

“No Going Back”

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Prologue

“–So anyway, Mom and Dad, that’s what I’ve been up to. Your turn. What’s been going on back home? Did Talsh ever come for a visit like he said he would? Is he still–”

Flight Officer Darin Stanic stopped just inside the door to his quarters when he noticed that his roommate, Flight Officer Hentil “Quiver” Yanilr, was making a message to send home. Feeling a dull ache inside, Darin did his best not to disturb his wingman. He quietly went over to his desk along the opposite wall, grabbed a couple of datacards to take to the hangar and work on, and was turning to leave when Quiver noticed him.

“Hey, Darin, hold up!”

Darin paused, expecting Quiver to stop the recording and tell him something about work. Instead, Quiver turned to his computer console’s recorder and said, “Hold on a second,” and without stopping it, he stood and came over to Darin, motioning once with his head back toward the recorder. “Come say hi to everyone.”

Darin blinked once in surprise, but he got over it quickly and said softly, “That’s okay, Quiver. I don’t want to interrupt.” He started to go, but Quiver grabbed his arm and pulled him over to the console on Quiver’s desk.

“Come on. I’ve told my family so much about you, and they all want to meet you. You’re never around when I record these. I bet they think I’m making you up.” He forced Darin down in the chair and then knelt beside him, his height still making him nearly eye-level with Darin. Quiver amiably draped an arm across Darin’s shoulders, turned back to the recorder and said, “Everyone, I want you to meet my wingman and roommate, Darin. Darin, this is everyone.” He gestured with his free hand.

Of course, all Darin was looking at then was the computer’s little recording device. “Uh, hi, everyone.”

“Tell them a little about yourself.”

Darin felt really uncomfortable, and he couldn’t figure out why. It seemed worse than his usual shy tendencies, and the only thing he could really define was the lonely ache that reminded him he had no one to send a letter to. His family was gone, and he had long ago decided not to risk sending messages to other people in his hometown since it was now under Imperial control. He swallowed and said, “Well, I’m from the Craci System–”

“–One of the reasons we call him ‘Thumper,’” Quiver interrupted with a smile.

“–And I’ve been with the Coronas for something like seven months now. Um, that’s really all there is to know about me. I, uh, hope you’re all doing well, and I’ll keep an eye on Quiver for you.”

“See, Lillen?” Quiver said smugly to the recorder. “I *told* you that was my nickname. It’s not just something CC likes to call me.”

Darin turned to look at him in surprise. “They don’t know about your nickname?”

“They do. All of them, especially my cousin Lillen, just think it’s funny that people actually call me that.”

“Oh.” Darin turned back to the recorder. “Well, then, I’ll keep an eye on Hentil for you instead. Hopefully he’s not as much trouble as Quiver is.”

Quiver half-snorted at him. “You wish.” Then Quiver’s eyes lit up, and he whirled back to the recorder. “Oh, yeah! I forgot to tell all of you about this prank I pulled the other day! It was great!” Darin started to quietly excuse himself and get up, but Quiver pulled him back down on the chair with a grin. “Stay here, Darin. You have to show them the face you made when you found out. There’s no way I can imitate that and do it justice.”

Darin felt a little embarrassed, but then Quiver dragged Darin’s shipping crate chair over to sit on and began his humorous, embellished narrative of the prank. During that time, Darin began to relax. He was still nowhere near what he considered to be comfortable, but he loosened up enough to add a few details and throw a couple friendly gibes at Quiver every so often.

Even after the retelling of the prank was over, Quiver kept Darin there and made him help with the letter. Darin was secretly curious about whether the Yanilrs would be able to follow it: Quiver would start out by asking them a question about something, then in the middle of it he would turn to Darin and quickly explain the background behind the question and why he was asking it, and then he’d face the recorder again and finish his query as if there had been no interruption. Once in a while Darin would ask Quiver something about the current topic for clarification, and if Quiver didn’t know the answer he would make Darin ask it in the letter directly, ignoring the fact that the question was already recorded when Darin asked Quiver about it in the first place.

Even though he knew his wingman liked to talk to other people, it still amazed Darin at how much Quiver had to tell his family and wanted to know in return, even while always avoiding specific city names and surnames and such on both their end and his in case the Imperials got hold of the transmission somehow. In fact, when Quiver ultimately stopped the recording, Darin suspected he did so not because he ran out of things to say but because they had to get to their daily squadron briefing.

Chapter One

“Well, Mom and Dad and everyone else, probably the biggest news with the squadron lately is that for the last few days, our commander has been making us take some refresher courses for officer training. Apparently the career-military types like him don’t like the haphazard, anything-goes, on-the-job crash course kind of training the Rebellion provides, and they try to remember how they were taught in the academies wherever and teach us that way. Sometimes it’s not so bad, but this particular training has been so boring that I bet it would put you to sleep in a heartbeat, Lillen. The main reason it’s boring for me is that I already know everything about being an officer. It’s simple, really. When you’re an officer and you have to do something, you just find some enlisted grunt and tell him to do the work instead. What’s so hard about that? But at least it’s almost over. Then we can go back to something more exciting.”

“Okay, Coronas, let’s get started,” Commander Quentell Mackin said from the front of the briefing room as he looked out over his squadron. The assembled pilots’ private discussions gradually quieted down. They all knew the drill.

Darin glanced around the room at the same scene he saw every day at this time, 1400 hours to be exact. The Corona Squadron pilots, ten in all, were gathered in the pilot briefing room of the Rebel ship *Crescent Star*. The seating arrangement was the same as always.

Commander Mackin stood before them all, somewhat stocky and plain-looking but with intelligent, dark blue eyes that Darin swore could see inside each pilot’s soul. Mack preferred to hold the reins of the squadron in a light grip, and that was usually all it took since his subordinates respected him so much. He never let the squadron down, and the military experience he had obtained before joining the Rebellion was invaluable to them. Darin remembered hearing once that Mackin had flown Z-95’s for his homeworld’s military before his squadron, the Bluehills, got loaned to the Rebellion. When the Bluehill pilots were later given the opportunity to transfer back home, Mack had stayed with the Rebels along with some of his squadmates and had then been transferred into the Rebels’ newly-formed Corona Squadron. He’d only been a flight leader in Bluehill Squadron at the time of his transfer, but due to his experience and the rampant attrition in the Rebellion’s pilot ranks then, he soon found himself in command of the Coronas.

Sitting at the front of the room near him was Lieutenant Steen “Snubber” Weas, the Coronas’ XO. The brown-haired pilot emphasized self-discipline and expected nothing less than perfection from each of them. Darin figured that between Mack and Snubber he was getting a good, well-rounded education, difficult and demanding though it may be.

Darin himself was sitting in the middle of the room next to Quiver, and on the other side of Quiver was CC, or Flight Officer Chryse Cerac. She had shoulder-length black hair and beige eyes that seemed to be constantly laughing as though she loved everything about life. By comparison, Quiver would take any excuse to laugh, and usually did. He was tall and lanky with a blond crew cut that could best be described as sloppy: it had a messy, almost spiked appearance from being a bit longer than the typical crew cut, and it often made it look like Quiver had just woken up. Darin’s blond hair was longer to the point of having bangs, and he was more of an average height with a medium build.

Quiver, CC and Darin, or “the Trio” as Mackin called them, were nearly inseparable, and Quiver and CC always knew how to have a good time. Darin loved listening to the good-natured banter that was constantly flying back and forth between those two, and the other pilots evidently enjoyed the pranks Quiver and CC pulled. Most of the time, the victim was Darin.

In front of CC sat the only pilot not slouched in his chair: her wingman, Lt. Shaun “Scoop” Pellicer. Darin recognized his choice of seats as progress: a couple of weeks ago he had still been sitting a few rows up, off by himself. CC had been working hard in the two months since Scoop had joined the squadron to make him relax and feel at home, and she usually invited Scoop along when she, Quiver and Darin did things together. At first, Pellicer had always politely declined the invitations, but lately he’d been accepting them more often.

Pellicer had been an Imperial TIE pilot before secretly defecting and becoming a Rebel, and a few months after that, he had been assigned to the Coronas. Thumper wondered if Pellicer had been as uneasy about his new squadmates when he joined as Darin had been about him. It had taken Darin a while to become comfortable with the idea of flying with a former enemy, but he was past that now and was starting to enjoy the time he spent with Scoop. After Mackin and Weas, Darin figured he could learn the most about being a good leader from the man with the dark brown crew cut sitting in front of CC.

On the other side of the room sat the other four pilots. Toward the front was Lt. Tictintco Tnis, always called “Slurry” by those who knew him. He was a Bilgana, a short, slim humanoid species with four arms, four eyes, charcoal-colored skin and “backwards”-bending knees. He also had a very thick accent, which had made it hard for Darin to understand him when they first met.

Every day Ikoa sat with someone else, and she was sitting with Slurry today. Lt. Ikoa Fyndcap had the seldom-used callsign of “Rancor,” but she was one of the sweetest people Darin knew. It was like the small woman’s face wasn’t capable of doing anything but smiling. If he’d just met her on the street, the last place Darin would have placed Ikoa was in a starfighter cockpit, yet she was a skilled fighter pilot.

Going from one personality extreme to the other, Chopper and Kalre sat in the back of the room together. Chopper, or Lt. Jayke Forsgren, was a solidly-built man who believed he was tougher than duracrete. His wingman, Flight Officer Kalre Unatel, had such a similar personality that they could have been brothers if it weren’t for the little fact of Chopper being a human and Kalre being a Rodian. If there was a fight going on or a chance to show off their flying skills, they were there. If they could do both at once, so much the better.

Darin grinned to himself a bit as he looked at all of his friends. They might be a strange group, but one pilot’s weakness was another one’s strength, and when they worked together, there was little they couldn’t accomplish. Besides, they knew how to have a good time in their off-duty hours too. He wouldn’t trade this squadron for any other.

By now the room had quieted, and Commander Mackin was ready to start his daily briefing. Mackin ran a hand through his black crew cut and said, “I only have one big thing to talk about, so I’ll let Snubber go first and then I’ll finish up. Steen?”

The Coronas’ Executive Officer stood up and made his point quickly. “We have an adjusted patrol and sim schedule coming up due to the activity that Commander Mackin will be briefing you on momentarily. Since it will involve us being off the ship for a few days, we obviously won’t be doing our patrols during that time. Enjoy the respite while you can, because the Quakes will be doubling up to cover for us here, and we’ll be returning the favor immediately after we get back.

“This brings me to my next point. While we’re gone, our X-wings will be remaining on the ship. For the patrols during that time, the Quakes are going to be doing some training in our X-wings while we’re not using them, and in exchange we’ll be doing some Y-wing training in their fighters when we return.”

“Great. My seat’s going to be all messed up,” Quiver grumbled under his breath.

Either Weas didn’t hear him or he simply ignored him. “We want our snubfighters to be in good shape for them, so before we leave, I want all of you to clean out your cockpits.” Weas addressed the entire squadron but looked directly at Darin as he did so, who got the hint and blushed. “I want them neat, clean and orderly. There’s no excuse for them being otherwise.”

As Weas wrapped it up and returned to his seat, Darin muttered to himself almost inaudibly in frustration, “Leave some datacards and food wrappers in there *one time* and you’re blacklisted for life.” A moment later, when Mackin asked if anyone had anything to bring up and Quiver’s hand shot up, Darin knew he’d made a mistake saying that out loud and wished he could go back thirty seconds and keep his mouth shut. Apparently he’d just made Quiver forget about being upset that another pilot would be adjusting his cockpit’s seat.

“Commander,” Quiver said with a mischievous gleam in his pale blue eyes, “Darin just said he has so many food wrappers and datacards and who-knows-what-else in his cockpit that he’d like to be excused now to get a head start on cleaning it.”

Chopper never missed a beat. “He can clean out mine too while he’s at it.”

“If the rookie needs practice keeping the inside of his snubfighter clean, why not have him clean them *all* out?” added Kalre. “This is sounding better all the time.”

Pellicer turned to Darin and said sympathetically, “You’re in for it now. They smell blood.”

“Wait, come on, guys,” Darin protested. “I—”

“Drinks three for person every whose cockpit he does clean not.” Slurry’s lipless grin looked particularly evil, even for a Bilgana.

Chopper projected his voice. “All in favor?” All of the seated pilots’ hands went up except for Darin’s. Chopper looked at Darin and shrugged as if to imply helplessness. “Sorry, Thumper, but your superiors have spoken. We expect full and satisfactory maid service before we leave for wherever we’re going. To anyone whose fighter is not cleaned well enough, you owe three drinks of that pilot’s own choosing.”

Darin sighed and glared sidelong at Quiver. “This is all your fault,” he grumbled quietly.

Quiver grinned back, clearly not sorry in the least. “Yup. It’s tough being the rookie, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be surprised if your cockpit is suddenly and inexplicably filled with a mound of table scraps from the mess hall come Inspection Day. That might be worth the cost of three drinks.”

“What was that, Darin?” CC’s voice was louder than normal as she leaned forward to look at him from her seat on the other side of Quiver. “You said you want some K.P. duty as well?”

The other pilots snickered, and Darin groaned and covered his face with one hand. “I’ll just be quiet now.”

Shaking his head hopelessly, Commander Mackin cleared his throat to attract his pilots’ attention again, and then he started his topic. “Leadership training. The last few days have gone fairly well, I thought, and we just have one more project to finish it all up.” The pilots seemed

happy about that, and Mackin continued. “It’s all well and good to sit you down in a classroom and tell you how an officer should act, but now we’re going to get a little hands-on activity. For lack of a better term, call it community service.”

Those two words quickly changed the mood in the room. A large moan sounded from the Coronas, and Chopper asked, “Community service? Commander, how come? Can’t we do something else instead?” Chopper looked positively indignant.

The volume of Mackin’s voice dropped a little, and it had an edge to it when he spoke again. “We’re going to a Rebellion safeworld, where the people are living very hard lives. Most have had to flee there for safety, either because they are close to someone in the Rebellion and the Imperials are also aware of that, or because their homeworld was occupied or their cities bombed into nonexistence and they have nowhere else to go. On this particular world, money and luxuries are rare and so is any sort of extended free time. The best way to think of it is like a fledgling colony world where the benefits of technology are not always available, and people have to work hard. We’ll be volunteering for four days in places where the people are desperately in need of a break. By doing so, you’ll be learning that an officer’s primary duty is to serve others, both the people he commands and the people he protects.”

A dose of guilt swallowed the moan, and the room fell quiet. Mackin broke the awkward silence a moment later after everything sank in, and he began going over details such as when they would get there and where they could volunteer.

The small Citadel-class cruiser continued its lonely flight. Hyperspace bathed the spacecraft in a soft blue glow, at the same time highlighting the craft’s name of *Silver Dart* where it was emblazoned on the outer hull. The ship had been on this journey for a few weeks now and had visited numerous systems along the way.

Inside, the lone occupant sat in the pilot’s seat, restlessly drumming her fingers on the forward console and staring out the windows at the all-too-familiar sight. When she could stand it no longer, she rose and walked toward the aft, into the room that served as her quarters.

Keely rummaged through a pile of datacards on her desk, found the one she was looking for a minute or two later, and sat down with it and a datapad. She forced her attention to the information on the datacard—public service bulletins as well as dry, technical military reports, which said everything and nothing all at once.

As always, it wasn’t too long before her mind started wandering. Like every other time this happened, Keely eventually found herself looking at the holo she kept on her desk. In the holo, her brother stood tall in his uniform, a proud smile on his face and not a single hair of his dark crew cut out of place, right after receiving his commission. He was next in the growing line of a distinguished military family, and his potential as an officer and leader was boundless. She only hoped she would see him again. They’d had no contact with him for a long time, and not only did she miss him terribly, but she was also very worried about him.

Like every other time this happened and her mind wandered, the reminder of her brother gave Keely enough motivation to go back to the horribly dry report. After all, this was the reason she was out here. Maybe this was the report that would tell her where to head next to find him. Maybe this was the one that would finally lead her to him.

Chapter Two

“Heh, asking you that question about Tori reminds me of Darin. They’re a lot alike in some ways, the most noticeable one being how easy it is to get them into trouble or talk them into doing something. Don’t ever tell him this, but one of my personal goals is to see how many different odd jobs I can make Darin do without me being the one who actually tells him to do it. This can be a challenge at times, but the easiest way I’ve found to do it is to plant the seed in another pilot’s brain that, hey, we don’t want to do this job, so let’s make the rookie do it. For as long as I’ve been here, even before Darin showed up, that’s always been a popular idea. Once the squadron agrees that the rookie should do it, there’s no talking them out of it. Lately Darin’s gotten a little better about sticking up for himself, but overall he still doesn’t put up a big fight about it. That’s one of the reasons it’s so much fun to get him into trouble, too. He might glare and act annoyed with me for a short time, but he won’t really say anything. I think he secretly enjoys it on some level, and that’s really why he puts up with me and CC to the extent that he does. I couldn’t ask for a better roommate. Oh, that reminds me, CC wanted to tell you something...”

Darin couldn’t tell if it was the light entering the room or the tantalizing smell of food cooking that first woke him up. Once he fully realized there was food cooking, though, he no longer cared about the cause of his newfound consciousness. He opened his eyes and sat up as his stomach began to growl.

He felt some mild confusion initially when he found himself inside an unfamiliar room, but once he got his bearings, things started coming back to him from the previous night, and he relaxed. A glance across the small room revealed Quiver, who was sound asleep and lying on a pile of worn blankets on the floor like Darin was. In spite of the odd surroundings, seeing his roommate and friend there made Darin feel a little more comfortable, like nothing had changed and they were still onboard *Crescent Star*.

The Coronas had had a series of delays during their trip to the Rebellion safeworld, first caused by delays in loading the supplies they were bringing for the safeworld’s city, and then worsened by having to take an unexpected detour around a small group of Imperial ships, all of which caused their shuttle to reach the safeworld much later than originally expected. When they finally landed, it was close to 0100 hours local– 0300 Galactic Standard– and the places where they were supposed to stay that night, which were mostly supposed to be the same places where they would be volunteering for these few days, were long since closed or the people had fallen asleep. Commander Mackin met up with his contact on the planet, who scrambled around trying to find households to take the pilots in at that late hour. Finally, all the pilots had hosts for the night, and they were due to report for work in the morning.

Darin didn’t remember a whole lot about last night other than it had been close to 0200 local when he and Quiver were taken to someone’s house. Thumper thought hard for a minute and then remembered the homeowner’s name: Mr. Pel Tinnan. He was an elderly gentleman who lived alone, and he was small and stooped but had sharp eyes and a keen mind. At least that was Darin’s bleary impression of him from the previous night.

Stiffly climbing to his feet, Darin looked around the small room. He and Quiver had been

too tired last night to do more than shuck their boots and drop their duffle bags before collapsing onto the pile of blankets each was given for a bed, so this was the first good look Darin had at the place. The furniture in the room, a table, two chairs and a set of shelves with some ceramic pots on it, looked rough and handmade, yet sturdy. The walls had a similar appearance. The room wasn't clean, but it wasn't really dirty, either. There was a soft whistling sound coming from the large window, which was the main source of light in the room when the curtains were open, and when Darin went over to find the cause of the noise, he felt some air blowing in from between the edge of the dinged-up glass and the wall. It ruffled the curtains slightly. He idly told himself to check in the shuttle before they left the planet to see if there was some sealant they could use to fill in the gap.

While standing at the window, he partially parted the curtains to look outside and had to blink hard against the sudden onslaught of light. The sun was up, and people were roaming the dirt streets either on foot or on the backs of various large animals. Very few speeders could be seen. As people walked, they called to each other and waved, their cheerfulness a stark contrast to the dreary-looking world. Patches of grass were few and far between, leaving everything else to be hard-packed dirt. The other buildings looked much the same in terms of handiwork as the inside of this room did.

Darin's stomach growled again, so he pulled back into the room, this time momentarily going blind from the sudden darkness. When he could see once more, he quickly changed and got ready. After he was done, he noticed two cups of water just inside the door. He took one, gratefully downed half of it, and then nudged Quiver with his foot. "Hey, Quiv. Breakfast."

Still half-asleep, Quiver rolled onto his side and covered his eyes with an arm. "What're we havin'?" he mumbled.

Darin was sorely tempted to dump the rest of his water on Quiver's face to retaliate for all that extra time spent cleaning the squadron's X-wing cockpits and a host of various pranks, but he figured he shouldn't do that in someone's home. Plus, it wasn't imaginative at all when compared to Quiver's pranks, and he wanted to do something clever and funny for his revenge. Instead, he simply replied, "Real food, apparently."

Quiver became a little more awake at that, blissfully oblivious to how close he'd come to being woken up more violently. Rolling onto his back and sitting up, he gave a huge yawn and then sleepily peered at his wingman. "Real food? Honest? Hey, no fair, you're already ready. Wake me up sooner next time when there's real food involved."

"And have you get there first and eat it all? No way," Darin said with an evil grin. Then he lightened it and nudged Quiver once more. "Hurry up, you pokey bantha. I'm hungry." Quiver didn't need to be told again.

Soon they had walked into the kitchen, where they saw Mr. Tinnan cooking. "Something sure smells good," Quiver said, hungrily eyeing the steaming metal pans on the cooker.

Tinnan looked at them and smiled. "Good morning! You're just in time. This'll be ready in a minute, so make yourselves comfortable."

"Can we help, sir?" asked Darin. "I don't want us to be--"

"No, no, have a seat," Tinnan interrupted. "You're my guests."

Quiver again didn't need to be told twice, though Darin hesitated before sitting down at the table himself. Thumper watched Tinnan while he finished up, and the pilot did not fail to notice the nearly empty food cabinets their host looked through at one point for something; however, the dish Tinnan put on the table a few minutes later was loaded with food.

“Here we go. Dig in.”

“Thanks!” Quiver took his plate and eagerly helped himself. “Mmmm, real homemade food. Just like Mom makes. This is all worth it right here.”

Darin likewise took a dented metal plate but again hesitated. He ended up putting a modest amount of food on it, but that only prompted Tinnan to offer him the serving utensils again.

“Come on, son, eat. I expect this dish to be empty by the time breakfast is done, okay, boys?”

“I like this guy,” Quiver said to Darin between mouthfuls while pointing at Tinnan with a fork. Turning back to the elderly man, the lanky pilot said, “This is really good. Where’d you learn to cook like this? I’ve never seen *sinnen* root used this way. It’s great.”

Tinnan shrugged while he served himself. “I learned from my folks, longer ago than I care to remember, and around here you have to get creative with your limited ingredients. I’m glad you like it.” His voice was filled with pride although he kept his expression humble. Then he shook his head and added, “I can’t imagine what sorry excuse for food they give you on those ships or bases or wherever you two are stationed. I’ve learned throughout the years that bad cafeteria food is a universal constant.”

