

“The Way”

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Prologue

Chase Barton stared at the ceiling through the darkness while he lay in bed. The bedroom window was open as it was almost every night, allowing the fresh sea breeze to blow in off the bay. Chase inhaled deeply and savored the salty-smelling air. This assignment might have put him out on one of the farthest edges of the galaxy thousands of light-years from nowhere, but it was a million times better than the cramped, polluted conditions of Coruscant.

From beside him, his half-asleep wife snaked her arm across his chest. “You still awake?” she mumbled, eyes closed. “Get some sleep.”

Chase laid his hand atop Lataise’s and kept his voice quiet. “I will.” His accent still betrayed the origin of the pilot in his mid-twenties, and his light brown military crew cut gave a less traitorous hint to his general profession.

Lataise pried her eyes partway open and squinted at him. “You *are* awake. Can’t you sleep?”

With a shrug, Chase whispered, “Just thinking.”

“About what? It’s too late to be thinking.”

“I’m working through some schedules in my mind. I think I can finish getting the baby’s room painted before I leave if I come home during my lunch break today and work on it then.” Chase already had gotten some of it done, and finishing it shouldn’t take long; he had all the supplies he needed.

The slight confusion in Lataise’s green eyes showed that she was still not fully conscious. “You’ll only be gone a few weeks. You’ll have more than enough time to do it when you get back.”

Chase figured Lataise must really be tired if she thought this was something he would put off. It was too early in her pregnancy for her to even be showing yet, but that hadn’t stopped him from diving headfirst into the preparations with her. Sometimes she even teased him that he was more excited about it than she was, and sometimes he wondered if that might be true.

He hadn’t thought it would be possible for him to adore his wife more than he already did, but when she had broken the news to him that the baby they’d been trying for for so long was finally on its way, he’d realized it truly *was* possible.

He couldn’t wait to be a father. He couldn’t wait for Lataise to be a mother. This child was going to be special—it was going to be *theirs*—and he couldn’t wait to share the galaxy with him or her and in turn see the wonders of the galaxy through his child’s eyes. Life seemed more complete and meaningful with that prospect.

Sure, they would have lots of time after Chase got back before the baby arrived, but so

what? Chase smiled a bit and said, "I know. But I'm happy to do it. I want to." Chase leaned over and kissed her gently, then she enveloped him in a sleepy hug.

Lataise soon fell back asleep with her head on his shoulder and her arm around him. Chase pulled the blanket up farther to protect her from the cool breeze, and then he softly brushed some stray strands of her mussed-up wavy brown hair away from her face. He simply watched her sleep for a while, trying to soak up the sight and ingrain every detail in his mind so he could remember it clearly while he was gone.

He knew he should probably try to get some sleep, since morning would be there soon. With the morning would come one more day: one more day closer to when he had to leave.

Let the morning wait.

Chapter One

The pair of TIE Fighters from Fireburner Squadron of the 321st Imperial Fighter Group followed their designated course through the interplanetary space of the Craci System. Chase's sensors were active as he and his wingman kept watch for any ships not on an approved flight path or which otherwise seemed suspicious. The system's location and situation made it susceptible to pirates and smugglers, and ever since the planetary defense satellites around the two inhabited planets had been destroyed, the Empire had stepped in to assist with protection of the populations.

From inside the leading TIE Fighter, Chase looked around at the familiar starfield through his cockpit windows. "It's strange to think about, Four," Chase remarked to his wingman, Lieutenant Junior Grade Radek Deror, while addressing him by his squadron designation.

"What is, Three?" Radek asked.

"That this will be our last patrol out here for a while."

"Eh, I don't care," replied Radek. "Nothing ever happens way out here, and patrols day after day are enough to drive you crazy. I'm really looking forward to some *real* action!"

Chase meant it when he said, "I'm glad you're looking forward to it so much. I'm happy to do my part and all to make the galaxy safer, but I'll be glad to get back here when we're done with this temporary duty tour."

He divided his visual attention between his sensors and the view outside while they talked. Chase loved challenging himself by navigating by sight; navigational instruments made the feat too easy.

The pair passed the docking structure TIE pilots could use to board suspicious ships out in the interplanetary space. It marked the halfway point for their patrol lap, and Chase smoothly guided his TIE into a turn to their next checkpoint, still trying to maneuver and orient his flight path by sight alone. Radek kept perfect time beside him.

"Yeah, I'll bet you won't be able to wait to get back," Radek said once their flight path straightened again. "Gotta get back to those *smoochies smoochies*, right? Right? Poor Junior Lieutenant Barton, gettin' himself no wife-lovin' for a few weeks."

"My relationship with my wife is no concern of yours."

"Right. Sure." Radek paused for a few moments, and then Chase saw Radek's TIE sidling closer to his own. "Gonna want someone *close* to you," Radek said. The fighter got closer. "Next to you." The TIE moved to within a handful of meters. "There *with* you. Right? Right?"

"Four!" Chase jerked his TIE away. "Stop it. You know I hate it when you fly so close. It's dangerous."

Over the comm, Chase heard Radek laugh before his wingman moved back to the standard flying position. Chase sighed a bit. Radek was a good guy, but Chase would never understand why Radek acted so juvenile sometimes. He'd be going on surlights to a promotion until he grew more mature. As the senior of the two, Chase was trying to set a good example for Radek in that regard, and he knew he must be doing something right because the commander had hinted at the possibility of a promotion for Chase soon. The extra money that a jump up to lieutenant would bring would be quite welcome on a planet with such a high cost of living and with a baby on the way, and he and Lataise were both hoping for it. Lataise was low in seniority at her own job and didn't make much money, and if they didn't live in the affordable base housing they would be having a lot more problems trying to make ends meet.

The system traffic was quiet that day. After their next checkpoint, their turn brought the planet of Craci IV into sight. Beyond it lay the bright nearby stars of the Corporate Sector, an entire region of space run solely by money and totally lacking in Imperial military presence. The sole exception to that which proved the rule was the existence of the small Imperial military bases on the worlds of Craci III and Craci IV.

The Craci System fell just within the Sector boundary, but the Cracians had long ago set up a business contract with the Corporate Sector Authority allowing them to govern themselves. Their relatively distant location helped their case, and enough money essentially bought their freedom from the CSA from year to year, with certain terms and conditions subject to negotiation. This political independence allowed the Empire to help them when their planetary defense satellites were destroyed without technically violating any parts of the Corporate Sector Charter that stated the Imperial military would not take up residence there.

There were rumors around the base that there was really more to it than that, but Chase ignored them. They didn't matter. If the Empire wanted to spend the money to set up even small bases way out here far from other Imperial fleets and supply lines, that was their decision. He admittedly hadn't been happy about his squadron's transfer to such a remote place at first, and some of his squadmates like Radek still didn't like it, but gradually the cloudy planet before him had become a cozy home for Chase and his wife, a great place to start a family. They simply had to avoid the few isolated towns that had objected to the Imperials' presence and still contained pockets of unrest. Other Imperial bases on the planet were responsible for maintaining order in those locations.

The system patrol drew to a close with no disturbances, and after being relieved by another wingpair from Fireburner Squadron, Chase and Radek flew back through the daytime clouds on Craci IV to their naval base on the edge of the city of Legis Bay. The two pilots landed, took off their life support gear, and spent some time filing their reports on the completed patrol. Afterward, they went to a quiet lounge to work on the outprocessing for their new temporary duty assignment.

They'd been absorbed in it for about an hour when Radek spoke up. "Can you believe this?" he asked with a smile as he scribbled information in yet another form on a datapad. The pilot had dark hair that was very short but still curly, and eyes that seemed a little too large for his face. When he was excited about something, they got even larger, and they were that way now. "We're really going to be stationed on a Nebulon-B for five weeks! I wonder how many escort missions we'll end up doing. Those Rebels would be stupid to try anything with us there ready for 'em!"

"You know they probably wouldn't be asking for our squadron's assistance unless they were getting lots of casualties in whatever area of space where they're escorting, right?" Chase asked. He was a bit less enthusiastic about the endless paperwork they were plowing through.

Radek scoffed dismissively. "That's because *we're* not out there flying. Things will be different then. Then maybe once The Powers see how good the ol' 321st is, they'll transfer us off this rock to someplace more useful. This is our big chance!"

"I don't know, I think we're plenty useful here." Chase finished Datapad Number Seven and reached for Number Eight. "We're protecting otherwise-defenseless civilians from the raiders going into the Corporate Sector after all that money. What more do you want?"

"To blow up a Rebel or two." Radek grabbed Datapad Number Ten. "I'll be happier then, and the whole galaxy will be better off."

“True.”

“Let the Cracians and the CSA worry about the raiders out here,” Radek continued. “It’s not our problem. When I signed up with the Navy I wanted to go after some Rebs, not babysit some wimpy far-flung planet.”

Chase had heard it all before. He muttered something noncommittal before tuning out Radek and continuing with his paperwork. Blast, his brother had told him to expect a lot of paperwork before going into full-blown front-line combat status again, but he certainly hadn’t expected *this*...

Chase cleared his throat slightly. His older brother Kane had been on the front lines in a TIE months ago, and despite being as great a pilot as he was, the Rebels had still managed to injure him and end his piloting days. Chase secretly was concerned about that as he filled out the information for who had legal power over his affairs if he should become incapacitated or killed during this deployment. If even Kane couldn’t make it out unscathed, things didn’t bode well for Chase. He coughed to clear a tickle in the back of his throat.

“What’s wrong?” Radek asked.

Chase raised his eyes from his datapad. “What?”

Radek, on the other hand, never looked up. “You’re doing that thing.”

“What thing?”

“You know, that...thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Chase dropped the subject and turned back to his datapad as a new, more positive thought came to him. He had been in a couple of small fights with Rebels before being transferred out here, and while he’d been here he’d gotten into combat with pirates numerous times, but maybe Radek was right. Maybe this was his big chance. Maybe, just maybe, if Chase could make it through this more intense combat deployment, he could finally prove he was as good a pilot as Kane was. Maybe he wouldn’t be able to take out four Rebels while his fighter was damaged like Kane said he did, but if he could destroy a few over the course of the deployment and come home in one piece, maybe that would be enough. Maybe his own less-than-stellar piloting skills wouldn’t be tarnishing the shine on his brother’s reputation any longer. Chase smiled at that thought.

The small base was a flurry of activity the next morning. Landspeeders loaded down with people and crates wound through the crowds of personnel and droids on foot. Some people were riding the native Cracian thumper workbeasts through the activity more quickly than landspeeders could manage, and others led pack thumpers to various destinations to unload their burdens. Every person and machine seemed to be going a different direction and doing it in a hurry. Many were converging on the general area of the operations building at the edge of one of the landing pads. Crates of equipment and baggage and spare parts were being loaded onto a shuttle to be taken up to orbit to the waiting capital ship. Mechanics swarmed the squadron of TIE Fighters, finishing the final preps and fueling before the starfighters would also fly up to that capital ship. The mechanics would follow on a transport afterwards.

Even though he was standing at ground zero of the chaos just outside the operations building, Chase didn’t notice any of it; he was too busy going for a new record on the longest hug he had ever given his wife. Lataise was all too happy to assist him in that record-breaking

attempt. Chase didn't even know how long they had been standing there close together with their arms wrapped around each other, their eyes closed and their heads resting against the other. All he knew was that he never wanted to let go.

"Hey, Lover Boy." Radek's voice punctured Chase's mental bubble. "Come on, hurry up, we're waiting on you. I want to get off the ground! Let's go!"

Chase took a deep breath. "Radek," he said in a steady, matter-of-fact voice, "if you're still here in one second, I will hurt you."

"Right. Sure," Radek muttered. His footsteps moved away.

Chase sighed, opened his eyes and pulled back from Lataise's embrace. "Leave it to Radek to ruin things," he grumbled.

"Sure, it's annoying, but you know he doesn't mean anything by it," Lataise replied. "You watch out for him out there: you know he's going to need it. You're the responsible one of the two."

"Yeah. And who knows, maybe he'll grow up a little out there," Chase said. He could only hope.

Lataise looked over Chase's shoulder at the landing pad operations, and her voice sounded a bit strangled when she said, "He was right, though—it looks like they're just about ready for you." Lataise locked a frightened gaze with his. "Be careful, Chase. I need you to come home."

Chase tried to sound as firm as he could, even though his voice was threatening to break as well. He cleared his throat and said, "I will. Don't worry. If you think I'm going to miss out on raising our child and spending the rest of my life with you, you're sorely mistaken. Do you remember everything we talked about yesterday?"

Lataise nodded, but she tempered that with, "It was just a lot easier to deal with yesterday when I still had all those hours between then and now."

"Everything's going to be fine," Chase repeated as much to himself as to her. "You'll be fine and I'll be fine, and I'll see you right here in five weeks. Now, you have all the emergency contact numbers, the numbers for my family, all the pertinent people here on base in case you should need anything while I'm gone..."

Lataise nodded again and furiously blinked back tears. "Right by the comlink. The base and the town will take good care of us here. Just take good care of you. I love you." She pulled him into a long kiss.

The pilot at last had to break the kiss to take a breath. "I love you too," Chase said softly. He smiled at her, gently brushed his fingers against her cheek to wipe away an escaped tear, then reluctantly turned and walked into the operations building. *It's only five weeks*, he told himself to prevent his feet from turning him around and going back to her. *It's only five weeks. You'll be back soon.* The words helped his stride, but they didn't fill up the void that materialized in the pit of his stomach. He discreetly wiped first one eye and then the other before anyone noticed.

Chase made his way through the operations building past all the people working on getting things together for this deployment, stopped briefly in the now-empty locker room to put on his flight gear over his black flightsuit, and walked out the other side through a security checkpoint to the landing pad. His squadron leader, Commander Tabb Wiantance, stood amid the racks of TIEs and directed last minute activities. "Hurry up, Barton," Wiantance barked when he noticed Chase. "Get in your fighter and get ready to go."

"Yes, sir," Chase replied, and obeyed. He performed his exterior preflight inspection with

his crew chief, climbed into his spherical cockpit, donned his helmet and powered up the fighter and his flightsuit's life support system. Everything looked good on the internal preflight too. His TIE was in excellent condition, as always. Then there was nothing to do but wait for the commander to be ready and give the order to launch.

"I can't wait," Radek transmitted over a private comm frequency from his own TIE.

"So I've noticed," Chase replied.

"You think the commander will mind if I don't wait for him and just launch now?"

"Take a nice, deep breath of that recycled oxygen, Radek," Chase said. "You're always too quick to want the next big, flashy, exciting activity. We need to get you a girlfriend so you can settle down somewhere."

"Hey, no one's gonna tie ol' Radek down!" his wingman exclaimed. "Hey, did you get that? Tie? TIE? Right? Right?"

"So you used the same word as the fighter name. So?"

Radek heaved a sigh. "Why do I even bother. It's wasted on you. Where's Fikri? He'll laugh." The comm channel closed, and Chase figured Radek was now dialing in the private comm frequency to their squadmate Fikri.

At last Commander Wiantance had everything set, and he gave the order for the 321st to launch. The TIEs lifted up and moved out in precise formation, and the concentration Chase needed for that activity thankfully prevented him from thinking about much else as they left. Once they were clear of the landing pad structures, they pointed upwards and streaked through the grey cloud layers of Craci IV.

After breaking through the ceiling, the greyish-blue sky stretched in all directions. Soon it got darker and eventually faded to black. Stars appeared, and then the starfighters were in orbit.

Ahead of the squadron was an old Victory-class Star Destroyer. It wasn't much to look at, but luckily they wouldn't be on it for very long; it was only meant as their ride from the Corporate Sector to the rendezvous point with the Nebulon-B Frigate they were to be stationed on for the next few weeks. Chase idly wondered what was in store for them.

"I can't wait!" Radek transmitted over the private frequency again.

Chapter Two

Chase Barton stared at the ceiling from where he lay on his bunk. Blast, he was tired. He hadn't been sleeping well on these rock-hard so-called "mattresses" in the bunks his squadron had on the Nebulon-B *Nashtah*...or at least, that was what he told people.

He turned onto his stomach and looked at the wall at the head of his bed. He had taken holos of Lataise, Kane, his older sister Jina, his parents and a few good friends, including one he had attended the Imperial Naval Academy with, and printed them out on flimsi sheets and adhered them there to the wall. Another picture was of the group of kids he and some other adults were teaching to camp back on Craci IV. All of the kids and adults had signed it and wished him luck on his combat deployment. And finally, there was a piece of flimsi on which Lataise had written a date: 32 Yelona. The pilot reached out and traced the writing with his fingertips. That was the day when, at long, long last, they were expecting their first child. He felt some of Radek's impatience rubbing off on him as he thought about how far off that date still was.

His gaze found its way back to Lataise's picture. It had only been a week, but already he was counting down the days until he would be back home. And even though it had been a week, he could still taste that last kiss she gave him. Chase closed his eyes and lived that moment over aga-

His chrono beeped, signaling the imminent beginning of his duty shift. Chase grumbled at the interruption as he opened his eyes and silenced his alarm. He climbed down from his top bunk and walked past the other Fireburners' bunks on his way out of the sleeping quarters to the hangar. He had to concentrate on his job now. Besides, Chase was certain that his wandering thoughts of what was happening back home would keep him awake tonight as they had the other nights. There would be time enough to contemplate things on the homefront then.

The flight he was in was due to launch on a patrol soon and scout out the area around the planet where the small fleet would be refueling. The refueling wouldn't take long, as most of the ships were small cargo transports without the capacity to hold a large amount of fuel, but it was also a time when they were vulnerable, and the job of *Nashtah* and the TIEs aboard her was to protect them. In an area of space where Rebel attacks were becoming more frequent, the captain of *Nashtah* was insisting on a security recon patrol.

There was a small room near the hangar where details of patrols were ironed out between the participants before they left, and when Chase got there he found the other three members of the flight already present. Commander Wiantance and his wingman, Lieutenant Panas, were sitting at the table and chatting with Radek. They all looked up as Chase entered.

"Ah, Barton, good. Right on time. Have a seat, and we'll get started," Wiantance said.

Radek smirked while Chase grabbed a chair. "Where were you? Re-reading all the good parts in a letter from your wife?"

Chase shot a quick glare at his wingman. "Do you mind?" he asked, somewhat sharply. What a stupid comment for Radek to make, and right in front of the commander, no less. Chase felt that promotion slipping a little farther out of reach.

Wiantance ignored the exchange and instead passed out datacards with the patrol details to everyone. "Let's get going here. Panas, doublecheck the comm frequencies and procedures when we get to that point in the review. Barton, same as always, check our navigation vectors. Deror, optimal sensor frequencies and modes."

It was a straightforward enough patrol plan, and in fact was a variation on the familiar

system patrols the squadron had done back in Cracian space. It wasn't too long before the four TIE pilots were done with the details, in their starfighters and ready to go.

The fleet had stopped at the edge of the system. As they left the hangar of *Nashtah* Chase saw their destination planet far ahead of them. When they got closer he was able to tell that the planet was a gas giant, though a bit on the small side as gas giants go, and it was a brownish-orange color. The refueling docks orbited the planet, and the TIE's sensors picked up some tiny rocky moons. Only one of those moons was large enough for Chase to see with his own eyes.

The flight split as planned, and each wingpair headed off around the planet in a different direction. Chase led the way to their assigned hemisphere, the one nearest the large moon. He kept his sensors at full power and his eyes open. If they missed a sign of a threat, thousands of lives in their fleet could be lost.

At last Radek spoke up after a thorough sensor sweep. "I've got nothing anomalous on my sensors, Three."

"Same here, Four," Chase replied. "There's just one more place we have to check."

"Where?"

"That moon. Perfect raider hideout. Stay alert. Let's go."

As they approached the pockmarked moon, Chase ran through a few things in his mind. If there was anyone waiting there to spot large fleets coming in to the fueling docks, they would be watching toward the eastern side of the moon, which was in the direction of the somewhat distant hyperspace lane, the general direction of the planet and the direction of the moon's rotation. If this was a large enough operation, there would be at least two people stationed there on diametrically opposite sides of the moon, so their targeted area would always be in view to at least one of them regardless of the moon's rotation. He'd seen pirates do it before. Often they would be listening in to the refueling stations' approach frequencies too.

Chase adjusted his course to approach the moon with the system's star at his back. Radek stuck with him. If the TIEs' sensors hadn't found anything yet, chances were that the pirate ships, if any existed, were powered down to avoid detection and the people were only watching with their eyes or short-range, passive sensors. It was possible the small Imperial starfighters could have been noticed already, but if not and if raiders on the moon had to look into the sun to see the TIEs, the TIEs could probably move in close undetected.

"Four," Chase said, "if this is like other pirate ops there might be one on each side of the moon, if there is anyone there. You take the lit hemisphere. I'll take the night side. Go in from the west, counter-rotation. Call if you need anything."

"Copy that, Three." Radek throttled up and passed him.

For his part, Chase changed course out of the equatorial plane and up to the northern polar area of the moon. He spiraled high above, getting a look at what was below. Craters were everywhere, and all of them were swallowed in nighttime shadow. This would be an excellent place for a raider hideout, and the more Chase thought about that, the more uneasy he felt. He wouldn't be able to see anything hiding down in a dark crater, especially if the ship was powered down like he suspected it would be, and he recalibrated his sensors to look for localized concentrations of materials that were different from the lunar terrain instead of for energy signatures. Then he picked an optimal route to take him from north polar orbit to western equatorial orbit with minimal energy and therefore minimal engine exhaust glow, and he started searching.

The night side of the uninhabited moon was pitch black. Even the soft illumination from

Chase's fighter console displays hurt his eyes after a few moments. Maybe it was the total darkness or maybe it was his experience telling him the high probability that something could be out there, but he didn't like it. He licked his lips to moisten them, then decided to turn on his fighter's communications jammer. It was preset to the general range of frequencies that Rebels often used—-independent raider frequencies were anyone's guess—and even though the jammer used a lot of power it was a sacrifice he was willing to make at this time. The last thing he wanted was to be the trigger that made any Rebels he found call in for their fleet before he had a chance to silence them. Better to prevent the call altogether.

Chase had covered about one-third of the area when his sensor screen started flashing. He called up another sensor mode, which quickly resolved the data and displayed the information. There was a Y-wing ahead of him in a crater, almost completely powered down. His sensors were just picking it up over the crater rim now. Its IFF transponder was not transmitting any identification data.

The Imperial didn't hesitate. He throttled up and maneuvered to point-blank range above the Y-wing. As he approached, his sensors told him the starfighter was powering up quickly: apparently it had noticed him too. But it wasn't quick enough.

Chase made sure to stay away from where the dorsal turret was pointing as he transmitted over an open comm frequency, "Unidentified Y-wing, by order of the Empire you are to power down your ship and surrender. If you do not comply immediately, I will open fire. Your shields are down, you're stationary, and I'm at point-blank range. I will not miss. Don't make me shoot."

He couldn't tell from the sensor readings if this was a Rebel Y-wing or if it was a Y-wing owned by any number of raiding groups or even planetary defense forces. Anything legitimate shouldn't be cozied up hiding out here on this moon, though. He watched his sensor readings carefully, making note of the turret position, the energy levels, and anything out of the ordinary.

The energy levels stopped increasing, but they did not decrease either. A static-filled reply came over the open frequency and asked, "And why shouldn't I think an Imperial is going to shoot me even if I do comply?"

"If I had wanted to shoot you regardless of your actions, I wouldn't have even bothered giving you a choice. Now enough talking. Power down." Chase kept his TIE moving enough to not be a completely easy target for any weapons or allies he might have missed, and he kept his own weapons trained on the Y-wing below him.

The energy levels of the Y-wing began dropping. Chase smiled tightly. "That's better." Once only enough energy remained for life support in the Y-wing, Chase punched in the encrypted frequency to his squadron leader. "Lead, Three," he said. "I've captured a suspicious Y-wing on the nighttime surface of the largest moon. Requesting support from *Nashtah* to come and retrieve the prisoner. I'm jamming Rebel frequencies, though I'm not certain if this ship is Rebel. A raider party might still show up."

"Good work, Three. I'll contact *Nashtah* immediately, and I'll also tell Four to come assist you. He reported destroying a Y-wing on the day side of the moon a minute ago. Nice scouting work, both of you. Keep your eyes open. Two and I are continuing sweeps in case something arrives. Lead out."

Wiantance's words bothered Chase, but he kept quiet and concentrated on guarding his captured Y-wing until he noticed Radek approaching. Chase turned to the private frequency he shared with his wingman. "Four, Lead said you destroyed a Y-wing on the other side of the moon. What happened?"

“Ha, that’s right, I sure did, Three,” Radek replied, his voice full of pride. “He never knew what hit him. One more kill marker for me. Want me to take care of yours too?”

“No. And watch the turret.”

