

“Commencement”

by Katie Zajdel  
thumper@coronasquadron.com  
<http://www.coronasquadron.com>

Disclaimer: *Star Wars* is not mine. All characters in this story are original.

## ***Chapter One***

This wasn't the first time he had wondered what he had gotten himself into, and he had a feeling it wouldn't be the last.

Darin Stanic stared with wide eyes at the scene before him. For more than twelve hours he had been a passenger in a cargo shuttle's hold, where the time had passed quietly and intolerably slowly despite taking a nap and making a distracted attempt to read a datapad he'd brought. Now they had arrived at their destination: the main hangar of a winged MC80 Mon Calamari Cruiser. From where Darin stood at the top of the shuttle's landing ramp, it was obvious that those quiet and slow hours were gone for good.

The sheer number of sights and sounds that assaulted him made Darin long to retreat back into the shuttle. He wanted to go back home. He wanted to go back to the relative familiarity of his training squadron. He wanted to do anything except face this frightening new situation. Everywhere he looked, there were people and droids going about their tasks with a seriousness that underscored the fact that this was a warship, and with every action completed, every bolt fastened, every decision made, lives could and did hang in the balance. This was no game.

Darin gripped the shoulder strap of his duffle bag harder, chewed on his bottom lip and scolded himself for his reaction; after all, this shouldn't be that different from what he'd gone through with his training squadron. He could do this. Besides, his new squadron wouldn't want a pilot who was intimidated by a little chaos.

With a deep, shaky breath, Darin forced himself down the landing ramp and then did his best to move out of the way of people and droids coming to help unload the cargo from the shuttle. Pungent odors of lubricants and fuel saturated the cool air and smacked him in the face, and the noise created by voices, engines, equipment and repair tools was soon compressed by his brain into a general background din. Darin's gaze floundered around, searching for a particular uniform type to anchor him. All he'd been told was that someone from Corona Squadron would meet him there.

After dodging another droid he finally spotted three men in the familiar beige general duty uniforms of starfighter pilots. They were standing together near the shuttle and were searching the faces of the personnel around it. If nothing else, Darin hoped they could tell him what to do or where to go to report to the Coronas, his first active-duty squadron.

The eighteen-year-old began walking toward them, and as he got closer one of the men noticed him and directed the others' attention to him. All three turned toward him expectantly. Maybe they were there for him after all.

As soon as he was the focus of their attention, Darin's pace faltered a bit. The swirling thoughts in his mind now were taken over by an unhealthy dose of anxiety, but he was past the

point of no return and had to keep going. He couldn't mess this up.

The highest-ranking one was the commander in the middle of the group, so that was whom Darin came to attention before and saluted. He took care to make the salute as sharp and correct as possible. "Flight Officer Darin Stanic reporting for duty, sir!" His new rank still sounded funny in his ears after he'd been a cadet for so long.

The commander returned the salute. "At ease." He then smiled at Darin and raised his voice a bit to be heard above the activity in the hangar as he said, "Welcome to Corona Squadron, Flight Officer, and to *Crescent Star*." He indicated the entire hangar in a general way with those last words. "I'm Commander Quentell Mackin." Mackin reached out to shake Darin's hand, and after a hesitation Darin returned the unexpected gesture. The commander had a black crew cut and was a little taller and more stocky than Darin.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Darin replied. He resisted the urge to wipe off his sweaty palms and hoped the commander hadn't noticed they were like that.

Mackin nodded toward the brown-haired pilot on his left. "This is Lieutenant Steen Weas, my XO."

There was no smile offered from Weas, only a scrutinizing look and finally a hand for a handshake. "Flight Officer."

Something about the cool tone and appraising gaze made Darin wonder if he'd already made a mistake and didn't know it. Hopefully the lieutenant wasn't angry that Darin wasn't in uniform, but he and the other people on the shuttle had been ordered to wear civilian clothes in case they had encountered any Imperials. Darin acknowledged Weas as politely as he could through a large new dose of shyness. "Sir. Pleased to meet you too."

Once Weas stepped back, Mackin indicated the pilot on his right. "And this is Flight Officer Quiver Yanilr. He's going to be your wingman."

Quiver stepped forward wearing a big grin and heartily shook Darin's hand. "Hi there. Great to meet you."

Darin somehow managed a small smile. "You too."

"You have any more bags on the shuttle?" Mackin asked.

Shaking his head, Darin said, "No, sir. Just this one."

"All right. Now, as you'll find will be the case many times, I'm going to leave you in Quiver's—" Mackin coughed slightly, "—capable hands. He'll show you around and get you set up, and we'll take care of the more official paperwork and such once you've had a chance to get settled. We've got a squadron briefing at 1400, which gives you almost two hours. Quiver will get you there; just make sure he does it on time." Quiver snorted softly and rolled his eyes at that comment, and Darin was surprised he wasn't reprimanded.

"We're glad to have you with us, Darin," Mackin continued. "If you have any questions at all, just ask."

"Thank you, sir. I'm glad to be here."

"I just wish none of us had to be." The commander nodded once in unison with Lt. Weas, and then those two turned and walked away.

It was a new personal record for Darin: less than five minutes had elapsed before he had made his first mistake. He watched his two superior officers go while he tried to get his stomach to stop sinking. "Oh no."

"What? What is it?" Quiver asked. "You forget something on the shuttle?"

"No, I—I didn't salute them before they left." The absence of a formal dismissal had

caught him off-guard. “I didn’t mean–”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Quiver chuckled as he cut him off. “You didn’t do anything wrong. If Mack had wanted a salute, you would have known it. Generally we’re pretty informal, and we don’t worry about the whole saluting thing within the confines of the squadron unless you’re in trouble or we’re surrounded by the ship’s officers. Then you’d better dot your t’s and cross your i’s, if you know what I mean.”

Darin’s brow furrowed. “Um...okay.” This was a strange new concept to him. The surest way to get in trouble in his training squadron had been to fail to properly salute a superior.

Quiver genuinely didn’t seem to think twice about it, though, and he beckoned Darin with a nod of his head. “Come on.”

Darin followed, and as they began walking he got a good look at Quiver. Darin guessed him to be in his early twenties, and Quiver’s blond hair was short but unruly and styled like a crew cut that hadn’t been trimmed in a couple months. Being tall and lanky, Quiver was a rather atypical-looking snubfighter pilot, and his long strides allowed him to walk along easily while he talked.

“Now I don’t know what they’re teaching you recruits nowadays, so I’ll start slowly.” Quiver smirked. “Test at the end, so listen up. This is called the ‘hangar.’ It’s a big parking area for ships. Did you get that? You need me to repeat it?”

Those were just the sort of teasing comments his best friends back home would have made if they were still alive, and it had been months since Darin had heard anything like it. For just an instant he almost felt comfortable, and before he could stop himself he grabbed onto that familiar feeling and let himself respond in kind. Darin plastered a confused look on his face and tested the word out like he was saying it for the first time. “‘Sh-i-p-s’? What’s that?” He was relieved when Quiver didn’t get mad at the remark; instead, his new wingman just laughed and mentioned something about how Darin would fit right in.

Quiver expertly guided his new charge around equipment and through small groups of people in the hangar. Off to the side Darin saw Y-wings in one large subhangar where they were being swarmed by mechanics. Another subhangar housed X-wings, which were receiving much of the same attention. Quiver motioned toward those fighters and said, “Your X-wing’s over there with the rest, but we’ll come back after we get some other things taken care of first. Besides, it’s cold in here, and I want to go warm up a bit. Why does space have to be so cold, anyway? It’s annoying.”

They left the hangar and were only about five steps down the corridor when Quiver pulled Darin to a stop next to a door. “Here’s your first stop, rookie,” Quiver said. “You’ve got to go through in-processing with Security. They’ll authenticate your orders and everything, make sure you are who you say you are, maybe interrogate you or throw you in the brig if you look at them wrong, standard procedures like that.” He shrugged and grinned with a casualness that almost seemed to inject truth into what Darin thought were merely joking remarks. “I’ll be waiting out here for you, so I’ll see you when you’re done. Well, unless they throw you in the brig, in which case I can’t make any promises. Maybe I could visit you sometime, though.”

Quiver keyed open the door while still wearing that grin. Darin decided not to comment and simply thanked him before stepping inside.

\*\*\*\*\*

It took nearly an hour for Darin to finish with Security, though he was glad for that in a way since it gave him a chance to clear his mind a bit and settle down. He was going to be spending a lot of time with his new squadmates, and he couldn't let himself be taken over by his shyness now, especially when he was making his first impressions on everyone. At least Darin wouldn't have any issues when flying with them, and that should help him fit in. His training squadron had been challenging, but he'd made it through and was ready to fly with the Coronas out here. If he could focus on that professional aspect, it should help carry him through until he overcame his shyness in the more personal areas, and then everything would be all right. Darin felt a little better after his mental pep talk.

When he finally walked out of the Security office back into the corridor, Quiver was gone. Darin looked around and tried his best to examine his options calmly. Going farther down the corridor to look for Quiver would likely just result in Darin getting lost, so he turned toward the hangar to try there first. He wasn't ready to be alone in this overwhelming place just yet.

Once inside the hangar, to Darin's relief it was pretty easy to find Quiver: he was sitting on a shipping crate nearby and talking to two people and a Gran who were all wearing uniforms identical to his. Quiver noticed Darin almost instantly, held up a hand to pause his conversation, jumped off the crate and came over to him. "Ah, you're done," he said to Darin. "So are you legit? Not a spy or anything, right?"

Several possible comebacks came to Darin's mind, but he settled for the safe reply this time. "No, I'm all cleared. They gave me some of my access codes too."

"Good. Come on, there are some squadmates here you should meet." Quiver draped an arm over Darin's shoulders and steered him toward the group he had just been talking to. Darin immediately tried to pull away from the contact but then caught himself and uncomfortably stayed with Quiver.

As the pair walked up, Quiver said to the three others, "Here's the new guy I was telling you about. I found him wandering around earlier, and lucky for him I found him when I did, too: the poor rookie was trying to get into an airlock thinking it was the door to the mess hall."

Darin barely noticed what Quiver said. His full attention was instantly drawn to the lieutenant rank plates the two human pilots were wearing, and he snapped to attention and saluted.

The Corona pilots seemed startled at his actions—especially Quiver, who jumped and pulled his arm away from Darin's shoulders—but they quickly recovered. One of the lieutenants, a small, slim woman with light brown hair that just barely reached her shoulders, smiled and returned Darin's salute. "Hi there." She raised an eyebrow at Quiver and said, "I figured you would have broken him of that habit by now."

Quiver sighed. "I'm working on it," he replied.

Darin was still saluting rigidly, and one look at the other lieutenant showed why: the man had simply crossed his arms and was basking in Darin's salute with a smug grin. "I don't know," the man said to the others. "I kind of like this treatment."

"Oh, stop it," the woman said, swatting his arm. "Just return the poor rookie's salute before he strains something." She turned back to Darin and said, "He's not normally this mean, only when he forgets that he was a rookie once, too."

The other lieutenant, a solidly-built man with dark hair that was cut very short, shot her an indignant look. "I was not," he muttered under his breath to her before he grudgingly returned the salute.

As soon as Darin's arm came down to his side again, Quiver took his new wingman by the shoulders and shook him around. "Relax! Loosen up! My back hurts just looking at you. These are squadmates: I told you saluting isn't necessary."

"I'm sorry, but it's just too weird to not salute," protested Darin.

The male lieutenant snorted a chuckle. "Oh, this is going to be great. Five-to-one odds that Quiver goes crazy about the rookie saluting all the time before the rookie goes crazy about *not* saluting."

"I say that as a compromise we let the rookie salute anyone *except* Chopper here," said the Gran in a calm voice.

The woman laughed. "I like that idea." She turned to the other lieutenant, who presumably was "Chopper," and emphasized, "I like that idea a *lot*."

"Wow, Maptoo, you made a joke!" Quiver said to the Gran. "I'm amazed, truly I am!"

The confidence generated by Darin's earlier pep talk was being eroded as he tried unsuccessfully to follow the banter and figure out if they were telling him to do something or not. Quiver noticed his bewilderment and made a dismissive gesture. "Don't listen to them, rookie. Just stick with me and you'll be fine."

With a grin, the woman said, "Well, I'm not so sure about *that*."

Quiver's expression turned mournful as he put a hand over his heart and directed his attention back to the woman. "Ikoa, I'm hurt. I never expected you of all people to say such a thing. Are you taking lessons from CC or something?"

She considered. "No, I'm not, but that's a good idea. Thanks for the suggestion."

Quiver muttered something unintelligible and then launched into a brief round of introductions with Darin and the three pilots. The male human was Lt. Jayke Forsgren but was usually called Chopper, the woman was Lt. Ikoa Fyndcap, and the Gran was Flight Officer Maptoo Moog.

When the introductions were over, Lt. Fyndcap looked from Darin to Quiver and said, "We've got that mission coming up soon. Have you talked to Mack about whether Darin will be flying with you on it?"

Finally, something Darin could use as common ground with his new squadmates. "What kind of mission is it, ma'am?" he asked Lt. Fyndcap. "Escort? Scouting?"

"A hit-and-run," she answered.

Somehow Darin hadn't quite expected that reply. He paused, blinked and then said, "So it's a combat mission, ma'am?"