Quiver chuckled. “We made a conscious decision to *stop* trying to imagine what they served us. It was bad for morale.”

“And for your insides too, I bet!” Tinnan’s slightly wheezy yet hearty laugh joined with Quiver’s easy laughter.

Darin laughed a little as well, but it was more of a conscious effort on his part. He was a bit envious of his wingman’s ability to fit in so quickly with people he didn’t know and be comfortable with them. Quiver was obviously hitting it off rather well with Mr. Tinnan, but all Darin could think about were the bare food cabinets and how many days’ worth of meals had just been served to them, all of which just made the quiet pilot even more uneasy. As usual, he ended up letting Quiver do most of the talking during the meal.

The food was excellent, and Darin was still hungry after finishing his first helping. Though he felt guilty with each scoop, Thumper took a little more food in an attempt to satisfy his hunger as well as their host who, for his part, smiled genuinely and encouraged Darin to take even more. When he served himself an amount that Darin felt was a fair compromise, he began eating again and spoke up during a lull in the conversation. “Sorry we weren’t that great of company last night.”

Tinnan waved his concerns away. “You boys were tired. It was perfectly understandable. Did you sleep okay? Sorry the accommodations weren’t better, but as you can see, it’s all I can offer.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, I slept fine, sir. I have a feeling that Quiver did, too, given how hard it was to wake him up this morning.”

“I hope you didn’t mind sharing a room.”

“Oh, no,” Quiver said dismissively. “We’ve always been roommates. We’ve got it all worked out: Darin acts as my alarm, and I don’t complain about his snoring. It’s a decent compromise, though he gets the better end of the deal.”

Tinnan laughed a bit, and Darin kicked Quiver under the table. “I don’t snore and you know it,” he muttered.

Ignoring his wingman, Quiver said to Tinnan in a mock serious tone, “If his snoring kept

you up last night, please tell me. The Alliance has identified this as a cruel and unusual infliction on both the general population and service members alike, and they are willing to compensate those who have suffered because of it. Unfortunately, a bunch of credits won't help ease the trauma nor its detrimental effects, but it's all we can do at this point."

Tinnan responded in kind. "Thank you for your concern, but I left my hearing aid out last night. I guess it's a good thing that we can't get the corrective surgery out this way and I still need the aid, isn't it?"

Quiver shook his head. "No, sir, it sounds like you were just lucky last night. Lack of hearing has never prevented the trauma before: it's *that bad*. I guess it was just an off-night for him, which means a good night for you."

Both of them laughed, enjoying the game. Darin just rolled his eyes.

Once the laughter had settled, Darin tried to figure out how Quiver could be so relaxed. Darin himself felt artificially stiff and formal, especially compared to Quiver, and he just couldn't make himself feel at home here; it felt too strange being in an honest-to-goodness *house* after all this time, particularly one that didn't belong to him or to someone else he knew. It was also making stray thoughts of his old house on Craci Four rattle in his brain. Who lived there now? What did his room look like? Did they find the stash of toys he had secretly placed behind that loose wall board when he was a little kid?

Maybe the secret to being relaxed was to just talk, like Quiver always did. In an attempt to push the distractions away, Darin said, "Thank you for letting us stay here last night, Mr. Tinnan. It's very kind of you."

The old man waved that away as well. "It's the least I can do for boys like you who are fighting for my freedom." He said it gruffly, but with a friendly smile. "A few years younger and I would have been right alongside you, but we gotta leave the big stuff to you younger folks. Same as my grandson," he continued, his voice again filling with pride as he pointed in the direction of an adjacent room. "He's in the Rebellion, in the ground forces. Comm specialist."

Darin looked toward the room where Tinnan pointed, and from his seat in the kitchen Darin could see part of the far wall of that room through the open doorways. He noticed the edge of a holo on the wall, and when he leaned back to see the rest of it, he indeed saw the image of a young man in a Rebel army uniform. It was displayed so prominently and Mr. Tinnan had pointed it out with such pride that it caused Darin to wonder, not for the first time, what his own family would have thought of his decision to join the Rebellion. Would they be proud of him? Disapproving? Pleased? Supportive? Uncertain? He believed he knew, but he honestly would never be able to find out for sure. He had never had the chance to ask since he joined the Rebellion as a result of their deaths. Darin couldn't believe how much he still missed them even over a year later.

Above, below and beside the holo of the grandson were other ones, apparently of the rest of Mr. Tinnan's family: young couples, old couples, children. A few more and the number would have rivaled that of Quiver's extended family. Feeling like everyone in the galaxy had a family except for him, Darin bit his bottom lip and turned back to the table, tuning into the conversation again just in time to hear Tinnan say, "I'm glad you boys got to stay here. This ramshackle house and I have been without someone to take care of for much too long."

Turning to Quiver, Mr. Tinnan added, "You know, come to think of it, you kinda remind me of my grandson. About the same age, and he has the same... quirky sense of humor that you do. Runs in the family." Tinnan grinned.

Quiver's response was something that made both Quiver and Tinnan laugh, but Darin didn't hear what it was. He was concentrating too hard on trying not to let this all get to him and on trying to outwardly appear normal so Quiver wouldn't notice and question him about it. He couldn't tell which was harder.

Keely grabbed one of the tasteless ration bars to eat while she sat down and logged her latest progress. She was out of real food and would have to resupply soon. She'd hold off on that for right now, though, because she'd just met with some sensor specialists who'd had a little data she could use after some sweet-talking on her part, and she was anxious to spend some time looking it over. After a quick glance at her brother's holo and a couple other family holos she had brought along, Keely began to incorporate that data into what she already had to see if it changed anything or if it reinforced her current direction.

She had never been accused of being a patient person, but to her credit, she was breaking her old records of the length of time she was staying focused on one task with this long journey made of nothing but a milligram of information here and another puzzle piece there. Keely also knew that nothing short of the deep concern she felt for her brother would have made her keep going with this for so long, following this elusive trail to find him. It helped that her family supported her on this and did their best to answer her questions or send her extra money when needed. Though they remained back home, they did what they could for her, knowing that everything they did went toward helping Keely find their missing family member. Her parents had told her they were proud of her for doing this.

It warmed Keely inside to know that and to finally be able to do something meaningful for her brother, something to show him just how much she cared about him and admired him. She was proud of her brother for doing his part to keep their home safe and make the galaxy a better place. On the flip side, though, she was also afraid for him. Life in the military was fraught with dangers, after all, especially on the front lines as he had been. Had those dangers caught up with him? She was afraid they had—otherwise he wouldn't have been out of contact for so long.

Keely also knew that he was proud to be doing his duty, but that duty may have cost her brother his life, or worse. She had to find out.

Chapter Three

“Hey, Mom, you would have been really proud of me. I only had one candy bar for breakfast the other day instead of two, and I even had some fruit with it. Of course, it’s not because I was trying to eat healthier. Please don’t cry, Mom. It’s really because I’m trying to ration out these candy bars you sent so they last as long as possible. I could get almost anything I wanted if I tried to barter them because things like this are so rare on the ship, but I don’t. They’re too good. Please send more. You know, it’s support like this from home that really helps us out here. Not that I’m trying to guilt-trip you into sending enough for the whole squadron, but it’s good for morale. Besides, when I only get a couple candy bars I don’t want to share them, and then the others guilt-trip me, especially CC. I swear, she’s so good at it that she could make me regret being born if she wanted to. So you can spare me that trauma and just send more candy bars, right? Please? For the sake of your favorite son, who’s out here so far from home? Hey, I never realized I could channel guilt-trips like that before. Was that a Jedi skill? Was Great-Uncle Minnah Force-sensitive, perhaps, or was he just crazy and eccentric like we’ve always thought? Oh, but getting back to the candy bars... Mom, I still could never understand why you think that my belief that candy bars are a perfectly acceptable breakfast food would have made me a bad babysitter. That’s the kind of babysitter I would have wanted.”

“Again, I can’t thank you enough for doing this,” the tall, blond woman said as she ushered the two pilots inside after a quick tour of the town.

Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap smiled, a warm expression as soft as the brown hair framing her face. “We’re glad to be of help.” From one step behind her, Darin nodded agreement.

Liy, the woman escorting them, looked like she had been run so ragged that she had forgotten the meaning of the word “sleep.” “I’ll warn you now, they can be quite a handful at times, but that’s how kids are.” Just inside the front door, Liy stopped them in the common room, a large area with a makeshift couch and chair, an outdated holoprojector, a small playpen, and handmade toys scattered everywhere across the floor. Smiling apologetically, she said, “This town is probably a bit different than what you’re used to living in.”

“Actually, I grew up on a colony world very similar to this,” Ikoa said. “Almost feels like home.” Darin had grown up with a higher standard of living than this town enjoyed, but he didn’t comment.

Liy nodded and pointed to four separate doorways in the room in turn. “That’s the ‘Grown-up Room,’ as we call it. There are two cots in there for you two and some drawers to put your belongings. Feel free to move anything in there if it’s in the way or if you need more closet space, and Nel’lan and I will put it back when we get back. That room,” she continued, pointing to the next doorway leading from the common room, “is the children’s bedroom. That one is the refresher, and I suggest you get up early unless you want to fight six kids in the morning to use it. I doubt even your dogfighting experience will have prepared you for such a brutal battle. Finally, there’s the kitchen and dining area. They’re all in there right now finishing up breakfast. They eat a lot. I hope one of you can cook.”

The helpless glance that Ikoa gave Darin made it clear that he’d be the one in the kitchen the most. He mentally shrugged; it wasn’t like he’d never cooked meals for his sister while

growing up. Out loud he said, “Yeah, it’s not a problem,” before looking back at the kitchen.

Darin could easily hear the laughing voices coming from that room, and the innocent happiness was somewhat contagious. *These four days won’t be that bad*, he thought, feeling better than he had earlier that morning at Mr. Tinnan’s house now that he was growing more accustomed to this world’s selfless hospitality. The Coronas were already the big news in the town, and just about everyone he had met there so far had gone out of their way to offer them help. Even Liy was being more helpful than he’d expected with getting him and Ikoa prepared for this.

When Darin had tentatively brought up that very topic earlier, Liy had explained that the mentality of the safeworld was that as long as a person living there did something sufficient to pull his or her own weight and also contribute something substantial to the town, he or she was welcome and others would provide that person with most of the rest of the things needed to live. That was how Liy and Nel’lan, the other adult there, were able to stay at the orphanage the whole time and not worry too much about growing or buying most of their food. Instead of credits, the currency was generally service or bartering. The philosophy was simple: help, and be helped in return, because all the safeworlders really had was each other. Add that to their knowledge that the strangers in town were really fellow Rebels on the front lines who had come to help out for a few days, and it was easier for Darin to understand the people’s gracious attitude toward them.

When Mackin was explaining the community service options to the Coronas back on *Star*, Darin had jumped at the chance to volunteer at the safeworld’s orphanage. He’d helped take care of his sister while growing up, and he enjoyed being around children. Ikoa had volunteered with him. CC had put on her best sad, pathetic, pleading expression and had convinced Quiver to work with her out at the livery stables, a place where people could borrow animals for a day or two to ride or pull carts, depending on their needs. Grinning to himself as he listened to the children’s laughter, Darin realized he’d get to spend the week playing with kids while Quiver was probably knee-deep in manure at that very minute. Maybe there was some justice in the galaxy after all.

The pilots dropped their duffle bags in the Grown-up Room and came back into the common room. When they did, Liy said, “I forgot to tell you: don’t worry about their schooling. This will be a good break for them, and we’ll just pick it up again with the teachers when we get back. So, are you ready to meet the crew?”

Ikoa nodded. “Sure. Then you two can head out and have a few days off.”

Liy smiled a tired smile. “A break that’s badly needed, too. Even with two of us, taking care of six kids and a baby is an around-the-clock job.” She looked toward the kitchen and called, “Nel’lan, bring the troops out here to meet our two friends.”

There was a sudden clamor of chairs being pushed back and utensils being dropped onto plates, then a group of children ran into the room. Curious at first, now that they saw the two strangers some huddled together, suddenly shy. A couple younger ones came up to the pilots, nearly bouncing with excitement and wanting attention. A lithe pink-skinned Twi’lek male followed them out of the kitchen, carrying a two-month-old human baby. The Twi’lek shushed the excited kids, walked over to the two pilots and shook their hands awkwardly while holding the infant. “Hello, I’m Nel’lan, the other half of this operation. Thank you for agreeing to stay with the kids for a few days.”

“Nice to meet you,” the pilots told him.

Liy turned to the children and said, “Kids, these two nice people are Ikoa and Darin.

They're going to be watching you for a few days. Remember we talked about that yesterday?"

The kids nodded, and one young boy started asking all sorts of questions ranging from what town Darin and Ikoa were from, to whether or not they were married, to if he could be in charge until Liy and Nel'lan got back. The boy was told that, sadly, he couldn't be in charge until he was older, and then Liy and Nel'lan introduced each of the kids to Ikoa and Darin. A quick glance at Ikoa in the midst of it showed Darin that, like him, she couldn't keep track of all the introductions even with her best efforts.

Once that was completed, Liy sent the kids on the task of cleaning up the breakfast dishes while Nel'lan showed the two Coronas where the baby's supplies were. He elaborated on the details of caring for little Jilli until he seemed certain that Darin and Ikoa had a handle on it.

Finally, Nel'lan and Liy showed them the emergency contact information posted in the kitchen.

"Comm us any time, day or night, if something comes up or if you need some help. We'll be in the local area. Our comlink channels are here with the other emergency information. Now, is there anything else you need, anything at all?" Nel'lan asked.

Ikoa shook her head. "I don't think so. Liy already went over the daily schedule with us and gave us some tips on how to work this. She also took us to the medical clinic so we know where that is. So unless Darin has any questions—" When he shook his head, Ikoa continued, "—It looks like you two can go have a break. We'll take over from here."

"All right. Again, thank you for doing this. We'll be back soon." Nel'lan handed Jilli over to Ikoa, who rocked her and cooed to her while Liy and Nel'lan went to get their bags from the Grown-up Room. Coming back to the common room, they gave each child a hug and said, "Everyone be on your best behavior for Ikoa and Darin, okay? Be nice to each other. We'll be back in a few days." With that, they said another round of thank-yous and goodbyes, and left.

The pilots took a deep breath, then exchanged a green-eyed glance with each other and looked at the huddle of children. There were two human boys: a brown-haired five-year-old (the youngest of the whole group, excluding Jilli) and one that looked to be on the small side of eight with a mop of black hair. One human girl had black hair and was eight or nine, another was a blonde and closer to ten or eleven years old, and then Jilli was an infant. There were also two nonhumans in the group: a male Mon Calamari with dark pinkish-brown skin, and a female Twi'lek with powder-blue skin. Darin could tell they were young, but he couldn't judge the aliens' ages very well, and he had no idea how quickly each species matured.

The kids' clothing was handmade, functional and apparently rather durable, but there were also various food and grass stains on it to suggest that the kids played very hard in these sets of clothing and also perhaps that they didn't have many other sets to wear. The kids were as healthy as, if not healthier than, most of the people Darin had seen on this planet, which meant they obviously weren't living on one of the Core Worlds but they at least had basic medical treatment and vaccines. *Could be better, could be worse*, he thought.

Finally, Darin knew they had all lost their families because of the Empire. Either the parents and known family members were dead, or they had been separated from the kids in an attack and were not yet located. It sickened him that such young kids would have to go through the same trauma he remembered all too well, but he also felt a kinship with all of them which reminded him that he really was *not* the only person without a family. For a brief moment, he wondered if he would have ended up in a place like this had the occupation of his homeworld happened a few years earlier. Then he considered that it actually would have likely been an

Empire-run orphanage or foster care on his homeworld, and then what would have—

“Well,” Ikoa said to the children, snapping Darin out of his thoughts, “it looks like the first thing we need to do is learn everyone’s names.”

The five-year-old boy immediately ran through each name while pointing at the person he was naming, but that was even faster and less helpful than the initial introductions had been. Plus, it didn’t help that now that Liy and Nel’lan had left, more of the children were more subdued, most of them just staring at the two strangers and not saying a word. One girl started sniffing a bit, softly saying, “Liy...”

Hoping to distract the kids from missing Liy and Nel’lan, Darin grinned and said to the five-year-old, “Thanks, buddy, but we can’t make you do all the work. How about we make a little game out of it?” Darin walked over to the center of the room near the wall, moved a toy aside, sat cross-legged on the floor and said in a friendly tone, “Everyone come over and sit in a circle.” He patted the floor beside him invitingly.

“A game, a game, a game!” The five-year-old eagerly bounced over and flopped on the floor. “Everyone make a big circle starting here! From me!” The Mon Cal was right on his heels and sat down beside him.

The other children were more hesitant, but they did as they were told. When the six of them plus Ikoa (with Jilli) and Darin were seated in something resembling a circle, Darin spoke up again. “Okay. Do you all know your alphabet?” The kids nodded a little. “Great. Now what we’ll do is everyone will say their name, and then they’ll think of something they like that starts with the same letter as their name. We can help you out with the letters if you need it. All right? I’ll go first.” Darin smiled and said, “My name is Darin. That starts with a ‘d,’ so I have to think of something I like that also starts with a ‘d.’” He paused a moment to come up with something. He was glad Quiver wasn’t there because his wingman would have immediately piped up with “Drinking!” even in front of the kids.

Thumper started over. “My name is Darin, and I like droids. See how that goes? Now, who’s next?” He looked at the small eight-year-old boy sitting on his left. “Want to give it a try?” Darin coaxed.

The dark-haired boy was shy, and he looked at the floor while he answered quietly. “Um, my name’s Hilaj, and I like, um, I like...having pillow fights.”

Some of the younger kids giggled and agreed, and Darin could see a little bit of tension leaving. It got better with every child who took a turn, and especially when they got to Jilli and the Coronas encouraged all the kids to think of things Jilli liked that started with a “j.” A couple kids even leaned over to their neighbors and asked what they were going to say or what letter something started with. The two pilots worked hard at committing all the names to memory as they heard them. Their retention of the information was much better now.

Silver Dart flew along on a new heading. Hyperspace remained the same; the only difference was the letters and numbers found on the ship’s navigational displays.

Keely read the transcript of the original exchange again, just on the off-chance that she’d missed something the first few hundred times. It mentioned her brother’s name, and it was what started off her search for him. All the names were bouncing around in her head: her brother’s name, the names of the squadrons and the ship, the planet’s name, everything...and then more

names as she followed up on the first ones and got some additional leads, more recent ones. She was following the names. That was all she could do until she found something more solid to go on.

Names... They were fascinating in their power and simplicity. Keely had long since learned that her own family name had some weight attached to it. Sure, it wasn't nearly as influential or as powerful as some others she knew, but it was sufficient to cut through some of the insanely frustrating bureaucratic red tape at times. More than once on this trip, Keely had been delayed by "the system," the same system that didn't seem to be as concerned about her brother as she was. Times like that were when she was glad her father had taken her and her brother to various military receptions while growing up. Their father, a naval officer, was well-liked and respected in his circles, providing the family with a good networking capability. Their grandfather had also joined the service in a smaller capacity a few years before their father had, which helped even more. Both had joined when the siblings were very young, so Keely had met a lot of military officers over the course of her life.

She wasn't afraid to use this knowledge, either. Once Keely was frustrated enough with runarounds and delays in a given planetary system, she started dropping certain names. If her own family name wouldn't accomplish what she wanted, she dropped another one, one that was more well-known. She continued this until one made an impact with the person stonewalling her. Each time, she was amazed at how that expedited her requests for information.

Keely also figured that once her brother was found and returned home, he would be a hero after whatever ordeal he was going through now. People would really notice their family's name then.

Names were powerful things.

Chapter Four

“So is Rilana still seeing whats-his-name? Oh, and what’s this I hear about her going on a business trip to you-know-where? Tell her that is completely unacceptable. You know and I know that she’d have way too much fun there, and it’s under the guise of going to work? No way. She’s not allowed to have fun at work. The journal I worked for before all this came up never sent me to neat places like that. Did they ever say, ‘Hey, go do a story on this upper-class resort’? Nooooooo. Blast, but you don’t know how jealous I am. The unfairness of it all is making my head spin.”

Quiver grinned as he stepped into the large common room with Ikoa and CC and took a minute to observe his wingman. Four kids were sitting in a circle on the floor, watching Darin and obviously having fun. Darin, meanwhile, was standing in the middle of the circle and spinning around. A small, giggling five-year-old kid was sitting on his shoulders with his legs looped tightly around Darin’s neck and his arms wrapped tightly around Darin’s head. Darin held onto the kid’s legs with one hand to keep him put, and Darin had looped his other arm around the waist of another boy to hold him off the ground. This boy was facing the direction of the spin and was parallel to the floor. Between the kid’s outstretched arms and Darin’s accompanying *vroom* noises, Quiver figured that the laughing boy was pretending to be some sort of speeder.

“He’s been like this the whole time,” Ikoa whispered to Quiver with a smile while she held a sleeping baby in her arms. “I never realized he was so good with children.”

“You’re forgetting that he spends all his time with Quiver,” CC whispered back.

Quiver gave CC a dry look and stuck his tongue out at her. When CC did the same to him, Quiver whispered in a whiny voice, “Ikoa, CC’s picking on me.”

CC playfully matched his tone. “Ikoa, make Quiver stop!”

“She started it!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!” Quiver stuck his tongue out at CC again, then smirked at her and turned his attention back to Darin before she could get another comment in. He raised his voice slightly to be heard over the laughter of the children and Darin’s *vrooming*. “You’re having way too much fun in here, Thumper.”

Darin looked up when he heard Quiver and slowly came to a stop. “Hi, guys.” He put the first boy down and then futilely tried grabbing the one on his shoulders. “Remi, you have to go down now.”

“I don’t wanna,” the five-year-old said, not sounding too concerned. “Start spinning again! That was fun!”

“I’d better not– I’m pretty dizzy.”

“Hee hee, Dizzy Darin!” said one of the seated children.

Darin looked like he was about to ask someone for help in getting the boy off from around his neck, but Quiver was already there and had taken hold of Remi, trying to gently pull him off his wingman. “Okay, buddy, time to come down,” said Quiver.

Remi grinned. “No. I like it up here!” He let go with his arms, but he didn’t unloop his legs from around Darin’s neck.

Darin simply tickled the bottom of one of Remi's feet, causing the child to shriek with glee and jerk his feet away, quickly unlooping his legs out of necessity and nearly hitting Darin under the chin as he did so. Quiver pulled the laughing boy off and set him gently on the floor.

