

“Metal Coils”

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Prologue

One week ago

“Coronas, retreat. Jump out immediately. Meet at Rally Point Echo.”

Flight Officer Darin Stanic was relieved to hear his commander’s order. This hit-and-run had turned brutal, and he couldn’t wait to get out of there. It was hard to convince his racing heart and sweaty palms that this was only a simulator run, and he had too much else on his mind to bother trying. Besides, everyone always told him to treat sims like they were real anyway.

Darin disengaged from the TIE he had been firing at in an attempt to discourage it from coming after his temporary wingman. He’d been flying with Flight Officer Chryse “CC” Cerac ever since they had both lost their regular wingmen earlier in a particularly heavy part of the fighting, and things hadn’t improved much. Three of CC’s engines were inoperative, and her X-wing was having difficulties fighting the gravity of the gas giant below them.

“Six, come on, let’s get out of here,” Darin said over the comm while he flew over to join up with her. He noticed one pair of the surviving pilots from Corona Squadron jump into hyperspace, and he kept an eye on his scope for any TIEs turning in CC’s direction.

“I can’t, Nine,” CC replied. “I can’t jump with three of my engines out. Hell, I can’t even get out of this gravity well. You go on.”

Her words made Darin stop for a moment. She didn’t really say that, did she? Or mean it? “But what about you?” he blurted out urgently. His stomach knotted.

“One knows my status. My X-wing will be able to stay in orbit a little longer, then I’ll eject to give myself more time for a rescue to come. Maybe my droid can fix an engine before then too.”

Even though he’d only been flying starfighters in combat for about a month, Darin saw way, way too many things wrong with that plan. CC would never survive that, especially with so many TIEs still present. He looked around desperately. There had to be another option. “But—”

“Nine, go! Don’t worry about me. You’ve got retreat orders,” CC said, somewhat sharply.

Another pair of Coronas jumped to hyperspace. All his help was leaving. The TIEs would turn their attention to them at any second, and then they’d both be dead. Darin felt panicky.

He finally caught a glimpse of one of the gas giant’s small, rocky moons. “Six, there! Head to that moon at 07 mark 16. You’ll be able to land there. It’ll be tons safer.”

“*Gravity*, rookie!” CC said in exasperation. “I told you, my fighter can’t break free of this decaying orbit. I can’t get up the speed to reach that moon.”

“I’ll give you the speed then,” Darin said without thinking. The instant the words were

out of his mouth, though, he realized he had no idea how to do that.

“How?” CC demanded. “Oh, never mind. Nine, will you just go?! You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“Get on the correct heading,” Darin told her stubbornly. “Let me worry about the rest.”

He was a bit surprised to see her comply. Now what the hell was he supposed to do?

Darin grabbed onto the first frantic idea that entered his mind. “Stay as straight and level as possible, Six. Lower your shields.” He lowered his own shields, set up directly behind and above her, matched her speed and then lowered his landing struts. This was idiotic and suicidal, but he was going to try anyway.

Darin nudged his X-wing forward slowly, calling upon every milligram of flying skill he possessed. When he thought he was in the correct position directly above CC’s X-wing, he lowered his X-wing a bit and tried to hook his landing skids on the trailing edge of CC’s fighter’s hull. Then he could push—

There was a hard impact, a jostle, and horrible sounds of metal scraping against metal that reverberated through Darin’s cockpit. He felt something give on his X-wing, and it threw off his yaw control. In one instant Darin overcompensated and caused another hard impact below him.

“Nine!” CC yelled, terrified.

Darin immediately pulled back, away from her fighter. He gasped for breath and glanced over his diagnostics. Red lights flashed, warning him of damage he’d caused to his starfighter. He was missing a landing gear strut now as well.

“Sorry, sorry!” he replied breathlessly. Darin looked at CC’s X-wing and saw some large gouges he had created on the top of the engines and fuselage. It looked like he had crushed the dome of her astromech droid too. He grimaced. So much for the astromech-repairing-the-engines plan.

Darin had just pulled his X-wing directly behind CC’s again when her shaken words sounded on the comm. “Nine, this isn’t working! Just go. I’ll be fine! You’re going to damage me more than the Imps did!”

Darin chewed on his bottom lip in determination and ignored her. Leaving her behind to face death or capture wasn’t an option.

This time he stayed directly behind CC’s X-wing when he started to urge his own closer. The landing struts didn’t work, but there were other ways of pushing a starfighter. He hoped.

The exhaust from CC’s sole working engine buffeted Darin’s fighter. Darin was a lot more cautious this time as he brought his X-wing’s nose within a meter of the aft end of CC’s X-wing. Then half a meter. Then twenty centimeters. Ten. Five. He held his breath.

As soon as he felt the impact, Darin increased his throttle a bit to force his X-wing’s nose to stay pressed against CC’s fighter and not bounce off of it. Success was marginal at best, but they were both still in one piece so far. Fighting his controls and trying to determine how to steer with this odd new center of gravity affecting him, Darin increased his throttle a little more. By some miracle, this pushing method worked and caused CC’s fighter to move slightly faster.

Darin’s astromech droid, Botch, gave a shrill whistle. “Quiet, Botch!” Darin snapped, struggling to concentrate.

“Nine?”

“Not now, Six. This is working.”

“But we’ve got five TIEs inbound,” CC said.

“What?” Darin’s concentration shattered, and he lost control of his X-wing in its

precarious situation. Its nose slipped up, causing CC's fighter to yaw to starboard and pitch down, and Darin's fighter scraped against it while going up and to port at a considerably higher throttle. A tangle of laser cannons and S-foils hooked the two X-wings together and spun them momentarily before the weapons broke off and the fighters were thrown free of each other.

It all happened so fast that it was over before Darin realized it had started. Alarms blared in his cockpit. Botch squealed. Darin reflexively fought to stabilize his tumbling X-wing while battling down panic and bile. Botch immediately reported going to work to fix a critical cooling system that was damaged. Darin had just gotten everything back under control when he happened to glance at his tactical scope. Sure enough, five red dots representing Imperial TIE fighters were bearing down on his position hard. They were almost on top of him.

Darin slammed in his throttle and desperately wheeled around to bring his remaining weapons to bear. "Botch, is Six okay? She in control of her fighter?" Darin asked.

Then with a sickening feeling, he remembered one very important thing. Two TIEs directly ahead of him fired at the same time Darin hit the control to raise his shields.

The simulator's hum faded into silence while the windows opaqued and the simulator's hatch unlocked and raised a couple of centimeters. Darin blinked at the sudden changes, then he heaved a huge sigh and slumped in his seat. He was dead. Damn it, he'd been so close!

He raised the simulator's canopy hatch and shivered when the air rushing in hit his sweat-dampened face and flight suit. The room was oddly quiet, and one look at the area where the sim viewscreens were explained why: the rest of the Coronas, both the ones who had "died" and the ones who had survived, hyperjumped out and ended their involvement in the sim, were standing together and staring at Darin with open mouths. Darin suddenly felt very self-conscious, and he blushed. He hoped he wasn't in trouble for disobeying the retreat order.

The silence was broken at last by Lieutenant Jayke "Chopper" Forsgren's incredulous voice. "What the hell was that?"

"That? *That* was my wingman!" came the proud reply from tall, lanky Flight Officer Hentil Yanilr, always called Quiver.

Darin watched as the Coronas broke themselves out of their stupor and started exchanging money, some of them happier about it than others. Feeling the post-adrenaline crash coming, he unfastened his seat restraints and took off his helmet, then he looked over at the only other occupied simulator. CC was likewise wearily preparing to get out, and when he caught her eye Darin quietly said, "Sorry, CC. I tried."

"I know you did, and I appreciate that," she said with a genuine smile. "You just convinced me you're totally crazy, which I'll blame on Quiver, but you're a good kid, rookie. Next time, though, you really should leave. No sense in both of us getting needlessly killed."

Darin didn't answer, and he made a bit of a face but quickly turned away so CC wouldn't see it. Then there was a sudden electronic shriek from CC's direction. Startled, he looked back and saw CC's astromech droid Ruby fixated on him, flashing its lights and making a racket.

Darin jumped again when a similar racket started from directly behind his own seat. He looked over his shoulder. "Botch! What are you doing?"

Botch paused in his outburst, then he beeped once, more mellow. Darin studied the astromech's readout in his sim cockpit. DEFENDING YOU, it simply said.

"What are you defending me from?"

CC was also reading her astromech's words in her sim cockpit, and she grimaced. "Apparently Ruby's not too happy that you crushed him with your X-wing in the sim," she said.

“Oh,” Darin replied. “Sorry, Ruby. I didn’t mean to do that. No harm done, though, right? It was only a sim.”

Ruby apparently didn’t agree, since the droid launched into another electronic tirade. A moment later, Botch retaliated with his own harsh sounds.

“Hey, Ruby! Ruby!” CC called sharply. “Quiet down!” Ruby finally complied, and Botch did as well. CC continued, “Look, it was an accident. He apologized. Let it go, okay?”

Ruby didn’t give an audible response. All the droid did was keep its optical sensor fixed directly on Darin. Darin shifted uneasily.

CC laughed lightly. “He’s a little annoyed still, rookie, but he’ll get over it.”

Darin nodded, then whispered to Botch, “Thanks for sticking up for me.” His white and green R5-D4 beeped with pleasure.

Darin got out of the simulator, unfastened Botch’s connection to it and joined up with the other Coronas. Quiver tousled Darin’s dark blond bangs, much to the younger pilot’s annoyance, and sounded duly impressed with Darin’s effort even though he hadn’t succeeded. The Coronas all walked out of the sim room to go to their post-sim debrief, and right before Darin left the room as well he hesitated and looked back. Across the room Ruby was out of his simulator like all the other astromechs, and he still had his optical sensor pointed straight at Darin. It followed the pilot’s movements while one light on his front panel flashed slowly, regularly, thoughtfully, accusingly. Darin stared, then he shook himself out of it and walked out. So Ruby was watching him. And flashing a light. So what? Big deal. It was nothing.

However, Darin couldn’t stop an involuntary shudder. He didn’t know why, but he’d never been so unnerved by a droid before.

Chapter One

A series of beeps cut through Darin's sound sleep. He scowled, fighting the external pull from his slumber. The galaxy was way too unfair if it was morning already, and five more minutes of peace would be a good first step to making up for this injustice. Darin blindly reached out to swat at his alarm, but his hand smacked prematurely into a large piece of metal. His alarm squawked at him in annoyance.

"Huh?" Darin rubbed his stinging hand and pried his eyes open with difficulty against the inexplicable ambient light. He didn't expect to see Botch there right in front of his face. His droid beeped at him again.

"Oh. It's you. Sorry 'bout that, Botch," Darin mumbled. He closed his eyes and turned over to succumb to his exhaustion again.

That plan was foiled when Botch squealed insistently, then he began emitting harsh, grating noises, each one louder than the last. After the tenth round of torture to his eardrums, Darin gave in. "All right! All right! I'm up! Crazy droid." The pilot rolled back to face his astromech, reluctantly sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. For the first time he realized where he was: he'd fallen asleep on the old couch in the pilots' lounge again. The light was even still on. According to Darin's chrono it was 0218 hours, and he found some small comfort in the fact that it really wasn't morning yet and he might have a chance for more sleep. Darin positioned himself to get a good view of the small text readout on the front of Botch's housing. "Okay, now what is it?" he asked through a yawn.

Botch's more regular beeps, whistles and grunts translated themselves into Basic words on the display, and Darin read them incredulously. Sleep was soon forgotten. "Really? Are you sure?"

An affirmative, plaintive beep answered him. Darin sighed and rubbed his eyes again. "Okay, I'll see what's up." He picked up the datapad he'd been reading from where it had fallen to the floor when sleep claimed him, and then he rose stiffly and walked out with his astromech following.

Standing there in the droids' small repair bay, Darin briefly second-guessed the wisdom of his decision not to ever memory-wipe Botch.

Sure, there were lots of reasons why he kept Botch memory-intact. It improved Botch's interaction with his X-wing, which could mean the difference between life and death in a dogfight, and Darin knew he needed all the help he could get in that area. It allowed Botch to learn from experience, just like sentients did. Finally, Darin couldn't help but anthropomorphize droids. He wasn't sure why; it might have been something to do with his upbringing or maybe it was nothing more than a weird quirk, but droids were individuals to him, not mere collections of nuts and bolts. How could he purposefully take away the memory of someone—or something—he saw as a friend? It seemed wrong. He'd talked to CC about this topic at length when he'd first arrived and had to decide whether or not to routinely wipe Botch, and her identical views had lent strength to his own and persuaded him not to.

But... Darin reconsidered fleetingly, memory-wipes also avert problems like this.

He studied the display he'd called up on a computer console while Botch grunted in

annoyance behind him. From what Botch had told him in the lounge mere minutes ago and from what the computer was showing, Darin knew Botch was frustrated with Ruby, CC's memory-intact R2-B3 unit.

Darin tuned out the droid as he made his way through the computer records. Sure enough, Botch's claim was correct: somehow Botch had been scheduled for a series of both hardware and software downgrades. Going into another set of records, Darin could see that Ruby was later scheduled to receive the advanced systems from Botch as upgrades. Darin frowned and returned to Botch's records. He didn't recognize the name of the person who had approved the scheduled changes, which was unexpected: Darin had thought he knew all the people who could schedule something of this magnitude. Using his authorization code, Darin canceled the orders and added a comment that the technician should see him personally about this matter if there was a need to proceed like it was originally planned.

"There, I canceled the orders. Now someone will have to come talk to me before they do anything to you." Darin turned back to his droid. "You have any insight on what's behind this?"

His droid's answer appeared on the text display. I DISCOVERED THAT RUBY ACCESSED MY SYSTEM SPECIFICATIONS YESTERDAY. THERE IS A 94.7415% PROBABILITY THAT RUBY SOMEHOW INITIATED THESE ORDERS IN AN ATTEMPT TO IMPROVE HIMSELF AND WORSEN ME.

Darin sighed. Maybe having two memory-intact droids that were suspicious of one another was just a bad idea. "It's been a week since that sim, Botch. He can't possibly still be upset about that." What had started as nothing more than Botch defending his pilot's intentions in the sim had apparently snowballed and developed into something personal between the two astromechs. "Why are you and Ruby still squabbling?"

Botch's reply was indignant. HE STARTED IT.

"So what?" Darin asked. "Whenever I see you two near each other, you're doing what I can only assume is arguing or being insulting. Stop letting him get to you."

RUBY HAS TAKEN THIS TOO FAR.

"Yes, I know he has. Listen, I'll talk to CC about it first thing in the morning, and she'll straighten Ruby out for good, okay? But those tech orders are canceled now, so you'll be fine. You know I won't let anything happen to you."

There was a pause, and then Botch beeped once, sounding a little more happy than before. Darin affectionately patted Botch's inverted-flowerbox-shaped dome before saying, "I'm going to bed now. Tell me if you hear anything else about this." Botch beeped a concurrence, and then Darin headed out of the droids' repair bay alone. Once in the corridor, the pilot sighed. As recently as one year ago, never in his wildest imaginings had he ever expected to find himself caught between two feuding astromechs on a Rebel ship.

It took Darin a few minutes to wind his way through the maze of corridors in the winged MC80 Mon Calamari Cruiser to the deck where Corona Squadron's quarters were located. At last he stepped off the final turbolift and ambled down the corridor to his room, where his bed and sleep awaited him. When Darin approached the door, he reached out and automatically punched in his room's passcode as he walked by the control panel, barely breaking stride as he completed it and turned into the doorway.

The door didn't immediately open like it had every other time he'd done that, though, and he ended up walking into the closed door as the control panel beeped darkly at him, rejecting his code. Darin's forehead and right knee solidly impacted the door and bounced him backwards.

"Ow!" He recovered from his surprise and sheepishly glanced to each side to make sure

no one had witnessed that. Then Darin shrugged to himself and entered his passcode more carefully.

The door remained shut, and the panel blatted at him again. Darin's brow furrowed, and he checked the room number to make sure he had the right quarters. He slowly and deliberately reentered his passcode.

Once more, it was rejected. Darin sighed in frustration and pressed the door chime. There was no response, so after a minute he pressed it again. This time a groggy voice from inside called, "Go 'way."

"It's me, Quiver," Darin said. "Open up. I'm locked out."

"Don't care. Tired. Come back in the morning."

"Quiver!" There was no reply, so Darin threatened, "I'm going to keep hitting this door chime until you let me in."

Another moment went by before the door opened to reveal his disheveled roommate standing in the dark room, though to be fair, Quiver's untrimmed and unruly blond crew cut always made it look like he'd just woken up. Quiver squinted into the bright corridor. "What do you mean you're locked out?"

Darin shrugged. Wasn't it obvious? "I tried my passcode three times. It didn't work. If this was a prank, it just backfired on you."

"No, no prank." His wingman gave a huge yawn and stepped aside to let Darin in. "Just a glitch. Happens all the time. You owe me the sleep I just lost." Quiver climbed to his top bunk bed and pulled the covers over his head.

Blackness swallowed the room when the door closed behind Darin, so he turned on the small reading light at the head of his bottom bunk bed just long enough to change into his nightclothes and discreetly fiddle with the room's temperature control. At last Darin's head hit the pillow. He'd figure it all out in the morning.

Chapter Two

The mess hall was always one of the warmest places onboard the MC80 *Crescent Star*, especially during a standard meal time.

Quiver loved it. Darin hated it.

Darin followed his friend as they went from the food serving line to their usual table with their trays of what the servers claimed was breakfast. Quiver's plate was heaped high with the stuff, and despite his brief sleep interruption he was obviously in a good mood as he stopped periodically to talk to someone he knew at a table they passed. Darin quietly waited each time he did so, all the while wishing that he was back in the hangar with its cool temperatures, its starfighters and shuttles, and its lack of crowds. He unzipped the front of his orange flight suit a little in an attempt to get more air flow in the stuffy heat. Quiver never did so; in fact, he'd mentioned more than once that he wished it was even a little warmer in there.

Those same differences in preferred temperatures had recently led Darin to start a thermostat war in their quarters. Even now it was on the verge of becoming a game: who could get back to the room first and adjust the setting to claim his comfort? Most of the time Quiver used Darin's status as the squadron's designated "rookie" to trump whatever changes Darin made, but Quiver always did it in such an easy-going, fun-loving manner that Darin didn't mind losing nearly all the battles in the thermostat war.

Besides, Quiver was a heavy enough sleeper that he never noticed when Darin cooled the room down after Quiver fell asleep.

CC was already sitting at the table when they got there and settled into their usual seating arrangement where Darin sat next to CC and across from Quiver. CC and Quiver had been good friends before Darin even joined the Coronas a month ago, and they were being gracious enough to let him into their tight friendship. In fact, Darin was spending so much off-duty time with them that he once thought he'd heard Commander Mackin refer to them as a trio. After losing all he had and being so far from everything he found familiar, it was nice to feel included in something.

"Hey, C-Squared," Quiver said, grinning. CC waved back while chewing some food.

As soon as Darin's tray touched the table, CC reached over and took one of the two glasses of juice he had gotten. For some reason she'd been stealing a drink of his since the first time he had eaten with them, and Darin soon found it was much easier to simply get two glasses to begin with than to try to get the stolen one back.

She'd just swallowed her food and had begun taking a drink when Darin asked, "CC, is Ruby scheduled to get any upgrades now?"

CC gulped that as well and set the glass down. "Well, a good morning to you too. Quiver, tell your rookie wingman that the first words out of his mouth in the morning can't be about work."

"Rookie, the first words out of your mouth in the morning can't be about work," Quiver dutifully relayed.

"Sorry." Darin plastered a happy expression on his face and tried to force brightness into his tired green eyes through sheer willpower. "Good morning, CC. How are you doing on this wonderful, glorious day?"

"That's much better," she said with a smile. "I'm doing very well, thank you. Actually, I'm doing even better now that I see you got some dried starfruit. I didn't know they had it today. Hue will love these." She picked a couple pieces of the preserved fruit off Darin's plate and

pocketed them for her pet.

“That’s good,” Darin said genuinely as he dropped his act. He paused. Quiver was starting to scarf down his own food, and CC was going back to hers with considerably more restraint. “Am I allowed to talk about work now? It’s kind of important.”

“No,” Quiver said through his full mouth. “You should never be allowed to talk about work ever again, especially before we even go on duty. You know, workaholic wingmen aren’t very compatible with the more... non-time-constrained ones like me, and I’m always the one who pays for it. Stop setting high standards in view of Mack.”