“You’re no fun. It’s easier to just shoot them. Solves so many problems.”

It was true that there was less paperwork to fill out for a kill than a capture, but... “Four, we have not confirmed yet who these Y-wings are.” Chase reminded himself to stay focused on watching his sensor readouts of the Y-wing; it was easy to get distracted by Radek. “They might not have been involved in anything, which means it was unnecessary and even dangerous for you to start a shooting match. And besides, I’m not going to shoot at someone who can’t defend themselves. I caught this guy flat-footed.”

“Oh, if only our enemies were as noble as you, we wouldn’t even *be* in this war!” Radek said melodramatically. Then his voice grew serious again. “Look, the way I see it, if I get him before he has a chance to get me, that’s one less chance he has to get me. Right? Right?”

Chase didn’t necessarily agree with that line of thinking, but it was pointless to debate it with Radek, and not something he should be doing anyway while guarding a potentially dangerous prisoner in a starfighter. He dropped the subject and simply said, “Go scan the rest of the nighttime surface and let me know when the shuttle from *Nashtah* is on its way for the prisoner.”

“Right, Three.” Radek sounded a bit hurt or confused, but he flew off, leaving Chase alone with the Y-wing.

Lt.j.g. Barton again gave the captured starfighter his undivided attention, aside from a few stray thoughts. No matter what Radek said, though, Chase was comfortable with his decision to not blow apart the Y-wing on a whim at the first encounter. Something about that method of surprise killing of people, even enemies, when they didn’t see it coming and had absolutely no chance to defend themselves just seemed cold-blooded and wrong. Even in war. The galaxy had to have order restored, but there were right ways to do it. That wasn’t one of them.

Chapter Three

A week and a half and two small skirmishes later, *Nashtah* had placed its on-duty TIE pilots on alert as the fleet had come out of hyperspace at an Imperial transfer point in the late morning. As per standard operating procedures, Chase and the other pilots had been fully suited up and staying in the hangar near their ships. It was the perfect breeding ground for a continuation of the squadron's latest internal debate when the commander and executive officer weren't in earshot.

"I can't believe I actually agree with Deror," one of the pilots was saying. "We know that Y-wing was up to no good or it wouldn't have been hiding on that moon. You should have shot it, Barton."

"Yeah. What if it had gotten away? It could have taken out both of you. It was a totally unnecessary risk to not eliminate the threat once and for all," another added.

Chase was tired of all the flak he'd been getting from some of his squadmates over his actions on that patrol. He crossed his arms. "I stand by my decision," he said stubbornly. "In that situation, it was the proper thing to do."

"Are you guys still going at this?" a third pilot piped up. "Didn't it ever occur to you that live prisoners equal a source of information we can use? We've had many, many Imperial lives saved because of what we've learned from captured enemies."

"But we wouldn't need--"

The discussion was interrupted by the deafening blare of *Nashtah*'s battlestations sirens. The pilots ran to their fighters as the ship-wide intercom announced the call to battlestations and incoming fire. The hangar instantly snapped into organized chaos.

Chase's crew chief told him his TIE was good to go as Chase ran past him and climbed into the cockpit. While the hatch closed, Chase put on his helmet, strapped himself in and finished powering up the few systems the crew chief hadn't had a chance to get to yet. When he turned on his comm system, his headset instantly bombarded him with the talk and instructions coming over his squadron's frequency.

In a minute the 321st Fireburners reported ready, and they began to launch into space. *Nashtah*'s other TIE squadron, one from the 487th Imperial Fighter Group, was launching behind them except for the flight that had already been out on patrol when the fleet came out of hyperspace.

When Chase and Radek cleared *Nashtah*'s hangar, Chase noticed that the four TIE pilots who had been patrolling were not showing up anywhere on sensors. That was the last chance he had to think about them before he and the rest of the Fireburners were face-to-face with a squadron of X-wings.

A loud, harsh tone sounded in Chase's cockpit. His stomach plummeted as it did every time he heard that particular sound in the sims or in real life, and almost instantly a squadmate confirmed the missile lock indication by calling over the comm, "Torpedoes incoming!"

Chase immediately threw his fighter into evasive maneuvers to try to break the lock a proton torpedo had on his TIE. The Rebel X-wings were not formed up, but they had all turned to face the Fireburners and were bearing down on them. Flashes of light from the X-wings ahead told Chase they had just fired their torpedoes. His heart would have stopped at that sight if it had had any time to do so.

He couldn't consciously remember what he did with the flight controls and the throttle to

get his TIE away from being the focus of that torpedo, but in one second Chase's TIE was in a different location and orientation than it had been, he saw a torpedo go flashing past his cockpit closer than any had ever been before, and then his fighter was buffeted by a few explosions from different sides. The sickening tone stopped, and Chase quickly checked his sensors to see if the torpedo was circling around to come back at him from behind, but it seemed like its lock was broken. He exhaled.

The X-wings were right on the heels of their torpedoes, and Chase barely had time to recover from the first before he had to deal with a head-to-head run from the second. He managed to get one shot off at the nearest X-wing before he had to jerk his TIE out of the line of return fire. Just like that, the X-wings were past them, and they were clear.

Immediately Chase pulled his TIE into a hard turn, one much sharper than any X-wing could match, and tried to loop around and settle on the tail of the X-wings before they could turn around. It was a standard tactic, and around him Chase saw the rest of the squadron following suit as Commander Wiantance focused them and got them to regroup. Short, clipped reports began to come in over the comm: four Fireburner pilots had been lost in that first attack run by the X-wings. To Chase's relief, he saw Radek pull up beside him, apparently undamaged.

The Imperials got within optimal firing range, and the Rebel fighters broke by pairs and went evasive. Chase picked an X-wing pair as a target, transmitted his choice to Radek, and the two of them began their pursuit.

Over the comm, Chase also heard the commander of the 487th trying to coordinate things with Wiantance. Some Y-wings were blasting a couple of the Imperial cargo transports with ion cannons while a Dreadnaught occupied *Nashtah's* attention by exchanging fire. Some shuttles were flying from the Dreadnaught to the Imperial transports. The 487th went to deal with the Y-wings and shuttles while the 321st was left to handle the X-wings.

Chase and Radek knocked out one of the X-wings' shields before another Rebel pair came to help and forced the two Imperials to disengage. They went evasive for a short time and managed to lose their attackers. X-wings just couldn't match the maneuverability of a TIE.

As the TIEs joined back up, Chase saw an X-wing immediately ahead that was firing at a lone Fireburner. He called Radek's attention to it and turned to pursue while Radek flew on his wing and voiced his approval of their new target selection. "Good, Three. Let's go chase him down."

"Stow it!" Chase snapped. Again with the name jokes. Enough was enough, damn it.

Chase settled on the Rebel's tail and fired a few salvos. One shot missed but the rest splashed against the Rebel's shields. The X-wing promptly began to jink and juke to throw off Chase's aim. It didn't do it well enough, though, since Chase's next shot hit its shields again.

"How we looking, Four?" Chase asked distractedly.

"You're clear, Three," Radek replied. "Finish him off, unless you want me to."

"I got it." Chase followed up those words with another set of laser blasts. One took out the rest of the X-wing's shields. The X-wing evaded more desperately, but Chase managed to stick with it. A few more shots missed, and then two lasers from Chase's TIE hit the Rebel's engines. The X-wing exploded into a fireball, and Chase smiled tightly. There was a little bit of payback for the squadmates he'd just lost. He hadn't even had a chance yet to find out who had been killed, but maybe that was just as well for the moment.

"Good shooting, Three," Radek said. "There's another pair over at 312 mark 07."

"Then let's go," Chase replied. He and Radek turned that direction.

Before they got there, Chase glanced at his sensor console and noticed that two X-wings were coming at them from their starboard side. He again called Radek's attention to them and began to turn to—

A bright flash, a deafening noise, and Chase's TIE was violently thrown in a different direction and spinning wildly out of control. Sharp pain shot through Chase's shoulder and chest where restraint straps forcefully imparted his fighter's new momentum to him, but a surge of adrenaline quickly washed it from his mind. Cockpit alarms blared. Red diagnostic alert lights made it look like his entire cockpit was bleeding.

Training kicked in, helping to hold the instinctive fear at bay. Get leverage inside the cockpit against the spin. Fight the g-forces. Start the techniques that help keep blood in the brain to prevent passing out. Find the throttle. Find the flight controls. Decrease power. Get out of the spin. Fight the spin. Get out of the spin. Get out of the spin.

Chase swept his gaze over all his instruments while trying to regain control of his fighter, and in doing so it was easy to see his flickering, erratic sensor readouts. They showed him a new danger: an X-wing was coming right for him. It could easily finish him off in this state.

Just when Chase thought he was done for, the sensors also provided him with a green dot representing Radek's TIE moving in toward the oncoming X-wing. The X-wing broke off its attack.

"Damn. Thanks, Four," Chase said shakily. Despite how obnoxious he could be at times, Radek was a good guy.

Back to the more pressing crisis. Stop the spin. Fight the spin. Isolate systems. Prevent more damage. Call for help. "Mayday, mayday! Fireburner Three needs assistance. Declaring emergency!" Chase continued to fight with his TIE as it stubbornly refused to let him bring it back under control, and he waited for an answer. None came. He tried again. Again, nothing. Come to think of it, he wasn't hearing anything on the squadron frequency anymore. It wasn't static from a jammer, it was just dead, nonexistent. A quick look at the diagnostics confirmed that one of those red lights was associated with the comm system. Chase swore.

Outside his viewport, the galaxy continued to tumble chaotically. He caught a glimpse of part of the dogfight and part of the fleet. He also saw that his TIE's port wing had been sheared off by the X-wing's lasers. Not only did that cut his available engine and electrical power from the solar panel wings in half, it also completely threw off his fighter's center of gravity. Chase changed his control tactics, firing the ion maneuvering jets in different experimental ways to see how they reacted to the different CG, since they certainly weren't behaving like normal. The engine-fed jets were much weaker than normal, too.

At last he found a technique that began to counter the spin and slow his fighter. Chase desperately stuck with it, and finally the TIE was relatively placated. It was still drifting and spinning, but it was a slow drift and an even slower spin. It was the best he could get.

Chase closed his eyes for a few moments and again called for help while he waited for his dizziness to subside. Again, there was no answer. He tried resetting his comm system, changing frequencies and adjusting settings, but nothing seemed to help.

He was just about to try some bypassing and power shunting when his slowly spinning view afforded him a look at the dogfight he had drifted out of. He saw a couple of the Imperial transports blink into hyperspace. Then the last few did as well. *Nashtah*, the only remaining Imperial target, was continuing to fire at the Rebel ships pounding it mercilessly as the Nebulon-B maneuvered and picked up speed. A last pair of TIE Fighters desperately streaked into the

hangar, a bit too fast for normal safe operations, and mere seconds after they were aboard, the Nebulon-B also disappeared into hyperspace.

Chase paused his troubleshooting as the implications of what he'd just witnessed began to sink in. His TIE slowly rotated his cockpit windows far enough that the Rebel ships and the place where his fleet had been were no longer in sight.

He was alone.

Without a hyperdrive on his fighter, he was stranded there in interstellar space. Without a working comm, no one would know he was alive and needed help. He was dead.

The only ones still there were the Rebels.

With a shaky hand and a few clearings of his throat, Chase reached forward and turned off his IFF and emergency beacon so the Rebels wouldn't detect it and would have a harder time finding him. If they did, most likely they would just blow him out of the sky, but the other option wasn't any better. Everyone knew about the horrible things they did to their prisoners, and he was not going to let himself be captured if he had any say in the matter.

Activity meant there was no room for thinking. For the next few minutes Chase worked through checklists to assess his fighter's condition and salvage what systems he could. Most of them were down or at less than half capacity. Power was down to 23% and was slowly decreasing. He had no weapons. Engines were at 9%.

His personal biological diagnostics had somewhat better news, but the adrenaline was wearing off and he was beginning to notice the injuries more. It felt like his left collarbone and a few ribs were broken where the restraint straps pressed against them, and he had jammed his left elbow hard against something in the initial hit as well. Chase was quickly growing more and more reluctant to move his left arm, and he soon stopped doing so unless it was absolutely necessary. Before too long he also tried to minimize head and neck motion and anything that put pressure on his ribs.

On another slow rotation, Chase looked out his viewport again and saw that the Rebel ships had left. He breathed a little more easily, then turned his IFF and emergency beacon back on. He noticed with dismay that they used up a lot of his available power, and he'd need a good amount of it to transmit a signal if he ever got the comm working again. He nudged his TIE around to have the intact starboard solar panel wing point as much as possible to the brightest star he could see. It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do. He turned off all nonessential systems that hadn't already been destroyed, and that stopped most of the power drain, but not all of it. Power was still inexplicably trickling out of his TIE somewhere faster than it could be recharged, but it was a small enough rate that he should be okay for a while until he could isolate it.

Chase took a couple of breaths and tried to concentrate on ways to fix his destroyed comm while his fleet might still be close. Kane would have known exactly what to do. If only he was as good as Kane was, then...

Thinking about his brother and how inaccessible he was made an unsettling feeling begin to grow in Chase's stomach, one he'd never felt at this level of intensity before. He looked out his cockpit windows at the infinite black void of stars all around him. His mind slowed down considerably from its previous frantic survival mode, and his thoughts found their way back to a few earlier words that had danced across his brain: he was alone. Utterly and completely alone. Possibly the only sentient being for light-years in any direction.

The vast emptiness of outer space had always been a welcome escape from the

claustrophobic conditions Chase had grown up with on Coruscant, but never before had space seemed as cold and forbidding and merciless as it did at that moment, and Chase hadn't ever felt so small and helpless when facing it. He had always been the strong one, the steady one, the one who provided for his family and protected them. He couldn't afford to be helpless with people depending on him, people like—

Chase felt the blood drain from his face. Lataise. His unborn child.

He was stranded, adrift, with no way to ever get back home to them all because some Rebels decided to fight dirty and ambush them at a hyperspace transfer point like the cowards they were. They had chased away his fleet, his only chance to escape. His only chance to live. The fleet couldn't afford to risk thousands of lives to come back and look for one pilot who wasn't even still alive as far as they knew. Chase knew that. It was too dangerous for them since the Rebels might still be close. His fleet was gone, taking his life with it.

Breathing had never before been so difficult. Chase didn't care about his own life as much as he cared about the fact that without it he would never be able to see Lataise again, would never grow old with her and do all the things he wanted to do with her like he'd promised he would. What hurt even more was the realization that he would never even meet his own child, the child they'd been wanting for such a long time, whom he had been going to love and cherish like no other father ever had before. He didn't even know yet if it would be a boy or a girl. Either one was equally welcome, but now he would never know. *Never*. He would never raise his child with his wife. He would never be a father. Instead he was going to die a slow death out here alone because of the Rebels. In spite of himself, the pilot felt hot tears well up in his eyes.

Everything that mattered to him, everything he had wanted, everything he had anticipated was now erased by one word that hadn't previously had such a personal meaning: *never*.

A cold void grew inside him, larger than the void of space outside his cockpit.

Chase sobbed until he ran out of tears and cursed the Rebels until he ran out of curses.

The first hour adrift was the longest sixty minutes Chase could remember in his lifetime. Once he'd pulled himself together, his initial frantic motivation and determination to get the comm functional again so he could get home to his family was systematically being eroded away by frustration and the stress of failure after failure. He couldn't concentrate. His arm and ribs were killing him.

As if that wasn't enough, with his fighter powered down as much as it was, there was no substantial heat being generated by the avionics boxes and engines. Heat from those sources was designed to partially radiate into the cockpit to keep the pilot warm while the excess heat was radiated outward. The unforgiving cold of space was now starting to seep into his energy-deficient cockpit.

But no matter what, he couldn't let this happen. This wasn't happening to him. It couldn't be. He had to get back.

Chase cursed as his latest attempt at bypassing some systems to kickstart his comm failed. He hit the heel of his palm against his helmet a few times, racking his brain for another approach he could try, but all he could see when he closed his eyes was Lataise and a mental image of the child he'd never know.

It was easy to mistake the stab of pain in his gut for an inadvertent protest from his

injured ribs.

A couple lengthy, lonely hours crawled by. Chase was chilled to the bone and shivering. His cold fingers were harder to move correctly, which made working with the computer and what hardware he could access from inside his cramped cockpit an even greater challenge. He was getting thirsty, and he occasionally spoke aloud to himself to drive away the eerie silence.

He spent a long time trying to connect the communications output first to the IFF transponder and then to the emergency beacon antenna. Neither tactic worked. He wanted to scream. He wanted to personally kill the Rebels who had done this to him. He wanted *something* in this forsaken cockpit to actually work and give him a shred of hope. It didn't.

Chase's frustration peaked. He hit the nearest cockpit console as hard as he could, which made his frozen muscles feel like icy needles had shot into them. He shouldn't even be in this mess. He should have done better. He should have avoided that shot. Kane could have. Hell, even his mother could have. He should be able to fix the comm. His father could have. Chase's wife and child were counting on him to make it back and provide for them and protect them, and he was letting them down. He was furious at himself for it.

He was too stupid to do the simple repair. He was useless to his squadron. He was useless to his family.

Everything had been just fine until the Rebels did this to him. The filthy, cowardly Rebels. The mere thought of them and their smug, righteous superiority complex made Chase seethe. Was this their goal? To tear families apart?

They could all burn in all nine Corellian hells. He only wished he could have had the chance to help more of them get there.

More hours dragged by, even longer than the first ones. Chase was shaking from more than the cold, and occasionally he briefly forgot where he was or what was happening. He believed he'd been able to boost the power to his emergency beacon signal, but he wasn't sure of the actual results. He had exhausted every single idea for his comm, even the silly and totally baseless ones, yet the system was still inoperative and power was still trickling out. Unless he could get his communications working, all he'd be able to do would be to sit and watch the two days' worth of consumables in his life support system slowly be depleted with every breath he took.

That's what he was doing right now.

The vastness and emptiness of space around him was an oppressive weight bearing down on him, telling him in no uncertain terms just how puny and insignificant and alone he was. It was becoming impossible not to think about, and Chase couldn't focus his thoughts on what they needed to be focused on. They kept finding their way back to that outer space void, then to the Rebels, then to Lataise and his child and his brother and everyone else, then to everything he was going to miss being a part of in the years ahead, then to everything he was going to miss the most from his life.

He couldn't stand thinking about it all, but there was literally nothing else he could do.

He promised his fighter that he would live his life better if it would only get him through this. He'd be better to Radek, better to his family, all of that if only the comm would start working or a miracle could arrive in the hyperspace transfer point, which was now a distance away from his drifting fighter.

Eventually Chase gave up on hoping for those miracles and instead promised anything he could think of in return for making the Rebels pay for their actions, for the hurt they will have caused his wife, for making his child grow up without a father.

With no comm, he couldn't even access the cockpit voice recorder to record a farewell message for Lataise and his child to hear on the off-chance his TIE was ever found. Just as he would never know his child, his child would never know him.

Still the hours trudged along, each one somehow slower and more torturous than the last. Chase's life support consumables were halfway gone. His stomach growled, and his throat was dry. The end of his life was unavoidable now; his fingers and toes were numb from the cold and had long since become useless at any type of work on his fighter's systems. Besides, he couldn't see anything anyway: his helmet's lenses were fogged up and frosted over. Earlier, Chase had awkwardly pulled his stiff right arm out of the sleeve and flight glove and had gingerly folded it across his body inside his flightsuit for warmth, but his left arm hurt too much to try to get it out of the sleeve. It was just as well, since having only one arm pressed against his ribs under his suit's life support made breathing hard. Two would have made it impossible.

Despair teamed up with the cold and made his thoughts murky. There was nothing more he could do to save himself from...whatever it was he couldn't save himself from. He couldn't remember. Now it was just a matter of waiting out the last interminable, agonizing hours until his life support ran out or he froze to death. He miserably wondered which would be worse. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he could fall asleep. Sleep sounded like a good thing anyway.

Chase closed his bleary eyes and eventually dozed off into a fitful sleep. At times he wasn't quite sure if he was awake or unconscious. He saw Lataise. He talked to her. He talked to his son. He talked to his daughter. He had fun with them. He loved them. He even saw his brother and Radek. He thanked Radek for trying to help him and apologized to Kane for not living up to the family standards. He told them all how his death and also Kane's career-ending injury were the Rebels' fault and how the galaxy wasn't safe for his children or anyone else because of them. How the Rebels ignored every honorable rule of warfare and fought dirty with ambushes and hit-and-run guerrilla tactics and never came out for an honest fight. How the Empire had been too lenient in dealing with them. How the Empire would need to fight dirty to bring the war to the Rebels and ever have any hope whatsoever of defeating them. He told them all.

He even told that to the bright light he saw. He talked to it. He saw some people that looked vaguely familiar. He talked to them. There was bright light and warmth. The people talked back to him. They said something about a rescue shuttle from *Nashtah*.

Chapter Four

The first thing Chase became aware of was the disgusting taste of bacta in his mouth. It brought him back to consciousness more effectively than any audible chrono alarm could have. He squeezed his eyes shut harder, grimaced and opened his mouth to get that taste out of—

“Chase?”

He recognized his name.

“Chase? You awake? You okay?”

He recognized the voice now too, though it was sounding nervous, a far cry from how it usually sounded. Chase slowly pried his eyes open and turned his head a bit. Sure enough, sitting there in a chair beside the bed was Radek with his big eyes even wider than normal. His head was tilted to the side somewhat.

It was much warmer here, though he still felt chilled deep within. Chase pulled his bed’s blanket up some more.

“Radek?” he managed weakly. “You’re dead too?”

Radek tilted his head more as Chase spoke and furrowed his brow in concentration, then after a short pause he replied a bit loudly, “Did you ask if I’m dead? Hell, no, I’m not, and you’re not either.”

That didn’t make sense. “What happened?”

“Well, I knew your TIE didn’t explode from that hit, but I couldn’t tell if you were still alive before we had to pull out, and you were out of range of *Nashtah*’s tractor beams. We regrouped and were doing damage control and repair when a smaller Imperial ship contacted us about a day later and said they had found you near the transfer point, but they didn’t have the capability to bring you onboard. So then Commander Wiantance convinced the captain to send a rescue shuttle back for you. You were in pretty bad shape when they found you: hypothermia, frostbite, some broken bones and a bit delusional. It didn’t look like you were going to pull through. They confirmed your identity with DNA testing, then you were in bacta for your bone and frostbite treatment, and they pulled you out not too long ago.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Chase muttered, smacking his lips. “So...I’m not dead.” It was a welcome yet almost foreign concept to him now, and larger than he could wrap his mind around at the moment. Maybe that was why he didn’t feel as happy as he would have expected. Chase mustered the strength to move to a different topic. “Are you okay? How many people did we lose in that fight?”

“You bet I’m okay. It takes more than a little dogfight to get rid of ol’ Radek. Right? Right?” Radek smiled a bit, but it seemed forced. After a pause, he continued in the same slightly louder tone but in a more serious voice, “We lost six: Bridger, Hailen, Fikri, Rostecek, Arliss and Eairrsidh. The 487th lost four. A couple more, like you, are down for injuries here in medbay. They’re trying to get some more TIEs sent here for the backups and other shift pilots to fly so we can be back to a full fighter complement soon. Sorry, but they did the memorial services while you were in bacta.”

Chase nodded and allowed the news of their lost squadmates to sink in. Damned Rebels, fighting dirty. Ten good men were dead because of it. Ten good men would never return to their families because of it. Well, no more.

Radek looked past Chase, and then he said, “Uh oh, the doctor’s giving me that look, the

one all the bartenders give me right before they throw me out. I think he wants me to let you get some rest. I better do that before he pokes me with something sharp.” Radek at least didn’t sound as nervous anymore. He stood and said to his wingman, “Take it easy, and I’ll come by to see you later, okay, Chase?”

“Sure. Thanks for the visit.”

Radek gave a grin in reply and walked out. Chase suddenly thought of something and said, “Oh, Radek, wait a second,” but Radek never stopped or turned around. Apparently the letter to Lataise to let her know what happened would have to wait.

Chase pulled the covers up to his chin and tried to warm up. The Navy would notify Lataise that he’d been injured, but until he could tell her himself that he was all right it would only worry her needlessly. But that would have to wait. He was tired, and sleep sounded like a good thing. He shivered and pulled the blankets around him more tightly.

Chase Barton stared at the ceiling through the darkness while he lay in bed two nights later. The medbay recovery room was quiet enough to be loud in his ears with only the soft, hypnotic hum of the ship’s systems breaking up the deafening silence and keeping him from losing his mind. The other patients in the beds beside his had long since fallen asleep, but try as he might, he just couldn’t follow their example.

