

“Muddy Waters”

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Prologue

When he logged into the computer terminal, the name he used was not his own. Lately it had been getting more and more difficult to remember that the name he used, the one he wore on his uniform like a shield, was nothing more than a facade.

The Rebel Intelligence operative, codenamed Halon, pulled at the tight collar of the Imperial uniform he wore, then completed his login. The computer program acknowledged Sergeant Kilbourne, his undercover persona, and dutifully pulled up the screen he needed.

Halon leaned back in his chair in the cluttered room and began his persona's regular duties for the day. He pulled up the last shift's summary of the comm traffic they were monitoring there at the Empire's communication station on the moon Braycot V and glanced through it. Very little caught his attention; it had apparently been a quiet night. Halon was nearly to the end when one phrase jumped out at him: Operation Apex. He eagerly read the full entry more carefully. It was all he could do to keep his expression neutral for the benefit of the security cameras he knew were omnipresent in the room; he and Gundark had been hearing rumblings of this and knew just enough to recognize that it was a large Imperial military campaign in its infancy stages, but they'd discovered very few details about it thus far.

It looked like that was finally about to change. From the size of the transmission and the sender and recipients, this incoming transmission had to contain details. Lots and lots of details.

It was an even harder struggle not to smile triumphantly as he realized the full implications of his discovery. *He* was the one who had found it. *He* was the one whose efforts would receive accolades from the Rebellion. *He* was the one showing the Rebellion just how valuable he was and how much his efforts were worth. *He* was the one pulling gold out of this miserable, worthless assignment.

He was the one who would be praised for giving the Rebellion such priceless information. Maybe even promoted.

Now he just had to figure out how to get this to them.

Chapter One

Something was wrong.

Flight Officer Hentil “Quiver” Yanilr’s eyes snapped open, pulling him from a restless sleep to his darkened quarters on the Mon Calamari Cruiser *Crescent Star*. He lay still, listening, trying to discern what had awoken him.

He felt it a moment later: a very slight rock to the bunk beds originating from the one below. The whispered sound of thin, coarse bed sheets crumpling wafted up to him right after. Mere days ago Quiver would have snored right through something so insubstantial, but now he tensed with his heart pounding while worrying about what had happened to Darin or if something was wrong with him.

Quiver switched on the small reading light at the head of his bed, then he rolled onto his stomach, wincing when pressure was put on his sore shoulder, and maneuvered himself to peer over the edge of his top bunk at his wingman below. Flight Officer Darin Stanic sat on the edge of his own bed with his face buried in his hands.

When Quiver stopped moving, Darin let out a long exhale and pulled his hands away to look up at Quiver. “What are you doing up?” Darin whispered.

“Thought I heard something. You okay?” Quiver replied.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you. Go back to sleep. It’s the middle of the night.” Darin looked away and rubbed his face and eyes with the heels of his palms.

“Why are you up? What’s wrong?” Quiver asked.

Darin didn’t look at him. “Bad dream. It’s nothing.”

Those words were familiar coming from Darin. Mere days ago, Quiver would have followed Darin’s instruction to go back to sleep. Today, though, things were different. “But are you okay?” Quiver pressed.

“I’m fine, Quiv. Don’t worry about it.”

That meant he should. Or, at least, now it meant that he would. Plus it was a good distraction from his own fitful dreams. “I’m already up. Want to talk about it?”

“No. Go back to sleep.”

“Darin, come on. Tell me what happened.”

Darin aimed a look his way that was puzzled and wary at the same time, though Quiver didn’t know why the latter would be there. The puzzlement was almost certainly due to the large amount of time that had passed since Quiver had voluntarily pressed for details of one of Darin’s bad dreams. That had always been CC’s department.

CC’s.

Damn it.

At last Darin turned his gaze to the floor and took a deep breath. “I...” he faltered. The nineteen-year-old chewed on his bottom lip and started again. “It... it was about that damn third-pilot mission again. That flight. Things went... really wrong. For all of us. That’s all.”

Quiver raised his eyebrows, then let them fall. So Darin’s bad dream hadn’t been about CC. Quiver wondered if he himself was the only one still plagued by nightmares about her death. He must be— after all, Darin’s history and personality made him much more susceptible to such things, as Quiver had discovered time and again over the past year, but CC’s death obviously wasn’t affecting Darin any longer. Anger flared inside, and Quiver couldn’t keep it out of his voice when he replied, “I see.”

Darin shifted his weight. “Sorry. I— I shouldn’t have said anything. Not when you...”

“When I what?” Quiver demanded when Darin trailed off.

It was hard to tell in the dim light, but it looked like Darin flinched. “When you have other things to deal with now. Sorry. Look, forget I said anything and just go back to sleep.”

“Oh, right, like it’s that easy to do,” Quiver snapped. “Thank you *so* much for reminding me about CC, and in the middle of the night no less. Getting back to sleep will be an absolute *breeze*. Though I’m guessing it has been for you, huh? That’s why you can tell me to do it like it’s no big deal. Hey, for added fun, let’s sit here in the dark and talk about when your friend Cohen was shot. Or when your family was killed. So go ahead: try to tell me how simple it is to get to sleep with those kinds of thoughts ricocheting in your head. Pfft, third-pilot mission. Whatever. Why would you care anyway if it had gone wrong? You wouldn’t have been the one surviving it and stuck with dealing with the aftermath!” Quiver pushed himself away from the edge of the bunk in a huff and cursed at the twinge of pain that shot through his shoulder as a result.

He switched off his reading lamp and plunged the small room into total darkness. The only internal sound came from Hue, CC’s pet, when he stirred in his cage against the wall in his first night here under Quiver’s care. Quiver threw his own upper body down on his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut, though he was too wound up to feel tired any longer. He was even too angry to think about his plans for the upcoming R&R the Coronas were getting to recuperate. He grabbed his bed sheets and yanked the covers over his head.

Once again, he wished he could go back in time a week and prevent the squadron from ever setting foot on that damned planet. Stop the mission to Lokinha before the Imperial trap could be sprung on them.

Prevent one of his best friends from being ruthlessly killed while he stood there helplessly and watched.

Seated comfortably behind his office desk, Lieutenant Colonel Adaic Traineer of Special Forces kept a piercing gaze on Major Aylward Linnme, long enough to make the Starfighter Command officer shift his weight. Sure, Linnme might have more combat experience than him— actually, that was a definite, not a maybe— but Traineer had the higher rank and the connections that went with it to make anyone below him think twice before crossing him. And Linnme certainly was thinking twice.

If only the damned starfighter pilots under Linnme’s command had been as smart.

Finally Linnme cleared his throat where he stood; Traineer had not invited him to sit when he’d arrived in the office at Traineer’s request, nor had he extended the offer while he’d explained his intentions to Linnme. “Colonel,” the major began carefully, “I’m really not sure this is... the best course of action to take. Why would you want starfighter pilots on a ground infiltration mission?”

Traineer narrowed his eyes. “We have to do this mission— it’s of vital importance to this fleet, and Intelligence risked a lot by letting us know what they’ve discovered. Learning the Empire’s short-term military plans for Operation Apex would be invaluable and would save countless Alliance lives.”

“I agree, sir. I’m certainly not disputing that.”

“What that means—” Traineer snapped, cutting Linnme’s interruption short, “is that my Special Forces platoon will be going out into the field, and they’re severely understaffed after

getting hit so hard on Lokinha. Not that *your pilots* helped to prevent that. But I'm willing to move past that and try to soothe the strained tensions between your people and mine. Your pilots could help my people accomplish this mission, and I thought working together on it would help mend relationships. There's no doubt we'll have to work together in the future— do you *really* want my commandos' lasting impression of your pilots to be their deplorable behavior on Lokinha? Are all of you really so selfish that I'll have to tell my commandos that Starfighter Command *again* refuses to help them in their time of need?"

Linnme visibly bristled. "Now Colonel, Lokinha—"

"Lokinha was where twelve of my soldiers *died* because *your pilots* didn't protect them!" Traineer jumped to his feet, swiftly strode around his desk, and stepped forward into Linnme's space, not stopping until he was toe-to-toe with and towering over the smaller ex-pilot. Surprisingly, Linnme didn't budge. Traineer injected more anger into his growl to regain the upper hand. "You *owe me*, Major. You owe my troops. All I'm asking for is support on *one mission*. Is that really so horrible? Think long and hard— do you really want to fight me on this?"

As it turned out, Linnme didn't. Smart man. Grudging, but smart.

The "grudging" aspect did not disappear while Traineer explained the preliminary details. If anything, it took a stronger hold. That would not do.

"And Major," Traineer added in conclusion, "I'm doing this to help. It's a peace offering, trying to build a bridge between our groups. As such, I *will not tolerate* any poor behavior from your pilots here. I expect this to make up for Lokinha, not re-enact it with your subordinates' disobedience of direct orders and blatant disrespect. I trust you're taking care of those problems now, correct?"

Linnme exhaled forcefully. "Yes, sir. It's... being handled. All of it."

"Good. Because I'm going out on a limb here to entrust the safety of my people to yours again after yours let us down so badly in that regard already. If I can't at least count on your pilots to mind their manners with this little-deserved second chance, then I'll consider that a huge problem and a massive liability to the entire fleet, and I'll let Captain Tralkett know that clearly. Now, dismissed."

Linnme looked rankled again, but he obediently took his leave.

Once the door closed behind Linnme, Traineer sat back on his desk and smiled to himself in dark anticipation. This was going to work out exactly like he'd hoped. One way or another, after this mission he wouldn't have to concern himself with those damned pilots ever again. Disobey him? Disrespect him? *Assault* him? And after he'd gone out of his way to rescue them even when they didn't deserve it? Well, they'd made their bed, and now they'd have to lie in it. And once he showed everyone else how incompetent these pilots really were, everyone would finally believe Lokinha and the loss of his two Special Forces teams was in no way Traineer's fault and would thank him profusely for saving the fleet from the continued danger of these addle-brained flyboys.

If there ever was a textbook definition of win-win, this was it.

Chapter Two

Lieutenant Bren Troy propped his feet up on the desk in the small office he had informally claimed as his own and put another datacard in his datapad to read. He liked this place. It had originally been a small storage room for the adjacent shooting range, so it was out of the way and had the added benefit of nearly constant blasterfire sounding through the air. It was a familiar sound, one that in these confines inexplicably made him feel safe and confident. Sergeant Arrunes, the sole remaining squad leader from Troy's platoon, had told him back when he'd picked this room that he was crazy, that he was going to get ulcers from the nonstop sounds and subconsciously thinking that he was always in danger. Troy was actually finding the opposite to be true, however; he felt more calm and less intimidated when under fire on a mission ever since he'd started this particular brand of desensitization and immersion therapy. Not that it had been a problem before, but this was an extra edge he was glad to get in his line of work.

The Rebel Special Forces soldier did miss his previous office, though. It had been quieter, roomier, nicer, with enough space for at least half of a squad at once even when they were fully geared up. This place would be lucky to fit a pair. But when Lt. Colonel Trainner had taken over *Crescent Star's* Special Forces personnel after Major Brexxil's death a month ago, the colonel had deemed that a dedicated office for a mere lieutenant was a waste of space and resources and had kicked Troy out of it. But the platoon leader had needed one despite what Trainner thought and had unofficially staked out this place for himself.

With difficulty, Troy tried to distract himself from thoughts of Trainner and to focus instead on his job. He hadn't been able to believe it when he'd read the offhanded, almost casual message from the colonel that morning saying that they were going on another mission shortly. He and the single surviving squad in the platoon were still reeling from losing the other two in the disaster that was the Lokinha mission last week, and at the time they hadn't even had a chance for the deaths to sink in before the squad was back on *Crescent Star* and prepping for a rescue mission for the X-wing squadron that had been stranded on Lokinha by Trainner's order. Thankfully that rescue mission ultimately hadn't required the participation of Troy's team, but it was still exhausting. If Trainner would just open his eyes for once or listen, he could see that this squad wasn't ready to go back in the field so soon. When Troy had protested, Trainner had ignored him and simply ordered him to do his job.

And so, Troy did his job.

But it was hard. Usually after the loss of a soldier under his command, Troy helped himself through it by immersing himself in his work. There were too many this time, though. All the work in the Rebellion wouldn't be enough to distract himself from thinking about his two squads—damn it, *two squads*—and all the letters he'd written to the families who would never see their loved ones again because he hadn't gotten them off Lokinha alive. Melkilof had had a fiancée. Broder had had no family and asked that his next-of-kin notification go to his best friend Jennis, but Jennis himself had been in the other decimated squad and had needed a letter of his own. Pettly had had parents and siblings and nieces and nephews, and he'd also been the best smashball player Troy had ever seen...

In between the painful, flitting memories of the twelve people he'd lost, Troy eventually finished reading the information about the moon the new mission would take place on and its surrounding system. Next he reviewed the data Trainner had attached in the message about the Imperial base there.

Based on the vague mission summary and objectives Trainner had included, accomplishing this with only eight people would be difficult. There should have been more, but the colonel had specifically said the mission was for the remaining squad only. Troy worked out the mission assignments and was almost finished with his recommendations of other personnel who would be good temporary additions— even if Trainner wouldn't agree, Troy was obligated to bring up the personnel shortage on this mission— when his comlink beeped. He pulled it from his pocket and flicked it on. "Troy here."

"Lieutenant, this is Colonel Trainner. Report to my office immediately."

"Yes, sir." Troy switched off the comlink and sighed softly. He copied his mission plan to a datacard for the colonel and headed out.

He'd never had the knack for walking and typing at the same time, but he managed to peck his way through the datapad's keyboard during his walk to the colonel's office and had finished his recommendation list by the time he pressed Trainner's door chime. The hardest part had actually been recognizing that all of his automatic first choices for the supplemental personnel had been killed on Lokinha.

"Enter," Trainner called from within.

Troy once again made himself ignore the reflexive disdain that churned up whenever he heard the colonel's Coruscanti accent. The poor Outer Rim world Troy had grown up on had had nothing but distrust and contempt for the Core Worlds, and some habits were harder to break than others. The fact that Trainner had used some of the fleet's chronically limited supply of bacta to accelerate the healing of the superficial bruise and black eye sustained when one of the starfighter pilots had punched him didn't do much to counter the selfish impression Core World denizens made on Troy.

Pushing all the distractions aside, he stepped in and saluted. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

Adaic Trainner returned the salute with his typical cool detachment that made Troy miss Major Brexxil's more friendly demeanor all over again. "At ease, Lieutenant. I have to tell you about the upcoming mission," Trainner said.

"Yes, sir. I put together a preliminary mission plan and profile." Troy offered Trainner the datacard, but the tall redhead didn't take it. It hung there like a half-finished bridge. "I also feel strongly that we need more people to accomplish the mission, so I've put together a list of sugg—"

"I did the mission plan already," Trainner interrupted.

Again? Troy pulled his datacard back and kept his voice level. "Sir?" Trainner's constant micromanaging was getting on Troy's nerves.

"I did it already. I know what I want to happen. And yes, you're getting more people. Some of the Coronas are joining us."

It took Troy a moment to sort out that unexpected news. "The Coronas? You mean the X-wing pilots, sir? I— thought this was going to be more of an infiltration mission and we wouldn't need anyone flying escort for us."

"They're both flying escort and assisting your squad in the field."

"They are? Sir, they're starfighter pilots. Do they know what they're doing?"

Trainner dismissed the concerns with a wave of his hand. "They'll be training with you until you leave, but really, they're just warm bodies, and that's all they need to be. Your squad will be handling the real work."

"If we're handling the real work and don't need them, then why are they even coming along in the field?"

“They may prove useful in other ways.” Traineer’s gaze hardened, warning Troy about following this tangent too far.

