

“Searching and Finding”

by Katie Zajdel
thumper@coronasquadron.com
<http://www.coronasquadron.com>

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Prologue

My heart was stuck in my throat as I followed Macro’s smoking ship down through the atmosphere. He always seemed to be on the verge of losing control and I kept shouting what he needed to correct in his attitude or flight path over the comm to him. I don’t know if he heard me or not, because he never responded.

The fight had been a complete disaster. Some filthy pirates had sold us some information saying that this was a Rebel-friendly facility, and since all they really seemed to do here was grow food and provide it to the Rebels, they had no defenses to speak of. Just a handful of Y-wings. We came here to investigate and to put an end to any Rebel activity.

I flinched when something sparked on the outside of Macro’s TIE fighter and caused it to become even more unstable as it dropped like a rock through the air. I swore to myself that if something happened to Macro because those disgusting pirates had lied to us—

There was no handful of Y-wings. We could have easily dealt with them if there had been. Instead, there was nearly an entire squadron of X-wings, and we were totally caught off-guard. We engaged not far above the atmosphere, and then one of them hit my wingman, Macro, pretty hard and sent him going down. I immediately told my already-distracted commander that I was going after him, and it wasn’t long after that when I heard the recall order given. I kept going after Macro, refusing to leave him unprotected, and then my scope showed that our cruiser was retreating. I put in a call to them, but all I could really do was hope they came back for us.

We broke through the lower cloud layer and I saw a broad plain littered with trees, making up a sparse forest at the most. The exception to this was the set of buildings clustered together in one spot, and large farm fields were located to the north, northeast, and eastern sides of the buildings. A man-made water reservoir was stationed prominently in the center of each group of fields. I guessed that this was the Rebel installation, and I cursed the luck that brought us down so close to it instead of someplace safer. We were coming in from the south, and if we kept going the way we were then we’d end up somewhere west of the northern fields in the light woods.

The atmosphere was thick now, and Macro was obviously having more trouble with his fighter. I fervently prayed that he would straighten it out and get it under control.

Macro was more than just my wingman—he was my best friend. We attended the Academy together and were thrilled to find out that we’d been assigned to the same fighter squadron months ago. We’d gone through everything together, more than everything, actually, and we had big dreams of serving on, and then commanding our own Star Destroyer together one day. I was not about to see that all end just because some filthy pirate lied and because some

Rebel scum had gotten off a lucky shot. I knew that if anyone could keep that fighter under control it was Macro, but I was scared all the same. His situation just kept looking worse, and there was nothing I could do to help.

Then, just after a “Macro, you’re rolling to port,” and a “You’re yawing too far to starboard! You’re going to spin!” his fighter shuddered and started pitching down. That left me with only one command to give as my stomach bottomed out. “Macro, pull up! PULL UP...!”

Chapter One

Commander Quentell "Mack" Mackin

"Okay, Coronas, we're done here. Any injuries or critical damage?"

Everyone reported that they were in fairly good shape after the dogfight. I allowed myself a brief smile of gratitude for the good news and then continued, "All right, then, let's do a quick sweep of the immediate area, and then we can head back."

We scouted around, but we did not find any Imperials or Imperial devices lying in wait in orbit. As we finished up, I reported our status to the base, and then turned to the squadron frequency. "Form up, everyone. I'm getting pretty low on fuel and I imagine the rest of you are, too. We're not expecting anything else immediately, but in case we need to come back out in a hurry, the Serk personnel will be waiting to refuel us right away."

Quiver's voice came over the comm then as everyone began forming up behind me. "That's something I've been meaning to ask you, sir."

I hesitated for barely an instant when I heard him say that. I survive by using my instincts. Any good fighter pilot does. The ones that live long enough tend to develop instincts that can inexplicably get them through many tough situations. Along somewhat similar lines, one might say that I've been around Quiver long enough that I've come to develop a "Quiver instinct," if you will. Now, Quiver's a bright guy who is capable of asking important, insightful questions, but he's equally capable of cracking jokes or making witty comments in a totally innocent voice and it's hard at times to know what to expect from him. Right now, however, that instinct was telling me that he was *not* going to ask a serious question. I knew I'd regret it if I replied but for some reason I did anyway. "What, Ten?"

"What kind of a name is 'Serk' for a base, anyway?" Yes, I should have listened to my instincts. "I mean, does it mean something? Is it the Gran translation for 'little out-of-the-way place on an unexciting hunk of rock that could really benefit from a dose of civilization'?"

CC piped up at that moment and said, "No, it's the Gran translation for 'the only place in the galaxy that can bore hyper pilots just by existing.' Trust me. I learned the language from Maptoo."

"Okay, you two, cut the chatter," I said mildly, and the channel obligingly went silent. The name ultimately wouldn't matter anymore because Serk Base had just been discovered by the Imperials and would have to be evacuated immediately.

We passed through the atmosphere of the planet and I radioed in for landing clearance. The base asked if all my pilots were accounted for, so I double-checked my scope and asked them all to report in. They did, and I told Control that they were all right behind me, but Control did not explain further.

A few minutes later, my X-wing settled to the planetside hangar deck lightly and my R2 unit, Bluehill, began helping me power down the fighter. Within half a minute the rest of my squadron had landed as well, and once they did I sent out one last transmission. "As soon as your fighters are powered down, report directly to that conference room on the second floor of the operations building that we've been using for debriefing. No stopping for drinks in between."

There were scattered moans in reply and then Ikoa looked over from her cockpit next to mine and asked over the comm, "Lead, can we at least change first?"

I shook my head. "Negative. We're still on call, Two, especially since there might be more Imperials in the area. Just because they ran doesn't mean that they ran far, and I'm sure

they'll be back soon with big brother."

There was still some residual good-natured, or what I hoped was good-natured, moaning about the sobriety requirement but one touch of my comm system's on/off button remedied that. I left my helmet and gloves in my cockpit and easily jumped down the ladder now hooked to the side of my fighter. A tech was seeing to Bluehill and the limited number of other techs had begun to service and refuel my fighter and the rest of the Corona Squadron X-wings. When I reached the deck I moved out of the techs' way and then stopped and waited for Snubber.

Most of my pilots by now had finished powering down their fighters and were likewise starting to climb out. I simply stood and watched them for a minute while I waited. Slurry and Pellicer, who had gotten some minor damage to their craft during the fight, were talking to the techs about it. Pellicer was taking his usual direct, hands-on approach and was showing the tech exactly where and what the damage was. He'd only been with us for a couple of months and was only just now beginning to show any signs of loosening up. Everything about him, from his rigid posture to his self-assured demeanor to his dark brown regulation crew cut, showed that he was the product of an Imperial military upbringing. I knew CC had been working hard to get her wingman to relax and feel at home here, but she still had a considerable challenge ahead of her.

Slurry had apparently gotten the tech who wasn't really used to being around nonhumans. The small Bilgana barely reached the private's shoulders, but the young tech still looked intimidated by him. Even though he had an easy-going personality, I had to admit that Slurry's appearance did take some getting used to. His modified orange flightsuit clashed horribly with his charcoal-colored skin. Taloned fingers on his four arms were either pointing out damage or gesturing while he talked, all while turning his head to look at the tech with his four slightly reflective, nonmoving eyes. As he crouched down to show the tech something on his fighter's repulsor coils, the tech went a little pale as he saw Slurry's knees bend opposite of how a human's would. And if all that wasn't enough, he was probably having a hard time understanding the Bilgana's thick accent and manner of speech. I saw Ikoa walk up then, probably to help the young tech understand what Slurry was saying and maybe even to help him relax in Slurry's presence. Ikoa was small and slim of build like Slurry was, too, but her shoulder-length light brown hair, green eyes and friendly smile made her a very nonintimidating figure. My wingman was a very understanding, compassionate person and was probably one of the most well-liked by all her squadmates.

The others were okay after the battle and had no special technical requests, and were meeting up with each other. Kalre and Chopper were evidently comparing dogfighting notes from the last battle, if their wild hand motions were any indication. Those two worked well together, but that was probably because they were so alike in their fighting styles: they were both bold and aggressive when it came to flying, and I've caught myself thinking on more than one occasion that I should split them up so they don't amplify each other's habits all the time. At one point, Kalre moved both of his hands as if they were two starfighters, and then had one of them cut right in front of the other. Chopper laughed a little at the Rodian and shook his head, then did what Kalre had done except this time, the "fighter" was cut off much more sharply and closely. Kalre didn't even acknowledge the solidly-built human's clarification, and if anything when he repeated the motion he made it more sloppy, and then kept going with whatever he was explaining to Chopper about his wingman's maneuver during the fight.

Then there were the other three. I was just barely able to hear Quiver say to Darin when his wingman walked up to him, "Hey, did you notice how Mack said we just couldn't *stop* for

drinks? If we go in to get one and never stop walking the whole time, we should be okay.”

Darin laughed a little and shook his head, then said something I couldn't hear and tapped his chrono. I guessed he was mentioning something to Quiver about it being only early afternoon and, therefore, too early for drinks anyway. They walked over and met up with CC just as her droid Ruby was being placed on the deck after being taken out of the X-wing's droid compartment. As they walked by the astromech, Darin surreptitiously moved so that Quiver and CC were between him and the droid. I grinned a bit at the sight. Thumper had been doing that for so long that I wondered if he even realized he did it anymore.

There were times when I couldn't figure out if Quiver and Darin were complete opposites or if they were so alike that it was scary. CC's personality was a much closer match to Quiver's overall and she was the only one I'd seen so far who could really hold her own against Quiver's quips, banter and pranks and even respond in kind. Quiver, in turn, loved that and even seemed to thrive on it. As if to prove the point, after they met up Quiver said something to CC and she tapped her chrono like Darin had and said something back that I couldn't hear over the din of the hangar. They exchanged a couple more remarks with each other, each one smirking a bit more with every response they gave, and finally Darin started snickering as he listened. CC apparently was the one who won that round because Quiver elbowed Darin as they walked to get him to stop laughing. That prompted CC to grin victoriously and she poked Quiver in the arm and said something to him, which just made him roll his eyes.

You could usually tell just by looking at her when CC was up to something: her beige eyes had a way of twinkling that always gave it away. They were a sharp contrast to her black hair, which in turn was a sharp contrast to Quiver's and Darin's blond hair. Of the two, Darin's was slightly darker and it was long enough on top that he had bangs falling down just past his eyebrows. Darin's bangs were longer than Snubber's, and they were the only two men in the squadron to have them. Quiver's usual hairstyle was a sloppy-looking crew cut and I honestly couldn't picture the tall, lanky, pale-blue-eyed pilot with any other haircut because it seemed to suit him so well. Thumper was another nonintimidating figure with slightly-below-average height, an appropriately medium build and green eyes that nearly matched Ikoa's. Quiver had a more distinctive appearance, but I also couldn't picture Quiver ever looking intimidating. It was actually a little amusing to think about.

Snubber walked up at that point. He had brown hair that was a shade somewhere between Ikoa's and Pellicer's, and was probably only about average height, if that. He was the kind of person who could easily blend in with a crowd and whose appearance would not make an impression on a casual observer, but he sure knew how to look intimidating when he wanted to. That was a very useful quality in an XO. “Looks like they were right to expect trouble, sir,” he said without preamble. “Do you think more's on the way soon?”

“It wouldn't surprise me,” I said as we turned and started toward the conference room. From there, I could contact our superior here while waiting for my pilots to assemble, give him a quick rundown of the situation, and recommend immediate evacuation.

When I contacted Commander Whittek (whom I reported to here) before the debriefing, he explained a bit about what had happened earlier. The Imperials had shown up on the long-range sensors and had insisted on inspecting the base. The Serk commander hadn't been able to

talk his way out of it, and the Imperials launched TIE fighters as a show of their seriousness. If they even got as far as the hangar it would have been obvious that this was a Rebel facility, so he felt it was better to tip his hand and have us engage, even though X-wings suddenly appearing to defend a place makes it a Rebel base beyond all doubt. We engaged.

Once all the Coronas had assembled in the room, the debriefing itself of the subsequent events was painless enough: as far as dogfights went, this one had been small, quick and fairly straightforward. Luckily for us, the Imperials happened to attack when all of us were already in the air doing some atmospheric training runs together, not when we were split into our shifts, so for once our numbers had nearly evenly matched the Imperials'. It didn't seem like they had expected a squadron of X-wings to suddenly show up, but that was understandable seeing as how there had only ever been between a flight and a squadron of Y-wings defending this place during any given pirate skirmish or raid, so we probably hadn't been part of their intel. It didn't take long for the Imperial cruiser to recall what was left of its fighters and jump out of the system, which was perfectly fine with us.

Looking back, it was probably best that we had been here. The Y-wing pilots I just mentioned, Nova Squadron to be exact, who had been here before had taken a beating the last few weeks while staving off the increasing pirate raids. We were filling in for them while they took a break, and in the condition they had been in when we got here a week ago to relieve them, they probably wouldn't have survived against an entire TIE squadron.

We finished with the preliminary report and were having a discussion jumping between the topics of why it was the Imperials that showed up this time instead of the raiders and pirates that had been plaguing this base recently, of where the Serk personnel could evacuate to and how long we had before the Imperials came back in greater force when the room's door chime beeped. Snubber went to answer it while the rest of us continued, and I stole a glance up a minute later to see what was happening across the room. Steen was standing in the doorway, quietly and intently discussing something with Commander Whittek, and my curiosity was piqued: no matter who it was, if it was a trivial matter Snubber would have sent them away and told them to come back later or he just would have gotten the necessary information and that would have been it. The fact that he was not doing either of those two things made me wonder what was going on. Steen motioned Whittek in and they walked up, with Steen raising his eyebrows at me in that quirky little way of his that means he has something he needs to tell me. Everyone stopped talking when they noticed the two come up, and I told the squadron that we'd continue the discussion later.

