

“Solid Ground”

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Prologue

The voice coming over the communication system’s speakers sounded concerned, troubled, anxious to help, matching the expression of the Rebel on the screen who was speaking. “We’ll do what we can.”

“Thank you,” Tayer Fohl’zic said before closing the transmission. As his screen went blank he sighed bleakly and looked up at the Imperial officer standing out of detection range of the transmitter and flanked by two stormtroopers. The armored Imperial shock troops lowered their blaster rifles from where they’d been preemptively aimed at Fohl’zic’s heart.

The officer, a major, offered Fohl’zic a cold smile and said, “Right on script. Excellent performance as well: I almost believed it myself. Now you’d just better hope that the rest of your Rebel friends do.”

A few days later and light-years away aboard the Rebel Alliance’s Mon Calamari Cruiser *Crescent Star*, Commander Quentell Mackin of Starfighter Command frowned at the computer console as the recorded plea for help ended. The low number of Imperial forces the man had quoted surprised him, but Mackin figured he was missing some key factor to explain it. “And who is this person, sir?” Mackin asked.

“His name is Tayer Fohl’zic,” said Lieutenant Colonel Adaic Traineer, a scrawny redhead wearing a Special Forces uniform. He directed his words to all the officers in the command staff’s briefing room. “He’s the leader of a small mining colony that has secretly helped the Rebellion by supplying us with trilhithide, their main export. Because of the colony’s relative proximity it’s this fleet’s primary source of the material. The Imperials use it as well, and as you all saw from what Fohl’zic said here the Imperials have sent in a few troops to secure the colony and its trilhithide production for themselves. If the Imperials deny us that supply, Logistics has assured me that we’ll have some major problems.”

While Mackin and the others considered that, Traineer continued, “We’ve been authorized to assist, and I’ve already worked out a plan with Captain Tralkett’s approval.” He nodded once toward the ship’s blue-skinned Mon Calamari captain. “Given the types and numbers of Imperial forces Fohl’zic reported, this will be a simple mission: we can hit the Imperials hard before they even realize we’re coming. My Special Forces teams can handle the beginning phases, but we’ll require involvement from both the Army and Starfighter Command as well. We’re here to brief you on your roles, so let’s get started.”

Chapter One

It was a trap. He was certain of it.

Flight Officer Hentil “Quiver” Yanilr narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the pilot sitting on his left. He turned the question she had posed to him over and over in his mind until it entered an uncontrolled spin that no thrusters could ever hope to stabilize. As a starfighter pilot Quiver was accustomed to being in tight spots and having to scrape and claw his way through situations he had no business surviving, but he couldn’t find a way out of this one. Even his wingman, sitting on his right, wouldn’t be able to help this time. There was no answer Quiver could give that would let him escape unscathed.

Might as well go all out and make the best of it then. Quiver took a deep breath and blurted out with as much conviction as he could muster, “Yes.”

Flight Officer Chryse “CC” Cerac scoffed, though the black-haired young woman’s reply was nearly lost in the boisterous chatting of the other Corona Squadron pilots scattered in their usual seating arrangement in *Crescent Star*’s pilot briefing room. Until their tardy commander and executive officer arrived, there was no reason to quiet down. “Of course you would,” CC muttered. “I should’ve known by now not to expect anything better from you.”

“Hey, you asked,” Quiver said with a shrug. “I think it’s reasonable enough: if this hypothetical girl you mentioned offers to buy me a hypothetical drink and there are no hypothetical stipulations placed on it, you bet I’m going to order something expensive. It’s not my money, so why not?”

“Because it’s taking undue advantage of a friendly offer where the hypothetical girl wasn’t realistically expecting to spend a fortune to send alcohol down your gullet. Someone like you should be thanking the Force that someone’s even talking to you, not be driving her away with insane demands.”

“Better for hypothetical her to know right up front that I’ve got expensive tastes,” Quiver said, grinning. He settled in and geared up for a very enjoyable argument with his best friend. He rocked back in his seat to project an air of relaxation and nonchalance— part of it genuine, part of it to rile up CC more— and put his booted feet up on the chair in front of him. There wasn’t much room to stretch his long legs.

The front of Quiver’s chair came back down to the deck unexpectedly hard when his boots were immediately shoved off the seat ahead; the culprit was the lone pilot in that row, who was sitting in front of CC. Lieutenant Shaun Pellicer then turned to look at Quiver and said, “We really don’t need your dirty, smelly boots on the seats. And I’ve seen your ‘expensive tastes’ eat things off the floor. I think you really meant to say that it’s better for her to know up front that you’re cheap and broke.”

“Nah, I prefer my version.”

Next Pellicer twisted more toward CC and said, “But CC, as much as it pains me to defend Quiver, you would have been just as annoyed with him if he’d said no because you would’ve implied he assumed the hypothetical girl couldn’t afford something pricey.”

CC sighed, crossed her arms and slouched in her seat. Her bearing matched Quiver’s but was a stark contrast to her wingman Pellicer’s straight, self-assured posture. “Of course I would have! Blast it, Scoop, it’s no fun when you ‘out’ things like that. Way to ruin a perfectly good argument,” she said, using Pellicer’s callsign. She softly kicked the back of his chair.

“Yeah,” Quiver agreed. “You know how long it takes her to come up with these no-win questions for me when my mind is such a durasteel trap?”

“A second, tops,” CC said. “And it’s really more of a rusty trap with broken springs and a huge lit-up sign with arrows pointing to it that says, ‘CAUTION. TRAP HERE.’”

“Rusty traps are actually more lethal in the long run, so thanks for the compliment.”

Like always, CC took Quiver’s turnaround in stride and replied, “They’re also corroding and falling apart, which is the comparison you need to take away from this.”

Pellicer simply raised an eyebrow at them and faced the front of the room again. Even though the initial fun with CC had been derailed, Quiver couldn’t be too upset with Pellicer for it. The voluntary interaction meant that the former Imperial TIE Fighter pilot was finally loosening up and wanting to be included in the Rebel squadron. Hopefully soon the combined efforts of Quiver and CC would wear Pellicer down enough to convince him it was okay to initiate a little fun on his own every so often.

Quiver surreptitiously tried to put his boots on the chair in front of him again, but they’d barely touched the metal before Pellicer pushed them off once more without even looking.

With a smirk, Quiver said, “You’re awfully concerned about my boots, Scoop. You want them clean so badly, then you can clean them. I’ve got much more important things to do.”

“Like what?” Pellicer didn’t turn around this time. “Finding ways to make Darin do all your work?”

“Actually, yes! Don’t underestimate that effort. It takes a lot of creativity, ingenuity, persuasion, conning and threats. It’s hard! I’m worn out by the end of the day.” Quiver tried to reflect the self-imposed adversity in his expression. Even if Pellicer didn’t see it, CC would.

“Poor thing.” Pellicer’s words were decidedly unsympathetic.

“I know. Thank you.”

CC piped up with, “Quiver, I can’t fathom how you haven’t broken poor Darin’s sanity yet.” Her eyes flickered over to the pilot on Quiver’s right and returned. “I’ve never in my life felt as sorry for a being as I do for him. Being forced to spend all that time with you must be horrible. I bet there’s long-term damage.”

Quiver offered another shrug. “I don’t see what the big deal is, CC. Sure, at the basest level Darin has to spend time with me whether he wants to or not. But you? You don’t. It’s completely voluntary, and you do it anyway. So what does it say about you that you put yourself in such a sanity-endangering situation?”

The look CC gave him—slightly squinted eyes, a scrunched nose—was one that Quiver had learned long ago meant she was going to hit him... as soon as she decided how hard.

Quiver immediately shied away, reached to his right and grabbed his wingman’s shoulders. When he yanked Darin’s torso between himself and CC as a shield, Darin yelped in surprise and struggled to brace himself and keep his balance. CC barely managed to abort her Quiver-bound swat without hitting Darin.

“Quiver!” Quiver had heard that annoyed admonishment from Darin, his other best friend, more times than he could count. “What was that for?” Flight Officer Darin “Thumper” Stanic pulled himself out of Quiver’s grips and gathered his feet under him enough to sit back in his seat. “And what’re you laughing at, Scoop?”

Pellicer didn’t answer, opting instead to continue snickering, and Quiver innocently said to Darin, “I was just trying to include you, rookie. You’ve been quieter than normal.”

“Because I was trying to take a nap.” Darin rubbed his green eyes and reestablished his slumped position in the uncomfortable chair, which was made of scrap metal and discarded coolant pipes like all the others in the room. The moment he did, CC smacked Quiver on the upper arm. Quiver stuck his tongue out at her, and she made a face at him in return. Though Quiver and CC were both in their very early twenties in Standard years, every chance they got they did their best to mentally defy the extra years the galactic civil war tried to age them.

“Anyway, if you’d just asked I would’ve been more than happy to join in the conversation,” Darin continued through a yawn. “I agree with Scoop. Your boots stink.”

Quiver snorted. “Fine, Scoop’s off the hook. You can clean my boots instead, Darin. You have to live with them, so maybe you’ll be more motivated.”

Darin brushed his blond bangs aside and shifted his weight for a more comfortable position. “Sure, whatever,” he said offhandedly. He picked at the beginnings of another hole in a threadbare spot of his orange flight suit and rubbed futilely at a smudge of grease ingrained in the fabric. “I’ll get right on that when you manage to find some boot polish around here.”

It was one of the few things Quiver liked about living with little in the Rebellion: lack of supplies meant they weren’t expected to be impeccably dressed and spotlessly groomed. Let the Imperials worry if their boots were clean enough to eat off of or if their sleeve creases could be used as weapons. The Rebels, especially in this isolated fleet, had no need of that.

Quiver didn’t have a chance to respond to his roommate about the boot polish before the voice of the lone Rodian in the squadron cut through from the back. “Oh, come on, this is ridiculous,” said Flight Officer Kalre Unatel. His bumpy green skin was flushed with a tint of yellow caused by his exasperation, and his huge black eyes narrowed. “I thought this was supposed to be some important mission briefing, but we’ve been sitting here wasting time for fifteen minutes. They’ve never been this late before. Are they even coming?”

Darin shrugged. “Maybe they forgot about it.”

“Both Mack *and* Snubber?” asked Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap from near the front of the room. The small woman shook her head and caused her chin-length, light brown hair to swat against her face. “That’s hardly likely. They never forget anything like this.”

“Or the backfired pranks Quiver *wishes* they’d forget.” CC threw a mischievous look in Quiver’s direction, who feigned complete and utter innocence, then she addressed the rest of the squadron again. “So... what? Should we comm one of them? What if they’re in the middle of something more important?”

“More important than *us*?” Quiver replaced his innocent expression with one of pretend indignation. “There’s no such thing.”

“I don’t care what you do, I just wish we’d get this briefing over with,” Kalre replied. Scattered agreements followed.

Quiver rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe you guys. Are all of you that desperate for a briefing? Here, I’ll give you a briefing.” The lanky pilot stood and walked to the front of the room.

The other Coronas quieted and watched curiously as Quiver turned to face them. Before him lay the small, cozy briefing room, a boring result of some past retrofitter either wanting something that was “functional and simple” or being the lowest bidder. In their retina-burning orange flight suits, the X-wing pilots of the understaffed Coronas took up less than a third of the available chairs: the rest were usually occupied by the members of Quake Squadron, the Y-wing squadron stationed onboard *Crescent Star* with them, though only the Coronas were present now.

Beside Quiver at the front of the room was a table with a holoprojector. A lectern was pushed off into the corner behind him. Few events there were formal enough to require the lectern's use or benefit from it, and that suited Quiver just fine.

On a side wall, CC's former wingman had painted the emblems of the Coronas and the Quakes. These walls had beheld the plannings of many missions, both wonderful victories and heartbreaking defeats, as well as promotions and award ceremonies and the preparations for the next memorial service. They had heard countless jokes, innumerable taunts, ringing laughter and somber silence.

And now they were going to see something they never had before: Quiver in charge.

Just like Commander Mackin did each time, Quiver quickly counted the pilots, cleared his throat and began. "Okay, Coronas, let's get started," he said in his best imitation of Mackin's accent. "Mack and Snubber will be required to contribute to the Squadron Pot for being late at the going rate of two credits for each minute they're overdue."

Some of the Coronas snickered at his performance, which was all the encouragement Quiver needed. He mimicked Mackin's mannerisms again as he crossed his arms and sighed pointedly for them to quiet down. He'd seen that look from his commander enough times. That only made them laugh harder, and Quiver fought to keep the self-satisfied grin off his face.

Finally he continued in a serious tone, forgetting about the accent, "Our mission is a difficult one and will require us all to be on top of our game." He entered a few commands into the holoprojector, and the familiar image of a planet that was covered in one huge city fizzled and flickered into existence in the air beside him as a hologram. "Our destination: Coruscant, or Imperial Center. Former capital of the Republic, current capital of the Empire. Imperial defense stations, fighter patrols and planetary shielding will all have to be mitigated or avoided to reach our primary target: The Swordcat's Lair, home of the best nerf steaks this side of Corellia. Our objective: take-out."

Like he'd been counting on, the Coronas were more than willing to play along and be entertained. The mock *gasp* coming from them was done so perfectly in unison that an outsider could have been convinced the whole thing was scripted beforehand. Before the subsequent, uneasy murmurings had completely died out, Darin protested, "But that's a suicide mission! We'll never make it!"

"We have to try, though, Thumper. The future of the entire Rebellion is at stake!" Quiver said with conviction.

"I don't take orders from someone who makes such bad puns!" CC joined in.

"You have no choice. We need everyone, and this mission *must* succeed."

"So what's the plan for getting on-planet then?" Lieutenant Jayke Forsgren, better known as Chopper, asked in a skeptical tone. The man with the close-cropped black hair sat back and crossed his arms as if to defy the very notion that this mission could possibly work. His solid build added to the impression of stubbornness.

It didn't faze Quiver, though, and he actually felt a flutter of excitement that even Chopper of all people was participating. Quiver eagerly accepted the challenge; he could make this be awesome. "Well," Quiver said reasonably, "the first step is to steal a Star Destroyer. Any class will do, though I'm partial to the *Victories* myself. They may be smaller, but they've got character. Slurry, Chopper and Snubber will be in charge of this. You two tell Snubber when he gets here."

The pilots fidgeted and looked dubiously at each other. The exception to the fake skepticism was Slurry, who nodded and said in his thick accent, “*Star* received reports of those Star Destroyers three a time short ago. Maybe one is nearby still, and we can get it before it moves away far too.” His real name was Lieutenant Tictintco Tnis, but since none of the pilots could easily pronounce that mouthful they always used his callsign instead. He was a Bilgana, a short species with four arms, four eyes, dark skin and knees that bent the opposite way of a human’s.

“That’s a really good place to start. You guys work out all the details, and I want a preliminary report by 1700. That gives you... almost three hours,” said Quiver with a quick check of his wrist chrono before he addressed the whole squadron again. “Once we steal the SD, if it comes with a crew then CC and I will get them to defect and help us.”

CC interrupted with a laugh. “Oh, that’s easy,” she said. “All we have to do is introduce you to them and say you’re joining the Imperials. They’ll be so afraid that they might be assigned to the same ship as you that they’ll join the Rebellion in an instant.”

Quiver smirked back. “Yes, my mere presence *does* seem to influence vast numbers of people for the better, doesn’t it? But back to the mission. If there is no crew we’ll have to figure out a way to fly it on our own.”

Ikoa spoke up. “We can temporarily reprogram our astromechs to help run the ship. Each of them could probably do the jobs of a couple hundred crewmen, especially if we only have essential systems powered. The more we can keep things localized, the better.”

Nodding, Quiver said, “Great idea. You and Kalre start on the program in case there’s no crew. Darin, get as many droids as possible, astromech and otherwise, to agree to help.”

“What makes you think the droids will listen to me?” Darin asked.

“Because Botch is near the top of the pecking order, and he listens to you. Usually.”

“That’s my point. What if he doesn’t?”

“Make it work. Threaten that astromech of yours with a memory wipe if you have to.”

CC cut in again. “Quiver, you’re not taking full advantage of skill sets. Scoop should be on the programming team too.”

“Strine blink, I know,” Quiver said. “Relax. I’ve got something more important in mind for him, okay? Now where was I? Oh, yeah. We now have a Star Destroyer to fly to Coruscant, and we’ll use that to blend in.” Quiver turned his attention to Pellicer. “Speaking of you. Scoop, you’ll pretend to be the captain because you had that whole ‘Imperial thing’ going. Mack and whoever else is available will be the bridge crew. You’ll have to talk us through their defenses using whatever secret language Imperials speak to each other.”

If Pellicer was upset at still being associated with the Imperials after defecting to the Rebels a year ago due to the destruction of Alderaan, he didn’t show it. Though if it really bothered him, Quiver figured, Pellicer wouldn’t keep his dark brown hair trimmed in the Empire’s regulation crew cut and would instead grow it out into bangs like Lt. Weas had. Pellicer merely replied, “I’m fluent in Imperial-speak. I’ll get you through. Lesson one: all Imperial transmissions must contain the phrases ‘Rebel scum’ or ‘for the glory of the Empire.’ See, I’m not rusty at all.”

“Good deal, Scoop. We’ll need that.” Quiver grinned briefly and then acted serious again, though he knew his unruly, untrimmed blond crew cut and mischievous look in his pale blue eyes made it hard for anyone to really take him seriously. “If we get into trouble we’ll have our X-wings in the hangar, and the Quakes can come too if they want. You’ll each have the choice of

using your X-wing or the Destroyer's big guns if we get into a firefight. If you use the SD's guns, though, remember to flag Rebel ship IFFs as 'friendly' beforehand.

"Once Lieutenant Pellicer gets us into orbit, we'll take a shuttle to Quadrant Thirty-Eight on-planet. The pilot of the shuttle will be whoever loses the most games of sabacc on the way to Coruscant, whoever is most sober at the time, or both if applicable. The rest of us will disguise ourselves as Vader, the Emperor, and various other well-known, high-ranking Imperial officers whom no one will dare ask for identification upon landing."

The Coronas looked at each other and nodded like that idea made a lot of sense.

"From there, we go to the restaurant, get our delicious nerf steak take-out, and get out the way we came in. Any questions?"

Several pilots spoke up at once.

"Can I be the Emperor?"

"I'm not playing if we're using Chopper's sabacc deck."

"Who's bringing the drinks?"

"Wait, wait, wait, one at a time." Quiver held his hands up, palms out, to stop the outburst of questions. "We will *not* be using Chopper's sabacc deck. I know better than that."

"Aww." Chopper sounded crestfallen.

"Next," Quiver continued, "whoever asked about being the Emperor can be the Emperor. I want to be a Grand Admiral, and Darin has to be Vader."

"What? Why do I have to be Vader?"

"Because you already have the dark, evil heart of blackness. And you're bringing the drinks, like always. Now, are there any other questions relating to planning this mission?"

"Yeah," Commander Mackin said from the back. Quiver's stomach plummeted. "What if the restaurant runs out of Savor Sauce before you get there? You're not planning on going during lunchtime and fighting the crowds, are you? And have you fully explored the option of delivery instead of take-out?"

The Coronas all turned around in their seats to see what Quiver had noticed too late: Commander Quentell Mackin, Lieutenant Steen "Snubber" Weas and an unknown officer were standing in the doorway with quite unreadable expressions. Normally Mackin might have found Quiver's impromptu briefing amusing, but the timing was horrible with that unknown officer there.

Quiver grinned sheepishly at them. "Just warming up the holoprojector for you, sir." He turned off the image of Coruscant and retreated to his seat in the middle of the room between Darin and CC, who were having a hard time stifling their laughter.

As the other pilots likewise tried to keep quiet and while the three senior officers walked to the front, CC whispered to Quiver, "You didn't answer Mack's questions about the mission planning. That's some horrible leadership you just displayed. They were valid questions that we need to work out."

Quiver groaned. "That could have been so much more awesome with a few more minutes," he said quietly. "I was just about to name my shiny new SD *Quiver's Annihilator* or something great like that. But why didn't you tell me they were there?" The last part was muttered to Darin. "I know CC wouldn't, but you?"

Darin got enough control over himself to whisper back, "How was I supposed to know? My back's to them; *you* were the one facing their direction. It's nice to know my wingman's blind. But even if I'd known I wouldn't have said anything because it's a lot funnier this way."

“Traitor.” Quiver kicked him in the shin. Darin was learning a bit too much from CC. “And to think your callsign refers to an animal known for its *loyalty*.”

Darin looked at Quiver, grinned evilly and quietly imitated Darth Vader’s mechanized breathing. “Hhhhh hhhhh. Hhhhh hhhhh.”

Quiver reached over and put Darin in a headlock so calmly that no one seemed to notice besides CC. She shook her head hopelessly before joining in the antics by driving her elbow into Quiver’s ribs to get him to release Darin. He did so, throwing a mock hurt expression her way, and then they reluctantly stopped roughhousing and focused on Mackin at the front of the room.

It was just in time because one heartbeat later Mackin said, “I apologize for being late. And I regret to inform you all that this mission does not involve coming away with nerf steaks.” The pilots moaned and looked disappointed. Woeful comments would have followed— especially from Quiver— if the unknown officer had not been there, but with difficulty Quiver kept his mouth shut. Mackin allowed the Coronas to usually dispense with most military formalities within the confines of the squadron and keep things fairly relaxed, but that all changed the minute someone was in trouble or when they were dealing with a higher-ranking officer who might not understand or appreciate the looser atmosphere. From the looks of this new guy, Quiver figured that was the case. He frowned at the prospect. Spoil sport.

The unknown officer went to the lectern and was about to pull it away from the wall when he stopped short. From the way he peered at the top and then backed away, Quiver’s best guess was that the dust scared him off. Instead the officer came to stand beside the front table where Mackin and Weas were waiting. Mackin briefly input commands on the projector, and a hologram of a pale green and grey planet appeared.

Facing the Coronas, the officer smoothed out his impeccable uniform, straightened his shoulders and spoke in a voice that had the tilt of a Coruscanti accent. “I’m Colonel Traineer of Special Forces, and you will all be working for us and under my command on this mission.” His expression suggested that he was no longer certain he was entirely happy with that idea. The wiry redhead was taller than Quiver, and his presence confirmed the rumors Pellicer had relayed about a fairly new Special Forces CO on the ship who had replaced Major Brexxil a month ago.

Traineer motioned to the hologram. “This is the planet Lokinha. Its main feature of note is a mining colony of the same name, and the only population on the planet resides there due to mountainous and mostly inhospitable terrain elsewhere on the world. They have secretly supported the Rebellion in the past and are one of our main suppliers of trilhithide, particularly in this region.”

“Trilhithide? Borrrriinnng,” Quiver mumbled under his breath. “My briefing was much better. What do we need trilhithide for anyway?” As expected, CC kicked him in the ankle.

Traineer kept going, oblivious to the nearly inaudible peanut gallery. “Very recently, the Imperials took an interest in Lokinha. We received a transmission from the colony leader requesting assistance because the Imperials have sent a small force down to the planet to take control. The colony does not have adequate defensive equipment or manpower, so there is little they can do to resist.”

Chopper spoke up. “What’s a ‘small force’? Sir.”

Traineer aimed an annoyed look at Chopper and said, “If you’d kindly not interrupt my briefing, Lieutenant, there will be time for questions afterward. As it is, I was just getting to the force complement so you would have heard it in another second anyway. The leader reported a couple squads, maybe a platoon, of stormtroopers and a handful of TIEs that were dropped off.”

“That’s it?” Pellicer asked in surprise.

Traineer let out a short, sharp breath, and his irritated gaze was briefly directed at Commander Mackin this time before the colonel answered. “Yes. The colony is not very big, either in size or population, and has few defenses to speak of. A large amount of Imperial forces would not be needed to take or hold the planet. Proportionately it’s not unreasonable.

“Continuing on, we’re going in to help them. Commander?”

The Special Forces officer yielded the floor to Mackin, who pressed some buttons on the holoprojector. The planet was replaced with the image of a star whose surface was coated in an abnormal number of eruptions with an occasional flare or prominence visible.

“We’re going in and we’re going in quick,” Mackin announced. “The system’s star currently has a large storm erupting on it, and that’s predicted to last for another day or so. The storm will hide our signals and should allow us to land undetected by scrambling any sensors they have in orbit. That works both ways, however: we won’t be able to use our comm systems or sensors while in the storm’s area of effect until we’re within Lokinha’s magnetosphere.

“Normally an Intel team would go in first, but because of the limited window of opportunity available due to this solar storm we’ll all be going down at once and will stage there. Like past Alliance missions to this planet, we’ll use the canyon to the east of the colony as a landing and hiding spot. After we land, a Special Forces recon team will gather intel in the colony, and we’ll finalize mission plans once we have their reports.”

Mackin paused and looked around, but the Coronas remained quiet. He continued, “At 1630 hours today we’ll escort the two Special Forces assault shuttles to Lokinha. When we arrive tonight we’ll go to the canyon with the majority of the Special Forces commandos and wait for the recon team’s reports the following morning. Meanwhile, the fleet will make a brief stopover elsewhere to pick up enough army forces to protect the colony afterward. The storm should die down by tomorrow, so we’ll signal the fleet after the recon team reports in and we’re ready to begin the main operation. Once *Star* arrives, we’ll provide air support for the rest of the commandos and the troops going into the colony.”

Pellicer crossed his arms and cocked his head. “Sir?”

“Yes?”

“If it’s just a ‘small force’ there with only a handful of TIEs and no capital ships, and if we’re waiting on the offensive until *Star* arrives anyway, then why is the whole squadron going down so early? Why not just have one flight escorting, and the other can remain on fleet duty until *Star* brings them?”

Traineer gave a little huff from where he was standing off to the side. At the same time, Mackin’s and Weas’s faces both twitched. Quiver doubted Traineer could have seen the slight motions, but he also would have bet that every single Corona caught them and knew exactly what they meant: Mack and Weas had argued that exact point and lost.

“Our full strength has been requested for the escort and on-world protection as long as the planet is considered occupied and hostile,” Mackin answered. The words were more diplomatic than usual for him and carried subtle undertones of frustration.

“But that’s—” Kalre started to say before he was cut off with swift warning glares from Mackin and Weas. The room fell silent.

Mackin changed the holoprojector’s display to a graphic showing an overhead view of different buildings and structures. “You’ll each get a basic map of the colony to study on the way there so you know what’s what when we’re flying cover. The west side of the colony has

aqueducts going into the nearby mountains to provide the needed water for their manufacturing and mining equipment, and you'll have to watch out for them if we end up over there. There are also several processing plants that use highly explosive materials, and if we get into a scuffle the Imperials may try to blow them up under you. Make sure you study up on the layout and the potential dangers. We don't want civilian casualties. You'll get the standard frequency and navigation data for the mission as soon as we finalize it. Are there any questions?"

None of the pilots spoke. Mackin turned to Weas. "Did I forget anything?"

The XO shook his head and said, "No, sir. I'll go get the support squadron up to speed."

"Thanks." Mackin looked back at the rest of his pilots. "All right, then. We've got one night off-ship. Pack up and get ready to launch at 1630. Dismissed, everyone."

With scattered acknowledgments, the Coronas headed out. Quiver, Darin and CC stood, and CC said, "Yet another mission where I need a pet-sitter. I'd better go see if Kile can watch Hue until we get back. You guys want to grab something to eat at 1530?"

"Sounds good," Quiver said.

"Okay. Quiver, you're treating us all to nerf steaks because you really got me in the mood for one," CC told him.

"Sure. Go kill me a nerf, and I'll cook it right up."

"Stop talking about nerf steaks! You're making it worse," Darin said. "That sounds so good right now."

"Hey, for all we know the mess hall could be serving us nerf," Quiver said with a shrug. "They have to get mystery meat from somewhere, don't they? Maybe we've been having nerf all along and don't even know it."

"I don't want to know what part of the nerf they got that from then," grumbled Darin. "I can't remember the last time I had real food."

Quiver raised an eyebrow at CC while they walked out. "Does your wingman complain this much?"

She shook her head. "Nope, just yours. And the poor guy's got a lot to rightfully complain about since he's stuck with you."

"Want to trade?"

"No," she answered. "Damage control. Quarantine. You've already messed up Darin, so he has to stay with you so it doesn't spread. Don't want you messing up Scoop or any of the others too." She put a comforting arm around Darin's shoulders. "Sorry, Thumper, but it's up to you to contain the damage."

"Oh, wonderful. Thanks," Darin answered with a bit of sarcasm. "I feel like such a useful part of the squadron now."

CC grinned at him, and her light brown eyes twinkled. "Ha, are you kidding? You don't get much more useful than that."

Chapter Two

“I swear, Thumper, only you could fall asleep on an S-foil.”

Darin woke up when he heard Quiver’s remark, and it took him a moment to get his bearings. Corona Squadron and the two Special Forces shuttles had reached the canyon on Lokinha without incident, and after throwing camouflage netting over the ships and helping the commandos set up some perimeter sensors there was nothing for the pilots to do that night but wait for the recon team to report back the next morning. Darin lay on his back on his X-wing’s port S-foil on top of the netting, with his feet pointing toward the laser cannon and his hands cushioning his head. He looked up past the top of his head to see Quiver sitting on that S-foil’s engine and grinning in amusement in the darkness. Darin stretched his stiff muscles but made no move to get up, and he said, “Sorry, I was stargazing a little. I guess I drifted off.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Quiver replied. “Take all the sleep you can get. Though how you can sleep with no blanket when it’s this chilly out is beyond me.”

Darin smiled. “It’s nice out.”

“It’s cold.”

“It’s nice out.”

Quiver shook his head, silently proclaiming his wingman a lost cause, and pulled his jacket closer around himself. “You missed the game. We were having a contest to see who could come up with the best guess of what trilithide’s used for in the fleet and why we need it. CC had a good one about it being a main ingredient of the artificial gravity on the capital ships. Really, what do they make our gravity out of anyway?”

“That’s not at all how it works.”

“Oh, I know. But it’s more fun this way.” Quiver looked up at the sky. “Nice night for stargazing. Hopefully those clouds to the west will hold off.”

“Yeah. There have been some really nice aurora from that solar storm too.” Darin looked at the twinkling stars and said more quietly, “My friends back home and I used to stargaze for hours. We’d single out a distant star and then argue about what system it was, though none of us honestly knew. And whenever a ship would go by overhead at night, we’d try to figure out what kind it was based on the lights alone, or the sound too if we could hear it. We were better at identifying ships than identifying stars.” The smaller pilot paused, and as he stared up into the limitless universe he felt even smaller. “Doesn’t it ever make you feel– I don’t know, homesick?”

Quiver’s voice betrayed his curiosity. “What do you mean?”

Darin shrugged. “Being on a planet somewhere and looking up at the stars, but not seeing one familiar constellation. Not one. I mean, I–” He cut himself off. No reason to bother his friend with his never-ending homesickness again.

His wingman looked back at the sky. “I don’t know. I never really thought about it.”

Still on his back, Darin picked up a datapad laying beside him and held it up to show Quiver under the light of the two moons. “I had Botch give me the starmaps as seen from this system.” From his droid socket in the X-wing, Darin’s astromech beeped contentedly at the recognition. Darin pointed to a group of dim stars not far above the northeastern canyon ridge. “You see that group of stars that’s kind of clustered together but spread out at the same time? Well, I guess it’s more of a small band, a little denser than the surrounding area. Just above the ridge?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the Corporate Sector. My planet’s at the edge there somewhere. Redu—” Darin cut himself off again and chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. “And you know what? We’re so far away that I wasn’t even born yet when the light we’re seeing now left our sun and reflected off my homeworld to merge with and join the starlight out here, if that makes sense. There’s no reflection of me in it, just as there’s no reflection of the— of everything that happened there in it quite yet. Given the distance, I doubt my parents are even part of that reflected light. Maybe I’m seeing my grandparents or great-grandparents as children right now. Makes you think.”

While Quiver enjoyed philosophical discussions, there were times, such as now if the look on his face was any indication, when he felt that Darin gave that kind of stuff much more thought than any nineteen-year-old had a right to. Quiver looked at the group of stars Darin had pointed out and squinted, but apparently couldn’t see what Darin was seeing in the pinpoint of light. Darin’s home system, the Craci System, wasn’t even distinguishable from the other Corporate Sector stars at that distance. Darin sighed softly as he regarded the tiny specks of light, so far away. Blast, he missed home. He missed his family and friends. Their deaths still hurt too much.

Quiver’s gaze searched the sky once more, and he asked, “Where are the Core Worlds?”

Thankful for the distraction, the younger pilot pointed straight up at the zenith where a pale, wavy band cut across the sky. “Up there.”

Quiver leaned back and craned his head to look up. “At the top, just like they should be. Where specifically is Druzien?”

Darin called up the coordinates and pointed out the star, and Quiver grinned as he looked at it. “It’s a lot warmer in person. You know how many sunburns I got from that thing growing up?”

“I can imagine. So what do they call someone from Druzien anyway? Are you a Druzienian?” Darin’s voice turned much lighter, replacing the earlier contemplativeness. It was hard to be serious for too long with Quiver around.

Quiver deadpanned back, “It depends. If you’re bigger than me you can call me whatever you want.”

“And what should someone smaller than you call you?”

“Master.”

Darin laughed a bit and shook his head to himself. “I’ll remember that, master.”

Another voice spoke up nearby. “Quiver, for the last time, stop making your wingmen into your personal slaves. That’s not what they’re there for.”

Quiver scoffed as the other pilot approached the X-wing. “Of *course* that’s what they’re there for, CC. What, do you think I’m going to go risk my life in battle if I haven’t gotten my X-wing spit-polished first? Absolutely not!” He glared down at Darin. “Well? What are you lying around here for? I know you’re not done with it yet. Get back to work!”

Darin sat up, hung his head and slowly spun around to face Quiver. “Yes, master. I’m sorry, master. It won’t happen again, master. I go now.”

“And stop groveling. I hate it when you grovel.”

“Yes, master. I’m sorry, master. It won’t happen again, master.”

“Actually, come to think of it, that’s how you could clean and polish my boots,” Quiver remarked thoughtfully.

By now CC had climbed up on Darin’s X-wing, and she playfully gave Quiver’s shoulder a shove. “You are such a bad influence on him. Poor guy, stuck with you.”

Darin tried to hide a grin at the comment. If only he'd known back when he joined the squadron almost a year ago that CC would be making a running gag out of using that phrase, he would have kept a written collection of them.

The two other members of what Mackin called "The Trio," Quiver and CC were very close in age, making them both a few years Darin's senior, at least physically. They'd already been inseparable friends before Darin had met them, and since then Mack had blamed them all for more than a few grey hairs despite his relative youth. Darin figured Mack wasn't entirely joking; after all, Quiver and CC were constantly trying to lighten things up for everyone in the squadron, often by any means necessary. If they could do it by pranking Darin, so much the better. Sometimes Darin suspected Quiver did his more exuberant things just to see the look on Mackin's face.

Sitting down on the fighter's wing between the two other pilots, CC brushed her black hair behind her shoulders and asked, "So what are you guys up to? Is anyone else bored just sitting around here waiting?"

"Darin was stargazing," Quiver offered.

"Really?" CC turned to Darin, who still had his head bowed. "Find anything interesting, rookie?"

Darin didn't say anything for a moment, then still not looking up, meekly asked, "Permission to speak, master?"

"Granted. Just don't grovel," Quiver replied.

Darin finally raised his head like nothing was out of the ordinary and said to CC, "I was just trying to find my home system."

"Did you?"

"I found the Corporate Sector, which is as good as I can hope for at this distance." He pointed out the stars.

A few seconds later, Quiver spoke up. "Okay, okay, CC has to look at my star now." Quiver proudly pointed it out in turn.

CC peered at the speck of light high above and said to Quiver, "So you mean to tell me that that beautiful, shining star up there produced something as strange as you? Please say you're the exception rather than the rule."

Quiver grinned and replied, "Yup, one in a trillion, that's me."

"Let's hope so. Then there can't be too many more of you running around out here. What's the population of the galaxy again, in trillions?"

Darin snickered, causing Quiver to half-heartedly kick him in the knee. "Hey!" Darin protested through a laugh.

CC never seemed to notice the interruption. "So that's your home system," she continued in wonder, still looking at the star of the Druzien System. "That's where your family is. Do they have trouble sleeping at night, knowing that you're out here on the front lines?"

Quiver shook his head. "No, they don't worry about me. In fact--"

"No," CC interrupted with a mischievous grin, "I meant, do they have trouble sleeping at night knowing that a crazy guy like you is out here on the front lines, and that's their protection? That's not very comforting."

Quiver slapped a hand over his heart and affected an exaggerated look of pain. "Shot down by my own ally! She wins again! Another Quiver kill-marker to go on the side of her fighter!"

“Quiv, you’re slipping,” Darin said with a smile. “She’s been winning a lot lately. You losing your touch or something?”

Quiver smirked. “No, just giving her some victories to keep her morale up and the competition sharp,” he answered.

CC rolled her eyes and said, “Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night, Quiver.” She stuck her tongue out at him, and he returned the gesture.

When they finished and appeared to mentally toe the line of adulthood again, Darin turned to CC. “At the risk of giving Quiver an equal opportunity for jabs at you, do you want to try to find your home system?”

“Sure.” CC definitely sounded interested.

“Avalar, right?”

“Right. Hot star. Almost blue.”

CC and Quiver crowded in to read over Darin’s shoulder while he called up the coordinates on his datapad. It wasn’t long before they had found the bluish star and had also drawn the attention of a few other pilots.

The next hours passed quickly. The stargazing activity soon spread through the pilots’ ranks as well as that of some of the remaining Special Forces personnel who eventually wandered over, and before long all of the participants’ home systems that were visible and had risen had been pinpointed. Darin was amazed at how many worlds were represented in their little group. They located other systems and shared personal tales about them, which quickly escalated into a storytelling competition between Starfighter Command and Special Forces. One of the commandos managed to really give Quiver a run for his money. Darin lost track of the tangents after that.

It was shortly before local midnight when Weas and a Special Forces lieutenant whom Darin didn’t know came up to the large group of Rebels sitting on the ground beside Darin’s X-wing. Weas had brown bangs and brown eyes and was scrappy in both appearance and demeanor despite being several centimeters shorter than the commando. “Okay, Coronas, wrap it up,” Weas said. “I know the time difference between here and the ship is messing with your internal clocks, but it’s time to get some sleep.”

A practiced, collective moan greeted his order. “Come on, Snubber,” Ikoa pleaded, “give us a few more minutes. We’re trying to figure out if the constellation of the Corellian Sector looks more like a sleeping gundark or a speeder bike from here. What do you think?”

“I think you’d all better get some sleep. Now.”

The pilots groaned again and reluctantly stood. CC picked herself up from where she’d been leaning back against Darin and using Quiver as a foot rest while lamenting the loss of how comfortable she’d been.

The Special Forces lieutenant motioned his people to their feet as well. “Let’s go, guys, it’s almost time for a shift change on watch anyway,” he said.

“And Coronas, don’t go wandering around outside of camp,” Weas added. “Tell one of the commandos like Lieutenant Troy here if you notice anything unusual. Remember there are some Imperials on this planet. Don’t get complacent.” The Coronas mumbled agreement as they walked off to their snubfighters.

Darin stood, pocketed his datapad and ducked under his S-foils to reach the cargo hold access in the belly of his X-wing. He got his bedroll out and found a good spot of grass for it beside his X-wing where he could still look up at the stars until he fell asleep.

He didn't expect to hear Weas's voice close behind him when all the other pilots and Special Forces soldiers were out of earshot. "So where's the Plonian System?" Weas asked softly.

Darin tried not to let his surprise at the question show while he turned to face Weas, wordlessly got out his datapad again and called up the coordinates. After studying the map he answered just as quietly, "Sorry, sir, it's on the day side of the planet right now. It's not visible."

The squadron's Executive Officer nodded in acceptance and walked away toward his own X-wing. Darin just raised an eyebrow before stowing the datapad and getting ready to go to sleep.

Chapter Three

The eastern sky had brightened only slightly the next morning when Darin jerked awake from something big and wet hitting his face. He flinched, wiped his face with his sleeve and felt another big drop before he had even opened his eyes. He wiped his face again and sat up while more drops hit him. No predawn stars were visible; the sky overhead was heavy with dark clouds, and it began to rain harder.

Darin grimaced and picked up his bedroll. A glance around showed him that Quiver was likewise not under substantial cover, but CC had been smarter than both of them and wouldn't be affected. Darin walked over to Quiver and nudged him with his foot. "Hey, Quiv, get up. It's raining."

"That's what blankets are for," Quiver muttered groggily as he pulled his blanket up over his head.

Darin shrugged and yawned. "Suit yourself. Just don't blame me when you get soaked." He walked back to his X-wing, laid his bedroll underneath one of the S-foils and had just begun trying to get back to sleep when he heard some commotion. Rolling onto his stomach and praying he was only dreaming it so he wouldn't have to get up, he squinted in the direction of the sound and saw Lt. Weas running between the squadron's fighters and calling to the pilots asleep under the wings. Unfortunately, it was reality. Blast it.

"Coronas, up, now! We've got a situation! Wake up!" The pilots started peeling themselves out of their bedrolls while Weas continued his rounds through the makeshift camp. "Up, everyone! Let's go! Now! Three and Four, get ready, you're launching in five minutes."

Within one minute all of the Coronas had gathered around Mackin and a glowrod, and Chopper and Kalre were both hurriedly donning their flight equipment. Mackin quickly met each of their gazes in turn, and Darin recognized the look in Mackin's dark blue eyes that always seemed to transform him into someone else. The commander was a rather plain-looking man, about average height with a build that was on the stocky side. Normally, not much about his appearance really made a lasting impression; however, at certain times when he felt his squadron may be in danger, his expression contained such intensity that it actually made his pilots feel safer.

Mackin ran a hand through his black crew cut and started his impromptu briefing. "Sorry to get you all up so early, but about five minutes ago we picked up a distress call from the scout team that had gone into the colony last night. It was cut off before we got any useful information, and we have been unable to contact anyone on the team since. Colonel Traineer has given us our new instructions."

Darin unconsciously glanced toward the two Special Forces shuttles at the mention of the colonel. Last night he'd gotten the impression that neither the other Coronas nor the Special Forces teams knew why Traineer was down here on the mission himself instead of delegating it and staying back on the ship. The Special Forces teams hadn't seemed too happy about it from what Darin could tell and had been grumbling amongst themselves about micromanagement.

"Three and Four, because of the unknown situation you two will be escorting the Special Forces shuttle *Star Ray* to Rally Point Echo," Mackin continued. Darin forced his attention back to his commander. Rally Point Echo was to the west, between the canyon and the colony. "Make sure you do terrain-following flight so it'll be harder for any sensors to pick you up. Once you reach that point, *Star Ray* will drop off a second Special Forces team who will go into the colony

to try to find the first team. They'll go most of the way on speeder bikes and then sneak in on foot. You two will remain with the shuttle at Echo as backup or until you hear otherwise. Everyone else, be ready to go. We'll be staying here with the final Special Forces team. Any questions?" All of the Corona pilots shook their heads. "Let's go then. I want us ready to lift at a moment's notice. Snap to it, everyone."

Chopper and Kalre jogged to their X-wings, and the other pilots hurried to pack up all the bedrolls and camouflage and don their flight equipment. A few minutes later Chopper and Kalre lifted up, rendezvoused with one of the Special Forces shuttles and headed toward the colony.

The eight remaining Corona Squadron pilots tried to stay dry under the S-foils of Mackin's X-wing while they listened to the comm. All of their X-wings had been prepped as far as they could go on the checklists without starting the engines, and all of their equipment was packed, leaving the pilots free to listen for more news from their squadmates or either of the Special Forces teams in the field. Mackin saw some of them fidgeting with their ejection harness straps and pulling at their flak vests. The waiting was always the worst.

The first minutes passed uneventfully aside from a gradual lightening of the overcast sky as sunrise fought the rain clouds but lost; however, just before the two X-wings and the Special Forces shuttle reached the rally point, Mackin's ears perked up when Kalre said over the squadron frequency, "Three, you see that?"

"I see something, Four, but what—" Chopper stopped, then his words rushed out. "No, wait! They said there was only a small amount of troops here! Lead, this is Three, come in!"

Mackin wasted no time in answering. When Chopper was worried, things were bad. "Report, Three."

"We have a squadron of TIEs coming right for us, repeat, a *squadron*. We need help, now!"

The other Coronas didn't even wait for Mackin's orders before they jumped up and ran to their snubfighters. Mack punched in a frequency on his combadge before climbing into his own fighter. "Colonel—" he began.

"I heard, Commander," Trainneer replied. "Go help that shuttle! Quick!"

"Yes, sir." Mackin slid into his cockpit and flew through the remaining items on his checklist. When he patched his headset into the communications system, he heard Chopper's voice again.

"They just entered firing range, Lead. We can't outrun them. Tell Special Forces to get a faster shuttle next time!"