Ignoring that, Troy shook his head. “Sir, I don’t like this. We’ll be babysitting them! They’ll get in the way and just make it harder for us! I’m sure they’re fine pilots and competent in their own element and all, but this mission requires *ground* personnel. If you’d just look at my recommendations for people who would be valuable—”

“This is how it’s going to be, Lieutenant,” Traineer said sharply. “They’ll train with you, and you can give them whatever other training you deem necessary in the time before we go. They’ll need to do whatever we tell them to do to prepare: *we* are in command of them. They work for us on this mission. Don’t let them get away with anything. Now, here’s the mission plan.” Traineer handed him a datacard, and Troy reluctantly swallowed the rest of his words, took it, and inserted it in his datapad. He called up the assignments and scanned through them. He hid a cringe when he saw that Traineer was coming along, and things only got worse from there.

It was like the Lokinha mission planning all over again: there were so many things wrong with what Troy was reading that he wanted to bang his head on the nearest immobile surface until unconsciousness claimed him. He didn’t know where to start his protests, either. Finally he settled on beginning with the small team assigned to him. “Sir, Zyrytchev can’t be undercover in the role assigned to him here. Acting as a servant to us? He’s rightfully going to go ballistic. He scares me when he goes ballistic.”

“With that garbled mess of a name I’m betting you’re talking about the Sludir. Tell him to suck it up and deal with it. He’s in that role *because* it’s perfect for him, and the Imperials won’t think twice about it. Same with the Mon Cal. They’re servant species. They won’t raise Imperial suspicion in such roles.”

The Mon Calamari, Kicktar, probably wouldn’t object to playacting her subservient role, but Troy dreaded breaking the news to Zyrytchev. He dropped it for now, intending to argue it more once he had a better idea of how many battles he could pick, and pointed to the unknown fourth name. “Sir, who’s this person? One of the pilots?”

“On your team?” Traineer asked. When Troy nodded, Traineer continued, “Yes. I forget his name, but the one on your team has experience with a shipping company. Use him for that. It’s the sole reason he’s coming along.”

Another file on the datacard indicated it was the Coronas’ pilot roster, so Troy pulled it up to get any other possible details on this guy. He finally found Stanic’s name toward the bottom, though it was colored red along with four other pilots’ names. A quick cross-check showed that Stanic was the only red-colored name assigned to the Special Forces mission. “What does the red mean on the pilots’ roster, sir?”

“Hmm? Oh, that’s the current copy of the roster that Major Linnme gave me. He’s the SFC head onboard. Red means they’re unavailable for the mission for medical reasons.”

“But Stanic is red.”

Traineer offered another dismissive gesture. “If he’s the one on your team, he’s needed for his shipping knowledge. I’ll get him reinstated. He won’t be doing anything that will be a problem physically. He can deal with it.”

Uneasy, Troy deferred that for the moment as well. If Stanic truly was injured the doctors wouldn’t allow him to go back on active duty. That was their fight. But Traineer’s willingness to casually disregard the health of another Rebel for the sake of the colonel’s own needs and agenda didn’t sit well with Troy. One of these days it would be Troy or someone else in his

platoon that would be on the receiving end of this mentality. But actually, considering that they were going on this mission in their current state probably meant that day had already come and passed without Troy's knowing.

The commando looked back over the pilot roster, searching for any possible excuse to not bring the pilots with. There was a small separation between each numerically listed pair, and two pairs were being split up: one member going on the mission, and one staying behind for medical reasons. Again, Stanic was in that category: the name paired with his was remaining on *Star*. "Are these two pilots going to be okay with going on the mission without their wingmen, sir?" he asked.

Trainee aimed a sharp gaze at him. "What are you talking about?"

"There are two pairs getting split up, sir." Troy gave the datapad to Trainee and pointed out what he was referring to. "I don't know a lot about starfighter pilots and their structure, but I'm pretty sure each indicated pair here means they're a wingpair and they fly together. A lot like our fire teams. They can get awfully close to and protective of their wingmen. Are they going to have a problem with splitting up like this?"

"So that's what the spaces and this formatting mean?" Trainee looked at the bottom of the roster intently, and Troy was surprised to see a dark glower pass over the colonel's features as he did so. Then Trainee mostly wiped it from his expression, though his face did redden a bit and he muttered something under his breath, and he handed the datapad back. His voice had a harder edge when he spoke again. "There will be no 'problem,' Lieutenant. The pilots will behave or they'll suffer the consequences. We won't put up with any of their nonsense. Now go read my mission plan and get things ready. We don't have a lot of time to prepare. Dismissed."

Troy suppressed a sigh. "Yes, sir." He saluted, waited until Trainee saluted in return, and left.

Chapter Three

Quentell Mackin, commander of Corona Squadron, crossed his arms and studied the younger officer facing him. Quiver stood at attention in Mackin's office and looked decidedly unapologetic and unabashed. Disciplining Quiver wasn't anything new, though the instances had tapered off significantly since Darin had joined the Coronas *nearly* a year ago, and all of Quiver's past transgressions had been laziness, a lack of foresight or consideration, or an overly exuberant prank gone awry. Nothing had ever been malicious. Not until now. And while he understood the cause and the reasoning, Mackin didn't know how to deal with the fact that his carefree jokester of a morale officer had made such a drastic turnaround to— this.

One of many things Mack had recently wished for was the ability to go back in time and recognize the signs that Quiver was going to lose it before he'd punched Colonel Trainner upon their rescue from Lokinha. Mack couldn't shake the feeling that he really should have seen it coming, given that at the time CC was dead and Darin was suspected of being so as well. He'd just had too much on his mind to consider the possibility that Quiver would act out in that fashion and against the colonel.

Mackin glanced at his Executive Officer, Lt. Steen "Snubber" Weas, standing beside him, and turned back to Quiver. He put an edge to his voice. "Flight Officer, you know why you're here."

"Yes, sir." Quiver's neutral tone almost crossed the line into sounding bored.

"Colonel Trainner wants to press charges against you for assaulting a superior officer. Because of the circumstances Major Linnme is giving us the opportunity to handle it internally first." Mackin didn't add that he suspected Linnme was only doing so because he was too busy investigating Mackin's actions on the planet to deal with it. "So I need you to give me one damn good reason why I shouldn't toss you in the brig like the colonel wants."

Although his shoulders didn't move, everything about Quiver seemed to shrug. "Go ahead, sir. I don't care."

Mack stared. He hadn't expected that. "That's it? You've got absolutely nothing to say for yourself?" he demanded.

The lanky pilot snorted. "What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? Because I'm not. That I'll never do it again? Because the next time I see him I hope you're not there to hold me back. Trainner can go to hell for all I care for what he did to CC and the rest of us on Lokinha. I'll never feel differently, and some stupid charges or brig time won't change my mind. Actually some brig time might be a nice reprieve from all this for a while. I'm sick of dealing with it."

Mackin furrowed his brow. "Dealing with what?"

"With... this." Quiver made a brief, vague hand motion that indicated the room or the ship or something else before resuming the position of attention. "With Trainner and the Rebellion in general and thinking about CC. I don't know why I bother to be here anymore."

Mack filed that last statement away for the moment; Darin had come to him a day or two ago and worriedly asked for ideas in convincing Quiver to stick it out and stay. The last time Mack had asked about it, Darin said Quiver was constantly changing his mind about whether to leave the Alliance or not. If this was simply a "down" time, the trend indicated Quiver would flip back to staying before too much longer. He'd watch Quiver closely but there was no need to dwell on this latest mindset and decision before it became more cemented, more permanent.

"So let me get this straight," Mackin said slowly. "You want to go sit in a cell for days, weeks, whatever, alone, with absolutely nothing to do but think about what happened and let

your mind fester on it?”

Quiver immediately opened his mouth to reply but stopped. He paused for a moment and then said, “Well, not when you put it that way, sir. Becoming a moody antisocialite like Darin wasn’t part of my plan.”

“Then you’d better give me something to work with.”

Quiver scowled. Mack was surprised his facial muscles even knew how to make that expression. “Can’t you just yell at me for a while or something, sir? Then I’ll genuinely apologize to you for putting you through that, and you can tell Major Linnme you got *an* apology.”

“You’d better start taking this seriously, Flight Officer,” Mackin snapped, “because you have no idea how much you really have put me through with this since we got back.” Quiver looked surprised, almost taken aback by Mackin’s sudden shift in tone. “And since I’m in trouble too it’s a lot harder for me to defend you. It’d be a hell of a lot easier for me to wash my hands of this and let Colonel Trainner throw away the key to your cell. Silly me thought that would be cruel given what you’ve just gone through, and I don’t want to punish Darin by taking away his primary support either. But I can’t just laugh this off and bail you out on my own this time: this is a serious charge from a powerful person, someone much more powerful than I am. So grow up, at least *pretend* to give a damn, and give me something to work with!”

Mack finally stopped and forced himself to take a breath.

Quiver chewed on that for a minute, then exhaled in aggravation and said at last, “Sir, just give me my punishment already. I’m not apologizing for hitting him.”

Weas stepped in before Mack could explode in frustration at Quiver’s apathy. The XO said, “Fine. Flight Officer, if you weren’t already on medical leave you would be grounded. As it stands now, your R&R is being revoked, and you’ll also be assigned punishment detail. Effective immediately you’re confined to quarters for two weeks, allowed also in the hangar, mess hall, briefing room, sim room, and any specific locations required by your punishment detail. If you encounter Colonel Trainner in any of those places, you are not to be within five meters of him at any time for any reason, and you are forbidden from contacting or communicating with him except in the case of a formal apology, which will be handled through either Commander Mackin or myself. A formal reprimand will be placed in your permanent record. Make no mistake, the circumstances surrounding this are the *only* thing keeping you from being thrown in the brig. Is this understood?”

Quiver kept his sights forward, though his pale blue eyes narrowed slightly. Despite their glacial coloring, it was the first time his eyes had seemed cold to Mackin. “Perfectly, sir.”

Mack had regained enough control while Weas had been speaking to mostly modulate his voice when he said, “Dismissed.”

Salutes were exchanged, and Quiver stomped out.

As soon as the door was shut behind Quiver, Mackin sat on the edge of his desk and focused all his energy on breathing and not hitting anything. Deep breaths hurt the slowly healing blaster wound in his abdomen, but he was glad for the distraction this time.

Beside him, Weas cocked his head and crossed his arms as he regarded the closed door. “Who the hell was that?” Weas asked.

“Wish I knew,” Mack replied.

Weas turned to Mack in concern. “He’s getting worse instead of better. Even today is noticeably worse compared to yesterday. And I’ve never, ever known Quiver to not try to talk his way out of a punishment.”

Mack nodded. “Yeah. I think I should set up another appointment for him with the counselor.”

“Probably. I’ll tell Darin to keep a better watch on him too.” Weas hesitated before adding, “Sir, I hope you didn’t mind the couple real-time additions I made to the punishment we’d discussed before, but with the attitude he displayed I didn’t feel we could let him off as easy as we’d planned. But it’s done. Think this’ll get Trainner and Linnme off your back about it?”

“Without a key to his cell, I doubt it. And speaking of them...” Mack checked his chrono and groaned. “Shoot me now. Take your blaster, and one clean shot to the head. Right here.” He tapped his temple. “That’s an order.”

Weas shook his head. “Can’t, sir. If you end up dead then I have to go see him in your place. Plus the paperwork.”

Mack rubbed his face. His dread of the quickly approaching appointment with Linnme to go over the major’s investigation findings from the botched Lokinha mission four days ago roiled like acid in his stomach. “This isn’t going to be pretty, Steen. I don’t know exactly what’s coming, but it’s not good. I can smell it.”

“Can I do anything?”

“Thanks, but no. Just... convince everyone to keep a low profile until this meeting is over. The last thing I need is for something crazy to pop up while I’m already getting the book thrown at me. I don’t want Linnme to decide throwing me in an airlock is the simplest solution to all his problems.” Mack heaved a sigh and forced himself to his feet, wincing when a sharp pain cut through the healing tissue. He smoothed out his uniform, deliberately straightened his shoulders and stepped toward the door.

He was just about to open it when Weas said, “Sir.” Mack turned, and Weas’s brown eyes were earnest. “We got your back.”

Mack offered a tired but grateful smile, then headed out.

“Sir, I—”

“I’m not *finished*, Commander!”

Mack shut his mouth at the sharp rebuke and stood quietly, momentarily casting his eyes downward in a show of contrition that he didn’t feel as genuinely as he knew he should. He’d learned enough as a cocky, headstrong cadet and young officer to fake his way through some things with superiors.

When he looked up again to fix his gaze on a blemish on the far wall, Mack could see that on the other side of the desk, Major Aylward Linnme was not acting in the slightest. “I just can’t fathom what you were thinking! Unlike so many, too many, of our members, you’re career military, Commander. You *know* better than to disobey a direct order! You screwed up so badly I don’t even know where to begin! Actually, maybe I do. We’ve had these kinds of talks often enough: you like to ‘reinterpret’ some of your orders if it might adversely affect your squadron. I’ve given you the benefit of the doubt at times and tried to be reasonable, but it looks like I was wrong to do that because now we’ve gone down the slippery slope of ‘reinterpreting’ and landed at the bottom in ‘disobeying’.”

Linnme paused in his rant just long enough to take a labored breath; his artificial lung probably was having difficulty keeping up with the load placed on it now. His reddened face was

the angriest Mack had ever seen it. “You know what the Rebellion is?” Linnme continued. “Beings from every conceivable background trying to work together cohesively. The only common language, the only way to get all those backgrounds onto the same present page is discipline.

“So what happens when one small group doesn’t speak that same language and isn’t in step with everyone else? They cause serious complications because of it! Not being on the same page with everyone else, not doing what you’re told, can literally mean life or death for us! You *know* this! When you disobey orders, it’s not just you and your pilots that are affected: you’re affecting, maybe killing, other people too when their parts get compromised or they have to clean up your mess like we did with Lokinha. So what do I do? What do I do with a squadron that’s a mission liability? What do I do with a commander who demonstrates to all his subordinates that it’s acceptable to disobey orders and disrespect superiors? What do I do with a commander and pilots who aren’t disciplined?”

Mack recoiled slightly, feeling personally insulted. Linnme looked like he wanted to go on, but his lungs were limiting him and he stopped to catch his breath. Mack took advantage of the past injury that had ended Linnme’s starfighter combat career and ventured, “Permission to speak, sir?” He had to consciously work to keep his voice neutral.

Wheezing, Linnme looked at him sharply and warily, but finally motioned for Mack to talk.

He did so. “Sir, I do not believe my squadron is undisciplined. This had nothing to do with discipline or lack thereof. I disobeyed the colonel’s retreat order because half of my squadron, some injured, was stuck on that planet in the middle of a large hostile force. I was not going to leave them there to be captured or killed.”

Linnme caught his wind. “So you risked healthy, viable pilots to support those whose skills were lacking in Escape and Evasion? We have a training deficiency?”

Mack blinked. That wasn’t at all what he’d said. “No, sir. E&E for any pilot in that particular situation would have been futile.”

“And therefore you decided to put all of your pilots into a futile situation instead of only a handful.”

Mack forced himself to take a breath. He’d made it through lots of stressful events in the past: that pirate attack with his first squadron; water survival training; proposing to the woman who’d become his wife; countless combat missions; and recently, Lokinha. He could get through this too. “No, sir, the reason for sending the healthy pilots into that situation was to get the injured and stranded out before E&E would be necessary. I certainly wasn’t intending for every pilot to engage in it. But given the difficulties we faced even when supporting each other, E&E would have been impossible for only the injured or stranded to do on their own. That much was proven when four of my pilots were captured and another one was killed. It was not an option.”

Linnme nodded. “Yes, four captured, one killed. Of those, two were pilots who had been capable of escaping to orbit but were kept there, in danger, by your disobeying the retreat order. Once that order has been given, it is no longer your right to endanger the Rebellion’s finite, valuable assets like you did!”

