

Collection of Corona blurbs and unfinished snippets

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*Early Coronas, nightmare about occupation. 4/8/11*

Darin pulled on his general duty uniform over his nightclothes in the dark and also pushed his feet into his boots. The images from the nightmare he'd just had about his homeworld's occupation were vivid in his mind. He wouldn't be getting back to sleep anytime soon; he'd long since learned that lesson.

He quietly slipped out the door of his quarters and stood blinded in the corridor until his eyes adjusted to the light. He didn't really know where to go. He wanted to be alone, but at the same time he needed some company. Darin finally turned and headed for the hangar. Maybe the third-shift techs could use some help with his fighter and he could get his mind off the dream that way.

When Darin got there, he found no techs around his X-wing. He walked to a computer console and pulled up the maintenance log. In it he discovered that his fighter was in the middle of a decay check on some of the gaseous systems, so no additional work was being performed on it at the moment.

Darin went back to his fighter and stared at it for a minute, absentmindedly letting his fingers play over one of the lower laser cannons.

The snubfighter was its own little world. Inside that cockpit was all he needed to survive in the hard vacuum of space. That cockpit let him detach himself from the outside world. Hide from it. Live independently of it.

That sounded exactly like what he needed right now.

Though deep down it seemed a bit silly, Darin looked around. No one seemed to be watching, so he quickly climbed up the cockpit ladder and settled into the seat while leaving the canopy open. The cramped cockpit felt cozy, almost like the snubfighter was embracing and comforting him. Darin ran a light touch over a couple of powered-down instrument displays, then he leaned back against the seat and heaved a long sigh. Turning his head, he looked out through the hangar's magcon field to the blue tunnel of hyperspace.

Out there. Out there was everything he knew, everything he missed so terribly much. It was potent enough to be a physical sensation in his stomach. That type of dream always did this to him. Blast, he felt so damned alone.

The ejection seat wasn't very comfortable, but Darin snuggled into it, huddled down and let the seat and cockpit envelop him. He knew exactly what was coming, and he tried to brace himself for it.

The harsh, negative emotions lived up to his expectations.

The onslaught exhausted him even though he didn't waste any energy trying to fight back.

When it finally eased up, Darin felt his eyelids starting to droop. He didn't fight that either.

\*

"Flight Officer?"

Darin snapped awake with a jerk, and it took him a few seconds to get his bearings. His heart hammered, and his wide-eyed gaze settled on his crew chief Sergeant Talo Ritter, who was standing on the top of the cockpit access ladder and looking quite startled himself.

"Sorry, sir, I didn't mean to surprise you," Ritter said.

Darin shook his head. "No, it's not your fault. I— What time is it?" The hangar was a lot busier now. He hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep.

"0630," Ritter replied.

"Oh no. I need to get back and get ready." Darin rubbed his eyes, then looked guiltily at Ritter. "Uh, Sarge?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I... ask a personal favor?" Darin fumbled. He felt his cheeks reddening. "Please don't tell Commander Mackin or Lieutenant Weas I was in here all night."

Ritter raised an eyebrow. "Why would I tell them that anyway? This isn't an alibi thing, is it?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I just— There was no reason for me to be here so I probably shouldn't have been, and I—"

Ritter chuckled, cutting him off. "Relax, kid. You think you're the only starfighter pilot who's had a night where they couldn't sleep? Go get some caf in you, sir. You'll be fine. But if you want your fighter fixed up now, I need cockpit access."

Darin managed a small smile. Ritter always seemed to take care of him one way or another. "Thank you."

Ritter made way for him, and Darin climbed down to the deck and headed back to his quarters.

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*Early talk with Mack. 4/8/11*

Darin leaned against the wall outside his quarters and watched the sporadic third-shift traffic walk past. Every minute that ticked by was one less minute of sleep, but tonight was just going to be one of those nights. He yawned but remained where he was.

"Darin?" came a confused voice from his left.

Darin looked. Mackin was walking his way.

"Sir," Darin greeted him. He straightened up a bit so he wasn't slouching so much.

Mackin came up to him and stopped. "It's awfully late. What are you doing up?"

"I could ask you the same thing, sir," Darin responded. "You were a first-shifter today too."

Mack chuckled. "True enough." He leaned against the wall beside Darin. "You mind a bit of company?"

Darin shook his head. Like he'd ever tell his CO to go away anyway; he wasn't that stupid.

