

“Outside Looking In”

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Prologue

Flight Officer Darin Stanic grinned a little as he walked down the corridor with his helmet tucked under his arm. Two days ago he had completed his first mission with Corona Squadron, and in fact his first combat mission ever, and according to the local tradition he was now allowed to personalize his ugly, beaten-up, hand-me-down pilot helmet and make it a little more presentable. At last it would make him look like a part of the squadron instead of some outcast who had dug the helmet out of the garbage to pretend he was something he wasn't.

Darin reached the section of the corridor that contained the quarters of the Corona Squadron pilots, and he shifted his grip on his helmet as he stopped outside one of the doors, pressed the door chime and waited. A few seconds later, he heard a heavily accented voice from inside call, “*Tranissila!* From that world to this!”

Darin hesitated. *What?* “Excuse me?” he called uncertainly.

The door opened and revealed Slurry standing there, all 1.5 meters of him. “Ah, the rookie,” said the four-eyed, four-armed, dark-skinned alien. “That is a greeting Bilgana typical, how we say ‘Enter through the door.’”

“Oh, sorry,” Darin said. He was still struggling to make out Slurry’s words even four days after first meeting him. Hell, even his real name was something too difficult for Darin to remember yet, so he just stuck to the Bilgana’s callsign like the other pilots did. “I didn’t know. Is Flight Officer Moog available?”

Slurry clicked his teeth together. “Yes, the Admiral is in.” He stepped aside and motioned Darin inside the room.

Maptoo Moog rose to his feet from where he’d been reading a datapad on the bottom bunk. “Hello.” The Gran took in the sight of Darin in one instant and said simply, “I expected you sooner.” He motioned with one hand toward Darin’s helmet.

Darin shifted his grip on the helmet again. He’d been reluctant at first to get his helmet painted because anything that made him think of that combat mission had made him break out in a cold sweat, so he’d delayed doing it. Then Quiver had sold him on the idea that he’d feel better when his helmet looked better. It had been strange logic, but it led to Darin’s thinking of being able to look like an actual squadron member, and that was something worth looking forward to. “Hi. Yeah, um, I was talking to Flight Officer Cerac yesterday, and she told me that you’re the one who usually paints all the pilot helmets here. I was wondering, Flight Officer, if you’d please do the same for mine. If you have time.”

“No need for such formality. Call me Maptoo.” Maptoo smiled, and the thing that struck Darin the most was how expressive the Gran’s three eyes were. The smile seemed to be contained mostly in them; Darin had never seen anything like that before.

Maptoo held out his hands, and Darin gave him the helmet. “Certainly I’ll help,” said Maptoo as he studied the helmet. “We can even get the chip in the crest fixed before we paint it.”

“I think Quiver said he knows someone who could do that,” Darin offered. He felt like he could fall asleep just by listening to Maptoo’s easy, laid-back voice. It was such a contrast from Darin’s wingman and roommate, Flight Officer Hentil “Quiver” Yanilr, who was constantly talking and always seemed to be looking for a laugh.

Maptoo nodded. “I know whom he’s referring to, and this person has lent his assistance in the past. That won’t be a problem, and I’ll get in touch with him. So,” he said, turning his gaze back to Darin, “do you know what you want it to look like?”

“I think so. I’ve just never tried to design something like this before.”

“There’s no right or wrong way to do it; it’s a very personal matter,” Maptoo responded. “Have you looked at some of the other Coronas’ helmets for ideas?”

Darin nodded. He’d even asked a few how they came up with their designs. Commander Quentell Mackin’s was a deep blue with a black crest and black Rebel Alliance insignias outlined with a thin white stripe. The side “horns” also had that thin stripe. Mack had said it was the basic color scheme of the squadron he had belonged to on his homeworld, and he painted his Rebel helmet that way to honor them. Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap’s helmet was white with a black crest and a red stripe going down the center of the crest. The insignias on her helmet were red, and they were superimposed over larger black insignias. She had said she just wanted a simple design in the squadron colors of red and black. Quiver’s helmet was black with bold red and white stripes shooting out from the front of the helmet where the crest began. Apparently he had found a design he liked while with his previous squadron and just changed the colors when he joined the Coronas. Flight Officer Chryse “CC” Cerac had green stripes on her beige helmet, though not as loud as Quiver’s were, and they were laid out more in a grid pattern with a black Rebel Alliance insignia over them and a black, white and green crest. Her design was also a tribute: the green was in memory of the lush life of Alderaan, and the grid pattern was a symbol for luck on her homeworld of Avalor.

In his squadmates’ helmet designs there were ties to the past, ties to the present, ties to hope. The only one Darin could really figure out how to do was the middle one.

Maptoo set the helmet on his desk, turned on the desk light and looked inquiringly at Darin. Slurry was quietly watching as well, occasionally clicking his teeth together.

Darin stepped forward and began explaining what he wanted, pointing out the areas when appropriate. “Grey for the overall base color.” Plain white seemed too boring. “Red Rebel Alliance insignia on the front of each side. Red for the top of the crest, black along the side of the crest all the way to the bottom, and then starting over here where the crest grows down a bit—” he indicated the place where the side of the helmet became more depressed about halfway back, making the crest relatively taller, “—make it a red stripe, under the black.”

A glance at Maptoo showed the Gran nodding as he followed along and took notes on a datapad. Darin continued, “Along the back of each ‘side horn,’ make it black. Along the sides there on the bottom edge of the horn, thin lengthwise stripes of silver, black, red, black, and then silver again, tapering together to a point at the back.” Maptoo nodded again. “Two red dots on the horns themselves, and the standard circle with slashes on the side of the helmet over the ears. And...” Darin said, though his voice trailed off.

Maptoo looked at him. “And?”

Darin sighed as he looked at the ugly helmet sitting on the desk. He had the squadron

colors like he wanted along with a design that he felt wasn't overly flashy and wasn't too plain either, but there was just something missing, something he hadn't yet been able to put his finger on. "I don't know. It just doesn't feel complete yet, but I can't think of what else to add. I wanted something to honor my family or my homeworld, but how do you put a planet or a lifetime on a helmet?"

"Let's give it some thought." Maptoo likewise studied the helmet. "It doesn't have to be literal. Are there any designs or pictures you associate with your family? A flower, a symbol, a crest, a silhouette, even a letter or number?"

After thinking it over, Darin shook his head.

"What do you think of when you think of your family?"

Darin fought to hide a flinch as he looked down momentarily and said, "Everything."

Maptoo offered that mesmerizing smile again. "I'm afraid that's a bit too broad." He considered, and then said, "Let's try to narrow that down. Holidays generally have an abundance of symbols; do you associate your family with any particular holiday? Is there something they ever did for you that was exceptionally memorable that we could show here? Do either of your parents work in an occupation that is especially fitting for them and can be represented in a simple picture or design?"

Darin chewed on his bottom lip absently as he considered that, trying to keep his thoughts superficial and generic to better distance himself from them; it still hurt to recall specific individual events and occasions in more detail. There was no one holiday that stood out as being better than the others. His parents had both been at work when they were killed, and he didn't want to remind himself of that. As for the memorable actions or gifts, two immediately sprang to mind: *donri* and flying. Those had been large parts of his life back home, and his whole family had shared in each of them.

Donri was a popular sport on his homeworld of Craci IV. His parents had always tried to come to his *donri* games, and at least one of them had made it to most of them. They had usually brought along his little sister as well, and Darin remembered seeing her sitting in the stands during games, pointing him out on the field. His parents once told him that when she did that, she was telling everyone around her that that was her brother. Darin strongly considered the *donri* option, but the equipment was either too hard to draw or not recognizable enough as belonging to that sport alone. He filed the idea away and moved to the second.

Flying. It made up the daydreams of his childhood and the days of his youth. Now it made up his livelihood, and it was what brought him here to this particular spot. Just a few years ago, his parents had enrolled him in flight lessons as a surprise gift, and he'd been thrilled beyond measure. He couldn't stop smiling on the day they'd told him, just like the day he eventually soloed in *Skybolt*...

Darin frowned, deep in thought. There was something there. *Skybolt* was a small suborbital ship that belonged to the family of his lifelong best friend, Cohen Nuuren. Darin had never figured out how Cohen had convinced his dad to let Darin make his first solo flight in *Skybolt*, but he did. Afterward, and after he had gotten his license, Darin had continued flying *Skybolt* whenever he could: with his friends for fun, with his family on short trips, with his sister because she just loved to see the dim moonlight sparkle on the ocean from overhead, and finally to the spaceport where he'd gotten passage offworld to join the Rebellion. He and Cohen had often let their imaginations run wild on that small ship, even long after they had supposedly outgrown such games, with Cohen pretending it was a battlecruiser he was captaining and Darin

taking the role of whichever other crew member caught his fancy at the time. *Skybolt* was a cornerstone of many different memories and aspects of his life all coming together and overlapping. That one ship was the culmination of the flying lessons his parents had given him, a direct connection to his best friend, and also a connecting point to countless happy memories with his family and friends, all of whom were dead now and sorely missed.

And in his mind's eye, on the outer hull next to the ship's entranceway Darin could see the name *Skybolt* and below that, the weathered lightning bolt that Cohen had painted on the ship years ago as a kid.

Darin's frown of concentration became a smile as he found the last puzzle piece, the one that completed the picture more perfectly than he could have imagined. He pointed to the bottom side area of the helmet, just underneath the rear tip of the "horn." "A lightning bolt on both sides. Red to match the rest. Thin black outline."

Maptoo nodded once more and seemed to sense that the design was complete. "If I can get Corporal Pentassa to fix the chip quickly, I may be able to have this done for you by the end of the day, or tomorrow at the latest."

"Really? That would be great. What do I owe you for this?"

Maptoo shook his head. "Perhaps a simple favor later. If I remember."

Darin smiled. "Thanks, Fl-Maptoo. I really appreciate it."

"Certainly. I'll comm you when it's done."

Darin left after a brief exchange of goodbyes, and then turned toward his quarters. Now would be a good time to get back to work on those datacards.

Chapter One

Yesterday Darin had been given a stack of datacards by Lieutenant Steen “Snubber” Weas, the executive officer of Corona Squadron, with the simple direction to “get up to speed.” The datacards contained operation manuals, X-wing and Y-wing and even TIE Fighter system information and diagrams, emergency and standard operating procedures onboard their ship *Crescent Star*, and scores of other similar information packets. Some of the starfighter information Darin had learned while with his training squadron, Horizon Squadron, but what he didn’t know on the datacards vastly outweighed what he did know. He had been studying them during every stretch of time he had had available since getting them, and it didn’t seem like he’d even scratched the surface. Darin wondered how the other Coronas remembered all of this and, more importantly, how in the galaxy he was supposed to.

Of course, at the moment he figured it would be a bit easier if one little thing was different...

“Hmm. I didn’t realize the flashback suppressor was that important. It always seemed like something meant more for aesthetics than function, you know?” That was Quiver. Earlier he had pulled his desk’s ejector seat chair over behind Darin and was sitting sideways on it while reading the manuals over Darin’s shoulder and providing commentary. Darin couldn’t tell if his comments were made in jest or if they reflected a sincere desire on Quiver’s part to learn the information, but in any event, they were making it hard for Darin to concentrate.

Darin glanced at Quiver out of the corner of his eye. “I can make copies of these manuals for you if you want.”

“Hmm? Oh, no, I’ve already got my own copies from when I first got here.” Quiver grinned and motioned with his head back toward his desk, which was buried under a sea of what Darin could only describe as “stuff.”

“Oh. Okay,” Darin said, puzzled. He mentally shrugged and went back to reading the manual.

It was only a handful of seconds later when Quiver asked, “Aren’t you planning on sticking around?”

This time Darin turned his head to look at Quiver. “What?”

“You haven’t unpacked yet. Are you planning on leaving in the near future?”

“Oh...that.” Darin’s duffle bag, virtually untouched, sat on the floor next to the bunk beds. “I’ll get to it later.”

Quiver checked his chrono and said, “Well, it sure can’t be now because we’ve got patrol. Come on, let’s go.”

It seemed to Darin like everything out of Quiver’s mouth today was part of a vast conspiracy to shroud him in a grey fog of utter confusion. “Huh? I checked earlier. We don’t have patrol today.”

“Yes, we do, as much as I hate to admit it. It’s on the schedule. Has been for a while.”

“But—” Darin punched in some commands on his computer console and called up the copy of the patrol schedule he’d been sent a few days ago. “See? We’re not on it today. Not for another three days, when we have the late morning advance patrol again.”

Quiver squinted at the schedule being displayed, and then understanding flashed across his face. He shook his head and gave a big sigh. “Rookie, that’s last week’s schedule! You just looked at the days, not the dates. The patrol schedule changes every week, so you have to be sure

you have the current one. Which is..." The lanky pilot with a messy blond crew cut leaned forward and input a few commands to bring up another level in the computer's database. "In here. See? Now you can access the current week's schedule." He demonstrated, and sure enough, the new file listed the pair as having an imminent escort patrol.

Darin flushed and silently berated himself for the mistake. "Oh," he mumbled. "Sorry. I didn't know." The eighteen-year-old got to his feet to go, wondering if Quiver was laughing with him or at him, and then realized something else with a sinking feeling. He was going to get in so much trouble for this oversight. "I-uh-since I thought I didn't have patrol for a while, I gave my helmet to Flight Officer Moog earlier this morning for him to paint. I don't have a helmet to use." He blushed a little more at the admission and mentally braced himself.