"Yeah, but you'll get some sim time on it before it comes up," Quiver told him. "It's nothing you need to worry about right now."

That answer didn't do much to quiet the sudden shifting of his stomach, but Darin said, "Oh. All right."

Then Quiver directed his attention to Lt. Fyndcap. "Do you know something I don't, Ikoa? Why wouldn't he be flying with me? He's my wingman." The lanky pilot grinned.

"I meant more in terms of whether Darin has enough experience to be going on the mission, period, not whether he'd be flying with someone other than you," Lt. Fyndcap said.

Quiver shrugged. "He's here. That's got to mean he's qualified. Right, rookie?" Still grinning, Quiver nudged Darin but didn't seem to notice Darin's sudden inability to speak.

Lt. Fyndcap studied Darin for a moment while he tried to put on a brave front, and then she asked him, "Have you ever been in combat before? What squadron are you coming from?"

Quiver jumped in before Darin had a chance to answer. “Oooh, wait, I know this one. Mack told me the other day. It’s...um... Sunrise Squadron, right?”

Darin half-grinned. “Actually it was Horizon Squadron with Major Collins commanding. Training squadron. And no, ma’am.” He grew somber again. “No combat outside of sims. We flew a couple of real escort missions but never ended up in a fight. They called it something like ‘accelerated training’.”

“What?” Chopper’s voice was flat. “Are you serious? They let a fighter pilot graduate from a training squadron without ever having flown in combat? What the hell are they thinking?”

“What do you expect them to do?” Lt. Fyndcap asked Chopper. “We’re so short on pilots that we need them faster than they can train them. Or have you forgotten that it took us three weeks to get Darin and we’re *still* short two pilots?”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten. I’m not stupid,” Chopper retorted. “But—” He glanced at Darin, then continued speaking to Lt. Fyndcap. “But what good is a fighter pilot who’s never even fought before? That’s something that should be worked out in some little border skirmish in the safe little controlled environment of their training squadrons, not out here in the deep end on the front lines. We don’t know how he’ll react. It’s unpredictable loose cannons like that that kill people who aren’t supposed to be killed. People like *me*. At his current experience level, he shouldn’t be here. At best he’ll get in the way, at worst he’ll get one or more of us killed.”

“I can’t believe you just said that, and right in front of him, no less,” Lt. Fyndcap said in a low but sharp voice. “What’s wrong with you?”

Chopper crossed his arms. “Don’t get all bleeding-heart here, Ikoa. This is no place for coddling rookies. This is a *fighter* squadron. This is life and death—namely *our* lives and deaths. If he can’t handle it then I want him nowhere near me, and I want him to know it.”

Darin was getting more nervous with each word Chopper said throughout the exchange. The one thing Darin had thought he had was no longer there, and he didn’t know what to do. He knew he’d probably get in trouble for interrupting the lieutenants, and he’d never talked back to a lieutenant before, but he felt compelled to say something. He just hoped his voice wouldn’t waver. “With all due respect, sir,” Darin said to Chopper as calmly as he could, “we did a lot of combat work in the sims, like I mentioned. Major Collins did all he could to prepare us and let us know what to expect in a fight through the sims, which are supposed to be realistic from what I’m told. And it’s not like I’ve never been shot at in real life.” He left out the fact that he’d been a civilian at the time, not in a ship or even armed, and that he’d been scared to death. But he was more prepared now. “I think I can handle myself here, sir.”

“Really. You think you can handle yourself here.” Chopper’s tone was somewhere between disbelieving and challenging.

Darin felt a bead of sweat on the back of his neck, and he tried to take a deep breath. “Yes, sir, I do.”

“Yeah. Well, we’ll see about that. You’ll see how lacking the sims are in some aspects. Prove me wrong, rookie. But without combat experience under your belt it’s going to take a hell of a lot of sim work before I’m comfortable flying around you with live weapons.”

Quiver spoke up. “Chopper, blast it, lay off him. He’ll be fine. He’ll be with me.”

“You’re not helping your case,” Chopper said.

Quiver snorted. “Shows what you know.”

Lt. Fyndcap muttered a word in a language Darin didn’t understand, and then she looked at Quiver. “Just talk to Mack first, okay?”

Quiver held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, if it makes you happy. And now if you’ll excuse us, I’m cold, and my wingman and I have warmer places to be.”

The pair left, and Quiver again took Darin out of the hangar and started through the maze of corridors. Maybe it was all the turns or maybe it was his inability to stop thinking about what Chopper had said, but Darin soon realized he had no clue how to get back to the hangar. Luckily Quiver didn’t seem to be attempting to ditch him and leave him stranded, lost and alone in the veins of the great ship; he actually seemed more interested in making conversation.

Darin didn’t even hear most of what Quiver was saying as they walked. At one point he noticed a lull in Quiver’s talk and took advantage of the opportunity. “Quiver, what’s that mission about? What will we have to do on it?”

“Huh?” Quiver looked at him. “Oh, it’s a hit-and-run against some Imps, like Ikoa said.”

“What’s my duty schedule for the rest of today? Can I get a copy of it?”

“Your duty schedule?” Quiver gave him a strange look. “It’s your first day. It’s called ‘orientation.’ Your regular duties will start tomorrow, and you’ll get a copy then.”

“Will we have any time today when you can show me where the simulators are so I can start practicing that combat mission?” Darin pressed. “I’d really like to get some time on that as soon as I can.”

Quiver finally stopped and turned fully to Darin, who stopped as well. “Rookie, relax. It’s your *first day*. You’ll get time in the sims tomorrow when the rest of us do another practice run for that mission. Until then, enjoy the last easy day you’ll get for a very long time, and let me enjoy it too.”

“You won’t have to do anything; just point me in the right direction and tell me how to load the sim with the correct mission. I’d really rather not wait until tomorrow. You heard what Lieutenant Forsgren said. I have to get up to speed on this mission, and I’d rather not go in cold and blind tomorrow when all of you already know what you’re doing.”

“Wait, is all this because of what Chopper was shooting his mouth off about?” Quiver shook his head and continued walking. Darin followed. “Ignore him.”

“Ignore him?” His new wingman was either insane or a whole lot braver than Darin was. “I can’t do that, Quiver! He’s a *lieutenant!*”

Quiver rolled his eyes. “Trust me. Ignore him. If you can do that, you’ll like it here much more.”

“How will blatantly disrespecting a superior officer I just met help me like it here more?”

“You’re giving Chopper too much credit. Besides, like I told you, it’s pretty relaxed around here. Despite what you may think after Chopper’s little rant, we actually have a really good time with each other. Well, mostly. Sometimes I think Snubber’s incapable of having fun, but that’s his loss. His *big* loss. And don’t you dare tell him I said that.” Quiver stopped at a turbolift and pressed the call button.

“Wait, ‘Snubber?’” Darin asked. He couldn’t keep all these names straight, and every moment spent with Quiver seemed to create more confusion. “Who’s that?”

“Oh, right. That’s Lieutenant Weas, the XO. We have yet to find a snubfighter he can’t fly well, hence ‘Snubber.’ As you’ll see, everyone in this squadron has a nickname or callsign. You will too after you’ve been with us for any amount of time. Of course, some callsigns tend to stick better than others.”

“What’s yours?” Darin asked.

“Quiver.”

Darin blushed a little. "I thought that was your real name," he admitted.

The turbolift doors opened, and both of the pilots got on. "No, my real name is Hentil, but no one ever calls me that, not even when I'm in trouble." Quiver pressed the button for a different deck. "Not that I ever get in trouble, mind you. See, mine is one that sticks."

"How'd you get your callsign?" Darin asked while the turbolift ascended.

His wingman grinned. "I'm still waiting for someone here to figure that out. The pilots in my former squadron gave it to me, so I joined the Coronas with it. Let me know if you ever have any guesses."

A brief lull came in the conversation, and then Darin spoke up again. "So can you show me where the sims are, or what else I need to do to get ready for everything around here? Please?"

Quiver closed his eyes and heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Yes, rookie. We're on our way to our quarters now, and after we drop your stuff off I'll show you around before the briefing."

Worried that he had annoyed Quiver, Darin felt himself blushing again and kept quiet for the rest of the brief turbolift ride. After the turbolift slowed to a stop and opened its doors, the pair stepped off and Quiver directed Darin down the corridor. It wasn't long before Quiver came to a stop next to a door. "And here we are," he said. "Our quarters."

He punched in a passcode on the door's access panel, and the door slid open to reveal a rather small, simple room. A set of bunk beds sat along the far wall. The only thing along the left wall was a desk made mostly out of a shipping crate with a computer console, some datapads and datacards, and a light sitting atop it, with another smaller crate available as a chair. In contrast, the right side of the room had holos projected on almost every square centimeter of the wall. Datacards were scattered haphazardly over the crate desk and computer console, and the old ejector seat chair held a few more.

Quiver ushered Darin inside with a flourish. "You can probably guess which side is yours, and you get the bottom bunk. The refresher is right through there," he said while pointing to a door in the far corner at the foot of the bunks, "and we share it with our next-door neighbors, Chopper and Kalre."

Darin tossed his bag onto his bunk and sat down next to it before taking a moment to look around the cramped room. He also noticed a closet door on Quiver's side of the room and some makeshift shelving units on the wall by the entrance. "Cozy."

Quiver nodded. "Yeah, but you get used to the tight spaces after a while. I'll warn you, though, I've had this place to myself the last three weeks, so it might take me a bit to get used to having a roommate again. The former Corona Nine was a difficult roommate anyway.

"So where are you from? I've never heard your accent before," said Quiver. He smirked and then added, "It sounds kind of funny."

Darin wasn't sure how to take the comment about his accent, but he decided to just let it pass to avoid saying the wrong thing to Quiver again. Besides, Darin didn't think Quiver was one to talk when it came to having a funny-sounding accent. "Craci Four, near the edge of the Corporate Sector," Darin answered. Quiver's eyebrows knitted together for a moment in apparent thought, but Darin had no desire to continue with that sensitive topic. Doing so would only open the door for the inevitable grief and homesickness pangs and everything else he was trying to cope with. He hurriedly cut off any follow-on questions by asking one of his own. "What about

you?”

Quiver snapped himself out of it and answered, “Druzien. It’s a little place near the Core Worlds.”

“What did you do before joining the Rebellion?” Darin asked.

“Me? I was a writer, actually. If you want, I’ll let you read some of the periodical articles I wrote before I Rebel-ized myself. My favorites almost got me thrown in jail by the Empire,” Quiver said with a proud grin.

Darin’s brow furrowed. “A writer? Seriously? And now you’re a fighter pilot?”

“You know, I get that reaction from everyone.” Quiver chuckled. “What can I say? I love being a fighter pilot. I have better luck with women this way, too, and it sure beats my boring first job in the Alliance. How about you? What did you do before joining?”

“After I finished school I did local freight runs for a shipping company. Not exciting to most people, but I enjoyed it.”

Quiver looked at Darin for a moment and then simply said, “Ah.” It was all too obvious to Darin that Quiver was part of the majority that didn’t find such an occupation exciting. Then the lanky pilot said, “You want to see some holos of my homeworld? Come here, I’ve got a bunch as you can probably tell.”

Darin spent several minutes looking at holos Quiver was pointing out on his wall and eagerly telling about. He tried his best to follow along, but there was just too much information, and Quiver’s energetic attitude was starting to tire Darin out. It was too much, too fast, too soon after his long flight here on the shuttle, and that flight was starting to really catch up with him now.

Darin wondered if his eyes were visibly glazing over when Quiver looked at him and stopped in the middle of one holo’s explanation. “You look beat. Do you want to unpack?” Quiver asked.

Shaking his head hard to wake himself, Darin said, “No, not now. Sorry, I’m just tired after that flight.”

“So you don’t want that big tour anymore, right?”

Darin really wished he could take a nap, but he didn’t want Chopper to think he was incompetent *and* lazy. “No, I’d still like that, please,” Darin replied. “Moving around will wake me up, and I really need to figure out everything here as soon as I can.”

Quiver shrugged. “All right, if you want to. There are some general duty uniforms and boots for you here in the closet. Hopefully they’ll fit. Go ahead and change, grab a datapad and then we can head out. But don’t blame me when you realize down the road that you squandered your one and only chance to relax.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“See, all the lockers are sorted by squadron, then squadron designation,” Quiver was saying while he showed Darin the pilots’ locker room. “Those over there belong to Quake Squadron, the Y-wings stationed here with us. This row is ours, and here’s your locker. You’re Corona Nine. I’m Ten.”

The open locker Quiver was pointing out contained Darin’s flight equipment. Darin felt a

bit better just knowing where this was in case something happened and he had to launch. Hopefully nothing would actually happen, but if it did he was closer to being prepared now than he had been ten minutes ago.

Darin looked at the designation above his locker. He knew that simple number would soon sink into his soul as it was now his identity in the squadron, and he softly tested it out. “Nine.”

“Right.” Quiver pulled out the bright orange X-wing flightsuit from Darin’s locker and held it up to the smaller pilot for comparison. “Blast, I figured as much. Probably three sizes too big for you. Sorry, rookie, but it was the only X-wing flightsuit they had in Supply. We’ll try to get you a couple better-fitting ones whenever the next supply ship is due to arrive. This one will be fine until then, though.”