He knew he needed to. The doctor had said that if his exam went well in the morning, Chase could be released from medbay and go on light duty for a few days. In that scenario, Chase would be performing the same type of administrative and light work that his brother had been doing for his own squadron ever since Kane had gotten injured. He’d been thinking about Kane a lot since he’d been stuck in medbay. His brother would understand what he was going through, but Chase’s letter to Kane still sat unfinished on a datapad on the small table beside the bed.

The chrono on the wall plodded through another half hour. The pilot sighed and covered his face with the thin pillow in aggravation. Maybe he should ask for some sleep meds. He wanted so badly to fall asleep, but he couldn’t; he kept expecting the battlestations alarms to sound at any moment. The Rebels were out there somewhere, waiting to ambush them again. What the hell type of galaxy was this? There was no protection from the damn Rebels, no security, no place that was safe from them. Was this the sort of galaxy his child had to grow up in? That was completely unacceptable. He could not allow that.

There had to be a way to fix things, to make the galaxy safer. If the Rebels played dirty, he would play dirty too if it meant getting rid of them. There had to be a way to bring the Rebels down once and for all, no holds barred: the next suspicious Y-wing he came across would be blown out of the sky even if he caught it flat-footed. Taking chances was a luxury he no longer had.

He would definitely have to fix this.

Chase returned his pillow to its proper place and mulled things over in his mind, wondering how to accomplish his goal. He knew he needed to get some sleep, but this was more important. Besides, who could sleep when it was freezing in that room like it was?

“This is so unfair!” Radek exclaimed as he stomped after Chase down the corridor. “I should be flying with you, not Daetwyler!”

Chase took a deep, aggravated breath and wondered if it would be better to respond to Radek or ignore him. He didn’t need this now, not mere minutes before his first non-sim flight since he’d been put back on active duty. The few days of performing administrative and light duties for the squadron had driven him stir-crazy, and he couldn’t understand how his brother could do it as his permanent job. Apparently Kane was better than he was even with simple things like that. Maybe that was why Kane was in a squadron in the Core while Chase was way out here out of everyone’s way. In any event, Chase needed to do something, and this little patrol around the fleet to requalify him for combat flight duty was just fine with him.

If only Radek would let him do it.

“I mean, Daetwyler doesn’t know anything!” Radek continued his rant in a loud voice, and Chase ground his teeth a little bit. “And now *he’s* the one who gets to fly with you? Didn’t you tell the commander that I should get to go? You should’ve!”

Chase came to an abrupt stop, and he got the impression that Radek almost ran into him from behind. Completely ignoring the other people moving past them in the corridor, he spun around to face the younger pilot and raised his voice a little as well. “Listen, Radek, it’s pretty damn hard for you to go flying when you’re on medical leave. In fact, it’s damned impossible.”

Radek tilted his head to catch the words better, and he crossed his arms even more tightly. “But I shouldn’t *be* on medical leave. There’s nothing wrong with me! I can fly fine!”

Chase gave a short, incredulous scoff. “Nothing wrong with you? You can hardly hear anymore! You’re well under the minimum medical requirements to fly a starfighter.”

Radek’s expression darkened as it always did whenever someone brought that up. Chase had learned that after his own TIE was damaged, a glancing hit on Radek’s TIE from a Y-wing’s ion bolt during the dogfight had caused a powerful feedback surge over Radek’s helmet headset. No one could tell yet if the hearing reduction was permanent, but the doctors had worked hard and Radek’s hearing had improved slightly over the past week.

“I don’t need to hear every single little thing to do my job,” Radek snapped. “The only thing hearing is good for in space is the stupid comm system. The damn thing is what got me into this mess. I can work around it. I don’t need it.”

“Don’t tell me comms are useless,” Chase retorted, bristling at the unwelcome reminder. “Look, you’ve got to settle down about this. So you need to wait for the more specialized care back on Craci Four. So what? It’s one more week. It’s not the end of the galaxy!”

Chase’s words just seemed to be making Radek more upset. Radek took a deep breath, looked down at his overly polished boots and then shook his head in disgust at the conversation before returning his attention to Chase. “Maybe it’s not the end of the galaxy for *you*, Mister Perfect-Home-Life. Mister This-Is-Just-My-Job-But-Not-My-Future. But it is for me if they don’t let me fly again!”

“Are you serious? Your whole existence cannot revolve around flying starfighters. There has to be more to your life than that. What, did you think you were still going to be a TIE pilot when you were 35? 40? 50?” Chase asked. “Didn’t you ever think you’d need to retire sometime and do something else? Transfer to another job? There will come a day, if it hasn’t come already, when you’ll take your last starfighter flight. It’s normal. There is life after TIEs. The galaxy will not end. If you truly think it will, you need to open your eyes and grow up.”

Something changed in Radek’s expression, though his glare remained intact. “Well, I

guess it's abundantly clear then that I can't be a TIE pilot forever," he said. "That's all the more reason to fly as much as I can now. I won't let this stupid injury shorten my already limited time in a cockpit!"

Chase let out an exasperated sigh but tried to keep it quiet enough so Radek wouldn't hear it. "You're overreacting. And besides, what are you yelling at me about it for?"

"You're the only one who listens," Radek said.

"That's because you haven't stopped complaining about it for the last week and everyone is sick of hearing it," Chase informed him.

Radek's eyes narrowed again, and then he looked away. "I know the others won't, but you could be a little more sympathetic, you know." The words were intended to be a mutter but still came out at a higher volume than normal.

Chase paused a moment and tried to extend his shortened patience. It was true that when he had learned months ago that his brother had been injured by Rebels, all of his emotions had centered on concern for Kane's well-being. Chase would have expected to feel the same thing now for Radek, but he didn't. Instead, when he had heard what happened to his wingman it had just been one more log on the fire of Chase's anger at the Rebels; he didn't care about the effects any more, only the causes. Radek just had the unfortunate timing to be the first victim of his shifted priorities.

"Maybe," Chase conceded with an effort to even out his voice. "How about I'll try to be more sympathetic if you give me a reason to and stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Go in the sims or something. Damn it, Lieutenant, you're an Imperial Naval officer: start acting like one. Now I've got to go. I'll see you later." Chase turned and continued walking toward the hangar, and he didn't hear Radek's footsteps behind him any longer.

Inside the hangar, Lieutenant Daetwyler was waiting for Chase by the new replacement TIEs. "Lieutenant Barton. Ready to go?"

The man was amiable enough, but it was hard for Chase to put up with his monotone voice for long periods of time. The argument he'd just had with Radek did not help his tolerance level either. "Yes, sir, I'm ready."

"Good. Mount up and tell me when you're set." Daetwyler headed off to his own TIE.

Chase was greeted by his crew chief as he climbed into his new cockpit, then he donned his helmet and took a few moments to adjust the seat and restraint straps to comfortable positions and lengths. Everything felt normal. Chase powered up and reported ready.

He followed Daetwyler through the magcon field into the inky vacuum of space, and suddenly everything no longer felt normal. Cold sweat trickled down his neck and back, his heart pounded and his throat tightened. Chase tore his eyes away from the infinite depths of space and plastered them on his cockpit instruments instead.

Daetwyler must have noticed the second TIE's faltering. "Coming?" he asked.

Chase hesitated before forcing out the only acceptable answer. "Yes, sir." He sped up and settled closer than usual on Daetwyler's wing.

Over the course of the patrol, Daetwyler took them farther from the fleet than Chase liked, but he said nothing about it. Instead, he relieved his tension by making sure he had working two-way communications with Daetwyler every few minutes. That knowledge was the only peace of mind he had when every flashing light and every odd reflection off his windows seen from the corner of his eye made Chase think the despicable Rebels were dropping out of the sky and ambushing them again.

That feeling of a constant threat lurking out there somewhere was something that would always be present as long as there was one Rebel left alive, and that feeling was something he couldn't let his wife and child endure.

He would truly, definitely need to fix this. Soon.

The patrol was short, but Chase was exhausted when they finally landed.

Chapter Five

Chase's countdown reached zero at long last, and after a couple days' delay they were heading back to Cracian space.

The return flight seemed longer than the flight out, and during his off-duty hours Chase restlessly stalked the corridors of the Victory Star Destroyer that was transporting them back to the Corporate Sector. Like on the outbound trip, the squadron was using the return trip to get themselves oriented to the local time zone of their destination, and this time it meant Chase's daytime took place during the Victory's night cycle. It felt a bit strange to think the temporary assignment was actually over and he'd soon be back in Legis Bay with its normal, laid back, day-to-day life. He couldn't wait to be with Lataise again.

The various moods of the rest of the Fireburners underscored the fractured state of the squadron since they had lost their six pilots. Some wanted to stay out on the front lines and exact revenge for their fallen squadmates. Some wanted to put it all behind them. All of them were still trying to cope and mentally recover, but Chase knew that as Imperial officers, not a single one would admit to such a weakness. He wouldn't either.

At the end of their journey, Wiantance still didn't allow Radek to fly down to the base in a TIE and instead was ordering him to go on a transport. Radek was angry almost to the point of insubordination, and Chase quickly pulled him aside and shut down Radek's outburst before he said one word too many. Wiantance had been insisting on stricter discipline since the loss of their pilots, and if he caught wind of Radek's attitude and anger during the flight preps, it would lead to a confrontation, a chewing out and yet another landing delay.

Though even with as floundering and fragmented as the pilots were, it was hard to tell anything was wrong from an outside perspective based on the smooth way the Fireburners all formed up outside the Victory in Cracian orbit and flew down to Legis Bay Imperial Naval Base in perfect formation. The familiar landing racks were a welcome sight to Chase when his fighter broke through the grey clouds of the late afternoon.

After the squadron landed, he secured his fighter with the help of a temporary replacement technician from another group. Transports were landing, and the base around them was alive with activity to receive the pilots and support crews who were returning.

Commander Wiantance gathered all the Fireburner pilots together, then he waited for a sulking Radek, another injured pilot and the other shift pilots to disembark from their transport and join them. He began to go over the schedule for the next few days, when and where the pilots were expected to report next after some time off, and other information.

Chase waited with growing impatience as the commander spoke. They could have been out of there already if the commander had just typed all this up and sent it to the pilots for them to read. He couldn't stop fidgeting, and at one point Wiantance stopped his talk and looked directly at him.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Barton, is there a problem?" he asked sternly.

Chase willed himself into stillness at the warning. "No, sir."

"Do you want to be the last one out of here?"

He'd be angrier than Radek if that happened, and he fought to keep his expression and voice neutral. "No, sir."

"Then settle down and pay attention." Wiantance continued his mini briefing, and with an effort Chase tried harder to stop being so antsy.

At last the commander dismissed them. Chase hurried to the locker room and went straight for the comm unit on the wall before any of the other pilots had a chance to reach it. He entered in Lataise's comm frequency.

She answered it immediately with a hopeful-sounding, "Chase?"

"Yeah, it's me," he answered. "Damn, it's good to hear your voice."

"I saw all of you land. When are they going to let you guys go?"

"They just did. Where are you?"

"Right where we left off."

"I'll be there in a minute."

"I'll be waiting."

Chase closed the transmission and peeled himself out of his life support equipment in record time. His heart was pounding in his head as he wove as fast as he dared through the crowds of people in the operations building, and finally he was through the door and looking once more into the eyes of his wife.

Lataise jumped into his embrace, and Chase held on for dear life. Neither one spoke for a minute, but then Lataise whispered through tears, "I'm so happy you're back. I missed you so much. And when we heard about the six... Ella and Moyne and Shanitra are still so devastated. I was so afraid I'd get that same news about you. Just hearing you were injured was too much."

Chase squeezed her a little more tightly as she mentioned the wives of three of the pilots who had been killed. "It's okay," he whispered back. "Everything's all right now."

Except that it wasn't. It almost *had* been Lataise going through that pain now. His squadmates had been killed by the Rebels, and the Rebels were still out there, endangering everyone and everything. He suppressed a shudder at the vivid memories of being stranded in his TIE, face-to-face with the end of his life and the loss of all he had. For the first time Chase didn't feel safe in Lataise's arms, and he knew she shouldn't feel safe in his either. He couldn't protect his family from the Rebels unless he did something more drastic than endless system patrols on the edge of the Corporate Sector. He hated thinking he was so powerless and so worthless that he couldn't even keep the people he cared about safe.

Chase pulled back and briefly wiped his eyes, and Lataise let him go. "I couldn't wait to come home," Chase told her. "I missed you every single day."

Lataise looked him over and asked, "How are you feeling? You look good."

"I'm fine," Chase replied, trying not to think about the injuries he had had and what had caused them. "Everything is healed, and nothing is so much as sore. How are you? How's the baby?"

"Just fine. The doctor said everything is going well." Lataise gave him a huge smile and wiped away her own tears while she said, "All this excitement is making me lightheaded. I've got your favorite meal planned for dinner tonight in celebration, and we can open all the windows in the house or eat outside. I figure you've been missing this fresh air while you've been stuck on the ship." She pulled him into a kiss.

Chase broke it a few seconds later, and then he shook his head. "We don't need to open the windows anymore," he said softly. "It's too chilly of a planet, especially with that wind coming in off the water. But I can't wait for that meal."

The sudden loud beeping noise in the middle of the night snapped Chase out of his light sleep and made him bolt out of bed in a cold sweat. He stubbed a toe and fell sideways against a wall in his off-balance scramble before he heard someone anxiously calling, "Chase?"

The room lit up, and Chase saw Lataise in bed with one hand on the bedside lamp and her fearful eyes on him. As his brain tried to reconcile that sight and its implications, the loud beeping came again. Still confused and unnerved, he jumped and looked around for the threat he should be responding to.

Lataise quickly came to him. "It's just the holoreceiver, Chase. It's fine."

Anger and embarrassment pushed the panic down. "The holoreceiver?" he asked incredulously as his cheeks flushed. "The *holoreceiver*?" Chase silently cursed at himself and took a deep breath just as the loud noise sounded again. Sure enough, now that he was paying attention it was obvious that was the holoreceiver's familiar tone, not something indicating an imminent attack. "Wonderful. Sorry for waking you up. I'll see who's comming."

"I can answer it," Lataise offered. She began walking to the living room, but Chase stopped her.

"No, I got it. I'm awake now anyway. Go back to sleep."

Grumbling, Chase subconsciously smoothed out his sweatsuit as he sat at the holoreceiver in the living room a moment later and turned on the holo unit. Lataise watched from the bedroom doorway. "Hello?" Chase said, making only half an effort to not sound cranky.

Two familiar faces greeted him as the holo resolved into being. "Hey, you *are* back! Welcome back, Chase!"

Chase closed his eyes momentarily and let out a small, aggravated sigh. "Mom, Dad, it's the middle of the night here. I had just gotten to sleep. I've told you a hundred times about the time difference between me and you." In his peripheral vision, he saw Lataise go back into the bedroom now that she knew it wasn't an emergency.

"Sorry, but we couldn't wait to talk to you. Lataise commed us earlier and left a message saying you were back, and then her parents commed later on and said the same thing. We just couldn't believe we hadn't heard from you yet," his mother, Nari, said.

"I just got back this evening, and I was going to comm you first thing in the morning. I'm pretty tired," Chase replied. Lataise had told him that she'd contacted everyone while he was in the shower earlier.

"So how are you doing?" asked his father, Edik. "You all healed up? You gave your mother quite a scare when you said in your letter you'd gotten hurt."

"I'm fine, Dad. Back to normal."

"How are Lataise and the future grandbaby?" Nari asked. "Did they do okay while you were gone?"

"Yeah, the doctor said everything's going well. Lataise seemed to do just fine while I was away." The house was in great shape, the bills and paperwork were all in order and she'd made progress on the baby's room. Even though he knew it shouldn't, all of that rubbed Chase the wrong way. It was like he wasn't needed for anything and was expendable around here too. "Look, I appreciate the comm and everything, but can we continue this tomorrow? As in my tomorrow? I'm beat."

"Oh, sure, we won't keep you up. We were going to get Jina on the line too, but she's in some big high-level business meeting. We think. You know we can never keep track of where she is. I'm sure she'll call you when she gets in," Edik said. Chase secretly doubted that. "But

there is one more person who'd like to say hi. We coordinated with Kane and got him on a carrier signal from his base. We'll sign off and switch over to him now."

"Kane's on the line?" Chase asked, feeling a little crankiness dissipate. "Sure, yeah, switch him over. I'll talk to you two tomorrow. My tomorrow."

"All right, Chase. I'm so happy to see you back safely! Love you." Nari closed their transmission.

That holo was replaced a moment later by one of a man very similar in appearance to Chase with darker hair and wearing an Imperial naval uniform. Kane grinned at him. "Hey, little brother, how you doing? Back home?"

"Yeah, just got back a little while ago. It was a hell of a time. It's good to see you." Chase grinned a bit himself.

"I'm glad those Rebs didn't make nerf food out of you. Oh, that reminds me, I got your letter from when you were in medbay."

"You did?" Chase said. "Good. I don't want to do it now, but I sure would like to talk to you more about it sometime, seeing as how you went through something similar."

Kane laughed a bit. "Something similar? Come on, Chase, you only broke a couple ribs. You call that an injury? It's not an injury if you heal from it; that's just a scratch. Did you at least destroy the Rebels that hit your fighter like I did, or did that little scratch get in the way?"

Chase was taken aback. "No. I told you I couldn't because my TIE was—"

"Right, you couldn't fix your TIE. I remember now. Listen, you're fine. Compared to what could have happened, nothing happened to you. No one's going to take you seriously as an officer or as a fighter pilot if you start complaining about little scratches. Don't make that mistake. That's the best advice I can give you, little brother. If you want to be a better pilot and if you want that promotion to full lieutenant, that's what you have to do."

Chase couldn't believe Kane brushed off his ordeal in that fight so quickly. He was too disappointed and confused to know how to respond, so there was silence for a few seconds while Kane looked off to the side at something else happening near him. When Kane turned back to the holocam he said to Chase, "I've got to go. We've got a big mission coming up soon that we've got to get ready for." He grinned in anticipation and obvious importance. "Glad you're back safe, Chase. Have fun way out there on your little far-flung planet." The transmission closed.

Chase closed his end a few moments later and stared at the air where Kane's image had been. Finally he stood up and went to the kitchen. It would be a while before his mind would quiet down enough to get back to sleep after that discussion.

He was heating up water for some Kosh Tea when he heard bare footfalls. He glanced up and saw Lataise slowly entering the kitchen.

"You have enough water in there for two?" she asked softly.

Chase nodded and got a Kopi Tea packet out of the cabinet for her. They waited in silence for the water to warm up until Lataise said, "It sounded like you were talking to Kane just now." Chase nodded again. "How's he doing?"

"He's doing great," Chase answered honestly. He went to get some mugs.

"Did you have a nice talk with him?"

"Yeah. I always do."

Lataise pressed on. "Did he say something that got under your skin?"

Chase looked sideways at her and then began pouring the water. “No. He was just trying to help me out with some advice. Is there a reason we’re playing the question game so late at night?”

Lataise sat at the table with her tea packet. “I’m just a little concerned. Kane’s ‘advice’ isn’t always the best thing for you. I hope you’re not taking whatever he said and automatically assuming it’ll fit you.”

“He’s just looking out for me and wanting to help,” Chase repeated. Even though Chase didn’t really like what his brother had said, Kane was the one with the great piloting skills in a Core squadron, not him. Kane had to know what he was talking about.

“Okay.” Lataise dropped the subject and thanked Chase for the mug of hot water he gave her. He sat down at the table across from her, and they both prepared their tea.

Lataise watched him for a couple minutes like she was expecting him to say something, and then she ventured, “I understand if you don’t want to yet, but if you ever want to talk about the last five weeks, I’m here to listen.”

“Thanks,” Chase said. Though apparently he shouldn’t make a fuss about a little scratch.

They sipped their tea while Lataise caught him up on a few more things that had happened during the time he was gone. Some of her friends had helped her around the house, she had come up with a few more baby names for him to consider, and she threw in a few stories from her job. She’d even met someone whose baby had just outgrown most of its newborn clothes. This person was going to sell the clothes to her for a great bargain.

Chase tried to put Kane’s words out of his mind and instead listen to the normal, everyday things he had missed so much. With every story, though, he just grew more uneasy. These normal, everyday, ordinary things would be the first casualties if the Rebels weren’t stopped. That was bigger than a little scratch, and even Kane would have to see that.

Chapter Six

Learning to live with a pregnant woman just entering her second trimester was challenging in ways Chase hadn't fully anticipated.

"Chase, are we out of fertilizer for the outdoor plants?"

"Yeah, I used up the last of it yesterday. I wrote it on the list to get more."

"You were right by the base's store today at work! Why didn't you stop and get another bag?"

"Because it's raining and we wouldn't be using the outdoor fertilizer today anyway. I didn't see any reason to. The plants won't need it for a couple weeks."

"Didn't you ever think that maybe I was planning on doing some yard work tomorrow on my day off? I was looking forward to that, and now you ruined it!"

"It's supposed to rain tomorrow too."

"That's not the point!"

Learning to live with a fighter pilot who had just come off a near-fatal combat duty was challenging in ways Lataise hadn't fully anticipated.

"Not the point? Lataise, don't you think I have more important things to do than jump on every little task you decide you want done? I get enough of that from my CO! Blast, it's like I'm in Basic Training again."

"What important things? All you do is sit around or roam the house."

"Maybe because I'm still trying to realize I don't have to constantly worry about eating a torpedo or inhaling vacuum!"

"It's been a couple of weeks already! How much longer is this 'realization' going to take?"

"If I have to duck and cover at every one of your mood swings so I don't get my head bit off, it's going to take a little bit longer!"

That was why, on one particularly challenging day, Chase was relatively relieved to be inside his TIE cockpit and out flying a routine system patrol. He'd been forced to fly in space so much after getting back to the base that that activity was very slowly becoming tolerable again. It helped the most when he could avoid thinking about it too much, and today most of his thoughts were on his latest argument with Lataise anyway. Chase had even snapped at Radek once before he'd realized what he was doing and forced himself to stop taking things out on his wingman. Chase wished he could remember how he had previously managed to focus primarily on his duties after having an argument with Lataise, because he was finding it next to impossible to find that focus now.

At least Radek was happy, if the way his TIE was dancing along beside Chase's fighter was any indication. A couple weeks of treatment planetside had returned most of his hearing, though his right ear still had some loss. It was considered as good as he was ever going to get without rather invasive surgical procedures, and despite being marginal with the medical hearing requirements Radek had been put back on active flight status. This was one of his first non-sim flights since his status was restored, and Wiantance had told Chase to take it easy with Radek for a few days.

"Damn, Three, I missed this," Radek told him. "But see, those blasted Rebels couldn't keep me down long. Right? Right?"

“That’s right. And I’m glad you’re back,” replied Chase. He was, too, even if the feeling in general was more diluted than it would have been before everything happened. In fact, lots of things seemed that way now. He’d heard of other people who had lived through near-death experiences and said that life was a million times brighter and sweeter and better afterwards. For some reason, Chase had seemed to go the opposite way after his. He shivered and turned up the heat flow within his cockpit, then tried to keep his sights more on his navigational instruments rather than out his viewport.

About an hour into their patrol, a YT-1300 appeared on Chase’s scope. It was not in a standard navigational lane, and something about it seemed off to Chase. Smugglers would often try to sneak through the system outside of the navigational lane in hopes they wouldn’t be spotted and identified. “Four, heads up,” he said. Then he transmitted over an open frequency, “YT-1300–” He checked his scope for the name showing up via the YT’s IFF–“*Tight Beam*, this is Lieutenant Barton, Fireburner Three, Imperial Navy. State your business.”

A reply came back a few moments later. “Lieutenant, this is *Tight Beam*. I’m a cargo hauler departing the Corporate Sector. I just refueled on Craci Three and am en route to Troiken.”

Something about the words sounded nervous. Anxious. Something wasn’t right, and Chase was in no mood to be fooled or messed with. He narrowed his eyes a bit and said, “I’m sending you the coordinates of our docking station. Dock there. I’ll be boarding and inspecting your ship. Out.” He closed the voice transmission and sent the coordinates. This freighter had picked the wrong day to try to sneak through the system.

The two TIEs followed the YT-1300 the short distance to the docking station while Chase remotely queried their dirtside database for any past information on this ship and its current flight records. Then he told Radek, “Stay out here, Four, and watch for anything suspicious.”

“Copy that, Three, but when am I going to have a chance to do some of the fun stuff? You’d promised you’d start letting me get some experience with boarding and inspections.”

“Maybe the next one. Think of it as more time you get to spend in your TIE since your return.” With that, Chase rendezvoused with the small structure and docked his TIE while the YT-1300 did the same.

The docking station was little more than a large, specialized airlock that allowed a TIE pilot to leave his fighter and enter another ship. All pilots were required to remain in their full life support gear until they were onboard the other ship in case the other ship tried to prematurely disconnect after docking.