Mackin gaped at his superior. “Finite, valuable assets”? Sir, you’re talking about my pilots! My squadmates! Not some interchangeable, faceless droids!”

“And the rescue you necessitated put many more individual, living, breathing beings on this ship at risk!” Linnme shot back. “Your pilots aren’t the only individuals worthy of respect and consideration! The other people on this ship are not interchangeable, faceless droids for you

to disregard and use and put in danger! Like the Quakes. I think you'd agree that they're not interchangeable, faceless droids. What if a Quake pair had been killed while fighting TIEs during the rescue?"

"That's different, sir. We would do and have done the same for the Quakes, and this isn't the first time they've done that for us either."

Linnme hardly seemed to hear the last sentence. "'Different'? It's not different at all! And moving on to actual machinery, by not retreating you also gave the Imperials a much greater chance of obtaining *all* of your X-wings, not just a handful! The loss of that many fighters, or pilots for that matter, would have crippled this fleet!"

Mack stood his ground. "But sir, that didn't happen. We got all the intact X-wings out too."

"Which was nothing but luck," Linnme all but spat. "All the reports are clear that it was a close call for all of you. You weren't in control down there, and you *certainly* didn't know at the beginning that you'd get all the fighters out. It could just as easily have been worse. Hindsight's the only thing helping you here." He shook his head. "Commander, you disobeyed a direct order from your superior on that mission, who is not happy at all. Not only is this disobedience completely unacceptable in and of itself, but I'm concerned it's indicative of a larger trend. The Coronas are learning to not follow the rules and to not be team players with others. We can't have this anymore. It has to stop. Right now."

Linnme's eyes bore into Mack's, and with a growing feeling of sickening dread Mack knew that everything he'd been afraid of was about to come to a head. Linnme didn't disappoint him; the major continued, "Here's how it's going to be. You're temporarily relieved of command. Lieutenant Weas will assume command in your absence and will retain it through completion of a new mission I'll be briefing him on shortly."

Anxiety overrode the initial punch to his gut. Mack found his voice in time to say, "Sir, what mission? The squadron is scheduled for R&R."

"R&R is cancelled. This mission came up this morning and will serve a dual purpose. The Special Forces teams onboard *Star* took a heavy hit on Lokinha, as you may recall. They're in need of some temporary stand-ins. Due to the Coronas' injuries you're only at half strength anyway and can't fly effective missions, so the Coronas who are cleared medically will accompany the Special Forces team on this mission and assist them on the ground by filling in their holes."

Mack's voice momentarily failed him again. This was unreal. It had to be. "Special Forces? Sir, none of my pilots have any Special Forces training."

"Then this will be good for them. They'll learn something. Maybe it'll make them more competent at E&E," Linnme shot back. "They'll train with the Special Forces team from now until they leave. Besides, they're backup only. Support roles."

"Then there are other, more qualified personnel onboard who could fill in," Mack argued. "Fleet troopers. Army personnel. Other Special Forces commandos. My pilots are in no condition to go on any mission right now, *especially* a Special Forces mission!"

"Good to see you're not trying to use any interchangeable, faceless droids of personnel to fill those spots," Linnme snapped. "Like I said, they're backup only. They'll be fine. This will also give them an opportunity to learn to be better team players. They have to work with and respect people outside their squadron and branch, which doesn't seem to be happening if Lokinha was any indication." He glared at Mack pointedly. "Speaking of which, don't forget I expect a detailed description of Flight Officer Yanilr's punishment. Actually, never mind, I'll get

it from Lieutenant Weas now.”

Linnme crossed his arms and continued, “Commander, understand this. This mission will be a test for them. I need to see how they act without you there exerting direct influence on them so I can find out how serious of a trend this disrespect and disobedience is. If they handle themselves well then I won’t consider that you’re having a lasting, bad influence on them and you’ll be allowed to resume command, likely under probation, upon their return. If they show signs of disobeying orders, bucking the system, and going against their superiors, then I’ll know we have a deeper, chronic problem whose solution will begin with your permanent reassignment and likely won’t stop there. Is that understood?”

Mackin could only stand there and struggle to recover from everything Linnme had just thrown at him. He finally kicked his mind into gear and sent it into overdrive, trying to find a way to refuse, a way to get out of this. His pilots could *not* go on a mission now. They just couldn’t.

Linnme knew Mackin well enough to see when the wheels were turning. He narrowed his eyes. “I should clarify that the test for following orders is starting immediately. So I’ll ask one final time: is that *understood*, Commander.”

The pilot felt more trapped than he had on Lokinha. The volume of Mack’s voice dropped in anger. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. I’ll be in contact regarding your new temporary duties. Dismissed.”

Seething, Mackin saluted and fled Linnme’s office. His years of military training were the only thing preventing him from stomping down the corridor and punching the wall. He had to get some distance before he did something he regretted.

Quiver shivered from the chill as he walked into the Coronas’ subhangar. He wove between landing struts and laser cannons toward the back, looking for Darin. He had to be here. He was always here.

Sure enough, Quiver spotted Darin over with his X-wing. The snubfighter had taken a brutal beating on the Lokinha mission, particularly in what they’d nicknamed the “third pilot” portion, and now it was swallowed whole by access platforms. Despite the massive amounts of damage it received, Darin was the only one repairing it at the moment. While the pilot was on medical leave for another week or so, his X-wing’s maintenance crew had been temporarily reassigned to help get the less damaged X-wings of active duty pilots up and running first. Instead of assisting with those other repairs like any rational person would do, Darin had this inexplicable desire to fix as much on his own fighter as he could.

Darin was lying awkwardly on his side on a platform about halfway up the X-wing, with his arms engulfed in the X-wing’s innards as he worked. His R5-D4 droid, Botch, sat on top of the starfighter, presumably assisting. Or supervising. With Botch, Quiver was never quite sure which.

As Quiver walked closer, he picked up a warbling whistle coming from the white and green droid followed by a series of staccato beeps.

“I know,” Darin replied. He yawned, then kept working while he spoke. “Look, you don’t have to remind me that I promised you thrusters. I’m working on it. Finding the parts for that has gotten bumped down in priority until I can find four more astromechs to replace the ones we lost, okay? That’s a bit more important right now, and it’s not easy. Tracking down individual parts is

hard enough, and getting an entire droid is almost impossible, much less four. And Procurement's too busy looking for new trilithide suppliers, so they're not helping me. I'm on my own."

Botch blatted and blooped. Quiver would never understand how Darin made any sense out of that gibberish noise when he couldn't see Botch's text readout.

"We can't wait that long. If we get the replacement fighters before the astromechs then I'll be the one holding things up and Mack'll kill me. Then—" Darin cut himself off when he noticed Quiver walking up, and he craned his neck around to look at him. "Quiv? Didn't expect to see you here now."

"Hi, Thumper." Quiver rubbed his hands listlessly. "You busy?"

Darin gave one more twist with whatever tool he was using and then extricated himself from the bowels of the X-wing. He put the tools down on the platform and rolled into a sitting position, letting his legs dangle off the side. His face, hands, and general duty uniform were smeared with grease, and he looked at Quiver in concern. "No. You okay?"

"Mack had his talk with me."

Understanding dawned on Darin, and he twisted and slipped underneath the platform railing, then let go to land solely on his left leg on the hangar deck. "What happened?" he asked.

Quiver looked around, not willing to answer quite yet, and spotted a personnel transport cart nearby that wasn't in use and had no one around it. He beckoned Darin over to it.

When they reached it Darin hopped on the seating area and Quiver went to the control console. The cart was powered down, but Quiver absently punched buttons and fiddled with the control levers. It reminded him of the time he and CC had snuck into the hangar on third shift, juiced up two of these carts and had races with them.

A wave of depression hit him, and he looked immediately for his friend, his anchor, his distraction. Sure enough, Darin was there, patiently watching him and waiting.

"Mack and Snubber didn't like the fact that I wouldn't apologize for punching that slug-rat," Quiver ranted. "Just to emphasize exactly how un-sorry I really am, I threatened to do it again and of course they didn't like that either. But it's not like I go around smacking senior officers for fun! Trainee deserved that and a whole lot more! So how come they punished me? Aren't they the ones always telling us to stick up for each other and protect each other? How come I get in trouble when *I* do it?"

"What did they do?" Darin asked.

"Confined me to quarters for two weeks. Formal reprimand. Said I'll get punishment detail too. But the worst part? They took away my R&R. I'm going to be stuck here on the ship *alone* doing stupid punishment grunt-work while all you guys are off enjoying yourselves. This is the last place I want to be right now anyway, and by myself, no less? I hate them! How could they do that to me?!"

"I'll stay here with you, Quiv."

Darin's simple offer snapped Quiver out of the whirlwind of despair he was swirling up around himself. Quiver knitted his brows in surprise and then could only say, "What?"

Darin shrugged, like it was no big deal to throw away the only R&R they'd gotten in recent memory. "I'll stay."

"You can't. That's stupid. You shouldn't be stuck here too when you can go have some fun." Despite his words, Quiver's breath shortened at the thought of being separated from Darin for a few days. He turned back to the cart's controls and fidgeted more intently with them.

"It's not like I had any plans of my own anyway," Darin said. "Most of the others are

going to visit people they haven't seen in a while. I can't do that, so where is there for me to go?"

Though Darin's voice was mild, Quiver felt a stab of guilt for so coldly bringing up the losses in Darin's past last night. What in the galaxy had possessed him to do that? "But you did have plans," Quiver protested, looking back at his wingman. "You were going to come with me and have fun."

Darin just looked at Quiver plainly and raised his eyebrows as if inviting Quiver's brain to catch up. "Then I guess I'll stick with those plans," Darin said.

At last it sank in that his best friend wasn't leaving, and Quiver breathed easier. He felt like he'd just dodged a blaster bolt, and he smiled in relief. "Thanks."

Darin gave his usual half-grin in return. "Maybe we can find some of the Quakes to do something with," he said. "Everyone else is still going to be onboard and on duty, you know. It's just our squadron getting a few days off."

"I know. But I see our guys the most. I didn't want to be by myself." It was the first time all day Quiver had felt— well, not quite "good," but "better," and he didn't want to risk losing that elusive feeling by continuing with his venting about his CO. Instead Quiver nodded toward Darin's X-wing and changed the subject. "You gonna be in here a while yet? You want help?"

"Help?"

"With your X-wing. Fixing it."

Darin snorted in amusement. "Did *you* actually just offer to help with *repairing* something?"

"Yeah. Or you want to go get something to eat? C'mon, Thumper, I can't go sit in our quarters. Let's *do* something. Show me how to use that tool-y thing you were doing."

"All right," Darin replied, still grinning. He slid off the transport cart and walked back toward his X-wing, and Quiver immediately fell in step beside him. Only a slight limp was still noticeable in Darin's gait. "I could use some help with the—"

Darin's comlink beeped, interrupting him. He pulled it from his pocket and flicked it on. "Stanic."

"Flight Officer Stanic, this is Medbay. Report here immediately for your exam appointment."

"What?" Darin stopped and looked baffled, though unfortunately the expression wouldn't translate over the comlink. "But..." He trailed off, forehead creased in hard thought, and then he picked back up with, "But I don't have an appointment today."

"It's on the schedule now. It was a last-minute addition. Please come immediately, sir. You're expected in ten minutes for it." The frequency closed.

Darin stared at the comlink in his hand, but no answers were forthcoming. Quiver shook his head and *tsk'*ed. He'd never understand Darin's fear of Medbay and medical appointments. That's where all the cute nurses were. "Mack's gonna kill you if you miss a doctor's appointment," Quiver pointed out.

"But I don't *have* an appointment. I'm sure of it. Why would they add one now?" Darin grumbled to himself under his breath and then sighed. "Guess I need to go get this straightened out. Sorry, Quiv. I'll catch up with you afterward, okay? Maybe you can help Ikoa with her fighter." He gestured to the starfighter in question, where it looked like Pellicer was in an atypically hyper discussion with Ikoa and some others, and then Darin headed toward the hangar exit while wiping the grease off his face with a sleeve.

Quiver stayed behind and forlornly watched him go. He didn't want to help Ikoa or any

of the others. He'd wanted to hang out with Darin.

Darin loitered outside the main door to Medbay, watching the seconds pass on his wrist chrono. He refused to go in there one nanosecond earlier than he absolutely had to.

He wasn't even sure what he was doing here. His next appointment wasn't supposed to be until after R&R was finished, at which point he thought he'd be physically well enough to be put back on active duty. For the first time he could remember, he was okay with staying out of the cockpit and wasn't going crazy trying to get back inside it. So what had caused this last-minute urgent appointment? He had better things to be doing, helping Quiver being one of them.

The display on his chrono reached what he'd been told was his scheduled appointment time. Darin gulped a deep breath, but still he hesitated. It took a few additional seconds for him to steel his nerves enough to go through the door.

The instant odor of bacta and bandages churned up memories that had been made fresh and raw by Quiver last night. Darin cringed at the recollection of his best friend's hurtful and uncharacteristic hostility, but he did his best to put it out of his mind again and not take it personally. Quiver was just going through a lot, and Darin had to understand that and be there for him. Darin had to be the strong one this time, and he wouldn't let Quiver down. But still, Darin couldn't help but wish that Quiver would stop snapping at him so much now.

Darin intended to further protest this unexpected appointment at the check-in station, but to his surprise the Ithorian manning the front desk directed him immediately on sight to a droid, who in turn led him to one of the examination rooms in the back. The lack of check-in paperwork was odd, but this was slightly better than Darin had hoped for; if he had to be here, at least he wouldn't be stuck in the waiting room forever while being assaulted by the scent-borne memories of his hometown's Imperial occupation. Given the recent events, he didn't want to relive any of it. The mere thought of dealing with more loss like that terrified him. The only way he'd been able to get through his days so far and be coherent enough to try to help Quiver was by pretending there was no recent loss to cope with.

The droid pointed him to an exam table inside a small room occupied by four people: his treatment physician Doctor Effetuy, Major Linnme, Colonel Trainner, and a Special Forces lieutenant who was hanging back and looking distinctly uncomfortable.

For his part, Darin was immediately intimidated. He pulled up short right away, just inside the threshold of the doorway, and saluted. "Um... Sirs." Why the hell were all these people here? All these high-ranking people? He must be in the wrong room—

"As you were, Flight Officer," Linnme replied. "Just—"

Trainner interrupted with biting words. "Flight Officer, you're late and your uniform is a disgrace. It's deplorable that you'd let it get so filthy."

Darin immediately looked down at his uniform. It had smudges of grease on the fabric, but that was all. He wasn't going to wear one of his cleaner uniforms for a marathon repair session. "I'm sorry, sir. I was in the middle of repairing my X-wing when I was commed to come here immediately, and—"

"Save your excuses. An officer should never be seen like that," Trainner replied disdainfully.

"Regardless," Linnme broke in firmly, while giving Trainner a sideways look. Linnme turned back to Darin and patted the exam table. "Have a seat up here. The doctor needs to

examine you.”

“But... for what, sir?” Darin directed his questioning gaze to Dr. Effetuy. “My appointment wasn’t supposed to be for another week.”

Linnme’s tone got sharper. “That’s irrelevant, Flight Officer.”

Darin looked down and blushed a bit at the reprimand. “Yes, sir.” He hopped up on the exam table, pushing off with only his good left leg. “Is... is Commander Mackin going to be here too, sir?” he ventured.

“No, he’s not.”

Darin nodded and followed the nonverbal command to be quiet. The other officers remained in the room while Dr. Effetuy poked at Darin’s injuries from Lokinha. The cuts on his face from the canopy shards were healed and fading, as were the larger cuts on his left arm.

“Your weight’s still down from Lokinha,” Dr. Effetuy mentioned while making a note on a datapad.

Darin shrugged. “I haven’t been hungry.”

“You still need to eat. I’m authorizing increased rations for you for each meal for the next week. You need to recover some of the weight you lost from that mission, especially before you start combat flying again.”

