

“In-Dependence”

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VROOOM! WHOOSH! POW POW POW POW!

The Lambda-class shuttle flew less than a meter above the crowd. The crowd did not react. None of them so much as blinked.

Very close by, a Z-95 Headhunter appeared on the scene, also in flight. Its weapons sounded with a slightly higher pitch as it returned fire. *POW POW POW!*

“Ha! I hit you!”

“Did not!”

“Did too! I’ll prove it!”

The Headhunter rammed nose-first into the Lambda shuttle. There was no explosion, only a surprised shriek of, “Ow!” Out of control, the Lambda fell to the ground and landed centimeters away from the crowd. The crowd again did not react.

“Aurora! Stop it! I’m not playing Starships with you anymore!” The boy reached down, grabbed his toy Lambda shuttle and his action figures who had made up part of the “crowd”, and then turned and walked off in a huff toward the school.

The young girl proudly holding the winning toy Headhunter stood there for a moment in surprise, then she collected her dolls who had also been spectating and ran after the boy.

“Daeder, why not?”

“Cause you always have to win. I never get to,” Daeder answered. “It’s no fun with you.”

Something about his reasoning confused Aurora. “But I *have* to win! I got the Headhunter! The good guys fly the Headhunters, and the good guys always have to win.”

“Then let me be the Headhunter next time.”

“No!” Aurora held the toy starship protectively against her. “It’s mine!”

“Mrs. Tillinar! Aurora’s not sharing!” Daeder ran off toward their teacher where she was supervising.

Aurora stopped and stuck her tongue out at Daeder’s back. “Dumb Daeder,” she muttered. She spun on her heel and went deeper into the school’s play yard. Once she had some room away from the other kids she dropped her dolls on the ground and released the Headhunter from its protective hug. Aurora held it at arm’s length and began to run with it, letting the wind made by her speed rush over its wings. In her mind’s eye she saw the Headhunter flying gracefully over the blue-tinted hills around their home, then over strange and funny-looking places she had seen on the Holonet.

She ran in circles and straight lines until she heard Mrs. Tillinar calling her name. Aurora slowed to a stop, hardly even noticing when the sleek vehicle in her imagination reverted to a worn, scuffed-up toy. She narrowed her eyes a bit and once more defiantly clutched the Z-95 to her chest before walking toward Mrs. Tillinar. She knew Mrs. Tillinar would again try to make her give up her Headhunter and let someone else hold it and play with it.

That wasn't going to happen. No one else's daddy flew a Headhunter. No one else's daddy used a Headhunter to fight and shoot down bad guys. No one else's daddy was a good guy.

Calla Mackin drove her daughter home from Bluehill Base Primary School later that day. It was hard to concentrate on Aurora's nonstop chatter while both driving the landspeeder and thinking about the brief talk she had had with Aurora's teacher after school. Mrs. Tillinar's concerns about the one-track mind Aurora was developing and how it was beginning to affect her social interactions at school kept bouncing around in Calla's head. Mrs. Tillinar had also mentioned some things that Aurora was telling others about her father and what he was currently doing. That frightened Calla more than anything else.

She slowed the speeder to a stop at a traffic signal and refocused on what her daughter was saying.

"So my blue stylus broke when I was trying to color in Daddy's flightsuit. He can't fight bad guys without his flightsuit, so he borrowed a purple one 'cause my purple stylus was good. So he's got a purple flightsuit now. I need a new blue stylus. Otherwise Daddy will have to keep wearing the purple flightsuit."

Aurora happily babbled on. Torn between admiration and a sinking realization that her fears were coming true, Calla watched Aurora for a few moments before she noticed the traffic signal had changed. She quickly put the speeder into motion again.

Soon they arrived back at their house, and Aurora skipped inside with her schoolbag and her toy Z-95. Calla looked more closely as she followed Aurora through the door. "Aurora, didn't you take some of your dolls to school today?"

"Huh? Oh. I forgot them there in the play yard."

"You need to be more careful with your things!" Calla scolded. "What if someone takes them or you can't find them tomorrow?"

