

“Turnaround”

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Flight Officer Darin Stanic grabbed an extra tool belt from one of the repair areas in the hangar. None of the mechanics gave the pilot a second glance as he did so; Darin came to the hangar to help with some of the more simple repairs on his X-wing every chance he got. He loved doing it, and his crew chief seemed to welcome the assistance and effort.

Normally he'd be heading to his own X-wing now, but not this time. Now Darin latched the belt around his waist and nonchalantly walked toward one of the other Corona Squadron X-wings. He fought to hide a smile.

He couldn't believe Quiver had talked him into doing this, but his wingman was a persuasive speaker. Or Darin was just gullible. Or both. At the moment, he honestly didn't care.

*“No way. I'm not getting involved in one of your pranks,” Darin had told Quiver earlier.*

*“Come on, Darin! Why not?” Quiver pleaded.*

*“Common sense tells me to stay away.” That was a lesson Darin had learned very quickly.*

*Quiver snorted and rolled his eyes. “Common sense is the anti-fun. Have I taught you nothing? Which would you rather do tonight: look back on everything that happened and say, ‘Well, that was a common, sensible day,’ or say, ‘Well, that was a fun day!’?”*

*“With you involved, an unanticipated third option always seems to bubble up.”*

*“That would fall under the ‘fun’ category. Blast it, come on. Please? I have everything together and planned out, but I don't know how to get it started with Chopper's X-wing. You're good with that mechanical stuff. I need you for this.”*

And there it was: Darin was *needed* for something. After a couple months of floundering around and trying to find his place in the squadron, he at last had a niche to fill, a service to provide, a position where he belonged.

And it felt *wonderful*.

Darin reached the X-wing belonging to his squadmate, Chopper. The snubfighter's tech crew was off at lunch, leaving the fighter alone in the hangar in the midst of preparations for their upcoming mission. That made it easy for Darin to make his way slowly along the fighter's hull until he stopped just forward of the S-foils and engines. While facing the fuselage, he didn't have to worry about hiding his smile anymore. He felt damned good, and this prank would be pretty funny once it was all ready. Everyone in the squadron would get a good laugh out of it, except for probably Chopper.

He located the small access panel on the side of the X-wing. The first step was to remove the panel, which was simple enough. The next step was to do a straightforward rewiring: swap the two wires going to the cockpit's ambient temperature controls. When he was done, a cold setting would bring in hot air and vice versa. Just to be on the safe side, he'd checked the X-wing manuals to verify what wires to adjust. The rest of Quiver's planned prank all hinged on this

simple, benign first step.

Darin's grin faded after he removed the access panel and looked inside the snubfighter. Instead of the two wires he expected to see, there was an entire bundle of wires of different sizes and colors that seemingly went everywhere. He chewed on his lip, then he set the panel down on the deck and narrowed his eyes in determination. Quiver couldn't rewire something if his life depended on it, but Darin could do this. He would. He needed to.

He just had to do it fast before anyone saw him.

Darin unbundled the wires and tried to lay them separate. He didn't know where most of them went, and he couldn't make out the labeling on the connector board where they were all hooked up, but he isolated two that looked like the ones that should lead to the temperature controls. He'd checked beforehand to make sure the cockpit wasn't powered up, and since it wasn't he would have no problems quickly swapping these two wires. He reached in and changed their positions on the connector board.

Darin was connecting the second wire when it buzzed and sparked, stinging his fingertips. He quickly pulled back, more out of surprise than pain, and then he pulled back even more when the connection erupted in a shower of sparks. His stomach plummeted.

That was definitely not supposed to happen.

He breathlessly grabbed a rubber pad from the tool belt and reached in with it to disconnect the wire. Black smoke and the smell of burnt electronics began to trickle out of the open access compartment from somewhere deeper within the X-wing. That was definitely *not* supposed to happen either. Panicked, Darin grabbed at the offending wire but flinched when it defended itself with a fresh shower of sparks. Sheer desperation made him try again, and he pulled the wire out of the connector board, kept the rubber pad around it and let go before it decided to electrocute him.