Quiver returned the flightsuit to the locker and then waved Darin out of the room with him. “We have a little time left before the briefing. Let’s go introduce you to your fighter.”

The hangar was only meters from the locker room, and when they entered it Darin found that things had calmed down a bit in the last ninety minutes. He eagerly followed Quiver over to Corona Squadron’s subhangar, and they wove between the X-wings, ducking under S-foils and laser cannons until Quiver pointed to the fighter farthest in the back. “That one’s yours.”

Darin’s gaze settled on it. Aside from some different patterns of scorch marks on the hull and a lack of kill markers, it looked the same as every other X-wing there. It was a flat grey, and the red stripes on its fuselage were outlined in black. The four engines sat dormant while they patiently waited to be called into action again and take flight. Its elongated nose pointed the way for the laser cannons mounted on the ends of the S-foils, like on every other X-wing in this hangar and many others in existence.

There was nothing different about this one. And yet, the fact that it was *his*, that the ship would be like a partner and would play a large part in deciding if he lived or died in any given encounter, made all the difference in the world.

Darin felt a bit silly for getting so caught up in the moment, but he couldn’t help it. He slowly walked up to the fighter, then under it and around it, letting his hand trail lightly over the hull and become accustomed to its feel while his eyes soaked up every visual detail. All the anxiety of his new situation melted away for a moment, and Darin smiled at the snubfighter underneath his fingertips. He couldn’t believe such an amazing thing was actually assigned to *him* of all people.

During his time with the Horizons, he had often reflected on his decision to join Starfighter Command instead of another branch, like Fleet Command, that was more sane. Darin had gotten his small transports pilot’s license back home a couple years prior, and the only thing he’d wanted when he became a Rebel was to fly something, *anything*. Some early simulator testing had convinced the placement officials that Darin was at least good enough to warrant an attempt at starfighter training, and he’d gone along with it. Since then, Darin had discovered that this was flying at its most dangerous; however, it was also flying at its best. Nothing else could compare to it, and there was no room for any regrets or second-guessing inside that moment of awe he was sharing with his new X-wing. There was no doubt in his mind then that Starfighter Command had been the right choice.

“I think this is the first time I’ve seen you smile since you got here,” Quiver commented as he walked up beside Darin.

The smile turned self-conscious. “It’s all just a lot to take in at once.” At least he knew

where he stood with a starfighter. He didn't have to prove himself *to* it, only *with* it.

"You'll get used to it." Quiver grinned.

A sharp squawk and something ramming into Darin's leg grabbed his attention. "Hey!" When Darin looked down, he saw a white and green astromech had wheeled into him. The R5 droid harshly blatted again and then whistled a query.

There was a small text readout on the astromech's front panel of what the droid was saying, and Darin was instantly grateful: it had been so hard to figure out what the R2 units in Horizon Squadron had said when outside of the starfighters. He crouched down to get a better look at the readout. "What am I doing over here?" Darin repeated the astromech's question. "I was just looking at my fighter."

YOUR FIGHTER? the droid replied with a flat tone. THIS IS NOT YOUR FIGHTER. THIS FIGHTER BELONGS TO ME AND MY PILOT.

Darin looked at the droid in confusion. "But—wait, who's your pilot?"

I HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED THAT MY NEW PILOT IS FLIGHT OFFICER STANIC.

Darin almost laughed. "That's me. I'm Darin. What's your name?"

The droid processed that for a long moment before replying, GREETINGS. MY DESIGNATION IS R5-D4, SERIAL 198YJ437TN, IDENTIFIER 62690857. ORGANICS CALL ME BOTCH.

"It's nice to meet you, Botch."

"Aww, one big happy family," Quiver piped up before cryptically adding, "I can't wait to see you two trying to work together." He smirked and then checked his chrono. "Well, we'd better head to the briefing; I'll never hear the end of it if I get you there late. You and Botch can chitchat later if you want. Let's go." Darin said a silent goodbye to his ship and an audible one to Botch before the two pilots left.

They soon walked into a small briefing room near the locker room. A table with a holoprojector was situated at the front, and the chairs were arranged theater-style. Three people already occupied the room, but Darin only recognized two: Commander Mackin and Lt. Weas. He reiterated their names to himself to ensure he wouldn't forget them.

Quiver led him to a middle row and sat down, putting Darin in a seat directly behind the unknown pilot. The rookie jumped a bit when the charcoal-skinned pilot in front of him turned his head almost completely around to look at him. Darin hadn't really had a chance to notice before that the pilot in front of him wasn't human.

"Ah, you must be the pilot new. I'm happy to meet you," the slim alien said with a thick accent. At least, those were the words Darin thought the alien said.

There were four reflective eyes on the alien's face, and only a slit marking his nose a few centimeters above his lipless but otherwise "normal"-looking mouth. He turned his head back to the front again, stood up and turned around to face Darin, and that was when Darin noticed the extra two arms. One pair was situated at his shoulders like a human's, and another pair protruded from his sides where the lower part of a human's ribcage would be. He stood barely a meter and a half tall.

Darin suddenly realized he was staring and tried to cover it up by blinking and offering an embarrassed smile. Quiver gave him a little push to get him to his feet.

"I'm Tictintco Tnis," the alien said, "but everyone here finds it easier to call me Slurry."

Darin shook the three-fingered hand Slurry offered and introduced himself.

"Quiver, are you scaring away the new guy already?" asked a voice from behind. "At least let him get through his first day."

Darin turned and saw Lt. Fyndcap approaching with a black-haired woman pilot, who was a flight officer like Slurry was. The woman he hadn't met, and who Darin guessed had just spoken, smiled at him. "Hi, I'm CC, Corona Six."

The nametag on her uniform proclaimed her last name to be "Cerac," so Darin figured CC was probably her nickname. "I'm Darin."

"I feel sorry for you, being paired with Quiver," CC said. "I know a good place to go scream if you ever need it."

"And she's good at screaming, too," Quiver remarked as he stood up.

CC set her jaw. "Only when I see you."

"Oh, curse this handsome face which causes ladies to scream and squeal when their gaze alights upon it!" Quiver said melodramatically while covering his face with his hands.

Rolling her eyes, CC said, "And you wonder why I scream." Then she turned back to Darin and said, "But your arrival kept Quiver out of my face for the last two hours, and for that I'm deeply grateful to you."

"Only because you know that absence makes the heart grow fonder," Quiver told her while lowering his hands.

A Rodian flight officer stepped up, interrupting them. "This is the new pilot." It was phrased halfway between a statement and a question.

"Yeah, this is Darin," Quiver said. "Darin, this is Kalre. He's one of our next-door neighbors."

"Nice to meet you," Darin answered. There was no way he'd remember all these names in fifteen minutes.

Kalre crossed his arms and looked Darin up and down. "Chopper was right. You're kind of scrawny, aren't you. Younger than I expected, too. Well, I hope you're a tougher pilot than you look; we need everyone to pull their own weight around here. Though compared to the low standard of your wingman, I imagine any amount of effort on your part will look spectacular, so—"

"Oh, great. Now you've done it," CC scolded, cutting off both Kalre and the self-defensive remark Darin had just taken a breath to say.

"Done what?" Kalre asked sharply.

"Ha! Did you hear that, CC?" Quiver said with a big grin on his face. "Kalre said my actions make other people better. I make the galaxy a better place simply by existing. See how lucky you are to have me as your wingman, rookie?" He elbowed Darin.

Darin had no idea how to answer, but he didn't need to because CC looked at Kalre and pointedly said, "That."

Kalre demanded, "Do you two always have to do that?"

CC's tone of voice shifted to one of pure innocence as she replied, "When you start saying stupid things, yes."

The Rodian shook his head in exasperation and left to find a seat in one of the back rows. Lt. Fyndcap turned to Darin and said, "Don't listen too closely to Kalre, or Chopper for that matter. They just like to sound tough."

"Yes, ma'am," Darin replied, attempting to hide the fact that he was actually a bit rattled by Kalre's words. He hadn't even done anything yet and he was already getting judged by more than one squadron member. Was it that apparent to them that Darin wouldn't be good enough or didn't belong there?

Slurry made a sound like he was clicking his teeth together and then said something that Darin couldn't comprehend for the life of him.

Lt. Fyndcap apparently didn't have any problems making it out. "True, true," she replied with a soft laugh. Then she looked at the tallest pilot and said, "Oh, Quiver, I ran your idea by CC, and she's agreed to give me lessons on how to annoy you. I figure I can't ask for a better teacher."

Quiver heaved a big sigh and moved past Darin to where Lt. Fyndcap stood in the center aisle. He picked her up around the waist and began to carry her toward the door. "Then I'd better put you someplace where you two can't get in contact with each other. Maybe the brig?"

Darin watched incredulously, breathlessly dreading the swift and decisive discipline that was sure to be handed down to Quiver for such treatment of a superior officer. But all that came was some laughter from Lt. Fyndcap and the mild, almost disinterested voice from Commander Mackin at the front of the room saying, "Quiver, kindly set my wingman down. We're almost ready to get going here."

"Blast. And we almost had Quiver in the brig, too," CC muttered.

Quiver put Lt. Fyndcap down lightly on her feet just as Chopper and Flight Officer Moog entered the briefing room and found some seats. Darin still couldn't believe it. If anyone in his training squadron had tried doing something like that to an officer, no matter how playful or innocent the intentions, they would've gotten in trouble so fast that—

In his peripheral vision, Darin saw movement at the front of the room. He looked and saw that Lt. Weas had moved to the front center next to the commander. Commander Mackin took a head count, made a comment to Lt. Weas with a smile and all ten fingers held up, and cleared his throat. "Okay, Coronas, grab a seat. Let's get started," he announced. The loitering pilots scattered to various seats around the room, and Quiver returned to his seat next to Darin. CC sat on the other side of Quiver, and Darin pulled his datapad from a pocket in preparation for taking notes.

A moment later, Mackin began. "As you all know by now, we finally have a new pilot with us, Flight Officer Darin Stanic. Introduce yourselves afterward if you haven't already.

"The mission we've been simming for will be coming up soon, but the exact timeframe is not final yet. Our next sim session will be tomorrow afternoon, and some of you have patrols coming up. Check the schedules. You know the drill."

Quiver leaned over to Darin. "We have a patrol tomorrow," he whispered. "I hope they taught you some tricks in training for how to make patrols less insanely boring."

Darin could only shrug and shake his head slightly at Quiver, then he made a few notes and turned his attention back to what the commander was saying.

The briefing started off straightforward enough, but soon Mackin was getting into topics and details that Darin didn't understand. It seemed like every note he wrote on his datapad was accompanied by two or more questions he'd have to ask Quiver after the briefing was over. Easily half of these subjects, particularly ones regarding maintenance and scheduling, hadn't even been touched on in his training squadron, but all the other Corona pilots seemed to know exactly what Mackin was talking about. Integrating into this squadron seemed to become more and more challenging with every question mark on Darin's datapad. He fought the urge to fidget and tried to concentrate on getting down as much information as he could. He'd just have to figure it all out after the briefing.

A short discussion on the newly reorganized flight groups made Darin realize he didn't

even know most of the other pilots' numerical designations or who his flight leader was, though he did learn that the underpowered squadron only had two flights and he and Quiver were in Two Flight. Darin made another note to ask Quiver about it all.

Finally Mackin and Lt. Weas wrapped up the briefing. "And that's it for today," Mackin said. "Anything else from anyone?"

Quiver raised his hand, and Mackin looked dubiously at him. "Yes, Quiver?"

"Yes, sir, I just wanted to remind everyone that a Tatooine Sunburn, even if properly mixed, does not go well with nerf steak."

"Sorry, I should have asked if anyone had anything *useful*," Mackin said.

"I believe that was useful, sir."

"Pertinent, then."

"Oh. Well, in that case, Squadron-Warming Party tonight at 2100 hours at the Tank. Bring your favorite initiation rite for our rookie."

The pilots were decidedly happy about that. Darin looked uncertainly at Quiver, who just shrugged in return with an air of innocence about him.

"Well, I think I'd better end this briefing before something else like that is announced," Mackin said. "And I will see all of you back here tomorrow at 1400 as usual, no matter how hungover you are."

## *Chapter Two*

Darin fiddled with his uniform's waistline as he sat at their table. The Bacta Tank was the main downtime establishment in this section of *Crescent Star*, and it had as sterile a feel to it as most medical bays did. When Quiver had brought him here, Darin had noticed a sign beside the door that said, "Come cure all your afflictions by getting tanked." Now they were almost an hour into his Squadron-Warming Party, during which time his new squadmates had quizzed him about himself and his flying experience, and Darin was beginning to feel somewhat buzzed from the round exchange rite. However, he wasn't yet out of it enough to not be annoyed at having to wear his uniform inside-out.

Throughout the night and between the quizzes and various initiation rites, the other Coronas would often get into rambunctious, tangential discussions with each other, and during those times Darin felt himself turning invisible and forgotten as the alcohol and his quiet shyness took hold more and more. In some ways he was glad to have the attention taken off of himself, especially since he was dead tired now from all the social interaction, the events of the day and the travel lag, but in other ways he felt like an uninvited guest in the midst of it all. Even though most of the pilots had been friendly so far, there was just too much within that tight-knit group that Darin didn't understand, didn't know and couldn't relate to.