"Hold on, Three, we're lifting now. Help is on the way," Mackin told him.

The eight pilots fired up their repulsorlifts and engines and climbed out of the canyon, flying full-throttle toward the fight. It seemed to take forever for the Coronas to cover the distance, and during that time the situation did not improve. "We can't hold them! There's too many! They're hitting us hard and trying to force down the shuttle!" Kalre reported.

"Four, my shields are gone, I lo—" Chopper's urgent voice was cut off.

"Three, punch out!" There was a pause before Kalre continued, "Lead, Three ejected right before his X-wing was destroyed. I think."

“We’re coming, Four,” Mackin said. He willed his X-wing to go faster. “We just entered visual range. We’ll cover you and the shuttle. Mark Three’s location.”

The Rebel reinforcements left the rain behind, though the sky remained thick with clouds. Mackin could now make out the TIEs’ green lasers ahead and a black cloud of smoke sticking out against the dark grey clouds. Debris left smoky trails in the sky as it rained down from the dissipating black puff like it was trying to mimic the storm clouds behind the X-wings. Gusts of wind buffeted the starfighters. The clouds and haze blurred the reference line of the horizon, making the ground seem closer than it really was. In addition, the cloud ceiling above them looked oppressive and solid, and the Rebel fighter pilot who had grown more accustomed to dogfights in outer space than anywhere else felt a couple uneasy flutters of claustrophobia in his stomach. Mackin shook it off as well as he could and reminded his pilots of the dangers the weather and visibility posed to them.

At the appearance of the other eight Coronas, the TIEs increased their firepower against the two Rebel ships within their range. Mackin knew neither Kalre nor the shuttle would last long against that. He ordered the Coronas to set up for a proton torpedo launch, and it was evident his pilots were doing as they were told when multiple TIEs broke off their attack runs on Kalre and the shuttle and started dancing around to break the targeting locks the Coronas had on them. With one word from the commander, eight proton torpedoes streaked out from the X-wings, blazing a blue trail in the murky sky for the snubfighters to follow.

Most of the TIEs managed to break the locks before they were hit. Two of the less nimble or less experienced ones did not. The TIEs regrouped and came at the X-wings, setting up for a head-to-head run. Kalre and the shuttle were just about to reach the Coronas and were still getting fired at from behind.

“Four, join up with Five and Six. Everyone, switch to lasers. Keep them off that shuttle,” ordered Mackin. Then he turned to one of their tactical frequencies and called the shuttle. “*Star Ray*, Corona Lead. Can you make orbit? What’s your status?”

“Don’t know about orbit, but we’re sure going to try!” the Special Forces pilot replied in a harried voice. Alarms and other voices were audible in his transmission. “They did a number on our engines! We’re on our last legs here.”

“Get as much altitude as you can, and break hard to port now,” Mackin told him.

While Mackin spoke, he put his lasers on dual-fire mode, then he strengthened his forward shields in preparation for the head-to-head. He and the other Coronas began firing from too far away to take some of the Imperials’ attention off of the damaged ships they were chasing. *Star Ray* and Kalre pulled sharp turns that took them out of the converging paths of the fighters at the last moment. When the Imperial and Rebel starfighters met, there was a blur of red and green crisscrossing lasers, a screech of fighters flying past each other, displaced air slamming into the starfighters, and an explosion marking the death of another Imperial TIE pilot. Then they were separate again and moving away from each other.

As expected, Mackin’s sensors showed the more maneuverable TIEs making tight turns to settle in on the X-wings’ tails. He led his squadron into a hard climb into the thick bank of low-hanging clouds above them. It wouldn’t fool the TIEs’ sensors, but the momentary lack of visuals might give the Coronas enough time to regroup.

They only had an instant before the TIE Fighters tore through the clouds and were upon them again. At least they were focused on the Coronas and not the shuttle. Then another eight

dots appeared on Mackin's scope, inbound from the direction of the colony. The blood red color tagged them as enemies, likely more TIE Fighters.

"Lead!" his wingman, Ikoa, called.

"I see them, Two. Heads up, Coronas, more's coming. Break by pairs and fire at will. Go for quick kills, not long engagements," ordered Mackin. "Five, Six, Four, you three stick with the shuttle. Watch for any heading toward the canyon."

Mackin's astromech, Bluehill, positively identified the incoming craft as TIEs, or eyeballs as the Rebels called them. After accounting for all the kills and destroyed ships to this point as well as the eight additional TIEs screaming toward them at full throttle, the Coronas were outnumbered sixteen to nine.

Being outnumbered was nothing new, but this... this would be hard.

Darin despised dogfights where the odds were so skewed against them. And to have lost one of their most aggressive fighter pilots in Chopper so early on was making this even harder.

Luckily Darin didn't have much of a chance to think about it. The battering his shields were taking from enemies in all directions kept his mind sufficiently occupied.

The six Coronas engaged with the eight TIEs were being kept busy enough that the eight newly arrived TIEs had simply skirted the existing dogfight and gone after the shuttle and its escort of three, which hadn't gotten very far due to the damage to the shuttle's engines. The Imperials cut the shuttle off at every turn, preventing it from escaping.

"Two, come on," Mackin said. Then to Weas he added, "Eight, keep this group busy with Two Flight." Mackin and Ikoa disengaged from their skirmish with difficulty and took some damage as they went to assist the rest of One Flight with defending the shuttle.

Keep this group busy. Right. It always sounded so much easier than it was.

The four Coronas in Two Flight now faced seven TIEs, and Darin constantly felt like he was a step behind everything. From the reports of damage coming in from Weas and Slurry as they fought, he figured he wasn't the only one.

A pair of TIEs unexpectedly drove themselves between Darin and Quiver, causing the two Rebels to involuntarily split. Another TIE had been waiting for the opportunity and dove in, settling himself behind Darin's solitary fighter.

"Ten?" Darin asked.

"I got you, Nine. Go," Quiver replied.

Darin complied and fell into a familiar pattern. He made sure his shields were even and toned down his evading a little to pretend to be an easier target in the hopes of encouraging the TIE to focus solely on him. Darin watched for firing patterns from the TIE behind him as he evaded. If he could anticipate each shot better, he could make each evasion count. As always, Botch even dedicated one subroutine to analyzing the firing habits and shared the results with his pilot.

This time, though, the seconds dragged on. Darin managed a few successful dodges and felt a direct hit on his shields. Quiver should have been there by now. Darin wanted to look for him but was concentrating too much on not getting shot.

Then another TIE dropped alongside the first, uncontested. Darin's heart skipped a beat. He threw himself into full evasion mode just as the TIE wingpair unloaded laser after laser on him. "Ten, hurry up!" he called.

"Coming!" Quiver said. Sure enough, Darin's targeting scope showed Quiver's X-wing angling in toward the TIEs' flank while the Imperials' attention was on Darin. A few bursts of laser energy later, one TIE blew into a fireball. The other disengaged and peeled off. The two Rebels swung around and joined up with each other.

"Took your time on that one," Darin said, letting out the breath he'd been holding. While his defensive flying skills and Quiver's gunnery skills had long ago led them to develop what they called their bait game, it still got harrowing being the bait. And with two enemies it was a hundred times worse. It was a brief but effective reminder of one reason why Weas always actively discouraged them from using that tactic at all. Maybe one of these days they would listen.

"Sorry. You gave me a hard setup," Quiver said.

"There's too many TIEs here. Baiting's too hard. Stick with me from here on, okay, Ten?" Darin asked.

"Gotcha."

Two TIEs crossed their paths, bearing down on where Weas and Slurry were engaged with their own two problems. Darin and Quiver wheeled after the eyeballs and fired just in time: the TIEs' lasers went wide of Slurry's fighter after the distraction by the wingpair. The two TIEs split off in different directions, and Darin led Quiver after the one circling to the left.

"Where'd they come from?! Get 'em off me!" Kalre's urgent voice crackled over the comm. Darin had been subconsciously tuning out most of One Flight's comm chatter, but that drove through.

"Four, break left!" Pellicer said.

Darin spotted the troubled group of Coronas close to the shuttle a distance ahead of him and Quiver. As he watched, one final laser blast from a TIE impacted Kalre's wounded fighter despite Pellicer's and CC's attempts to defend him. The Rodian's X-wing couldn't take anymore, and it plummeted to the south, trailing black smoke before it was lost from sight in the clouds.

"Ejecting!" Kalre reported.

The aftermath of that encounter continued to worsen. Mackin and Ikoa were out of position, being antagonized by two TIEs. Another four TIEs had CC, Pellicer and *Star Ray* directly in the middle of some nasty crossfire. A barrage of laser blasts hit those three Rebel ships. Some desperate evasive maneuvers got Pellicer and CC out of immediate harm's way, but *Star Ray* couldn't recover as quickly.

"We need help here!" Pellicer called.

Weas's lasers clipped the side of a TIE and sent it spiraling out of control. He pointed his fighter at the three TIEs remaining in Two Flight's group, and Slurry stayed on his wing. "We can't disengage," Weas said. "Nine, Ten, go."

Darin wheeled his X-wing around and slammed in his throttle. "Five, Six, we're coming!" he said. One of the three TIEs tried to cut them off, but a snap shot from Quiver chased it away. Darin and Quiver circled it and kept going toward the shuttle.

"Coronas, I know it's hot out there, but we can't take another hit like that one!" said *Star Ray*'s pilot. "We've got major damage."

"*Star Ray*, land," Mackin ordered. "At this point it's your safest and best chance."

“I’d love to, Corona Lead, but the colonel’s forbidding it. Said back to Base is our only option for help since we can’t make orbit,” the Special Forces pilot replied darkly.

“What?”

Darin and Quiver finally reached optimum firing range and shot at the TIEs still antagonizing *Star Ray*. The Imperials scattered. Darin’s scope showed Mackin and Ikoa now only facing one TIE. That TIE disengaged, and Mackin and Ikoa headed back toward the shuttle.

Pellicer and CC looped out, looking for a bit of breathing room after the brutal beating they had just taken. “My hyperdrive is gone. Shields are failing,” Pellicer reported.

“Five, your X-wing’s venting a white gas. Is that your life support?” CC’s distracted words were laced with both static and worry, and cockpit alarms blared in the background of her transmission.

Darin and Quiver circled above *Star Ray*, and Darin’s stomach sank when he saw the TIEs regrouping. One group of three, including the one that had disengaged from Mack and Ikoa, was coming at them from starboard, and another pair was coming right for them from port. More crossfire potential. “Ten, heads up.” Darin wished his shields would recharge faster; they’d been battered down to next to nothing.

Star Ray’s pilot spoke up again and had a hard edge to his voice. “Forget it, we can’t do what he wants. We’re landing here. We have to. Our other option is crashing.”

Pellicer’s words overlapped on the squadron frequency. “The venting’s from my hyperdrive. Six, what’s your status?”

CC’s troubled reply left little doubt as to how seriously her fighter was damaged. “Not good. I lost all—”

That was all Darin heard before his full attention was forced to the five incoming TIEs. He, Quiver, Mackin and Ikoa did their best, but the nimble TIEs skillfully avoided most of their fire. In half a moment, the TIEs’ lasers caused Darin’s shields to collapse and also hit *Star Ray* with a decisive impact. The shuttle shuddered and continued a slow descent. Gases leaked from it in places that should have been airtight, and sparks sputtered and trailed the craft.

Then the TIEs were past the shuttle and did something that made Darin’s heart stop. The group of three circled around to come back at the shuttle, and the other two kept going at high speed toward CC’s and Pellicer’s crippled starfighters a short distance away.

“Six!” Quiver called to CC. He immediately pulled his X-wing around and started after the two TIEs.

“Ten!” Darin’s voice betrayed his rising panic at suddenly being without a wingman or shields while trying to defend *Star Ray* against close, incoming enemies. He couldn’t join Mack and Ikoa before the TIEs would be on him.

“Ten, stay with the shuttle,” CC said. “We’ll handle these guys.”

The instruction came too late, and Quiver was too far out of position when he turned back toward the shuttle once more. Darin, Mackin and Ikoa fired for all they were worth, but the TIEs fired more and the shuttle was already too far gone. *Star Ray*’s engines were impacted by Imperial lasers. Panicked cries briefly filled the comm waves right before a massive explosion enveloped *Star Ray* when it was immediately off Darin’s port side and destroyed the shuttle.

The energy from the lethal fireball hurled his X-wing sideways, and the fighter was hit with a hailstorm of shrapnel. A piece of projected debris slammed into the port side of Darin’s canopy. Botch’s terrified squeal was drowned out by the sound of shattering transparisteel, and Darin felt himself getting showered with the shards exploding inward like a vicious, bloodthirsty

snowstorm. Many hit off his helmet and visor. Others rebounded in all directions in the enclosed area. All of this was accompanied by a sudden gust of frigid air inside his fighter, and the abrupt change in pressure made Darin's ears pop.

Instincts kicked into adrenaline-filled overdrive, and he desperately fought to get his snubfighter under control. No sooner had he done so than he heard another explosion outside.

The air howling into his cockpit was deafening and his ears were ringing, but he could still hear Pellicer's and Quiver's simultaneous and anxious shouts of "Six?!" on the comm.

"Six, eject! You hear me? Eject!" Pellicer continued. The only reply was a short burst of static.

Too much was happening too fast. Shaken, Darin barely caught sight of CC's X-wing, trailing smoke and spinning, heading groundward at a shallow angle to the north before it was lost under the cloud layer. It was on a course to hit the ground not far from the beacon on their scopes marking Chopper's location.

"Botch?" Darin yelled over the wind noise in his cockpit, desperate for any sort of anchor in the chaos. He turned up his headset's receiving volume and wheeled his starfighter away from what he thought was the engagement zone until he could get his bearings.

His R5-D4 beeped, a short, clipped noise that indicated the memory-intact droid was concerned for his pilot but busy with something more pressing.

"Nine?" Quiver said. Darin couldn't hear the second part.

"What?" Darin shouted into his mic.

"What? Nine? Blast, you okay? I'm with ya," Quiver called back. It was strange to hear Quiver so rattled. Normally Darin relied on him to be the confident, worry-free one.

"Ten, what happened?" Darin asked. "Six?"

"Nine, status!" Weas called. Apparently Darin and Quiver weren't the only ones feeling frazzled, and it took even more for it to happen to the XO.

"I- I- stand by," Darin said. His mind was blank. What was his status? Quiver was beside him. The dogfight had condensed; Mack, Ikoa, Pellicer, Weas and Slurry were engaged with the remaining five TIEs. The parts of Darin's face, neck and left arm that had been hit by the transparisteel fragments stung like crazy. He took half an instant to brush some of the shards off of his flight suit, and in doing so he noticed some larger transparisteel pieces had hit his flak vest, which had thankfully done its job and protected him. The freezing air howling into his cockpit made him shiver and his eyes water.

"Eight," Darin finally called, "I have no fighter life support. Aux only, unless my chestbox has been damaged." If the chestbox hose had been punctured by any of that transparisteel, he wouldn't be able to even make orbit. He'd have to land and check before he would trust his life to the emergency life support system.

A new voice entered the mix of transmissions. "*Starsmoke* to Corona Lead." *Starsmoke* was the only remaining Special Forces shuttle and was the one the Coronas had left back in the canyon. Darin could barely recognize Colonel Traineer as the speaker, and he struggled to hear what was being said while he went with Quiver to help his squadmates. Without *Star Ray*, the Coronas were the only targets left for the Imperials, and the Imps were taking full advantage of the damage they had dealt to the X-wings.

"Corona Lead here," Mackin answered on the tactical frequency. "We can't hold out. We've got some serious trouble."

"I can't contact *Star Ray*," Traineer said.

“We just lost *Star Ray*. Survivors unknown but unlikely. As soon as we can disengage, we need to withdraw. They’ve hit us too hard,” said Mack.

“You lost them?” The words were sharp, then there was an aggravated sigh. “Then that confirms we’d better get out. The Imperial forces here are much stronger than we anticipated. We’re temporarily aborting the mission. You and your pilots are to break off and head for Rally Point Delta in-system. Omega Signal. Acknowledge.”

“Omega Signal acknowledged,” Mackin answered to confirm the retreat order. The TIE in his sights danced, trying to throw off Mackin’s aim. “*Starsmoke*, I have three pilots down and one, maybe two who need a ride out. We’ll send you their locations and move the fighting away from them before we disengage. I need you to come retrieve them so we can leave.” He fired and missed.

Quiver took point, and he and Darin went after a TIE giving Weas and Slurry some problems.

“Negative, Corona Lead. I said get out. Our last recon team member inside the colony managed to get one more report through before we lost contact completely, and he said more Imperial forces are on the way. Cut your losses. We’re leaving and so are you. Everyone who can jump out needs to do so right now. The rest can go to ground and engage in E&E as required,” said Traineer.

Darin blinked at the words. Escape and evade with all these TIEs here? It would be impossible. And if CC or the others were hurt—

“*Starsmoke*,” Mackin said in a quiet but dangerous voice Darin knew meant business, “I need you to get my downed pilots out. We can’t carry extra people in our fighters, so we can’t do it. It’s too dangerous here. I’m not leaving without them.” The next laser salvo coming from Mackin’s fighter actually seemed angry. The TIE exploded, and Mackin twisted around, looking for the next threat.

It came over the comm frequency. “You’d better! For the last time, Commander, we are not flying into that firefight and we are not coming back that way, especially with more Imperials coming. We’re out of time. Again, cut your losses. This is an order. Get out of there now!”

A few incredulous, protesting voices were heard in the background inside *Starsmoke*, then one of those new ones spoke up on the comm. “Coronas, we’ll drop some supplies and weapons for you before—”

“Negative, Lieutenant!” Traineer snapped. “I won’t condone—” The frequency abruptly closed.

Even in the midst of the dogfight there was a momentary shocked silence, then the Coronas’ squadron frequency erupted with angry questions.

“What the hell was that?!”

“Is he just abandoning us here?!”

“We’re not leaving the others, are we?”

“Enough!” Mackin said, silencing them. “Listen up. My sensors show *Starsmoke* already well on her way to orbit. Looks like two of these TIEs just spotted her too. Seven, Eight, go cover our friends. Make sure they send help down for us ASAP if they won’t do it themselves, or transmit to *Crescent Star* or her fleet if you see them.”

Slurry and Weas acknowledged grimly and peeled off after *Starsmoke*.

The numerical odds had been turned to the Rebels’ favor now, but in exchange for considerable damage to the Coronas’ fighters as well as failing shields. The Coronas pressed on,

struggling to end this fight before the Imperials could take out any more of them. The unexpected sense of being alone against their enemies weighed on Darin, and the more the dogfight took out of him, the harder it was to shake off.

A short time later, Slurry and Weas returned just as Mackin and Ikoa shot down the last TIE Fighter. “Lead,” Weas reported, “*Star* is nowhere in sight and didn’t respond to our calls, and there’s a small Imperial fleet up there. Our sensor readings were still scrambled, but it looked like a Nebulon-B, a *Victory* Star Destroyer and maybe something else, like a Star Galleon or another ship. *Starsmoke* managed to hyper out, but we can’t be sure that the cruisers didn’t see us. There’s still interference from the solar storm, but they might be able to compensate for that.”

The comm picked up Mackin’s long breath. “Okay, we need to get our people, regroup, and then figure out what to do. Five can’t jump, Nine is iffy on reaching orbit, and we’ve got three more down on the surface. Eight, take Two Flight and go get Three and Six. One Flight, we’re getting Four. Meet at Rally Point Alpha.”

“Yes, sir,” Weas responded. Mackin, Ikoa and Pellicer joined up and turned southward to go after Kalre while Weas, Slurry, Darin and Quiver came together to head north and find Chopper and CC.

“Here’s the deal,” Weas told his flight on the way. “I’ll land by Three and help him out. Nine and Ten, help Six. Seven, fly cover. All of you, think of ways to get them from here to the rendezvous point.”

“Yes, sir,” came the chorus of acknowledgments.

As they split slightly and headed to their respective destinations, Darin switched to his private frequency with Quiver and said, “Looking back, I think your nerf steak mission was safer, Ten.”

“What?” Quiver said loudly. “Can’t hear you! Too windy on your transmission.”

“Never mind!” Darin yelled into his mic. He’d tell him later.

Chapter Four

Quiver and Darin landed near CC's smoldering wreck in the sparsely wooded hills. They yanked off their helmets and flight gloves, unbuckled their seat restraints and jumped out of their cockpits, landing hard on the ground from the height. Each shouted an order back to his astromech to secure the X-wing for them, and then they sprinted across the small field to CC's fighter. Quiver silently prayed they weren't too late.

The scene before them was horrible. CC's X-wing was now nothing but a long line of wreckage strewn about from the first place the snubfighter had hit the ground a short distance away. The largest piece consisted of one S-foil, one engine and a large part of the fuselage, including the cockpit. It was almost completely upside-down, and the nose had dug itself partway into the ground, leaving a short furrow in its wake. Gases hissed and streamed out of various punctures in the wreckage like the fighter was a mortally wounded animal on the defensive. CC's R2 unit Ruby wasn't even visible, and with the X-wing positioned that way, the droid was most likely crushed underneath beyond any hope of repair. CC hadn't ejected: Quiver could see her inside the shattered, crumpled cockpit, strapped to her upside-down seat and not moving.

The bent and twisted metal of the cockpit's canopy had been driven partially into the solid ground, and it refused to cooperate as the two wingmates tried desperately to pry it apart. After a couple frantic minutes of pulling and pushing and digging away at the dirt underneath, they finally cracked it open a little bit. Quiver got down on his back, and with difficulty the lanky pilot squeezed partway inside to check CC's condition.

"Darin, she's in really bad shape!" he called in a panic. "Alive, but unconscious and blood everywhere. Bad head wound and barely a pulse. We've got to get her out!"

"I'll run back to my X-wing and find something to cut the canopy with. Hold—" Darin's combadge chirped, interrupting him, and then a series of urgent-sounding beeps and whistles from Botch sounded over it. As Darin stood and jogged away, he hit his combadge and asked, "Botch, what—"

Quiver couldn't hear any more of the conversation and put it out of his mind. Let Darin handle it. He was too worried about CC.

Quiver took off CC's helmet as gently as he could, and then part of his right sleeve became a casualty as he tore it off and with shaking hands tried to make it into a bandage for the nasty wound on her temple. He had little medical training, but even he could tell CC was in serious trouble. The sight and the thought of her condition made him feel sick. The impact had been bad enough to even damage her helmet and shatter her visor.

"CC?" he asked in a frightened voice. "Can you hear me?" Quiver's voice started wavering and hitting embarrassing octaves that CC would never let him live down, and he only partially succeeded at forcing it under control as he pleaded, "You need to stay with me! We have to play that prank on Darin we were planning, remember? We'll get you out of here. Please don't— You have to be—"

He was cut off when Darin shouted fearfully, "Quiver! Get out! Hurry!" Darin pulled hard on one of Quiver's legs, but Quiver was wedged in the small space.

"Ow!" Quiver yelled. He didn't have time for this. "Darin, I'm trying to bandage this! Just go—"

"Ten, Seven's down and there's a TIE right on top of us! Get out!" Darin pulled again.

Quiver reacted that time. Feeling the color drain from his face, he worked his way out of the inverted cockpit as fast as he could. Darin grabbed his arm to haul him to his feet, and about twenty meters away the ground exploded from a TIE Fighter's laser blast. The Rebels ducked and flattened themselves against the hull of CC's fighter while the TIE flew low overhead from behind them and began a slow turn to come back around. The early morning light, though muted by the overcast sky, illuminated the TIE.

The Rebels were now exposed between the TIE and CC's fuselage, so they ran behind a piece of wreckage a few steps away that was large enough to shield both of them from the eyeball when it turned. It looked like a piece of an S-foil stuck in the ground, and while it realistically wouldn't protect them from a TIE's lasers, the psychological aspect of having some sort of cover was at least a little comforting.

Darin hit his combadge but only got static from a jammer. The two of them held their breaths as the TIE approached again at treetop height. They flinched when it fired a lazy shot well short of them that hit the ground almost in the same place as the first one. Then the starfighter was past them with an overwhelming shriek from its engines and a gust of chilly, damp wind, and it continued its figure-eight maneuver. The two Rebels moved the few steps back to again be better protected by the hull of CC's fighter.

Quiver anxiously watched the Imperial starfighter while it turned to come overhead again. "It's trying to pin us here," he said.

"And it's doing a damn good job at it, too," Darin replied. "There's no way we can make it to our fighters and launch. If we try, I'm sure it'll stop just pinning us down."

Quiver didn't want to acknowledge the truth in Darin's words. He swore loudly, and the strain in his voice was evident. "CC's going to bleed to death in there!" Quiver's last words were almost drowned out by another laser blast from the TIE hitting the same spot on the ground. The pilots ducked behind the smaller cover again, and once the TIE was past them Quiver began climbing to his feet. "I'm going for my fighter."

Darin immediately reached up and grabbed Quiver's flak vest, then yanked him back down to the ground. "Ten, no! You won't make it!"

"We have to do *something!*" Quiver retorted.

"I know, but—" Before Darin could finish his sentence, they noticed that the TIE was spiraling up high into the sky, straight above them, and then it disappeared into the clouds. This was the best chance they'd likely ever get, and Quiver was desperate. Even Darin seemed to recognize that, since he let go of Quiver's flak vest and scrambled to his feet along with him.

"You launch and go after the TIE," Quiver said, looking up where the Imperial starfighter had vanished. "I'll get C—"

He was cut off when Darin grabbed him again and shoved him hard to the ground behind their small piece of cover. Darin threw himself down as well and landed half on Quiver. Laser bolts from handheld blasters came in at them, flying through the air they had just occupied.

Darin pushed himself to a crouching position. His eyes were wide, and he was breathing hard and fumbling for his blaster. Countless blaster bolts rained in, peppering the front of their small cover and CC's hull behind them.

Breathless, Quiver picked himself up and moved beside him. Quiver pulled his blaster out as well, but Darin only grimaced when he saw it. "Please, let this be the day you actually hit something with that," Darin whispered.

“I can use it just fine,” Quiver replied curtly. To prove the point, he stole a glance over the wreckage they were using as cover and fired off some wild shots before ducking back down. “Imperial biker scouts,” he reported, even though he knew Darin had already seen them. “With speeder bikes, but stopped now. Too many.”

“Hit any?”

“Next time.”

Darin threw him a brief, helpless look that suggested he was still trying to figure out how his wingman could be such a good shot in his fighter but so horrible with a blaster. Thumper awkwardly leaned out from the left side of their cover, fired a couple of shots and pulled back when a fresh Imperial barrage came their way. “I think I hit one in the leg. They’re on foot and using the bikes as cover. They’re advancing on us quick. We don’t have much time.”

Quiver gritted his teeth and leaned out as little as possible past the opposite side of the wreckage, shooting so much that it looked like he was trying to lay down his own suppression fire. Maybe he could make a break for his fighter...

A shot, most likely from Darin’s blaster, hit a biker scout in his chest armor, and he went down.

A second later, Quiver yelped in pain and jerked back behind their cover. Darin pulled back as well. Quiver gripped his lower right arm near his elbow where part of what remained of his sleeve was blackened and burned away. There was also a nasty burn from a blaster graze on the skin beneath.

“You okay?” Darin asked anxiously.

Quiver didn’t answer. Instead he resolutely gripped his blaster even harder in his right hand and shifted his weight to start firing again. His arm was killing him, but they were fast running out of time and options.

Darin also turned to shoot again, but before either of them could do so a voice directly behind them made Quiver’s heart skip a beat. “Freeze, Rebel scum. Drop the blasters. Hands on your heads.”

Both of them froze. Chancing a quick look over his shoulder, Quiver saw that two biker scouts had circled around behind them and were on top of the hull of CC’s X-wing while also using it as very effective cover. From there, they were aiming their blaster pistols directly down at the two pilots. There was nothing between the Imperials and Rebels to stop a blaster bolt, and at point-blank range the biker scouts wouldn’t miss. Quiver’s heart sank even as it hammered in his chest, and he slowly laid his blaster on the ground and put his hands on his head. Darin did the same. Neither dared to move enough to even turn around and face the two scouts.

The Imperials they had been shooting at emerged from the other side of the Coronas’ small piece of cover and kept blasters trained on them. One biker scout limped up and took the Rebels’ blasters, and another two roughly and warily patted the pilots down and took the combadges from their left sleeves as well as their flare belts and data recording rods. Then they bound the Rebels’ wrists in front of them, grabbed the pilots’ collars and hauled them to their feet at blasterpoint. “Come on. Move,” ordered one.

Quiver and Darin exchanged a frightened look as they were pushed about fifteen steps away from CC’s wreckage. Three biker scouts guarded them and the other two from the firefight were walking toward the nearest speeder bikes, possibly to secure the perimeter or provide high-speed backup if needed. Astride a stationary 74-Z speeder bike was a scout who was holding his helmet and his blackened armor chestplate. He was putting a bacta patch on his chest, but his

injury didn't appear to be life-threatening or even likely to slow him down much. Finally, there was one scout crouching beside CC's cockpit and peering inside at her, and another scout approaching him.

The two prisoners were thrown down onto their knees very close together with Quiver directly behind Darin. From there they anxiously watched the biker scouts next to CC's cockpit. The one that had been looking at her stood up to face the newcomer.

Quiver tensed and asked, "What's he doing?"

"Shut up!" one of the guards said harshly. Like the others, he was well out of reach. "No talking."

Agitated, Quiver shifted his weight from knee to knee. He looked around, trying to keep the action subtle, and desperately attempted to map out a strategy in his head. How could they get out of this? Where were the greatest threats? How could they deal with them? How could they rescue CC?

No matter how much he tried to concentrate, though, his mental wheels kept spinning and could never gain traction. The questions were words with no meaning. The only thing that was truly sinking in was the urgent need to do something. Anything. Even if he had no strategy, no plan. Anything was better than nothing.

Darin stole a glance back at him, looking scared. Quiver didn't blame him. Darin also looked worried, and Quiver knew he knew what Quiver was thinking. True, they probably wouldn't survive more than twenty seconds after jumping the guards, but Quiver couldn't just sit there and do nothing. There was a chance they could make it. It was a small one, but it existed.

The activity beside CC's cockpit caught Quiver's attention again. The Rebel strained to hear what was being said over there between the two scouts, but they must have been using internal communications because Quiver couldn't hear anything despite their relative proximity. He concentrated instead on the visuals. The Imperial who had looked at CC shook his head and pointed to his left temple where CC had been badly injured. There was a pause, and then he shook his head again. He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness or uncertainty, and he firmly shook his head a final time.

The biker scout with whom he was speaking simply nodded and knelt down as if to look inside at the injured pilot. In one smooth motion, he pulled out his blaster pistol, stuck it inside the cockpit, aimed directly at CC and fired a few point-blank shots.

"*Aaah!*" Quiver and Darin cried out and jerked back violently in horror and shock.

Blood rushed to Quiver's head and drowned out most of his hearing. Everything slowed to a crawl and became part of some detached, alternate reality, something Quiver was watching unfold from light-years away on a holoprojector.

Over the pounding in his ears he thought he heard Darin yell something, but the words were garbled, muddled. The slow-motion view of what wasn't really happening showed him Darin jumping to his feet and running toward the shooter.

Time and reality came crashing back. Quiver sharply inhaled a gasp of cold air into lungs that had been forgotten. He started and blinked, feeling himself returning to the present. The ringing in his ears dissipated.

Three meters ahead of him and half on the ground was Darin, who was subdued by one of the guards in a submission hold but was futilely struggling to get free. "You- you-" Darin spat a string of curses at the Imperials, worse ones than Quiver had realized he knew. "I swear I'll kill you!"

Darin gave a short cry when his guard applied noticeably more pressure to restrain him, and he tried to jerk away. When it was obvious he wasn't going anywhere and couldn't do anything, the Imperial who had shot CC stepped up to Darin and said, "I wouldn't count on it. In fact, keep that up and you'll be two out of three very soon. Just give me an excuse."

The young pilot tried to fight again, but after another yelp he began to yield to his guard.

The biker scout before him holstered his blaster and said dismissively, "You should thank us. We did her a favor."

Darin struggled a little more at that and swore incoherently for another few seconds, but the Imperial ignored him. He moved well out of range of the prisoners, looked at his group and said, "This area's clear. Let's go. Move them away."

Quiver felt a blaster poking into his back right before he was grabbed and pulled to his feet. It snapped him out of his immobility. "Don't even think about trying anything stupid, scum," the guard told him menacingly. "You'll regret it if you do."

Quiver complied in a daze and worriedly watched his wingman. Two biker scouts had gotten him to his feet as well, and they were obviously ready for trouble. Both pilots were forced away from the wreckage, but Darin resisted, both physically and vocally. He received a hard shove from a guard and a command to be quiet. Two other scouts seemed to be staying behind.

All the voices seemed distant to Quiver. He felt faint and was having trouble breathing. He numbly stumbled along, unable to escape the horrible scene that kept replaying itself in his mind. He could see the flash of the blaster inside her cockpit, hear the whine of the TIE Fighter that started this nightmare here...

With a start, Quiver realized that he actually *was* hearing a TIE Fighter. He looked back and saw the TIE diving straight at CC's crash site. He stopped dead in his tracks, and his throat tightened even more.

Beside him, Darin had stopped and was watching wide-eyed as well. "No," Darin breathed. Quiver hardly even realized it when he and Darin started fighting to get back to CC's X-wing, though there was absolutely nothing they could do at that point.

Just before it leveled off, the TIE opened up with its lasers. It hit the remaining fusial engine on what was left of CC's X-wing, and the sight was enough to paralyze the two Coronas in the midst of their struggles. They squeezed their eyes shut not even an instant later as her fighter immediately blossomed into a miniature sun that proclaimed its combined birth and death with a deafening noise. The light died away almost as quickly as it had come into being, and a wave of dissipating heat washed over the group, though they were too far away to feel more warmth than that made by a springtime sunbeam.

A few long seconds later, the Rebels pried their eyes open and saw only emptiness where CC's fighter had been. The two friends stood there and stared, silently watching as debris rained down after being launched by the blast. A large piece fell on Quiver's stationary X-wing and looked like it hit one of the upper engines.

There was a void in Quiver's stomach as big as the crater marking where CC and her fighter had once existed. Everything felt unreal, part of a horrible, horrible dream. All at once the galaxy seemed a cold, bleak, hopeless place.

Something covered his eyes and plunged his whole world into darkness.

Chapter Five

Darin tried yet again to get the blindfold off despite the fact that nothing in his situation had changed since the last futile attempt. His bound hands were still restrained on his lap, and from what he could tell from his pulling and limited movements, they were somehow connected to his ejection harness. His ejection harness itself was being used to keep him haphazardly yet effectively strapped down while sitting backwards on a speeder bike. Darin wasn't sure how the Imperials had done that, but he'd felt them grabbing and tying parts of it to secure him. He wasn't going anywhere.

But even if he could get off or fight against the biker scout controlling the speeder bike, would he? Darin's best guess was that the bike was going fast but probably not full throttle, and he had no idea where they were going or what was below them, or even how far below them it was. Even from a slow-moving speeder bike, he was too afraid to literally make a blind leap, though a large part of him was equally afraid of wherever the Imperials had decided to take him. He figured Quiver was on another bike, but Darin wasn't certain about that either. His own initial strugling had covered the sounds of what had been happening with his wingman.

It wasn't too long before the speeder bike descended, slowed and stopped. Darin strained to hear anything that could give him a clue of where he was, but his hearing had felt muffled ever since CC's fighter exploded, and the speeder bike's repulsorlift whine didn't help. It felt like they had stopped outside due to the cool, damp air, though the lack of direct sunlight made the determination difficult. He no longer had any sense of direction or distance either.

Darin felt the Imperial who'd been flying the speeder bike partially turn around in his seat, and then the tip of a blaster was jabbed into Darin's spine. His heart thudded. "Keep still," the biker scout ordered.

Darin did so. He felt them doing something to his ejection straps again, and then the pressure from them on his legs was gone, and his cuffed hands were no longer held down. The blaster was pressed harder into his back: they obviously hadn't forgotten the last few minutes. Darin knew he never would.

"Ten?" he ventured, unintentionally loudly. He desperately needed to know if Quiver was with him or if he was alone.

"Quiet!" the Imperial commanded. The word coincided with someone roughly grabbing Darin's upper arms. Darin flinched, and then he was half lifted, half shoved off of the speeder bike and dropped into the unknown.

Darin had only an instant to panic before his feet hit soil. Off-balance, he fell to the ground and immediately rolled onto his side, sat up and began pulling at his blindfold. He dimly heard something else hit the ground directly to his left.

He and Quiver got their blindfolds off at about the same time and noticed each other at once. Darin didn't expect to see what was sitting on his right, though: Chopper and Weas. Their hands were likewise cuffed in front of them with wrist binders. Darin felt a wave of despair at seeing them captured as well, and more flutters of fear found footholds through the remnants of his anger, grief and adrenaline. Every passing minute showed him a new example of how physically resisting the Imperials was impossible. All hope of escape was eroding away, and he was scared to death of being the Imperials' prisoner.

Weas's X-wing was sitting serenely off to the side, under Imperial guard. The pilots all sat on a wooded hillside and were ringed by numerous biker scouts, some of whom were

conferring and some of whom were guarding the Rebels. Contemptuous remarks were muttered in the Rebels' direction. Darin edged a little closer to his squadmates.

The two lieutenants also didn't look too happy at seeing the newly arrived pair, and the Rebels scrutinized each other in concern. Weas didn't look injured. Chopper's left leg was awkwardly sticking straight out in front of him, and he looked like he was trying to keep every bit of weight off of it. There was also blood all over half of his windburned face; he must have had a rough time landing after ejecting. The parts of Darin's face and neck that hadn't been protected by his helmet and visor were littered with cuts from the broken pieces of his canopy window, and his left arm had some larger cuts from the same source. Aside from Chopper, Quiver probably looked the worst. He had a large burn on his right arm and blood on his hands, his face and the top of his flight suit from when he was trying to bandage CC.

CC... Damn it all...

"You hurt, Ten?" Weas quietly asked.

His first answer was a sharp kick from the nearest guard. "No talking!" the Imperial commanded.

The other three pilots tensed, but that one blow was all that came, and Weas looked to be all right. Once Weas collected himself again, he looked at Quiver and raised an expectant eyebrow.

After thinking more about the blood on Quiver, Darin paled, bit his bottom lip hard and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to mercifully blank his mind. When he chanced a look, he saw Quiver staring at the blood on his hands and clothing. The lanky pilot was shaking and not breathing well, and he looked like he was going to be sick. Finally Quiver started blinking hard, then he furiously wiped at his eyes, turned away from the others, brought his knees up to his chest and awkwardly buried his face in his bound arms.

Weas and Chopper aimed confused looks at Darin, but Darin wouldn't meet their eyes. He guessed that Quiver's behavior combined with his own averted, disconsolate gaze and colorless face tipped off Weas because in his peripheral vision Darin saw the horrified understanding, or at least the suspicion, dawn on the lieutenant. Weas knew they had gone to help CC, and she wasn't there with them now. Chopper still looked puzzled.

Quiver didn't move from his position and Darin wouldn't look the others in the eye for the entire time they sat there, but before long, activity began to increase around them. The biker scout leader announced that he called for a transport from the colony to come pick them all up, then he pointed out a relatively flat clearing half a klick away where the transport could more easily land. Darin nervously anticipated the Imperials blindfolding and strapping them to speeder bikes again, but while most of the Imperials mounted speeder bikes, the ones on foot who were guarding the Rebels forced them to their feet and started herding them toward the field. The scouts on the bikes took up perimeter positions around the group of prisoners and their guards. A couple stayed behind with the X-wing.

The distance wasn't far, but the going was slow because Chopper was only hobbling along and leaning heavily on Weas for balance and support. The handcuffs made it hard for Chopper to hold onto the other pilot, and it made them a strange sight to look at: Chopper was resting a lot of his weight on Weas by draping his left arm over Weas's right shoulder. Weas was steadying him by holding onto Chopper's left wrist near the binders as well as he could with one hand. Darin and Quiver followed directly behind.

Darin's hearing was recovering, and one time he thought he heard a muffled beep coming from the direction of the lieutenants. Both Weas and Chopper looked side to side furtively like they were expecting to be caught, but none of the guards had seemed to hear the small sound through their helmets. Darin couldn't figure out what was happening until he saw Weas's finger tapping almost imperceptibly on a combadge cupped and hidden in Chopper's hand. Darin felt a glimmer of hope. Either that TIE had held the jammer or the Imperials had decided they didn't need it anymore and turned it off. They also must have missed Chopper's combadge or one of the two had hidden it before they were caught.

They were about halfway to the field and still in the hills when a considerably louder beep sounded. Weas flinched just a little, hurriedly shut off the combadge, took it from Chopper and moved his own hands away, but this time the guard nearest them heard the electronic noise.

"What was that?" the Imperial demanded. He called for everyone to stop and threateningly moved in front of Weas and Chopper.

Chopper hopped left as if off balance from his injury, and when he stopped against Weas he casually shifted his weight left and in front of Weas's lowered arms. Darin saw Weas sneaking the combadge into his hip pocket, and Darin likewise subtly shifted his weight sideways to block the view of the guards behind them. They would see it if he tried to take the combadge himself.

Weas looked so calm and unruffled that he could have been filling out a maintenance log for all Darin knew, but he'd always had trouble reading the XO. Snubber simply replied, "My elbow hit a button on my chestbox. That's all."

The biker scout regarded Weas and said in a cool voice, "Do it again."

Weas obligingly moved his arm and hit it against his chestbox. At the same time he made a noise in the back of his throat, something approximating the beep from earlier.

The biker scout wasn't fooled. He pulled Weas away from Chopper, who almost truly lost his balance and had to hop backwards to hold onto Darin for support instead. Then the Imperial patted Weas down and stopped when he came to the pilot's pocket. "He's got a combadge!" he yelled over his external speaker. "What *idiot* didn't confiscate this?!" He inspected it with a cursory glance and then continued searching Weas.

No one admitted the mistake. The group's leader, the biker scout who had killed CC, spoke up a minute later over his external speakers. "Command didn't detect any transmissions in our area just now from it, but they'll send a TIE escort along with the transport to be on the safe side. But really, who are they going to call for help when our forces have already caught up to the rest of their squadmates?" His voice turned smug as he regarded the four Coronas. "There's no one left to rescue you."

Darin's sputtering glimmer of hope was buried in an avalanche of lightheaded, nauseous misery. All the others? Captured? Killed?

The fuming guard searched the other three pilots as well, and when he found one more combadge hidden inside Chopper's boot he turned to the group's leader. "Sarge, this isn't worth it. *They're* not worth it." He jabbed a finger at the Rebels. "We're just asking for trouble here. At best these damn prisoners are a drain on resources, and at worst they'll have some other trick that could injure or kill us. If the others are caught or taken care of, does Command really need these four too? Can't we minimize the trouble?"

The biker scout sergeant held up a hand and silence followed.

Weas's unruffled expression lost some of its composure. "Wait, you can't—"

“Shut up, scum. We’ll do what we want,” the guard snapped.

A minute later, the leader addressed the group again. “Command wants them all for various purposes,” he said. “We’ll choose one to take back for questioning, and we’ll keep another to make that first one cooperate and talk. The third will also be brought back with us, and tomorrow he will be used to set an example for the colony, showing them exactly what happens to Rebels and their sympathizers. That will be done live and in public, and to warm everyone up for it we’ll be executing the fourth one now, recording it and then broadcasting it in the colony. It’ll be beneficial for the colonists to see their supposed saviors powerless and helpless. We’ll use the stun settings on the Rebels’ blasters to knock out the first three. If they resist or cause trouble, we are authorized to shoot to kill. Although Command wants them, they won’t put us in undue danger, especially since these Rebels won’t be alive much longer anyway. They’re only useful for so long.”

Darin hadn’t thought that things could get any worse that morning, but he’d just been proven wrong. He went white at hearing the news regarding their fates and reflexively took a fearful step back, only to be grabbed by a guard. He simultaneously tried to fight both his panic and the Imperial, and in turn he was held in place much more securely. Chopper was pulled away from him, and the other pilots also struggled and were restrained. Weas’s desperate protests of the Imperials’ decision were falling on deaf ears.

The sergeant turned to study the group of prisoners, and another biker scout checked each pilot’s rank insignia plate under his flak vest. Darin and Quiver, the two flight officers, were quickly dismissed, but Lt. Forsgren and Lt. Weas were both pointed out. The sergeant seemed to look at Chopper’s injuries, and then he shook his head and pointed at Weas. “You’re the lucky one who’ll get to meet our interrogator.”