"Thanks," said Darin as he rubbed his neck a bit. Then he turned to Ikoa and said, "Ikoa, you told Quiver that he's not allowed inside the Grown-up Room due to his maturity level, right?"

Quiver just rolled his eyes, an action that seemed to confirm Darin's assessment. "Yeah, yeah. I've heard them all."

Darin gave his wingman a smirk before asking, "So what's going on?"

"CC and I were just taking a quick break from the ever-enjoyable task of cleaning the animal stalls, so we thought we'd come over and see how things were going," answered Quiver. "I'm not sure I like what I see, though. Now Darin, you know I watch out for you. I'm your friend. Your wingman. I can tell that the laughter I heard just now and the happy expression on your face are just facades. And because I watch out for you and have only your best interests in mind, I'll selflessly trade volunteer assignments with you so you don't have to go through this."

CC gave Quiver a glare that was somewhere between playfully indignant and downright threatening. "I'm going to smack you as soon as we're out of sight of the young, impressionable children. Although, maybe teaching all of them to hit you would be a good thing."

"Come on, CC," Quiver said. "Look at this— they've got toys!" He reached down to pick up a toy near his feet. "Tell me you're not jealous that these two get to spend the week with a houseful of toys." As he held the toy out to her as an example, he paused and studied it in puzzlement. The item he was holding was a stiff tube about twenty centimeters long, and one end had a half-meter-long straight piece of some type of soft, colored foam sticking out of it, the same diameter as the tube. "Wait a minute, what is this?"

"That's mine!" Remi ran up and tried to grab it, but Quiver held it out of the boy's reach while he studied it for another few moments.

"That's mine! Give it here!" Remi jumped a couple of times to try to reach it, and once Quiver was done looking at the oddity in his hand, he lowered it just enough for Remi to jump up and snatch it.

Once Remi had it in his hands, he ran off and jumped up on the couch. Holding the foam toy high above his head, he announced, "I am the great Jedi Remi! I have super powers to beat up the mean Sith Anrak!"

"See?" CC muttered under her breath to Quiver. "He could beat you up. He should."

"No fair!" the young Mon Cal yelled back at Remi. "I'm always the bad guy! I wanna be the good guy this time!"

"No, you can't, 'cause I'm the great Jedi Remi, and I say so!" Remi leaped off the couch and started bopping Anrak on the head with the foam part of his toy. "I'm gonna beat you up with my lightsaber!"

Darin grabbed the toy "lightsaber" out of Remi's hands just as Anrak jumped up and said, "Not once I get *my* lightsaber! I'll beat you up then!"

Anrak ran for the doorway to the kids' room, but in order to get there he first had to go past Quiver. As he did so, Quiver reached down, grabbed Anrak around the waist, and lifted him up. Anrak shrieked, which sounded strange in a Mon Cal's voice, and as Quiver held him, the pilot said in a deep voice, "Ah, yes. At last Darth Quiver has found an apprentice. Together we shall crush all who oppose us. Listen well as I tell you my evil plan. We shall defeat the good

guys, my young apprentice, by tickling them. Oh, we are mean, aren't we?"

Quiver began to give his most villainous laugh, which Anrak giggled at and tried to imitate, but Quiver stopped and looked up when he heard Darin pointedly clear his throat. Darin was standing in front of Quiver, pinning him with a cool expression while holding the tube section of the toy in one hand and slowly and deliberately hitting the palm of the other with the foam "blade."

In the meantime, Remi was reacting to Quiver's evil plan to take over the galaxy. "No! No tickling!" Remi squealed. He started jumping up and down by Darin and tugging on his arm. "Gimme my lightsaber back! I have to stop them! They're gonna tickle!"

Darin didn't answer Remi, and his expression never changed as he quietly told Quiver, "If you get them all wound up right now, I've got a lightsaber here that says you're going to regret it."

"Why?" Quiver asked. "Can't you handle a few rowdy kids? I told you I was offering to swap to be nice to you. Looks like I was right. You do need help." Quiver smirked at Darin and put Anrak down.

"No," Ikoa said. "We don't want them too excited right now because it's just about time for their nap."

The kids all moaned loudly, and CC laughed. "Hey, they sound just like our squadron!"

The older, dark-haired boy who had been the "speeder" sat on the floor beside Thumper and wrapped himself around Darin's leg like an anchor. "Darin, we don't want to go to sleep! Can't we stay up a little longer? Pleeeeease?"

"You're right! It's uncanny!" Ikoa said to CC with a grin.

Darin stopped repeatedly hitting his palm with the toy lightsaber, and as he looked down at the boy clinging to his leg, his voice shifted to a more friendly tone. "Come on, Hilaj, naptime. All of us pilots like taking naps. Don't you?"

"No."

"That's too bad," Darin said. "Stories are best when you hear them in bed. I was going to finish the story we started this morning, but I guess we can't now if you don't want to go to bed. I wonder if Thenni the Thumper will find the magic flute in time to save the forest."

"What?" Hilaj said. "That's not fair!"

"Yeah," the blond-haired girl said. "We weren't in bed when you started the story. We don't have to be in bed for you to finish it."

Darin shrugged helplessly. "The ending is so much better when you hear it in bed that I can't even bring myself to consider telling it to you anywhere else. I'm not *that* mean."

Quiver put an exaggerated look of disbelief on his face and stage-whispered to the kids, "Yes, he is." When Darin shot him a look, Quiver quickly erased the expression and replaced it with one that just dripped innocence. Some of the kids giggled.

The Twi'lek seated on the floor asked, "You promise to tell us the rest if we go to bed?"

Darin nodded. "I promise I'll start it again as soon as everyone is in bed and ready for their nap. Otherwise, we might never know if the *gorza* beast finds the flute first. If that happens, the breezesingers will never remember how to sing, and Thenni's forest will become a dark, gloomy place."

The Twi'lek stood and walked over to Hilaj. She yanked on his arm and said, "Come on, I want to hear the rest!"

"Okay, okay," Hilaj muttered as he got to his feet. The rest of the children followed, some

looking a little more eager than they had before, or at least less reluctant.

The last one in line was the youngest human girl. She took Darin's hand and began trying to pull him after the others. "Come on, Darin!"

Darin looked helplessly at his squadmates while he let himself be pulled along. He handed the lightsaber to Ikoa as he went past her. "Duty calls. I guess I'll see you guys later, okay?"

"Sure. Have fun with the Coronettes," Quiver said with a grin.

Once Darin was gone, Quiver turned to ask Ikoa to let him see the toy lightsaber again, but before he could even open his mouth, he was cut off with one word from CC: "No."

A little while after CC and Quiver left, Ikoa quietly stepped to the doorway of the bedroom where the kids were taking their afternoon nap. Jilli had fallen asleep a short time before Quiver and CC popped in, so she had beaten the older children to Dreamland. The lights were out in the room, and Darin had finished his story a short time ago; however, while it was nearly quiet now Ikoa could still hear his voice, and she was coming to ask if he needed help with something.

When she reached the half-open door and looked inside the darkened room, she paused. In the soft glow of a nightlight, Darin lay on one of the small beds on top of the covers, and he was sitting back against the headboard. He had to slouch a bit since he was on the bottom bunk of that set of bunk beds, and his head didn't have much clearance beneath the top one. Under the blankets and contentedly snuggled up next to him with a doll and closed eyes was Melene, the little girl who had pulled him into the room. She was maybe nine years old, had long, curly black hair, and from what Ikoa had learned of her that day, she was a sweetheart, if a little shy. Ikoa also secretly suspected that Melene had a little crush on Darin.

Thumper had wrapped one arm comfortingly around Melene's shoulders, and now Ikoa realized why she was hearing Darin even when his story was over and the rest of the kids were asleep—he was softly singing a lullabye. He hadn't yet seemed to notice Ikoa, so she merely waited and listened.

"...This world is full of joys and tears, you'll have your share throughout the years of happiness and stumblings, giving and needs. Fly up above, fall to the ground, or skip and dance your way around, no matter what, wherever you are, you will always find me here. So close your sleepy eyes, let gentle warmth fill you inside and feel my love protect you in the night. The stars will set, the sun will rise, you'll see your dreams fill up the skies, so softly rest your hopes inside the precious love you feel, and lay your wishes in my heart..."

Darin suddenly noticed Ikoa's presence, and he looked up to see her looking back at him with a gentle smile while leaning with her head resting against the doorjamb. His face went bright red as if he hadn't been expecting an adult audience, and he quickly looked away. Ikoa quietly came over to him and sat in a chair beside the bed.

"She said she couldn't sleep," Darin whispered sheepishly, still not looking at his squadmate. "I think she's asleep now, though."

"Don't be embarrassed," Ikoa whispered in reply. "I think that was incredibly sweet. Where'd you learn that song?"

"My mom." Darin shifted his gaze to Melene's peaceful face. "She used to sing it to my

little sister. She said she sang it to me, too, but I was too young to remember it then.”

“But you remember it from your sister. Was there a big age gap between the two of you?”

“About seven years.”

“That much? Did you two get along?”

“Oh yeah,” Darin said wistfully, still looking away. “Shiori always wanted to spend time with me, and it was a rare occurrence for me to say no. I was her Big Brudder, a nickname left over from the time when she couldn’t even pronounce the word correctly, and she was my Little Squirt. I know a lot of siblings don’t get along while they’re growing up, but we did.”

Ikoa’s soft smile became one of sympathy, and she studied Darin for a moment. “You miss them, don’t you.” It was more of an observation than a question.

Darin nodded a little. “She reminds me a lot of Shiori,” he said, indicating Melene with a slight motion of his head. “Looks a lot like her, and sometimes acts like her too. It always hurts at least a little, but times like this make me remember just how much it can still hurt and how lonely it is.” He finally looked at Ikoa. “Never forget how lucky you are to have a family.”

“You’ve still got a family, Thumper. It’s just a little different, that’s all.” She moved to sit on the edge of the bed and ducked under the top bunk, all while trying to be careful to not wake Melene as she eased her weight down. She put her arm around Darin’s shoulders in turn and explained, “It’s an adoptive family instead of a biological one. Mack is like a stepfather who’s always getting his kids out of trouble. Quiver’s the big brother who’s always getting you *into* trouble. Snubber’s like the uncle who everyone knows better than to cross because he’ll write you out of the will in a heartbeat. We may not be related, but that doesn’t mean we’re not all in this together like any family is.”

Darin sighed softly. “I guess. But...it’s just not the same.”

“It’ll always be different,” Ikoa said gently. “It won’t be exactly the same as the kind of family you’re thinking of, but this family will always be here to help you out, just like you’ll be here for us. Biological or adoptive, that’s what any family is about, isn’t it? Being there when you need them, unconditionally, no questions asked?”

Thumper merely nodded. Ikoa gave his shoulders a small squeeze and then said, “I’m going to go try to clean up the common room. As long as they’re all asleep, why don’t you take a break?” When Darin nodded again, Ikoa carefully got up, gave him another soft smile, and left.

Darin watched Ikoa go out of the room. He knew she was trying to make him feel better, but right now it was just reminding him of how much he missed his parents and sister. At that moment, he suspected he would have sold his soul to just have one more chance to see them all again and to apologize for not being there to protect them those last times when it really mattered. Home seemed very far away, and Darin felt very much alone. He was having lots of fun with the kids here, but Darin hadn’t anticipated how much this volunteer assignment would affect him on deeper levels.

He looked down at Melene next to him, and for just a moment he let himself pretend it was his sister he was protecting from the blackness of the darkened room, not someone he had only just met that day. It eased the pain a little, and for that he was grateful.

Often, especially at night in bed before she fell asleep, Keely would imagine the moment she would see her brother again: where he would be, what he would look like, if she would have to call in help to rescue him or get him out, what she would say when she saw him, what he would say to her, and so on.

Some of her imaginings actually frightened her. At times like that, she had to clamp down on her fear, her pain and her dread, and resist the urge to turn on the light and bring reality back. Those were the times she was sorry her brain chose bedtime to start down those paths, when her room was dark and the windows were shut against the blue glow from outside or to block the light from the star she was orbiting.

Keely couldn't remember a time while she'd been growing up when she hadn't been afraid of the dark. While she lay in bed in the blackened room on *Silver Dart*, she thought about those nights back home as well and how the only times she hadn't needed a nightlight were when her brother had been there in the room with her. Now, the grown-up Keely no longer needed that comforting light because her big brother had protected her from the shadows on the wall and had shown her that she'd be all right. He'd saved her from the dark.

Remembering that and feeling comforted, she would close her eyes to go to sleep. Space was dark. So were the other places her brother was likely to be. She'd return the favor at least once.

Chapter Five

“Two weeks ago I played another prank on Darin. CC helped me reprogram the lights in our quarters so that they could be turned on and off by using a small remote. She even made it so that the regular light switch panel wouldn’t work as long as the remote was turned on. Anyway, this is basically how each instance went. Darin and I would be sitting in our quarters chatting while doing work at our desks. In the middle of a conversation I’d secretly turn on the remote, hit the button and pow! The lights would go out. So I’d accuse Darin of turning them off and angrily tell him to quit fooling around and turn them back on because I had finally gotten on a roll doing work, and how was I supposed to do that in the dark? He’d be all bewildered and swear he had nothing to do with it, which of course I said I didn’t believe. He’d try to turn them on, but neither the switch nor the voice activation would work, and he’d tell me the lights were broken when I’d secretly turn them back on with the remote. So I’d tell him to cut it out, he’d apologize in the midst of his confusion, and we’d get back to work when it would happen all over again. Not even a day later, he had taken the light switch panel apart and was trying to figure out how to fix the lights because he was so paranoid that I thought he was responsible for the lights’ behavior. Some of the things he’d say to try and convince me that he wasn’t the one messing with the lights were hilarious, and overall, it was a great prank. You’ll say I’m mean, Lillen, but I don’t care. Like all the others, it was done in good fun. Besides, it was funny, and if you’d seen it, you’d agree. Hmm. Maybe I should record the next one...”

The next day, Melene came over and grabbed Darin’s hand. “There’s someone at the door.” She started pulling him in that direction.

Darin was on the far side of the common room at the time. He tried to follow, but between Anrak sitting on his shoulders and Remi sitting on one of his feet and holding on around Darin’s leg to stay put, he couldn’t move very fast. Each step he took with that leg required Thumper to literally lift the child off the floor on his foot. He’d already learned that he’d be wasting his breath and time to ask Remi to get off. “Go ahead and answer it,” he told Melene. “I’ll be right there.”

Melene dutifully ran back to the door and opened it. “Lo?”

“Hi,” Darin heard Commander Mackin say in a friendly tone. “Is Ikoa or Darin here?”

“Darin’s right there.” Melene pointed at him. “Ikoa’s in the backyard with Jilli and Hilaj.”

“Come on in, sir,” Darin said as he finally came close to the door.

Mack did so, and when he saw Darin’s situation he just stopped and stared. He looked like he wanted to laugh.

Darin got in front of his squadron leader at last. “Hello, sir,” he said with a half-grin.

Anrak must have recognized Mackin from his short visit the previous day since he gave Mack a salute, though with the wrong hand. Mackin seemed positively tickled by that and returned the salute with a smile. Anrak beamed back.

Melene tugged on Darin’s sleeve. “Should I go get Ikoa?”

Mackin answered for him. “No, that’s okay. I’ll only be here a minute, but thanks.”

“Okay.” She looked at Darin and said, “I’m going outside by Ikoa.”

“All right,” Darin answered. Melene skipped off to the back door through the kitchen.

After she left, Mackin said matter-of-factly to his subordinate, “Darin, you’ve got a growth on your leg.”

“Really?” Darin looked down like he hadn’t even noticed, and Remi giggled and hid his face behind Darin’s leg. “Oh, it’s just one. You should see it when there’s one on each of my legs, sir.”

“I can imagine. How are you and Ikoa doing?”

“Just fine. We usually—oh, no! Commander, where did you go?” Anrak had put his webbed hands over Darin’s eyes, and Darin played along. “The whole room is dark! Did someone turn out the lights?” Anrak took his hands away, and Darin sighed in relief. “There you are, sir. I couldn’t find you for a minute there. Anyway, we usually each watch a few kids for a while, then we gather them all together and one of us will take a short break. It’s—” Anrak covered Darin’s eyes again, causing Thumper to say, “Huh? Oh, look, it’s nighttime! Time for bed.” He slumped a little and made snoring sounds. Anrak and Remi giggled, and then Darin’s eyes were uncovered. Darin yawned and straightened up. “Oh, good morning, sir! How are you today?”

Darin was sure that Lt. Weas would have been annoyed with him had he been there instead, but Mack seemed rather amused by Darin’s actions. Then the commander cocked his head thoughtfully, leaned in closer to look at something on Darin’s face and asked, “Darin, is that lipstick you’re wearing?”

Darin’s eyes widened fearfully, and he hurriedly wiped at his mouth. “Sorry, sir,” he mumbled in embarrassment during the brief instances when his hand and sleeve weren’t wiping his lips. “The girls really wanted to play ‘makeover,’ and Ikoa was still gone with the others. Luckily she got back only about ten minutes after we started so I could pass them over to her instead. I thought I got this all off.”

He also remembered how hard of a bargain Ikoa had driven at the time, too, because she had known how desperate Darin was to not continue with the makeover. Ikoa had even grinned evilly and mentioned something about how much Quiver would want to see a holo of that, which had made Thumper even more desperate to get out of it. He knew she was just having fun with him, but it also served to remind him of how someone who was normally so compassionate could end up with the callsign of “Rancor” and not have it be a solely ironic nickname such as calling a tall person “Shorty.” He gave his face one last hard rub with his sleeve.

Meanwhile, Mackin was just laughing. “Tell them to go a little easier on the blush next time. Your whole face is red.”

Darin didn’t doubt him for an instant because he could feel it burning. If only he could go back and take one more look in the mirror before Commander Mackin had come... “Yes, sir, I’ll do that.”

“Anything you expect to need today, tomorrow or the day after?”

“No, sir, not that I know of.”

“Well, it looks like you two have things well in hand. I’ll—”

A loud clatter suddenly sounded from the kitchen area, startling them. When they looked over, the pilots saw a white cloud of flour billowing up from the floor and expanding. The older blond girl and the female Twi’lek ran out of the kitchen to Darin, and they were covered head-to-toe in flour as well.

“Darin!” the Twi’lek called plaintively. “Sinsi dropped the flour, and now it’s all over the place!”

“No I didn’t, Nima!” Sinsi yelled back. “It’s your fault too! You were supposed to help me pour it! Besides, you’re the one who stepped on the bottle of syrup and squirted it everywhere!”

“Liar!”

“Tattle-tale!”

Mackin just gave Darin a twisted, evil grin, as if he had been in Darin’s position all too often. “Carry on, Thumper.” He left just as the flour cloud spilled out into the common room, turning everything in its wake white. Remi gave a happy cry and bounded into the flour cloud, apparently thinking it would be great fun to become bleached like Nima and Sinsi were. He jumped up and down, stirring up the floating flour even more. Darin sighed and began breaking up the girls’ argument.

In the next system where Keely’s search took her, it took a little longer than usual to get her information because the inhabited planet was celebrating a local holiday, and some of the government offices were closed. Snow was falling gently, but the inhabitants didn’t seem to mind. Festivities and food were everywhere, and the multitude of treats for sale along the roads and in marketplaces brought to mind the fights she and her brother had had when they were kids and they’d both wanted to be the one to bake the cake for the lifeday or whatever occasion their family was celebrating. At times like that, it seemed like more food had ended up on the floor and on each of them than in the bowls and pans. Looking back now, she could laugh.

She bought some pastries from a streetside vendor to satisfy her sweet tooth and continued on toward the government buildings and military offices, hoping to find at least one person who could help her or show her where else on the planet to go for her information. She smiled to herself as she bit into a pastry: she’d always been a better cook than her brother, whether he admitted it or not. Keely decided a homemade cake would be a good thing to have at his Welcome Home party.

Chapter Six

“You haven’t told me yet how the family holiday party went. I want details, complete details, with nothing left out. Unfortunately, I’m sure it can’t be as much fun now that all of the cousins have grown up, and we aren’t running screaming around the house and yard anymore. We always had so much fun together as kids. Heh, remember all those times, Lillen? Tell your brothers and sister and the rest of the cousins that I miss the havoc we wreaked. The total chaos of having relatives my own age to run around with and cause mayhem with sometimes made me wish for a brother or sister of my own, at least until I realized I’d have competition then and my parents would no longer be able to spoil me exclusively. So I had to settle for all you crazy cousins. Though looking back at all the fun we had, the holiday party is probably more fun for everyone else now that we’re all grown up, huh? And Lillen, no comments here about physical versus emotional or intellectual maturity, because I’ve heard them all and even made up a few of my own. But anyway, details. I want details.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

“Remi, you don’t need to scream,” Ikoa called offhandedly. She was in the common room, going through some simple mathematics and counting exercises with some of the kids.

Darin was also in the common room, lying on his stomach on the floor, propped up on his elbows and distracted with trying to fix Sinsi’s toy. It had broken sometime yesterday after the Flour Incident, probably during the full-scale pillow fight that had raged through the house before the pilots could put a stop to it. Or maybe it was during the Mine! No, Mine! Incident, or the Can’t Catch Me! Game, or the Who Can Jump the Farthest Off the Couch Contest, or the...

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” The excited, ear-splitting shriek caused by nothing but pure energy never lessened as the boy ran from the kids’ bedroom into the common room with Anrak chasing him and laughing.

Sinsi put her hands over her ears and shouted, “Remi, be quiet!”

The two runners had already made half a lap around the room before Darin could say, “Hey, you two, no running inside. You’ll trip and get hurt.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaah!” Remi adjusted course and ran toward Darin. At the last second, he dove forward and flopped onto Darin’s back.

“Oof!” The force of the child landing on him knocked Darin flat. Anrak was hot on Remi’s heels but didn’t jump like Remi had; instead, Anrak tripped over them and landed on them all in a heap. Darin thought he heard Ikoa trying to stifle some laughter at Darin’s predicament.

Anrak gave a happy, gravelly-sounding laugh and just rolled off, then scrambled over to sit on the back of Darin’s legs as the pilot lay on his stomach. “I got you now, Darin! You can’t get up!”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Darin wheezed as he pushed himself back up on his elbows. “Settle down, okay, you two?” Though technically, Darin reflected, they were no longer running or screaming, which was good.

Still on top of Darin, Remi brushed his brown bangs out of his eyes and shifted around so he could lay forward on Darin’s back. He rested his chin on Darin’s shoulder and wrapped his

arms around Darin's neck, and then he watched Thumper fiddle with the broken toy for barely an instant before saying, "Tell us a pilot story!"