Darin nodded, strictly for show. Having more food on his plate wouldn’t make his appetite return. Quiver would love the extra portions, though. Maybe that would help cheer up his wingman.

Next the doctor inspected the tender area on Darin’s head that had hit the ground after his fall from the X-wing’s skid. Dr. Effetuy nodded in apparent acceptance of the skin’s appearance, took out a scanner and then asked, “How’s your head feel? Are the lingering symptoms dissipating at all?”

“I’m still getting some headaches. Not as frequent, though,” Darin replied.

The doctor passed the scanner beside Darin’s head several times and considered the readout while he asked, “Debilitating, moderate, or minor?”

“Minor. I don’t take anything for them and just work through them.”

Dr. Effetuy nodded again and set down the scanner. “Take off your right boot and roll your pants leg up to your knee.” When Darin did so, Dr. Effetuy bent down to Darin’s leg. Darin shifted away in uneasy anticipation of what was coming. The physician didn’t let him down: he cupped the inner portion of Darin’s right lower leg where he’d been shot and pressed both of his thumbs hard onto the healing tissue.

“Ow!” Darin tried to jerk away from the unexpectedly sharp burst of pain, but the doctor held on and kept prodding the wound. Darin stopped moving but bit his bottom lip hard. Why Dr. Effetuy had pressed so much harder this time, Darin didn’t know.

At last the doctor let go. “Why do you *always* have to do that?” Darin bit out, rubbing the sore spot on his leg. The reddened, injured skin was an ugly contrast to the tattoo that was nearly at the same latitude but on the outer part of his leg. Given what had happened with CC, if the Imp’s shot had been just a bit farther over and destroyed his tattoo, Darin suspected he might have snapped right then and there.

“The muscle feels like it’s healing,” Dr. Effetuy said by way of explanation. He took a different scanner and generated images and data of the muscles and tendons, then studied those for a few minutes while Darin put his uniform back together. Next the doctor addressed the senior officers in the room. “The scans confirm that. But it’s *healing*, not *healed*. As you can see it’s still sore and does impair his movement. Too much stress on it now will damage the newer

tissue. Add that to the persisting headaches from his concussion, and no, he can't be cleared for active duty at this time."

Darin's eyebrows quirked. Why was this even a question? It was too early, and he didn't feel up to flying again quite yet. Not only for the physical reasons either. And why was Trainneer here anyway? Why would he care about Darin's medical status?

He wished Mack was there.

The doctor continued, "Another round of bacta treatments would help get him there, but it would take some time to perform."

"Why wasn't he already fully healed with bacta?" Trainneer asked.

Linnme was the one who answered. "He got sufficient bacta treatment when he was rescued to ensure that his injuries would heal correctly and fully, Colonel. Between the fleet's limited supply of bacta and the length of time it was projected to be before his starfighter was combat-worthy again, we chose to give him the time off and let the tail end stages of the injuries heal naturally. It saved us bacta and overlapped with their recuperation time anyway. We did the same with the other Coronas too."

Trainneer's expression darkened, and his voice grew hard. "That was stupid. Plus, by giving them time off you're rewarding them for everything they did wrong on Lokinha. Stop coddling them. Doctor, I need to speak with you outside for a moment." Trainneer led Dr. Effetuy out of the room. Linnme grumbled to himself and followed, leaving only Darin and the Special Forces lieutenant in the room.

Darin looked at the commando. He wasn't at all what Darin thought of when he heard the words "Special Forces": instead of being a muscular, armed-to-the-teeth super soldier who ate the bones of his enemies for breakfast, the man was lean and not much taller than Darin, and he had a thick shock of wavy, unruly black hair. He looked normal, approachable, and Darin felt a little more at ease in his company. He even thought he remembered seeing the lieutenant on Lokinha at the beginning of the mission before everything went haywire. "Sir? What's going on?" Darin asked.

The soldier shook his head and stepped closer. "Not 'sir', okay? I'm Bren Troy. Call me Troy— everyone else does." He offered his hand.

Darin shook it and gave a brief, tentative smile. "Darin Stanic. You can call me Darin, sir. Er, um, sorry."

Troy waved the apology away. "So," he said casually, hooking his thumbs in his pockets, "I read your report and your debrief on the Lokinha mission. You were the one who did that solo flight at the end, huh?"

Darin looked down and had to make himself breathe. It took all his energy to push away the horrible memories of that mission as well as the lingering thoughts from his nightmare. "Yes, sir. That was me," he finally said softly. He suppressed a shudder.

"It was quite impressive, what you did. You must care about your squadmates a lot to do that for them."

Darin hesitated, shrugged self-consciously and kept silent. Though Troy had sounded sincere, Darin didn't want to open himself up to ridicule from a hardcore Special Forces commando.

When Darin spoke again at last, it was to change the subject to something else that had been eating at him. He kept his gaze fused to the floor. "Sir, I'm... really sorry about the Special Forces soldiers who were killed on Lokinha. Especially the ones on *Star Ray*. We tried. I really wish we could have done more. Losing just one person is hard enough, but that many all at

once... I'm sorry."

In his peripheral vision Darin saw Troy offer a small smile, but it was obviously forced. "Thanks," Troy said simply. A moment passed, and then Troy took a breath and sounded just as anxious to change the subject himself. "Anyway, you'd asked what all this was about. It's—"

He was cut off when the door to the examination room opened and the three others returned. Dr. Effetuy's face was set as hard as carbonite. The doctor strode to the small bedside table and snatched up the datapad he'd been using to make notes on Darin's condition. "Don't know why I even bother sometimes," Dr. Effetuy muttered. Then he whirled to confront Traineer. "But I don't understand why you won't give him the extra bacta treatment first."

"I told you, it would take too long. We can't fit it in the schedule," Traineer said. "Now are you going to do this, or do I need to talk to your superiors?"

Dr. Effetuy narrowed his eyes and looked like he wanted to say something more, but he didn't. He typed a few words on the datapad, with his fingertips hitting the screen's keyboard with more force than Darin had ever seen from him, and then he glowered at Traineer. "There. He's back on active duty. You'd damn well better be right about his expected level of physical activity. People like you always make things worse for the patients, and I'm the one who has to clean up your mess and deal with your mistakes. They're not droids that you can slap a spare part in and call it good." With one final glare, Dr. Effetuy left the room in a huff.

Darin looked between the other officers. Linnme looked discomfited. Troy looked even worse. Traineer was standing there with a smug, triumphant smile on his face.

"Sirs?" Darin asked a little more insistently. "What's going on?"

Chapter Four

“This is ridiculous!” Lieutenant Shaun “Scoop” Pellicer said in a heated voice.

“Are you crazy? This is awesome!” said Flight Officer Kalre Unatel. “Well, not the part about Mack. But the Special Forces thing is going to be great! How can you not be excited about doing something like that?” The Rodian’s huge black eyes were practically lit up with joy.

“Because I’m not a Special Forces commando, that’s why,” Pellicer retorted.

“Why did they take away R&R for the rest of us?” Lieutenant Jayke Forsgren, always called Chopper, demanded. “Why can’t we take our break while you guys are off gallivanting around in the mud with groundpounders?”

“Because you’re already on R&R. It’s called ‘medical leave’,” Kalre told his wingman.

Darin sat quietly and listened to the growing arguments and protests from the pilots around him. All of the Coronas except for Mackin were sitting in their briefing room and reacting to the news Lt. Weas had just given them about the results of Mack’s meeting with Major Linnme earlier that day. Some of them, like Pellicer and Ikoa, had already seemed to know what was coming.

In his customary seat beside Darin, Quiver had crossed his arms and looked livid.

“Hey!” Weas finally shouted into the cacophony of complaints. “Settle down!” The Coronas gradually and grudgingly did so.

“Look, I’m not happy about this either,” Weas continued when there was a modicum of silence, “but the simple fact of the matter is that we don’t have much choice.”

“Yes, we do,” Pellicer said. “We could refuse to do this.”

Weas narrowed his eyes. “And that’s exactly what would get Mack kicked out and cause who knows what other transfers.”

“Then this is nothing but extortion. Blackmail. However you want to look at it,” Pellicer shot back. “This is the kind of thing we need to elevate above Major Linnme if need be. No one here is fit for a mission like this. Not now. And we’re supposed to blindly follow Colonel Trainneer’s lead after what he did to us on Lokinha? Hell, forget ‘blindly’, we’re supposed to follow it at *all*?”

A new voice spoke up from the back of the room. “Yes, you are.” All of the Coronas turned to see Mackin carrying two small stacks of datacards and walking up the side aisle to the front. He continued, “Major Linnme’s putting his foot down on this. Don’t pick this battle. Keep a low profile, keep your heads down, do what Colonel Trainneer wants, and get out. That’s all you need to do. Anything less will get the book thrown at us. *All* of us. It’s not just about me.”

Some of the pilots voiced their protests again, but when Mack reached Weas at the front of the room he cleared his throat sharply. The protests died down. When they had, Mack said, “I apologize for interrupting Snubber’s briefing, especially given my current position. This’ll be quick.” He held up one of the stacks of datacards. “We’re finishing going through CC’s affairs.” The room became dead silent. “She recorded a personal message for each of you. Since you’re all here, with Snubber’s permission I wanted to take the opportunity to pass them out.” Mack nodded to Weas and began doing so.

Darin shifted uncomfortably and watched while the others received theirs. Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap coughed and quickly wiped at her eyes when Mack handed one to her. Chopper and Kalre didn’t react much. Pellicer took his, and the oddly uncontrolled anger that had been manifesting from him since Lokinha increased another level in his expression. The dark skin of Lieutenant Tictintco “Slurry” Tnis, a Bilgana, flushed a greenish hue, and he restlessly fiddled

with his datacard, exchanging it between all four hands like he didn't know what to do with it.

When Mack approached Darin and Quiver with the final two datacards, Quiver's enraged expression from the briefing changed abruptly to something that looked like terror. He shifted in his seat closer to Darin and leaned back, away from the small item in Mack's proffered hand. Finally Quiver snatched it and held it away from his body, gingerly holding it on its edges like it was made of acid. He stared at it.

Darin absently accepted his and immediately stuck it in a pocket, focusing instead on worriedly watching Quiver. He barely noticed Mackin leave.

From the front of the silent room, Weas sighed. "Those who are scheduled to go on the mission, stay here. Everyone else is dismissed. Behave."

Quiver jumped to his feet and hurried out right away, but Darin remained sitting. He watched Quiver go with increasing concern.

When the briefing room was empty except for Darin, Weas, Slurry, Pellicer, and Kalre, Weas shook his head. "Darin, you might as well head on out too. I know you're scheduled for this, but you ultimately won't be going since you're on medical leave. I'm sure it was a mistake, and I'll get it corrected with Colonel Trainner."

Darin chewed on his lip. "Actually, sir, Colonel Trainner just got me put back on active duty about a half hour ago. They told me I was going."

"What?" Weas stopped and stared at Darin. "He did *what*?"

Darin hesitated. So Weas didn't know? "He and Major Linnme called me into Medbay. The colonel convinced the doctor to put me back on active duty for this."

Weas crossed his arms tightly and apparently tried valiantly to calm down. "Well. Nice of them to go behind our backs and not even tell me or Mack or give us a chance to stop it. I'll bring this up with Major Linnme— a nice little discussion is warranted here. I can't believe they cleared you. You can't even walk right yet."

"I know, sir," Darin said softly.

Weas growled deep in his throat. "Fine. Well. I just wanted to give you lucky select an idea of what to expect before they split us into the Special Forces teams and we start training with them this afternoon."

Commander Mackin loitered in the corridor outside the door to the briefing room. He wasn't really supposed to be there any longer, but he'd bargained with his current supervisor to let him out of his duties long enough to drop off the datacards, and he was stretching it as long as he felt he possibly could to fulfill one other thing he needed to do.

By eavesdropping, he could hear Snubber's overview of the Special Forces mission to the other four pilots and the constant objections voiced by Pellicer. The worst part was that Mack agreed with every single objection yet his hands were tied to do anything about it. In his current situation there wasn't much he could do about anything, but that made him all the more determined to see through what he was able.

And so he waited.

When Snubber's briefing concluded, Mack pushed himself off of the corridor wall he was leaning against. Kalre and Slurry were the first ones to leave the briefing room. Pellicer came soon after them, and when he saw Mack he stepped up to him and took a breath to speak.

Mack recognized that expression and held up a hand to forestall him. "I know, but there's

nothing I can do,” Mack said.

Pellicer closed his mouth, looked disgruntled, and finally nodded. “Yes, sir.” He left.

Weas walked out a few moments later. Seeing Mack, he came up to him. “We need to talk, sir,” he said. When Mack started to shake his head, Weas hurriedly added, “Tonight. After you’re off duty.”

Mack hesitated. He shouldn’t, but— “Okay. Comm me when you’re free.”

“Thank you, sir.” Weas headed off.

Mack stepped into the briefing room, now empty except for Darin, who was sitting in his normal seat and rubbing his eyes. Mack said, “Darin.”

Darin jumped and twisted around, then exhaled when he saw the commander. “Oh, sir. Sorry.” He immediately stood and faced Mackin.

“Relax, Thumper. I just wanted to talk to you quick.” Mack walked up, and he dropped his voice so it wouldn’t carry outside the room. “How are you doing? About CC?”

The younger pilot grimaced. “I’m still really worried about Quiver, sir. He’s all over the place. I can never tell what to expect from him anymore.”

Mack sighed softly; he should have known Darin wouldn’t answer that question, but he’d held out hope all the same. “Snubber’s scheduling him for another counseling session; hopefully that will help a bit. Just continue to keep an eye on him and do what you can to help, okay? I know things will be rough for a while, but let me or Snubber know if it gets worse.”

“Yes, sir. I’m trying to help him, but I... don’t really know how. I never know what’s going to set him off.”

“I’m sure you’re doing fine, Darin. You know him better than anyone else on this ship. While things are still raw like this it might not seem like you’re making progress, but I have no doubt that in the long run you’ll find you’re helping him more than you realize.”

Mack could tell that Darin didn’t believe that for one second. The commander pressed on before Darin could ingrain that belief too strongly in his mind. “In the meantime, though, let us know if it gets much worse, and talk to one of us or a counselor if you need to for yourself.”

“Yes, sir. Is... what if Quiver has a bad stretch while I’m off on this mission?”

“The rest of us will be looking out for him, and you won’t be gone long. Don’t worry about that,” Mack said. “You’ll both get through this. It’s just going to take time.”

Darin seemed to deflate. “That’s what I’m afraid of, sir.”

Mack clapped him on the shoulder. “You’ll both get through this,” he repeated to make sure Darin heard it.

Darin gave a half-hearted nod, then changed the subject. “Snubber said your new temporary assignment is working on the maintenance and stuff for the shuttles onboard.”

“That’s right.”

Darin looked down. “I wish I could be doing that instead.”

“If I could trade with you, I’d do it in a heartbeat,” Mack told him. “But these next few days will fly by for you, and this’ll all be over soon. Just be careful.” Darin nodded, and Mack took his leave and headed to his new duties in the hangar.

Chapter Five

Lieutenant Bren Troy pointed to the projected hologram floating in the air before him. “This is the moon Braycot Five. That’s where we’ll be going.”

From the back of the darkened Special Forces briefing room where he sat with the other four Coronas, Darin cocked his head as he studied the translucent image of their destination. It was pale grey, patched with snow and ice, on the large side for a moon. Probably a captured planetoid. Troy zoomed the image out to show four smaller moons between it and the red gas giant planet it orbited, plus a few more moons farther out. The gas giant had an impressive ring system as well. The main band of rings was between the fourth and fifth moons.