Weas was pulled a few more steps away from his squadmates. Completely ignoring the brown-haired pilot’s struggles and loud protests, the sergeant said to another biker scout, “TB-793, unpack the recording and transmitting equipment from your bike and set it up for the big event. Now,” he continued casually, turning back to the remaining three Coronas, “two of you will accompany your friend back with us to the colony, and the last will get to smile pretty for the transmitter. So which of you wants to be our holo star? How about...” He waved in Quiver’s direction. “You.”

Darin inhaled sharply while his blood ran cold. “No!” he yelled. “Don’t!” He had to stop them. A surge of panic and adrenaline fueled his redoubled efforts to get away from his guard, and it felt like he was getting close to breaking free.

Darin actually seemed more upset than Quiver did. In a shaky voice Quiver yelled at him, “Damn it, Darin, stop!”

He barely heard Quiver and hardly heard Weas’s and Chopper’s urgent calls of, “Nine! Ten!” Darin was too focused on getting to his wingman. Half an instant later, Darin was snapped out of it when his legs were kicked out from under him and he landed heavily on his knees. Before he could recover Darin was shoved face-first to the ground. He still fought for another second or two until his guard solidly pinned him down with a sharp knee and a hold on the base of his neck, and Darin felt a blaster put to his head. He froze.

“You have a problem with our choice, little Rebel?” the sergeant mockingly said to Darin. “Fine, we can change it. I was hoping to give you some payback first for trying to get at me and threatening me after we first caught you, but you’re proving to be more trouble than you’re worth. So if you’re that concerned about your little friend here, you can take his place.”

Now Quiver was the one starting to frantically yell and resist, at least until the sergeant turned up the volume on his external speakers and said to Darin's guard, "If he or any of the others so much as *blinks* before the transmitter is set up, shoot him."

Darin would have swallowed hard if his mouth hadn't gone completely dry. The back of his mind wished the biker scout would get off of him so he wasn't lying on his chestbox: his ribs didn't appreciate it. There were considerably fewer sounds of scuffling from the other pilots due to the threat.

"That's better," the sergeant said. "TB-855, bring one of the Rebels' blasters here. Looks like we'll have to stun the other three now. It's getting too dangerous." He directed his voice at Darin. "As for you, if you believe in an afterlife you'd best make amends for your despicable life quickly."

Some blades of grass, which were still damp from dew or the early morning rain and were completely oblivious to Darin's situation, were tickling his nose like they were trying to get him to giggle or sneeze. Irrationally upset at the grass and just plain overwhelmed, the pilot squeezed his eyes shut and silently cursed this planet, the planet where CC had died and where he and the others were going to die as well.

Darin's heart and lungs were racing each other, and then his mind decided to join in the competition too. His thoughts tripped over themselves in their haste to be articulated. Darin had had some close calls in his time as a fighter pilot, and while he had previously believed that he'd come to terms with his mortality as a result of that career, he discovered now that he'd been wrong. It was one thing to look back and realize that he *could* have died in a particular part of a dogfight, and it was quite another to look ahead and realize that he was *going* to die and couldn't prevent it. The fresh memory of CC's death also coldly and bluntly reminded him that none of them were invincible, and none of them were blaster-proof.

Thumper squeezed his eyes shut harder. He'd lose it if he opened them and looked at his squadmates. His whole life was going to be wasted just so he could be a propaganda tool for the Imperials. His one and only consolation was that at least it wouldn't be Quiver or any of the others just yet. But what if they didn't—

A sonic boom sounded, startling him. Suddenly there were nearby thuds of impacts, and the air was instantly filled with the sounds of shouts and running and chaos. Darin opened his eyes just in time to see a huge red laser hitting the ground about ten meters away and sending dirt flying everywhere. The smell of smoke and burnt vegetation hit him immediately after. It was an eerie recreation of the TIE's initial attacks at CC's crash site.

The welcome yet deafening engine noise of an X-wing roared low overhead with a tremendous gust of wind following in its wake as it passed. It was out of Darin's field of view, but it sounded like it turned to come back around.

Handheld blaster bolts shrieked through the air right above Darin. The blaster was taken away from his head and more shots sounded, followed by some that came extremely close, and then the weight keeping him down was falling to the side.

And then Quiver was there, grabbing him and hauling him up. Darin stumbled to his feet, and the two of them scrambled over to where Chopper and Weas were lying flat on the ground for protection from the firefight around them and covering themselves and the two flight officers with biker scout blaster pistols. That pair looked a whole lot calmer and more collected than Darin felt. Around them their guards lay on the ground, either dead or unconscious.

The rest of the biker scouts were mostly occupied with the wobbly snubfighter flying overhead. The Imperials scattered to escape the X-wing and find whatever cover they could among the trees, and a few brave or foolhardy souls fired at the X-wing with their speeder bikes and got fired at in return. Some Imperial casualties were strewn around the area.

As soon as they were all together, the Rebels began crawling away at the best speed Chopper could manage with his broken leg. They stopped and flattened themselves again when one of those brave or foolhardy scout troopers sped by on a bike, not much more than five meters away. The X-wing fired once at it; the laser missed the vehicle and rider but hit the ground almost directly beneath it. It launched the speeder bike into the air on a geyser of dirt. The scout trooper was thrown off, and he landed, unmoving, on his back a short distance away. The speeder bike fell, and its repulsor field caught it before it impacted the ground. Its engine coughed and sputtered but did not cut out, and without input the bike floated there, stationary and pacified.

What started out as an angry mutter from Weas about their squadmate firing so close to them became an amazed whisper at their potential luck, and his mouth quirked into a small smile. He scoped out the firefight around them, and then he turned to the others with a gleam in his eye that seemed out of place for the strict officer. "To the bike! Hurry!"

Darin and Quiver obeyed and pulled Chopper up as fast as they could. There didn't seem to be any Imperials in the immediate vicinity who noticed them; the X-wing still held their undivided attention.

Weas reached the liberated speeder bike before the others, and he jumped on as far forward as possible and quickly checked the controls while Chopper hurriedly hopped over with Quiver and Darin assisting. Weas didn't waste time. "Listen up! Because of these damn handcuffs we need everyone. I'll take the right steering lever. Nine, sit behind me, you've got the left steering lever. Ten, behind him, speed and brake pedals. Three, in back, you cover us with the blaster. Ten, hold onto him. Let's go!"

In any other situation, Darin would have stared at his XO incredulously. If he was feeling exceptionally brave he might have even asked how something that crazy was supposed to work. But in this situation he never hesitated. In the midst of Weas's urgent demands for haste, Darin and Quiver lifted a backwards-facing Chopper onto the rear of the speeder bike, and then they climbed on with difficulty between the lieutenants. They were squeezed together and even then they barely all fit, and the speeder bike sank considerably under their weight.

Darin reached forward around Weas and grabbed the left steering lever in a manacled hand. To put it mildly, this was going to be hard.

Luckily they got going before Darin had a chance to think about it too much. "Hold on!" Weas said. "Go, Ten!" Quiver pressed the pedals to accelerate, and the speeder bike jumped forward with a labored jolt. The four orange-clad pilots on the loud speeder bike had now attracted the attention of more than one Imperial. Multiple blaster bolts flew at them.

Weas brought the bike around in a clumsy turn and fled the engagement. The bike had been damaged by the X-wing; between that and the weight overload they weren't going faster than two-thirds maximum speed even at full throttle, but it was still much faster than if they were running on foot.

And it was still more than fast enough to send waves of terror rippling through the Coronas as they tried to steer it out of the firefight.

"Left, left! Straighten out! No, too much! Brake! Okay, let go! To the right now! Now left! No brakes, no brakes! Wait, brake!" Weas frantically acted as the control coordinator, and

the speeder bike jerked around the Imperials and obstacles in their way, jostling the pilots onboard. Even their straightaways weren't exactly "straight": the speeder bike wove and wobbled like all four of its operators were drunk. There was nothing smooth or graceful about the bike's flight by any stretch of the imagination, and Darin could hear and feel the bike's protests when they accidentally gave it conflicting commands, but they were getting away. No one said it had to be pretty.

By the time they crested the first hill and left the scouts on foot behind, the Coronas were getting the hang of the controls and were better anticipating each other's actions. The turns to avoid trees were more coordinated, and the straight stretches had a smaller amplitude of oscillation.

However, two urgent sentences from Chopper interrupted Darin's concentration and almost made their tenuous control disappear. "Another bike coming up fast behind! He's firing!"

There was no way they could outrun the Imperial. "Hard right!" Weas jerked the bike to the right as he said it, Darin released all leftward steering pressure as quickly and as smoothly as he could, and Quiver applied differential braking to help them turn even more sharply. Chopper fired some shots behind them.

The X-wing appeared in the sky, looping around from the side. When it was ahead of them it turned toward them, positioning itself for a head-to-head run with the underclass biker scout after the Coronas would pass by underneath. But the Coronas' bike was still in front of the X-wing and dangerously close to the starfighter's line of fire.

In the middle of an evasive "hard left," a laser blast from the Imperial bike hit the very front of the Coronas' bike and disintegrated two of the directional steering vanes. Quiver must have instinctively hit the brakes because the speeder bike slowed abruptly right before the steering was lost. The bike skewed in a longitudinal turn, out of control, and it felt like the nose of the bike hit something. The pilots were pitched off with startled cries and hit the ground hard. The bike flipped through the air above them and crashed a few meters beyond.

Slowly getting his bearings and his wind after the spill, Darin heard two sounds converging on them: the X-wing from ahead and the biker scout from behind. Then the biker scout peeled off and went back the way he had come as fast as he could. The X-wing fired a warning shot well behind the Imperial to discourage any thoughts he had about turning around, and then the X-wing circled back to the Coronas lying on the ground.

The snubfighter locked its S-foils into cruise configuration and landed beside the escapees. They painfully pushed themselves to their feet and helped Chopper up while he spewed harsh Rodian curses that Kalre had taught him. From the cockpit, Ikoa urgently waved them forward. They began to hurry toward her X-wing but stopped short: how were they supposed to escape with her?

Then Weas jerked his head and pulled Chopper over to the snubfighter's front landing gear. He sat Chopper on the landing skid and made him hold onto the strut. Weas himself ducked below the X-wing's nose above him and stood precariously on the other half of the skid, wrapped a leg and his bound arms around it as well as he could for balance, and grabbed onto Chopper to help keep him put.

That was the XO's second crazy and suicidal proposal in almost as many minutes, but Darin didn't have a better idea. He and Quiver each ran to a main landing gear strut and sat on the skids. Even while sitting, Darin and especially Quiver had to duck down as there was very

little room below the engine housing. They held onto the struts as well as their handcuffed wrists would allow.

As soon as they all confirmed they were ready, Weas yelled above the wind caused by the idling repulsorlifts and engines up to the astromech, “Rudder, go! And whatever you do, keep the gear down!”

Rudder, Ikoa’s R2 unit, beeped and quickly relayed the message to his pilot. Ikoa gritted her teeth when she read it and realized what her squadmates were doing. She lifted up as gingerly as she could and moved forward slowly at first. Then she gradually picked up some speed as she became more comfortable with trying to fly low to the hilly ground while babying a nose-heavy snubfighter with a broken stabilizer.

Chapter Six

Darin couldn't remember ever getting motion-sick before, but the wavy, unsteady motions of the X-wing to which he was much too tenuously secured were determined to change that. The wobbling, combined with such things as the sight of the ground speeding by mere meters below him, the stinging cuts on his arm and face, the headache he was getting from the engine noise and wind, and the acidic residue in his stomach from the intensity and turmoil of the morning left him feeling pretty rotten.

The roar from the engine directly above his head consumed every other sound, and he decided that he didn't like the view very much either. He couldn't do anything about the noise, but it wasn't long before Darin shut his eyes to block out the wind and the rest of the galaxy while he attempted to hold on more tightly. He tried his hardest to forget, or at least not think about, everything that had happened.

What seemed like a very long time later, the snubfighter slowed. Darin pried his eyes open and saw that they were flying low over some treetops. The X-wing abruptly sideslipped a few more times like it had been doing, prompting Darin to close his eyes again and bite his bottom lip. He swore his heart would explode since it seemed like it hadn't stopped hammering since he'd first lifted off from the canyon early that morning.

Finally the X-wing hovered over a very small clearing in a forest, and Ikoa descended very cautiously beside two X-wings covered with their camouflage netting. At long last the escaped pilots felt the ground beneath them again, and Darin shakily exhaled in relief while the fighter powered down and the canopy opened with a hydraulic hiss. Mackin, Slurry, Kalre and Pellicer were walking over. Kalre was cradling his right wrist. The sight of them made Darin feel a hundred times better, and his worries about their fates evaporated.

After unwinding his legs from around the strut, Darin lay on the grass and rolled out from under the X-wing. As soon as there was murky sky above him again he stopped, wearily shut his eyes and simply lay on his back on the wet ground, relishing its stability and firmness. A cold drizzle was falling, but at the moment he didn't care. It actually felt good on his face. Darin's ears were ringing, so he didn't hear Quiver approach; rather, he sensed someone watching him so he opened his eyes.

Quiver was standing beside him and looking down at him in concern. "You okay?" he asked more loudly than normal.

"Yeah," Darin responded just as loudly as he awkwardly sat up. "Just never realized how comforting solid ground can be at times."

Quiver nodded. He shifted his weight and looked around listlessly before turning back to Darin. He didn't seem to know what to do with himself. "How'd you like the flight over the canyon?" Quiver asked.

"We went over the canyon? I wasn't watching." That had probably been for the best. "So are we on the far side of it now?"

Quiver nodded again and pulled Darin to his feet, much less frantically than before. Darin's cramped muscles protested, and he took a few seconds to limber them up.

The wingpair met the other Coronas underneath the tree cover. Slurry and Ikoa finished putting the camouflage netting on her fighter and joined the rest at the same time as Darin and Quiver.

“The Imperials said they’d caught up to all of you,” Weas was saying to the others as the stragglers approached the group. Relief was evident on his face as well. “I knew at least someone was out there because I got the reply to my transmission, but I wasn’t sure about everyone else.”

Mackin looked puzzled. “No, they never got close to any of us. We were in and out of each site pretty quickly though. And that was an interesting method of passenger transportation you had,” Mack remarked. “Seemed to work better than ours did. We kind of shoved Four into my cockpit with me— I’m still not sure how I managed to fly like that— and Seven sat on top of Five’s X-wing and held onto his astromech. With four arms he can hold on to anything, or so he claims.”

“What happened to you?” Weas asked Slurry. “Why’d you go down?”

The Bilgana crossed his upper set of arms, a human mannerism he was fond of, then winced and lifted his arms away from his torso. “After right you all landed, a TIE came out of nowhere and shot me blank point. I think it had been waiting below the treetops with power minimal,” Slurry answered.

Alarm suddenly spread across Mackin’s face, and his eyes swept over his pilots. “Where’s Six?” Mackin asked.

The world stopped for Darin as the question brought back the burned-in memory all too clearly. Hot anger and painful grief filled the void in Darin’s stomach, and Quiver flinched. Neither of them spoke.

Mackin didn’t miss their reactions. After a glance at Weas plainly told him the XO didn’t know for certain what had happened to CC but knew it wasn’t good, Mackin turned back to Darin and Quiver. “Nine? Ten?” he asked in a slow, careful voice, like he knew he was prodding a tender wound but had no choice if he was to determine the amount of damage and try to fix it. “Where’s Six?”

Nothing was moving. Even the breeze had become still and the drizzle had briefly let up. Darin and Quiver held the Coronas’ full attention. They all watched the pair intently, waiting for the wingmates to deny their worst fears... but as much as Darin wanted to, they couldn’t.

A wave of anguish hit him full-on. Darin directed his sights downward, but he could still feel all of the pilots looking at him, a silent pressure he couldn’t deal with. He didn’t want to think about it, and he didn’t want to talk about it. Saying it just made it real. He couldn’t do this. Not again.

Quiver looked away from the other pilots, though his bleak gaze didn’t appear to be seeing anything at that moment anyway. The stillness stretched on.

“Dead, sir,” Quiver finally said weakly. It shattered both the tense silence and Darin’s last, irrational hope that he’d somehow been wrong about what he’d witnessed.

“*What?* Oh, no, no.” Ikoa looked as shaken and stunned as all the others, but she was the only one who immediately voiced the feelings. She quickly turned around and wiped at her face.

“From the crash or ejection?” Mackin asked. His voice was carefully controlled, but a flash of shock and pain on his face betrayed his emotions.

When Quiver didn’t answer, Darin looked at him and saw Quiver struggling to keep himself in check. Darin swallowed hard and quietly answered the question for him while he tried to control his own feelings. “Neither, sir. She was alive when we reached her.” It was hard to admit to such an awful failure.

“Then what happened?”

Quiver still made no move to answer and remained looking at the ground, so Darin fidgeted and haltingly continued, “She was unconscious and hurt badly. She hadn’t ejected and was trapped in her fighter, but before we could get her out the biker scouts captured us.” He raised his bound wrists a bit as if to offer proof. “They moved us away, looked at her for a minute and—” His voice broke, and he shifted his weight. Finally he tried to slow down his breathing, and he forced out the rest in a tone that was so quiet that he couldn’t hear himself say it over the ringing in his ears. “They shot her. A few times. Real close. Then they called in the TIE and completely destroyed her fighter with her still inside.”

Though he didn’t even hear his own voice, he could tell from the horrified looks on the faces of the other Coronas that he had indeed said it out loud. Darin felt himself getting overwhelmed with the memory again as everyone stared at him.

Chopper was the first one to speak after that. “What the hell?! How could you let them do that to her?!”

Darin jerked his head up and sent a scathing glare comprised of every negative emotion boiling inside right at Chopper. “What did you say?!” Darin demanded. “*Let* them?!”

“Weren’t both of you there? Two people, two X-wings? You mean to tell me that even with *two starfighters*, a group of biker scouts had the upper hand and won? How does that happen?!”

Darin immediately took a breath to retort with heated words he knew he’d regret, but Weas spoke first. “Three, enough!” Weas snapped. “We had a starfighter, but they still caught us, remember?” He lifted his cuffed wrists.

Chopper snorted. “But we didn’t have a second one that could have stayed at the ready like they did!”

Slurry’s dark skin was turning a greenish hue that always came as the result of charged emotions, either good or bad, though there was no question of which extreme he was experiencing now. “No, I was supposed to be covering them,” he said, distress evident in his voice. “They were counting on me to be watching their backs while they focused on Six. Same as Eight.”

“So it’s *your* fault then?” Chopper demanded of the Bilgana. “Or do you just feel like sharing blame with Nine and Ten?”

Pellicer looked shaken to the core at the news of his wingman’s fate, but Chopper’s words jolted him out of it enough to speak up sharply. “Lay off! You weren’t there. You don’t know what happened. You got shot down, and yet you’re holding it against Seven that he did too?”

Chopper whirled toward Pellicer and said, “Hey, I got shot down at six-to-one odds! Not by *one* TIE!”

“One TIE while alone and *after* going through that entire dogfight and accumulating damage!” Pellicer countered. “It’s the same difference. And why would Nine or Ten have been expecting biker scouts to come so quickly? Without that expectation, why would one of them have been sitting in his cockpit while CC needed immediate help and while they thought they had air cover? You really think that these two would have ever, *ever* ‘let’ anything happen to her, especially from the Imperials?”

“Oh, thanks for bringing that up: let me ask you about those Imperials. What kind of sick Imperial protocol is that?! Killing helpless, injured people in cold blood?!”

Pellicer’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking me?”

“Why do you think?” Chopper shot back.

Pellicer didn't back down. “The Imperials bombard cities, enslave entire species, and destroyed a whole *planet*. Why does it surprise you that *this* happened?”

“Because that kind of thing's only supposed to happen to *other* people!” Chopper retorted. “It's disgusting! Why would they kill her? Why not just take her prisoner like the rest of us?”

“Think for a minute!” Pellicer angrily blurted out. “You don't need me to translate! If you're an Imperial and you already have four other prisoners—” He stopped and visibly forced himself to calm down. There was dead silence until Pellicer continued at a more deliberate rate, “If you're an Imperial and you already have four prisoners who are alive, conscious and at least somewhat mobile, why would you waste bacta on just another Rebel prisoner from the same group who's out, badly hurt and might not make it anyway?” He crossed his arms tightly and aimed his gaze at the ground. “Look, your everyday generic Rebels aren't worth the skin they're wearing to most Imperials. This isn't anything new.”

“If it's nothing new, then you're proving my point that Nine and Ten should have been better prepared to stop them,” Chopper grumbled. “They should've expected it and done more to prevent it.”

It was one accusation too many. “Thank you for your *wonderful* insights!” Darin snapped at Chopper. He felt himself getting choked up and angrily forced the words past the lump in his throat. “I'm *so* glad you're telling us this, because we haven't *already* been drowning in hindsight from the instant it happened! It's not—”

“Three. Nine.” Mackin's quiet voice cut through the air. “Take it easy, both of you. Settle down.”

Darin sullenly clamped down on his tongue and subconsciously moved closer to and a bit in front of Quiver.

Pellicer turned to Darin and Quiver when it was obvious Chopper had grudgingly fallen silent as well. “I wasn't trying to imply you did anything wrong or should have expected anything like this to happen,” Pellicer said. There was a twinge of something in his forced calm voice that Darin couldn't pinpoint. “I know I wasn't there, but I don't believe for one instant that both of you didn't do all you could for her. It's not any comfort, but sometimes things are just out of our control.” Pellicer's stance got a little more defiant as he faced the entire squadron and addressed them. His voice grew subtly stronger. “And I'm sorry I wasn't good enough to protect her in that fight. I wish I had been. She deserved a hell of a lot better.”

Uncomfortable silence lingered for a long moment until Darin averted his eyes and said softly, “And now you don't even have to be injured for the Imperials here to decide not to bother with you.”

Mackin's brow furrowed. “Nine, what do you mean?”

Chopper took over again. He was still riled up. “If Two had gotten there any later, sir, you'd have four fewer pilots to worry about. After we signaled for help, they changed their minds about how many prisoners they wanted. They were going to keep two of us for questioning and use the other two to set examples for the colony about the consequences of being a Rebel. One of those was going to be executed right then and there. At a minimum, the two 'examples' would have been dead by tomorrow and likely all four of us from the way they were talking. It would've been long before any rescue could have come. Between their intended executions and what they

did to Six, it's clear they'd ultimately rather have dead Rebels than live prisoners. If we get caught, we can't expect to survive."

Mackin stood there and took all that in. Another interminable, uneasy silence followed until Weas quietly asked, "What's our status, Commander?"

It took a minute for Mackin to answer. He drew in a deep breath and sounded much older when he said, "We have three X-wings: Two's, Five's and mine." He indicated Ikoa and Pellicer respectively. "We're about 150 clicks east of where the dogfight started, with the canyon to the west between us and the colony. This patch of forest was the only place we found on short notice on this far side of the canyon where we could try to conceal the X-wings while simultaneously being surrounded by plants and whatever animals are here to hide our life signs from their sensors. I didn't trust going back to the canyon.

"They'll likely pick up any transmissions and triangulate the signal, so no communications of any kind, understood?"

"The Imperials have some of our combadges and X-wings," Weas added. "They can hear and understand any transmissions we make over our standard squadron and tactical frequencies and encryptions."

Mackin nodded in acknowledgment of that news before he continued, "We need to find another way to contact any friendlies or rescue parties who will come for us, while avoiding the Imperials who undoubtedly are trying to find us and may even now be on our trail. We didn't go to great lengths to cover our tracks.

"The rations available in each remaining snubfighter's survival kit mean that with... nine of us, we'll each have about three meals, plus whatever is left from last night. Keep your eyes out for food, since we'll need some very soon. Eat sparingly, but keep your strength up. We may have to hunt." Mackin got a distant look on his face and quietly said almost to himself, "Six would have been appalled at killing cute little forest creatures."

Then he shook himself out of it and looked Chopper over. "I doubt we have enough medical supplies in the survival kits to get you better, but we'll do what we can. Everyone else, if you need medical attention we'll treat you now. If you're okay and not helping with the medical treatments, keep watch and passively scan the comm frequencies for Imperial or Rebel transmissions. If someone can start going over sensor data for another place to hide, we need that too. After we get everyone patched up, we'll see if we can find a way to get those binders off you four. And everyone, go ahead and stow your chestboxes in my fighter's hold. You don't need that extra encumbrance unless you're flying. Two, while we're doing the medical rounds I need you to tell me about the forces you saw when you picked those four up."

The pilots somberly responded, "Yes, sir," and quietly got to work.

Darin headed off past Ikoa's X-wing, and Quiver jogged over to catch up with him. "Where you going?" Quiver asked.

"Keep watch, do a perimeter patrol," Darin replied. "I can't do too much else with my hands cuffed together."

Quiver fell into step alongside his wingman. "Aren't you going to get looked at?"

Darin shook his head. "No, I'm okay. You should get that blaster burn treated, though."

"Maybe later."

"Your arm doesn't look like it feels too good," Darin said. "You gulp down painkillers if you so much as get a hangnail. Why are you waiting?"

"Because it's a good distraction, okay?!" Quiver snapped.

The outburst surprised Darin, and for the first time he took his eyes off their surroundings and looked at his friend. "Are you okay, Quiver? I mean, will you be okay? When something awful like that happens to a really good friend..." He trailed off, not knowing what else to say. No words would ever make things right. Ever.

Quiver took a very shaky breath. "I just can't believe what they did to her. How can anyone shoot someone in cold blood like that? It's horrible! And then they—" He stopped talking as his voice started wavering, and after another two steps he abruptly angled off in another direction around their temporary camp.

Darin went after him in concern. "Quiv, wait."

Quiver stopped and turned, and the distraught, angry look on his face made Darin pull up short. "Just leave me alone!" Quiver bit out.

"Come on, Quiv," Darin coaxed. "I know it's hard. I just want to make—"

"Strine blink, I said leave me alone!" Quiver retorted. "And you— don't you *ever* try to take a blaster bolt for me ever again! Who the hell gave you the right to do that?!" Fuming, he stomped off.

Hurt, Darin stood there watched him go, unsure of what to do. He'd never seen Quiver so upset before. If CC was there she would have known exactly what to do, and Darin's own ignorance in this situation made him feel like a very bad friend. Finally he sighed and sadly continued walking the opposite direction around the camp's perimeter. He'd respect Quiver's wishes and leave him alone for a while. He needed that too.

Quentell Mackin stepped through the forest's underbrush and hoped he would find his pilot before too long. He also hoped this would go a bit better than the talk— or lack thereof— he'd just had with Quiver.

Finally he spotted Darin sitting against a tree and facing away from him. Mackin paused. At first all he saw was the bright orange of Darin's right sleeve and the red, black and white of the squadron patch on his right upper arm, but a couple sidesteps gave Mack a better view. Darin had his cuffed arms draped awkwardly over his knee and was softly rubbing a small area on his right lower leg. It took a moment for the commander to figure out why, but then he remembered that was the spot where Quiver, CC and Darin had gotten matching tattoos a while back. The tattoos had been the spontaneous result of drunken stupors, but even after the alcohol had worn off the three pilots had remained openly enthusiastic about them. Mack sighed. As concerned as he was for Quiver, he was just as concerned for Darin given his history.

"Nine," he said.

Darin jumped and then spotted Mack over his shoulder. He scrambled to his feet and faced Mackin. "Sir?" His voice sounded odd.

"Come on, you're too far away from everyone else. I don't want you by yourself out here," Mack said mildly. He beckoned toward their temporary camp with his head.

Darin looked down, sniffled and walked up while he scratched at a couple of the cuts on his neck. "Sorry, sir. I know I'm supposed to be keeping watch. I was, or I was trying to, but then I just..." He trailed off. "Sorry, sir. It won't happen again." He kept walking toward camp.

"Hold on a second, Nine," Mackin said. Darin stopped. "Before we go back, I wanted to talk to you. See how you were doing. I know losing Six is going to be really hard for you."

Darin chewed on his bottom lip. “Ten too,” he said softly.

That was the understatement of the year. Mackin nodded. “Ten too. I just talked to him.”

“I’m glad someone was able to,” Darin replied.

“Well, we didn’t get very far. Now Nine, I know you don’t like talking about things like this, but I really, really hope you’ll talk to me about Six now. Tell me what you’re thinking. Open up even a little. Vent, yell, scream if you want. There’s too much else going on on this planet for you to waste all your energy and make things harder for yourself by keeping it all bottled up.” This was pretty much the worst situation Mack could think of in which to force Quiver and Darin to cope with losing CC.

Darin shifted his weight and didn’t say anything for a long moment, but then he finally met Mackin’s gaze just long enough to say in a strained voice, “All of that should never have happened.” And then the eye contact was gone again. Mack prepared himself for the inevitable survivor’s guilt and what-if scenarios, so he wasn’t quite expecting the direction Darin took next. “I’ve been trying, sir, but I really can’t figure out why it did. Why did things turn out this way this morning? Why didn’t the colony warn us ahead of time about all those additional Imperial forces? And— and why did Colonel Trainner do that? Why did he leave us all behind?”

Mack wished he truly understood the answers to those questions himself. “I don’t know about the colony,” he answered softly. His gut suspected it was because the colony was involved in setting a trap for them, but that theory wasn’t something Darin needed to hear at that moment. “As for the colonel, he said he thought it was too dangerous to come back for us.”

“But— but that doesn’t make any sense,” Darin protested. “His commandos sounded like they wanted to come back for us. They were willing to. It’s Special Forces! Even I know they could have done it! Didn’t their own CO know?”

“From what I learned, he didn’t come up through the Special Forces ranks,” Mack answered. Part of him wanted to rant and commiserate with Darin about the colonel’s actions which had hurt his squadron so badly, but another part of him, growing smaller by the second, warned against being so unprofessional toward a superior officer. Even if that officer totally deserved it. “I think this was his first field mission. He’s... more conservative than the commandos are obviously used to, and that’s a lot of rank for him to be able to throw around to get his way.”

Darin shook his head. “But that doesn’t explain everything. I just *don’t understand* how all that could happen,” Darin repeated. He paused and fidgeted, and Mackin furrowed his brow. Something was clearly bothering the young pilot a lot, and Mack waited patiently and hoped he’d expand on what it was. Darin was probably spooked after being one of the pilots who could have been stranded here if the other Coronas had followed Trainner’s retreat order, and was likely feeling it a bit more personally, especially when adding CC’s fate into the picture.

At last Darin’s green eyes locked with Mackin’s dark blue ones again. “Sir, it’s not just what happened with us. We’re nobodies to Colonel Trainner. He doesn’t know us or care about us. But I don’t understand how he could do that to his own people. Once the fighting started he stopped trying to help the recon team *and* he told the team on *Star Ray* that he wouldn’t help them if they didn’t make it back to the canyon either. He turned his back on two-thirds of his own people here. And— and— sir, we lost Six, but those Special Forces groups lost *two teams*. That could have been us. That might *still* be us. And they’re— those commandos seem just as tight as we are. Heh, you know what?” Darin feebly tried to give a distraught grin and kept rambling. It was strange coming from the quiet pilot instead of his talkative wingman. “I was thinking about

this because I was thinking... thinking about Six. Last night during the stargazing we were talking to a couple of the commandos, and Ten was telling them about our tattoos. The commandos showed us theirs. Same spot. They told us how everyone down there except for Traineer had a tattoo corresponding to their team. *All of them*. They said the recon team all had them too.”

The feeble grin disappeared, and Mack continued listening in concern. “How could Traineer actively let his *own* group which is so close and so tight get so torn apart and devastated with all those casualties and not even try to help?” Darin demanded weakly. “He could have helped the recon team. He could have helped the team on *Star Ray*. When we were talking to some of them last night... They were good people. That one team that survived must be going through hell right now. I just... can’t understand how he– or anyone– could turn his back on them so nonchalantly.”

Darin finally took a breath, and then another. It looked like he was done with his tirade.

Mackin likewise inhaled a slow lungful of cool air. “I honestly don’t know what to tell you, Nine,” he said softly. “I don’t understand it either. I wish it hadn’t happened that way.”

“It never should have,” Darin stated once more in an unsteady voice. “For any of us.” He fell silent, and Mackin sensed his closing down.

The commander tried to squeeze one more question in before that happened. “It’s true that the surviving commandos are going to have a hard time recovering,” he said. “I certainly won’t deny that. Though right here, right now, I need to concentrate on *your* recovery. How are *you* feeling? Can you talk to me about Six?”

“Ten’s going to have the harder time of it, sir,” Darin said, looking down. He didn’t offer anything more. The window of opportunity had passed.

Mackin sighed, weighing the pros and cons of pressing Darin harder. When would forcing him to share be beneficial, and when would it cross the line to being more damaging? He made up his mind, hoping it was the right decision, though losing CC and having his squadron in such a bad spot made him think he wasn’t making too many of those that day. “Let’s head back to camp,” Mack said gently. “We think we have a way to cut your binders apart. And I know it’ll be hard, but I need to get some facts and details from you about what happened with you and Ten after you landed.” He had to check on Pellicer too.

Darin nodded and fell into step alongside Mackin. After about twenty paces through the damp brush, dead leaves and grass, Mackin heard Darin quietly say, “Sir?”

“Yes, Nine?”

“Thanks for not turning your back on us.”

“You sure you know what you’re doing, Trip?” Darin’s question to the heavily modified R4 unit was apprehensive.

From his droid socket on top of Pellicer’s snubfighter, Trip beeped confidently. The lift inside the droid socket had raised the astromech just far enough for Trip to be able to deploy his cutting wheel. He turned it on, and the circular saw whirred to life, becoming a ghostly blur.

Sitting in front of the astromech, Darin eyed the high-speed blade, then he extended his arms toward Trip and pulled his hands as far apart as the wrist binders would allow. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head away.

“Nine, stop pulling back,” Ikoa said from where she was sitting on the fighter’s port engine beside him.

Darin opened one eye, forced himself to stop leaning farther and farther away and brought his wrists closer to Trip again. He saw the droid raise the cutting wheel and aim it at the connection point of the wrist binders before he closed his eye again. He couldn’t wait until someone with a lower rank joined the squadron: even though he had been with the Coronas for over eight months he was still the lowest-ranking member, and the “rookie goes first” commands, even if done in good fun, had a way of wearing thin at times. Like now.

The droid slowly moved the cutting wheel forward, and as he heard it getting closer Darin chewed his lower lip. Yes, he was quite surprised his heart hadn’t exploded yet.

He felt the cutting wheel contact the connection point in the almost nonexistent gap between his wrists, and Trip pressed the blade forward. Darin pushed back to accelerate the cutting process while simultaneously trying harder to pull his wrists apart. Trip gave a low grunt and then whistled in triumph when the cutting wheel severed the bands’ connector. Darin’s hands flew apart, almost causing him to hit Ikoa.

Darin grinned in relief as he shook out his arms. “Thanks, Trip.” Trip beeped happily.

Ikoa took Darin’s arm and inspected the metal band still around his wrist. She cautiously tested the cut connection point with a fingertip but stopped quickly. “Ow, that’s hot. You guys be careful so you don’t cut yourselves: this edge is pretty sharp. Maybe we can find a rock or something to dull it down with. Too bad we can’t get the binders off completely.”

“Well, no offense to Trip, but there’s no way I’d let anyone try cutting these off my wrists with a cutting wheel. I’ll live with them until we get back,” Darin said.

He climbed down so Quiver could come up and sit in Darin’s spot. It didn’t take long for the other three pilots to get their binders cut apart, even after a brief argument about how best to hoist Chopper up. Once they were done, Ikoa grabbed Darin and Quiver and pulled them over to Mackin’s X-wing.

Commander Mackin had just finished talking to Pellicer and was now lying on his stomach on top of his X-wing to help his droid, Bluehill, do a repair through the camouflage netting. Bluehill beeped, and Mack looked up to see Ikoa dragging Quiver and Darin in his direction. He paused and watched them in concern, trying to read from their body language what Quiver and Darin had refused to vocalize to him. He’d have to try again later, maybe when it wasn’t quite so fresh and raw. He would need to sit down with Ikoa soon too; she was by nature a gentle, compassionate person who took every death hard, and CC had been her roommate on top of that. But Quiver and Darin... well, it was Quiver and Darin. A Trio wasn’t a Trio without three.

“Everyone’s pushing us around today,” Quiver moaned as Ikoa brought them to a stop beside the fighter.

“Stow it,” Ikoa scolded lightly. She knelt by the X-wing’s hold, put their chestboxes inside it and pulled out the medpack and bacta bandages. None of them seemed to notice that Mack was there above them. “You two should have gotten looked at before.” She cleaned and bandaged the wounds on their arms and scrubbed the dried blood off Quiver’s face and hands while he protested in embarrassment the whole time about how Ikoa was not his mother. She

didn't respond, opting only to hurry through the cleaning with unsteady hands. After she was done she pulled Darin over and leaned in close to inspect the cuts on his face.

"Don't even start that sadistic little 'does this hurt?' game of yours," said Darin while he blocked her hand suddenly coming up toward his face.

Ikoa offered a half-hearted smirk and lowered her arm. "Well then, tell me, does it?"

"Yes."

"That wasn't so hard, now was it?" She winked at Quiver. "See? I told you thumpers could be trained. We've finally taught him to speak on command." Normally they both would have laughed at the joke, but neither one gave so much as a chuckle. Ikoa tried to smile, but Mackin could tell it was forced.

Looking back at Darin, Ikoa sobered and said, "We'll need to disinfect those cuts and make sure there aren't any transparisteel fragments inside them. I'll have to remove them if there are. Have a seat."

Darin shifted his weight. "Have you ever done something like that before?"

"I'll numb it a bit for you first. Just sit down."

Darin sat under the X-wing, out of Mackin's sight. The commander went back to work on his repair.

A couple minutes later Quiver spoke. "How's everyone else? How's Chopper's leg?"

"All in all, we're in pretty bad shape," Ikoa explained. "Chopper's the wor—"

"Ow!"

"Sorry, rookie. Almost done. Anyway, Quiver, Chopper's the worst off. He broke his leg and hit his head. We set the break and splinted his leg with a tree branch like you saw, but he needs bacta. Kalre broke his wrist landing after ejecting, and Slurry bruised his ribs pretty badly. If the Imperials decide to chase us, we won't be able to run very far or for very long."

As if on cue, Slurry called out from Ikoa's X-wing where he and Rudder were scanning the comm frequencies, "Lead, we got something on the comm! It's not good, sir."

Mackin frowned and jumped down. The pilots all made their way over to listen but left room for Mackin to go up front to hear it better.

The broadcast from the comm system in the X-wing buzzed sporadically with heavy static and was barely intelligible. "The cruis- ... -stant arou- ... -anet. Be- ... -bital mi- ... fighter pat- ... -tal cover- ... -bels can't ... in or ou- ... -ing them."

"Orbital mines? And was that 'fighter patrols'? They've got us blocked in! We'll never get out," Darin whispered fearfully, fiddling with one of his wrist binders.

"Hold on, don't panic," Mackin said firmly. He couldn't afford to let things get out of control. "What kind of transmission is this?" he asked Slurry.

"Well, sir, Rudder found it while he was scanning the airwaves, and he's been working for the minutes ten last to decrypt it. According to him, the level encryption is about what he would expect for frequencies military Imperial general. He's not done decrypting yet quite, which is why there's static much so. And the range is short too for us to be receiving it from far very outside this system. The odds are good very that it came from the colony, orbit or a moon. I do believe not there are planets other any within range of this signal."

Mackin thought that over as Kalre said, "And not only can we not get out, but no rescue can get in past that fleet Eight saw up there. Now what are we going to do?"

"We should've gotten more blasters from the dead biker scout guards," Darin said. "I never even thought of it. But we should've. At least everyone would have a weapon."

“A couple blasters aren’t going to make the difference between getting caught or not when you have who-knows-how-many Imperials after you,” said Weas. “Besides, we had other things on our minds at the time, like the X-wing buzzing us.”

“You’re welcome,” Ikoa said.

“All right,” interrupted Mackin. He turned to face them. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

The Coronas quieted and gave him their full attention. They looked at Mackin with steady gazes, the kind that said they were simply waiting for him to lead so they could follow.

In front of him was a squadron with a reputation for being so fiercely loyal to its own that some superiors accused them of not being team players with everyone else and called them unreliable and undisciplined. “Mission liabilities” was a phrase he’d heard more than once. But Quentell Mackin knew better. They were disciplined where it counted and for reasons that mattered. His squadron was made up of the most dedicated, most selfless people he knew, and he was proud of the team he had developed.

His primary concern, as always, was doing what he felt was best for the squadron as a whole, and the Coronas knew that and rarely questioned him. There was something to be said for that kind of trust. It was the solid ground that made up the foundation of this squadron, and he would not let them down. Even after the death of a squadmate— a good person and a good soldier for whom he had been responsible— they still looked to him. Even after an event like that had shown them that he couldn’t protect them all the time despite his best efforts...

Commander Mackin took a deep breath. He’d failed CC, but he couldn’t— *wouldn’t*— fail the others.

“If that’s the tactical frequency for the Imperials here, we’ll have a huge advantage by knowing where they are and what they’re doing,” Mackin told his pilots. “Seven, you and Rudder keep working on the decryption. We’ll listen for a while to see what we can learn. See if you can find any more frequencies too.

“We’ll have to start moving soon, but that means we need to find more places to hide. I would like to wait until nightfall to start out, but that’s a long ways off, and if it sounds like they’re coming close before that then we won’t have a choice. If you’re injured, rest now. And everyone, take whatever sensor data our X-wings have of this area and try to find some potential places to move to. I’ve got a couple datapads I was using last night that you can work with. Remember we can’t go far in one stretch: we’ll be carrying people on the outside of our fighters so extended flights would be hard for them, and extended terrain-following flights are hard on the pilot in the cockpit.” The strut-riding pioneers nodded agreement.

Mackin continued, “We don’t have detailed sensor data and hardly any useful information at all about other areas of the planet, and I’d like to stay in this general area for now because one, this is the first place a rescue party will look for us, and two, the colony is the only place that has technological resources we could potentially use. I realize we might have to take our chances and leave this whole area behind eventually to escape the Imperials, though. In the best possible scenario, the next hiding spot will be nearby, can drown out our life signs and hide the X-wings. I would certainly like to keep the fighters as long as possible.

“We also need a constant watch now. At least two people are to be awake at all times. Eight will make up a rough schedule. Anyone who’s tech savvy, do what repairs you can on the X-wings.”

The commander met the gaze of each of his subordinates to make sure his words were sinking in. “Just be smart and be cautious. We’re going to get out of here, everyone. I’ve seen

this squadron do amazing things before, against worse odds than this. We'll make it through if we all stick together."

Most of the Coronas nodded silently before they started off to their assigned tasks. Mackin watched all his pilots go, and then he lifted his gaze to the overcast sky through the drizzle and tree branches. How was he going to get them off this planet?

Chapter Seven

“Seven just gave me some news from the comm. We need to get out of here. Someone please tell me you’ve found a suitable hiding spot,” Mack said, interrupting Darin’s concentration. Darin and Pellicer paused in the jury-rigged repair they were working on together at the lieutenant’s snubfighter and listened. Darin also took the opportunity to pull his flight suit’s damp, clammy fabric away from his skin in areas and wipe the light rain off his face.

Ikoa and Chopper were going over sensor logs out of the rain underneath the S-foils of Pellicer’s X-wing. “We think we might have a place, sir,” Ikoa said. “Lots of plant and animal life readings, and it’s far enough away but not too far. We’re not sure of the exact terrain or the coverage though.”

“Is it our best option?”

“So far, yes.”

“What direction?”

“Southeast.”

“From the reports Seven heard, the Imperials are coming this way from the west. It’ll do,” Mackin replied. “The strut-riding, for better or for worse, seems to be the safest option we’ve come up with so far, if you can believe it. Two, figure out the strut-riding assignments. Balance things out as best you can.” Ikoa nodded. “Nine, go get Eight and Ten. They’re out on patrol.”

“Yes, sir.” Darin jogged off after Pellicer indicated he’d close up the repair access area.

Ikoa had the assignments figured out when Darin returned with Weas and Quiver a couple minutes later. Chopper gave the new location’s coordinates to Pellicer, Mack and Ikoa, and soon they were ready to go. Pellicer was carrying Kalre and Slurry each on a main strut, and Darin took a main strut on Ikoa’s ship while Quiver opted for that fighter’s nose gear where there was more head room. Weas helped secure Chopper to the nose strut of Mackin’s fighter and took a main gear on it for himself. This time they thankfully had an opportunity to buckle their belts around the struts and their waists for a minimum of security.

The X-wings slowly lifted up and headed off while skimming the treetops. They mainly used repulsorlifts with low engine throttle to minimize any engine emissions the Imperials could detect. The noise caused by the wind was still loud, but nothing like it had been with an engine running with substantial power right above the strut-riders. Darin shivered from the rushing cold air hitting his wet clothing and skin.

Eventually the terrain below changed. The forest thinned out, but each individual tree got bigger. Small streams converged and mingled. More and more soil was replaced with murky standing water that had a vast amount of small green plants floating on it rather unattractively. The rain tapered off and eventually stopped, but the sky remained overcast.