It was during one of those tangential discussion times when Darin was poking at his uniform's waistline and looking around the Bacta Tank. He again noticed a woman who was sitting at the bar across the room and discreetly looking at him. When she caught his eye, she grinned bashfully and quickly turned away to whisper to her friend. Darin had noticed her doing this a few times since he and Quiver had arrived, and if he wasn't so burnt out from already meeting so many new people that day he figured he probably would have gone over to talk to her.

Darin sighed and swirled his drink around in his glass. Then again, maybe he wouldn't have tried to talk to her. Every social activity had gotten so much harder since he'd lost his best friend, and the motivation to be more sociable than required just wasn't there anymore. He remembered how even the Horizons had written him off as a loner, although Darin believed that he'd been misdiagnosed.

"What do you think of her?" asked a quiet voice.

Looking up from his drink, Darin saw Quiver conspiratorially leaning over to him. Darin raised an eyebrow and asked, "Who?"

Quiver kept his voice soft so it wouldn't carry. "That girl over there who keeps stealing glances at you."

Darin hoped he hadn't been so obvious in looking at her that Quiver had noticed. His gaze returned to her. "She's cute."

"Glad you think so." Quiver's mischievous grin reappeared and his voice strengthened as he straightened up and rapped three times on the table, the indication of an initiation rite. "Go sing her a song. A love song. And make sure we can hear it from here."

The other Coronas laughed and settled down for the show as Darin stared at Quiver in horror. "You're not serious."

Quiver knocked on the table three more times. "You bet I am. Don't worry, nothing will happen to you. And no talking to her before you start, either."

Darin opened his mouth to protest again, but CC cut him off. "Come on, rookie. The sooner you start..."

Chopper piped up with, “Besides, you’re not scared, are you?”

Damn right he was. “No, sir, I’m not.”

A smug grin spread over Chopper’s face, and the lieutenant simply replied, “Prove it.”

Darin chewed on his bottom lip, took a deep breath and reluctantly pushed his chair back to get to his feet. The pilots applauded as he stood, and Quiver patted his shoulder. “Atta boy, rookie.”

Silently cursing his idiotic, inside-out uniform, he slowly wound his way around tables toward the woman. He couldn’t believe what he’d just implicitly agreed to do, and there was no graceful way out of it now. Darin stopped about a meter behind her and felt himself go pale when she and her friend turned around to look at him curiously. For one awful moment he froze, drawing a blank on every musical note he had ever heard in his life. He probably would have stayed like that for hours had the bartender not accidentally clanged two glasses together while filling them. That outside noise was all Darin needed to snap out of his stasis, and he took a quick breath before he could forget everything again and began singing the first song about love that came to his mind.

*“I’ve wanted to tell you something now for quite a long time—”*

“Louder!” he heard Slurry call out. Darin obligingly raised his volume a bit.

*“—About why you see this goofy grin when your gaze returns mine. I’m usually in such control, I never break my stride, but ever since you came around, that seems like such a lie. I stutter and I falter and the words just cannot flow. It’s a far cry from the confidence I always show.”* The women in front of him were giggling timidly, and he was getting a wide range of reactions from the other patrons around him. Darin tried to block it out and sang the quick-tempoed song even faster. *“I never looked for love before and I swore I never would, but you’ve got some strange grip on my heart and, girl, you’ve got it good. I have to say this now before my courage runs away: I have to learn just what you do to make me act this way.”*

He stopped after the first verse and refrain, confident that the other pilots wouldn’t know there was more to the song. Even if they did, he doubted they cared as they started cheering his performance. The other patrons went back to ignoring him while Darin grinned sheepishly at the woman he had just serenaded. He could tell there was color in his face again because now it was burning. “Um, sorry about that,” he said.

All the shyness from the two women evaporated, and they laughed heartily.

Stunned at their abrupt transformation, Darin could only stare. Was his singing that bad, or was something funny about his apology?

The one to whom he had sung, a woman with braided dark hair, said through her laughter, “If your face gets any redder you’ll look like a dehorned Devaronian.”

“Well, I—” Darin fumbled. “I’m sorry for embarrassing you like that.”

“You thought *you* were embarrassing *us*?” she asked in amusement. “Who’s the one with the landing flare for a face right now?”

“So you’re not mad?” Darin ventured hopefully.

“Despite the fact that you’ve probably had too many drinks and gave in to pressure from your drunken pilot buddies to make a totally forward move on me in a bar, no, I’m not.” She smiled. “Relax, rookie. Nothing bad happened to you just now, did it?”

Darin’s brow furrowed. How did she know he was a rookie? Was the inside-out uniform the ship-wide indicator of such a status?

Her companion, a woman with a blond ponytail, nudged her. “He actually apologized.

Did any of the others do that?"

"I don't think so, but he's newer than most were when they got here, I think." The dark-haired woman grinned. "And they're so sweet when they're brand-new."

"Unless they're one of those 'I'm invincible' guys," the blonde said, nodding. "They're a bit hard to swallow."

"If this past minute is any indication, though, I don't think we'll have to worry about that with this rookie. The hangar might become bearable again unless the Coronas corrupt him."

The blonde sighed. "And they are good at doing that, aren't they?"

Suspicious now, Darin's green eyes flickered between the two women. "What are you talking about? What's going on?"

The blonde answered that with a smile. "We're members of Quake Squadron, proud partners-in-crime with Corona Squadron."

Darin slowly processed that information through the haze of alcohol and puzzlement. "Quake Squadron? The Y-wings? So—wait, you knew about all this?"

"Yeah, we set this up ahead of time," the dark-haired woman said. "The two squadrons secretly join up for this kind of stuff. You're not the first pilot to sing his heart out to me, and you won't be the last. You should ask Quiver what song he sang." She winked at him. "I think some Coronas want to do a round exchange as a reward. Better head on back. Stay sweet, rookie." She smiled, then the two Quakes turned back to the bar.

In bewilderment, Darin slowly retraced his path to his table where he was greeted with backslaps and handshakes and, as the Quake had predicted, drink offers. As per the custom with a round exchange, he bought a drink for each Corona pilot who bought him one. He wondered if this was why Quiver had been so eager to help him get access to his financial and computer accounts after the briefing.

Quiver gave Darin's shoulder a good shake as he sat down. "That was the 57<sup>th</sup> best singing I've ever heard in my life."

"Right between Huttese love songs and Jawa picket dancing, huh?" Darin asked over the rim of his glass as he went to finish off his old drink. As soon as the liquid hit his tongue he spat it out; where there once had been lomin-ale, now there was something that tasted atrocious.

With a grimace, he pushed his chair away from the table, trying to spit the taste out of his mouth. "What was that stuff?" he finally managed to ask over the renewed laughter of the Coronas. Maybe being invisible and forgotten hadn't been such a bad thing.

CC rapped three times on the table and grinned mischievously. "Just a bit of a strong, nasty drink from Coruscant mixed into your lomin."

Darin was seriously wondering if running his sleeve across his tongue would help get rid of the taste when Slurry came up behind him and put two of his hands on Darin's shoulders. The young pilot had learned by now that Slurry was a Bilgana, but that fact didn't help much since Darin had never heard of a Bilgana before.

"Do worry not, rookie, I know what'll get that taste awful out of your mouth: it fixes everything else. Barkeep!" Slurry raised one of his lower arms. "A Bacta for my pal, please!"

The bartender cocked an eyebrow at Darin, who wearily held up two fingers. The bartender gave the server droid two drinks, and they were ferried to their table.

Darin picked up his glass and studied it for a moment. The Coronas had told him that the most popular drink here was called a Bacta due to its uncanny resemblance to the bubbly liquid medical bacta. Feeling rather paranoid now, he cautiously sniffed the drink.

“Come on now, rookie,” Slurry said as he took a swig from his own glass. “There’s nothing wrong with that one, I promise.”

Still not convinced, Darin took a trial sip. It wasn’t that bad, so he took a bigger one. The taste of a minty alcoholic drink filled his mouth, and the bubbles tickled his nose from inside. He swallowed quickly and coughed, rubbing his nose when it seemed like a sneeze was imminent.

Quiver laughed at his reaction. “You’ll be used to that bubbly feeling by the end of the glass.”

Sure enough, he was.

\*\*\*\*\*

A weird rhythmic beeping and a constant throbbing inside his head pounded him awake. Slowly Darin began to think that the beeping sounded like a distorted comlink.

“Someone get comlink,” he muttered as he covered his eyes with his arm and tried to go back to sleep. Sleep meant escape from the awful headache.

Neither the headache nor the beeping was letting up, though, and Darin eventually became more aware that whatever he was lying on was hard and uncomfortable. This didn’t feel like his bed. He pried one eye open and peeked out from under the cover of his arm. It took a few blinks for his vision to focus, and then he saw that he was lying on what looked like grating.

“Huh?” Darin slowly opened his other eye, which confirmed the first one’s findings. He tried to look around a bit more, but it hurt to move his head so he kept motion to a minimum.

A few long seconds later Darin saw that he was lying on a narrow walkway between rows and rows of different pipes running parallel to the floor. The lighting was dim, and the area was fairly quiet. He had no idea where he was.

Even more long seconds later some neurons started firing in his brain. Bits and pieces came back to him from the previous night. That’s right—he’d been at a party. He was even still wearing his uniform inside-out. His memory ended at some undetermined point during the party. He still had no idea where he was or how he got here. And blast, his head hurt.

The incessant beeping was getting on his nerves. Darin finally realized that it was his own comlink making the noise, and it took him a few moments to figure out how to reach that pocket with his uniform inside-out. As soon as he managed to grab his comlink, he lay back down, closed his eyes and moaned a bit before turning it on. “Cadet Stanic.”

“Finally! Darin, where the hell are you?” the vaguely familiar voice on the other end of the connection said.

“I don’t know.” It was an effort to get the words out correctly. “Who is this?”

“Who is this?” the voice repeated. “This is your wingman, you nerf herder. Quiver. And what do you mean you don’t know where you are?”

“Quiver?” Darin thought for a moment. “Oh. Yeah. I know you.”

“Listen, Darin, you’d better shake off that hangover really quick and start concentrating here. The commander wants to see you right away.”

Quiver’s words hit home even through the mental fog. “Commander? Oh no.” Suddenly the headache got even worse. He was in deep trouble for getting so drunk at that party, he was certain of it. “Blast it, what do I do now? How do I get there?!” Darin opened his eyes and struggled to a sitting position.

“I can’t help you until you tell me where you are.”

“I told you, I don’t know where I am!” The temptation to panic was getting stronger by the second. Not only would he be in trouble for his behavior, but every second’s delay in reporting to the commander was another nail in his coffin. Mon Cal Cruisers were over a kilometer in length, and if he’d ended up on the far side somehow... “All I see are pipes and fluid lines. No one’s around. There aren’t any signs or anything!”

“Pipes and fluid lines? Are you in the service access areas or something?” Quiver asked. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. Just find a door back to civilization. Once you’re in a normal corridor on a normal deck, I can get you back here.”

“Okay.” Darin pushed himself to his feet, wobbled a bit and steadied himself against a large pipeline beside him to fight off some lightheadedness. Going vertical shot a new throb of pain through his head. Once he had regained his balance, he looked around. He picked a direction at random and began stumbling along the narrow path of grating. The larger, sturdier pipelines became invaluable in helping to keep his balance at first until he remembered how to properly walk.

About ten meters down Darin came to a side door. He went through and ended up in a more roomy maintenance hallway. This one had a solid floor and different sorts of equipment and droids stored along the walls. Looking around, he saw another door a few meters away.

Luckily that one opened into a regular corridor. Darin would have sighed in relief if he wasn’t busy flinching from the sudden and painful bright light. Once he could see again, he put the comlink back to his lips. “All right, Quiver, I’m in a normal corridor.”

“Good. Where?”

“I don’t know.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Quiver’s even voice came back. “Find out.”

Darin looked around but saw no signs posted. There were room numbers by some of the doors, though. He was just about to ask Quiver if those would help when an enlisted Mon Calamari came out of one of the rooms and headed his way down the corridor.

Darin intercepted him. “Excuse me,” he said, “can you tell me which way the hangar is?”

The Mon Cal stopped and looked Darin up and down uncertainly, and Darin suddenly wished he’d remembered to put his uniform on correctly. He hoped the Mon Cal wouldn’t call Security on him. “I’m new here,” he tried to explain. “I got lost during an initiation.” It was close enough to the truth for now.

The Mon Calamari muttered something about pilots under his breath, then asked Darin, “Which hangar?”

“The aft hangar. The main one.”

The webbed hand pointed back over the Mon Cal’s shoulder. “That way. Quickest way is on the trams.”

“Thanks.” The Mon Cal left, and Darin ducked back into the maintenance hallway for a moment to put his uniform on correctly.

At last he was on his way. Jogging made his head hurt, but it was better than the headache from the stress of thinking that walking was too slow. He only prayed he wouldn’t come across some high-ranking officer as he dodged beings in the corridor: he was too desperate and in too much of a hurry to do more than salute as he ran by. But he was in trouble anyway, and he doubted things could get much worse. “Quiver, where are the trams? I’m at—” Darin read off one of the room numbers as he jogged by.