I stood when Snubber and Cdr. Whittek came up, shook the hand the big man offered and nodded. "Commander Whittek."

"Commander Mackin," he replied in his booming yet amiable voice while he returned the handshake. "Your boys did a fine job flying up there. How is everyone?"

I knew my wingman well enough to know that Ikoa would be rolling her eyes at that "boys" comment, and from where the Trio sat just at the edge of my field of vision I saw Quiver immediately whisper something into CC's ear, which prompted her to silently elbow him in the side. I ignored the antics and said, "We all came through pretty well, thank you."

"Good." Whittek paused a heartbeat and then continued, "Listen, I'm sorry to interrupt your discussion before, but there's a situation we're looking into and we may need your squadron's help with it."

"We'll certainly do what we can to help. Should we move to a private room somewhere?"

"No, that's all right. They'll all need to hear this. During the dogfight, we picked up what

we believe might have been some TIE fighters landing on planet a little northwest of here, out beyond the southwest corner of Complex A, which is the one to the north of us, as you may recall. We're trying to pinpoint location and range, and we believe the craft are still there, as we have not picked up any other signals besides our own ships since and the Imperial cruiser has long since jumped out of the system.

"If those are indeed TIEs, we would like your help in locating the pilots. You know that as a farming complex we don't have any substantial number of ground troops or security or defenses, so even one Imperial can cause a lot of damage to us, and with the small number of people we have here and the huge area we have to cover, ten extra people can go a long way in assisting. Besides, who better than pilots can give us an idea of where the pilots might go or what they might do after crashing?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Quiver turn to Darin this time and whisper something to him, and then Darin gave him an odd look and shook his head hopelessly. They quickly faced front again when I turned my head to briefly glance at everyone, and the others were all more or less patiently paying attention. Just as expected, I didn't see any signs of resistance to the request with the exception of Chopper, who looked like he wasn't sure about tromping off like a common minion to search for Imperials.

Then I remembered the bigger issue. I looked back at Whittek and asked, "Commander, why does it even matter? We need to evacuate as soon as possible. Looking for a couple Imperial pilots will just waste time and resources that are much better spent in getting ready to leave, and once we're gone it won't matter if the pilots reach the base or not."

"I'm afraid it's not that easy," he replied. "With harvest season comes many things. One is the increase in pirate raids, which is ultimately what caused you to be here in the first place. Another is the increase in shipping runs as we ship our crops out. All of our large cargo haulers are out right now on freight runs—I'm sure you've noticed how empty the hangar is, even with all your X-wings in it. We don't have enough capacity at the moment to get all of our remaining people off-planet at once unless we take nothing else and pack the smaller, remaining transports wall-to-wall with people. That's our last option, and one that no one wants to do."

I just stood there for a moment as I realized what that meant. "How soon can you get a ship here? And can we at least relocate elsewhere on the planet in the meantime?"

"The nearest available Rebel ship with the required capacity is on its way and should be here in about two-and-a-half to three days. Relocating everyone and everything to a safe place elsewhere on the planet would take almost as long because of the same capacity issues we face, so either way, those Imperial pilots could still be a threat to us. The timing here couldn't have been worse. We're going to stay and pack up as much equipment as possible and harvest and pack as many crops as we can, too. We'll save as much as we can before our ride arrives, and we need to protect against any Imperials on-planet in the meantime."

I wasn't fond of that overall idea. "With all due respect, Commander, equipment and crops can be replaced. The people here can't. We need to relocate as soon as possible. There's no telling when the Imperials will be back, especially if some crashed here. And after they come back and get their people, what's going to stop them from leveling the place? We won't catch them off-guard again."

Cdr. Whittek shook his head. "We're well off the Imperials' main patrol route—that's why we stayed hidden for so long and why pirates are such a problem for us. It will likely take as long for them to get here as it takes the Rebel ship. Besides that, weeks, and sometimes months, of our

lives are out in those fields, Commander Mackin. No one here wants to see all that hard work be wasted because of the Imperials if there's a chance we can save it. The Rebellion is always short on supplies and food anyway, which makes everything here in this base and out in those fields a valuable commodity. We're staying as long as we can. Now, because so many of our remaining personnel are starting to pack up at this very moment, we'll really need your squadron's help with the search."

I still thought they were making a mistake, but they were the ones deciding and they were the ones who ultimately had the most to lose. From the way Whittek was speaking, everything seemed pretty final and not open for negotiation, and besides, as long as we were here we were under their command, so we had to do what they wanted anyway. I ran a hand through my black crew cut, hardly realizing that I did so. "Just tell us what you need us to do," I said, making sure to keep the resignation out of my voice.

Whittek smiled. "Excellent. We have enough people to guard and pack the operations building, the barracks and most likely the supply building, so as soon as they confirm that those were TIEs then I'll get you in touch with the search coordinator. She may have different ideas about this but just off the top of my head, I'd ask that you keep at least two pilots on call to fly at all times and they can double as security for the hangar. If they need to leave to fly, we'll pull some others in to cover for them in the hangar or we'll pull all of you to fly depending on the situation. The rest of you will probably be split up into search groups outside. It'll be more efficient for us to stay here and pack since we're more familiar with our equipment and facilities, but we'll give you what help we can spare out in the field for the search."

I nodded just as Whittek's comlink beeped. He momentarily excused himself to answer it and got the news that the signal was confirmed as a TIE fighter, at least one, most likely two, and it was sending off a repeating transmission. A minute later we were all following him down to a large briefing room on the first floor where the search was being coordinated.

Lieutenant Ikoa "Rancor" Fyndcap

Although I'd never admit it to anyone, there are a lot of added perks that come with being the commander's wingman that I like quite a bit. Almost always when we split up into pairs or teams to do something, Mack splits us by wingpairs, which means I get to help him with whatever he's doing, and being the commander means that he usually gets to do the important stuff.

For instance, the search coordinator wanted one of us to fly out to do an aerial recon and find the TIEs so we could start the search for the pilots from there. Since the situation was still largely unknown, naturally Mack decided that he'd better be the one putting his six on the line. And since we never go out alone into an unknown situation with hostiles, that naturally meant that I'd get to go, too.

I don't mind, though. In fact, I enjoy it, and I'm sure he knows that. I didn't join the Rebellion to sit around doing nothing. Besides, it's a great feeling knowing that Mack trusts me enough to watch his six so he can concentrate on doing whatever important stuff he needs to do, and even though I'm a good pilot and can more than hold my own in a dogfight so he doesn't have to babysit me, every time I fly with him I'm forced to stay on my toes just to keep up, which means that my flying improves each time. I couldn't ask for more.

Finally, if I wasn't his wingman I'd be stuck down on the ground now like the rest of the squadron. Like I said, there are perks involved. I'd take time in the air over sitting in those run-down old buildings any day; I certainly didn't envy the Novas being stationed here. The next time I found myself thinking we had it rough onboard *Crescent Star* in terms of the condition and amount of supplies, equipment and facilities we had, I would just have to remember this place and *Star* would seem like a palace.

We had spent some time in a planning session with the search coordinator and the rest of the base personnel whom we would be joining for this. With the recent string of raids and now the Imperials' attention, she wanted at least four pilots on call at all times, so the two of us plus Quiver and Darin were going to be suited up and doubling as security in the hangar for the first shift. Those two were back there now while we scouted. The rest of the Coronas would be on search teams once we found the TIEs and knew what we were dealing with. Personally, I was hoping we'd get to stick with the aerial search.

Once we were airborne and heading northwest, it wasn't hard to spot the smoke marking the crash site. We pointed our X-wings' noses toward it and kept an eye on our scopes and out the windows for any surprises.

When we got there, we found two TIEs. Well, that may be too generous. We found one intact and powered-down TIE, which had landed nearby, and the scattered wreckage of another one. There were no life signs around either of them, though there were indications that a small fire had started around the wreckage and had been put out. I flew high cover while Mackin circled in for a closer look and reported his findings back to the base.

After we joined back up, we moved opposite each other and did a few ever-increasing spirals to try to catch sight of either of the pilots, but we found nothing. Anything that wasn't farm fields was covered with very light woods. Spotting the pilots from the air shouldn't be too hard unless they took cover. Spotting their trail from the air would be nearly impossible. I looked around some more, trying to imagine where I'd go to hide if this was the view I had while coming in. Besides the light woods to the west of Serk Base, the only things really sticking out against the horizon were the fields and Serk Base itself, which the TIE pilots *had* to know was a Rebel facility since the Imperials came to attack it.

We stayed above the Imperial fighters and waited for a ground team to come out and make sure that there were indeed no people down there that were just waiting to power up the good fighter and take them all out with one laser blast. A few minutes later we saw a landspeeder approaching from the direction of the base. About ten minutes after that, the speeder pulled up and stopped a respectable distance away. One person began securing the speeder and the rest piled out and started cautiously walking toward the fighters, blasters and scanners ready. It didn't surprise me to see Pellicer and CC in the group. I wished them all luck.

I felt kind of bad for Pellicer right then, really. He became a Rebel after defecting from the Imperials, and since he was the only one in our squadron that had any substantial experience with TIEs and the Empire, we often relied on his unique expertise in situations like this. Shaun joined the Rebellion to put the Empire behind him, yet that was the last thing we were allowing him to do.

Chapter Two

Lieutenant Shaun "Scoop" Pellicer

Our portable scanners didn't find any life signs either among the wreckage or in the intact fighter next to it, which obviously meant that either the TIE pilots were dead or they weren't there, or one of each. I didn't know of any places in a TIE that could shield life signs. Regardless, we all kept our blasters ready just in case, though they were only set on "stun." Some of the Serk personnel started to cautiously pick through the wreckage while CC and I and another Serk grunt made our way over to the intact fighter.

The TIE sitting there was a pretty familiar sight to me, and that reminded me that I was kind of annoyed right then. The topic had come up on the drive over here and it turned out that CC was the only one in the speeder who was not originally an Imperial. The thinking seemed to be that since we had been Imperials, then we should be the ones to check out the Imperial craft.

Granted, I was far and away the TIE expert in the Coronas, having flown them for almost ten months before defecting, and I knew my knowledge and experience were valuable to them, but I couldn't help but wonder if they all just saw me as "the Imperial." There had been a few suspicious looks when I first joined the squadron a couple months ago and the news was first revealed, not that it was a secret, but after a dogfight or two they seemed to start accepting me. At times like this, though, I wondered if it was just becoming harder for me to live down my past, something few of the Rebels-from-the-start seemed to have to do, no matter what they did before joining.

I kept telling myself that I didn't need to prove myself or my loyalties to anyone, but some small voice deep inside kept disagreeing with that, and then the voice would ask how I could go about proving myself. The obvious answer was to offer whatever assistance I could in Imperial matters and procedures and maneuvers to show them I was trying to help, but that also seemed to be a vicious cycle because it would remind everyone each time that I was, gasp, the Imperial, and would make me have to prove myself even more.

So you see, the familiar sight I was approaching aggravated me for being just that. Life would be so much simpler if I'd never been an Imperial, except that I never would have heard the end of it from my family, and there had been no reason for me not to join at the time. I knew I was stuck with my past. But honestly, did I have to be the only source of Imperial information here, the only one who could do anything with Imperial hardware? The TIE was sitting on the ground, so I wouldn't be flying it, and the computer would almost definitely be locked out so they'd really need a computer expert here, not a pilot, TIE or not. Did I have to spell that out for them, that they didn't need to automatically assume that my past experience meant I should or could handle anything and everything Imperial? Didn't they know the computer would be locked out? Didn't they know that it would have to be unlocked before I could even think of turning off that transmission or getting any data whatsoever? And didn't they know that we were taught to keep TIEs out of Re-

"Hold up," I said suddenly as that thought occurred to me and I halted, two meters from the intact TIE. CC and the other Rebel with us also stopped and looked at me curiously. "Stay here for a minute." I holstered my blaster and stepped up to the cockpit area, then began visually scanning the seal of what passed for the TIE's canopy.

"Shaun, what-" I heard from behind me.

"Stay there, CC. Let me check this out first. Don't let anyone touch this TIE."

It took some doing, but finally I found it: the makeshift booby trap that Imperial pilots were taught to set up if they landed behind enemy lines to keep the fighter from falling into Rebel hands. “Ah, there it is,” I mumbled.

“What?”

Without taking my eyes off of it, I motioned CC forward. “Come here, but be careful not to touch anything.” I guessed it was time to do my part and share my knowledge with this little corner of the Rebellion, or at least with the Coronas.

CC slowly stepped up beside me and knelt down and I pointed it out. The Serk also came up and looked over my shoulder. “You see that?” I asked. They nodded. “If we were to try to open the cockpit without removing it, this thing would trigger and overload one of the laser cannons, sending us all up in smoke along with the fighter. It’s not meant to be hard to disable, in case the real pilot comes back and needs to leave in a hurry, it’s just supposed to be hard to detect, especially for people who don’t know it’s there.”

CC nodded again, said, “Good thing you caught that,” and studied it while I called in the situation.