The three X-wings came to a floating stop above a small area of dry land surrounded by stagnant swamp water. As small as this patch was, though, it was the largest one Darin could see. The stink of rotting plants hung heavily in the air.

“You have got to be kidding.” Kalre’s words were barely audible as the Rodian looked down at their prospective landing site.

Mackin, Pellicer and Ikoa likewise assessed the area. They all opened their canopies, and Ikoa called to the other two, “There’s not enough room to get all three of the X-wings completely on dry land.”

“The important thing is to keep the engines out of the water,” Pellicer called back. “Can we put our sixes to each other, land on the dry part with the main gear and let the noses sit in the water?”

“Probably. Let’s try,” Mackin said. “Let me drop off Three first so I don’t drown him.” He settled to the ground and called down to his two strut-riders. Weas assisted Chopper off the skid and out of the way, then Mackin lifted up again. Ikoa mimicked that process with Quiver, and Darin took the opportunity to hop off early as well.

Once they were clear, Ikoa maneuvered her wobbly starfighter around and set it down first. She allowed the nose gear to partially submerge but kept the main gear on the dry, exposed ground at the edge of the water to leave as much room as possible for the other snubfighters. When she landed, the skids depressed into the ground with a wet sucking sound. Pellicer came down next and imitated her positioning, and finally Mackin landed beside them the same way. It was a landing that would have impressed any precision flying group: the X-wings were packed so closely together that someone could step from one to the other easily. The pilots powered down the fighters and put the camouflage netting on them, and then all the Coronas joined up in the small area between the starfighters.

TB-061 called his commanding officer over. “Major, they *were* here,” the biker scout said. He pointed to some indentations in the wet ground of the forest clearing. “These are spaced correctly for an X-wing landing gear. It looks like they have three fighters. I doubt one would have landed in three different spots. The footprints all stay in this general area. Either the ones on foot are covering their tracks well outside this area or only the ones with X-wings were here.”

Major Wendessin nodded. “It’s likely that only the three who were piloting the X-wings are here. Pilots don’t know enough to cover their tracks on the ground that well, and the ones on foot couldn’t have made it all the way over here yet regardless. Are the guards posted at the other X-wings we’ve found?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Go find out. The Rebels will go back to them sooner or later. And make sure we have enough search parties looking for the ones on foot as well. If they think they’ll slip through our defenses that way, they’re wrong. Pilots are clueless on the ground, and those will be the easiest ones to catch.”

“Yes, sir.”

The scout trooper walked away purposefully, and the Imperial officer continued to wait for his people to find some leads, some indication of where the Rebels went. It was more challenging since the Rebels had the X-wings and were not all forced to travel on foot, and ever since the Rebels had turned off their small fighters’ transponders early on, they had been very difficult to find.

But at the same time, he merely had to wait them out. With the Imperial fleet in orbit the Rebels could not get off the planet unseen, and three X-wings and any other scattered survivors were no match for the Imperial forces here under Wendessin’s command. Besides, if the Rebels could have left the planet, they would have tried to do so already. They were his, so he could be patient. They could not afford to be, which meant it was only a matter of time until they slipped up.

His troops would find them. The biker scouts and TIE pilots had lost numerous comrades that morning at the hands of the Rebels, and his people were looking forward to some payback and bringing these criminals to justice. Personal motivation like that was more effective than any pep talk Wendessin could have delivered.

Three hours later, most of the Corona pilots sat sullenly under Pellicer's camouflaged fighter and swatted at the incessant insects. That group was going through sensor logs to find another place to go, trying to concentrate through the never-ending bug bites and discomfort of the damp, spongy ground. The top of Ikoa's fighter hosted a flurry of activity as Rudder and Slurry monitored the comms from there and Kalre and Darin tried to fix its stabilizer. Trip had been raised out of his droid socket and had managed to wheel himself over the X-wings to help with the stabilizer repair as well. Mackin's R2 unit, Bluehill, was over in his snubfighter's droid compartment, watching the other astromechs and beeping softly to himself like he was feeling quite left out.

"Hold these parts so Trip can fuse them," said Kalre, indicating a broken metal tube he was holding in place in the starfighter's bowels. "I need to go scrounge a piece out of another X-wing to use here."

Darin took hold of the snapped fluids tube, then Trip extended his arc welder and began working. Satisfied, the Rodian got up and went to have a brief discussion with Mackin. When those two opened an access panel on Mackin's X-wing, Ikoa climbed up on her snubfighter and sat beside Darin.

"How's it coming?" she asked.

Darin shrugged and swatted at a bug on his neck before it could bite him. Damn things were driving him crazy. "Your command relay box to the stabilizer's automatic adjustment controls got fried. We're trying a few tricks to patch it up and reroute stuff, but we won't know for sure if it'll work until you're in the air again. Kalre went to go cannibalize a part from Mack's X-wing to use."

Ikoa nodded absently as if she only heard half of what Darin had said. Then she dropped her voice considerably and asked, "Is Quiver okay?"

Stealing a glance at his wingman who was sitting under Pellicer's X-wing with the others yet apart from them, Darin just as quietly told Ikoa, "I doubt it, but I don't know what to do about it. If I bring it up or try to get him to talk about what happened, it'll just remind him, and I don't want to do that. Besides, it's not something I want to think about either." He might lose it if he did, and he couldn't afford that here.

"None of us do," Ikoa said gently. "We all have to get through this, though. Scoop is taking it hard, and I know it's going to be really rough on you too. But I think Quiver's going to take it the hardest, and I don't want to see something happen down here because he can't deal with it. We at least have to let him know we're there for him. You know him best. Have any ideas?" She slapped an insect on her arm.

Darin sighed and removed his hand from inside the X-wing when the R4 droid finished. "I'll try to figure something out. I'll talk to him."

Ikoa smiled. "Thanks, Thumper. And thanks for helping get my fighter back in the air."

With another shrug, Darin answered, “Kalre’s the one doing all the work. One-handed, no less. Besides, I have a vested interest in wanting you to fly straight if I’m going to be strut-riding with you.”

There was a pause before Ikoa sobered and softly spoke again. “And how are you yourself doing?”

It was suddenly very important that Darin visually inspect the tube Trip had fused. “I’m fine, Ko.” He kept his voice neutral, matter-of-fact. Maybe if he said it enough, he’d believe it himself.

“With everything that happened this morning, though, plus what the Imperials were going—”

“Mack already asked me the same thing,” Darin interrupted. “I’m okay. Like you said, it’s Quiver we need to be concerned about.”

“All right,” Ikoa relented. She put her arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze, then she returned to where the others were working on the datapads.

Kalre came back holding a length of thick wire and an odd-looking piece of metal, but most of Darin’s attention was now focused on Quiver. Before, Quiver had been going through the sensor logs on a datapad like everyone else, but now he was just sitting there, staring ahead blankly and looking miserable.

“Do you need me for anything else right now?” Darin asked Kalre.

Kalre shook his head. “No, Trip and I can handle this next part. Hopefully we’re almost done.”

“Okay.” Darin jumped down and slowly made his way over to Quiver, all the while wondering what he could possibly say to him. Quiver was the one that had the way with words, not him. What if he ended up making things worse? His earlier attempt at talking to Quiver had backfired, and Quiver had been touchy with him since then too.

When he reached Quiver, he tapped his wingman on the shoulder, and after Quiver distractedly looked up Darin motioned with his head over to Mackin’s X-wing. With a sigh, the lanky pilot reluctantly pushed himself to his feet and followed Darin.

Darin stopped him on the far side of Mackin’s X-wing at the edge of the dry patch of land. When they had the most privacy possible, Darin softly asked, “Do you want to talk?”

Walls that Darin had never seen before immediately shot up, and Quiver glared at him. “No. I don’t. Leave me alone.” He started to walk away, but Darin quickly stepped in front of him. Darin was starting to feel a little desperate at his complete inability to help his friend when he really needed it. He didn’t know how to react to Quiver shutting him out for the first time.

“I’ve never known you to not want to talk and talk and talk,” Darin pressed. “Besides, you’re the one always telling me not to keep stuff pent up.”

“Ask me later.”

Darin waited a heartbeat, and then asked, “How about now?”

“Stop it, Darin,” Quiver warned in a low voice. “This won’t help. Nothing will help now. She’s gone, and there’s nothing I can do about it anymore.”

Something in his voice caught Darin’s attention. He studied Quiver more closely and finally asked, “You don’t think it’s your fault, do you?”

“How is it not?!” retorted Quiver. “Chopper was right. I should have tried to get to my X-wing as soon as that TIE appeared. It would have given us the upper hand, and *everything* would have been different. I should have resisted more instead of just meekly surrendering and giving

them the chance to do whatever they wanted. Or if I'd gotten her out quicker, we would never have been caught. They never would have gotten to her!" Quiver's voice was a mixture of grief, guilt and anger.

Darin shook his head. "Quiv, that TIE would have cut you down the second you went for your fighter. Fighting that many Imperials once they had us was suicidal, and how were we supposed to know they'd be cruel enough to do that to her instead of just taking her prisoner too? And there was no way to get her canopy open. We tried. It wasn't possible to go any faster than we did."

"Yes it was! There had to be a way! You can't tell me she was supposed to die like that!"

That made Darin stop. "No, I can't," he said at last. "But I *can* tell you that it wasn't your fault that it happened. Nothing you could have done would have changed things for the better back there."

"Then what's the point of all this?" Quiver demanded weakly. "If I can't change anything, if I can't help the people I want to, then why am I even here? Might as well just give up."

Darin shook his head. "I didn't say you can't change *anything*. I said you couldn't change *that*. There was nothing we could have done differently with what we knew at the time." Darin couldn't count the number of times Quiver and CC had said those same words to him during bad periods of his dealing with other losses. "No one deserves to die like that, but if you give up, then the Empire just gets stronger and that will happen to more people. It's not your fault that she died. CC wouldn't think so either. You did all you could. You have to understand that."

Quiver didn't say anything for a minute. Then he finally looked down at Darin, sniffled and said in a shaky voice, "I never lost someone that important to me before. Does it ever get easier?"

Returning his gaze somberly, Darin answered, "No, but it does get more bearable."

Quiver barked a humorless laugh as he shook his head and blinked fiercely. "That made no sense, Niner."

"Neither does this galaxy."

"Okay, I'll give you that."

"Nine! Ten!" Weas called. "Come on, we have to go."

"Think about it, Quiv," Darin said quietly as they ducked under an S-foil to join the others in the midst of the three snubfighters. "You can't blame yourself. It's not your fault. It's the fault of the Imperial who pulled the trigger. I hope you see that."

Quiver nodded half-heartedly, but Darin got the distinct impression he was just telling Darin what he wanted to hear. While Cdr. Mackin and Lt. Weas began organizing everyone to evacuate from the swamp, Darin stayed beside Quiver. He felt awful for his best friend and hoped Quiver would take Darin's words to heart sooner or later.

And who knew, maybe one day Darin could believe them too. Hopefully before he came up with even more ways of what he himself should have done differently to get CC out alive.

Major Wendessin looked around the small patch of land in the disgusting swamp as his biker scout teams combed the surrounding areas. TB-061 stepped up to him.

"They haven't been gone long, sir. We just missed them."

The Imperial officer nodded slowly. "Once again, they just manage to squeeze past. What, do they have a mind-reading Devaronian with them or something?" He looked around again. "We can play Jawa-and-droid all day, Sergeant. All month. Much longer than they can. Just tell me where they went, and we'll continue our pursuit."

"Yes, sir. We'll have a report to you as soon as we can, Major."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Sooner or later, they'll have to stop running."

Chapter Eight

“We can’t keep running. We’re getting nowhere,” Kalre said.

With the exception of Pellicer and Ikoa who were on watch, the Coronas were gathered together in their new hiding spot, another forest clearing southwest of the swamp and south of the canyon. It was dark out, and the sky was partially clouded over, obscuring most of the stars and turning the two moons into fuzzy blobs. Mackin could tell his pilots were exhausted, and Darin and Slurry were even nodding off.

“So what do you propose we do?” Quiver sullenly asked the Rodian. “Stop and fight?”

“No. We need to get away once and for all. Let’s face it: there’s no rescue coming. Special Forces didn’t seem interested in helping when they just took off, and—”

Chopper interrupted his wingman. “Yeah, that’s what caused this whole mess. Why did they just leave like they did? Seems to me they could have helped a *little!*”

“If it had been anyone else calling the shots, they probably would have helped,” said Weas. “Special Forces are experts at that sort of operation. I just doubt Trainneer knows that: he recently transferred in to Special Forces, and my impression from the little I worked with him while planning this mission was that this was the first SpecOps mission he’s commanded. He doesn’t have a lot of field experience.”

“Wonderful,” Chopper muttered. “Seven told me he’s already written us off as ‘acceptable losses’ or something like that. So as long as it’s his say-so, no one will come for us. But then why didn’t the other commandos say something at the time if they could help?”

“They tried,” Mackin said. “I heard some protests in *Starsmoke* when Trainneer was transmitting. His microphone picked them up in the background. Another commando started to directly talk about helping but was cut off. But really, the commandos aren’t the ones at fault. Their own shuttle *Star Ray* and their recon team got burned by it too. You don’t go against a lieutenant colonel’s orders.”

“Why not?” asked Chopper. “You did, sir.”

“And you let me worry about that, Lieutenant,” Mackin said firmly. “I’m not trying to incite a breakdown of the chain of command. It’s there for a reason.”

Weas offered one of his rare smiles, a small, amused one. “Unless that reason interferes with protecting your squadron, sir. Then an admiral is no different from a private. And we do appreciate it.”

When Mackin shot him a look that he hoped would convey how much Weas wasn’t helping matters, the XO’s knowing smile got just a little bigger, but he relented, saying in a monotone, “But yes, I agree with the commander. The chain of command is the most important aspect of the Rebellion. Respect it, lest it smite you.”

“Anyway, as I was saying,” Kalre continued before anyone could respond to that, “Special Forces won’t help, and for all the Rebellion knows, we’re long dead by now or have been captured. If I was them, I sure wouldn’t risk sending valuable, finite forces in through whatever the Imps have up there to rescue a single, underpowered fighter squadron who’s probably all dead.”

“Why not? *We’d* rescue *them*,” Darin mumbled, half-asleep.

This time Kalre ignored the interruption. “It’s also obvious that we can’t escape on our own, not if we want to get everyone out. We should go to the colony and get help.”

“The colony?!” Chopper looked at his wingman like he’d just sprouted polka-dotted tentacles. “The *colony*? The same colony that said there was only a platoon of stormtroopers here? The same colony that also failed to mention the TIE squadrons, the biker scouts, the cruisers and the rest of whatever Imperial fleet was parked in orbit overhead on the very day those said forces attacked us? *That* colony?”

Kalre glared defiantly at Chopper. “Besides them, there’s no one that can help us.”

“Including them, there’s no one that can help us,” Chopper shot back.

“Hold on now,” Mackin said wearily. If he had to break up one more argument that day he was going to scream. “We have to consider all options here. At the very least, maybe we could send a signal from there.”

“We couldn’t get within ten clicks of the colony without being spotted,” Weas said. “Not with so many Imperials around.”

“If you just want to send a message, send up one X-wing and transmit it,” Chopper said.

“To who?” asked Kalre. “Our fleet’s not here, and I’ll bet a thousand credits that they’re not in range of an X-wing’s comm.”

Chopper shot a look of growing frustration and annoyance at Kalre and replied, “Fine, then maybe the X-wing could escape and bring help.”

Quiver shook his head. “Suicide against the forces we’ve seen so far and heard are in orbit. Then we’d be down another pilot *and* another fighter, all for nothing. And can we wait for someone to leave, gather help and get back?”

Chopper’s expression turned stony. “Then we can’t go forward, we can’t go back, we can’t stay in one spot and we can’t go up. We’re never going to get out of here.”

Mackin looked at him sternly. “We *will* get out of here.” He owed his pilots and his wife and daughter nothing less. “We just have to figure out how. For now, let’s wrap this up. We need clearer minds. Follow Seven’s and Nine’s examples and get some sleep.”

Darin snapped awake. “I’m awake, sir, honest!” he said in a rush.

The pilots couldn’t help but laugh a little, and Quiver smirked at him faintly and said, “This isn’t a briefing: this is the one time you’re *allowed*, even *encouraged* to be asleep. So cease and desist with the consciousness.”

Darin looked at him in bewilderment, then seemed to get very tired again very quickly as the scare wore off. “Oh.” He lay down on the ground and was asleep in moments.

Mackin briefly chuckled at him before regarding the other pilots. “We’ll give the last watch to Nine and Seven. I’ll take first with Eight, and we’ll wake up two more to relieve us in a couple of hours, okay? Whoever’s awake, make sure you keep listening to the comm. Get some sleep, everyone. We might have to move again soon.”

The pilots dispersed a little to claim a place to sleep under the camouflaged starfighters. As Cdr. Mackin and Lt. Weas walked off to relieve Ikoa and Pellicer, Mackin looked at his Executive Officer and quietly said, “We need a plan, Steen. And we need it now.”

Kalre caught Quiver’s yawn as they sat out on watch. The airwaves had been fairly quiet, matching the stillness of the chilly night. Quiver shivered and wished he had his jacket.

Suddenly a transmission broke through. Quiver's heart sank as they listened to it: there was a group of Imperials heading right for them. The two squadmates exchanged weary glances before hurrying to rouse the others.

"Major Wendessin, we're closing on them," TB-045 reported not long afterward on a private channel. "We estimate they left this area not more than ten minutes ago."

In his temporary quarters, Major Wendessin rubbed his eyes sleepily as he listened over the comlink to his subordinate's report. He'd been asleep, but he wanted to know everything as it happened and was glad his troops were following his orders to report significant findings the moment they had them.

These Rebels were getting frustrating. Even in the middle of the night, they managed to just barely escape from under the Imperials' noses. Even more frustrating was the lack of any leads for the pilots on foot; Wendessin was beginning to wonder if they were dead or with the starfighters somehow. "Do you have any indication of the direction they went?"

"Not yet, sir, but we should have some leads soon."

"Get someone there to analyze any footprints. I want to know how many pilots we're tracking with those X-wings."

"Yes, sir."

Another frequency came in over the major's comlink, overriding the first. A different voice spoke up. "Major, we may have something."

Commander Quentell Mackin listened intently to the Imperial's transmission on the tactical channel as they flew: "Major, we may have something."

"What is it?"

"We're picking up a slight trail of carbade ions, used in hyperdrives. It's not coming from any of our ships. It's possible that one of the Rebel X-wings has a leaking hyperdrive. We can follow it right to them and be on them very soon."

"Excellent work. Do so immediately."

Mackin sighed. Losing one of their available fighters would cost them dearly, but they'd lose everything if the Imperials tracked them with it. From what it sounded like, they wouldn't have time to try to fix the leak, and Pellicer's hyperdrive had been written off earlier as a complete loss so no one had even thought to try to patch it up. They'd have to be more careful and better anticipate the risks those decisions brought.

He looked around for a place where Pellicer could land the X-wing. They'd been flying west-northwest and were now southwest of the north/south elongated canyon, which was about thirty clicks away. The forest was thinning out, and the terrain was opening up into hilly fields. A minute later he spotted a clearing, slowed and caught Pellicer's attention. They had a limited number of hand signals for use during comm silence, and Scoop understood the message and set the X-wing down.

Mack and Ikoa landed beside the leaking fighter while Pellicer quickly powered it down, secured it and initiated a memory-wipe sequence on Trip. Ikoa's fighter looked a little wobbly again; Mack wondered if the stabilizer repairs were holding. Ikoa coughed several times.

The commander opened his canopy and called to Pellicer's strut-riders, "They're tracking the leaking hyperdrive on that fighter, so we need to ditch it. You'll all have to strut-ride with me and Two. Come on, time's short."

Pellicer grabbed the survival kit from his fighter and followed Slurry and Kalre to the other two X-wings. Pellicer stashed the kit and his helmet in Ikoa's cargo hold and settled onto her available main gear across from Darin. Kalre took a main strut of Mackin's, opposite Weas, and Slurry shared the nose gear with Chopper. Slurry's smaller stature and greater ability to hold on made him look a bit more comfortable there with Chopper than Weas had been the first time. Once they, like the other strut-riders, were secured to the strut by fastening their belts around it, the fighters lifted up and continued on their way, going north-northwest this time.

Chapter Nine

“Sir, we’ve found the X-wing with the leak. It’s on the ground with no humanoid life signs within short-range, and it’s powered down and secured,” TB-045 reported.

Major Wendessin bit back a curse as he flew with TB-061 on a transport to inspect the last camp area the teams had found. Once again, these Rebels seemed to have anticipated his actions. They were flying that X-wing just a short time ago— what would cause them to abandon it? Now, no less?

He frowned as he thought of something, and the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. The Rebels had tipped their hand. He turned to TB-061 beside him. “Sergeant, do you get the feeling we’re being eavesdropped on?”

The biker scout paused to consider that, then he slowly nodded. “It makes sense, sir.”

Major Wendessin took out a datapad and called up a map of the area. “Quickly, indicate the Rebels’ last known camp location, the location of the leaking X-wing, and the location of our largest amount of forces.”

TB-061 immediately input the points, and the commanding officer smiled. “Excellent. So Group Gamma is to the west of where the Rebels seem to be going. Let’s test this theory, shall we?” The major opened a private, encrypted transmission to TB-045. “Lieutenant, we have reason to believe the Rebels are listening in on the tactical frequency. I want you to use a more secure line to alert Group Gamma to expect the incoming hostiles. We’re going to feed the Rebels enough false information over the tactical frequency to herd them in Group Gamma’s direction. And get some TIEs or air support over to Gamma ASAP. Understood?”

“Understood, sir.”

Major Wendessin waited a minute to give TB-045 time to relay the message to Group Gamma, then he turned to the tactical frequency. “TB-045, I want our groups to the east and north of that leaking X-wing’s general location to increase their search areas and be alert. Remember they may have two other X-wings.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lt. Ikoa Fyndcap frowned at the news coming over her X-wing’s comm system. That last Imperial group was south of them at Pellicer’s leaking X-wing, and if there were groups east and north of there, it sounded like they were flying directly into more.

She pushed her helmet visor up momentarily and rubbed her eyes with shaky hands. She’d had a growing headache ever since Kalre had woken her up earlier, and this wasn’t helping. She was starting to feel warm.

Ahead and to the side, Mackin slowed and motioned for Ikoa to come abeam his fighter. When she did, he tapped the side of his helmet, pointed straight ahead to the north and then over to the east. Ikoa nodded. Then Mackin pointed to the west and gave the signal for “Follow me.” Ikoa confirmed, and the two of them gently turned westward. She tried to suppress yet another cough and scratched at her itchy upper arm and neck.

After another five minutes’ worth of flight, static suddenly filled her headset and drowned out the Imperial frequency she was listening to. Just as abruptly, her tactical scope lit up with numerous red dots.

Her headache was momentarily forgotten. Ikoa inhaled sharply when she saw the indicators of the Imperial ground forces dead ahead of them. The Imperials began to fire. Acting on reflex, Ikoa applied full air brakes before pitching up and rolling to loop back around. Mackin pulled a sharp turn back the way they had come.

The strut-riders had absolutely no warning of what was about to happen.

One minute Ikoa's snubfighter was flying calmly along, if a bit unsteady, just above the ground, and the next Darin thought the fighter was trying to launch him like a proton torpedo.

Darin felt physics turn on him during the sudden braking, and only a desperate and instinctive tightening of his hold on the strut coupled with his belt strapping him in place behind the strut kept him from flying off the landing skid.

As quickly as it began, his forward momentum was replaced with backward momentum. The abrupt jerking hurt Darin's neck and the crooks of his elbows and knees, and then everything slowed to a crawl. Only the black night sky was visible to his tunneling field of view now, though it was hard to distinguish one from the other.

The next thing Darin realized an indeterminate amount of time later was that he was no longer in contact with the skid, and the engine housing above him was getting closer. This seemed like a strange thing for it to do, and he tried to raise a hand to block it but he couldn't move his arms away from the strut. That might have been a good thing, since then they helped him hold on when everything spun sideways.

Air no longer wanted to go into his lungs, and his limited, greying vision wasn't cooperating either. He dazedly felt like he was swimming in a dream, in the middle of oblivion with no reason for being where he was, wherever that was.

From far away he felt cool air rush into his lungs, and he jerked as his brain started processing information again. Darin almost lost his balance as a result, and a panicked scramble kept him on the skid, which he belatedly realized he was sitting on again like normal. He shook his head hard to clear the cobwebs out and forced his eyes to focus. Luckily his peripheral vision was returning, and he saw that the world had righted itself. The X-wing— right, that's where he was— was level now and flying after the glow of the other X-wing's four engines ahead.

Quiver was still on the nose skid, but over on the other main landing skid Pellicer was having major troubles. His belt must have broken, and he was dangling half off the skid, holding on by his arms and one leg. Darin could only watch helplessly as Pellicer struggled to climb back up.

Every movement of Scoop's was calculated and deliberate, exhibiting a control Darin knew he himself wouldn't have had in that situation. Pellicer first worked at getting his other leg high enough and positioned correctly to slip that leg's ejection harness loop around the end of the skid. Once he managed that, he tested it by putting a little weight on it, and it looked like the strap acted fine as a sling and was strong enough to support him. Pellicer put more weight on it, which allowed him to shift his grip enough to get a better one. Once he was stabilized, he pulled himself up little by little until at last he was again seated on the skid.

Darin exhaled in relief, but knowing Pellicer was safe didn't stop his shaking. He never wanted to go through that again, and at that moment Darin doubted Darth Vader himself could have pried his hands away from that landing gear.

The two X-wings cleared the jamming region. All stealth abandoned, Mack briefly turned on his active sensors and got a good electronic picture of the surrounding area, much better than what he could see in the dark. Below them were mostly hilly fields, with a deep river valley far to the north on the edges of the larger mountains and next to a dense forest. The river flowed south through the valley and eventually formed the canyon where they had originally landed. Right now, the Rebels were heading roughly northeast, back toward the canyon.

They wouldn't stay ahead of the Imperials forever. The Coronas' CO decided to aim for the river valley in the hopes that it would give them a place to hide and maybe even slow down the ground forces pursuing them. Mackin kept his fighter low to the ground and turned a bit to enter the river valley at its south end where it deepened and opened into the north part of the canyon so the Imperials wouldn't have a straight line to follow to them. Ikoa was tucked in on his wing, but her stabilizer appeared to be getting worse.

The X-wings skimmed the planet's surface until the ground dropped out from under them to form one of the valley's steep walls at its narrow southern end. The fighters went into a shallow dive to bring them closer to the river and then gently turned north to go deeper into the valley. Shortly afterward, Mack saw a huge waterfall ahead at the far end of the valley.

Mackin looked more closely at his sensor readouts and told Bluehill to focus the sensors on the waterfall. Yes, there it was. If the sensors were right, there was a cavern in the rock cliff behind the middle of the waterfall that was big enough for both of the fighters. It would be a perfect place: the rock would shield them from the Imperial scanners, and with both X-wings inside taking up so much space, it shouldn't scan like a big empty cavern to the Imperials, so they might not even notice it.

He motioned Ikoa abeam of him again. They didn't have hand signals that could communicate everything Mackin wanted to ask, but he tried to pantomime the rest to fill in the gaps.

Mackin saw Ikoa cough, look at her sensors, then look up at the waterfall. She said something to Rudder and then bent her arm so that it stuck straight up from her elbow to her fingertips. She pointed to the middle of the vertical part of her arm, moved her hand behind and past it as if sending it through her arm, then stopped and made a fist with her pointer hand. She gave the signal for landing and ended it all with the signal asking for Mackin's confirmation.

The commander sighed. They needed a larger hand signal vocabulary. He hoped they were on the same page, but they couldn't risk a transmission now that they were out of the Imperials' sight again. It seemed like his wingman understood his intentions and that her sensor readout was the same, so he confirmed. She nodded and moved back to her standard position off Mackin's wing.

A moment later, the X-wings were aimed directly at the middle of the waterfall.

The Corona pilots riding on the struts peered through the darkness as the X-wings leveled out of their shallow dive and then turned slightly. Ikoa's fighter moved forward for a minute, then moved back. They started climbing again.

Darin shook his head again to clear away the ringing from the wind and engine noise and tried to distinguish the other low sound he thought he was hearing. He couldn't be sure, so he called over to Pellicer, "Waterfall?"

Pellicer listened intently. "Yeah," he called back. "Sounds like Wuitho Trifalls on Alderaan did."

At first Darin didn't think anything more of the dull rumble from the waterfall ahead, but after it became apparent that they were heading that direction he began to wonder what was over there to cause them to go that way. The nearly white waterfall was now visible in the darkness, looming above them in an intimidating fashion. The steep valley walls narrowed considerably, converging to touch the edges of the huge waterfall and the turbulent water at its base, which then flowed out to become the relatively serene river they were now flying near.

With each passing second, Darin's curiosity changed into nervousness and then anxiety as he watched the high valley walls closing in around them while the X-wings unerringly flew straight for the middle of the waterfall.

"Um, Five? Are we going to turn?" he called uneasily.

Pellicer spared a glance at him before concernedly returning his attention to the wall of water. Apparently his thoughts were paralleling Darin's. "I don't know," Pellicer said.

Still the X-wings got closer. Now it was evident that the other strut-bound pilots noticed their course as well. They looked between each other and the waterfall ahead in distress, and Darin wondered if they too were itching to break comm silence over their combadges to demand to know exactly when Mackin and Ikoa had lost their minds. What the hell was going on?

From underneath Mackin's X-wing, Slurry yelled above the waterfall's increasing roar, "Bluehill, are they awake?!" The droid's affirmative beep came faintly back to them.

The X-wings slowed gently, and Mackin's took the lead with Ikoa's settling in a short distance behind; however, Darin noticed with a sickening feeling that they were still moving forward. While he trusted Mackin and Ikoa with his life and would have let them put a loaded blaster to his head without a second thought, this situation was a bit much. Jumping off certainly didn't appeal to him though, and he was too afraid to let go of the strut anyway; instead, he just bit his lip and turned away. His heart would explode any second now. He was sure of it.

If their sensor readings had been wrong or distorted by the waterfall, this was going to get very ugly very fast.

Mackin tried valiantly to not think too much about the waterfall he was about to go through or the river far below them; his paralyzing fear of drowning could kill himself and four of his pilots if he let his thoughts focus on the damned water and overwhelm him. He consciously focused on his breathing, but that only helped so much.

The nose of Mackin's fighter went cautiously into the falling water, and it immediately lurched downward as a ton of water hit it from above. Mackin jammed in the throttle and repulsor power for an instant to keep the whole craft from plummeting as he yanked his stick back, and his fighter jumped forward laboriously. The nose cleared the water just as the aft got shoved downward. He pushed his stick down and after a couple violent bucks, one of which caused the nose to pitch up and hit the ceiling of the cave, the X-wing was through the water and inside a large, pitch-black cavern in the cliffside. Mackin quickly applied his air brakes, wrestled

control back to stabilize the ship, turned on his landing lights and paused just long enough to allow the remnants of the water deluge to sluice off his canopy windows so he could see. He moved in as far as he could to give Ikoa room.

Ikoa took the lack of explosions as a good sign. She made herself concentrate through the worsening headache and general muddled feelings, gritted her teeth and moved her X-wing forward into the vertical water where Mackin's had disappeared, a little faster than he had. After the same difficulties with physics that Mackin had encountered, she cleared the water, accidentally rammed her X-wing's nose into the back of Mackin's snubfighter, then forced her X-wing under control as well. She backed up on the repulsorlifts and settled her X-wing to the ground behind the commander's, blocking his in.

Slurry, Kalre, Chopper and Weas had crawled out from under Mackin's starfighter after he landed, an action Darin envied when Ikoa's fighter came in and hit the other X-wing. Even though the impact wasn't that great, it still jolted Ikoa's strut-riders.

Once Ikoa landed, Mackin powered down his fighter and shut the landing lights off. Pitch blackness engulfed them until Mackin and Ikoa turned on their small cockpit lights while they powered down their fighters. Pellicer, Quiver and Darin crawled out and joined the other strut-riders in collapsing on the damp, rocky floor of the cave.

"This is not yet the worst day of my life, but it's getting very close very quickly," Darin mumbled weakly.

"Am I the one only who got just wet really?" Slurry asked over the echoing, almost deafening roar of the waterfall. Scattered grumblings and chattering teeth from the other strut-riders assured him he wasn't alone.

Weas pushed himself to a sitting position when Mackin's cockpit hissed open, and then Mackin said, "I just lost one of my laser cannons. It got sheared off in the waterfall." He turned the cockpit light off and climbed to the ground, then used the tiny glow from Ikoa's cockpit light to find his cargo hold on the underside of his dripping X-wing.

"One of my upper ones got bent downward. It's useless," Ikoa said. She was hit with a fit of coughing, and when it cleared she continued in a scratchy voice, "And sorry for running into you, sir. I'll take a look at it and see how bad it is."

"You're not the only one who ran into something," Mackin replied. He pulled out an emergency glowrod and turned it on. "I hit my fighter's nose on the way in. Bluehill, next time we power up, do a diagnostic on the sensors, all right? They might have been damaged by that."

"I'll have to do that too. My sensors might be damaged from the impact," Ikoa said.

"*Next time,*" Lt. Weas interrupted in aggravation, "*next time,* when you decide to suddenly go the complete opposite way, remember that your lowly strut-riders don't have inertial compensators or enclosed cockpits or even decent restraints to keep them in place. And even if it means breaking comm silence on open frequencies, a quick little message to say, 'Hey, don't worry, we're not *really* going to ram into that cliff,' can go a long way for morale!" Darin silently agreed.

“Next time?” Kalre repeated, just as upset. “There had better not *be* a ‘next time’!”

“I’m sorry, guys,” Ikoa said, sounding genuinely troubled. “I didn’t mean to do that flip. Force of habit.” She shut off her own cockpit light and slowly climbed to the ground.

“I’m sorry too, Steen, but we couldn’t risk the communication,” Mackin said to his XO.

“Given an opportunity, strut-riders can see hand signals too,” Weas countered.

Mackin sighed. “You’re right. I just didn’t think of that at the time. I’m sorry about the tight turn too. We were about to fly into a swarm of Imperial ground forces. They were hot on our tails, and we just barely outran them. Hopefully this place will keep us safe for a while.”

“Well, they sure shouldn’t be able to see us in here,” said Kalre. “I’m sitting here talking to you, and *I* can barely even see you!”

Turning to Kalre, Mackin sternly silenced that discussion. “The lighting should improve once the sun comes up, Flight Officer. Just concentrate on the fact that we’re still alive. That’s a lot we have going for us.”

“Nine?” Pellicer called softly. “Can you come over here?”

Darin draped an arm over his eyes. “Don’t make me get up,” he pleaded.

“Owww,” Quiver moaned.

Darin reluctantly rolled over, pushed himself up, and carefully made his way in the poor lighting over to where he had heard Pellicer and Quiver. “You guys okay?” he asked when he got there. In this area of the cave, the air smelled like a combination of coolant liquid and the big rocks on the ocean shores back home that Darin used to play on as a kid. He shivered from the cold air hitting his wet skin and clothing, and he brushed a damp lock of his blond bangs away from his eyes.

Pellicer’s voice came through the soft darkness. “I think Quiver separated his shoulder during that little turn-and-flip fiasco. From what he said, it sounds like it popped back in right away, but he needs it wrapped and some painkillers would help a lot. Can you go get them?”

“Sure.” Darin picked his way over to Mackin’s X-wing, trying not to step on anyone. “Anyone else need medical stuff?” he asked.

“I need a drink. A strong one,” Kalre said.

“I could really, really, really use some painkillers for my leg,” Chopper said.

Darin reached the hold of Mackin’s fighter and got out the little remaining medical equipment, then he took it back to Quiver and Pellicer. Mackin and Ikoa joined them, and Darin brought the last few painkillers to Chopper.

Ikoa held the glowrod in a trembling hand and helped the commander wrap Quiver’s right shoulder and put his arm in a makeshift sling while Mackin tiredly said to the squadron, “Okay, everyone, listen up. Seven and Nine, I want you two on watch. Keep listening to the frequencies, but we may no longer be able to completely trust the Imp tac now. I don’t know where that last Imperial force came from: it sure wasn’t announced on their tactical frequency. Also, keep your eyes and ears peeled for anything living in this cave. Eight, I need to talk to you. The rest of you, get some sleep.”

The pilots never even moved from where they had collapsed. Some of them wearily took off their flak vests and bundled them up to use as pillows. Slurry and Darin each took a blaster, and as they stayed on watch Darin paced along an open area of one wall while Slurry monitored the communications with Rudder.

Darin completed his 57th lap around the tiny area. Number fifty-eight didn't seem appealing for some reason, so he wandered over to Ikoa's X-wing below where Slurry and Rudder were working on the comms.

"Seven?" Darin asked quietly. He needed to interact with someone to prove to himself he wasn't alone in the dark void surrounding him.

The soft lights from Rudder's housing electronics were the only way Darin could make out Slurry's silhouette as the lieutenant leaned over to look down at him. "Yes, Nine?" he asked just as softly. Darin could barely hear him over the waterfall's din, and it was harder to decipher Slurry's thick accent with the ambient noise.

"Do you... do you think we'll get out of here?"

Slurry clicked his teeth together. "Yes. One and Eight will figure out what to do."

"Even with all the Imperials around?"

"Yes, even with that. Everything will be fine, rookie," Slurry said. "This is a place good to regroup. We'll be okay."

Even if it was a lie, it made Darin feel a little better. "Okay. Thanks."

Slurry paused. "What was that?"

"I said thanks."

"No, you not. I heard else something." He fell silent again, and this time Darin strained to hear what Slurry had detected. His hand went to the blaster he carried. Was there something else in this cave?

Slurry climbed down from the snubfighter, throwing out a few curses in his native language directed at his sore ribs as he did so, and turned on the glowrod they'd been told to use only in an emergency so it would last and to minimize the risk of detection. Darin followed Slurry to the far wall.

They didn't see any intruders, sentient or otherwise, but they did find the source of the sound Darin was finally able to hear. Next to the cavern wall Ikoa was lying on her side, awake, huddled up and shaking. Her breaths were wheezing and labored but rapid.

"Two?" Slurry asked in concern. "Are you okay?" She blinked but didn't answer him.

Slurry crouched beside her, put a hand on her shoulder and gently shook her. This time Ikoa mumbled, "I feel horrible."

Slurry studied her uncertainly and then rose and backed up a step. He motioned Darin forward and held the light for him. Human physiology had never been the Bilgana's strong suit.

Darin immediately took Slurry's place. He knelt beside Ikoa and felt her forehead with the back of his hand. She was burning up and sweating even in the cool, damp air, and a rash was barely visible on her neck under her collar. Her eyes were red and watery. "Ikoa? What's wrong? What happened?"

"Don't know. I feel horrible," she repeated hoarsely.

"I'll go get Mack," Slurry said. He handed Darin the glowrod and quickly moved off.

"Where do you feel bad?" Darin asked anxiously.

"Everywhere."

"When did you start to feel like this?" Darin asked.

"Sometime after the swamp," Ikoa wheezed. "It got a lot worse not long ago."

Mackin and Weas appeared out of the darkness with Slurry in tow. "What's wrong?" Mack asked urgently. He dropped to his knees next to Darin and checked his wingman's vitals while Darin related what she'd said.

“Eight, get one of the survival blankets and some water for her to drink. Seven, thank you. We’ll handle this for now. I need you back on the comms,” Mackin said as he hurriedly opened the medkit he’d brought. Two affirmatives greeted him. After they had left, Mackin pulled out a small vial and prepared a syringe. “Does anyone else have any symptoms?” Mack asked Darin.

“I don’t know, sir. I’ll go check.”

“No, stay here. I’ll send Eight after he brings the blanket. Roll up her sleeve and hold her arm steady for me.”

Darin did so and was surprised to see the rash emanating down from her neck to her upper arm. It got much more concentrated and much redder around a small raised, almost swollen, area with a tiny puncture mark in the center. Mack brought the glowrod closer and studied it.

“She said she started feeling bad after we were at the swamp?” Mack asked.

“Yes, sir.”

Mackin pointed out the raised area. “That looks like the bites I got from those blasted insects there, minus the rash and illness,” Mackin told Darin quietly. “I wonder if this is an insect-borne illness or a bad allergic reaction to the bite. Hard to tell without basic medical equipment.” He gave Ikoa the injection while Darin held her arm still.

A little later Ikoa was as comfortable as they could make her on the rocky ground. The small, brown-haired woman was on her bedroll, wrapped in a blanket, still sweating and shivering and wheezing, but she was asleep. Mackin sat for a minute rubbing his unshaven face before speaking to Darin in a tired voice. “I need you to stay with her until your shift is up. I’m hoping the medications will help, but they could be completely useless depending on what’s wrong with her. If she gets worse or if her fever increases, get me right away. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Darin said softly. “Is she going to be okay?”

Mackin exhaled and pushed himself to his feet with difficulty. “I sure hope so.” He patted Darin on the shoulder and stiffly walked back to the opposite side of the cavern where he and Weas had been talking beforehand. Weas was there waiting for him.

Darin sat down at Ikoa’s head and gently lifted it so his leg could act as a pillow for her. It would have to be better than the hard ground.

The young pilot leaned back against the cavern wall and let out a huge sigh, but his tension didn’t dissipate. Things kept getting worse. They were never going to get off that damned planet alive.

Chapter Ten

Mackin and Weas were still having a quiet discussion beyond the nose of Mackin's X-wing when the cavern started to slowly lighten an hour later. At one point they woke up Pellicer and involved him in their conversation for about twenty minutes. Another hour after that, Slurry woke up Pellicer and Chopper to relieve them on watch. Ikoa had slept the whole time and seemed to be breathing a little better, and Darin briefed Pellicer on what had happened and what to watch for while he'd be staying with her.

At last his duties were done, and Darin found a good, out of the way spot on the ground. He bundled his flak vest into a pillow and was ready to fall blissfully into unconsciousness when Weas's silhouette approached him in the dim light.

"Flight Officer Stanic," Weas said in a subdued voice.

Darin looked up in mild surprise at the formality. "Sir?"

"Come with me, please."

Darin wearily pushed himself to his feet again and followed the XO to where he and Mackin were sitting in the soft light of a glowrod.

Mackin looked up as they approached and managed a small smile. "Have a seat, Thumper. Just be careful of our rocks."

Darin looked down and saw some small stones placed seemingly randomly in a small area on the ground, connected and surrounded by lines in a thin film of dirt. Guessing they were meant as some sort of planning map, he made sure to avoid them as he sat down across from the other two pilots. When he looked up again, for the first time he noticed Mackin's and Weas's bloodshot eyes, and he wondered how long they had been awake since all this began.

"How's Two?" Mackin asked.

"Not much change, sir, but I think she's starting to breathe a little better," Darin replied. "Five's with her now."

Mackin nodded. "She needs medical attention. We have no way of knowing how severe her illness can get, and our med supplies are almost gone. Any reports over the comm?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, we just got one," Darin answered. "Seven was going to talk to you in a minute about it. They know they lost us in this area, so they're starting to do tight-beam scans of the entire canyon and valley while biker scouts patrol the surrounding woods. A tight-beam scan aimed in here will find us, sir."

Weas and Mackin exchanged a resigned look. Mackin tiredly ran a hand through his black crew cut and then met Darin's gaze. "Lieutenant Weas and I have been discussing our situation at length, and we believe we have a plan to escape. However, we need a third person, and we believe you are our best candidate."

Darin was a bit surprised, but he answered, "Anything, sir. Just tell me what to do."

Mackin looked like he'd rather be doing anything but talking to Darin right then. "Hear the plan first, Flight Officer. Then decide."

A red flag went up in Darin's brain, eclipsing the small glimmer of hope he had begun to feel at the prospect of escape. "Yes, sir," he said more carefully.

Mackin nodded again. "You know our situation: too many injuries and too few X-wings to fly everyone out of here. We're essentially out of food, too, and we won't find any in this cave."

So unless we want to wait around for a rescue that may never show, we need to get a ship that will allow us to get all our people out. A small shuttle or transport.

“We figure if one of us can sneak into the colony, that person can steal a suitable transport and bring it back here, load it up, and escape. We might even get lucky and find an Imperial transport on the way to take instead. Regardless of where or how we find it, finding it is going to be my task. I’ll need one of the X-wings to get to the colony. Lieutenant Weas is going to stay here with the remaining X-wing to guard the others in case something goes wrong.”

Mackin paused for such a long moment that Darin thought he was done and wondered if his tired brain had missed something obvious. “Uh, sir? Then what do you need me for?”