Sitting on the floor in front of Darin, Sinsi protested, "No. He's fixing my toy now."

"It's all right, Sinsi, I can do both at once," Thumper told her. Continuing to work on the toy, he addressed Remi. "So you want to hear a pilot story, huh?"

"Yeah!" Anrak said. "About how you fly and zoom and zap those ene- emem- bad guy ships!"

"I don't know..." Darin sounded uncertain to egg them on a bit for fun. "It might be kinda scary for you..."

"I like scary!" Remi said enthusiastically. "Like Sinsi- Sinsi's *really* scary!"

"Stop it, Remi! I am not!"

"See? She's scary!"

"Okay, everyone, relax," said Darin, hoping to head off the fight he knew was coming. "All right, let me think of a good pilot story for you."

Thumper's first thought was to tell them about a mission, but all of the missions he briefly ran through in his mind he didn't feel were appropriate story material for young kids. He finally settled on a sim run the Coronas had done against each other, but he added, deleted, tweaked and embellished things at his will to make it into a simple action story of the Rebels against the Imperials that was more of a race than a dogfight. Parts of it ended up sounding like something Quiver would have come up with, and he hadn't realized how much of an influence Quiver had been on him until now.

About a quarter of the way through the story, he had shifted into a more normal sitting position on the floor against a wall and had finished fixing Sinsi's toy. The others had postponed their math game to come listen to the story as well. Ikoa joined them, and after figuring out what Darin was doing, she just grinned knowingly and listened in amusement for a while, offering a made-up detail here and there before leaving to fix a snack for everyone. Sinsi volunteered to watch Jilli while Ikoa was in the kitchen.

About halfway through Darin's story, the two boys and Anrak were excitedly jumping around, pretending they were starfighters and trying to reenact the scene Darin was describing. At first, Darin began throwing even more action into the scene in an effort to tire the boys out, but there was one little problem with his plan: Melene was attached to Darin's arm and looked like she was anxious about whether Darin and the others would come out of "the mission" all right. That made Darin tone down his action tale and simply extend the "race" parts some more.

Finally, by the time the story was coming to an end, the kids were worn out from the running or sleepy from the snack or both, and they were either asleep on the couch or using Darin as a pillow for an impromptu nap.

Glad he hadn't remained on his stomach, Darin couldn't move without waking up the kids sprawled on him, so he just sat there on the floor against the wall, holding Jilli and enjoying the quiet. The only noticeable sounds were those made by Jilli as she drank from a bottle that Ikoa had given to Darin for her. Now Ikoa was in the bedroom taking a break while all the kids were with him.

Just as Jilli finished her bottle, Remi slowly blinked his eyes open and sleepily looked at Darin. With a half-asleep smile, Remi whispered, "Sounds fun bein' a pilot."

"Yeah, it is," Darin whispered back.

"You fly everywhere."

“Yeah, we go to lots of different places.”

Remi sighed contentedly and closed his eyes. As he drifted asleep again, he softly said, “When you go everywhere and find my mommy and daddy, tell ‘em I wanna find ‘em. My daddy is big and strong and his name is Daddy.”

“I’ll remember that.” Darin was surprised he got the quiet words out past the lump in his throat.

Keely pointed the optical receiver of the small recording device at the mess of wires in the console she had taken apart. “Does this look right?”

The datapad she had with her was patched into *Dart*’s communication system. The recording device fed the image of the wires through the datapad and through the comm system real-time to the mechanic on the receiving end of the transmission.

The signal Keely was receiving from him was displayed on the datapad. She saw him squint at his screen, which was showing him the wires in *Dart*’s console, and then he nodded. “Yeah. Looks right. I double-checked with a few of the guys here, and they agreed on how I told you to reroute the wires. Just be sure to turn that console off when you’re not using it, and the repairs will hold until you can replace the router. It should work now.”

Keely turned the recording device so it was facing her, and she smiled. “Thanks. What would I do without you guys telling me how to fix this old ship when it breaks?”

The mechanic grinned in reply. “Just tell your dad to put in a good word for us when promotion time comes around.” He looked off-screen for a moment, then turned back. “Is there anything else you need? Otherwise, some damaged starfighters need a little attention. Sarge is getting that look on his face again.”

Keely shook her head. “No, I think *Dart* and I are good for now. Don’t want you to get in trouble with ol’ Sarge. Thanks, Corporal.”

“Any time. Good luck out there.” The transmission ended.

Keely closed her end of the transmission as well, and then she started putting the covers back over the console. She was glad the mechanics on the ship where her father was stationed were willing to help her and tell her how to fix *Dart* when something broke or shorted out. Otherwise she would have never gotten this far; she wasn’t very mechanically-inclined.

This last incident could have been really bad if she didn’t have that help. An electrical problem had caused her hyperdrive to shut down, and she could have been stranded in the middle of nowhere for a very long time. When she realized that, the universe suddenly seemed enormous, and she seemed very tiny.

That same lesson had been taught to her over and over again on this journey while she searched for her brother. Before she set out, she hadn’t realized just how big the galaxy was and how small one person was. Everything had been reversed out here: the sky was black instead of the soft blue of her homeworld; a star that at first had looked so tiny became a huge, blinding ball of gas when she entered a system; and now a person that had been such a large part of her life was drowned in the vastness of the universe, too tiny to find. But Keely would keep trying, even if she had to exhaust every resource at her disposal and ask every person in the galaxy to let her know if they’d seen him.

Chapter Seven

“Sorry I keep yawning. In the last week we haven’t had a normal night’s sleep once, due to one thing or another. When are people going to learn that it’s not nice to reverse day and night on a guy? You’d think they believe that everyone should be awake whenever it’s most convenient, regardless of what time it is. See, Darin’s lucky—he can turn control over to his astromech and take quick, impromptu naps in his fighter while we’re out on really long patrols and nothing’s happening, but you all know I’ve never been able to sleep in small vehicles like that. Sometimes when I get really sleepy and jealous of him, like the last time we had an 0-dark-30 patrol, I’ll wait until his astromech says he’s asleep, and then I’ll yell something over the comm to him in a panic, like a Star Destroyer just came out of hyperspace on top of us. That wakes him up.”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

Darin squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to wonder what time it was. He buried his face in his pillow and prayed someone else would get up and see to Jilli so he could go back to sleep. After only three days with the kids, he was beat. He couldn’t imagine how Liy and Nel’lan did this all the time.

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

“Darin,” Ikoa muttered, half-asleep, “go.”

Darin mumbled an inarticulate plea and buried his face deeper in the pillow, which prompted Ikoa to throw a datapad at him to wake him up. It hit the mark. “Ow!” He lifted his head to glare at Ikoa over on her cot, not realizing she probably couldn’t see his expression in the dark.

Even if she did see it, she was too tired to care. “You promised me two full nights of Jilli duty in exchange for getting you out of that makeover. That still includes tonight. Don’t think I’m going to let you out of that, rookie.”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

“Okay, okay,” Darin grumbled. He forced himself out of bed and stumbled barefoot out of the Grown-up Room and into the kids’ room.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he stepped up to Jilli’s crib and reached down to pick her up. As he did so, even in the dark he could tell the diaper had to be changed. “Aw, blast it,” he muttered as he wrinkled his nose. The pilot brought her to the changing table and swapped the dirty diaper for a clean one, but that didn’t stop the wails.

“What else is wrong? You hungry?” Darin asked as he held Jilli again and gently rocked her in an effort to improve her mood. He brought her into the kitchen and did everything he could think of to get her to stop crying while the bottle warmed up: he rocked her, talked to her, tickled her, even made funny faces at her, but nothing seemed to help.

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

“I know, I know,” Darin said through a yawn as he took the warm bottle and went to sit on the couch in the common room to feed the bottle to Jilli. It quickly became obvious that she wasn’t hungry, though, as she kept refusing the bottle and then her pacifier as well. Darin was at a loss for what to do. He wasn’t that familiar with babies, and he was running out of tricks. He tried them all again with the same results as before.

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!”

“Jilli’s having a bad night.”

Darin looked up in slight surprise at the sleepy voice and saw Melene standing in the bedroom doorway in the dark, watching him. He whispered, “Yeah, she is. I can’t get her to quiet down.”

“You’re doing it wrong.” Melene came over and held her doll in the crook of her elbow while she shifted the position of Darin’s arms slightly. “She likes it when her head is held better. She should quiet down soon now if you rock her, and if she doesn’t we have a song recording she likes that puts her to sleep lots of times. That’s how you do it. It’s not so hard.”

Thumper chuckled and said, “Thanks, Squirt. I—” He stopped abruptly, bit his bottom lip, scolded himself for slipping and calling Melene by the old nickname he’d given Shiori, and then started over. “Thanks, Melene. As you can see, I’m not too good with babies.”

“Jilli’s an easy baby most of the time. We all know how to take care of her.”

Melene climbed up on the couch next to Darin, then sat down and leaned against him while hugging her worn doll. As Melene had predicted, Jilli’s crying finally started to lessen.

“Yeah, sure seems that way,” Darin whispered in a delayed response as Jilli quieted for the most part and started swatting at his nose. “You all seem to know how to do a lot on your own. It’s good that you can all help Liy and Nel’lan.”

“Some of us do. Remi never does—he just makes messes.”

“Well, Remi’s still a little boy. Little boys do things like that.”

“Yeah. He has to grow up still.”

Growing up. . . Darin waved his finger over Jilli, and she grabbed it in her tiny hand. The moment there with Jilli and Melene in the quiet, darkened house was so perfect in its simplicity that he was almost able to forget what kind of person growing up had made him become. He missed the carefree days of being a kid when his biggest worry had been if they could scrounge up enough players for a pickup game of *donri*. Now Darin was grown up, and he had duties, obligations, responsibilities, people to protect and lead and serve. It seemed like there was always something weighing on his mind, always something else to do, always something else that should have been done.

Enjoying the easy simplicity there on the couch in the dark, far away from the life-and-death situations, he smiled softly while wagging his finger some more and said, “Sometimes growing up is overrated.”

“Over-what?”

“Never mind.” Darin grinned sidelong at Melene. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to be in bed? It’s late.”

Melene snuggled against him a little more. “Jilli woke me up.”

“Think you can get back to sleep now that you showed me how to hold her and she’s quiet? Ikoa and I were thinking of taking everyone to the park in the morning if it doesn’t rain. Liy told us they have some playground equipment there and a nice field of grass. You’ll want a good night’s sleep so you can have lots of fun.”

“Yeah, I can go to sleep,” Melene mumbled softly. She closed her eyes.

Darin laughed quietly. “No, not here on the couch. In your bed.”

“But I wanna stay out here with you.”

“I’m not staying out here, though. I need to put Jilli back in her crib, and then I’m going back to sleep on my cot, so I can’t be your pillow out here. I’m sleepy, and this couch isn’t very

comfortable.”

Melene sighed. “Do I hafta?”

“Yeah, sorry. Time for bed again.”

“Okay...” She reluctantly slid off the couch and headed to the kids’ room. Darin followed with the baby once he’d put the full bottle back in the cooler.

After putting Jilli back in her crib and praying she’d fall asleep soon and not cry anymore, Darin tucked Melene in again, and then he went back to the Grown-up Room, flopped on his cot and promptly fell asleep. His scattered dreams in the few hours before sunrise involved him taking care of his sister, Shiori (who sometimes became Melene), in a place much like the orphanage, but his memories of the dreams flitted away with the first rays of light shining through the curtains.

In the middle of the night, Keely woke up from a dream about her brother. In it, she had found him, and the two of them were going home together. The military base was holding a celebration for his return, and their father and grandfather were there in their uniforms, proudly welcoming back their family’s next generation. It would be one of the happiest days they had ever seen. The party would make such a mess, but she’d worry about that later. All that mattered was that her brother was finally found...

And then she’d woken up, coming back to a universe where her brother was still out there somewhere, lost. Keely wiped away a tear as she realized all that was just a dream, but she vowed it would be one dream that would come true. Somehow.

Chapter Eight

“One of these days, if we’re ever in the area and we get R&R, I’m going to come back home for a visit. I’ll bring along CC and Darin so you can meet them in person and they can meet you. But the best part will be that I won’t tell you I’m coming; I’m just going to walk in the door one day and surprise you, just like any other day getting back from work or class, just like nothing ever happened and I was never gone. Then just like always, Mom, you can ask me who these strange people are who I brought home and then insist they stay for supper before I even have a chance to tell you their names. Of course, the one thing I’d want to change from before is the part where I have to clean up the table afterward. Then the next day we can have a big party. I’ll start working on the guest list. Hopefully some of my old buddies are still in the area. You ever hear from Cam? What’s he been up to?”

Melene pulled a dinner plate out of the water-filled sink and began working at it with a sponge while Darin dried another plate. At first he had hated the fact that the orphanage didn’t even have a washer for the dishes and it had to be done by hand almost every day, but when he discovered that the kids, especially Melene, were generally either willing to offer their help with the chore or would do it when told, it wasn’t so bad. Of course, the “help” sometimes consisted of water fights and swatting each other with towels and the like, but during the times the kids behaved, it was a nice way to spend time with them.

“What’s your favorite color?” Melene continued their question game. “Mine’s pink.”

“Green,” said Darin. “How ‘bout you, Hilaj?” he asked as he handed Hilaj the dry plate to put away.

“Rainbow,” he said immediately as he took the plate to a cabinet.

“That’s not a color!” Melene protested.

“Is too! It’s all the colors,” said Hilaj.

Darin chuckled at the answer, then he asked, “What’s your favorite season?”

“Summer,” answered Hilaj.

“Fall,” said Melene.

Darin smiled. “Mine, too.”

A few questions later, an excited shout came from the common room where Ikoa and the others were tidying up. “Liy and Nel’lan are back!”

“Liy!” Melene dropped the plate she was washing back into the sink, causing some of the water to splash on Darin. Melene never even noticed, though, because she and Hilaj were running into the common room.

Darin wiped the water off and gave a little sigh. It was a bittersweet moment, because even though he was really tired from babysitting and wanted to go fly again, he also would really miss these kids. He’d developed a soft spot for Melene in particular over these four days, which hadn’t really surprised him, and he knew he’d have a hard time saying goodbye. Thumper finished drying the plate in his hand, set it aside and then joined the others in the common room.

Nel’lan and Liy were on the receiving ends of lots of hugs and also looked a bit overwhelmed as all at once, all of the children excitedly tried to tell them everything they’d done with Ikoa and Darin. After a couple of minutes, the male Twi’lek and the human woman were

able to disentangle themselves from the kids momentarily, and they came over to where the pilots were standing together.

“Well, looks like you two made it through,” Liy said with a smile. “How did it go?”

“Everything went really well,” Ikoa said. “The kids were really good. Remi hurt his knee at the park today, but it’s just a scrape. We cleaned and bandaged it. I think he’s already forgotten about it.”

“Comes with the territory,” Nel’lan said. “It’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“You two look better,” said Darin. “You were able to relax a bit, I take it?”

Liy nodded. “Yes. The first day I was worried and kept getting the temptation to comm you and see how things were going, but then I slept really well that night, which really helped me unwind. It was a very welcome, very nice break.”

“Where are we in the schedule right now?” Nel’lan asked.

“We just finished supper,” Darin answered. “I’ll be done with the dishes pretty soon, and Ikoa was cleaning up in here just now. The kids played pretty hard at the park today, so they might go to sleep early for you.”

“I’ll help you with the dishes,” said Nel’lan. “I don’t feel like unpacking yet, and I need to get back in this mindset anyway.”

“All right, if you want.” Darin looked at the two women and was about to ask if they’d be okay with watching the kids, but before he could open his mouth, the children scampered into their bedroom while talking excitedly amongst themselves. He shrugged, and Ikoa motioned for him to go finish up.

Back in the kitchen, Darin took the sponge and began tackling the dirty dishes while Nel’lan dried them and put them away. After a minute of work, Darin quietly said, “Nel’lan, some of these kids... their parents haven’t been found yet, right?”

Nel’lan stole a glance at the blond pilot and then went back to drying the dishes. “Right. Some are confirmed dead. It’s possible some others may still be alive somewhere, but they were separated in an occupation or during an attack, and the kids were brought here if the situation was very dangerous and no family could be found. We’re looking for the parents or for other family members, but it’s a big galaxy.”

“How much information do you have on the relatives who could be alive?”

“It varies. Sometimes just a name, sometimes as much as a holo and occupational data to go with the name.”

“Listen, I– I can’t guarantee anything, but in my line of work I end up in a lot of different systems,” Darin said. “If I know what to look for, I can keep my eyes open...just in case.”

Nel’lan smiled, and the tip of one *lekku*, or brain tail, waved slightly. “Anything you could do would be appreciated. I’ll get you a summary of the info as soon as we’re done here.”

Darin smiled in return. “Thanks.”

“No, thank *you*. It also seems like the kids had a good time with you two, which is something else I’m grateful for.”

“And we had a good time with them. I have to give you and Liy tons of credit, though: I don’t know how you can do this all the time. It’s exhausting.”

Nel’lan laughed a little. “Well, once you forget what something like sleep is, you don’t miss it much anymore.”

Soon the two were done with the dishes. A knock came at the door, and when Ikoa answered it, Chopper and Kalre were standing there. They had been part of the group that was

helping construct and repair buildings, and they looked tired and a little dirty. “Mack told us to come pick you up since you two were on our way,” Chopper said as they stepped inside. “Everyone else is already heading back to the shuttle.”

“We’re almost done here,” Ikoa answered. “Just give us a few minutes to pack and finish up.”

“All right.”

Remi came up and looked curiously at Kalre. “You’re green,” he said with a grin.

Looking down at the boy with his huge black eyes, the Rodian said, “I am, am I?”

“Yeah,” Remi answered. “How come?”

“Remi, behave yourself,” Liy said.

Chopper spoke up. “He’s green because he eats lots of vegetables.”

“Chopper, behave yourself,” Ikoa scolded. To Remi she said, “Don’t listen to him. That’s not true.”

Darin watched Remi for a moment. The boy apparently hadn’t paid attention to Ikoa, and it looked like he was torn between wanting to never get within ten meters of a vegetable again and thinking that turning green would be an incredibly fun thing to do. Finally he giggled, squealed and ran back into the kids’ room.

“Now look what you did,” Ikoa said to Chopper. “You don’t need to make this harder on everyone. Kids can be fickle eaters to begin with.”

“Hey, if someone had told me that when I was a kid, I would have eaten a *lot* more vegetables,” Chopper replied. He ended the conversation by reaching down into the playpen he had just noticed and lifting Jilli out. He held her securely in his arms and cooed to her, “Well, hewwo dere. You wike veggie-tables, don’t you?” He gently beeped her nose with a fingertip. “Yeah. Dey’re nummy-nummy. We wike ‘em. And don’t wowwy, dey won’t turn you gween—”

Chopper suddenly stopped, likely from remembering he wasn’t alone in the room. Darin was simply staring at the lieutenant, and from the corner of his eye, Darin could tell Kalre didn’t know what to make of the scene before him. Chopper gave Darin a withering look and said, “Something I can do for you, Flight Officer?” He made it sound like a challenge.

“Uh, no, sir,” Darin said.

“Don’t you have some packing to do?”

“Um, yes, sir.”

Darin saw Ikoa trying to hide a grin at Chopper’s actions and defensiveness, but Chopper only shot her a glare and didn’t say anything to her.

Darin and Ikoa went to pack their duffle bags, and a few minutes later they were finished. Nel’lan gave Darin the information he requested, and the pilot secured the datacard in a pocket.

When everyone was gathered once more in the common room, the kids started exchanging looks with each other and whispering, and finally someone pushed Anrak forward when he didn’t get the previous hints. Anrak came up and tugged on Ikoa’s sleeve, then he handed her something. “We made this for you.” Then he turned to Darin and gave him something as well. The kids watched proudly and expectantly.

Ikoa and Darin had each been given a piece of flimsi. On them, all of the kids had scribbled pictures of whatever had come to mind—a house, an animal, stick figures labeled with misspelled names and doing an activity that particular child had found especially fun during the pilots’ stay, and more. Darin was completely at a loss for words as he looked at it. Shiori was the last person to give him something like this, and he’d forgotten how moving those kinds of

drawings could be.

Nima broke Darin out of his thoughts. "Do you really have to go?"

Nodding, Ikoa said gently, "Yes, we do. But thank you all for this wonderful picture." The small, slim woman smiled warmly and put it carefully in her duffle bag.

"Yeah, thanks, everyone," Darin said once he was sure his voice wouldn't waver. "I'll hang it up in my room when I get back." He too put it carefully in his duffle bag, trying not to crease it.

Liy gave them each a hug, as did all the kids, then Nel'lan shook Darin's hand and hugged Ikoa. "Thank you so much for all your help," Nel'lan said. "It meant a lot to everyone here."

"And to us, too," Ikoa said. "Thanks for letting us do this."

"You're welcome here any time," said Liy. "I hope you keep in touch."

During the adults' short conversation, Melene had quietly sidled up next to Darin, though no one had really noticed until she spoke. "Darin?" she asked softly as she slipped her hand into his. "Can I come with you?"

That stopped Darin cold. The other pilots watched as it took him a moment to recover, then he dropped down to his knees so he was closer to eye-level with her. "Sorry, sweetie," he said gently as he brushed a wayward lock of black hair out of one of her eyes, "but you have to stay here with the others."

"Please can I come with you? I'll be good!"

"I know you would be good," Darin said, "but it's not safe for you where I live."

"You're going back to fight in the war," Hilaj said, almost accusingly.

Looking up at the boy, Darin answered softly, "Yeah, I am."

"People die in wars."

Darin certainly wouldn't miss the blunt, unfiltered truths that children spoke. "Yeah," he answered regretfully and even more softly, "they do."

"Are you going to die, Darin?"

Thumper forced a smile to his face and a laugh to his lips. "Who, me? Are you kidding? Those Imperials will never be good enough to catch me. Right?"

Hilaj smiled a little. "Right."

Darin gave Melene a final hug and then stood up. Every minute they stayed was just making it harder to leave. "Everyone be good, okay? And watch out for each other."

The children nodded, then started up with sad-sounding choruses of "Bye, Ikoa! Bye, Darin!" The two pilots returned the farewells from the children and adults alike, and then slung their bags on their shoulders. Chopper handed Jilli back to Liy with one final nose-beep, and the four pilots headed out.

The sun had set, and the light was fading from the sky. While the four of them walked down the street to the Coronas' shuttle, Ikoa hung back with Darin, who was silent, very distracted, and content to let Chopper and Kalre outpace them while he chewed on his lip.

