

“Pilot in Command”

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Darin Stanic grabbed the blue stylus and added a long, bold streak of color on the piece of flimsi in front of him. There. It was perfect. He'd been working on this picture forever— a whole half hour!— and it was finally ready.

The seven-year-old broke into a huge smile, grabbed the flimsi and raced out of his bedroom. His pounding footsteps echoed down the hallway. “Mom! Mom!” he yelled. “Look!”

The first sound that greeted him was a whimper, then a cry, then a screech. He slowed to a walk and grimaced. Stupid baby.

He found his mother in the living room just as she was heaving a sigh and getting to her feet. “Darin, you woke her up!” Ginala snapped. “She'd just gotten to sleep! Didn't I tell you to be quiet?” She walked toward the baby's room.

“But Mom, I had to show you. I drew this for you.” Darin held up the flimsi as he followed her.

Ginala never turned around. “It'll take forever for her to settle down again. Go play outside!” She disappeared into the baby's room, and immediately her soft, comforting voice came wafting out. “It's okay, Shiori. Shhh. You need to go back to sleep, baby. Please?”

Darin stopped in the hallway. “But I made this for you!” he repeated.

“Go play outside!”

Darin threw the picture to the ground in anger. Stupid baby. Always crying. Especially in the middle of the night. Mom and Dad had been so cranky since they'd brought the baby home a few weeks ago. Darin wished he could have one night when he wasn't woken up by the stupid crying.

Fine then. He'd go play outside. He didn't want to be in the same house with the stupid baby anyway.

Darin put on his boots and vest and grabbed his favorite toy starship, then he ran out the back door. His father was there, doing yard work.

Without slowing down, Darin held his ship high in the air and flew it out into space. He ran around the small yard, weaving and turning and spinning. Then he spotted a pile of dead branches and weeds his father had been collecting and turned right for it.

“Oh no! The ship's gonna run into space trees! Aaaaahhhh!” Darin yelled as he jumped headlong with his toy into the pile. The branches poked him and stuck him all over as he landed, and his excited narration quickly turned to a surprised shriek of pain. He scrambled out of the pile.

“Darin! What are you doing?!” his father demanded, rushing over. He picked Darin up, set him on his feet and checked him for injuries.

“My ship ran into space trees!” Darin said.

“Yeah, well, can't you see I'm busy here? Go play over there.” Jodeco pointed to an area

of grass near the house.

“Will you play with me, Dad?” Darin asked. “You can be the space tree controller!”

“I can’t now, Darin. I’m too far behind on the yard work since your sister came home. Play by yourself.” Jodeco went back to the weeds he was battling.

Darin stomped over to the designated area of grass and stood there for a few moments. Then he lifted his toy ship high above his head, gave another energetic shriek and started running all over the yard again, including through the patch of weeds his dad was trying to clear.

“Darin!” Jodeco scolded. “No more running! You’re in the way! I told you to play over there!”

Darin sullenly returned to his prison of grass. He sat down cross-legged and angrily crashed his toy ship into the ground repeatedly.

A short time later, he was trying to fill up the cargo bay with plucked pieces of grass when his mother stuck her head out the back door. “Jo’co, we need more diapers. Go get some, please. And I can’t watch Darin out here now, so take him along.” She ducked back into the house.

Jodeco sighed and took his dirty gloves off. “Well, you heard her. Your sister needs diapers. Let’s go, Darin.” He brushed the loose dirt off his pants.

“I don’t wanna go,” Darin said. “I wanna stay out here.”

“You can’t. Your mom can’t watch you out here while she watches the baby inside.”

“So don’t watch the baby.”

His dad didn’t buy Darin’s perfect logic. “You’re coming with. Let’s go,” he said sternly.

Darin crashed his ship into the ground once more before his father took his arm and hauled him to his feet.

“Darin!” Jodeco snapped. He was quickly losing his patience with that kid. “I told you to put that back!”

Darin looked a bit taken aback. “But Dad, I just wanted to show it to you.”

Jodeco sighed in aggravation. Why would Darin feel the need to show him something as random and pointless as a caf mug emblazoned with the logo from a holovid neither of them had ever seen? “Put it back and stop touching everything in the store. How many times do I have to tell you we’re just here for diapers?”