“You’re way up there?” Quiver asked. “Oh, never mind, I’ll ask later. Okay, first you

need to find a turbolift and go down five decks. And you'd better be hurrying, too. I don't want to have to tell Mack that I lost my wingman in less than 24 hours."

"How long ago did he say he wanted to see me?"

"It's been a good ten minutes by now, rookie, and if you are where I think you are it'll be another ten."

Darin cursed and increased his jog to a sprint while he looked for a turbolift. Being twenty minutes late to such a summoning without a damn good excuse in the Horizons would have been unthinkable and unforgivable, and Darin certainly didn't have a damn good excuse this time. Quite the opposite, in fact, he thought with a cringe.

This was not the kind of lasting impression he had wanted to make on his new commanding officer.

\*\*\*\*\*

Six minutes later, Darin skidded to a breathless stop outside his quarters. Quiver was there waiting for him after providing turn-by-turn directions once Darin had gotten in the hangar vicinity.

"About time, rookie," Quiver grumbled. "It's been keeping me awake and away from my hangover-reduction sleep. It's way too early for this." Darin secretly agreed: he'd checked his chrono on the run over, and it was only a little past 0630. Quiver continued, "Now, Mack's office is that way." He pointed down the corridor to the left. "Turn left at the first corridor, three doors down on your right. And—what did you sleep in? Come here." Quiver took Darin by the collar and began rubbing something off Darin's face with a sleeve.

"Quiver! Stop it!" Darin blushed and squirmed out of his wingman's grip. "Thanks for the directions." He took off again at a run.

It only took a few more seconds for him to reach Commander Mackin's office. Darin pulled up outside of it and stood there for an instant trying to compose himself, catch his breath and brace himself. Berating himself for letting this happen, he quickly ran his fingers through his dark blond bangs to smooth them, pressed the door chime and immediately heard Mackin call from inside, "Come in."

Darin entered the converted crew quarters and came to attention before Mackin, who was seated at his desk. He saluted as he said between short gasps for air, "Flight Officer Darin Stanic reporting as ordered, sir."

"We're informal right now, Darin. Have a seat." Mackin studied him as he did so. "I'd expected you a little sooner than this."

"Yes, sir. I apologize. It won't happen again, sir."

"I'm guessing that your panting and sweating have something to do with your tardiness. What happened?" Mackin asked.

"Well, sir," Darin faltered, "I...uh..." He wished he could do anything but tell the truth, but he had no choice; lying to a CO or XO was another unforgivable sin. "I woke up on a different deck, and I ran down here as soon as I heard from Flight Officer Yanilr that you wanted to see me."

"A different deck?" Mackin didn't look like he'd expected that answer. "What were you doing there?"

"I really wish I knew, sir."

“You weren’t in someone’s room, were you?”

“No, sir!” Darin immediately replied, his eyes wide. “I wasn’t in anyone’s room, sir. I was in some kind of maintenance accessway. Sometime after the party last night. I...really don’t remember any more than that, sir.”

Mackin gave a small sigh. “Well. It looks like I’ll need to have a chat with your new wingman about this. As for you, roaming the ship while intoxicated is not something I’m going to tolerate. If you’re off doing something juvenile or insulting to another crewmember while you’re drunk, you’re not the only one who’s going to get in trouble and pay for it. Do I have to worry about this behavior from you in the future?”

Darin was so humiliated that he wondered if the color of his face had moved into the infrared region. “No, sir, you don’t. I swear it won’t happen again.”

“Good.” Since it hadn’t happened yet, Darin was certain the yelling and chewing out were still coming until Mackin leaned back in his chair and continued in a mild voice, “I imagine the parties Quiver throws are a little more intense than what you would have been used to in a training squadron anyway. Now you’ll know what to expect. So how was the party last night?”

Darin couldn’t believe his commander had just asked him that question. Maybe his awful headache was causing him to hear imaginary things. “Well...I guess... It was interesting, to say the least, sir.”

“Judging from all my pilots’ lack of activity this morning, it must have gone late.”

Darin nodded, then stopped when that action caused the throbbing in his head to increase. “Or early, depending on how you look at it, sir.” Darin found himself getting distracted by the sights of various potted plants throughout the office, and he forced his foggy brain to listen to what the commander was saying.

With a small chuckle, Mackin said, “Let me guess: they introduced you to the round exchange rite.”

Darin really didn’t want to answer that, but he again didn’t have a choice. “Yes, sir.”

He was amazed that Mackin didn’t get upset, even after surely knowing how drunk that had made him and seeing how unfit for duty he was at that moment as a result. Mackin actually seemed to have expected his answer.

The commander nodded, smiled and continued, “Anyway, down to business. I only called you in here to see if you were okay. Yesterday must have been fairly overwhelming for a rookie.”

Darin wearily rubbed a temple in disbelief. All the stress and headaches and embarrassment this morning for that? He did his best to not sound cranky when he replied, “Thank you, sir. I’m fine.” He opened his mouth again, then quickly closed it.

Mackin raised an eyebrow. “Something more?”

“No, sir.”

“Come on, you’ve got me curious now. What is it?”

Darin hesitated. He never would have dared to say what was on his mind now to Major Collins, but Commander Mackin wasn’t letting him off the hook, so he was obligated to follow through and probably get in more trouble. It was yet another corner he was backed into, and he didn’t even have the mental capability at the moment to think of something else to say instead of the truth. Darin studied the commander’s expression to make sure Mackin was serious before he cautiously ventured, “Well then, with all due respect, sir, if you knew about that party then couldn’t this have waited another hour? Or two?”

Mackin stopped smiling, though his expression gained no hostility. He leaned forward on

his elbows and locked gazes with the young pilot. “Yes, it could have. But if you’ll permit me to lecture for a minute, Darin, let me teach you something about the Rebellion: it’s all about condensing. Condensed training, condensed forces, condensed supplies. There’s an overwhelming need to make do with as little as possible, and that goes for time as well. We don’t have the luxury of being able to take our time to get to know someone’s core personality traits. In our line of work we can be called on at any moment to go fight, and we have to know and trust our squadmates and instantly act on that knowledge and trust if we’re to all make it out alive.

“The party last night was good for morale, but also think about how much all of you learned about each other during that short amount of time. When faced with an unexpected situation, how do you react? How far will you go? Do you trust them when they say you’ll be okay? Do they keep their word? And I’ve found that a good indication of how someone acts under physical hardship is to wake them up early with a hangover.”

Darin blinked as the first layers of that began to settle in. “So what you’re saying, sir, is that everything so far, even this, has just been a lot of tests and I didn’t even know it.”

Mackin leaned back in his chair. “In some ways. More like informal assessments with no right or wrong answers. They are what they are.”

A silent moment stretched on as Darin wondered what he had passed and failed, but all he could eventually do was blink again and say, “Oh.”

Mackin spoke up again while his easy smile returned. “Go get some breakfast: it’ll help your headache if you have one. You and Quiver have the late morning advance patrol, then you’ll be back in time for the daily briefing at 1400 that you attended yesterday. This afternoon we’ll get you some sim time and see how you do. Have any questions?”

“Um, just one, sir,” Darin said as he stood up. “I don’t remember how to get to the mess hall.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The food did indeed help ease Darin’s headache, though his taste buds weren’t too thrilled with it. What was helping even more, though, was the cup of watered-down caf he was nursing. He kept his eyes closed between sips and wished he could block out the noise of the mess hall as easily.

“It looks like our sweet little rookie had a good time with the rest of the Cronies last night.”

Darin forced his bloodshot eyes open and saw the two Quakes from the party smiling and leaning on the chairs across his table from him.

“Yeah, it does,” the blonde answered. “Unless he started drinking to forget what crazy squadmates he has.”

“Hello,” Darin managed.

“You’re the first Corona we’ve seen down here at breakfast this morning,” the dark-haired woman told him. In the better lighting, Darin could now tell that her hair was black like CC’s was, and like his sister’s and mom’s had been. “Does that mean that Mack sprung his hangover test on you while the rest are sleeping in?”

“Yeah. I’m trying to get rid of it now,” Darin answered. “Um, do you two want to sit down or something?”

The blonde shook her head. “Thanks, but we’re on our way out. We have work to get

done, unlike all you lazy Coronaries.” From the looks of her smirk, Darin figured there was some pretty heavy but good-natured teasing that went on between the two squadrons. “But you’re a sweet guy, so we wanted to warn you about something.”

Darin’s brow furrowed, and the black-haired woman picked up the talk. “One thing your squadmates like to do is find out if their rookie initiation victims remember most of the initiation party. If he or she doesn’t, the rest will make up lots of stories of embarrassing things that the rookie supposedly did, and they’ll convince him or her that they’re true. We didn’t stay the whole time, but you didn’t do anything embarrassing that we saw. Don’t let them convince you otherwise if you don’t remember everything, okay?”

At first Darin wasn’t sure if this was another teamed-up prank, but the two women looked sincere enough that he decided to give them the benefit of the doubt. Plus, he was too tired to get all paranoid about conspiracies. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Good. We’ll see you later, rookie.”

The two Quakes left, and Darin went back to his caf for a couple more minutes until he saw Quiver come into the mess hall. Quiver noticed Darin and headed in his direction.

“I couldn’t sleep anymore after Mack commed me and expressed his displeasure that I’d already managed to lose you on the ship,” Quiver said as he helped himself to a chair at the table.

Darin looked down. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Quiver said dismissively. “I told you I don’t get in trouble, remember? Though I am curious what you were doing up there on that deck. The last thing I remember with you at the party was when Chopper started pressing your buttons again.”

Darin’s gaze resettled on Quiver. “What happened? What’d I do?”

“I don’t know. Chopper made some comment, you disagreed, and it eventually turned into him claiming that you wouldn’t even be able to find the forward hangar by yourself. You told him you could and that you’d prove it to him right then and there, and you left. If you never made it back to our quarters last night, I guess hunting down the forward hangar was what you were doing when you passed out drunk wherever you were.”

All of that was sounding vaguely familiar now, so Darin figured it was true and didn’t fall into the category of made-up situations the two Quakes had just warned him about. “Yeah, I guess. But didn’t anyone notice that I never came back to the bar last night?”

Quiver shook his head. “Sorry, rookie, but we got caught up in drinking and just kind of forgot. I warned you it might take me a while to remember I had a roommate again, and all bets are off when I’m drinking. Nothing personal.”

Darin sighed and looked down again. “Right.” He swirled the remaining caf around in his mug.

“I’m hungry. I need some food. And caf,” Quiver announced. He stood up, then paused long enough to say, “Remember what I told you about ignoring Chopper? If you had done that, then neither of us would have gotten in trouble this morning. Think about that next time before you get tractored into doing something you think he wants you to do. Now, food. Caf. I’ll be right back.”

Quiver walked toward the food serving line, and Darin turned a bit to watch him go. Once he was certain Quiver was out of earshot, Darin sighed again and quietly said to his wingman’s back, “Easy for you to say. None of your squadmates are afraid of flying with you because they think you can’t do anything right.” He turned back to his lukewarm caf and realized one final thing: he never had found the forward hangar last night. Chopper had been right.

### *Chapter Three*

“So has this been a typical patrol?” asked Darin. He was flying off Quiver’s wing while they scouted the area ahead of the fleet.

“Pretty much,” Quiver answered, “except for the part where I put you through your paces.”

“Well, it’s good for us to know how the other flies,” Darin said. “If there’s one thing I learned with the Horizons, it’s that wingmen have to be able to work together.”

“True, very true. Though the way you said that makes me think you had a bad wingman experience,” said Quiver.

Darin wondered if his chronic frustration with his former wingman had leaked through in his voice without his realizing it. “Kind of. My Horizon wingman always just bumped his shields up and tried to outrun everything during sim battles.”

“Really? I hope you didn’t learn that habit.”

“No,” Darin said. “In fact, I think I got killed in sims more often than him because I tried to protect him when he did that. I hated it when that happened, but he wouldn’t change.”

“Fighter pilots who won’t change don’t last long, unfortunately,” Quiver replied. “You ready for another run?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Let’s switch this time: *you catch me.*” Quiver immediately banked his X-wing to port and began a relative-downward spiral.

Darin yanked his stick to port and followed. He increased his throttle slightly to try to catch Quiver, but had to slow down again as Quiver pulled out of the spiral only to start another spiral turning in the opposite direction.

Darin didn’t follow Quiver’s path this time, but instead rolled over to starboard and dove straight for him. Quiver leveled out and started an inverted loop back toward their starting point.

Shying away from the head-to-head, Darin banked to starboard as Quiver passed him, cut out his throttle to make a much tighter turn, then ran his engines all the way up and was promptly on Quiver’s tail again. Quiver feinted a turn to port then turned slightly to starboard.

Darin fell for the feint and cursed softly as he saw Quiver pull away from him. He looped around nose-over-tail and increased his speed.

He’d almost reached Quiver again when his scope started flashing and Botch beeped at him. He immediately put the game out of his mind and entered straight-and-level flight. “Ten, you see that?”

Quiver had also stopped dodging and pulled up alongside him. “Yeah. Working on getting a reading now.”

Botch displayed the long-range sensor data on Darin’s scope, and Quiver confirmed Botch’s report. “A Nebulon-B. Looks like there may be some smaller ships around her, but it’s hard to tell. Come on, we’re out of here. They could have detected us farther out than we can detect them. Keep your eyes open while we head back, and keep comm silence until we’re within range of our ship unless you spot something else.”