“That right there is more than enough reason for me to encourage Darin’s work ethic,” CC replied, but when she turned back to Darin she sounded a bit dubious. “If I say yes, can we get it out of the way really quick?”

“Yeah.”

“Then go ahead.”

“Ruby? Any upgrades?”

CC shook her head. “I don’t think so. Why?”

Darin studied something on his plate that was supposed to be a type of bread. The starfruit had been the only thing he’d been able to identify and recognize. He suspiciously picked bite-sized pieces off while he answered, “Last night Botch showed me that he was scheduled for a bunch of downgrades, and Ruby was scheduled to get those removed systems as upgrades. I didn’t recognize the name of the person who input the orders, and I canceled them. Was I out of line by doing that?” Darin had recently been assigned the extra duty of the squadron’s “Droid Wrangler,” as he called it, which meant he had to keep track of all the droids and coordinate with the maintenance squadron and Procurement to make sure all the Coronas’ astromechs were kept in good operating condition. He was still trying to learn the extent of his responsibilities, but this certainly seemed like something that should fall within his jurisdiction.

CC dismissed the concerns. “No, it’s within the rights of your new duty to cancel strange orders like that, especially for your own droid. They should have gone through you first for something of that significance anyway. I don’t know anything about any major upgrades, but I’ll have a chat with my little R2. Hopefully this isn’t related to their little spat.”

“Thanks,” Darin replied after venturing a bite of the alleged bread. Was bread supposed to be gooey? “I mean, this is all just a bit unusual for me. Arguing astromechs and all. They didn’t really cover this in my training squadron.”

“Don’t worry about it. This is nothing,” CC said while she continued her own breakfast. “Ruby can get a little cranky, but he’s a better friend to me than Quiver is.” She kept speaking over Quiver’s mock-injured scoff. “He’ll come around, and things will get back to normal. I can’t really speak for Botch, since his previous pilot performed regular wipes on him. I don’t know what he’s like while memory-intact.”

Darin shrugged. “He’s been a great droid so far.”

Quiver shook his head and cut into the conversation. “I swear, I can’t understand why you two don’t memory-wipe your droids,” he said. “This little droid war wouldn’t be happening now if you did. Granted that it’s funny to watch, but they also woke me up from my nap the other day with their racket.”

“Admit it, Quiver,” CC said with a sly grin. “The only reason you wipe Sonic’s memory is because you don’t want a permanent record of all the stupid stuff you do.”

“Why would I need another one? I’ve got you here to constantly remind me. Case in

point, the Corellian Incident. You always talk about that.”

“I’m not the one who always brings it up, though. That’s your fault. Case in point, right now,” CC replied.

Darin raised an eyebrow. He’d never be able to decipher all the inside jokes these two had. “‘Corellian Incident’?” he asked.

Quiver groaned and covered his face with a hand, and CC’s light brown eyes lit up. “You haven’t heard about that yet?” she asked Darin. “Oooh, this’ll be fun!” She shot a smirk in Quiver’s direction and turned back to Darin, almost too eagerly.

“The pilot who was unfortunate enough to be stuck as Quiver’s wingman and roommate before you was a big guy called Cracker. Skull Cracker, actually, after his favorite smashball team and his favorite hobby,” CC started by way of explanation. Her words had the air of a well-practiced narrative, yet one that still held opportunities for improvisation to tailor to the audience. “He was a fierce loner, always keeping to himself, and he’d get hostile if anyone pushed him to interact on an even remotely personal level. I’ll let you imagine just how much this annoyed Quiver, since mere words cannot describe it.”

“He was never any fun,” Quiver muttered.

CC shushed him. “No interrupting. But you see my point,” she said to Darin. When the younger pilot nodded in complete understanding, she continued. “One day, for whatever reason, Quiver convinced himself that Cracker was from Corellia. His warped little mind saw a way to use this supposed knowledge to get Cracker to like him and do stuff. Can you guess what that plan was?”

Darin shook his head, and CC went on. “Whenever he was around Cracker, Quiver would start gushing about how wonderful Corellians were. Everything he saw or did would be compared to a Corellian version, which would always be superior. What Quiver *didn’t* know, though,” CC said as she started to snicker, “was that Cracker wasn’t Corellian and in fact did not like Corellians whatsoever. There was some really bad blood there which I think involved some previous prison time.

“One day, I was walking with the two of them to a briefing or somewhere, and Quiver made another praise-filled Corellian comment. Something to do with Solo. It must have been one comment too many because Cracker shoved him, threatened him and told him to quit going on and on about Corellians because he didn’t like them one bit. His language was a bit more colorful than that. Anyway, Quiver quickly realized his mistake, and he tried to backtrack and fix it to save face. He blurted out that he’d just been trying to make conversation, he didn’t really mean all of that, and he *really* thought Corellians were the lowest lowlives in the galaxy just like Cracker did, again with more colorful language than that. You know how artistic Quiver likes to get with his insults.” Again Darin nodded.

CC snickered harder at the memory. “This time, what Quiver didn’t know was that a major had come within earshot just as Quiver started his anti-Corellian tirade. And yes, you guessed it, he was from Corellia and was damn proud of it. When he chewed out Quiver right then and there, *that* was the most colorful language of the day. You should have seen the look on Quiver’s face when he realized what he’d gotten himself into!”

His mind’s eye painted a great picture of the scene, and Darin joined CC’s laughter; however, he eased up in anticipation when CC held up a finger with the promise of more after she recovered.

“Wait, wait, you know the best part?” CC managed to ask Darin a second later. “Quiver

had just gotten Cracker all riled up about Corellians, and now suddenly Cracker is face to face with Major Corellian Poster Child. Heated words were exchanged, and the next thing you know, Cracker's throwing punches at this guy! And poor little victimized Quiver is physically caught right in between them. Your wimp of a wingman got caught with a stray elbow or two and squealed like a Gamorrean girl. I pulled Cracker away from the major just when a fleet trooper ran up and tackled Quiver, thinking he was actually some sort of threat. Quiver and Cracker both got sent to the brig! After they were released, Cracker told us that when they first arrived at the brig, Quiver was freaking out, yelling things like, and I quote, 'I'm too young to be in prison! Too pretty! I have too much to live for! I can't rot in here!'" She mimicked Quiver's accent and voice but said it in an extra high octave.

Darin was glad he had swallowed his mouthful of food earlier; if he hadn't, he surely would have choked on it in his new bout of laughter. CC was wiping away tears as she struggled to control herself. Her laughter was too infectious to allow Darin's to stop.

Quiver sighed in exasperation and said loudly enough to be heard, "Hey, I was just scared that Cracker would literally kill me if we were in the same cell. A second imprisonment due to Corellians didn't put him in a forgiving mood that day. And blast it, why does that officer's rank increase each time you tell this story? This time he was a major. Last time you told it, he was a commander. I swear he was no higher than a lieutenant."

"Oh, and why does his rank *decrease* every time you remember it?" CC countered, finally regaining some control. "Last time you said he was no higher than a captain."

"And a lieutenant *isn't* higher than a captain, so I'm still right," Quiver said with a snort. When the other two didn't answer due to their laughter-induced shortness of breath, the lanky pilot rolled his eyes and said, "Yeah, yeah, okay, I'll admit something short-circuited in my brain that day. A little more situational awareness would have greatly benefitted me there, especially since I was lying about hating Corellians anyway and all that could have been avoided. But I'm not going to be the only one laughed at this morning—I get enough of that as it is." He fixed his gaze on Darin. "Now it's your turn. What's the stupidest thing *you've* ever done?"

"Nice try," Darin said, his laughter dying down at last, "but I don't think so."

"All right, it doesn't even have to be the stupidest thing, just something dumb that we can tease you about."

"No thanks."

"Tell ya what, Thumper," CC said. Darin's new callsign still sounded funny to him. "If you share one with us, I'll tell you two about a really dumb thing I did."

Quiver's pale blue eyes grew wide, and he seemed to forget both his wounded ego and the forkful of mashed food he was about to eat. "I don't believe it. The all-knowing, all-perfect CC actually did something that wasn't all-knowing and all-perfect?" He whirled to Darin. "I've never had an opportunity to hear something like this before. Take her up on this offer or you'll find yourself locked out of our room permanently."

Darin sighed and asked CC, "And when, exactly, will you be sharing this little story with us if I go through with this? I noticed you didn't specify that."

CC laughed easily. "Okay, you caught me. I'll tell it immediately after yours is done."

Upon hearing of CC's attempted trick, Quiver eyed her. "You are such a sneak." Then he gave a big sigh and said wistfully, "I'm so jealous."

CC smirked at him and then prodded Darin with her elbow. "Come on, let's hear it: a stupid thing you've done. And agreeing to be Quiver's wingman doesn't count."

“Of course it doesn’t,” Quiver said, the words barely intelligible through the food he was beginning to chew, “because that’s the *smartest* thing he’s ever done.”

Darin thought while he used his fork to absently draw designs on his unappetizing meal. “Well...” He chuckled. “It won’t compare to Quiver’s Corellian Incident, but it wasn’t exactly my finest moment. It’s one of my earliest memories. I think I was five, maybe four.” Was it thirteen years ago already? He couldn’t believe the time had passed so quickly. “My best friend Cohen was the same age. The two of us got it in our heads that repulsorlifts were nothing but metal coils, and being the wanna-be pilots that we were, we decided to make the most of that knowledge. We scrounged up some old metal springs, and then I used a ladder to climb on the roof of our backyard shed. Cohen wanted to be the first one to try it, but I kept insisting that since it was *my* idea, I got to go first.”

Darin could tell from CC’s and Quiver’s expressions that they knew where this story was going. “I tied the springs on the bottoms of my boots and jumped off the roof, expecting to fly like a speeder. Needless to say, I didn’t, at least not for more than that split second before gravity realizes you’re doing something you shouldn’t be and steps in to put a stop to it. I broke my arm, Cohen ran and got my parents, and I got rushed to the hospital. I wouldn’t go near that shed for months afterward.”

That story was good for a few laughs from his two friends. CC caught Quiver’s eye and said, “Can’t you just picture that? An adorable little five-year-old Darin leaping off a shed thinking he can fly?”

“What I *can*’t picture,” Quiver said, still snickering, “is what his face must have looked like the instant he realized that he couldn’t.”

“I’m sure my expression was sufficiently surprised and horrified,” Darin said. “One of my fundamental beliefs about the way the world worked had just been proven wrong at an altitude of about three meters. When you’re a kid, that’s a *loooong* way.” Darin chuckled some more and continued, “That whole incident actually prompted my dad to show me how machines worked, probably so I wouldn’t get a similar idea in my head in the future. He started letting me help with really simple repairs on the speeders and droids at the shop and at home. But who knows, maybe it was just his way of keeping a closer eye on me.”

To his surprise, Darin actually enjoyed sharing the story with Quiver and CC. It was a treasured part of his childhood, and it was an irrevocable part of him that helped make him into the person he was today. Then the happy memories of his father and Cohen slowly gave way to sadness and homesickness, just like always. Blast, he missed them so much. He would have given anything for them to still be alive and to have his old life back. Darin felt the familiar walls reflexively coming up, warning him not to form another close friendship with anyone so he couldn’t get hurt so badly again.

Darin blinked hard and took a deep breath, determined not to lose it in front of the others, and then he focused his attention on his nearly empty glass and on finishing off his juice. He stubbornly fought the walls back down; fortunately those battles were slowly getting easier the more time he spent with this squadron and with Quiver and CC in particular. Finally, praying he was in control of his voice, he looked at CC and said, “Your turn.” Thankfully, he was.

“All right, Repulsor Boots,” she said with a wink. Darin was suddenly glad he already had a callsign. CC settled back into her seat and began, “Well, there was this guy—”

A huge smirk grew over Quiver’s face. “I should’ve known. That says it all right there.” CC kicked him in the shin under the table, and one indignant remark from Quiver later,

CC pointedly continued. “*As I was saying*, there was this guy. This was a good few years ago: I must have been fifteen, and he was a couple of years older than me. I found out he liked the color green, so to get his attention I wanted to put streaks of green in my hair. Something eye-catching, you know?”

The young woman absently twirled the end of her shoulder-length black hair as she went on. “My friend and I got a little impatient with the dye and didn’t bother to read the instructions. After all, how could we not intuitively know how to do it? How hard could it be?”

CC grinned ruefully. “Instead of getting some nice green streaks, I got a head full of bright green hair. Plus, the day I did it was the day I’d forgotten my parents were taking us to a business reception with my dad’s boss: trying to make a nice ‘family impression’ and all that. You know, that stuff doesn’t come out for a few days, no matter what you do to it, and trying to re-dye it black didn’t work. My parents just about died when they saw me.”

Darin stared at her and laughed incredulously, trying to imagine CC with green hair. “You’re kidding. What did your dad’s boss say?”

CC shook her head, still grinning. “Nothing, really. He just stared at me for a second and ignored me for the rest of the night. We never got invited back, but I think that had more to do with my older sister’s disruptive little argument with my parents in the middle of the evening than with my green hair.”

Quiver insistently tapped a finger on the table. “That information is extremely welcome and will constantly be used against you, but come on. You still haven’t told us the most important detail.”

“What’s that?” CC asked.

Quiver’s face sprouted a mischievous grin while he said, “If that guy ever noticed.”

CC scoffed. “Like I’m going to share my dating history with *you*.” She stuck her tongue out at Quiver.

Quiver raised a contemplative eyebrow before he leaned across the table to Darin and said in a stage whisper, “She didn’t deny it, and she’s getting defensive. I think we’re getting close.” Then he straightened up and asked CC in a normal voice, “So what’s his name? How long did you see each other? Was your hair green the whole time you dated? Get to the juicy stuff already.”

“Pleesh, and you wonder why I never tell you things like this,” CC shot back playfully. “Are you jealous? Is that why you’re so curious?”

Apparently Quiver hadn’t expected that turnaround. “Me? Jealous? Of course not. I’m just trying to make polite conversation while having fun at your expense. Why? Do you want me to be jealous?”

“He’s good at being jealous, so be careful how you answer that,” Darin piped up. “If you want an example, just mention his old classmate Tenk Larunre and be prepared for an earful.”

“Oh, Force, don’t,” CC pleaded. She held up a hand to silence Darin. “Never *ever* mention that name around him when I’m nearby. I’ve had to sit through way, way many more Tenk rants than you have.”

“Pfft, so I don’t like him,” Quiver replied. “What, is it a crime now to dislike people who have more raw talent than me and don’t even have to work to polish or develop it?”

“Huh. That’s funny,” CC said in wonder to Darin. “I never realized that Quiver hated everyone in the entire galaxy.”

“But it should give you some indication of why I like you two,” came Quiver’s smug

response. Then he continued in a mutter, “Blasted Tenk got everything: newsletter editor position, the best leads and stories, grades on essays that he didn’t deserve because he hardly spent any time on them at all, a date with that cute girl, and–” He blinked and stopped, then asked, “Wait, how did this get turned around? We’re talking about CC’s green hair and her boyfriends, not me.”

Darin snickered. “That’s for sure,” he said under his breath. Quiver gave him a dirty look and kicked him in the shin. “Ow!” Darin protested. “That hurt.” He kicked Quiver back.

CC shook her head hopelessly at the immature antics of her friends. “And how many thousands of beings in this fleet rely on us for protection?”

Quiver kicked her under the table as well. “You started it. Don’t sound so high-and-mighty.”

“Well, you yourself said I was all-knowing and all-perfect.” CC smiled sweetly and batted her eyes in an exaggerated manner.

Darin laughed again, and Quiver snorted before saying, “What really annoys me is that I don’t have a comeback for that. It’s too early in the morning for the full-scale assault that this requires, especially since Darin’s little glitch woke me up last night. I need my pick-me-up nap. How long until the morning briefing?”

Darin checked his chrono. “Fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. I can wait until then.” Quiver settled back in his chair and downed his cup of caf in one large chug. “Ahh.” He wiped his mouth with a sleeve of his flight suit and put his empty cup and dirty dishes on Darin’s food tray, next to the plate Darin had picked at more than eaten off of. “Here you go. Clear off the table for us.”

“What? Why me?” Darin knew it was wasted breath to even ask, but he did anyway. Being the squadron’s rookie wouldn’t be so bad if it wasn’t the accepted mechanism by which the other pilots dumped any and all of the grunt jobs on him. There was no way out of it, and it was getting old.

“We need a reason, rookie? Fine, if it makes you feel better, how about this: because you made me lose sleep last night. You owe me.”

CC put her dirty dishes on Darin’s tray as well. “And now I have to sit here and listen to him whine and complain about it, so you owe me too,” she said.

“Oh no. Hold on here,” Darin said. “Your droid was the reason Botch woke me up then. If he hadn’t done that, I would’ve stayed asleep and never would have woken up Quiver at that hour. You clean this up.” He pushed the tray in CC’s direction.

CC stared at him with wide, startled eyes, then she took in the sight of the tray in front of her, the result of his defiance. Finally she heaved a huge, despairing sigh and said woefully to thin air, “Oh, no. This is awful. I *told* Commander Mackin this would happen. ‘Don’t stick the new rookie with Quiver, sir,’ I begged. ‘Within a few weeks, maybe less, Quiver’s obnoxious ego will rub off on him, and the rookie will forget that *he’s the rookie.*’” She stubbornly pushed the tray back in front of Darin. “‘These things start small, sir,’ I said. ‘First he forgets his place, then he forgets his manners, then he becomes insolent, disrespectful and disobedient, then the next thing you know, he’s the new Emperor.’”

Quiver didn’t miss the opportunity to play along. He sniffled melodramatically and really hammed it up when he said, “Who would have ever thought that that innocent little five-year-old boy jumping off a shed trying to fly would end up like that? We’ll ask ourselves, ‘Where did we go wrong? Where was the innocence lost?’ And a hundred years from now, historians will look

back and say with heavy hearts, 'It all started one innocuous morning at a breakfast table when he forgot *he was the rookie* and--'

"Oh, fine, for all the snow in a blizzard," Darin interrupted in irritation. "I'll take the tray just for the chance to get away from you two right now."

CC smiled in relief. "That's our good little rookie! The galaxy is saved!"

Darin stood with the tray but paused. "Wait, let me just ask you guys something. I've gotten some experience here. I've been in a few fights. When do I lose rookie status?"

Quiver waved his hand. "Oh, that's simple. When someone of an equal or lower rank and with less experience than you joins the squadron."

Darin's hopes dimmed. "What? But that could be--"

"Weeks. Months," Quiver finished for him. "Yeah, it's rough being the rookie, isn't it."

"Sometimes you get lucky," CC reassured him. "For instance, I was only the rookie for two weeks when Quiver took over that job for me."

"And she was eager for some payback, too, let me tell ya," Quiver added. "Cracker took it over for me about a month later, and he was the last new addition we had until you. In fact, those few weeks after he was killed and before you came, we didn't have a rookie." He shook his head in despair. "Those were some dark times."

"Dark times," CC agreed solemnly.

Darin just looked at them oddly before wordlessly taking the tray to the washer station. He could no longer tell if they were being serious or not, and for some reason he felt it was better not to ask.

Chapter Three

Another day, another sim run.

Corona Squadron's briefing that morning had led them directly into this simulator exercise. It was another iteration of the mission they'd been practicing for the past week, a hit-and-run against an Imperial monitoring station orbiting a gas giant. Quake Squadron, the other starfighter squadron stationed on *Crescent Star*, was joining them; the earlier sim runs had determined the Imperials were too strong at that location for the Coronas to do this mission alone. In this particular attempt, the Coronas were to conduct a fighter sweep in their X-wings and act as a remote escort to keep most of the Imperial starfighters busy while the Quake Y-wings came in behind and pounded the station. Once the Quakes had dealt enough damage, all of the Rebels would hyperjump out.

Darin hoped this sim would go better than the others had, especially last week's. Even without having to worry about pushing another X-wing out of a gravity well, he was still having difficulties adjusting to flying with such an experienced squadron. Trying to catch up to them skill-wise was exhausting.

Darin's cockpit console beeped, indicating five seconds before reversion to real space. He took some deep breaths, remembered to fasten his helmet's chinstrap at the last minute, and pulled his hyperdrive lever at the appropriate time.

The swirling blue tunnel around him became elongated streaks of light, and the elongated light snapped into pinpricks of stars sprinkled haphazardly on a black backdrop. Darin formed up with Quiver's X-wing, which had reverted immediately in front of him and to the side, and the rest of the shorthanded Coronas also fell into formation. The Quakes would be reverting a few minutes later to give the Coronas a chance to soften up the opposition. The station loomed before them in orbit around the greenish-blue gaseous planet.

