wasn’t cut out to fly X-wings, and it would be better for everyone if he transferred to Fleet Command where he could fly more passive vehicles that he was more suited to. Weas’s refusal to let him transfer out of the Coronas still grated on him, and now he was trapped with no way out but forward.

But “forward” was impossible too if his repeated sim failures were anything to go by. It was plain to see that Weas was making a mistake keeping Darin in the squadron when there were better, more obvious choices out there who could– and should– replace him: choices like any true, honest-to-goodness starfighter pilot, not the haphazard mess floundering around in the simulator that night.

If Weas was going to force the issue and keep Darin there, though, the only option he had was to figure out how to fly like actual starfighter pilots did and muddle through missions as best as he could. He wondered if that would be enough.

Probably not. Pretending never lasted while under fire long-term.

His R5 droid beeped questioningly from where it sat plugged in to the simulator behind Darin. Darin took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and glanced at the translation display in his cockpit. “I’m fine, Botch,” Darin replied with a sigh. “Just... apparently trying to do the impossible and fool the galaxy into thinking I’m something I’m not.”

He forced his attention back to the datapad and was dismayed to see he was running out of options— he'd studied most of his squadmates' flights already. He'd tried flying in the extremely precise way that Lt. Weas did, but Darin wasn't skilled enough to pull it off. He'd tried mimicking the more touch-and-go, shoot-then-disengage style of CC, Corona Six, but it wasn't effective for him. Maptoo, Corona Five and CC's wingman, had a knack for spotting quick opportunities in a dogfight, which made the Gran a natural choice to pair with CC, but a dogfight still just looked like a jumble of supreme chaos to Darin. Slurry, Corona Seven, seemed to be able to optimize his fighter for every single situation he found himself in, but since Darin only had two arms and not four like Slurry did, that soon proved futile. He already knew he couldn't fight like his own wingman, Quiver, since he'd been trying to since joining the Coronas. Quiver was a much better shot in an X-wing than Darin was. He'd just failed at flying like Ikoa, Corona Two. She was a defensive pilot who excelled at keeping TIEs outside of her "bubble," which usually included her wingman, Commander Mackin, the Coronas' Commanding Officer.

The next recorded file Darin had queued up on the datapad was Chopper, Corona Three. He grimaced. He probably should have started with Chopper, but at the same time he knew exactly why he'd been delaying it. Chopper was an extremely aggressive fighter, and Darin already knew that he himself wasn't like that. But that was the problem.

Chopper was exactly what Darin thought of when he heard the words "starfighter pilot." He was cocky, self-assured to the point of arrogance, and the kind of person who would jump in a cockpit without a second thought, easily slam some torpedoes into their enemies and take it all in stride. He was confident. Competent.

In short, Chopper was everything that Darin wasn't.

And that was exactly why Darin didn't belong in this squadron: nothing about him was anything like a starfighter pilot should be. Not all the other Coronas were as aggressive as Chopper, but they were still true starfighter pilots, so Darin had thought they would be easier to model his act after. But so far he couldn't. The others were just as elusive and out of reach for him. Though really, he supposed that wasn't exactly surprising since he *wasn't* a true starfighter pilot. He couldn't swim like a Mon Cal either when he wasn't one.

He finished studying Chopper's recorded run, gritted his teeth, then started the simulator program again.

Darin tried his best to follow Chopper's example and fight the virtual TIEs as boldly and aggressively as he could, but it ended just as abysmally as he'd expected. Cockpit alarms blared and his viewport lit up with the beginnings of the explosion that consumed his X-wing, then the program shut down as his fighter was destroyed. He leaned his head back against the headrest, stared at nothing, and sat there for a moment in despair.

The comm inside his helmet's headset crackled to life. "Nine? It's really late. What are you doing in there?"

Darin sighed at hearing Commander Quantell Mackin's voice and wondered if he was in trouble. He took a breath and then transmitted his reply. "Just some sim work, sir."

"Obviously," said Mackin. "But there's no sim work that is so pressing at the moment that it has to be done at this hour. I can't have you stumbling around half-asleep on duty for no reason. There'll be enough of that in the future. Come on out."

Darin wanted to protest, but his CO was not the one to do it with. Instead, he said, "Yes, sir." He powered down the simulator and hit the control to lower Botch to the floor. Then he unfastened his seat restraints, raised the sim's cockpit canopy, stiffly climbed out, and shoved the datapad in one of his flight suit's many large pockets. Darin pulled his helmet and gloves off and

pushed some of his sweaty dark blond bangs away from his eyes.

Mack was half-standing beside, half-sitting on the edge of the master control console in the sim room. The stocky pilot was wearing his beige general duty uniform, and Darin felt a bit self-conscious in his bright orange flight suit and X-wing gear. It all looked natural on everyone else, but it always made Darin feel like he was dressing up in a costume for some theatrical performance.