After a couple minutes of walking, in a quiet voice Ikoa said to him, "I can't tell if you're trying to talk yourself into it or out of it." When Darin didn't answer and just looked at the ground in front of his feet, Ikoa continued, "Come on, Thumper. I know what that little girl means to you, but you know it would never work."

"What if there was a way to make it work?" Darin asked hesitantly. "Maybe there is. It would be better than the life she has here on this world."

“On a warship? A warship is not a place for children. What would you do with her when you’re out on patrol or on a mission? Lock her in your quarters? Here she has friends her own age, some schooling, space to run and play and grow. She’d have none of that on *Star*.”

“She doesn’t have a family of her own here. That’s something I can offer her that this place can’t right now. Maybe I could turn in my wings, maybe find a job somewhere like here—a planet, not on a ship or a base.” Even as he said the words, he didn’t sound too enthusiastic or convinced that he should do what he just said, and the conflict made him fidget a little.

Ikoa sighed. “Yes, that’s an option. And honestly, Darin, if that actually *was* your sister, I’d encourage you to do that, but it’s not. It’s a completely different person, and you have to remember that. It wouldn’t be fair to Melene to make her into Shiori. Besides, are you really ready to make the commitment of raising a child alone, one that you had no prior obligation to? You’re still young, and you have a promising yet demanding career ahead of you. Think about where and how you’re most needed.”

Darin had no answer to that, and the two of them walked the rest of the way in silence. The more he thought about it, though, the more he reluctantly realized Ikoa was right. But if Ikoa was right and it was best that Melene didn’t go with him, why did he feel so lousy about leaving her behind?

Keely remembered hugging her brother goodbye at the gates to the military academy. “So my big brother’s going to be a fighter pilot,” she had said to him. “He’s going to go off and protect the galaxy from every evil. You get all the excitement. Can’t I come with you, *Cadet*?” She had emphasized the last word proudly as it carried with it the beginning of an honorable career for him.

He’d laughed easily and returned the hug affectionately. “Maybe later. When the galaxy’s a little safer.”

Their father reached out his hand when the siblings had released each other, and the two men shook hands firmly. “You’ll make sure of that. I’d wish you luck, son, but you won’t need it. This kind of service is in your blood. Make your old man proud.” He smiled.

“Just you watch, Dad,” her brother had said with a confident smile of his own. “I’ll have my own squadron before too long.”

“That’s my boy. Remember, graduation is just a few years away. Study hard. The time will fly.”

Soon after that, her brother had turned and walked into the academy. It all seemed so long ago now— that hug, his graduation, even the last letter received after he’d begun his tour of duty. Part of the reason those memories seemed so distant was that the time had been artificially stretched out by the uncertainty and worry about his fate. But soon now, he’d be safe, even if the galaxy wasn’t any safer than before.

Chapter Nine

“Oh, Lillen, Depli asked me something in the last letter that I’ll answer now while I’m thinking of it. If she’s not watching this with you, please pass it along. If she is, then hi, Depli. Anyway, she asked why I left my comfortable little literary career to become a fighter pilot, a profession that’s so full of danger. Knowing her, she was just venting an ‘I-can’t-possibly-comprehend-your-bizarre-mind’ question, but it intrigued me so I’ll answer it anyway. Cover your ears, Mom, because you won’t want to hear this. They covered? Good. Yes, this is a very dangerous line of work. I know that. I’m zooming along at breakneck speeds in the middle of hard vacuum while being shot at by people who are determined to reduce me to my fundamental particles and get another kill marker on their fighter for the glory of the Empire. I’ve flown so close to Star Destroyers that if a crewman onboard had walked from the side of the ship nearest me to the opposite side, the SD would shift enough to hit my fighter. And I go out and do this day after day because there is absolutely nothing quite like that challenge and that adrenaline rush. That’s why I was always so fascinated by the pilots at home, and even that was nothing compared to what I’m experiencing now. My old line of work could never amount to this, no matter how much longer of a life I could have while doing it. This way, I feel like I’m actually doing something and making a difference to protect the galaxy. Besides, when you’ve got squadmates as good as mine, you don’t even really think that you won’t come back from a mission. My wingman protects me, and I protect him. That kind of trust and security leaves a lot of room open to feel that complete and utter thrill that even I can’t adequately put into words. Okay, Mom, you can listen again. Dad, tell her she can listen again.”

“It’s not safe for you where I live.”

“Nine, you got one on your tail, be careful!”

“You’re going back to fight in the war.”

Darin’s lasers tracked along the path of the TIE fighter in his sights, but it was more of an afterthought, and he kept missing. Most of his attention was focused on trying to evade the TIE shooting at him from behind.

“People die in wars.”

An admittedly lucky shot caused the Imperial in front of him to explode into a burst of deadly light. A second later, the canopy windows of Darin’s X-wing caught the reflection of the fireball that the TIE behind him had become, courtesy of Quiver.

Another TIE fighter came streaking toward them, and its lasers opened up on him.

“Are you going to die, Darin?”

Darin couldn’t move out of the way quickly enough, and before he knew it, the vast majority of his shields was gone, as well as his hyperdrive and primary life support. The TIE finished its strafing run and silently zoomed past.

Quiver followed Darin when his wingman broke off to get temporarily clear of the fighting, and he called, “You okay, Nine?”

“Fine, Ten,” Darin answered distractedly as he hurriedly input commands to seal off any possible leaks and tried to regroup.

“Are you sure?”

Quiver's voice jerked Darin out of the jumble of recent memories, and he forced himself back to the present. "Yeah, I'm fine," Darin repeated. "Why?"

"Because we were supposed to land ten minutes ago."

Thumper hadn't realized he'd zoned out that badly. He was a bit shaken by that, considering it had happened while he was piloting a starfighter. *Blast it, focus!* "Sorry." He turned the Y-wing back toward *Crescent Star* and called in their position and a request for landing clearance.

Once they were headed in from their close-quarters patrol, Quiver piped up from the back seat of the wishbone, "Hey, you know what Scoop told CC he found out?"

"No, what?"

"Remember that skirmish we got into the other day with the Imps? Oh, of course you do. You had to buy drinks for the squadron for having the most damage."

"Last time you made me buy drinks for having the least damage," Darin pointed out.

"Anyway," Quiver continued, "*Star* took some damage for which we need some extra parts and material, so according to rumor, we're heading to some space station to get them. Scoop heard Snubber mention something about us getting some time off while we're there."

"Really? That would be nice."

"Yeah." From the gunner's aft-facing seat, Quiver tried to look at Darin behind him but the structure of the double-seat cockpit wouldn't let him do it easily. "You seem to need it, too. You've been kind of out of it lately. Those kids last week must have really worn you out."

Darin sighed quietly, annoyed that when he was really distracted with thinking about something that he couldn't hide it better and act more normal. He didn't want to get into that discussion because it would just remind him of his family and make him feel worse. At least Quiver had just provided him with a good, innocent excuse for his recent behavior that he could use to avoid the real reasons. "Well, you know how it goes. Between babysitting then and doing double patrols now, and then having that dogfight thrown in there, yeah, I'm kind of beat."

"I think that's part of the reason you got so shot up in that last fight," said Quiver. "You're tired and not thinking clearly. You need a break. When we get to that station, we'll go relax. Just you and me and CC, and I'm sure she'll invite Scoop too. I've got it all planned out already."

Darin had to laugh a little at that. "Relaxing according to a schedule? Is that possible?"

"Of course it is: I'll show you when we get there. Now quit chitchatting and put in a little more juice. We're going to be late for the briefing."

"It's 1400 already? Oh, no. Wonderful, just wonderful." Darin throttled up a bit to quicken their approach. He had to stop thinking about those orphaned kids and everything that went with that topic. He wasn't focused on his job here and now, and in his line of work, that could be fatal.

They landed easily in the hangar of *Crescent Star* and quickly powered the Y-wing down. They were a solid ten minutes late by that time, so they jogged over to the pilots' briefing room near the hangar, not even bothering to get out of their flight gear.

Commander Mackin stopped his talk and looked their way when they entered. "Well, look who finally decided to join us."

"Sorry, sir," Quiver said as they went to their usual seats without slowing down. "Darin forgot how to land a Y-wing, so it took us longer than expected to get back in."

"Really." Mackin raised an eyebrow at Quiver, completely unconvinced. "And tell me,

why didn't the senior officer on board take over then and tell him what to do?"

"If I had done that, sir, he wouldn't have learned anything," said Quiver innocently. "The leadership training we did the last couple of weeks inspired me to help Darin learn to take command and take responsibility for what he has been placed in charge of. Experience is the best teacher, both in landing snubfighters and in leading missions. I was letting him work it out on his own."

"You can give it up, Ten. I'm not buying it."

"I figured I'd try anyway, sir."

Mackin checked his chrono. "Ten minutes times two credits per minute means each of you owes the Squadron Pot twenty credits."

"Yes, sir." Quiver discreetly elbowed Darin in the side, leaned over and whispered, "Hey, can I borrow twenty credits?"

"One of those candy bars will be an acceptable substitute as well," Lt. Weas said; however, the expression on Quiver's face clearly told him, "Hell no!"

"Anyway, as I was saying." Mackin shot the two late arrivals a look and then pointedly continued his briefing. "*Star* is going to a nearby space station for a couple of days to get some repair parts. For security reasons, she'll remain outside of the system, and there will be shuttles bringing parts and people back and forth. We've got a schedule worked out with the Quakes where we'll be alternating duty times with them: they'll have some time off on the first day to roam around the station while we remain here on duty, on the second day we'll get the free time and they'll be here on the ship for duty, and if we stay longer than that, we'll work it out then. We'll be arriving tomorrow. I said it before, but it bears reiteration and our fashionably-late squadmates need to hear this: this is not a Rebel space station. It's also not an Imperial military outpost, but they do not support the Rebellion, and they don't want trouble from the Imperials, so keep a low profile.

"And yes, I know what you're going to ask." Mackin held up a hand to momentarily forestall questions. "The taverns are called Hyperspace Glow and Outpost 20. Datacards with maps will be available."

"Does he know us, or what?" Quiver whispered with a grin. "*That's* why he's the squadron commander."

"This is going to be so much fun," CC said in a quiet yet excited voice. "I wonder what's all there to do."

"Don't worry, Quiver's got it all planned out," Darin said dryly.

Ignoring the scattered murmurings and private discussions regarding this news, Mackin looked at Weas, Ikoa and Chopper in turn. "Lt. Weas, Lt. Fyndcap and Lt. Forsgren, we might have an informal 'working lunch' there during that time, but I'll let you know as it gets closer. Now, on to other things..."

Chapter Ten

A couple of days later, Keely walked into the space station's nearest tavern, Hyperspace Glow. She had just finished resupplying her ship and wanted to get something to eat before going back to poring over the Imperial reports, looking for any more mentions of this squadron to make sure she was still on the right track. A recent report she'd seen about a nearby skirmish with a Rebel squadron having a similar description kept her confidence up that she was going the right way.

The tavern itself seemed like a decent place. As viewed from the doorway, the dining area consisted of a large rectangular room with tables scattered throughout in some semblance of order. There was a semi-circular bar along the wall on the left-hand side with numerous stools lining the rounded circumference. It was well-stocked with colorful bottles from different places all across the galaxy. The walls of the room were brighter than Keely would have expected in a tavern: they were a blue and white marbled design, certainly an homage to the tavern's name. The only other thing in the way of decoration in the place was a large aquarium along the wall to the right side of the door. Various aquatic creatures lazily glided through the water, and Keely noticed that the water even had that marbled effect, as if the small creatures were swimming through hyperspace. She figured there must be a holoprojector or two shining into the tank to give it that effect since some of the creatures had marbled highlights as well, though she had to admit that it all looked beautiful.

It was early afternoon onboard the station, and the tavern wasn't that full yet though there were some people sitting at tables here and there, isolated in pockets. A few more ringed the bar. As always, her eyes passed briefly over the patrons as she walked past them on her way to a table, but it was her ears that first alerted her to something very familiar and terribly important. Keely swung toward the sound, her hopes rising even as she consciously tried to push them down to avoid getting hurt again. But what she saw made her stop and gape.

Her brother was sitting at a table with two other men and a woman. The three strangers were on the tail ends of what had obviously been rather hard laughter, and their diminishing volume allowed Keely to hear her brother laughing a little as well. It looked and sounded so much like him, but she didn't dare to believe it just yet. "Shaun?" she ventured weakly. She fully expected to be wrong, and she tried to brace herself for the inevitable disappointment.

As she watched, though, Shaun Pellicer's laughter instantly stopped, and his eyes widened. Jerking his head around, he spotted her quickly. "Keely?! Is that you?"

She ran toward him while he jumped to his feet, and Keely leaped into his embrace. Keely was laughing and crying, overwhelmed with elation.

Shaun was the first one to speak after that. His voice was a little high-pitched as he asked incredulously, "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you!" Keely finally managed, hugging him tightly as if afraid he would slip away and be lost again.

They stayed that way for a long moment. All those days of seemingly futile searching and all the despair and hopelessness she had felt were suddenly dispelled by that hug, evaporating faster than water at Tatooine noon. For one perfect moment, the universe was right again, and her life was whole again. She wished time would stop and stay that way forever.

Time continued forward, however, and she spoke again at last. "Shaun, what happened? Are you okay? Where've you been all this time?"

She felt him stiffen ever so slightly, and then he said, "It's a long story. It's so great to see you! How are you? How are Dad and Mom?"

"Everyone's fine. We were just so worried about you! We thought you were dead or captured! I'm so happy you're safe!" Keely leaned back just a little and placed one hand on his cheek while she looked into his eyes. "It is you, and you're real. It's really you! But how'd you end up here? What are you doing? Why didn't you contact us?"

"I'm sorry," Shaun said softly. He gave her another squeeze and then gently pulled out of the hug. "I wanted to, but I couldn't."

"Why not? Is it because of what happened over Galantos?"

"Sort of. Let's go someplace private to talk about this, okay?"

Keely smiled and wiped her eyes. "I've got a better idea. I came in here for a reason, you know. I'm hungry. This is a nice little place. Let's kill two mynock with one blaster bolt and talk now over dinner."

Shaun started to say, "Keely, I don't—" but she was already sitting down in an empty chair at the table and pulling him down into the chair beside her where he'd been sitting.

"Come on, Guggly," she teased. "There's no reason to be so antisocial. This is a time to celebrate! Where better to do that than in a restaurant?"

One of the strangers at the table, a skinny man with messy blond hair, looked like he was going to explode if he stifled his laughter any longer. "*Guggly?!!*"

Shaun's face flushed in embarrassment, and he shot the man a sharp look that was completely ignored. Shaun turned back to Keely and said, "Don't you think we're a little old now for nicknames, Nerf Breath?"

Keely grinned mischievously. "Fine, I won't call you Guggly anymore, Shaun. At least, not in public." This wasn't the first time they had had this kind of conversation, and she knew that tomorrow she'd go back to calling him Guggly, and he'd go back to calling her Nerf Breath. They always did. Somewhere along the way, the mean-spiritedness which had created the names when they were kids had been replaced with affection. Now they were an inside joke, something special just for the two of them. It was so familiar, yet the normality seemed odd after such a long time apart.

She briefly turned to the strangers at the table. They all seemed to be in the same general age range as Shaun and herself, and like Shaun, they were dressed in civilian clothes. "Sorry for barging in like this, but I'm sure you can understand. I'm his sister, Keely."

Shaun spoke up before any of them could. "Right. Um, Keely, these are...my shipmates."

The skinny man might have looked indignant if he wasn't still laughing. "We're having family reunions and no one told me?"

The words were barely out of his mouth when his laughter abruptly stopped, and he whirled to glare at the black-haired woman sitting next to him. "Ow!"

The woman stood up and smiled easily at Keely. "Never mind him. He has horrible manners." Looking at both Keely and Shaun, she added, "It looks like you two have a lot to talk about. We'll leave you alone. If you need anything," she continued, locking eyes momentarily with Shaun, "*at all*, we'll be right over there at the bar, okay?" She took her drink in one hand and the skinny man's upper arm in the other, and she pulled him up. "Come on, your buddy here will buy you a new drink." She motioned with her head to the third person, a smaller man with longer blond hair.

The smaller man took his own drink and got to his feet to follow the other two. "I don't

like that plan,” he told them. He cast one uncertain look back at the siblings before going to the bar with the others.

Keely put them out of her mind and turned expectantly back to her brother. Finally, *finally*, the moment had come, and it was a million times better than she had imagined it.

Shaun hardly noticed his squadmates leave—he had too much else on his mind. He wanted privacy—*needed* privacy—but Keely could be stubborn and single-minded at times, and she had made her feelings known regarding staying there at the tavern. Besides, he didn’t know where to go on this station where no one could overhear them, and he knew his three squadmates would insist on remaining close by. Maybe this was as good a place as he could get. At least there wouldn’t be people randomly walking past them here. He could keep an eye out for people approaching a table and avoid any eavesdroppers that way.

He spotted a vacant corner table across the room from both the bar and the doorway with no one in the immediate vicinity. He could make that work. Shaun returned the smile Keely was offering him, then he stood and nodded toward the corner table. “Let’s eat over there. More privacy.”

“Does the hotshot fighter pilot get swarmed by girls swooning over him if he stays out in the open?” Keely teased.

“Fighting them off left and right,” Shaun answered in kind. “But I’m really just being selfish because I want to spend the time with you and you alone. Come on.”

He led her to the corner table. Keely looped an arm around his neck and contentedly rested her head on his shoulder while they walked as if she was unwilling to let him out of arm’s reach.

Shaun’s mind was whirling. This was so unexpected. What was he going to tell her? *How* could he tell her? He doubted he could keep a “low profile” by telling her the truth, but she would press until she got a satisfactory answer from him about his recent whereabouts. Shaun saw a number of ways around the problem, but they would all require him to tell a blatant lie to a family member, something which he absolutely refused to do. He felt that no one should look into the eyes of their own flesh and blood and knowingly say something false. He hadn’t outright lied to anyone in his family since he was old enough to attach importance to the concept, and he had no intention of starting now.

That was one of the reasons why he had kept his defection a secret and not said anything about it to his family since it occurred. He recognized his silence was a lie on a lesser level, but to him, omissions of truth weren’t as bad as saying something completely untrue or, in this case, telling them the actual truth. Shaun had never completely reconciled all this in himself, but he had learned to live with what he felt was the least of the evils.

Besides, it’s not like he hadn’t considered telling them the truth at various times. He couldn’t count the number of letters he’d started writing in the seven months since he’d defected explaining what had happened and what he’d done, but he’d always erased them after a paragraph or two. Words had always seemed so...inadequate. Shaun simply didn’t know what to say or how to say it. In any event, he doubted he would have been allowed to send it due to the security risk it would have posed. Sending messages to Imperial officers (like his father) was generally frowned upon in the Rebellion. Sending them to an Imperial officer’s spouse or

immediate family member wasn't much better.

All of that left him unprepared at that moment in the tavern with Keely; however, like any other ambush, he forced himself to keep his cool and work it out. If there was one thing for which he was grateful to the Imperials, it was for teaching him to keep his wits about him in times of great stress. If he could remain calm and simply ease her into the explanation, maybe it would keep her calm and everything would be all right. Yes, it would be.

Shaun and Keely sat down. Picking up a menu, Keely asked thoughtfully, "So those are your shipmates? Huh. Didn't seem like any Imperial officers *I've* ever met. Was that woman one of their girlfriends?"

"No," Shaun said simply. There were so many excuses he could think of, so many ways to get out of this...He was absolutely thrilled to see his sister again, but the feeling was dampened by the knowledge that he had to be careful with every word he said. *Blast it, why did this have to happen here?* How had he started those letters? He was drawing a blank, and he needed time to figure out what to say.

Tactic One: Stall. Shaun turned a critical eye on his sister and was amazed to see how frankly pretty she had become. She wasn't a gangly teenager anymore. He hadn't seen her in person since his graduation from the Academy a year and a half ago, and she had changed since then in ways he hadn't been able to notice over a Holonet connection. Some things hadn't changed, though, like her long dark brown hair and her desire to always be stylishly dressed. The color of her eyes matched the rich color of her hair, and Shaun shared those genes as well. It was almost like looking into a strange mirror; people had always commented on their family resemblance. "Well, just look at you," he said. "My baby sister is all grown up."

She was studying him as well, and she answered, "Your baby sister has had to do a lot of growing up lately, since she's been out scouring the galaxy for you. Speaking of which, you owe me some kind of explanation, don't you think? What's been happening these last months? You've been listed as MIA, presumed dead. You don't know the toll that's taken on everyone back home."

"I'm sorry, Keely. I really am." He was. "You said you were hungry. What do you want to eat? And now that you're all grown up, I can have a drink with you to celebrate."

A Twi'lek woman came over to take their orders. Shaun noticed that Keely was distinctly uncomfortable in the nonhuman's presence. That's how Shaun had been, too. He'd been raised with the Imperial notion of human superiority, and his time in the Rebellion had been forcing him to take a hard look at that way of thinking. He was trying his best to change it, though it was taking some time.

They gave their orders to the waitress, and she left. Shaun returned his attention to his sister and shook his head in amazement. "I still can't believe you're here. How did you find me?"

Keely unconsciously played with a napkin while she answered. "About a month ago we got word that some of your identity information had been used by Rebels. We knew you'd never give that to the enemy, but that's the best lead we've gotten on you since you went missing. I didn't think the Imperials were doing enough to follow up on it, so I took a leave of absence from my job and started following the trail myself. Even if those Rebels didn't have you, I figured they could give me a good lead on you, especially with the proper encouragement. I could always call in the nearest Imperial ship for help if it got to that point. There was nothing else I could do, and I had to do something. I just couldn't wait around any longer." She hunched down, leaned forward and added in a conspiratorial voice, "I was able to find some information on my own,

but I never would have made it out here if Dad hadn't snuck me all the relevant nonclassified reports. Sure, the general bulletins the Imperials put out to citizens might give warnings about Rebel activity in a certain sector, but only the more controlled military reports gave the descriptions and details I needed."

She leaned back in her seat again, and she looked so utterly happy that Shaun figured she'd start crying again at any second. "We were sure those Rebels had you prisoner if you weren't dead. I'm so glad we were wrong and that you're safe."

Shaun tried to swallow the guilt and dread that was rising up in him like bile. This was going to be a million times worse than he had imagined it.

Tactic Two: Evade. "How'd you get here? We're not exactly close to Commenor."

Keely grinned proudly. "I flew *Dart*."