The black smoke increased, and Darin stumbled back and gaped at it. He didn't know what to do. The panic was paralyzing.

"*DARIN!* What the *hell?!!*" Chopper yelled from somewhere nearby. His voice was a combination of surprise and fury, mostly fury. Darin jumped and whirled around.

The panic was much worse now.

Some techs were running up to the X-wing with special fire extinguishers, and Chopper was striding purposefully toward Darin. Out of everything so far, *this* was the one thing that was *most* not supposed to happen. Darin begged his feet to run, but either the fear or Chopper's livid glare held him in place.

"What the hell are you doing to my fighter?!" Chopper demanded when he got closer. The venom encouraged Darin's feet to move him a few steps backward, but it was too little too late. He was trapped, fenced in on three sides by the X-wing's elongated nose, the S-foils and the laser cannons. Before then, Darin had never seen a starfighter assist its pilot in capturing its tormentor. Chopper grabbed the front of Darin's uniform near his collar and used the younger pilot's backwards momentum to spin Darin around off-balance and shove him into the side of the X-wing.

"Well?! Care to explain why my X-wing is *smoking* now?!" Chopper said, fuming as much as his X-wing. He kept Darin's back pinned hard against the starfighter.

Darin finally found his voice. "Sir, please! I swear I wasn't doing anything! It was just supposed to be a simple little prank--"

"A *prank?!!*" Chopper's hold on Darin's uniform tightened, and then the lieutenant

pointed at his X-wing's open maintenance compartment. The techs had thankfully stopped the smoke coming from it and were now dealing with the wiring and power. The nasty smell was still lingering. "You think this is funny? Do I look like I'm laughing?!"

"No, sir! Please, I—all I was doing was swapping the cockpit temp controls! I swear! But there were more wires than I expected and I was sure I had the right ones but it—"

"All those wires were from a jury-rigged field repair the techs had to do to keep my fighter working! You know how long it took them to reroute all that stuff because we didn't have the proper spare parts? I can only imagine what a box you shorted out in there!"

Darin swallowed hard. He could tell there was no color left in his face. "I'm sorry, sir, I really am! I honestly didn't mean—"

"Sorry'." Chopper spit the word back at him. "Is 'sorry' going to undo what you did? Is 'sorry' going to fix my fighter? I don't think so." His free hand balled into a fist, and his voice lowered. "But I can guarantee that you'll be feeling really sorry in a minute."

Darin desperately tried to squirm out of Chopper's grip, but luckily whatever Chopper had in mind was pre-empted by one word coming from off to his side. "Lieutenant?"

Chopper shot Darin an ice-cold glare to silently promise that this wasn't over, then he forced his fist open and looked over his shoulder. "Sir?"

Commander Mackin was scrutinizing them both as he walked up. "What's all the commotion about?"

Chopper gave a derisive snort. "Why don't you ask the rookie here, sir?" he said stonily. He roughly pulled Darin away from the X-wing and gave him a shove toward Mackin.

Darin stumbled to a stop in front of their commanding officer. He looked up with wide green eyes at Mackin, who was waiting expectantly for some sort of answer.

This wasn't supposed to happen either.

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Darin felt like he'd just been punched in the gut. It was all he could do to keep his voice from squeaking or wavering as he stood in the commander's office and looked between the commander and executive officer in shock. "You're grounding me, sir?"

Commander Mackin crossed his arms. "Did I stutter? Was I not speaking Basic? Can you not understand Basic?"

Darin took that retort as a "yes." "But...sir..." he stammered, trying his hardest to deny the news. He honestly hadn't meant to do any harm. "This—this wasn't my fault!" If Quiver hadn't talked him into this—

Lieutenant Weas, the Coronas' Executive Officer, spoke up. "Oh really. Who was the one with the tools?"

Darin hesitated. "...Me, sir."

"And who was the one rewiring Chopper's X-wing?" Mackin added.