Aurora shrugged. "I don't care, Mommy. I got my Headhunter." Still holding that toy, she went to her bedroom to change out of her school uniform.

Calla sighed and sank down onto her favorite comfortable chair in the living room. Everywhere she looked, she saw chores that had to be done. The dishes had to be put through the washer. She needed to go food shopping soon. The laundry was piling up. Now she had to figure out how to help her daughter with school, plus...more serious things. She would need to address that tonight before it got any farther and caused major problems for everyone.

"Mommy!" Aurora called from her room. "Where's my yellow sweater?"

Calla rubbed her eyes wearily. "It's in the laundry, dear."

"I wanna wear it."

"You can't wear it until I wash it."

"When?"

Calla sighed. "Not tonight, dear." Looking around, she saw that Aurora's schoolbag was spilling its contents onto the middle of the floor where the girl had carelessly dropped it. Calla pushed herself to her feet and scooped it all up, then deposited the bag's contents on the kitchen table.

The item that ended up on the top of the pile from the bag was a folder stuffed with flimsi sheets. Calla didn't recognize it, so she opened it. To her surprise, on every piece of flimsi was a

different drawing done by Aurora of her father doing various activities, but mostly flying what was supposed to be a Z-95. Aurora had included herself and Calla in some of the pictures. And everyone was smiling. They were always smiling.

“I wish I knew how you do it,” Calla whispered as she looked at the colorful pictures and happy expressions. “I wish I could do it like you do.”

Light footsteps approached, and then Aurora sat at the table. “You like my pictures, Mommy?” she asked.

Calla forced a smile onto her distracted expression. “They’re very nice, Aurora. We need to talk about this tonight. Now, though, you can help me make lunch.”

Hours later, Calla finished tucking Aurora into bed. She put the toy Z-95 on the nightstand where Aurora insisted it remain every night, and then Calla sat on the edge of the mattress and asked, “Aurora, what’s Daddy doing?”

Her daughter smiled. “He’s fighting bad guys with his Headhunter.”

“No, sweetie,” Calla said gently. “Remember what we told you? He’s not fighting anyone. He’s teaching some people how to fly starfighters on another world.”

“When he flies starfighters he fights bad guys.”

“No, dear, it’s nothing like that. He’s just teaching other pilots. Like Mrs. Tillinar teaches you. That’s all.” Calla desperately hoped her daughter would believe the lie. Too much was at stake for her not to. “You can’t be going around saying he’s fighting people. That will get him in trouble, like how the kids at your school get in trouble if they fight someone. Understand?”

Aurora didn’t look too happy. “But... Daddy’s a good guy.”

“Yes. Yes, he is.” Calla stroked her daughter’s hair and tried not to think about how she had inherited her father’s warm blue eyes. “But he can be a good guy this way too. You can’t say he’s fighting people. I mean it. All right?” She tried to be as firm as possible without losing her composure and showing her true fear. Best to play it this way for now, she decided. Anything more would seem like a huge overreaction to Aurora and would probably do more harm than good.

Aurora looked down. “Okay.” She sounded despondent.

“Good. Good night, Aurora.”

“Night, Mommy.”

Calla doubted the problem would actually disappear so easily, but it was a start. She would need to pay close attention to make sure things went right. She kissed her daughter, turned out the light and walked out of Aurora’s bedroom. Calla closed the door behind her, then leaned back against it and closed her eyes. She took a few deep breaths.

The house was now empty and still and only slightly less dirty. She’d managed to get the dishes washed after supper, but everything else was still staring her in the face. Calla couldn’t deal with it all right now, especially after growing so worried about what Aurora had been telling people, and she eventually distracted herself by looking at Aurora’s drawings on the kitchen table.

Most of them showed her husband wearing his blue flightsuit, like Aurora had been talking about in the speeder. Calla wished he was still with his local defense Headhunter squadron here on the base and wearing that blue flightsuit instead of being where he actually

was. She wondered where that might be. It was so hard to accept that she barely knew any details of his life anymore.