“And this, by extension, is the planet Braycot. Remember the rings: we’ll get to them in a minute.” Troy returned the view to Braycot Five and zoomed in on the surface until a small city and its buildings became visible. “Braycot Five was a Herglic colony world. After their subjugation by the Empire, the Imperials moved in and set up a base there. It’s a communications hub and monitoring station. The rocks making up Braycot’s rings have a high metal content, and many of the larger rocks have been shaped, formed and equipped to act as receiving antennas for transmissions. Due to their nature and the sheer number of them they require lots of maintenance, which the Empire provides by means of Nosaurian slaves. The Nosaurians are also forced to mine precious metals from other rocks in the rings. The Nosaurian housing is on Braycot Five in an area near the Imperial base.” He pointed them out. “Most humans are Imperials and live on the base or very near it. Most of the rest of the world remains Herglic.”

Darin’s stomach twisted at the thought of slaves being used, and the dim light barely illuminated the Special Forces commandos and the other Coronas stirring listlessly at the news as well.

Troy paced back and forth while he continued. “We have two Rebel Intelligence operatives undercover as Imperials at this base, codenames Gundark and Halon. They discovered that Imperial military plans for the near future have recently been transmitted there. The problem is that they don’t have the clearance or the slicing expertise to access the plans themselves, and if they try they’ll draw unwelcome attention. Simply put, that’s our mission. Get in, get the info, and get out without the Imperials knowing. If they find out, they’ll change the plans and it becomes useless to us.”

Colonel Trainner raised the lights and stepped forward from where he’d been standing off to the side. Troy backed off, and with the better lighting Darin saw a new cut and bruise on Troy’s face that hadn’t been there when he’d met Troy in Medbay.

“Before we go over your individual assignments, there’s something we need to clear up for the benefit of our newcomers,” Trainner said. He looked squarely at the gaggle of Coronas in the back. “All Starfighter Command personnel on this mission are under the direct command of Special Forces. Secondary command falls to Rebel Intelligence. Starfighter Command *takes* orders, they do not *give* them. To anyone. Now,” Trainner continued casually, oblivious to the nearly inaudible grumblings from the Coronas, “assignments. We have four teams on this mission. Listen up.

“Team Aurek will consist of myself, Sergeant Hozke, and Lieutenant Weas. We’ll be the backup or contingency team should anything go wrong. The next team—”

“Um... sir?” An unshaven man with a shaggy mop of blond hair tentatively raised his hand.

Trainner glared at him, and the commando lowered his arm. “I’m not interested in

interruptions at this time, Sergeant.”

The commando kept quiet but looked at Troy questioningly. Some brief, invisible and inaudible communication must have passed between the two because a second later the blond man sat back, crossed his arms and returned his attention to Trainner.

Trainner reacquired his audience in his sights. “Team Besh is the largest. It’s headed by Sergeant Arrunes and includes Corporal Rayal, Private Dazara, Lieutenant Tnis, and Flight Officer Unatel.” Darin wasn’t surprised that Trainner mangled the pronunciations of Slurry’s and Kalre’s names. Two of the commandos, a dark-haired woman and a female Arcona, looked over their shoulders at the group of pilots. Kalre waved jauntily. The woman wrinkled her nose in distaste, and they both faced front again and whispered to each other.

“You’ll receive more details during your training, but Team Besh will be going to the ring station that received the original, raw Imperial transmission and will be rebroadcasting it down to Team Cresh for processing and recording. That’s the easiest way for us to access it without risking detection by the Imperials.”

If that was the easiest way, Darin didn’t want to know the harder ways. He glanced at Pellicer to see if he was missing something in his estimate, but from Pellicer’s expression their lines of thinking paralleled. Darin wasn’t sure if that made him feel better or not.

“That brings us to Team Cresh,” Trainner continued. “This will be Warrant Officer Dohner and Lieutenant Pellicer. With the assistance of Halon and Gundark, you two will be inside the Imperial base, posing as Imperials.” From beside him, Darin barely heard Pellicer mutter under his breath. “The decryption protocols for the ring stations’ data are programmed into the base computers. Dohner will receive, decrypt and package the data onto datacards, then will send it out with Team Dorn. Trying to walk out with the datacards is too high a risk, so we’ll smuggle them out instead.”

Trainner glanced at a datapad and then said, “Team Dorn will be Lieutenant Troy, Corporal Kicktar, Private Zyrytchev, and Flight Officer Stanic. You’ll pose as a shipping company delivering supplies to the base and then picking up outgoing shipments, which will include the datacards from Team Cresh.”

“I do *not* want this role you have set for me!” interrupted a deep voice. Darin followed the gazes of the other Special Forces commandos and easily found the speaker: he was a massive reptilian with six legs and a humanoid torso. Braided hair fell from the top of his head, and scars blemished his scaly, greenish-grey skin. “I am *not* your servant or your slave, and I resent the idea that I am so!” He hissed.

Trainner crossed his arms and glared at Troy. “I thought I told you to get this settled and done with.”

Troy didn’t answer Trainner and instead looked plainly at the reptilian speaker. “Zyrytchev, we went over this, remember? We’re not saying you’re our slave or our servant. You’re not.”

“And yet you tell me to be one! You would not do this to a Human!”

“Private!” Trainner shouted over him. When he was the only one speaking, Trainner said harshly, “Get over it. You have your orders. I expect you to obey them!”

Zyrytchev hissed again and muttered something in a language Darin didn’t understand.

Darin leaned over to Pellicer and whispered, “Sir? What species is he?” This was the first such being Darin had encountered, and though he’d caught some glimpses of Zyrytchev on Lokinha early on, he’d steered clear. Now he was glad he had; something about the reptilian and the sheer power he exuded scared Darin.

“He’s a Sludir,” Pellicer whispered back. “Be careful around him, okay? They’re strong and not the most reasonable beings around.”

“The pilots will fly escort for us coming in,” Traineer continued. “Since setting up their base there, the Imperials have actively discouraged outside traffic from landing or taking off. The main traffic is Imperial, many of which are shuttles that take Imperials and Nosaurians to and from the ring stations for work. Most of the other ships are supply transports for the Herglics and the Imperials. With the IFF code that Gundark will provide, *Starsmoke* can pass for a Herglic-contracted supply ship. The X-wings will be trickier and must stay out of detection range of any Imperials. We’ll enter the system on the far side of the gas giant from the moon. The X-wings will enter the gas giant’s rings and will hop from rock to rock, always keeping the ring’s rocks between themselves and any Imperials. *Starsmoke* will travel alongside them but will skirt the rings. When we get within range of the moon, the X-wings will leave the rings and immediately position themselves tightly together on the far side of *Starsmoke* so *Starsmoke* will block them from any Imperial scans. In this way, we’ll land in a warehouse the Intel operatives have set up in a Herglic city near the Imperial base, and we’ll begin the mission.”

The Coronas, even Kalre, looked at each other in disbelief. Their thoughts obviously matched Darin’s: the rock-hopping that Traineer just proposed for them was absolutely insane. Weas raised his hand and said, “Colonel—”

“We leave in three days,” Traineer said. “Lieutenant Troy has your training plans. Dismissed.” He turned off the holoprojector, gathered his things with one sweep of his arm, and walked out.

Weas narrowed his eyes. “Oh, there is *no way* we’re committing suicide in that planet’s rings.” He jumped to his feet and went after Traineer.

Noisy conversations started up, but the moment the door closed behind Weas, a shrill whistle from Lt. Troy pierced the air and all the commandos’ voices immediately fell silent. Darin, Pellicer, Kalre, and Slurry noticed the sudden silence a second later and likewise abruptly shut their mouths.

“That’s better,” Troy said, moving back to the front of the room.

“This is a stupid plan, boss,” one of the commandos said. The others voiced agreement.

The unshaven blond man spoke up, holding his hands up, palms out. “Wait, wait, wait. Everyone, I’m in dire need of your help. Can someone— anyone— *please* explain to me why I’m not with Team Besh? Or even Teams Cresh or Dorn? What *possible use* can I be to anyone as the field medic if I’m hanging back with the ‘contingency group’ away from all the action? As if the colonel’s going to go into a confirmed hot spot voluntarily. Pack your own bacta patches this time, kids. No house calls for you. If you get shot, you’d better be well enough to drag your carcass back to me.”

“Why do the fighter jocks have to come along?” the woman demanded. “Didn’t they do enough to us on Lokinha?”

“Hey!” Troy sharply rebuked her. “Next one who talks like that gets latrine duty on the nearest Hutt planet. Lokinha was not their fault, and I bet they have other things they’d rather be doing too.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Kalre piped up. “Even though it’s a groundpounder mission, this has the potential for some excitement.”

Troy gave a small sigh. “All right. Well, let’s do some introductions, and then we can go over the training plan and break into teams.”

Ten minutes later, the briefing room was buzzing with the conversations within the small groups. Sitting alone since Weas had chased after Trainneer, the unshaven blond man was singing a ditty to himself. Darin sat with Troy, the Sludir Zyrytchev, and a blue-skinned Mon Calamari named Kicktar. Darin hoped to keep quiet and stay out of their ways as much as possible, but within the first five seconds Kicktar foiled that plan by turning one large eye toward him and asking, “So do you have any clue what you’re doing?”

Darin hesitated. “With what?”

“This shipping stuff?”

“Oh, that? Yeah. I’m pretty comfortable with that.”

“What about flying your X-wing through the planet’s rings like Trainneer was saying?”

“Um... less comfortable with that.”

“And getting us through the gate of the Imperial base?” Kicktar added. “You realize that if you screw that up, all four of us will die messy, painful deaths, right?” Her tone was light in spite of the heavy words.

Not that it helped Darin much. “Uh, see, here’s the thing,” he said, fidgeting. “I’m terrible at acting, and—”

“Kicktar, not now,” Troy interrupted. “Darin is both a veteran starfighter pilot and a former shipping pilot; therefore he will be piloting our cargo speeder into the base. He’ll do fine.”

Kicktar chuckled. “Okay, okay. Was just teasing the new guy.”

“I do not share that confidence,” Zyrytchev growled. “When a pilot admits he is bad at something, I tend to believe him.”

“It’ll be a ten-second conversation, and we can coach through some scenarios beforehand. It’ll be fine,” Troy repeated firmly.

Zyrytchev kept going, with his glinting eyes focused on Troy and his anger increasing with every word. “And once we are inside, what of these Imperials? I told you earlier that I will not participate in this manner. Why have you and Trainneer blatantly ignored my wishes? You think I am joking, that I do not feel strongly about this, but I do, and I will make you listen to me!”

“I *am* listening to you, Zyrytchev,” Troy said, almost pleading. “I know you don’t want to do this. Help me think of a different way to fit you into the mission, and I’ll take it to Trainneer.”

“That will do nothing!” Zyrytchev retorted. “Trainneer is deaf to everything I say. He will only accept his way, his plan, no matter what it means to those carrying it out! He does not care that he is putting me in danger while simultaneously humiliating and belittling me! We will be entering a base full of Imperials who are accustomed to brutalizing Nosaurian slaves without a second thought, and in their eyes Kicktar and I will be eligible for, even deserving of, the same treatment. Yet you two Humans will be immune! Protected!” His voice suddenly became a shout. “I refuse to be subjected to the violent whims of Imperials again!” Zyrytchev lurched to his six feet and rounded directly on Darin, who was so surprised and alarmed he jumped to his feet as well and backed up several steps.

“You. I do not know you.” Zyrytchev’s voice was deadly, his eyes narrow. The huge commando advanced, and Darin retreated, wide-eyed.

“Zyrytchev!” Troy commanded sharply.

The Sludir ignored him. “So how do I know how far you will go in this role of yours?” Zyrytchev demanded of Darin as he kept forcing the pilot backward toward the wall. “You will play-act one of my ‘owners,’ my ‘masters’—” Zyrytchev spat the words— “and will have artificial power over me on a world where slaves are considered less than beasts of burden. What if there is suspicion from the Imperials? Will you beat me to solidify your cover? Allow the Imperials to mistreat me to enforce your role?”

Even through his fear, Darin couldn’t help but feel indignant at the accusation and disgusted at the notion. He stopped backing up and didn’t move when Zyrytchev stepped right up to him, toe-to-toe. “Of course not!” Darin said. “Why the hell would I do that?”

Zyrytchev hissed. “Maybe because pilots like to feel important. Like they are better than others. Or maybe because I do not believe any of you pilots thinks our mere ‘groundpounder’ lives are worth protecting, or indeed worth anything. You have already demonstrated this quite clearly.”

“We tried!” The hot words rushed out before Darin could stop them. “We did everything we could to keep *Star Ray* safe! We didn’t want to lose her! We just couldn’t do it!” Belatedly aware that his voice had gotten a little too loud, a little too high-pitched, he forced his volume down. “I’m sorry. I really am. I know it’s— I know it’s horrible. I wish I could go back and change things. But I can’t.”

“That is right! You cannot!” Zyrytchev shouted. He shoved Darin hard and advanced on him. Darin slammed into the wall and barely managed to stay on his feet. “And your wishes mean nothing because of it!”

“Zyrytchev!” Troy and Kicktar both appeared between Zyrytchev and Darin and tried to physically force the Sludir to halt. “Stop!”

Zyrytchev almost casually shoved Troy aside, but it was still enough to fling him a good five strides away. “I will deal with this *my way!*” Zyrytchev barked at Troy. “I am tired of Humans always telling me what to do!”

By now everyone else in the room was running over. Darin barely caught a glimpse of the three Coronas rushing in; Kalre was practically salivating at the prospect of a brawl, and Pellicer and Slurry both seemed determined to get to Darin. The instant Troy got his feet under him, he flung up a hand toward the pilots and desperately shouted, “Stop!”

Pellicer faltered, probably from reflex. Behind him, Slurry did the same. Kalre kept coming toward Zyrytchev, and now toward two of the commandos— the woman and the Arcona— who had interposed themselves to protect their Sludir teammate. They each put a hand on their holstered sidearms.

Pellicer saw the new situation just in time to reach forward and grab Kalre by the belt before the Rodian could tackle the two commandos guarding Zyrytchev. He yanked Kalre to a halt.

“Stand aside, Kicktar!” Zyrytchev roared at the Mon Calamari, who was still trying to force him away from Darin on her own. Another commando ran up and joined Kicktar.

“Stop him or we will!” Pellicer shouted at Troy.

“You pilots aren’t touching him!” the Arcona guard threatened.

“Rayal! Dazara! Stand down!” Troy yelled at the two guards.

Zyrytchev had forced his way forward enough that Darin was trapped, pinned behind the two commandos who were trying to help him. Zyrytchev pushed aside the newcomer, and then he balled his massive hand into a fist. Both Troy and the newcomer grabbed that arm on its backswing and held it back with difficulty. The Sludir’s taut muscles strained to break free and

complete the punch that would probably end Darin's life.

Kicktar slapped Zyrytchev hard across the face with her large finned hand.

Zyrytchev jumped, then directed his fury at her once he recovered from his surprise. "How dare you—"

"This won't solve anything, Z!" Kicktar interrupted. "He's already below you on the food chain on this mission. What good is pummeling him going to do?"

"I will not allow my well-being to be placed in the hands of someone who views me as expendable!" Zyrytchev shouted back. "If they failed to care enough to protect us once, they will do so again!"

"Damn right!" Rayal agreed.

"You need to give them a chance!" commanded the person struggling to hold on to Zyrytchev's arm with Troy. If Darin remembered right, that was Sgt. Arrunes. "That wasn't their fault! Now stand down, Private!"

"Z, he's not your enemy," Kicktar said. "Why not save your strength for someone who is? Like that *entire base* full of Imperials? If you pummel the pilot now, you'll get in trouble again and won't be allowed to go face your *real* enemies."

"That means if I pummel him now, I will not have to endure this servant role that I told them I will not participate in anyway!" Zyrytchev's arm muscles strained with renewed vigor, and Troy and Arrunes lost ground.