The docking went smoothly, and Chase soon walked through the cold of the structure into the starboard docking ring’s airlock on the YT-1300. The outer hatch closed behind him, relieving some of Chase’s anxiety, and through his helmet Chase faintly heard the circulation of air. A small, round man opened the YT-1300’s interior hatch after the circulation noises stopped. “Lieutenant, I’m Captain Nehanda. *Tight Beam* is my ship.”

“Captain,” Chase replied. He walked inside, exhaled, took off his helmet and faced Nehanda. “Are you aware that you were not flying in a standard navigational lane through this system?”

Nehanda’s brow furrowed. “Uh, no, Lieutenant, I wasn’t aware there was one. I apologize.”

“Now, you see, I find that a bit hard to believe since the coordinates are posted in every Cracian spacedock and are available from any Corporate Sector controller. Plus, this ship has

come through here four times in the last year, and each time it was in the proper navigational lane.” Chase watched the man’s reaction closely.

Nehanda didn’t answer right away and looked uncomfortable. Finally he said, “Perhaps those were the times my brother was flying it instead of me. I’m not certain.”

“Let me see a copy of your cargo manifest, please.”

Nehanda handed Chase a datapad, and the pilot quickly looked it over and matched it to the one filed with the CSA for this flight. He made his way to the cargo hold with Nehanda accompanying him, and then he chose some listed items at random and compared their filed quantities to what was physically present in the hold. Some of the larger items were off by one or two from what was listed on the datapad, but Chase tried to not let on that he knew. There was only one explanation for Nehanda’s behavior, unusual flight path and filing discrepancies: Chase was convinced this man was smuggling things. Another thought crossed his mind, one that said Rebels often employed the assistance of smugglers. Hot loathing flared up in Chase’s gut as the implications hit him. Nehanda was working for the filthy Rebels.

Chase quickly turned toward a stack of crates so Nehanda wouldn’t see his reaction. This man was helping the Rebels and therefore represented everything that was wrong in the galaxy. It was because of people like him that Chase had had to go through what he did, and it was people like him who made the galaxy a dangerous place for everyone else. And he was right here, in the same system as Chase’s family. Nehanda was right here, in arm’s reach.

He had to be stopped, right now.

Arresting him and getting the Empire involved provided too many opportunities for the bureaucracy and proceedings to mess something up and let this man go free, so the pilot would step up and deal with him on his own. That way he’d be sure it was taken care of, and that was nothing less than his responsibility.

Chase cleared his throat a few times, then he turned to Nehanda and handed back the datapad as casually as he could. His heart was pounding double-time, and it was all he could do to keep his voice sounding neutral and reasonable. This was his big chance, just like he’d hoped for while he’d been flat on his back in medbay. “I’d like to see your navigational flight plan.”

“Of course,” Nehanda said. He led the way up to the cockpit.

Chase sat down in the pilot’s seat and examined the navcomp’s display. The stored flight plan did indeed say the destination was Troiken, and it matched the flight plan filed with the CSA. That made things much easier.

The Imperial glanced to his left where the environmental displays were. “Oh, Captain, it looks like you’ve got a small atmospheric leak. Might want to go check and make sure that outer hatch is sealed properly at the docking port.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.” Nehanda left the cockpit.

As soon as he was gone, Chase quickly started going deeper into the navigation system’s programming. He might be useless with communications systems, but he knew his way around navcomps and was considered the squadron’s “go-to guy” for anything relating to navigation vectors. He got deep down to the lower levels of the programming that most people never saw or even knew existed, and there he saw the data of the navigational computer’s plotted hyperspace route from the Craci System to Troiken.

Chase quickly traced the graphical route with his eyes, then he entered in a few commands. Those commands pulled the first section of the projected flight path over in one direction by small fractions until he was satisfied. He manually confirmed the changes, overrode

numerous program alerts of the manual changes and hastily backed out of the lower levels of the navcomp's programming.

Finally, Chase typed in a list of coordinates showing the standard travel lane through the Craci System. The navcomp's destination still showed Troiken, and it was indicating the hyperspace flight path was confirmed and ready, just like it had before. The only apparent thing different about it all was that it now had the navigational lane information prominently displayed.

Chase left the cockpit and encountered Nehanda as he was returning from the docking port. "The leak indicator alert just stopped. How did things look at the hatch?" Chase asked him.

"I couldn't find anything wrong, but sometimes that cabin pressure sensor gets glitchy and says there's a leak when it's really not."

"Oh. All right. Just be careful. That probably should be on your list of parts to get fixed." Chase motioned back toward the cockpit. "I entered in the information for the nav lane here through the system so you can follow that until you jump to hyperspace. It's safer for everyone that way."

"You're right, and I do apologize. It won't happen again," Nehanda said.

"I'll let you be on your way now. Thanks for your cooperation."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Good day." Nehanda cycled the airlock for him after Chase donned his helmet.

Chase made his way back to his TIE and then reported in to Radek. Radek asked, "So what happened? You find anything suspicious?"

"No, nothing suspicious. He was just a little lost, that's all."

Radek gave a small scoff. "I told you nothing ever happens way out here."

"After those five weeks, you should be glad for that." Chase undocked his TIE and watched while *Tight Beam* also disengaged from the structure and maneuvered away. He kept an eye on it while he continued his patrol with Radek. *Tight Beam* stayed in the navigational lane, then increased its speed and finally jumped to hyperspace.

Chase smiled tightly. If all went as planned, those few little changes he'd made should adjust the hyperspace course enough to make the YT-1300 fly straight into a nearby star. The computer would detect the gravity well from the star and would exit the ship from hyperspace, but even that emergency exit would be too late; the ship would be unable to avoid getting caught and destroyed by the star. Then there would be one less helper for the Rebels in the galaxy. One less person to aid them.

He contemplated his deed while they continued on patrol. It was simple. Efficient. Bloodless. Untraceable. No holds barred. As dirty as the Rebels, but they had brought it upon themselves and so he didn't mind. He actually felt good at the small progress he made in eliminating the Rebel threat, even if it was just one person.

In musing about it some more, Chase's mind wandered until he realized the perfect way to fight back and cripple the Rebels. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before, but it was wonderful. It could be done, and he would do it.

Chase smiled big as he flew along with Radek and breathlessly figured out his new plan in his head. He couldn't wait to land and start working on this in earnest. He could cripple the Rebels. Now there would be hope for his life. For Lataise's. For his child's. Hope.

Here was a way to make life a million times brighter and sweeter and better.

Chapter Seven

The one thing Chase really disliked about the Empire was its bureaucracy. There were always so many forms to fill out, so many approvals to obtain, so many rules and regulations and legalese that a person could go mad trying to sort it all out. Sometimes the Fireburners claimed that no one was allowed to breathe unless the appropriate form was filled out in triplicate. Chase thought that was something of an exaggeration, but the concept behind the example was sound.

The idea he had come up with was something that the Imperial military would want in its fight against the Rebels, but the problem was that too many people would start asking questions about it, asking if it was safe for this or that, who was going to pay for it, who was going to develop it, who was going to test it, and on and on and on. Then they'd bump the questions up to their commanding officers, who would in turn raise the questions to their superiors. It would be stuck in the purgatory of "almost approved" for months or even years before work on the implementation could even begin. His child would be born and growing up by then, making that sort of timeframe unacceptable for this. It had to be done now, and that meant he had to skip all the Imperial bureaucracy and take a different route.

Besides, it felt better to be actively working it instead of sitting around waiting for someone to review it. It was one of the few times Chase had felt genuinely good since his TIE had been hit.

It had been a week since he had come up with his idea, and during each of his morning workouts that week Chase had refined his plan in his mind. Each evening that week after he got off duty he would go and do the research that he needed to prepare his plan.

One day toward the end of that week, after he got off duty he quickly headed back home, strode into the house without a word and went directly into the bedroom to change out of his flightsuit, just like he had done the previous days.

"Chase? Is that you?" Lataise called from a different room.

"Yeah, it's me," he called back. He hung up his flightsuit and put on cargo pants and a heavy long-sleeved shirt. Most Cracians in this area wore a work vest over the shirt for warmth, but since getting back Chase had foregone his vest in favor of a full jacket.

He was lacing up his boots when Lataise came into the bedroom doorway. "Don't tell me you're going out again," she said in disappointment.

"Yeah, sorry, I got things to do." Chase barely looked up as he spoke.

"Like what? What have you been working on so much all week?"

"Just a few things for work. I'll be back later." Chase stood, grabbed a datapad and his jacket and headed for the doorway, but Lataise remained standing in it, looking tired. Chase hardly noticed she was wearing the green sweater he liked.

"Then why don't you do them while you're at work instead of when you're off-duty?" Lataise asked. "And you never wear civvies when you're doing things for work."

Chase fought down the flare of impatience inside him; he was itching to go continue his research. Looking forward to this activity in the evenings made the entire day drag on so long. "I don't really have time to talk about this now. I'll see you later." He squeezed past Lataise and walked to the front door.

"Will you at least be home for supper tonight for once?" she called after him.

"I doubt it," Chase replied. With that, he was through the door and in their landspeeder.

His destination was a small café in town not far from the base. Soon Chase was settled

there at a small table with a mug of caf and a public access Holonet terminal to help minimize anything being traced back to him. He got out his datapad, gulped down some caf and got to work.

A deli sandwich, three cafs and four hours later, he was still there. Chase was scribbling notes on the datapad and scrutinizing different databases, employee records of the Corporate Sector offices of Cybot Galactica, and usernames on various Holonet social networked locations. He was so absorbed in his research that he jumped when he heard his name spoken sharply from behind. Chase guiltily shut down the various Holonet connections in rapid succession before turning around.

Lataise was walking up to him with her arms crossed and a glare pinned on him. Chase figured she must have taken the public transportation into town. "I thought that was our speeder out front," she said. "Is this where you've been spending all your time after work lately?"

Chase mentally cursed. He did not need this interruption right now—he'd just come across a promising candidate in his research. He stood up, pocketed his datapad and said, "What's the problem? I've just been on the Holonet."

"What's the problem?" Lataise repeated. "You're barely ever home anymore! We have Holonet access there that you could use, you know. What can you possibly have been spending so much time on it for that you couldn't do at home? Somehow I really doubt this is a work project like you've been saying. Did you meet some girl on it? Getting friendly with her?"

Chase's expression twisted into one of distaste. "What? No! That's absurd. This is not the place for you to be making a scene, though. We can talk outside."

Though that was exactly what he didn't want to do.

He grabbed his jacket, quickly paid for his Holonet access time with hard credits and then followed Lataise out into the cool, dark evening. There was a fair amount of landspeeder traffic on the lit road, and occasional pedestrians passed by on the sidewalk. Many were carrying small shopping bags from the stores on that street, and the ones who were empty-handed were apparently looking for a place to eat.

"Making a scene," Lataise muttered when they got outside. She parked herself under a small ornamental tree on the edge of the sidewalk and refocused her unhappiness on her husband. "I am *not* making a scene. I'm asking you a very simple question."

If only it was that simple. "Lataise, I'm not talking to any girl on the Holonet. How did you get such a ridiculous notion in your head?" Chase asked.

"What else am I supposed to think?" she demanded. "Every day for the last week you've come home after getting off duty and stayed just long enough to change clothes and leave again. You've been vague at best when I ask you where you're going, you're gone all evening, and you sure seem eager to go do whatever you're doing."

Chase's expression soured again. "You were annoyed when I was just sitting around the house, and now you're mad that I'm going out and doing things. I just can't win with you lately. Will you make up your mind?"

"Why is it nothing but the extremes?" Lataise countered. "Why can't it be like it was before?"

"What are you talking about? This is what it was like before."

"No, it's not." Lataise shook her head and sniffled. "It hasn't been the same since you got back from that combat tour. Before that, you would come home, we'd talk, have dinner, maybe go do something together or just stay home. You'd see your friends, I'd see mine. You know

what it's been like this week? You leave right away without saying a word. You're gone all the time, and you miss dinner. I need help around the house. I—I just don't know where you are anymore or what you're doing, and you won't tell me. You never used to hide things from me. You didn't even tell me about the investigators: I heard about that from someone else. Two months ago that would have been something you'd tell me about as soon as you got home, but now you didn't breathe one word of it to me in however many days it's been."

Chase waved off her concerns. "That? That was nothing." It had been twenty minutes' worth of questions by a small team from Troiken looking into the disappearance of *Tight Beam* and trying to locate the missing ship. Chase was on record as the last person to have seen it during his boarding and inspection, but he felt he had handled the questions well enough and had a good enough record that they didn't suspect him of any wrongdoing. "I didn't want you to worry and think I was in trouble or something."

"Why don't you let me decide what I'll worry about," Lataise said flatly. "And besides, that's not the only thing different about you. Like you haven't gone camping with the group since you got back."

"I'm not going to go camping now. It's cold out," Chase replied. He was even starting to get chilly from the stiff breeze blowing discarded flimsisheets down the street.

"That never stopped you before. You've gone camping in the snow, remember?"

Chase fought the urge to roll his eyes: he didn't need that lecture too. "So you think I'm running around on you because I stopped going on silly little camping trips?"

It was obvious that Lataise didn't like that comment. "No, but damn it, Chase, listen to yourself. When have you ever thought that camping was silly? It's little things like that that I can't figure out about you since you got back from combat. I know we're not supposed to force the issue, but I can't help you if I don't know what really happened out there, and you won't tell me. You wanted to talk to Kane about it but not to me."

"Because I thought Kane would have understood."

"And I won't?" Lataise challenged.

Chase's reply was simple. "No, you won't."

The anger Chase was expecting from her didn't appear; however, something that sounded like desperation did. "Why can't you give me even one single chance to understand? What will it hurt? Why won't you let me help?" asked Lataise.

Chase didn't voice the first thought that popped into his mind: *Because I need that promotion to help with the baby's expenses, and officers on the promotion list don't complain about scratches*. Instead he said defensively, "I can handle it. I don't need help." He was the one who was supposed to help his family, not the other way around.

Frustration leaked into Lataise's reply. "If this is what you call 'handling it', then no, you can't. 'Handling it' shouldn't turn you into a different person."

"A different person?" Chase was none too happy at the accusing tone in her voice. "For all the snow in a blizzard, you're overreacting! Besides, you sound like your psychologist friend. I'm your husband, Lataise, not one of her therapy patients," he grumbled. "Stop analyzing me and treating me like I am."

She locked a defiant gaze with his exasperated one, and in the light from the café's sign Chase caught the glint of tears in her eyes. "You're sure not acting like my husband," she said, "and I will use everything available to me to figure out why and how to fix it."

"Oh, for all—fine, you want to know what happened out there?" Chase said in a slightly

raised voice. "I got to come face-to-face with the end of my life and the loss of everything I care about. You can't honestly tell me that's something you truly understand."

The look Lataise gave him was one he didn't recognize and couldn't interpret. Chase ignored it and pressed on. "So that's what happened. There. I told you. Happy now?"

Lataise's voice turned into a surprisingly soft entity, as if she was trying to use it to cushion the impact of Chase's sharp words. "Actually, yes, I am. Because, see, even though you came face-to-face with it, you didn't lose it all. You still have your life, and it's right here in front of you. And you're gaining another life too." Lataise placed her hand on her belly, which was beginning to grow swollen. "But the way you act sometimes now, I have to wonder if you really realize that."

Chase couldn't have cared less about how soft her voice was at that moment. "Of course I realize that. I'm not blind. Though how did this all get turned back around on me? What *any* of this has to do with your trust issues and your thinking that I'm running around on you, I have no idea."

Lataise seemed surprised, and her next words were hot with no trace of the gentleness they'd had a moment ago. "I don't have trust issues. I have husband issues."

"Right." Chase didn't bother resisting the urge to roll his eyes this time. "*I'm* the problem here. Not the one with the hormonal outbursts even when I bend over backwards for her. No, the one who got shot and nearly died is the one who hasn't been the perfect spouse these last few weeks."

Tears welled up in Lataise's eyes. "At least I'm trying," she bit out. "You just run off to go play on the Holonet."

Chase narrowed his eyes. She had no idea what she was talking about. Playing on the Holonet? This was no game. She just couldn't see things the way he did after he had learned the truths about the danger the Rebels posed and the gritty steps that would be necessary to eliminate them. If he did his job right, she'd never have to see things that way, but she sure didn't seem grateful about it, or about the fact that he was getting his hands dirty for her. Instead she was insisting that his life should be sunshine and rainbows because he was still breathing. Too bad things didn't work that way.

"That's right, I *am* playing on the Holonet," Chase said sarcastically. "How can you say you're trying when you don't even believe me when I say there's no girl on the other end?"

"You haven't been open or straight with me for days," Lataise snapped. "I've always relied on you and trusted you, Chase, but I'm not so sure I can anymore. I've never seen you act this way, and I don't know what to do about it."

That hurt more than Chase expected it to, and his words lashed out defensively. "Fine, you don't trust me? You don't believe me? Maybe I'll go back in there and really find a girl on the Holonet, or maybe I'll go do the nightclub scene instead. If I'm going to get accused of it anyway, I may as well have some fun and actually deserve the yelling!"

Lataise stared at him in horror for a few moments and was visibly fighting back tears. Finally she spun and began quickly walking away down the sidewalk.

"Now who's running off?" Chase grumbled. At least that fight was over and he could have some peace and quiet again. He stalked back into the café with every bit of his body language warning everyone in a three-block radius to leave him alone. Other café patrons discreetly scooted their chairs in more as he walked past them. Chase went straight to the public access Holonet terminal to pick up where he'd left off.

For thirty minutes he tried to do just that, but he couldn't concentrate enough to get anything done. The words on his datapad and the terminal screen were just lines and dots that never translated into Basic and never sank in while floundering in the aftermath of the argument. Blast it, everything had been fine. What was she getting on his case about, and why? What was her problem? This seemed bigger than one of her mood swings.

"Damn it," Chase muttered as he finally gave up on getting any more productive work done. He'd better go home and figure out what the hell was wrong with his wife before he was forced to sleep on the couch for the rest of the month.

He again collected his belongings, paid for the useless access time and got into their speeder. A few minutes later he pulled up to their house.

"Lataise?" he called as he unlocked the front door and walked in. A light in the living room was on like it always was in the evenings regardless of whether they were home or not, but that was all. No one answered him. If she was giving him the silent treatment, Chase couldn't help but think it was almost refreshing after having to sit through all the tirades and arguments lately.

He walked through the living room, tossed his jacket on the couch and poked his head in the kitchen. Some dishes were piled up, waiting to be put through the washer, and a few ironing projects were hanging off a cabinet by the far wall. Chase pulled back and continued his rounds of the small house. "Lataise? Are you here?" She wasn't in the baby's room, the refresher or the bedroom.

Chase paused in the bedroom and then walked over to the four special shelves on the wall that held Lataise's beloved collection of glass birds. He inspected them closely and noticed a fine layer of dust on them. That wasn't good; she always kept those things cleaner than the plates they ate off of. The only times she let them get dirty were when she was upset about something.

It was obvious that Lataise wasn't in the house, so he sat on the bed and pulled out his comlink. As Chase tried to get through to Lataise's comlink, his eyes were drawn to the holo on the wall of the two of them at some zero-g dance lessons they had taken. He realized with some dismay that it had been a while since they had done something enjoyable like that together, and if things kept going the way they were going, it would probably be even longer. That was even assuming the Rebels didn't take everything away first.

Chase grumbled to himself as he waited for her to answer. He felt stuck between the Rebels and his increasingly-difficult marriage. Working to solve one of those problems made the other problem get worse.

Lataise never answered her comlink, and after giving up on that route Chase walked back into the living room to figure out his next move. Looking around, he saw a small box by the holoemitter. Upon further inspection he found that the box contained their collection of episodes of *Smuggled Stars*, a classic comedy series that Lataise enjoyed and which was older than either of them. Chase smiled a bit in spite of himself as he remembered one of their first dates when they sat and watched the episodes together for hours, something that was enjoyable even though he couldn't have cared less about the comedy aspect of the show. The comforting memory lessened his reflexive grudge that had been building since the fight. She must have been watching the episodes again recently, but why would she be wasting time doing that when she herself claimed she had a lot to do around the house?

Chase tossed the box back down on the floor, and the small noise it made echoed softly down the hallway. He looked down the hallway as if he could see the sound. Had the house

always echoed like that? He didn't know, and for some reason it made him uneasy. Chase decided he didn't want to be in the living room anymore and the kitchen was a better place to be.

Inside the kitchen, he took the kettle and began filling it with water to make some Kosh Tea. It was almost full before he realized that he had automatically been preparing enough for Lataise as well. But she wasn't home, and he didn't need this much water just for himself.

Just for himself.

Something about those three words made Chase hurriedly shut off the faucet and leave the kettle, nearly full, in the sink. He began to pace around the kitchen, and then he moved beyond that to restlessly walk throughout the house to relieve some nervous energy that was building up. He unconsciously followed the walking path he had created through the different rooms in the couple weeks following his return from the combat deployment, but this time his footsteps echoed noticeably and seemed to emphasize the fact that there was no other person there to break up the stillness.

Being alone in the house was nothing new to him, but something now made it feel different. Cold shadows spilled into the hallway from the bedroom and the baby's room. A circuit breaker inside of him tripped, and the small, comfortable house began to grow large, lonely and unwelcoming without Lataise's presence.

The sensation unnerved him. Chase stopped walking, shook his head hard and fought back memories of the similar feeling he had experienced in his damaged TIE Fighter, but a few deep breaths didn't keep them at bay for very long. The feeling grew, and with it the realization of the looming physical distance between him and Lataise. Just like back then.

The pilot felt cold sweat on the back of his neck, and he coughed to clear his throat. He didn't know why his heart rate was increasing and his breath was short. He wasn't in a doomed TIE anymore: he was back home. He wasn't going to die. He wasn't losing his family...

Only he had no idea where his wife was, and he was completely alone.

Chase had just enough presence of mind to grab his jacket before he quickly backed out of the front door. He barely took the time to lock the door and stumbled into the landspeeder with only one thought in his head: he had to go find her. But where? Had Lataise said she was going anywhere special tonight or this week? Chase tried to remember, but nothing they had spoken of for the last few days had stuck with him.

He put the speeder in gear and hurried into town without caring if he got caught for going too fast. The outermost streets curved to match the shape of the bay's shoreline, but aside from that the familiar roadways were laid out efficiently and allowed Chase to navigate his way through them effortlessly.

The closest place was where Lataise worked, not too far from the café he had been at earlier. It was one of the few businesses on that street that did not have an evening shift, and from the road Chase could tell the building was dark and unoccupied. He continued on. Their earlier argument that had taken place mere dozens of meters away was forgotten.

He had no better luck at her favorite restaurant, several stores she frequented or the community center where they were attending parenting classes together. Every failure just made Chase drive more quickly and more anxiously to the next place. He even went to the nearby house of one of her good friends, but the woman hadn't seen Lataise either and promised to get in touch with Chase if she heard from her.

Chase was trembling as he got back into the speeder. After all the fights they'd had recently, he didn't know why this was affecting him so badly. He'd never lost control like this

before just because he didn't know where Lataise was, and his reaction was frightening him almost as much as everything else was. Chase tried to search for that internal discipline the Imperial Navy had given him, but he couldn't concentrate enough to seek it out. All that was there was a desperate need to see his wife.

He tried her comlink again as he drove back through town, but she still didn't answer. Chase sped up, not knowing where else he could go but feeling a little better that he was at least doing it in a hurry.

He was a few blocks away from the café and feeling like he was going in circles when he caught sight of a familiar parking lot he was going past. Chase's heart beat a little faster at recognizing the location's potential, and he braked hard and pulled in, oblivious to the collision he had almost caused with the speeder behind him. The lot was empty, and Chase parked the speeder underneath a lone split-bottom srika tree before jumping out.

As soon as he was outside of the speeder, the sound of waves lapping at the beach below filled his ears. Chase jogged to the beach access staircase that this parking lot served, and he jumped down the stairs two at a time. Maybe she was here. Lataise loved walking on the beach.

Chase landed in the deep sand at the bottom of the staircase and looked around. It was hard to see at night, but the beach looked deserted. Small whitecaps on the waves were the only part of the water that was visible. The cloud layers almost invariably disappeared at night, but the starlight and the light from one of Craci IV's two small moons didn't help visibility much.

A short distance down, there was a dark area visible on the light sand. Chase squinted, then began walking toward it to get a better look.

When he got closer and his eyes had adapted more to the dark, Chase almost drowned in relief. That dark figure ahead of him was Lataise sitting on the sand. "Lataise?" he called.

She got to her feet with a little bit of difficulty and began quickly walking down the beach away from him.

Chase had never seen her do that before. He began jogging after her, his chest tight. "Lataise? Wait. Please."