Essentially all she knew was that somewhere light-years away out among the billions of stars was her husband, secretly commanding a combat starfighter squadron in the Rebellion. They'd been so careful to not let Aurora know that that was what her father was really doing. Calla fervently prayed she hadn't inadvertently slipped and made a mistake that allowed Aurora to learn the truth. If even rumors got started that their world was secretly supporting the Alliance and fighting the Imperial "bad guys"... Calla felt nauseous just thinking about the potential consequences. So few people on the entire planet knew, and every single one of them knew they had to keep it that way for everyone's sake.

Calla sighed and browsed through more of the drawings. The old admiration and even envy resurfaced as she looked at them. When Aurora thought of her father there was nothing but adoration and happiness, and she had to express her feelings to the world in vibrant colors. She was always smiling when she talked about him. But when Calla thought of him, smiling was the farthest thing from her mind, and any happiness was drowned inside the endless ache telling her how much she missed him and how terrified she constantly was for his safety. She wasn't sure how much longer she could keep going like this without him.

"Your daughter's a lot stronger than your wife is," Calla whispered to an image of her husband scrawled by her child's hand. "She didn't get it from me, but I sure wish I could get it from her. If I was even half as strong as she is, things would be so much easier and I could get so much more done, like she does with all of her pictures. You should be proud of her. She's not going out of her mind without you like I am. I need you too much to be able to do this alone. I wish I was like her. She's stronger than me."

She left the drawings and went into the living room where she welcomed the comfort of her favorite chair and reached for the holoprojector on the small table beside her. Calla stared for a long time at her favorite holo of her husband. In it, he, Calla and a younger Aurora were together and smiling. Together. He had his arms around his wife and daughter and was holding them close. Calla imagined he was holding her again. She wanted it so badly that she could almost feel his embrace.

Yet another day of trying to raise a child alone, keep a large secret, and hold their lives and the deteriorating household together caused Calla's eyelids to droop as she longingly gazed at the holo of her absent husband. Before too much longer, she had fallen asleep.

Commander Quentell Mackin entered his office, closed the door behind him, then leaned back against it and closed his eyes. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. It hadn't been a good day. He couldn't believe how frankly *childish* his squadron could be at times. He would have thought that a group of beings who gave up everything to risk their lives every day fighting a corrupt galactic government would have some shred of maturity in them, but... What was he doing wrong with them?

With an effort and a hard shake of his head, he put it out of his mind. He didn't have to think about it for a while. Mack had spread the word to each and every one of his pilots that this next hour was his Personal Time. His Executive Officer would handle anything that was not an emergency, and all of his pilots knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that any non-life-and-death situation that interrupted his rare Personal Time would result in something like three weeks of

K.P. duty for the offender if Mack happened to be feeling lenient.

Mackin took one more deep, calming breath, opened his eyes and went straight for his computer console. He needed this so badly. It had been too long. Although, he reflected, even one second was too long.

The preparations had become automatic, and soon he had changed clothes and cleared away anything from the field of view of the holocam that might indicate "Rebel Alliance". Ready at last, he sat down and looked for a moment at his favorite holo where it was displayed prominently on his cluttered desk. In it, he was holding his wife and daughter close while they all smiled. Those had been simpler times, easier times, happier times. He wished he could have it all back. Sometimes, especially times like this in light of his squadron's recent antics, he wasn't sure if this was all worth what he was giving up by being here. The notion of resigning and returning home floated in the back of his mind, looking for a foothold.

Finally Mackin reached over and pressed the holocam's recording button to begin his letter home. Weariness and a stab of homesickness tainted his smile. How much longer would it be until he could look into their eyes instead of the holocam's cold lens?

"Hello there, Calla and Aurora. How are the two most important people in my life? I love you both, and I miss you so much." Mack started every single letter the same way; the words were just as true now as they had been every other time.

He launched into his letter, always aware of the security risks in the back of his mind and the need to not provide any traceable information. He would never forgive himself if the message was intercepted by the Imperials and something happened to his wife or daughter because of him. The Empire wouldn't hesitate to do something like that.