Even though I told him I could, Commander Mackin wouldn’t let me disarm the thing on my own right away, so then we were stuck waiting for a field worker droid to be brought out from the base to use. I used the time to explain more about the booby trap to CC and then I went over both fighters looking for any more of them in likely places, but found none.

The two X-wings continued to circle lazily overhead, slowly spiraling out and then spiraling back in, just to repeat the process over and over again. I couldn’t help but think of some of the flying carrion eaters I’d seen while visiting Alderaan, waiting to come in and pick up the scraps from the carcass of the dead TIE.

About twenty-five or thirty minutes after the request was put in, someone finally drove up with a worker droid. He attached a holo recorder and transmitter to its shoulder so what it saw could be fed into the datapad he gave me. Once that was done, all of us moved to the other side of our speeder a short distance away for cover.

Using the holo feed, I stepped the droid through disarming the trap and I talked the others through it as well, explaining each step. It was simple and straightforward and as I expected, it was disarmed within half a minute. I headed back out there with CC following and checked it with my own eyes, but everything was disconnected properly. I reported that it was disarmed and got the go-ahead for the droid to open the cockpit. Once more, we had to move behind cover while it did so, but there were no problems and the canopy opened without any explosions.

We had our blasters ready once again but it was all for nothing: the cockpit was empty, which made sense given the booby trap. It was a standard TIE cockpit, nothing extraordinary. I climbed in and checked the computer, and sure enough, it was locked out.

“Can you go ask one of those Serk guys to send out a slicer?” I asked CC.

“I already did,” she answered as she pushed some wayward black hair back behind her ear, “and it turns out that one of the Nova Squadron pilots was their slicer. No one else here has any slicing skill to speak of.”

“What?” I looked at her incredulously. “No one does?”

She laughed easily. “They’re farmers, Scoop. It’s not like they have to hack into the plants to get them to grow.”

Yeah, okay, I should have realized that, but blast, they relied on that squadron for everything! Lieutenant Weas even told us that the wishbone pilots doubled for security here. As I

understood it, normally two Nova Squadron pilots would be on call to fly, two would be on the ground working security and on flight reserve, and then eight (including their four extras) would be off, and they would rotate shifts like that. But lately the base had been getting hit often by raiders and pirates, forcing more to be on call to fly more often. After a few weeks of this, it wore the Novas out and even cost them two pilots and ships. Lt. Weas had a friend in the squadron and they arranged it so that we would come cover for them while the Novas took some R&R. Both to ease the temporary transition and because of the numerous raids, the Serk personnel were covering security on their own so that we only had to worry about flying, but we were getting pulled into it anyway because of this.

And now their only slicer was off on R&R as well. “All right, then. Who’s the best slicer in the Coronas?”

CC thought for a minute. “Well, it *was* Maptoo. Now that he’s gone, given what little I’ve seen you do with a computer I’d say it’s either you or me.” She winked and added, “It’s the curse of Corona Fives everywhere to be the resident computer terrors.”

I looked at the blank readout for a moment. “I’ve never tried to do this before. I wasn’t expecting to have to.”

“Rudder has some slicing programs, though he’s up in Ikoa’s X-wing right now. Should I tell her to land so we can get him out?”

“No, between the two of us we should be able to do this.” I was not about to admit that I couldn’t do it until I had compelling reason to believe otherwise. And I certainly wasn’t going to let a droid come down and effortlessly zip through it, only to discover that I could have done it myself all along. For some reason it irked me when droids showed me up.

Commander Mackin asked what our status was, and CC replied that we were going to slice into the flight computer. I liked how she didn’t say we were going to “try” it—she just said we were going to *do* it, end of story. Commander Mackin simply told us to shut off the transmission as soon as we could and report what we found when we got into the computer, and he ended with saying he and Ikoa were heading back to the base.

I knew they would send out the search teams soon, and hopefully by then the Serk personnel outside would have found some kind of trail to follow or we would have found a lead from the computer. I mentally shrugged and put it out of my mind as I got ready to start slicing into the computer with CC’s help. I needed to focus. The TIE was my problem right now, just as it had been for months and just as it seemed it would always be.

Flight Officer Kalre “Parsec” Unatel

I eagerly paced back and forth. “How long until we leave?” I asked whoever was listening.

Chopper just glared at me from his nearby seat in the conference room and his dark brown eyes looked even darker. “Settle down, Parsec,” he grumbled. “I can’t believe you’re so excited about doing this.” He leaned back and crossed his arms, determined to be in a bad mood.

I shook my head. “I can’t believe you’re *not*.”

I’ve heard some individuals classify all Rodians as bounty hunters. That’s really as much a stereotype as saying that all Wee-Quay are mercenaries or even that all Humans are Imperials, though it is a fact that a seemingly disproportionate number of bounty hunters are Rodians, and

the successful ones too, might I add. Maybe there's something inherent in us that draws such large numbers of us to that profession. Maybe it's a Rodian trait to want to match wits with someone and come out ahead. I don't know. All I knew was that I wanted to get out there and track those pilots down.

This type of activity wasn't one that we'd ever really done before as a squadron. While you're serving off a ship, it's kind of hard to have the situation where you're trying to find a crashed enemy pilot on a planet. Normally I prefer my routine, but when it's broken up by something exciting and interesting like this then I really don't complain. Besides, Chopper was doing that enough for all of us.

Commander Mackin and Ikoa started flying back at last, and we finally got the order to head out to the crash site. I jumped in a landspeeder and waited impatiently for the others. As Chopper, Slurry, Snubber and a handful of other Humans followed more calmly, Slurry clicked his teeth in the Bilgana form of laughter and said to me, "It looks like someone is excited very to get out there."

"Yes, excited very," I replied as we headed out.

The whole way there, Chopper was grumbling to himself about how stupid this was, how we had better things to do with our time than this, and if he ever found out who those Imperial pilots had gotten away from during the dogfight-. I was tempted to tell him that he was the one who had engaged one of them and let them get away just to get him to be quiet, but I knew he'd check his in-flight recordings and ask his astromech Fluke to be sure, and then he'd find out that I lied. Well, I suppose it could be true, but I didn't know, and Chopper holds grudges much too easily to make it worth it to lie for no reason.

We slowed down when we left the area of the fields and began to weave through trees, and they got a touch more dense nearer the crash site. We stopped beside the wreckage at last and I jumped out. I jogged up to the Serk personnel combing the wreckage and I saw two discarded TIE pilot helmets on the ground. "Any leads? Any news?" They shook their heads, so I went over to the intact fighter.

CC and Pellicer were there working at the computer. "Do you have anything about which way they could have gone?" I asked.

They both shook their heads and CC said, "No. We're still working on getting into the system. We'll let you know if we find anything."

"All right." It was just as well, anyway—it was more challenging this way. I stepped away from the fighters and slowly turned in a complete circle, looking at the landscape. Was there anything noticeable about the terrain? Any differences between one area and another that could be exploited? If I had started out from here, where would I go?

Given the way the wreckage was strewn about, I could take a guess at which way the fighters had come in from. I considered the angle of the sun as they came in, and what would have been visible from a TIE cockpit during a nominal descent. I figured they couldn't be very skilled overall since they were TIE pilots and wouldn't be more than a year out of the Academy. I considered the ease of travel over the terrain under the assumption that at least one had to be injured, if not incapacitated, from the crash. I calculated how far they could have gotten in the time they'd had so far with that same assumption. Their standard sidearm make and model, the color of their uniform, and variables like if they would split up or stay together, how much I believed they would hope for a rescue and whether they would run or fight in the meantime all came into play.

Blast, but I loved this.

Lt. Weas and Slurry started circling around the crash site, looking at the ground for clues and putting data into their scanners and datapads. The Serk personnel did the same. That was so inefficient. None of them was even close to getting the bead on the Imperials like I was. Chopper just stood there watching me while I tried to figure out where the pilots had gone.

I finally had all the factors in mind and I looked around for the place that would best fit the criteria I'd come up with. I found my most likely location candidate to the south-southwest of the crash site: a denser grove of trees that was visible through the light woods a small distance out. It was far enough away to be a comfortable distance and close enough to be a good first stopover point; an injured person would have been able to reach it before the X-wings came looking. The terrain between here and there would have been easy enough for an injured Human to move over, and it also provided sufficient cover along the way.

I abruptly headed in that direction, causing Chopper to sigh and roll his eyes. "Where are you going?" he asked as I passed, sounding annoyed that I was actually doing something and forcing him to come along.

"Over here." I stopped about ten meters south of the crash site and started intently scanning the ground in that general area. It had to be there somewhere. I was sure of it.

It took me about ten minutes but then I spotted the barest traces of it, just like I knew I would. And it was heading from the crash site to that grove of trees.

I looked up and called triumphantly to the others, "I found the trail."

Chapter Three

Flight Officer Tictintco "Slurry" Tnis

I looked up with everyone else when Kalre called out, saying he found the trail. I walked over there with Snubber, and Kalre pointed out the path.

Two of the gods Bilgana powerful, Ttrinilltrit (Keeper of Light and Energy) and Ttangrssiil (Soul of the Ground), must have been bickering with other each because I could see not anything at all where Kalre was pointing. Snubber saw apparently something but said he wasn't convinced that it was the trail and wanted to keep looking for indications other, especially since the pilots may have split up. Then for the minutes few next, Kalre proceeded to explain all his reasoning about why he was sure that was the trail one and only and where he thought the pilots were going. I saw the grove of trees he pointed out in the distance but I did see not why that was different any from bunch other any of trees here. Seeing numbers large of trees together like this felt still odd to me, after even all of my time in the Rebellion and visiting worlds other.

Lt. Weas gave in finally and agreed to follow the trail for a while. A couple of the personnel Serk joined us while the others continued searching around the site crash.

Kalre made everyone walk well to side either of what he said was the trail, claiming that "its integrity had to remain intact." I shrugged to myself with my arms upper like Humans do and followed along, keeping eyes four all open for signs any of the pilots Imperial as we went.

Our blasters had been ready the time whole, and when we got inside the grove and fanned out a bit I was glad they were, even if they were only on "stun" like we'd all been ordered to set them to at least twice. Snubber jerked suddenly a hand up and motioned for us to stop, then he leveled his blaster at whatever he was peering intently at through the brush. "Freeze! Don't move!" he said.

He began walking cautiously forward, sighting still down his blaster at something that was out of sight from where I stood, but that changed when I, Kalre and someone from Serk Base joined him and mimicked his actions. The rest stood ready behind us in case something happened.

A pilot Imperial lay there in the brush, hand one raised in surrender and the arm other broken obviously. He had bandages makeshift some on his arm broken, a leg and around his torso, but it was clear quite that they were being held on only with intentions good. From what I know of expressions Human, he looked like he was scared and in pain.

"Cover him, Borlan," Snubber told the Rebel other with us. Borlan took the Imperial's blaster and then stepped back a bit to cover him. Then Snubber got out his comlink and called the base, reporting quickly our status.

A bolt blaster flew suddenly through the air and hit Borlan in the shoulder, sending him to the ground with a cry of pain. We all dove for the ground as well, but out of reflex, not injury. Couple another of bolts came in, allowing us to get a location general of their origin. Ttrinilltrit was not definitely happy with me today for reason some. I would have to appease the Keeper of Light and Energy as soon as I could to earn his favor back.

We started returning fire with bolts stun only and a second later I saw the Imperial hidden a distance short away decide he was outnumbered badly too far. He rose to his feet but ducked down behind the cover of the underbrush at the time same and ran, protected from our shots. The Rebels with me stopped firing, cursed a few times and began scrambling around to cover the Imperial injured and help Borlan. I was on my feet in an instant and took off after the pilot

escaping.

There are bipedals few very who can outrun a Bilgana, if any. I doubted this Human knew that, but he was about to learn.

I suppose we'd be slow like everyone else if we were restricted to running just on our feet two. What makes us fast is being able to use our arms lower as a set second of "legs" in a way. When we need to run fast, we crouch down farther on our haunches, lean on our knuckles on our arms lower and take off. We run basically like a creature four-legged then, and have almost the speed to match. Bilgana many I know of in the Rebellion are part of the forces ground to take advantage of this. I was one of the few odd who went the route flying.

At least Ttangrssl had decided to help me now, as I was able to run through the brush without problems any. I know the Imperial heard me crashing through the brush after him but unless he wanted to stop, turn around, and aim, which would expose him to a shot from the others, there wasn't much he could do about it by the time I caught up, about meters ninety from the rest of the group. I was holding my blaster in one of my hands main but it's impossible nearly to aim while running and if I stopped to take a shot I could lose him in the brush again, so I closed simply the gap quickly and tackled him.

That was a mistake. I went down on top of him and I saw his blaster fly from his grip, but this Human was agile more than I expected. He twisted around before I could react and grabbed the barrel of the blaster I was holding.

Our arms main are meant not to be strong like our arms lower; they're supposed to be dexterous. If I'd been holding the blaster in my hands lower I would have been able to keep my grip, but instead, in the scuffle that ensued, the Imperial wrenched my blaster around and the instant it was aimed at me, he pulled the trigger.

I'm glad really it was set only on "stun."

Lieutenant Steen "Snubber" Weas

The sound of the blaster discharging certainly caught my attention. I jerked my head up and saw the last remnants of the blue flash dying out in the brush a distance away, then the brush near it started moving as something started running through it again, away from us. I cursed under my breath and turned to give orders to my subordinates.