She kept going, so he increased his speed and caught up with her. "Lataise, please wait. I'm sorry." She slowed to a stop, and Chase tried to gently pull her to him but she shook free of his hold.

Hurt, he backed off and tried a different approach. "I've been looking everywhere for you," he said just loud enough for her to hear over the waves. "I'm sorry for what I said. It was stupid of me, and I didn't mean it."

Looking more closely at her face in the soft glow of light pollution from the city of Legis Bay, Chase could see she was crying and probably had been for a while. Guilt bubbled up amid the turmoil of the other emotions in his gut.

Lataise wiped at her eyes and wouldn't meet his gaze. Finally she said in a small, shaky voice, "I thought you wanted someone pretty."

It was hard to make out her words through the tears, and Chase wasn't sure if he'd heard her correctly. "What?" he asked softly. "What are you talking about?"

She sniffled and waved a hand in the general direction of the rest of her body. "I'm all bloated and swollen and nasty, my hair is all ratty, and I was worried you'd found someone pretty..."

He at last heard what she was telling him. Those words surprised Chase more than almost any others he'd heard that night, and he took extra care to keep his tone of voice gentle. "No, no,

no. Why would I do that? I've got my pretty little someone right here." He again tried to softly pull her into a hug, and this time she let herself be enclosed in his arms. "Everything I need is right here." Chase held her as her tears dampened his jacket, and he closed his eyes and inhaled her sweet scent mixed with the salty air and salty tears.

"You're beautiful, and you have a beautiful little life inside you," he murmured to her. "Don't you ever believe otherwise."

When Lataise eventually spoke next, the tears had not let up. "I'm sorry. I miss you. I'm scared, and I need you."

"Shhh," he soothed. "I'm here, just like I promised. I'm not going anywhere. We're in this together."

"I know you're physically here, but it's almost like you never really came back. I miss *you*."

"It's okay," Chase whispered. "Everything will be fine."

He was ashamed to think that he had let things with the Rebels get so personal that he'd ignored the personal reasons he was doing this for. He wouldn't make that mistake again, no matter how hard it would be to keep things right with Lataise while he secretly worked on securing their future safety.

That was the problem, though—his efforts had to be a secret because his superiors wouldn't approve of the route he was taking outside of the sacred Imperial bureaucracy and chain of command, so he had to continue preventing Lataise from learning about it in order to protect her and himself. He had to be careful. If his superiors found out about his plan and disapproved to the point of sending him to prison for his initiative, he still wouldn't be able to raise his child with Lataise like he so desperately wanted. He wouldn't be able to hold his wife like he was doing right now. Protecting them all meant keeping this secret from Lataise, and damn, that was going to be hard.

Gradually Lataise's tears diminished, and the pair sat together on the cool sand and watched the dark waves. Chase was getting cold, but he found that keeping Lataise close helped warm him. At one point while they were holding each other, Chase broke the quiet by softly saying in Lataise's ear, "Do you really want to know what I was doing on the Holonet outside of home?"

She looked at him. "Yes, what was it?"

"Well, it'll ruin the surprise now, but...I was looking for a nice gift for you. Sort of a little pick-me-up since your pregnancy seems to have gotten you down a bit. I couldn't do it at home because I didn't want you accidentally seeing anything while I was working on it and searching." Chase made a mental note to himself that now he'd actually have to look for such a gift as well as come up with the money to pay for it. Luxuries cost a lot of money on this world.

There was silence for a moment, then Lataise buried her face in his chest. "Damn it, I'm so embarrassed."

"No, no, don't be." Chase smiled a bit as he pulled her down with him until he was lying on his back and she was lying next to him while using him as a pillow. He was pleased to note that he felt no pain from his former injuries in his shoulder or ribs where Lataise was lying on them. "This is one of those things we'll look back on in twenty years and laugh about."

"What? No, it won't. First, it's too embarrassing, and second, you never laugh at jokes or funny situations anyway."

"Sure I do." Chase knew his claim wasn't really true, but he tried to sound a bit indignant

all the same. “Listen, it’ll go something like this. Something like, ‘Hi, Mom, that’s a pretty piece of jewelry. When did you get it?’ ‘Well, Daughter, funny story, before you were born your father was shopping for it as a surprise, but he was acting so weird that I thought he was having an affair. Funny story, huh?’ Right? Right?”

Lataise playfully swatted his shoulder. “You’ve been around Radek too much. All joke attempts do not have to end with the words ‘right, right’.”

“Hey, give me a break. I’m not good at this.”

Lataise laughed softly and then snuggled into her husband, making herself comfortable. They rested their clasped hands gently on her growing belly and simply lay there together on the beach listening to the waves and looking at the stars. The recent reminder of his damaged TIE soon made Chase divert his sights away from the void of space above. A few firebugs drifted lazily overhead.

Before too long Lataise was lulled off into a nap. When Chase noticed this, he shifted his body very carefully so as not to wake her and managed to reach in his pocket with his free hand and pull out his research datapad. While his wife dozed, he reviewed the information he had gotten on the Holonet earlier that night. He still had work to do.

Chapter Eight

Two weeks passed. Chase felt he could have gotten things done in one week except he'd had to cut back on his daily research quite a bit to spend more time with Lataise and put her mind at ease. Thankfully, it seemed to be working for now, and it was time to test that.

Chase casually showed Lataise a datapad when he got home from work one day. "I have to take a short trip to check on something for the squadron."

"You do?" She looked over the datapad, which contained a Naval travel authorization document Chase had filled out with bogus details and a forged signature. "When? How long?"

Chase took the datapad away before she could start memorizing any information on it. "Tomorrow, and it's only for the day." He was taking tomorrow as a day of leave from work to cover that side of things. "I'll be home in time for supper. Can you drop me off at the spaceport before you go to work in the morning?"

"Sure, I suppose so. Where are you going? Is there a problem?"

"I'm going to Etti IV," Chase replied. "A company there was supposed to ship something to us and it got delayed significantly. The commander wanted to send one of us to check on it because it sends a stronger message to the company to have a fighter pilot breathing down their neck, but within the squadron they couldn't spare anyone with too high a rank. So out of the junior grades I drew the short straw. Sorry."

Lataise didn't say anything for a minute, and Chase knew she was contemplating this in the wake of the previous fake work excuses. At last she shrugged and said, "Not your fault. Duty calls, right? Just let me know when you need to be at the spaceport tomorrow."

Chase smiled at her, grateful for the perfect behavior he had forced from himself for the last two weeks. "Thank you."

The next morning, Lataise dropped him off at the Legis Bay Spaceport. Once Chase was inside the spaceport and alone, he changed out of his uniform into the civilian clothes he had worn underneath his uniform. The uniform was soon stowed in a storage locker. Chase was too nervous to have anything blatantly Imperial in his possession in case something backfired during this next part of his plan.

A few hours after that, Chase was sitting on a commercial transport bound for Etti IV; however, his destination there was not a company with bad delivery dates, and it certainly wasn't anything squadron-sanctioned either.

In the course of his research during the last few weeks, Chase had scoured and cross-referenced a lot of information on the Holonet, and his results pointed to a person he thought could help him out with a very important part of his plan against the Rebels, someone named Yhunia Vient. Vient was an employee in the computer code programming division at Cybot Galactica's headquarters whose information had similarities to an anonymous person with the social username of "CodeBlue." CodeBlue had expressed opinions on various Holonet sites that made Chase believe he was both competent enough to do this and would be willing to.

While Chase believed that Vient and CodeBlue were the same man, he wasn't 100% certain. It would be too risky to contact Vient through Cybot Galactica channels, so instead Chase had set up his own anonymous account and had used it to send a message to the CodeBlue alias requesting a meeting for a possible work project. He hadn't liked the thought of a face-to-face meeting for liability reasons, but it was safer than sending detailed information about his plan over unsecured Holonet channels or communication frequencies. Who knew where the

information could end up then.

CodeBlue had accepted and suggested a specific meeting location on Etti IV. All of that had brought Chase to where he was right now in that passenger seat. The uncertainties and anxious anticipation of the rest of the day made him feel like he was leaving on the Victory Star Destroyer to head into combat again.

Eventually the transport dropped out of hyperspace, and the capital planet of the Corporate Sector came into sight. Etti IV was pale green and blue, and dark clouds swirled over much of its surface. The vast amounts of starship traffic around the planet tended to intimidate most pilots not familiar with it, and it was definitely a lot more intense than the refueling hub of the Craci System, but it still did little to faze Chase after he had grown up on Imperial Center. He noted with approval from the way the transport was boldly moving into the fray that this ship's pilot was not intimidated either.

The transport began its descent to Etti IV's surface and rocked slightly as it passed through storm clouds. Finally it settled to the ground in the spaceport of Mondder, the capital city. Lightning flashed outside as rain sluiced down the transport's small windows.

Chase disembarked with the rest of the passengers and went through the environmentally sealed tunnel into the spaceport where he was greeted with numerous security scans and identification checks. As soon as he was clear and past them, the first thing he noticed was the advertisements everywhere. Lights, sounds, on the walls, projected in the air...everywhere, for everything. The spectacle made dogfights seem lazy and boring, and Chase decided he really didn't need more of that type of excitement in his life. He tried to step around the people who had stopped in their tracks to gawk at it all.

The spaceport was huge and noisy with many different languages assaulting his ears, and even though he had no bags of his own, it was a challenge to move through the milling crowd of bodies and luggage and screaming children and travelers running late for their flights. The only ones whom the crowd willingly parted for were the armed CSA security officer Espos while they patrolled, and Chase also made sure to stay well away from them. He'd heard enough stories to decide that he did not want to cross them or even get their attention. He was eternally grateful that the team that had been investigating *Tight Beam's* disappearance was from Troiken and had not been comprised of Espos from the CSA. He'd probably be in prison right now if it had been.

Within the mass of people and aliens, Chase hunched his shoulders down a bit and unconsciously reverted back to the short steps and skillful maneuvering he'd learned to use back on Imperial Center to get through the dense crowds. He found and took advantage of every cubic centimeter of space between him and the people around him.

Chase made his way through the spaceport, past nonstop ads and clothing stores and pet shops and restaurants, until he found the outdoor speeder taxi stand. Pulling his jacket collar up around his neck, he went through yet another set of security scans at the exit, stepped out into the humid air and the thunderstorm and headed to the line waiting for speeder taxis. Luckily it was underneath an overhang that mostly sheltered the people from the rain.

The speeder taxis operated with an odd sort of organized chaos. The passenger barely had a chance to tell the taxi pilot his destination before his bags were in the storage compartment and the passenger was rushed into the taxi. He'd be lucky to be able to take a breath before the taxi would blare its horn and try to get out into the spaceport traffic. No sooner had one taxi left than another arrived to take its place and consume the next waiting passenger.

Chase was ready when it was finally his turn. He knew this drill. As an airspeeder taxi

pilot herself back on Imperial Center, his mother had ensured that Chase and his siblings knew exactly how to work with taxi pilots.

It was just as hard for the taxi to get through the spaceport traffic as it had been for Chase to get through the spaceport. The streets of Mondder were full of speeders and pedestrians despite the rain, but the taxi pilot skillfully maneuvered between them all.

It wasn't too long before the taxi dropped off Chase at the meeting location, a brightly lit cantina a few kilometers from the impressive and massive buildings of the Cybot Galactica headquarters. Chase paid the speeder taxi pilot and gave him a hefty tip, then he stood outside of the cantina for a moment and looked through the bright windows thoughtfully. He'd expected it to be...dimmer. More run-down. In all the holovids he'd ever seen, that was what covert meeting locations were supposed to look like, not...this. Chase shrugged to himself and went inside out of the rain.

The pilot easily located the side table CodeBlue had told him about. Chase slid into one of its seats, took off his wet jacket and glanced at his chrono. He was an hour early since his plans had included some buffer time for any traveling issues, so he settled back to wait.

The cantina was about half full in the late afternoon hour, and Chase didn't bother trying to adjust much to the large time difference since he wouldn't be here long. Most of the patrons were blue-skinned Etti and humans, though there was a table of ugly, segmented, bug-like Rakririans as well. Another table had two Espos who seemed to be coming off-duty. Chase looked away from the disgusting sight of the Rakririans, then flagged down a server droid and ordered a drink. There was no reason for him to stick out, especially with those Espos around.

Chase nursed a couple drinks while he waited and casually watched the other patrons come and go. He breathed more easily when the two Espos left. The nonstop speeder and pedestrian traffic on the street outside reminded him of Imperial Center, and his thoughts wandered to that place. He didn't really miss the planet, but he missed his parents at times. His mother had been ecstatic at the news of her first expected grandchild, and he figured they would make more of an effort to visit him and Lataise after the baby was born.

A little under an hour after his arrival, another patron walked in. Chase glanced at the ridiculous appearance of the alien and then tried to ignore the creature by going back to his drink. He wasn't expecting the alien to give a cheerful greeting to the bar staff, grab a drink from them, and then come right up to Chase's table and slide into a seat across from him. "Hello," the alien said. "I hope you haven't been waiting long. You're ProgrammerNeeded, are you not?"

Chase blinked in surprise as the alien called him by the anonymous username he had sent the meeting request with. "Yes, I am. But you—" He broke off and studied the absurd alien for a moment. It looked like a Pho Ph'eahian with its four arms, large pointed ears and bright blue fur. "*You're CodeBlue?*"

The alien gave a large, toothy grin. "That's me. Is that so hard to believe? Go ahead and look, I don't mind." He held up all four hands to show them off, then he tried to pat some of his fur dry. "But I've got to say, you really need a more imaginative username."

"It gets the job done," Chase replied shortly. Damn it. Unfortunately, it looked like he was stuck with this blue thing for the work. It had still been the best candidate. He lowered his voice. "All right, well, this is a very sensitive project I wanted to talk to you about. Isn't there somewhere a little more...private we could go?"

CodeBlue held one hand to his chest, and his voice changed to almost bashful intonations. "Why, Needed, we just met. Don't you think that's more of an activity for a second

date? Or do you just get more forward with handsome blue-furred fellas like me? I shouldn't fault you for it. I *am* pretty irresistible."

Chase twisted his expression into one of distaste. "What? What in the galaxy are you talking about? I'm here to talk business, that's all."

CodeBlue's ears sagged, and he sounded almost bored when he said, "Oh. You're one of *those* people. All serious business, no humor. That doubles my rate right there. I get enough of those types at work."

This blue thing was acting even worse than Radek. Chase grabbed onto the lead he had been given and plowed ahead, hoping that the "doubled rate" comment was merely another of its attempts at humor. "Your job, good, that's one question I wanted to ask you, since I guess we're not going anywhere else..."

"We don't need to go anywhere else," CodeBlue said. "Everyone's good here. Besides, haven't you ever heard of hiding in the open? All the 'private' places are crawling with Espo and surveillance devices. Now what about my job?"

"Is your real name Yhunia Vient? Do you work for Cybot Galactica?"

CodeBlue narrowed his eyes slightly. "That's an odd question. Sounds like something an undercover Espo would ask."

"Do I look like an Espo?"

"All Humans look alike. And your reply wasn't a denial."

"I'm not an Espo," Chase clarified. "Besides, I'd think they'd be more apt to arrest or shoot first and not bother with asking sneaky questions, don't you? I'm just trying to confirm your credentials, nothing more."

CodeBlue thought about that for a moment. "Good point. And since it was such a good point, I'll give you your answer. Yes, 'tis I," he said with a flourish. "Though most people don't make the effort to piece my identities together. You must really be desperate for something."

Chase was relieved that his research had been correct, though the alien's last comment ruffled him so he tried to ignore it. "Okay, good. Listen," Chase said in the same low voice as he leaned a little closer. Then he pulled back a bit when he smelled the alien's funny scent. "I need something done, and I need it done secretly."

CodeBlue grinned wickedly and leaned forward as well, mirroring Chase's position. "What kind of something?" he asked quietly.

"A computer something."

"I'm good at computer somethings. Care to elaborate?"

"Do you care to promise that whether or not you accept this, you'll keep it quiet?" Chase wished he didn't need to rely on an alien's word, but he hadn't really been prepared for this particular situation.

"Ooh, now I really feel like I'm in a holovid or something. Yes, I promise. Want me to take a blood oath on it as well?"

Chase paused, uncertain. Crazy, nonsensical alien rituals. "Uh, no, I don't think that will be necessary."

"Good. 'Cause I was joking about the blood oath. Now what's this project?"

Flustered, Chase took a few breaths to calm himself down, then he cleared his throat a couple times and began explaining. It felt strange to finally be speaking his plan aloud to someone else, and it was freeing and frightening all at once. "I need a computer virus made. This particular virus should *only* affect R-series astromechs. R2's and R5's in particular. No other

droids or computer systems.”

CodeBlue’s ears pricked, and his eyes lit up. “A hit on Industrial Automaton droids? Wonderful! My rates just went back down to their normal levels. You might even get a discount for this. Keep going.”

That was exactly the kind of reaction Chase had been hoping for and why he had picked a Cybot Galactica employee: the two companies were bitter rivals. Chase continued, “Here’s what I need the virus to do. An infected astromech should look and behave normally. Its diagnostics should come back clean. A memory wipe should not get rid of the virus. The virus can be transmitted in whatever way is easiest, though I think direct droid-to-droid communications over their own frequencies would be simplest. Some sort of long-range transmission is needed as well or it might not spread past one capital ship. Now, listen closely. On starfighters like Y-wings and X-wings, the astromech droid is the only way to input hyperspace coordinates into the navigational computer. On randomly selected hyperspace jumps, say within the first ten jumps or so after becoming infected, an infected astromech should ‘inadvertently’ mix up or transpose some random numbers when inputting the hyperspace jump calculations into the starfighter’s nav computer. It should not realize it made any sort of mistake. That’s what I need.”

The blue alien seemed to mull that over. “So what you’re saying is that you want a virus to cause an R2 to mess up the hyperspace jumps at random times, and the droid should appear on all counts to be healthy so no one suspects it’s infected.”

“That’s right.”

“And you realize these messed-up hyperspace jumps will cause that particular ship to—”

“End up somewhere the pilot didn’t expect. Fly into something. I’m aware of all the possible results.” They were the ultimate end product Chase wanted; in fact, he was counting on them. Anything from a simple mission disruption to pilot death was welcome.

His heart beat faster from the excitement of thinking about his plan again. The Rebels relied on their precious starfighters very heavily, and those starfighters relied heavily on their hyperdrives. If a squadron with infected astromechs made a jump to lightspeed and came out the other end with only half of their pilots, it would be chaos. They would falter. They would be weak and unprepared for whatever mission they were on. As the virus would spread and the Rebels had more and more occurrences, they’d have to change so many of their tactics and procedures to try to compensate for it or guard against it, and all of those changes meant utilization of more manpower and resources, which would often result in less efficient operations.

Plus, no pilot would willingly get into a starfighter if he thought the hyperdrive would likely malfunction and strand him to die somewhere in space or impact him into the surface of a planet. They probably wouldn’t even retreat from a fight on their own hyperdrives. There would be a panic. There would be chaos. There would be Rebel pilots who would never make it back from a fateful hyperspace jump, and many of them would likely never know what hit them. Chase would be the one responsible for weakening the Rebels’ starfighter corps and therefore the entire Rebellion. Crippling them. Opening them up to a decisive strike from the Imperials.

Kane had taken out four Rebels with a damaged fighter; Chase had the potential to take out many, many more without firing one shot. This whole plan was perfect from so many angles.

Let those damned Rebel pilots see what it felt like to be stranded in a fighter without a way to jump to hyperspace and no one close enough to get help from.

CodeBlue finally spoke. “I think I can do what you’re asking. It’ll be hard, but I can get it

done.”

“How quickly?”

“How quickly you want it? Price goes up for rush jobs.”

“I’m not familiar with the normal timelines for these sorts of things. Is two months considered a rush job?”

“For something of this scale, two months would not be a rush job but it would be a priority job. Smaller price increase than a rush job. You’re lucky I’m so good. For most people, two months would be impossible for this.”

“Then two months.” That still gave him time to get the virus implemented in the field before his baby was born.

“All right.” CodeBlue nodded. “Oh, and I’ll need your help with one small part of this. We have all the specs of the R-series astromechs, but I’ll need the nav computer specs for the affected starfighters, since the programming interface between the droid and the navcomp will be important. Are those something you can get me? You seem like you have Imperial connections.”

“What? I do not,” Chase said defensively.

CodeBlue held up two hands in surrender. “All right, point taken, it’s none of my business. But can you get them?”

Chase waited for his nerves to settle down. “Yes, I can do that.” He cleared a tickle in his throat.

“Good, just send them to the same Holonet account you sent the meeting request to. The earlier, the better. Now, in exchange for this service, my contractual price will be...” The alien thought for a moment. “Twenty thousand credits.”

Chase stared dumbfounded at him. “Twenty thousand?” he finally managed.

“You should be glad it’s that cheap for something of this magnitude and with all the difficult restrictions you put on it, like the diagnostics. Plus, it pays for the total secrecy and a complete clearing of our tracks during the making of this product. I even gave you the ‘Industrial Automaton Embarrassment Factor’ discount. Sell any stocks you may have. As it is, you have the opportunity to allow me to finally pay off my endless debts and get the hell out of this place. Doesn’t that make you feel all special inside? It should. The full amount will be due on delivery of the product. I’ll take a 10% down payment to get started, or more if you’d like.”

Chase’s head swam as he contemplated where he could possibly get that kind of money. He didn’t have much of a choice though if he wanted to see this through. “All right, deal. How do I get the down payment to you? I don’t exactly have it on me.”

The Pho Ph’eahian scribbled a number on a piece of flimsi he pulled from a pocket. “Here, send it to this financial account. It’s secure and won’t be traced back to either of us.”

The pilot pocketed it. “All right.”

“Well then, anything else I can help you with, ProgrammerNoLongerNeeded?” CodeBlue grinned at him.

Chase was still distracted by the thought of all that money. “Um, maybe. Are there any places around here that sell gifts or jewelry really, really cheap?”

“Why, there certainly are. We have everything. If you can’t find it here, you can’t find it anywhere.” CodeBlue gave Chase directions to a few nearby stores, then stood and shook hands with him. “Pleasure doing business with you. I’ll be in touch.” The blue, four-armed alien left.

Chase sat there for another few minutes and tried to think things through. One large hurdle had been overcome with his hiring of CodeBlue, but now he just needed the funds. In two

months.

He finished off his last drink, paid for it with hard credits, grabbed his jacket and left the bar. It was still storming out, but suddenly a speeder taxi seemed like an expensive luxury. Maybe his decision at the spaceport to decline purchasing a CSA Viscount tag and getting its visitor consumer discounts hadn't been such a good one. Chase began walking to the nearest store pointed out by CodeBlue.

Chapter Nine

“Okay, you can open your eyes now,” Chase told Lataise.

She did so, and before her she saw the intricate glass bird Chase was holding on his open palm. The bird was folding its wings in such a way that it enveloped a small open area, and at the bottom of that open area was a small holoemitter. When a holo was being projected, it would look like the bird was holding the image in its wings. Lataise inhaled at the sight, carefully took the figurine to look at it more closely and said, “Chase, it’s beautiful! Thank you!” She gave him a lingering kiss.

When they separated, Chase smiled at her, soaking up the warm light in her eyes. “When the baby’s born, we’ll put a holo of him or her in it.”

Lataise happily inspected the glass figurine and let it sparkle in the early morning sunlight coming in through the window. “I still feel so embarrassed about everything, but I couldn’t have asked for a better pick-me-up gift. It’s perfect. Wait ‘til I tell the girls about this. They’ll be so jealous. They’re always groaning about how lucky I am to have you.” She leaned against Chase. “I love it when you prove them right.”

“I try.” He checked his chrono and said, “Sorry, but I have to get going. Time for work.”

Lataise sighed and straightened up. “I suppose it’s that time, isn’t it. I need to get ready to leave soon too. That marketing firm wants the demographic report for the sporting events delivered this week. It’s crazy at the office because of it.”

“I already offered to take you to a donri game so you could do your research in person.”

She rolled her eyes a bit at the notion. “And I already declined the offer.”

“Are you sure?” Chase asked, enjoying teasing her. “It’ll be fun.”

“Quite sure. That’s what Radek and your squadmates are for, remember? Come to think of it, you haven’t gone to a game with them since you got back. Maybe you should.”

His teasing mood quickly disappeared, but Chase tried his hardest to not let it show. He did not want a repeat of the earlier discussion on his post-deployment behavior: he couldn’t afford it right now. He couldn’t afford a lot of things, it seemed. “I’ll ask them about it,” he lied.

“Good.” Lataise seemed pleased with his answer. “It’ll be fun for you, and once the baby comes there won’t be many opportunities for things like that. Now, you’d better get going. Have a good day.”