But he was glad for Mack's presence tonight. He was so blasted lonely, and he needed to talk to someone who wouldn't make fun of him.

Several silent moments crawled past. Finally Darin took a deep breath and looked at the floor. "I really miss my family," Darin said softly.

Mackin's voice was sympathetic, just like Darin had hoped for. "Is that why you're not sleeping?" he asked.

Darin nodded. The dark, quiet room didn't provide enough distractions some nights.

"Tell me about them," Mack urged. "What are some of the things you miss the most about them?"

Darin glanced up and shifted his weight; this wasn't quite the direction he'd expected Mackin to take. An off-hand pat on the shoulder as a token of support, yes. Engaged, personal interaction and interest, no.

"You don't want to hear any of that, sir," Darin mumbled self-consciously, looking down again. The commander had much more important things to concern himself with than how Darin wished he could get some of his dad's easy-going perspective on events, a warm hug from his mom while he mock-protested in embarrassment, and the feeling that he could take on the galaxy just because his little sister Shiori believed he could. Besides, what starfighter pilot would ever admit he wanted a hug from his mom?

Mackin's grin was part amusement, part puzzlement. "I don't? But I'm the one who asked the question. Come on, we're just chatting. Informal, just two people, no strings or ranks attached. Tell me about them. Whatever you'd like to share."

Darin chewed on his lip and fidgeted but finally started telling Mack about his family. He left out the hug part.

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"It's hard," Mack agreed when Darin finished. "Being so far away from everything you know and want to be with. It must be going around tonight. That's why I'm not sleeping either." When Darin looked at him in slight surprise, Mackin continued, "Calla sent me a letter today. I can tell something's wrong, but she didn't say what. Probably didn't want me to worry about it here where I can't do anything, but that just makes it hit even harder that I *can't do anything*. It's... not a pleasant feeling."

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*Claustrophobia. 4/8/11*

Darin stood near the hangar's magcon field and fidgeted away some nervous energy. He gazed out at the stars, doing his best to pretend that he was in that vast void and wasn't feeling so smothered.

Quiver stepped up next to him and elbowed him in the side. "You're acting weird today."

"Sorry." Darin kept his sights on space.

"What's going on in that head of yours?"

"Just going a little stir-crazy, I guess."

"You've always been a crazy Cracian. What's different about today?"

Darin looked up at his wingman. "It's getting suffocating here."

"Hmm? How so?" Quiver asked in confusion. "Did they run out of air again?"

Darin ignored Quiver's attempts at humor and kept his tone serious. "You're part of the Rebellion. You have to be in hiding and secretive and on the run every single second of every single day possibly for the rest of your life or you're done for. Killed. Doesn't that get to you?"

Quiver pursed his lips in thought before finally replying, "No."

"You're lucky then." Darin shuddered and looked back at the starfield. "I'd give anything for one hour of being normal again with no worries and not having to watch my words and my back."

"I don't believe you were ever normal to begin with."

"Like you can talk."

"Takes one to know one."

Darin dropped that tangent. "I just can't help but feel that we're fighting for freedom but because of that, are denied it ourselves. Being on the cutting edge of idealism is damned hard."

"That's why I don't worry about intangible stuff like that," Quiver said with a shrug. "You can chase ideals and concepts your whole life, but there's no point because you'll never catch them. All you'll do is spin your wheels. Why waste the energy? You only need to concern yourself with what's right in front of your face. Things you can touch." He gave Darin a sideways shove and a sideways grin when Darin caught his balance again. "Those are the things you can affect. Besides, more fun that way. And as for the future, well, when the Rebellion wins we won't have to worry about hiding from the Empire any more. Problem solved."

"And if the Rebellion doesn't win?" Darin asked.

"Then we'll have bigger things to worry about than this. If you insist on being a worrywart, which I'm not encouraging, by the way, then pick your battles."

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*"After the war" discussion. 4/8/11*

"So what about you, Darin?" CC asked. "Do you know what you're going to do when the war is over?"

Darin smiled as he lay on the old couch in the pilots' lounge and looked up at the ceiling. "I know exactly what I'm going to do," he said quietly.

"So? What is it?" Quiver prompted from the chair he was sitting backwards on.