Instead of getting angry like his Horizon Squadron instructors would have, Quiver stood, still laughing to himself, and draped an arm over Darin's shoulders. He steered Darin out the door. "We'll go steal CC's helmet for you to use," Quiver said. "All I can say, rookie, is that you're lucky to have me around to tell you what's going on and bail you out of trouble."

"Sorry," Darin said again.

They stopped a couple of doors down the corridor, and Quiver pressed the door chime. Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap opened it, and the small, brown-haired woman smiled warmly at them. "Hi, guys. Come on in."

"Thanks," Quiver said with a grin while he pushed Darin inside. The push threw off Darin's balance as he started to reflexively salute the lieutenant, and needing to regain it gave him enough time to realize Quiver wasn't saluting. Uncomfortably following the example, he fidgeted and forced his arm to remain lowered while watching warily for any indication that Ikoa was taking offense. Darin couldn't figure out what was expected of him here-it was too different from what he'd been taught in training.

"Is CC around?" Quiver asked, taking in the otherwise unoccupied room.

"No, she's been gone for a while. Not sure when she's getting back," Ikoa replied. "Want me to tell her something for you? Something I'd be willing to repeat, anyway?"

"Not when you take all the fun out of it like that. But no, I was just hoping we could borrow her helmet for patrol now. The rookie's helmet ran off earlier this morning." He shook Darin by the shoulders a bit.

Ikoa gave Quiver a long, hard look, and then she addressed Darin. "Do you really need it for patrol, or did he tractor you into helping play a prank that he needs CC's helmet for?"

Some color came into Darin's cheeks. "I need it for patrol, ma'am. I mixed up the schedules and gave my helmet to Flight Officer Moog to paint."

Ikoa smiled sympathetically at him. "Then go ahead and take hers, or take mine. Just don't let Quiver do anything 'creative' to them." She winked. "CC will kill me if that happens. They're in our cockpits."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Quiver, for his part, looked insulted. "Such suspicion. And right in front of my brand-new wingman, no less. You're tarnishing my image and doing irreparable damage to my reputation."

With a laugh, Ikoa replied, "Better for him to learn the truth early on."

A strange chirruping sound joined in with Ikoa's laughter. Darin searched for the source in the cluttered room, and it was surprisingly easy to find: the sound was coming from a small black animal in a cage in the far corner. "You have a pet, ma'am?" he asked. He would have thought there would be some sort of regulation against that.

“He belongs to CC.” Ikoa walked over to the cage and opened it up. The animal, whose head and body were a little larger than two fists put together, immediately stepped onto her arm, and she brought it over. “Darin, meet Hue.”

“Careful, rookie,” Quiver said in a low voice. “If he decides he doesn’t like you, he goes straight for the jugular.”

“You be quiet,” Ikoa scolded. To Darin she said, “Don’t listen to him. Hue’s a sweetheart. Here, you can hold him.”

“Uh, that’s okay, I just—” Darin started to say, but Ikoa was already taking hold of his arm and letting Hue walk onto it. The four-legged animal had a pair of wings on his shoulders that now opened up and flapped to help propel him in his climb up Darin’s sleeve. Darin shied away a bit, but Hue stayed on. Hue’s black fur had glistening highlights of dark blue, purple and green, which Darin had to admit looked pretty neat.

When the little pinprick claws finally reached Darin’s shoulder, Hue sat down and squeaked, obviously content to stay right in that spot for the rest of the day. Ikoa laughed, and Hue joined in again with his chirrup sounds. Darin eyed the creature and its long, flicking tail. It squeaked again, louder this time, and in that sound Darin swore he heard his little sister squealing with delight at seeing the cute animal. He fully expected her to start tugging on his other sleeve, begging him to let her hold it or at least pet it.

He quickly shook the thought loose and brought himself back to the present, where he was just a confused, bumbling rookie pilot about to be late for patrol. Darin looked uneasily at Ikoa and said softly, “Ma’am, please... Help?”

Ikoa took Hue off of Darin’s shoulder. “We’ll let them get going now, Huey,” she said to the small avian. “See you both at fourteen.” Seeing Darin’s puzzled look, she quickly added, “—Hundred hours, for the daily briefing.”

Darin nodded at that, grateful to finally be familiar with something the others were talking about. After a short round of goodbyes, Quiver and Darin resumed their walk, first toward the pilots’ locker room to suit up, and then to the main hangar where their snubfighters waited.

The cavernous hangar was a depressing grey: grey decks, grey walls, grey hulls, grey Y-wing pilot flightsuits here and there. Even the technicians and mechanics wore light-colored jumpsuits. The only visual relief was the shimmering blue of the magcon field at the hangar exit, the wingpair’s own bright orange flightsuits, the painted markings on the snubfighters and the various colors of the droids.

In spite of the bland colors, though, Darin loved it here. The starfighters, the sounds, the smells, even the cool temperature, he loved it all. He suspected it would be his favorite place on the entire ship if not for one little thing. He willed it not to come, but it came anyway: an involuntary glance at the deck near the magcon field where that mutilated Y-wing had landed two days ago at the end of his first mission. Darin then tried to will away the imminent shudder, the burst of speed from his heart and the queasiness inside, but he was just as unsuccessful at keeping those at bay. He sidled closer to Quiver.

The wingpair walked into the subhangar that housed the X-wings of Corona Squadron. Darin waited while Quiver hopped up a ladder to CC’s cockpit and grabbed her helmet from where it sat on her seat. He also noticed Quiver smirk and quickly fiddle with a knob on one of her cockpit displays.

After jumping back down to the deck, Quiver tossed the helmet to Darin and said, “Here you go, rookie. Now let’s go preflight, then you can follow me out.”

The pilots headed to their X-wings, and Sergeant Talo Ritter, the crew chief for Darin's own fighter, walked up to him. Sgt. Ritter had a close-cropped beard, and though he wasn't much taller than the pilot he outweighed Darin by probably fifteen kilograms—thirty if you included his tool belt. From the little Darin knew of him so far he seemed to be a decent guy. Ritter vaguely reminded Darin of one of his old co-workers back home, though he had a very different accent.

More than the sight or the sound of him though, there was one thing about Ritter, and even the other mechanics, that Darin always noticed, and it was a simple smell: a combination of lubricants, fuel, sweat, cooling fluids and a musty kind of reminder that their clothing had been in constant contact with machined metals. It was a universal honor badge that all mechanics wore, and that smell constantly triggered a flood of memories for the young pilot, memories so vivid they could have happened mere minutes ago. There was Darin's father, a mechanic, getting home from work and wrapping his children in a hug before going to change; his father being playfully scolded by his mother for wearing that filthy jumpsuit at the breakfast table before he left for work; Darin tagging along to his father's job for the simple fun of it when school permitted; one of Darin's best friends, Bosko, who had also worked at the repair shop where Darin's father had, performing free standard maintenance service on *Skybolt* and showing Darin and Cohen how to do it, after which they'd all grab some lunch and go flying together. If homesickness had a smell, that was it. Well, that and the smell of a local delicacy, Icicle Cakes. Blast, a "Sickle" would have tasted so good just th—

"We got your first kill marker painted on your hull from the other day, sir," Ritter said. "Congratulations."

The sudden reminder of the mission and—as always—that Y-wing brought Darin truly back to the present again, and he once more became that lost, overwhelmed rookie pilot. He self-consciously thanked the mechanic and looked up where Ritter was pointing. Sure enough, there was one little TIE Fighter silhouette on his X-wing's grey hull.

"Overall, sir, your fighter's all set," Ritter continued. "Fueled up, ready to go." Every time Darin talked to him before a flight, Ritter looked like he was trying to hide a laugh or a smirk, and this time was no exception. The only available X-wing flightsuit onboard was too big for Darin, so they'd needed to fold and wrap parts of it to make it smaller and then hold it that way with mechanics' tape. Darin was certain he looked ridiculous and unprofessional.

"Okay, good," Darin said.

Ritter joined the pilot on the exterior preflight inspection and pointed out a few things about the control surfaces and engines he said Darin should know about. Darin took the information seriously and did his best to learn it all and ask questions when he had them; he knew Ritter was much more familiar with that particular fighter than he himself was.

This was another working relationship Darin felt completely unprepared for. The Horizon pilots-in-training had had vastly different views of how much authority a pilot should exert over his or her crew chief, particularly since the crew chiefs were generally older and more experienced than the officers flying the starfighters, namely the Horizons. Neither extreme made sense to Darin, maybe because of his personal history with people who were mechanics, so he fell into the third group who believed in some sort of compromise between the two approaches of "completely submissive" and "completely controlling." This was proving to be a lot harder in practice than Darin had thought it would be, but he learned a lot by watching Quiver casually interact with his own crew chief, and at least Ritter seemed forgiving of well-meaning mistakes.

The pair finished the exterior preflight and stopped by the ladder to the cockpit. "Good

flight, sir,” Ritter said. “Oh, forgot to mention, we even found a few more parts she was missing and put ‘em in ‘er.” He grinned and patted the fuselage.

Darin looked at him uncertainly for a moment before simply saying, “Thanks, Sergeant.” He’d been told that while his inherited fighter had been pilot-less, it had often been used for spare parts for the other X-wings. Now that he was there and needed to fly it, they’d had to scrounge around other places for the missing parts and make legitimate or jury-rigged repairs on broken hardware to fill the holes. A couple of times now, mechanics had told him they’d just put in a part that had been missing. Darin wasn’t sure if that was simply a way to mess with the new guy’s head for fun or if they were being serious, and he didn’t exactly want to find out. In any event, the snubfighter had performed without any problems the last time he’d flown it, on...the mission.

He shoved CC’s helmet on his head as if it could block the images from entering his mind, but that quickly proved to be a mistake. Trying not to wince from the discomfort, Darin slid his hand under the helmet to adjust the inside fitting and headset so it was better suited to his head than CC’s, and after his ears were no longer scrunched and yelping in pain he climbed up to his cockpit.

Once the pilot was seated, Ritter took away the metal ladder as easily as if it was made of flimsi and gave a thumbs-up to Darin before walking away. The fighter was already mostly powered up, short of the engines. Darin went through his preflight checklist, made sure his astromech droid, Botch, was secure and ready, and started the engines. Once Quiver received launch clearance, Darin followed his wingman out into the main hangar transferway and then through the magcon field into the blackness of space. Despite the subdued feeling from thinking about the Y-wing and the mission, he couldn’t help but smile as he guided his X-wing in its flight. Piloting a starfighter was something he’d never get tired of, especially when there was no combat involved. Flying didn’t get any better than this.

The first thing Darin discovered out there was that four days was not enough time to grow accustomed to the sheer enormity of the winged MC80 Mon Calamari Cruiser *Crescent Star*. His training had mostly taken place on planets, and in the last eighteen years he was used to being around transports and freighters, not ships more than a kilometer in length and capable of administering a small apocalypse. He felt very insignificant and powerless in its shadow. It was hard to believe that a behemoth like that could possibly need anything from a puny little starfighter.

Darin formed up behind Quiver, and they started their escort patrol route, which began at the starboard side of the small grey fleet and continued along the entire perimeter. Darin looked back once over his shoulder while they got into position. *Crescent Star* was doing a poor job of growing smaller with distance.

Over the comm, Darin heard Quiver sigh. “Patrol...” Quiver grumbled, clearly not enthused in the least. “I hope you’re fun to talk to, rookie: that’s the only way I can stay entertained on patrol, especially the escort ones where we just do lap after boring lap. It was bad the last few weeks when I was the odd-pilot-out numerically and I had to patrol with Snubber and Slurry. Slurry was always fun to talk to, but whenever Snubber would find out we were chatting, we’d get an earful.”

Darin wasn’t sure how to respond. It sounded like Quiver wanted him to participate in an activity the XO didn’t approve of.

Luckily Quiver didn’t seem to notice Darin’s silence. He continued talking, launching

into a story of a particularly memorable patrol conversation with Slurry that Lt. Weas had put an unfortunate and premature end to, and then he interrupted himself in the middle of a sentence and hit the ground running with a completely different topic. “Hey, rookie, have you been properly introduced to the other ships in this fleet?”

After Darin mentally aligned himself with Quiver’s new direction, he said, “No, not really. I started reading up on them with those datacards, but—”

“Oh, that’s not an introduction,” Quiver said dismissively. “Here, I’ll show you around now while we’re on patrol.”

Darin brightened. That was a safe, duty-related conversational topic that would hopefully keep Quiver “entertained.” Besides, there was so much he needed to learn about these ships that anything would help. “Sure, I’d like that,” Darin said.

“Good. Come on.” Quiver increased his throttle, which forced Darin to do the same, and soon they were near the first ship to be the subject of Quiver’s talk.

The fleet wasn’t large, which Darin later realized was probably a good thing. As they went to each ship in turn and Quiver introduced it by telling him more than he had ever expected to hear about each one, Darin felt he would have gone crazy from information overload if there had been any more ships present. These five were quite enough for him at the moment. There was a Bulk Cruiser named *Darkspeed*; a broken-down, barely flightworthy Dreadnaught officially named *Stellar Echo* but usually called *Bacta Patch*; *Providence*, a Gallofree Medium Transport; *Windstar*, a Corellian Corvette; and of course, *Crescent Star*.

Even with the information overload, Darin felt that the patrol was going rather well and he was feeling relatively comfortable with everything until he asked Quiver why *Stellar Echo* was still being used if its condition was obviously so bad. Darin began to regret the question after it led to a brief overview by his wingman of the sheer desperation and undersupplied nature of the Rebellion. While Darin had noticed this predicament during training, its gravity hadn’t truly sunk in until Quiver ended his overview and summed it all up with a pertinent example.

