

“Night Vision”

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The sensors on Flight Officer Darin Stanic’s X-wing showed no enemy ships. And why should they? They hadn’t for the last however many hours that Darin couldn’t even bring himself to count. Why would things change now?

“Remind me again why we’re out here?” Darin muttered to his wingman, Flight Officer “Quiver” Yanilr.

Quiver’s transmitted reply carried a mixture of boredom and defensiveness. “I told you, I had nothing to do with that prank—”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Darin interrupted, though he actually didn’t believe Quiver’s claim and privately thought the wingpair’s assignment to Corona Squadron’s farthest target was a direct result of that backfired joke a few days ago.

“Oh.” Quiver’s tone lost its defensiveness. “Then I don’t know what you’re asking, Nine. I know you’re bored, but even if you’re as bored as I am you can’t be so bored that you want me to rehash the mission. Hey, I just used the word ‘bored’ three times in one sentence.”

Darin rolled his eyes. Quiver was starting to count his words again, which was never a good sign. It meant the prolonged lack of activity was getting to him and would soon make him act even more strangely than usual. Best to end this discussion quickly before it got to that point. “No, I’m not quite that bored, Ten. Never mind,” Darin replied.

The comm between the two patrolling X-wings fell silent, and the fighters continued on their flight together. Darin shifted in his seat and fiddled with his inertial compensator’s settings to try to get comfortable, but that was too great of a challenge after almost twenty straight hours in this cockpit. Some of that had been travel time to this planet from their fleet, and aside from a brief refueling stop dirtside the rest had been spent in orbit around this Rebel-friendly world, keeping an eye out for any approaching Imperial ships.

Darin couldn’t wait to get out of that cockpit. A nap and a hot meal would be wonderful too but were secondary objectives. His stiff muscles made him wonder how much longer it would be before his primary goal could happen.

The pilot’s gaze went first to the instrument gauges with the remaining amounts of his consumables displayed on them. Fuel, oxygen, water, coolant...he did the calculations in his head, quantifying his life into basic volumetric amounts and how much longer each would last before he’d need to refill them again on the planet’s surface. Unfortunately, the math told him it would be a while.

Next Darin checked his chrono. He matched that time with the mission plan and tried to extrapolate where the fleet was, where the other Corona Squadron pilots were, what each was doing, and when they would all meet up again so he could land on his capital ship.

Of course, that depended on how the mission went and if any of the other pilots found some Imps. Darin’s mind glazed over all the details, the contingency plans, the nominal

procedures, the sub-procedures making up the patrol, all broken down into steps and tasks to remember and perform. Cut-and-dry instructions, orders, jobs to do. Darin sighed. Everything about his life was just one duty after another. Finish one, start the next. Over and over again.

Some jobs, however, never seemed to end, especially when maintenance was involved. That reminded Darin of some repair work the mechanics still had to finish on his X-wing when he got back. The port-side S-foil servo actuator was acting glitchy yet again, probably due to the jury-rigged electronic control unit inside of it, but a proper replacement ECU wouldn't be available until the resupply ship came in a week or two, if they were lucky. In the meantime the mechanics were trying to convince Darin that a procedure to link the starboard ECU to his port actuator to bypass his broken port-side ECU would work despite no previous testing and—

Darin raised his helmet's visor and rubbed his eyes. Speaking of repair work, he had to turn in a report about the squadron astromechs' preventative maintenance procedures when he got back, too. He had too much to do to be sitting here in this blasted cockpit, all of which was needed to even *have* an operational cockpit. The endless cycle exhausted him...or maybe that was due to the completion of still another boring, uneventful orbit around this boring, uneventful planet with no change in his sensor readings. Quiver didn't report anything different, either.

With another big sigh, Darin slouched in his seat, rested the side of his helmet against his cockpit canopy and looked over all of his X-wing's consoles and displays. Numbers, information and words looked back at him. Words that defined his fighter as the maintenance-intensive, resource-consuming machine that it was. Words that told him if this machine could carry out its next assigned duty. It was a weapon, a vehicle for transport. That was all he could see anymore.

It was a sobering thought. "When did that happen?" Darin asked himself aloud. Or was he asking his fighter? Not that long ago, he realized, the distinction between himself and his X-wing wouldn't have even existed during a flight. Now it did. Not that long ago, he couldn't wait to get *into* his cockpit. But now...

"Well, that's depressing, too," Darin said, and meant it. "When did my job start becoming nothing more than a job?"

He had no answer to that. Maybe it was time to return things to how they had been before, when the mere sight of an X-wing had filled him with awe thinking of the wonderful way it could fly, instead of how it now filled him with dread at seeing in it all the tasks and all the systems that needed repair and work and blood and sweat. Corona Nine took stock of his current mindset as honestly as he could, and before too long he came up with a few things he hoped would help rekindle that old spark.