“You too,” Chase answered. “I’ll be back to take you to your checkup with the doctor this evening. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Chase grabbed his jacket and the datacards he would need and headed out the door.

In the week since getting back from Etti IV, he felt like he had accomplished a lot. He had taken the two thousand credit down payment out of their savings account and sent it to CodeBlue, who had promptly acknowledged receipt of the funds and promised to get to work right away. Chase had also sent him copies of the Rebel starfighter navigational computer specifications. He had needed to sign the originals out of the Intel reference library on base, and to do so they needed a personal identification code. There was no way that Chase was going to use his own code for that, but it had all worked out. Radek was pretty lax with keeping his own code secret when he was inputting it into something around Chase, and it had been a simple enough thing for Chase to memorize and use Radek’s code with no one the wiser.

Chase would have preferred someone else’s code, but he figured Radek’s should do well

enough. If this all blew up in his face and things were traced back to their roots, at least this piece of evidence would point to Radek, not him. The wonderful part about it was that even if they determined Radek was set up, no one would suspect that his own wingman had done it. Investigators would go after the squadmates that openly had a problem with Radek's obnoxious ways, and there were a few of them. Yes, Chase thought that should work out just fine.

The only big problem now was still the money. If asked, Chase might be able to blame the 2,000 credit savings withdrawal on something false like a speeder repair part or transport tickets for his parents to visit from Imperial Center, but hopefully he could get that amount paid back before Lataise even noticed the money was gone. And he had to similarly pay back the money he had used to buy his transport ticket to Etti IV, *and* he still needed 18,000 more credits on top of that. How? How how *how*? He was stumped.

The finances constantly distracted him as he performed his duties that day. Chase wished he could set up a phony contract and make the Imperials pay for it or just siphon off some funds without them knowing, but he didn't know how to do that. A phony contract would be next to impossible because of all the bureaucracy and would take much longer than two months.

The last thing on his agenda for the day was a standard system patrol with Radek. Chase was glad for it: flying usually helped to clear his mind, and he needed a lot of that right now.

Radek babbled on while they flew like he normally did. Chase tuned him out. As they passed the inspection docking structure on one of their patrol laps, Chase was snapped out of his thoughts by Radek's voice saying, "Three! Hey, Three!"

Chase blinked, startled. "What?"

"Aren't you listening to me?"

Chase sighed. "Sorry. What was that again?"

"I said, it's been a long time since you promised I could start doing ship inspections. Can't we do that today? I'm tired of waiting. I want to have something good like that to show the commander."

"Oh, sure, I suppose we can do that today," Chase said distractedly. "Let's see. Let's start with something nice and benign, and find some law-abiding clunky freighter in the navigational lane to do a random check on."

"Great!" Radek sounded excited. "Okay, okay, let's see...oh, there's an Etti Lighter freighter coming up. How about that one?"

"Sure."

"Let me contact them, Three. I know what to say."

"Okay, go ahead."

A moment later, an open frequency carried Radek's voice. "Etti Lighter *Star Flag*, this is Lieutenant Deror, Fireburner Four, Imperial Navy."

"This is Lighter *Star Flag*, go ahead," a female voice replied.

"We will be boarding and inspecting your ship. Dock at the following coordinates. Out." The coordinates followed, and then Radek's voice changed over to his frequency with Chase. "How was that, Three?"

"Good, Four. Now get all the info you can on the ship from dirtside, and keep an eye on the ship to make sure they're complying." Chase did the same so he could compare what he got with what Radek came up with, and he also transmitted their intentions back to the base.

The freighter and the two TIEs docked at the structure without incident. Chase led Radek onto *Star Flag*, and he didn't expect to see a pink Twi'lek woman there waiting for them. Chase

was suddenly glad Radek was there and would be dealing with her.

She introduced herself as the captain of *Star Flag*, and Chase walked Radek through the inspection procedures while habitually remaining on Radek's left side so he could hear the best. Radek caught on quickly and even did a faster yet more thorough check of all the cargo than Chase normally would have done.

While Radek did that, Chase glanced through the cargo manifest. There were some expensive items on this ship, and everything looked to be in order. The Twi'lek was the only one they had encountered aboard so far. What if...? Chase thought about a few things and casually looked around as Radek finished with the cargo and checked the navigation logs.

When he was done, Chase smiled at him. "That was a really good job. Head on back to the fighters. I'll be there in a minute—I just want to double-check a cargo listing number."

Radek beamed at Chase's compliment, then he thanked the Twi'lek for her cooperation and went through the cycling airlock. Chase waited until Radek was completely off the freighter before he stepped up to the Twi'lek.

"I too would like to thank you for your cooperation with us," he said to her. "I'll let you be on your way as soon as your outstanding Goods Transit fee of 100 credits is paid in full."

The Twi'lek studied him skeptically, and her *lekku* twitched. "Goods Transit fee? I've never heard of such a thing."

"It's a new Imperial law, not a CSA one, so if you mainly do business in the CSA boundaries I'm not surprised you haven't heard much about it. But you hadn't paid it before entering and transiting this system with your cargo, which is why we stopped your ship." Chase casually leaned against a bulkhead and tried to look reasonable.

The Twi'lek was still watching him warily, obviously trying to determine his level of honesty.

Chase shrugged. "Really, when you stop to think about it, it's not that much money when you consider the kind of valuable goods you're hauling in this ship. It's a new type of customs fee here in this system."

"But I already paid customs on everything here," the Twi'lek said. "It's all recorded in my flight logs and signed off by the CSA."

"But see, that's where it looks like you keep getting stuck," Chase replied. "This isn't for the CSA. The Craci System is under Imperial rule, so everything within the system boundaries is subject to Imperial rule and doctrine." Chase decided to try to sweeten the deal. "It's only 100 credits, and I think I forgot to mention that it covers an entire year, so after you pay this you can forget about it. I can enter it into the database immediately so you're covered. But think about it, ma'am: your time is much too valuable to be sitting here going around in circles over this measly thing. How about we just get this over and done with so we both can be on our way?"

The pink alien thought it over. "I won't have to worry about this anymore for a whole year?" Her tone of voice was flat; she obviously wasn't happy.

Chase nodded. "That's right."

She stared at him for a long moment before finally muttering, "Fine," then the Twi'lek walked into another room. Chase let his hand dangle near his holstered blaster just in case he'd pushed her too far and he would need it to defend himself, but she came out armed only with one hundred hard credits. "Here." She gave them to him.

Chase gave a tight smile and pocketed the credits. For once he was grateful for the stupid, gullible aliens. "Thank you for your cooperation, ma'am. I'll mark your ship as cleared

immediately.”

He donned his helmet, exited through the airlock, climbed into his TIE and undocked from the structure with Radek. *Star Flag* did the same and quickly pulled away.

“That was great, Three! Thanks!” Radek exclaimed.

For once, Chase bet that he was smiling as big as Radek was, and he shivered once in excitement. The two TIEs circled away from the docking structure, and Chase looked at the nearby navigational lane. All those ships... they all meant credits. Credits he desperately needed. As long as he was careful and played it smart. He could raise the fee or do fake inspection violation write-ups, but he'd need to space out the selected transports enough over the next two months to ensure he wasn't discovered. He'd also have to make sure Radek was always docked at the same time to give him some deniability. If Radek always made the initial comm contact, that would be even better. In-flight voice recorders made wonderful alibis.

He loved it when flying cleared his head.

“Sure thing, Four. You did well,” Chase answered. “Want some more practice with it?”

Chapter Ten

Looking back over the last month, Chase couldn't believe how amateurish and frankly dangerous his first fee collection with the Twi'lek had been. He'd been damned lucky she hadn't tried to research such an ambiguous-sounding fee afterwards and that he hadn't gotten caught.

Things were much better now. He was more prepared and more selective in the ships they stopped, and he adjusted his methods for each individual captain. Most of the time he simply wrote up fake citations if he thought they wouldn't know any better. All he had to do was rattle off some Imperial documents and form numbers he was quoting the "rules" from to make it sound as official as possible, and if their eyes glazed over or looked like an animal caught in speeder headlights, Chase knew he had it made. Plus, he convinced those people that if they paid the fine immediately, the infraction wouldn't go onto their flight record. This was his favorite approach, as the people often felt he was doing them a favor and would be less likely to complain to others about it or look into it more closely afterward. Chase found he could get a good amount of money from the more gullible or more anxious transport pilots. He was starting to get a secret thrill out of seeing how intimidated some of the more nervous ones got at his authority.

He had also made it a habit to enter the ship with his wingman, then stand back and let Radek do an inspection completely on his own. When Radek was done, Chase would have him stay by the airlock while Chase did a "follow-up inspection" alone to make sure Radek had done it properly. It was during that time when Chase found fake violations to write up.

Everything was going great, and if things kept going at a comparable rate he could have a decent portion of the 20,000 credits by the time the computer program was ready. He didn't believe he could get the full amount by only using this method and staying suspicion-free, but in the meantime he was thinking hard of other ways to get the money. He was starting to get nervous though, as time was running out.

"All done?" Chase asked from beside the airlock as Radek came out of the cockpit of a Barloz Medium Freighter called *Speed of Dark* with its captain following.

"Yeah." Radek handed Chase a datapad on which he had typed the results of his inspection. Radek looked annoyed, but he politely thanked Captain Adilnik for his time and then parked himself next to the airlock to wait for Chase.

Chase raised an eyebrow. He'd never seen Radek so anxious to be done with an inspection before.

Adilnik looked coldly at Chase, obviously not happy that an Imperial was still onboard and interrupting his schedule. Ignoring the look, Chase glanced over the datapad. Radek had written up a few minor but legitimate infractions, and Chase was happy for it; that made things much easier when dealing with people as uncooperative as this man had proven himself to be so far. On the bottom of the list Radek had typed a note that said, "Three: this guy's being a damn pain. I wouldn't stick around longer than needed if I was you."

Chase had already guessed that much, but Radek's note confirmed it. He couldn't push this guy too far, which meant he'd be getting very few extra credits out of him. Chase took his time transferring Radek's infraction list onto a different datapad—it was just too bad if the poor captain was inconvenienced—and in the middle of the list Chase added his own fake rule violation and attached a 35 credit fine to it, his lowest collection amount. He hated using 35's when he still had so much more to collect since it meant more credits from another ship which meant more risk, but he didn't have a choice in this case. He handed Radek's datapad back.

The pilot did a brief walkthrough of the ship's cockpit and cargo hold and pretended to doublecheck things against his updated datapad while Adilnik stalked along behind. When Chase was done, he remained in the cargo hold so Radek wouldn't overhear anything from over by the airlock. Chase nodded and said, "Yes, this is accurate. We noticed a few things wrong here, Captain." He handed the datapad to Adilnik. "Here's a list of the write-ups and the fines. If you pay me in full for them now, either in hard credits or electronically to the collection account, they won't go on your flight record."

Adilnik scowled as he read through the list, then his eyes stopped. "What the hell is this one? 35 credits for engine certification?"

Chase silently cursed. Why did he have to single out the only fake one? "Your engine hasn't been certified as being calibrated to the proper efficiency rating in the last 18 months. If it has been, you're missing the proper documentation and cal seal. That's all."

Adilnik sent a glare Chase's way that reminded him of his drill instructor in Basic. Even their close-cropped, greying blond hairstyles were the same. "That sounds awfully peculiar to me."

At least Chase was prepared this time. "It's in Imperial document 104TH-109.IL, Revision J, entitled *Certification and Documentation Requirements of Conventional Propulsion Systems for Small- and Medium-Sized Transports, Freighters and Shuttles, Civilian Class*." He'd been proud of the title he'd managed to come up with.

The captain motioned toward the forward part of the ship. "I have a Holonet connection here. Why don't you use it to pull up that document and show me this rule?"

Unfortunately, Chase hadn't been prepared for that. He thought as fast as he could and said, "Captain, it would take a long time for me to search for that particular document and then look through it for the specific rule. It's only 35 credits. Your time is more valuable than that."

"No, I don't mind waiting. I'd like to see the rule so I can be sure I don't violate it again. After all, I live in the Corporate Sector, not the Empire, and since obviously I'm being held to Imperial rules whenever I come through this system, I need to know exactly what I need to do. Right?"

Chase was getting unnerved by the man's hard, challenging tone. "Captain, really, it's such a small amount—"

"But I need to know the rules to avoid having to pay larger amounts in the future. Educate me on the rules."

"I told you the rule already." Chase's only hope now was to go circular. "You need the cal seal and documentation."

"You said it had to be the 'proper' rating. What's 'proper' for my ship? I need to see it in print so I can follow your wonderful rule."

Chase hardened and flattened his voice. "Captain, your attitude is leaving much to be desired."

Adilnik snorted. "What's wrong with my attitude? I'm trying to comply with what you're telling me, and you're not allowing me to. My request is very simple."

Chase hesitated. This wasn't going well at all, and Adilnik wasn't buying the story. His constant confrontational demeanor was worrying Chase as well, and he was just asking for trouble by continuing this discussion. Backing down wouldn't be something that an Imperial officer should do if he was within his rights to demand compliance from someone, but maybe Adilnik would stop making a big deal out of this if he won. "All right, then, Captain, I really

shouldn't do this, but I'll let that fee citation go. It's a minor thing that's not worth the time we're wasting on it."

The gaze coming from Adilunik was steady and calculating as he processed Chase's capitulation. Finally the captain barked a short laugh. "An *Imperial* is letting a rule violation go? When all he has to do is just show me the rule to get me to pay? There's only one reason something like that could be happening. You can't do it, can you?" Adilunik bit out. "You can't show it to me because it doesn't exist. I'm so sick of being bled dry by greedy, power-hungry types like you, trying to take what's not yours. CSA, Imperial, it doesn't matter; you're all the same."

Adilunik was really rubbing Chase the wrong way. "The Empire is not at all like the CSA," Chase countered. "The Empire is making the galaxy better for everyone, even you. If some people, like you, don't like the rules that enable peace and prosperity for everyone, then that's just too bad. The CSA is only interested in lining their own pockets. They don't give a damn about anyone."

"And what organization do you represent again? Going from your own descriptions, I think you have the wrong uniform on."

"You're forgetting your place here, Captain," Chase said sharply, feeling anger well up inside. "Besides, I just offered to waive the fee you owe. Explain to me how that makes me interested only in getting money."

"On the contrary, I think *you're* the one forgetting your place," Adilunik retorted, his voice equally heated. "I've dealt with your kind way too much in the CSA, seen every trick in the book to get money that wasn't rightfully yours. Hell, you're not even very good at it—you're so transparent that I can see through you better than my viewport. That has to make me wonder how no one else has caught on yet. Or have they, and they're allowing it? Does your commander know you can't show me this wonderful rule of yours, or is he in on it too to where I have to go higher to report this little incident? Trust me, I'll go as high as I need to."

Chase narrowed his eyes, all nervousness forgotten. "That's really not necessary," he warned in a low voice.

"Oh, but I think it is," Adilunik said, not backing down. He pulled a small handheld comlink off of his belt.

Chase's hand immediately gripped his holstered blaster. "I wouldn't turn that on."

Adilunik entered the cold stare-down with Chase. With each strangled breath he took, the Imperial pilot was acutely aware of the danger Adilunik's comlink posed to himself and everything he'd been working so hard for. He kept his eyes focused on Adilunik and the captain's comlink. "Keep it turned off, and put that comlink away nice and slowly," Chase said, controlling each word as best as he could. "Let's discuss this like rational adults."

Adilunik snorted, and then he spread his hands out casually to each side from the elbow. One held the comlink, one held the datapad he'd been given. "Rational adults? You're the one subtly threatening the use of a blaster against someone holding a comlink. There's nothing 'rational' about that. In fact, it sounds a lot like a cornered criminal. Is that what you are?"

"I mean it," Chase said, dead serious. "Put it away."

"I think it's time for you to get off my ship," Adilunik said, equally serious.

Chase tried desperately to think things through, but no action, no words held promise of getting him out of this mess. The only thing he was positive about was that he had to find a way to guarantee Adilunik wouldn't report him. "I don't think so. I'm in charge here. I've got a

galactic military and government backing me up,” Chase said. “Do you?”

“Your damn military and government are not on this ship. This is my ship. I don’t answer to you. Now get off.”

“You want to make this messy?” Chase demanded. “We can make this messy. We can start by me arresting you, impounding your ship, all sorts of things.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Adilunik shot back. “Not when it would just call attention to your own unscrupulous actions. My ship, my rules. If you’re not going to leave, I’ll show you the door.”

Adilunik pocketed his comlink and strode purposefully toward Chase, and the pilot reflexively backed up a step. Adilunik grabbed Chase and tried to give him a shove toward the airlock area, but Chase resisted. Off-balance, the pilot pulled the blaster out of the holster, and with that action Adilunik’s strategy changed drastically.

The captain lunged for the blaster and grabbed the barrel. He tried to simultaneously point it away from himself and pull the blaster out of Chase’s hand, but Chase wrested it away. The next thing Chase knew, a datapad hit him hard in the side of the face. The collection of legitimate and fake infractions fell to the deck after having done their damage, and Chase staggered back a step from the blow. His thumb desperately sought and disengaged the blaster’s safety. He fought to regain his balance against the challenges of his head throbbing from the hit and his bulky helmet latched to the left side of his belt and generally getting in the way, and he stumbled into a defensive posture.

It unfortunately didn’t help much when he realized where Adilunik was an instant later. The captain grabbed Chase from behind and tried to pin his arms to his sides. Chase struggled and was strong enough to prevent Adilunik from getting a good hold on him. The pilot kicked one foot backward, hitting Adilunik in the shin hard, and that allowed Chase to push Adilunik off with as much force as he could. Once his arms were free, Chase immediately spun around, raised his blaster and pulled the trigger.

The shot hit Adilunik, who gave a short cry and then hit a bulkhead while he was still moving with the momentum from Chase’s shove. He bounced off the bulkhead, fell to the deck and didn’t move.

The sight was enough to even cut clean through the waves of adrenaline. Chase stopped and stared with wide eyes at Adilunik as he lay crumpled on the deck. That was definitely not a stun bolt like it should have been. His frozen mind could only articulate two words: *Oh, no*. It was just as well, since no Basic word had yet been invented that described how utterly bad this situation was to Chase. His frozen mind began to thaw out with panic.

“Chase?!”

Chase jumped at the unexpected voice, whirled around again and raised his blaster. Coming into his crosshairs this time was Radek, who was standing in the doorway to the cargo hold and gaping at his wingman. In one hand Radek held his own blaster at the ready but pointed up, and the other gripped his helmet, ready to activate its internal communications link.

The surprise and concern on Radek’s face quickly turned to shock when he saw Chase bringing a blaster to bear on him. Radek jumped backwards out of the doorway and flattened himself against the corridor wall.

Chase caught himself just in time to prevent reflexively firing on Radek, but the sight of his wingman just panicked him even more. Even though he didn’t shoot, he kept his blaster trained on what little he could see of Radek. “What are you doing here?!” Chase demanded,

forcing thick, solid air into his lungs with difficulty. “What did you see?”

“Chase, calm down!” A frightened voice from Radek was something Chase just couldn’t get used to. “Put the blaster down. It’s me! What are you doing?”

“What did you see?!” Chase repeated. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Everything was collapsing all around him, and he had to fix it. He had to. Somehow. The familiar desperation demanded it.

“I—I—I don’t know what I saw! I just thought I heard a blaster shot and came to make sure you were all right! Damn it, Chase, put the blaster down already! Please! You’re really freaking me out here!”

Chase hesitated, unsure of what to do and scared of that uncertainty. He couldn’t let Radek find out about any of this, but in the last five seconds Radek had learned too much and it couldn’t be unlearned. A few unbidden options flashed through Chase’s mind, wondering in an instant how much he could control Radek or if something more...drastic was his only way out.

Finally Chase lowered his trembling blaster, engaged the safety and forced the blaster back in the holster. “Sorry,” he managed to say without too much faltering. “I—you—damn it, you scared the hell out of me!”

Radek warily peeked around the doorway, obviously still disturbed by his wingman’s actions. Then he relaxed a fraction and slowly moved just inside the hold. Radek holstered his own blaster. “You okay?” he asked. Chase nodded.

Radek’s eyes flickered down to Adilnik on the deck and then swept the area immediately around the captain. “I’ll call for a med team,” he said softly. Radek lifted his helmet and reached for the comm trigger inside of it.

“No.” Chase’s sharp command stopped Radek cold. Radek retreated a step and looked up at Chase anxiously, and Chase tried to get more air into his uncooperative lungs. “No,” Chase repeated. “Just...wait. Hold on. Stay right there.”

Chase worked his jaw a bit and wiped off the blood he could taste on his split lip, then he cautiously moved toward Adilnik’s body. When he got next to it he crouched down and rolled the captain onto his back. This was bad. This was beyond bad. Now two ships had had serious problems where the last common denominator had been Chase’s boarding and inspection. That was too obvious for anyone to ignore. He was going to be investigated and arrested and sent to Kessel and—

To Chase’s surprise, he found that his blaster bolt had only hit Adilnik in the shoulder. He had a gash and a bump on the back of his head that were probably from ramming into the bulkhead, and he looked to be breathing but unconscious. Chase quickly felt for a pulse and nearly drowned from relief when he found one.

“He’s fine,” Chase announced when his head stopped swimming. The realization was like a breath of sweet, fresh air outdoors after drawing the last lungful of oxygen from a depleted life support system, and he cleared his throat to get rid of the pathetic waver his voice had just had. “Just got knocked out. He doesn’t need a med team.”

“But...Chase...” Radek ventured, still well out of reach. “We’re supposed to—”

“I’ll treat him now,” Chase interrupted with finality, trying to reestablish himself as the senior officer. The glimmer of hope that accompanied the realization that he did not have a dead body on his hands made it much easier to think things through and try to formulate some sort of plan of action. His mind was beginning to absorb the situation and analyze different threats and options as if it was a dogfight. Chase welcomed the return of his training and instincts with open

arms.

Rule Number One was to avoid getting higher authorities involved at all costs. Chase stood and walked over to get the dropped datapad as casually as he could, then he surreptitiously erased the data on it. “If I can wake him up and talk to him, maybe we won’t have to report this.”

“What? What in the galaxy would make you think we don’t have to report this?”

Chase silently cursed. “Radek, it was a fast, confusing moment. He attacked me first, and I acted in self-defense. It all stemmed from a misunderstanding that escalated more than it rightfully should have.”

“A misunderstanding?” Radek interrupted. “What kind of misunderstanding could possibly have caused *this* from Unflappable You?”

“It was a pretty big one, okay? Don’t you believe me?” Chase snapped. When Radek looked properly rebuked into silence, Chase fell back on his default strategy: lies that made it sound like another person was benefitting were the easiest to swallow. “Do you know what will happen to him if we report this? He’ll be arrested for assaulting an Imperial officer, and he’ll get thrown in prison and lose it all—his ship, his job, his family, his freedom, everything. That’s not something *I’d* want.” At least the last part was the truth. Just the mere prospect of that was making his palms sweaty and his chest tight. “Look around at this ship. It’s obvious he doesn’t have much. I don’t want to take away what little he does have over a misunderstanding, do you?”

Radek studied his wingman for a few moments with a strange look on his face. At last Radek said, “It’s hard to have sympathy for someone who was acting like a jerk.”

Chase hoped Radek was talking about Adilunik and not him. He remained quiet.

Radek continued, “If you patch him up and something happens on the way to his next destination, like the treatment wasn’t good enough, we’ll be responsible for it. We’ll get blamed.”

“No, I’ll be responsible for it, not you. I’m the officer in charge here. This is all on me.” That had always been the big problem area in his plan to point some evidence toward Radek, but maybe here he could use it to his advantage.

“And you don’t care?”

“I’ll take the chance, and I’ll make sure he’s willing to as well. If he’s not, we’ll call a med team.”

Radek hesitated and was obviously thinking hard, and Chase was beginning to feel uncomfortable and impatient under his scrutiny too. “This doesn’t seem right,” Radek said at last. “It doesn’t sound like the Mr. Follow-The-Rules-So-We-Can-Make-The-Galaxy-Better guy I know.”

That line of thought had to stop right then and there. “Listen, Four, he’s bleeding here. Make up your mind. Are you going to let me do this for him or not?” Chase asked sharply enough to drive the words home through any interference.

Radek shifted his weight before he finally shrugged. “All right, all right,” he said. “I think you’re crazy and are making this too hard, but it avoids a lot of paperwork at least. You want help?”

Chase tried hard not to show how relieved he was. “Sure, go find me a first aid kit. Check the ship’s ‘fresher or get the one in the docking station.”

Radek hesitated again and looked like he wanted to say something, but when Chase raised his eyebrows in a silent, impatient gesture, he left without another word.