I took in our status in an instant. Private Mulhol, the other Serker with us, was tending to Borlan, who was awake and seemed more angry than hurt. Kalre was guarding the injured Imperial. Chopper was standing beside him, also with his blaster trained on the Imperial, and I saw him turn his head to look from where the blaster had discharged to look down at Borlan and then at me. "You see?" he said, on the verge of sounding indignant. "You *see*? *That's* why it was a bad idea to come out here!"

"Stow it, Lieutenant!" I barked. I turned to Kalre and said, "Four, you're with me. Three, you guard him. And call Private Lenha and tell him to bring the speeder for Borlan. We'll be right back." Kalre and I hurried off to where we'd seen the blaster fire.

We slowed down and moved more cautiously when we got closer. Very soon, though, we spotted Slurry on the ground, alone and not moving. "Blast it, Seven," I muttered under my breath, upset at the whole situation. I came over and checked him for a pulse (after remembering that the best place to feel a Bilgana's pulse was between his upper shoulder blades), and I was

relieved to find he was alive, just stunned. His breathing was regular.

Kalre had been diligently keeping watch while I checked on Slurry, and he looked down when he noticed I was done. “How is he?”

“He’s fine, just stunned. Though if I remember correctly from the last time this happened, he’ll be out for quite a while.”

The Rodian nodded in agreement and went back to watching the trees around us. “It would be a lot easier on everyone if their physiology was more like everyone else’s. It seems that nothing biological or medical works the same with them as it does with most other sentients. Takes more effort to figure them out.”

“The galaxy would be a boring place if we were all the same, Flight Officer,” I said mildly while I draped Slurry’s unconscious, slight form over my shoulder and then stood up. “Now, we need to get him, Borlan and the Imperial to medbay. Can you remember how to get back to this spot?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I’m going to go back with the other Serks, but I’ll be back out once we drop everyone off at medbay. In the meantime, you’re going to bring Three out here and continue looking for that other pilot. Be extra careful, because now we know he’s armed and is willing to fight. I’ll pull some of the Serks over at the crash site to help you guys too, at least until I come back out and join you.”

“Yes, sir!” His huge eyes seemed to light up at the prospect of going after the Imperial again. It was a refreshing change from Chopper’s complaining.

After rejoining the others and making the appropriate arrangements, it didn’t take long for us to be on our way back to the base and soon we had reached the medical facilities. The Imperial was sedated and handcuffed to the bed, and Private Mulhol volunteered to act as guard. The base medic then began treating both the Imperial and Borlan, and while there wasn’t really anything he could do for Slurry at this point, he did agree to monitor the Bilgana. Once I was sure everyone was being cared for, I drove back out with Private Lenha and joined the others in the search once again.

The next few hours passed relatively uneventfully. Pellicer and CC got into the TIE’s computer and turned off the repeating transmission, which helped us out a lot, if for no other reason than to put us more at ease. They were also able to start downloading some information off the fighter’s computer. We couldn’t find the other pilot, and shortly after sundown Mackin told us all to come in, get a bite to eat and then we’d change shifts.

After dinner, I dropped by the medbay to check on everyone. Borlan was doing better and the doctor said he’d be released shortly. Slurry was still out, which didn’t surprise me. The Imperial was pretty groggy and just muttered a few incoherent things. The doctor said his bones were healing normally with the limited bacta treatment available there, and while he was pretty banged up from the crash, he had no life-threatening injuries.

I sat down on the bed adjacent to the one where the TIE pilot lay and just looked at him for a short while. He reminded me a little of someone I went to the Academy with, my astrogation lab partner to be exact, though it certainly wasn’t the same person. I wondered what ended up happening to him. I wondered if he even graduated—I never knew, since I dropped out

during my third year for reasons totally unrelated to the Rebellion.

That seemed so long ago. After I dropped out and went back home it was hard to find work locally, and I'd ended up as a spaceliner pilot. It certainly wasn't the best job in the world but it paid most of my bills most of the time. Then skirmishes between the young, almost-unheard-of Rebel Alliance and the Imperials started popping up on or near my assigned route, making people stop traveling that route and our business started going from bad to worse.

One day had started the same as any other but at my first layover point I was thrown into the middle of the Galactic Civil War when I found out the hard way that one of my few passengers was part of the Rebellion and the Imperials weren't happy about that. While he was quickly trying to convince me to help him escape or at least not prevent him from doing so on his own, Captain Quentell Mackin struck a chord with me in a way that my instructors at the Academy or even my boss at the time never did. He valued what input I could give, he didn't treat me like a second-rate nameless nobody and he let me make my own decisions. After spending more time with him after that little fiasco I soon found myself wondering if this attitude was typical of the Rebellion and if so, if that would be a place I could go to actually make a difference and find that niche I'd been searching for. Mack helped get me in, and later on he convinced the then-commander of Corona Squadron, his new squadron, to get me transferred there. When Mack later became commander, he made me his XO. As I looked at the semiconscious TIE pilot, I could only think that the person I was today was a far cry from the person I would have been had I remained on my original path. I wondered what I would have found at the end of that road.

I was still lost in my musings when Commander Mackin, Ikoa, Quiver and Darin came in. As they approached, Mackin asked, "How's everyone doing?"

Bringing myself back to the present, I said, "Borlan will be released soon. Slurry is still out, though if you remember the last time he got stunned, sir, you'll know that's to be expected. Our friend here is all patched up, but the doctor's keeping him out of it for the most part."

Mackin nodded. "Did you eat?"

"Yes, sir. The others did, too."

"Good. Here's what I need you to do then. You, Chopper, Kalre, CC and Scoop will now have hangar duty. The Serks put a few cots in the hangar, so I want a couple of you getting some rest now, then after a couple of hours, switch. At least two should be awake at all times."

I nodded, already figuring out the schedule. Kalre and Chopper had been out in the field the most, so they'd sleep first. CC, Pellicer and I would remain awake for now.

"In the meantime," Mackin continued, "the four of us will be taking your place out in the field." He indicated himself and the three others with him. "The search coordinator is anxious to find the other pilot and she said they got a strange reading out near one of the farm fields so we're going to scope that out first. Is there anything you need before we go?"

Shaking my head, I said, "No, sir. We should be fine."

"All right, then. Call if you need anything." With that, Mackin and the other three left, and a moment later I left as well and headed for the hangar to talk to my group.

Chapter Four

Flight Officer Darin “Thumper” Stanic

After talking to Snubber, I followed Mackin, Ikoa and Quiver over to a landspeeder to head out to the farm fields. I was kind of envious that some of the Coronas staying behind now would be able to take a break, but I didn't say anything. I knew that so far the four of us had had it pretty easy, and now it was our turn to go do some legwork. The others deserved some rest. At least we'd gotten to eat earlier, and I was happy for that, even if the food here was ironically more bland than the stuff they served on *Star*.

It was a nice night out—clear skies, not too warm, not too cold, and a fairly strong northeast breeze. We climbed in a landspeeder with a few Serks and headed toward the fields.

The fields were huge. They began a short ways from the base but stretched far into the distance. Each complex was made up of fields in a square with a large ground-level reservoir in a clearing in the center, providing easily accessible water to all the fields in that complex. There was a complex to the north, northeast and east of Serk Base, and our assignment was to the northern one. An access road ran from the base to each reservoir, and we followed that since the search coordinator wanted us to start at the reservoir and see if we picked up anything there. After a minute or two we reached it.

The Serks dropped us off and then drove off to the northeast field where they'd likewise check for any weird readings. The four of us that were left there pulled out our portable scanners, spread out a little and walked around the clearing, looking for any signals in the fields. We had to rely on the scanners since it was hard to see anything: besides being dark out (and the base didn't have any night-vision goggles, which somehow didn't surprise me), the crops that surrounded us were taller than I was and when looking in, we couldn't see much past the first few rows of plants. The sounds were useless, too: the breeze was blowing through the crops, making the dry leaves rustle noisily.

Like everything else at this base, the portable scanners were old, second-hand equipment that didn't work as well as they should have. I smacked the side of my scanner a few times just to get it to boot up when it stalled in mid-process. Eventually we started recalibrating the scanners to disregard the life readings from this particular kind of plant because they were drowning the sensors and we had to filter it out. I randomly wondered what kind of crops these were, and I moved over to Quiver to ask him. “Hey, Quiver, do you—” My scanner stalled again and I hit it, which got it going once more. “Do you know what kind of crops these are?”

“The dry, ugly kind.” When I shot him a look, he tried again. “The kind you eventually eat.”

“You just don't know,” I accused him.

“Your words, not mine.” He pointed his scanner at me and looked at the readout. “Let's see if this thing works yet. Hmm. Yeah, it's working perfectly. Though you could have told me that you were a Taanabian Swamp Creature, Thumper. I thought we were friends.”

I didn't have a chance to answer my wingman before I heard a strange kind of pop from a distance out in the field from the general direction of the road and the base. The others obviously heard it too, because we all looked over that way to see what it was.

The pop came again, and I recognized it this time: it was the distinctive sound of a flare gun being fired. My thoughts were confirmed as we saw a flare streak low and land just barely in the crops on the edge of our clearing. We all put a hand on our holstered blasters and cautiously

moved more closely together while trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. Three more *pops* came, one after the other, and we briefly saw another few streaks that disappeared into the fields around us, also near the clearing's edges.

I couldn't figure out what was going on—those flares weren't being aimed vertically like normal, and why was someone shooting a flare, anyway? Did the other Serks need something? Then a split-second later, the first red-orange flames caught my eye and everything started making sense in a horrible sort of way.

Then more flames, and more, and more started sprouting up in several spots in the fields all around us, too quickly to even keep track of. I couldn't believe how fast the flames spread through the dry crops. We started running for the access road, but a fire had started down there too and had drowned the road in smoke and flames before we could reach it. We stopped once we saw the road was cut off and we frantically looked around for another escape route. The only place around us not yet consumed by fire or smoke was the area of crops at the opposite end of the clearing, but it was spreading so fast that it was obvious we wouldn't reach it in time to escape. We were effectively surrounded by the raging blaze and could see no way out.

By now the heat was unbearable and the flames were blinding against the night. That didn't matter much, though, because I could hardly see anyway with all the smoke. The fire roared as if it was proclaiming its victory over the crops for the whole galaxy to hear. The noise hurt my ears almost as much as the flames hurt my eyes.

The grass in the clearing started catching on fire as well, causing our buffer to start disappearing. We were all coughing and teary-eyed from the smoke and it was just getting worse every second. I didn't know what to do or where to go and I was getting scared. Then from behind me, over the popping and cracking and roaring of the fire, Quiver yelled, "Back this way!" We dropped the bulky scanners and instantly turned and ran away from the advancing ring of fire, toward the reservoir in the middle of the clearing. It finally dawned on me that that was a pretty good idea.

The reservoir water was eerily illuminated by the fire surrounding it, and even though it was still somewhat hard to see in the dark and through the stinging smoke, it seemed like we were almost on top of it before Commander Mackin noticed it. I think he momentarily forgot it existed and was distracted with trying to figure out what to do, but when he did notice it, he seemed to really take note of it. For some reason Mackin began slowing, looking like he was getting ready to stop and go somewhere else.

Directly behind him, I didn't like that idea. There was nowhere else we could go, and the reservoir was the only option that would protect us. "Sir!" I said between gasps for clear air as I pushed him to keep him from slowing down. "Jump!"

"What?! No!" Mackin said in a voice more afraid than I had ever heard from him before. I couldn't stop and ask why it was like that, though: we were out of time. The fire was getting closer, and I could hardly breathe. Plus, we were practically on top of the reservoir now anyway.

"Jump!" I put on an extra burst of speed and just as Mackin started to stop and veer off I grabbed him from behind, half-pulling, half-pushing him off the edge of the reservoir with me toward the protection of the water below. It suddenly occurred to me that I didn't know how deep the water was, but I was past the point of no return by then.

Mackin had just enough time to cry out before we hit the water, and I heard Quiver and Ikoa jumping in to either side of us as well. I surfaced, but an instant later something yanked me back down underwater and didn't let go. I struggled and fought my way back up, pulling that

weight up with me as I went, and as I broke the surface I saw that it was Mackin who had grabbed onto me.

Mack gulped in air as his head came above the water, and he was flailing and splashing and panicking. He looped an arm around my neck from behind me and in his frantic, desperate attempts to push himself up out of the water, he pushed me down once again. He was dead weight while thrashing around in fear and I wouldn't be able to keep both of us afloat. Not like this. I still didn't know how deep the water was, but all that mattered to me was that I couldn't touch the bottom.

I spit water out of my mouth and looked around quickly the next time I got my head above water. Quiver was thrashing around too, not in the mad panic like Mackin but still obviously afraid. For the moment he was managing to stay afloat with his kicking and splashing, but in a very inefficient way that would tire him out very soon. He fearfully looked over at me and called, "Darin, how do you do this?!"

"Blast it, can't any of you swi—" I started to say before being shoved down again.

After I struggled up toward air a moment later, I saw Ikoa swimming toward me. Grateful that someone else besides me could function in the water, I shook my head a bit and over the noise of the fire and the splashing I called to her, "Help Quiver!" Ikoa hesitated, nodded and then adjusted her course toward my wingman.