His commander seemed to snap out of his thoughts and looked again at the younger pilot. “The third pilot would be coming with me part way. With all the Imperials here looking for us, there’s no way that I could survive getting into the colony on my own to look for a transport. Plus, they know we have two X-wings, so we’re going to show them two X-wings.”

He took a deep breath and explained further. “I’ll drop off the third pilot at Quiver’s X-wing, since from the reports I have that one is damaged the least, and it’s also close to being on the way. That pilot and I will head toward the colony, avoiding detection as long as possible. If we avoid it altogether that would be wonderful, but realistically I don’t expect that to be the case. In any event, the closer we get to the colony before they spot us, the better off we’ll be.

“Once the inevitable dogfight starts, I’ll fake a bad hit to my X-wing and go down as near to the colony as I can while out of their direct line of sight in the hills, probably using my last torpedo to trigger an explosion on the ground. It’ll give the impression of a crash while I actually land, since we can’t have them detecting an ejection. Now, that would all be well and good except that if I was alone, the Imperials would come to investigate, find an intact X-wing and hunt me down within minutes, maybe less. There’s no way that I could obtain a transport in that amount of time, so I need a distraction to pull their attention away from my ‘crash’ and make them forget about me, writing me off as dead at least in the short-term in order to focus more on something else. That’s where the third pilot comes in.”

Mackin took a second deep breath. “When I go down, the third pilot will need to draw them away from that area. The Imperials are undoubtedly monitoring different frequencies, so the pilot will put out a distress call that the Imperials will hear, calling any Rebel ships within range, which won’t be any if that solar storm is still active and disrupts the signal beyond the magnetosphere, and saying that he’s the last survivor and has important information to bring to the Alliance, something like that. Something to make the Imps believe that he’s the last remaining target and they had better focus on him. Something to make as many of the Imperial ships as possible go after him. Once he leads them far enough away and occupies their attention for long enough, he does whatever he can to escape the system on his own. By that time I should be in the colony securing a transport, which I’ll fly back to pick up everyone else. Then the rest of us will head for orbit, escorted by Lieutenant Weas.”

Mackin stopped and studied Darin, who didn’t know what to think about all this. “That’s the best plan we’ve been able to come up with given our resources and situation, and with the Imperials breathing down our necks and now Two being sick we don’t have much time to come up with another unless someone else has a good idea.

“I will not order you to fly this mission, Darin. You can say no, and no one will hold it against you. But after seeing how well you evade TIEs when you and Quiver play that bait game of yours, not to mention that because of that you’re more accustomed to having TIEs on you so

you won't have as much tendency to panic when it happens... I hate to ask you to do this, but you're by far our best candidate. Think it over for a minute."

Darin stared at the ground while that all sank in. His first reaction was to say no. He was scared and not at all ready to die yet, especially on a suicide mission like this. Given the amount of Imperial forces they knew were here, he didn't see any way a single pilot could survive and escape after drawing all their attention to himself. A few heartbeats later, though, Darin felt guilty and selfish, and he tried to think things through a little more rationally. He knew he got impulsive when he got emotional, and now was not the time to be impulsive.

He'd been hoping that his bleak assessment of their situation had just been pessimistic or unfounded, but his leaders' assessments seemed equally bleak. They were all going to die here unless they could escape, and to escape it sounded like they'd have to pull this off. What were the odds? *Not good*, he thought. *Not good at all*. He was going to die here. They were all going to die here. The Imperials would find them and kill them.

He looked over his shoulder at the other pilots, their silhouettes barely visible in the muted light coming in through the waterfall. Almost all of them were injured. All of them were scared, though none would admit it. All of them were like family to him, the only family he had left. And all of them were going to die.

...Unless they pulled this off.

The more Darin thought about it, the more he realized that Mackin was right: he *was* the best choice for this ominous "third pilot" role, as much as he wished he wasn't. He often allowed TIEs to sit on his tail while Quiver snuck up behind them and picked them off, almost always without Darin getting excessively hit by the TIEs if Quiver was prompt. Whether he liked it or not he was one of the best pilots in the squadron when it came to not getting hit if that's what he was solely focusing on, like he would be in this situation. Besides, if he didn't do it then someone else would have to, and he didn't want to push this off on someone else because he was too afraid to do it himself. Thumper honestly doubted that he'd be able to live with himself if his "replacement" was killed. Plus there weren't that many left who were healthy enough to fly a fighter to the extent required by this plan.

Still unsure, Darin looked back at the ground in front of him and studied the rocks to distract himself a bit and give his mind a chance to breathe and sort things out. Now that he got a good look at the stones and the dirt, he realized it was a rough map of the area, showing things like the canyon, the valley, the colony and each intact X-wing or crash site. There was a particular group of three rocks that he knew must be representing his X-wing and Quiver's and where CC's had crashed. There were more rocks indicating the relative locations of Pellicer's and Weas's snubfighters as well as Slurry's, Chopper's and Kalre's crash sites.

His gaze found its way back to the rock he knew represented CC's fighter, or what was left of it. Darin blinked hard a few times and unconsciously fiddled with his wrist binders while he stared at the rock. They'd suffer a fate similar to CC's if they were captured. Four of them had escaped that fate once already, and he didn't think they'd be lucky enough to do it again if the Imperials caught up to them.

Darin's thoughts drifted back to CC's crash site, and in his mind's eye he saw the TIE Fighter flying closely overhead and that long stretch of nothingness between him and his X-wing. All he would have had to do was get to his fighter, and things would have been a lot different. As much as he'd wanted to, he hadn't taken that big risk to help CC. To some degree he still intellectually knew it would have been suicidal, but then again, so was this. The others needed

him to take that big risk for them now, and he couldn't make the same error again when so much was at stake.

So much was at stake... *"I don't take orders from someone who makes such bad puns!"* CC's teasing voice cut through his memory, putting Darin back in the briefing room just a mere couple of days before when his good friend had still been so alive. Now she was dead, and Quiver, his other best friend, was almost as lifeless. Darin barely noticed his hand moving down to softly rub his tattoo.

That whole fake briefing by Quiver had been a farce, just a silly way to have some fun, but now Darin recalled some of his own words there and felt uneasy at how eerily similar they were to what he now faced. *"That's a suicide mission! We'll never make it!"*

And Quiver's response to that, though Darin knew it had only been made jokingly, had stuck with him nonetheless: *"We have to try, though, Thumper."*

They had to try. *He* had to try. Too much was at stake for him not to. Even if he ultimately wouldn't make it out alive, which was a distinct possibility, he had to do his best to make sure the others got the chance to avoid CC's fate or something worse... and that meant agreeing.

Darin jerked his head up. "I'll do it, sir."

Mackin nodded somberly. "All right. We'll brief the others on what we're planning, then the three of us will get some sleep. I don't want to fully commit to this just to discover too late that my sleep-deprived brain forgot something important. We'll go over it again before we head out to ensure that and also to go over details. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," Darin and Weas answered.

"I'll get the others up," offered Weas as he rose and walked back to them.

Darin and Mackin stood up stiffly. "I truly wish we had another way, but this is the most feasible one we could come up with," Mack said quietly. "Just so I'm clear, Flight Officer, you do understand the full extent of the danger in that third pilot role, correct?"

Darin nodded absently, looking back again at the other pilots as Snubber woke them. "Yes, sir," he said with considerably more courage than he felt, "I do."

"So that's the plan," Mackin said to all of the pilots except Ikoa while they stood at the nose of his fighter. "Comments?"

Darin heard nothing but the waterfall and an uncomfortable silence until Kalre shook his head and said, "It'll never work, sir. You're betting too much on being able to find and steal a suitable transport without getting caught. Alone, no less. Plus if you don't pull it off successfully, the Imps will have a much better chance of finding us, and we'll be much worse off."

Pellicer nodded. "You're risking everything on this, sir. We could easily lose you and Nine and also be down to one fighter. Then what?"

"Then Lieutenant Weas gets the promotion he's always wanted." Mackin forced a small smile and tried to make his words a joke, but the humor fell flat. Sobering, he continued, "Eight and I have come up with a contingency plan if this should fail. That will be available for the rest of you if needed."

"You should have more of us going," Chopper added in agreement with the others. "Two X-wings is too few. Besides, what if the Imperials took them?"

“We have to hope that the fighters are still where we left them– yes, it is a risk. Anything more than two will be picked up by the more concentrated forces around the colony while we’re still too far away. Two is pushing it as it is. Besides, we only want to show the Imperials what resources they knew we had at last count fighter-wise, or they’ll suspect the rest of you could still be out here somewhere.”

Chopper kept going. “They have to have guards at the fighters. Once they see you coming, all they have to do is report that one X-wing’s coming, and the Imps will know that if they see a second fighter after that, it’ll have come from that site and there’s another one still out there somewhere, like you just said.”

Mackin nodded. “Right, but it’s covered to the best of our ability. Rudder has assured me that jamming any guards’ communications won’t be too difficult. As a backup, we can always transmit something on the Imperial tactical frequency to throw a little confusion into the mix.”

The next comment came from Slurry. “Sir, the Imperials are on alert heightened in this area immediate. They’ll spot you as soon as you fly out of this cave. Then that will lead them to the rest of us as well.”

“Ah, I’m glad you brought that up,” Mackin said. “Five helped us with some ideas for how to distract the Imperials long enough for us to get out.” He acknowledged Pellicer with a slight motion of his head. “There’s a way we can use what we have with us to send a combadge floating down the river. With the right preparations, we’ll use it to transmit a few signals well downstream of us. Of course we can’t guarantee that every Imperial in this area will go after it, but we’re hoping it’ll attract the attention of enough of them for us to have a better chance to sneak out of here. Once we’re out of the river valley, it’ll be much easier for us to avoid their sensors.”

“Down here, maybe,” Kalre said. “But say we’re really lucky. Say you get a transport back here in one piece, and say we all get in and fly away. As far as we know, there are still all those capital ships in orbit, plus orbital mines and whatever else the Imps said. We will not get past them. Not with some ungainly, slow transport and one X-wing as escort. Nine won’t either, not by himself. One X-wing, in either group, cannot defend itself and possibly a transport as well long enough to clear the gravity well and jump out. Instead of dying on the surface, we’ll just die in the air.”

Darin saw all the Coronas look to Mackin expectantly, but the commander only deflated himself with a sigh and shook his head. “I don’t have a good answer for you, Four. I honestly don’t,” Mackin said. “That fleet is going to be a major problem for us. All we can do is try to keep our electronic signatures at a minimum and maybe skim the upper atmosphere until we hit a blind spot.”

The commander paused after that but was met with only silence. “I’m not denying that this is a risky plan. We’re betting a lot on luck, and if we lose, the rest of you will be in a much tighter spot. If anyone has a better idea for a way to get off, now’s the time. I’m more than happy to listen.”

Pellicer took a breath when no one else spoke up. “Sir, we should just leave this whole area,” he said. “Go to the other side of the planet where the Imps have no chance of finding us. Then we can lay low until we’re either healthy enough to escape or the Imps give up looking.”

“From what I know about this planet, the terrain elsewhere is inhospitable or is inhabited by creatures that rank above us in the food chain and aren’t afraid to prove it. There’s a reason the colonists only stay in this one area of the planet,” Mack replied.

“If it’s only temporary, we could make it work,” Pellicer countered. Darin could tell he wasn’t too thrilled with this plan.

Mackin looked like he halfway agreed with Pellicer’s point. “The contingency plan Eight and I made in case this ‘third pilot’ mission doesn’t work is for the rest of you to relocate far away just like you’re saying, Five. But it’s not something I’d want to do if I don’t absolutely have to. Do you really want to fly hundreds or thousands of clicks by hanging on to a strut?”

“If it’s a choice between strut-riding and sacrificing your life and Nine’s, sir, then yes, I’ll take the strut-riding.”

Mackin rubbed his eyes. “Because that’s been so safe for all of us so far, has it? And to complicate matters, Two is in no condition to either fly a starfighter or strut-ride, so how do we move her? What if she takes a turn for the worst? Or what if she’s contagious? We don’t have enough medicine for everyone. We could soon be facing a situation where everyone except Four and Seven is incapacitated, or it might even affect their physiologies differently and make them worse. Five, I don’t want this squadron to spend any more time on this planet. We’ve been here much too long already. We’ll starve if we stay in this cave, so we have to get out of it very soon regardless. One well-aimed tight-beam scan and it’s all over anyway. I want to take this chance to get offworld completely instead of forcing everyone to stay down here even longer and have who-knows-what happen during that time. The longer we have to regroup, the longer the Imperials have to regroup and find us. When you’re in such a bad spot, sometimes there are no good solutions.”

Pellicer still looked frustrated, and he was obviously thinking hard about how to counter the points and change Mackin’s mind.

Quiver had been unusually quiet during the discussion, just standing next to Darin with his arms crossed awkwardly due to the sling and looking more unhappy every minute. Suddenly he whirled around, grabbed Darin’s arm and yanked him toward the waterfall at the other end of the cavern. “Come ‘ere,” Quiver grumbled.

“Hey!” Darin said in surprise before letting Quiver tow him across the cave.

Quiver took him to the far side of Ikoa’s snubfighter where he stopped and pinned a fuming look on Darin. “Are you crazy?!”

Darin was caught off-guard by his best friend’s hostility. “What?”

“Your role in this mission is suicide, Thumper. Suicide! Open your eyes for once! I can’t believe you’re being such an idiot! What the hell were you thinking when you agreed to this?!”

Darin’s ragged emotions made it easy to get infected with Quiver’s anger. His immediate answer was defensive and hot. “I know full well what I’m getting into! And you know what? Of all the pilots able and available to fly now, I’m the one most likely to make it out of that alive. I know how to evade, Quiver. The others don’t have the bait experience that I do. You of all people should know that!”

“And you of all people should recognize the difference here!” Quiver retorted. The roar from the waterfall behind him gave the impression that he was even more upset than he already was. “We’re not talking about one TIE on your tail with your wingman there actively trying to take him out. We’re talking about five, six, seven, even potentially an entire *squadron* after you. And you’ll be *alone*, which means the Imps will have no reason to stop chasing you. They will keep after you *until they shoot you down*.” Quiver emphasized each of those words individually. “So tell me what possessed you to go kill yourself!”

Darin narrowed his eyes. “We’ll all be dead soon anyway if we don’t get off this rock. The Imps get closer to finding us every single second we’re here, and I have no desire to be captured and executed. I’ll take my chances in the air. And if doing it this way means you all have a chance of getting out, that’s really the only reason I need.”

Quiver was clearly fed up. “Didn’t your near-death experience with the biker scouts teach you that that damn loyalty of yours is going to get you killed?! Why can’t you learn that before you learn it the hard way?”

“This is different!” Darin shot back.

Quiver lost the remainder of his patience and raised his voice to a shout. “No it’s not! *It’s* not different, *you’re* no different from anyone else, and *your fate* shouldn’t be different! There’s not a person here who doesn’t want to escape, since so many of us are hurt and especially after what happened to CC and what almost happened when we were caught! But there has to be a way to get *all* of us out safely! A suicide mission on your part isn’t the answer!”

Darin immediately matched Quiver’s volume. “This is hard enough already, Quiver! Don’t make it harder!” He spun and stalked back to the rest of the Coronas, leaving Quiver behind. On the way he heard Quiver slam his hand on Ikoa’s X-wing, but he didn’t look back. Quiver didn’t come after him.

There was dead silence when Darin returned to the group, and the majority of the pilots studiously avoided looking in his direction. When Darin parked himself in the spot where he had previously been standing and crossed his arms tightly, Mackin simply looked at him and asked, “Everything all right, Nine?”

“Yes, sir,” Darin lied through anger he couldn’t control. “Everything’s fine.”

Mackin didn’t press the issue. “I want everyone to get some rest and do what you can to get ready, okay?” he told the Coronas. “Make sure the watches are covered. We’ll aim to head out after sunset so we’ll have the cover of darkness unless we’re forced out before then. Four, would you check the sensors on Two’s fighter in case we need to fix them?”

As the pilots walked away, Mackin motioned for Darin to stay. When everyone else was out of earshot, he came up to Thumper and quietly asked, “What’s going on?”

A growled sigh of simmering frustration mixed with biting anger escaped from Darin, who didn’t meet his commander’s gaze. “Nothing, sir. Really.”

“You need acting lessons.” Mack paused and then said more gently, “He’s worried about you, you know.”

“He has a lousy way of showing it!” Darin was so upset that he couldn’t think straight. “I don’t—” His voice crackled and tears threatened, and that vulnerability and loss of control instantly became the target of his unfocused, boiling ire. Tears wouldn’t dare come, or so help him, he’d do something he’d regret to whatever was in reach.

“You’re both dealing with a lot right now. Take it easy on each other.” Mack looked at him plainly but didn’t exude the self-confidence Darin always expected from him. “Do we need to get this worked out right now? Is this going to be a problem?”

Distrustful of his own voice, Darin didn’t vocally respond. Instead he shook his head, tightened his crossed arms even more, looked down and kicked at the ground with the toe of his boot.

“So once you both calm down, you’ll be able to let this go and concentrate on other things?” Mackin asked.

Restlessness and agitation fed off each other. He couldn't deal with this right now. "Permission to be excused, sir?" Darin asked.

"That was not an answer." Mack's voice was calm but firm, insisting on his subordinate's attention.

Darin forced air deeply into his lungs and willed himself to not snap quite yet. "Permission to be excused, sir?" he repeated in a strained voice, desperate to get away from the demands, the pressures, the frustration, the hurtful feelings, the questions he didn't have answers to.

Mackin closed his eyes for a moment. "All right. Take some time to cool off. We'll talk about this later. Now go get some rest, all right? Sleep if you can. A lot's going to happen soon."

"Yes, sir," Darin grumbled.

Darin avoided Quiver, who returned the favor, and slowly walked toward his claimed sleeping area, then he lay on his stomach and buried his face in his arms and flak vest pillow. Darin shifted a few times until the pressure on the cuts on his face didn't hurt. He tried to fall asleep, but the person who could doze off on an X-wing's stiff, hard S-foil was having problems doing the same thing there on the cave floor. He could never get comfortable, either inside or out.

Chapter Eleven

There was still some dim natural light in the cavern when Darin awoke from a shallow, fitful sleep. He rubbed his eyes tiredly, tried to ignore his growling stomach and went to get a drink of water from the available consumables on the X-wings.

Mackin was there, doing the same thing. "Get some sleep, Nine?" he asked.

Darin shrugged. "A little, sir. How long until we go?"

"Another three hours. An hour from now, suit up and we'll go over everything."

"Yes, sir."

Mackin walked away. Darin finished his water and ducked down to open the cargo hold in the belly of Mackin's fighter. All the strut-riders had stowed their bulky chestboxes in there earlier, and Darin started looking for his; after a thorough search of the hold, however, it was apparent that his own equipment wasn't there among the rest. He was baffled.

The next logical course of action was to ask someone about it. Darin looked up to do exactly that but hesitated. Chopper, Kalre, Pellicer and Slurry were sitting together near Ikoa and within earshot of the fighter's comm speakers, and it looked like they were trying very hard to have a normal conversation together. Thumper couldn't hear the topic of the talk over the waterfall's din, but the specific topic wasn't necessarily important next to the act of having the conversation. Chopper and Kalre were chuckling at something Slurry had said, and the Bilgana looked confused about their reactions so Pellicer started explaining something to him. Probably just a cultural difference. From that small amount of laughter and the looks on their faces, Darin figured they'd been able to put their current situation out of their minds for the moment, and he couldn't remind them of it again.

Mackin and Weas were deep in their own conversation and Ikoa was still asleep, so that left one person he could ask: Quiver. His wingman was sitting by himself against the far cave wall and was working on something. Darin couldn't remember ever seeing Quiver voluntarily sitting alone or not participating in a group discussion before. Their fight was still fresh in Darin's mind and he seriously considered not asking him, but he really needed to find his chestbox to see if the hose had been damaged by the broken transparisteel canopy window, and if so, if he could patch it up somehow before he left.

He hesitantly walked up to Quiver and tried to sound casual. "Hey, Quiver, have you seen my..." He trailed off as he looked down and saw Quiver with his missing chestbox plus another one. "Chestbox." One question was answered, more were generated.

Quiver glanced up. "Yeah, just a minute." He punched a few buttons on one chestbox, hit a couple others on the second, then flipped the same switch on each. "There." He stood up and offered one to Darin. "Here you go."

Darin looked at it in puzzlement. That was Quiver's chestbox if he wasn't mistaken, and Darin's, the one with an obviously damaged hose, was still on the ground. He turned his confused look to Quiver. "That's yours."

"Don't worry, I adjusted it for you. Your hose was all cut up and punctured. I was going to just switch hoses, but we don't have the correct tools with us so it was easier to change optimized box settings. Here, you're going to need it."

When Darin realized that Quiver would be keeping Darin's useless emergency life support system, he shook his head and didn't take the equipment. "Quiver, I—"

“If you protest,” Quiver interrupted in a hard, deliberate voice, “I will hurt you so much that no life support system in the galaxy could help you.” He cocked his head and shifted his tone of voice to a more reasonable one. “Think about it. If this all goes as planned, I’ll be on the stolen transport and won’t even need it. You will.” He casually stepped beside Darin. “And you know you can use my X-wing if you want, but this will allow you to use yours if you so choose and have Botch there to help. You’ll fly better in your own X-wing with him, and you’ll need all the help you can get. Besides, we don’t know how damaged my engine is after that wreckage fell on it. I don’t think I ever remembered to tell Mack about that. You can’t use an X-wing that only has three good engines for something like this, especially when going up against TIEs.”

Darin nodded slowly, still somewhat bewildered at Quiver’s turnaround; because of that, Darin wasn’t sure if he was joking or not when he heard himself saying, “Well, I can’t reach your rudder pedals anyway, and I know how cranky you get when someone adjusts your seat.”

“That’s right– I’d forgotten about that,” Quiver said thoughtfully. He calmly reached over and put Darin in a headlock with his left arm. “Take the good chestbox, you crazy Cracian. My seat is perfect. Don’t you touch it.”

“Okay, okay!” Darin surrendered, feeling better now that Quiver was reverting a bit to his old antics. “You know, when I get there I should move it just to annoy you.”

Quiver sighed and barely seemed to notice Darin’s half-hearted struggles to get free. “When you stop to think about it, it’s really a shame that we’re all about to die. I mean, we can’t let Slurry go to his grave without knowing about that time you–”

“Okay, okay, okay!” Darin interrupted loudly. He gently elbowed Quiver, and Quiver released him. “I’ll get you for that,” Darin said, trying to smile as he straightened up.

Quiver sobered as he looked Darin straight in the eye. “I certainly hope so.” He thrust the working chestbox at Darin, then picked up the damaged one. Quiver started to walk away toward Mackin’s X-wing but turned again just long enough to say, “Chopper won’t be flying anytime soon. I’ll steal his chestbox and set up that one for you too. Then you can have a backup, and it’ll double the time you can spend in space between escaping and reaching safety. If you want any more, just let me know. We’ve got a bunch.”

When Darin had last checked his chrono, only an hour remained until he and Mackin were planning on leaving. Each second that ticked by brought him closer to the deadline and carried with it more anxiety. He sat against the back wall of the cave and fiddled with the remnants of the binders on his wrists while he watched the bustle of activity before him. He should have been mentally reviewing the details of the plan Mack and Weas had just gone over in depth with him, but he wasn’t. He couldn’t. He was too busy with other thoughts.

From his vantage point he could see the entire squadron. Each pilot was focused on the various tasks needed to prepare for Mackin’s flight. The thought of it and what he was getting himself into made Darin’s hands tremble, and he pressed his fingers harder against the metal binders to hide his shaking. His somersaulting stomach reminded him of pre-mission times during his first weeks with the Coronas.

It was one thing to look back at previous missions or even the previous day and realize that he could have died in a given situation; it was quite another to look ahead and realize he was going to die in the upcoming one. Sure, it was possible they’d get really lucky and he’d only have

to deal with a TIE or two at most while alone, but when was the last time they'd been lucky on this planet?

Darin pulled his knees up to his chest and used them to hide his more vigorous fidgeting with the binders. The Imperials had shown him exactly how valuable they considered his life to be and what they were willing to sacrifice it for. In this pre-departure lull time it was now fully sinking in that by agreeing to do this mission, Darin had given his own answer to those same questions. But if he already knew the answer, why was it still so damned hard to face it?

He watched the Coronas. Mackin and Weas were in the middle of everything and were coordinating efforts, answering questions and providing any needed assistance. Slurry was diligently monitoring the comms while he pulled another shift on watch. Ikoa was awake but only felt well enough for a small task, which was tying up the spare duty uniform Mack kept in his X-wing's hold for medical emergencies so that it could hold air and float on water. Chopper was cutting a piece of the X-wing camouflage netting to cover the floating uniform. Kalre had been digging deep behind the seat of Ikoa's X-wing with his one good arm. Before too long he pulled one of the bottles of oxygen out of the life support system, then he began searching for a suitable hose in the snubfighter that the craft wouldn't need, which they could hook up to the oxygen bottle and use to inflate the tied piece of clothing. Pellicer was programming a combadge and sleeve data recording rod so at the designated time the combadge would automatically broadcast the audio they had recorded for this purpose. Darin idly wondered how they were going to keep the combadge and data recorder on their makeshift life preserver for its trip down the river. Maybe the netting would hold them on.

And Quiver... Quiver was slowly walking over to where Darin sat alone in the corner. The lanky pilot sat down next to his younger wingman and silently joined Darin in watching the activity for a handful of heartbeats.

"They all shooed me away," Quiver said offhandedly. "Said I didn't need to do anything. Said they had it covered."

Darin nodded. "They told me the same thing."

Try as he might, he couldn't completely cover up the anxiety in his voice. Even if he could have done so well enough to fool any of the others, though, Darin knew he wouldn't have been able to deceive Quiver.

Darin felt Quiver studying him and sensed that Quiver wanted to say something, but a second later he apparently changed his mind and didn't.

They sat for a couple of minutes before Quiver said, "I know there's a lot that's going to happen. I can leave if you want to be alone."

Darin shook his head. "No. Stay put, okay?" He realized as he said it how weak and fearful it sounded. Fighter pilots shouldn't sound like that. They should be confident and strong, cool under pressure. But right then, Darin didn't feel like a brave starfighter pilot. He was simply a scared nineteen-year-old who desperately needed his best friend's company.

A flicker of relief and gladness crossed Quiver's face at Darin's words. Quiver stayed, and they silently watched their squadmates while the pre-mission time dwindled and eventually ran out.

“You know, I think I’m dreading this upcoming strut-ride more than anything else,” Darin said to Quiver with a nervous half-grin. Darin scratched a cut on his face, then when he lowered his arm he brushed his hand against a hip pocket. He had decided to take along the small rock that had been representing CC’s fighter on Mackin’s low-tech tactical map and was reassured to still feel it in his pocket. He wasn’t sure why he kept it, except maybe for some sentimental reasons, but he hoped it would give him a little bit of good luck in this escape attempt.

The Coronas were all gathered around Ikoa’s snubfighter next to the cavern opening to see off Mackin and Darin. Most of the pilots were subdued and not saying much. Quiver looked down at his wingman and quietly said, “You’ll be fine as long as you hang on. Then all you have to do is hang on until you can get away from here.”

“And you’d better be hot on my six,” Darin told him as he saw Mackin indicate that their floating comm had been transmitting as planned for long enough and it was time to go. He couldn’t make himself say goodbye, so he simply gave Quiver the best smile he could manage before he stepped away and sat on the nose skid. He fastened his belt tightly around the strut and got his customary death grip on it. He had Ikoa’s sleeve combadge and flare belt, Pellicer’s helmet, one of the blasters, a pair of flight gloves stashed in a pocket, and a total of two auxiliary life support systems. Chopper’s was strapped to Darin’s back for use after his first one was depleted.

Mackin hadn’t been happy about it and had unsuccessfully tried at length to talk Darin out of it, but he was allowing Darin to fly his own X-wing with Botch as long as he had the working chestboxes. Darin couldn’t help but wonder if Mack had finally agreed to it in order to fulfill the condemned pilot’s last request or something like that. Thumper hadn’t taken any more chestboxes since he figured with two of them he’d now run out of fuel before he ran out of air, so bringing additional ones wouldn’t necessarily help him.

Once he was settled on the skid, Darin looked back at the Coronas. Mack said something very quietly to Weas and pressed a datacard firmly into the lieutenant’s hand before he walked toward the X-wing. Quiver, barely visible except for the light of a glowrod Slurry was holding, was watching Darin with an odd expression that he had never seen before and didn’t know how to read. The other pilots were looking between Darin and Mackin. Some strange combination of hope that the plan would actually work and sad resignation that it probably wouldn’t was evident on most of their faces, though he also saw appreciation and a few gazes that seemed to be seeing the “rookie” in a whole new light. Darin wasn’t sure what his own expression was telling those he was leaving behind, but he sure knew what was on his mind. He wanted nothing more than to see his squadmates again and would have given anything to ensure that happened. He hoped they lifted off before he changed his mind and stayed.

Kalre shook his head and stepped forward when Mackin climbed up the S-foils and over the fuselage into the cockpit. “Lead, there has to be a better way. Don’t do this. It’ll never work.”

“I figured the Battle of Yavin would have taught you at least one thing,” said Mackin. He donned his helmet, adjusted the seat and seat restraints, and readied Ikoa’s fighter.

Kalre looked confused. “And what’s that?”

Mackin paused and looked down at the Rodian. “You can say something’s impossible, but the impossible has happened. Don’t underestimate it.” His gaze encompassed the rest of the pilots. “Be back before you know it. Eight will take good care of things in the meantime. Ready, Nine?”

No, he wasn’t. “Yes, sir.”

Mack closed the canopy and fired up the repulsorlifts while the Coronas backed away to give him room. The water impacted the snubfighter with a loud noise and jostled it hard when the craft backed out of the cavern and passed through the falls, and with that they were gone.

Chapter Twelve

The last remnants of light were quickly fading from the sky and stars were beginning to appear as the X-wing skimmed above the ground on its way to pick up Darin's fighter. This stabilizer wasn't broken after all. Commander Mackin kept a close eye on his readouts, particularly when they entered the vicinity of CC's crash site, which was still tagged on the scope from earlier with a blue dot. He gently slowed, waiting for the fighter's passive sensors to show him what he wanted to see.

They didn't.

The two intact X-wings were not there.

Mackin's chest tightened while he checked his scope again. The sensors had indeed been damaged by the impact of the fighter's sensor housing against Mackin's fighter when Ikoa had flown into the waterfall cave, but the pilots had been unable to repair them. They'd been acting up during this entire flight as a result, so Mack also looked out his windows at the darkened landscape. They were practically on top of CC's crash site, and Darin's and Quiver's fighters should have been visible on sensors or to his own eyes, but they weren't. If there was a bright spot to the situation, though, the only life sign was the one indicating Darin, which likely meant no Imperials were lying in wait for them.

A strange blip flickered on his sensor readouts. Mack turned his attention to it, but it was gone as soon as it appeared. Before he could even begin to wonder what had caused it or if it was legitimate, he was given an answer.

An explosion erupted from below, very close by, and it hurtled a thunder clap and a shockwave of heat and energy outward. The shockwave impacted the X-wing's portside shields, violently knocking the entire craft upward and to starboard and throwing Mackin against his seat restraints and the inside of his cockpit. He desperately tried to right the fighter and regain control. No TIEs or ships were on his scope. His best guess was that they had just tripped a proximity landmine that the Imperials had planted at the crash site, and there could be more. As long as they stayed in this area, they were in danger.

The shockwave had long since passed by this point, and the X-wing was finally obeying him again. One glance at his scope told him everything he needed to know for the moment: the life sign still present on his sensors meant Darin was still alive, his shields had been knocked out by the blast, and there were no Imperials in the vicinity. Time to get out of there before that last part changed.

Altitude would make them more visible, but the explosion had already erased whatever stealth they'd had, and altitude would also help keep them out of range of more mines. Mackin increased power to his repulsors and lifted them above CC's crash site, picked southeast as a random direction and accelerated as quickly as he dared with Darin in an unknown condition on his strut.

Darin was quickly learning that sweaty palms were not conducive to holding on tightly to the smooth metal of an X-wing's landing gear, especially as the fighter jumped and jerked, seemingly out of control. That knowledge, however, kept worsening the situation.

Whatever had just happened had slammed into him and the X-wing with enough force to snap the belt that was restraining him to the nose strut, and now he was dangling off the skid in midair and feeling his grip loosening by the nanosecond no matter what he did to counteract it. His panicked scrambles and flailing weren't helping, and he wasn't in a position to loop any straps around the skid like Pellicer had done or even hit his combadge. He tried not to look down.

Though it had only been a few seconds, it felt like hours before the fighter steadied itself. Darin forced himself to take a deep enough breath to yell over the engine and repulsor noise to Rudder, but before he could, the X-wing suddenly lifted up and pulled itself out of the remainder of his tenuous grasp. Darin fell.

He had just enough presence of mind to try to maneuver himself into what he'd been trained was the best position to absorb the ground impact after an off-nominal ejection.

Darin didn't remember losing consciousness, but he didn't remember keeping it either. He groaned a bit at the blossoming headache when he fully came to, pried his eyes open and pushed his sore body to a sitting position with difficulty. He was grateful for the helmet.

He looked all around, and his pounding heart sank lower and lower.

There was no X-wing in sight.

And undoubtedly the Imperials would be coming right for him very soon.

He hated strut-riding.

Once they were well clear of the crash site, Mackin dropped to terrain-following flight over the hillsides again and channeled power into his shields to recharge them faster. It felt like his fighter was flying more easily, and he was glad for it. Rudder must have been adjusting the atmospheric controls.

His sensor display dropped out completely and then flickered erratically. Mackin ignored the malfunctioning system and instead increased his visual scanning and paid more attention to his targeting scope to detect any enemy vehicles.

A couple minutes later they passed over a small river, and a bright reflection from the water grabbed Mackin's attention. Glancing down at the river, he winced and then looked over his shoulder to confirm his fears: he hadn't even considered the glow from the X-wing's engines and in particular how visible it was in the darkness. He might as well get on the comm and tell the Imperials their location.

His peripheral vision caught his sensor display, which had become steady and seemed to match what he could see outside in the night. But something wasn't right. He looked more closely, and a second later it hit him like a charging bantha: there was no longer a life sign on his sensors. Mack cursed at the system and reset it a few times, but it still stubbornly gave the same readout.

"Rudder?" he asked while he paralleled the river and looked for any type of hiding spot. "Can you tell with your own sensors if Nine's okay?"

The droid blatted a negative and pointed out how the X-wing's fuselage was blocking any readings he could get of the pilot on the nose gear.

That made one more big reason to land in a hurry. Unfortunately, Mackin only found one hiding place that was even remotely usable. The river he was flying beside forked into two branches. One branch continued on in a southwesterly direction, and the other was entirely

blocked by a crude stone dam, turning that branch into a dry riverbed. There was room in the dry riverbed to land the X-wing next to the dam.

The X-wing settled in place between the banks after half a minute more, and Mackin opened his canopy and powered down the fighter as quickly as he could. "Power yourself down, Rudder," Mackin told the astromech. "We need to be totally hidden now. No power signatures."

The droid beeped and shut down. As soon as the pilot was done, he jumped to the ground. "Nine?" he called softly. "You all right?" He hurried to the nose strut.

The sight that greeted him made the commander stop and stare stupidly for a moment. Mackin had expected to see Darin so much that the empty landing gear before him was simply incomprehensible.

That feeling passed quickly, though, and in its wake came a surge of what he privately referred to as Commander's Chaos: a swirling mixture of panic, alertness, questions and even calmness, all fueled by a shot of adrenaline. Darin was somewhere between there and CC's crash site, and if he'd fallen off he was probably hurt or maybe even dead. He could be injured from the landmine blast as well. And depending on where he was, the Imperials could be bearing down on him.

"Anything yet?"

"Not yet, Major Wendessin. The TIEs just reached the site."

Major Wendessin paced a few times behind the corporal's makeshift sensor station. "And you're certain there are no indications of which way the Rebels went?"

The Imperial corporal nodded. "I'm certain, sir. Shrapnel from the landmine's explosion destroyed the sensor we were using as a trigger, so we couldn't get any readings after the detonation. Given all the debris in the area and the limitations we faced with making it undetectable while still being able to detect, sir, it was the best we could do on short notice."

"It worked at least, and hopefully well enough to cripple them or slow them down at a minimum," Wendessin said. "Perhaps the ground team will be able to find some debris, a lead as to what direction the Rebels went, or even confirmation that it *was* them. I don't want to commit every available resource now only to discover some wild animal wandered too close and set it off. What's the ground team's status?" He directed his last question to the soldier manning a comm station.

"ETA ten minutes, sir."

"Tell them they have five minutes to get out there. Every minute's delay means the Rebels' trail gets colder."

"Yes, sir."

Wendessin left the men to their tasks and went to the room where the communications group was working. A new script should be ready for his approval soon. They had long since stopped using the original tactical frequency for official communications and instead were sending out fake broadcasts designed to sound authentic. A few comm specialists and tacticians had been tasked with creating scripts that sounded believable without giving away any important information while at the same time hiding the Imperials' true actions. It was tricky to come up with the right mixture of falsehoods and truths, since if the Rebels heard something they knew wasn't true, then the frequency's credibility would be lost forever. Major Wendessin wasn't

certain if the Rebels were still believing the information they heard over that frequency, but he wanted to keep that path open in case they were and he needed to use that tactic again.

He also wanted to get an update on the comm signal they had detected in the canyon. After not using the comm since this hunt had begun, it was strange that the Rebels were using it now; however, Wendessin had prudently sent forces to investigate the location of the signal's origin and the location mentioned in the transmission.

But for now, he was content in the knowledge that the Rebels were slipping, and in doing so were slipping closer to his grasp.

Mackin climbed up to his cockpit as fast as he could and hit Rudder's power switch on the way.

"Rudder, we've lost Nine!" he said, trying valiantly to keep his voice down. "If there's *anything* you can do to make these blasted sensors better, do it!"

The R2 beeped, and Mackin hastily powered up the X-wing again, starting with the comm system. He knew it was reckless, but this would be so much quicker and easier if he could get in touch with Darin over his combadge.

The first thing he heard when he powered up his fighter's comm system was lots of traffic over the Imperials' tactical frequency. Mack paused and listened while his feeling of dread grew in his stomach. The Imperials were indeed sending forces out to CC's crash site in response to the landmine explosion, and they would arrive before he could get there. He wouldn't be able to reach Darin in time if he was close to the crash site, and Mackin felt sick at the prospect. Going in there with laser cannons blazing on his X-wing wouldn't do either of them any good against the reported forces. They would also have a good chance of tracking Darin down if he transmitted from there. Mack kept his outgoing comm signal silent.

When his X-wing was powered, Mackin lifted up and backtracked as far as he dared, but it wasn't long before he felt he was pushing his luck and would be detected by the incoming Imperial forces. He pulled back.

If Darin remembered their contingency plans for what to do if they got split up and if he wasn't too injured to do so, he should be making his way to the closest rally point. That rally point was still too close to the reported Imperial concentrated forces for Mackin to feel safe bringing his fighter in, though. He'd have to find a good place to hide the X-wing and then somehow make his way back here before the Imperials found Darin, if they hadn't already.

Mackin pointed his snubfighter away from the Imperials and swept low over the landscape, looking for a suitable hiding place. Roughly two minutes into the aimless, anxious flight, Rudder whistled and caught Mackin's attention. It was then that Mack noticed the light flashing on his communications console, indicating an incoming transmission. His first hopeful thought was that Darin was trying to get in touch with him, but a closer look at the panel showed that wasn't true. Surprisingly, the transmission was coming over the Rebels' secure mission frequency, one which hadn't been used since the Coronas' last communication with the Special Forces units.

A text message on a screen from Rudder told the pilot that the transmission had been a short burst only and used the same encryption the Rebels had on this mission, so the droid had

recorded and decrypted it. Puzzlement, hope and skepticism all vied for dominance in Mackin. “What did it say?”

The droid’s answer across the screen was simple: 063’049/187’170.

Mackin furrowed his brow and slowed the fighter. “What? Rudder, do you have any idea what that means?”

WORKING.

The R2 processed the numbers for an agonizingly long minute before replying, THE NUMBERS ARE GLOBAL COORDINATES.

Mackin frowned. “Coordinates? Where are they? Are they nearby?”

39.2 KILOMETERS WEST-SOUTHWEST OF OUR CURRENT POSITION. PLOTTING.

A yellow dot appeared on Mackin’s scope to indicate the location. The commander thought hard, staring at the dot until the image burned into his retinas. Somehow he wasn’t too optimistic about this. There was no way Darin was at those coordinates. The Imperials had the Coronas’ combadges, so it was conceivable it was a fake transmission from them, a lure. Or another trap being set by the colonists. The timing was too suspicious, and Mack wasn’t inclined to trust *anyone* on this planet aside from his pilots at this point. Plus, it was doubtful that it was a rescue party since the transmission wasn’t following any rescue protocols that he knew of.

But what if one of the Special Forces soldiers had survived? What if one had managed to get away from whatever had happened in the colony to start this whole mess, and he was the one sending the signal? Given its properties, wasn’t that the most likely possibility?

But still, if it was a Special Forces soldier, why weren’t they using the proper comm protocol? He came up with a handful of possible reasons, none of which truly satisfied him.

More seconds ticked by. Mackin posed one more silent question to himself: with his lack of other options, did he really have any other choice? He had to face the fact that he was desperate. He couldn’t return to the waterfall cave without giving away the Coronas’ location, and he needed help to find Darin. Fast.

Yet more seconds passed. He turned the X-wing and headed for the yellow dot.

“We should be going after them,” Quiver blurted out.

“Give it some more time, Ten,” Weas replied.

“What if we don’t have time? You heard the Imperials’ tac frequency! They responded to a landmine explosion at one of our crash sites!” Quiver stopped his incessant pacing in the cave and now faced Lt. Weas. Did he have to spell this out for the XO? “What else could have caused that except One or Nine getting too close to it? They could be injured or dead or in the hands of the Imps as a result.”

“If the Imperials had them, don’t you think they would have reported that too? They haven’t, which means One and Nine got away at least. If One had the shields up, a mine wouldn’t do a lot of damage.”

“If it was the X-wing that set off the mine and not one of them on foot.” Quiver shook his head adamantly. “Something’s wrong. If they did get away then they’re still in trouble, because if they weren’t in trouble and everything was fine and they had the second fighter, we would have heard from them twenty minutes ago!”

“Try to relax, Quiver,” Ikoa said gently. She was still feverish and having difficulty breathing, but she forced her words out anyway. “There are lots of reasons why we might not have heard from them yet. Maybe they’re laying low until the Imps move out of the vicinity. Maybe they had to take the long way around due to a patrol they encountered. Maybe—”

“Maybe the Imperials are executing them this very second,” Quiver snapped.

“Ten. Enough,” came Weas’s harsh reply.

Quiver spun around and resumed pacing. “Should never’ve let’m do this insane mission,” he grumbled under his breath. Then he gradually raised his voice as he said, “Because how are we ever going to know if they need help? When we get the broadcast from the Imperials? It’ll be a little too late then!” Pellicer mumbled agreement.

Weas glanced between both of them before saying, “You know, it would be nice if you trusted your CO a bit more than that. He knows what he’s doing.”

Quiver turned his attention to Weas as he continued to pace restlessly. “I *do* trust Mack!” he said in aggravation. “That’s not the problem here. The problem is that I don’t trust this whole damn *planet!*” Every milligram of sarcasm in his being went into his next sentences, the first of which was delivered in the most girly-sounding voice he could muster and accompanied by melodramatic gestures with his uninjured arm. ““Oh no, there are one or two Imperials here in our precious colony, please save us!”” The next set was an impromptu impersonation of Trainner’s voice, which was adequate enough to get his point across, with more gestures. ““Hello, I’m Lieutenant Colonel Special Forces Man. Yes, we’re part of the same organization as you, on the same mission and therefore are your allies, but at the first sign of trouble we’re abandoning you to the enemy. Good luck, see you around if you happen to make it back alive.”” Quiver’s voice returned to the angry version of “normal.” “Not one single thing on this whole blasted planet has been what it seemed, so no, I don’t trust the situation One and Nine are in. I don’t trust anything about it!”

Weas looked hard at Quiver. “Like it or not, One and Nine are now part of that situation. Trust *them.*”

Quiver gave up trying to get through to the XO. At least Pellicer seemed to understand what he was saying. Quiver paced faster, and he consciously tried to hold on to the anger boiling inside. At first he had been frightened by these aggressive mood swings, but he had soon discovered they were more easily defined and therefore more comforting than the alternative, a feeling more empty than the incoming comm frequencies. That frightened him even more.

Things just kept getting worse and worse, and there were way too many Imperials nearby. He was never going to reach that blasted rally point.