This wasn't going as planned. "Me. Sir."

"And so whose fault is this?"

Darin looked down, chagrined. "Mine, sir," he mumbled.

The volume of Mackin's voice dropped when he spoke next, and Darin could tell Mack was extremely angry with him. It felt awful, especially on top of everything else. "You *do not* mess with the fighters, *at all*, and this was how we felt we could best make the seriousness of this

infraction sink in. You can't do everything Quiver wants you to do, especially when it has to do with his pranks. I thought you knew better than that by now. What were you thinking? Do you have no common sense?"

Darin's cheeks burned, and he fought back a frustrated answer to the rhetorical question. Blasted Option Three.

"Really, this consequence shouldn't be surprising," Weas said. "You can't go on the mission tomorrow with no ship to fly. You're grounded by default as well as by intent."

Confusion tempered the humiliation. "But sir, I have a ship to fly. There's nothing wrong with my X-wing."

"You're right, there's nothing wrong with it," Weas agreed, "which is why Chopper will be flying it since you took his fighter out of commission for a few days. Congratulations, Flight Officer. You took an underpowered squadron and forced them to become even more short-handed. Something to consider before you do something like this again. But hey, no worries, right? Because we *always* outnumber the opposition, don't we? Losing an available fighter for no reason won't hurt the rest of the squadron or put everyone else in added danger *whatsoever*."

Darin winced at the bite in the words. It was even worse knowing they were true. Even if he wasn't very experienced yet, the squadron needed him out there on the mission along with Chopper, and he was letting his squadmates down by virtue of his own stupidity and desire to be included.

He wondered how much longer it would be before his superiors were done chewing him out so he could go find a hole to climb into.

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Darin stood in the hangar and forlornly watched the Coronas lift up and leave the Mon Calamari Cruiser. The Y-wings of Quake Squadron followed them.

Just like that they were gone. Heading to their mission. Without him. And he couldn't do a damned thing about it. What if someone got injured? What if someone got killed? What if it happened because he wasn't there to help?

Oh, who was he kidding? He was just the rookie. They didn't need him.

Darin's stomach was twisting in too many directions to count. The hangar was now conspicuously empty, and he felt the familiar pangs of loneliness pricking at his gut, pangs that his slowly growing friendships with his squadmates had begun to keep at bay.

When the last starfighter was out of sight beyond the hangar's magcon field, Darin turned back to Chopper's X-wing where he'd been ordered to help repair the damage he had caused. The techs performing the task with him were obviously unhappy with the pilot, but Darin silently took the poor treatment and never once tried to defend himself. He deserved it, after all. He'd thrown himself into the work to try to atone for the problems he'd caused.

About an hour later, the techs began running a few diagnostic tests to verify the functionality of the latest repairs made to the damage. With nothing for him to do during the twenty minutes the tests would be running, Darin took a break and began strolling around the hangar. It was strangely empty without the two squadrons, and he'd never been here before at such a time to see it like this. Most of the starfighter tech crews looked to be taking some well-deserved time off or were over on the other end of the cavernous hangar assisting with the small fleet of transports.

Darin stopped and watched as a small shuttlecraft came through the magcon field and landed. He'd never seen it before, but after getting closer he saw from the identification markings that it was the craft used by their fleet's Gallofree Medium Transport *Providence* to ferry supplies and material here to the Mon Cal Cruiser. Darin remembered one time when one of the Y-wings had needed a new harmonic vibration damper before its next flight and there hadn't been any spares here. The local logistics group had enlisted the aid of the larger logistics group aboard *Providence* to find one somewhere in a hurry. The large group had even been given some additional funds out of the local group's limited amount to help the effort since it had been such a critically needed piece of hardware. Even though giving up that extra funding had meant they couldn't afford to buy some other parts they had needed, there had been a lot of happy pilots and tech crews the day the *Providence* group scrounged a damper unit up from somewhere.