The two pilots pushed in their throttles and silently flew back to *Crescent Star*. By the

time the immense capital ship and its small fleet finally came into view ahead of them, Darin's mind and heart were racing from speculations about what spotting the Nebulon-B would now mean for them. Quiver wasn't acting like it had been a friendly vessel. Lost in his imaginings, Darin was a bit startled when Quiver's voice suddenly crackled over his comm system. "*Crescent Star*, this is Corona Ten."

The response came back as, "Go ahead, Corona Ten."

"We picked up a Nebulon-B at coordinates 83x9x12. Some smaller ships appeared to be with her, but we couldn't get a good reading. I'm not certain if they spotted us or not, but they weren't reacting as if they had. We came back right away as per orders. Should we go back and find out what's really out there?"

"Stand by." The comm fell silent, and it remained silent for a long enough time that Darin's imagination started running away again. He was just about to ask Quiver if there was a comm problem and was wondering what they should do if they were being jammed by an enemy ship getting ready to ambush them when the Mon Cal Cruiser replied. "Coronas Nine and Ten, come back in for refueling and report to your briefing room immediately."

"On our way. Corona Ten out."

\*\*\*\*\*

Darin swiped a roll of tape from a mechanic's countertop as he and Quiver headed out of the hangar to the briefing room. All around them, alert lights were flashing, and personnel were scrambling to finish their tasks. A flight of Y-wings launched. He had thought the hangar had been busy and overwhelming when he'd first arrived on the ship, but that was nothing compared to this. This was beyond overwhelming, moving into the realms of "charged" and "almost frightening", and he'd never seen anything like it on any of the capital ships his training squadron had flown on. Darin wasn't sure exactly what was going to happen now, but whatever it was, it was serious.

After moving through that mayhem, the briefing room was an oasis of tranquility. Darin and Quiver took a seat inside and waited for the rest of the pilots from the two fighter squadrons to join them. To distract himself, Darin attempted to adjust his oversized orange flightsuit some more. Darin folded over a couple more sections of the fabric to make it shorter and less baggy, and then held those folds in place with the tape.

Quiver chuckled and tore off some tape for him. "Still too big, huh?"

"Just a little. The parts we taped before seem to be okay, though."

"Good. And now let me pre-empt something." Quiver took a long piece of the adhesive strip and used it to haphazardly tape Darin's thigh to his chair. "When Mack or anyone else comes in, you don't have to jump up and call the room to attention. Just stay sitting. Don't fight the tape."

"Easy for you to say," Darin muttered as he kept working on his flightsuit. "You haven't spent the last three months getting in trouble for *not* doing it."

"You need to relax here, rookie. Everything will be so much easier for you then."

“Easy for you to say,” Darin repeated. He honestly didn’t see how it was possible to relax when alert lights were flashing and enemy ships were nearby and—

“Ten, come here.”

Darin looked up from his project to see Commander Mackin and Lieutenant Weas fully suited up in their flight gear and looking at Quiver expectantly from the center aisle. As Quiver stood up, he pushed Darin’s shoulder down to keep him in his seat, then he walked with the CO and XO toward the front of the room. They stopped a fair distance away, and Darin couldn’t hear what they were saying when they began to talk. A couple of times Darin noticed Mackin and Weas glance in his direction. Mackin in particular seemed serious and concerned about something, almost completely opposite of how Quiver appeared at that moment.

The other pilots were steadily filing in and finding seats, likewise suited up in their respective flight gear. CC smiled, greeted Darin and sat down to the left of him, leaving one chair open between them for Quiver.

Darin finished with the tape, including the piece Quiver had used to stick him to his chair, and stowed the roll under his seat just as Quiver came back and sat down. “Pay good attention to the briefing, rookie,” Quiver said with a grin. “You get to come along on the mission now.”

“What?” Darin barely managed to get the strangled word out.

“Yeah. Don’t worry, it’s a pretty straightforward fight. You flew fine on the patrol. You’ll be all right.” Seeing Darin’s unchanged expression and wide eyes, Quiver’s voice grew a touch more serious. “You’ve got to go on your first combat mission someday. It’s better to get it over and done with sooner rather than later so it’s not hanging over your head. Honest.”

CC nudged Quiver and muttered something to him that Darin couldn’t hear, and Quiver mumbled something back to her. That exchange went on for another few seconds until Mackin announced from the front of the room, “All right, everyone, listen up.”

Darin turned his fragile attention to the commander. Another man stood beside him, whom Quiver quickly and quietly identified as the Quakes’ leader, Commander Unirt. The room abruptly fell silent.

Once everyone was focused on Mackin, he went on. “The mission we have been preparing for in the sims over the last few days has come a little more quickly than we expected. Instead of another day or two, it’s pushed its way to the here and now.”

On the holoprojector, he called up an image of a group of ships. “You know all this already, but we’re going to make sure everyone is on the same page. Nearby is an Imperial scientific fleet. Not very large, as you can tell. Most of the ships are made up of minimally-armed transports and science vessels, which is why they have this as an escort.” With the press of a button, the holo changed to the image of a Nebulon-B frigate. “This is *Night Phantom*, and she will be the main opposition on this mission.

“There are two scientists aboard one of the science vessels, *Focus Sweep*.” That particular ship became highlighted in the holo, casting a strange glow over Mackin’s face as he looked out at the pilots. “They have valuable knowledge about the research being done in this sector of space by the Empire, and they wish to defect to the Rebellion. They’ve been sending us the coordinates of the fleet daily. The scientists have assured us that they’ll be able to access a

hyperdrive-capable shuttle when required, but due to their stations they can't fly out unnoticed or unopposed. That's where we come in. The scientists will be given the word, and they'll be ready to escape on their shuttle, which will have a special IFF frequency Commander Unirt and I will give you. Our role in this mission is to engage and occupy *Night Phantom*'s TIE complement long enough for the scientists to board their shuttle and jump to predetermined coordinates. The primary goal here is not to take out the frigate, just to provide enough distraction to let that shuttle escape."

Commander Unirt, a heavyset man with greying hair and a mustache, continued the briefing. "The Imperial fleet has apparently moved in an unexpected direction since we received the last coordinates, which is why we stumbled upon them sooner than we thought we would. The advance patrol has just spotted *Night Phantom* and her fleet and discovered their new coordinates. We're keeping our fleet out of their projected sensor range, but we don't know if they saw our patrol, so we must act quickly. The two squadrons will microjump in with *Windstar* and *Darkspeed*. While we focus on the TIEs, they'll be cutting off *Focus Sweep*'s escape vectors and also be trying to keep *Night Phantom* occupied from a distance. If *Focus Sweep* looks like it might get away, the Quakes will hit it with ion cannons and a boarding party will be sent to extract the scientists. This is not going to be a long engagement: this is an in-and-out hit-and-run." He looked around. "Are there any questions?"

No one spoke up. "All right," Commander Mackin said, "let's go."

\*\*\*\*\*

Darin felt sick from nervousness as he walked to the hangar with the others. Quiver, on the other hand, didn't look too concerned about the fact that they were all about to fly into a swarm of lethal laser bolts. He was chatting with CC about something until Darin interrupted with a hesitant question. "Quiver? What are *Windstar* and *Darkspeed*?"

"Huh?" Quiver turned his attention to him. "Oh, they're a couple other ships in our fleet. A Corvette and a Bulk Cruiser, respectively."

"They didn't mention *Crescent Star* in the briefing. Isn't she coming too?"

"I doubt it. She'd just spook the tiny Imp fleet and make it run. Didn't they teach you these kinds of things in training?"

CC elbowed Quiver in the side, prompting a small yelp from him. "Be nice to the rookie!" she scolded. Quiver stuck his tongue out at her, and she returned the favor before ignoring him and patiently explaining to Darin, "We've done similar hit-and-runs on small fleets before. One thing we noticed is that when *Crescent Star* and sometimes *Bacta* come with, the targets put all their efforts into running as soon as their sensors detect us, and we end up not catching anything. So what we've started doing for small, low-firepower fleets like this is having *Star*, *Bacta* and *Providence* hang back out of sensor range until we microjump in, and once we have the targets engaged, the three of them will start moving closer with their sublights for support and pickup. Make sense?"

"Yeah...I think so." Darin was about to ask what kind of ships *Bacta* and *Providence* were

when he was distracted by Quiver taking the forgotten roll of tape from him and tossing it back on the countertop in the hangar.

“I heard *Bacta*’s weapons are being glitchy again, otherwise she might have come with on this one,” Quiver said offhandedly. “Should give that roll of tape to her mechanics: they probably need it more than your flightsuit does, rookie.”

CC sighed, shook her head, gave Darin an encouraging grin and started angling over to the subhangar housing Corona Squadron’s X-wings. “Be nice to the rookie, Quiver!” she called over her shoulder.

“Hey, I’m the epitome of the word ‘nice’!” Quiver called back. Darin couldn’t be sure, but it sounded like CC almost choked on a spasm of laughter.

Since they had just come back from patrol, Darin’s and Quiver’s X-wings were near the hangar’s magcon field, separate from the others and getting a quick turnaround. The two pilots hadn’t taken more than three additional steps in that direction before they were stopped by a voice from behind saying, “Look, it’s our sweet little rookie!”

Darin recognized that voice by now. He turned around to see the two Quakes dressed in grey Y-wing flightsuits, the blonde with a pilot insignia and the black-haired woman designated as a gunner. He realized that he hadn’t even gotten their names yet, though to be fair his memory capacity for names had gotten maxed out the previous day anyway. Before he could ask for them the black-haired woman grinned and said, “Good luck out there.”

The blonde finished braiding her hair and took her helmet back from her gunner. “You’ll do fine,” she told Darin. “Buy us drinks when we get back, okay?”

Darin tried to smile through his anxiety but met with only minimal success. “Sure. Good luck to you too.”

The women turned toward their Y-wing in the other subhangar as Darin and Quiver continued on. “I’m glad to see you’ve already learned the proper answer for ‘buy us drinks’ is ‘yes’,” Quiver said.

Darin didn’t have a chance to respond before Chopper jogged up to them. Kalre walked up a second later. “Blast it, I told Mack this was a bad idea,” Chopper muttered, studying Darin in his flight gear. To Quiver he said, “Listen, keep this wingman of yours away from me out there, got it?”

“What? You mean the mighty Chopper is afraid of a widdle ol’ rookie?” Quiver asked.

“No. I just don’t want to be in the vicinity if he freaks out. I will not have my cause of death be ‘accidentally shot by panicked supposed ally’,” Chopper said.

Quiver rolled his eyes. “Relax. Mack already told me what to do with him in the fight. You won’t have to worry about a thing.”

“I better not.” Chopper and Kalre also walked away and began discussing something between themselves.

Quiver snorted and kept going with a silent Darin toward their two fighters. Quiver looked down at his new wingman and said, “What, no proclamations of self-defense this time? No ‘I’ll show you I can do it’ rebuttals?”

Darin hardly heard him. The hangar exit loomed larger as they approached, and Darin’s

gaze was drawn to the infinite, black void of space visible through the magcon field. His pace faltered when they reached the fighters. "I'm—I'm not so sure about this, Quiver."

Quiver grinned reassuringly at him. "You'll be fine, rookie. Just stick close and shoot at anything that's not friendly. If you hit it, that's even better."

Darin watched Quiver jump up the ladder to his cockpit, then he put a shaky hand on his own ladder, but his legs suddenly wouldn't move. Every single thing he'd ever overheard veteran pilots say about the short life expectancy of Rebel fighter pilots and especially about the slim odds of a pilot surviving his first dogfight was now crystal clear in his mind, all underscored by Chopper's words. Suddenly the consequences of his decision to join Starfighter Command seemed much, much more real, and his mind began bombarding him with unwelcome, uncontrollable thoughts. What if this was the last day of his life? What if he was about to die? What if there was no tomorrow for him? What if everything ended right here, right now?

The top of the cockpit access ladder seemed out of reach under the weight of those questions until Darin remembered something else, another day about half a year ago when he had had those exact same thoughts: was this his last day to be alive? Would he live to see the next morning? A day that had begun as normally as any other had ended with Darin's whole world being turned upside down. Blaster bolts from the Imperial forces trying to occupy his hometown had gotten too close and had changed everything about his life. That day had been much more frightening than this one was, and it had been caused by the Empire as well. Despite everything, Darin *had* gotten through it and lived to see the next morning, and that day had started him on the path that had brought him here in an attempt to right his world once again. He couldn't afford to lose control now, not after all he'd gone through to get here. Darin chewed on his bottom lip, took a few deep breaths, then closed his eyes and forced himself up to his cockpit, trying to ignore the fear that he might never touch solid ground again.

After he strapped himself in, Darin took his helmet and tried not to grimace at the sight of it. The one remaining X-wing helmet the quartermaster had found wasn't much better than Darin's flightsuit. It was ugly, half of it a sickly green color, and it had a large chip in the crest and no chinstrap. The only saving grace was a local tradition Quiver had told him about earlier that allowed rookies to repaint and personalize their helmets after their first combat mission.