Shaun couldn't help but laugh. "Dad's still got that old thing? I figured he would have gotten something better by now. But—wait, you flew *Dart*?" His voice was all seriousness now, and the tactics were forgotten. "Not alone, right?"

"Yeah, alone."

"What are you doing crossing half the galaxy by yourself? It's not safe! There are pirates and battles and all sorts of dangers, and if *Dart* breaks down it could—"

Keely looked indignant. "Shaun, I'm twenty-one years old. I can handle myself. I made it here—isn't that proof enough?"

"You don't know what some of those pirate groups do to people unlucky enough to cross their paths. I don't want you to be anywhere near them, especially by yourself."

She dismissed the concerns. "Pirates, Rebels...they're all the same, and I made it past them all. I didn't have any problems. Besides, I'm not by myself anymore—you're here now. In any event, *I'm* not the one who's been out in this 'big, unsafe galaxy' and not been heard from in forever. So let's get back to you. I've waited seven long months for this moment, and I don't want to wait anymore! What happened to you? After the Battle of Galantos, no one, not your squadron leader or your wingman or your roommate or *anyone*, knew what happened to you. You just vanished during that fight. Like I said, we were sure the Rebels captured you, if you were even still alive. But here you are, obviously not dead and obviously not in a prison cell."

Shaun fought to hide his discomfort. "It's complicated."

"I'll bet it is!" said Keely. "I never expected to find you like this, just sitting in a tavern somewhere laughing and drinking, not a care in the world. It's completely unfathomable that you would disappear, be out of contact with everyone you knew and then show up like this. So, you're not a prisoner, which means the only thing that makes any amount of sense now is..." Her thoughtful expression quickly turned into a fearful one, and she dropped her voice. "Oh no, did I just blow your cover? Are those Rebels you're with?"

With a sigh, Shaun said, "You didn't blow my cover. I'm not an Intel op." That was the perfect excuse, and he itched to use it. He fought against the little voice inside asking if one little lie was really all that bad...

"You have to be." Keely's voice was still low. "If Intel pulled you for a secret infiltration mission, it would explain why the Navy can't tell us where you are and why they're just saying you're MIA, and it explains everything here except for—"

"I'm not undercover," Shaun repeated a little more firmly, as much to himself as to her. He could make this work without resorting to lying. "As much as I love digging around for news, I don't work for Intel."

Keely's expression became thoughtful and a little puzzled again. "Right, right. The people you were with heard me calling you 'Shaun,' and they didn't react strangely to it. No one uses their real name in an undercover assignment—it's foolish and dangerous. But if you're not undercover, that means the Imperials *really* don't know where you are; they're not just saying that to protect you, and those aren't Imperials you're with here. That means you *were* captured by the Rebels." Now she looked distressed. "How long ago did you escape? Did a transport pick you up or something? Why didn't you contact the Imperials for help when you got out?"

"Keely, calm down. Think. Look at me. Do I look like I've been in prison? I wasn't captured. There's not a Rebel alive who could catch me. You know that."

"Of—of course. You're right." There was more relief in her voice now. "You look too good to have been in a Rebel prison. Everyone knows what they do to their prisoners, which is why we were so worried about you. You should have heard the threats Dad was making about what he'd do to those damn despicable Rebels if he found out they had you."

Though it said a lot about how much his father cared for him, in his current position that was something Shaun wished he'd never heard. That little voice inside piped up again and continued second-guessing his decision to not lie. Keely had proven that one determined individual could track them down, and if his father got it in his head to do something rash—

Keely went on. "But if that's not what happened, then what? I'm just so confused!"

Shaun took a deep breath and looked around. There was no one else nearby. He saw CC discreetly watching him from over at the bar, and he quickly broke the lock their eyes held by turning back to his sister.

"Shaun?" Keely pressed. "What happened?"

After another pause, Shaun answered, "I had to make a decision—the hardest one of my life."

"Just like that? Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you let us help?"

"I couldn't tell you, for lots of reasons." *To protect you. To protect me. To save you from the disgrace you'll feel because of it.*

"And what was this decision?"

Shaun saw the waitress coming with their drinks, and he waited until she had given them to the siblings and returned to the bar. CC was still watching him, and he looked away. He was caught directly between two opposing duties.

"Shaun?"

He sighed and dropped his voice. "I don't want to talk about this, Keely. The answer isn't something you want to hear."

"If you knew what I wanted, you'd know that I want an explanation about why we've had to go to bed worried sick about you each night for the past seven months. You owe us that. Just tell me!"

It wasn't hard to detect the growing frustration in her voice, and Shaun knew it was due to his evasions. He understood where she was coming from and how he would have felt had the situation been reversed, and he felt horrible for putting them through that.

He glanced over Keely's shoulder at his three squadmates, and then he looked back at her—his sister, who had come all this way to find him. Who had risked her life to make sure he was safe. "There's a reason the Imperials don't know where I am. I'm not an Imperial anymore," he said softly. He felt a sharp stab of guilt for even saying that much. Loyalty to one duty was betrayal to another.

Keely seemed taken aback as Shaun's last words seemed to sink in. Even after seeing him here and being able to guess as much, it must have still been a shock for her to hear him confirm that news. "What? At all?"

"At all."

"Are you aware that no one is officially aware of that?"

"Yes."

"Stop joking around."

"I'm serious."

"So you dropped out of the military but decided not to get discharged or even tell anyone about it? Is that it?" The look on Keely's face showed that she thought it was the stupidest thing she'd ever heard, and she couldn't believe her own brother had done it. "That's desertion!"

"I know, but—" Shaun started to say.

Keely interrupted him. "I can't believe what you're telling me! The Imperials didn't say you were facing any courts-martial that you'd be running away from, and I certainly never figured you for the cowardly type anyway. What's going on? Why did you desert? Whatever happened, either Dad or Grandfather could have helped fix it. You didn't have to do that!"

"Yes, actually, I did," said Shaun in a deliberate voice. When Keely looked ready to protest again, he added, "Neither of them could have helped me."

"You don't know that. You never even asked. That's what family is for, isn't it? They could have done *something*."

"Keely, the galaxy's not quite so simple, okay? There's a lot that happens that you just don't know about."

"I know enough. I know I haven't heard any reason yet for why you couldn't have at least told us what happened and that you were okay, or told us what the problem was so we could try to help. Nothing can justify your inexplicable secrecy all these months while we went through hell worrying about you. Didn't you ever stop to think about that? Now why did you desert?"

Shaun felt like he was backed into a corner, and he forced himself to think his answer through. "I guess it all goes back to Alderaan."

Keely's frustrated expression lightened, and her voice had a touch of sympathy to it when she spoke next. "Yeah, that was a horrible day. I remember how much you said you loved it there that time your squadron got to go for some R&R."

"Alderaan's needless destruction hit me harder than anything I could have imagined," Shaun said quietly. Maybe, just maybe, Keely would let it go at that. If not, this seemed like as good a way as any to broach the subject.

Even more gently than before, Keely said, "If you were having such trouble dealing with it, you should have talked to someone. That way you would have been better able to stay in the military, and you could be out there right now hunting down the awful Rebels that caused it."

One step forward, two steps back. "Alderaan wasn't destroyed by the Rebels, Keely. It's propaganda."

Keely's look questioned his sanity again. "Of course they're the ones who did it. No one else could have, though I'm afraid to ask where they got that kind of weaponry or that kind of ruthlessness. It's sickening and horrifying to think about. But really, if you wanted to make a difference and help avenge the memory of Alderaan, you should have gotten some help and then gone back out and helped your old squadmates fight the Rebels. Some of them stayed on after their tour of duty was over and took command positions. They're all worried about you, too."

Shaun allowed himself just the hint of a smile as he remembered his old TIE squadron. Most of them had been pretty good guys, people who, like him, had honestly believed they were making the galaxy a better place. “You’ve heard from them? What are Link and Crevitt up to?” Link had been a good friend of his in the squadron. Crevitt had been Shaun’s wingman.

“Of course I’ve heard from them. We’ve been in contact since your disappearance just in case someone heard something. Link is the XO of the 207th, so that keeps him busy. He’s the one who stumbled on the news about your identity information being used and let us know about it. Crevitt...no, I guess you wouldn’t have heard. He was killed in a dogfight with Rebels two months ago. I’m sorry, Shaun.”

The news about Crevitt made a larger impact on him than Shaun expected. Crevitt had been an intelligent, likeable guy and a good pilot. What if he’d become one of those TIE kill markers on Shaun’s X-wing...?

Shaun angrily tried to push down the grief and the doubts. As awful as it was, he’d accepted that possibility when he defected. He couldn’t lose it now.

Keely must have seen his brief look of anger and hurt because she continued, “I’m sure that news is hard for you to hear, and it’s normal to be angry at the people who caused it. And I can understand how Alderaan’s destruction disillusioned you with the galaxy, but that’s not the kind of thing to deal with alone, especially if you’re going to base life-altering decisions on it. Don’t you see that by your deserting and now just sitting here doing whatever it is you’re doing, the Empire got weaker and what happened to Crevitt will happen to others?”

Shaun didn’t respond. He was glad she didn’t know just how horribly true that statement was.

“You should be doing your part to put a stop to these horrible things,” Keely went on. “Besides, you’re supposed to be the steady one, the one who does everything right, the role model for flighty little me. So how come *I’m* the one who spent nearly an entire month following a belief, and *you’re* the one who up and quit?” Shaun could remember only a few times when she’d looked so disappointed with him. Then he couldn’t see her expression anymore because she covered her face with her hands and said, “Guggly, what were you thinking? Now what are we going to do? Desertion is a serious offense!”

It took Shaun a moment to orient himself with Keely’s new direction. “*We’re* not going to do anything,” he said.

“Yes, *we* are,” Keely said stubbornly, taking her hands away and giving him a hard look.

Shaun shook his head. “I don’t want you involved in this mess. It’s not what you think it is. Why do you think I never asked for help?”

“That’s the exact time you’re *supposed* to ask for help,” Keely answered. “We can deal with problems, even big ones, and if we can’t, we have friends who can help out. You’re not doing yourself any favors by refusing that support and protection.” She moved her drink aside and leaned forward on the table closer to him. “We’re going to figure out what to do about your desertion, since it was just a big mistake. No more of this secrecy, no more of this hiding. Maybe they’ll go easy on you if you turn yourself in and explain what you were going through at the time. Dad can help—”

“No, he can’t; he never could. I told you that already. And it wasn’t a mistake.”

Constantly fighting the internal conflicts was wearing his nerves thin. How much longer would Keely keep pressing for an answer? More importantly, how much longer could he dodge her questions? Shaun knew something was going to give sooner or later, he just didn’t know what.

“Shaun, why are you acting so strange? Stop being so stubborn! You’re not the only one who was affected by Alderaan. Let us help. There has to be a way around this, something we can do.”

“I told you, it’s not that simple.”

Keely was obviously getting frustrated again. “Then explain it to me! Stop telling me I don’t understand, only to refuse to help me understand. All you’ve said so far is that you deserted, no one can help you, and you apparently want your whole life to remain a secret. That’s not the Shaun I know.”

Shaun had grown equally overwhelmed from the pressure and conflicts. “Maybe that’s because he’s been out in a galaxy you don’t know and don’t understand. In his galaxy, he’s learned that the Rebels did not blow up Alderaan. The truth about that made me question everything I believed, and I wanted nothing more than to talk to all of you about it, but I couldn’t. It was too dangerous for all of us, and I already basically knew what everyone’s response would be. It wasn’t too hard to figure out, seeing as how being a part of the Imperial Navy is part of this family’s identity.”

His momentum kept him going. “You said I never told you what was going on. In a way I did, though not directly. Look at my last few letters before Galantos; if your mind was open enough and you weren’t blindly loyal to the Empire, you’d see some subtle hints about what I was planning, but none of you ever caught on. Maybe it wasn’t enough, but it’s all I could afford given the circumstances, and the lack of any response to those hints told me a lot.

“I’ve had to make some hard decisions, Keely. One of those was deciding that I could no longer be a part of the organization that really did cause something as awful as Alderaan’s destruction. That’s why I’m not an Imperial anymore. Like you said, I had to do my part to put a stop to these horrible things. I am. I’m not hiding because of the desertion; it was merely a means to an end.”

He stopped, acutely aware that he’d said too much. Even so, he didn’t have to come right out and say what he had done. Shaun could almost see Keely’s bewildered mind connecting all the pieces: his desertion, his secrecy about his whereabouts and actions, a proclamation that he held the Empire responsible for something he found atrocious and unforgivable, his short statement saying he was actively working against the Imperials, his refusal to ask for help from his father, and the only thing their father would be completely powerless to help him with, let alone completely unwilling. Maybe she was even understanding now why she had found him after trailing a group of Rebels.

As more and more of his story seemed to dawn on Keely, Shaun also realized too late that easing her into the explanation had not worked at all. He quickly tried to stop the situation from going supernova. “Now listen to me, Keely. You have to understand—”

“But then—that means—” Keely stammered. She went pale and jumped to her feet. “How *could* you?!”

“Keely, hold on! I—” Appealingly, Shaun stood and took a step toward her, but she immediately jumped back again and interrupted him.

“No! How could you do this to us?! For months we were worried sick about you. Both Dad and Grandfather called in favors to try to find you. After all that, after all we went through, I finally find you only to learn that you were never really missing and in trouble, but that you *defected?!*” Her voice rose a few octaves with that last word.

Everyone in the tavern was easily hearing every single word, and the scattered patrons

and employees were cautiously and uneasily watching the exchange. Shaun had lost control over the situation, and he shook his head and desperately said, “Wait, just hold on! Calm down! I—”

“Calm down?! You’re telling me to *calm down*?! You’re nothing but a traitor! The third Imperial in our family and you just spit on everything you were!”

“Sis, please! I—”

Keely was nearly hysterical. “Don’t call me that! I’m not your sister! I don’t have a brother anymore! He died over Galantos, and that’s exactly what I’m going to tell Dad and Grandfather! I won’t let Dad think his own son is a traitor! It would kill him! You know that!”

“And *this* is exactly why I didn’t try directly contacting any of you about my decision,” Shaun snapped, the last harsh blow jolting him out of his tongue-tied shock. “I knew you wouldn’t even hear me out or try to understand.”

He was about to say more, but he stopped and forced himself to keep his temper in the face of Keely’s verbal onslaught, drawing on a reserve of willpower he didn’t know he’d had. Instead, Shaun quickly stepped up and lightly grabbed her hands. As she tried to pull away, he said in a pained voice, “Keely...Nerf Breath...please, *please* listen to me.”

Keely stopped, possibly due to his use of her nickname, but the betrayal evident on her face never lessened. “Why should I?” she demanded, nearly in tears. “Why should I listen to anything you say ever again?”

“Because you’ve just proven yourself to be the steady role model out of the two of us, and that job means you need to finish hearing what flighty little me has to say before passing judgement,” he said softly but firmly. “You’ll do that, won’t you? You just spent a month looking for me. Are another few minutes too much to ask?”

“And were a few minutes to just come out and tell us what was happening too much to ask?” she spat. She was crying now. “You can’t expect us to be mind-readers. When did you start hating us enough to do that to us? To do *this* to us?! To go off on a whim and join the enemy?”

“Stop it. I don’t hate you.”

“Yes, you do! Otherwise you would have told us what was going on. You never would have just disappeared without saying a word. You never would have become—one of *them*. What if the next ship you attack is Dad’s ship? Then what?! Don’t stand there and lie by saying you don’t hate us if you could fire on your own father!”

“I am *not* lying to you, Keely.” Shaun’s sharp voice cut through her tirade. “Everything I’ve told you here has been the truth.”

“All the Rebels do is lie. Why should I think you’re any different from the rest of them now?”

Shaun let go of her hands and held her by the shoulders instead. “Because you know me, and you know I don’t lie to you.”

“No, I *don’t* know you. Not anymore. I don’t know the Shaun who would turn on everyone he knows.”

“But you know the one who has to do what he honestly believes is right.”

“Like betraying your family?!”

Darin’s nervous voice cut into the conversation from beside him. “Um, Scoop?” Shaun hadn’t even noticed him approach.

He was about to respond when Keely tried to pull away. He held on, and then her tearful voice, pitched to carry, was a combination of hatred and fear as she said to Darin, “All of you are Rebels, aren’t you?! Damn you all, what did you do to my brother?!”

“They didn’t do anything to me—this was *my* decision,” Shaun said. He quickly turned to Darin.

Darin kept an uneasy eye on Keely while he quietly said to Shaun, “The bartender just called Security. I don’t think he knows we heard. He reported a disturbance which could escalate and that a suspected Rebel was involved. The others are watching and listening for anything else, and they sent me over here to tell you that we need to leave. We don’t have much time.”

“Keely, you need to go tell the bartender that everything’s fine,” said Shaun.

“It’s not fine!” she bit out. Upon further reflection, Shaun realized she looked like too much of a wreck for her to convince anyone of that anyway. Keely continued, “Besides, there *are* Rebels here—your three ‘shipmates,’ as you put it. I can tell the bartender *that!* Let Security come.”

“No, you don’t understand!” Shaun’s voice was growing urgent.

“I do understand! What do I care if Security hauls away your criminal pals here? I won’t help Rebels!”

“If they’re hauled away, I’m hauled away too.”

Keely shook her head adamantly. “No, you won’t be, because we’re going back to *Dart*. We’ll contact Dad and let him sort this all out.” She took his wrist and started pulling him toward the tavern’s doorway.

However, she stopped after two steps when Shaun said, “I can’t talk to Dad.” When she whirled around to argue, he held her by the shoulders again and continued, “It won’t end well for at least one of us and probably both, no matter what happens. He can’t know. Can’t you see I’m trying to protect you?”

“What kind of person has to protect his own family from himself?” she demanded.

“I’m protecting you from what the Empire will do to our entire family if they find out about me. Our family history and pride in the Empire won’t matter; they’ll think you were all covering for me. In their eyes, you’d all be secretly supporting the Rebellion, and you know what that means! It’s injustice like that that I’m trying to fight!”

“See? I knew you hated us if you could do that to us and put us in that position! You’re endangering us and slapping us in the face at the same time.”

Darin fidgeted and glanced at his chrono. “Scoop, we need to get out of here.”

“You three get out then,” Shaun said. “Head for the shuttle. I can’t leave yet.”

“We shouldn’t split up and leave you, sir,” Darin said, sounding a little less nervous and a little more resolute. “Especially since if they take you into custody, they’ll contact the Imperials and—”

“I know, I know,” came Shaun’s somewhat strained reply.

CC and Quiver casually approached them at that point. “Hi, guys,” CC said cheerfully, probably for show. When they got close, she said under her breath, “Come on, Security will be here any minute. What’s taking so long?”

“Keely and I still have some things to work out,” Shaun answered. “I can’t leave yet.”

“Then bring her with,” Quiver said. “At least until everything’s calmed down.”

“After some of those earlier outbursts, everyone will think we kidnapped her,” CC said.

Quiver gave a small shrug. “If everything works out in the end, she can say she willingly went along to talk with her brother. If not, well, it’s just the sort of dastardly thing Rebels are known for. Play off the stereotype, and it won’t affect things in the long run.”

“No!” Keely shrieked, sounding more afraid now than anything. She tried to pull away again.

Shaun flinched and immediately covered her mouth with a hand. “Thank you *very* much, Mr. Tactful,” he bit out at Quiver.

“Sorry, sir.”

“I told you he has horrible manners,” CC muttered.

Shaun paused for a second to think it all over. It might be the only way they could get out of there and also give him a chance to finish talking to Keely. He took his hand away from her mouth, moved between her and the others, and gently lifted her chin so she was looking into his eyes. She definitely looked frightened, so he tried to make his voice as gentle and soothing as possible. “Come on, let’s go to *Dart* like you wanted. We just need to finish talking about this somewhere else, somewhere safe. I promise nothing’s going to happen to you, and I’ll be right here with you. Okay?”

She cast a fearful glance at the other three pilots and said, “Not with them.” Turning back to Shaun, she took one of his hands in both of hers and pleaded, “Stay with me, Shaun. We can fix this somehow. Come back home with me. Don’t go with them.”

Something in his sister’s voice, the touch of her hands and the look in her eyes eroded Shaun’s resolve more than anything else had since his defection. It had been easier when he was in the Imperial Navy and had gotten accustomed to only being able to see his family and friends on a communication console screen. The physical distance made the insulation simpler and possibly made him feel more independent from them than he actually was; however, Keely’s presence there in the tavern was something tangible that showed him all too clearly the life he was giving up. It made both the decision and the consequences much more real.

He felt a flash of irrational resentment—toward the Empire for being so corrupt and forcing this decision on him, and toward the Rebellion for just being the Rebellion and putting him in this position due to its very nature. If it wasn’t for all of this, he *could* go home with his sister and see his mom and grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins and friends again, and his dad too the next time he was able to come home. Was he really doing the right thing by sacrificing all that just to fight for his beliefs? Were they really worth the cost?

He glanced at his three squadmates, people he had met a mere three months ago. He looked at his sister, someone who had shared in virtually his whole life in a way no one else ever could. There was really no comparison between the two choices...until Shaun remembered that a large part of the reason he was with those relative strangers was because they were the ones helping him to protect his sister from an evil in the galaxy that she couldn’t even see. He was doing more for his family than they’d ever know or even acknowledge.

In spite of that belief, in spite of his private reassurance that he was doing the right thing, it still killed him inside to say to Keely, “I really, really want to go home with you, but I can’t. I have to stay with them.”

That brought a fresh round of tears flowing down her face. “I see. So the Rebels really are more important to you than us.” She slowly took her hands away even though Shaun tried to hold on, and he felt cold as the warmth of her hands was withdrawn.

Before Shaun could respond to her words, he noticed the bartender cautiously approaching. He was a short, round man with a close-cropped brown beard.

“Is there a problem over here?” he asked carefully.

“No, no problem,” Shaun answered as calmly and casually as he could. At least, he wished there wasn’t. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to shake Keely and tell her to snap out of her mindset and actually hear what he was saying, or if he wanted to just pull her into a long, comforting hug and tell her that this wasn’t personal and everything was going to be all right...somehow.

The bartender directed his next question to Keely. “Are you all right, miss?”

Keely sniffled, wiped her new tears away and didn’t answer immediately. The bartender took in her tear-streaked face and distressed condition and asked, “Are these people bothering you?”

Before she could say anything, Shaun replied, “I’m afraid I just had to give my sister some bad news. That’s all.”

The bartender gave him a stern look. “I’d appreciate it if you let her answer for herself.”

“And *I’d* appreciate it if you stayed out of our family’s business,” Shaun replied, just as sternly.