I was glad for that, because now I didn't have to worry about Quiver and I could focus all my attention on preventing my commanding officer from drowning me. I was already getting tired from trying to keep Mack afloat like this. "Mack! Mack!" I said loudly enough to be heard. "Sir, stop! Please! Don't make me knock you out! You'll kill us both if you keep thra—" Apparently Mackin didn't hear, because he never stopped panicking and pushed me down once more in his struggle to get out of the water.

This time I didn't try to resurface right away; I swam underwater a bit below the surface, carrying Mackin for all intents and purposes over to the side of the reservoir. Luckily it wasn't far at all since we hadn't moved much since jumping off the edge. I kicked my way back up, struggling against Mackin's grasp and weight. I spit out more water and gasped for air but nearly was pushed under again. I couldn't take it anymore—my commander was going to drown us both if this continued.

There was no access ladder in sight to hold onto, and above us, the top edge of the reservoir was out of reach, which meant we had to stay afloat on our own. I swam rather awkwardly backwards and to the side, pushing Mackin ahead of me until I pinned my squadron leader against the duracrete reservoir wall, and I kept trying to swim toward it, keeping him pinned there.

Feeling the solid object at his back seemed to help. Mackin's splashing subsided a bit, allowing me to thankfully get into a better position to tread water and keep us both afloat; I needed every advantage I could get since our clothes and boots were weighing us down as well and making everything more difficult. The problem that remained was that Mackin was still holding on with a death grip around my neck in such a way that it was uncomfortable, awkward and hard for me to breathe.

I craned my head around as much as I could to look at Mackin. He was still panicked, his face was pale and his dark blue eyes were wide from fear. I'd never seen our rock-solid, unflappable squadron leader like this before, and I was rather unnerved by it. "Sir," I said in as calm a voice as I could muster, "it's okay. Relax. We'll be better off if you relax." I wasn't sure,

but it felt like Mackin's hold around my neck tightened.

"Sir," I tried again, this time pleading, "you have to listen to me. You have to stop struggling and thrashing around. If you stop splashing I can keep both of us afloat easier. Please, sir, try to relax!"

The splashes died down after what seemed like a painfully long time, and as they did so the strength in Mackin's grip increased. That was even worse, so I moved us slightly away from the wall, abruptly twisted around and grabbed Mackin around the neck and under one arm with my left arm and held onto him that way, continuing to tread water using my legs and right arm. It also effectively made it hard for Mackin to maintain his hold around my neck without hurting his shoulder or elbow; unfortunately, he didn't like being unable to easily hold onto something and he started to struggle again.

"Commander, please!" I begged. "It's okay. Just relax. I've got you. You're fine." It took some more convincing, but Mackin finally stopped fighting and squirming though he became stiff as carbonite from fear.

The flames were starting to lick the night sky above us and sparks and ash were falling like lazy meteors and fizzling out the instant they hit the surface of the water. I knew the fire was getting very close to the edge of the reservoir. It felt odd because any part of my body above the surface of the water could feel the extreme heat, but below I was actually getting kind of cold. Personally, I would have preferred the cold and had it just been me I would have been mostly underwater, but somehow I didn't think Mack would go for that.

Ikoa finally swam up to us and came beside me on my right. "You okay?" she asked quietly, treading water.

I nodded and spoke just as quietly as she had. "Yeah, I think we're doing okay now. What about Quiver?"

"He's fine. I'll keep an eye on him, unless you want to swap."

"Not yet. I'll let you know if I get too tired. Besides, now that everything here is settled down I don't want to mess with it."

Ikoa nodded. "I just tried to get through to the base, but no one answered. I'm going to start trying to contact the other Coronas through their comlinks."

"Thanks."

Ikoa swam back closer to Quiver, and I saw her get out her handheld comlink again. Mackin was still frozen in fear, though if I let us sink a few centimeters too far then he'd start struggling until I got us up into his comfort zone again. I wondered why no one was answering the comms back at the base. I hoped Ikoa could contact someone soon and get a rescue for us, because I honestly wasn't sure I could stay afloat if Mackin decided to panic again.

Quickly wiping my wet bangs aside so they weren't plastered in my eyes, I started quietly talking to Commander Mackin about whatever I could think of, and while I wasn't sure how much of it he really heard, all I hoped was that it would distract him enough from whatever terrified thoughts he was thinking so he wouldn't panic again. It also helped to distract *me*: seeing Mackin act like this was really unsettling. Oh, yeah, and there were the flames all around trying to consume us in a fiery death, too, and no way out of the reservoir that I knew of. We were trapped, and we couldn't stay there like that forever.

Trying to push aside those thoughts, I closed my eyes for a few moments and continued rambling on, softly talking about whatever came to mind. Being the quiet person that I am, it only took me about a minute to exhaust all conversational topics off the top of my head. It's

funny how fear can totally blank your mind of trivial matters. It's also funny what you can randomly remember in times of stress: suddenly I thought of my little sister Shiori's favorite story, one that she had loved so much and had insisted I read to her so often that I suspected I would always know it by heart. Somehow I doubted Mackin would be interested in the adventures of Thenni the Thumper, but it was something extensive to say and I doubted he heard the words anyway. I figured the sound of my voice would be what mattered, if anything, so I began reciting the story.

I wondered again if anyone would find us out here and rescue us before it was too late. I wondered how long I could stay afloat. I wondered why Mack was acting like this and if something I did, some sort of huge mistake on my part, had caused that behavior now. And right then, with fire and smoke and heat above and water and cold below, the only other thing I could think about as I continued talking to Mackin was that I really missed my sister.

Flight Officer Chryse "CC" Cerac

All of us must have jumped at least a klick in the air when the alarms suddenly started blaring in the base. Our first reaction was to get to our fighters, but we hesitated as it registered that this alarm sounded different than the air raid alarm. Different comm panels started lighting up, and Serks began quickly manning them and then started shouting information and orders to each other. I wasn't sure, but it sounded like they said they'd been fired upon, though I hadn't heard anything, and then the air raid siren should be going off instead.

Snubber wasted no time in stopping the nearest Serk who was moving purposefully and looked like he knew what was going on, and who turned out to be Commander Whittek. "Sir, what's going on?" he demanded.

"Complex A is on fire!" came the hasty response. Whittek started to continue on, but then he stopped and looked at Snubber for an instant as if suddenly remembering who Snubber was. "We need pilots. Come on!"

Snubber quickly turned to Chopper and Kalre, who had been awakened by the alarms. "Three, Four, stay awake. You have hangar and first-response combat flight duty." He then turned to me and Shaun and said, "Five, Six, let's go."

We followed Whittek over to where some people were scrambling around a few small airspeeders that were used for various duties around the fields, or so they told me earlier. He pointed out some containers that were being carted over for their contents to be loaded up through a hose and he said, "That's our fire suppression chemical being loaded into the dusters. We need you to fly over the fire and douse as much as you can, then come back and load up again. We'll have someone with you to work the duster controls. The fire is already big and with dry, harvest-ready crops it'll just get bigger, so we need to hurry!"

We were just about to split up and head toward the three ships we'd be flying when Snubber's comlink beeped. He started walking as he pulled it out and answered it, then I saw him stop dead in his tracks and say, "Two? Is that you?"

Shaun and I stopped as well, and I exchanged an anxious look with him as I started to remember that the rest of the Coronas were outside somewhere near the fields, and the tone of Snubber's voice caught my attention. We waited and listened.

"Where are you?" Snubber got visibly more worried as he listened to Ikoa's answer, then

said, "We'll be there in just a few minutes, okay? Can you hold on until then?"

That definitely caught my attention. A few seconds later Snubber signed off and then looked at all of us while we waited expectantly. "The four of them are trapped by the fire. They're in the reservoir right now," he reported.

Whittek responded without hesitation. "We'll get some blankets and medical supplies in the speeders right away." He quickly moved off, grabbed a passing Serk, relayed his orders and sent the Serk scurrying on his way to fill them.

Meanwhile, I was just staring wide-eyed at Snubber. He'd just told me that my two best friends, my roommate and my commanding officer were in mortal danger. "Are they okay?!"

"For now. Let's go." He didn't have to tell us to hurry. We ran to the ships and started powering up while the Serks finished prepping and loading them. Suddenly, fighting this fire had gotten a lot more personal.

I'd never realized how hard it was to fly through fire. Maybe it was my mindset: it had taken much too long, in my opinion, to get the ships loaded and ready, and I was so sick with worry by the time we finally lifted that I rivaled Darin on a stressful day. Maybe it was being as blind as a *punkrok* with its head below ground due to all the smoke and needing to do sensor flying, which I've never been very good at. Or maybe it was the horrible aerodynamics caused by the temperature differences in the air from the cool night and the intense heat that tried to drag the airspeeder down.

We had problems right from the start. These speeders were not orbital craft and as such, were not intended to have to survive the high heat loads of re-entering an atmosphere. Flying close to a fire, I learned, is not much different than that to some degree, no pun intended. We needed to fly pretty low for the suppression chemical to have any effect at all and not get ineffectively dispersed while too high up, and the hull was obviously having troubles with the high heat near the ground. I wondered if Scoop and Snubber were having the same flying difficulties I was.

Anxious to get rid of my dousing load so I could go find the others, I got the ship where the Serk douser, Lt. Polax, wanted it to be as quickly as I could, even though I was probably a bit too reckless in my hurry to get there. Luckily, our dousing spot was on the way to the reservoir. In another minute my load was gone, the crops immediately below me were protected against the fire spreading to them so we could try to contain it and I got the go-ahead from Snubber to look for the others.

I found the reservoir on my sensors and headed toward it. I keyed my comm, fervently hoping I wasn't too late. "Six to Two, come in!"

I waited for a number of seconds, got nothing, and then anxiously tried again. I was extremely relieved when Ikoa finally answered. "Six, where are you guys?!"

"I'm coming your way now," I told her. "Just hold on!"

"We're trying!"

I reached the reservoir and Ikoa guided me over to their specific location. Once I neared them and got below the worst of the smoke I was barely able to pick out the four Coronas. I carefully got closer and maneuvered the ship so that the smoke wouldn't be blowing into the hatch behind me on the starboard side once it was opened.

Lt. Polax took care of things in the back and opened the hatch while I spent most of my efforts concentrating on getting us as low as possible over the water and keeping us as steady as possible. The repulsors were shooting off water spray in all directions from the surface directly beneath us, helping me gauge how low we were, though I'm sure the four in the water didn't appreciate it too much.

I could tell by the stench of smoke that filled the airspeeder exactly when my resident Serk opened the hatch, and he began calling down instructions to the others that were too muffled for me to make out over the noise from outside. About a minute later, I heard some more noise from closer behind me, and the starboard side of the airspeeder dipped a little. I corrected for it and stole a quick glance back. At first it surprised me to see Commander Mackin onboard first and quickly and silently moving to one wall of the tiny little compartment. Usually he'd let the others on before him, but I soon put it out of my mind, figuring it was simply because of the position of the ship relative to them. It was probably just easier for Mack to get on first.

Another dip another minute later, and I saw Lt. Polax help Darin climb aboard. Mackin was pale and looked like he'd just been through a three-hour dogfight, but Darin looked exhausted even compared to that. I saw him look at me and try to smile, but he didn't even seem to have the energy to do that. He sat down in a controlled collapse against the wall opposite Mackin.

Quiver was next, and I've never known him to *not* have enough energy to smile. He grinned a bit at me and said, "I motion that from now on, the rescuer puts ten credits in the Pot for every minute it takes to rescue the rescuees. That will ensure prompt pickup." He briskly rubbed a hand back and forth on the top of his head, presumably to help dry out his sloppy blond crew cut, and then sat down next to Darin.

"I tried, Quiver," I replied, concentrating too much on the controls to think of a good comeback.

Finally Ikoa climbed aboard and sat beside Mackin. She and Quiver both looked tired, but nothing like Mackin and Darin. I wondered briefly why there was such a difference between the two pairs, and finally just figured that Mackin must have had to help Darin out there, maybe because Darin had gotten scared in that situation. I wouldn't have blamed him. Lt. Polax closed the hatch and said we were ready to go. I fired up the repulsors and engines and lifted out of there, heading back toward Serk Base while I reported that I had all our people. Lt. Polax tended to my soaked, shivering squadmates on the relatively short trip back.

After we landed in the hangar, I turned to face them all as soon as I could. At first glance, no one seemed to be horribly burned, but they were all bundled up in blankets so I really couldn't tell for certain. At least they were all alive. I was so relieved that all I could think of to say was, "Don't *ever* scare me like that again!"

Quiver just grinned and said, "Yes, ma'am."

I sighed, laughed off a little extra nervous energy and began helping them out. "I'll be back to give you a proper scolding later. And that's not a promise, that's a threat." Then we turned them over to someone who would take them to medbay, and Lt. Polax and I got ready to fly out on another dousing run. Hopefully the Serks would get the chemical loaded more quickly this time.

Lieutenant Jayke "Chopper" Forsgren

Commander Mackin, Ikoa, Quiver and Darin all were given a quick checkup by the base's medic when they got back and then they came to stand vigil with us in the hangar afterward, but it soon became apparent that they weren't really up to the task of keeping watch. Since the two of us were used to staying up late anyway, Kalre and I remained awake so the others could all get some sleep. Slurry was still missing all the excitement due to still being unconscious in medbay.