If only they'd been able to do the same for the part Chopper's X-wing needed so the jury-rigged repair wouldn't be necessary. Darin considered for a moment. Maybe he could go ask, informally, just in case they had such a unit lying around and if the logistics group here had never contacted the *Providence* group about it. It couldn't hurt. He shrugged to himself and walked toward the shuttlecraft.

Two men from the shuttlecraft unloaded a couple crates and stacked them for in-processing, then they headed over to the subhangar where some of the X-wing repair parts were kept. Darin changed his course to follow them. They looked around a bit, stopped at the bottom of the large shelving units holding the boxes containing spare parts, and glanced over the box labels.

When he got within earshot, the pilot heard one of the men say to the other, "This one has a TRBF of ten days for one of the X-wings." He was pointing to a small box containing a spare part for the snubfighter, though Darin didn't know what specific part it was. He did know that TRBF referred to "time remaining before failure", an estimate of how long until a given part on a starfighter would need to be replaced based on its history. The man continued speaking in a voice that was hard for Darin to hear; if the hangar had been as full and busy as it normally was, the words would have been lost in the din. "They'll need it soon, and it's the only one they have. High turnaround time to repair one, so it'll be faster to replace it. It's a good one to take."

The other man nodded and took the box. He looked around at the rest of the containers. "Any others? Anything they'll really need on short notice?"

Darin hesitated, by now only a handful of meters behind them. Something wasn't right. They hadn't noticed the quiet pilot yet, and he listened more carefully.

The first man scanned some more of the labels with his gaze. "I don't think so."

"We should only do the high criticality parts so we can do fewer ones and still get some good money. If we do too many total, they'll notice something's up. Then what?"

"We had this talk already. Now let's go. The squadrons are going to be back soon."

They both turned around to head back to their shuttle but stopped abruptly. Right in their path, now less than a meter from them, was an average-height, blond eighteen-year-old with smudges of grease on his face and absolutely livid green eyes. His arms were crossed defiantly, showing both the Corona Squadron patch on the upper sleeve of his pilot general duty uniform and the rank plate on his chest proclaiming him to be a flight officer. It was a low grade, to be certain, but he was an officer nonetheless.

The first man, a sergeant, took a moment to visibly shake off the surprise at seeing Darin right there, then he quickly tried to cover his tracks. "Oh, uh, good day, sir. Sorry, you startled us

there. Is there anything we can help you with? We were just over here taking inventory--”

Darin’s glare didn’t lessen as the sergeant spoke, and then he tuned him out and briefly considered his options with the two men. Now he knew exactly how Chopper had felt, though this time Commander Mackin was light-years away and wouldn’t be interrupting. Besides, what’s the worst that could happen? He was already grounded.

Darin balled his hand into a fist, uncrossed his arms and punched the sergeant in the face. That man fell, and the other quickly backed up out of reach. He wouldn’t get anywhere. The added bonus was that the punch had already drawn the attention of security guards in the hangar. The relatively low noise in the empty hangar allowed Darin to hear a few shouts from some techs already and some footsteps running closer.

Darin never took his eyes off the second man, a corporal, who was now noticing that more company was coming as well. He put the box down on the deck and looked around anxiously but didn’t seem to have a good escape route in mind for such a situation. The sergeant on the deck was moving but was too out of it to attempt getting up. Then the corporal pointed at Darin and yelled to the subhangar in general, “He hit him! Did you see that?! Knocked him out! He’s crazy! Security, we need help here!”

The pilot stood his ground, confident that everyone in this hangar knew him well enough by now to recognize aggression like this wasn’t normal for him and there was probably a good reason for it. The shifted blame wouldn’t stick, and Darin would make sure Security would investigate these two. They would never hurt the squadron, or the Rebellion, this way ever again. He also completely understood now what Commander Mackin was intent on teaching him: one does *not* mess with the starfighters. *At all.*

In spite of his throbbing hand, Darin fought to hide a smile. He may be grounded, but his squadron still needed him, and he could still help them.

And it felt *wonderful.*

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*The End*

Revision A  
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