From the corner of his eye, he saw CC begin to whisper something to Darin, but Shaun couldn’t hear her words because the bartender said, “Your family’s business becomes my business when you’re in my bar and it looks like there’s going to be an...altercation because of it.”

“Look, everything’s fine. Emotions just got a little high.” Shaun managed to calm his voice and sound halfway reasonable when he said this.

The bartender looked at Keely again. “Miss, I want to make sure you’re really all right.”

Shaun was a bit surprised to see that Keely looked a touch calmer than she had a minute ago, but one second later he saw what had probably caused it: CC and Quiver were silently walking away from their little corner.

Keely still didn’t answer, but she looked at Shaun and appeared ready to start crying again. Unless Shaun was seeing things, it also looked like she was trembling slightly. At that moment, he realized he had no idea what she was thinking, what she thought of him, what she would say, what she would do.

“Miss? If they’re bothering you, tell me. I can help. Security is coming, just in case.”

A few endless moments later, Shaun heard something he honestly never expected to hear: CC’s voice, angrily shouting, “Don’t give me that line! I know you’re cheating on me, you disgusting bag of—”

“Oh, shut up!” Quiver yelled back, just as angry. “I’m just in here for a drink! Ten minutes! I don’t have to account for every single damn minute with you!”

“I don’t believe you! Is she meeting you here? Was she here and now she’s hiding? Where is she?!”

The voices were coming from near the tavern’s door. A glance in that direction showed CC and Quiver standing and shouting over a table at each other. A few security guards were approaching from the doorway. They wore grey and black uniforms and had holstered blaster pistols; they were the only ones allowed to carry weapons on the station.

The one in front was a balding man with dark hair, and he looked remarkably fit. Stepping up to the two pilots, he said, “All right, what’s going on?”

“This bucket of Hutt drool that I have for a husband is cheating on me!” CC replied hotly.

The bartender looked utterly confused at the abrupt, unexpected turn of events. “What the—?!” He started toward that group, leaving Shaun, Darin, and Keely alone.

“*I am not!*” Quiver retorted. “Besides, if I was, did you ever stop to think there might be a reason for it?!” He turned to the nearest security officer as if looking for sympathy, and his voice dripped with exasperation and sarcasm as he said, “Nag nag nag nag nag!” He even made his hand into a simple puppet that “spoke” the last words as he said them.

Over in the corner, Darin grabbed Shaun’s arm. “Come on, let’s go,” he whispered urgently.

Shaun resisted the pull on his arm. “Wait, what’s—”

“Distraction. We’re meeting up outside the tavern. Come on!”

“What’s going on?” the bartender asked as he reached the other group.

CC ignored the bartender’s approach, and her voice was fuming and indignant. “I do *not* nag!”

Shaun hoped his squadmates knew what they were doing, but he also recognized that he didn’t have the time to question it. He desperately turned to Keely. “Keely, let’s go.”

Keely, still trembling, shook her head.

“Besides,” CC continued, “if I do, did *you* ever stop to think there might be a reason for it?! Get your lazy hide in gear and get a job!”

“Scoop—” Darin sounded a little frantic. He pulled harder on Shaun’s arm.

“Keely, *please!*” Shaun begged.

“What does this have to do with Rebels?” one of the security guards asked the bartender.

Quiver jumped in, sounding very frustrated. “Rebels? Nothing! She called me a rabble-rouser, that’s what happened! See what I have to put up with?”

Back in the corner, Keely shook her head again and a few more tears escaped. “No. You’re not Shaun. You’re not my brother. You made it very clear that this family means nothing to you anymore. You’re just a Rebel, a traitor. That’s all.” She backed a small step away from him.

“You don’t understand!” Shaun pleaded.

“You don’t understand!” the bartender said. “The disturbance I called you about is down there!” He pointed across the room at Shaun, Keely and Darin.

At that, Darin gave Shaun a hard shove toward the kitchen door by the bar. “We’re out of time! We have to go!” he whispered.

Shaun resisted, trying to go back to his sister, but Darin stubbornly kept driving him toward the swinging kitchen door with an emergency exit sign above it. There were some commanding shouts from the security officers, and one desperate call from Shaun. “No, Keely, wait!” His sister was still standing there, unmoving.

Then they were through the door, and it swung shut behind them. He had lost sight of Keely.

Chapter Eleven

“I wouldn’t worry about that problem at work you mentioned in the last letter, Dad. It’s probably just caused by a glitch somewhere, and they happen all the time. For instance, no mission is ever without a glitch or two, but hopefully that’s as bad as it gets. Glitches in and of themselves can be worked out, but when they start compounding, that’s when the bad things happen, so watch for that just in case. The important thing is to just keep your cool, look at the problem and weigh the factors. Sometimes this has to be done in a split-second, but it should never be done impulsively or based on pure emotion. Those are your words of wisdom for the day. That’s what they’ve been teaching us in this officer leadership training, anyway, so don’t say I wasn’t paying attention just because I already know it all, like I said. But I’ll be happy if I never have to use this glitch-solving advice anywhere other than in a classroom workshop.”

It had been a typical on-the-spot plan: Point A and Point B were clearly and respectively defined as the beginning action (distraction) and end goal (escape), but everything in between A and B was a grey area.

Plus, it didn’t help that things were already going wrong at Point A. The initial plan called for Darin and Scoop to sneak out of the tavern while the security officers’ attention was focused on Quiver and CC. Those two would then make an appropriate exit, probably after playing along long enough to blow off enough steam for Security to think they were done with their domestic spat. In actuality, though, it had been Quiver and CC who ended up ducking out while Darin and Scoop held Security’s attention. Luckily, the outcome had been the same: both pairs had gotten out.

Just when the security guards had started to come after them, Darin had pushed Pellicer through the kitchen and out into a side corridor, where he’d gotten confused for a few moments about which way to go to reach the meeting place. Finally he’d found his way, and he and Pellicer joined up with Quiver and CC, but not before Security had caught a glimpse of all of them. The next few minutes had been an exercise in evasion: sometimes they sprinted down empty side corridors to gain some distance, while other times they tried to casually blend in with a crowd, which Darin found particularly challenging as he had to constantly fight the urge to look over his shoulder.

As they got farther from the tavern, Pellicer began acting a bit strangely, and Darin was getting a little confused by him: once or twice during the escape Scoop would point them in a direction he said they should go, then he’d try to turn around and go back the way they had come by himself. The three flight officers always forced him to stay with them, and they would continue on, though none of them really had a clear idea of where they were going.

After all that, the four pilots finally found themselves...here.

“Blast it, Quiver, I swear I’m going to kill you if we make it out of this alive,” Darin said weakly. He was sitting with the others on the external top of a turboshaft car and was holding onto a bracket with a death grip. “I can’t believe you made us come up here. We’ll be killed if we fall off.”

“Oh, just relax,” Quiver replied. “I did this a lot as a kid. You’ll be fine if you hold on. I hit the button for every single deck when we went in, so we won’t have any big, sudden, long

drops or ascents. We just needed a place to regroup. If those security forces managed to track us to this turbolift, they should be out scouring the decks where it already stopped since it left before any of them got to it when we initially got in, and then they'd find it empty. We're actually relatively safe here."

Quiver carefully maneuvered himself across the top of the turboshaft car to get a better look at the datapad CC was carrying. As soon as he stopped, the turbolift lurched upward and came to a stop at the next deck.

CC glanced at Quiver when he began reading the datapad over her shoulder. "You know," she mentioned offhandedly, "I was hoping we'd keep going with our distraction for another minute. I was about to slap you."

"I'm not surprised," Quiver answered. "Women just can't keep their hands off me."

CC shrugged. "I guess that's true enough if you count all the attempted stranglings as well. I'm so happy that you can find such a ray of sunshine in your delusions."

"I much prefer my reality to the real one."

Normally Darin would have enjoyed hearing where that conversation would lead, but he wasn't in the mood to find out now if it meant a delay in getting off this turbolift car. He cut them off by saying to Quiver, "Some relaxing break. I thought you had this visit all planned out."

"Don't worry, we're fine," said Quiver.

"In your reality, maybe. What about this one?"

"Darin, relax for once, will you?"

Giving up on that route, Darin turned to Pellicer. "Scoop, what are we going to do?"

Pellicer didn't answer for a long moment, prompting Darin to say more loudly, "Scoop?"

Shaun blinked and looked up. "What?" he asked distractedly.

"What are we going to do?"

"About what?" Pellicer's voice was strained, a little frazzled.

Darin was getting a sinking feeling even though the turboshaft car was moving upward. "About getting away from Security and getting out of here."

Quiver spoke up before Pellicer could answer. "There are several decks that might be good places to get off and hide," he offered, motioning with his head toward the station map on CC's datapad. "We can contact One, tell him our status, and figure out a rendezvous place and time. Then all we have to do is figure out a way off this station."

"Sounds good," Pellicer mumbled before appearing to lose himself in some very troubling thoughts again.

Darin was confused about Quiver's last statement. "We know the way back to the shuttle. What—"

He was cut off by a shake of CC's head. "They suspect one or all of us of being Rebels," she said. "Security is going to be monitoring the docking tunnels. If they see us board the shuttle, it'll be much too easy for them to follow the shuttle to the ship, and then what? We've already put it at enough risk—we have to hope the shuttle leaves before Security looks through recordings from earlier today and sees us disembarking when we arrived. Now we'll probably have to find another way off and meet up with the shuttle or *Star* elsewhere, out of sight of anyone. That's the price you pay for being part of an organization that's always hiding and always on the run."

Darin tried to suppress a grimace. This day was just getting worse and worse...and it had started out so well, too. The much-needed break had been a good distraction for him, and he enjoyed being able to feel like a normal nineteen-year-old again, even if only for a little while.

A moment later CC began fiddling with her comlink, but she turned it off in frustration after a minute or two of effort. “I can’t get through to One. There’s too much interference and shielding in here for a decent signal.”

“Fine,” Quiver said. “Next suitable deck, we get off and try. That’s...31, coming up soon. Everyone down. I’ll go first after we make sure it’s empty. Watch how I do it.”

Thankfully, the turbolift car was indeed empty, so they climbed back down into it, and Darin was only too glad to be inside the car again. Pellicer was continuing to act strangely—he looked very tense, but he also didn’t react much to anything and appeared to just be going through the motions when he had to move.

When they reached Deck 31 they all headed out and found themselves inside an empty corridor lit only with intermittent light. The pilots passed a few doors before stopping and opening one. The room was a crew quarters but mostly empty and very dusty; it obviously was not used. Two desks and a small space in the corner for food storage and preparation were all that were visible in the dim light spilling in from the corridor. Quiver turned on a desk lamp to partially illuminate the darkened room, and it reminded Darin of Melene’s nightlight. With the added light, the pilots noticed another door, which upon further investigation showed to lead into a small bedroom with a bunk bed frame and some closets.

Pellicer glanced around the main room and gave a short, quick nod. “You three hide here,” he said tightly. “Contact One.” He abruptly turned to walk out the door.

Quiver moved in front of the door before Shaun reached it. “Scoop, you’re staying here too. You’re not leaving.”

Pellicer narrowed his eyes a bit. “Yes, I am. I’m going to go find Keely now. I have to finish talking to her.”

“Are you out of your mind? Security will find you. You’re not leaving this room, so just forget it.”

“Wrong. I am leaving. Didn’t you hear anything I just said? My sister is still down there somewhere. That’s where I’m going.”

Quiver stayed in front of Pellicer as he tried to maneuver around and get to the door. “That doesn’t make any sense. What’s with you? You’re overreacting to this whole situation.”

“If you think I’m overreacting, then you have no idea what’s going on,” Pellicer bit out. He was growing less calm each time Quiver blocked him, and his tenseness was coming more to the surface. “What Keely does in the next ten or fifteen minutes will determine if I’ll still have a family in an hour. Why can’t you understand that? *This is important*, and my window of opportunity to influence it is growing shorter every second you keep me here. Once it closes, it closes forever.”

“Nothing is permanent besides death,” Quiver argued. “Besides, for all you know, Keely’s with Security right now.”

Darin had never seen Scoop fight so hard to keep control. “That’s exactly why I have to go,” Pellicer said in a low voice. “I have to talk to her before she talks to Security or anyone else in my family. If I don’t, if I can’t make her understand my side of the story, what she’ll tell them about me will ensure they’ll never want anything to do with me ever again, no matter what. I would be dead to them, and like you said, death is permanent.”

He tried to move around Quiver but was blocked again. “It can’t be that bad,” Quiver said. “Look, you’re staying here. You’ll just get caught otherwise.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You’re not thinking.”

“I’m thinking you had better let me do this.”

“I’m thinking I’d better not.”

“Get out of my way, Quiver,” Pellicer warned. “I’m really not in the mood to be having this conversation.”

Scoop tried to move around Quiver once again, and this time Quiver blocked him, grabbed him by the arms and spun him around. He forced the struggling lieutenant into the adjacent bedroom.

“Blast it, let me go!” Scoop said.

Quiver didn’t respond and kept pushing Scoop into the other room. When they reached the doorway, Quiver called, “Come here, Darin.”

Darin followed, a bit uncertainly. In the small bedroom, Quiver told Darin to turn on the lights. The bedroom’s main light switch didn’t work, but Darin found a small reading light by the bottom bunk that did. He turned it on and saw that Quiver was holding Scoop against one of the far walls. Pellicer wasn’t struggling anymore, but he looked more angry and upset than Darin had ever seen him before.

“What’s wrong with all of you?” Pellicer demanded. “Why can’t you see how important this is to me? Let me do this!”

Quiver motioned Darin over and then said, “Keep Scoop in here. It’s pretty much empty, and it’ll keep him farther away from the main door.” Looking at Pellicer, he continued, “CC and I will get in touch with One. We just can’t have you trying to leave these quarters. You’ll get us all caught.”

“No, I won’t,” Pellicer retorted. He definitely wasn’t happy about being kept in this room. “I just need to talk to my sister! If I can talk to her, I can fix all this!”

Quiver shook his head. “Too big a risk.” He motioned Darin closer, then had him hold onto Pellicer while he himself let go.

Once Darin and Quiver had swapped positions, Quiver said, “I’ll be in the other room acting as lookout so CC can concentrate on getting through to One. We’ll be turning down the signal strength, so the best comm reception will be there by the quarters’ main door.” Finally, he leaned down to whisper in Darin’s ear, “See if you can get him to settle down.” With that, Quiver was gone, and he closed the door to the bedroom behind him.

Darin chewed on his bottom lip, uncertain how well he could hold onto Scoop alone if he decided to really fight this little mutiny; it had been hard enough getting Scoop out of the tavern without assistance. He hoped Quiver and CC could get them some help soon.

The arrival of help was out of his hands, though. The only thing he could really do something about was the task Quiver had given him. *Get him to settle down*, Darin thought, looking at Scoop’s upset, agitated expression. *Right. Just like that. Simple.* Based on how strangely Pellicer had been acting, Darin agreed that would be a very good idea. Maybe once Scoop was settled down, he would revert to the confident, in-control leader Darin knew him to be. It was just too bad that Darin didn’t know exactly how to go about calming Scoop.

He figured there had to be a way, though. This was different than what had happened with Commander Mackin back on Serk Base in the farming complex reservoir: Scoop was angry and hurting, not panicked, so Darin doubted a recitation of the adventures of Thenni the Thumper would help here. A stray thought crossed his mind that Melene had liked the story of Thenni he had told the orphans, though not as much as Shiori always had.

Before Darin could come up with anything, Pellicer looked down at him and said in frustration, “Damn it, Darin, you understand! Let me go.”

“Scoop, I can’t,” Darin said regretfully. He stopped at that point, honestly not sure what else to say. How could he, when Thumper was certain he himself would be ten times more upset if he thought one of his family members hated him and had just disowned him? Compared to that, Scoop technically *was* calm.

“Yes, you can!” Pellicer said angrily, almost desperately. Darin figured he’d used up the last of his patience with Quiver. Quiver sometimes had that effect on people. “I just need to talk to Keely, that’s all. I have to find her before I lose everything!”

Darin knew what that felt like. He felt horrible for keeping Pellicer there, but he also agreed with Quiver in that it was just too dangerous for all of them if Pellicer tried to find his sister. He hated being caught in the middle like this, and he quietly and sadly responded, “Sorry, Lieutenant, but it’s too risky. Security’s looking for all of us, and most likely you in particular. It’s for your own good.”

The look that came over Pellicer’s face made it all too clear that Darin had said the wrong thing. “My own good?!” What do you know about that? My own good is being able to see my sister again and talk to her! She gets excitable. She’ll listen when she calms down. I can make her understand, and make all of this right. She’s the only one who can really say with any certainty what happened down there. Don’t you see that if I can make her understand my side of the story, not only will it give me some hope with my family, but it will also protect all of you? She won’t report you as Rebels if I can make her see that you’re not the enemy!”

It made logical sense, but based on what Darin saw of Keely’s reaction to all of them in the tavern, he honestly didn’t think it would work. He also didn’t think Shaun would be able to get her to listen to him about anything, but Darin didn’t know Keely and could give Shaun the benefit of the doubt on that at least.

Darin couldn’t dispel the first, stronger doubts as easily though. Feeling guilty at having to prevent Pellicer from trying to mend the situation, he looked away and repeated, “Sorry. We barely got away from Security as it was. We can’t do it twice.”

“Don’t you *dare* do this to me,” Scoop hissed. “Don’t you dare deny me the last chance I’ll ever have to make my family listen to my side of the story. I have to make Keely understand before she goes back and cuts me off by saying I don’t exist anymore. Once that happens, they’ll never listen to me because they either won’t believe it’s me, or they’ll simply decide I’m not their son anymore, like she did. No one is going to prevent me from taking this last chance to make things right with her and them, especially someone like *you* who should know better.”

Darin shifted his weight uncomfortably and wouldn’t meet Pellicer’s intense gaze. “Scoop, listen. I’m not—”

“No, *you* listen,” Pellicer snapped. “I know enough about your past. Tell me you wouldn’t be fighting like hell if our positions were reversed and *I* was keeping *you* from the last chance to see *your* family, so how can you do this to me? Tell me you wouldn’t give *anything* to have the chance I have right now, the chance to save your family and keep them. You don’t have the right to take that from me. Don’t you dare even *try*.”

Darin winced a little at the words—the fact that they were true made it worse—and then they started sinking in a bit more and echoed in his head. *Save them...keep them...* Pellicer’s words made Thumper’s mind flash to something he had thought about a lot, especially lately after seeing Melene in the orphanage and being reminded of everything he was missing without his

family. *I could have saved them. I could have kept them. If I had taken Shiori to work with me that day instead of letting her go to the tavern with Mom, she would still be alive...*

It made an even larger impact on him to realize that he had lost his sister in a tavern, just like Pellicer might as a result of this. Thumper fought in vain to push all the thoughts aside and took an unsteady breath to call for Quiver and CC, but he couldn't do so before he was cut off again.

“Are you jealous of my opportunity? Is that it?” Pellicer demanded. He started forcing his way forward, and while Darin still held on to the front of Pellicer's shirt, Darin was now being pushed back step by step though he hardly noticed the shift in power. “If you can't have a family then no one can, even if they have a chance to keep them? Is that the satisfaction you're getting from this, from keeping me from going after her?”

“No, it's not like that—” Darin managed to say.

The two of them were now at the bedroom door. “I need to go find Keely,” Shaun interrupted in a sharp voice. “I won't lose them because of this when I can prevent it, and the others and *especially* you don't have any right in hell to stop me. You'd want this chance just as badly as I do, and you wouldn't want *me* to stand in *your* way behind some 'it's for your own good' line, because it's *not* and you know it. I just need to talk to her and make all this right! This is my last chance, and I have to take it. If you keep me here and deny me that, you're just taking them away from me forever. You'll be responsible. Now *let me go*, and *don't even try* to keep me from my family anymore!”

Something hurt badly inside, but Darin couldn't tell if it was from Pellicer's words or from the guilt and the memories the words were dredging up again. Another flash. *If only I'd had Shiori with me that day. Mom would have come to pick her up for lunch and wouldn't have been at the tavern during the shooting either.*

If only I'd asked Dad for a ride the morning of the occupation instead of Mom. Then he would have gotten into work later and been put on another job, a later one over in the other building, not near the fuel explosion during that fight.

As always, the thoughts were getting suffocating. *If only I had the chance to change what happened, to prevent them from being lost, to keep them alive, to save them, to keep them here with me.*

If only I could apologize to them.

If only I could make sure they approve of what I'm doing.

If only I could see them just one more time, talk to them, make everything right...

If only...

Slowly, slowly, little by little, the strength in Darin's hold and his grip on Pellicer's shirt lessened. The younger pilot was externally unresponsive as Pellicer pushed past him and slapped his hand against the panel to open the door. In one purposeful stride, Scoop was out of the bedroom and heading for the main door.

Pellicer ran directly into Quiver, who was walking up to the bedroom door at that moment and saying, “Hey, One said—Oof!” The collision in the dim light seemed to startle both pilots equally, but Quiver regained his wits first and grabbed onto Pellicer. “Hold it, Scoop!” When Pellicer started struggling again, Quiver said, “Blast it, Darin, what the hell are you doing back there?!”

“Let me go!” Pellicer shouted angrily, drowning out the last of Quiver's words.

CC moved in front of her wingman and raised her voice to be heard above the shouts. “Quiet down, both of you! Someone might hear!” Turning to Pellicer, she demanded in a quieter but no less frustrated tone, “Scoop, what are you thinking?! What can you *possibly* be planning on doing?”

“I need to see Keely!” Pellicer answered, sounding equally frustrated and angry. “I have to find her! Damn it, just let me go! Stop doing this to me!”

“Seeing her will only get you arrested,” CC replied.

“No, why can’t you understand? I can fix this. I can fix all of this. I have to!”

“We’re relatively safe here, and the others are working on getting to us soon. You don’t need to endanger yourself to get us out.”

“It’s not just that,” Pellicer said in a strained voice. “It’s Keely. I won’t ever get another chance to talk to her after this.”

Quiver shook his head a bit as he held on to Scoop. “I’m sure we can set up a comm connection for you somehow later on, after we’re well out of reach.”

“No—that won’t help. It’ll be too late. As soon as she talks to my family, she’ll cut me off, and then I’ll never be able to contact them again, ever! I won’t let that happen. I can’t! And neither of you has a right to stop me!”

CC’s voice grew firm. “You tried talking to her already. It didn’t work. Maybe we’ll find another approach down the road somewhere, but this is the wrong place and the wrong time. Let everyone calm down first and clear their heads. We’ll try again, but in a different way, a safer one. Okay? We’ll help. Don’t be hasty here when there’s so much to lose.”