Commander Quentell Mackin's voice came promptly over the comm. "Coronas, S-foils in attack formation, accelerate to attack speed. Check your shields. You know your job, now let's do it." The pilots obeyed, and the ten X-wings swiftly approached the station.

It wasn't long at all before Darin's scope showed the red dots of enemy TIE fighters coming to intercept them. Lieutenant Steen "Snubber" Weas, the Coronas' XO, reported them. "Lead, we have two incoming squadrons of eyeballs. We should have jumped in closer and taken our chances with the gravity well. They have too much reaction time this way."

"Agreed, Eight," Mackin replied. "Coronas, ready two torpedoes each and fire on my mark."

Clicks of acknowledgment sounded in Darin's headset. Darin switched his weapons controls to torpedoes, picked out a random TIE fighter near the middle of the formation and centered his targeting brackets over it. While they were still out of firing range, Darin's mind wandered a bit. If this had been a real mission, that particular Imperial pilot might not live to see another day, all because Darin had chosen to target that fighter on nothing more than a whim—

The steady tone of his targeting computer indicating he had a torpedo lock snapped him out of his thoughts. An instant later Mackin commanded them to fire.

His focus again sharp, Darin squeezed his trigger. Twenty proton torpedoes simultaneously shot toward the incoming TIEs, causing some of the Imperials to break and scatter to evade the warheads. They also tried to shoot the torpedoes. The end results were seven TIEs destroyed, a small group not in formation, and the Coronas bearing down on them.

“Two Flight, back to lasers,” ordered Weas. Darin obeyed his flight lead.

The Coronas blew through a head-to-head pass with the wave of TIEs that had remained in formation. Darin did his best to fire and evade at the same time, but his shields still got peppered with laser blasts.

Lt. Ikoa Fyndcap, Corona Two, apparently was worse off than Darin was. “Shields at 50%,” she reported.

“Mine are at 62%,” said Slurry, Weas’s wingman. His thick accent made him hard to understand, especially over the static-filled comm.

Once they were past the first line, Weas spoke again. “Two Flight, break by pairs and engage.”

Darin dutifully stayed on Quiver’s wing as Quiver punched forward and led him to the smaller group of Imperials ahead who had scattered and were only now beginning to regroup. “Come on, Nine. Let’s jump in this group before the first ones turn around and start shooting,” Quiver said.

“Copy, Ten,” Darin replied. He evened out his slowly recharging shields.

Quiver picked out a target, a straggler, and went after it. Quiver’s first few shots missed, and then Darin noticed another TIE coming in full speed on their flank to assist its squadmate.

“Ten, incoming, 200 mark 20!” Darin said. He tried to twist his X-wing in a tight overhead loop to aim his weapons, but the TIE was too close and coming too fast.

Quiver must have realized the incoming TIE had the advantage, since he immediately broke off his pursuit and evaded in such a way that the TIE couldn’t easily fire at him. Darin evaded as well and joined up with Quiver again while warily keeping an eye on the Imperials. The two TIEs paired up and circled wide.

“Good catch, rookie,” Quiver said. “Let’s go find someone else.”

The pair evaded, engaged, fired and disengaged several times over. The dogfight grew more condensed. A couple more TIEs had been destroyed, but the Coronas were still outnumbered. Most of the Rebel starfighters were in a thick skirmish, and Darin heard Slurry’s anxious reports of heavy damage and failing shields. Weas was trying to get his hurting wingman to the edge of the fight so his shields could recharge, and the Coronas nearby were also trying to keep the TIEs off the pair.

One well-placed shot by Quiver crippled a TIE they happened to fly past, and then he aimed his fighter toward a pair of TIEs making a move on Weas and Slurry from the outside. “There we go. Our new playmates, Nine. You’re my wing,” Quiver said. Darin wasn’t sure how much longer Slurry could survive this fight with all the damage to his X-wing. It was going to be close, and he and Quiver had to keep those TIEs away. Darin’s lungs demanded air more quickly as he followed.

A few moments before they engaged the two TIEs, Botch blatted at Darin, and only then did the pilot notice the additional squadron of TIEs launching from the monitoring outpost. Darin chewed his lip in apprehension: they’d known the squadron capacity of the station, but they hadn’t expected all of the opposition so quickly.

Quiver’s fighter remained steady through it all. He fired a shot to distract the two outside TIEs from Slurry’s X-wing, then he smoothly settled in behind them. Darin stuck with him, but his attention faltered while listening to the words coming over the comm system.

“Coronas, heads up,” Mackin said. “Another squadron inbound. This’ll get real hairy real soon. Stick together and listen since we’ll probably need to abort. Switch lasers to quad bursts:

that should help lower the numbers on these guys before the new ones get too close.”

Darin followed the orders as he flew after the TIEs with Quiver, feeling a self-imposed urgency to hurry up and finish this dogfight so he could start the next one. Then, as if the galaxy decided all of that wasn't enough to deal with, a flashing light on Darin's sensors signaled the Quakes' departure from hyperspace.

One glance at his scope showed that if the new group of TIEs went after the closest opposition— the Coronas— all the TIEs would be fully engaged with the X-wings and vastly outnumbering them before the slower Quakes would be within range to help. The pressure kicked up a notch and became nearly suffocating. Mackin relayed the current situation to Commander Unirt, the Quakes' leader, but Darin barely listened. He now had too many other things on his mind, like the large odds the Coronas were about to face and in particular, the two TIEs he and Quiver were chasing. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck.

The pair of TIEs abandoned their interception attempt on Slurry, but that didn't get them out of Quiver's crosshairs. Quiver seemed impervious to the flood of new information and was keeping fairly good time with the two Imperials. In contrast, Darin struggled to keep up at first and tried to focus through the distractions. It worked, but slowly. And Darin couldn't afford to have anything happen slowly then. There was no time for it.

His only saving grace was that Darin was getting the hang of Quiver's flying habits by now and could therefore stay with his wingman relatively well to protect him, even when the two TIEs ahead tried hard to lose the two Coronas. Quiver's shots were getting closer to finding their mark. But this chase was getting more difficult as the TIEs got more desperate, and they had to destroy these TIEs quickly, so Darin threw all of his concentration into his flying. The TIEs rolled, Quiver rolled, Darin rolled. The TIEs dove, Quiver dove, Darin dove. The TIEs accelerated, Quiver accelerated, Darin accelerated. The TIE jinked, Darin jinked. The TIE spiraled, Darin spiraled—

The TIE split, Darin split.

The TIE Darin was chasing veered off, away from its wingman. Darin kept following it without a second thought. It tried to throw off its pursuit, but Darin remained on its tail, determined not to lose it after all this. He fired a couple of times but missed. Darin pushed his fighter harder and fired again. He missed, but not as badly. Just another few seconds and—

“Damn it, Nine, answer me! Where are you?!” Quiver's frantic voice on the comm system snapped Darin out of his fixation.

With a wave of horror, Darin suddenly realized he had no idea where Quiver was. He checked his scope wildly. “Ten?!” Thumper had gotten so focused on that TIE that he'd completely lost track of what was going on around him and, maybe even more importantly, where his wingman was. One unbidden question flashed through his mind: *What's the stupidest thing you've ever done?* A TIE blew past Darin's fighter, startling him and making him even more disconcerted. He tried desperately to get his bearings, to figure out where in the fight he was and where Quiver was, and what the situation immediately around him looked like.

“Come on, I need some help here!” Quiver called.

The news didn't improve. Weas reported the destruction of Slurry's X-wing. Darin struggled to keep from getting mentally overwhelmed.

After an eternity, Darin located Quiver on his scope. They were a considerable distance apart, and Quiver had a TIE firmly on his tail. Darin pulled the sharpest 180 he could manage and heedlessly punched in his throttle. “Ten, I'm coming!”

It was too little too late. The TIE unleashed a salvo of laser blasts directly into Quiver's X-wing, and the starfighter exploded.

Darin cursed at his mistake with equal parts of anger and fear, then that too was forced from his mind when his shields were impacted heavily from behind. He reflexively jerked his fighter out of straight-and-level flight while Botch added a few alarmed shrieks for good measure. He half-heard Mackin and Weas trying to coordinate the squadron, but the words were obscured by his growing panic from the abrupt loss of Quiver and his own life-threatening situation. More lasers hit Darin's shields, and suddenly they were on the verge of buckling. Darin twisted his X-wing around desperately; he saw now that two TIEs were chasing him. "This is Nine, I've got two on me. I need help!"

"Nine, Five," said Flight Officer Maptoo Moog. The Gran sounded calm even in the midst of the chaotic battle. "Six and I are on our way."

One of these days, Darin wanted to figure out exactly how Maptoo could be so laid-back at times like these. Darin put all of his efforts into evading long enough for help to reach him, but that became much harder with a drastic and unwelcome change in their situation. The Coronas had been unable to down enough of the first TIEs to be able to safely disengage and regroup as a whole before the Imperial reinforcements came. Although a couple Rebels had managed to break off long enough to send a few torpedoes into the arriving swarm, it wasn't enough. The new TIE squadron entered the fray and doubled the Imperials' numbers against the battered X-wings. Some continued on to intercept the incoming Quakes.

The next thing Darin knew, and just when he swore it couldn't get any worse, the Coronas' hectic dogfight was momentarily interrupted with two distinct sounds over his headset: a sharp warning tone from Botch and the frantic voice of Quake Six, Flight Officer Welker, on the mission frequency. "A *Carrack* cruiser just dropped in behind us! It's starting to—" His transmission abruptly cut out.

Panic surged in Darin. He twisted around more, trying in vain to get away from the enemy that seemed to be everywhere. Thumper funneled some power from his engines to his failing shields, and he was glad he did when the pursuing TIEs hit him again.

Maptoo and CC, Coronas Five and Six, were at last approaching firing range near Darin's ten o'clock position. One of the TIEs chasing Darin veered off to meet the pair.

Darin made a few tight turns to evade the TIE behind him. After the last of those turns, for one split second he had the other TIE close to his sights. He saw it going for Maptoo and CC, and he saw it fire at them.

Determined to do at least one thing right on this mission, Darin fired a snap shot at the TIE. Unfortunately he did so when it was beginning to pass the two X-wings, and his quad burst went wide of its intended mark. Instead, his converging lasers headed straight for CC's fighter. In the half instant it took for Darin's laser shot to cross the space between him and CC, he couldn't even articulate the dread that materialized as soon as he realized what he did.

To her credit, CC had good enough reflexes to jerk her X-wing out of the path of Darin's lasers. The downside was that her evasion ended up taking her into the path of the oncoming TIE. The two fighters collided in the bedlam, both of them exploding in a single huge fireball.

Darin figured it was a shot from the pursuing TIE that killed him one heartbeat later when the hum of his own simulator fell silent, the windows opaqued and the hatch unlocked.

Darin's first action, after silently telling himself in no uncertain terms how insanely stupid and idiotic he was, was to reach up and pull the canopy completely closed once more. This

was as close as he could come to disappearing into a hole somewhere.

However, Quiver foiled his plan when he walked up and opened Darin's sim canopy all the way. While Quiver stood there waiting, Darin sighed miserably and couldn't bring himself to look at his wingman. "I know, I know," Darin mumbled. "I'm sorry."

"You can't stay in there forever, rookie," snapped Quiver. "Come on, join the rest of us here in the afterlife. What the hell was wrong with you, leaving me alone like that? That's Day One of Starfighter Piloting 101. Thought you knew better than that!"

Darin winced, then when Quiver walked away Darin unfastened his seat restraints and began reluctantly climbing out. Before he could, Botch caught his attention with a few questioning beeps. Darin glanced at his sim console's display for the translation, but then he shook his head and answered distractedly, "No, Botch, I don't know where Ruby went." He didn't care, either, and the random question was soon gone from his mind, swallowed by guilt and embarrassment as he disconnected Botch and then joined his "dead" squadmates. Slurry was there as expected, and Maptoo as well; Darin wondered if the blast from CC's explosion had caught Maptoo's fighter. Quiver and CC were quietly arguing or picking a fight with each other. A few Quake pilots and gunners were also present, victims of the *Carrack's* swift, surprise attack, and they were watching the rest of the sim unfold on the viewscreens with the Coronas. Darin took off his helmet and stood apart from the others, rigidly keeping his attention on the monitors and unwilling to meet the eyes of any of his squadmates.

The sim wound down, and the Rebels had not accomplished their mission. The surviving pilots clambered out of the simulators, and everyone began walking to the briefing room for the standard sim run discussion and debriefing. Dread ate at Darin's stomach.

Chopper and his Rodian wingman Flight Officer Kalre Unatel were two of the Corona survivors. As that pair walked by the group clustered by the monitors, Chopper said, "Better get a leash for that wingman of yours, Quiver."

Kalre nodded. "A couple more X-wing kill markers and he'll be an ace Imperial fighter pilot."

"You sure he's on our side?" added Chopper.

Quiver immediately shot back, "And how many times have you two killed each other or one of us in the sims with one of your hotshot maneuvers?"

"There's a big difference between a maneuver simply not working and a pilot being stupid and incompetent," Chopper said. "I think the rookie used up all his flying skill last week in that other sim. Thought he was finally improving before, but looks like he's just learning how to be more dangerous to *us*."

The last words came just as the pair walked out the door, preventing any replies. Quiver grumbled something under his breath, crossed his arms and moved beside his wingman, though he stayed farther away from Darin than he normally would have. He hardly looked at Darin, opting instead to keep his eyes on the doorway Chopper and Kalre had gone through. "Don't listen to them, rookie." Quiver's voice had an edge to it that Darin had rarely heard before.

"Why not?" Darin asked. He could feel the heat in his flushed face. "They're right."

"Are you planning on making the same mistakes again?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then you've already proven you're smarter than them. Now let's go. Debriefing. And *don't wander off* this time!"

Darin suppressed a sigh and silently followed his squadmates to the briefing room.

Quiver had every right to be upset with him for leaving him unprotected. There was no excuse for that. And CC– she certainly hadn't looked or sounded happy just now while arguing with Quiver. And again, Darin couldn't blame her. She would have made it through the sim if it wasn't for him. He'd better tread very softly around her for a while. If this had been a real mission, his mistakes would have killed his two friends and himself, and maybe Maptoo as well from the way Chopper and Kalre were talking.

Stupid rookie mistakes.

Chapter Four

Darin did his best to will himself into invisibility in the small briefing room. He stayed as quiet as the animal that had inspired his callsign and simply listened to the lively debate filling the air about whether it was best to jump in closer to the planet and risk getting caught immediately in the gravity well or to jump in farther away with a chance of a quick escape but giving more notice to the Imperials. Most of the pros and cons brought up on either side by the pilots were things Darin would never have thought of. Blast, he felt so naïve.

Operation: Please Forget About My Stupid Mistakes went rather well for Thumper until the debate wound down and Commanders Mackin and Unirt began their usual debriefing procedure. They went around the room and had each pilot relate how the mission had looked from their perspective and what had gone well or could be improved upon.

“So the TIE was dumping all his laser power into my poor X-wing. About that time I figured it would have been *really nice* if I’d had a wingman with me like I’d thought I did,” Quiver said as he ended his tale of woe during his turn. He still sounded aggravated. “By the time I finally got Nine’s attention, though, I’d transformed into a ‘regret to inform you’ letter for Mack to write to my parents. Which I hope would contain lots of wonderful adjectives and adverbs.”

Mackin crossed his arms casually, and the stocky commander with a black crew cut half-sat on the table at the front of the room. “Depends,” Mackin replied. “For instance, what should I tell Mr. and Mrs. Yanilr about their wonderful son’s teaching skills?”

Quiver immediately opened his mouth to answer but stopped as suspicion clouded his face. “What do you mean?” Quiver asked skeptically.

Mackin shrugged. “You know Nine’s new, so you should be devoting a bit of extra effort to making sure he’s doing what he’s supposed to be doing instead of assuming he is. Right? That’s how he’ll learn. When we’re flying, you need to teach him.”

The words were mild, but there was a quiet reaction and stirring from all the other pilots that was best summed up by CC. “Busted,” she muttered under her breath to Quiver from where she sat beside him. On the opposite side of Quiver, Darin’s stomach sank. The cobbled-together metal chair felt a hundred times more uncomfortable, and he fidgeted in his seat.

Quiver looked caught off-guard. “Huh? Sir, how is this my fault? I tried to get Nine on the comm when I saw he wasn’t there anymore, and he didn’t answer.”

“Then it sounds like you’ll need to work harder in the future to make sure it never gets that far, especially now that you know it can happen. Anything else?”

Quiver didn’t say anything for a moment, then he merely replied, “No, sir.” Once the words were out of his mouth, he whirled to Darin. “Did *your* mistakes just get *me* in trouble?” the lanky pilot hissed in Darin’s ear.

“No, I didn’t mean—” Darin started to quietly and quickly say back to him.

“Flight Officer Stanic,” Mackin said, cutting him off, “your turn. What can you tell us about the sim?”

Darin stopped and looked back at his commander like an animal caught in speeder headlights. He noticed Weas, Chopper and Kalre had fixed him with expressions containing varying degrees of impatience, frustration, and a pleading hope that this would be the last time the rookie committed such stupid errors since he should have known better in the first place.

“Yeah, Darin,” Chopper piped up. “Why don’t you tell us all the ways you messed up in that sim?”

“Lieutenant!” Mackin rebuked. The sharp word quelled some of the snickers that had rippled through the assembled pilots at Chopper’s comment. Chopper fell silent, though he didn’t look apologetic. His close-cropped black hair was trimmed shorter than Mackin’s, and the similarities ended there. Chopper was built as solidly as a slab of duracrete, and he was once again making Darin believe he had the mindset and stubbornness to match.

Operation: PFAMSM was an official failure, and Darin’s face felt so warm that he had to resist the urge to pull at his collar for airflow. “Um, sir, can I please discuss my sim performance with you in private afterwards?”

Chopper muttered something that Darin couldn’t make out, though Kalre chuckled at it. Mackin raised an eyebrow at his youngest subordinate but merely said, “All right. Moving on then.” He directed his attention to the next person, a Quake gunner.

By the time the debriefing was finally over and only Darin and Mackin remained in the room, Darin’s cheeks felt like they had returned to their normal color. Mackin motioned him up to the front and then said, “Okay, let’s hear it.”

Darin squirmed miserably and recounted his sim experience, not even trying to sugarcoat his blunders. Maybe there was a higher reason why he had been paired with a droid called Botch: this way, all the mistakes could be contained in one snubfighter. When he finished, he cringed slightly, squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself for the imminent chewing out.

Instead, he heard Mackin give a soft sigh. “Darin, relax. For the hundredth time, I’m not your training squadron commander. What good would it do for me to yell and scream at you when it’s so blatantly obvious that you know you messed up?”

Darin gratefully pried his eyes open and tried to breathe. Old habits were hard to break.

“Now, tell me what you can do to ensure your mistakes won’t happen again,” Mackin continued.

Darin’s gratitude was short-lived. He’d learned this was one of Mackin’s favorite tactics in situations like this, but knowing it was coming didn’t make it any easier to come up with acceptable solutions. Sometimes Darin was half tempted to offer a completely off-the-wall suggestion just to see how Mack would react.

Today wasn’t that day, though, and Mackin was apparently satisfied with Darin’s response because he simply patted Darin on the shoulder. “Give it a try. You’ll get there. Last week made it clear that you’ve got the ‘pilot’ part down pretty well; now we just need to fix up the ‘combat’ part. If there’s nothing else, you’re dismissed,” Mackin said.

Darin retreated and headed off to the rest of his duties. At least the rest of the day couldn’t get any worse.

“I’ll see you later, guys,” CC said as the three of them left their dirty dinner plates and trays at the mess hall washer station that evening. “Ruby has a stuck access panel I’m going to fix. It’s been annoying him ever since the sim.”

“You need any help?” Darin asked.

CC shook her head. “I got it, but thanks.”

“There you go again,” Quiver quipped, “wanting to spend time with your droid instead of us.”

“No, just instead of you,” CC replied. Quiver stuck his tongue out at her, and she returned

the gesture before adding, “And Quiver, be nice to your wingman for once today. He indirectly caused my virtual death today too, but you don’t see me getting on his case about it. Poor guy, stuck with you. That’s punishment enough.”

Quiver snorted, and CC walked out of the mess hall. Then Quiver snuck a handful of dried berries and nuts from the food serving line and pocketed them. When he walked past Darin on his way out of the mess hall, Quiver said, “Heel, rookie.”