Darin heard another TIE approaching his position, and he scrambled under a bush as well as he could and held his breath. After it had passed, he listened for a few moments before he pulled back, picked himself out of the mud and continued moving as quickly and quietly as he could through the light woods. He tried to avoid stepping in the larger patches of mud to minimize his tracks, but it was hard to see the footing in the dark. Though his orange flight suit was fast becoming covered with grime and wet dirt from the recent rain, it was still orange and made him feel very obvious. The helmet muffled sounds and made him exhaustively hyperalert to compensate, so he had resorted to carrying the headgear.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he heard a speeder bike coming closer. Darin wildly looked around, trying in vain to stay calm. The ground forces would have a much easier time of spotting him.

Where was a good hiding place when he truly needed one?

Chapter Thirteen

Mackin slowed his X-wing, circled and set down in a small clearing in the trees a short distance from the location of the transmitted coordinates. Soon the hum of the starfighter's systems faded away into the night, and he popped his canopy open, left his helmet on the seat and told Rudder to keep a lookout. Mackin quietly jumped out of his cockpit and nervously fingered the blaster in his holster. He hoped he wouldn't regret this.

On his flyby he hadn't noticed anything on sensors at the coordinates, but that didn't mean much. Mackin cautiously began walking toward the coordinates' location and remained close to trees and bushes for cover. Concealment was out of the question due to his orange flight suit. When he got back, he vowed he was going to invent a reversible flight suit: orange on one side and dark camouflage on the other. Mack wished he knew what he was looking for here.

A gruff voice from the trees behind and to his right commanded, "Hold it."

Startled, Mackin stopped in his tracks. "Who's there?" he demanded, looking around. He gripped his holstered blaster. He was itching to draw it, but would he get gunned down if he did?

"Drop your weapon," came another voice from the opposite side.

"Show yourselves," Mackin countered. The situation wasn't improving.

"A'right then. Just stay right there now," said a third voice, this one from the direction toward which the pilot had been walking. "We don't want to shoot you, so don't make us."

Out of the trees emerged four men. Each had a blaster pistol trained on Mackin, and he was quick to notice that he was surrounded. There was no way out of this.

The four men weren't Imperials—far from it, actually—but that didn't raise Mackin's spirits much. After all, the colony was at least partially to blame for the trap the Rebels had fallen into, so despite their words there was no reason to think these four burly locals wouldn't shoot the Corona where he stood or, worse yet, take him to the Imperials. He was such an idiot for coming here.

"Drop your blaster." The repeated words came from the third speaker this time.

Mackin's gut felt hollow while he slowly pulled his blaster out. He let it fall to the ground, and its light impact was muffled by the grass and sealed his failure. He could only miserably hope his pilots could eventually escape on their own. He held his hands out in plain sight.

The first man who had spoken came up and took the pilot's blaster while the other three stopped well out of reach but kept their weapons raised. One briefly shone a glowrod beam over Mackin. Now that they were closer, Mack could make out more details in the light from the glowrod: the men were definitely strong, and their clothing was the type worn by people who did lots of manual labor.

The third man spoke again. "Who are you now, and what are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I'm an Alliance pilot," Mackin said carefully. The uniform and gear gave it away anyway. "I followed a transmission here to these coordinates. In short, I'm a survivor of one trap who just apparently walked into another." He couldn't keep the coldness out of his voice at the memories of all that his squadron had suffered as a result. Even if the increased Imperial forces had shown up after Lokinha's original call for help, he could never forgive the colony for not warning them when it happened. It would have changed everything.

“Just hold on now, Alliance pilot,” the man said brusquely. “Sorry for not serving you Whyrren’s and nerf steak, but we do have to be sure you’re not an Imperial and didn’t bring them along.”

The situation remained unchanged for another minute until a series of clicks sounded over one man’s comlink. The four locals relaxed slightly. The one who was doing most of the talking slowly holstered his blaster pistol, and the other three did the same. The commander was surprised to see things apparently getting better, not worse. He’d forgotten what that felt like lately. Breathing came easier now that Mackin wasn’t sharing the air with a blaster barrel.

“You’re not the only Rebels on-planet, you know, a’though we don’t a’ have fancy equipment and titles like you do now,” the man said. He had short, curly hair and a beard. “When the Imperials came, some of us formed a local underground resistance. You’re forgetting now that this colony was sympathetic to the Alliance long before this invasion.”

“You’re right,” Mackin replied, crossing his arms. “I forgot that a few days ago when this colony led us into a trap where we were ambushed by the Imperials. Sorry if I’m sounding a bit testy, but understand these haven’t been the best days of my life.”

“A’right, if *you* understand that our group had nothing to do with that ambush,” the man shot back. “Show some gratitude, pilot. We’ve been monitoring the events as best we could since then, and we want to help you. We sent the transmission in hopes you’d come here.”

“How did you get access to that frequency and encryption?” Mack asked, not acknowledging the offer of assistance or even the denial of involvement with the Imperial trap.

“Well, technically it was the other Rebel’s doing. He’s the one with the comlink and a’ your frequencies.”

That made Mackin stop, and he stared at the man. “Other Rebel? What other Rebel?”

“He’s a Rebel commando that was injured during the firefight in the colony early yesterday morning. He’s hiding with us until he recovers,” the colonist answered.

Mackin felt a rush of relief. That was an unusual feeling lately too. “Can I talk to him? I really need some help getting to my other pilot before the Imperials do.”

The man nodded, and the group started walking back toward the X-wing. The other three men moved off into the woods and came back walking beside one speeder bike each. One of them pulled out a comlink, but Mack couldn’t hear what he said.

“We’ll take you to our meeting area so you can talk to the leaders and to the Rebel,” the spokesman told the pilot. “You can bring your fighter with. There’s plenty of room there to hide it, and it’s a much better hiding spot than out here now. But where’s your other pilot? Not near where that landmine went off, I hope. That’s an Imperial hotbed right now.”

Mackin looked sharply at the man. “How do you know about the landmine?”

“I told you, pilot, we’ve been monitoring things,” the man scoffed. “We have friends in the colony passing along information they hear. Don’t be so suspicious. If we were working for the Imperials, you would have been stunned, tied up and taken to them a’ready, since that would be the easiest course of action. We could have made some good money too with that bounty the Imperials put on you. But you’re fine. Relax.”

That only served to agitate Mackin even more, but he said nothing.

They were almost to the X-wing when the man spoke again. “What about a’ the rest of your pilots now? Do you need to contact them? Where are they?”

Still uneasy, Mack withdrew even further and just replied shortly, “Dead.”

“Oh.” The man coughed lightly and scratched at his head before mumbling, “Sorry.”

Mackin sighed and directed his gaze forward, though he wasn't seeing anything while he solemnly said, "Yeah. Me too."

The floorboards creaked, the windows were dirty, and the air circulation was poor at best. And this, Major Wendessin reflected, was one of the most prominent buildings in the entire colony, as it served as their main governing hall.

It was without a doubt the worst government office building Wendessin had ever set foot in, and he had only done that because this building was the logical place for his temporary Command and Control center. It was centrally located within the colony, it had all the needed utilities and capabilities and infrastructure, and it was one of the nicest buildings there. But if this was considered "nice," he couldn't bear to see what "dirty" was.

Really, how could these people live like this? Didn't they realize that if they simply joined the Empire, they would get all the benefits a galactic government could offer them? They could clean this place up, attain a higher standard of living, grow from a small, backworld colony to a developed planet and major exporter, have a voice in galactic affairs. Why not do that? Why side with the bankrupt insurgents? It was completely irrational, and he simply couldn't fathom it.

"Major?"

Wendessin turned away from the smudged window and faced the saluting Imperial soldier, whose uniform insignia proclaimed him to be a communication specialist. Returning the salute, he said, "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, we have results back on the numbers that were received over the comlinks we obtained from the dead Rebel commandos. We've determined that they're most likely global coordinates on the planet."

Wendessin frowned. He'd had the communication teams working double-time now that there had been a second transmission after the prolonged Rebel silence. "Coordinates? Where?"

The lieutenant handed Wendessin a datapad showing a map of the local area and a dot marking the location of the coordinates. "There, sir, near a couple abandoned trilithide mines. One of those mines is where we're keeping the Rebels' starfighters. The coordinates, however, are closer to the other mine. We swept it before we moved the Rebels' fighters into the one nearby, but it was empty."

Wendessin studied the datapad and let his gaze linger for a moment on the second abandoned mine. If this was what he thought it was, things were working perfectly. "Only Rebels would be using that frequency and encryption. Something is happening at those coordinates, and the Rebels could have moved into that mine after we swept it. I think it may be time to re-sweep that place, don't you?"

Without waiting for an answer to the rhetorical question, Wendessin gave back the datapad. "I'll have the C&C team find out which squad is on standby and get them ready to go. However, first I want you to coordinate this with Intelligence," Wendessin ordered. "They might have some particular instructions on how to handle this, and I'm sure they'll want to analyze the signal for any special subcarriers or hidden pulses in it. Did you already do that?"

The lieutenant blinked. "No, sir. The signal looked normal. Nothing to make us suspect it had a hidden carrier frequency in it or anything."

“Intel might see things differently. Assist them with whatever they need, then report back.”

“Yes, sir.”

If nothing else, Mack reflected, that guy was right about the hiding spot.

The local resistance’s center of operations turned out to be a depleted trilithide mining complex to the south. The river he had flown above earlier flowed very near the complex, and dark silhouettes of power-generating or cooling equipment were visible in the water. The mining operations had taken place entirely underground, and the complex was barely visible from the air. The mining shafts sloped underneath the surface and were large enough for a repulsor hauler to go through. At the bottom of the shaft was a huge, cavernous area from where the trilithide had been extracted, as well as solid building structures along the side that presumably had housed the operation centers while the mine had been in use. In the depths of the mine, the only light came from the X-wing, the three speeder bikes, the windows of one of the buildings and some portable floodlights in what looked like a courtyard-type area nearby.

What he would have given for a hideout like this earlier.

The men on the speeder bikes led Mackin to a spot near the structures and motioned for him to land. He did so, wishing he didn’t need to shut down his X-wing’s landing lights and lose most of the illumination immediately around him, but at least the four men were lighting glowrods to help alleviate that problem.

After Mack secured his fighter and told Rudder to keep watch again, he climbed out and cautiously walked over to the speeder bikes.

One of the men returned his blaster and beckoned him with a nod. “Let’s go.”

The pilot followed, and the faint echo of their footsteps told Mackin the cavern was quite large. The air was cold and clammy, and it had an unrecognizable odd smell like back in the waterfall cave. He wondered if residual trilithide was the cause of what his nose could only compare to cooling system liquid. Peering into the impenetrable depths around them, Mackin quietly said, “You all are sure taking this ‘underground’ resistance literally.” If anyone heard him, they didn’t answer.

Mackin funneled his energy into absorbing every detail he could see while they walked, like the layout of the structures, the locations of doorways, the place where the speeder bikes were parked, and even roughly how long it would take to get to his fighter from the closest building. If something happened to turn the tables on him down here, he wanted to know exactly where he was going.

Mackin was escorted into the building that housed the interior light and then down a corridor. They passed several humans and Quarren on the way who were all wearing the same type of work clothing. After coming to a stop at a room, the bearded man knocked on the doorframe and then opened the door. “One of the other Rebels came to the coordinates, boss,” he said to the two beings inside.

A tall, stout man with greying blond hair and a male Quarren with mottled orange skin and startling bright blue eyes both looked up from the datapads they were working on at a dusty desk. The man stood and walked up to Mackin while the pilot’s escort moved aside. His

weathered face looked amiable, and he offered a hand. “Welcome. Please, come in and sit down.” He had the same type of accent the first four men had.

Mackin guardedly shook hands and sat, and the man retook his seat. He and the Quarren scrutinized the pilot, and Mack could only imagine how haggard and dirty he looked. Mackin shifted and restlessly perched on the edge of the hard metal chair. Neither this man nor the Quarren were a Rebel commando. He didn’t have time for this. Every passing minute made it easier to believe something had happened to Darin.

“Given the situation, I hope you don’t mind if I don’t tell you my name,” the man said.

Mack would have been surprised if he’d gotten one. “Then you won’t mind if I don’t tell you mine,” he replied.

The leader nodded in acceptance. “Can I get you anything? Water? We have some fruit if you’re hungry.”

Mackin’s mouth watered at the mere thought of it, especially after having nothing but those disgusting ration bars, but he ignored that and his rumbling stomach and said, “Thank you, but I’m running short on time. My other pilot is in trouble. I was told there was another Rebel here who might be able to help...?”

The leader’s brow furrowed. “There is, but he’s injured. I don’t know how much help he can give you.”

“Can I talk to him?” Mack’s impatience fluttered up.

“Of course. Follow me.” The leader got up and motioned Mackin out the door. The Quarren silently followed them both.

“How long has the Rebel been here with you?” Mack asked while they walked down the corridor.

Mack could almost see the leader counting in his head. “Only about... maybe six hours?” the leader said. “He got help from some people in the colony I know. They contacted us, and we brought him out here for everyone’s safety; there are too many Imperials there. We thought it would be hard to smuggle him out of the colony, but it really wasn’t. Of course, we heard that the Imperials really cracked down on searching vehicles and checking identification after that.”

Mackin suppressed a sigh. That meant he’d still need the third pilot mission or some variation of it to get inside the colony.

“Do you know if any other Rebel commandos survived?” Mackin asked.

The leader shook his head and said, “Unfortunately he’s the only one I’ve heard of.” He paused. “Is there something we can do for you? We’d like to help. What kind of trouble is your pilot in?”

Mackin hesitated, still not fully trusting their “help”. How much should he share with the colonists? “We got split up, and I think he’s near some Imperials.”

“For his sake, I hope not.”

The man stopped at a door and knocked, then opened the door after the invitation from inside.

Inside this room Mackin saw a man with short brown hair and dark eyes lying partially upright on a makeshift bed. He wore a Rebel Special Forces uniform that had seen better days: his right leg was elevated, and the pants leg had been rolled up and cut away to reveal several bloody bandages wrapped around his thigh. Older, smaller blood stains were visible in various places on the fabric. But despite the story the uniform told of what its wearer had endured, the

commando smiled. “So someone did get my transmission!” he said. “I was so afraid no one would find me and I’d be left here for dead.”

Mack exhaled, sharing the man’s relief at finally seeing an ally. Darin would be happy that one of the commandos survived too. He entered the room, followed by the resistance leader and the Quarren. “Well, honestly we didn’t know anyone else was alive,” the pilot explained. “Otherwise we would have tried to find you earlier. Corona Lead, mission code crystalline.”

“Braze Four, mission code prism,” the commando replied. Mackin nodded; Braze was the mission designation for the Special Forces recon team. Mack didn’t recognize the man, but he hadn’t spent much time with the recon team either. The commando went on. “This mission has been such a carbon flush, hasn’t it, sir? We got ambushed by Imps early yesterday morning in the colony. We tried to warn the rest of you, but I don’t know if it ever got through. The rest of my team was killed. I was injured but managed to get away, and the locals hid me and have been treating me. But what’s been happening with you and your pilots? The colonists told me the Imps have been hunting you since that fight.”

Mackin gave a weary sigh. “We’ve been having a tough time. The Imperials got some of our X-wings and combadges. They can hear and understand anything that’s broadcast over our frequencies.”

The commando frowned. “They did? Wish I’d known that earlier. I hope they don’t know what those coordinates mean then.”

The Quarren spoke up for the first time and addressed the commando. “We told you when you got here that the Imperials had gotten some of the X-wings. You knew that.”

Mackin raised an eyebrow, and the commando’s frown deepened in thought. “I don’t remember it,” the soldier finally admitted. “You’ve got to stop giving me the good painkillers right after telling me things.”

“We didn’t,” the Quarren said.

“But there was a transmitted signal on one of the frequencies not too long ago,” the commando insisted. “That wasn’t me. If the comms are so dangerous—”

“That wasn’t a real comm signal,” Mackin explained. “We needed a distraction.”

The Quarren made a hacking, gargling noise that sounded like he was clearing his throat and cut in. “Getting back to the imminent danger, so the Imperials could have received your coordinates transmission as well?” he asked Braze Four. “Those coordinates aren’t that far away. It won’t be hard for them to piece things together and come looking here.”

The resistance leader looked uneasy. “Go tell everyone to start gathering their things to get out, just in case,” he told his second-in-command. The Quarren nodded and left. Turning back to the Rebels, the leader said, “If that’s true, you’d better figure out quick what you want to do about your pilot. If you need something from us to help, we might not be sticking around much longer.”

The commando looked at Mackin. “Sir? What’s he mean?”

“I’ve got a pilot on foot out there alone, probably being overrun by Imperials right now,” Mack said. “I need to find him and get him out ASAP; we’ve learned the hard way that the Imperials here aren’t very interested in keeping live prisoners. I was hoping to get your help, but they’re right: you’re too hurt.” He felt his internal pressure building and tried to think things through. What other options did he have on impossibly short notice? “Maybe if there’s a speeder bike I can take—”

“What, this?” the commando scoffed, gesturing to his leg. “This is nothing! I’m fine. I can go find him for you.”

Mackin hesitated, then he shook his head, though it killed him to do so. “I can’t ask you in your condition. It’s too dangerous for you.”

The commando crossed his arms. “Listen, sir, I’ve got the training for this. I could do this in my sleep, and I can move fine with all the painkillers they’ve given me. I’ve lost enough teammates lately; I don’t want to see you lose one of yours too when I can help. I’ll go grab a speeder bike. Just tell me where he is and how I can identify him.”

Mack was ashamed to admit to himself how relieved he was to hear this. “I’ll come with,” he offered.

Braze Four considered that and then looked at him plainly. “As long as you won’t slow me down, sir, fine. But I need some info to prepare and in case we get split up. Where is he? What kind of terrain are we going into?”

Mackin described the relative location of the rally point and a phrase he felt Darin should trust. The commando nodded and pushed himself to a sitting position on the bed. He put his boots on, and then he rolled down his right pants leg. It had been cut lengthwise below his knee, and he gathered the cut ends and stuffed the fabric into the top of his boot to keep it secure.

Mack watched him do it, and something started to niggle in the back of his mind. Something about what he was seeing on the commando’s leg... or rather, what he wasn’t.

He tried to push the thoughts away and dismiss them as paranoia, but when they refused to leave him he gave in. “I know someone with a tattoo on his right leg there,” Mack said. He did his best to sound casual and conversational.

“Is that so, sir?” Braze Four asked idly while he fiddled with the fabric.

“Yeah. It’s amazing what weird little memories can float in your brain when under stress,” the commander continued lightly. “I never got any tattoos myself. How about you?” He watched the commando more closely for his reaction.

Braze Four hesitated before saying, “No, sir. Not my style.”

Mackin nodded for show, but instantly his mind flooded him with doubts and questions. In his stressed and emotional state, had Darin been exaggerating about all the commandos having tattoos in order to drive his point across? Or for that matter, could the commando who told him that in the first place have been exaggerating? It was certainly possible.

The soldier pushed himself out of bed and gathered a few things into a standard issue backpack. He fastened his blaster holster around his waist, checked the weapon’s charge, and finally hobbled out slowly and stiffly with Mackin and the resistance leader.

Braze Four broke into Mackin’s worried thoughts and asked, “Sir, I’ve got to know... What happened? Were there any other Special Forces survivors? I didn’t see anyone else in the colony while I was there.”

“Epsilon made it out,” Mack replied. He resisted the urge to check his chrono and caught himself wishing the injured man would hurry up. He instantly regretted it.

The commando smiled, oblivious to the mental judgements. “Good.”

“I’d like to know more about what happened with you,” Mack said, making himself focus on more productive things. “You said you didn’t know our comm frequencies were dangerous, so why did you wait until now to try comming anyone? Why not try earlier?”

“My combadge was broken. I just finished fixing it,” Braze Four replied. “The colonists let me use their equipment to boost the signal out of this mine.”

“Why didn’t you use standard comm protocols and content? If you wanted help, it almost backfired on you. Do you realize how much your transmission seemed like a trap?”

The commando shrugged. “But it worked, sir. You came.”

Mackin hesitated. That non-answer really didn’t sit well with him. “Only because I was that desperate. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t have come, and then what?”

The limping commando met Mackin’s eyes, and some haughtiness and impatience leaked through in his voice. “Sir, please. Special Forces doesn’t do everything by the book. We do things so that they get done. And this got done. Your standing here is proof of that.”

They walked out of the building at last and into the large courtyard area housing the lights, storage crates and some small vehicles. Other colonists moved about, packing things into the crates. The group headed for a few speeder bikes on the far side. “What about your other pilots?” the commando asked.

“Nine’s my only concern.”

“You’re sure?”

“Nine’s my only concern,” Mack repeated more firmly.

“All right, sir.” He nodded toward a two-seat speeder bike. “You fly. I’ll hop on back.”

Mackin looked at him in confusion. “But then how can we bring Nine back?”

“Oh, right. Sorry, sir. We’ll take two bikes.”

Mackin stopped, second-guessing this entire plan. Was the commando simply affected by painkillers as he claimed? If so, was he more of a liability to bring with? But if not, then what did that mean? Mack tried to fight down the persistent feeling that had been nagging at him ever since he’d learned the commando didn’t have a tattoo. That was third-hand, unsubstantiated information. Nothing to base anything drastic on or overreact about.

But why did it have to cast a different light on other, seemingly innocent actions and words?

Ahead of him, the commando paused and looked over his shoulder at the pilot. “You coming, sir?”

“Who’s your CO?” Mackin blurted out.

Braze Four turned around and stared at him incredulously. “Sir?”

“Tell me the name of your commanding officer. The one who put this whole mission together,” Mackin ordered.

The commando didn’t look too happy. “Seriously? You know we’re not supposed to name names with non-Alliance around.” He shot a meaningful look at the resistance leader there with them.

“Make an exception. Whisper it to me. I don’t care,” Mackin replied.

Braze Four crossed his arms. “You came to me, begging me to help rescue your pilot, and now you’re wasting my time with these pointless quizzes? Sir? I think if you want your pilot to be rescued alive, it’s time for us to get going. Or I’ll go by myself.”

“No. Wait. It takes two seconds to say a name,” Mackin countered.

“You’re digging for information. And if you’re really not a Rebel and I end up giving the Imperials personal information about my CO and endangering him?” Braze Four demanded.

“Then maybe that’ll teach you to use correct comm protocols in the future,” said Mackin. “Now set my mind at ease. Who is it?”

The commando narrowed his eyes in a glare, and then when he aimed his glare at the resistance leader the man got the hint and stepped back. The commando turned back to Mackin

and finally growled in a low voice, "Major Brexxil. Happy now, sir?" He started toward the speeder bikes again.

The last thing Mackin wanted to do was delay Darin's rescue if that was indeed what it was, but he immediately pulled out his blaster pistol, disengaged the safety and aimed at the commando. Trainner had replaced Brexxil about a month ago after the major's death. "Hold it!" Mackin ordered. His thumb quickly changed the blaster's power settings.

Braze Four halted. The colonist was backing away even farther and looking between them both with wide eyes. "What are you doing?!" the local said.

Mackin ignored him for the moment. "Turn around slowly, 'Braze Four'," Mackin demanded. "You've got five seconds to convince me you're actually a Rebel and not an undercover Imperial."

"What? Undercover Imperial? Come on now, sir, take it easy here. You're completely overreacting. Let's talk this out," Braze Four said. He began to slowly turn to his left, no longer favoring his injured leg as much. Despite the placating words, Mackin caught the new look of smug danger in the commando's eyes at the same time Mackin realized the soldier's turn was momentarily blocking the view of his right arm. In that split second, Mackin remembered in a flash everything he had told him about Darin's location and situation. If any of that or Mack's current location was transmitted to the rest of the Imperials, both he and Darin were dead.

That, more than anything else, made Mackin's finger tentatively touch his trigger. There was a sudden movement as the Imperial flung up his own unholstered blaster and brought it to bear. Mackin fired instantly. So did the Imperial.

Mackin's consciousness was consumed by a searing pain in his left side. He cried out, staggered backwards and doubled over, then he looked down and clamped his left hand against his bleeding wound at the bottom edge of his flak vest.

The Imperial was down. Breathing hard, Mack stumbled backwards some more. He saw the resistance's leader quickly approaching him, but he jerked his blaster up and shakily tried to aim it. "Stay away!" Mackin commanded through gritted teeth. He should have known it was another trap. He should have known the colonists and Imperials would do this again. He was so stupid.

If he couldn't make it to his fighter, if he didn't get out of there, he was dead. Darin was dead. At least the others had a chance with Steen taking care of them, but letting them down so badly hurt worse than the blaster wound.

Mackin also became acutely aware that he was fully facing the prospect of never seeing his wife and daughter again.

That thought provided the strength for another step backwards, but then his leg buckled. He ended up on the ground, grimacing. His wound was killing him, and he felt lightheaded.

Mackin's vision tunneled and went black.

Chapter Fourteen

Gasping for breath, Darin stumbled to a stop and leaned against a tree. He couldn't keep doing this. The Imperials were slowed down because they had to search a large area on the wooded hillsides, but they had faster vehicles and sensors that covered a lot of square meters. Once he'd realized he was able to stay beyond the outer range of their focused sensors, he'd started running to ensure that remained true. His only breaks had come whenever he'd heard a TIE approaching overhead, and then he had hidden just long enough to watch the TIE depart again. The ground forces would get too close if he stayed any longer.

Darin knew he was wearing himself out too quickly, but that intellectual knowledge couldn't cut through the fear of what would happen if the Imperials found him. If they got a good mark on him then he wouldn't be able to outrun them anyway. His only hope to get away once and for all was to make it to the contingency rally point as soon as he could and pray that Mack was there waiting for him. Mack would get him out.

Darin forced himself to push away from the tree and kept running. His head hurt, there was a pain in his side from the exertion, and he couldn't see well in the dark. Invisible tree branches and roots slapped at his face and feet, making him stumble. Climbing and descending the low hills with all his gear made his heart pound in his ears and his shoulders ache. Thankfully the rally point couldn't be much farther.

At long last he came to a clearing and stopped at its edge, still inside the tree line. This had to be it: he'd made it!

But the clearing was empty. There was no X-wing waiting there.

Darin looked everywhere but saw nothing aside from the dark outlines of more trees and bushes. There were no sounds except for the ones he'd learned were natural. He fought to catch his breath, dropped his helmet and doubled over, holding himself half upright by putting his hands on his knees and locking his elbows. Finally he dared to say in a low voice, "Lead?"

There was no answer. Nothing changed. He was alone.

"No, Lead, where are you?"

Again, nothing answered. Darin wiped sweat off his face and realized he couldn't make himself run anymore. He was lucky he could still stand on these rubbery legs. He really needed some water too.

So now what? Stay here and hide and hope the Imperials didn't find him? Or somehow force his legs to keep him moving and leave the only place where he had a chance of meeting his commander? Where would he go then? Just keep moving away from the Imperials? He could never last; he'd have to stop sometime. With that being the case, maybe it would be best to stop here, hunker down and hold out hope that Mack would reach him first. Though did Mack even know they were separated?

Darin's mind wandered back once more to that strange transmission he'd received over the Rebels' secure mission frequency sometime after he'd fallen. Had that been from Mackin? Who else could it have been from? The problem was that Darin didn't know what the numbers meant. If they were instructions from Mackin of what to do now or changes to the plan, Darin couldn't follow them, and that prospect worried him. He felt so blasted scared and alone. Until now he hadn't truly realized just how much he'd come to rely on Quiver helping him and watching his back. His wingman's absence was acute.

He wrangled his thoughts back to a modicum of usefulness and decided he had to stay here until he got some of his wind back. He wouldn't have much time to find a good long-term hiding place that would shield him from Imperial sensors when they got closer, so he'd better get to it, especially with the huge trail Darin was sure he'd left while blundering through the woods. His escape and evasion skills were rusty at best.

Darin picked up the helmet and had just begun looking when he heard a noise nearby, the rustle of leaves on a tree branch moved by something other than the breeze. He froze, and then he slipped behind a tree and silently pulled his blaster out of its holster. It was either Mackin or something very, very bad, but on this planet he wasn't putting good odds on the former.

"Hey, pilot!" an unknown, rough voice quietly called in his direction. "Hold up. I'm here to help you."

Darin's racing heart leapt into his throat, which had constricted in panic. The Imperials had spotted him. It was a pretty weak lure— if they thought he'd fall for that they were crazy— but it didn't change the fact that he had to save himself. *Now.*

He stayed still and flicked the safety off his blaster while he held his breath as much as his demanding lungs would allow. Darin strained to hear movements around him, and his mind bombarded him with questions: how many Imperials were here? Had they transmitted their location to the rest yet? Did they have a vehicle nearby he could commandeer? Or was this the end of the road for him? Maybe, just maybe, he had a chance. Maybe the Imperial had only heard him and didn't know exactly where he was.

Footsteps that were quiet but not stealthy came directly toward him. "Relax, just wait a second," the same voice said. "I can get you out of here. I'm not going to hurt you."

So much for that hope. Darin didn't know the answers to his self-posed questions, but he did know that he'd have to fight his way out until he could hopefully find the Imperials' vehicle. He shifted his left-hand grip on his helmet in case he needed to use it as a last-ditch melee weapon.

The footsteps were still approaching him. Increasing panic gave Darin one last jolt of adrenaline. The pilot summoned the last of his energy in anticipation of a firefight, leaned partially out around the tree and raised his blaster.

And hesitated.

His target saw the action and immediately jumped behind a tree himself while reaching for a holstered weapon, but Darin still held his fire. He'd caught a decent enough glimpse of what he'd thought was an Imperial biker scout or soldier to realize it wasn't one at all. Although it was hard to make out details in the night, the silhouette of the being's oddly shaped head was unmistakable as a Quarren.

"You're— not an Imperial," Darin managed to gasp out with his shortened breath. He let the hand holding the blaster fall limply to his side. He nervously glanced around, but the Quarren seemed to be alone.

The Quarren chanced a cautious look from around his own tree and slowly lowered his own blaster partway. "No, I'm not," the Quarren said simply and with a bit of an aquatic growl, "and if you'd just listen for a minute I'll explain. I live in the colony. Your squadmate met up with us and said you'd be here and would need help. I'll tell you the rest on the way back. I've got a speeder bike here, so hurry up and come on before the Imperials catch up."

"My... my squadmate?" Darin asked. This wasn't sitting right with him. He didn't want to leave the area without Mackin, and who knew where this local really wanted to take him? He

could get dropped off at the Imperials' feet. He tightened his grip on his weapon. All the blasted external pressures made it hard to think things through.

"Yes. Human, male, black hair. Mentioning something about a third pilot to you was supposed to help you know this was legitimate?" the Quarren said.

That sounded like Mack. "Where is he? Couldn't he come?"

"No, he's injured."

Darin stepped out from behind the tree. "Injured?! How badly? What happened?"

"Are you going to stand there a' night asking questions while the Imperials get closer, or are you going to come with?" the Quarren asked in growing annoyance. He slowly holstered his weapon and took a watchful step backwards, away from his own cover.

Fear for his commanding officer overrode the remainders of skepticism and wariness. Darin holstered his own blaster pistol, uncertainly followed the Quarren to the speeder bike and climbed on the back. He hoped he wouldn't regret this.

The speeder bike took off through the night.

Consciousness was slowly returning. His eyelids fluttered.

Immediately his ears picked up a sound: "Sir?"

Quentell Mackin groaned and pried his eyes open, squinting out into the world. He was on his back, lying down on something relatively comfortable for the first time in days.

"Sir, can you hear me?"

Mackin forced his blurred vision to focus on the blond person sitting beside him, who was practically hovering over him and watching him with undivided attention. "Nine?" Mackin mumbled. "That you? Please tell me that's you."

Mack heard Darin exhale. "Yes, sir, it's me. Are you okay?" The question was urgent, fearful.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay." Aside from the cobwebs in his mind, he actually didn't feel too bad. He shook his head a bit to diminish that first problem. It looked like he was in the same room where he had first met the fake Rebel commando. He had to warn Darin about that and this new trap right away. "What's going on? There was an undercover Imperial, and the locals—the locals—"

"—Fixed you up pretty good, considering," Darin finished for him. Mack's anxiety turned to confusion at his subordinate's words. "They told me what happened," Darin continued. "The Imp is dead. The locals used the rest of the medical supplies they had brought for what they'd thought was the Rebel commando on you instead. Got some fluids in you, sealed the blaster wound, used some bacta and painkillers. But sir, please, *please* don't scare me like that ever again." Darin fidgeted.

"Wait, *I* scared *you*?" Mackin replied incredulously. "*You're* the one who sent *me* into a panic! What happened to you? And how'd you get here anyway?"

"I kind of fell off the skid when that blast hit us at the crash site." Darin looked embarrassed. And muddy. "I got to the rally point, and one of the locals picked me up and brought me here."

Mackin rubbed his face as if to physically push the thoughts into his brain. Now that he thought about it, he vaguely remembered a local or two being there when he told the fake

commando about the rally point. “All right,” was all he could manage for the moment. Mack noticed for the first time that his flight suit from the waist up was unfastened and off of him, now pooled at the small of his back. His white undershirt had been cut for clearance around the blaster wound, but the remnants in that area were stained red.

Darin checked his chrono. “Sir, I hate to do this to you, but we have a bit of a time crunch,” he said. “The Imperials are investigating the coordinates the fake commando transmitted earlier, and it won’t be long before they show up here. The colonist who found me said that he can take me to the place where the Imperials have our X-wings— apparently it’s not far— but that depends on you. Are we still doing this, sir?” Darin uncomfortably looked down at the bloody bandages on Mackin’s side. His thoughts were written all over his face.

Mack pushed himself up so he could sit. The injured area was rather sore when he moved, but whatever painkillers they had given him were doing the trick for now. He tried to sort through the information Darin had just thrown at him. “They think you can get your X-wing?”

Darin nodded. “Yes, sir. They also told me about all the checkpoints the Imperials have set up at the colony’s entrances and exits. Sneaking in that way isn’t going to work.”

“Then we’re still doing this.” Mackin forced himself to his feet with difficulty, and Darin assisted him until he felt steady when upright. The younger pilot also helped the commander get his arms through the flight suit’s sleeves again, and he gathered Mack’s chestbox and his damaged and bloody flak vest from where they were set on the floor while Mackin fastened his flight suit and tentatively tested his mobility. Soon he was geared up again. “We’ll have to exchange stories of the rest of our exploits later. Do you need help getting to your X-wing?”

“No, sir,” Darin said. They walked out of the room, though slowly because Mackin was setting the pace and favoring his left side. He wished he could make himself hurry up. “The X-wings are being kept in another depleted mine like this one,” Darin went on. “There are old evacuation tunnels in the mines, and the colonist is going to get me in using those. He thinks the Imps don’t know about them. I can meet up with you once I’m airborne. I’d really prefer to just get you in your fighter here so I can breathe easier knowing you’re all set, sir.”

Mackin sighed. “Leave the worrying to me, Nine, all right?” Even as he said it, though, he knew it was wasted breath.

While they walked through the corridor and then out of the building into the cavern, Mackin saw that the mining complex was now deserted. The lights for the ground floor inside their building were on and were spilling out through the windows, but the courtyard lights were off. Waiting by a speeder bike ahead of them was a Quarren holding a lit glow rod; he was the only other soul Mackin could see. “Where is everybody? Did they evacuate?”

“Yes, sir,” Darin answered. “They said the Imps have been really hard on the colony. There are even standing threats against the colony if anyone helps us. The undercover Imp you caught really spooked the group here, and no one knows how much he told the Imps about them. Everyone thinks they’re in serious trouble because of him, and they’re making sure to get far away now. They were even brainstorming on what to do with the undercover Imperial’s body and were thinking of telling the Imps they killed him because he was a Rebel to get some good graces back, but the leader thought that might really backfire on them.”

Mackin’s mind was still processing the first part of the answer, and he pulled Darin to a stop and leaned in close. “There are threats against the colony?” Mack asked in a quiet voice. Darin nodded. Mackin looked around, but still saw only the Quarren in the darkness. “Then we’re risking that he’ll take you to the Imperials as a peace offering to save the colony. A trade.”

“They didn’t do it earlier,” Darin said, equally quietly.

“But if they’re spooked now, things might have changed.”

“Sir,” Darin implored, meeting his gaze fully, “we don’t have a choice.” His voice hitched.

Mackin paused and then backed off. “You’re right,” he relented. Darin understood the risks, and Mack was only scaring him with his paranoia. That was the last thing he wanted to do. They walked forward again.

“Oh, and here, sir.” Darin snapped back to sounding mostly normal, unfastened one of the two holster belts on him and handed it to Mack. “The colonists weren’t comfortable with you having a blaster until after I talked to you. Something about a threat right before you passed out?”

“Yeah,” Mackin mumbled while he secured the belt around his hips. It pressed a little too closely to his injury.

The Quarren, whom Mackin now recognized as the resistance’s second-in-command, looked up when they came within earshot. “The Imperials are on their way. We need to go,” he reported. Darin nodded in reply.

Once they reached the X-wing, Rudder whistled happily as Darin gave Mackin a leg up to his cockpit, and the droid reported over the sole powered cockpit console that everyone had stayed well away from the snubfighter. Mackin winced at a sharp pain in his side but tried to not let Darin see it. The commander shakily exhaled as he settled himself into the seat and then looked down at Darin in the dim light. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, sir.” Darin tried to smile. But while the tone of voice and the expression suggested it was a half truth at best, Mackin knew Darin would see it through. His pilot wasn’t the same little “rookie” who had left *Crescent Star* a few days ago and never would be again. Mack doubted Quiver or any of the others would be the same either. “You just take it as easy as you can, sir,” Darin told him. “I’ll contact you as soon as possible. Hopefully you won’t have to fight through too many of those Imperials before then.”

Mackin nodded. He wasn’t looking forward to that. “Good luck, Nine.”

“You too, sir.”

“See you soon.”

“Counting on it, sir.” Darin’s partial smile flickered, then he saluted and jogged back to the speeder bike.

The lights in the building they had just vacated went out completely, and the pitch blackness in the mine made Mackin think he’d gone blind. Then the single lit glowrod that the Quarren was holding stabbed through the cool, inky air. Mackin watched the Quarren go from the building to the speeder bike in his small bubble of light.

There, the Quarren slung a backpack over his shoulders, turned on the speeder bike’s headlight and turned off the glowrod, and Darin buckled his borrowed helmet to the chestbox on his back and climbed on the back seat of the bike. The pair peeled off a moment later and were swallowed by the cavern. Soon the headlight was all Mackin could see, and he paused in powering up his starfighter to watch them go. He knew Darin was downplaying whatever it was he’d have to do to get his X-wing from the Imperials, and Mackin wished he’d had more time to pry the truth out of him. Even if Mackin couldn’t physically help, maybe he could have at least offered some ideas of what to do.

The speeder bike’s light slowed and disappeared into the mining cavern’s wall a distance down. Mack wondered if that’s where one of those emergency tunnels was that Darin mentioned.

The commander turned on the small cockpit light and went back to prepping his fighter while trying very hard not to move the left side of his torso. This was not going to be pleasant or easy. He wondered how long he should wait before escaping up the large mining shaft. Once he did, he'd probably be knee-deep in Imperials, but better knee-deep out there than knee-deep in here.

At least the darkness surrounding him made Mackin feel a little safer.

Chapter Fifteen

The ride to the depleted trilithe mine the Imperials were using didn't take long on the routes the Quarren took. Once there, he and Darin had gone on foot down the narrow emergency tunnel from the outside into the mine. The dark passage was made up of stairs, straight corridors, turns and slopes, and under their feet were loose rocks and ill-fitting floorboards, testaments to the lack of maintenance and cleaning over the years. The already cool temperature outside dropped considerably the farther down they went.

Darin and the Quarren crouched down to remain hidden at the emergency tunnel's opening to the mine's cavern. The Quarren turned off their glowrod, and Darin tried to push down the sharp, distracting feelings of vulnerability and being alone. He had work to do.

The four impounded Corona Squadron X-wings sat together in the cavern a distance ahead of them. A couple of Imperial soldiers rushed about near the building. Darin guessed they were on alert, probably because of the forces approaching the resistance's base nearby.

Darin ducked down farther and prayed the Imperials wouldn't see the two of them spying from the emergency tunnel doorway set into the wall about two meters above the cavern floor. From there, he could perform a decent survey of the area. This mine's layout was essentially identical to the other one, with the same sturdy buildings along the side of the complex opposite them and two large mine shafts leading up to the surface, one to Darin's left and another far to his right. This mine had considerably more illumination, though: a couple of portable fixtures bathed the X-wings and the Imperials' work areas in light. Across the vast cavern at the base of the left-hand mine shaft was a flimsy-looking comm antenna, probably for temporary signal amplification. Close to the buildings there were two Imperial landspeeders, a stack of storage crates, a soldier guarding the four astromechs gathered together on the ground, and four guards without armor ringing the group of X-wings. The X-wings were in a square formation with their noses pointed toward the buildings. Darin's fighter was in the row closest to the buildings but in the left-hand column, the one nearest him.

The cockpits of three of the X-wings were still closed— the Imperials probably hadn't been able to break the canopies' electronic locks the astromechs would have engaged— but the fourth X-wing's, Darin's, was open. With the broken window, it would have been much easier for them to gain access. An Imperial tech was sitting and working in his cockpit, and a couple other techs were helping from the ground. The flash of emotion was irrational, but Darin felt dirty, almost violated, at seeing the enemy inside his ship— *his ship*— and forcing it to betray the Alliance. What information had they gotten from his X-wing's computers? The only good thing about that situation was that it looked like they had a ladder set up on the starboard side of Darin's fighter for the tech in the cockpit. That would be tons easier than climbing up using the engines and S-foils.

The pilot's gaze drifted back to the droids; this presented a different problem. As if he didn't have enough. How was he going to get Botch on top of his fighter?

He sighed and rubbed his burning eyes in exhaustion. His headache was still lingering as well, but the painkiller the locals had given him earlier was helping with that and the general aches from the fall and his run. The painkiller couldn't alleviate mental pressure though. Everyone was counting on him to do this, and he flat out didn't know how.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the Quarren staring at Darin's arms. The studying lasted long enough that Darin shifted his weight. "What is it?" he whispered.

The Quarren broke his lock. “Nothing,” he whispered back. “Just... really noticed your cut wrist binders for the first time. After what happened with the commando and your other pilot, we weren’t really sure who a’ was telling the truth anymore and who was an Imperial and who was really a Rebel. I have to admit I had my doubts, but somehow I don’t think the Imperials would fake a detail like cut wrist binders.”

“Oh,” Darin said. “Yeah. These... haven’t been good days.” He looked back into the mine. He still was no closer to knowing what the hell to do, and he had to hurry. Mack could be in the middle of a dogfight at that very moment. Alone. Injured.

The Quarren reached into his backpack and drew out a small silver ball that had a short rod attached at one end. He handed it to Darin and said, “Here. Don’t know what this is, but will it help?”

Darin looked it over with wide eyes. “This is a stun grenade. Got any more?”

“No, that’s the only one the commando had.”

One was definitely a whole lot better than nothing. He stashed it in a pocket, and the first fragments of a plan began to coalesce in his brain. “The blast radius on these things is pretty small. I’ll only be able to stun one of the guards because of how far apart they’re standing, and I don’t know how many other Imperials are in the buildings. I’ll be in a firefight with the rest as soon as this goes off. But I can’t win a straight firefight or get into my fighter during one. What I need is some time without getting shot at.”

“You have the element of surprise. Will that give you enough time to do what you need?” the Quarren asked.

Darin had no clue. “Maybe. I guess it’ll have to be enough time.”

Thumper tried to force his tired, muddled thoughts to focus. What else could help him?

His sights found their way to the signal amplifier, and he remembered Chopper’s comments during the “third pilot” discussion about how they couldn’t let the Imperials know the second X-wing was different from the one they had previously seen in Rebel hands. Darin mulled things over.

It was an okay idea. He thought for another moment, but it was the best he could come up with. “Well, here’s what I’m going to do,” Darin told the colonist. “You’ll want to head back up the tunnel as soon as I start this, but have a backup route in mind just in case. I’ll sneak down as close as I can get and shoot that comm antenna, then go for the cover of those storage crates. From there I’ll use the stun grenade and my blaster to take out as many guards as I can.” It sounded so easy just saying it like this. If only. “After that’s under control, I’ll get my astromech to my fighter and try to haul him up there somehow. Then I’m blasting my way out of here up the shaft.” Darin looked sideways at the Quarren. “I’m... not usually the one who makes the plans,” he admitted. It felt like an apology, but he didn’t know why. “Will you need cover or anything getting out?”

The Quarren dismissed the concerns. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll make it out of here fine. Good luck.”

Darin managed a small smile. “Thanks for your help.”