“That’s my point!”

“That’s not what I meant.” CC stared him straight in the eye and said, “If you go down there now, you’ll be walking right into a mass of security officers who are looking for you. You’ll get caught. After you get caught, you’ll be turned over to the Imperials and executed for defecting.”

Pellicer’s struggles against Quiver lessened, and distress and desperation replaced some of the anger in his expression. Then he shook his head hard and said, “I don’t care! I have to try!”

“Think, Shaun,” CC said. “How will being caught and executed help your family understand? How will that let you talk to them or get through to them? Their final, lasting impression of you will be that you were punished for becoming a traitor, and you’ll never have the chance to correct them or possibly even tell them why you chose this path. It doesn’t have to happen like that. It shouldn’t. Another time, another place, we’ll find a way to let you talk to Keely and your family safely and sort things out. Don’t sacrifice yourself here needlessly because that’s all that will come out of this if you go down there now. You know that. You don’t want to admit it to yourself, but you know it’s true. Are you willing to trade your life for a slim chance to say a few words to your sister when she’s in no mood to hear them anyway? Like I said, now is the wrong time.”

“This is *my* decision,” Pellicer insisted, though he looked more shaken now. “It’s my sister, my family, my life—not yours.”

CC never backed down. “You’re right—it *is* your decision, but your decision affects all of us too.”

“Not if you get out with the others like you said.”

Shaking her head, CC said, “Let me try this a different way. You wouldn’t let one of us do something like this—that is, heedlessly rushing into a hostile situation—so why would we let

you? We're trying to help, Shaun, honest. Besides, you can't expect three crazy, wimpy little flight officers to get out of here on their own, can you? You know us well enough by now—one of us is bound to make some dumb mistake, and we're going to need you to get us out of it before we're caught and turned over to the Imperials as well."

"But—" Pellicer's voice sounded strained again.

"How are you going to do that? How are you going to make sure everything goes according to plan? You can't help us if you're roaming the station or sitting in a holding cell, Lieutenant."

There was an unnervingly still pause throughout the room, then Pellicer renewed his efforts to get out of Quiver's grasp; however, while before he had been trying to push his way to the door, now he was trying to pull backwards away from them. In a strangled, conflicted voice he said, "Just leave me alone! All of you!"

CC studied him for a moment, and then she said, "Ten, let him go."

"What?" Quiver gave her a look of total disbelief. "Are you crazy?"

"Let him go," CC repeated. "It'll be okay. Trust me."

Quiver looked like he wanted to protest again, but he let go of Scoop and then quickly positioned himself between Pellicer and the door. For his part, the instant he was free of Quiver's grip, Pellicer stalked over to the farthest, darkest corner of the main room and threw himself down, then buried his face in his hands while he sat there silently. CC gave a soft sigh and watched him in concern.

After it was apparent that Pellicer had no intention of moving from that spot in the near future, Quiver made his way over to Darin.

Darin was only a few steps away inside the bedroom, where he'd been chewing on his lip and uneasily watching the events taking place through the open doorway after the push from Pellicer and the subsequent shouts had brought him back to the present. When he saw his unhappy wingman coming toward him, he took a small, involuntary step backwards.

"Come here." Quiver grabbed his arm and yanked him into the main room, over to the door leading into the corridor. That allowed them to guard the door and be able to watch Pellicer easily while giving both groups a small amount of privacy.

Without meeting the eyes of either of his friends, Darin wordlessly sat down on the floor against the wall, and CC and Quiver sat down on either side of him.

CC softly told him, "One thinks there might be a way to get us out of here and back on the shuttle immediately without putting it in danger. As soon as he and the others get back to the shuttle, he's going to talk to some people and see if they can work it out. We're supposed to lay low until he contacts us. He emphasized the 'laying low' part, since he said we didn't seem to hear it the first time before we got here."

"Kay," Darin said in a subdued voice without looking up.

Quiver sighed in frustration. "Now what's with you?" he asked quietly and with more than a hint of irritation. "You were supposed to keep him put. A simple enough task, I thought, but apparently not. Then you weren't even helping me hold him just now—you were just standing there. If he'd gotten out of here, we'd all be caught, and then what? What in the world were you doing? How'd he get past you? We didn't hear any bones cracking or heads hitting the wall, so you can't use that excuse."

Darin guiltily fidgeted a little. "Scoop's right, you know."

CC shook her head and, like Quiver and Darin, kept her voice from carrying too far. “Darin, no good will come out of him trying to contact Keely now.”

“I know, I guess, but this might be his last chance. What if it is? Once it’s gone, it’s gone, and you don’t know how awful it is once you realize it’s gone.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t do that to him.”

“I know what you mean, but—”

“No, CC,” interrupted Darin as his voice grew hard, “you *don’t* know what I mean. Neither of you does. You both still have your families: you can see them, talk to them, laugh with them, ask them questions, and until that’s taken away from you, you won’t understand.”

“Oh, so you think you can only feel loss when you lose someone related to you? Is that it?” CC quietly replied in an equally hard voice. “I’ve got news for you, Darin: you’re wrong. Every time we’ve lost a member of this squadron or thought we lost them, it’s hit me to the core the same as it would have if it had been a blood relative of mine instead. When Maptoo died, I was so upset I couldn’t think straight. You remember how I was. How was that situation any different? Wouldn’t you feel like you lost a brother if Quiver was killed?”

“Hey, let’s not jinx things here,” muttered Quiver.

CC ignored Quiver and continued speaking to Darin. “Basically, what I’m saying is that I *do* know what you mean. I know it’s awful. That’s why we have to stick together out here; otherwise, more of that is going to follow.”

“You say you understand, but you’re really comparing two different things,” Darin answered. “It’s not quite that simple to just lump everything together.”

“No, I think you can,” said CC. “Here’s why. I know you cared a lot for your family and you care about us too, and if I know you, I bet that if something happened to Quiver or Mack or any one of us, you’d find those feelings are really on similar levels with no distinction between blood and water. But you’ve got some conscious barrier stopping you from either seeing or accepting that, and it shouldn’t take a death or injury to break that barrier.

“Maybe the difference between your mentality and mine lies simply in the way we’re approaching this. Apparently, you need to be related by blood or law to another Cracian or another Stanic before you consider them family, and everyone else is a friend. There’s nothing wrong with that, but think about it in another way. What if ‘family’ was everyone you cared deeply for and who returned the favor with you, regardless of genetics?”

“I’ve already lost my family once,” Darin replied stonily. *And look what it’s done to me.* “If I think like you’re suggesting, and then if something bad happens, I couldn’t deal with that.”

“I thought Quiver already gave you his gains and losses talk,” said CC. “Don’t think of the potential losses; instead, think of how much you’d have to gain. Take everything your family ever did for you and everything you did for them and multiply it again and again, once for each squadmate, and that’s what would result. Besides, a young guy like you can’t spend the rest of his life closed off so much. You’re part of this squadron, and we’re essentially all we have out here. None of us can open a comm channel on a whim and talk to our relatives, so we’ve made each other into our family. I’ve got to tell you, if you haven’t done the same yet, you’re missing out on a lot and making everything harder on yourself. Think about this: would you rather be living with, fighting alongside and spending all your time with ‘family’ or with ‘friends’? Plus, if you’re worried that considering someone to be part of your family is just opening yourself up for more loss, you’ve got it backwards: *friends* can come and go, but a *family* you keep. Your way, you’re an orphan. My way, you’ll always have someone.”

CC took a breath and continued. “Just my humble opinion here, Thumper, but if having a family means that much to you, you’d do best to broaden your definition of that word. You may find you have one in a place you didn’t truly realize before, and then that’ll help others, like Scoop, see that as well. He’s next on the list to get this talk too, by the way. We can’t have him thinking like you apparently have been all this time if he’s really convinced he’ll never be able to talk to his relatives again. He’s not all alone now, and neither are you.”

Darin chewed on his bottom lip some more and didn’t respond right away. Finally, he quietly said, “Sounds like what Ikoa told me too.”

“My roommate’s a smart person. Wish I could say the same for yours.”

“Doesn’t make it any easier, though, and it doesn’t change the fact that I’ll never see my *relatives* again, just like Scoop.”

With a quiet sigh, CC reached over and gently pulled Darin’s head down to the side until it was resting on her shoulder. Leaning her head against his and dropping her voice down to a more gentle level, she said, “You never talk about things like this. If we had known, really known, we might have been able to help earlier, like we’re going to try to do with Scoop now. But I bet I know what happened now to cause all this with you. Ikoa told me there was a girl on that safeworld who was a lot like your sister. Did she make you miss your family again? Did seeing her make you homesick?”

Darin’s voice was barely audible when he answered, “I’m always homesick. But don’t tell Lieutenant Weas or Commander Mackin.”

“One way to fix that might be to broaden your definition of ‘home,’ too, but we won’t overload you now. One thing at a time.”

Darin mulled the words over. CC and the others were willing to help him, and at his own pace, no less. Even after all his bonehead rookie mistakes, there it was: that same unconditional support he’d gotten from his parents, who’d had to put up with all his stupid childhood and teenage mistakes but still had never turned their backs on him. Had this same support been there in front of him all along with the Coronas, and he’d just never seen it? Was he blinded so much by his past that it was putting his present and future in danger? Could he even reach for this new support while holding on with both hands to the past? Was he simply afraid that considering anyone else to be his family would mean he was being disloyal to his relatives and cheapening the meaning of the word somehow?

Regardless of what the answers to those questions were, Thumper realized he’d been dominated so much recently by the thoughts of his home and parents and sister that he’d put all of the Coronas and his duties to them in second place. As he thought about what had almost happened here because of it, not to mention the patrol two days ago when he’d zoned out and also his poor performance in the dogfight before that, he saw that he was endangering the others by acting this way. He certainly hadn’t intended to do that, but it was happening. *As if I need that guilt on top of all this*, he thought. He had to fix it. Somehow. But damn, it was going to be hard.

Darin still didn’t meet anyone’s gaze as he said in a small, faltering voice, “I’m sorry for letting go of Scoop before. I wasn’t trying to get us all caught. But I couldn’t—I can’t—”

“Poor Thumper,” CC said sympathetically. “Things can get tough, I know. But nothing happened, and everything’s going to be fine.”

Quiver spoke up, a bit incredulously. “So all this happened because you miss your family?”

“Sorry,” Darin mumbled guiltily.

“Don’t apologize for that,” CC told him. She shot a look at Quiver and said, “Leave them alone. They’ve been through a lot.”

“*They’ve* been through a lot? So have we. Or have you forgotten that we just had a problem with people trying to willingly jump into the path of the security forces after us?”

“We’re fine. Quit complaining.” Then CC whispered somewhat loudly to Darin, “Don’t listen to him. That big mean pilot over there doesn’t know how good he’s got it. I mean, come on, he’s got a family that sends him candy bars.”

Darin picked up the challenge in her voice, and he recognized what CC was doing. It was a game she liked to play, one where she secretly tried to derail Quiver’s train of thought. She’d admitted to Thumper that sometimes she did it just to have fun with Quiver, and other times Darin suspected she did it if the conversation was heading somewhere she didn’t like. The funny thing was that she always managed to shift Quiver’s mood and focus to something better without him seeming to realize she did it. Darin wondered if he did.

She’d certainly gotten Quiver’s attention now. “What?” he asked.

“It’s a hard thing to go through. Not having someone to send you candy bars, I mean,” she said with a one-shouldered shrug. “Must be the perfect family. You’d never be in Darin’s or Scoop’s situation.”

“What makes you think I don’t have family problems? Did I ever tell you about Great-Uncle Minnah? I’ve got crazy relatives!”

“You? Noooo...” CC said in mock disbelief.

Darin could tell she was winning this little game, and it made him feel a tiny bit better. He didn’t want Quiver to be mad at him.

“Besides, if you have crazy relatives, you’re much better off out here since you don’t have to deal with them this way,” CC added. “You should be happy.”

“Ohhhh, okay, I see what this is about.” Quiver sounded like he’d just had a revelation, and he seemed determined to not lose the game; he just didn’t know he was playing by different rules than his opponent. Quiver came over to the other side of CC and put his head on her shoulder, mirroring Darin’s position. His tone of voice was definitely lighter than it had been a minute ago. “My relatives aren’t here either, and I never had any brothers or sisters so I grew up all by my lonesome. Can I get some sympathy too?”

CC snorted and gave the smirking pilot a one-armed shove, and how she managed to do that and keep the rest of her body stationary, Darin didn’t know. “Quiet, you,” scolded CC, though Darin caught the barest hint of triumph in her voice. “All my sympathy’s reserved for my wingman and yours. Poor guy, stuck with you. No wonder he wants to go home.”

Keely heard another knock at the door, followed by a muffled voice calling from the other side, “Miss, are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’ll be out in a minute!” she called shakily for the fifth time in twenty minutes. Keely sniffled and wiped at her red, puffy eyes. Security had brought her here to their offices to take her statement about what had happened in the tavern, but as soon as they arrived, she had fled to the refresher and cried her heart out.

Keely had never felt so hurt and so utterly betrayed. Her own brother...someone she loved dearly and had admired and looked up to...and after all she had sacrificed to find him...

Her mind was a confused jumble of half-articulated, constantly-interrupted, conflicting thoughts. The exact thing she didn't want to happen was now going to: her father, and indeed her whole family, would learn the truth about what Shaun was now doing, what he had become. When she herself had first understood the news, she had fully intended on just going back and saying Shaun had died at the Battle of Galantos. There would be closure, and no one else would have to live with the disgrace of him being a Rebel.

However, now that station security officials were involved and there were suspected Rebels here, there would be reports written, witness statements taken, security holovids viewed. It complicated things to the point where she didn't know how to straighten it all out. She couldn't cover it up any more, not with statements from the other people in the tavern all certainly saying that she had been talking to someone she had said was her brother. Few would have missed her outbursts, both when she had first seen him and when she had learned the truth. Somehow, somehow, it would get back to her father.

There might still be ways around it, Keely thought desperately. She could say the man to whom she had spoken was an imposter who had fooled her. She could still go back and say Shaun, the *real* Shaun, was dead. After seeing and experiencing the toll his MIA status had inflicted on her family, she didn't want to say he was still missing. She couldn't.

If she didn't say he was missing, could she tell her family the truth? No, absolutely not—that would be worse for them. She couldn't bring herself to do either of those. She could say he was dead, since as far as she was concerned, her brother had died that day at Galantos at the hands of the Rebels.

If she did that, if she went back and said he'd been killed and there was an imposter running around with his identity, her father would likely try to pull a few strings to have the nearest Imperial ships go after the "imposter" and the Rebels he was working with so they could no longer "dishonor Shaun's memory." Keely could almost hear him saying those words.

Part of her was so hurt that she supported that fully; however, another part of her, the same part that still refused to accept that Shaun had willingly chosen to defect, was more hesitant about it. Though she wanted to see those Rebels hunted down and brought to justice for what they did to her brother, that approach would certainly mean Shaun's death as well since he was with them, and her father wouldn't know to tell the Imperial forces to be selective in their targets. That same part of her soul couldn't allow that to happen. If Shaun hadn't done it willingly, he could be saved. Rescued. Rehabilitated if necessary, if the Rebels had done something to him.

If he was to ultimately be rescued and saved, though, she couldn't stand up now and say he was dead. It would be even harder for her family to accept his death, have him show up later out of nowhere, alive, and then for them to learn what had happened.

She could say he was being held against his will or being blackmailed. That might work. The Imperials could stage a rescue attempt, which would both hurt the Rebels and keep Shaun safe. But what would happen when they brought him back if he maintained that he had defected on his own?

Her brother was suddenly two separate people: one was a dishonorable traitor who deserved to be turned over to the authorities and punished for his crimes; the other was a victim of a horrible war who needed her help and protection now more than ever. Keely didn't know which one she had found down in the tavern.

Another knock came on the refresher door, and then one of the female security officers opened it and cautiously poked her head in. “Miss Pellicer?” she asked gently. “Do you need anything?”

Keely shook her head and brushed some wayward dark brown hair back behind her ear. “No, I’m coming.” She couldn’t delay any longer, and her circular thoughts were getting her nowhere. Maybe she could find out what other witness statements said first. She sniffled once more and tried to pull herself together—she *was* a member of a dignified Imperial family, after all—and then she slowly walked out with the security officer.

She still didn’t know what she was going to tell them.

Epilogue

It was getting late, and Darin stifled a yawn as he finished up some work at his desk onboard *Crescent Star* a few days later.

It had taken some doing to get them off the station, even with Pellicer more or less cooperating by that point. They'd met up with Commander Mackin and some of the other Rebels from *Star* at a freight turbolift stop in another section of the unused deck where the four pilots were hiding. The plan to put the four of them in the large crates filled with *Star*'s repair parts certainly wasn't the most comfortable one, but at that point they couldn't be very choosy. So they'd been smuggled onto their own ship, crammed between sheets of hull plating and ventilation ducts. Darin wondered if he should start counting the number of times he'd been literally smuggled somewhere, and he hoped it wasn't the start of a trend.

Sitting safely in his quarters on *Star* after all that, he rubbed his tired eyes to take a break from staring at the computer screen and his work. All of the recent events and his time away from the ship had put Darin behind on some of his duties as the squadron's "Droid Wrangler." He was in charge of working with the quartermaster, Procurement and the various "scroungers" to find needed upgrades and repair parts for the astromechs. He also had to schedule time with the mechanics to implement those upgrades, make sure the records were kept straight for each droid's maintenance, and more. It kept him busy when he wasn't flying or training. Besides, now it was a nice, mindless break from everything that had been going through his head recently.

When he finally opened his eyes again, he found himself looking at a couple of his holos from back home that he had displayed on his desk. There was a new addition, too: stuck to the wall beside a holo showing Darin, his parents and his sister together was the piece of flimsi the kids at the orphanage had given him.

A small smile came to his face while Darin looked at the drawing. Earlier, thinking about Quiver's letters home had given Darin an idea. He was planning on writing a short letter to Liy and Nel'lan tomorrow to see if they would be receptive to Darin staying in touch with the kids as a pen-pal, and he was going to ask Ikoa if she wanted to do it as well. He typed himself a reminder to talk to her about it before writing the letter, and then he forced himself back to work.

Darin's quarters were unusually quiet. He'd kicked Quiver out so he wouldn't be distracted, at least externally, and now Thumper told himself he should do that more often when he had a lot of work. He'd gotten a lot done in just a few hours, though he'd sure hear about it the next day from Quiver when his roommate would start mercilessly guilt-tripping him about Quiver's bout of homelessness. In fact, Darin figured that Quiver was probably down at the Bacta Tank this very minute, having a wonderful time telling everyone how his mean old roommate had kicked him out of his own quarters and he was now living life on the streets. The pity might even land him a date, during which time it would be Darin who wasn't allowed inside their room. It all seemed to come back around, one way or another.

Darin had been a little confused by Quiver when they'd gotten back, particularly during the time when Quiver had sat him down in private and had asked question after question about whether there was something else, *anything* else, that was bothering Darin. Quiver had emphasized that Darin could trust him with anything troubling him. Darin had reassured him that he'd heard all the problems back on the station, but Thumper also noticed that Quiver used the word "trust" numerous times during the discussion. He secretly wondered if Quiver was really saying something more between the lines, or if he was simply reading too much into the

unexpected conversation. In any event, Quiver was pretty much back to normal now, and Darin figured a prank wouldn't be long in coming.

The door chime beeped, breaking the silence. "Come in," Darin called automatically. He was so used to Quiver inviting people over all the time that it didn't occur to him that Quiver wasn't there and that he didn't want distractions until it was too late.

The door opened, and Darin looked up as Pellicer hesitantly looked in. "Hi," Scoop said uneasily from out in the corridor. "You busy?"

"Not really, sir. I can finish this up tomorrow. Something I can do for you, Lieutenant?" Darin didn't know what to expect from Scoop then, and he decided to err on the side of formality. He also tried to keep his tone light but couldn't tell how successful he was.

He hadn't seen much of Pellicer since they'd gotten back from the station; CC had said he was in Mackin's office a fair amount of time, and other times even she didn't know where he went. When the two *had* crossed paths, Darin tried to act as if nothing had happened, and he never brought up any of the recent events, but the truth of the matter was that some of Pellicer's comments back on the station still stung. If Pellicer hadn't looked so uncomfortable standing there in the doorway, Thumper would have even suspected that the lieutenant had come to yell at him for what had happened. *Blast it, why do I have to be the one destined to be on the wrong end of a superior's personal problem lately?* he wondered. *This is getting really old really fast.*

He waited while Scoop walked one step inside and the door closed. Scoop took a deep breath and finally said, "I need a favor. But no ranks, no 'sirs.' It's just 'Shaun' right now, okay?"

"Uh, okay," responded Darin, feeling puzzled. Scoop never asked for favors and rarely asked for help. "What do you need?"

Pellicer didn't say anything for a long moment, and then he quietly answered, "Advice on how to cope with losing your whole family." When Darin just looked a little surprised, Scoop continued, "It's been... 'strongly recommended' that I talk about this with someone, and the counselors on board are trying to analyze me to death like they're doing a psych evaluation, so I gave up on that route. Never cared much for counselors anyway. I know the rank disparity between us might make it awkward, but...you're one of the only ones in the squadron who's had to deal with something like this, and you're one of the only ones here I've spent any real amount of off-duty time with and feel comfortable with. I just need to talk to someone who understands."

The thought of how awful that experience had been for Darin to go through alone overshadowed the remainder of the hurt he still felt from Pellicer's words on the station. True, he would have preferred to steer clear of Scoop for a while longer until the memory of the station fiasco wasn't so fresh, but Darin couldn't do that at the expense of turning his back on Scoop at a time like this. "Sure," he said softly.

Darin had often found it hard to "read" Scoop in the past, even after spending time with him when CC invited her wingman along to do things with her and Darin and Quiver, but it was more than obvious now that Scoop wasn't dealing with this well. Thumper wanted to help, and even if he couldn't offer any revelation-inspiring advice, his quiet personality made him a good listener. He knew he wouldn't understand everything that Pellicer was facing now, but Darin did understand all too well how devastating it was to be torn away from one's family and all connections to one's past, and how hard it could be to go forward when there was no going back.

Darin looked around his quarters and said, “Quiver will probably be back soon, so if you want some privacy I can take you to an empty deck where I go to just get away from it all. No one’s ever up there, and we can walk while we talk. It helps.”

Pellicer just nodded and said distractedly, “Sounds good.”

Darin closed his computer files and then led Scoop out of the room. It was late, but Darin no longer cared. A friend—no, a *family member*—needed him, and that was what mattered.

The End

Revision A

8-12-04