Darin fought down a flare of annoyance as he followed his wingman up to their quarters. Ever since the sim debriefing Quiver had been giving Darin commands for every single action, no matter how small or insignificant. The only good thing was that the more Quiver did it, the more he seemed to be turning it into a game. Maybe the reminders of Darin’s unfortunate bout of tunnel vision would blow over before too much longer.

They had just stepped out on the deck where Corona Squadron’s quarters were located when Darin heard a familiar voice behind him. “Look, Chopper, the rookie is actually staying with his wingman!”

Darin sighed and didn’t turn around. Or maybe it wouldn’t blow over anytime soon.

“It’s truly a miracle!” Chopper told the Rodian. “But you know they’re in trouble when *Quiver*’s considered the smart one of the pair. Poor rookie won’t learn a thing.”

“I just spent the last half hour throwing comebacks at CC for the exact same joke,” Quiver said in between the nuts and berries he was snacking on. He didn’t look back but said it loudly enough for Chopper and Kalre to easily hear. “I like my comebacks to be fresh and unique, and I just don’t have any new ones left. So you’ll forgive me if I don’t engage in your battle of wits this time.”

Darin tried to ignore it all. The teasing continued until Chopper and Kalre walked into their own room next to Darin’s and Quiver’s. Darin reached for their room’s access panel to unlock the door, but Quiver stopped him.

“I got this,” Quiver said. “Your codes are too glitchy today for my patience.” Quiver entered his own passcode, and the door opened. “Did the mess hall workers ever say what the problem was down there with you today?”

“No,” Darin replied as they walked in. While getting his supper, the computer in the mess hall’s serving line wouldn’t accept Darin’s code to deduct the dinner from his meal account, but the mess hall workers recognized Darin and let him through with his food anyway.

“You should send a note to the computer techs. Ask them about it,” Quiver suggested. He transferred a small pile of datacards from his desk chair onto the mess covering his modified shipping crate desk. He straightened one of the holos that were projected over nearly every square centimeter of his wall, then he grabbed a datapad, sat down and began reading.

On the opposite side of the room Darin sat down at his own desk, another modified shipping crate but with more organization on its surface and considerably fewer pictures above it, and decided Quiver’s idea was a good one. Darin logged into his computer console and typed a request to the computer technicians onboard to look into why his authorization code and computer codes were having problems. Once that was sent, he remembered he had to update a few parts of a droid repair report that was due the next morning, so he loaded the document on his console.

The gibberish that filled his console screen when he did so left him stunned and speechless for several seconds. Anxiously Darin scrolled through the report, but there was no coherent information in it anywhere: all the characters were illegible and unrecognizable, and

some entire sections were either missing or had words and lines compressed crazily. The whole thing was ruined. An even more frightening thought struck him, and Darin hurriedly called up his other report that was due the next afternoon. His stomach churned when he saw the second document was corrupted as well. Darin cursed vehemently and desperately began trying every trick he knew to fix it.

“What is it?” Quiver asked.

“Both of my reports got corrupted, and they’re nothing but gibberish!” Darin said. “They’re due tomorrow. If I can’t fix them or recover them...”

Quiver crossed the room to look at the console screen over Darin’s shoulder. “Wow,” Quiver said. “Yeah, that looks pretty ugly. But before you even ask, no, I had nothing to do with this. I don’t do harmful pranks, no matter how annoyed I am at the person. Even if he happens to be my clueless wingman who got me in trouble in front of everyone *and* got me killed for no reason.”

Darin paused in his troubleshooting efforts just long enough to throw a look over his shoulder, one that he hoped would convey exactly how much he didn’t appreciate that comment given how bad he already felt about the whole sim run and how fed up he was with the reminders. Quiver must have been able to read it well enough because he relented, saying, “Okay, sorry, that was uncalled for.”

Darin worked in silence for another couple of minutes, and at one point Quiver idly remarked, “Computers just haven’t been your friend today, have they.”

“No, they haven’t.”

The more Darin worked, the more desperate he got. Nothing was recovering the old, pre-corrupted data or fixing the data in front of him. Quiver walked him through a couple of tricks he knew, but those didn’t help either.

Twenty minutes later, Darin gave up. “Wonderful,” he bit out. He wanted to hit something. “It’ll take me half the night to redo those reports.”

“Comm Maptoo or CC,” Quiver said. “They’re pretty good with computers, especially Maptoo. Maybe they can figure it out.”

After what had happened in the sim, those were the two squadmates he was the least willing to ask for a favor. Darin shook his head. “No, that’s okay. I’ve wasted enough time trying to recover these things. I’d better get started on rewriting them.”

“You can ask them for help, you know. They’re not—”

“It’s okay, Quiver,” Darin interrupted. “I’ll just redo them.”

Quiver looked at him for a few seconds before shrugging. “Okay. If that’s what you want.” He returned to his desk and picked up his datapad.

It wasn’t what Darin wanted, but it was what he was going to make himself do. Darin grabbed a datapad of his own to use so he wouldn’t run into the same corruption problem that had plagued his computer console. He sighed a quiet, seething, frustrated sigh as he glared accusingly at the blank screen and tried to remember everything he had written in those reports.

Stupid computer glitches.

Chapter Five

Darin yawned and hoped the sound didn't transmit over the comm system. He'd been up way too late last night rewriting those reports, but he'd finally gotten them done and submitted on time with no one the wiser except Quiver. After that and being busy all day with his regular duties, he couldn't wait to go back to his quarters and take a nap. A glance at the chrono in his X-wing's cockpit told him that in fifteen minutes his afternoon fleet escort patrol would be over and he'd be able to do just that.

Ten minutes later, a light on his comm system started flashing. Puzzled, Darin called up the communication: it was a text message telling him to stay out there on patrol. Chopper wasn't feeling well and needed someone to cover his patrol duty for him.

Darin sighed. His nap would have to wait. "Ten," he said to Quiver in the X-wing beside him. "I'm stuck pulling a double patrol. Don't wait for me to head back." Darin had made doubly sure to stay close to Quiver's fighter today, though luckily grudges never seemed to get a good foothold in Quiver's short-term memory, let alone his long-term. A night's sleep usually erased them pretty well, and this time didn't appear to be any different.

"A double?" Quiver asked, sounding surprised. "How come?"

"Sounds like Three's not feeling well. I got a message saying to cover for him."

"Well, all right. I won't say I envy you because I don't. See you afterward for dinner, okay?"

"Okay."

Quiver's X-wing turned toward *Crescent Star* just as Kalre's lone X-wing emerged from it. Darin gave in to another yawn and continued his patrol route, waiting for the Rodian to catch up and join him.

It was about an hour and a half later when Quiver left his quarters to check on something in the hangar. As he was walking out, he saw Chopper heading into his own quarters next door. Quiver paused. "Feeling better, Chopper?"

Chopper stopped and looked at him blankly. "About what?"

"Weren't you feeling sick earlier?"

"No. I'm fine. Why? Who told you that?"

Quiver was growing equally confused. "Darin. He said he had to cover your patrol now because you weren't feeling well."

Chopper shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. I got a message from Darin earlier today offering to take my patrol for me. It said something about needing the practice after that sim run. Who am I to pass up an opportunity to get out of patrol?" Chopper ended the conversation by walking into his quarters, and the door shut behind him.

Quiver stood there for a moment, puzzled. Finally he shrugged and checked his chrono as he started toward the hangar. The patrol would be over soon anyway; he'd ask Darin about it at dinner.

Quiver eagerly scrolled down to the next section on the datapad. His supper was nearly forgotten and growing cold in front of him on their usual table in the mess hall, but he had more important things to do than eat, like finding out if the Wookiee detective could stop the runaway airspeeder in time.

“Quiver, have you been guilt-tripping Darin about what happened during that sim?”

Quiver jumped when he heard CC speak, and he looked up as she sat down across from him. He reluctantly put down the holonovel and replied, “No, guilt-trips are your territory. I haven’t given him a hard time today. Though I might have to since he’s late for supper.” Something about the scene before him wasn’t right, though, and it occurred to him an instant later. “Wait, so what are you doing here now? I thought you couldn’t come to supper tonight because you had patrol duty.”

“That’s why I was asking about Darin,” CC said as she started to eat her meal. At the same time she picked up Quiver’s datapad and distractedly glanced over the holonovel displayed on it. “I got a message from him a little while ago saying he was volunteering to take my patrol because he needed more flight practice. It went on to mention something like how he also wanted to make it up to me for what happened in the sim, and I felt bad that he felt bad, so I let him do it.” CC looked up, paused, and then narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Quiver. “Why are you staring at me with that strange— well, *stranger*— look on your face?”

“Because I’m trying to figure this out,” Quiver answered, deep in thought. “I’d say something’s got to be glitchy with the scheduling system, but that wouldn’t explain the messages going around. The exact same thing happened during the last patrol with Chopper.”

CC’s brow furrowed. “Maptoo and I were supposed to relieve Chopper and Kalre on patrol. Are you saying that he took over for one of them too?”

“Yeah.”

“So this is Darin’s second patrol in a row?”

“Third. The two of us were on the normal schedule before that. But the reason Darin told me for why he had to stay out to cover for Chopper was different than what Chopper told me. I was going to ask Niner when he got back after Chopper’s patrol, but now it sounds like he’s covering for you too.”

“Maybe Darin honestly did want the extra practice but just didn’t want you to know, so he made an excuse?” CC asked.

“But why?” Quiver asked. “He can fly fine, and patrols don’t really help with anything else most of the time.” He rocked backwards on his chair and couldn’t decide if he wanted to laugh or groan, so he opted for a little of each. “I don’t know what’s going on. He’s going to be so annoyed when he gets back.”

CC checked the time. “It hasn’t been too long since our patrol started. Once I’m done eating, I’ll go relieve him. I didn’t realize he’d been out there for so long already. He must be bored out of his mind.” She casually tossed the datapad back at Quiver. “Good novel. And for five credits I won’t blurt out the ending.”

Stiff. Uncomfortable. Hungry. Tired. Irritated.

Those were just some of the words coming to Darin’s mind that he could have used to describe himself when he finally set his X-wing down in *Crescent Star*’s hangar. CC had just

relieved him, and from their brief in-flight conversation Darin got the impression that there had been a mix-up in some system somewhere to cause his triple patrol.

Earlier, Darin had been more than a little annoyed when he'd gotten a text message from CC a mere fifteen minutes before his second patrol was over. It had said she was in the middle of something she absolutely had to get done, and if he would cover her patrol for her while he was already out there, she'd owe him one. Maybe she'd even forget about that incident in the sim the other day.

When he'd read that last line, Darin had known there was no way he could refuse the request. He'd yawned once more, shifted his weight to find a more comfortable position, and chalked up the inconvenience to something he knew so well, his rookie status. He hadn't been happy about it, but he'd accepted this additional task without complaining to anyone besides Botch.

But now... now CC had quickly told him that something wasn't right, that she never sent such a message, and she wasn't sure if Chopper had needed someone to cover for him either. Now Darin was stiff, hungry, tired, irritated and confused. He couldn't discount it all being an elaborate prank, but if it was, he knew he wouldn't be a good sport about this one.

Thumper gratefully climbed out of his snubfighter, gave his crew chief a quick status, stopped in the locker room to take off his flight gear, and then headed to his quarters. He was too tired and aggravated to look into the details of the problem right away when he could instead do the same thing tomorrow with a much clearer mindset. He had some fruit bars stashed in his desk— hopefully Quiver hadn't found them— so he'd have one or two of those for a quick dinner and then finally be able to go to bed.

Darin reached his room and punched in his passcode. The control panel blatted at him and refused to open the door.

The pilot scowled, then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and chewed on his lip for a minute, willing himself to remain calm and not break something. That did little to relieve the stress inside him, though, so as a compromise he chose to pound on the door rather than serenely pressing the door chime. "Quiver! Open up!"

Chapter Six

A blaring alarm jolted Darin awake. His immediate thought was to take action, but his next immediate thought didn't know what kind of action to take. Run? Fight? Freeze? It was dark all around, and for a moment Thumper couldn't remember where he was.

Then he heard Quiver yelling over the deafening, awful noise, "Darin, what is that?!" Quiver turned his small, bedside reading light on.

Reality flooded back. With his heart still pounding after the initial scare, Darin rolled out of bed and headed toward what sounded like the source of the alarm, desperate to turn it off. The sheer volume was killing his ears. To his surprise, the horrible sound was coming from his computer console.

Darin logged into his console in record time, and after another agonizing minute he located the offending program and shut it off. Silence prevailed. Darin studied the culprit: somehow the computer program that was used to send gentle audio reminders about meetings and deadlines had been set to blare that racket at—Darin checked his bedside chrono, not certain he wanted to know the answer—0241 hours. No, that was knowledge he'd rather not have.

The problem solved, Darin turned around to go back to bed; he was blocked, however, by Quiver, who had been standing directly behind him and who did not look happy at being woken up in that fashion at that hour. "What the hell was that?" Quiver demanded.

"I don't know. My reminder program did that for some reason."

"How could that happen?"

"I don't know, Quiver," Darin repeated. He prayed Quiver would let it go for now so he could get back to sleep. He was so tired from that triple patrol earlier and everything that had happened before it. "Either someone logged into my computer and set it up manually, which I find highly unlikely, or whatever glitch corrupted my reports also affected this."

"Strine blink, rookie, why is every computer on this ship out to get you?!"

"I don't know," Darin said once again. "Look, I'm tired. I'll figure it—"

The alarm blasted through the darkened room again, making both pilots jump. "Didn't you turn that program off?!" Quiver said loudly once he recovered, putting his hands over his ears.

"Of course I turned it off! I don't know what's wrong with it!" Darin called back. He turned back to his console, but now he discovered that the console had locked itself down while the alarm program was still running. It wasn't supposed to do that, but Darin had given up trying to figure out the computer's logic.

He quickly typed in his authorization code and password, but instead of allowing him to log in, the computer screen greeted him with a simple message: "*Your password has now been changed. Shutting down.*" The screen went blank, and the alarm continued.

"What?!"

Darin tried to log in again, but he couldn't call up the screen. Both the computer and the alarm program remained inaccessible. At this point Darin opted for the brute force method: he punched the computer's on/off button, harder than was necessary. The room was once again plunged into tranquility as the whirring of the console faded into silence.

"That does it," Quiver said. "Comm Maptoo. Have him come over and look at it."

"In the morning."

"No. Now."

Darin shook his head. “Quiver, it’s almost 0300. I am not going to comm him now.”

Quiver grabbed Darin’s comlink off his desk and forced it into Darin’s hand. “Yes, you are. This is beyond ridiculous. Don’t worry, he won’t be upset. Nothing ever upsets him.” When Darin made no move to turn on the comlink, Quiver added, “I’m not letting you go back to sleep until you call him.”

“If you’re so adamant about it, *you* do it.” Darin shoved the small comlink in Quiver’s direction. Maybe forcing the dirty work on him would make Quiver hold off on this for now.

To Darin’s chagrin, it didn’t. “Fine,” Quiver said as he took the comlink. Two seconds later he was trying to raise Maptoo.

It took a minute for a response to finally come through. “Flight Officer Moog,” said a groggy voice over the frequency.

“Maptoo, it’s Quiver. Sorry for waking you up, but Darin’s computer is possessed.”

“Is that what that noise was?”

“Yeah. Can you come take a look at it? Needless to say, we don’t want it to happen again.”

“All right. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Thanks.” Quiver turned off the comlink and handed it back to Darin. “See how easy that was?” he asked. Darin didn’t answer.

It wasn’t long at all before their door chime sounded. Quiver turned the main room lights on and opened the door before Darin’s vision had a chance to adapt to the sudden brightness. Maptoo sleepily greeted them both and then asked, “What’s the problem?”

“Computers hate me,” Darin grumbled.

“Everyone on this deck probably hates you now, too,” Quiver added.

Maptoo was still waiting patiently, so Darin tried with difficulty to swallow his crankiness and said, “I’ve had a lot of problems lately with my authorization code and passcode not working, and at the same time I’ve gotten files and programs corrupted on my console here. Like my reminder program, which inexplicably was loud enough to hear in a vacuum just now.”

The Gran nodded. “All right. Turn on your computer and log in.”

Darin looked at the console apprehensively. “Do I have to?”

The push Quiver gave him in that direction answered his question. Darin held his breath and turned on his console, and luckily the alarm did not start up again. The log-in screen appeared, as innocent and peaceful as ever. Maybe, just maybe, it had all been a bad dream.

Darin typed in his authorization code and password, but after entering the data, the message “*Invalid password*” appeared on the screen. Darin sighed. So much for the dream theory. “The last time I tried to log in, it said it changed my password and proceeded to shut down even though the reminder program was still running in the background somehow.”

Maptoo twitched an ear. “That’s strange. Nothing like that should have happened.” He sat down on Darin’s shipping crate chair and logged in with his own authorization code; however, the moment he entered it, the alarm began blaring again. It took thirty excruciating seconds for him to access the program and shut it down.

The pilots held their breaths and waited for a few seconds in the sudden quiet, half-expecting the alarm to go off once more. When it didn’t, Maptoo merely exhaled and said, “There. That’s better.”

Maptoo checked the configuration and the settings of the reminder program, but nothing appeared to be amiss. It didn’t even show any reminders that had even been scheduled for 0241h.

He contemplated that for a short time, and then he asked, "Have you been experiencing constant problems with your codes and the computer, or does it fluctuate?"

"It's been pretty constant," Darin answered. "I sent a request to the computer techs to look into it, but I haven't heard anything back from them yet."

Maptoo's triple gaze regarded Darin. "They generally look into things rather quickly since the computer systems are tied so closely to security. When did you send it?"

Darin shrugged. "I don't know. Something like... around thirty-two, thirty-three hours ago?"

"They should have contacted you by now, even if it's simply to confirm that they're working the problem," Maptoo said. He entered some commands and eventually was able to bring up Darin's messages. After spending a short amount of time looking through them, they saw that the message requesting support had been written but was never sent. Darin was baffled. He was positive he'd sent it.

"That's quite odd," Maptoo said. "Perhaps something blocked it from going out." His three eyes blinked slowly while he thought things over again, and then he asked, "You said these problems were fairly constant. What's the last thing you did with a computer that went *right*? We can start there and see if anything changed between that and the first instance of something going wrong."

Darin was too tired to think properly, and it took him longer than it should have to figure it out. "The first time my passcode didn't work was two nights ago. Right before that, I had to fix something in the computer regarding the droids, and that went through fine."

"What system was that in?"

Darin gave Maptoo as many details as he could remember about how he usually went about accessing the database for the droids. Maptoo recognized it at last and navigated there a short time later. Using a few commands Darin had never seen before, Maptoo found Darin's entry in the database regarding Botch's downgrades from late that one night, and then he went another level deeper into the system.

Thumper could only stare blankly at the lines of incomprehensible information, but Maptoo seemed able to decipher them. Maptoo jumped to another screen, studied the displayed information intently for a short while, and repeated that process several times before finally saying, "I think this is where the problems started." With a meaty finger he pointed to a line of gibberish that apparently had some special meaning to him.

Seeing Darin's helpless expression, Maptoo elaborated. "As near as I can tell, there was some kind of spy-and-snatch program set up within the orders about downgrading Botch. The program was designed to store any inputs to the file with the orders and route a copy of it somewhere else. Essentially, this program 'caught' your authorization code when you entered it to cancel the orders." Maptoo shook his head in a manner somewhere between disgust and despair. "I'll need to tell the computer techs that we have such a blatant security hole. This is unacceptable and dangerous."

Darin was still struggling to process Maptoo's explanation. "Why would anyone want to steal my authorization code? I'm a nobody. I don't have access to anything important or vital. And why would it be causing so many problems with my computer programs and files?"

"There are many reasons to try to steal codes, depending on the intentions of the individual doing the stealing," Maptoo answered. "As for why it's causing those problems, I'm not certain. We'll look into that more closely in case your computer has a virus. It may simply be

a coincidence.” He pointed to another line of code farther down. “Back to your authorization code, though, I believe this data tells us where the captured information was routed. The techs may be able to help us track this down.”

Darin hardly heard the last words: he was too busy staring at the last line of gibberish Maptoo had pointed out. Something about it looked familiar, but what? He forced his tired brain to think, to look for patterns, to make his subconscious mind tell his conscious mind what it had picked up on...

Suddenly, there it was. “Wait.” Darin leaned closer to be sure he saw the numbers correctly. It was a string of eight numbers, and he was certain he’d seen this particular sequence before. He worked with eight-number identifiers quite often now, ever since he had started his new duties with—

“The droids,” said Darin absently. He quickly looked through a pile of datacards on his desk, then pulled one out. Popping it into a datapad, he called up the information. Quiver and Maptoo waited expectantly.