Without taking his eyes from Darin, Mackin said, "Botch, you can head back to the hangar now. You're done here for the night." Botch swivelled his flattened head back and forth between Darin and Mackin for a moment, then he beeped and rolled out of the sim room.

Mackin gestured to a chair at the console. "Have a seat, Darin."

Darin longed to follow Botch and escape, but he did as he was told. He set his helmet and gloves on the deck next to him.

Mackin ran a hand through his black crew cut, walked around, and sat in a chair beside Darin. "I've been meaning to talk to you," the commander said casually. "I was going to do it in the morning, but then you went and made yourself a lovely captive audience for me here." Mackin grinned briefly, then sobered. "You've been acting different since Lieutenant Weas told me you asked to transfer out. Is that what this was all about?" He indicated the simulator.

Darin looked at the floor and nodded.

"Based on the bit I saw on the monitor, your last run didn't seem like it went too well. Your flying seemed... off, too. What were you trying to do in there? Maybe I can help."

Darin fidgeted, wishing his squadron leader hadn't seen how much of a useless failure he was. "Nothing, sir." He still didn't look up.

Mack leaned back in his seat. "Ah. So you were doing 'nothing' after midnight in the simulator for no reason when even I can see you're exhausted. How about you try a real answer this time?"

Even though Mack's voice was mild, Darin still flinched. He squirmed, uncomfortable, and wondered how little he could get away with saying.

He opened his mouth to give another evasive non-answer, but then he stopped as a different thought occurred to him. Maybe this was a blessing in disguise. This might be his chance. If he could convince Mack to accept the transfer, there would be nothing Lt. Weas could do about it. And since Mack had just seen the disaster that was Darin's last sim run, maybe he'd be more open to it.

Darin finally met Mackin's steady, dark-blue-eyed gaze, and said, "Sir, I've been trying to figure out how to integrate into the squadron like Lieutenant Weas said, but I can't. It isn't working. This whole thing isn't working. *I'm* not working."

Darin half-expected to get yelled at like he would have been in his training squadron, but instead, Mackin seemed to give the words careful consideration. Then the commander simply asked, "Why not?"

"Because I'm not like the others. I don't know how to do this," Darin said.

"How to do what?"

"Be a starfighter pilot."

"Except you do. You graduated from your training squadron. You've flown in combat. You can fly an X-wing," Mack said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"But sir, you don't understand. None of that means anything when— when— it's—" He stopped with a short growl. He didn't know how to put it into words that made sense, and the negativity and lack of sleep were getting to him.

“When it’s what?” asked Mackin curiously.

“When it’s me!” Darin blurted out in aggravation.

Mackin blinked at him. “Okay, you lost me. Run that by me again.”

“Sir, I’m *just me*. I’m not a fighter pilot!”

Mackin started to bark a laugh, but he abruptly strangled it when he seemed to notice the deadly serious look on Darin’s face. Mackin cleared his throat and said, “You think you’re not a fighter pilot?”

“Sir, I *know* I’m not! That’s what I’m trying to tell you and Lieutenant Weas! That’s why it’s a mistake for me to be here. You should transfer me out so you can get a *real* starfighter pilot in here instead, and everyone will be safer!”

“And what do you consider to be a ‘real’ starfighter pilot?” Mackin asked.

Wasn’t it obvious? “One of you!” Darin’s voice strained with frustration at himself, at the others for not listening to him, and at the galaxy at large. “All of you are. Especially Chopper. But all of you. You can jump in your fighters like it’s nothing. You can handle yourselves. You know what to do. You make dogfights look easy! And that’s not me! Sir, I’m just some nobody from some far-flung planet you barely even knew existed. I flew landspeeders on a local delivery route. I only had my orbital pilot’s license. I played sports with my friends. *None of that* makes me anything close to a starfighter pilot!”

Mackin was apparently struggling to follow Darin’s logic. “But being able to fly a starfighter does,” Mackin pointed out. “I know you can do that. You’ve done it numerous times on our missions and patrols. You’re a pilot in a starfighter squadron. The rest will come with experience. So what am I missing?”

“That’s what I don’t know,” Darin said plaintively. “That’s what I can’t figure out. It’s not experience—it’s something more than that. I could fly for twenty years and I’d still be in the exact same spot, because nothing about me is a starfighter pilot. So I was going through sim runs from the others to try to figure out what they did, to see if there was any way I could replicate how they fly to act like an actual starfighter pilot and minimize the damage I’m going to cause by not being what I need to be, but I can’t.”