"Z, listen!" Kicktar shouted. "A base full of Imperials! It's been a while since you had that chance! Don't let that all pass you by for this puny short-term pleasure! Without that pilot, you can't get in the base! Literally! He's driving us in! Let him stay intact long enough to do it! You've made your point— I don't think he's going to do anything to you in your roles, and if he does, we'll deal with it! Troy and I will be there too— the three of us will outnumber him!"

Zyrytchev didn't move for a long moment. Then at last he refocused on Darin. "You said you will not allow anyone, including yourself, to abuse me in the role demanded of me," he growled. "You had best keep your word, Pilot."

The huge, tight muscles in the Sludir's arms and shoulders relaxed slightly. Troy and Arrunes warily released him. Without another word, Zyrytchev turned, went back to his bench, and resettled himself on it.

Darin shakily let out the breath he'd been holding. "Thanks," he weakly said to Kicktar.

The Mon Cal turned to him. "I was sure he was going to kill you," Kicktar told Darin breezily.

"Yeah. So were we," Pellicer grumbled. Kalre was indignantly trying to pull out of the lieutenant's grip. "What the hell was all that about?"

Troy turned first to Rayal and Dazara. "You two retake your seats. *Now*," he snapped. "And don't let me *ever* catch your hands anywhere near a weapon while facing allies *again*." The woman and the Arcona mumbled something and walked back to their places.

Pellicer finally let go of Kalre. "Behave," he ordered the Rodian. Kalre's offended scoff faded as he and Slurry also returned to their seats.

"I'm sorry about that," Troy said to Pellicer and Darin.

Pellicer stared, incredulous. "'Sorry'? Your Sludir was ready to take his head off! Why?"

Troy shook his head. "He's a little sore about this mission and Lokinha. I promise it won't happen again."

Pellicer lowered his voice and said, "Not that I'm doubting your sincerity, but no, I don't think you can promise that. Because what I just saw was that you *cannot* control him or make

him do anything he doesn't want to do! And what set him off? Is another one of us horrible pilots next because of what he thinks happened on Lokinha? What minefield of unknown triggers are we walking into? If we're going to be in danger from our own teammates, and it looks like we are, then I'm going to go to Traineer right now and call off this whole 'SFC participation' thing."

"Sir, wait, please," Darin cut in. "I'm fine."

Pellicer threw a sharp look his way. "Stay out of this, Darin."

He didn't. "Sir, we can't refuse to do this mission. You know what'll happen."

"To hell with the consequences. This was a mistake to begin with, and that was before I knew we'd be in danger before the mission even started."

Troy looked back and forth between them in confusion. "What consequences? What are you talking about?"

"Sir, *please*," Darin said to Pellicer. He tried to keep the growing sense of desperation out of his voice. "I'm fine. Everything's fine. Let's forget it ever happened, okay?"

Pellicer gave a short sigh of frustration and stepped close to Darin to speak quietly with him. "Seriously? You almost got your head bashed in, and you want to just pretend it didn't happen?"

"If the alternative is failing our probation, sir, then yes," Darin replied.

"There are bigger things at stake here than our probation. I'm going to tell Snubber to pull us out of this."

What could possibly be bigger than the consequences of failing their probation? The thought of losing Mack and possibly the rest of the Coronas was something Darin just couldn't bear. He swallowed hard. "If you do, sir, I'll deny anything ever happened with Zyrytchev."

Pellicer blinked and then stared at him for a long moment. Finally he shook his head. "You know, Quiver was right about one thing: that loyalty of yours *is* going to get you killed. A few reassignments aren't worth your life, or anyone else's. Think about that." Then he turned back to Troy, who was conferring softly with Arrunes. "Fine, I guess we're all doing the 'forgive and forget' thing. This time." His last two words held a warning in them.

"It won't happen again. I swear. No one in this room is in danger from anyone else in this room." Troy made his last sentence into a loud command for the room at large.

Pellicer shot one last exasperated, disappointed look at Darin before returning to his seat along with Arrunes and Drohner. The unshaven blond man, Sgt. Hozke, was looking on from a short distance. "So no Zyrytchev pounding this time? No one needs medical treatment? Or a morgue?"

"No," Troy said.

"Ah. Okay." Hozke returned to his seat and his ditty.

Troy gestured Darin back toward the chair he'd vacated, and Darin warily returned to his place. Kicktar and Troy did the same.

"Zyrytchev, you and I and Arrunes are going to have a long talk after we're done here," Troy growled.

Zyrytchev nonchalantly picked at a sharp nail with his pointed teeth. "Fine."

"And then I want you to tell me what consequences you were talking about," Troy said to Darin. "If it's affecting this mission, I need to know."

Darin stifled a sigh. "Yes, sir," he said softly.

Troy shook his head hard as if to reset his brain. "Okay. Well. Now that we've got... that... out of the way," he said, grasping for any words to get the normalcy back in place, "let's

get down to business. Darin, we'll be delivering a few items to the Imperial base on fake requisitions that Gundark or Halon will put into the system there. It'll be things the Imperials can use so they shouldn't look too closely at the order histories and instead chalk it up to administrative glitches. What do we need to do to deliver those things?"

Darin tried to put the last couple minutes out of his mind and focus on Troy's words. "Well, that depends, sir. What are they?"

Troy held up a datacard. "We have options. Gundark gave us a list of things that would be reasonable, and we have to see what's available here in the fleet to bring. Rations, supplies, spare mechanical parts, that sort."

"Each item will probably need some type of shipping form to get it onto the base. Which form and what's needed will depend on the local system's shipping regs and the Imperial regs. Some items will need special permits, like if they're hazardous, pressurized, a weapon, organic, if they're from a certain system, things like that. Some of those permits could need some lengthy local or Imperial approvals, so we'll have to avoid delivering anything that would need those, both for schedule and scrutiny. And we have to make sure the things we bring will actually fit in the freight speeder we'll be using. Shipping containers can take up a lot of room. What model of speeder will we have there, sir?"

When Darin finally stopped, the three commandos looked between each other, processing the onslaught of information. Troy scrolled through a datapad but then shook his head. "I don't know. The model type isn't in the planning information. I think they were just going to rent whatever they could find on the moon."

Darin suppressed another sigh. "That's going to make things harder, sir."

"Yes, I agree. But it sounds like you've got a good handle on this. Kicktar will help you put together the list of items we'll be taking, and then you can complete whatever forms or permits are needed. We'll have to work around not knowing how much cargo room we've got. Err on the smaller side."

"Yes, sir."

Chapter Six

Darin walked with the other four Coronas into the Special Forces training area. He'd never been inside this room before and was curious about what he'd find.

He didn't expect it to be so big. The large open space was easily half the size of the Coronas' subhangar, if not larger. The area immediately around the door was empty except for some tables, chairs, and the personnel drifting around, and beyond that things got serious. Targets, body armor, and a rack of weapons lined the nearest walls. Stacks of crates and cases held who-knew-what. Starting about ten meters from the door and going deep into the training area were large partitions set up to resemble makeshift building-esque structures, doorways and corridors. Darin was fascinated by the variety of equipment. He'd have to ask Lt. Troy what all it was used for.

The Special Forces commandos were milling around the open area near the door in small groups. Trainner was nearby, scrolling through a datapad. Kalre immediately went to where Sgt. Arrunes stood, and after a pause the other Coronas headed together toward an empty spot in a corner. Darin followed them.

"Flight Officer Stanic!"

Darin jumped at the colonel's sharp, unexpected rebuke. Trainner was glaring at him, his datapad forgotten.

"Is your arm broken? Are you no longer capable of saluting a superior officer?" Trainner demanded.

"Sorry, sir!" Darin hastily offered a crisp salute while his mind raced to catch up. He hadn't thought he'd needed to salute here. He hadn't seen any of the other Coronas salute just now either, but he immediately reprimanded himself for blaming them. This was his mistake, not theirs. He'd gotten so relaxed with Mackin's informality that he hadn't even been paying attention.

Trainner huffed at him. "Why can't you and your squadmates learn to do such a simple, simple gesture? Maybe this will help it sink in for all of you: go run laps, Flight Officer." Trainner indicated the perimeter of the large training area. "And don't stop until I tell you to."

"Yes, sir." Chagrined, Darin jogged off. Though he ran quite a bit now for fitness, he hadn't had to do mandatory punishment laps since he was with his training squadron, when that had been a favorite disciplinary action handed down by his commanding officer. Now here he was, an incompetent cadet yet again.

The other Coronas and even most of the commandos looked at Trainner in confusion. Weas took a few steps toward Trainner, but Troy stopped him with an upraised hand on Troy's own way to the colonel. Troy stepped up to Trainner and got into a conversation that Darin couldn't hear, and then some partitions cut them off from his sight.

His injured leg was considerably sore after less than one lap around the large room, and now Darin understood why Dr. Effetuy had previously told him to hold off on jogging for another week or so. By the time Darin got back in sight of everyone he was limping noticeably despite all his efforts not to. The Coronas and commandos were seated at the tables and starting their first training session, though Weas, Pellicer, and Slurry were visibly distracted by Darin's punishment. Trainner snapped at them, and they slowly turned back to the training.

After fifteen minutes Darin's leg was killing him, and Trainner still hadn't told him to stop. Normally a fifteen-minute jog would have been nothing to Darin, but trying to compensate for and deal with the pain in his leg was taking a lot out of him, and he was struggling to catch

his breath. The monotonous pounding on the hard floor made his head hurt as well. He slowed drastically, desperate to give his leg a rest, but Trainner noticed and called, "Keep going, Flight Officer. And don't slow down."

Darin tried to pick up his pace, but a dozen strides later he felt a sudden, sharp pain where he'd been shot, and his leg threatened to buckle under him. Barely managing to stay on his feet he cringed, immediately stumbled to a stop, and leaned against the wall, bracing his right side against it to take all his weight off his right leg. That did not feel right. Something was wrong.

"Flight Officer, what are you doing?" Trainner demanded.

Between gasps for air, Darin called back, "Thirty seconds, please, sir." He had to keep going. He couldn't disobey Trainner already. If he could just have a second, he would make himself regroup and continue.

"You think you get *breaks* during a punishment?" Trainner said incredulously. "Absolutely not!"

Darin gritted his teeth and moved forward again. He could barely put weight on his bad leg, not even enough to limp on, and ended up hopping awkwardly next to the wall.

"Darin, stop." That was Troy's voice. Darin was desperate enough to take the flimsy excuse of obeying that Special Forces order.

"Lieutenant—" Trainner started sharply.

There was a murmur from the group, and when Darin chanced a look back he saw Troy talking intently with Trainner. Darin took advantage of the colonel's distraction to attempt to catch his breath. He also put his efforts into somehow looking like he was doing better than he was. He didn't want the others to know how much his leg hurt at that moment or how winded he was because of it. The commandos would think he was weak.

Half a minute later, Troy finished whatever he was saying to Trainner, and Trainner let him go. Troy beckoned Hozke with him, and they trotted over to Darin while Troy spoke quietly to the medic.

"Sir, I'm sorry," Darin managed when the pair arrived, "but I can't—"

Troy held up a hand to forestall further words from Darin, and he stood back while the other commando came up to the pilot. "How's it look, Hozke?" Troy asked quietly.

Hozke knelt down in front of Darin and asked, "Where'd you get shot?"

Darin pointed above his boot on the inside of his right leg. "Something just happened. It hurt really bad for a second. Really sharp. I can barely walk on it now."

"That's not good," Hozke said. He reached a hand toward Darin's leg, but Darin jerked back.

"Darin," Troy warned.

Reluctantly Darin held still when Hozke reached forward again, and he inhaled sharply as even a light amount of pressure caused a stab of pain in the inflamed tissue. He could tell Hozke was trying to be gentle as he palpated the muscles and tendons, but finally Darin could stand it no longer and jerked his leg away again.

Hozke shook his head and stood to face Troy. "He shouldn't even be on duty, much less running laps. What the hell was the colonel thinking?"

When Troy only stared pointedly at the medic, Hozke relented and continued, "He needs to get off his feet, boss. Medbay should look at him, but in the meantime I'll get a cold pack and a bacta wrap to bring down the swelling and undo some of the damage this running just caused. A painkiller or two too."

Troy nodded. "Good. Go get them." Hozke jogged off.

Troy turned to Darin. "Hozke will take good care of you. Come on, let's grab you a chair and you can listen to the rest of this tactical session."

Darin felt a flutter of fear and said, "But I can't. What about Colonel Trainner? I'm not allowed to stop yet. I have to do what he says or--"

"You let me worry about him. Come on," Troy took hold of Darin's elbow, and though at first Darin tried to pull away in embarrassment of letting the others see him needing help to walk, Troy firmly held on and wouldn't let go. Darin bit his lip and gave in, and Troy slowly helped the hobbling pilot back toward the group.

A couple minutes of rest hadn't helped significantly, and Darin was desperate for something else to focus on during that interminably long walk to the group. "Sir?" He motioned toward the partitions in the room. "What do you use those partitions for?"

Whatever he had said to Trainner after the mission briefing, Weas had lost.

Darin was glad this was only a simulator run. If it wasn't, he would have been dead at least half a dozen times over the last four hours.

It was approaching 2300 hours and Darin was exhausted, but Weas had insisted on one more run before calling it quits for the night. Maybe this would be the run where all the Coronas would survive their rock-hopping in the gas giant's rings.

The swirling red planet dominated Darin's front viewport. From the shuttlecraft-sized chunk of rock his X-wing was sitting on at the moment, he watched while Pellicer took his turn hopping from one large rock to another. The Coronas called out warnings when stray floating rocks threatened to collide with him, but Pellicer dodged them all, and his X-wing alighted on a huge rock farther away.

"Your turn, Nine," Weas said over the comm.

Darin's chest tightened at the dreaded words. "Eight..." he said in a strained voice.

"Go, Nine," came the stern reply.

Darin's heart pounded as he gave his repulsors a tiny bit of power; barely anything was needed to break this small rock's weak gravitational hold. He lifted up and was immediately in the path of destruction of any number of boulders hurtling past. Darin feathered his engine throttle and headed for his next targeted landing zone.

He slipped in and out of the paths of other rocks, some of them the size of a donri ball, some of them larger than his starfighter. He followed the directions and warnings from his squadmates. There was one very near miss from a rock as big as an astromech that almost smashed into his canopy, and his heart was racing when he finally settled his fighter on the large rock he had targeted.

That had just been one hop of many, a tiny fraction of the distance they had to cover between their hyperspace exit point and the moon. And they were taking it incredibly slowly and carefully tonight, much more slowly than Trainner wanted them to do on the actual mission. Tomorrow Weas wanted them all to try rock-hopping simultaneously. Faster, no breaks, no outside assistance.

Darin wiped sweat from his face with a trembling hand. Normally he would have found such flying a challenge, certainly, but not quite so mentally debilitating. His nerves were still frayed from the third-pilot mission on Lokinha, and it didn't help that due to his physical recovery, the last time he'd flown, real or simulated, had been that third-pilot mission. Going

straight from that to this rock-hopping with no mental recalibration or recuperation in the cockpit was hard. Under the circumstances he'd even skipped the standard requalification flight for returning to active duty from medical leave.

Forty-five minutes later, both Slurry and Pellicer were killed by impacts within two minutes of each other, and the Coronas hadn't even reached the halfway point yet. Weas called for an end to the simulation.

Darin opened his simulator's canopy and sucked in lungfuls of the fresh air before pulling his helmet off. He winced when he moved his bad leg; Hozke's wrap job helped stabilize and support it but also made it awkward and stiff in the cockpit. Hozke was doing what he could to help, though, since Trainner had denied Darin permission to get it treated in Medbay, citing schedule concerns and expressing disbelief that anything was actually wrong that Darin couldn't just shake off or ignore.

When he looked around the room, he saw Mackin and Troy sitting together next to the simulator monitors and control panels. They both stood when Weas climbed out of his simulator, and they walked toward him. Troy spoke first, his brow furrowed and his voice concerned and uncertain. "What do you think?" Darin could hardly hear him over the hum of computers and simulators.