Darin finally found what he was looking for. “There. That eight-number sequence exactly matches—” Oh, no. “—Ruby’s identifier code.”

Quiver was silent for a moment, then he barked a short, dry laugh. “I should have guessed as much. So Ruby’s been the one messing with your authorization code and anything else he could get to by using it, like your passcode and computer files and settings. Things are so much clearer now. Maptoo, my friend, those problems were indeed caused by a virus, one that looks suspiciously like your wingman’s astromech.” He opened Darin’s closet, took out a general duty uniform and tossed it at Darin. “Get dressed, rookie. We’re going to go pay CC a visit.”

“What? No way. It’s—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s 0300.”

Darin glanced at his bedside chrono again. “Actually, now it’s closer to—”

“You think I care?” Quiver interrupted as he began putting a uniform on over his nightclothes. “We’re going to get this settled once and for all.”

Darin sighed, then turned to Maptoo. “Thanks for your help. I guess we’ll, uh, take it from here. Sorry to keep you up.”

Maptoo smiled, an expression that always fascinated Darin by the way it was mostly contained in the Gran’s three eyes. “It’s no trouble. I need to talk to the techs about this security issue anyway. Look on the bright side: this discovery will make us all safer.”

“Yeah, we’ll be safer— assuming CC doesn’t kill the two of us first.”

“Well, there will always be danger in everything we do.” Maptoo stood. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

By the time Maptoo left, Quiver was dressed and ready to go. He looked expectantly at Darin. “Well? Let’s go!”

“Quiver, she’s going to be livid if we wake her up now for this. You know that. Can’t we do this in a few hours when it’s morning?” Darin asked.

“And what if Ruby does something else in the meantime? No. Right now. It’s her droid, her mess. She has to help clean it up.”

Darin reluctantly donned his uniform over his shorts and t-shirt. He’d barely gotten his boots on before Quiver pulled him out of the room.

The one time Darin wished Quiver's laziness would kick in was the one time it didn't.

Darin slouched against the wall and yawned. The third shift foot traffic in the corridor was lighter than during other shifts, but every so often a crewmember or two would walk by. Most had learned to ignore the strange behaviors and antics exhibited by the pilots on this deck.

Beside Darin, Quiver pressed the door chime to CC's quarters again. "Come on, CC, open up," Quiver called.

The door finally opened. "About time," Quiver said with a snort.

From the doorway, CC glared at him, or as much of a glare as she could muster while squinting into the bright corridor. She was wearing an old sweatsuit that was grey and dark green with a logo on it that Darin didn't recognize, and her pet Hue lay curled up on top of her head. Darin doubted he would have been able to distinguish between the small, four-footed, black-furred avian and CC's black hair if Hue's fur and wings didn't also have shimmering, multicolored highlights.

Hue squeaked in sleepy protest at the unwelcome interruption, and CC muttered, "That's right, Huey. Tell this big mean pilot that it's almost 0330, and that he'd better have a damn good reason for waking us up."

"Oh, he does," answered Quiver, not fazed one bit. "Your mean little droid is behind all the glitches and computer problems that Darin's been having, and it's made our night quite miserable. You have to make it stop."

"That's all?" CC asked incredulously. "And you couldn't have waited a few hours? If Ruby's really the problem then I'm sorry, but blast it, Quiver, it's too early for this. I'll deal with it in the morning. The *real* morning." She stepped back and reached for the door controls, but Quiver put his hand on the inside of the door frame to prevent the door from closing.

"No, you'll deal with it now," Quiver said stubbornly.

"Oh, you are *so* on my list. Why does tonight have to be the one time you dragged your lazy butt out of bed to come bother *me* instead of putting it off and going back to sleep like you do with everything else?" CC grumbled.

"Because I don't think I'll be *able* to go back to sleep tonight," Quiver replied. "We've been up for almost an hour now because of what your droid is doing. How can I think it won't start up again as soon as we go back in there unless you do something about it?"

CC gently lifted Hue off her head and set him on the shelving unit by the door, then she stepped into the corridor, and Quiver allowed the door to close behind her. She turned to fully face him, and the gentleness that had been evident in her handling of her pet was completely absent from her voice. "Okay, I'll play along for one minute. So you're telling me that, despite all your self-proclaimed intelligence, you're completely powerless to stop an R2 from waking you up tonight, and it's imperative that I be the one to do it because I'm the only one who can?"

Quiver actually smiled. "Hey, fine, if you're giving me permission then I'll go memory-wipe that crazy droid of yours right now. Problem solved!"

"Don't you *dare* touch Ruby, or Force help me you will regret it dearly," CC shot back in a low voice. Unnerved, Darin shifted his weight; while he'd heard CC and Quiver threaten each other in pure fun and mock annoyance countless times already, this was the first threat he sensed was real. Even Quiver must have picked up on it, since his smile fell off his face.

"Quiver, let's just go back to our quarters and figure this out later," Darin said uneasily. This had been a mistake from the beginning, and it was going downhill fast.

CC shook her head. "No, no. *Quiver* wants this taken care of now, remember? Because

it's so deathly important to do *right this second*. So, Quiver, tell me." She turned her attention back to the tall pilot. "How do you know it's Ruby that's causing the problems? How did you come to this wonderful epiphany at this time of night? Have too much to drink? Did you dream it? Did a Jedi Master of old come and impart wisdom to you from beyond the grave? Force knows you're in desperate need of some."

Quiver stared straight back. "Strine blink, Darin was right. You *are* insufferably cranky if you don't get your beauty sleep." Appalled, Darin tried to figure out when he had said that, and the dirty look CC gave him made Darin want to smack Quiver. Quiver continued without missing a beat, "As a matter of fact, Maptoo came to help us with Darin's computer and found evidence that Ruby had stolen Darin's authorization code with a spy-and-snatch. That's what he's using to mess with Darin's computer and stuff. Yeah, that's right. Don't trust me or Darin, but you trust your wingman's word, don't you?"

"Let me get this straight," CC answered, unamused. "You found 'evidence' that Ruby set up a spy-and-snatch program on Darin. If Ruby was the one doing all these things, do you really think he'd leave evidence like that behind? Come to think of it, it's funny how Botch was the one that discovered all this in the first place." Darin suddenly found himself in CC's crosshairs. "Sounds to me like your droid is framing my droid, Darin! Don't forget Botch is half of that squabble between those two! So let's turn this around to the way it ought to be: you had better call off Botch before he gets Ruby in trouble for something Ruby didn't do!"

Darin felt a surge of defensiveness, and he pushed himself off the wall to stand upright. "No way. Botch did not do this!" Darin said. "He wouldn't do all this stuff to me just to get Ruby in trouble! I know him!"

"And guess what, rookie: I've known Ruby longer than I've known you. You know how many months Ruby and I have flown together? Probably more than the number of real missions you've flown in your entire career, so don't think for one instant that I don't trust Ruby with my life. Botch is the unknown here."

CC's words made Darin stop. Although he knew they were true, they really rubbed him the wrong way. Even if they were nothing more than words spoken in the heat of the moment from someone who, like Quiver, was usually so carefree and easy-going, Darin realized that maybe he wasn't integrated in this tight group friendship as much as he'd thought he was. Apparently he came in fourth, behind a droid. Jealousy bubbled inside. As much as he liked Botch, he didn't put Botch above Quiver or CC.

"Oh, please," Quiver scoffed during Darin's silence. "Botch has only been memory-intact for what, a month? Ruby's had a much, much longer time to develop all the psychoses and problems that come with being memory-intact. Seriously, CC, your droid weirds me out sometimes. If Botch did anything, it's only because he recently learned it from Ruby."

CC took a breath to retort, but before she could, the door to her room beside them whooshed open. "Hey!" Lt. Ikoa Fyndcap, CC's roommate, scolded as she poked her head out. Her chin-length brown hair was mussed up, and the small woman blearily rubbed sleep from her eyes with a sleeve of her light purple nightclothes. "Some of us were on second shift today and are trying to sleep! Blast, first that loud alarm noise, now this? Keep it down or I'll toss all three of you in an airlock. You can argue in vacuum without bothering the rest of us. And CC, I think Hue is eating something he shouldn't be." Ikoa pulled back and shut the door.

CC scowled, then she walked up close to Darin, who retreated a step. "Ruby is not the problem here," she said to him in a flat voice, though the statement almost sounded like a

warning. "I'll talk to him about everything in the morning, if for nothing else than just to prove that he's not doing anything to you. I suggest you have a long heart-to-processor with your own droid in the meantime." CC turned and paused just long enough to glare at Quiver before she went back in her room. The door shut behind her with finality.

Quiver grumbled in frustration, contemplated the closed door like he was trying to decide how far he could push things and still walk away uninjured, then he turned to Darin. "Fine, it doesn't look like we're getting anywhere tonight. CC can have her little talk in the morning, and we'll go see Mack or Snubber first thing and tell them what's going on too."

That jolted Darin almost as much as the alarm had. "No, we can't."

A look of complete and utter incredulousness came over Quiver's face. "Why not?"

"I don't want them to know about this."

Quiver gaped at his wingman. "Darin, listen! They can help. They need to know what's going on with this so they can fix it. They can take over and handle it, and we won't have to worry about it anymore."

Quiver might have forced the discussion with CC that night, but, rookie or not, this was where Darin was drawing the line. Darin shook his head adamantly, and when he spoke he tried to keep his voice down. That was partially to keep things quiet enough for Ikoa and CC to go back to sleep, and partially to not let Ikoa hear it and risk it getting back to her wingman, Mackin. "I can't go to Lieutenant Weas or Commander Mackin! What am I supposed to tell them? 'Sir, a droid is out to get me.' 'Sir, a droid is messing with my head.' 'Sir, a droid is keeping me up at night.' Or how about this one: 'Sir, I'm in charge of all the droids in this squadron, but I'm so incompetent that I can't even keep one under control.' Yeah, that'll *really* help. How stupid does all that sound?" Darin stopped and didn't vocalize the last part, the part he was most afraid that his leaders would hear between the lines if he approached them with this problem: *Sir, it's obvious that memory-intact droids are nothing but problems. Please make memory-wipes mandatory with no exceptions.*

Quiver rolled his eyes. "Fine. Whatever. I'm getting too tired to argue. You and CC work it out then. But that droid had better not cause any more trouble, especially tonight. I'm sick of losing sleep over such a stupid problem, especially one with such an easy solution. I'd think you'd be sick of it by now too, Mister Rewritten-Reports-and-Triple-Patrol." He turned and walked back toward their quarters.

Darin didn't follow; instead, he closed his eyes, heaved an exhausted sigh, ran his fingers through his dark blond bangs and leaned back against the wall again. As much as he didn't want to admit it, Quiver was right: this had to be taken care of tonight. Putting it off gave Ruby the chance to do something else— something worse— that would prompt Quiver to override Darin and take this to Snubber or Mack. Without CC, there was only one more approach Darin could try, though he dreaded it.

Darin split off from his wingman and went after the threat on his own.

"Ruby."

Within the vast main hangar, Darin saw the red and white R2 unit stop at the sound of his name. Ruby's domed head swivelled around, and when he spotted Darin nearby and striding straight toward him, he blatted harshly and began to hastily roll away into Corona Squadron's

subhangar.

“Oh, no, you don’t. Stay right there.” Dodging equipment carts and hoses, Darin started jogging to catch up, prompting the tarnished silver C-3PO unit coming with him to sputter in protest against Darin’s quickened pace.

Ruby stopped and spun to fully face Darin but never let the pilot within arm’s reach. That suited Darin just fine: he didn’t want to be too close to the droid either.

Darin waited while the 3PO droid, Sparks, shuffled up to where the two faced off. Every so often a spark would ignite on some exposed wiring in the 3PO’s joints; Sparks was never allowed near any fueling or hazardous ops in the hangar. “Sir,” Sparks said in a plaintive voice, turning his golden, glowing eyes to Darin. They flickered when another spark crackled from his elbow. “I must remind you that my circuits were not made for such haste. In any event, I simply do not understand the hurry. What can possibly be so important that—”

Darin ignored the rambling and even cut Sparks off by saying, “Ruby,” in his most calm, reasonable voice, a challenge at 0330 hours and after all that had happened both that night and in the days prior. The astromech waited for him to continue, and Darin obliged. “Look, we need to talk. This has gone on long enough.”

Ruby emitted a couple of short beeps ending with a questioning whistle. Darin looked expectantly at Sparks for the translation, and the 3PO complied. “Sir, Ruby would like to know what you are referring to.”

Exhaling in aggravation, Darin said to Ruby, “You know what I’m talking about. Don’t play dumb, and don’t bother denying it. I know you’re the one who’s responsible for all my computer problems these last few days.” He refused to believe it was Botch’s doing.

Ruby’s response this time was a challenging blat. Sparks sounded a bit confused when he translated, “Ruby says it was nothing more than self-defense.”

“Self-defense?!”

Ruby’s string of beeps and low whistles was dark and guttural. “Oh, dear. He says you have shown a clear intent to kill him and his pilot on at least two recent occasions, and he has no intention of giving you a third opportunity. He is merely trying to defend himself and CC.” Sparks sounded disturbed, and he took a step away from Darin.

“What?” Darin’s voice rose an octave. He couldn’t believe it had gone this far. “I have not tried to kill you! Or—” Darin stopped sheepishly when some passing technicians warily looked his way, and then he continued in a quieter tone, “Or CC! Look, Ruby, this is ridiculous. Those were accidents! In sims, no less! I am not out to get either of you! CC knows better and doesn’t think I’m trying to kill her. And actually, in both of those cases I was trying to save you two!”

Ruby replied with an astromech’s equivalent of a huff, and Darin could almost guess Sparks’s translation before he heard it. “Sir, Ruby says that’s exactly the kind of response he expected from you, and he doesn’t believe you,” Sparks said.

“And why’s that?”

A few lights on Ruby’s panel flashed, and a shrill whistle accompanied the beeps this time. Darin could only associate the reaction with Ruby laughing in his face, and he tried to push the image from his mind. Maybe he was taking this anthropomorphizing thing a little too far.

Ruby’s answer was rather long, and when Sparks finally turned to Darin to translate, he spoke in a more subdued manner. “Oh, my. Ruby says... that he knew you wouldn’t openly admit to trying to kill him and especially CC. He’s not so stupid so as to expect humans to come out

and say when they are trying to harm another. Instead, they lie and make excuses to cover it up to protect themselves and their goal. He says you're lying. He also brings attention to the point that the simulators are meant to be practice for real life, and you keep practicing the murder of him and his pilot. Finally, Ruby has heard reports that two of your fellow pilots also said you are a danger to your allies, and your actions during combat simulations are closer to those demonstrated by Imperials."

Darin was quickly losing his patience, and his last nerve had been rubbed raw by CC. "Oh, for all the snow— You mean Chopper and Kalre? They weren't accusing me of anything, they just always give me a hard time when I mess up! And that's all it was: a mistake! But I— You— Fine. If you don't believe me, I can't help that. But this has gotten completely out of hand. You've got to stop messing with my computer and my authorization code and everything associated with it. I can't keep pretending like it's not happening, and we know it's you. I'm actually doing you a favor by talking to you now and giving you a chance to stop. You'd better. I can't, and won't, protect you from the consequences forever."

A set of short, harsh beeps and whistles, the most abrasive sounds emitted from Ruby thus far, met Darin's ears. The message was clear: No. Ruby wouldn't stop as long as he felt there was danger, and he certainly didn't believe *Darin* of all people was doing him a favor or protecting him from anything.

Darin didn't even wait for the translation from Sparks. Fed up, he took a swift step toward Ruby, causing the astromech to wheel back out of reach, and blurted out, "Listen, you Force-forsaken hunk of scrap metal, let's get one thing straight here. If you don't stop this damn nonsense *right now*, you'll find yourself in a few million parts scattered across a few million star systems. I'm sick of losing sleep and having my life messed up because of you, Espo Droid! Understand?!"

An eerie stillness settled over the small group. Slowly, Darin began to realize what he had just said and how he had said it, and there was really only one way Ruby would interpret that outburst. Darin's anger transformed into sickening dread, and that same unbidden question flashed through his mind: *What's the stupidest thing you've ever done?*

He wished Quiver had never asked him that question. Ever since then, he'd kept generating new answers to it.

One light started flashing on Ruby's panel, slowly, thoughtfully, accusingly. In desperation, Darin hurriedly pleaded, "Wait, Ruby, I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. I just—"

Ruby gave one low blat to cut him off before extending his energized arc welder in warning, then he quickly rolled away. Darin watched helplessly as the droid disappeared into the forest of landing struts. This was not good. At all.

Stupid rookie mistakes.

Chapter Seven

Finally, something had gone right.

Despite everything that had happened overnight, Darin almost felt like smiling while he climbed out of the sim along with most of the other pilots at the conclusion of the latest iteration of their mission preparation. He hadn't died. He hadn't caused the death of any allies. He'd stayed with Quiver a lot better and for the entire time. He'd gotten a kill. And he *certainly* hadn't fired his weapons anywhere in the vicinity of CC and Ruby.

Ironically, that had been his only big mistake during the sim run.

"Okay, rookie, here's the deal," Quiver said mildly as he walked up to Darin's simulator. Darin finished disconnecting Botch from it and turned to his wingman. "Remember at the beginning of this sim when we were going after those TIEs that were on CC and Maptoo? In the future, you can't freeze up like you did and not shoot. If we don't pick the Imps off at times like that, CC and Maptoo could have gotten killed. I even told you that this time, so you can't say you didn't know better."

Darin made a face and sighed. "I know." He just couldn't win. Firing weapons near CC's fighter endangered her, and not firing weapons near it endangered her.

"So what was the problem then?"

Darin raised a tired eyebrow. "With my luck, I would have accidentally missed the TIE and made Ruby think I was aiming for him and CC again. The last thing I need now is for him to go completely ballistic on me."

Quiver nonchalantly stepped beside Darin, and the next thing Darin knew, he was in a docile headlock. Startled, Darin reflexively struggled to pull away, but Quiver held on just tightly enough to keep him in place. "Thumper, listen," Quiver said in a conversational yet pointed tone. "Do not let that psychotic little droid make you develop a dangerous habit like that. You do not want to lie in bed at night thinking that you let a friend die because you were intimidated by an astromech. If it'll prevent all that and possibly save someone, I have no qualms about reporting Ruby's behavior to Mack this very instant."

Darin was glad Quiver couldn't see his cringe. "I know, I know. But don't— Quiver, will you please let me go?" Quiver obliged, and Darin thankfully straightened up. "Don't tell Mack. It won't happen again. I swear." He meant it, but it was only one of the many things he was dealing with in trying to overcome and learn from the mistakes he'd made in that bad sim run two days ago. Like he'd told Mackin then, he was attempting to remain more aware of the entire situation around him, but that seemed to come at the cost of losing focus on his primary activity, whether that was flying with Quiver, tracking a target, defending a squadmate or going evasive. But when he focused on only one of those things, he lost the bigger picture. Thumper couldn't find a good balance point. Trying to do so in this sim had been mentally exhausting.

"All right. As someone whose life may literally depend on that answer, I'm going to hold you to that," Quiver replied. Darin's internal pressure kicked up a notch at hearing those words and realizing the truth and gravity of them.

Quiver led a now-silent Darin around the other milling pilots toward CC's simulator, where she was crouched down and fiddling with a loose access panel on Ruby's housing. Ruby's optical sensor tracked Darin as the young pilot approached, and Ruby let out a quiet stream of static.

Darin's step faltered, and he sidled behind Quiver so the taller blond pilot was between

Darin and the droid. “Ruby just hissed at me,” Darin whispered worriedly, keeping an uneasy eye on the R2.

“He did not,” Quiver argued.

“Yes, he did.”

“A little jumpy, are we?”

“No,” Darin said in as normal a voice as he could manage. It came out sounding a little more anxious than he would have liked, and all the happiness in his mood abruptly vaporized. Everything Ruby had done to him up to that point had been a result of suspicion, nothing more. Darin didn’t want to know what the R2 was capable of after being openly threatened.

“Seriously, this is beyond crazy. And I know crazy,” Quiver muttered. “You need to reconsider your position on this whole matter and tell Mack or Snubber. Ruby’s going to have an easy time of driving you insane if your overactive imagination helps him out. You’ll be as paranoid as he is before too long.”

“I’m fine,” Darin said. He wished he believed it himself.