My wingman and I secretly bet each other about who would be the second one to fall asleep. We didn't even bother betting on who would be first because it was obvious from how tired he was that it would be Darin, and sure enough, he was out almost before his head hit the cot's pillow. I'd bet that Ikoa would be second, but I lost because she stayed up and quietly talked to Mackin for a little while. Kalre won by correctly guessing Quiver, and he passed up no opportunity to remind me of his victory even after I'd paid up. I'd considered betting on Mackin because he looked really tired too, but he also seemed really agitated so I quickly decided against it. Mackin doesn't act like that too often, but I guess being trapped by a fire will do that to you.

A large portion of Complex A had been destroyed by the time the fire was finally put out. Once the flames were extinguished, things had slowly begun to get back to normal. When they finally got back, the ones who had been fighting the fire looked better than the first four, but not much. It didn't take long for them to go back to their quarters to presumably pass out.

Well, one minor amendment: things *had* begun to get back to normal, but a little while after the rest of the squadron had fallen asleep it was discovered that our Imperial prisoner had escaped from the medical facilities. Both the guard and the doctor had been knocked out and no one could say exactly when it happened, aside from after Mackin and the other three had left after their checkups. That had thrown everything into chaos inside the base again as people began scouring the place to find him. The other Coronas were even woken up and joined in the search. Kalre and I got to stay in the hangar, which was perfectly fine with me; I was really sick of going all over the place looking for those Imperials. It sure didn't help that even before all this started, I'd begun to get really tired of being here. This whole assignment at this base started to feel long about a day or two ago and I couldn't wait to get back to *Star* where things were normal. I was sure the others were beginning to feel the same way.

People were still packing, but then they started mostly looking for this escaped pilot since they figured he was inside the base somewhere or close by outside, lurking. By then it was getting late and everyone was looking tired.

The inside-the-base search had been going on for about an hour or so when two techs came into the hangar. Normally I wouldn't have given them a second thought. Rebel techs inside a Rebel hangar are not something that screams conspiracy. But as they angled past me toward one of the larger transports being loaded, one of them seemed to be walking stiffly or uncomfortably. When I turned to glance at him curiously to see what the problem was, they quickly returned the gesture but with a lot more anxiety than they should have had. As I saw the face of the one walking oddly, I could feel the recognition flash across my features.

I've really got to find out how to stop it from doing that. It only causes problems.

The stiff Rebel tech was actually the wounded Imperial prisoner we had found and that I had guarded for a short time outside. He obviously recognized me as well. I imagined the other one who was walking right beside him was the second Imperial pilot. This theory got stronger when that healthy one grabbed his blaster and brought it up to level it at me.

I was already drawing my blaster, too, but he'd had a head start. "Look out!" I yelled as I dove for the deck, rolling so I could come up in a firing position.

His first blaster bolt went right through the space I had been standing in and it sounded like it hit the side of a ship on the other side of the hangar. As I rolled and came up I got ready to fire, but they had taken off running and were now weaving through a small crowd of frantic Serks and shoving them out of their path in their hurry to get to the transport. I cursed as I realized I didn't have a shot and shouted to Kalre to call this in as I ran after them.

They were inside the transport by now and had shoved a few more Serks outside the ship before closing and locking the ramp. I hit the closed hatch with my hand in frustration and then started running to the other side in case there was a second ramp when I heard noises coming from the ship. It was being powered up and I also heard something mechanical open nearby. One of the Serks yelled, "The laser turret!" and immediately everyone dove for cover if they hadn't yet done so already. An instant later, I could see why: the Imperials had activated one of the transport's laser turrets and was swivelling it around, looking for the nearest threat. Now, that threat was me.

I threw myself over to the other side of some crates that were about to be loaded onto the transport and managed to get clear just in time before the turret fired and scorched the deck nearby. I fired off a couple of shots at the turret before ducking back into cover. Just then, I heard the engines whine to life and the repulsors power up; the transport lifted off and began moving forward. It fired a few laser shots in its wake before heading straight for the hangar doors. The doors were closed at first, but after the laser turret had a chat with them, they no longer were, at least not completely.

I sprinted for my X-wing and took the ladder two rungs at a time, grateful that Kalre and I were already totally suited up for just such an emergency. Beside my fighter, Parsec was already in his cockpit and was powering up. Without even sparing a glance in his direction, I called, "The others know?"

"Yeah," he answered. "They're on their way and getting ready. Mackin said to follow and disable."

"Got it." My fighter was quickly ready to go, thanks to a few shortcuts and Fluke's help, and Kalre and I sped out of the hole in the hangar doors.

The Imperials had a large head start so it took us a minute to find them on sensors. They were heading for orbit, and we pushed our fighters as fast as they could go in an attempt to catch up. By the time we reached space, they were preparing to break orbit and presumably start on their jump heading.

"Imperial pilots," I said over the open comm, "stand down and surrender your ship." Their answer was a quick series of laser bolts from their turrets. I turned to the squadron frequency and said, "That's it, I'm sick of talking. Let's go, Four."

"Right with you, Three."

We made a beeline for the transport as they lined up on their jump vector. In a rare occurrence, I decided to be nice and fired a warning shot that went well wide of them; however, instead of following my instructions like any sane person would do, they fired at us again. Kalre and I easily avoided the shots and then I said, "Target their weapons and engines, Four. Disable."

"Copy, Three."

After a couple of tries, our lasers hit the engines of the transport and jolted it enough to keep it from jumping immediately. I heard Mackin report that he and the others were in the air

and would reach orbit shortly. One of Kalre's shots took out a laser turret on the transport, and I assured Mackin we wouldn't need the help. He never listens to me when I say that, though, and my scope confirmed it as it showed the rest of the squadron still coming.

Fluke beeped at me, distracting me from dealing with this Imperial. "What is it?" I asked my droid in annoyance.

Fluke lit up one of my displays and I had just taken in the information it showed when Kalre said, "Three, I'm getting multiple bogeys coming out of hyperspace close by and heading this way."

"Copy, Four, I see it." I evaded another few shots from the transport and said, "Fluke, we need an ID on those ships."

The droid worked for a moment and then gave a hesitant identification of a group of uglies, horrible-looking fighters made from a conglomerate of different starfighter parts and commonly used by pirates. These particular uglies had an elongated fuselage, a rear-facing ion cannon behind the cockpit and forward-facing laser cannons on the ends of short, stubby wings that obviously didn't match the elongated fuselage, but everything they lacked in looks they more than made up for in speed. It wouldn't be long before they were on us.

"Lead, we have fifteen uglies coming our way fast. They just dropped out of hyperspace."

"Another pirate raid, I'm sure," Mackin answered. "Three, Four, break off your pursuit and join back up with us. I don't want you two isolated out front up there."

I was about to protest and say we could still get the Imperials but before I could open my mouth, the transport ran up its engines and jumped to hyperspace. I cursed to myself and then said to Kalre, "Come on, Four, let's get back to the others." We turned and headed toward the others at full throttle.

It turns out that full throttle wasn't fast enough. We were about two-thirds of the way to the rest of the squadron when the uglies behind us entered optimum firing range, or at least what Fluke guessed was optimum range for their weapons, which were fully powered up. An instant later, they started firing. I wasn't about to be shot in the back, so I simply transmitted, "Lead, engaging." I circled around to go at the uglies and I saw Kalre right there with me. I heard Mackin start to protest but then the fight began. The others caught up and also went headlong into the fray.

All of us at one time or another ended up cursing those rear-facing ion cannons that we kept forgetting about since the ships we usually fight don't have rear weapons, but after a near miss or two we all started adapting. We got hit hard at first, but soon we hit our stride and began to at least hold our own.

I never leave the ground thinking that I won't touch down lightly on it again. It's suicide for a fighter pilot to think that. Even as we fought these very fast, maneuverable ships who seemed bound and determined to fight dirty, I never doubted for a minute that we could take them. However, doubts started surfacing when, about halfway through the dogfight, a very large Imperial ship dropped out of hyperspace and appeared on our long-range sensors.

Chapter Five

Commander Quentell Mackin

My report that a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer had just jumped in-system finally convinced the Serks that they needed to evacuate. They assured me that they were now forgetting about packing more and were just shoving people on transports to leave, but they also mentioned this would be harder because the Imperial pilots had stolen one of the larger transports. Could we buy them some extra time to get things sorted out?

We were getting hammered, I replied, which was the absolute truth. These raiders were fighting brutally and kept breaking away from the main group to make a run for the planet's surface, forcing a pair of us to go after them, become isolated and then get pounced upon. This was not helping my mood at all.

Things looked even more hopeless when the *Victory* got closer and launched TIE fighters. I was two seconds away from ordering the Coronas to withdraw when a commanding voice came over an open comm channel. "This is the Star Destroyer *Sovereignty* to the Bloodknight Pirates. By order of the Empire, you are ordered to stand down immediately and prepare to surrender your ships."

We were still in the middle of the dogfight, and the transmission caught me so much by surprise that I almost didn't see the ugly coming at me begin to fire. I danced out of the way just in time. A reply came an instant later, presumably from the pirate leader, that basically told the Imperials exactly what he thought of the orders and of the Imperials themselves. I regretted it being over the open comm, because most of my pilots had a colorful enough vocabulary already and didn't need to learn those new words.

The TIEs started moving in, but we were still too deeply in the middle of this fight to escape without taking a lot of damage if we disengaged from the pirates and moved off. We already had substantial damage. "Coronas," I said, "disengage at the first safe opportunity and get out. We're in way too deep here."

"Lead, I don't think it's going to get much safer," said Snubber.

The TIEs split and the foremost ones immediately went after an ugly trailing Kalre. The three Imperial fighters teamed up to take out the ugly and then moved on, looking for the next one. They didn't give Kalre a second glance. That surprised me, too. But if they were willing to ignore us for now, I figured it was best to let the Imperials just focus on the raiders so my next order was, "Coronas, do not fire on any of those TIEs unless they specifically fire at you first. If they're willing to leave us alone, we want to encourage that."

"They won't leave us alone forever, Lead," Ikoa said.

"I know, but let's not shorten that time. Everyone, work on building up your shields if you're in a position to let a TIE do the shooting."

"I don't like this, Lead." This was Snubber.

"I don't either, but until we can get away, we need to make the most of it."

A new voice came over the squadron frequency then. "Lead, this is Seven."

"Well, look who finally decided to wake up. Couldn't stand missing the fun, huh, Seven?"

"No, sir, I couldn't. The Serks woke me up to evacuate and said to tell you they need minutes more fifteen."

"Tell them that won't happen, Seven. The Imperials have already launched TIEs, though

they've just engaged the raiders so far.”

“Sir, I'm ready about to launch. Where do you want—” He stopped for a moment, and then hurriedly asked, “Do we need to buy time, sir?”

“You could say that.”

“Is the TIE intact out still at the site crash?”

The Imperial fighters continued to exclusively go after the raiders and the pirates' numbers were dwindling quickly. Soon we'd have the Imperials' full attention. “What are you getting at, Seven? Make it quick.”

“Sir, I can fly the TIE up, call for help from the Imperials and either lead them away or distract them for a while short. It can buy us time.”

I snap-fired at a raider in my sights as I quickly thought about it. I was originally just going to have Slurry stay down there and cover some of the Serk transports, but both the Serks and us needed time and it was possible this scheme could get us just that. “Five, will you be able to help him play the part? Procedure details, things like that?”

There was a slight hesitation, and then Pellicer responded, “I think so, Lead—”

“Good,” I said, cutting him off. “Do it. Seven, go. Be quick about it. Take your X-wing out to the crash site and have Blur move it someplace else on planet and send us the coordinates after you launch in the TIE.” Blur was a rather odd astromech, prone to random outbursts of nonsense, but the droid was functional and I trusted it could perform that task without any problems.

“Yes, sir.”

“Hey, Seven?” Quiver said. “For when you start doing this little distraction of yours?”

“Yes?”

“Talk normally.”

I grimaced a bit as I remembered the Bilgana's odd speech patterns, but I could only hope that he didn't slip and if he did, that the Imperials wouldn't notice it. The accent could probably pass off as being human, but the manner of speaking was not something I'd ever heard a human do before.

I couldn't worry about it anymore because our immediate situation changed drastically. The last remaining uglies were destroyed. I'd been so distracted by talking to Slurry and fighting the last few raiders that I hadn't really noticed the unengaged TIEs begin to take up positions around the area of the dogfight. As more TIEs finished off their targets they moved to join the first ones in actively surrounding us in all three dimensions. The fight had taken us a good distance away from the planet and now I saw that *Sovereignty* had also moved in much, much closer to us.

This was not good. How had I let this happen? I quickly ordered all of my pilots to form up behind me and I looked for the largest gap in the TIE fighter blockade. I spotted one above and slightly behind us, but when we throttled up toward it, the TIEs quickly moved to block the opening. The Imperial fighters then started repositioning to plug the other gaps so we couldn't scatter and run, which would have been my next tactic.

I tried out one of those new words I learned from the pirate leader as I quickly assessed our situation. We were outnumbered nearly three-to-one. We'd gotten through odds like that before, but not from starting out in the condition we were in. A hasty status report I ordered each of my pilots to give told me that we were too damaged to survive any substantial fight here.

“Lead, orders?” Snubber asked calmly.

I couldn't seem to think straight. The TIEs were slowly moving in to herd us more closely together, but as of yet, not a single TIE had opened fire on us. I needed some of that time that we were trying to buy for the Serks. "Everyone, hold your fire. Stay cool."

That same commanding voice came through the open comm channel. "This is the Star Destroyer *Sovereignty* to X-wing fighter squadron."

I took a deep breath and answered, trying to stall to give myself enough time to think of a way out. "This is Corona One. We appreciate the help you gave us with those pirates."