The Quarren nodded. Darin turned the volume on his combadge all the way down, donned Pellicer’s helmet, took a deep breath and scoped out everything one last time. It was now or never. When no one seemed to be facing his direction, he slipped out of the tunnel’s entranceway. The mine’s wall around the tunnel’s opening was rough and covered with crags from battles between the digging equipment and the rock, and Darin used those to climb down.

Once on the flat, empty mine floor, he ducked down and moved as quickly as he dared through the darkness toward the comm antenna. He hated how exposed he felt. Though the large area he was in wasn't directly lit, the shadows and darkness were the only cover available. At the moment he wished he was wearing anything but orange. The mud and dirt on his flight suit wasn't a large enough help.

At long last he slowed, then stopped and lay on his stomach near the edge of the light, not willing to go farther. With any luck he could hit the antenna at this distance. Darin pulled out his blaster and took careful aim.

A blaster bolt hit the ground near Darin. The pilot jumped, and a hasty glance showed that the tech up in his cockpit was pointing in his direction while an X-wing guard aimed a blaster rifle at him. The Imperial fired again, and the resulting bolt came much closer. Darin only had time for one silent curse before pulling his trigger and sending bolts of energy at the antenna.

Parts of the antenna dish blew apart. The split-second lull in incoming fire after the antenna's explosion was all Darin needed to push himself up using arms and legs full of restocked adrenaline. While he sprinted for all he was worth toward the storage crates near the X-wings, he fired wild shots in the direction of the guards to discourage their attempts to kill him.

The guards didn't stay discouraged long. Some incoming rounds sailed harmlessly by while he ran. Darin was mere meters away from the storage crates and was about to dive for cover when one shot hit him at an angle on his chest. The flash and the burst of scorching heat surprised him so much that he tripped at the start of his dive and ended up hitting the ground hard in a facedown heap behind the crates.

The pungent odor of burnt electronics slapped him in the face. Wincing at the smell, he untangled his limbs and pushed himself to his hands and knees to do a quick damage assessment. The laser shot had impacted, burned through and melted a portion of his chestbox, while the laser's residual energy had charred his flak vest and singed his flight suit. He was shaken up at the sight.

More incoming fire returned his attention to living, not dying. Darin raised his blaster again, then thought better of it and took out the stun grenade. He was certain the Imperials were quickly maneuvering closer.

He peeked over the crates and managed to get a glimpse of the situation before a barrage of shots forced him down. Three of the guards were fairly close together at that moment, but they were beginning to split up. Thumper hit the button on the stun grenade, jumped briefly to his feet and threw it at that group.

He couldn't watch the throw since he immediately ducked back down, but it had felt like it should be relatively accurate when it had left his hand. Strangely enough, it made him think of his Economics teacher back home who had told Darin that playing his favorite sport of donri all the time would never benefit him at all. It was amazing what weird little memories could float into his brain when under stress. Then a blaster bolt impacted the front of the crate he was hiding behind and cut short his feelings of self-righteousness.

The stun grenade's bright blue flash came at the same time a shout and more blaster bolts flew in. Darin returned fire and found that two soldiers had been knocked out by the grenade, leaving three guards to deal with. All of them had their own cover now as well. None of the techs were in sight, not even the one that had been in his cockpit.

More shouts came from various places and echoed through the cavern as the Imperials and the Rebel exchanged more shots. The only things missing were a TIE flying overhead and a wingman shooting wildly from beside him.

Darin knew how that type of situation ended up. This wasn't working. All they'd have to do is get behind him or flank him— and it looked like they were trying— and he was done for. Anxiety tightened his chest, and he cursed under his breath: he had hoped to have reached Botch or his fighter by now, not be trading weapons fire with the first of many opposing soldiers. He tried to lean out a bit from behind his cover but was quickly forced back by a fresh barrage from the guards. Old, screeching sirens stuttered to life and began to wail.

He had reached the point where true desperation made any idea seem like a good one. Darin disconnected the mortally wounded chestbox's hose from his flight suit and tore the connector socket off the end of it. The small metal piece fit comfortably in his hand. Darin sent some wild blaster fire in at the Imperials, then leapt to his feet, reared back and threw the connector socket with all his strength at the closest Imperials.

The sight of another small projectile being thrown at them made the Imperials scatter. That gave Darin just enough time to aim for the portable lighting fixtures. He really hoped he wouldn't regret this.

His laser blasts shattered the lights and plunged the mine into darkness. Transparisteel fragments fell to the ground, but their crystalline tinkling was soon swallowed by the abrasive sirens. The light leaking from the small windows of the support buildings was barely enough to allow Darin to make out silhouettes in the cavern area.

The guards called for someone to bring them night-vision scopes. He had until that happened to get to his X-wing or he wouldn't have a chance.

The Imperial guards were still between him and the starfighter. Darin moved laterally as softly as he could, trying to angle closer to his fighter. The guards, now realizing he hadn't thrown another grenade, fired at the approximate origin of his footfalls and at his last known location. The blaster bolts came much too close for comfort. His blind stumbling found another storage crate to hide behind, and Darin sprayed a horizontal line of return fire at the estimated source of the Imperials' weapons fire. He heard a guard cry out, and then the others zeroed in on Darin's new position. The pilot grabbed the lid of the storage crate to use as a body shield and moved away.

It sounded like the two remaining guards were maneuvering toward him. Shouts and glowrod beams stabbed through the darkness near the support buildings and headed his way as well. Darin stopped shooting and concentrated instead on quietly moving around the Imperials toward his X-wing, trying to feel his way.

He was almost there when he stumbled over something that felt like a tool bag. Metal impacted the rocky ground with sharp clangs. Darin abandoned his quasi-stealth approach when he regained his balance; he dropped the crate lid and ran the last few steps to his X-wing as Imperial blasters tracked his footsteps. He hunched down and kept his right arm partially raised in front of him to ensure he wouldn't hit his head on the S-foils or laser cannons by accident. His left hand, empty and outstretched, slammed into the portside hull of his fighter immediately forward of the engines.

Now that he knew exactly where he was, he briefly returned fire behind him and ducked underneath the fuselage to the far side. Darin put out his left hand to feel for the ladder that the tech had used.

His hand came up empty.

He frantically waved it around in a wider arc, certain the ladder had to be there. But it wasn't. Darin couldn't believe the tech had had the presence of mind to remove the ladder with a blasterfight in his immediate proximity.

Hot, searing pain exploded on Darin's right lower leg, just above his boot. He yelped and jerked back in surprise and couldn't prevent the harsh swearing from leaving his lips. While his upper body was protected by the X-wing from the guards on the opposite side, in his fluster about the ladder he'd forgotten his lower half wasn't. Darin desperately jumped backward one-legged closer to the engines, which offered slightly more cover closer to the ground.

The pilot steadied himself, holstered his blaster, bit his lower lip and began to climb up on the engines. It hurt like hell to move or put weight on his right leg, but that option was better than dying. Thankfully the adrenaline took some of the edge off.

When Darin finally made it to the top of his fighter, he tried to stay low. Now came the hard part: moving on the top edge of his fighter around the raised canopy to get inside his cockpit. In the dark. With one hurt leg.

And now while being shot at.

A blaster bolt from the first guard to spot his silhouette up there came dangerously close. Darin dropped to his stomach next to the empty droid socket, pulled out his own blaster again and tried to make full use of his higher vantage point.

It quieted the Imperials' weapons enough for Darin to decide to take a chance and go for it. He pushed himself up, silently cursing his leg, and grabbed the edge of the raised canopy. He used his tenuous grip on it to counterbalance his awkward lunge around the canopy.

He barely managed to slip inside the cockpit before more blaster bolts came his way with a renewed vigor, this time from both sides of the X-wing. Darin ducked as far down as possible in his seat, holstered his blaster and blindly punched at the spots where he knew the buttons were to close the canopy and power the laser cannons. The increasing hum made by the starfighter likely encouraged the guards to think twice about being next to the powerful craft. The storm of incoming blaster bolts stopped.

Darin didn't trust straightening up yet; one well-placed shot through his broken canopy window would be the end of him. But it felt so good to be on the inside of a snubfighter again, and he was irrationally happy to be in the familiar confines of his own fighter. He yanked out the cables connected to his X-wing's computers that the tech had left dangling inside. The other ends of the cables were loose, with whatever they had been connected to now likely safe in the hands of the tech elsewhere. Darin flew through the rest of the minimum power-up sequence as well as he could with no visuals on it. His own helmet was rolling around by his feet; he'd swap that out once he had more time.

An odd but soft *thunk* reverberated within his X-wing. Then another. The sound seemed to be coming from the top of the starfighter and behind Darin. The pilot straightened up and chanced a look over his shoulder, and through his aft window he saw one of the guards on top of his fighter, now lying on his stomach on the rear portion of Darin's canopy. His left hand was sticking the tip of a blaster pistol through the broken canopy window and turning it to point at Darin's head.

Darin immediately tried to shove it away with his own left hand, but the Imperial held on and braced the weapon on the bottom lip of the canopy, only allowing it to slide forward, not

down. Unable to get rid of the weapon completely, Darin's last-ditch effort attempted to pivot the weapon and point the blaster tip anywhere but right at him.

It was just in time. The Imperial fired, and the shots crossed Darin's cockpit in front of him, mere millimeters away. They impacted a starboard cockpit console, which shorted and erupted in a shower of sparks. The Imperial kept firing and tried to force the aim back at the trapped pilot through sheer strength.

Utter desperation took hold again. Darin pulled his own blaster with his right hand, braced it on his left wrist, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

The Imperial shrieked, and Darin knew he'd hit the guard's arm. The rain of blaster bolts inside his cockpit ceased, and the Imperial instantly let go of the blaster pistol and jerked back. Darin twisted around in his seat as well as he could until he was facing the aft of his fighter. Above him, he saw the dark silhouette of the guard beginning to get up.

The Rebel quickly stuck his right arm out the broken window, estimated his aim as well as he could and fired several times.

At least one of those hit the Imperial— where, Darin couldn't be sure— and he fell backwards and to the side. The Imperial tumbled off the X-wing. Darin pulled his arm back in and turned back to sit properly, cringing every time he moved his right leg. He holstered his blaster once more and put the safety on the Imperial's blaster before tossing it behind his seat. Smoke from the destroyed console was filling his cockpit, and the pilot made a few quick, half-hearted attempts to fan it out while trying to remember where he'd been in the fighter's power-up sequence and checking which instruments had been destroyed. He tried to slow his pounding heart without deeply inhaling the smoke.

Large energy bolts slammed repeatedly into the front of his fighter. Startled, Darin's heart skipped a beat, then he saw what looked like an E-web set up near the support buildings and spitting lethal light at him. Darin bit his lip and narrowed his eyes, then he hit the last button to raise his shields. He pulled his X-wing into the air on repulsorlifts just high enough to turn and point his laser cannons at the Imperial weapon. He split his S-foils, pulled the trigger on his flight yoke and shot numerous blasts from his laser cannons at the E-web's location. Then Darin pressed on his ethereal rudder with his aching leg and let his laser cannons slowly track across the support buildings while his weapons continued to spit death. It was much more than was necessary to take out that one weapon and escape, but after everything the Imperials had done to them on this planet, Darin couldn't bring himself to care.

When he finally relaxed the pressure on the trigger, all Imperial weapons were silent. No sounds came through his broken window aside from the echoing sirens, his X-wing's engines and repulsors, and the crumbling of the building structures, and he saw no glowrod lights moving. Dust billowed up from the destroyed buildings and engulfed his X-wing, mixing with the smoke inside and making him cough. His eyes watered.

Darin turned on his landing lights and carefully nudged his snubfighter toward the group of astromechs. The dust parted and swirled chaotically all around him. He lowered his shields, put his S-foils back into cruise configuration, retracted his landing gear and gently settled the X-wing's belly onto the ground to make it easier to get Botch on top. He climbed out of the cockpit with difficulty and hurriedly limped over to his droid, pulling on his flight gloves as he went. He could barely put any weight on his leg at all, and it was bleeding noticeably.

Darin punched Botch's power button, then as an afterthought hit those of the other astromechs as well. "Botch, let's go!"

The pilot was quickly halted by a pitiful wail from Botch. At that point Darin saw a restraining bolt on his droid. He paused just long enough to aim his blaster carefully and shoot it off, and then he hastily repeated that action with the other droids. "Sorry, guys. Get out if you can. Botch, come on!" This time the R5 happily joined him, his gears whirring in overdrive. Darin partially leaned on Botch to walk faster. Blast, if this was anything like what Chopper's broken leg had been like these last two days, Darin suddenly had new respect for him. He was just happy it hadn't been his left leg that had been shot: he didn't know how the flares on his flare belt would have reacted to a sudden surge of blaster energy hitting them, but Darin suspected it wouldn't have been good.

Thumper grabbed a large storage crate lid to use as a makeshift ramp from the ground to the top of his X-wing's S-foils for Botch. As he was taking it, some of the smaller crates caught his eye. A crazy possibility clicked in the back of his brain, so he grabbed two of the small ones and tossed them into his cockpit.

Botch wheeled up to the top of the S-foils, but getting him over the engine to his droid socket proved to be harder. The crate lid ramp was much steeper, and Darin had to use all his strength to push the droid up it. It took a few tries for Darin to successfully brace all that weight on his bad leg enough to take any steps up the ramp. "Botch," he muttered, straining hard against the astromech and gravity, "if we get back, the first thing we're doing is getting you thrusters!" Botch blatted at him.

There was still no obvious movement from the Imperials, but there was potentially still trouble outside with Mackin. When Botch at last was settled into his droid socket, Darin returned to his cockpit and turned on its small light. He tossed the small crate lids, Pellicer's helmet and the damaged chestbox behind his seat to join the Imperial blaster.

He didn't have any bandages, so he wadded up a portion of his flight suit's pants leg and pressed it against his wound. Then he put his ejection harness loop over the top of the wad and tightened the loop around his leg as tightly as he could stand it. Finally, Darin used one of the Imperial's thin computer cables to tie off the ejection harness loop in that location and at that tightness. It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do.

After putting on his own helmet, he hooked up Chopper's chestbox, lowered the canopy, buckled his seat restraints and finished powering up his X-wing's systems. Among other things, his fuel gauges and inertial damper controls had been turned into slagged metal, wires and circuits from the pistol shots. It was inconvenient, certainly, but the inertial damper itself still worked, and at first glance he didn't think he'd lost anything critical. He could still do this with his own fighter like he wanted.

At long last Darin breathlessly kicked in his repulsors and engines. He was halfway up the mine shaft when he finally realized what his sensors were telling him: the large doors at the top of the mine shaft were closed, turning the shaft into a literal dead end. Corona Nine narrowed his eyes again and hoped that a powered-up laser cannon or two would be all he needed in this situation as well.

It was.

Major Wendessin listened closely to the reports coming in from the various C&C stations. He'd been right: there *had* been Rebel activity associated with those coordinates. The X-

wing his forces had engaged at the supposedly empty trilithide mine nearby was proof. Intel's undercover agent had done his job well in finding Rebels and Rebel sympathizers, and Wendessin wished the agent would report in with more details.

From the sounds of it, this Rebel was putting up a nasty fight. One TIE Fighter had been lost by the time the ground forces reported going into the mine to flush out any colonists or legitimate Rebels inside, and another TIE pilot was killed soon after.

That wasn't the only damper on things. Despite finally finding the Rebels' lair, Wendessin frowned. He didn't like this. Something wasn't right. If they'd truly caught the Rebels by surprise, their reaction should have been to get both fighters in the air immediately, and yet there was still only the one. He was missing something. Had they split up? Had the other X-wing been involved with making the first transmission they had picked up and investigated?

"Tell all forces in the field to be on the lookout for another X-wing," Wendessin ordered. "They had two at last count. Find the other one. Make sure this isn't a diversion for something else in another location."

"Yes, sir," the comm officer replied and went to work relaying the instructions. A few minutes later, the Imperial spoke up again. "Sir, we've just lost another TIE. The remaining pilot is reporting a second X-wing on sensors."

"Excellent. We've got them both," Wendessin said, half to himself. More loudly he continued, "Scramble the TIEs here in the colony. Have them intercept those Rebels before we lose them again."

"Sir, most of those TIE pilots just came off of all-day patrol duty--"

"They'll have more than enough time to sleep after these Rebels are taken care of once and for all," the major snapped. "Now pass along the order."

"Yes, sir."

If Commander Mackin's sensor readings were to be believed, then there was an X-wing in flight about thirty klicks away. Of course, the damaged sensors also said that there were ten stationary TIEs around him when there was really only the extremely mobile one on his tail and a handful of ground vehicles remaining.

Luckily that first sensor reading was confirmed by a low strength, tight-beam transmission over a private frequency saying, "Lead, Nine."

Mack began to let out a sigh of relief but stopped when that made pain shoot through his side. He returned the favor with the frequency settings and replied, "Nine, Lead. You mind getting this eyeball off my six?"

"Be right there, sir." Darin's words were loud, nearly shouted, but still were almost drowned out by the noise caused by the wind rushing in his broken window.

Together the two Coronas destroyed the last few Imperial vehicles, though Mack's side was beginning to bother him and made the fight last longer than he felt it should have. He was nervous that it was affecting his performance to that degree already when they still had another fight ahead of them. Once they were clear, Mackin asked, "Everything go all right?"

"As well as to be expected, sir. Despite the Imps' efforts, I'm still in one piece."

Mackin allowed himself a small smile. "Glad you're okay, Nine. Patch your sensor readings through to my fighter. You're my wing. I'd say we got their attention, so let's do this."

“Right with you, Lead.”

The two X-wings sped as fast as they could in terrain-following flight toward the colony.

Quiver couldn't even begin to guess how many laps he'd made around the cavern before he heard traffic on the squadron frequency, which Mackin and Darin would be using in wide-beam after discovery so the others could hear what was happening. All of the Corona Squadron pilots' heads jerked up, and the comm system's broadcast speaker suddenly became the single most important thing on the planet.

“Nine, we have fighters approaching.”

“Copy, Lead. I see them.”

Weas raised an eyebrow at Quiver, but Quiver was too intent on listening to the transmission to react. The relief that they were both still alive was nearly overpowering. After Mackin's calm yet somewhat strained transmission, it was something of a start to hear Darin yelling into his mic over the wind noise in his cockpit. Quiver smiled grimly for a brief moment nonetheless; at least that meant that he was in his own fighter and partnered with Botch. Darin's odds just got a little better: he worked better with Botch than with any other astromech and knew how to squeeze every bit of capability out of his own fighter. Plus Botch's intact memory enhanced the work the R5 could do with the X-wing and increased the astromech's efficiency. Those advantages could potentially mean the difference between life and death in a dogfight, especially one where the odds would be so skewed.

“They've seen us, Nine. Turn on your IFF. I'll do the same. S-foils to attack formation.”

“Yes, sir. But... um... I can't turn on my IFF. I'll see if Botch can access the control somehow.”

The grounded pilots listened as Mackin and Darin entered the dogfight. It wasn't long at all before they used the code phrases to indicate they were starting their plan.

“Nine, I just lost three of my engines! I can't hold it!” “Three engines” meant Mackin had found a suitable place to “crash.” Being “unable to hold it” meant he was about to stage the ground impact.

“Lead, eject! Eject!” Following the script, the double command to eject indicated that Darin knew Mackin was okay and was not really in trouble.

“I can't, I—” Mackin's voice was cut off.

The Corona pilots looked at each other uneasily. Even though they knew it was fake, it was still eerie to listen to.

A second later Darin called out in distress, “Lead, no! Not you too!” That phrase meant Darin had seen the explosion from Mackin's torpedo on the ground, and each pilot was on his own. This was further evidenced when the next transmission that came through the Coronas' comm system was on the emergency channel. “Mayday, mayday! To any Alliance ships in range! This is Corona Nine. I'm—” He broke off for a moment, then resumed. “I'm on the planet Lokinha. My fighter is damaged, everyone in my squadron is dead and—” Another pause. “And I have five TIEs after me. I have vital information! Any Alliance ships, please respond!”

Quiver suddenly felt overwhelmingly alone. He shuffled over to where Ikoa was sitting against the cavern wall. Her fever had recently broken, but she was still weak and wrapped tightly in her blanket. Quiver lifelessly sank down beside her.

His pained expression was obvious enough for even someone in the grips of an illness to detect. Ikoa rested her head on Quiver's left shoulder, took a hoarse breath and whispered, "He'll be okay."

Quiver worriedly looked down at the small woman, his eyes dull. "I'm going to lose them both, Ikoa. First CC, now him."

"Don't say that."

"I wish I could convince myself that the fear in his voice was just from him being a good actor, giving the Imps a good performance to make it sound realistic, but I know it's not." He looked back toward the X-wing's cockpit where the comm system resided. "He must honestly mean it because he's a horrible actor, especially when he's nervous."

"Maybe you can give him some lessons when we get back," Ikoa suggested gently.

Quiver nodded absently, barely hearing her. His attention was once again focused on the static coming over the comm.

Chapter Sixteen

It was one of the first things that had gone right on the Lokinha mission since they'd originally landed in the canyon.

It hadn't started out that way, though. While he and Darin were dogfighting, Commander Mackin had gotten good sensor readings of the colony and surrounding terrain courtesy of Darin's sensors. At first he had thought the plan was stillborn: while the colony was located in low hills, he hadn't seen a suitable out-of-sight landing spot near enough to the colony to get him and Rudder inside in any short amount of time. Time was his enemy in this plan, and it had had him surrounded and at blasterpoint.

Then their luck finally changed. Mack spotted a processing plant on the far outskirts of the colony with a buffer of undeveloped land around it. Rudder cross-referenced it with their colony map and confirmed the plant used hazardous materials. He could get there quickly since it was so isolated and buried deep in the hills.

Mackin had wanted to help Darin finish off more of the TIEs before splitting up and leaving him on his own, but his side was hurting worse by the minute from the extended fighting and was interfering with Mackin's movements and concentration. A few spots of fresh blood on the bandages made him think the wound had partially reopened. Helping Darin destroy more TIEs wouldn't do the squadron any good if Mackin stayed too long and got killed himself because of his lessened capability from his injury.

All he could do was hope his help had been enough and let go.

It was damned hard.

The prospect left a horrible taste in his mouth and acid in his stomach. Just because it was necessary and had been agreed to ahead of time didn't make it any easier or make Mackin feel better about abandoning his pilot in a situation like this.

But he had to. Mack silently wished Darin luck and prepared to "crash."

Now just a short time later, Mack was on the ground crouched beside Rudder and trying to stay out of sight. He felt much too visible in his orange flight suit, and his wound had progressed to not appreciating his breathing. He wished the painkillers and adrenaline hadn't worn off.

"This is taking too long," Mackin said in a low voice while the droid worked with his cutting wheel to open a hole in the plant's perimeter fence. The metal links of the fence were resisting a lot of the energy from the cutting wheel, and progress was agonizingly slow. Scaling the high fence wasn't an option: sharp barbs on the top were designed to discourage that very tactic, and Rudder couldn't make it over anyway. Hell, even Mack didn't think he could climb it in his condition. "Don't cut as much. Make the hole smaller."

Rudder complied, and soon he created an opening that was large enough for Mackin to crawl through, though it was too short for the R2. The pilot pulled the cut fencing material aside and scooted through, favoring his side and trying to not get dirt in the wound. On the other side of the fence he stopped and rolled onto his back.

Rudder had returned to the hole and had raised his cutting wheel again. Apparently he thought Mack would go on ahead while the droid finished cutting away enough of the fence to get himself through. But Mackin had other plans. Still on his back, he stuck both feet through the opening, planted them together as high up on Rudder as he could, held his breath and pushed hard.

The droid let out a surprised squeal as it tipped over backwards, hit the ground with a thud and lay prone. Mackin cringed for more than one reason and rolled over onto his knees. “Keep it down!” he demanded harshly but quietly. He grabbed the bottoms of Rudder’s “legs” and with considerable difficulty pulled the heavy droid through the opening in the fence. Pushing the astromech back upright was even harder.

Once Rudder was on his feet again, he flashed a series of lights at Mackin in annoyance. Probably threatening to tell Ikoa about his treatment. Mackin ignored it and limped toward the plant’s largest building. There was definitely some fresh blood on his bandages now.

He kept half an ear open for any alarms in case there had been sensors in or around the fence, but all he heard in the night was the hum of large machinery inside the plant. Mack and Rudder moved as quickly as they could to the end of the building. It looked like a shipping and receiving dock area with large doors, which Mackin hoped were to accommodate transports or speeders.

All the large doors were closed, but the area was bathed in light. A small side door was visible, and Mackin led Rudder to it. He saw no workers outside.

The side door had an electronic cipher lock with a keypad, and Mackin stepped aside to let Rudder access it. The droid plugged in and went to work.

Seconds crawled by. In the distance Mackin could see tiny bursts of light in the night sky from Darin’s dogfight. There were more green-colored ones from the Imperial fighters than there were red ones from the X-wing. Mackin couldn’t make himself watch and looked away, though he felt selfish for it. He felt so blasted helpless.

“Come *on*, Rudder,” he hissed impatiently.

The R2 unit swivelled its domed head to flash more irritated lights at the pilot. Finally the droid beeped softly in triumph, and the door opened. Mackin slipped inside followed by Rudder, and they hid behind a piece of machinery. From there Mack took stock of his surroundings.

There was a row of small landspeeders, some hoists and repulsor flatbeds, and various cargo containers all around. Against the wall nearest the large bay doors were what Mackin was looking for: a few small space transports with cargo containers stacked beside them to be loaded.

There was something else in the bay as well: a group of workers crowded around a window and looking in the approximate direction of where Mackin’s torpedo had exploded on the ground in a fireball and lit up the night. They were all talking over each other with varying degrees of excitement and fear, but Mackin could make out what some of them were saying.

“I’m telling ya, it was a starfighter or something. Crashed. The Imperials just put out a priority bulletin saying a’ air traffic is grounded until further notice. Something about a dogfight right above the town!” one said.

“You know what this is?” another was saying to someone else in abject fear. “The Imperials are attacking us! Some idiot ignored their threats and now we’re a’ gonna pay for it!”

More random snippets floated back to Mackin. “What do you mean, dogfight? Above the town? I need to call my wife, make sure she’s okay!”

“We won’t be okay! The Imperials are bombing us! Didn’t you see? That shot just missed us! Hell, it was close enough that I *felt* it! It blew out a few windows upstairs! More’s coming! We need to evacuate or go to the emergency shelter or something! Do any of you want to be in here when they don’t miss and hit the tanks of all these chemicals?! You saw the safety holos of what happens if you breathe or touch that stuff!”

Someone who had the air of a supervisor walked up to the group from deeper inside the bay. His bearing looked so much like Snubber's that Mackin almost laughed. "What's going on? Don't you a' have some work to be doing?" he asked.

"The Imperials are bombing us!" one worker replied.

"There's a dogfight nearby! The Imperials put out a bulletin about it!" another said at the same time.

The group continued bombarding the supervisor with worries and rumors that he tried to squelch, but Mack now turned his attention elsewhere. He could use this to his advantage.

Mackin crept quickly to the nearest alarm station on the wall. He needed the dock emptied fast so he wouldn't be seen, and nothing was faster than an emergency evacuation of a hazardous materials handling plant whose workers were already skittish about their surroundings and *wanting* to get away.

The dock was vacated moments later amid panicked cries of impending doom, and the alarms covered up the sound of Mackin's uneven footfalls as he sorely jogged to the nearest transport that he recognized as having a hyperdrive.

Rudder was rolling up the side loading ramp when Mack hastily finished powering up the transport and bringing its systems online. The pilot sealed the doors and double-checked the diagnostics and fuel quantity gauges while the droid queried the ship's computer to learn how to open the bay doors.

Moments after that, the transport disappeared into the night.

"Major, one X-wing has been destroyed. There's only one left, and we're picking up a distress signal from it. It sounds like it's the last survivor." The comm officer obligingly played the transmission.

Major Wendessin nodded absently as he listened. This game was finally almost over. "Poor Rebel. Too bad no one else is going to hear your sad little cry for help."

Minutes passed with no update, and Wendessin grew more irritated with each one. "Haven't those TIE pilots taken care of him yet? What are they waiting for?"

"The 165th Squadron leader reports that the X-wing's maneuvers approach suicidal at times, sir, and--"

"We have a clear and-- I thought-- overwhelming advantage in numbers. That should be more than enough!"

Before the comm officer could reply, the sensor officer became very busy at his station. "Major," he said while hurriedly scrolling through data on numerous datapads and cross-referencing it with the display on his scope. "There's a transport-- small freighter or shuttle from the looks-- leaving the vicinity of the colony, heading east at full speed. It bypassed the mandatory checkpoint completely, and I can't find any authorizations for this flight. All air traffic is ordered grounded right now regardless. I'm alerting the nearest forces."

Wendessin opened his mouth to respond, but he was cut off by the Imperial who was acting as liaison between the ground-based C&C and the ships in orbit. "Major--"

The commander of Corona Squadron squeezed every milligram of speed out of the transport as he flew directly toward the river valley. He met no immediate resistance and figured Darin had done a good job of leading most of the Imperial air forces away. He doubted he could sneak back into the valley with the Imperials certainly on heightened alert now after the dogfight though. This next part, getting his pilots and somehow escaping past the Imperial fleet in orbit, was the part he was dreading more than any other. He still didn't really know how to get past that fleet alive. It was going to get ugly, starting in the valley and getting worse from there.

He punched in the squadron frequency so he could use their pre-scripted words to tell Lt. Weas to be ready to provide cover as he came in, and he told Rudder to plug into the console and encrypt his transmission.

Mackin was surprised to hear traffic already coming over the channel. The static and gibberish were incomprehensible, and Rudder beeped and began decrypting it. While Mackin waited, his scope showed the blinking dots of Imperial vehicles moving toward him from around the river valley. Someone must have detected him peeling out of the colony without clearance, or one of the evacuated workers had seen the ship leave and reported it. He wondered if he could bluff his way through whatever he might be asked by the Imperials about his intentions, or if they would skip that and go straight to forcing him down. It wouldn't be hard for them to assume he was a Rebel, and they would take precautions, especially if all air traffic was supposed to be grounded now.

He checked the crude sensor display of the transport, but the sketchy data it supplied only worsened the bad feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. Those Imperial vehicles ahead weren't TIEs. Based on the data, Mack guessed that the vehicles coming to meet him were a HAVr A9 Floating Fortress and two Hoverscouts. They were probably part of the forces who had been looking for the Rebels' lost trail in the river valley.

Quickly Mack mentally ran through even halfway plausible excuses for the transport's unauthorized flight while Rudder cleared up the squadron frequency's signal. "—peat, th— ... —ke L— ... Coro— ... —nel, ple—"

The pilot's brow furrowed. "Rudder, can you clean that up any more? And hurry?" The Imperial vehicles came into view, and what he could see of them in the dark confirmed his suspicions. The Floating Fortress's targeting search beams stabbed through the darkness and began to home in on the transport. Mack eased the transport away from them, hoping the maneuver didn't look too guilty.

The droid chirped, and soon Mackin heard the voice again. It was still distorted but much more clear this time. "Quake Lead to any Corona Squadron personnel, respond."

Mackin hesitated but then hit the transmit button. There was a chance it was a fake transmission from the Imperials, a lure, but the voice sounded enough like Commander Jeffron Unirt, the Quake Squadron CO and the Coronas' shipmate, for Mackin to decide to take the risk and respond. His starved hopes dared to rise a bit; if this was legitimate, they just might get out of this yet. "This is Corona One, Quake Lead. We could sure use some help down here."

The Y-wing leader sounded relieved. "That's what we're here for, C-One. *Star's* fleet is occupying the Imp ships in orbit and allowing some of us to come down for you. *Starsmoke* is on standby with ground forces if needed. We're coming in above a transport heading east toward the canyon. What's your situation?"

Mack quickly assessed that information and what it meant for their chances of survival. *Crescent Star's* fleet, which consisted of the winged MC80 Mon Calamari Cruiser, a chronically

damaged Dreadnaught, a CR-90 Corvette, a Bulk Cruiser and a Gallofree Medium Transport, should be able to stave off the last known Imperial fleet in orbit long enough for them to get out. Mackin replied, "I'm in the transport, and very soon I'll be face-to-face with what looks like a Floating Fortress and two Hoverscouts. If you can clear them out along with any other hostiles in the valley, I'd be most appreciative. And I have another pilot, Corona Nine, out alone near the colony somewhere or possibly in orbit by now. Can you spare some help for him if you can find him? He's in his X-wing, probably fighting TIEs." He hoped Darin was still alive. If he was, though, he wasn't speaking up.

"Affirmative, One, we'll do what we can," Unirt replied. The lights on the Y-wings were now visible off Mackin's port side. Most angled in to intercept the Imperial assault vehicles, but two Quakes peeled away and flew off toward the colony.

Unirt spoke again. "We were at the edge of the system getting intel when we picked up parts of a distress call saying the whole squadron was dead, so we came in immediately. Are you two the only survivors?"

"Negative, I'm going in for my pilots now, Quake Lead. I'll explain later."

"Copy, One."

"Corona Eight to Corona Lead, what's going on?" Weas asked over the comm. "Do we have a rescue here for us?"

"Affirmative, Eight, we've got help." The utter relief gave Mackin a second wind and even made his side feel less sore. He looked around as he entered the valley, but as far as he could tell the Quake pilots had engaged all of the Imperial forces who could pose a threat. The Imperials weren't lasting long against the hardy Rebel fighter-bombers. "Is everyone ready? I'll be there in a second."

"We're waiting hot for you, Lead."

Chapter Seventeen

Weas, piloting Mackin's dripping wet fighter, was floating on repulsorlifts outside the waterfall next to the transport and was on lookout duty. Meanwhile, Mackin struggled to keep the small transport in place as he hovered against the cavern opening with the waterfall pounding down mercilessly on the ship, which he didn't trust to fly into the cave. After an initial amazed hesitation at seeing the ship, the rest of the Coronas worked at cautiously getting into the open hatch as the deployed loading ramp banged up and down against the cave's floor. It was a challenge getting Chopper aboard, but they managed it at the cost of some colorful curses from him. Ikoa was as tricky to get aboard but much quieter about it.

Slurry poked his head into the transport's cockpit a minute later. "I was the one last. We're clear."

Mackin nodded. "Hold on, everyone," he called. He retracted the loading ramp, gratefully pulled away from the waterfall and flew off, followed by Weas in the X-wing. Mack keyed the comm and said, "Quake Lead, I have my pilots. We're on our way out."

"Copy, C-One. Some fighters are coming down from orbit. Give us a few minutes to deal with them and the orbital mines," Commander Unirt replied.

"We'll wait." Mackin began using the time to try contacting Darin on the squadron frequency, the Rebellion's tactical frequency and even his combadge, but he got no response.

He stopped when Quiver made his way up front while assisting Ikoa's staggering but determined attempts at walking. Mackin was glad to see her looking a little better. Quiver helped Ikoa into the copilot's seat, then he looked over the transport's sensor scope and asked, "Are we clear?"

"There's another batch coming in from orbit, but the Quakes will deal with them," Mack answered. "They want us to hang back while they sweep a path for us."

Ikoa was staring at him. "Sir," she wheezed, "you've got blood all over you."

Mack looked down at his bandaged wound and bloody flight suit. "Oh. Yeah. It's nothing to worry about."

His wingman saw right through his attempt at downplaying it. She narrowed her eyes at him and said, "Liar."

The commander gave a short sigh, one designed for minimal movement of his side. "Look, it's fine for now. Really."

"I want my X-wing, sir," Quiver blurted out.

Stunned, Mackin looked up at him. "What?"

"I want to go back for my X-wing. We have a bit of time now. Just drop me off there, and I'll fly out in it."

"Ten, are you out of your mind?"

"Sir, this squadron now has one, maybe two X-wings. There's no way we can operate with that few, and it'll take forever to get so many replacements. We have a couple good fighters down there, and the Quakes are buying us time. You said they don't even want us to follow yet. At full throttle, our fighters aren't far."

Mackin shook his head. "The Imperials moved them to an underground mine. Nine had to go in and get his."

If Quiver was surprised at hearing about Darin's additional duty, he didn't show it. "Are all the fighters together then? That would make it even easier. If Nine could get in and out, we can too."

"Commander," Ikoa said, "he's making a good point. If you know where the fighters are and if we can get in, we should get them. I'll fly Eight's--"

"No, you won't," Mackin interrupted.

"Fine, Four can probably fly Eight's," Ikoa conceded. "Five's hyperdrive can be fixed later if he can jump out on another ship. It would more than double what we have now and give us added protection on the way out. Plus the Imperials wouldn't still have them after we leave."

Mackin thought hard for a long moment, weighing the risks and wondering if that was honestly why Quiver wanted his fighter. He couldn't deny that the reasoning was sound, though, and after another glance at the scope he punched in a frequency to call Weas, adjusted his course and applied full throttle. Yet again, he hoped he wouldn't regret this. "Eight, follow me. We're making a slight detour."

The transport's sensors, coupled with Rudder's coordinate data and Mackin's admittedly sketchy memory of where he had first seen Darin's airborne X-wing, allowed him to find the hole in the ground where Darin had blasted out of the Imperials' mining facility. Quiver was amazed as he watched Mackin backtrack all of his steps: what in the galaxy had they been doing, flying all over the planet like this alone, and with Darin strut-riding, no less? He'd have to have a little chat with his commander if they got back.

Weas led the way into the mine, but they encountered no resistance or threats. At first glance, the mine didn't look like a particularly easy place from which to steal an X-wing, and Quiver wondered how Darin had managed it. The two ships' landing lights illuminated the X-wings belonging to Quiver, Pellicer and Snubber where they waited patiently in the cavern, assaulted by a horrible, screeching siren alerting the mine's previous occupants to danger. Some buildings along the side of the mine were blackened and demolished. Dust hung thickly in the air.

Quiver started out as soon as Mack landed the transport next to the fighters and opened the door, but Mackin grabbed his uninjured arm and pulled him back into the ship. "Listen to me, Ten," Mackin said in a low, firm voice once he had Quiver's fragile attention. "I only want one thing on your mind: as soon as your fighter is powered up, you will go straight up to orbit with the rest of us."

"Yessir," Quiver offhandedly replied, already on his way out of the transport again.

The three pilots grabbed their chestboxes from the X-wing's hold, and Quiver took Ikoa's instead. Mackin gave Pellicer his helmet. The next few minutes were an exercise in finding their astromechs and loading them into the fighters. The first part was easy since the three droids came to meet the Rebels, but the next part was more challenging. Finally the pilots moved the droids into the transport, and Mack lifted up and tried to keep the ungainly craft still enough over each X-wing for the droid to roll down the transport's loading ramp and onto the top of the starfighter. Weas landed Mackin's X-wing and climbed into his own fighter, Pellicer and Quiver also got in their own X-wings, and Kalre took Mackin's starfighter. A few quick preps later, the transport was escorted by four X-wings out of the mine.

Quiver's first actions once he was out of the mine shaft and in open air again, even though he discovered that indeed only three of his engines worked, were to climb steeply for altitude and leave the group behind. After leveling off, he tried contacting Darin and looked for him on sensors, but he came up empty on both counts.

The only response he got on his comm, in fact, was a sharp warning from Mackin. "Ten, regroup with us immediately."

"Just give me a minute, sir. I only want to check for Nine quick."

"Negative, Ten. There are two Quakes out there who are doing their best to find him. Let them do their job."

"I can help."

"No, Ten, you won't be helping. The Quakes will detect an X-wing— yours— and think it's Nine, and it'll interfere with their search. Regroup with us immediately!"

The last thing Quiver wanted to hear was logic. He stubbornly turned his fighter toward the colony, the last general area where he had known Darin to be.

"Ten, if you don't turn around *now*, I'll have a Quake pilot ion you and then I'll tow you out of here with this transport's tractor beam."

Quiver hesitated for the briefest of instants, trying to discern from Mackin's voice and mood if he would (or could) actually do that or not. He was just about to push in his throttle and call Mackin's bluff when four bright X-wing engine exhaust nacelles rose directly in front of him from below. He reflexively pulled back on the yoke and braked hard to avoid a collision, and once his heart had stopped hammering from the fright he glared at the other X-wing, trying to determine which Corona was deserving of a piece of his mind. Probably Snubber, he figured.

But his scope told him it was Pellicer right beside him, turning his own fighter toward Quiver's and forcing the lanky pilot to turn the same way. Quiver cursed and said, "Blast it, Five, what are you thinking?!"

"Take a guess," Pellicer replied on a private channel.

He had turned Quiver almost all the way around to point back toward the group now, but Quiver kept pulling his flight yoke in the same direction, intending to circle inside Pellicer and go back on his original course after another 180 degrees. Pellicer spiraled over him, cut him off again and herded him into a turn in the other direction to keep him on track.

"Why is this such a big deal to everyone?!" Quiver demanded of him. "I'll be right back! Why won't anyone let me at least try to look for him?"

"Because you're injured and your fighter's damaged," said Pellicer bluntly. "If those TIEs are still tangling with Nine, you're at a severe disadvantage to help and will probably get shot down yourself. It's too high a risk that we'd lose you as well."

There was that damn logic again. "You don't want to lose me, but you'll accept losing Nine?! Is that it?!" Quiver retorted, pulling away yet again from Pellicer's herding attempts. It annoyed him to no end to realize Scoop was winning and was maneuvering him farther from the colony no matter what Quiver did to counter it.

"That's not at all what I said, and you know it," Pellicer said.

"Five, you just lost your wingman. Don't make me lose mine too!"

"You've got it all backwards," Pellicer shot back. "I'm trying to make sure Nine doesn't lose *his* wingman. And let's look at it from Nine's perspective. He's risking his life on that insane mission to give you, and all of us, a chance to escape alive. That's how much it means to

him. If you don't acknowledge that, accept it and leave right now when you have the chance, then he's risking his life for nothing. Don't do that to him. That's a horrible waste."

"But he—"

"Besides, for all we know, Nine could already be in orbit or out of the system. If that's true and you go off looking for him here—"

"It isn't!" Quiver cut in. "He didn't transmit his escape code word!"

"And maybe his comm is down. We'll see if *Star* detected him in orbit," Pellicer stubbornly continued. "But again, if it's true and you leave to look, what would he think if the rest of us show up without you? It would crush him. We'd have yet another shot-up pilot trying to come back here looking for his wingman."

Quiver fell silent, desperately wanting to believe Pellicer's scenario but not fully able to do so. But... what if it *was* true? What if Quiver made things worse for Darin by doing this? Now he didn't know what to do, so for the moment he settled for cursing again.

Thinking back over Pellicer's argument from Darin's point of view, Quiver came to a realization: Pellicer had spent way too much time around CC. Before now, CC had been the only person able to reduce Quiver to a guilt-induced speechlessness.

Remembering CC just made things worse and confused him more. Pellicer wasn't going to let Quiver search, but Darin had demonstrated a few times while on this planet just how much his friends meant to him. How could Quiver just turn his back and leave without at least attempting to return the favor, especially in light of what had happened to CC? He couldn't lose them both.

"I have to do this for him," Quiver said, stumbling over his words.

"For him or for you?"

"For him!" Quiver immediately snapped, then he started faltering again. "I— he— apparently he's the only one who gives a damn about anyone else now, so for him!"

"You want to do something for him? Then come with us. Get out of here safe and sound like he wants you to."

Pellicer forced his fighter into another turn back toward the others, and this time Quiver trembled but didn't try to veer back toward the colony. He didn't know what to think anymore, and it was easier to let Pellicer think for him. Quiver wondered, while Pellicer was at it, if he could decide for Quiver whether or not to believe Darin would ever forgive him for leaving him behind. Quiver's stomach felt hollow, a feeling he had only felt to this extent once before when...

A blue dot on his scope appeared, marking a location on the ground that had previously been saved in the flight computer's memory. Now in range to both his sensors and his own eyes, its location coincided with a crater made visible only by the black shadows inside it that were darker than the surrounding night.

Darin had never flown so recklessly in his life. But then again, he'd never been trying to escape from three TIEs while alone before, either. It had been five to begin with, but he'd managed to down two of them somewhere along the way.

He spun and twisted and dove so much that there were times he thought he'd make himself sick even with the inertial compensator. He'd actually lasted longer than he had expected

to, but another hit from behind brought his shields down to a mere 8% and reminded him that he wasn't out of the proverbial asteroid field yet.

Thumper pulled into a steep climb to put more distance between his X-wing and the darkness-concealed ground. When he leveled out, a laser punched through his thin shields and hit the underside of his lower port S-foil with a loud explosion and a violent shove that threw him against his seat restraints. Botch squealed, and a glance outside showed that the very tip of his port S-foil along with that laser cannon were gone. Darin even felt the change in the fighter's center of gravity. More diagnostics went from green or yellow to red. Alarms blared as coolant levels dropped, bleeding out through the X-wing's wound.