“...So you see, rookie, this little situation we like to fondly call ‘being critically short on everything we need’ is everywhere in the Alliance, and especially out here. Look at this fleet if you don’t believe me. According to the people with more colored rank squares than me, this fleet has an important mission. We’re the only concentrated Rebel presence in this entire area of space. We have to aid allies, try to win others to our side, make strikes of opportunity and keep our ears open for any news on the Imps, all while staying out of sight—or at least out of reach—of the Empire to avoid getting blown up. We’re the Rebels’ only mobile powerhouse for this area, and it’s more space than we can cover, but we have to anyway. To support us, those same people with the numerous colored rank squares have sent quote ‘all they can afford’ unquote, and so what do we have? An MC80, a dilapidated Dreadnaught, a small handful of escort craft, and a grand total of two starfighter squadrons that aren’t even at full strength.”

Darin couldn’t do anything but absorb that for a few moments. He’d thought they had their work cut out for them before, but now...

Life in this fleet was going to be a little more complicated than he’d first thought.

The rest of the patrol passed uneventfully. Darin concentrated on watching his sensors and practicing staying in proper formation with Quiver’s fighter. He also better familiarized

himself with his fighter's cockpit displays, since their layout was a bit different than his Horizon X-wing's had been. While they flew, Darin kept turning the tour information over in his mind, forcing himself to remember the important operational and emergency parts while trying not to think about how many people were on all these ships that would rely on him and the other starfighter pilots for protection during a fight. He'd barely been able to protect one damaged Y-wing in combat—how could he protect a capital ship, or numerous capital ships? Darin didn't know, and that ignorance frightened him. He'd been taught ways to defend capital ships while in his training squadron, but his first mission with the Coronas had shown him that theory and practice were quite different.

After the patrol was over, the wingpair changed back into their beige general duty uniforms and went back to their quarters. Darin threw himself into the various operations manuals and ship information datacards with a renewed, almost desperate vigor. There had to be some information in there that could be used to help protect the fleet ships during a fight. He had to find out what it was before something happened and other people were counting on him to protect them.

Darin was so engrossed in trying to absorb as much of the information as he could that he jumped a few centimeters when a loud banging sounded on their door.

An instant later, a voice replaced the banging. "Hey, come on! I'm hungry!"

"Coming!" Quiver called.

"I'm gonna hack into your door access panel and drag you out of there if you don't hurry!"

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" Quiver said. "The mess hall's not going anywhere. Relax!" He opened the door and walked out.

Darin caught a glimpse of CC standing in the corridor. It didn't really surprise him that she was there: Quiver and CC seemed to get along well with each other, and Darin got the impression they hung out together a lot when they were off-duty.

CC told Quiver, "I'll have to remember that line for the next time *you're* hungry and squawking at *me* to hustle." The last part was nearly drowned out by the closing of the door, and the small room was plunged into silence.

Darin looked at the closed door for a moment and chewed on his bottom lip. Eating lunch with those two might have been fun, but they hadn't even acknowledged his existence.

He had just turned back to his computer console when the door opened again and Quiver strode in with a big sigh. "You've been messing with those datacards long enough, rookie. CC's hungry, and she's complaining about it. So come on. What are you waiting for, an invitation?" Quiver grabbed Darin's collar and yanked him off the crate serving as his seat.

Darin yelped a bit, then he let Quiver tow him to the door. "Well, actually, yeah," Darin admitted. "I didn't want to—"

"You never need an invitation to do things with us," Quiver interrupted as they joined CC in the corridor.

While they started for the mess hall, CC shook her head hopelessly and swatted her black hair behind her shoulder. "Poor rookie. So naïve. So innocent." She looked sideways at Quiver through narrowed eyes and then added, "I guess I should enjoy it while I can. It won't last long since he's stuck with you."

"So don't ever say I'm not doing my part," Quiver responded.

Darin wasn't exactly sure what they meant, but he didn't ask and simply absorbed their

conversation as they walked. Quiver and CC more than made up for his share of it.

Before long they had made it through the maze of corridors to the warm mess hall. Darin had already eaten here a few times with only Quiver, and he was happy that he wasn't completely clueless about the meal process anymore. He followed the other two pilots as they all got their food, an unappealing grey mash of some sort that Darin couldn't readily identify, and went to a table near the wall about ten paces from the door.

Quiver and CC sat down across from each other with practiced ease, and as the odd-man-out Darin decided to sit next to CC so he could more easily talk to Quiver. Darin set his tray on the table and had barely sat down himself when CC reached over and took the drink he had gotten.

"Thanks, rookie. It was nice of you to get this for me." CC smiled at Darin and took a drink of the juice before putting the glass down next to her own plate.

Darin blinked. "But...that was my ju--"

CC cut him off by saying to Quiver, "See? The rookie's nice to me. Force knows I'd never get that kind of treatment from *you*. You could learn a thing or two from him."

A moment later Quiver jumped just a little and retorted, "Ow! Hey now, what makes you think I'm not nice?"

"If I were to start answering that, I'd die of old age before I could list everything."

"How do you know I didn't secretly tell him to get some juice for you so he could get the credit?" Quiver shot back. "Because that's just the kind of guy I am. Always thinking of others before myself."

The words were barely out of Quiver's mouth when something hit Darin hard in the shin. He jumped and yelped, then looked under the table to see what had attacked him.

Quiver and CC burst out laughing. "Sorry, rookie!" Quiver said with an amiable smile. "I wasn't aiming for you. Force of habit: I just forgot to account for your being there when I started my Patented Sidewinder Retaliatory CC-bound Kick."

"You protected me from your big mean wingman!" CC beamed at Darin. "How sweet!"

This wasn't the kind of lunch Darin had expected. "Do you two always kick each other under the table?" he asked.

CC nodded. "Pretty much, yeah."

"It's just one of our many mature, creative outlets," Quiver added.

"Well, I'm going to go get a new drink before I get caught in the line of fire again," said Darin. He got up and wove between tables and people on his way back to the drink dispensing station.

A minute later he had his new glass of juice and turned to go back to their table. When he got within sight, he stopped in confusion. The table was empty. Even all three trays were gone. He frowned and looked around, even though he was certain he had the correct table. Quiver and CC were supposed to be there, and they couldn't have finished lunch so quickly.

Had they been scrambled to go fight? Darin's comlink hadn't alerted him to any incoming calls, but maybe he was still too new and the person in charge had forgotten to notify him. But another fight... *Please not another fight*, he thought with growing uneasiness.

Darin looked around the mess hall a little bit faster, but all he saw were unknown faces and features of a place and situation that seemed overwhelmingly foreign to him all of a sudden. "Quiver? CC?" he called, trying to keep his volume down while making his voice carry at the same time.

A few increasingly anxious moments later, he spotted them sitting at a table in the middle of the room. Exhaling in relief and feeling silly for getting so scared over nothing, Darin walked over to them.

Quiver looked up as he approached. “There you are,” Quiver said before Darin had a chance to voice that exact same thought to them. “We were just about to scramble a SAR team for you.”

“What are you two doing over here? Why’d you change tables?” Darin asked as he sat down. He might have thought they were trying to ditch him except that his tray of untouched food (minus his original drink) was sitting beside CC’s, just like it had been before. It was like nothing had changed except for their location.

CC looked confused. “What do you mean, ‘why’d we change tables’?”

“Just what I said. What was wrong with the first table over there?” Darin jerked his thumb back in the direction of the previous table.

Quiver was looking at him strangely too. “What are you talking about, rookie? We didn’t change tables. This is where we’ve been the whole time. I bet your chair’s even still warm.”

“But...wait, no. I’m pretty sure you were back there before. We were by the wall.”

“It’s a big mess hall. It’s okay to admit you got lost and couldn’t find your way back here,” CC added. “We’d understand that because you’re new. But to start making things up like saying we moved to a different table...” She shook her head woefully. “I’d expected better than that from you, rookie. You seemed so promising.”

“But—but I didn’t—um—sorry,” Darin finished in a mumble. Wait, how come he was starting to feel guilty for a lie he never told? Or had he? His previous steadfastness and belief that he was right about the whole situation began to waver. The mess hall *was* big, and it *was* easy to get lost amid all the tables... He sighed a bit. If he wasn’t right, then either these two were really good actors or he was really gullible.

After accepting that he wasn’t going to win, Darin began to eat. It wouldn’t surprise him at all if his callsign ended up being “Confusion”: it seemed like that was already his middle name here. What a wonderful impression he was making on the others.

Chapter Two

Going to see doctors or medical droids was high on Darin's list of "Routine Activities to Not Do Willingly". Hospital and doctor visits hadn't been quite so bad before his homeworld's occupation, but since then it was too easy for his imagination to go wild merely by seeing one blood-soaked bandage. Whatever control he'd managed to get over his mental imagery over the last few months had been erased by seeing the fatal, red results of that Y-wing two days ago. Now his imagination was harder than ever to hold onto.

So when Lt. Weas had told him earlier that he'd scheduled a routine incoming physical and vaccinations for Darin for after lunch that day, Darin wasn't too happy. Regardless, he arrived at medbay right on time and tried to keep his sights on the clean, sterilized areas and away from some of the other patients. Outsmarting his mind was trickier, but he tried to distract himself with thoughts about the earlier escort patrol and the somewhat unusual lunch he had had with Quiver and CC. He could honestly say he hadn't expected the antics those two had shown at lunch. It had just been...odd. An X-wing schematic from a datacard that he also mentally ran through while waiting made more sense to him than Quiver's and CC's behavior.

Finally his physical got underway, and Darin eagerly awaited his escape, which was now within sight. During the physical, the medical droid inquired about the bruise on his shin, but Darin brushed off the question by saying he bumped into something.

Darin began his retreat from medbay as soon as the appointment was over, and in fact a few moments before it technically was. He was nearly out when he was stopped by a voice calling, "Rookie!"

He paused and looked around. It was then that he noticed he had just passed the recovery room where Flight Officer Jenna Deltond of Quake Squadron had been staying since she piloted the damaged Y-wing back at the end of The Mission. Darin's stomach twisted into a knot as he slowly backed up and stopped in the open doorway. "Hello, Flight Officer."

The blond woman smiled at him from where she lay in bed, sitting upright against the bed's headboard. Medical monitoring equipment on the wall behind her displayed information about her condition on softly lit panels. "I thought that was you who just ran past! Don't be shy. Why don't you come in for a minute, sweet little rookie?"

"Uh, all right," Darin replied, trying to cover up his anxiety. He stepped into the room but hovered near the door. Jenna had considerably fewer bandages on than she had had right after It happened. Now from what Darin could see there was only a light wrap on her left forearm and a couple of small bacta patches on her face and the side of her neck. "How are you feeling?"

Jenna shrugged. "All right. They just want to monitor my progress a while longer. Thankfully I wasn't hurt too badly, considering." Darin tried to rein in his imagination at that. "Hey, will you do me a favor and get me a glass of water?" The wishbone pilot pointed to a pitcher on a table across the small room.

"Sure." Darin obliged and waited while she downed most of the glass at once.

"Much better. Thanks." She put the glass on her bedside table and motioned with her head to a chair. "Have a seat," she invited in a friendly tone. "I'm bored out of my mind. Unless you have someplace you need to be, of course."

The part of Darin that wanted so badly to escape prodded him to lie and say he had somewhere to be; however, he knew from experience that the part of his conscience that was feeling guilty after hearing her say she simply wanted some company was the bigger bully of the

two. He shook his head. “No, I’ve got some time.”

“Great,” Jenna said as he sat down. “The other Quakes have been stopping in pretty much, but they’re all simming now for some upcoming mission, so I’ve been going crazy. Usually Carsyn would be keeping me company, but...” She trailed off.

Darin tried not to squirm. Carsyn was Jenna’s gunner and the one who had died when their Y-wing was hit. “Yeah,” he said, thinking he ought to say something, though he didn’t know what. “I’m—I’m really sorry about Carsyn. I didn’t really know her, but it seems like you two were good friends.”

“Thanks, rookie. And we were,” Jenna said, her small smile now distant and full of sadness. “These days have been really hard. I miss her a lot. We worked together so much and did so many things together, and now she’s gone. It’s so empty now.” She sniffled just a little, looked down and blinked hard a few times.

Memories of home lumped in his throat, and Darin forced them down with a couple swallows. His heart beat a little faster. In spite of what Quiver had told him after the mission about gains and losses and everything, apparently losing a good friend cost just as much in this setting as it did elsewhere, and it had the potential to hurt just as badly. That prospect made his palms grow sweaty, and Darin tried to discreetly wipe them off.

Jenna cleared her throat. “I know Carsyn would have liked to have gotten to know you,” she continued after looking back up at the younger pilot. “I bet you would have gotten along well with each other. Oh, sorry for not telling you this earlier, but thanks for escorting us back after we got hit.”

Darin wondered if Jenna knew how close he had come to getting her killed when he made a bad mistake while covering them. “No thanks are necessary.”

Jenna grinned at him a bit. “So how have you been doing? Settling in all right? Is Quiver being nice to you?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Darin answered, looking at the hard, white floor. “It’s going okay.”

“That’s good.” Jenna reached for her glass of water again and in doing so noticed her bedside chrono. “Oh, rookie, it’s getting close to 1400. You guys have a briefing today? I don’t want you to be late.”

Darin was torn between relief and guilt at the relief. “Yeah. I should get going. Will you... um... will you be okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be out of here soon. Thanks for chatting. And that glass of water does not count as the drink you still owe me.”

“Right. Well, I—I’ll see you later.” Darin got up and headed for the door.

“Oh, keep the door open after you leave, please.”

Darin paused and turned back to Jenna. “Why? Doesn’t it get loud in here with it open?”