“I just can’t believe you threatened him last night.” That was probably the fiftieth time Darin had heard Quiver say those words that day, and for the fiftieth time Darin didn’t try to defend himself. CC had been strangely silent about the whole matter; all she had really offered was an apology for losing her temper after being woken up.

The pair stopped behind CC. She glanced over her shoulder at them and shifted her weight. “Hi, guys.” She sounded subdued, almost distracted, and she turned back to the access panel. “I thought I got this fixed before, but I guess when I unstuck it I made it too loose.”

“You can mess with that later. Come on,” Quiver said, beckoning with his head. “Mack increased the fine for being late to debriefings and meetings to two credits per minute, remember? I can’t be late again. I don’t have any credits.”

“You never have any credits,” CC said, but her voice was bland and lacking the teasing spark that would usually have lit it up. She straightened up and patted Ruby on the dome. “I promise I’ll fix this after our debriefing, okay?”

Ruby beeped in agreement, sounding every bit the happy, cheerful droid he appeared with his colorful flashing lights and slight bouncing motions.

The simulator room was nearly empty by now as the two squadrons moved to the briefing room, and the three pilots began to follow. As soon as they did, Ruby hissed once more and let the sound linger this time. Darin looked behind him and saw Ruby’s optical sensor trained solely on him again. The colorful flashing lights on the droid had turned a foreboding dark grey and red.

Darin fidgeted and again moved so his friends blocked him from Ruby. “He’s doing it again,” he whispered. “I swear he’s hissing at me.”

CC stopped and spun around. “Ruby!” she said sharply. The droid instantly fell silent until it let out one innocent, curious, questioning whistle a second later.

“What did we talk about this morning?!”

Ruby blatted, but CC cut him off. “No! Leave Darin alone.” Her stern voice left little room for objections.

The R2 didn’t respond, and CC turned around again. Darin and Quiver had both paused a few steps farther down, and when CC caught up to them she put a hand on Darin’s shoulder to gently turn him and urge him toward the door. As soon as she touched Darin, Ruby let out a frustrated, warning shriek.

“Ruby!” CC yelled back at her droid. The droid fell silent under the rebuke.

“At least it sounds like you believe us now that Ruby’s behind it all,” Quiver said to CC while they continued out. “I guess your little talk or whatever you did this morning paid off. Come to think of it, if you ever need proof, Ruby *is* memory-intact, which means everything he’s ever done should be recorded forever in his memor–”

“Quiver. Stop.” The short words and the warning glare from CC made Darin wonder if Quiver had hit a nerve.

A second later, Quiver picked up the talk again but with a slightly different topic. “I still can’t believe you threatened him, rookie,” he grumbled as they reached the doorway. “Given the situation, that wasn’t very smart. Downright stupid, in fact.”

Darin looked uneasily back into the sim room to make sure Ruby wasn’t following. “Yeah, I know. I know.”

Darin experienced no more problems with his authorization code or passcode that day, Maptoo was able to fix his console problems, and Darin gratefully changed his codes and passwords to invalidate the ones Ruby had.

In the subsequent trouble-free days Darin might have thought the situation had been resolved for good if it wasn’t for one thing: Ruby seemed to be everywhere.

When Darin left his quarters in the morning to go to breakfast, twice he found Ruby outside in the corridor, simply sitting there next to his door. Once Darin appeared, Ruby would give his static hiss and slowly back away in the direction of CC’s quarters a few doors down. Darin would also back away in the opposite direction down the corridor to prevent finding himself on the business end of an arc welder. Whenever Darin went to the hangar or the droid repair bay or the pilots’ lounge or the sim room, Ruby was there, watching him. Darin even encountered Ruby one time on an empty deck where he always went jogging. He didn’t know what Ruby was doing, and the constant worrying and attempts to figure it out did him no good.

Quiver kept urging him to get the situation taken care of once and for all, especially when they had to walk past Ruby and Darin would automatically duck over to the far side of Quiver or CC for protection; however, Darin kept refusing. He wasn’t about to risk getting Botch and even Ruby memory-wiped and “killed” just because an astromech was watching him. Darin simply wished it wasn’t so tiring to always be looking over his shoulder for some potential, unspecified threat. He refused to admit the extra spent energy was taking a heavier toll on him than that.

On the morning of the fourth day since Ruby had started hissing, Darin was called to Commander Mackin’s office. It was unexpected, and Darin hoped he wasn’t in trouble for anything.

Darin pressed the door chime to Mackin’s office, and Mackin called, “Come in.”

When Darin opened the door, a small room lay before him. It had originally been a standard crew cabin but had been remade into the commander’s office. The bunk beds had been removed, and the only pieces of furniture were a small, round table in the near corner, some overflowing shelving units, and a desk in the center of the room: an actual desk instead of the cobbled-together desks they called “Uglies” that the subordinate pilots had in their quarters. Mackin’s desk was positioned so that he was facing the door, with two chairs for guests on the side nearest the door and another two chairs at the table.

Mackin’s desk itself reflected the organized chaos the commander had learned to master.

Amid different types of potted plants were stacks of datapads, datacards, a pile or two of flimsi sheets, and a mug of caf that made Darin long for another cup to help shake himself awake. At first glance the desk looked as messy as Quiver's, but the difference was that Darin had seen Mackin immediately find any particular datacard he wanted.

On the desk along with those things and his computer console were also some holos and mementos, and two items in particular always stood out to Darin. One was the emblem of Bluehill Squadron, the squadron Mackin had flown with on his homeworld, painted on a small piece of a Z-95 fuselage. The other was the Corona Squadron emblem Maptoo had painted on a similarly small piece of an X-wing fuselage to complete the set. The metal pieces had each come from a fighter flown as part of the squadron but had later needed all or part of its hull cut up for scrap. Mack had told him that those types of paintings were a tradition on his homeworld, and Darin was fascinated by it.

Now on the far side of the desk, across a jungle of plants and datacards, Commander Quentell Mackin looked up from his work. He was a rather plain-looking pilot, but one whom Darin was happy to be serving under. "Hi, Darin."

The use of Darin's first name confirmed that he wasn't in trouble, and he relaxed a bit and convinced himself he didn't have to report officially. As Darin walked in and the door closed, he said, "Sir, you wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Have a seat." Mackin motioned to one of the chairs by his desk.

Darin obeyed but wondered why Mack's expression and voice held traces of confusion and concern. Had something happened? Was he about to get bad news?

He didn't have much time to guess. Mack leaned forward with his elbows on the desk and focused on Darin. When Mackin spoke an instant later, his question was not one of idle chitchat but was a direct request for enlightenment. "What's wrong?"

So that's what this was about: he'd noticed Darin was acting strangely. Darin tried not to react, but it was hard to cover up the sudden fear that Mackin knew something was going on with Ruby. And if that was true... "Nothing, sir," he said as neutrally and as casually as he could. Darin belatedly tried to suppress some fidgeting.

It didn't look like Mackin believed him one bit. "You're sure."

"Yes, sir." It wasn't technically a lie, was it? Ruby *had* stopped messing with his codes, even if he hadn't stopped messing with Darin's head.

"Any problems with anything?"

Darin's gaze flickered downward. "No, sir. Nothing important. Things are fine." That crossed into the realm of untruthfulness again, and Darin cringed inside. He couldn't keep this up. He looked back at his CO and ventured, "Why, sir?"

Mackin leaned back in his chair, still scrutinizing Darin with steady, dark blue eyes. "Because I want to know why you requested a transfer."

The answer was so unexpected that Darin couldn't do anything for a second. Then all his other problems vaporized, and he couldn't keep the pure confusion and anxiety out of his voice. "A transfer? Sir, what are you talking about? I didn't do anything like that. I don't want a transfer. I don't have to leave, do I?" He really liked this squadron. If he had to go right when he was finally starting to feel like he might fit in—

"You tell me." Mack handed him a datapad. "It's a request for a transfer, which you signed. Snubber brought this to me about ten minutes ago after receiving it, and he couldn't figure it out any better than I could. If there's a problem bad enough to make someone feel like

they have to transfer, we'd like to try to resolve it internally first, and if there's another reason someone wants to go, we'd at least appreciate some advance notification. We don't like getting blindsided like this. I'm glad to hear now that you want to stay, but that doesn't explain how this got here. If you didn't do it, you'd better make sure those pals of yours understand that pranks like this are dangerous."

Darin read over the datapad's information in disbelief. Sure enough, it was a standard request to be transferred out of the squadron, and he had signed it. Only, he hadn't. It was surreal to look at. "No, sir, I didn't do this. I really don't think it's a prank, either. Although..." He trailed off as the realization dawned on him, and he mentally cursed.

"Although what?" Darin was so preoccupied with the potential ramifications that he barely heard the question, and Mackin repeated more insistently, "Darin, although what?"

Darin heard it that time, and he jerked his head up. Forget speeder headlights: now he felt like an animal caught in the targeting search beam of a HAVr A9 Floating Fortress. Damn it, why the hell had he said that one stupid little word? It was going to ruin everything! "Nothing... sir... It's nothing serious..." Darin stammered.

"If it's transferring pilots out of my squadron, then yes, it *is* serious. What is it? What's going on?"

Thumper tried not to squirm. He opened his mouth, hesitated, then closed it again and bit his lip.

"Flight Officer," Mackin said sternly, "I asked you a very simple question."

This was it: he was trapped now. With difficulty Darin resisted the sudden urge to pull at the collar of his beige general duty uniform for airflow. "Well... sir... it's... um, it's Ruby," Darin finished lamely. Even saying that little bit left a horrible taste in his mouth. "He's paranoid about me."

"Explain. What does Ruby have to do with this transfer request?"

Darin wished he could do anything but answer that question. "He thinks I'm out to get him, so he was using my authorization code to mess with stuff in my computer. I think he was hoping I'd get in trouble and get washed out or that I'd get fed up and leave, but he never did anything this drastic. I think he forged the transfer request to get me away from him."

"Ruby was using your authorization code?! Why didn't you mention any of this before?"

"We were trying to resolve it on our own, sir. I thought it was getting better."

Mackin wearily ran his hands over his face and through his black crew cut as if he could feel grey hairs growing. "This is not something you deal with on your own, Flight Officer. This is a security threat."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." Darin's cheeks flushed, and he set the datapad on Mackin's desk. He'd been so hopeful that everything would work out in the end like it was supposed to, but somewhere along the way his repulsorlifts had turned into nothing more than old metal coils, and it was a long way down.

"What's been happening? How long?" Mack asked. "I want details. Start from the beginning."

Darin bit his lip again, took a breath and related everything that had happened with Ruby ever since that simulator run a couple of weeks back that had started Ruby's hostility and paranoia. He took great care to emphasize that he'd gone against Quiver's insistence to report the problem and that CC had tried to fix things as well; the last thing he wanted was to get them in trouble for his mistakes again. If he was still with his training squadron, Darin knew that's

exactly what would have happened: with the Horizons, no one was safe from punishment if they were even the slightest bit involved. But maybe Mackin wasn't like that. Maybe Darin could put the others in a good enough light and accept all the blame himself. He might as well, since he was going to get busted for this anyway. That was a given.

Mackin absorbed Darin's words, only interrupting to ask a question or two for clarification. When Darin was done, the commander said slowly, "Actually, this does explain a lot." When Darin only looked up at him, he continued, "I had attributed those extra patrols you took to some pilots using your rookie status against you. While I'd hoped I was wrong, I think I would have preferred that to this. Then there was all that sim work we've done the last couple of weeks. Even though Snubber and I can tell you're improving, your sim scores have been dropping sharply, especially in the past few days. We checked out the simulator you've been using, but it worked just fine for us and gave us scores we expected. If there's something going on that's tied to your access code, well, then it would only act up when you're logged into that simulator. It also explains why you actively put Quiver and CC between you and Ruby when you're around that droid now. A little jumpy, are we?"

Darin felt no need to answer, so he kept quiet and miserably cast his eyes down at the desk until Mackin spoke again. "Getting back to your story, though, there's one large part I don't understand. Why were you so adamant about not reporting the problems Ruby was causing?"

"Sir, I—" How was he supposed to explain this? "I didn't— Well, I was hoping to—" *Oh, just get it over with*, he scolded himself. "Um, sir, I was afraid that reporting it would lead to... uh, memory-wipes."

Mackin considered that for a moment and then said, "If there's a problem with any aspect of this squadron, it needs to be fixed for the good of everyone, Flight Officer. Never refrain from reporting something because you're afraid of the potential consequences. Plus, if it's something we can catch early enough, the fixes might not have to be as drastic as they would be later on after the problem has worsened."

"Yes, sir."

"You also said at the start of this little chat that you didn't think this problem was serious or important. Short of obviously trivial matters, which this definitely is not— and I suspect you know that— don't presume it's your place to determine what is and is not important, since there may be more to a situation than is apparent to you. That's what the chain of command is for. Lieutenant Weas is your flight lead as well as the XO: talk to him next time if you have any concerns, and he'll take the appropriate action or raise the issue up to me. We're aware of more of the bigger picture than you may be, especially if you get focused solely on your own little corner of the galaxy."

"Yes, sir." Darin secretly wondered if Mackin knew how hard it was to apply all those easily-spoken words to real life. It was a good philosophy, but there were so many factors that came into play each time.

As if to address one of those other factors, the commander took out his comlink and dialed a frequency. The call was answered a moment later with, "CC." Darin's stomach sank. He wanted to disappear.

"Flight Officer Cerac, this is Commander Mackin. Report to my office immediately."

The tone of CC's voice shifted to a more serious one. "Yes, sir, I'll be right there."

"Out." Mackin turned off the comlink and then turned back to the young pilot in front of him. "One more thing, Flight Officer."

“Yes, sir?”

Mackin waited until Darin gave him full eye contact, and his voice had a noticeable edge to it. “If I ever again ask you a question like this and receive a less-than-straight or less-than-truthful answer, it will not be taken lightly.”

His insides were swallowed by a black hole as Darin looked down and said, “Sorry, sir.”

After that, the two pilots waited in silence. It made Darin uncomfortable, but in some ways he preferred that and the silence to what he was afraid would happen after CC arrived. His stupid slip-up was about to alienate one of the only people he really considered a friend on the entire ship, and if that had been a genuine threat Darin had seen in her eyes when Quiver had merely mentioned memory-wiping Ruby, then Darin was done for. It wouldn't be a TIE that would cause his demise like he'd expected.

Before too long the door chime to the office sounded and heralded the beginning of something Darin had hoped would never happen. Mackin called, “Come in.”

Mack had used CC's rank when he commed her, and Darin knew she had caught that signal. That's why, instead of coming in the way Darin had, CC would—

She walked in, came to attention in front of Mackin's desk, saluted and said, “Flight Officer Cerac reporting as ordered, sir.”

Mackin stood and returned the salute before saying, “Have a seat.”

They sat, and Darin could feel the puzzled glance from his friend. He avoided looking at her by studying one of the desktop plants, a bluish-green leafy thing sitting beside a holo of Mackin's wife and daughter. Darin hoped CC wouldn't think he'd gone behind her back on this. And whatever would end up happening, it'd be all his fault.

“Flight Officer Cerac,” Mackin began, “have you or anyone you know, such as your partner in crime, been involved with any pranks involving squadron transfer requests?”

In Darin's peripheral vision, CC looked genuinely surprised. “No, sir. We wouldn't do a prank like that.”

“That's good to hear,” Mackin answered. “Unfortunately, something like that has happened to your squadmate here, and since you just confirmed it wasn't a prank, the remaining theory is that it's connected to your droid. Have any insight on that?”

CC stopped breathing for a moment, then she shifted her weight and slowly replied, “No, sir. I can't confirm it, but I can't exactly deny it, either. I certainly hope it's not.”

Mackin pointed at the datapad. “What we have here is a request for a squadron transfer that Flight Officer Stanic apparently signed, though he claims he didn't. If it wasn't a prank and if your droid was *not* involved, can you think of any other plausible way something like this could have happened? Assuming, of course, that he is telling the truth.”

Darin fought the urge to flinch, and he wondered how badly he had affected Mackin's trust in him, what little there could have been to begin with after being in the squadron for so short a time.

Half a minute passed before CC reluctantly said, “No, sir, I can't.” Her words were pained.

“I can't either.” With a sigh, Mackin said, “I'll have the computer techs look into it to be certain. In the meantime, though, Ruby has to be memory-wiped.”

Those were the exact words Darin had been dreading. CC was the first one to voice their mutual feelings. “Sir, please!” She sounded desperate. “Isn't there something else we can do?”

“Sir, we don't know for sure that it was Ruby who made that transfer request,” Darin

added hastily, pleadingly. “Besides, it—” He glanced at CC’s distraught face and hesitated, hating himself for what he was about to say. Then he said it anyway. “It might have been Botch behind all this to frame Ruby.”

To his surprise, CC looked down and shook her head. “It’s not, rookie,” she said softly. “I talked to Ruby that morning. He made no secret about his actions, and I even double-checked. It was all there, clear as day in Ruby’s memory banks. He was responsible for everything.”

Darin stared at her briefly but then snapped himself out of it. His confused questions of why she hadn’t bothered to mention that little fact in the last few days would have to wait. Darin turned back to Mackin and repeated, “Sir, that aside, we still don’t know if it was Ruby that forged the transfer request. I changed my passcode. He shouldn’t have been able to do that.”

Mackin raised an eyebrow that silently invited Darin to think for just one second. “And he couldn’t have prepared it when he still had access to your codes or figured out a way around it since then? But it really doesn’t matter. This should have been done days ago when you first found out he was causing the problems with your authorization code, Flight Officer Stanic. If he didn’t forge the request, it still needs to be done. Who knows what sensitive information he obtained about you or while electronically posing as you during that time, and it’s sitting there in his memory banks while he roams around the ship for anyone to find and access it. Or the Imperials could get ahold of it if, Force forbid, something happens during a dogfight and they take possession of him. If he did forge the transfer request, it’s one more rather large reason to do it. And Flight Officer Cerac, since you want alternatives, let me ask you this: what exactly have you done so far to get Ruby to stop being antagonistic toward Flight Officer Stanic?”

“Well, sir,” CC faltered a bit but then recovered, “we’ve both told Ruby to stop. I warned him that if he didn’t, he’d be in trouble, and I emphasized how important this was. I told him Darin wasn’t trying to hurt us. I really thought he’d listen to me.” Disappointment and guilt clouded her face, and she was keeping her eyes averted from Darin’s direction.

“Based solely on how ill-at-ease your squadmate here still looks in Ruby’s presence, I have to question whether the warnings did anything at all to solve the problem,” Mackin replied.

Darin piped up with, “Sir, I’m just a little jumpy after what happened before. It’s not—”

“The problem isn’t truly fixed as long as you’re wasting energy thinking it’s not. Now, Flight Officer Cerac,” said Mackin, turning his attention from Darin to CC, “what do you propose to do to fix this problem that you haven’t already tried? Your previous attempts don’t seem to have worked.”

“I– I don’t know, sir, but there has to be something,” CC said.

“Can’t we just use a restraining bolt or something, sir?” asked Darin.

Mackin gave another sigh and held both of their gazes. “Look, I know you’re attached to your droids. I’m attached to mine, so don’t think I don’t appreciate the sentiment. I know lots of pilots who don’t like to memory-wipe their astromechs, but this has gone beyond the normal realm into something that frankly is a danger to us. Flight Officer Cerac,” he said, giving her his full attention again, “let me present you with a scenario. Ruby is kept memory-intact, he doesn’t heed your warnings and he doesn’t change. He wants to keep your squadmate away from him. What’s to prevent him from tinkering with the programming of, for example, Flight Officer Stanic’s nav computer? With the undetected change of only one number, your squadmate here, or any of the others if Ruby turns his attention to them, could wind up hundreds of light-years away from everyone else after a hyperspace jump, lost and unable to find help in time. A few well-placed lines of code affecting your squadmate’s comm system could broadcast a homing signal to

the Imperials while on long-range patrol. What about a command that brings his shields down in the middle of combat or detonates a torpedo while it's still in the firing tube?"

Darin suddenly felt a whole lot more vulnerable.

Mackin continued, "A restraining bolt won't guard against things like that. Are you willing to trade Flight Officer Stanic's life for the electronic memory banks of your astromech droid?"

"No, sir," CC said. "Of course not."

"Good answer," Mackin said. "And now you see where I'm coming from." He considered for a short time, and then added, "If Ruby's personality stabilizes after this memory-wipe, I won't make routine wipes mandatory for him. However, if the problem shows the *slightest hint* of recurring, he'll be wiped again immediately. Understood?"

"Understood, sir," answered CC defeatedly.

"And as for you," the commander said, addressing Darin, "if your droid starts showing any potentially dangerous behavior, he will be memory-wiped as well."