While continuing to evade Darin hastily punched buttons and flipped switches, trying to reconfigure valves upstream to block and reroute coolant around the damaged lines and plug the drain. His systems crept closer to overheating. Finally the coolant was in a closed circulation loop again, and his avionics boxes' temperatures trended back toward nominal.

The pilot mentally added the lower port laser cannon to the list of destroyed or inoperable systems along with his sensors, communications, repulsors and landing gear deployment. His IFF remained off; the damage to that console in his cockpit had prevented him from even turning it on. He was also out of torpedoes.

"Botch, we need those shields!"

His R5 blatted at him as if to say, "You do your job, I'll do mine." Darin didn't bother to read the display of Botch's words; he had more pressing matters to deal with. He realized too late that while he'd been distracted with troubleshooting, the three TIEs had herded him into a prime crossfire zone. Darin instantly dove into the bottom half of an inverted loop, which caused the ground to fill his forward windows. He snapped a few shots at a TIE that came into his sights as a result but missed.

After rolling out of the loop and leveling off, Darin spotted the caution lights on one of the raised aqueducts coming to the colony from the mountainous terrain in the west. He hadn't realized he'd gone so far from the colony, and he could barely see its lights anymore when he looked back. Darin had to take any advantage he could get, and right now that involved stressing the TIEs' lower maneuverability in atmosphere and hoping their pilots were more used to the high maneuverability in space and unable to compensate in time for the difference. He chewed on his bottom lip as he throttled up toward the aqueduct.

The TIEs stayed on his tail. Darin slowed as much as he dared, judged the distance between the aqueduct's massive support pillars, and with a curse at the pain that shot through his leg every time he pressed the ethereal rudder, he started to randomly slalom between the pillars, praying he wouldn't miss seeing one in the darkness. He concentrated on getting an exacting performance from his X-wing in the dangerous turns and unconsciously accommodated all of the fighter's quirks: both its normal, nuanced ones and the new large one brought on by the slight shift of CG.

The first Imperial fighter tried to follow, but its wing clipped a pillar after a turn that wasn't sharp enough, and the TIE went out of control. It exploded when it impacted the ground, and the light from that fatal fireball momentarily illuminated the other TIE Fighter that successfully began to follow the Rebel. The last TIE pilot wasn't going to be pulled in as easily. Instead of following in the slalom, he flew directly above the aqueduct and fired at the aqueduct immediately in front of and above Darin.

“Blast it, I can’t get away!” Darin said, fighting the strong urge to panic. He pulled sharply out from under the crumbling aqueduct structure before it could rain down on him, and he shot off, trying to outrun the TIE overhead that had now turned to come after him. The other TIE exited the slalom and followed as well.

Something about seeing the two TIEs still sticking relentlessly on his tail made an avalanche of exhaustion hit him. He’d been out there alone for a long time, and his nerves were worn thin from the pressure. The constant, loud wind noise through his broken window was starting to get to him psychologically and dull his mind. He could tell he was losing his focus and his reflexes were slowing, and Botch was being forced to pick up a lot more slack in keeping the damaged fighter operational than Darin had ever asked from him before, in addition to helping the pilot with the enemy firing patterns like always. Darin was too mentally fried to consciously watch for firing patterns on his own anymore; almost everything now was down to instinct and what Botch could tell him.

Despite this the Rebel was managing to evade the majority of the shots, but every ten successes seemed worthless next to a single failure. Another hit buckled his shields, and he knew he couldn’t hold out any longer: sticking around would mean certain death. Hopefully he had bought Mackin enough time. While it felt like hours to him, he honestly wasn’t sure how long it had objectively been since they’d split up; the X-wing’s chrono had been another casualty of the Imperial pistol. No time to check his wrist chrono under his flight glove.

Darin split his laser power between his shields and engines and corkscrewed full-throttle toward orbit. He just had to stay ahead of the Imperials long enough to jump to hyperspace... but it wasn’t more than five seconds later when another laser glanced off his fighter. It did enough damage to cause one of his engines to sputter, stall and then go deathly silent.

“No! Come on, don’t die on me!” he begged his X-wing as it involuntarily slowed. Power levels plummeted. His targeting computer and weapons controls went dark. Cockpit alarms blared. Darin shut off the alarms, hastily told Botch to isolate the damaged systems, and frantically but unsuccessfully tried to restart the inoperative engine. When it quickly became apparent that it was a lost cause, he put all of his efforts into randomly jinking and juking while trying to look in every direction at once to spot the TIEs. Without his sensors or targeting scope he was blind, and finding fast, dark-colored fighters against a night sky was practically impossible unless they were firing, but given those options, he preferred their invisibility. Botch patched through his own limited sensor readings to the X-wing’s computer, and while the droid’s sketchy, somewhat delayed readings weren’t nearly as good as the snubfighter’s military grade ones, they were at least something. Botch’s work at system isolation also made the power levels stabilize. Darin felt a tiny bit better.

However, that heartened feeling only lasted another half second until he looked at his engine diagnostics, which confirmed his engine was truly not going to start again no matter what. Then, his racing heart and a sinking feeling in his stomach accompanied the realization that he now could not outrun or outfly the Imperials. Darin put some power back to his lasers and hoped he still had enough control over his weapons systems to fire manually, though he wasn’t sure how much good that could ultimately do for him. He couldn’t run or effectively fight, so he tried thinking of something else, *anything* else, to do; however, the same four unbidden, unhelpful options kept coming to mind: he could eject and be captured, surrender and be captured, be blown up and die, or crash and be captured or die. A laser bolt narrowly missed his cockpit. He

desperately tried to think of a fifth option. Otherwise, within a matter of seconds he'd have to decide if he was more scared of surrendering or fighting to his death.

At that realization, something inside of Darin snapped, and the pressure made everything come crashing down around him. His leg was killing him. His head hurt. His nerves were shot. He was shaking. His X-wing was one hit away from exploding. He had no options. He couldn't do this anymore. He just couldn't. It had to stop.

Give up. He wanted to give up. No, he *needed* to give up. Not surrender, just give up. Stop trying. That was the only thought his overpressured mind allowed in anymore. He couldn't take anything else, and the thought of continuing all this was unbearable. It was hopeless.

Hopeless.

Darin didn't consciously register it when he began to ease off on some of his more extreme evading. One more hit and it would all be over...

Suddenly Botch beeped excitedly and patched through a transmission that the droid's own very short range comm was picking up: "Quake Six to Corona Nine, come in. You read?"

Darin's breath caught in his throat as he heard the unexpected Option Five. It jolted him into full evading again just in time as the Imperials tried to take advantage of his waver and finish him off. Darin responded without a second thought. "This is Corona Nine. I need help!" He had a feeling he would have yelled that even if he didn't need to shout above the wind noise in his cockpit. He also could hear himself mentally cracking in the tone of his voice.

"Hold on, we'll be right there."

Quake Six's transmission was a lifeline, glue for his shattered psyche, a relief valve for his internal pressure, motivation to keep going, a second wind that allowed him to function again. "Six, hurry!" Darin begged while he jerked aside to avoid another salvo of Imperial laser bolts. "And where are you? A lot of my systems are down. I have no readouts!"

"We're straight ahead of you, coming your way. Hang tight. Be there in four seconds."

Three seconds later, Darin saw the lights on the two Y-wings heading right for him before they banked to pass him on either side. The wishbones' red lasers flew past, converging on the TIE Fighters that had broken off to meet this new, much heightened threat.

After a few more passes Quake Six contacted him again. "You're all clear, Nine. Sorry for the delay, but it took us a while to find you. Lucky we did, though: we'd already stayed longer than we were supposed to, so you saved us from getting in trouble when we get back. We'll escort you up and clear a path through those mines for you."

The suddenness at which he went from being on the cusp of death to having a solid prospect of escape was overwhelming, and he didn't quite know how to react. He was almost afraid to believe it. His mouth formed the words his stupefied brain couldn't, and Darin heard himself say, "Thanks, Quake Six. You two and your gunners can have as many drinks as you want on me."

Regular thought processes were slowly coming back, staggering dizzily into his brain. The Quakes were here. The Coronas had help. Help. Darin opened his mouth to ask about the other Coronas but stopped. Could he mention them over the comm? Was it safe to with the comms still compromised? But he had to make sure they were rescued too.

Before he could, Quake Six chuckled and said, "Hey, Five, maybe we should save the Coronas more often if we get drinks out of the deal. With as much trouble as they get into, we'd never have to pay for another drink again."

“Careful, Nine, if the other Quakes catch wind of that offer you’ll have them following you around like lovesick mynocks,” said Quake Five. “But enough chatting. Let’s go. Your squadmates are probably wondering where you are.”

That caught Darin’s attention, and the desperation to confirm what he had just heard made him forget his caution. He responded without thinking. “My squadmates? You mean... They’re okay?”

“As far as I know. They’ve already jumped out of the system with the fleet and the other Quakes. I think one of our gunners rescued the X-wing abandoned outside the colony too, because we’re just that awesome.”

Darin hadn’t thought it was possible to feel more relieved than he had after the Quakes saved him, but he did. He laughed out loud– it started as nothing but nerves but ended in pure joy– and he was surprised to find he couldn’t make himself stop. As a result he almost missed Quake Five’s next words of, “You’re pretty shot up. Can you make it out?”

Thumper tried holding his breath to shut off the relief valve of compulsive laughter, and finally he gave an elated, shaky sigh to bring his voice under control. He closed his eyes for a moment and wiped tears from them. “I think I can make it, Five. I’ll be going just on emergency life support up there and I don’t know how much fuel I have left, so I can’t stay very long. But–” Darin remembered the small storage crate lids he had stashed behind his seat. “Wait, that’s right, I might be able to cover my window enough to partially pressurize my cockpit. Mind keeping an eye out for me while I land and patch it up?”

“No problem.”

A screen in front of Darin lit up with a message from Botch reminding him he couldn’t land without repulsors and a landing gear. Darin’s smile disappeared, and he cursed to himself. Why wasn’t anything ever easy? Out loud he said, “Blast it, I’ll have to try boarding up my window up here. Botch, keep an eye on things for me. I’ll try to just fly us in circles while I do this.”

“Copy, Nine,” Quake Six replied. “We’ll fly cover, just don’t take too long.”

“Don’t worry, I have no desire to stick around any longer than I absolutely have to.”

“How long have you been alone out here?” Quake Five asked.

Darin exhaled as he awkwardly pulled the lids out. The tension inside him was dissipating for the first time in days. “Way too long, Five. Way too long.”

Chapter Eighteen

Quiver silently followed the transport and the two other X-wings down to the plain-looking planet a dozen light-years away from Lokinha. These were the jump coordinates *Crescent Star* had given them in Lokinha's orbit, and Mackin had explained that they were going to be landing on this other world temporarily. Command wanted to quarantine the transport and any fighters from which they had been separated while on Lokinha and go over them with a fine-toothed comb to ensure there were no Imperial tracking devices on them. Plus, this way the ships would be isolated from the fleet for a while in case they missed a homing device and the Imperials showed up anyway: then when they did show up, they'd only find empty X-wings on an empty planet.

Quiver couldn't fault their reasoning, but this was another detour, another delay, and he really just wanted to go back to the ship. He envied Pellicer, who had needed to land on *Star* to escape because his hyperdrive was out and then got to stay aboard. The plan was for another pilot to bring his fighter down to the planet for him when *Star* and the fleet arrived in orbit so that it too could share in the quarantine. Without an astromech, Ikoa's Quake-flown fighter had also landed on *Star* for the hyperspace trip.

The three remaining X-wings and the stolen transport bumped through the atmosphere toward their designated landing spot and softly settled to the ground soon after.

Corona Ten clumsily powered down his X-wing with his off-hand and opened his canopy. The air rushing in was cold and smelled faintly of sulfur, and he shivered and wrinkled his nose in distaste before heaving a sigh. He just sat there at first, taking a long look all around at the sky and then blankly staring ahead at the bleak landscape. The end of his flight made him feel like other things were coming to an end as well.

While in hyperspace, Quiver had stared out his windows the entire time like he'd expected Darin to fly right up beside him and wave, but he hadn't. The two Quakes who had been looking for him hadn't found him before the Coronas jumped to hyperspace, and to Quiver's despair *Crescent Star* hadn't picked up anything in Lokinha's orbit either. Part of the plan was for Darin to transmit a code word over the squadron frequency right before he escaped the system so the others would know he'd gotten out, but they'd heard nothing from him since his distress call. *Windstar*, the fleet's Corellian Corvette, had been dispatched to the coordinates Darin would have jumped to according to the "third pilot" mission preparations, but they were empty. The strands of hope that had supported Quiver were gone, leaving him with nothing. Darin hadn't made it out, and the chances that he was still alive were fading with each passing minute. Any rescue team would be too late by now.

This mission had cost Quiver his two best friends in the galaxy. He'd experienced the loss of squadmates before, but never anything like this. It hurt like hell, and Quiver didn't know how to make the pain stop or if it ever would. He'd had some time to prepare himself for losing Darin, which had helped a tiny bit, but CC's death was still a mind-numbing shock to him.

Saying goodbye to her had been the hardest thing he ever remembered doing. Back on Lokinha, Quiver had begun flying to orbit with Pellicer when he had caught sight of the crater where CC's fighter had been, and the entire galaxy stopped. He remembered feeling like a dewback had barreled into him at full speed, but he didn't remember pulling back his power and descending to a floating stop at the edge of the area. The crater might as well have had a tractor beam on him for all the control it had.

It had taken more than a few calls on Pellicer's part before Quiver had realized there was a voice talking to him. Even then, he hadn't cared what the voice said; all he could do was stare at the crater, its deep shadows in the night making a black void in the ground that matched the one inside him. He almost turned on his exterior landing lights to illuminate it and chase the shadows away, but thankfully he hadn't. That would have been worse.

Quiver suspected he would have stayed that way for hours had not something else caught his attention in his peripheral vision and made him look up. At first he'd thought it was a reflection of the scope's blue dot up on his canopy window, but looking closer, he had noticed the stars were out and he was actually looking at a bluish star that was part of a new but somewhat familiar constellation. Quiver had blinked back sudden tears when he remembered the star was the one that Darin had pointed out to CC as her home system of Avalar during their stargazing session just two nights ago. It looked so peaceful, twinkling up there. He'd wondered if it had seen the atrocities there on that world from its vantage point high in the sky. He'd wondered how far away it was, how long it would be before the leftover light from those blaster bolts in her cockpit reached it.

That, more than anything else, finally convinced him he had to go. He had needed to get away from there, far enough so that he could look up into the starlight and see his friend reflected in it, alive and well once more.

When Quiver had looked back down, though, he almost couldn't do it. His throat had constricted to the point where it was difficult to breathe. Finally, in a wavering, unrecognizable voice that was somewhere between angry and pleading, he'd said, "This is not the way it's supposed to end." Quiver wasn't sure if the galaxy had heard him or not.

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he'd wiped at his eyes and choked out past the lump in his throat, "Bye, Chryse. I'm sorry." After one second more, he'd angrily jammed in his throttle and peeled off, with a surprised Pellicer turning to follow.

And that had been it. Now Quiver found himself here on this quarantine planet, safe with everyone else but facing two memorial services he'd hoped never to attend. "*Damage control*," CC had joked a mere few days ago. "*Quarantine*." Except instead of by Darin, it was without Darin. And without CC. The galaxy had never felt so empty.

With another sigh, Quiver unenergetically unfastened his seat restraints one-handed, left his helmet by his heads-up display and climbed to the ground.

The surviving Coronas and Rudder disembarked from the stolen transport and waited beside it. Quiver, Weas and Kalre silently joined them. Some offered small, disbelieving grins to each other as it began to sink in that the ordeal was truly finally over, but that and the obvious relief to be away from Lokinha couldn't completely cut through the general feeling of gloom and depression at what the mission and their escape had cost.

Weas's gaze settled on Mackin's bloody bandages and flight suit. "Sir? What the hell happened to you?" he asked. The other Coronas' attention was instantly drawn to his wound as well.

Mack exhaled wearily. "I'll tell you all the whole story later." He fell silent. A minute passed before he solemnly met Quiver's eyes, kept the contact for a long moment and then softly told everyone, "You should all be proud of Nine. He had a lot to overcome before we even started our plan, and he did it all." Something about the sincere words sent a stab of pain into Quiver's gut, but he got some perverse comfort out of seeing how troubled Mack looked. Almost

like he was dreading Quiver's reaction to everything. Or maybe he was feeling guilty for Darin's fate. As well he should.

But a small, annoying voice deep down told Quiver that he couldn't blame Mack. He couldn't even blame Darin. They weren't the causes of all this: they had only reacted to the position they'd been put into.

Soon the Special Forces shuttle recognizable as *Starsmoke* approached the landing site. Flying beside it were two X-wings painted in Corona Squadron's colors, a grey base and a red stripe with black borders. Quiver instantly thought one was Darin, but when they got closer he saw they were actually Pellicer's X-wing and Ikoa's X-wing that Mackin had flown to the colony, and Quiver's hopes were dashed hard against the rocks.

The three ships landed, and the side loading ramp to *Starsmoke* lowered. Nearby, Lieutenant Kemmanor, one of the Quake Squadron pilots, powered down Pellicer's X-wing and climbed out. Ambush, the Quarren Quake gunner who had flown Ikoa's fighter, did the same. She joined up with Kemmanor, and they walked over to the Coronas together.

Kemmanor somberly said, "Hey, glad to see you guys. Must have been a rough time, going from the highlights Scoop quickly filled us in on. I'm sorry about the pilots you lost." He looked at Quiver for a brief, sympathetic moment as if trying to determine how the Corona was faring.

Kemmanor quietly spoke to Mackin for a handful of seconds, and Quiver thought he heard Mackin say the word "rescue". When they were finished the two Quakes and Rudder headed over to *Starsmoke* and went inside.

It wasn't long before Kemmanor contacted Mackin over his combadge. Mackin acknowledged the transmission and said to his subdued pilots, "Okay, Coronas, the shuttle's ready for us. I'm sure you're all ready to head back to the fleet, get some medical treatment, hot food and sleep, right?"

They didn't need to be told twice. With a newfound energy borne of relief and feelings of safety, they quickly walked toward the shuttle. As they neared it, however, they saw the red-haired man appear and wait for them at the top of *Starsmoke*'s loading ramp. Lieutenant Colonel Adaic Traineer actually looked pleased with himself, as if rescuing the bone-weary pilots, or at least coming down on the transport to greet them personally, was a good deed he had gone out of his way to do. All of the pilots slowed their pace, and enthusiasm no longer propelled them forward.

There was one exception. Upon seeing Traineer standing at the top of the ramp, Quiver stopped dead in his tracks. He remained that way until Mackin, bringing up the rear of the group, gently pushed Quiver forward from behind. "Come on, Ten."

Mackin couldn't see Quiver's face turning redder or his narrowed eyes shooting lasers at the Special Forces officer. He didn't notice Quiver's breathing quicken and couldn't feel the lanky pilot's heart rate increase. Quiver reluctantly stepped forward again toward the ramp and toward the man who had ordered their abandonment. That was the person who had refused to help CC— and she'd still be alive if he'd assisted— and whose desertion of the pilots ultimately caused Darin to be missing and almost certainly dead, though Quiver would never know for sure, which just made it worse. He felt his hands ball into fists, and he clenched his jaw shut hard. The small, annoying voice inside was completely silent now.

The others apparently felt the same way, though maybe not as acutely as Quiver did. As Slurry helped Ikoa board the ramp and move into the back of the shuttle, they pointedly ignored Traineer at the top and brushed past him, never once even pretending to notice him or salute.

Traineer got visibly more and more agitated at each blatant show of disrespect, and when Weas came aboard next he pulled the pilot to a stop. “Lieutenant, I *strongly* suggest your pilots show some basic military courtesy. These are grounds for—” Traineer stopped, appalled, as Weas’s brown eyes pierced him with an angry glare. The Coronas’ XO shook off Traineer’s grip and silently continued past him as well.

Chopper hopped aboard with Kalre’s assistance, and Quiver followed them up the ramp with Mackin right behind. With each step closer Quiver’s heart raced faster from the bottled-up anger, especially after he noticed Traineer now glaring at each pilot as they passed. After Chopper and Kalre hobbled past Traineer like he was invisible, the colonel focused his attention on Quiver. Traineer’s angry look plainly said that if he valued his future, this next pilot would be smart to show a little respect for a high-ranking officer, their superior on this mission.

Quiver had had it. His only regret as he brought his arm back and then punched Traineer in the face was that since he’d separated his shoulder, he had to use his off-hand and couldn’t get as much strength behind the blow.

He was instantly yanked backwards and was backpedaling off-balance down the loading ramp. Quiver stumbled as he hit level ground and was whirled around by the grip on the back of his flight suit, then Mackin was between him and Traineer.

Traineer was so mad that the color of his face almost matched his hair. “What the hell are you doing?!” he shouted. He straightened up from where he’d caught himself against the bulkhead behind him, then he stormed down the ramp toward the two pilots with his eyes boring into Quiver. Quiver tried to maneuver himself out from behind Mackin for another confrontation, but Mackin grabbed his collar with his other hand and pushed his pilot back some more, though the action made the commander stiffen his left side and flinch. Ignoring his throbbing hand, Quiver defiantly glared back at Traineer and trembled with rage while Mackin held him in place with a death grip on his collar and flight suit.

There was the sound of running footsteps behind Traineer, and the other Coronas immediately appeared and skidded to a stop in the shuttle’s entranceway at the top of the ramp, crowding around the opening to see what was going to happen below them. The Coronas all watched Traineer intently; the expressions on their grimy faces showed beyond the shadow of a doubt that they were ready to instantly jump down and defend their squadmate.

Traineer stopped advancing, though his expression was no less furious. “Do you have *any idea* what you just did?!” he yelled at Quiver. “I’ll have you up on charges so fast you won’t know what hit you!”

“At least I know what hit *you*,” Quiver muttered through his clenched jaw.

Mackin shoved Quiver back another couple steps and turned to Traineer. “Sir, I’m sorry. I’ll—”

“Commander,” Quiver interrupted with an edge to his voice while still glaring at Traineer, “don’t apologize to him. Let me handle this.”

Mackin gave him another shove, harder this time, and hissed, “You will *not* handle it, Flight Officer, do I make myself clear? I think you’ve done quite enough.”

“Not as much as he’s done. Look at him! He’s not even sor—”

“Listen to me, Flight Officer!” Mackin warned in a very low voice. “Not another word, understand?! You’ll just make things worse.”

“Let me go, and I promise I’ll do exactly that,” Quiver said. His fuming scowl at Trainner lingered. “I’ll enjoy it, too.”

Mackin shifted his grip to put one hand on Quiver’s injured right shoulder, and he briefly squeezed hard. Startled, Quiver yelped and tried to jerk away.

“Now that I have your attention, Flight Officer, I’ll say this one last time,” Mackin told him. His dark blue eyes locked onto Quiver’s pale blue ones. “The more that comes out of your mouth, the less I’ll be able to help you. *So not another word*. Even if you don’t care what happens, I don’t want to lose a third pilot on this mission.”

Quiver wanted to point out that Mack already had, but he grudgingly fell silent and defiantly pulled his shoulder out of Mackin’s grip.

During Mackin’s private talk with Quiver, Trainner’s face had returned to its normal color except for where Quiver had hit him, but his eyes were still dangerous. When Mackin turned back to the Special Forces officer, Trainner said to him, “I’ll be pressing charges, Commander. Count on it. All of your pilots have been disrespectful here. All I’d expected was a little appreciation for rescuing this squadron, even though they didn’t deserve such a bail-out after you lost my shuttle, disobeyed my orders and put the whole fleet in danger by necessitating a rescue, and instead I got *this*. If your pilots aren’t on that shuttle in *ten seconds*, we’re lifting without them!” He spun on his heel and stalked up the ramp.

The Coronas jumped back to give Trainner a wide berth as he passed them and turned the opposite way to the cockpit. Then they cautiously returned their sights to Mackin and Quiver. As they did so, no one said a word, and few dared to even breathe.

Mackin looked at them and quietly said, “Everyone get in your seats.” The Coronas quickly pulled back out of sight and retreated into the aft of the transport, exchanging glances as they did so. Quiver knew they were wondering whether it was safer to be out there with Mackin as angry as he was or to stay on the same ship as Trainner.

The commander of Corona Squadron released his last grip and turned to Quiver, who stood there and stared back unapologetically. The look on the CO’s dirty face was just short of murderous. “I thought you were smart enough to know that insanely stupid stunts like that do not improve situations, Flight Officer.” Mackin was so angry that his voice was almost inaudible, and Quiver had to strain to hear. “Now get onboard, sit there and do not say a word. We’ll discuss this more, a *lot* more, when we get back.”

“Yes, sir,” Quiver said, almost spitting the words out. He spun and stomped up the ramp with Mackin close on his heels. Mackin was so close, in fact, that he very nearly ran into Quiver when his subordinate suddenly stopped at the top of the ramp and jerked his head up, watching as three Rebel starfighters flew overhead and circled to land. The one in front was missing a canopy window.

The crate lids had fallen off inside the cockpit when Darin’s X-wing had descended into this atmosphere far enough for the external air pressure to grow greater than the internal pressure. On the plus side, he now had full visibility back for what was going to be a very difficult task.

Darin circled for a moment to gather his nerve, then he set up on a landing approach angling away from the other ships. He'd been told his fighter had to stay on the surface of this planet for a while, and it would be just his luck to have survived that dogfight but die in this crash landing in friendly territory.

"Hang on!" he called to his droid over the renewed wind noise. He softly pleaded with his X-wing to get them down in one piece and hoped he wouldn't have to eject. Botch beeped insistently at him, but Darin silenced him by saying, "Not now, Botch. I have to concentrate."

While he descended, the ground came up from below frighteningly fast. Darin reflexively braked hard, *too* hard, and wished for the thousandth time that his repulsors worked.

"Nine? Why you going down so fast? You okay?" Quake Six asked urgently. Darin ignored that too. There were too many distractions at a very critical time.

A sudden plunge in altitude and a few anxious overcorrections later, Darin's snubfighter was skimming less than two meters above the grass, riding only on the dissipating bubble of lift created by the ground effect. Then his X-wing dropped, and its belly hit the ground with a bone-jarring impact. It bounced, hit again and started skidding. Botch squealed in alarm. Darin immediately reversed the throttle, slammed on his air brakes and desperately tried to stop the runaway fighter. It slowed to a halt after spinning almost completely around and digging a little trench.

Seconds passed. Everything was still. Calm. Darin sat there for a moment in disbelief. Was he truly still alive after everything that had happened? A sharp blat from Botch snapped him out of it, and he hurriedly shut down his X-wing before something leaked and decided to explode. The only thing he kept powered was the console that allowed Botch to communicate with him.

Darin turned off his chestbox's magcon field, unbuckled his seat restraints and opened his canopy. Botch whistled at him in annoyance, to which Darin replied, "Hey, *you* try a gear-up, high-speed landing, and we'll see how pretty *you* can make it. We're still in one piece. That's all that matters."

Botch squawked, and the droid's irate response lit up the console screen in front of Darin. YOU DIDN'T NEED TO LAND LIKE THAT. I TRIED TO TELL YOU. *DARKSPEED* COULD HAVE USED ITS TRACTOR BEAM TO SET US DOWN ON THE SURFACE HERE.

That made Darin stop, and he stared unmoving at the screen for a long minute as the words sank in. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten about the capabilities of the fleet's Bulk Cruiser. He must be more worn out than he'd realized if it was affecting his mind that badly, and all at once his survival seemed that much more miraculous.

He sighed deeply, closed his eyes and leaned his head against the seat's headrest, saying, "You're right. I'm an idiot. Sorry, I should have listened to you." Darin straightened up in his seat again and added, "Especially since you got me through that fight back there. I couldn't have done it without you, Botch. Thanks."

Beeping with pleasure at the compliment, Botch apparently felt forgiving of his pilot's error. Darin grinned, then affectionately patted the top of the forward console in his cockpit. "And that's my good ship," he whispered. "You did well too. Thank you. We'll get you all fixed up, don't worry."

The pilot shut off the final console and dropped his helmet and Pellicer's helmet onto the dirt below before he climbed out of the cockpit on one weak leg and one painful one. Darin slipped to the ground in exhaustion, then sat back against his fighter's hull to catch his breath. He

also briskly rubbed his arms to warm them; personal magcon fields from a pilot's emergency life support didn't trap much heat, and even with the cockpit heater on its highest setting the whole time he was still shivering from the flight through hyperspace. If he hadn't been able to mostly board up his canopy window and keep some heat in, he suspected he'd at best be suffering from hypothermia right now. Though this planet's temperature was on the cool side, it was downright balmy compared to hyperspace.

The two Y-wings had landed near his fighter in a much less dramatic display, and the pilots and gunners powered down the fighters and climbed out. Their grey flight suits almost blended into the haze in the distance.

"What the hell was that?" Lt. Cannlen, Quake Five, asked incredulously while the four of them approached. He indicated Darin's fighter and the destructive path it had left on the ground.

"Typical Coronary landing," replied Quake Six, Lt. Welker. "How you all manage to survive each day is beyond me."

Though he wanted to, Darin couldn't muster the energy to participate in the joking with his shipmates and friends. He offered a weary grin and simply said, "That's what a non-repulsor landing plus a dose of stupidity looks like." Above him, Botch beeped in agreement. Normally Darin would have thrown in some good-natured teasing about how even that mess was better than the Quakes' nominal landings, but not today. There would be no disparaging comments, even fake or humorous ones, directed toward that squadron and especially these four members from him.

Cannlen smirked and then asked more seriously, "You okay, Thumper?" Darin nodded.

"Good. I bet solid ground feels good again, huh, kid?" Welker piped up with a grin.

"And don't forget those drinks," Cannlen added while pulling Darin to his feet. He sheepishly steadied the Corona's balance after belatedly noticing Darin's injury, but Darin just gingerly rested the toe of his right boot on the ground once he was stable. He supported himself against his X-wing.

"Don't worry," Darin said. "I owe you guys. You saved my life back there. Thanks."

"You should've known we'd be back to save all of you," Welker said. "The alternative would've been that we'd have to protect the fleet all on our own and pull double patrol duty, and there's no way we'd ever allow that. You think you're going to get out of your share of the work just by being stranded on some hostile planet? Think again."

Darin chuckled, then they all looked up at the sound of running footsteps approaching. The four Quakes were only barely able to get out of the way as Quiver ran up. He had too much momentum to stop in time, so at the last second he put out his left arm to hook the inside of his elbow around Darin. Darin yelped and was knocked over directly into Quiver. Quiver hadn't let go, and his attempt at arresting his decreasing speed sent both of them sideways. They bounced off the X-wing's hull, but then Quiver managed to plant his feet and hold Darin up as well.

"You're alive!" Quiver exclaimed. He pulled Thumper's head close and squeezed it against him in a weird, one-armed hug.

"Ow, cut face," Darin managed weakly in a voice that was muffled in Quiver's flight suit. He finally pulled away from his wingman enough to breathe, and he was surprised his face could hold his huge smile. "It's so good to see you! Where's everyone else? Are they all right?" He looked back and saw the rest of the squadron quickly coming up.

Ikoa was on her feet, and she pulled herself away from Pellicer's help for the last few steps and threw her arms around Darin from behind. "I'm so glad you're okay!" she said.

It was a surprisingly strong hug for someone who had been— and still seemed to be— so ill. “Ow, too tight. Chestbox!” Darin almost lost his balance as she pulled him toward her.

When Ikoa finally let go, Mack stepped forward. One concerned look took in Darin’s leg, and then he shook Darin’s hand and heartily patted his back. Mackin’s broad smile radiated relief and pride. “Glad to see you safe and sound, Thumper. Great job.”

The other Coronas intervened with backslaps and hair tousling and friendly demands to know what had happened to him after the distress call, all while Quiver looked on like a proud parent and possessively draped his left arm over Darin’s shoulders. Darin gratefully leaned on his wingman for support.

Standing there in the middle of them all, Darin was just thrilled beyond measure to see each one again. In no time at all, he launched into the story of the dogfight and his rescue and escape, excitedly demonstrating the fighters’ actions with his hands, while Mackin picked up the two helmets and started gently herding all his pilots toward the shuttle to go home.

Chapter Nineteen

Darin absentmindedly swirled the water around in his glass while he sat across a table from Quiver in the Bacta Tank, the pilots' favorite bar and downtime establishment on *Crescent Star*, and watched his friend in concern.

It was the Coronas' second full day back onboard *Crescent Star*, and between identity confirmations, debriefings, medical treatments, standard counseling sessions due to CC's death, and more, they'd had very little opportunity to unwind after their ordeal. In fact, this was the first time they'd really had a chance to relax, and it was trailing CC's memorial service, which had recently concluded.

Darin had been surprised to see a few of the Special Forces commandos from the mission attending the service, but he hadn't inquired about why they came. Afterwards, all of the Coronas, even Mackin, had come to the Tank to have a few drinks and remember CC in a more informal setting. They had all sat together, along with the Quakes and some of her other friends on the ship. It was a subdued yet loose atmosphere, a breath of fresh air after the constant pressures of the mission and their full schedules lately.

In other words, Darin reflected, it was the first time since their rescue that Quiver didn't have a pressing activity to distract him from thinking about it all, and it showed. Quiver looked miserable sitting there in the Tank and had barely said two words to anyone the entire time.

As time went on, the mourners had excused themselves one by one until only Ikoa, Pellicer, Darin and Quiver remained at the large table. Some quiet, idle conversation between the first three had ended when Pellicer had looked at his chrono and said he had to get going. Ikoa had watched their worn out colleague walk away and seemed to want to go after him, but she had hesitated. She had caught Darin's eye, had given a meaningful glance at Quiver, and then had only left when Darin had offered a small gesture to indicate he'd stay with him. Ikoa had given Quiver's left shoulder a small squeeze before she walked away. He hadn't reacted.

That had been close to fifteen minutes ago. Darin finished his water and asked the server droid for another, more out of a desire for something to do than because he was thirsty. He really wanted something stronger, but he'd already reached his sad-occasion one drink maximum way back in the first round with all his squadmates. Part of that drink, in fact, was still present.

In the center of the table was the two pilots' only remaining company, a single glass full of various types of drinks. It was part of a tradition among the Coronas and Quakes after a squadmate died: at the beginning of an informal memorial gathering, an empty glass would be passed around, one for each squadmate being remembered, and every person would pour a little bit of his or her own drink into the glass. Once everyone had done so, the glass was put in the center of the table. When the glass originally reached him, Darin had poured in double the amount he did for other deceased pilots; it seemed fitting, given that at mealtimes CC had always stolen one of his cups of juice or water for herself, so he was used to multiplying drinks by two when she was involved.

Now, though, the server droid only needed to bring him one new glass of water. After receiving it, Darin resumed studying Quiver. His wingman was staring at the empty seat next to Darin and was hardly moving. That was where CC would have been sitting, had she been there. She always sat next to Darin and across from Quiver so Quiver would be in easy kicking range. The thought of the empty chair began to get to Darin as well, but he pushed the thoughts down amid a flutter of fear and instead focused on how he could help his wingman through this.

Darin remained there with Quiver in silence. He hoped Quiver would understand that Darin's presence was his way of showing support, of being there for his friend. Of course, Quiver was the kind of person who did things with language, not telepathy, so he might be thinking that the silence was a sign of lack of support. Though maybe in this case he preferred the quiet, seeing as how he'd become extremely untalkative himself since everything happened. Darin was so confused, and it fueled his worry.

About five long minutes later, Quiver finally spoke. "I don't know." The words were nearly inaudible, and he was still fixated on the empty chair.

Darin blinked once in surprise, then he kept his voice soft as well, like he was afraid of puncturing something with it. "What?"

"If she was here now, she'd be shaking her head and telling me to remember that gains and losses talk of mine. You know, the one that says we should focus on the good stuff we've gained, not the things we've lost."

"Yeah." Darin had heard that "speech" after his first mission with the Coronas, and it had helped him through some rough times.

"But I don't know." Quiver would have sounded plaintive if there hadn't been undertones of frustration, anger, and what sounded like desperation in his voice. "I've tried and tried, but I can't find one gain out of any of this. Not one damn thing. I don't know what it is. The only thing I've gained is this big void of vacuum."

Darin stalled by taking a sip of water. How was he supposed to think of happy memories at a time like this? But he had to be the strong one this time, so Darin took a deep breath before saying in the same soft voice, "I'm sure we can think of something. I think you're forgetting that the gains usually come from the person's life, not their death. At least in this case it would be."

When Quiver didn't answer, Darin went on. "How about the time she set up that prank to play on you? The one where she sweet-talked someone at the armory into loaning her a set of stormtrooper armor, and she set it up on a mannequin just inside the door to our quarters? But I got off duty early that day so I was able to walk back to our quarters with you. I opened the door first and got scared out of my mind. You laughed about that for days. You remember what happened after that?"

Quiver shook his head and remained looking at the seat. Darin wasn't sure if Quiver didn't remember or just didn't care. Probably the latter.

Thumper continued, "It put you in such a good mood that you decided to take full advantage of your power as morale officer, and you put together that big party for us and the Quakes. You invited the support squadron mechanics to that one too. A lot of good came out of that, Quiv, and it got rolling because of CC."

"Like any of that matters in the grand scheme of things," Quiver muttered. "A party. Big deal. A party is not going to defeat the Empire."

"I seem to remember some better relations with our mechanics coming out of that party, though," Darin countered, "as well as the resolution of a repair on an X-wing that a few of the techs had been puzzling about for weeks. All that in turn lets us better perform our missions. *Those* are what lead to the downfall of the Empire. They may be baby steps, but they are steps in the right direction."

"Baby steps do you no good if the enemy is going after you at full sprint."

"Baby steps are what destroyed the Death Star."

Quiver snorted. "Yavin was a fluke. We'd never be so lucky again."

Darin suppressed a sigh. “You don’t believe that.”

Quiver looked at him at last, and Darin was unnerved at seeing the hard, cynical look in Quiver’s eyes. “No, you know what, Darin? I do believe that. I didn’t before, but I do now. Because I’ve finally seen for myself what the Empire’s capable of and how blasted powerless we are to do anything about it. You see all this?” Quiver’s gesture encompassed the entire Bacta Tank, and his voice took on a sharp edge that cut right through Darin. “This is one puny, understaffed, undersupplied ship in one puny, understaffed, undersupplied fleet in one puny, far-flung, insignificant sector. This is nothing. *Nothing*. We have no chance of even making a dent in the Imperial war machine, and anyone who thinks we do is a delusional idiot. Yes, I’ll admit that I used to be one. Not anymore.”

The delusional idiot sitting across from Quiver felt a flare of aggravation, but he tried to let it go. Quiver was just venting, that was all. He hoped. “So what about CC?” Darin asked as neutrally as he could. “She believed we could do something worthwhile here.”

Quiver aimed a scathing glare at him and snapped, “She was wrong too, and it got her killed. Face it, Thumper: sometimes the things people believe just turn out to be wrong. Being here is pointless. All it’s going to do is get us all killed, and for what? For nothing.”

Sitting back in his seat, Darin spoke with an edge to his own voice. “Stop it, Quiv. I don’t mind if you vent, but don’t say things like that. All you’re saying is that her efforts here were meaningless, and you can’t do that if you want to honor her memory at all.”

“No,” Quiver replied angrily, “all I’m saying is that if we know what’s good for us, we’ll open our eyes before it’s too late! The sooner we *all* accept that there’s nothing we can do and the Empire is just going to win, the more lives we’ll save. Our *own* lives. Mack can go home to his family. Chopper and Kalre can... I don’t know, go work as Security somewhere where they can beat people up and get paid for it. All the others can do what they want. You’ve talked about wanting to go back to work for a shipping company. Hell, I’ll come with you and fly transports or whatever. The difference between delusion and non-delusion is that in the non-delusion scenario, *we live*. We come home each day. We don’t end up like CC, expecting to come back and be playing with Hue again by this time like normal and then have it not happen because we get killed by someone we can’t stand up to. I’m serious, Darin. We need to stop doing this. There’s no logical reason to keep fighting!”

Darin just sat there, not knowing what to say. Quiver didn’t give him much time to absorb the tirade, however: the lanky pilot abruptly stood, looking for all the galaxy like he was fed up with life, and shoved his chair in hard. It banged loudly against the table, and the noise was considerable even amid the conversational din of the Bacta Tank. Quiver whirled and stomped out with a huff.

Darin hurriedly dug out some credits and left them on the table to cover their tab, then he quickly went after Quiver. His leg was stiff from sitting for a while, but only a slight limp remained after the bacta treatments and it was expected to fully heal.

When he caught up to his wingman in the corridor, Darin simply matched strides with him for a short time while he turned things over in his mind. Quiver’s words and attitude scared him, but Darin remembered experiencing the same bleak feelings as Quiver was after Darin’s family and hometown friends had died, and the memory of how awful that long tunnel had been without any light at the end was particularly vivid. He didn’t let himself think about the frightening prospect of going through it again now because of CC. Instead, Darin thought about

what had gotten him out of that endless tunnel and headed for the Rebellion. Maybe Quiver just needed some of that same medicine.

At this point, it sure couldn't hurt anything.

"You're looking at this all wrong, Quiv," Darin finally said softly. "The Empire has weaknesses, and the Rebellion is stronger than you think. Because it's got people like CC and people like you. You wanted to see the gains and not the losses. Well, don't view her death as a reason to stop fighting. Look at it as a reason *to* fight."

Quiver's only reply was a derisive snort. Darin walked the rest of the way to their quarters with him in silence; there wasn't anything else he could say at that point to help. Quiver would have to sort some things out for himself.

Chapter Twenty

The next day, Darin fought a yawn while he walked to the quarters he shared with Quiver. The quarantined X-wings and astromechs had returned early that morning, and Darin had just had a long discussion with the techs who were upset that he would not allow them to memory-wipe Botch after the droid's prolonged exposure to the Imperials on Lokinha. What followed was another painstaking session in which he examined other options with the techs and started pushing through the appropriate paperwork to waive some of the memory-wipe requirements in favor of work-arounds and intensive scans that hopefully were just as effective. He had never memory-wiped his droid before and had no intention of starting now, especially after recent events reminded him of how precious some memories could be. It felt odd not doing it for CC and her memory-intact droid Ruby too, since she would have insisted on the same thing.

At his door he punched in his access code. Maybe he could catch a nap before he was needed again in the hangar. The door slid open, and the moment he had stepped in and the door had closed behind him, Darin glimpsed something small and dark flying directly at his face. Fast.

"Aaah!" He jumped back and raised his arms to protect himself against the unknown and unexpected projectile. His back hit the wall, but that was the only impact he felt; instead, he heard Quiver burst out laughing uncontrollably, and he also realized that something small was sitting on one of his upraised arms.

Darin cautiously peeked out. A double-fist-sized avian was clinging to his sleeve with tiny claws on its four feet, folding its wings against its sides and happily twitching its long tail. It looked at the pilot with wide, dark eyes while deep purple, green and blue highlights glistened in its black fur. Ears that were proportionately a bit too large were pricked to hear any sound Darin might make, and its soft breath had an almost imperceptible fruit smell to it. The animal chirruped at him, and Thumper exhaled as he recognized it. "Quiver!" he said over his wingmate's laughter. It was good to hear that again. "What's going on? Why is Hue here?"

CC's pet, Hue, flapped up onto Darin's shoulder and nibbled curiously at what was left of one of the cuts on his neck. "Ow, Hue, stop that," Darin said as he gently pushed the small creature away. Hue climbed up onto that hand and then jumped onto Darin's head, at which point Darin made him go onto his hand again and then brought him down to chest-level. Hue scrambled up onto the pilot's shoulder, nestled himself into the beige fabric of Darin's general duty uniform and spontaneously fell asleep while Darin waited for an answer.

Quiver finally stopped laughing long enough to start giving him one. "Hoooo, Thumper, you should've seen the look on your face! Just like when you saw that fake stormtrooper!" His control threatened to disappear again, but he managed to calm himself down after another minute and simply said, "Hue is going to be living with us now."

Darin curiously raised an eyebrow. "Kile always watches him when we go on missions. Why doesn't he keep him? Or Ikoa?"

Quiver walked up and studied Hue as he slept. "Kile doesn't want a permanent pet. Plus, Hue's better off in the company of other flying creatures like himself. Aren't you, Huey? None of those groundpounders for you. And I talked it over with Ikoa, and she's okay with it."

Then Quiver turned a somber look to his wingman, an expression full of more seriousness and sadness than Darin had ever seen from his carefree friend before the mission to Lokinha. Quiver added more softly, "She was one of my best friends, Darin, and now she's gone. Not even

that crazy astromech of hers is around. The least I can do for her now is to make sure that her pet is taken care of. I think she would be happy to know that he's okay."

Darin considered Quiver's words, and then he nodded and offered his wingman a small smile. "Yeah," Darin said quietly. "Somehow I think she'd want him to be stuck with you."

The End

Revision C
4-19-12