“Yeah, but being able to hear and see things going on out there in medbay makes me feel connected to the rest of the world. I like it better that way, and like my doctor’s been telling me, a happy person is a person who heals faster. I need all the ‘happy’ I can get right now.”

“Oh. All right.”

“Thanks, sweet little rookie. Say hi to the Coronas for me. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, Coronas, let’s get started,” Commander Mackin said from the front of the room at

the beginning of their daily briefing. The rest of the pilots gradually quieted down, including Quiver and CC who were softly snickering with each other about something. Darin wondered if they'd been laughing about his reflexive jolt to attention when the commander had entered the room. He took a deep breath to try to release some of his frustration and turned his attention to the briefing.

“You should all have gotten notifications of this, but as a reminder, our downtime activity with the Quakes is tomorrow night.”

Darin frowned a bit. He hadn't received any notifications of any downtime activity.

“Attendance by everyone is strongly encouraged. Attire is civvies or general duty uniforms without rank plates, your pick. Barring any unexpected happenings, the food will be served and the dance will start at 1900 hours in the forward hangar.”

Darin was too surprised at hearing those words to notice the reactions of the other pilots.

No one seemed to notice his reaction either, and Mackin went on with a different topic. “Immediately after we're done here, we'll be going to the sim room. We've got a new mission to start preparing for.” Darin's breath caught in his throat. “It's a strike against a large Imperial manufacturing plant that produces a number of things from stormtrooper armor to TIE Fighter solar panels. We've been wanting to make a strike against this target for a while, and now the timing is right. The plant's located just outside of a civilian city on the surface of a planet, so collateral damage must be kept to an absolute minimum. That means no firing on buildings or emplacements or vehicles that you aren't 100% certain are your target or hostile. Go out of your way to avoid involving civilians if you need to. We'll be prepping for this mission for a few days to ensure that everyone will be comfortable with what they're looking for. Everyone understand?” The Coronas nodded and offered scattered affirmatives.

“We're teaming up with the Quakes on this. Now, we'll be going down first. Our objective is to scout out the exact location of the plant and the best way for the Quakes to get there. If we can find good target locations for them on the manufacturing plant itself, that'll help even more. Once we're there, we'll be taking out any defenses the plant has. We know for certain that it has some anti-air emplacements, and we have to destroy all of those so the Quakes can get as good a run against the plant as they can. The emplacements will be small, so we'll have to get up close and personal. The Quakes will be circling between the planet and the fleet while we're down there. After we've gotten most of the targets and sent the sensor data to the Quakes, they'll follow us down to do their job, which is to destroy or cripple as much of the manufacturing plant as they can. At that time we'll either stay with them or go back to the midpoint spot where they were, depending on how things shape up. That's the overview. Now we'll get into more of the details.”

Mackin brought up some images and data on a holoprojector on the front table, and Darin tried to follow along and take notes on his datapad. That proved to be a challenge, considering how his palms were sweating and his stomach was already churning at the mere thought of going on another combat mission. Darin chewed on his lip and glanced around at the other Coronas, who were scattered in various seats throughout the cramped room. None of them looked concerned in the slightest. A few, like Chopper and Kalre, even looked bored.

When Mackin had finished, the pilots all went to the locker room to change into their flight gear and then to their fighters to get their helmets and flight gloves. Maptoo told Darin his helmet wasn't ready yet, so Darin jogged over to the Quakes' subhangar, found a member of that squadron, hurriedly introduced himself and begged to borrow a helmet long enough for the sim

exercise. Once he got one, he ran back and caught up to the rest of the Coronas just as they were leaving the hangar.

Lt. Weas stopped him at the exit and asked why he was running up with a Y-wing helmet. After Darin explained why he didn't have his own helmet at the moment, Snubber demanded to know what Darin would do if they were being scrambled for a real fight then instead of a sim run. Darin had never considered that possibility and didn't have a good answer, and then he got the verbal reprimand from Snubber that he had expected that morning when explaining the situation to Quiver. Being chastised about it was just as bad now as he had thought it would be then.

Chagrined, Darin mutely followed Lt. Weas and the other pilots to the sim room, where their astromechs were all waiting. It wasn't too long before the pilots and their droids were ready and situated in their simulator cockpits, and the simulation began.

They came out of virtual hyperspace near a planet covered with clouds. The Coronas got into formation, and Darin began to as well but the movements of Quiver's fighter threw him off. The way Quiver was set up with the others, it would put Darin in a position outside the normal formation unless he flew on Quiver's off-side. Darin hung back a little and keyed his comm. "Ten?"

"Yeah? Oh. Sorry, Nine. Forgot." Quiver swung over to his proper position, and Darin settled into his. *This mission is starting off extremely well*, he thought sullenly. At least there would be no capital ships to protect; he didn't need that anxiety on top of everything else.

They spread out into a looser formation going through the atmosphere, and soon they came within sight of the city as they broke below the lower cloud layer. Snow lay on the ground beneath them and on the roofs of the houses they flew over. The rising buildings of the city ahead grew larger and larger.

The sight somewhat reminded Darin of when he and his friends would fly *Skybolt* to the city of Corvallis on his homeworld in the wintertime. Then he wondered if any Imperial TIE pilots who were stationed near Corvallis now would see this same kind of sight while flying there in the winter.

Something in that last idle thought disturbed and startled him, and he quickly shook himself out of it.

"Pay attention, Nine!" Lt. Weas snapped. "You're drifting out of formation."

Darin jerked his fighter back into place. "Sorry, sir." In all the sim runs he'd done with his training squadron, he'd never compared any to his homeworld before. Why did it happen now, of all times?

They were now flying over buildings on the outskirts of the city, though their altitude would have put them above the tallest downtown skyscraper. Most of the civilian airspeeder traffic was below them.

The pilots got to work trying to locate the plant. It soon became visible on the far side of the city, and the Coronas circled around the downtown area while they approached.

"S-foils in attack formation," Mackin ordered. "Get your sensors up and running: we need all the detail we can give the Quakes. First priority is taking out the defenses, second priority is finding good targets. Watch the collateral damage on surrounding buildings."

The manufacturing plant ahead was massive. Numerous exhaust stacks belched smoke and gases into the air. A shipping dock on one side had large loading areas and tall cranes for hoisting payloads. The main building itself had unusual towers and rods and cables in seemingly

random places over its chaotic architecture. Darin couldn't imagine what all the differently-shaped bays of the plant were used to test for and manufacture.

At just about the time the X-wings had moved beyond the city, a red blip appeared on Darin's targeting scope, and his sensors identified it as a powered-up anti-air emplacement. He couldn't see the weapon out his windows.

"There's our first. Break by pairs and cover as much ground as you can," Mackin ordered. "It's going to start getting hot. If you find a target location or emplacement, tag it on sensors for everyone. Destroy as many emplacements as you can."

Darin followed Quiver as he broke off and headed at an angle around the plant. "Hey, Nine," Quiver said, "I found a good way to get close to the plant and get some great sensor readings without getting shot at. Come on."

That sounded just fine to Darin...or at least it did until he noticed Quiver was taking them directly toward the lines of exhaust stacks. "Ten? Are you sure about this?"

"Of course. We'll fly between the stacks right up to the building. Who's going to put defensive equipment in between rows of exhaust stacks? No one. Free passage for us, and then we can come back and hit all the emplacements from their non-firing side, the side facing the plant. See?"

Darin wasn't too certain, but he wasn't going to question a veteran like Quiver. Very soon they were in the narrow space between two lines of exhaust stacks. The pair stayed toward the top of the high stacks and just below the smoke to get a better sensor view around them.

They had barely entered the row of exhaust stacks before a weapons emplacement dead ahead of them lit up Darin's scope. Then another behind. Then another ahead. The anti-air weapons began to fire.

"Whoa, Junkit!" Quiver said.

"What?" Darin asked. At the same instant, he saw Quiver's fighter roll 90 degrees to stand on a wingtip and then fall like a slab of duracrete in that position toward the ground. Darin had never seen a maneuver like that before.

Darin jerked out of the way of the initial barrage of weapons fire, which Quiver's fighter had managed to fall beneath just in time. "Ten!" He tried to steer his X-wing to follow Quiver's, but he couldn't do so before a laser bolt from an anti-air emplacement hit him. Before he could wrestle back control of his fighter, another impacted his shields, then another. Darin frantically tried to get out of the crossfire, but every hit made it harder for him to regain control, and he had no maneuvering room. Botch squealed in alarm as another hit ripped the last chunk of energy away from the X-wing's shields.

Desperately Darin yanked his fighter's nose skyward and slammed in his throttle. If he couldn't go down and he couldn't go to the sides, then only up remained. The X-wing strained to ascend, and within seconds he was completely enveloped in the thick black cloud of smoke spewing out from the stacks. An unexpected flash of panic-induced claustrophobia told him that if he was in the smoke, he was over the stacks and therefore could and should get out *now*. Without checking his sensors, he jerked his fighter to the side to escape the smoke.

One second later a dull red glow came from below his X-wing, and before he knew what was happening his fighter was violently kicked skyward from underneath. His bucking X-wing spun out of control again and knocked Darin around in his cockpit, and diagnostics lit up the console with damage reports. Almost instantly he was out of the smoke, but now his view was a confusing, spinning blur of a smoke line, light grey clouds and white ground. His instruments

were no help either: the ones that were still working were just as chaotic as the sight out his windows.

Darin did everything he could think of to stop the spin, especially when he noticed that the blur of white ground was getting larger and larger compared to the other two. The handful of heartbeats he had to accomplish this feat weren't enough, though. His fighter hit the snow-covered ground nose-first at high velocity, and the hum of his simulator's equipment fell silent and the viewport opaqued. He was dead.

Darin sighed miserably and climbed out of the simulator. A whole lot of good he'd just done on that mission. He hadn't had a chance to tag anything on sensors, let alone even try to shoot, before he'd crashed. He hoped none of the others had seen that: it was too embarrassing, especially for so early in the run.

He walked over to the viewing monitors on the side of the room so he could watch the rest of the sim run. Once he got there, he sat down by a monitor and grabbed a headset so he could listen to the squadron frequency as well.

"You're kidding. Nine's already out?" someone was saying.

"Ten, same old drill, join up with me and Seven," said Weas. *"Just like old times."*

"Copy, Eight."

Darin slumped in his chair as he watched the others proceed with the mission. They were almost always getting shot at by the weapon emplacements, but rarely was any pilot hit twice in a row. Several of them did the same maneuver Quiver had done when they were shot at, and that seemed to get them out of the way for a time, especially when they were flying in between tall obstacles.

The sim run kept going, and the other Coronas kept destroying targets and reporting promising bombing locations. Darin took the headset off and paced around. He obviously wasn't needed for this mission. They were getting through it just fine without him. He was probably more of a hindrance than a help.

Darin stopped and watched the monitors a bit more while standing. He wondered if it was too late to tell Maptoo to not bother finishing painting his helmet. It was becoming all too clear that he hadn't earned that particular rite of passage yet, even though he had accomplished the letter of the law. Surviving that first mission had probably been nothing more than a fluke of dumb luck.

The sim wound down at last, and Darin watched as the others began getting out of their simulators. He chewed on his bottom lip and wondered what it would be like to also be climbing out of a simulator now amid that group of fighter pilots instead of sitting alone by the monitors across the room.

Probably the only way he'd ever find out would be to spend every available minute practicing in the sim. That might have been doable if he wasn't already spending every available minute studying those datacards.

Darin sighed and wondered how little sleep he could survive on.

Chapter Three

One hour ago it had been all Darin could do to leave off the phrase, “Oh, that’s easy, sir,” whenever he answered one of Lt. Weas’s questions in the unexpected oral test regarding X-wings late the next morning. Soon after that the answers started needing some amount of thought. A half hour ago the difficulty of the questions began requiring Darin to concentrate and think things through. Fifteen minutes ago he was racking his brain. Now he was standing beside an open engine compartment with Weas, who had just told him to point out five parts of the engine Darin had never heard of before.

He helplessly stared into the guts of the engine, silently begging it to telepathically tell him the answer to Weas’s directive. The engine remained quiet. Darin shook his head and said, “I–I can’t, sir.”

“Then tell me the in-flight procedure for configuring your X-wing to fly through an ammonia atmosphere.”

Darin hadn’t even known there was such a procedure. He looked down and said, “I don’t know it, sir.” He wearily rubbed his eyes and wished he could get out of Weas’s crosshairs.

“What about the maximum rate of turn in a location with an effective gravity of five times the standard? Do you know that?” Weas asked.

Darin kept looking down and slowly shook his head. “No, sir.”

Weas crossed his arms. “This is the kind of information that could save your life one day. That day could be today, it could be tomorrow, there’s no way to know. Have you read those datacards I gave you?”

Darin looked up at Weas. “Yes, sir, I have been. Every chance I get.”

“You need to do better, Flight Officer. We’ll stop for now and pick this up again when you’ve had a little more time to prepare. Maybe another day or two.” Weas walked away.

Darin was halfway to a salute when he realized that Weas was already gone. He let his arm fall limply to his side, then he slouched against the X-wing’s fuselage and intentionally banged his head against it a few times. He should have done better. He *had* to do better. If only he wasn’t so blasted tired. It didn’t help that the strange sounds on the ship and memories of his first mission were keeping him up at night, though he had been using that time to go over more of the datacards. For all the good that had just done him.

He felt like his brain would explode if he memorized one more fact, so he decided to go work on his other big deficiency instead during the time he had now for lunch. Darin walked over to where he had set his helmet down when Weas had come up and started quizzing him. Maptoo had done a great job painting it, and it looked even better than Darin had pictured in his mind. Now he just had to honestly earn that paint job. He went over to his own fighter to get his flight gloves, then he tucked his helmet under his arm and started walking to the hangar exit.