Mackin furrowed his brow, cocked his head and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Well, of course you can’t truly replicate their flights. Because you’re not them, and you don’t fly like them.”

“Yes! Sir, that’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you!”

“No, I think you’re misunderstanding me.” Mackin shut down Darin’s triumph. He studied Darin a bit more closely and finally asked, “Listen, do you think there’s something more to it that you’re missing? Because there’s not. There isn’t some magical Force-imbued quality that makes someone a starfighter pilot aside from simply being able to fly a starfighter. That’s all. Anything more is just holoivid nonsense and has no basis in reality. There’s no pedestal to get up on, no chosen status, no elite sponsored membership, nothing different from any other occupation.”

Darin shook his head, resisting the notion. “Sir, boring, normal nobodies like me just don’t fall into the starfighter pilot category.”

“Then I’ve got an entire squadron full of people who aren’t starfighter pilots, and I’ll need to take that up with our recruiting office and find out why they’re sending them when they’re not qualified,” said Mack. “The cold, hard fact, Darin, is that *all of us* are normal people. Well, I use the word ‘normal’ loosely in the case of your wingman, but that’s beside the point. We’re normal. Just like you. We do and like normal things. I can have you over for a horticulture

chat sometime if you want, and I could sit here and list something like that for every single one of your squadmates. No one was born in a flight suit, and in fact very few of them had much formal pilot training before joining the Rebellion. You're actually farther ahead in that regard. It sounds like you're viewing your squadmates through some special lens and seeing something that frankly isn't there, so the notion that you think you're missing it is incorrect because you can't be missing something that doesn't exist. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Darin tried, but he was too flustered. He ended up mutely shaking his head.

Mackin sighed. "Let me try putting this another way. Tonight you've been trying to fly like your squadmates, thinking that if you can fly like them, then that means you can fly like a 'real' starfighter pilot. Right?"

Darin nodded.

Mackin continued, "But the way each of them flies is a direct result of their 'normal' self. Who they are. What they're good at. What skills they had before they ever set foot in a cockpit. Your past and who you are is different from them, just like each of them is different from each other. That's why you have trouble flying like them, and why none of them can fly like the others. And besides, I wouldn't want them to. It would mean we lose something, that unique capability that each brings with them, and that would do nothing but diminish the squadron."

Darin kept quiet, struggling to reconcile the words with his ingrained mindset, and after a few moments Mackin leaned back in his chair. "You know, I remember my entrance interview with my first squadron on my homeworld," Mackin said. "I was a cocky, insufferable young cadet fresh out of our academy."

Darin blinked in surprise. "Cocky" and "insufferable" were not words that had ever crossed his mind when thinking of how to describe Commander Mackin.

Mack seemed to notice his reaction and smiled as he continued, "Yup, I thought I knew it all... until we got to one particular question in the interview. My commander asked me what I had to offer the squadron. I totally botched that answer, but the question stuck with me. Now I want you to think about it too. What is it that you and you alone can offer the Coronas as a whole? I don't want you to fly and fight like Chopper or CC or myself or anyone else. We already have a Chopper and a CC, and two squadron leaders would cause issues with the chain of command. I want you to fly and fight like *you*, with all of your unique skills and strengths and talents, regardless of if they were borne in a cockpit or not. That's the only way you'll ever be effective in this line of work, and I don't think I need to remind you that if someone in this line of work is not effective, they tend to meet an untimely end and lose any chance to figure it out later. So think about it. Come up with something. Because, honestly, Darin—" Mackin held his gaze— "being a benefit to the squadron is the only intrinsic aspect of a starfighter pilot that I care about. Everything else will take care of itself."

"But... sir..." Darin said. He fidgeted some more. "I... don't think I have anything."

"Yes, you do. I wouldn't have let you join the squadron if you didn't. Now," Mackin said as he slowly got to his feet, "it's really late and we both should get some sleep. Come find me in the morning if you have questions, okay?"

Darin nodded and also stood. He was still stiff. "Yes, sir. Thank you," he said, subdued.

Commander Mackin nodded, then said, "All right. Good night." He turned and walked out.

Darin hesitated. He looked back at his silent simulator. He still had two other pilots to study in this understaffed squadron.

One of the remaining ones was Mack.

He chewed on his bottom lip.

Or... maybe he actually should get some sleep. So he would have half a chance of figuring out what sort of elusive uniqueness some teenaged nobody delivery pilot could possibly provide to a bunch of veteran starfighter pilots.

Blast, this was all making his head hurt. He rubbed his aching eyes again, yawned, then picked up his helmet and gloves. First he had to head to the locker room to take his gear off, and then at last he'd be able to get some sleep before having to wake up for duty early in the morning.

He'd figure it all out then.

Somehow.

The End

Revision A

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