Instead of dwelling too long on the helmet's appearance, Darin flipped it upside down to look at the holo he had printed out and stuck inside before patrol. In this particular picture, Darin was sitting with Cohen Nuuren and Bosko Wanth, his two best friends from back home; all three were wearing their *donri* gear and posing goofily for the holocam. Donri was a popular sport on Darin's homeworld, and the three of them had played together for years on their school's team and in a few recreational leagues. The school's team had made it to the playoffs during the three friends' final year of classes, and the holo had been taken immediately prior to the first semifinal game. Even though their team had ended up losing, that road trip with his friends had been one of the best times of Darin's life.

He reminded himself that he had to find a picture of his parents and sister to put in there as well when he got back...*if* he got back. Then everyone he cared about who had been killed during the Imperial occupation would be there with him on every flight he made. Darin pushed

down the memories before they started taking over again, then he put his helmet on and pressed it firmly onto his head. “Help me out here, guys. This is for you, after all,” he whispered. Proving himself to Chopper became less of a priority in light of the need to prove himself to those he had lost.

Darin lowered the visor, put on his flight gloves, lowered the cockpit canopy and went through the preflight checklist with trembling hands. *Just like in the sims*, Darin told himself. *Just like other missions. Just like you’ve done before. Just like with the Horizons. Never mind the fact that nothing with this squadron is like how it was with the Horizons. Settle down. Focus.* The mechanics finished prepping his fighter and gave him a thumbs-up indication that he was good to go. Darin wasn’t sure if he was glad for that or not.

A minute later, Commander Mackin’s voice came over the squadron frequency. “Corona Squadron, status.” One by one, the pilots went numerically by designation and reported their X-wing’s condition. After Quiver’s report, Mackin said, “Okay, then, we’re set. Your astromechs have the shuttle’s IFF code, so watch for it. Nine, Ten, you two are up front. We’re cleared, so lead us out.”

Feeling like every eye in the universe was watching his every move, Darin tried to ignore his twisting stomach, carefully lifted up on his repulsors and followed Quiver out of the hangar.

## Chapter Four

The hyperspace jump was painfully brief, and after the blue tunnel had dissolved away and the typical black starfield snapped back into being around them, Darin fell into formation with the rest of Corona Squadron. Quake Squadron was there beside them, as well as *Windstar* and *Darkspeed*. Dead ahead of them lay the Imperial scientific fleet and the imposing Nebulon-B frigate *Night Phantom*, much, much closer than the ships had been when the two Coronas spotted them on patrol. Darin swallowed hard.

“Lock S-foils in attack formation,” Commander Mackin ordered.

Darin flipped the appropriate switch, and his S-foils split to give the X-wing its distinctive appearance. Just ahead and to port, he saw Quiver’s do the same.

*Windstar* and *Darkspeed* immediately teamed up to block the straightaway escape vector of *Focus Sweep*, which, like the other ships, was reacting to the Rebels’ presence.

“TIE squadrons launching,” Lt. Weas reported.

Commander Mackin’s response was immediate. “Corona Squadron, accelerate to attack speed and stay in loose formation to evade incoming fire from *Phantom*. We’ll intercept the TIEs before they can get organized. One torpedo on the initial pass, then switch to lasers, break by pairs and engage. Try to stay near the other Imperial vessels if you can: *Phantom* likely won’t fire into her own fleet. Watch for the defecting shuttle.”

Two squadrons of TIE Fighters, including a flight that had already been out on patrol, were in the midst of launching and were struggling to form up while the Rebels bore down on them. Darin centered his targeting brackets over a TIE, then almost lost his aim when *Phantom* began firing at the Rebel starfighters. Darin’s full attention was quickly occupied by the fact that he was getting *shot at*. He did his best to keep his fighter jinking in random directions and prayed none of those monstrous green bolts would connect with him or any of the Rebels.

His mind was brought back to the TIEs by the steady tone of a torpedo lock from his targeting system. It had come sooner than Darin expected as the distance between the squadrons dwindled, and the order to fire came more quickly yet. Numerous TIEs erupted into fireballs. Darin noticed with some dismay that the TIE he had targeted managed to break the lock the torpedo had on it and danced out of the way, but soon that was the farthest thing from his mind.

Darin had never experienced anything like flying headlong into a horde of real TIE Fighters before, and he was quite certain that he didn’t like it. No matter how realistic those flight simulators were, they weren’t *this* realistic. Darin followed his squadron in on the trails of the torpedoes but still flinched when the surviving TIEs began firing and flew past them in head-to-head passes. He cursed at himself for flinching and tried to concentrate on his scope, on following Quiver’s X-wing, and on staying alive.

Once they cleared the first wave of TIEs, Quiver veered off and Darin followed. Soon Quiver was chasing one of the TIE Fighters, who spun and twisted desperately to get away. Darin was presented with several good firing opportunities as the TIE moved into his targeting reticle, but fear of accidentally shooting an ally had frozen his trigger finger. This time, if he made a mistake and hit a squadmate, they wouldn’t be climbing out of the simulator afterward. Instead of

risking it, he stuck as close to Quiver as he dared and simply kept watch around them, letting Quiver do all of the shooting.

The TIE eventually twisted in more directions than Quiver could keep up with, and it broke away from its pursuit. Darin heard Quiver sigh in frustration over the comm as the pair turned to look for their next target, and then his wingman's voice followed. "Listen, Nine," Quiver said evenly, "here's Lesson Number One. You're not there solely as another set of sensors. You've got four laser cannons for a reason. Use them."

A TIE blew by, much too close for comfort. Darin jumped, then moved closer to Quiver's X-wing. For some reason Quiver seemed impervious to the unnerving chaos of the dogfight all around them, and Darin wanted to sneak inside that bubble of his. "Copy, Ten," he said uncertainly.

"All right, you see that TIE ahead of us, Nine?" Quiver asked. "We're in nearly perfect striking position. I'm your wing; I got your back. Fire at him."

Darin's throat tightened, and he quickly checked his scope for friendlies in the vicinity. In the delay Quiver hurriedly added, "Quick, before we lose him! You're clear—trust me!"

Darin aimed and squeezed the trigger, involuntarily cringing a bit as he did so. Red laser bolts streaked from his fighter toward the TIE and went wide. Alerted to the threat, the TIE climbed out of danger and joined up with a wingman.

"That's much better, Nine." Quiver didn't sound mad at all that Darin had missed. "Okay, you're my wing. Let's find another who's more willing to play with us."

"Ten, Eight. Feel like helping?" Lt. Weas, the Two Flight Lead, said over the comm. "Turn to four-five mark two. Seven and I have a group we're dealing with."

"Copy, Eight. Let's go, Nine," Quiver replied.

Quiver led Darin to where two X-wings were fighting four TIEs. A few breaks and rejoins and one wrong turn through the localized skirmish led to Coronas Seven and Eight facing off against three of the TIEs, Darin out of position and the remaining TIE on Quiver's tail. Quiver began evading and called over the comm, "Nine, I need some help here!"

"Coming, Ten!" Darin breathlessly went after Quiver and focused all of his efforts on helping his wingman. He ignored his scope and his comm so he could concentrate on staying on the tail of the TIE, and he tried not to think about what would happen if he hit Quiver by accident. Finally Darin's desperation overrode his fears, and he fired a couple of rounds at the TIE but missed. He struggled to get the now-distracted TIE in his crosshairs again.

It surprised Darin when Botch suddenly shrieked at him, and then he heard someone yell over the comm, "Nine, watch it!"

"What?" The word was barely out of Darin's mouth when he saw the danger: another TIE Fighter was ahead of him, heading his way and beginning to fire at him.

Darin cursed and immediately pulled his X-wing into a hard turn to starboard to get out of the line of fire. He hadn't even completed his turn before he saw that his new course was taking him right into the path of a different TIE that had been angling in from behind on an intercept course with him, likely to pick off any Rebel remains after the head-to-head.

Darin's heart stopped, and he knew he couldn't completely avoid the second TIE in time.

He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed down his trigger as hard as he could while trying to make the turn even tighter.

The TIE was at point-blank range and was also firing at him when Darin's lasers turned it into a fireball. One hit from the Imperial's laser and the energy of the TIE's explosion slammed against Darin's shields hard enough to physically throw the X-wing sideways, and shrapnel and debris from the TIE pelted his starfighter like an angry hailstorm.

Darin pried his finger from the trigger and anxiously worked at getting his fighter back under control. It responded a moment later and obediently followed his commands. The diagnostics looked okay, but he'd lost most of his shields in that blast.

"Nine? You all right?" Quiver asked.

"What? Um, yeah, I think so. Just lost some shields," Darin managed. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Seven got my TIE, and the other one flew off. I'm coming to join up with you."

Botch squawked angrily, and Darin glanced at the translation screen before replying, "I know, Botch, I'm sorry. Can you just work on getting the shields restored?" Darin made sure there were no more TIEs around, and even Quiver's pursuit was thankfully gone, and then he began adjusting his power settings to recharge the shields faster.

"By the way, Nine, congratulations on your first kill," Quiver said. "But trust me, there are easier ways of doing it."

Despite Quiver's words, Darin couldn't even comprehend what had just happened, other than the fact that he hadn't died, his X-wing was still in one piece for the moment, and the small percentage of shields was making Darin feel even more vulnerable. Quiver's X-wing pulled in front of him again, and Darin tried to clear his mind as he formed up to search for their next target.

It was hard to find one in the blurry chaos, and the disjointed information coming over the Rebel comm frequencies didn't help. Darin had learned how to mentally filter the comms in the sims, but it was a hundred times harder to do in actual combat. He hoped Quiver was better at it than he was, or things could get bad for the pair quickly.

Darin's shields were about halfway recharged when Lt. Weas's voice cut through over the Rebels' general combat frequency with a message even Darin caught. "The shuttle has just left *Focus Sweep's* hangar. Corona Two Flight, we're covering it."

Darin began to follow Quiver toward it, but suddenly there was a bright flash and a flurry of TIEs, and a new round of information came over that frequency.

"*Phantom* has moved within firing range!" Commander Unirt reported. "Quake Three's been hit. All fighters, check position and move away. Quake Three, what's your status?"

A broken, static-filled comm transmission answered. "--Down, direct...-B and TIE...lost my gun... power--"

"Three, get back to *Star* immediately," Commander Unirt said. "I need a Corona to fly cover for her."

"That's you, Nine," Weas said. "Go."

"Yes, sir." Immediately Darin obeyed and turned toward the damaged Y-wing, which was already heading out of the engagement at a reduced speed. *Night Phantom* was an intimidating

backdrop, and if *Windstar* hadn't started occupying its attention Darin would have had quite a few more reservations about approaching the firing range of its laser cannons again. He saw no TIEs moving in yet, but that could change in a heartbeat.

"What's your status, Quake Three?" he asked once he came alongside the Y-wing.

"-you, swee-okie?"

Darin's head swam as he recognized the blond woman's voice. "Yeah. That's you? Both of you?"

"Yeah, bo-...-ner, no shie-" There was a long burst of static, then, "-at 20%."

"I can't understand you!" Darin said desperately as his heart raced even faster.

Botch beeped urgently at him and drew his attention to a lone TIE approaching from port, apparently wanting an easy kill of a severely damaged fighter. Darin positioned himself between the wishbone and the TIE, hoping the sight of his fighter would be enough to deter the Imperial. It wasn't. Blast it, now what was he supposed to do? Confront it? Stay there in position? What? By the time he called for help and explained the situation, it would be too late. He silently willed the damaged Y-wing to fly faster, but it remained at its previous agonizing pace.

It wasn't like he had never been in the position of needing to protect someone during a sim battle. In fact, he couldn't count the number of times his wingman's actions had forced Darin into the protector role. But that had rarely ended well for Darin, and often not for his wingman either, and his wingman's ship had always been undamaged at the start of it. Quake Three was already at a disadvantage there. Darin knew enough to know that this wasn't going to be good.

They were now out of the dogfight and heading toward the distant spot where his sensors said *Crescent Star* and the rest of the Rebel fleet was, just like CC had said. Out here in the open, Darin was the only one available to protect Three, and he made up his mind. Darin chewed on his bottom lip, quickly told Quake Three what was happening and turned toward the eyeball, adjusting his throttle to try to keep himself between the TIE and Y-wing. He bumped his weak shields full forward and started firing.

The Imperial pilot dodged the laser bolts and started to climb; Darin followed and managed to nick one of the TIE's wings. That didn't affect it much, and as if to laugh in Darin's face the TIE smoothly spiraled upward a bit with the Rebel still following. Finally it pitched over and throttled up, heading straight for the injured Y-wing that was now a little distance away.

When Darin saw that he had left Quake Three open like that, his stomach turned hollow. He was still a little bit under the TIE in relation to Three, and in one instant he had reversed his throttle, desperately pulled a turn so sharp that the inertial compensators couldn't immediately correct for it, and punched his throttle in full again as he raced to get between the two craft.

He was going too fast to try to aim, so he put his shields full aft and snuck into the TIE's line of fire just as the Imperial opened up on Three. Darin felt the lasers impacting his rear shields as he physically shielded Three, and they were being drained fast. He hadn't gotten very far ahead of the TIE—he hoped he could get it to change course so they wouldn't end up ramming the Y-wing, an event which was imminent in the next couple of seconds. Quickly, before the TIE's first salvo had ended, Darin braked to two-thirds speed.