Quiver caught up to him about halfway out. “Hey, rookie!” he said excitedly. “Come on! CC sweet-talked one of the mess hall cooks into letting us taste-test and give input on some of the food they’re making for the dance tonight.”

That sounded like fun, but Darin quickly dismissed the thought. “Thanks, but I can’t,” he said. He tiredly brushed his dark blond bangs away from his eyes. “I’ve got way too much to do.”

“How can you have so much to do? You just got here! You’re not even unpacked yet!”

“It’s because I just got here. Maybe I’ll have less to do someday when I’m like the rest of you, but not until then.” Darin continued his walk to the locker room.

Quiver caught stride with him. “The way you’re saying that makes me think you’re not expecting to be able to get to know us and have fun with us for a long time. I sure hope I’m wrong.”

“Quiver,” Darin said, “getting to know you won’t do either of us any good if I’m not good enough to survive the next mission or if I accidentally take one of you down with me.” *Or if something else happens and one of you ends up dying*, he thought. *Was this taste-testing the sort of fun activity that Jenna and Carsyn had done before It happened?* A cold flutter of fear in his stomach strengthened his resolve to avoid it.

“Now you’re just being a pessimist,” Quiver scolded. “You’ll be fine. But I don’t care how busy you say you are, at the very least you’re coming to the downtime tonight.”

Darin fidgeted and looked away. “I don’t really want to.”

“Too bad. You heard Mack: everyone has to go. I’ll track you down and drag you there myself. As for now, some of us will be in the mess hall if you find you’re not as busy as you thought.” Quiver walked off in a different direction.

Darin forced himself to stay on his original course and not go with. The taste-testing activity still did sound like fun, and deep down he began wondering how long it had been since he had simply had some silly fun with someone. When the answer finally came that it had been with Cohen before the occupation, the ache inside reminded him of why it had been so long and why it would be even longer.

Once inside the locker room, Darin chewed on his lip and tried to rub away the first small throbs of a headache while he changed into his flight gear, then he grabbed his helmet and walked to the sim room. It was empty, and that suited him just fine.

Darin sat back in the simulator’s seat, smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, on the third try after he’d come in here to practice the mission by himself, he’d gotten to the plant past the initial barrage by a group of anti-air weapons. He’d gotten close enough to find another group of weapon emplacements and take a few shots at it, too, but for right now he was happy at getting past that first stumbling block. Maybe Quiver knew something he didn’t, but it was much easier approaching the plant out in the open, not through a virtual tunnel of exhaust stacks. Fifteen minutes of practice before starting the mission sims had also allowed him to piece together a very rough maneuver that somewhat mimicked the one he had seen Quiver and some of the others do, and that helped him get through some of the emplacements’ barrages in tighter locations between some of the obstacles and bays.

He hit the button in the simulator to start the mission again and randomize the locations of some of the weapon emplacements. Time to see if that last one had been a fluke or if he could get through it again now that he knew when and how to start dodging.

The simulator viewport flickered to life, and he flew by himself down to the planet. The ground got closer and closer, and soon he was skirting around the snow-covered city. Just a few more seconds before the first anti-air emplacement would have him in sight and he’d have to start evading—

Botch whistled in alarm, and one second later the prospect of the anti-air weapon was completely wiped from Darin’s mind, replaced with astonishment at seeing a pair of TIE Fighters come around a skyscraper and head straight for him. *What?! There are no TIEs here!* It threw

Darin so badly that he couldn't react, and then bright flashes from ahead reminded him about the anti-air emplacement, albeit too late. His fighter was hit square-on, which knocked away his control. Some desperate wrestling with the controls and damage isolation and rerouting kept him from crashing for the moment, but his fighter's obvious condition was like a beacon to the TIE Fighters. They were on him, and it was over in a matter of seconds.

Darin pounded his fist against the console once in frustration while the sim's viewport opaqued. What in the galaxy had happened? Where had those TIEs come from? There must be a problem with the simulator.

He slumped back against the seat, pushed up his helmet's visor and wiped the sweat from his face. A breath of fresh air sounded like a good idea to help clear his mind before the next run that was now needed, so he unlatched the simulator's canopy and let it rise.

Something off to the side of the room caught his eye. In that direction he saw Lt. Weas standing next to the sim room's master control consoles and looking at Darin with crossed arms.

"That certainly didn't go well." There was no hint of a joke anywhere in Weas's voice.

Darin grimaced a bit. Just his luck that the run with the glitch was the one the XO had seen on the monitors. Combine this horrible run with Darin's less-than-stellar performance on that X-wing quiz and Weas was probably wondering how Darin had ever made it out of training. "No, sir."

"Care to elaborate on what happened?"

"I'm not really sure what happened, sir. I was doing a little better on this mission, but for some reason the last run had some TIEs and—"

"Some reason?"

Darin blinked. "Sir?"

"Who do you think put those TIEs in there for you just now?" Weas asked. "You think they just magically appeared on their own? That the Force decided to tweak the simulator program for laughs?"

Adding nonexistent TIEs seemed like a completely pointless thing to do and a total waste of time. "But sir, there aren't supposed to be any TIEs there."

"Oh, so now the Empire bases its operations off of Rebel simulator runs? Think, Flight Officer," Weas said disdainfully. The brown-haired pilot walked up next to the simulator where Darin sat. "There's nothing saying that there won't be TIEs there. To the best of our knowledge there won't be, but never, NEVER mistake that for a fact. Missions never go smoothly. Something unexpected always happens, and what I just saw, Flight Officer, is that you don't react well to unexpected situations."

Darin had to secretly admit that he wasn't reacting well to this particular unexpected situation. He kept his mouth shut and tried to prevent his emotions from leaking into his expression.

Weas continued, "That's a bigger problem than you may realize. You're fresh out of training. All the pilots around you are veterans to various degrees, but veterans nonetheless, veterans who have learned how to take unexpected things in stride and adjust accordingly. You have a huge learning curve ahead of you, and your survival as well as the survival of the rest of us depends on how fast you can catch up to everyone else. I can guarantee you that if we have to go backwards to even meet you halfway or try to save you from yourself, we will meet an untimely end during a fight. That will not happen, so it's all up to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand," Darin said in a subdued voice. "I'm trying."

“‘Trying’ isn’t good enough, Flight Officer. Now, we’re going to run this again. Start going evasive earlier so you don’t forget to do it again if something else pops up. And whatever you do, don’t focus so much on what’s *supposed* to be there. Just keep your eyes and mind open and focus on what *is* there. Simple as that. If you absolutely need to set some expectations in your mind, then expect the worst, not the best. You can’t afford to make those kinds of mistakes.” Snubber turned and walked back to the sim control consoles.

With a suppressed sigh, Darin pulled the canopy and his visor down again. Why had he just gotten a lecture on the necessity of catching up to the others when he was obviously already trying to improve? Why did Lt. Weas think he was in here alone if it wasn’t to get better? He could be out there goofing around in the mess hall like Quiver and some of the others, but he wasn’t. Besides, it wasn’t his fault that he hadn’t flown in a lot of missions like everyone else. The unfairness of Weas’s words irked him.

Then he had no more time for angry thoughts as the simulator flickered to life again. All that remained was a determination to prove to Lt. Weas that he was making his inexperience vanish as fast as he could.

The bench on the Coronas’ side of the pilots’ locker room had been as far as Darin had managed to get. He lay on it with one arm cushioning his head and his other arm and one leg dangling limply over the side. What he had expected to merely be a lunchtime sim practice had grown into an entire afternoon sim practice after Lt. Weas threw those TIEs at him. The lieutenant had overridden Darin’s other scheduled duties, even the daily afternoon briefing, and kept him in there until ten minutes ago, when he’d told Darin to go get an early supper and get cleaned up for the downtime activity that evening. Darin’s stomach growled from missing lunch, but getting something to eat required first gathering the energy needed to change out of his taped-up orange flightsuit and then actually hunting down some food.

It had all been worth it this afternoon, though, just to notice the decreasing amount of remarks and pointers from Weas as time went on. The last sim run Darin did had even been called a “good enough one to end on” by Weas and had been the first one Darin had made it entirely through alive. Maybe there was some hope for him yet. Darin smiled at that thought.

Another five minutes passed before Darin could muster the energy and motivation to move. He stretched his stiff legs, changed, hit the refresher, and fed his growling stomach at supper. Quiver and CC insisted on coming to the mess hall with him then even though they claimed they were too full from the earlier taste-testing to eat much, but being full hadn’t stopped CC from taking Darin’s drink again. After supper, Darin tried to get caught up on some of the things he had missed doing that afternoon until he was tracked down by his wingman and dragged to the downtime activity.

The forward hangar of *Crescent Star* was considerably smaller than the main hangar at the ship’s aft. This secondary hangar had been temporarily cleared of vehicles on the inboard end; that half was now a large empty area partially ringed by chairs and some tables of food. When Quiver and Darin got there, people were already mingling and the lights had been

softened. Darin recognized the Coronas, a few members of their maintenance crews including Sgt. Ritter, and a couple of the Quake pilots and gunners. The rest he assumed were the other Quakes and maintenance crews, and maybe some other guests as well. He quietly stuck close to Quiver as Quiver made his way through the crowd while talking with people and laughing.

A few minutes later, the two starfighter squadron commanders and an Anomid whom Darin didn't know walked to the center of the open area and called for everyone's attention. Once they had it, the translucent-skinned, large-eyed Anomid gestured with his hands and spoke. "Welcome, everyone, both ground crews and pilots alike." The Anomid's vocalizer mask electronically grated out the Basic words. "It's well past time for a little fun and relaxation, and we're glad to see all of you here."

"Within the confines of this room for the next few hours," Mackin continued when the Anomid finished, "there is to be no talking about work. The war is on the other side of the door you walked through to enter this hangar. There are also no ranks. Or rather, there won't be after this one small exception." He grinned and said, "Commanders' prerogative to pick our partners for the first dance. *Now* no more ranks."

"This dance is being held in honor of Flight Officer Carsyn Tehir," said Commander Unirt of Quake Squadron. Darin's stomach did a barrel roll, and he unconsciously took a half step away from Quiver. Unirt went on. "She had been a large help in organizing some of the aspects of this activity before we lost her. The commanders and I all agreed that we should press forward and not delay this, both to help those who knew Hawk-Bat and to make sure her hard work wasn't in vain." He was interrupted when, almost as one, the Quake pilots and gunners all raised fingers to their mouths and let out a piercing whistle. Darin jumped a bit, but everyone else in the room seemed to have expected it. When the sound had stopped echoing off the hangar walls, Unirt gave a small smile and said, "Now let's get this started."

The music started playing, and a fast, upbeat rhythm filled the air. Unirt walked over to a female Quarren, graciously took her hand to the sounds of good-natured cheering from the Quakes, and led her onto the dance floor. The Anomid sought out a female Twi'lek that Darin also didn't recognize, and that pair joined the Quake pair. Mackin stood in front of Ikoa, bent one knee in such a way that one leg crossed behind the other and rested on the toe of his boot, and then he extended his hand to her. She smiled and walked with him near where the other two pairs were. They began dancing, and to Darin's surprise the Quarren and Unirt were an extraordinary dancing couple. The Quakes cheered them on.

Some onlookers started to pair off and join in. The rest milled around in conversation or headed for the food table. Quiver did the latter, and Darin followed after a small hesitation and a glance at all the unfamiliar faces around him. There had never been an organized downtime activity like this when he was in Basic Training or in Horizon Squadron, and Darin wasn't sure how he was supposed to act. As long as he stayed with Quiver, though, he could follow his wingman's example. Besides, he wanted to ask Quiver who that Anomid was.

Quiver managed to down a couple small desserts that he had pointed out as being his favorites during the taste-testing before CC walked up to him and grabbed his arm. "Come on," she said, yanking him toward the dance floor. "If I have to suffer, so do you." Quiver offered a few muffled protests through a mouthful of food, but CC ignored him.

Darin was left alone. He looked around uncomfortably and then took a seat by himself in the back. He watched the people dancing and couldn't help but notice the lighthearted, casual mood being displayed on the floor. That, more than anything else in the room, felt strange. There

would never be a dance like this on his homeworld of Craci IV. In Cracian culture, dances were much more serious, formal affairs.

He sighed and leaned back in the hard seat, watching the dance and listening to the music. No, this would never happen back home. He remembered the dance he went to before the occupation and how big of a deal it had been. Even though he'd had a girlfriend at the time, due to the significance placed on dances it had been a big step for Darin to ask her to go to it with him, and he'd been a bundle of nerves in the days preceding the event.

The memory of one evening in particular always stuck out whenever he thought about that time. Amid Darin's complaints that he would already know how to dance if his school would teach anything that was useful in the real world, his mother had just laughed easily and assured him she could teach him. But after experiencing failure after failure at learning how to do all the formal steps properly, Darin had gotten more stressed and nervous. Finally his mother had called in his father to dance with her and help her show Darin what the whole dance was supposed to look like.

What had begun as a demonstration laced with real-time explanations of each individual step had soon faded into something completely different. As Darin watched, his parents gradually quieted, drew each other near and closed their eyes, turning it into a silent dance shared by them alone. Darin had only been able to stare: the choreographed dance steps had seemed simpler at that point, but something about the dance itself had begun to seem a whole lot more complicated.

Darin shook himself out of it, feeling smothered by the memories of his parents and his home, and how simple and normal everything had used to be. The whole event here in the hangar seemed a lot less festive to him now, and he tried to distract himself before he got caught up in his homesick thoughts and lost his composure in front of everyone else.