Darin closed his eyes so he could better see the mental image. "First I'm going to go back home. Find work. Get a house. When I have enough money I'm going to buy a small cargo transport ship." There it was, that beautiful picture in his mind. His wonderful ship. He couldn't wait. "I'll do shipping runs within the system, maybe to some of the other closer star systems too. During that time I'll find a nice girl, get married, settle down. We'll have a couple of kids, too. Definitely." That was one of his favorite parts of the pictures and planning: he would arrive home from a shipping run, and his kids would run to the door to greet him. He'd pick them each up in a hug, and then share a long kiss with his wife. It would be the perfect life, and someday, it would all be his.

"Um, wow," Quiver said when Darin had finished. "I apparently haven't put anywhere

near as much thought into this as Darin has—”

“There’s a shock,” CC muttered.

“—*But*,” Quiver continued pointedly, “I do know I want to travel around and see the galaxy... without shooting at it.”

Darin hardly heard him. He was still watching the imaginary holovid play out on the insides of his eyelids. His kids were asking him if he brought them anything, which he had. Of course. He was laughing with his wife over a fun shared memory, then talking to her about their days. Their normal, everyday days. No war. No fighting. No killing. Just earning a living and making a life.

And it was perfect.

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*Book. 4/8/11*

Darin pulled out his beeping comlink on his way to the mess hall. “Stanic.”

“Hey, Thumper, it’s me,” Quiver said. “We went ahead and got your food for ya. The line was light.”

“Hey, thanks. I’ll be right there,” Darin answered before turning off the comlink.

A minute later Darin walked up to their usual table and stopped short. He should have known better than to trust his wingman’s intentions. “What’s this?” Darin asked. A bucket full of water and a plate heaped with what looked like some sort of green, leafy vegetable... thing were set at his spot on the table.

CC was trying very hard not to laugh, and Quiver grinned a grin that was too innocent to be natural. “Your lunch!” Quiver said proudly.

Darin sighed and rolled his eyes. Another prank, though a relatively mild one. “Before I go get my *real* food, you mind explaining what I’m looking at?”

“Aw, no, come on, I scrounged hard for this! I guarantee you’ll like it! The book says so!” Quiver protested.

“What book?” Darin asked warily, against his better judgement. The line was a total set-up.

“This book!” Quiver grinned again while he presented a datapad as though it was his punchline.

Darin read the title displayed on the screen: *The Care, Feeding and Training of Cracian Thumpers*. Then he turned a dry look on Quiver. “Ha ha ha,” he said wryly. “Very funny. Here, CC.” Darin pushed the bucket of water in front of her. “You always steal one of my drinks, so there you go.” He walked away to the food line to get a meal he could actually ingest.

When he returned to their table, Quiver was frantically scrolling through the datapad. “This isn’t good. This isn’t good,” Quiver was saying to himself. “Where is it? Where’s the section that says what to do when your thumper goes off his feed?”

“Easy, Quiver, easy, it’ll be okay,” CC cooed. She patted his lower arm soothingly. “We’ll figure it out. We can always stick a tube down his nose to his stomach and force-feed him. A thumper’s physiology allows that, doesn’t it?”

Darin pushed the plate of leafy things away to make room for his regular tray, then he

took the datapad out of Quiver's hands. Quiver and CC couldn't keep straight faces any longer and snickered. "Pleesh, why in the galaxy do you even have this?" Darin asked. He began scrolling through it. It looked like something his sister would have had.

"CC bartered for it and got it for me as a surprise. It's too perfect," Quiver replied. "Now I won't make any more mistakes with you; it's teaching me a lot. For instance, apparently thumpers learn best by command repetition. So go get me a new juice." Quiver held his empty glass out to Darin.

Darin gave him a look. "No."

"Juice."

"No."

"Juice."

"No."

"Juice!"

"No!"

"Bad Thumper!"

Quiver kicked him in the shin, and Darin yelped. "Ow!"

"Now, Quiver," CC scolded. "Negative reinforcement is *not* the best way to train animals!"

"Well, sorry, CC, but I didn't know that because *somebody has my book*," Quiver said pointedly, sending a mock glare at Darin. "I haven't finished reading the training chapters yet."

Darin went back to looking through the book's contents, already forgetting about his lunch. The real food wasn't too appetizing either. A year ago he wouldn't have cared about a book on thumpers, but today it felt different. "Heh, hey, look!" Darin said. "This book was originally published and distributed from Craci Three. And— ooh, the caption says that picture was taken there. I wonder if they have any from Four." He moved through the book more quickly, only stopping when he spotted pictures.

Beside him, CC sighed. "I think we lost him, Quiver."

"Well, I get his food then. Er, his good food." Quiver pulled Darin's plate toward himself, but Darin ignored it.