Whether it was due to lack of sleep, the pressure, the difficulties from the run, or something else, Weas looked ready to take somebody's head off. He yanked off his helmet and jerked his head toward the briefing room. Troy and Mack followed.

The rest of the Coronas trudged to their locker room and changed out of their flight gear. Pellicer and Slurry, the two lieutenants, claimed the two operational shower stalls in the adjacent refresher station.

Darin limped back toward the Coronas' quarters with Kalre. He wondered if he could stay upright long enough to take a shower there before collapsing into bed.

Without looking, Kalre stated to Darin, "Dibs on the 'fresher, rookie." The Rodian trotted off down the corridor to the refresher shared between their two rooms.

Darin sighed. Probably not.

Colonel Trainner looked up from his computer when the door chime to his office sounded. He hadn't expected anyone to come so early in the morning. He took a sip of hot caf from his mug before saying, "Enter."

Lieutenant Troy walked in and saluted. "Sir, may I please speak to you for a few minutes?"

Trainner didn't bother inviting Troy to sit. "What is it? Don't you have some work to be doing for the mission? The pilots' morning training session starts in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir," Troy said. "Actually, the mission is what I hoped to talk to you about."

Trainner narrowed his eyes. He should have expected this. Troy had done nothing but challenge Trainner's planning and execution of the mission since he was first briefed on it yesterday morning. It was getting very tiresome, especially from a mere lieutenant. He had better things to do than listen to Troy's whining, and he'd have to find a way very soon to nip that in the bud before it got out of hand. A subordinate questioning his superior was frankly intolerable. "Again? What is it this time?" he snapped.

"Sir, we need to modify the plan. The rock-hopping isn't going to work."

“Of course it will.”

“No, sir, it won’t.” Troy’s voice was suddenly firm, but luckily he caught himself and humbly softened it when he continued. “It’s not viable. The Coronas tried to do it for hours last night in the sims and couldn’t, and that was while going at a fraction of the speed they’ll need to go for the mission.”

“Then they’d better keep practicing.”

Troy took a deep breath. “Sir, it won’t do any good. We just can’t get there from here. Not in the short amount of time we have before we leave. The rings’ environment is just too dangerous. All we’ll accomplish is losing pilots and starfighters before the mission even begins. Besides, I still don’t think we can safely get the X-wings to the surface without being detected by the Imperials. That’s a huge long shot.”

Trainner sat back in his chair, drummed his fingers hard on the desk, and glared at Troy. “It’s a little late in the game to be changing plans so significantly, isn’t it?”

“Not when it’s something we truly need to change for the mission to succeed, sir.”

Trainner was amazed that Troy had had the nerve to say that. Maybe he should think a little more strongly about getting a new platoon leader— one that wouldn’t question him so much. The undermined authority and wasted time were things he didn’t need. “Oh. My mission won’t succeed, will it?” Trainner snarled. “Well then. How would *you* make it succeed, *Lieutenant?*”

Troy was at least smart enough to recognize a warning when he heard one, and he hesitated before replying. Probably rethinking his words. “Sir, do we really need all of the pilots? Why don’t a few of them stay here? We don’t need such a large escort for an infiltration mission. A smaller group means less chance of discovery.”

Trainner took a breath to immediately dismiss the notion that any of the pilots be allowed to snivel their way out of this, but another quick thought made him pause before speaking. All the pilots were still coming, yes, but maybe he didn’t need the *X-wings*. And if the pilots weren’t in their *X-wings*, but were instead on, say, *Starsmoke*, then he’d have direct control over them. There would be no chance for them to disobey him and go do their own thing in their own little ships. Plus, if he kept only a small *X-wing* escort, having the rest of the pilots on *Starsmoke* would give the *X-wings* a little more incentive to protect the shuttle under their care, unlike last time.

Trainner thought it over a bit more, letting Troy stand there silently and wait on him. Maybe this would work out to Trainner’s advantage. And maybe agreeing to this would throw Troy enough of a bone to keep him off of Trainner’s back for a while. Yes, maybe this could work.

“I see your point, Lieutenant,” Trainner said. He pretended not to notice the flicker of surprise that crossed Troy’s face. “I’ll modify the plan. Dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir.” Troy quickly saluted and left.

Trainner pulled a datapad over and got to work.

Team Dorn sat at a small table in a corner of the empty Special Forces briefing room. Troy and Zyrytchev were going over details of the Imperial base’s layout and defenses. Next to them, Kicktar was helping Darin finalize the list of what the Rebels would be delivering to the Imperials on Braycot Five. Darin had recently gotten out of the morning’s solid session of training made mandatory for the Coronas by Trainner, and he and Kicktar were skipping lunch

to work on the list. Darin tried not to think about it much since he'd really wanted to see how Quiver was doing, but this was Darin's only opportunity to work before the equally-solid afternoon training session began.

The pilot was surrounded by scattered piles of datacards and datapads while working on a datapad of his own. He picked up another, swapped cards in it, and searched for the paragraph he needed in the document it contained. Blast, the shipping regulations for that moon were confusing. Between drowning in red tape with all the Imperial regulations and the Herglics' unusual local requirements, finding the right rules and forms for each item was taking him five times as long as it would have on his homeworld. And if he messed any of this up, questions would be asked and the entire team could be compromised. Maybe even the whole mission.

The briefing room door opened, and Traineer walked in. "Are you done with that equipment list yet?" he asked.

"Almost there, sir," Kicktar said.

"We need that information. It takes time to pull these things from our inventory, especially if they're on one of the other ships in the fleet, and get them cleaned and packaged. What's taking so long?" Traineer strode over to Darin and picked up the datapad Darin had been working on, the one he was using to jot down jumbled notes and make a preliminary chart of forms needed for each potential item. Traineer started scrolling through it. Darin opened his mouth to explain it but thought better of it.

"They're going as fast as they can, Colonel," Troy interjected. He'd been following their progress and helping when needed. "It's a matter of—"

Traineer interrupted. "What is this gibberish?" he demanded, pointing at the information on the datapad. "The stock clerks will never be able to use this! It makes no sense! How are they supposed to read this list?"

"Um, sir, that's not the list. Those are my notes for the shipping documents," Darin tentatively replied.

Traineer skewered him with a sharp look. "Then where's the list? Why are you wasting time with this when you're supposed to be giving me a nice, clean list of items to deliver to the Imperial base? We need that first, and we need it now!"

"Sir, the shipping documents we need for different parts are one of the main criteria we're using to determine what to put on the list. We can't get some documents in time for certain items, so then we eliminate those items as candidates and—"

"I'm not interested in your excuses, Flight Officer," Traineer snapped. Darin was taken aback. What excuses? "Just get it done! And after you're done with the list, make sure you have everything ready to get those things through any orbital customs the Imperials may have."

Darin blinked. "Orbital customs, sir?" he ventured. Traineer had told him yesterday they wouldn't need to concern themselves with customs. And if those documents took half as long as the planetary shipping forms did...

"Yes. You're flying Teams Aurek, Cresh, and Dorn to the surface in one of the onboard shuttles under the Pinnacle Shipping guise. We may need to be very transparent to the Imperials so we won't arouse suspicion, which means a possible full customs inspection." He tossed the datapad back on the table, and then took a datacard out of his pocket and handed it to Troy. "Here's the new plan. Implement it."

Darin pushed his multitude of questions to the side for now. There would be time later to figure out why he was suddenly flying a shuttle instead of an X-wing, and what it meant that the other teams were coming with him. He settled for asking the single most pressing question in his

mind. “Sir, I— doing all the customs preparations along with the list is going to take a while. May I please have permission to hold off on the afternoon training session until after the list is done?”

Trainee’s expression darkened, and Darin instantly knew he’d made a mistake. “No, you may not. You’re expected to complete all the training just like everyone else. You knew the schedule. You should have had the list done by now anyway!”

Kicktar spoke up again. “Sir, we’ve been working on it. But the schedule is very aggressive, and since this list is understandably a higher priority than their training session—”

Trainee ignored her, and even cut her off by barking at Darin, “You’re here to handle this shipping stuff, so *handle it* already! Unlike your regular CO, I expect results! Starting now, Flight Officer, the amount of time that it takes you to get the finalized, legible list to me is the amount of time you’ll spend on KP duty tonight.”

“But sir,” Darin protested, “with the training sessions—”

“Plus an extra thirty minutes for making excuses!” Trainee interrupted. The colonel turned and headed for the door.

At that, Darin could only sit there speechlessly, which in hindsight he imagined was probably for the best. Troy, however, stood and firmly said, “Colonel—”

“As you were, Lieutenant.” Trainee kept walking and didn’t look back. Soon the door shut behind him.

Kicktar and Zyrytchev both looked at Darin, who was quickly transitioning from speechless to fuming. “Wow,” Kicktar said at last. “That took cranky to a whole new level.”

“That is *not fair*,” Darin finally bit out when he found his voice again. He could feel the heat in his cheeks. “We’ve been working on this list! I’m not trying to delay it or anything! I just thought he wanted it done *right!*”

“If it is not right, he will punish you for that as well, Pilot,” Zyrytchev said.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Kicktar said to Darin. “He’s been kind of a grump with the other Coronas, but whenever he wants to take something out on someone, he goes straight to you. Don’t you feel special?”

“Is there some reason he does not like you in particular?” Zyrytchev asked. “Something we should know about?”

“I don’t know why he’s acting that way to me. I’d barely interacted with him before this. I’ve never done anything to him,” Darin said.

“Well, he thinks you did,” Kicktar said. “And as much as I hate to say it, I doubt we’re going to get this done before your afternoon training starts, so is he going to count those hours you’re in his mandatory training against you for this delivery time?”

Zyrytchev nodded. “I believe he will.”

“All right, everyone,” Troy growled as he retook his seat. “Let’s get back to this list, you too, Zyrytchev, and hustle it up. We don’t need to be wasting time chatting. I’ll join you as soon as I dig through these new details. I have a feeling we’ve got a lot to change and not much time to do it.”

Darin glared at the closed door for a moment longer, then he grumbled to himself and went back to his datapad.

“*Starfall?*” Mackin repeated incredulously. “What do you mean they’re taking *Starfall?*”

“I mean they’re taking *Starfall*,” his temporary supervisor, Kennen, said. “Colonel

Trainneer demanded a shuttle in two days for his mission in addition to *Starsmoke*, and *Lodestar* won't be put back together from her overhaul until that afternoon at the earliest. That leaves *Starfall*."

Mackin turned to look at the Gymsnor-2 Light Freighter. The thing was broken more often than it was spaceworthy. And this, of course, was one of the former times. The few times he'd had to fly it around the fleet for something, he'd hated it and had always made certain Snubber knew how to contact his wife for next-of-kin notification.

"And *Lodestar* is definitely not an option? No shortcuts we can take or things we can skip?" Mackin asked. The Ghtroc 580 was a much better ship, and of course was in much higher demand, necessitating more frequent preventative maintenance.

Kennen shook his head. "Her hyperdrive's all torn apart for her 1000-hour inspection. Been working on it for days already. The colonel may expect us to materialize a working ship out of thin air at the drop of a hat, but it just doesn't work that way. With the short notice he's giving us and the hard schedule constraints, he's getting *Starfall*."

Kennen handed Mack a datapad. "Here's the list of parts we need to get her most essential systems up and running in time. Go grab them from stock. Luckily we'll be getting a few of the X-wing techs to help with her since the repair priority on those just got pushed way down."

"They did?" Mack asked, his brow furrowing as he took the datapad.

Kennen held his hands up, palms out. "I know you want to know, but that's all the info I got. They don't bother telling us anything around here."

Mack filed his questions away for later and instead quickly scrolled through the datapad's list. "I'll go get these." He trotted off. It sounded like some of his pilots were going to be on this decrepit freighter, and he'd make damn sure it was in the best condition possible.

Hue chirruped excitedly and bounded around in his cage, finally clinging sideways to the thin, open wire bars on one side. Quiver looked up from the datapad he was reading at his messy desk, then put it down and eagerly went to the door. He'd never believed CC when she'd said Hue knew when squadmates were walking down the corridor, but these last couple days Quiver had been experiencing the small avian's uncanny abilities firsthand. He only seemed to pick up groups, not individuals, and he didn't react to non-Corona personnel who passed by. Quiver wasn't sure if it was the smells, the sounds, or something else that alerted Hue to their presence. Maybe one of these days he'd experiment a little and find out.

Quiver opened the door to his quarters and poked his head out, and sure enough, he spotted the pilots down the corridor to his right and approaching. Kalre walked past Quiver with barely any acknowledgment and went to his and Chopper's quarters next door to the left. Farther down the corridor to the right, Weas walked into his own quarters, and Slurry turned into his. Quiver's eagerness evaporated when the corridor emptied with Darin nowhere in sight. He didn't see Pellicer anywhere either.

Quiver sighed and checked his chrono. It was after 2100 hours, but the others were back earlier tonight than the previous night. And Darin had been so out of it then that it wasn't even possible to have a coherent conversation. Despite Darin's much earlier start this morning, maybe tonight would be better.

When the corridor remained wingman-less for the next thirty seconds, Quiver walked

down to Slurry's quarters and pressed the door chime.

"*Tranissila*," Slurry called from inside.

Quiver opened the door but didn't go in. He kept his feet in the corridor, braced his arms on the doorway and leaned inside. "Hey there, Slurizoid," Quiver said.

Slurry clicked his teeth together and waved Quiver in with one of his lower arms. "Quiver, good to see you. Do you wish to enter?" Unlike Darin, Quiver didn't have a problem understanding Slurry's thick accent.

"Nah, I can't. Not allowed until I'm not confined to my own quarters anymore. Thanks though."

"How are you?"

"Bored. I saw you three come back. Is Darin coming soon?" Quiver hoped that didn't actually come out as needy-sounding as he suspected it did.

Slurry shook his head and sat in his desk chair, one modified to accommodate his reverse leg joints. "I am sure not. Scoop was finishing up his work with Drohner and will be here soon. But Trainner told Darin to stay and do something. I do know not what."

Quiver sighed again, deflated. The quick two-minute comm chats Darin was stealing throughout the day to check on him were appreciated, but they just weren't enough; Quiver wanted to lose himself in a long conversation with his best friend.

His gaze restlessly flitted over the walls of Slurry's room, seeking a distraction. Pellicer's half of the quarters was orderly, spartan and boring. Slurry's was more interesting: he had a holo of his "clutch", which he'd explained as comparable to his family; diagrams and charts of his other passion, biology; and four small shrines dedicated to each of the Bilgana gods. A good-sized piece of flimsi was fastened to the wall and had the rough beginnings of a sketch on it. Mптоо, Slurry's former roommate and CC's former wingman, had begun teaching Slurry how to draw. The sketch was nowhere near finished and far from being good, but Quiver thought it was supposed to be a waterfall.

"How your ribs feeling?" Quiver asked, focusing back on Slurry.

"Bad not," Slurry answered. "They are sore still when I move in ways odd or extreme, but it is nothing I can handle not."

"That's good."

"And aside from bored, how have you been doing lately?"

Quiver managed to stop himself from reflexively snapping and instead said in a fairly normal voice, "Wishing things could go back to how they were before."

Slurry nodded, and his charcoal skin flushed with a tint of green. He rubbed his thick lower hands together, hopped to his feet and paced restlessly. It was odd whenever Quiver saw him revert back to a more stereotypical Bilgana trait like that after becoming so accustomed to Slurry's mellowness.

He continued to pace and rub his taloned hands while he said, "Quiver, I have seen not you often since the mission Lokinha and have been meaning to talk to you. I am sorry for failing to cover you and Darin. I feel horrible for what happened because of it. I hope someday you can possibly... what is the word Basic... forgive me for it."