While he'd been in his own little world, the first song had ended and another had begun. The pilot sighed and rubbed his eyes. He didn't have to be here: attendance was only—how had Commander Mackin put it?—"strongly encouraged." All of the Coronas took that to mean "mandatory," but when it was looked at literally... Besides, Darin had come and made an appearance. Maybe he could slip out now—no one would notice he was gone anyway—and then—

Someone lightly swatted his shoulder. "Come on, sweet little rookie, let's dance."

Startled, Darin looked up to see Jenna standing next to him and smiling. Before then, he hadn't known it was possible to feel cornered while out in the open.

"Fli—um, Jenna. Hi," Darin said. "So they released you from medbay?" The only bandage he saw now was the one on her arm peeking out from under the sleeve of her general duty uniform.

"Yeah, earlier today," she answered, "so I have to take it easy tonight. But I can still have some fun, and after the awful week it's been, I really need a distraction, so come on." She nodded toward the dance floor.

"Thanks, but I...I was just about to head out. Got things to do." *Oh, yeah, that sounded really convincing*, he scolded himself silently.

"They can wait. Besides, the night just started! You can't leave yet, and you can't be sitting back here all by yourself in the dark, either. Shame on Quiver for leaving you alone."

"I don't think that was his first choice—" Darin managed to say before Jenna took his wrists and pulled him to his feet. She started to push him out through the maze of chairs.

"Wait, wait—" Darin protested, resisting their progress. He finally succeeded in stopping them about halfway to the dance area.

“What’s the problem?” Jenna asked. “You got a girl back home?”

“No.” That was certainly true enough: he and Tarrah had broken up not long after that dance, and the last time he had seen her was at the funeral for his mother and sister. “It’s just—too different.”

“What’s different?”

“Everything. I don’t know any of the dances everyone else is doing.”

“Neither do they,” Jenna said with a laugh, which made her blond ponytail bounce a bit. “Half of them are just making stuff up as they go along.”

“That’s the other thing. Dances on my homeworld were never as casual as this. This is like taking a formal, traditional, serious ceremony and turning it into a party. It’s too strange of a feeling for me.”

Jenna studied Darin for a minute, and then she said, “So show me.”

“Huh?”

“Ignore all the hooligans around us and show me what a dance on your homeworld is like. Provided, of course, that it doesn’t make me engaged to you or something unexpected like that. No offense, of course.”

“Engaged? Well, no, not quite. If you’re not already married, a dance invitation is more like telling your girlfriend or boyfriend that you want to go steady and see where the relationship leads. And no offense taken.”

Jenna grinned. “If it’s okay with you, then, can we skip that part for tonight?”

“It’ll be weird, but...maybe. I guess so.”

“Just try to pretend you didn’t bring that part of it with you through the door.” Jenna indicated the door to the hangar with a motion of her head, and then she took both of Darin’s hands and pulled him toward the dance floor again while walking backwards in front of him.

Darin’s eyes flickered over to the door momentarily before he found himself with Jenna on the edge of the dance area. He took a deep breath and awkwardly went through the motions as he briefly explained each thing he was doing. Darin gave a small bow, held Jenna’s hands and quickly taught her the dance steps. She caught on effortlessly, and before long they were moving together fairly well despite Darin’s self-imposed detachment and discomfort.

The slow song gradually came to an end, and Darin formally ended the dance. Jenna smiled and walked with him back to the sidelines. “That was sweet, rookie, thank you. I enjoyed it. I’d love to see a big dance on your homeworld: I bet it would be very romantic.”

“Thanks. And, um, yeah...I guess it is.”

A new song started up, another fast-tempoed one. Jenna raised an eyebrow at him almost mischievously. “Now that you taught me about your way of dancing, will you allow me to teach you a bit about mine?”

Darin fidgeted. “Well...”

“Come on, just one dance. If you don’t like it, I’ll never ask you to do it again.”

“Well...” Darin began to relent. It only seemed fair, and he needed to make a good impression on the other people here. He felt a little better now that he had righteously danced the proper way, too, so maybe it would be okay just this once. “Is it from your homeworld?”

“Not quite. It’s how we dance inside rooms like this when that door is closed.” Jenna pulled him back out onto the dance floor.

A couple meters away, Darin saw that Quiver was no longer with CC and instead was with a woman he was definitely trying to make a move on. His attention to it was broken when

Jenna shook him by the shoulders and said, “The first thing to remember when practicing this particular type of dance is that it’s meant as nothing more than fun and silliness. Nothing is connected to it, and it’s supposed to be mindless. Clear your head of every preconception you have and just concentrate on having a good time. You’ll look silly, but everyone does and that’s part of the fun. Now, listen to the music. Try to move with it as if it was a third dance partner.” Jenna demonstrated for a few moments before pulling Darin into it as well.

Halfway through the song, while Darin was feeling utterly mechanical, artificial and absurd, Jenna said encouragingly, “See, you’re getting it! You’re doing fine.” Then she snatched CC from somewhere nearby on the dance floor and swapped places with her.

CC quickly took in her new situation and smiled. “Took you long enough to get out here and have some fun.” She hooked an arm in Darin’s and spun around with him. “Relax, rookie! Enjoy yourself and forget about things for a while. Let loose!” She pulled him into a new step, one which Darin had to scramble to accommodate. He couldn’t keep up with her spontaneity.

Before too long they ended up near Quiver. The tall pilot glanced at them and said to Darin, “So she suckered you into coming out here too, huh?”

“I did not,” CC replied. “Anyway, I’m glad he’s out here—he’s a *much* better dancer than my previous partner was. I’m glad that other one ditched me.”

“Of course I ditched you! You keep trying to lead!” Quiver said.

CC grinned sweetly at him. “I’m just a natural leader, Quiver. What can I say.”

With a snort, Quiver said, “At leading people to their doom, maybe.” He winked at Darin and angled away from them with his dance partner.

After the song ended, Darin formally excused himself and retreated to the food table to give his mind a chance to breathe. He absently nibbled on a dessert and watched the dancers for the next song while he tried to figure out if he had enjoyed that and, if the answer was yes, if it would ever stop feeling like he had just spit on some time-honored tradition. Was he taking things too seriously or not seriously enough?

He hadn’t figured it out before Mackin came over beside him with a dessert of his own. “How are you doing, Darin?”

Darin had already transferred his dessert to his left hand before he remembered he wasn’t supposed to salute now. “Fine, sir, thank you.”

“Careful, that’s getting pretty formal,” Mack said with a smile. “Anyway, I’m glad to see you here and getting to know the others. It might be a bit strange and overwhelming for you now, but efforts like this on your part will pay off.” He patted Darin’s shoulder and moved off, disappearing into the crowd.

Darin sighed. It was probably a good thing that Commander Mackin didn’t know he was trying to do the exact opposite. He remained standing there for the next song as well, making his dessert last much longer than it was ever intended to. One time he tried to shift his focus from the dance to the food, but that just caused the dessert to get more tasteless with each bite. If this had been a Cracian dance there would have been Icicle Cakes, and they were so much better than—than whatever it was Darin was eating now.

He choked down the last bite, and then the pull of the world beyond the door got to be too much for him. He had work to do to follow Lt. Weas’s mandate to catch up, anyway. That was a better—and safer—use of his time.

Darin snuck out and walked back to his quarters. He was grateful he only made two wrong turns on his way back through the vast ship.

Chapter Four

Late the next morning again found Corona Squadron in the simulators. And it again found Darin sitting by himself over by the monitors watching the rest of the squadron complete the sim run without him.

Darin couldn't decide if he wanted to hit something or scream or both. That whole afternoon of practicing this blasted sim and for what? He'd stayed alive two minutes longer in this run than he had in his very first run with the squadron. At that rate, maybe he'd be ready for this mission in a few months.

He couldn't concentrate on watching the monitors anymore, so he got up and paced while he waited for the others to finish. He could get through most of the Coronas' part the mission on his own, but he couldn't do the same thing when he was with the rest of the squadron. Was he really that incompatible with them? Were they really that far beyond his ability level? The answer had to be yes. He'd never had this kind of problem with his training squadron.

Darin threw himself down in his chair again and slumped down in a huff. All that hard work, all that lost sleep for nothing. He'd either kill himself trying to catch up to the others or he'd get killed because he couldn't. What else could he do that he wasn't already doing? He bit his bottom lip hard, forcing himself to not kick or hit anything, and squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them a few seconds later, the sight on the monitors in front of him was no less frustrating than it had been before, and he looked away. Darin's gaze ended up on his helmet, where he'd put it on the chair beside him. He stared at the helmet for a moment as if it had somehow let him down, then he picked it up.

Turning the helmet around in his hands, Darin slowly looked it over. The color scheme was the only thing telling him he was actually a member of the squadron, and apparently it wasn't doing him much good to look like he belonged on the outside when his inside feeling didn't match. He lightly traced one of the red lightning bolts with a finger, then he flipped the helmet upside down. Darin swallowed hard as he looked at the picture of himself with Cohen and Bosko, and then he whispered, "I'm out of my league here, Cohen. I could really use your help. Didn't expect it to be anything like this, and I don't know what to do."

Cohen wouldn't have had a problem adjusting to this lifestyle or keeping up with everyone else, but Darin—Darin was just a shipping worker barely out of school with a pilot's license rated for small transports. Who was he kidding? He was no starfighter pilot. Not like the others were. They were good. They could handle anything and knew everything they needed to know. The gap between them and Darin seemed insurmountable if his best, nonstop efforts couldn't even make a noticeable difference in closing it. He didn't belong here—not in the squadron, and maybe not even in Starfighter Command. He should probably look into transferring to flying transports or freighters or something like that instead where he might be more useful. Damn, the pure thrill of flying an X-wing would be so hard to give up, but staying where he didn't belong and didn't know or couldn't do anything would just hurt the Rebellion and endanger his life and others. The sooner he got to where he actually knew what he was doing, the better.

Darin chewed on his lip, flipped the helmet around again and vacantly gazed at it. Maybe a new paint job didn't change the fact that underneath the new layer was still the same old outcast, beat-up helmet.

He was still staring at it when someone came in and sat in the seat previously occupied by

his headgear. "You okay, Darin?"

Darin glanced up and saw Commander Mackin. He nodded a little as he returned his gaze to his helmet. "Yes, sir," he said quietly. Darin spun the helmet around in between his hands.

"May I see?" Mackin asked. Darin handed over his helmet, and Mackin turned it around, inspecting it. "Nice design. It looks so much better than it did: you'd never know this was the same helmet. You come up with the paint scheme?"

"Flight Officer Moog helped too."

Mackin nodded and gave it back to Darin. "Snubber told me you did pretty well in this sim yesterday afternoon."

Darin sighed a bit. "Not that it did me much good now, sir."

"Don't underestimate a compliment from Snubber. You'll get there soon."

"I'm...not so sure about that, sir."

"You're doing fine, Darin. Don't get discouraged. I know when you got here I told you that time is precious, but there are limits set by reality. No one acclimates perfectly to a new squadron overnight: it's a big change. You've only been with us a week, and you need to give yourself a chance to settle in and adjust. Besides," Mackin said with a small grin, "you've got to wait on nine other pilots who are trying to adjust to you, too. All of us, including you, will get past this rough spot really soon if you keep applying yourself like you have been."

Darin nodded, unconvinced.

"This mission's a bit different than your first mission with us was," Mackin told him. Darin fought to hide a flinch and truly hoped Mackin was right about that. The CO continued, "When you add a planet and all that comes with it and obstacles and very specific targets with a different type of defense, it has to be flown, coordinated and approached differently than a dogfight, and that might be throwing you off. How about this: let's try building up the individual coordination gradually. We'll put you through the sim with only Quiver at first, and then the rest of Two Flight. Once everyone involved feels more comfortable, we'll add the rest of the squadron. All right?"

"Yes, sir." Darin stifled another sigh. Now he was causing more work for the others, all because he couldn't keep up. Making the others work backwards like this was what Lt. Weas had warned him about. He'd wanted so badly to figure things out on his own so he could prove to them—

"How much sleep have you gotten these last few nights?" Mackin asked.

"I'm not exactly sure, sir. Maybe five hours each."

"Make sure you get some good rest tonight. That's the first step. Things will look and be different after that."

"But sir, I just don't have time. I'm behind as it is."

Mack leaned closer, raised his eyebrows and confided softly, "You'd be amazed at how much easier it gets to remember information off of those datacards and how much better you'll do in the sim with a decent night's rest behind you. Try it once and see." Then he leaned back in his chair again. "Don't let Snubber intimidate you too much. Like I said, you're doing fine. You got farther on his little X-wing quiz than most of your squadmates here did on their first time."

Darin's brow furrowed at that unexpected news.

The commander smiled. "Oh, and I know just the thing that'll help. Besides being educational, it'll be a nice little break for you from datacards and sim work. I'll set it up for after the afternoon briefing today if I can."

“Um..all right, sir,” Darin said, puzzled.

“We’ll get you through this mission. Don’t worry. For now, though,” Mackin got up and motioned toward the sim room door, “come on. Let’s go get this debriefing over with.”

Startled, Darin looked around. The monitors were off, and he and Mack were the only ones in the room. He hadn’t even noticed that the sim run had ended. His cheeks flushed as he stood up. “Sorry, sir. Sorry if the others are waiting on me.”

Mackin didn’t seem too concerned as he led his subordinate out. “This isn’t the first time they’ve had to wait on some squadmates, Darin. They’ll survive.”