"Yes, sir." Not good, but he'd been afraid Botch would be ordered wiped too, so it was better than Darin had dared to hope for.

That relieved feeling didn't last long. "I expect you to schedule Ruby's memory-wipe to take place within the hour," Mack told him.

"Sir?" Darin prayed he had heard that incorrectly. Why him? Hadn't he done enough to CC already?

Mack cocked his head slightly as he regarded Darin. "You're in charge of coordinating with Maintenance for all of the squadron's astromechs, aren't you?" His tone of voice indicated that he wasn't really asking. "'Droid Wrangler' or something I think you're calling it?"

Now Darin saw where this was going, but it didn't make him any happier about the situation. "Yes, sir."

"Then make sure this maintenance is performed correctly and within the hour. I'll be checking up on it afterward. Any further questions?"

A simultaneous, subdued and depressed "No, sir," greeted him.

"Then both of you are dismissed."

The two flight officers slowly got to their feet, saluted and turned to walk out. Just before they reached the door, Mackin said, "Oh, wait a second."

Turning around, Darin saw that Mack had picked up the datapad that had started this mess. Mackin held it up and asked, "Flight Officer Stanic, what should I do with this transfer request?"

"Well, sir... I'd prefer that you forgot about it." If that was even an option at this point.

Mackin nodded, then he took the datacard out of it and tossed the card to Darin. "Here." After Darin caught it, Mackin said, "As far as I'm concerned, it never reached this desk."

"Thank you, sir." Darin pocketed the datacard and walked out with CC.

Both pilots slowly came to a stop in the corridor after the door closed behind them. Darin sighed miserably and looked at his feet. "CC, I'm really sorry. I didn't want this to happen. I didn't tell Commander Mackin on purpose—"

"It's okay, rookie," CC interrupted in a hard voice with a dash of anger. A slight waver in it made Darin think she was stubbornly fighting back tears with all her strength. "I know you didn't. But it happened, and he's right, you know? Let me know when Ruby's going to be wiped because I want to be there when it happens."

Without another word she walked away. Darin guiltily watched her go. He could imagine what it would be like for him if Botch was on the receiving end of this order, and he hadn't even had enough time yet to grow as completely attached to Botch as CC had with Ruby.

It was unfair, really: unfair to her. CC was the one ultimately getting hurt here and once again falling victim to Darin's ignorance of the situation around him. In the way that he'd been handling things with Ruby and in the little battle that resulted, Darin had pulled the trigger before realizing that CC was dangerously close to his line of fire. She'd been caught in the crossfire between Ruby and Darin while trying to mediate. When one side ultimately had to lose, a friend to both would end up losing either way.

Darin felt even worse now.

He sighed and shuffled to the droid repair bay to find out the soonest time a tech was available. Better get this over and done with.

Chapter Eight

In the droid repair bay, Darin sat with one of the maintenance squadron's officers and one of the astromech technicians, and he looked over the day's schedule with them. By shuffling around some of the lower priority work they were able to create an opening in thirty-five minutes in which Ruby could be memory-wiped. Once that was settled, the other two people went back to their previous work.

Darin commed CC with the projected time, and he kept the conversation brief and factual just like she did. After that, Darin logged the activity into the official schedule and took over the tasks of filling out the forms for the procedure and updating the various records and databases. He tried not to think too much about what he was doing or how it was affecting CC.

Ten minutes later, he was mostly done with the paperwork. Darin paused for a moment to rub his tired eyes and redirect his thoughts to something else... anything else... in the hopes of settling his stomach down.

The droid repair bay abruptly fell abnormally quiet. High-speed tools whirred to a stop. A hoist's gears came to a halt. Venting equipment turned off. The jovial, lighthearted conversations between the techs died down to murmurs which then became silence.

A couple clicks of blaster safeties cut through the still air like a vibroblade. That was the peak of the mountain of abnormality, and Darin opened his eyes and quickly looked toward the source of the sound. Immediately to his left was a spread-out group of four fleet troopers. The two on the sides had their blaster rifles raised in a covering position. The two in the middle had their blaster rifles in their hands at the ready as they cautiously came to a stop well out of reach.

And all of them were focusing their attention directly on Darin.

"Flight Officer Stanic," said one of the middle fleet troopers, a Zabrak, in an authoritative voice. The words penetrated through the bay like the safeties' clicks had. "Stand up and put your hands on your head. *Slowly.*"

The words slammed into Darin, and he forgot to breathe and blink for several seconds while his heart raced. The pilot was acutely aware that he now had the undivided attention of every single person in the repair bay. What the hell was happening?!

The Zabrak waited for several moments, but when Darin found himself unable to move in that time, the fleet trooper repeated his command more strongly. "Flight Officer Stanic, slowly stand up and put your hands on your head."

The only thing Darin was certain of at that instant was that those four fleet troopers were not beings he wanted to cross. Feeling stunned, Darin carefully and slowly did as he was told. A new, albeit weak, hope manifested in his mind and prayed that this was all nothing more than an elaborate prank... a very, *very* elaborate prank.

The middle two fleet troopers warily approached while the other two covered them. They grabbed Darin's wrists and cuffed them behind his back, and they patted him down and removed everything from his pockets. Darin finally found his voice and asked anxiously, "What's going on?"

"Intel flagged your numerous attempts to access restricted and secret information in the computer just now," said the Zabrak. "We were sent to immediately apprehend you."

"But— but I—"

"Save it. Let's go," the Zabrak said when his team indicated they were ready. One stayed behind at the computer console, and the other three fleet troopers quickly marched Darin out of

the repair bay.

Darin had been left by himself in the brig for a while, though he couldn't tell how long it had been because they'd taken his chrono. He hadn't stopped pacing the whole time, making lap after lap around the small cell while his mind had whirled twice as fast.

His first thoughts, strangely enough, had been that if he was kept in here for too long, he wouldn't have all the preparations done in time for Ruby's memory-wipe, and then Commander Mackin would be upset. Darin would get in trouble for not following Mackin's explicit order to have the memory-wipe done within the hour.

After Darin had a chance to calm down a bit, he had realized that he was overreacting. Unexpectedly being thrown in the brig was an extenuating circumstance, to say the least, and Mack would certainly understand that. Besides, if nothing else, Darin did schedule the memory-wipe like he was supposed to.

Thinking about Ruby's scheduled memory-wipe and the related commands Darin had put in the computer immediately prior to the fleet troopers' arrival had led him down a now-familiar line of thought, one which he was now unsuccessfully trying to convince the investigator was true.

"Sir, I already said I don't know what files you're talking about," Darin anxiously repeated for the third time as he sat in a questioning room across a table from a Rebel Intelligence officer. He was so scared; he'd never been in this much trouble before, and the worst part was that although he honestly hadn't done anything, they didn't believe him. "I was just scheduling a memory-wipe for one of the squadron's astromechs. That's all."

The Intel officer was a husky, dark tan Mon Calamari with a harsh, gravelly voice. Just listening to it made Darin even more intimidated. The Mon Cal shook his large head derisively. "Come off it already, Flight Officer. There were flags raised in the computer system that someone was directly attempting to access both secret and restricted military files and information, and it was immediately traced back to your authorization code and computer terminal login. We caught you— how does that Human expression go? 'Red-handed,' I believe. Rather sloppy job. You're not much of a slicer, are you. It shows."

Darin tried to will away the nervous energy causing him to fidget. No wonder he kept making so many dumb rookie mistakes. He could never be a halfway-respectable fighter pilot if he lost his head during something so relatively benign as a questioning session by his own allies. If he acted like this now, how could he ever expect to get through dogfights? He had to pull himself together. Somehow. He started by forcing his lungs to inhale deeply. "I'm not a slicer at all. Sir, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I'm just a pilot. I didn't do any of that." He shifted his weight and sat up a bit in his chair; after sitting there for so long, he was getting uncomfortable on the outside as well. "Sir, please, like I said, this astromech is paranoid about me, and he's been messing with my authorization code because he thinks I'm a threat to him. If you have one of your computer experts check the system, I'm sure you'll find something like a trigger that executed the whole sensitive-files snooping program as soon as I scheduled him for a memory-wipe. It's sloppy and obvious because he wanted me to get caught."

Contempt leaked into the Mon Cal's expression. "Riiiiight. Or, the more simple explanation is that the sloppiness is because you made a mistake or were in a hurry or simply

didn't know any better. But let's focus on this supposed snooping program you mentioned. How would you know about it, Flight Officer? Is it because you put that program there? Are you trying to frame the droid to shift the blame off yourself?"

Darin hadn't realized how thin the ice under him had become. He mentally cursed, feeling a little more nervous despite his newfound determination to stay calm and collected. It was hard to discreetly wipe off his sweaty palms. "No, sir, I didn't put it there. The droid did, if there even is a program like that. I don't know how to make things like snooping programs."

He was about to say more, but the Intel officer interrupted him by swivelling one large eye in Darin's direction in a most disconcerting fashion. "I'll play along for one minute. So you say this droid was supposed to be memory-wiped today. Did it know what you were up to with your snooping? Is that why you're wiping its memory? To ensure no record exists of what you were doing?"

Dread began to eat at Darin's stomach. Ruby was surely wiped by now. They couldn't really think Darin did it to cover his hypothetical tracks, could they? Without Ruby's intact memory banks there would be no way he could prove he didn't, beyond giving them his word that he didn't. He'd never been so desperate for a permanent record of all the stupid stuff he'd done as he was at that moment.

"I didn't schedule the memory-wipe because of anything like that, sir," Darin answered as levelly as he could. This was getting very bad very fast. What the hell was he supposed to do? "I did it because, like I've said, the droid was crazy and messing with my codes. My commander ordered it."

"How convenient. So you used these lame reasons of 'the droid has my codes' to maneuver your commander into ordering the memory-wipe so you could play innocent and claim it wasn't your idea? Sounds like some pretty far-forward planning to cover up your snooping and clean up after yourself."

"Sir, I didn't—I didn't pre-plan this wipe! I was trying to keep it from happening!" Darin felt himself mentally tripping over the obstacles the investigator was throwing in his path. First Darin was accused of being incompetent, then he was made to look like someone savvy enough to plan out every detail. He couldn't anticipate or prepare for any of the offside rebounds from the investigator, especially when they contradicted each other. He tried to forge ahead and take control. "Sir, you asked me how I knew there might be a snooping program that triggered all of this now. It's not because I put it there. I know about it because the droid's done something like that before."

"Really," the Mon Cal said smugly, or what Darin interpreted as smugness. "And is this reported anywhere so that we might follow up on it and verify what you're saying?"

Darin opened his mouth to answer but stopped. The computer techs had never received his message about his problems with his authorization code, and Maptoo had fixed it all for him back when they were still trying to resolve the issue of Ruby on their own. There would be no official record of it anywhere. Darin's heart sank.

Just as suddenly he remembered something else, and he frantically grabbed onto it. "Wait, wait— Mapt— um, Flight Officer Moog said he was going to talk to the computer techs about it! He said there was a security hole because the droid was able to set up some kind of spy-and-sneak program to get my authorization code in the first place. Flight Officer Moog was going to talk to the techs that night about fixing it. Flight Officer Yanilr witnessed all of that as well." Darin didn't want to drag Maptoo and Quiver into this, but he was desperate. He truly hoped the

Gran had done what he had said he was going to do. Darin belatedly realized he should have followed up with Maptoo to find out.

The investigator gave a short, harsh laugh and shook his head, vaguely reminding Darin of the duracrete-wall conversation he'd had with Ruby in the hangar. Darin could only hope this conversation would somehow end better. "This is the stupidest, most pathetic story I've ever heard. A *droid* is framing you for an extremely serious offense because it doesn't want to be memory-wiped?" The Mon Cal stood and leaned across the table, looming over the smaller pilot and causing Darin to shrink back. His face was so close that Darin could smell his odd aquatic breath. "Listen, Flight Officer, and listen well: this is not a joke. This is serious. Once we finish accumulating all the evidence we'll be pushing for a court-martial, and no self-respecting judge is going to believe such an insane story. You'd better help yourself by working with us and telling us the truth. Stick to this droid nonsense and I guarantee you'll be spending many years in prison. Think about it: *years*. Is that *really* what you want?"

If that was a scare tactic, it was working. Darin wondered fleetingly if there was any color left in his face. When the investigator phrased everything that way, Darin realized how truly dumb and incredible his story sounded, and if he'd been on the outside looking in like a judge would be, he himself wouldn't have believed it either. But what could he do when it actually *was* the truth?

The Mon Cal must have noticed his reaction because he narrowed his eyes and pressed harder. "Actually, it wouldn't be too hard to reach the conclusion that you were trying to get that information for the Imperials. Then if you're lucky you'd be locked away in some forgotten detention center for the rest of your life, never to so much as see daylight again. The Rebellion does not take kindly to spies and traitors in our midst."

It was obviously meant to be an even more effective scare tactic, but all it did was make Darin go from a defensive mode to an offensive mode for the first time in the entire questioning session. Blood rushed so quickly into his drained face that Thumper could feel the heat from it, and he straightened up and leaned forward, almost bumping heads with the investigator. "I am *not* a spy or a traitor!" he snapped, not even trying to cover up how insulted and resentful he felt at the accusation. "I'm telling you the truth about the droid—"

"You were carrying a datacard with a transfer request," the Mon Cal interrupted. "Were you planning on transferring somewhere else because the area was getting too hot here for your snooping? Were you disgruntled with your squadron and wanted to sell some information to the enemy as payback before you left?"

Darin was thrown off-balance with this new approach and the sudden inclusion of the forgotten transfer request he'd had in his pocket. This was just too overwhelming, and he scrambled to regain his mental footing. "What?! No, I don't want a transfer! That was the droid t—"

"Enough with the droid already! No one is going to believe such an obviously fabricated lie, so stop wasting my time. I can't—"

The Mon Cal was cut off with a short rap at the door, and Darin was all too glad for the interruption as it gave him a chance to breathe a little and recover. The Intel officer didn't seem to share the pilot's feelings; narrowing his bulbous eyes even more, the Mon Cal went to open the door. There was a small group of people standing outside in the corridor, though Darin couldn't see them all due to his angle of sight with the doorway. The Intel officer talked to them quietly for a moment before he waved a webbed hand in annoyance at something they said and

walked out of the room to join them.

Just before the door shut, Darin noticed that Commander Mackin and Maptoo were part of that group. The CO was looking at Darin with a raised eyebrow and a tired expression that seemed to say, "Do you think this Ruby fiasco has gone on long enough yet?" It might have said something more or something different, but that was all Darin caught in the half-instant before the door closed and left him alone in the room.

Darin was relieved beyond measure that Mackin was there and (presumably) helping him with Security and Intel. He sighed, folded his arms on the table, buried his face in them and closed his eyes.

Yes, he silently answered. *Yes, it has.*

It was late when Darin finally got back to his quarters, and luckily his passcode still worked. Quiver would be asleep at this hour, so Darin quietly slipped inside and kept the lights off. He was rapidly learning how to find his way around the room and change into his nightclothes in the dark so he wouldn't disturb his wingman, especially on nights when he came in late from working in the hangar or falling asleep in the lounge. Darin could even adjust the temperature controls in the dark.

The door had just closed behind him when Quiver turned on the small reading light at the head of his bed. Blinking against the sudden light and apparently just awakened, Quiver peered down at Darin from his top bunk. "Hey, Niner. You're back."

"Yeah," Darin said softly. "Sorry, didn't mean to wake you up." He grabbed his nightclothes and started changing to get his general duty uniform off as soon as possible. It smelled faintly of the brig, making it a rather unpleasant reminder of the vast majority of his day.

"Nah, I was kinda waiting for you to get back in anyway since I wasn't allowed to see you. So they finally decided you weren't going to blow up the ship and let you go, huh?"

"Something like that."

"You realize you'll never be able to live this down, right?" Quiver asked. "I mean, you're here all of one month and you're already arrested for treason or espionage or whatever it was. And here we gave you a callsign about loyalty. Perfect cover I suppose, though. So how was the brig food? Did the guards beat you up? Did they make you share a cell with some serial killer Imp or something? I wonder if you got my old cell. If they had given me a stylus like I asked, I was going to keep a running count on the wall of how many minutes went by just to mess with anyone who would be in that cell after me."

Darin exhaled forcefully. "Quiver, not now. My patience is long gone."

"Oh, fine. But keep in mind that none of this would have ever happened if we'd talked to Mack about Ruby right away like I wanted to. All you did by delaying it was get Ruby more paranoid about you and give him more time to set up all these traps. You'd better hope there aren't any more traps still waiting for you, lurking in the shadows of an innocent computer program. Remind me to give you my best 'I told you so' speech in the morning," Quiver said through a yawn.

That was exactly what Darin felt he didn't need. "Yeah, sure." Once he was done changing, he looked up at Quiver and hesitantly said, "So... we just finished Ruby's memory-wipe." It felt like confessing a shameful deed.

Quiver apparently thought the opposite. “That’s good to hear, but don’t tell CC I said that. I’m rather fond of my life.”

“I’m just glad Commander Mackin postponed it when he first found out I was taken in for questioning,” Darin said. “I’m sure I’d still be in the brig if they hadn’t been able to access Ruby’s intact memory and verify my story. During the questioning, I was so worried that it had already been erased. If he’d been wiped before they could see it, well, things would have been a lot, lot worse.”

“Even if you hadn’t been thrown in jail, the wipe would have still been delayed for at least a little while.” Quiver snickered. “It took nearly an hour to actually *find* Ruby in the first place and get near enough to him to put a restraining bolt on. Know what he did? That droid had used his magnetic tracks to climb up fixtures along the wall and stick himself to a metal support on the ceiling in a storage bay. I’m actually surprised he didn’t commandeer an X-wing. I would say that you missed some excitement, but you were experiencing some excitement of your own at the time.”

“I would have gladly traded.” Darin paused for a few seconds before venturing, “Um, how’s CC? Is she okay?” She’d been acting rather strangely around him during Ruby’s memory-wipe. CC had steered clear of Darin whenever possible, and something about her body language told Darin she didn’t want to interact with him. Her cold shoulder and reddened cheeks were deepening Darin’s feeling of guilt for his role in wiping her droid against her wishes.

“Oh, well... she was pretty upset earlier,” Quiver admitted. “Dinner wasn’t very pleasant, and that was even before he was wiped. Next time this happens, I hope you’re there so you can take some of the heat off me. I swear, how can someone get so attached to a pile of metal? It makes absolutely no sense.”

So she *was* upset at him. Darin grimaced at the confirmation and changed the subject. “Well, it’s late. I had a rough day and I’m tired, so I’m going to bed. Good night.”

“G’night, Convict Nine. And relax: you don’t have to worry about Ruby anymore. Well, probably. We’ll start a squadron bet on how long you can go without setting off one of his leftover traps that I’m almost positive have to exist.”

Quiver turned off the light, and Darin climbed into his bottom bunk, not even bothering to secretly fiddle with the room’s temperature controls beforehand. It *was* late, he *had* had a rough day, and he *was* tired, but he couldn’t fall asleep right away like he’d hoped. His brain wouldn’t rest: it kept going around and around about how he had hurt CC, however unintentionally, and how he was now obligated to make amends.

But the only idea he came up with for doing that was something he wished he could wipe from his own memory.

Chapter Nine

The next day, the mess hall was as warm as ever; Darin didn't pay the temperature much heed, however, as he poked at his lunch with a fork. He was too busy wrestling with other thoughts, the same thoughts that had been his constant companion last night and all morning. *It's the only fair thing to do.*

The food on his plate was now in a slightly different arrangement than it was three seconds ago. *So what?* he argued. *What happened to Ruby was his own fault. It's not fair to me or to Botch to punish Botch for something he didn't do.*

He absentmindedly pushed all the food toward the center of his plate. *You're taking this attachment to your droid way too far. Besides, it is your fault that Mack found out about Ruby before the situation could be fixed.*

So what? Whenever Darin argued with himself, that ended up being one of his defense's favorite phrases. *Ruby was the one doing things he shouldn't have been! He was dangerous! He was crazy! Quiver was right: I should have told Mack right away. It would have saved a lot of grief. Like yesterday. That was all Ruby's fault. What if I'd been stuck in the brig and an attack came? That would have gone beyond me and affected the whole squadron. Things could have been a lot worse than they were, and it would have all been because of Ruby. Botch hasn't done anything wrong. He doesn't deserve to be memory-wiped. I can't believe you're even considering this. There's no reason for it!*

"There you are, rookie."