As soon as Radek was gone, Chase unholstered his blaster and set it to stun like it

normally was. He wondered if the struggle for the blaster had accidentally knocked the power settings higher. Chase also pocketed Adilunik's comlink, lightly slapped the captain's face a few times and then pinned him down on the floor.

Adilunik began to stir. "Wake up," Chase commanded in a low voice.

Adilunik blearily opened his eyes to the sight of Chase holding the blaster at his throat.

"That was a really stupid stunt," Chase hissed in Adilunik's ear. "Let me tell you how things are going to work now. First, you're going to convince my colleague that you're physically fine and do not require professional medical attention. Then you and I will arrange things so you can land on Craci Four's surface." Chase already had an idea of how to do that with no unanswerable questions being asked. "If you breathe one word of all this or what happened to anyone, know two things: one, no more records exist of that 35 credit fee you didn't like, and two, I will press charges against you for assaulting an Imperial officer. The Imperial-favoring courts here will ensure you go to prison for a very long time. But if you're quiet, I forget all about it. Understand?"

Adilunik was blinking hard and trying to focus his eyes properly, but he was coherent enough to swear at Chase. He also unsuccessfully tried to squirm away from where Chase was exerting pressure near his shoulder wound to keep him pinned down. "*You're* the one who shot *me*, you damn Imperial!"

"In self-defense. And quit whining. You're fine. It's just a scratch."

"Self-defense," Adilunik spat. "So criminals can use that excuse now?"

Chase pressed the tip of his blaster hard into the captain's throat, only partly to get him to stop talking. "You brought this on yourself," Chase said. His glare was as cold as the inside of his stranded TIE. "Ask yourself this: is this stupid little defiant attitude of yours worth your life? I can quietly dispose of you in many, many different ways if you want to cause trouble. It was you who said I was cornered, and a cornered person is capable of a lot. Want to learn that first-hand?"

Chase heard Radek's footsteps approaching, and he quickly holstered his blaster, released Adilunik and erased the hard expression from his face. Radek came in tentatively as though worried he might be greeted with another blaster, and he held the medpack out to Chase.

"Thanks," Chase said. He opened it while he added, "As you can see, our patient's awake. I talked to him."

"And?" Radek asked. "Does he want a med team to come?"

Adilunik's response was a few long seconds in coming. "No, I'll be okay with a bandage and some bacta patches," he finally muttered.

Chase pre-empted anything else Radek might have asked by saying, "The captain was on his way to get some of his flight controls checked out in the next system." He began to bandage Adilunik's injuries. "I told him of a place here that can do it, and it'll be safer than traveling too far with a problem of that nature, so he's going to land when we're done here. Plus he'll have ready access to medical facilities if he needs it."

"Okay. That's good, I guess," Radek said.

It only took a few minutes to finish the bandaging, and Chase pocketed the medkit. Then the three of them slowly made their way up to the cockpit while helping Adilunik with his balance. He still seemed a bit dazed from the blow to the head, and Chase was glad for it; otherwise this would have been a whole lot more difficult, if not impossible.

When asked, Adilunik said that he wasn't scheduled to meet with anyone at his original

destination for a few days, so he wouldn't have to contact them and tell them about his brief stopover. Chase contacted the Legis Bay Spaceport on Adilnik's behalf and arranged a course for the autopilot to fly there as well as a controlled landing with ground-based tractor beams so they wouldn't run into problems from the "faulty" flight controls. They even revised his filed flight plan. When everything was set, Chase secretly typed a message in reply and sent it to the spaceport controllers: *Course received and acknowledged. I think I can fix this myself inside the ship—I just needed a safe place to power down for an extended period of time. Thanks for your help.* Hopefully that would prevent anyone from wondering why no one would disembark from the ship after landing.

"Okay, everything's ready," Chase told Adilnik and Radek. "You won't have to worry about flying with your head hurting, Captain. I apologize again for the earlier misunderstanding." He looked at Radek. "I'll take the captain back to his quarters for some rest, and I'll meet you at the airlock in a minute, Four. Program the airlock for a 30-second automated cycle so the two of us can leave on our own. I've programmed the autopilot to disengage from the docking station one minute after the airlock cycles shut behind us."

The group split, and Chase walked with Adilnik back toward the ship's living area. They were well out of Radek's sight when Chase nudged Adilnik into the refresher.

Off-balance, Adilnik opened his mouth to protest the action, but before he could say anything Chase drove his elbow hard into the side of the captain's head. Adilnik went down unconscious on the small floor of the refresher.

Chase rubbed his elbow. A stun bolt would have been much easier, but he couldn't take the risk that Radek might hear it. He dragged Adilnik over toward a large exposed pipe on the wall, then he pulled the medpack out of his pocket. He used the medical bandaging tape to bind Adilnik's hands behind him around the pipe. Then he quickly removed everything from Adilnik's pockets as well as anything else that was within reach in the refresher. There was no point in tying him up if he could potentially use something to escape.

"Sorry," Chase muttered, unrepentant, "but I just don't trust you." He locked the 'fresher door behind him and tossed all of the collected items, including the comlink he had turned off, into an adjacent room. The only thing the Imperial kept was the electronic entry key for *Speed of Dark*. Then Chase hurried to meet up with Radek so they could get off this blasted ship.

Chapter Eleven

It was a long night for Chase with little sleep and lots of worried thoughts. His tossing and turning woke Lataise up more than once, which she made sure to mention to him in the morning.

The lack of sleep was nothing particularly new, but everything else made it hard for him to force a smile when he reported for duty a few hours later that morning and held up two donri game tickets. “What do you say? A little apology for...well, you know. Yesterday.”

Radek grinned and took one to read it more closely. “Great! When is it?”

“This evening. Sorry for the late notice, but I just happened into these.”

Radek’s grin faded as he inspected the ticket. “Chase, you know this isn’t a Legis Bay game, right? It’s way down in Corvallis.”

“Yeah,” Chase said offhandedly. “Somewhere different to go.”

The younger pilot’s enthusiastic expression from a few moments ago was now replaced by one of discomfort. “I don’t like going down in that area,” Radek said. “Even the commander doesn’t like us going down there if we don’t have to.”

Chase dismissed the concerns. “It’ll be fine. We’re just going to the game. All the anti-Imperial hotspots around there are well outside the city. What, do we need to stop at the Army base there and get an escort for you? One bodyguard-slash-babysitter for Fighter Pilot Radek Deror?”

Radek gave Chase a dry look, and then he asked, “And your boss is letting you go? She doesn’t have some chores lined up for you to do tonight?”

Chase returned the dry look and dehumidified it even more. “If you’re referring to the person I’ve chosen to spend the rest of my life with,” he said pointedly, “it was her idea that we go to a game.”

“Hey, not too shabby, having a boss like that. Sure, count me in.”

The sun was getting low in the cloudy sky when Chase purposefully pointed the landspeeder toward the Legis Bay Spaceport. He dug out his comlink and dialed in Radek’s frequency.

“Yeah?” Radek said by way of greeting.

“It’s Chase. I’m running really late, and I won’t be able to pick you up. Go on without me, and I’ll meet you there at the game.” He did his best to sound hurried and contrite.

“Oh. Well, I can wait for you,” Radek offered.

That wouldn’t do at all. “No, I don’t want you to miss the game. I’ll meet you there,” Chase said. “Save my seat.”

“Well...all right.” Radek didn’t sound too thrilled at the notion.

“Sorry about this, Radek. I’ll see you soon.” Chase closed the transmission and refocused his attention on driving the landspeeder and doing some calculations in his head. The hour of travel time each way to Corvallis plus the expected length of the donri game would hopefully buy Chase enough excused time from Lataise for what he needed to do on his own this evening. It would have to be enough.

He parked at the Legis Bay Spaceport, donned a cap and pulled his jacket collar up

around his neck as much as casually possible to try to hide some of his features from security holocams. When he was ready, Chase made his way over to the landing platform where *Speed of Dark* sat, and he was relieved to see it was still there. Now the hard part would begin.

Thanks to the electronic entry key, Chase cautiously stepped aboard the ship without any problems and locked the door behind him. He put on some gloves and made his way first to the cockpit and then to the living quarters, looking for any hidden weapons that might cause problems if Adilnik got to them. There was one blaster pistol kept near the bed in a drawer of a nightstand, on which numerous holos of people were displayed. Chase's gaze swept the holos briefly out of curiosity, then he took the weapon and stuck it in his belt at the small of his back. Once he was satisfied with his search results, he headed to the refresher.

He stopped outside of it for a moment and listened. He could hear muffled swearing coming from inside. Chase wasn't looking forward to this in the least, and he wished he could have gone to the donri game instead of just using it as an excuse to be gone. His stomach felt like it did when he was flying into a dogfight.

Chase stood to one side completely out of the doorway, briefly cleared his throat and keyed the door open. The swearing and sounds of scuffling stopped abruptly, and then they were replaced by a voice calling, "Hey! Who's there? In here! I need help!"

Satisfied that Adilnik wasn't free and wouldn't come flying through the door to attack him, Chase stepped into sight and leaned casually against the 'fresher doorway. "Captain."

Adilnik was still bound to the pipe, though it was obvious he had been working hard at getting free for quite some time. The captain froze for a moment, and then his glare and voice shot venom at the Imperial. "*You!*" was all he managed.

"That's right," Chase said, outwardly calm.

Curses and expletives that Chase had never even heard before came flying his way from Adilnik. Chase simply stood there in the doorway without reacting and waited. When Adilnik's rant finally wound down, Chase asked, "Are you done?"

That brought a few new swear words into the mix, and Adilnik ended it with, "What the hell are you doing to me?! What do you want, you damn Imp?! Let me go!"

"If you'd just be quiet for a minute, I'd answer your questions." Chase picked at a fingernail with apparent disinterest. His nonreactions seemed to be driving Adilnik crazy, and Chase secretly was enjoying that immensely. When silence had prevailed for a record-breaking five seconds, Chase looked back at the captain. "If you cooperate, this will go very smoothly and easily. I would like that very much, and I hope that's the route you'll decide to take."

"To do what?" Adilnik demanded.

"We're going to be selling your cargo," Chase replied.

Adilnik almost choked. "Like hell! My money wasn't good enough, now you have to take my cargo?!"

"Captain, listen," Chase said in a low, warning voice. "You know what? You were right: I am interested in getting money, but only a certain amount of money. The quicker I get that amount, the quicker I stop collecting. I know from your filed manifest what your cargo is worth, and it more than covers what I need. If you cooperate and get good prices for your items without any problems from the authorities, you'll have to sell fewer things for me to reach my goal, and I'll be out of your way sooner. It also means you have more goods left over for yourself. It's that simple."

"Forget it," Adilnik spat. "You can take your simplicity and go to hell."

“That’s not the cooperation I was hoping for,” Chase said. “This is going to happen whether you like it or not. If you don’t help, you know what it’ll be like then? I try my hand at selling your cargo. I’m not a salesman. I’ll be lousy at it. I won’t get good prices, so I’ll get less per item, so I’ll have to sell more or all of it to get the money I need. It’s really in your own best interests to help me here.”

“How wonderfully considerate of you. I’m touched that you’re looking out for me. And what’s this magical amount you need?” Adilunik grumbled.

Chase added some contingency money for potential unforeseen expenses onto the amount he still needed to raise to pay CodeBlue, and he came up with, “15,535 credits.”

Adilunik stared dumbfounded at him. “That’s well over half my cargo!” he finally said. The subsequent cursing gave a very definite answer of “No.”

Chase sighed in aggravation. “Fine. It’s your loss. I was trying to let you come out of this with at least *something*, but I guess you don’t care. Besides, I can’t trust someone who’s not willing to at least attempt to cooperate with me. I guess *that* means I’ll need to rethink letting you go afterward. I hope the satisfaction you’re getting out of self-righteously fighting me on this is worth the fact that you’ll meet your end while tied up in a smelly refresher. Sounds real dignified to me.” Chase stepped backwards out of the doorway, turned and reached for the button to close and lock the ‘fresher door behind him.

His hand was halfway there when Adilunik urgently called, “Now wait just a damned minute! You’re insane, you know that? I’d like to see how receptive *you* are to cooperating when someone tells you to happily and willingly give them thousands of credits *or else!*”

The pilot paused and turned to face Adilunik again. “I imagine I’d have a similar reaction as you, but I’d also face the reality of the situation and decide that a temper tantrum and some credits were not worth my life,” Chase said. “As it is, you have the opportunity to allow me to pay off a rather important debt. Doesn’t that make you feel all special inside? It should.”

Adilunik snorted. “‘Special’ is not the feeling I have right now,” he said in a low voice. The captain glared frigidly at Chase for a long moment. “You keep changing the rules. Would you trust someone like that in a situation like this?”

“Would I have a choice?” Chase countered.

“Do *I* have one?”

“Not as much as you’d like to think you do.”

Adilunik didn’t say anything for a moment, and then he muttered, “So that’s the deal then? Those are my options? My cooperation in helping you steal my own money, or my life?”

Chase nodded. “There’s the easy way, and there’s the hard way. And of course, both ways require that absolutely no word of this gets to the authorities, now or ever.”

Chase unflinchingly met Adilunik’s glare while it continued for several moments more, and Chase saw him discreetly and unsuccessfully pull one more time at the tape binding his arms together around the pipe. Finally Adilunik muttered through a clenched jaw, “Fine. I’ll get you your money.”

Chase smiled tightly. “Excellent.”

“But if I show up at my original destination afterwards with all or most of my cargo gone, the people I answer to will be asking a whole lot of hard questions.”

“So you had to sell the cargo to pay for the ‘repairs’ to your flight controls. We can even make up a phony bill if you want,” Chase answered. “Now tell me what types of places your cargo can best be sold at on a planet like this so I can fly us to the right city. We only have a few

hours to do this.”

“How long ‘til you get here? The game already started,” Radek said over the comlink frequency.

Chase was sitting off to the side of the cargo hold, trying to keep tabs on Adilink’s negotiations with his latest customer. “Blast it, Radek, I’m sorry,” he said distractedly. “I should have commed earlier. My speeder broke down on the way there, and the tow service speeder just got here. I can’t talk long.”

“Your speeder broke down? What happened to it?”

“Huh?” Chase forced more of his attention back to the comlink conversation. This had to be at least somewhat believable or the whole setup would have been pointless. “Oh, I don’t know. Something with the thrust engine. It’s been acting funny for a while, and I never got around to taking it in like I was supposed to. I’m going to be in big trouble with Lataise if she finds out I never got it fixed before, so do me a huge favor and don’t mention this to her or anyone else, okay? I’m getting it fixed now. If it ever comes up, just say I was with you at the game the whole night.” Chase was glad now that Radek was a bit gullible and did what Chase asked without question. He was the only one who could be an alibi like this.

“Do you need me to come get you? I will.”

“No, no, I’m covered. Just enjoy the game.”

There was a pause, and then Radek asked, “Chase, what’s going on?”

Chase hadn’t expected that. He hoped Radek wasn’t asking what it sounded like he was asking, so Chase tried to play innocent. “I’m getting my speeder fixed. And I’m running short on ti—”

“That’s not what I meant,” Radek interrupted. “You’ve seemed to go in stress waves for the last couple months, and it was okay for the last few weeks, but from yesterday and now this it looks like you’re cresting again. You’re being weird.”

“I’m not being weird.”

“Yes, you are. You’re acting all weird, especially...well, especially yesterday. This evening was less weird but still weird. What’s going on?”

“You’re so wonderfully articulate, you know that?”

For once Chase’s attempt at redirecting the conversation didn’t work. “Come on, Chase. I mean it.”

Chase silently cursed. “Nothing’s going on, okay? It’s just a little stressful with the baby preparations.”

“So you try to set up something like seeing a game in Corvallis which takes more time and adds more stress?” Radek asked. “That makes no sense. It’s downright dumb, and you’re smarter than that.”

Chase’s patience was wearing thin. “Well, I’m ever so sorry that my misfortunes and my life are not meeting with your approval! You think I wanted all this stuff to happen tonight that prevented me from going and getting away from everything here for one little evening?”

“But all that stuff that happened doesn’t sound like it should’ve,” Radek replied. He didn’t sound happy. “You never forget about speeder maintenance. You never run hours late. I’m not really buying what you’re telling me, and that makes me think you just wanted me out of the

way so you dumped me somewhere you know I didn't want to go to in the first place.”

“Now you're the one who's being stupid.” Chase belatedly realized that line would have been easier to swallow if he hadn't said it so sharply. He should have said it more lightly as if he was just teasing, but this conversation was going on for much longer than it should have been and was venturing into areas it shouldn't have gone near. He had to get control of it back. “We can talk about this later if you're so desperate to. Now I've got to go.”

Radek's reply was immediate and stern. “No, just wait a second. Stop snapping at me, and stop being a jerk about this. Damn it, Chase, I'm your wingman, and I'm getting worried about you. I can help with stuff if you want.”

It looked like Adilnik was finishing up the latest sale. If he noticed Chase's attention was divided by the comlink, the captain could exploit that with very bad consequences. Chase just barely managed to clamp down in time on the reflexive response that Radek calling someone a jerk was like a Hutt calling a bantha fat, and instead he said, “Listen, you can help me the most by minding your own business. I'm fine, so save your worrying.”

A new idea popped into Chase's head, one that would be perfect for defusing this situation and bringing it to a close. That hope even allowed him to lighten his voice while he explained his idea to Radek. “Oh, wait, I know. I'll finish up my report on your ship inspection progress tomorrow and give it to the commander with a lot of good words for you. Will that help prove nothing's wrong?” Chase was just about done with it anyway, and he'd made it quite clear in the report that Radek was doing an excellent job with the inspections and was more than ready to handle them on his own. If Chase got the rest of his needed money tonight, he could stop doing all the inspections now and wrap up this part of Radek's training.

The enthusiasm Chase was expecting from Radek never came. All that did come was a few seconds of silence and then a sulking voice saying, “So you're not passing me because I did good, but just as a bribe for me to shut up now and stop asking about everything?”

That threw Chase more than he liked to admit. “What? No, that's not it at all. I've already got most of it written, and it—”

“Whatever. Stow it.” Radek closed the comlink frequency.

Chase blinked, then he closed his end of the frequency as well and put the conversation out of his mind. It was over, and that was all that mattered. So what if Radek was mad at him? He had more important things to deal with now.

“Here.” Adilnik shoved the last credit chip at Chase when they arrived back in Legis Bay. “15,535 damn credits. That's what you needed. You have it.”

Chase took it, inspected it and then put it securely in his pocket along with the rest of the credit chips from that night. “Perfect. See, that wasn't so bad.”

Adilnik sullenly looked around his half-empty cargo hold where they were standing alone. “Speak for yourself,” he grumbled.

“Well, thank you for your help,” Chase said, half sincerely and half to get under Adilnik's skin. “It's late, and I should let you be on your way now.”

He walked back to the ship's outer door with Adilnik stalking along behind. Just before he reached the exit, Chase paused, pretending to be deep in thought. “Although...”

Adilnik looked darkly at the pilot. “Although what?”

“Although I’m a bit concerned that you won’t keep this quiet,” Chase said with a shrug. “So while you were busy selling, I was thinking of what to do about that.”

He reached back to where he had stuck the blaster in his belt earlier. Chase saw Adilnik’s eyes go wide, and then they defiantly narrowed to tiny slits.

“You said you’d let me go if I got you your kriffin’ money!” Adilnik all but shouted. “I knew you’d change the rules again!”

Chase shook his head. “I’m not changing the rules. What, do you think I’m going to shoot you?” He brought his hand forward again, and it held only the power pack from the blaster. “No, no. I’m not going to do that. Your blaster is in a storage locker on the side of the cargo hold.” The time lock was set for thirty minutes; he’d be long gone by the time it opened, and having to reload it would give Chase even more time to put distance between him and the captain.

Now that he had Adilnik’s full attention, Chase pocketed the power pack and made sure he was a few steps out of reach. “So don’t worry, you can go back home to your wife now. Actually, I wanted to compliment you on your lovely wife. I saw the holos of her in your living quarters.”

Adilnik processed those words for a long moment. Chase shrugged again with fake amicability and added, “I’m hoping I’ll never see you again in my life, and I’m sure you feel the same way about me. But I’ve got to say, if word of any of this ever gets to the authorities or anyone else whatsoever, it’ll be extremely simple for me to find out where you are by using any of the countless resources at my disposal. Then I’d have to come pay you a visit, and I’d be sure to bring a special gift just for your wife too.” He patted the pocket holding the blaster’s power pack. “Understand?”

For once there was no swearing, no cussing, no outraged threats from the captain, only a red face and an extremely shaken look. Chase fought the urge to smirk. Adilnik had demanded to know earlier if their reactions to being powerless in a situation would be the same, and now he had gotten his answer. Chase knew the only thing in the galaxy that would guarantee his own complete and utter obedience would be a threat against Lataise or his child, and just like he’d figured, it was the same for Adilnik and his family.

Chase gave a small, mock-helpless sigh before Adilnik could say anything, and then the Imperial said, “You really should have just paid that 35 credit certification fee, Captain.” He opened the door and slipped out.

Chapter Twelve

The comm frequencies were silent yet again. On one hand, Chase was enjoying the reprieve from Radek's nonstop chatter. On the other hand, there was no distraction to help Chase avoid thinking about the void of space outside his cockpit. Plus, he didn't like the constant reminder that something was wrong. He'd had enough of that in the last sixteen weeks to last him the rest of his life.

Chase received landing clearance at the completion of their system patrol, and as they headed home in their TIEs he switched to the private frequency he shared with his wingman. "It's been a week, Four. Will you get over it already? I told you days ago that what I said about your inspection training report came out wrong and I never intended it like you took it."

Radek snorted. "You think that's all this is about?" he asked. "It's not. You've made it pretty clear that I'm not worth your time, so I'll be a *professional* like you're always telling me to be and suck it up and do my job with you like I have to. Beyond that, though, you don't have to worry about me bothering you."

"What? This breaks even your record for overreacting," Chase said. "After all those ship inspections we did so you could learn how to do it, how have I made you think you're not worth my time? That's absurd."

"Let's see..." Even over the comm, Chase could pick up the sarcasm in Radek's pretend-deep-thought voice. "For starters, you sure took your sweet time pointing that blaster somewhere else even after I told you it was me."

"Can we talk about that when we're *not* on an official, recorded frequency?" Chase interrupted. He hoped he hid the nervousness in his voice well enough.

"Fine, since we're doing everything else your way anyway," Radek grumbled. "Oh, and have I mentioned how much I didn't appreciate being tricked and left alone for that game in Corvallis when you *knew* I wasn't comfortable going there in the first place?"

"Only about a dozen times," Chase replied, "and I've apologized a dozen times. For all the snow in a blizzard, what can I say to convince you I didn't try to trick you and I didn't mean for any of that to happen?"

Radek ignored the question and instead said, "There could have been an anti-Imperial flare-up down there, and I would have been caught in the middle of it, maybe even targeted. That's exactly why the commander doesn't want us down there, and why I didn't want to go. So thank you *so* very much for putting me in that potential situation."

"You're a fighter pilot, Four. If you're that afraid of getting into a little scuffle, then maybe you should find a new occupation."

"Like you're one to talk, Mr. Worried-for-His-Wife-and-Future-Kid."

"What?" Chase said sharply. "When did I ever say anything like that?"

"You didn't need to say it."

The pilots were interrupted by their landing procedures. Chase was none too happy while he finished up with his crew chief; he was upset at being that transparent and angry with Radek for picking up on it. Chase used to have more control than that, and he needed it so he could stay *in* control. If he wasn't in control, things fell apart and endangered him and his family.

Radek finished with his fighter first and approached Chase just as he was wrapping things up. "But you know what, Chase?" Radek said, picking up where he'd left off as if there had been no interruption. He had the same combined sulking and angry look on his face that had been so

prevalent during the last week.

Chase quickly grabbed Radek's arm and pulled him out of earshot of the tech crews, then he gave a short, aggravated sigh. With any luck Radek's bad ear wouldn't pick it up. "What, Radek?" His voice was as clipped as his sigh. Chase was getting very tired of this conversation very fast.

"I could've lived with all that," came Radek's answer. "Really, I could've. But what really bothers me is that you don't even see me as your wingman. It's all too obvious there's something wrong or something unusual going on, and instead of letting me help you're viewing me as an obstacle to get around. You're not even giving me a chance to try. So—wait, what was that? You're asking how I read this? Oh, no problem, I'll tell you," he said sardonically. "It means the perception of us being wingmen had only gone one way, and in your mind we're just two people who happen to fly together. You don't trust me. And if you don't trust me with whatever this is, you won't trust me with something bigger like watching your back in a dogfight. Which means we're useless to each other."

"Oh, for—that's ridiculous. Just because we're wingmen, it doesn't mean that I need to share every little detail of my life with you, and just because I don't do that it doesn't mean I don't trust you."