After the afternoon briefing, Darin followed Mackin up to the bridge of *Crescent Star*. He’d never been on these decks before and was afraid he’d get lost if they got separated. Still, he was excited about the prospect of a bridge tour, and he eagerly kept pace with his commander. It could be one last perk before he left if he switched to something like transports instead of snubfighters.

Numerous turbolift rides and one security check later, they were standing outside the door leading to the bridge. Mackin paused there and quietly said, “Now, Darin, remember this is a sensitive operations area. We have to be careful not to interfere with anyone or anything, and we also have to be very respectful to the bridge crew. We’re guests in this area. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Darin softly replied.

“Good. I think you’ll like this.” Mackin smiled and opened the door.

In front of Darin appeared a large, spacious area. The room was white and beige, designed with aesthetic curves and rounded edges. Darin couldn’t see a sharp corner anywhere at first glance. The front viewport was massive, stretching nearly the length of the curved front wall and displaying a breathtaking view of the blackness of space and pinpoint stars outside. Mon Calamari crewmen sat at a few consoles there on the operations deck, and the opening of a circular pit near the center showed many more duty stations housed one level below around a briefing and tactical display area. The bridge was noticeably more humid than most of the other places Darin had been to on the ship so far. The Mon Cals’ gravelly voices mixed with the electronic beeps and the hum of powered systems to give the entire bridge a feel of being alive. The mood seemed calm, relaxed, yet attentive. The sight was everything Darin had expected it to be and then some.

Mack broke Darin out of his wide-eyed rapture when he leaned over and whispered, “Sitting in the command chair at the front of the room is Captain Tralkett. In the chair behind him and to his left is his first officer, Commander Betara.” Darin nodded. He’d heard the names a few times since arriving, but he reinforced the memory as solidly as he could and matched the names with the faces.

A security officer directed the captain’s attention to the portside door where the pilots waited. Mackin saluted before Captain Tralkett even looked their way. Darin quickly followed his example.

The captain put down a datapad, rose and returned the salutes. “Commander Mackin. Right on time, I see.”

“Good afternoon, Captain Tralkett. Permission to enter the bridge, sir?”

“Permission granted. Come in, please, both of you. Welcome.”

“Thank you, sir.” Mackin stepped inside and came to an easier speaking distance with the salmon-colored Mon Cal. Darin followed in the proper position, feeling like an intruder and half afraid that his mere presence would sully this work of art that was the bridge.

Mackin continued, “Sir, this is Flight Officer Darin Stanic. He just joined the Coronas.”

Tralkett looked down at Darin with one large eye. “Ah, yes, the new addition. Good. At last, right, Commander? Welcome aboard, Flight Officer. I’m Captain Tralkett.”

“Thank you, sir,” Darin replied through a mouth gone suddenly dry despite the humidity. “It’s an honor to be here and to meet you.”

“Have you ever been on the bridge of a Mon Calamari Cruiser before?” Tralkett asked.

“No, sir.”

“Then let me show you around.” Tralkett opened his mouth slightly in a Mon Cal smile, put a webbed hand on Darin’s shoulder and steered him toward the first console. Darin looked back at Mackin in surprise and slight alarm, but he only saw Mackin staying put and trying to hide a grin.

As the pair came to each bridge station in turn, even the ones in the lower level around the briefing area, the Calamari explained its basic purpose and introduced Darin to the Naval crewman manning the station. Darin saw the sensor console, communications, weapons, tactical, damage control, environmental systems, navigation, engineering, security, the helm, and also the station linked to the hangar and combat flight controller. Additionally there were linked data feeds and information screens for the other ships in the fleet. He was amazed at it all and tried to absorb every moment of the experience.

After they had visited all of the consoles and went back up to the operations level, the captain gave Darin a brief overview of how the different stations worked together, especially to keep things running smoothly in a battle, and also how the two starfighter squadrons fit into the picture. He ended it with, “You pilots are our eyes and ears beyond our sensor limits as well as our front line of defense in an engagement. Without you, this fleet could not function like it does now. It’s not an easy job, but I know our commanders only pick the best.”

The last place Captain Tralkett took him was the front of the room. After an introduction to the blue-skinned Mon Cal first officer, Tralkett stood with Darin behind the captain’s chair and turned him to face the viewport. He gestured to it and said to the pilot, “Now this is the best place to be in the entire galaxy: limitless space before you, a top-notch crew around you and a wonderful ship beneath you. My job is to make sure those three things are always present.”

Indeed, there was something of a different feeling at the front of the bridge while being conscious of those things. There was a sensation of power, of freedom, and even more so, of responsibility. Darin was awestruck.

And then a single thought ran through his mind: *Cohen will never, ever believe me when I tell him where I was. I can’t wait to—*

He stopped, sorted reflex from reality, and squeezed his eyes shut. *Cohen, you would have loved this. Absolutely loved this. Damn it all, I wish you were here. I wish you could see this. One day you would have been standing right where I’m standing with a ship of your own and—*

Darin took a deep breath and opened his eyes again, desperate to find a distraction. “She’s a wonderful ship, sir,” he quietly said, praying Tralkett wouldn’t pick up on the slight waver in his voice. “I’m sure you’re very proud of her.”

“Oh, yes,” Tralkett replied. “I’m extremely proud of her and of everyone on her.” He

smiled again.

From off to the side, Commander Mackin unobtrusively walked up to them and said lightly, "We'd best be leaving now, Flight Officer. We shouldn't take up any more of the captain's time."

"Yes, sir." Darin turned to Captain Tralkett and said, "Thank you for your time and for the tour, sir, and also for allowing me to visit the bridge."

"You're quite welcome, Flight Officer. I hope you enjoyed it, and I hope it'll help you better understand how the ship functions and how we coordinate with the squadrons onboard. As you saw, it's a lot of individual pieces and efforts that come together to make up the whole. You're part of it now, so it's important for you to gain a good understanding of it."

"Yes, sir, I learned a lot. Thank you." Darin moved the couple steps to be properly beside Mackin again.

Mackin smiled at the captain. "Thank you, sir. We appreciate it."

"You're quite welcome as well, Commander. The timing worked out well today, and it also gave me the chance to discuss a few other things with Major Linnme when he called with the request." There were so many names to learn on this ship, but Darin was pretty sure Quiver had told him Major Linnme was Commander Mackin's superior here. "Keep up the good work with your squadron, Commander."

"Yes, sir, thank you."

The two pilots saluted, and after Tralkett returned the salutes, they walked out. Once they were in the corridor, Mackin, still grinning, looked down at Darin. "I told you you'd like it."

"Yes, sir, I did. A lot. Thank you for arranging that," Darin replied in a sincere yet subdued voice. He couldn't get over how spectacular the tour had been, but his initial gaping amazement was being overshadowed at the moment. Now it was all he could do to keep his mind off of the best friend he had lost and the way everything should have been.

Darin stumbled through the rest of his duties that day while unsuccessfully trying to ignore a growing headache.

He had genuinely enjoyed the bridge tour very much. There was too much pure love of flying ingrained in him for him to not be thrilled at what he had been able to see and experience, and that made it a great story that he wanted to share with someone. Except the someone he wanted to share it with was dead. As awesome as the experience was, it kept reminding him of Cohen, so the excitement would swing back to depression and homesickness. He was never quite certain what exactly he was actually feeling and how he ought to feel, and trying to figure it out just worsened his headache.

He avoided the other Coronas and ate supper alone. Darin poked at the glob of food on his plate, losing his appetite more and more with every being he didn't know who passed by in the mess hall. He remembered another fairly recent time when he had felt homesick and alone, even though he'd been in his hometown at the time with his best friend standing beside him. Darin had just moved in with Cohen's family after his own family died, and after a short time Cohen urged him to unpack. Cohen had said something about how unpacking was a step forward or a step toward something. Darin didn't remember what, but he remembered doing it and feeling a little less outcast and displaced afterward. Maybe that advice would help a little now too. He

needed all the help he could get.

Darin sniffled, deposited his food tray at the washer station and shuffled to his quarters. If he ended up transferring it would be a wasted effort to unpack now, but he had so little that repacking wouldn't take long. Besides, he wouldn't be able to concentrate on the datacards or the sim run in this mindset, so it would be pointless to use the time for either of those activities.

When he got there he found Quiver up on his bunk looking at something on a datapad and talk-singing aloud to himself in an off-key, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. "*No, no, I got the time to go, and wait until you know that I—hey, rookie!*" Quiver said after Darin walked in. Darin wondered if the others even knew his name or cared that he had one. "There you are. Missed you at supper tonight. CC got pretty thirsty without her drink."

"Hi," Darin said softly. He could immediately tell that Quiver had turned the room temperature up again, and Darin wondered only half in jest if he could set up some quarters in the hangar instead where the temperature was more comfortable. As long as the place where Jenna's Y-wing had landed would be out of sight, he should be okay. *But no, no one will ever go for that*, Darin told himself sullenly. *This is the room I've been assigned to. I've got to live with it for as long as I'm here...however long that is.* He took his duffle bag and set it in the middle of the floor so it would be easier to spread things out and unpack, then he sat down on the floor and opened the bag.

"You're unpacking! So you're sticking around then, huh? Good. You need help?" Quiver jumped down the ladder from his bunk and sat on the floor on the other side of the bag.

"Thanks, but it's just a duffle bag," Darin said unenergetically. Blasted headache. "It won't take long." The top couple items were clothes, and he took them out to fold them. He'd hang them up in the closet all at once at the end.

"What's this?" Quiver reached into Darin's bag and pulled out an old datapad.

When Darin saw what he was holding, his eyes widened. "Careful! Give that here!" He grabbed the datapad out of Quiver's hand.

The action clearly startled Quiver. "Whoa. Hey now, I was just looking. I wasn't going to do anything to it." He looked a little bit offended.

Darin bit his lip and closed his eyes momentarily to calm down. "Sorry. I just— you surprised me, and this datapad has a lot of meaning to me. I'm pretty protective of the things in this bag." *Because it's all I have*, he added silently.

"All right." Quiver looked at him warily, but then his curiosity seemed to be getting the better of him. He craned his neck to try to get a look at the forbidden datapad while being careful not to make any move toward it whatsoever. "So what is it? Why are you so protective of it?"

"It belonged to my best friend." Darin still hated putting things in the past tense like that. "It's a bunch of true stories about historic battles of Republic naval fleets. He... he always wanted to be a starship captain."

"Sounds pretty interesting."

Darin nodded absently while he gazed forlornly at the datapad. Blast, this was only making the void inside even larger. Maybe he still wasn't ready to unpack and make a start here if he couldn't even look at this datapad without becoming painfully aware that a huge part of him was missing. The rest of the items in his bag didn't promise any relief and would probably just make everything worse. Darin knew he'd never again find that complete and utter sense of belonging as he had had with his family and friends, and after experiencing it and coming to rely on it, losing it had been devastating. He felt so aimless now.

Looking at the old datapad just made Darin want to talk to Cohen again. He wistfully imagined himself doing just that: getting help and advice and understanding, and then sharing with Cohen all the good, exciting things too, even from when he was in training. The first time he sat in a Z-95 cockpit, then a Y-wing and an X-wing. The first time he had flown in each. Every sim he'd managed to complete successfully. More recently, the incredible fact that Cdr. Mackin had told him he'd done pretty well on Lt. Weas's X-wing test, and most importantly, the bridge tour. Darin could go on and on about that subject alone, and Cohen would have loved it and soaked up every detail. But this whole scenario would never be anything more than a product of Darin's imagination now. Life without his best friend of the last fourteen years wasn't a life he wanted.

Darin's support, his encouragement, his success-sharers, his trusted shoulders to lean on consisted of his family and Cohen and Bosko. They were all supposed to be there for him like they had always been, but none of them were. Since losing them, Darin hadn't even bothered to look for someone else to fill the gaping hole. Nothing could replace what he used to have, so why try? And what if attempts to fill the hole here just ended up like Jenna and Carsyn? He couldn't go through this again and find something just to lose it. It wasn't worth it.

...At least, that's what he had thought before. Before learning of his inability to deal with the aftermath of his first combat mission. Before his troubles with the latest sim run. Before his uncertainties about his career choice. Even before the bridge tour had taught him how much he still needed to laugh and have fun and share giddy excitement with someone.

Blast, he was so scared and so confused. He needed Cohen so badly. Darin silently cursed his nagging headache, and then he silently cursed the Imperials in the worst ways he knew of. This was all their fault. All he wanted was one more conversation with Cohen. Just one. That's all. He'd give anything— absolutely anything— for one more chance to talk to him.

"Darin?"

Darin brought himself back to the present and tore his gaze away from the old datapad. He now found himself looking up at his new wingman, who was watching Darin and apparently waiting for him to say something.

The people who were supposed to be there weren't, but... What was it that Lt. Weas had said? Darin looked at Quiver for a long minute, long enough to finally cause Quiver to shift his weight, furrow his brow and ask, "Darin? Are you all right?"

It was all he had.

"Yeah," Darin managed to say. "Yeah, I guess so. Sorry. And— and sorry for snapping at you before." Darin took a deep breath, discreetly wiped off one of his sweaty palms and slowly held the datapad out to Quiver. "Here. You can borrow it and read it if you want. Just be really, *really* careful with it. It's irreplaceable."

Quiver pulled back a little bit and looked at Darin guardedly. "Are you sure?"

No, he wasn't. "Yeah, I'm sure. Here."

Quiver cautiously took the datapad. He studied it a little bit without turning it on, and then he asked, "So this belonged to your friend?"

"Yeah. Best friend."

"What's his name?"

"Cohen."

"He in the Rebellion too?"

Darin blinked and looked down. "No, he— he died."