“Fine,” Darin grumbled. He put the mug back on the store shelf and followed Jodeco toward the store’s baby section. On the way, Darin tapped his dad on the back and asked, “Dad?”

“What?”

“What’s that thing?” Darin pointed to a large contraption amid the outdoor cooking and grilling appliances.

“It looks like a big grill,” Jodeco answered.

“Really? That thing is a grill? For cooking? It’s huge! Can we get one?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t need it. We have a small one already.”

“But Dad, that small one’s all dirty. Let’s get a new one, and you can show me how to use it and we’ll cook supper on it all week! Just the two of us!” Darin said.

“We don’t need a new one, and we can’t afford it anyway,” Jodeco replied.

Darin paused. “But you’re buying diapers. Don’t buy the diapers so we can get the grill instead.”

“That’s ridiculous, Darin. We need the diapers for your sister. We don’t need the grill.” They reached the appropriate aisle, and Jodeco began looking for the correct diaper brand and size.

“But Dad—”

“The answer is no. Why don’t you help me find the kind of diapers we need?”

Darin snorted, looking miffed. “So you can buy them instead of our grill? No way!” He turned and ran out of the diaper aisle.

“Darin!” Jodeco called sharply. “Stop! Come back here!” He immediately went after Darin, but upon reaching the end of the aisle, his son was nowhere in sight. Jodeco mentally cursed and walked quickly in the direction he’d last seen Darin go.

He found him a few seconds later in Darin’s favorite toy aisle. The boy was gazing at all the toy starships and speeders. Jodeco marched up to Darin and grabbed his upper arm. “Darin! Don’t ever run off like that again!” he snapped. “What were you thinking?!”

“Just go get your stupid diapers. I’ll wait here by myself,” Darin grumbled.

“No. You’re staying with me.” Jodeco pulled an angry, protesting Darin along with him back to the diaper aisle. “Honestly, what is with you lately?” he demanded. “You never act like this! Now stay with me, behave and be quiet until we get home or no holovids for a week!”

Darin looked to be on the verge of tears, but he fell silent and stood there sullenly. Then it only took a minute for Jodeco to find the correct diapers and be waiting in line to pay. If only Darin had behaved from the start, they could almost be home already. Jodeco grew more frustrated as he thought of all the work he still had to catch up with from the baby’s arrival and how much time Darin had made him waste here.

His mental to-do list for the baby distracted him as he paid for the diapers and headed to their landspeeder. Ginala had only asked for diapers, but Jodeco hoped he hadn’t forgotten anything else for Shiori as he tossed the diapers in the backseat and climbed into the driver’s seat. He was just about to put the speeder in gear when he realized with a sinking feeling that he’d forgotten something important. Jodeco hurriedly reached over and unlocked and opened the passenger side door for Darin.

His son was standing there, waiting, and he just looked at Jodeco accusingly as if sensing the reason for the delay in letting him in. Darin hadn’t made a sound since Jodeco’s threat of punishment and had stayed behind him, out of his dad’s way and sight. Darin continued that general trend while he climbed in the speeder, closed the door, fastened his safety restraints and picked up the toy ship he’d brought along from home. He didn’t say a word and simply stared out the window while hugging his ship with a death grip.

The rotten feeling in the pit of his stomach for nearly forgetting Darin in the parking lot cut through Jodeco’s recent frustrations with his son. He studied Darin, wondering why he was acting so oddly lately. As Jodeco considered the timing of when he had first noticed it, the answer was obvious. It was even more obvious when he thought back through the past few weeks and couldn’t remember one single thing he or Ginala had done with Darin exclusively. They’d been too busy taking care of Shiori or worn out from her, and Darin had been cast aside, ignored, and now almost literally forgotten. The realization made Jodeco feel awful. But how could he fix it and make it up to his son?

Jodeco thought for a few more moments until his eyes settled on the toy starship Darin was clutching. He put the landspeeder in gear and headed out.

Darin sulked in the passenger seat of their speeder on the way home. He couldn't wait to see Cohen at school the next day. Cohen still liked him. Cohen didn't like a stupid baby more than him. Cohen didn't do everything based on a stupid baby. Darin hugged his ship harder. He was so angry he wanted to cry, and a couple of tears did manage to escape.