Mackin asked about Aurora's school and activities, Calla's job, their extended family and the house. A few other things he was able to talk about with a code he had developed with Calla the last time he saw her, too long ago. As he responded to things they had asked in their last letter and told them about things he was doing now, Mack kept his own information similarly vague, changing names around and talking in general terms about his "training". Mack wished he could tell Calla more about his life here, but he couldn't and she knew that. Her knowledge of the situation and acceptance of what was called for was little comfort to him, however. One of these days, when there was no longer a danger, he would tell her everything. He owed her nothing less and so much more.

When those wishful thoughts began to bubble to the surface again, Mackin quickly paused the recording before he was too tempted to forget security and share everything with her. He rubbed his temples, fighting the old headache that always came at times like this.

"I'm here to protect you," he whispered to his mental image of his wife and daughter, "and to protect you, I've endangered you." Mackin hated that particular conundrum. "I can't forget that. You were brave enough to accept the danger to yourself so I could be out here, and I won't do anything to make it worse." He looked back at the holo on his desk and whispered more to himself, "But damn it, I can't stand this sometimes." The thoughts of resigning fed on his frustration and grew. Resigning would solve everything. His family would no longer be in danger from a small slip of the tongue. They could be together again. He could watch his child growing up.

Calla smiled back at him in the holo. Mack gazed at the holo longer, much longer, thinking. Calla was strong and had sacrificed so much to allow him to be out here where he could do some long-term good for all of them. Resigning was the short-term, easy way out and would do nothing for their galactic quality of life in the years ahead. He couldn't let down the

person he admired most in the galaxy by stopping his long-term effort, and that meant pushing through even when things felt pointless and frustrating and it seemed like his squadron wasn't listening to a word he said despite it being their own lives on the line. Calla was brave enough to see this through even with all the difficulties. He had to be too.

Mackin exhaled slowly, looked back into the holocam's lens, pressed the button to continue the recording and said, "Sorry, I've been distracted lately, and I totally lost what I was just saying. I'll say something else, though. Calla, I frankly am in awe of you. I know it's got to be hard to take care of Aurora and keep everything running smoothly at home, but somehow you do it. I don't know how, because I could never do something like that, but you do." Mackin was certain she could have found and capitalized on the shred of maturity that had to be in his pilots if she had been in his position.

He took a deep breath and continued. "Whenever things get tough here, I think of you to help me get through it. I couldn't do it without you and the strength I draw from thinking of your bravery. You're my hero, Calla. I'm so lucky to have you."

Mackin stopped the recording. The hardened nerve that allowed him to lead other pilots into battle did not yet allow him to say these next words to his wife. If he was as strong as she was, maybe he could, but not until then. He looked into the inoperative, placated holocam and softly added words Calla would never hear. "Staying behind, never knowing what's happening out here and doing all that you're doing is harder on you than being out here is on me. Yet you're doing it willingly. If I had even a fraction of your courage and strength, I could have singlehandedly wiped out the Empire by now and long since been back with you and Aurora. But it's just me, and I'm not there yet. I'm trying, though. I'm trying. One of these days I'll get there, and it'll all be thanks to you."

He paused for a few moments, then hit the button to start recording again and continued with his letter.

Flight Officer Darin Stanic stood at the end of the corridor, leaning against the wall. Down the corridor he could see the closed door to Commander Mackin's office, but he stayed well away from it. He had heard stories of what happened to pilots who interrupted Mack's Personal Time and had no desire to find out first-hand if the stories were true.

Darin absently chewed on his bottom lip as he looked at the door and contemplated the person behind it. Even after all the hassle Mack had to put up with from Darin and his other squadmates, Mack never lost his faith in the squadron and never gave up on them. He was always there to protect them and help them and lead them. There had been times when Mack had led them into a situation Darin wouldn't have followed anyone else into, and he'd gotten them out of it again. Mack kept this group together like no one else could.

And after all that, despite all the problems and energy-draining issues that came with being a squadron leader on the front lines, Mackin still found the time to dedicate to his loved ones. He cared. He cared about his family, and he cared about his subordinates.

That was the kind of officer Darin wanted to be.

The young pilot pushed himself away from the wall and headed for the hangar. He had work to do if he ever hoped to be like that.

The End

Revision A
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