"Botch, keep an eye on our flight path for me," he said to his astromech. Darin straightened up in his seat, closed his eyes and took some deep breaths to clear as much of the clutter and obligations and technical jargon from his mind as he could.

Eventually his cynical thoughts quieted, and he slowly became conscious of only one sound: the soft, hypnotic hum made by his X-wing's powered-up systems and idling engines. He listened to it for a few minutes. It lulled him almost into a serene, dreamlike state.

He couldn't afford to get so peaceful that he fell asleep, so he mentally pulled back a bit once he felt calm enough to open his eyes. When he did so, he looked out his window and was surprised at what he now saw. The planet below him was dark except for the myriad of artificial lights glittering across the nighttime surface. From up here in low orbit, it was like the planet was its own little galaxy. Darin hadn't noticed this on the first couple dozen orbits.

Ahead of him, he saw the first changes of color against the gently curved horizon. Darin

focused his attention on that and watched while the thin film of atmosphere became a rainbow of colors and perpendicular streaks of white light from the system's star shot out from behind the planet. More emerged, then more, until finally the dazzling light was omnidirectional, and his cockpit canopy automatically polarized to cut down on the glare. He lowered his visor, blinked against the sun and squinted, trying to make the orbital sunrise last as long as possible.

The tiny galaxy below him was slowly and reluctantly giving way to an awakening planet. Oceans began to sparkle blue. Green and brown appeared, marred with the grey scars of civilization. Occasional contrails from airspeeders lined the sky between Darin and the surface. Wispy clouds swirled in their effortless flight, making Darin think that he could disperse them with one gentle breath.

Darin gave the flight yoke a small nudge—just enough to accomplish what he wanted—and the view began to rotate slowly, allowing him a better look at the ground below. A subtle sensation carrying through the small inherent vibration in the yoke let him know that his X-wing needed a little more power. He applied it smoothly, not looking at his instruments, simply trying to feel when his X-wing was content once more.

When it was, Darin grinned a bit and continued gazing at the planet. Maybe this recharging spark, this reminder of what flying was really all about, was working. He'd found the simplicity, beauty and peacefulness afforded by gazing at a world from orbit. He was tuning himself to his X-wing again, speaking to it, listening to it, letting it become a part of him, an extension. Darin no longer wanted it to be a mere tool for his job; instead, he was allowing it to become a flying craft again, which is what it, like him, had really been born for. There was just one more thing left to do to fully accomplish his goal...

Darin tapped the yoke in the opposite direction and waited patiently until there were stars above him and the planet was below him. He neutralized the roll and looked around.

There: a navigational buoy, just like the ones back home. He checked his scope for incoming traffic, then did a visual doublecheck out his windows. Finding no traffic nearby aside from Quiver, he allowed a mischievous, anticipatory smile to spread across his face.

"You ready?" he asked his ship. Time for it to let loose, to *really* become a flying craft.

Darin slammed in the throttle and shot off toward the buoy. "Wa-hooo!" He counted the number of rolls he did on the way: three, four, five—

"Nine?!" Quiver called over the comm system, more than a bit surprised.

"Back in a minute!" Around, around, a wild, crazy course fueled by joy and adrenaline... a chaotic dance in the sky...

Darin reached the navigational buoy. At the last instant he leveled out, dropped mere meters below the buoy and pulled up sharply on the other side, closer than any sane person had a right to be. *This* was flying! He went into a spiral for a bit, and then turned the spiral into a few loops, each one tighter than the last.

Finally Darin throttled down and headed back to where he'd left Quiver in orbit. Every so often he'd do a little sideslip just for fun.

"Get that all out of your system?" Quiver asked when Darin joined back up with him.

"For now," Darin said.

"Warn me before you do that next time."

"It's not as much fun then."

Darin eased his fighter directly above Quiver's and carefully rolled wing-over-wing 180 degrees. Looking up, he had an unobstructed view of Quiver's cockpit from the top. He liked

doing this during quiet periods on patrols so he could see Quiver while they talked, at least until their necks got sore.

Quiver likewise was looking up at Darin. "I can see the smile on your face from here, Niner."

"I've needed that for a long time," replied Darin. "There's a difference between flying and *flying*."

"There's also a difference between living and death-by-buoy." Quiver paused for a heartbeat, then added, "You have to show me how to do that sometime. You know I don't like it when you have more fun than I do."

Darin laughed easily. "Sure. We'll start in the sim. Just remind me. You'll love it; it's an insane adrenaline rush."

"All of my adrenaline is insane; otherwise I wouldn't be out here. But yeah, I'll remind you."

"All right." Darin rolled back to straight-and-level flight beside Quiver like before, and the wingpair continued on their patrol around the planet. Still smiling, Darin affectionately patted the top of the forward cockpit console of his X-wing.

Some reminders weren't all that bad.

The End

Revision A

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