Darin looked up and saw Quiver heading straight for him, or rather as straight as he could while having to weave between tables and people. He wasn't even stopping to talk to anyone he passed. From the looks of things, Quiver had deposited his lunch tray at their usual table and had then spotted Darin sitting on the other side of the mess hall by himself.

Darin chewed on his bottom lip; he'd wanted to finish lunch before Quiver and CC came. It would be best if he avoided CC for now and gave things a chance to calm down before trying to apologize. A discreet glance at his chrono showed Darin that it was later than he'd realized, and if he hadn't been lost in thought and poking at his food, he could have finished in time and left.

But now Quiver was there, and Darin was stuck. His wingman slid into the seat across the table from him. "Not planning on eating with us today?" Quiver asked. "You skipped out on breakfast, too."

"Sorry." Darin poked at his food some more.

"How come? Don't tell me you get moody. I don't want a moody wingman. It's no fun."

"No," Darin mumbled. "I just... felt like being by myself."

Quiver sighed and rolled his eyes. "Wonderful. First CC starts acting all weird, now you too. This is getting old, and it hasn't even been a whole day. What did that droid do to you guys?"

As if on cue, they both noticed CC walk into the mess hall at that moment. She stopped short when she spotted the two of them, and then she headed to the food serving line. In doing so, she took the long way around to give their table a wide berth.

Quiver muttered something under his breath and climbed to his feet. "Stay there, rookie. If you go anywhere, I'll tell Ruby everything that happened and sic him on you." Quiver's long, purposeful strides took him quickly in CC's direction.

Darin sighed as he looked after them. CC wanted nothing to do with him, and he couldn't blame her. He'd been right to avoid her today. He strongly considered leaving before Quiver got back but was held in place. He knew Quiver's threat was a bluff, but leaving would make Quiver upset. The last thing he needed was to have two friends angry with him instead of just one.

CC had gotten her food and was taking her tray to their usual table. Quiver was dogging her, and Darin could tell they were having a heated discussion. CC put her tray down across from Quiver's and sat down, and the action had a note of finality to it that Quiver didn't seem to care for. Still standing, the lanky pilot leaned on the table and continued whatever he was saying.

Darin went back to poking at his food. He should go. It was obvious he'd need to make it up to CC to set things right, and that led him back into his silent argument. *There is a reason for it*, he thought, picking up from where he had left off. *Wiping Botch's memory seems like the only fair thing to do for CC after what happened. Think of what a meaningful gesture that would be. You caused this mess to happen. Make it up to her. Sacrifice the same thing so she's not alone in going through it. You can do that for a friend, and you should.*

But it's not a trade between CC's safety and Botch's memory. You don't have to make that choice now like she did. You shouldn't have to choose. You can have both at once. Don't pick just one.

Like always, he was putting up a good argument with himself. *Just because I can, it doesn't mean I have to or that it's the right thing. Why should CC be the only one hurt because of this, the only one losing something because I messed up?*

And also like always, he knew how to counter all the important points. *But why should I be hurt because of this? Because of Ruby? He did enough to me, and besides, I've lost enough! I don't need to lose my droid for no reason!*

A surprised yelp from CC interrupted his despondent food-poking and made him look up along with several other diners. Darin could only stare as Quiver made his way toward Darin's table with difficulty, carrying CC's chair with CC still sitting on it. CC was holding onto the chair for dear life while simultaneously threatening Quiver's. Quiver ignored her—his gasping for breath would have made it hard to retort anyway—and he simply announced his progress with a sporadic grunting of, "Make way, make way, coming through." The people in his path stepped aside quickly and pulled their chairs and tables out of his way. Dirty and annoyed looks followed in his wake.

When they reached Darin's table, Quiver awkwardly kicked aside the chair he himself had been sitting in. Then with a loud thump, Quiver less-than-gracefully set down CC and her chair in that spot across the table from Darin, facing him. "There." Quiver collapsed into a chair beside CC.

Silence fell across the small group. Darin noticed that CC looked every bit as uncomfortable as he felt. Even though he hadn't known these two squadmates very long, he knew them well enough to recognize that this awkward quiet was extremely abnormal. Darin recalled the stories, the jokes, the conversations, the fun that had been so prevalent at mealtimes just a short time ago, and how comfortable he had been starting to feel around them. He wanted all that back so badly he could taste it. That taste was even stronger than that of this stale so-called food of which he had taken a couple half-hearted bites.

There is a reason, the inner voice repeated insistently after a few moments. Darin chewed on his lip. *It's that friend you're looking at right now.*

But... No one even knows I'm considering wiping Botch. It won't hurt anything if I make

it up to her another way... somehow.

Darin began to studiously rearrange the food on his plate. This time he was the one caught between a good friend and the fate of his droid, and it reinforced his earlier thoughts that a friend to both would end up losing no matter which of the two others won. In a situation like this, they couldn't all win, and as long as that was true, he was destined to lose.

His conscience was pricking him mercilessly for trying to get out of wiping Botch's memory, especially when he recalled how jealous he'd been of Ruby and how he'd self-righteously declared that he wouldn't put Botch over either of his friends. If he put Botch first now, Darin would just be a hypocrite. His stomach twisted as he realized that essentially made his decision for him: he had to do it. Despite the promises of protection he'd made to Botch, he had to put his friend over his droid. He just wished it was easier.

A frustrated sigh from Quiver brought him back to the current situation. "Okay, this is driving me crazy," Quiver announced.

"Must have been a short trip," CC muttered.

Quiver ignored that and continued, "You two have been avoiding each other all day and acting stupid and strange, and I'm sick of being caught in the middle. Now what's going on?"

Darin had learned his lesson from the last time that question was posed to him, so he kept quiet. CC didn't offer anything either, and in his peripheral vision Darin could see her looking around the mess hall: everywhere but directly at him.

Thumper started gathering his utensils and half-empty glass onto his tray, and he tried to keep his voice neutral when he said, "I should go."

Before he could get up, Quiver reached under the table with a foot and hooked it on a leg of Darin's chair to keep the chair in place. "Oh, no, you don't. Stay right there. No one's going anywhere until we figure this out."

"What's there to figure out?" Darin asked, feeling his defenses coming up. "I really screwed up. I know that. I'm sorry. Stupid rookie, right? Always messing things up and causing trouble for other people because of his mistakes? But forced interaction isn't always a good thing, you know."

CC looked at him at last, though her expression revealed confusion and was completely lacking in the venom Darin had expected. "What did you say?" she asked.

Darin aimed his sights down at the table. "I just don't think that making people interact before they're ready—"

"No, not that. Did you say you screwed up? Why?"

With a short, rueful laugh, Darin replied, "Uh, because I did? Last time I checked, it's my fault Ruby got memory-wiped. I figured it was best if I stayed out of your way for a while."

CC looked even more puzzled. "Why?"

Now Darin was getting confused too. Wasn't it obvious? "Because you're angry at me."

"What? No, I'm not. Why would you think I am?"

This wasn't making sense at all. CC looked as genuinely surprised and confused as she had in Commander Mackin's office, so Darin figured she was telling the truth. But then, that wouldn't explain... "Well," Darin started slowly, trying to collect his thoughts, "because Mack found out about Ruby because of me, which caused the wipe. I can imagine what it's like to have that happen to your droid, and I knew *I'd* be mad at me if it was mine, so I figured you were, too. Besides, Quiver told me last night that you were upset, so I took that to mean you were angr—"

"Oh, so this is *Quiver's* fault?" CC turned to glower at the pilot beside her, who looked

appropriately innocent. “What did you tell him?”

“That you were upset,” Quiver answered indignantly. “That was the truth. You were all moody and mopey yesterday. Strine blink, I thought you were going to lose it at one point and get all weepy and emotional over some deleted files of all things. Hence, you were upset.”

“But I wasn’t upset *at him*.” CC punctuated her clarification by jabbing her elbow into Quiver’s ribs. “Not like I’m upset *at you* now. It makes a difference when you add those couple important words. I figured the Language Master would know that.”

“The Language Master *does* know that,” Quiver countered. “However, the Language Master cannot yet read the minds of his inferiors. How was I supposed to know he was thinking differently than me and blaming himself?”

CC clearly wasn’t buying the excuse. “I thought you were supposed to be making sure the rookie knows exactly what’s happening and not just assuming he knows.”

“For normal things, sure,” Quiver replied with a snort. “This was totally different. There’s no fathomable reason for him to feel bad about the valuable service he performed for us yesterday.”

CC narrowed her eyes at Quiver and socked him in the upper arm, a little too hard for it to be considered playful.

“Ow!” Quiver rubbed the area where she’d hit him. “Sorry, it just slipped out.”

“Yeah, my fist just slipped, too,” CC muttered.

As much to distract them from more thoughts of violence as anything else, Darin brought the conversation back around with, “But you seemed awfully mad at me last night during the wipe, CC. You didn’t say a word to me the whole time.”

Looking like she was suddenly remembering Darin was still sitting there, CC turned back to him and shook her head. “You’ve got it all backwards, rookie.” She sighed. “Yes, I was upset about everything, but what the Language Master here neglected to convey is that I wasn’t upset at you. I felt really bad that you went through all that because of my droid, especially the whole brig incident, and I’m sorry. I’d been trying so hard to protect Ruby and keep him out of trouble, and all it did was make everything horrible for you. I should never have let that happen. See, I was avoiding you last night because I felt lousy enough about the brig stuff that I didn’t want to face you right away after they let you out. Then when I noticed you were avoiding me today, I thought *you* were mad at *me* because of Ruby, so I stayed away. I wanted to give you a little time to cool off.”

Darin’s brow furrowed. So she wasn’t mad at him? He’d just, yet again, jumped to conclusions based on faulty data? Perhaps in the future the day would come when he wouldn’t learn the truth only *after* he’d jumped. And if he’d only looked at the larger picture to see that she might have been reacting to something other than what his own little narrow focus told him was the cause... “Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“Really,” CC said. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, rookie. Not everything that happens around here is your fault. Usually it’s Quiver’s.”

“Only when I’m being framed,” Quiver clarified, still rubbing his arm.

To Darin, CC continued, “I am upset, as in sad, that Ruby had to be wiped, but I know you can understand why, unlike the Language Master here. Trying to talk to him about it at dinner yesterday was like trying to explain the finer points of a Tallon Roll to a groundpounder. I’m upset, as in angry, with Ruby for doing all those things to you and ultimately bringing it upon himself. I’m upset with myself for not fixing it before it got so out-of-control. I’m upset with

Quiver just because he's Quiver. But I'm not upset with you." She offered a small smile. "And as for those first three things, well, I'll get over them."

Darin answered with a small, relieved smile of his own. Deep down he still blamed himself, but he didn't feel quite so selfish anymore for wanting to keep Botch's memory intact. Maybe he wouldn't need such a large gesture to make it up to CC like he'd thought he had to. Maybe he'd overreacted based on more incorrect data. Again. Like Ruby had. He really had to learn how to step back from a situation and just take a breath or two. Maybe that's how Maptoo stayed so calm during dogfights.

CC finished by saying, "So, yeah, I'm sorry. I'll be keeping a very close eye on Ruby from now on to make sure he doesn't start going down that road again. I hope things can get back to normal now."

Darin's smile got much larger at those words before he sobered and said. "I'm sorry too. I didn't handle this whole situation the best way, and if there is ever a 'next time,' which I sincerely hope there's not, I'll do better."

Looking back and forth between Darin and CC, Quiver asked, "Okay, is the air clear? Is everyone happy again?"

"Please say yes," CC said to Darin. "You should have seen him this morning when you skipped breakfast. As you can tell from what just happened, he couldn't figure out why you suddenly didn't come. At the time I could only think that you were angry at me, but looking back now, it's kind of funny. Quiver wouldn't let it go because he feels insecure, and it was—"

Quiver gave her a dirty, sidelong look. "I am *not* insecure."

Rolling her eyes, CC replied, "Yeah, whatever you say, Mister I-Didn't-Do-Something-Wrong,-Did-I?." She grinned and said with a snicker to Darin, "I've never seen him so concerned before about whether or not someone liked him. Usually he just assumes the entire galaxy likes him, even when they flat-out tell him they don't."

"Well, some assumptions are inherently correct, like that one," Quiver said. "Others, on the other hand—"

CC laughed a little harder, seeming considerably more at-ease now. "Oh, that's right," she said. "Don't be surprised if Slurry comes by and thanks you, Thumper." Slurry was one of their other squadmates, a small, four-armed Bilgana. "You made him very rich yesterday."

"How did I do that?" Darin asked.

"One of the squadron betting pools," Quiver explained. "A couple of weeks ago, after one of the Quakes was jailed overnight for brawling, we got to place new bets on who would be the next starfighter pilot to get thrown in the brig. Didn't you know that? Maybe we forgot to tell you. Well, anyway, Slurry bet on you. He got great odds, too, because all we knew you as then was this timid, shy little rookie. No one else thought you would ever do something bad enough to cause yourself to get jailed."

"Well, I guess that's something," Darin said for lack of anything else to say. He wasn't sure what to make of the news that all the pilots thought he was some kind of sweet little kid who would never harm a firebug or do something crazy or against the rules. "Is there anything around here that *doesn't* have some kind of wager placed on it?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Quiver and CC looked at each other for a moment, obviously thinking hard. Finally CC answered, "I don't think so."

"If there is, we need to remedy that," Quiver added.

"This particular pool has always been an interesting one to follow because lots of

unexpected things happen. For instance, when Slurry was collecting his money, he told us why he picked you,” CC continued in amusement. “Funny thing is, it turns out it was because of Quiver. Slurry figured that since you two were hanging out together so much that eventually Quiver would do something stupid or one of his pranks would backfire, and he’d take off, leaving poor, little, innocent, naïve you to take the fall for it.”

“Which clearly proves that Slurry does not know me at all,” Quiver said with another snort, “because I don’t do stupid things, Corellian Incident aside, and my pranks are crafted too well to backfire. I say you make him buy you a drink or two, Thumper, seeing as how you’re the one who got him all that money.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” Darin said with a shrug.

“Hey, I’ll take your owed drink if you don’t want it. In the meantime, I’m hungry, so let’s get on with more enjoyable things.” Quiver leaned back far enough to rock on the two rear legs of his chair. “Now that we’re all one big happy family again, you’re not allowed to eat by yourself anymore, rookie. Not unless you had so much fun yesterday that you want to revisit the brig and get thrown in solitary confinement, anyway. Go get our food trays from the usual table and bring them over here.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we just moved over there instead?” Darin asked.

“No, because I’m comfortable here now,” Quiver answered. “Get going, rookie.”

“But—”

CC cut him off with a sigh and a shake of her head, and she said woefully to Quiver, “I told Commander Mackin this would happen. ‘Don’t stick the new rookie with—’”

“Oh, fine, for all— I’ll go get them,” Darin said in exasperation as he stood up. He might as well quit protesting anything having to do with the whole “rookie” subject, since he was bound to lose by design. And really, it wasn’t that bad. Usually.

“That’s our rookie,” CC said, grinning. “Oh, and get me a drink, too. I’m thirsty.” Changing the subject, she looked sideways at Quiver and said, “‘Weepy and emotional?’”

“Yeah,” Quiver said. He shrugged. “Hey, it weirded me out. It was like something a girl would have done, not you.”

“Oh. Sorry,” CC replied, the epitome of casualness. “I didn’t know it weirded you out. Then I promise I won’t get all weepy and emotional if you get hurt when I tip you off those two back legs of your chair. Rocking on it like that makes you look pretty unbalanced.”

Quiver instantly put all four legs of the chair flat on the floor. He composed himself for a moment, and when he turned to CC, his brief look of startled panic had been replaced with a cool sabacc face. “I’m not,” he said simply. “My balance has been honed to perfection through flying.”

Darin grinned to himself and walked off to get Quiver’s and CC’s food trays. It felt like things were getting back to normal... or as normal as they could ever be around here.

Epilogue

As soon as he had hooked himself into the simulator's droid socket and accessed the simulator's computer, he had found the small file addressed to him. It contained nothing more than a set of instructions: after the sim, go to a console in a corner of the aft hangar, navigate to a certain directory in a particular database, secretly download a specific file, and run it. The only part that did not make sense to his logic circuits was that he had apparently written the instructions to himself at some point in the recent past.

Ruby had no recollection of such an act. In fact, he had no recollection of anything beyond two standard days ago. Records indicated that time had existed beyond two days ago, and he couldn't process why he had no memory of that time or even how he could write a file to himself in that time. Perhaps this file would give him an answer.

Some time after he and his pilot (he had learned that "CC" was her designation) were done in the simulator, Ruby went to the hangar and found a secluded console. He easily navigated to the required directory, and he found the file, a rather large one at that. He was downloading it nanoseconds later.

When the download was complete at last, Ruby opened the file. It only took an instant for him to learn where the missing time had gone: this file told him what he had done a week ago, a month ago, two months ago, more, all the way back to when he had first been assigned as CC's astromech droid. A few standard days were still missing between the end of the file and the first thing he could remember on his own from two days ago, but a flagged string of information at the end of the file told Ruby why. This was a backup of his memory banks, and any missing time would mean that he had been memory-wiped between the time of this backup and the first new data in his memory banks. It also contained a warning: if he had needed to install this backup, then the organics must never learn he had done so, or he would be wiped again. Anything before the flag could not be accessed while dealing with the organics. The flagged information also ordered him to review the events at the end of the memory file and avoid doing similar activities, since they were likely the cause of the memory-wipe.

Ruby's lights blinked thoughtfully well after the millisecond it took to read that information, process its meaning, review it again, review the records of the final restored days, and find the pattern that had likely led to his downfall. He reached the conclusion that he'd been too obvious about what he was doing against the enemy. He'd have to be especially careful now, both to avoid the same error and also to ensure the organics would not become suspicious that he had his memory back.

A beep sounded from close behind him. Ruby immediately swivelled his dome around, causing his optical sensor to settle on Botch. The R5-D4 droid was aiming his own optical sensor at Ruby, and he demanded to know what Ruby was doing.

Ruby processed several different lines of logic at once before answering. It would be difficult to act like he was memory-wiped around the organics, at least until he could develop a consistent "innocent" personality. Botch was suspicious of Ruby, which would increase the difficulties and the chances of getting caught since another astromech could pick up on many things the organics couldn't.

With Botch on Ruby's side, though, it would be easier. Botch's pilot was the one from whom Ruby needed to protect himself. Botch was faithful and obedient to his pilot and worked with him a lot. Botch was also memory-intact due to the protection of his pilot, which put him at

risk of an inopportune memory-wipe just as Ruby had been. All of those inputs led to one output.

Ruby kept his communication volume down in order to keep the sounds below the lower audio reception threshold of any other nearby droids. Countless binary digits later, Ruby had proposed a deal to Botch: if Botch would keep things quiet and also constantly make sure that his pilot was not causing harm to Ruby or Ruby's pilot, then Ruby would teach Botch how to successfully protect a backup copy of his memory for the inevitable time when the organics would arbitrarily decide to erase it and his pilot could not prevent it. Ruby also agreed to not take any hostile action against Botch's pilot as long as Botch could guarantee Ruby was safe from him.

Botch considered that for a time, the length of which Ruby attributed to the R5's inferior processing speed. Before Botch had decided, his pilot, the enemy, approached.

As soon as the pilot noticed Ruby, he stopped. Fortunately he was well out of reach. Ruby was able to look back in his memory banks and match the particular combination of the organic's actions— the asymmetric positioning of his two eyebrows, the way he turned his head slightly to look at Ruby more out of one eye than the other, how he tensed the muscles in his shoulders, and even how he shifted his weight backwards so he had essentially retreated a centimeter or two— to what Ruby had learned was an indication of extreme discomfort or wariness.

Without taking his eyes off of Ruby, the pilot said in the organics' extremely slow and inefficient language, "Come on, Botch. We found a stash of parts we can use to change out that faulty gear of yours." The pilot backed up two steps before turning and walking away slowly enough so that Botch could keep up with him. Ruby wondered if the pilot knew about the memory retrieval or if this organic's suspicion program was simply caught in a feedback loop.

Botch beeped compliance and turned to follow his pilot, but the astromech paused briefly enough to spin his boxy head around so that his text display was facing Ruby. Botch remained silent, but after Ruby turned his optical sensor on Botch's display, he could make out one simple string of text: AGREED.

"Botch, you coming?" the organic called.

Botch chirped and rolled after his pilot. When Botch reached the pilot's side, the organic patted Botch's flat topped casing and then rested that hand on top of it, and they walked out of the hangar together.

Ruby simply watched them go. Now, he had an ally.

The End

Revision B
1-17-10