Darin had just reached the first chapter on training when he spotted a picture that was taken on the opposite side of Craci IV from where he'd lived. He'd never been to that particular place, but he stopped and stared at the picture, letting his mind cross light-years to get home again. There it was, right at his fingertips. He squinted so it became all he could see.

When he finally tore his eyes away he noticed the first sentences of the paragraph underneath the picture, and he silently read it to himself: "*Many thumpers are taught by only one trainer. This maximizes the thumper's learning potential and willingness to obey by taking advantage of its natural loyalty. Thumpers that are moved around between too many hands may have trouble adjusting and maximizing their full potential.*"

Darin snorted a sad scoff borne of homesickness pangs. "Got that right," he mumbled as he tossed the datapad back to Quiver. When Quiver caught it in surprise, Darin pulled his plate back. Luckily Quiver hadn't eaten it all yet.

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*Quiver's date. 4/8/11*

Darin stumbled the last few steps to his quarters. Blast, that report had taken way too long to finish. He was barely awake, and he just wanted to go to sleep and end this awful day.

He absentmindedly punched in his access code while he walked past the keypad, and the door whooshed open. Darin turned into the doorway but pulled up short when Quiver suddenly appeared from inside the room.

"Hi, buddy," Quiver said with a big grin and a quieter than normal voice. He stood in the doorway and faced his wingman. The upper half of his duty uniform was unfastened, revealing the large logo on the shirt he was wearing underneath it.

Darin waited a moment, but when Quiver remained standing there he said, "Quiver, move. It's late, and I'm really tired." Darin tried to squeeze past Quiver, but Quiver actively blocked his way and kept Darin in the corridor.

Darin turned a cranky look up to his roommate. "I'm really not in the mood for this right now."

Quiver leaned down to speak more softly to Darin. "Look, Thumper, I need the room tonight. So do me a favor and go to the lounge or something, okay? Thanks." Still grinning, Quiver pulled back and made a move to close the door, but Darin blocked it with his hand.

"No way," Darin grumbled. "All I want right now is to crawl into my bed. You go do your— whatever you're going to do— somewhere else."

"Rookies don't get a say." Quiver gave him a push backwards, just hard enough to dislodge Darin's hand and move him out of reach of the door. Darin hadn't expected that and stumbled backwards, but by the time he regained his balance the door was closed.

"Quiver!" Darin strode up and punched in his access code again, but the door remained shut. Quiver must have done something that disabled it from the inside, which Darin hadn't known was possible. Darin pounded on the door and yelled, "Quiver, come on! This is my room too!"

The door opened once more, but Quiver still blocked the entrance. His big grin was gone, but his face didn't yet match Darin's angry expression. Quiver rolled his eyes and said, "Strine blink, fine, here's ten credits for your trouble." He quickly pushed the credits into Darin's chest, and Darin automatically and awkwardly went to grab them. "Now shoo, will ya, rookie? You're killing the mood." Quiver immediately pulled back again and shut the door.

Darin glanced at the credits in his haphazard grip, and something clicked in his brain. "Wait, ten credits? Are these the ten credits I had sitting on my desk? Quiver, did you just pay me my own money?!"

There was no response, and the door remained closed. Darin pounded once on it in frustration, though he doubted Quiver would get the message. He never did.

So now what? The prospect of a homeless night wasn't appealing, and Darin was too aggravated to just let this go. He could stay there all night sounding the door chime every fifteen seconds. He could go to the lounge and hope there was no one there so he could try to get some sleep and be refreshed for yelling at Quiver in the morning. Or...

Darin grinned darkly and headed for the turbolift.

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Darin's chrono beeped, pulling him out of unconsciousness and alerting him to the new

morning. He reluctantly began to stir, greeting the galaxy with a yawn.

A few moments later he pushed himself up from the ejection seat and climbed out of the cockpit of Quiver's X-wing. He gave a sleepy hello to the third-shift mechanics there who were finishing up. They'd collectively been made ten credits richer in exchange for keeping their voices down enough for Darin to fall asleep late last night.

It actually hadn't been too uncomfortable sleeping there, especially after Darin moved Quiver's ejection seat as much as he could in as many different ways as he could. Darin smirked to himself as he walked out of the hangar. Quiver would go ballistic when he found out.

Too bad Quiver had made him find a place to sleep last night.