“Oh, sorry. I’m sorry to hear that,” Quiver said quietly.

Darin simply nodded and went back to unpacking. The next thing out of his bag was the stack of holodisks with all the pictures of his family and friends. He couldn’t compete with the large amount of various holos Quiver had projected on his side of the room, but Darin didn’t need to, either. He grabbed two holoprojector disks for his desk and started scrolling through pictures to decide on which ones to display. He needed to find a good family picture to print out and put on the inside of his helmet to complete that project, too.

Quiver moved beside him to look over Darin’s shoulder at the pictures and asked for names to go with the faces. Darin’s father, mother, and sister were easy to recognize after the first introduction, so Quiver didn’t say much as Darin scrolled through numerous holos of them. Then he said, “Wait, what’s that one?”

Quiver had stopped Darin on one of Darin’s favorite holos. It was the same image he had printed out and put inside his helmet before his first mission. “That’s me with my two best friends,” Darin said. Blast, that had been a fun time.

“Is Cohen one of those two?” Quiver asked.

Darin nodded. “Yeah. This is him.” He pointed him out. “Bosko is the other one.”

Quiver squinted at the image. “What’s that weird stuff you three are wearing?”

“It’s donri gear. It’s a big sport back home, and we played together.” Darin unfastened and reached into a side pocket of his duffle bag and pulled out his scoop. “This is my donri scoop. You wear it on the underside of your lower arm, like this.” He demonstrated. “Then you use it to catch and throw the ball.”

“You should organize a game of it for the squadron to play if it’s simple enough to learn,” Quiver said. “Then after we learn it and get good at it, we can teach it to the Quakes and beat them while they’re new to it.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” Darin said. He set down his scoop and resumed scrolling through his holos.

There was silence for a short time until Quiver spoke up again. “So I hear Mack took you on a tour of *Star’s* bridge today,” he mentioned. “What did you think of it?”

Darin paused and looked over his shoulder at Quiver for a few moments. Finally he said, “I liked it. A lot.” He smiled a bit.

Quiver grinned in much greater force. “Pretty neat up there, isn’t it? Ha, I loved my tour. I thought Mack was going to die from embarrassment when I asked Captain Tralkett where the self-destruct button was.”

Darin chuckled. “And where is it?”

“The captain didn’t tell me. Said if he did, he’d have to kill me. I know he was joking, but I think Mack would have volunteered to do the deed right then and there. *With pleasure.*” Quiver narrowed his eyes and comically imitated Mackin’s accent with his last two words.

After another short laugh, Darin told him, “I could have stayed up there for hours just watching everything or even looking out that viewport. That was a sight. I bet it looks awesome in hyperspace or orbiting a planet.”

“I’m sure it does too, but the view from an X-wing cockpit will always be the best, no matter what you’re looking at. Well, except maybe if you’re looking at a TIE firing at you.”

“The captain seemed really nice too.”

“Yeah, he is. The crew likes Captain Tralkett. Hey, I heard a story about something he did that was pretty neat...”

Epilogue

Darin chewed on his lip while his X-wing skimmed high above the featureless planet below. He purposefully hadn't put any obstacles on the planet's surface in this simulator program; all he needed was the ground reference point, an atmosphere and a planet's gravity well for what he was trying to do.

He mentally prepared himself, then he rolled 90 degrees to stand on a wingtip, cut out his throttle and hit the air brakes. The fighter slowed and dropped toward the planet, but not nearly as drastically as the other Coronas could make theirs do. "Blast it!" he said to himself. If it had been the previous day, he knew his language would have been considerably more abrasive for failing to get his desired results for the fourth time in a row, but the increased amount of sleep Darin had gotten last night after unpacking was doing wonders for his tolerance level and patience. He rolled level, increased the power and climbed for altitude to try again.

Darin was only halfway to his intended altitude when an alarm blared in his cockpit, indicating something had a torpedo lock on him.

He jumped so high from the unexpected noise that he felt pressure from his seat restraints. "What?!" Darin twisted his fighter around to try to break the lock and punched the button to bring his shields up. The target lock was broken a few seconds later, and only then did he check his sensors for what had caused that. Lt. Weas must be testing him again by adding unexpected elements into his sim run.

Soon he realized it wasn't Weas. The sound of laughter filled the squadron frequency, and the sight of two X-wings filled his viewport.

"Hey, Niner!" Quiver said through a laugh. "I didn't scare ya, did I?"

"Very good reflexes," CC added. "I'm duly impressed. And after we're done I'll help you chase down Ten and shoot him as payback for that. His idea, not mine."

"Only because you didn't think of it first," Quiver replied.

Darin exhaled and tried to will his heart to stop pounding so loudly in his head. He straightened out his fighter again. "What are you two doing here?"

Quiver and CC flew up and took positions on either side of him. Darin watched them warily: after that last stunt he half-expected them to pretend to crush him in between their two virtual fighters, but instead Quiver cleared his throat and began speaking as if he was narrating a documentary.

"The Junkit is a starfighter maneuver developed on the world of Treminal Three. The original maneuver was created and used by the Air and Space Forces for their Z-95 Headhunters and was taught to a certain Lieutenant Mackin when he was a member of that organization. Upon his arrival in the Rebellion, then-Lieutenant Mackin discovered that the Junkit could be easily adapted to the new X-wing fighter, descendant of the venerable Z-95. Jump forward to today, and all of the pilots in his squadron have been taught this exclusive maneuver...or rather, they will have been by the time the next few minutes are up. Our esteemed Corona Six will now demonstrate."

CC's voice took on the same intonations as Quiver's had. "Thank you, Corona Ten. Now, a proper Junkit can be performed by remembering the four R's: Roll, Reverse, Rudder, Recover, or also Resistance, Reverse, Rudder, Recover. In preparation, make sure you have enough drop altitude so you won't run into anything, and you will also need an effective gravity well of at least 75% standard. Once those are established, you're ready to start."

CC moved her fighter out in front and slightly off to the side where Darin could see. “First R: Roll, or Resistance. Either is acceptable because the roll is what decreases the atmospheric resistance below you during the drop. If there is no atmosphere, you can skip this step. Roll 90 degrees in either direction.” She demonstrated, putting her fighter up on a wingtip.

“The next three all happen in quick succession, so I’ll explain them all before showing you. Reverse: this is the hardest part to learn, but once you get the knack for how much to do, you’ll be set. Cut out your engine throttle, hit full air brakes, and as quickly as you can, reverse throttle and apply power. This is what determines how quickly your fighter will stop its forward motion before beginning to fall. The trick is to not apply full reverse power for more than it will take to stop you; otherwise you’ll just create more problems for yourself and send your fighter out of control. Once you’ve applied sufficient reverse throttle, cut it again and switch back to forward thrust without applying power. You’ll need it ready to go in another moment. Okay so far?”

“Yeah,” Darin replied.

“Good. Next R: Rudder. This is another step you can skip if there’s no atmosphere. After you’ve become as much of an unpowered, sideways hunk of metal in midair as you can, your ethereal rudder makes sure you stay that way as gravity takes over and you fall. Apply full rudder opposite the direction of the ground. So if you rolled to stand on your port wing, you need to apply rudder to the starboard side, and vice versa. This disrupts the airflow around your fighter and prevents it from naturally aerodynamically turning to point nose down in a dive. Nose dives aren’t necessarily a bad thing in this situation since you can recover from those in the right circumstances, but the Junkit lends itself better to staying sideways as you fall, especially for recovery in tight areas.

“Finally, that brings us to Recover. It can take upwards of 50 meters of altitude to recover from this maneuver depending on the gravity and atmospheric density, so don’t start recovery too late. Apply full forward power, neutralize rudder, and roll level, in that order. Any questions?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Darin said while he tried to work through the choreographed steps in his mind and make the list of individual actions into one whole coordinated maneuver. “At least not yet.”

“All right. Now watch: this is what it will look like.” CC’s sideways fighter quickly plummeted from the sky. At one point she called out, “Recovering!” Her fighter fell a little farther while its engines lit, and finally it traded its downward momentum for forward momentum and leveled out. She circled back up to join the other two.

“Your turn now, Nine,” Quiver said. “Give it a try.”

“Um, all right.” Darin wished he didn’t have an audience; he didn’t want the others to see how badly he was struggling to be even half as good as they were. He moved ahead of Quiver and CC. Then he ran through everything again in his mind, double-checked the locations of all the controls he would need, rolled on a wingtip, took a deep breath and went for the second R.

He didn’t expect the screech from his engines or the feeling of impacting a duracrete wall when he dug in his heels to make his fighter stop. Was that from too much reverse power or not enough? The X-wing began to fall, and Darin hit the rudder.

He fell a short distance before deciding to pull out of it. Darin’s recovery ran into a problem after he applied full throttle and then realized he’d forgotten to switch the control back to forward thrust beforehand. He somehow managed to subdue his crazy, bucking X-wing a few moments later and flew back to where the others were circling high above in the clear sky.

“Little issue there at the end, huh, Niner?” Quiver laughed.

CC was laughing too, but she joined in with, “Not a bad job on pulling out of that! But honestly, this maneuver is exciting enough without making it more so.”

“Let me try that again,” Darin said eagerly. He’d been so close, and he could do it right this time, he was positive of it. Quiver and CC again waited while Darin gave it another go.

This time he was more prepared for the sudden deceleration and the rush of adrenaline that accompanied the unusual sensation. As his X-wing plummeted in a near free-fall he actually grinned a little bit when he looked out his side window and watched the featureless ground coming straight up at him.

This time his recovery went more smoothly, and soon he was flying back to Quiver and CC.

“There ya go!” Quiver was saying.

“That was fun!” Darin didn’t care how juvenile that sounded—he had to say it. Quiver and CC both laughed again.

“Good job, rookie!” CC added. “You caught on quick. A little fine-tuning and you’ll be better than Mack at this maneuver pretty soon.”

“Really? I did okay?”

“You did better than okay. Much better,” Quiver said.

Darin smiled, then he said, “Thanks for teaching it to me. I was going crazy trying to figure out how you guys did it.”

“Just ask us next time. We’ll help out,” CC replied. “You’ll get enough headaches from Quiver, so don’t give yourself more of them for no reason.”

Quiver snorted before he spoke up again. “One note of caution since you like the maneuver so much, Nine. Junkits are very hard on the fighter, particularly the engines. Hence the name. They’re okay for occasional use when needed, but if you do them too much your crew chief will hunt you down and kill you. One of the first rules every pilot here must learn is to never make your crew chief angry, because they have more power over you than you might think.”

“All right.”

“Hey, Nine,” CC said. “You ready to give Ten some payback now?”

“Sure.”

“Aw, no fair!” Quiver said as his X-wing sped away.

“Stop complaining—I owe you more than this for turning the headset volume to max in my real fighter’s cockpit!” CC told Quiver as they went after him.

“You can’t prove that was me!”

CC scoffed. “Like I need proof.” Then she said, “Nine, welcome to the wonderful game of ‘Blow Quiver Up in the Sim.’ Technically the game is to alternately catch each other, but since Quiver’s so lousy I always win. Hence the name.”

“Hopefully that’ll change now that we’ve got a third player,” Quiver said. “Well, at least we do unless Nine thinks he’s too busy with *real work* to play this.”

It was hard to interpret Quiver’s tone of voice through the comm’s static, and Darin doubted he knew his wingman well enough to figure it out even if they had been speaking in person. Something about this felt better than the taste-testing invitation had, though, and Darin briefly bit his lip and then keyed his comm. “No, I’d like to join in if I can.”

“What did I tell you about invitations?” Quiver scolded.

“Poor rookie. So naïve. So innocent.” CC sounded almost mournful. “It’s sad that all of that will disappear shortly when the two of us virtually shoot your obnoxious wingman. Once you get even a small taste of the satisfaction of shooting Quiver, it settles into your soul like an addiction.”

“I told you that you lead people to their dooms,” Quiver muttered. “But it won’t matter because you two will never catch me.” Darin heard CC scoff at Quiver’s words again just as Quiver’s fighter maneuvered farther out of reach.

Soon CC and Darin began trying to coordinate their “attack.” They split up and came at Quiver from different angles. As he tried to get into position, Darin was vaguely aware of his subconscious and conscious efforts to take tactics and performance and instruments into consideration like his training had drilled into him to do. There were so many variables. So many systems. So much to learn. Maybe too much. A transport or freighter wouldn’t need to be configured for flight through an ammonia atmosphere. The maximum rate of turn of a transport in a five standard gravity environment would rarely, if ever, come into play. Transports didn’t generally end up as mutilated piles of metal sitting on a deck after being shot at, they didn’t typically fly into combat on purpose, and they didn’t have a high casualty rate for those who flew and crewed them.

CC commed Darin with another maneuver they could try. The jargon she used would have put the blankest look on any layman and probably even some transport pilots as well, but they were common terms to starfighter pilots. Darin complied without a second thought, and he couldn’t help but notice that his maneuver coordination with CC was going considerably better now than it had with all the other Coronas in that last sim run. It was disturbingly rewarding to see Quiver just barely manage to sneak out of the line of fire of the pair’s unified attack.

Ahead of him, Quiver’s X-wing pulled up and shot toward the clear sky. Darin pushed his helmet down more firmly on his head—maybe one of these days they’d find a chinstrap for it—and in doing so could barely feel the two flimsi pictures stuck on the inside top, one of his best friends and one of his family. Then he half-grinned in mischievous determination as he slammed in his throttle and took off after his wingman in a wild corkscrew pattern.

Besides, a transport couldn’t do *this*.

Cohen would have loved it.

The End

Revision A

7-21-08