The full-throttle TIE pulled up sharply to avoid the X-wing braking immediately in front

of it. As Darin adjusted his course and dove under the Y-wing, he was relieved that they were almost back to *Crescent Star*, which was coming to meet them. Once he was clear of the Y-wing, he pulled up and formed back up with Three. The TIE Fighter had turned around, evidently unwilling to get any closer to the Mon Cal Cruiser. Darin exhaled shakily, then told the squadron there was a lone TIE heading back toward the fight.

“Almo—...—kie,” Three said.

Darin figured *Crescent Star* could see what their situation was, but he’d better contact them anyway. “*Crescent Star*, this is Corona Nine. Quake Three’s heavily damaged. We’re incoming.”

“Copy, Corona Nine,” *Star* answered. “We have emergency crews getting ready to receive in the main hangar as we speak.”

A minute later, Darin watched Quake Three pass through the hangar’s magcon field. “*Crescent Star*, Corona Nine. You have Quake Three?”

“Affirmative, Corona Nine. Three has landed.”

“Thanks. Nine out.” Darin turned back toward the battle.

He was about halfway there with *Crescent Star* and the other ships closing the gap when a transmission from Lt. Weas came through. “The shuttle has jumped to hyperspace.”

“Coronas, disengage at your first opportunity and head back,” Mackin ordered. “*Phantom* and her fleet won’t be looking to stick around any longer with *Star* coming. *Star* will provide cover, and she’ll be jumping out of here the instant we’re all aboard, so don’t keep us waiting. And sorry, Nine, but you might as well turn around again. We’ll be hot on your tail.”

“Yes, sir.” Darin did another 180 and got landing clearance from the capital ship. He was still full of adrenaline but also relieved beyond measure that the battle was over and somehow he was still breathing. He’d done it! He’d proven he wouldn’t panic and endanger his squadmates. He’d proven he could get through a real live combat mission. He’d—

Darin’s thoughts broke off when he passed through the magcon field and saw Quake Three’s ship. He hadn’t gotten a good look at it while flying, but now he could see it clearly as he circled around the mess sitting in the middle of the hangar. The entire aft section of the fuselage was burned and melted. The cockpit’s forward part was barely recognizable as such, and the rear of it where the gunner sat had a large portion missing. Not much remained structurally to connect the cockpit and fuselage to the engines. Mechanics were swarming the wishbone, spraying foam onto it and trying to drain fuel to protect against the potential for an explosion.

Darin probably could have handled that sight if he had turned away then, but a second later he saw a mechanic near the front of the Y-wing talking to a deck officer. The mechanic was gingerly holding a light grey Y-wing pilot helmet, which Darin recognized as the helmet the blond pilot had worn. As he flew slowly past the mechanic on his way to his landing spot in the corner of the Coronas’ subhangar, he saw that the back outer half of the helmet was splattered with red.

Darin stared at it until Botch beeped at him to pay attention to his landing, and he numbly watched himself go through the motions as light-headedness threatened him. He made a landing for which any of his flight instructors would have docked him points, then powered down as

quickly as he could. He couldn't stop thinking about that mutilated Y-wing, the blond pilot's bloody helmet, and the black-haired gunner whom that blood had been inside of mere minutes before...and the more he thought about it, the more his thoughts amplified themselves inside his head and the more lightheaded and nauseous he got. The instant his ship was powered down, he unbuckled his restraints and awkwardly rested his head against his forward console to try to get more blood to his brain, ignoring the flight yoke pressing uncomfortably against his face.

From far away and through the ringing in his ears, Darin heard Botch whistle inquiringly, then concernedly. He stayed bent over for a long time, finally moving only to motion that he was okay to a mechanic who knocked on his canopy. He slowly sat up and slumped heavily in his seat after his initial wooziness passed, which allowed him to pop the canopy open and let the cool hangar air blow against his sweaty face. The ringing had mostly dissipated, and the whine of engines and repulsorlifts now heralded the return of the rest of the snubfighters. Even after the last ship landed he continued staring blankly ahead.

The fact that Quiver's X-wing settled to the deck next to him never registered in his consciousness. A short time later, Darin distantly heard a jumble of words that seemed to be directed at him, but he couldn't make them out and was too consumed by his frightened and disturbed thoughts to try. He chewed on his bottom lip and continued staring straight ahead, not even bothering to straighten up from where he was slouched in his seat. That would require energy and a motivation to return to the reality outside of his cockpit, neither of which he had at the moment. Even breathing was more challenging than usual.

A shadow appeared next to him at his port side where the ladder to his cockpit was attached. "Darin?" he heard Quiver ask cautiously. The words were much closer now and easier to make out. Quiver paused, and then he kept his calm voice at an easy conversational level. "You hurt?" Darin still gazed ahead, but he distractedly and slowly shook his head no.

Quiver spoke up again. "You did well for your first fight. The first one is always the worst." When Darin didn't respond, Quiver softly commented, "Gets pretty rough out there, doesn't it."

Darin's eyes involuntarily flickered down to stare at the Y-wing wreckage across the hangar. "Rough" was an understatement. How could Quiver be so calm about what had just happened? Didn't he see the—the—

His wingman pressed on. "When you were with Horizon Squadron, did you ever have any casualties?" Darin shook his head again. "So Carsyn was the first person you knew who was killed in a battle?"

Naming the victim of that melted, twisted pile of metal sitting on the hangar deck was the final thing needed to push Darin over the edge, and not even Darin himself really expected the floodgate that opened then. He whirled to Quiver with a stricken look on his face and began in a small voice, "She's gone, Quiver. Just like that. Gone. One minute I'm singing to her in a bar, the next she's splattered all over her pilot's helmet. She's just gone. On and off. There then not. No transition. No warning. Just—stopped."

Darin realized that he wasn't making much sense, but his momentum wouldn't let him stop now. "And just yesterday, and just before we headed out today, she was just like anyone

else. Nothing different. She was one of you. One of us. She *was* you. She was me. She was anyone, and that means that anyone can have the same thing happen to them. How do I live with that? With the knowledge that anyone I see or talk to could really only be moments away from being dead, another kill marker on some TIE Fighter? Or that it could be me, that *I'll* be that 'anyone'?" Taking an unsteady breath, Darin looked blankly ahead again. His voice got even quieter, and it slowed and shook a bit. "I don't think I can do this, Quiver. It's too much. I can't."

In the back of his mind, Darin knew what was coming next: he was going to get chewed out for expressing those views and wanting to quit. Similar things had happened to him and his squadmates in the Horizons at one time or another. He was going to be told in no uncertain terms to be quiet, stop complaining, stop being a baby, and suck it up like a soldier. Only, he *wasn't* a soldier. Soldiers could fight. He'd just proven that he couldn't, and he had let everyone down. Darin tried to brace himself for the imminent discipline but found he didn't have the mental energy to do even that.

Quiver processed Darin's outburst for a few moments before asking, "Why did you join the Rebellion, Darin?"

Darin turned back to him in surprise at the unexpected question and the mildness of it. He forced himself to think a bit and was afraid of what he was now realizing. Was he destined to lose everyone he cared about? First his family and friends were killed, and now he just put himself in a position to see more death every day of people he worked with? That thought was more than he could deal with at the moment, so Darin decided simplicity at this time was best to answer the question. "Because I don't want what happened to my world and my family and friends to happen to others."

"You've had losses in your life."

Darin winced a little. "Yeah."

"But you didn't stop at the losses."

"Huh?"

Quiver locked gazes with the younger pilot. "You want to know how to mentally survive? How to stay sane in a career where the difference between a chance at another lungful of air and being restored to your fundamental particles can sometimes be measured in nanometers? Where you find yourself at a memorial service for someone you just beat at sabacc yesterday? It's simple in theory but hard in practice, and it's this: you don't focus on the losses, the failures, the deaths, or the defeats. You focus on the gains, the achievements, the lives saved, the victories denied the Empire."

Darin stared at Quiver, trying to sort that out in his mind. "So you just stop thinking about them after they die? You forget about them like they never existed? Only think happy thoughts?" Darin knew from experience that it was nearly impossible to stop thinking about a recently lost loved one for even as much as a day. Besides being much too cold-hearted for Darin's tastes, doing it permanently was out of the question.

"No no no. That's not at all what I'm saying." Quiver thought for a couple seconds, and then he continued, "Here, let me try to give you an example. We lost a great gunner and a wonderful friend today in Carsyn, and we will remember her and mourn her and miss her. She

deserves nothing less. But instead of continuously dwelling on how sad we are that she's gone and how frankly damned unfair it is that she died, we'll focus on the good she did in her life and the people she helped, and we will also remember that her pilot survived. You allowed Jenna to make it back, and because of that, this galaxy will be a little brighter, a little better off, and a little more hellish for the Empire. We can't afford to shut down and stop every time we suffer a loss—if we did, we'd never get anywhere, so we find whatever gains we can and use them to propel us forward. Whether you realize it or not, you're here because you didn't stop at whatever losses you've experienced in your life: you've moved forward past them, so you know it can be done, though it can be one of the hardest things ever. Remember the losses, but focus on the gains.”

Quiver allowed that to sink in for a few moments. Darin thought about the words and tried to connect them to his past experiences. They sounded like they should make sense, but his mind was incapable of extracting the sense from anything at that moment. He'd have to think about it more later on when he was no longer face-to-face with it all.

At last Quiver took a deep breath. “Now, unless my wingman has any questions, I'm on my way to the medical bay to check on Jenna. You just might be able to convince me to show you how to get there too.”

Darin managed a faint half-smile and nodded. Quiver started back down the ladder but was stopped when Darin looked away again and haltingly asked, “Quiver? Who was Corona Nine?” For some reason, that question seemed terribly important at the moment.

Quiver reversed his step. “The one before you?” Darin nodded in reply.

The blue-eyed pilot took a few seconds to compose his thoughts. “His name was Prehn Johnsat, nicknamed Skull Cracker. Don't ask. Big-boned guy, adequate pilot, and he rivaled both Chopper and Kalre in his arrogance. I think he was a mercenary or smuggler before coming to the Rebellion, though no one really knew why he joined—he didn't seem to care that much about it. About three weeks ago, there was an accident aboard the ship here and he was killed.”

That response wasn't very comforting, and Darin fidgeted. Was this what he had to look forward to? Every moment of his life, everything he was, everything he'd done, shortened to a few comments told to the next Corona Nine? “That's all? Is that what Carsyn is now? Nothing more than some sentences for the next Quake Three to hear? The Rebellion condenses its people's lives, too?”

Quiver studied him more closely and finally answered, “Listen, Darin, just because I can sum up his biography in a few sentences, he's more than that to the people who knew him and who shared experiences with him. Same with Carsyn. It'll be the same with you and everyone else here in this hangar. Think about it: after just two days, you're already more than a paragraph to Jenna and to me and to the rest of the squadron, and Carsyn is more than a paragraph to you. Simple words never do justice to what's gained from a life. Understand?”

Darin wasn't quite sure, but he nodded anyway.

“Any other questions?”

“Um, just one.” Darin didn't know why this suddenly came to mind, and he felt a bit silly for even asking it but hesitantly did anyway. “What song did you sing?”

“What?”

“In the bar, she—Carsyn—told me you sang to her when you had to do that initiation rite. What song did you sing?”

Quiver grinned. “Oh, that. I sang ‘Your Love Is Bacta to My Soul.’ Given the location, it seemed appropriate. Remember it like it was yesterday. CC even secretly recorded it and entertained people with it for days afterward, and I didn’t hear the end of it for weeks. See, you’re catching on. Fun memories like that are the kinds of things you focus on here.”

After yet another silence-filled pause, Quiver started down the ladder again but was prematurely stopped once more. “Quiver?”

“Yes?”

Darin looked at him and smiled weakly. “Thanks.”

Gripping the ladder with his left hand, Quiver offered Darin a somber smile and a sloppy salute. He slowly went down one rung of the ladder, then stopped and jerked his head up as though expecting Darin to say something again. When Darin merely raised an eyebrow, Quiver chuckled and slid down the ladder to the deck. He stopped to talk to CC, Lt. Fyndcap and Commander Mackin, who were waiting by the wingmates’ X-wings and looking concerned.

Darin took off his helmet and, like he now noticed Quiver had, placed it next to his heads-up display before wiping the sweat off his face with a sleeve. As he turned a bit to position himself to climb out of the cockpit, he looked past Botch and paused momentarily when he saw the top of his port S-foil. There, painted prominently, was the Corona Squadron emblem. It was a black circle with a red border, the colors of the squadron. The center showed a total solar eclipse, a smaller black circle with silvery rays stretching past it from behind. Superimposed on this black dot was a red Rebel Alliance insignia.

He had seen the emblem before and even had the patch on his shoulder, but it hadn’t really meant anything until now. He looked past the Rebel insignia, past the oppressive black dot drowning out the majority of the star, and now focused on the silvery rays of the eclipsed star’s corona escaping from behind the black dot, refusing to be blocked.

*The gains, not the losses.*

Darin chewed on his bottom lip for a second more, and then he slowly swung out of the cockpit and went down the ladder, grasping it tightly so he wouldn’t see his hands still shaking. The mechanics tended to Darin’s fighter and droid as he joined up with Quiver, CC and Ikoa and accompanied them to the medical facilities.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The End*

Revision G

8-3-08