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*Galactic holiday (sometime after "No Going Back"). 4/8/11*

Lt. Shaun Pellicer rounded the corner of the empty, echoing corridor, following the light of the glowrod he held in the dark. He wasn't trying to be quiet, but he wasn't trying to make noise, either. He was looking for something, and he was playing a hunch that it was here somewhere.

He was right. When Pellicer entered the next chilly straightaway he saw another soft glow cutting through the darkness ahead. Approaching it, he watched as the glow occasionally flickered and became a slightly different hue or intensity for a period of time before flickering again.

Coming even closer, he began to make out details. The glow was a small holo projected from a disk in Darin's hand. Darin was sitting on the deck against the wall and was staring at the image. The only movement Pellicer could detect was when Darin blinked or moved his thumb to advance to the next image, which caused the flicker and the change. When Pellicer walked up to him, Darin turned his head ever so slightly to glance at the newcomer but then returned his gaze to the holos.

The older pilot stopped beside Darin and stood there, waiting for a reaction that never came. After a few moments Pellicer verbally pushed forward. "Kind of dark up here," Scoop remarked mildly.

Darin gave a half-hearted shrug. "I guess." His voice was scratchy, and he cleared his throat.

"So you're back from your patrol."

"Yeah."

Pellicer looked Darin over: the blond pilot was still in his orange flight suit. "You didn't change. We're in civvies today for the holiday party."

"I'll be volunteering for the next open patrol slot anyway, sir. No point in changing yet."

Pellicer shook his head. "You know Mack won't let you go. You paid your dues for today, and he wants you at the party. Everyone's wondering where you are. When Quiver and CC couldn't find you or contact you, I decided to try up here." Pellicer paused, crouched beside Darin and asked, "So they don't know you come up to this deck?"

"No, they don't. There are times when I have to get away from Quiver too. Many times." Darin glanced at Scoop and feebly tried to smile. "Please don't tell him I said that. I'll never hear

the end of it.”

“I won’t.”

Darin’s answer surprised Pellicer a little, though he didn’t show it. So he was possibly the only one Darin had told about his secret little hideout. Pellicer wondered briefly if Darin would find a new hideout now that Pellicer had shown himself willing to track Darin down here when Darin obviously wanted to be alone. He filed the thoughts away for later and said, “Come on, we can’t have you sitting alone up here in the dark. Let’s go to the party. The food is actually edible today for the holiday.”

Darin’s small smile was long gone. He sighed quietly and flipped to the next holo, one of Darin’s parents and sister, and Pellicer knew what he was going through.

Thumper was making no move to get up, and Pellicer switched to his usual direct route. “That’s why you’re volunteering for patrols today, isn’t it.” He indicated the holo with a nod of his head.

Darin didn’t answer. He continued staring at the holo, causing Pellicer to say with a hint of sternness in his voice, “You’re doing nothing but making yourself feel worse. Come take your mind off things for a while and you won’t feel so homesick.”

Thumper chewed on his lip for a few seconds and then said, “I used to love the holidays, Scoop. They were my favorite times of the year.” His voice grew bitter as he added, “Now I hate them. They’re miserable reminders of everything I lost and can never get back. I’m content to stay out of everyone’s way today and free up the people who *do* care about them. Let them have a good time.” He advanced to the next holo, this one of his two hometown friends, but he still didn’t look at Pellicer. “So go have fun.”

“If I can do it, so can you,” Scoop said firmly. “No one else’s family is here, but they’re all down there enjoying themselves anyway. Celebrating here while you know that people you care about are celebrating elsewhere at the same time makes light-years disappear. Don’t you want to celebrate with your hometown, with other friends you still have there?”

Darin bit his bottom lip rather hard, but Scoop couldn’t tell if it was because Darin was getting angry or more homesick. Pellicer pressed on. “You’re coming to the party, Flight Officer, and you’re going to keep an open mind and try your best to have a good time. You’re letting yourself get overrun with negative emotions and making no effort to stop it. You’re better than that, you’re stronger than that, and we expect better from you. Fight for your own happiness once in a while. Now come on.” He stood up.

Darin didn’t move for a moment, and Pellicer wondered if he was going to. Then Darin turned off the holo and slowly and stiffly climbed to his feet. To say that he’d done it reluctantly would have been an understatement, and Pellicer suspected Darin wouldn’t have done it at all if Pellicer hadn’t formalized it into an order.

Pellicer ignored the dark, sullen look Darin was giving him and added, “We’ll stop at your quarters first so you can change. Let’s go.” He started walking toward the nearest turbolift with Darin a few steps behind.

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