"I despise pirates, Corona One. They've been a vibroblade in our side for months." He paused for a split second and then continued, "We have come to inspect the facility on the planet's surface. By the order of the Empire, you and your eight pilots here are all under arrest on suspicion of being members of the Rebel Alliance. You are ordered to power down your weapons and surrender. By not trying to blast your way out, you've been realistic enough about your situation so far, Corona One—don't stop now. You have thirty seconds to comply."

Surrender. The word echoed inside my head for a moment and it made me feel like I was drowning again. Right now it could be the only way to guarantee life for my pilots, though I had no idea what those three syllables would ultimately mean for our fates or for those of everyone at Serk Base. If we surrendered, what would happen to them? At this point, did it even matter what we did anymore? I thought hard in silence, desperately trying to map out the consequences of either answer inside this whole crazy scheme Slurry was setting up.

I also silently wondered what each of my pilots was thinking right now. How would they react when I gave my answer? I believed Ikoa and CC would surrender if I told them to, and after pointing out any obvious logic holes in my thinking and making sure that I was really certain about my decision, Snubber would too. Chopper and Kalre would want to fight, so if they heard an answer they didn't like I'd possibly have to reiterate it a few times to get through to them. Darin would probably be scared but he'd do what I asked without comment, and that's all it would take to ensure Quiver would follow along as well; I'd never seen Quiver as protective of anyone as he was of Darin. Pellicer was the only one I wasn't sure would follow a surrender order, because the moment the Imperials got ahold of him and found out who he was, they'd probably execute him for defecting. If we surrendered, Pellicer might break off alone and fight for his life. I didn't want him to have to do that.

I liked it even less when I began wondering if CC would go help Pellicer if he broke off and began fighting. That would almost certainly draw Quiver and Darin into the fight, and that in turn would give Chopper and Kalre the excuse they needed to open fire as well. Just like that, half my squadron could be out there. Either answer could doom us.

I know I was silent for a substantial amount of time—I was too overwhelmed with trying to figure out what to do. I was vaguely aware of the TIEs prodding the rest of my pilots even closer together with me and the Victory was nearly on top of us.

Finally I decided that I had to trust my pilots to do what I asked. After getting hit so hard by the raiders, we couldn't survive fighting our way straight out of here like this. We really had no choice. There was a bitter taste in my mouth as I took a deep breath and gathered the nerve to tell my squadron we were surrendering when suddenly Ikoa called out, "Lead, I'm reading an energy spike from—"

She couldn't even finish her sentence before my fighter was buffeted violently by something invisible and Bluehill squawked in fear. I instinctively tried to stabilize the X-wing and go evasive, but the stick might as well have been disconnected for all the good it did me. The

buffeting stopped, and then cries of alarm from my pilots began flooding the squadron frequency.

“My fighter’s not moving!”

“I can’t turn or do anything!”

“I’m at full throttle and I’m not going anywhere!”

“Full reverse is useless too!”

“I’m stuck! How do you get out of a tractor beam?!”

“I don’t think you do!”

I tried every trick I could think of but I was held fast just like the others. *Sovereignty* came back on the comm. “Time’s up, Corona One. Power down your—”

He broke off, and I figured he must have been distracted by the same thing I was: a lone TIE transponder code coming from the surface of the planet, transmitting on the galactic emergency channel. “Mayday, mayday, mayday! I need assistance!”

The Imperials seemed to hesitate as they took this in and decided what to do. Slurry’s TIE was still a distance away, but it was enough to throw the Imps off just a little. It also helped to distract me from the sight of the Star Destroyer’s bow looming right over my puny fighter. This was really an awful day.

Pellicer opened a private comm channel with me. “Lead,” he said in a somewhat strained voice, “how desperate are we?”

I silently sighed in aggravation. “Look around, Five. We’re desperate.”

“Yes, sir.” He closed the channel.

Chapter Six

Lieutenant Shaun Pellicer

I really wished Mackin hadn't said that, because it meant I had to do something I really didn't want to do in order to save us. Even if the Coronas and Serks were all captured, most of them would probably still be alive, but I had no such optimism for my fate should the Imperials get their hands on me, so for me to live, we had to escape. And to get us out of this, I was going to have to give up the only protection I had against the Imperials hunting me down. Talk about a lose-lose situation. Ever since my defection, I had been listed as MIA, likely dead. They didn't know I was a Rebel. Now they would, or at least they'd be suspicious enough to assume that. Because we were "desperate," I couldn't risk trying to make up codes on the fly—they had to be legitimate and they had to pass the first time, and the only ones I knew of that would meet those criteria were my own Imperial codes.

I switched back to the private, encrypted tightbeam channel I was sharing with Slurry even as I futilely continued trying to break out of the tractor beam. Slurry had also given me the Imperial frequency used in the TIE so I could listen in.

"Lone TIE pilot, identify yourself," came the order from the Victory.

There was no going back now. "Tell them you're Flight Officer Shaun Pellicer, serial number 096289354, authorization code Gamma Green Zero Six Zero Five One," I told Slurry.

"What?" Slurry replied. "Five, why—"

"Just do it, Seven! I don't have time to explain!"

He didn't sound happy, but I heard Slurry repeat it back to the Imperials. He was still approaching our position, and while we were still stuck in the tractor beam at least we hadn't been pulled into the belly of the VSD yet. I wondered how long we had until that happened. I guessed the Imperials were trying to deal with one situation at a time so they wouldn't be spread thin.

It took a minute for the Imperials to guardedly respond. "Flight Officer Pellicer, good to have you back. We're always happy to find our MIAs. Stand by one."

Slurry was still getting closer. "MIA?" he asked me. "So they do know not that—"

"In another minute," I interrupted, "they'll send a few TIEs to escort you, because they have to be at least a little wary of this given the timing and situation. Watch for them. And polarize your cockpit so they can't easily see you. I'm sure you're just wearing your X-wing gear."

Sure enough, two TIEs came alongside Slurry and began escorting him toward the VSD. "What's going on, Flight Officer?" *Sovereignty* asked him.

Slurry began explaining slowly, apparently concentrating on putting words in the "correct" order. "There's a base down there. They burned all the crops to make us think it was destroyed and they moved to another place on the planet to hide. These fighters are protecting the place old as a decoy, I think. I was hiding and came up when my scanners detected you on r-long range."

I shrugged to myself. Sounded good enough on the first go-around. "In another minute, they'll have you enter a standard approach pattern," I told him. "The approach is flown 750 meters from the ship, forty-five degrees from its centerline, parallel to its longitudinal axis, toward its aft. When you're directly abeam of the middle of the docking bay, make a 90-degree turn and begin your final approach. Before you get that far, they'll ask you confirmation of

identity questions. I'll tell you the answers. You'd better start thinking about how long you're going to pull off this little ploy, because you're very quickly running out of space."

As expected, the next command from the Imperials was to tell him to enter the pattern. He did so, and while it wasn't with the precision of a typical Imperial pilot, it was good enough to pass for now.

"The battle over Galantos was a nasty one, wasn't it, Flight Officer?" *Sovereignty* asked.

"Tell them yes," I said.

"Yes, sir, it was," Slurry answered. He still didn't sound happy about repeating what I told him ever since he'd given out my name.

"Seven, you'd better think about getting out of there soon," I cautioned again. "There's only so much time you can buy."

"I will, Five. I—" A pause, and then he asked, "Are the generators tractor beam those signatures energetic highly at the front of the bay docking?"

"Yeah, they—" It was my turn to break off as I realized what he was thinking. "Seven, no! If you fire, they'll be all over you before you can blink any of those four eyes of yours!"

The Imperials transmitted to him again. "Flight Officer, we need some verification of identity. I'm sure you can understand the need for caution here, given what's going on outside. Tell us the score of what you consider to be the best game in history."

"Thunderwings 24, Torpedoes 27," I said. Slurry relayed it.

They were just about to turn final. I hoped Slurry wasn't suicidal. "What are the three corners of the Triumvirate Constellation?" the Imperials asked.

That brought back memories. The Triumvirate Constellation was a constellation my friends and I had made up as kids. "Kessel, Taanab and Phindar," I told Slurry as he and the TIEs with him turned final.

Slurry didn't answer right away. "Seven, it's Kessel, Taanab and Phindar. Tell them," I repeated.

Finally he replied to the Imperials. "Gand, Nar Shaddaa and Telti."

"Seven, what are you doing? That's wrong!"

The Imperials' answer was immediate. "TIE pilot, stand down immediately and prepare to—"

All of a sudden, Slurry punched in his throttle and let out a barrage of laser bolts at the active tractor beam generators while simultaneously going evasive. The hits made the power fluctuate just enough to temporarily break the beam's hold on the eight X-wings inside that were straining to get out. When our fighters were suddenly released, most of them either at full throttle or full reverse in our attempts to break free, and all of them close together to begin with, numerous yells of terror came over the squadron frequency as multiple collisions were only narrowly avoided before the starfighters were wrestled back under control and brought to a stop before being frantically punched forward again to avoid getting stuck in the beam once more.

"Coronas, get out of here!" Mackin ordered quickly. "Shields at max! Anyone have Seven's position?"

"I've got him, Lead," I answered. "Six, where are you? He needs some help."

"Coming up on your wing, Five," she answered. Together we flew through the swarm of Imperials and went straight after the TIE escort now firing at Slurry. The two of us took out one of them and that caused the other to pull away and reposition. We stuck by Slurry to give his unshielded fighter as much protection as possible. The others joined up and effectively started

bullying their way straight through one section of the TIE barricade together, trying to get out. Everything was thrown into chaos.

We got a transmission from the Serks containing coordinates of their planned hyperspace jumps and saying that they were on their way out. The Imperials noticed the ships leaving the planet and turned to intercept, but we were far enough away that the Serks jumped before the Imperials were a serious threat.

Mackin's voice came over the comm again. "Coronas, listen up! I want you to follow the Serks, *now*. Find a way to disengage and get out of here. We'll rendezvous at the final coordinates. If anything happens, go to plan Foxtrot Tango Four. Seven, get out of the dogfight and make your way back to your X-wing. Two and I will wait for you dirtside there to give you some backup. Understood?"

Everyone hastily acknowledged. At the first opportunity he had, Slurry found a way to sneak into a large area of wreckage from the dogfight with the raiders and he completely powered down. I hoped that would hide him sufficiently for the time being, but there wasn't anything else I could do. CC and I started looking for a way to break off and retreat. I swear, it's a lot harder to get out of a fight than into one.

Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap

It took some doing, but bit by bit the others were able to break off by pairs and jump out of the system. Between the pirate fight and now the abbreviated Imperial fight, some of them were on their last legs when they did so, too. I know I was. I doubt we would have survived if we had stuck around to fight instead of running.

By the time the others had all left and Mack and I got away, the Imperials were beginning to descend to the base and decided to ignore the two of us as we sped away to the other side of the planet. Upon entering the atmosphere out of their line of sight, Commander Mackin and I shut off our transponders and headed for the coordinates Blur had sent us.

Especially in the daylight, the empty fighter wasn't hard to spot: it was in an arid region with virtually nothing else but scrub brush around it. We came alongside Slurry's X-wing and then powered everything down in ours except the comm system and waited. We stayed in our fighters, but it felt nice to pop the canopy open and get some fresh air.

We'd been silent for about ten minutes when Mack quietly said, "That should never have happened." When I looked over at him, he remained looking away and continued. "By all rights, we should not have made it out of all that alive. We're not even sure Seven is safe yet and the others could break down in hyperspace for all we know."

"I'm sure everyone is fine, sir." I knew better than to say too much when Mack was upset, like he clearly was now.

"Why didn't you stop him?"

That confused me. "Stop who, sir?"

He finally turned to me and threw me a look that made it obvious that he wasn't happy with me. "You know what being in or around water does to me. I've told you how long it takes me to settle down again after something like that. We probably would have come out of this whole situation a lot better off if I'd been a little more with it, but I wasn't, because I was still rattled from the water fiasco. Why didn't you stop him?"

I finally understood where all this was leading. “Because if I’d stopped him, sir, you’d very likely be dead. We had no other options in that fire, sir.”

I stopped at that point. I could have said more, like how everyone was still alive in spite of everything, and how even though he was probably embarrassed about his behavior in the reservoir, it was perfectly understandable given his reasons and the squadron would still look up to him and respect him. I even could have said something like how if Darin hadn’t gotten him in the water and Mack had died in the fire, that we would have gotten hammered much harder in the following dogfights, or even how if we’d fought better than we ever had before, after two fights like that we’d still be in a similar situation. I could have said a lot of things. But I didn’t. There aren’t a lot of things that really get to Mack personally, but I suspected this was one of them and if that was true, he wouldn’t really listen to anything I said past a certain point anyway. I wasn’t sure what else to do. Like I figured, he never answered and we went back to waiting in silence.

I was glad when Rudder and Bluehill finally picked up Slurry’s TIE coming down near us. The TIE shakily settled to the ground and Slurry got out of the cockpit.

“Good to see you, Seven,” Mackin said.

“You too, sir,” he answered. “Did everyone else get out?”

“All but us. Let’s go.”

Slurry quickly climbed up to his X-wing cockpit and the three of us powered up the snubfighters. A short time later, we were climbing toward the sky, and then we were out among the stars and jumping into hyperspace.