He was really mad at his dad now. And his dad was mad at him. So what? His dad was stupid and didn't care about him anymore. Only the baby. Just like his mom.

The landspeeder slowed, then they turned down a street Darin didn't recognize. He didn't care. He'd just stay quiet like he'd been told. His dad didn't want to hear him or talk to him anyway. He wasn't the stupid baby.

They pulled into a large, vacant lot. Darin didn't react. The speeder slowed to a stop, and Darin heard his dad set it to stationary.

"You okay, Darin?" his dad asked softly. Darin didn't answer and only grasped his ship more tightly.

Jodeco sighed. "Look, buddy, I know we haven't been paying much attention to you lately. I'm sorry. Your baby sister's a lot of work, though."

"I don't want a baby sister. Can't you take her back?" Darin said.

"No, it doesn't work like that. She's here to stay, just like you're here to stay from when you were a baby. But even though we can't spend as much time with you right now, your mom and I still love you," Jodeco said.

"No you don't," Darin muttered darkly. "You love the stupid baby."

"Yes, we do love her, but that doesn't mean we don't love you too, just as much. And she's not stupid, Darin. She's helpless. She can't do anything for herself."

"Cept cry."

"Well, yes, she can cry," Jodeco agreed. "Can she ever. But we have to do everything for her. She takes up a lot of time, and you could almost say she commands the household because of it. As she gets bigger, like you, she'll be able to do more on her own. You're big now, so you don't need us to do everything for you like she does. Understand?"

"No," Darin mumbled, not even trying to.

"You're a big boy now, who can do a lot on his own. We need you to help her and help us like a big boy does," his dad continued.

"I don't wanna be a big boy," Darin said, still looking pointedly out the window. "I want things like they were before she came."

"Oh." Jodeco sounded disappointed. "That's really too bad. I was thinking of letting you fly the speeder around the lot here for a bit, but only big boys can do that. What a shame. Guess we'll just go home."

That caught Darin's attention. He whirled around to look at his father incredulously. "What? Dad, really? You mean it?! Let me fly it! Pleeeeease!"

"But I can't now," Jodeco said with a defeated shrug.

"Please! Let me! I'm big. I'm seven!"

"Well... if you're *sure* you're big enough."

“Yeah!”

“And remember, big boys have to help their parents and baby sisters. Are you still a big boy?”

“Yeah!” Darin said, not even realizing or caring what he was agreeing to as long as it meant he could... he could...

Jodeco grinned. “Then come on over here.”

Darin’s smile couldn’t fit on his face. He unbuckled his seat restraints, left his toy ship in the seat and hurriedly scooted over to his dad. Jodeco moved the seat back a bit, then he awkwardly lifted Darin up and sat him in his lap, facing forward.

“Okay, here’s how we’re going to do this,” his dad said. “You can’t reach the pedals yet, so I’ll work those and the accelerator and brake. You have the very important job of steering with the wheel here. Can you do that?”

“Yeah!” Darin nearly squealed the word from excitement.

“All right.” Jodeco redid his seat restraint around Darin as well, then said, “It’s important that you steer where I tell you to. Ready? Both hands on the wheel.”

Darin immediately grabbed the wheel. It was a magical feeling that left him breathless.

“Okay, here we go. Nice and slow.” Jodeco eased the landspeeder forward into motion, barely above walking speed.

Darin’s first reaction of terror was quickly replaced by ecstasy. “I’m flying it! I’m flying it!”

“Good job!” his dad said. “Now steer over there a bit. Don’t turn the wheel much. Nice and easy.”

Darin did so, and he was thrilled to see the speeder obey his command. “Did you see that, Dad? I steered it! Faster! Faster!”

“Oh, you want to go faster, do you? Okay, we’ll go *really* fast!” The speeder increased to jogging speed.

Darin shrieked with joy at the new velocity. “We’re going faster than light! I know we are! Wait’ll I tell Cohen!”

“Now steer over that way.”

Darin did so. “I’m doing it all by myself!”

Jodeco chuckled and ruffled Darin’s dark blond hair. “See, buddy, there are still some things that are meant just for you and no one else. Diaper runs for your sister don’t have to be all bad.”

The End

Revision A

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