"That's not what it means from where I'm standing," Radek replied.

Chase paused a moment. "Wait, what?" he asked in confusion. Too many meanings and non-meanings were being thrown around.

"I don't agree with you," Radek clarified.

"Why are you making such a big deal out of two little things that happened?" Chase asked, exasperated. First Lataise, now Radek. This was getting old.

"Because it's not just two little things. You've been like this for over two months now. Everything seems to trace back to the timeframe of when we were in combat."

"Two months, and you're yelling at *me* for not speaking up and asking for help with this problem you seem to think I have?" Chase asked plainly. "I sure haven't heard you bring it up before now, so why am I getting blamed for the entire amount of time?"

"Because I always wrote off the signs to something else before. Nothing really came together until the blaster stuff and Corvallis, and that's when I started really thinking about it all. I had a lot of time to do that at the game before I left." Radek hesitated before looking down and continuing in a self-conscious mumble, "The more I thought about it, the more I realized that things seemed fine between us before that fight where you got hurt. Well, we both did, but you were the one who was stranded. I'm sorry if I screwed up there, okay? I did all I could think of at the time to help you, but I guess it wasn't enough. Maybe I'm the one who ruined it all because of that, but you haven't exactly been trying to set this right either. If you can't stand me that much after what happened, then you should've requested a different wingman or something to get me out of your way instead of trying to get back at me. Now I've got to go do my paperwork for this patrol."

Radek immediately spun before Chase had a chance to say anything, and he quickly walked toward the locker room. Chase saw some color beginning to flush Radek's eartips, and Radek slammed his helmet against the locker room doorway as he walked through it. The echo rang throughout the landing bay and made some of the nearby techs jump.

Chase could only stand there for a minute and stare after Radek. He had never, ever heard Radek accept so much responsibility for something that wasn't a success, and apologies from

Radek were almost as rare and were never words he enjoyed saying. Chase felt a bit bad that Radek thought he was getting blamed for what happened in that fight, but that feeling was quickly erased by Chase's realization that he could work with this very easily. All he had to do was convince Radek it was the Rebels that Chase was mad at, not him, and maybe he could throw in some lines about how he shouldn't have been taking his anger out on Radek. That excuse sounded sufficiently plausible, and Radek would be back to his old annoying self in a heartbeat. Then Chase wouldn't have to worry about Radek's suspicions anymore; it would be just like what he had done with Lataise.

Chase began walking toward the locker room himself, quickly working out the best way to start the blame shifting toward the Rebels, which was more true than most of the things he'd told people recently. That would make it easier.

Before he got there, the Fireburners' Executive Officer came out. Lieutenant Commander Jahreiss noticed Chase and began walking toward him.

Chase stopped when Jahreiss stepped up to him. "Good afternoon, sir," Chase said.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant," Jahreiss replied. "Do you have a few minutes?"

It was merely a matter of courtesy for senior officers to even ask that, since there was only one acceptable answer from the subordinate. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Go ahead and get out of your flight equipment, put your sidearm in its locker, and then report to my office immediately. I need to talk to you."

Chase had never liked it when a superior said those six words, and the dread in the pit of his stomach was much more intense this time. "Yes, sir."

Chase barely even noticed how much he was banging on the computer console's keypad as he typed. All he knew was that as livid as he was, banging on it seemed both appropriate and psychologically helpful.

At the same time he was silently trying out some of the new swear words he had learned from Adilnik. It also seemed appropriate that they were directed at and referencing the teacher.

The talk with Jahreiss hadn't gone well. It was too out-of-the-blue and too pointed to be idle chitchat. Jahreiss never chitchatted anyway. He knew enough to be suspicious that something was up with Chase, and he'd been digging for information and details the entire time. Chase knew he'd been damned lucky Jahreiss hadn't grounded him or suspended him until a further evaluation was completed, but Chase figured he just barely managed to explain enough of his so-called odd behavior away by using the excuse of baby preparation stress at home.

If Jahreiss had had anything hard on Chase, more serious action would have already been taken, so Chase knew the XO didn't have enough information yet to do that. He just had to prevent him from getting enough information, which partly meant Chase would need his Perfect Behavior back again until this blew over. He couldn't give his superiors any additional reasons to think he was doing something he shouldn't be.

Jahreiss didn't say if he had a source of information that prompted this talk, but he didn't have to. Chase knew whom it had to have been: Adilnik had ratted on him. The captain had probably kept details vague enough so nothing could be traced back solely to him based on what was said, but honestly, did Adilnik think he wouldn't be suspected after all that had happened? Chase couldn't believe Adilnik had been so stupid to take that chance and had actually gone

through with his self-righteous threats of reporting Chase for his actions.

And that meant...

Chase finally tracked down Adilunik's personal information in one of the Imperial databases tied to the Corporate Sector Authority ship records. He scribbled down Adilunik's home address on a datapad, closed it all down and then headed home. He obviously had lost control of Adilunik, and serious problems were coming his way. He had to get control back.

Chase quickly planned things out on his way home. He'd stop to change clothes, then head to the spaceport. Lataise would be annoyed that he was running out this evening with no warning, but that didn't matter now. He had to take care of Adilunik tonight, right away, before things got worse. Before Adilunik said more. Before Adilunik knew he was coming. Before Adilunik fled with his wife. It had to be done now.

Thinking about what he would have to do in a mere couple hours made Chase feel a bit queasy, but he stubbornly pushed the feeling down. This was no different than a dogfight. He was trained for combat. He had killed people before. It was his job, his duty, and he would do it again one way or another.

Chase arrived at his house and walked in through the front door. He had hoped to slip into the bedroom unnoticed, but unfortunately Lataise was right there in the living room and saw him enter.

"Hi, Chase." She smiled warmly at him, and her eyes sparkled happily as she came over and kissed him. Even with the growing bulge on her belly, she looked beautiful. Chase just stared at her for a moment, feeling the queasiness return and take the place of his anger.

Lataise's smile faded to a look of concern. "You okay? You look upset."

"Yeah, uh..." Chase faltered. He was drawing a complete blank on any excuse to leave the house. "I just...I just had a rough day. The XO had a little talking-to with me." He quickly turned and went into the bedroom to change.

Lataise followed him. "What happened? Is everything all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, things are fine. I just made a dumb mistake with something and he wasn't too happy." Chase pulled on his civilian clothes and boots. "It just made for a lousy day. Um... Some of the guys offered to take me down to Interdictor's for a few glasses of Coruscant Cooler. We might watch the game there too if it's not too crowded. I really need to de-stress a little. I'll be back in a while, okay?"

"Well...okay. If you're sure you're all right."

Chase nodded in reply. Lataise hugged him and said, "We'll talk about it later tonight if you want another sympathetic ear. I've been pretty tired today, so if I'm taking a nap when you get home then wake me up. I know you guys usually eat supper there too, but we can have dessert when you get back."

She let him go, and suddenly Chase was unimpeded, free to go kill another man's wife. His forced smile felt fake even on the inside, and he managed to say, "Thanks. See you tonight," before he walked out the front door to the speeder. He got in and slowly drove off.

As the distance to Legis Bay Spaceport decreased, so did his speed. The only thing increasing was Chase's queasiness, and that gradually built up to nausea. When the spaceport came into sight, he had to pull over to the side of the road to calm down.

From the speeder, Chase watched the different ships rising up from the spaceport and disappearing into the clouds above. That's where he would be before too long. One of those ships would take him on the first part of his journey to the Corporate Sector planet Ession, where

said, “If you leave us alone, I’ll give you the name and information of someone I know in the Rebellion. You’re an Imp—you must want that! You have to!”

Chase’s ears perked up. He had only been intending to scare Adilnik into silence with this call, but things were getting better than he’d ever imagined. “You have a Rebel contact?”

“Yes, I do. It’s not me—I’m not a Rebel—but I know one.”

Chase processed that for a minute and slowly began to smile. “Well then, that changes things. Give me this information, don’t do anything to tip the Rebel off, and be prepared for a possible request in the future to make contact with him, and we’ll call it even.”

Chase copied down the information on a datapad, ended the conversation with Adilnik and lightly hopped into the speeder as if a huge weight had been lifted from him. He felt more relaxed, more stress-free than he had in a long time.

Now to head home to where his wife was waiting for him.

Chapter Thirteen

Early morning light was filtering in through the curtains of the bedroom when Chase finished putting on his naval uniform. He saw that Lataise still hadn't gotten out of bed, so he lay next to her on his side on top of the covers.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" he asked while his hand sought out hers and gently clasped it. "I can postpone the trip if you want."

"I'll be fine," Lataise said. She was now entering her final trimester and was definitely looking the part. "I'm just going to try to get some more sleep. I'll probably still be here in bed when you get back if my back pain doesn't ease up."

Chase nodded. She'd been up half the night because the baby wouldn't stop kicking, and as a result he'd been awake too. He was more accustomed to a lack of sleep than she was, though. "I commed your office already and told them you wouldn't be in today. Do you want anything for your back before I go?"

"No, the heating pad from last night is still helping."

"All right. Well, I'll get you some water and put it on the nightstand so it's handy."

"Thanks."

Chase got up and headed into the kitchen. "Some water" became "a pitcher of juice," which then became "muja fruit and juice," which in turn became "muja fruit salad, juice, parrolls and the holonovel Lataise was reading." Chase kept adding things at his whim, fueled by an exceptionally good mood that even the lack of sleep couldn't dampen. He would have been too excited to sleep last night even if Lataise hadn't kept him up. Today was the day. Two months had culminated into this one extra special occasion when he had scheduled a meeting with CodeBlue to pick up the final version of the computer virus he had ordered.

The only thing that could have made it all even better was if Lataise was feeling well, and that was the only reason he wasn't whistling from happiness as he brought Lataise's breakfast into the bedroom. If she hadn't felt so bad, he would have tried to pull her into a few dance steps.

When she saw the tray he was carrying, her eyes widened. Chase smiled at her and set it down on the nightstand within easy reach. "Water wasn't good enough," he simply said.

Lataise hooked her arm around his neck and pulled him down until he was leaning over her and their foreheads met. "You," she said lovingly, drawing it out just a little.

She had never once had to say more than that for Chase to understand what she meant. "It's the least I could do," he replied.

Lataise's voice was light. "I wouldn't mind some more of this type of service. Hurry back, will ya?"

"This won't take long," Chase said. "Just checking on a few things for the squadron."

"I thought that was the kind of thing they used the Junior Grades for," Lataise teased.

The newly-minted full lieutenant smiled at her again. After selling Adilnik's cargo, Chase had no longer needed to collect money or do anything unusual while on duty. Over the last few weeks, all of his energies during his duty hours had gone toward patching things up with Radek and being and acting as squeaky clean as possible to show his superiors that he was the same old trustworthy, reliable, obedient, by-the-book Chase. It must have helped at some level because that behavior plus all the "practice" with Radek to teach him boarding and inspection procedures had been the final things needed to convince Commander Wiantance that everything was fine and that Chase deserved a promotion. If he only knew. "They figured I got used to it

during my JG days. Now, if you're sure you'll be all right, I'll see you later today. My ride will be here soon."

Lataise unhooked her arm, but before straightening up Chase put a hand on her growing belly and affectionately kissed it, and he grinned when he felt a small kick in return through the thin blanket. Then he kissed Lataise, exchanged goodbyes with her and walked out of the bedroom.

He ducked into the refresher, quickly changed into some civilian clothes and put his uniform in a small duffle bag that he slung over his shoulder. He wished he could have just left it at the house, but he didn't want Lataise to accidentally stumble across it while he was gone.

Chase went out the front door, and within seconds Radek's speeder pulled into the driveway. "Ready to go?" Radek asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for the ride," Chase said as he climbed in. Things weren't back to normal between the two wingmen quite yet, but they were slowly improving, and Chase was trying his best to assist that improvement. "Lataise is having a rough time of things now, and I didn't want to ask her to drive me to the spaceport."

"No problem," Radek said. "It'll be a slow day for me with you on leave anyway. You can repay me by bringing me back something good from wherever you're going. I forgot where you told me. Okay? Some good local wine or something like that."

"Which will cost more than a taxi to the spaceport would have?" Chase remarked.

"Yeah, but you won't get this kind of personal, courteous service from a speeder taxi. Right? Right?" Radek gave a small smirk and pulled sharply into the street. Chase always forgot until it was too late that Radek drove his speeder like it was a TIE Fighter in a dogfight. He gripped the seat.

"Actually, this reminds me quite a bit of some taxi rides I've taken," Chase said. His mother in particular drove like this.

Radek's smirk got bigger. "We're fine. No one gets near me when I drive my speeder this way because they try to avoid me and give me lots of room. It's actually safer."

Chase made a mental note to never allow Radek to drive his child anywhere. He'd already been crossed off the babysitting list long ago.

It didn't take long for Radek to change the subject. "What's it feel like to be a full-fledged lieutenant?"

It was wonderful. "It's not much different than being a JG. Some different expectations, though, and I'm still getting used to those." Chase shrugged a bit.

"I'm happy you got it. I know you've been trying for it for a long time," Radek replied. "And I'm glad that...I didn't mess it up for you."

"We've been over this, Radek," Chase said as patiently as he could. "You didn't mess up in that fight."

"That's—um—that's not what I meant." Radek kept his eyes fixed squarely on the road ahead of them. "Back when we had our big problem and I was really steamed at you, I think I complained about it to one person too many, and Jahreiss got wind of it."

Chase blinked. "That was you?"

"What was me?"

"You're the reason he sat me down for a grilling one day?"

"He did? Oh. Um, oops. I never meant for it to get up that high, Chase. It's not like I went in and made a formal complaint about you or anything. I wouldn't have done that, not even then.

But it didn't affect your promotion, and that's good. That's all that matters."

Chase processed that information in silence for a few moments, then Radek hurriedly spoke up again, steering the conversation a different way. "So when's your promotion party?" Radek asked. "You haven't set anything up yet. You're not going to gyp the rest of us on that, are you? You know we demand a party."

With an effort, Chase tried to put Radek's admission out of his mind. It wouldn't change anything now, and thank all that was good in the galaxy that he hadn't gone through with his initial course of action. "Right, I just haven't had much of a chance to set anything up for it yet," Chase said.

Chase saw Radek open his mouth, hesitate without saying anything, close his mouth and then look sidelong at Chase to gauge his mood. Chase raised an eyebrow questioningly. This type of indecisive action from Radek had been happening ever since their argument a few weeks back.

"I could maybe put some parts of it together if you want," Radek ventured slowly.

Chase grinned a bit. "That would help me out a lot. Thanks."

Radek grinned more strongly in reply and went back to risking both their lives in bordering-on-illegal traffic maneuvers. Chase was extremely glad to finally step out of the speeder at the Legis Bay Spaceport, and Radek drove off.

Before entering the spaceport, Chase looked up at all the ships ascending and piercing the grey clouds above. That's where he would be very soon, and the mere thought caused him to smile.

He'd been back to meet with CodeBlue one other time for an in-progress demonstration, and after he'd gotten over his initial relief that the alien was actually doing the work and hadn't just run off with the down payment, Chase had been duly impressed at the work done so far. Now, though, now was the time that had dichotomously come much too fast and couldn't come fast enough.

Chase patted the pocket holding the datacard with the account information for the final payment, then he walked into the spaceport to put his duffle bag in a locker and find the transport that matched his ticket to Mondder on Etti IV.

He couldn't wait.

"You can tell me how wonderfully skilled I am. I won't mind," CodeBlue said.

For the fourteenth time, Chase entered another hyperspace destination on the setup's control panel and eagerly watched the results. Two different R2 processors were hooked up to the control panel. One of them was marked "virus" and the other was designated "clean". Each in turn was hooked up to its own simulated Incom navigational computer that had a data display added to it.

The R2 processors whirred and blinked. The one with the virus sent data to the navcomp data display that did not match 100% with the data output for the same destination from the uninfected processor. It was the second time it had done so; the other twelve results had matched exactly. However, Chase needed that delay: a virus that acted too fast would wipe out all the carriers before it could spread. CodeBlue had said that when the virus program started up, it would choose a random number between one and ten. When the number of hyperspace calculations done by the astromech after the program's initiation reached the value of that stored

random number, the next hyperspace calculation would then be erroneous. After that error occurred the virus program would reset, and it would begin all over again, assuming the astromech hadn't been destroyed as a result of the last error.

"It looks perfect," the pilot said.

"Perfect. I like that. It fits. You're too kind, Needed, too kind."

"And this cannot be erased with a memory wipe, right?"

CodeBlue used all four of his arms to pick up a datapad from the dirty cellar's workbench and simultaneously plug it in to another port on the control panel, then he handed the datapad to Chase. "You know some reformatting commands, don't you? Try to reformat it, erase it, anything you can think of. It's etched in stone. I was quite proud of myself for that."

Chase did indeed know some reformatting commands, but CodeBlue was right: the virus stayed put each time, and the R2 processor remained infected. Chase even used the datapad to run a diagnostic on the processor, and that came back with a clean bill of health. He ran the simulation several more times until he got the virus's incorrect output again to make sure it was actually still infected.

"It spreads by comm frequencies, both short-range and long-range," CodeBlue said. "The long-range ones work by riding on a subchannel of the starfighter's long-range comm. I don't know how much it'll spread, but that's all I could get unless you want me to keep working on it. I started tinkering with capital ship subchannels in case the astromech ever plugs into a capship or a base itself, but I can't guarantee that'll work."

Chase handed the datapad back to CodeBlue and said, "I hate to stroke your ego, but I'm extremely pleased with the program. It's exactly what I was looking for."

"Wonderful! And just think, all this can be yours for another 18,000 credits," CodeBlue replied.

They exchanged payment and product. Chase held the datacard containing the virus in his hand and looked at it almost reverently. This was it. It looked so simple, so benign, but it was well worth every milligram of trouble he'd gotten into—and almost gotten into—in the last two months. This humble little datacard was going to do so much good for the galaxy. At last, he had a chance of keeping his family safe.

When he looked up, he saw CodeBlue gazing at his new account balance in almost the same way.

Now it was time to let this humble little datacard prove its potential to the galaxy. Chase cocked his head a bit and said, "Let me ask you something."

CodeBlue looked back at him. "As long as I can give my complete and unbiased opinion in return."

"How easy is it to buy used but usable R2's and R5's here?"

CodeBlue snorted. "Try walking into any used parts store and *not* finding one."

"Good, good. Listen, I need to get this virus out where it can actually be useful. If I can buy some astromechs today, would you be willing to install the first viruses in them and then do another small job?"

The blue alien shrugged his upper arms. "I'll be bored this evening without your program to work on. So sure. I can wait until tomorrow to rebuild my social life."

Chase had never before bought a “gift” for the Rebels. He knew it was anything but that, but it still felt odd and almost treasonous.

He sat in the workbench chair down in the cellar and watched as CodeBlue finished verifying the virus in the tenth and final astromech Chase had purchased. CodeBlue had only loaded the virus program into four of them, and he had infected the other six by way of communication frequencies from the first four to demonstrate that feature. Afterwards, every droid was tested and found to be positively infected.

“Done, done and done,” CodeBlue announced. “And I’ve turned them all off so they don’t start messing with the droids here on planet and causing problems. Now what’s this other little job you had in mind?”

“Oh, it’s simple, really, especially for you. I need a secure Holonet account made.”

CodeBlue’s ears sagged. “That’s way too simple. There’s no challenge in that. I’d expected better from you.”

“No challenge, but there’s money.”

The Pho Ph’eahian pricked his ears up at those words. “I’m listening.”

Chase figured if he could get CodeBlue in on this, he wouldn’t have to involve Adilink again, and that was a very welcome prospect. “Now, I could make a so-called secure account myself, but I really need this one to be bomb-proof. It has to be totally untraceable to you and me,” Chase said. If anyone managed to connect Chase to this part of the plan, the consequences would be a lot worse than Kessel: he’d likely be executed for treason. “The account just has to be used to send a couple messages to a certain Rebel contact so he can pick up this anonymous-for-fear-of-being-discovered-and-imprisoned gift of ten astromechs for the Rebellion’s cause. Once he does that, we wait a while, say a couple months, to make sure the astromechs get distributed. Then we’ll use the account to contact the Imperials’ anonymous tip collection center and report that person as a Rebel, and we split the reward credits 50/50.” Chase hoped that a high and equal percentage like that should encourage CodeBlue to play on the up-and-up and also keep things quiet and safe. For his part, Chase figured the money he would receive from this plan would be a good nest egg to start for the baby.

He could tell he’d definitely gotten CodeBlue’s attention. “How much do these rewards pay out?” the blue alien asked.

“It could be anywhere from 500 to 5000 credits, depending on how important the captured Rebel is,” Chase replied.

CodeBlue grinned mischievously. “Excellent. You know, Needed, it was so nice doing business with you before that I believe I will do it again.”

Chapter Fourteen

“See? Isn’t she amazing?” Chase Barton said proudly. It was his first day back, and he had been systematically tracking down each Fireburner as they filtered into the briefing room. Lieutenant Panas was his latest victim, and Chase was holding one of dozens of holos of his three-week-old daughter, Cayin, right in front of him so he could see it. “She’s got her mother’s eyes and my nose. She’s strong, too. She’s going to grow up to be a fighter, but she looks so adorable sleeping in her little hat, doesn’t she? She’s perfect.” His life had changed forever, and he couldn’t be happier.

Panas nodded in agreement with the words and then grinned at Chase. “She’s beautiful. Congratulations to you and Lataise. How’s your wife doing?”

“She’s fine, just a little worn out,” Chase replied. “It helped out a lot that I was able to take paternity leave these last few weeks to stay home with her.”

“I’m surprised you made it back in today after that. I figured you’d try to take more time off to be home.”

“Well, I would have, except the in-laws arrived a couple days ago to help out too.” Chase shrugged.

“Ah.” Panas smirked knowingly. “Coming back to work didn’t sound so bad then, did it?”

“It’s not that bad. The house is getting a little small, but Lataise is happy they’re here.”

“That sounded really convincing. So how much sleep does Cayin let you get?”

“Enough. I’m used to it, so I’ve been getting the night shifts with her a lot,” Chase said. He left out the fact that he actually volunteered for the “night shifts”. There was just something about the nighttimes that felt special—holding his daughter, comforting her, protecting her, just the two of them alone while the rest of the house and city were asleep and dark and still. There was nothing to disturb them and burst that perfect, peaceful bubble when Cayin would finally quiet down. The big, dark, cold void of night didn’t seem so big and dark and cold and empty with her there in his arms.

Lataise would kill him if she ever found out Chase had been subtly encouraging Cayin to be nocturnal. He had to stop that practice now anyway since he was returning to duty and had to be able to function during the day.

A few moments later, Commander Wiantance spoke up from the front of the room. “All right, Lieutenant, baby pictures away,” he said mildly. “Let’s get this briefing started.”

“Yes, sir,” Chase replied. He turned off the holodisk, stashed it in a pocket and sat down. Radek sat beside him like he normally did.

Wiantance started off with the usual things: roll call, announcements from Naval Command, announcements from the base command, and the upcoming patrol and maintenance schedules. Chase tried to pay attention and get back up to speed after his absence of the last few weeks, but his new daughter kept invading his thoughts.

...At least until one particular topic snagged Chase’s mind in a tractor beam and wouldn’t let go. “I got some interesting news from Intel regarding the Rebels,” Wiantance stated. “Specifically, their starfighter corps.” Suddenly Chase couldn’t pay attention closely enough. He got the chills and held his breath as the commander continued, “Intel’s sources have been telling them about a strange problem or glitch in a fair number of Rebel starfighters. Whatever it is seems to be affecting the hyperdrive, as some starfighters are either lost for a while or completely

MIA after hyperspace jumps. The unknowns about the causes and therefore how to prevent it are causing quite a stir among the Rebel pilots. Recently some Imperial fleets have reported seeing a change in tactics by the Rebels to avoid having their starfighters jump to lightspeed. It has yet to affect any capital ships as far as we know. They're waiting on more news from their sources. I'll pass along anything else I hear on this interesting development."

Some of the other TIE pilots started to murmur amongst themselves in surprise and curiosity. Any major problems the Rebels had was good news to them.

Chase, however, didn't feel the need to gossip and guess about what was going on. He leaned over with his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands to stifle his sudden gleeful laughter.

A moment later he heard an amazed whisper beside him. "Chase?" Chase pulled his hands down just enough to uncover his eyes, and he looked over at Radek on his right. His wingman was staring at him like Chase had just turned into the Emperor wearing a pink frilly dress. "You're... Are you of all people *laughing*? You? What's going on? What's wrong with you?"

Chase kept his hands folded together over most of his face to hide the huge smile he couldn't wipe from his expression. It was an enormous effort to sound even mostly neutral and natural. "Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

The End

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