Chapter Seven

Flight Officer Hentil "Quiver" Yanilr

The place to which we had escaped was a small, Rebel-sympathetic colony on a large moon orbiting a gas giant, and we weren't that far from the system where the Novas had been taking their R&R. They were on their way to rendezvous with us while we figured out where to go from here. I wondered how they'd react when they found out what had happened while we covered for them, and I began figuring out how much I'd have to duck to hide behind Darin if projectiles started flying.

Ever since the first dogfight with the Imperials, we'd had all of our things packed in our X-wings and ready to go, so we, the prepared, intelligent pilots that we were, had whatever essentials we'd brought with us on this assignment. In contrast, the only equipment and crops the Serks had with them from the base was whatever had already been onboard the transports when the Victory appeared and finished ruining our day, minus what had been packed on the large transport the Imperial pilots stole. When the Victory showed up, the Serks simply wiped the computers, shoved everyone into the available transports and left, and I'm sure that as much as I dislike being crammed in my cockpit for hours at a time, being crammed with so many people on one of those transports was worse. The fact that the people flying the transports were only backup or secondary pilots probably didn't help either. But they'd made it and that was what mattered. So had we, somehow.

As it always seems to happen, just about the time when everyone began getting worried about our three stragglers was the time when they finally showed up. I could almost sense the despair emanating from the techs in the hangar when they saw another two blasted-up X-wings arrive, but at least Slurry's was in good shape and would give them some peace. The techs would probably fight over who got to service the good fighter. I thought that could be interesting to see.

I liked this place a lot better than Serk Base. There were people. Holofeeds. Restaurants. Bars. Technology. Civilization. It was wonderful. It even had a better name. When Mackin landed, I was going to tell him that I didn't mind covering for the Novas a bit more if the Serks would be staying here for a while, but as soon as I saw him I could tell he wasn't happy so I wisely decided to save it for later when he could appreciate my comments.

Mack just told us to find the nearest barracks and rest up until he called for us. On his way out of the hangar, he told Snubber he was going to go turn in his report and then he wanted to talk to him. I was more than willing to let them work out the important stuff while the rest of us underlings took it easy. While we'd waited for Mackin, Ikoa and Slurry to arrive, I'd already checked to see where the barracks were so I was all set to go once we were dismissed. I told everyone (including Darin) that Darin was buying drinks at the nearest bar in ten hours: that way we'd be well-rested before partaking in the unique cultural experience of getting drunk on whatever moon this was.

Darin was annoyed that I'd told everyone he was buying, but like always, he didn't really put up a fight about it. I just grinned to myself and decided to wait until we actually got to the bar to tell him that I'd sent a message inviting the Novas as well.

A week later, we were back onboard *Crescent Star* and back in our old routine. I was hard

at work at my desk like always when Darin came storming into our quarters. He hit the panel to close the door behind him and then angrily said, "He did it *again!*"

"Who did what?" I asked, looking up.

"You haven't seen the schedule, have you?" He thrust a datapad at me. "Mackin put us on SSP for another night!"

"Seriously?" My brow furrowed as I took the datapad and looked at its readout. Sure enough, Niner and I were scheduled for SSP that night, and I groaned inwardly. SSP was short for "short-straw patrol" and it referred to the patrol in the middle of the night that everyone hated going on. Normally to make it fair we rotated the duty through everyone equally, including the Quakes, but now this would be our third SSP in just over a week.

"Why is he doing this?" Darin demanded as he started pacing around the room.

"You know, if you weren't so busy avoiding him, you could ask him," I said.

"I am not avoiding him."

I rolled my eyes a bit. "Yes, you are. I can give at least three examples of it."

Thumper crossed his arms as he continued to pace. "Fine. I am. But only because he's seemed mad at me ever since we left Serk Base."

"That's because you're just a troublemaker, Darin," I said innocently, trying to get him to lighten up. "Of course he's mad at you. Everyone's upset with you for being such a nuisance. I live with you, and it's all I can do to restrain myself from jumping out of this chair and strangling you where you stand."

"Yeah, very funny," he mumbled before sighing in exasperation. "Never mind. What are you so involved in over there?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Setting up Slurry's Promotion Party," I answered proudly. Mackin had announced at our daily briefing that day that our favorite Bilgana was being promoted to Lieutenant, and the commander had cited things like the ingenuity and fast-thinking Slurry had shown back in Serk space as examples of why he was receiving this honor.

"The morale officer strikes again," commented Darin.

"You got it."

"When is it?"

"2100 tonight at the Tank, with initiation rites and such lasting for about the first hour."

Darin sighed again. "Just about the time we'll have to leave to get some sleep before the patrol," he grumbled. Then he shook his head hard as if scolding himself for bringing that up again and said, "It was really pretty amazing what he figured out with the TIE to buy everyone time during the evacuation. It was insane, but it worked. I'm glad he's getting recognized for it."

I looked up at my wingman. "Didn't you know? Insanity gets you promoted."

Thumper shook his head. "If that was true, you'd be a general by now."

"And I expect you to refer to me as such from now on," I said.

"Whatever you say, General." He didn't sound properly enthusiastic about my promotion, and I was about to admonish him for it but before I could, he took a datacard from his desk and said, "I'll be in the repair bay for a while. See you at dinner?"

"If I must, you lowly minion. Now be gone. The General does not wish to associate with subservient flight officers any longer. They disturb his creative aura as he tries to think of rites of passage for the slightly-less-inferior lieutenant at the party tonight."

"Yes, sir, General, sir," he said with just the barest bit of sarcasm. As he left, I thought I heard him mutter something about a general pain, but I couldn't quite catch it. I ignored it and

instead smiled to myself as I connected a couple things in what I'd just said. Flight Officer Minion. Yeah, I liked that. I'd have to remember that one and call him that once or twice.

We were all having a great time at Slurry's Promotion Party, thanks to all the hard work I put in to set everything up and make it run smoothly. I was annoyed that I had to watch how much I drank and that I'd have to leave insanely early if I wanted to get any sleep at all before the patrol, but I didn't dwell on it. Darin, on the other hand, did, though to his credit he didn't talk much about it (not that he talks that much about anything to begin with). I could tell it still bothered him enough that I didn't even make him buy us any rounds, but in all fairness, that was Slurry's responsibility tonight anyway as guest of honor.

Snubber usually doesn't stay long at our parties, and tonight was no exception. I think he just feels the need to keep an eye on us for a while, though then he should come toward the end when we have no inhibitions left and are challenging each other to napkin races (at least according to the reports of some patrons). When I saw Snubber getting ready to leave, I went over to Darin and pulled him aside. "Why don't you go ask Snubber what's going on with the SSP? Then you can stop moping about it." I didn't give him a chance to answer and instead gave him a little shove in Snubber's direction.

Snubber looked up as Darin stumbled to a stop near him. "What is it, Thumper?" he asked. I sat back down in my seat but discreetly eavesdropped on the conversation, which was tricky over the noise in the Bacta Tank and in the middle of the party.

Darin looked like he'd just been dropped into the middle of a dogfight with no warning, but he regained his composure quickly enough and quietly said, "Sir, why are Quiver and I on SSP again tonight? It's the third time since we evacuated."

Snubber seemed a bit confused at first, but then he remembered something and said, "Blast it, I told him to fix that. I guess we'd better go tell him again. Come on."

"Tell who, sir?"

"Commander Mackin."

Darin got noticeably uncomfortable. "Sir, that's okay. I was just wonderi--"

"Think of this as a valuable learning experience, Flight Officer," Snubber interrupted, still keeping his voice down so others wouldn't overhear unintentionally. "Your superiors are not infallible. They're only human, or whatever species they happen to be, and mistakes can happen. You need to learn to stick up for yourself when a mistake is made and you feel you're being treated unfairly because of it. Let's go."

Thumper definitely didn't look happy about that as he followed Snubber out of the Tank. I sighed to myself a little. Leave it to the XO to make Darin grow up a little more and thus undo so much hard work on my part.

Epilogue

Commander Quentell Mackin

I was still at my desk that evening trying to finish up some of the never-ending paperwork before calling it a day when my office door chime beeped. I looked up and called, "Come in."

I wasn't surprised to see Snubber when the door opened, but I didn't really expect Darin to be there too. "Evening, sir," Snubber said. "You have a few minutes?"

"Sure."

"Flight Officer Stanic would like to talk to you." With that, Snubber gave Darin a little push to get him in my office, then he pulled back into the hallway and closed the door.

It looked like Darin hadn't expected Steen to do that. He was staring at the closed door with an uncertain expression when an instant later it seemed to suddenly dawn on him that I was in the room too. He looked back at me and then snapped to attention and saluted so quickly that I was surprised he didn't injure himself. "Sir, Flight Officer Darin Stanic reporting, sir!"

"Relax, Darin. Have a seat before you break something." I can't say I was ecstatic to see him, but it was much better now than it had been earlier this week. After he sat down and somehow managed to look like he was still at attention, I asked, "What is it? Why are you so wound up?"

He chewed on his lip for a few seconds and then carefully said, "Sir, I'd like to know why Quiver and I are on SSP yet again tonight."

Blast it, I'd forgotten about that. I sighed and ran a hand through my hair before saying, "I forgot to change it. I'll take care of it."

My answer must have given him a little more courage because he continued, "Sir, why have we had to do it so much recently? Usually our rotation comes up once every couple of weeks, but now this would be our third time since we evacuated the Serks. How come? Sir." He stopped and looked like he halfway expected to be in trouble for asking that.

Now I was caught. Rehashing it and going back and forth about this with Steen as I'd done so much in the first few days was one thing; explaining it to Darin would be different. I had to be honest, though, and set a better example than I had when I'd originally caused this to happen. I gathered my thoughts, looked him in the eye, swallowed my pride and said, "Because I made a mistake, Flight Officer. I allowed my personal feelings to interfere and because of that, I did something I shouldn't have."

"Allow me to step out of the commander's role for a minute to explain, because I feel I owe you that much now at least. If you haven't guessed it by now, the water and I do not get along at all. Down on the planet, when you forced me into the reservoir I was more terrified of that water than I was of the fire. After talking to Ikoa about what happened there and having some time since then to sort it out on my own, intellectually I know you had very valid reasons for doing what you did and in doing so you likely saved my life, but it's very hard for me to really understand and accept that when all I can remember is how afraid I was and how much I resented being put in that position, especially in front of my subordinates. It's much easier to blame something on someone than it is to face my own shortcomings, especially where pride and fear are involved. I'm not proud of this, and I'm trying my best to change."

"I'm sure that one day you'll have your own command, Darin. Learn from others' mistakes because you won't have enough time to make all of them yourself. That being said, from this I hope you learn to never use your command authority to 'get back' at someone,

whether it's justified or not. Sometimes you can tell you're doing it; other times it might not be obvious, even to you. If you're ever in doubt, ask someone about it.

"I adjusted Snubber's SSP schedule earlier this week when I was still upset. Since then, Snubber noticed what I did and made me see the error of my ways. I was going to fix it and put it back to normal but it honestly slipped my mind. I'm sorry."

Darin just sat there, looking like he didn't know what to make of all that. I sighed again and asked, "Is the party still going on?"

Darin nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Go have some fun. Tell Quiver, too. I'll take the SSP tonight."

Thumper visibly brightened at that and said, "Thank you, sir!" but by the time he got to his feet he seemed a little more thoughtful and paused. "Sir, you'll need a second person to go along."

"Don't worry about it, Darin. I'll find someone."

He spoke up a bit hesitantly. "Sir, no one else was expecting to have to go and they're all at the party. I'll go."

Looking back later on, I knew I shouldn't have been surprised, but it caught me off-guard then. I must have looked startled because Darin explained, "It wouldn't be fair to suddenly dump this on someone else with so little notice, sir, and Quiver and I are probably the only ones sober enough to do it anyway. It might as well be me who goes with."

I chuckled a little. "I half-expected you to volunteer Quiver to go with me."

He timidly gave a small grin and said, "Well, sir, even though he tapped out all my credits earlier this week by making me buy drinks for two squadrons, I've now learned to not take revenge on people via my job. That's what pranks are for, especially when they're not expecting them."

I couldn't help but grin back. "Fine. I'll meet you in the hangar tonight for SSP. If nothing else, this patrol will give us a chance to talk informally. Go tell Quiver that he can now get as drunk as he wants. I'm sure he'll love that."

"Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

Darin snapped off a salute and walked out. After he left, I leaned back in my chair and just looked at the closed door for a minute, thinking. The prospect of going on this patrol with Darin reminded me of something I'd forgotten: my former commander with Bluehill Squadron back on Treminal used to go on a patrol with each individual squadron member at least once every month to make sure he stayed connected with them personally. It helped him see what was going on with the pilots that official reports didn't convey, and it also let him detect and prevent potential problems before they happened. We'd come up with an informal name for these patrols and even teased the person going on the next one-on-one, but looking through a squadron commander's eyes now, it seemed like a really good idea. I'd see how this one went first, and then I'd take Snubber aside tomorrow and discuss with him the possibility of doing this with the Coronas. I didn't want to get disconnected again to the point where I was again capable of singling someone out and punishing them for something that wasn't their fault. I should know better than that; a good leader didn't do those kinds of things. I needed to know who I was leading and where I was leading them to. That's all that mattered.

This squadron came first. Before my pride, before my insecurities, before everything else. We might not have done a good job of finding the crashed Imperials on that planet, but in

looking for them, I'd found something else instead. I was reminded of my priorities.
I wouldn't forget that again.

The End

Revision A
8-5-03