Quiver tightened his grip on the door frame and shook his head. "What happened to CC wasn't your fault. So drop it, okay?"

"But you were relying on me. I played a part large in how things unfolded. What Chopper said back then ma—"

"Don't listen to Chopper," Quiver snapped. "He doesn't know what the hell he's talking

about.” If Chopper had been right about Slurry’s share in the blame, it meant he was right about other things too, and Quiver was having a hard enough time fighting that himself for Slurry to add his agreement as well. “You just remember that the blame lies solely with the Imperials and Traineer.” *And me*, a persistent voice piped up in the back of Quiver’s mind. He tried to ignore it without much success.

Slurry stopped and faced Quiver. His four reflective eyes held that stubborn challenge Quiver saw in them so often. “And what of you?” Slurry asked as though he could read Quiver’s thoughts. Quiver hoped he actually couldn’t. He wasn’t entirely sure. “If I share no blame, then neither do you, and neither does Darin. Yet that is not how you have been acting. It has been obvious quite that you have been punishing both of you. Do tell not me that I am not at fault if you do believe not truly it. I cannot amend for what I am not allowed to amend for.”

“I am *not* punishing Darin for what happened to CC! And if he was ever around anymore you would see that!” Quiver retorted. “And I told you, I don’t blame you! Or him!”

“And you?” Slurry repeated, crossing his upper arms.

“Or me,” Quiver lied. “Look, Slurry, can we drop this already?”

Slurry sized him up, and although Quiver towered over him by nearly half a meter Quiver suddenly felt dwarfed by the Bilgana. “For now,” Slurry said at last. “I will ask again when you are open more to the discussion.”

“Fine,” Quiver said in exasperation. All he wanted was to get out of it for the moment. “So how’s the mission stuff going?”

“It is... difficult,” Slurry answered. “I will be asking for help much from Honored Ttangrsslil and Ttisstilt.”

Quiver’s eyes flickered over to the religious shrines. He couldn’t keep them straight. “And which ones are those again?”

“Honored Ttangrsslil is the Soul of the Ground. Honored Ttisstilt is the Breath of Air and Sky.” Slurry pointed out each respective shrine.

“Right,” Quiver said, nodding. “I hope they’ll help you out.”

“I will ask them to help us all, as I do always,” Slurry said. “They are generous with friends.”

“But I thought you said they bickered.”

“Only with other each.” Slurry clicked his teeth.

“Ah. Gotcha.” Quiver could suddenly relate to that a whole lot more.

Footsteps stopped behind him. “Quiver?” Pellicer asked.

Quiver pulled himself upright out of the doorway and stepped back. “Hi, Scoop.” Quiver looked both ways down the corridor again, but it was still empty. “Is Darin coming soon?”

Pellicer shook his head as he walked into the room. “I don’t know. He didn’t come with me. I think Traineer had him doing something.”

“Oh.” Quiver didn’t bother to keep the disappointment out of his voice. “Well, then, I guess I’ll let you guys unwind. G’night.” He walked slowly back to his quarters.

Inside the room, he sighed and got ready for bed early. It was bad enough dealing with CC’s absence. Darin’s absence on top of that was more than Quiver wanted to face at the moment.

Chapter Seven

It was lunchtime, and Quiver slipped through the crowded mess hall with his tray of food. Instead of stopping to talk to everyone he knew as he passed, he eagerly wove between tables and headed unerringly for his usual spot where he'd be meeting Darin.

When the table that he, Darin, and CC had always claimed for meals came into sight, Quiver pulled up short. Of course the chair beside Darin was empty. It always would be now, but Quiver still reflexively wondered where CC was whenever he saw it vacant, and it always hurt like hell when the answer came an instant later.

It was a comfort to see Darin in his normal seat, however. Darin had his head down on his folded arms and looked to be asleep. The younger pilot had already gotten his lunch, though the food was untouched. His tray was pushed aside to make room for his makeshift appendage pillow.

Quiver walked up, quietly put his own tray down, and sat in his usual spot across from Darin, but a chunk of ice formed in his gut when he looked at Darin's tray. His wingman had gotten two glasses of juice, a holdover from when CC would steal one of his drinks at every mealtime without fail. Why the hell was he still doing that? The sight, usually so normal and unremarkable, now was a sucker punch. That second glass was just sitting there, waiting for CC to grab it with a smirk.

But if that's what it was waiting for, it would be waiting forever.

And it shouldn't have been.

Anger and bitterness churned inside Quiver. If only they'd done more to get her out. If only Darin hadn't stopped him from getting to his X-wing when it really mattered. If only everything had turned out differently. He would never forgive the Imperials or the galaxy for making this sight fall under the category of "no longer normal."

He took the second glass of juice and put it out of sight on the empty table behind him. Once the offending glass was dealt with, Quiver found he could breathe a little easier.

This allowed him to focus on Darin, still asleep. Thumper was always gone now, always in training for that blasted mission they were leaving on tomorrow morning. He'd been coming back to their quarters late each night and leaving each morning before Quiver was awake. Quiver was frankly amazed that Darin had finally gotten time to eat lunch for once.

Darin probably needed the sleep, but Quiver needed the company. He reached across the table and flicked Darin's ear. "Wake up!"

Darin jumped and jerked awake. It seemed to take him a long moment to get his bearings, and then he rubbed his face and sunken eyes. "Sorry, Quiv. Didn't mean to doze off like that." He checked his chrono, pulled his tray over, and started in on his food. He didn't react to the missing drink, and that really rubbed Quiver the wrong way. Darin didn't even care enough to notice that something was different now with the drinks he'd gotten with CC in mind. It was as if he'd never gotten the second drink, as if the reason for it had never existed. How could it be so easy for Darin to get over her? Darin had acted like CC was a friend, and a good one at that. But was she really? Darin still acted weird about his friends who were killed over a year ago, but within two weeks CC was nothing more than an afterthought to him, if that. If Quiver died, would Darin just casually brush it off too? Did he really care that little?

Obviously. It was the only thing that made sense. Quiver was surprised he hadn't seen it before. Usually he could read people better than that.

Quiver shoveled a forkful of tasteless, rehydrated vegetables into his mouth and said,

“You look horrible.”

“Then I look better than I feel.” Darin offered a half-grin. “It’s good to see you. How’ve you been lately?”

“About as good as you feel.”

Darin’s small grin disappeared, and he poked at his own vegetables. “Sorry, Quiv,” he repeated. “I wish I could be around more to help. But I’m here now. Want to talk about anything?”

“No. Because all that’ll happen is as soon as we start talking about stuff, you’ll have to go back to your training and be off on that damn mission, and you won’t be around so I’ll be *alone* after churning all my thoughts up and it’ll be ten times worse. So don’t even bother,” Quiver growled.

Darin pulled back slightly and studied Quiver. Then he said, “I can still help you now. I’ve got a normal lunch break for once, and even a start would be better than nothing. And I’ll only be gone a day, but if you need someone to talk to while I’m on the mission, why not talk to Mack?”

Quiver scoffed. “So he can give me another punishment for wanting CC back? I don’t think so. Just because *you* run to him for everything and worship the ground he walks on doesn’t mean the rest of us do.”

“What?” Darin stared at Quiver in confusion, but Quiver ignored it; Darin was so blind and naive it was pathetic. He changed tacks. “Fine, then how about you talk to Ikoa?”

“CC’s roommate? Sure, *that’ll* go over well! Strine blink, did they put idiot pills in your juice or something?” Quiver snapped. He shook his head hopelessly and went back to attacking the food on his plate. He’d honestly wanted to have a good lunch with Darin, but blast it, Darin had messed everything up with that second drink, and this negative mood was too hard to shake.

Darin sighed. “Quiver, all I’m saying is—”

“Maybe that’s your problem,” Quiver interrupted. “When everything that comes out of your mouth is stupid, maybe you should take the hint about what that means. It amazes me that you can’t even *talk* without screwing up, rookie. Never realized how talented you were in that regard until now.”

Thankfully Darin shut up.

Several silent minutes later, Darin’s comlink beeped. Darin sighed again and pulled it out. “Stanic.” He sounded more tired now than he had when he’d just woken up.

Trainner’s voice invaded this last little sanctuary of Quiver’s, and he felt his hackles raise. “Flight Officer, this is Colonel Trainner. Your qualification on blaster rifles is not current. Report to the shooting range immediately to requalify.”

“But... I’m current with pistols, sir. Why do I need to qualify on rifles for this mission? My team isn’t even carrying them.”

“You had *better not* be questioning my orders, Flight Officer!”

Darin closed his eyes, bit his bottom lip hard and took a deep breath before saying, “No, sir. But sir, I just sat down to lunch. Permission to have ten minutes to finish eating?”

“Negative, Flight Officer. Since we leave tomorrow this is the only time available. Unless you enjoyed KP so much that you want more, you will get down there *now*.” The comm transmission closed.

Darin glared at the comlink in his hand. “Yes, sir,” he bit out, though Trainner would never hear it.

If the rage boiling inside was any indication, Quiver was positive he was going to

explode at any second. He ducked his head and furiously stabbed hapless morsels of food with his fork while in his peripheral vision he saw Darin shove his comlink back in his pocket and stand up. Darin took his tray but remained next to the table.

“I’m really sorry, Quiver,” Darin said softly. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

Quiver snorted darkly and didn’t look up. “I doubt it. And I doubt you’re sorry. Don’t even bother pretending like you care anymore.”

“What?! Hold on, I–”

“Look, just go! You’ve obviously got more important things to do. Don’t let insignificant little me hold you up.”

For the first time since returning from Lokinha there was heat in Darin’s voice directed at Quiver. “What the hell you talking about? You think I *want* to be doing this blasted training and mission?”

Quiver jerked his head up to glare at Darin. He couldn’t believe Darin would dare raise his voice to him when Quiver was going through so much. Some friend. “You’re running off at Trainner’s beck and call, so I’d say yes!”

“I don’t have a choice!”

Quiver’s voice grew significantly louder. “Like hell you don’t! You do! You could say no and stand up to him! Even *I* did that! I don’t believe that you can’t! It’s more like you *won’t!*” Conversations from other mess hall diners in the immediate vicinity halted, but Quiver didn’t care.

“You’re wrong! I can’t!” Darin retorted, matching Quiver’s volume. “Not without consequences for everyone else!”

“You mean Mack? Taking his side over mine now, huh?!”

“What?! Quiver, what are you *talking about?! It’s the same side!* And why do you care if I’m here or not anyway? We weren’t even talking or anything now! All you were doing was insulting me! I’d think you’d be glad I was leaving early!”

“Well I’m not! But you obviously don’t get that! And you don’t care! So forget it! Go to your damn training and leave me alone! That’s something you know how to do pretty well. Besides, with how you’re acting, I’m a lot happier when you’re not around! I’m sick of dealing with you!”

To Quiver’s surprise, Darin didn’t respond. He stood there for a long second with a hurt, stricken look on his face, then he hurried off. His limp was much more pronounced. He left his tray of mostly untouched food at the washer station, hunched his shoulders and went straight for the mess hall’s exit. He didn’t take his piece of dehydrated fruit to eat on the way to the shooting range like he normally would have.

Quiver stared after him, unwilling to believe Darin had actually left. Had left him behind, alone. Just like that. He hadn’t even tried to convince Quiver he really didn’t want to leave early for that stupid training, so that meant he did want to. Darin really didn’t care anymore. Well, to hell with him. Quiver didn’t need that kind of treatment. He was sick of hurting every time he talked to Darin, and reflecting some of that pain back to the source made Quiver feel a tiny bit better.

So what if it was obvious that Darin was hurt by Quiver’s words? Really, so what? Darin had hurt him first! He deserved it. It was completely justified, and true to boot. Let Darin dwell on that for a while. Get a taste of his own medicine.

It was completely justified.

Completely.

...Really.

Guilt churned up, renewing itself with Quiver's recent actions. As if it didn't have enough fuel from CC. Quiver slammed his fist on the table and buried his face in his hands. He couldn't tell whom he was most angry at: Trainneer, Darin, or himself. He felt so blasted out of control, and he was terrified by it. How could he stop these drastic mood swings? Was it even possible? What if it wasn't? What if he could never recover? Would he be angry and hate-filled for the rest of his life?

Of course he would. After what he did to CC, he didn't deserve to feel good ever again. How could he?

He felt so blasted alone.

A wheezing cough sounded from beside the table. "Quiver?" Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap hoarsely asked in concern. "What's going on?"

"Leave me alone, Ko," Quiver growled without taking his hands away. His chest felt tight.

"But I could hear you two from way over th—"

Quiver slapped his hands down on the table and jumped to his feet. Ikoa stepped back at his sudden movement. "Don't even start, Ikoa!" He glowered at her and immediately spun and stormed toward the exit and his quarters.

Bren Troy sank with relief onto his bed. He resisted the urge to check the chrono and find out exactly how late it was. It was late enough. He pulled off his boots and immediately felt tons better.

Two hands snaked their way up along his back and massaged the tight muscles in his neck. He smiled, closed his eyes, and leaned back into it. Now he felt tons, *tons* better.

"You were never this tight or tense when Major Brexxil was here," remarked his wife, Neala. Her massaging fingers moved down to his shoulders.

"There's a correlation there," Troy replied.

"You have to stop letting Trainneer get to you so much."

Troy sighed. "I know. But... it's not that easy."

"I know, I know. But keep trying, okay, Bren?" Neala kissed his ear and then patted him on the shoulder blade. "Go change out of that stinky uniform and then we'll talk."

"It wouldn't be so stinky if you'd get us some replacement uniforms, you know," he teased with a smile, but he did as he was asked. After a quick shower and changing into his nightclothes, Troy turned off the lights and collapsed into bed beside Neala. He appreciated that she always waited up for him even though she had duties of her own in the morning. Especially now, when her department was so swamped and the higher-ups were panicking.

She snuggled next to him, and he wrapped an arm around her. "Are you still going tomorrow?" Neala asked in what Troy had learned was her most careful casual voice.

"Yeah, we are. It should only take us about a day, though. Quick one."

"Are things any better than they were at the start?"

Troy shrugged. While he would be honest to a degree, he didn't want to let on to her just how messed up he thought Trainneer's mission plan was and all the difficulties he was positive they'd run into. Trainneer's plans tended to assume things would go perfectly on missions; the extent of his back-up plans was the mere existence of a "contingency team" that had no supplies

or Plan B's of its own. Troy suspected that the colonel thought creating contingency plans implied that the original plan could be flawed, which Trainee would never tolerate. He hadn't even learned from the Lokinha disaster. That reminded Troy: first thing tomorrow he had to exchange frequencies with Arrunes for the back-up comms the two of them were carrying. Major Brextil had never made him feel like there might be a situation where they'd have to communicate without their CO knowing, and Troy hated it.

Finally he replied, "They're getting there, though I wish we had more time to work out some of the kinks. I think my small team will be all right. Kicktar is her usual cheery self. Zyrytchev isn't happy, but it's manageable. Darin's confusing me though."

"That's the pilot, right?"

"Yeah. He started out fine, gave us lots of help with the shipping company aspect of our cover, really looked like he was trying hard with everything, and then today after lunch he just shut down. He refused to say why. I don't know what to think about that."

"Maybe he was just tired. I'm sure everything will be okay."

"I hope so. I still don't like the idea of taking starfighter pilots into the middle of a ground operation, so I told Z and Kick to watch out for him. He doesn't have the skills he needs to be safe there."

"Bren, he flies into combat all the time," Neala said. "He might go about it a different way than you, but he knows how to take care of himself, and you've done all you can to prepare him for this in the short amount of time you were given. There's nothing more you can do."

Troy shook his head. He hated hearing those words because they were never true. Besides, he'd heard them way too often since the loss of his two squads on Lokinha. The words weren't true then either. After that devastating loss, he couldn't handle someone else counting on him for protection and then ultimately letting them down. He couldn't handle more senseless deaths because his commanding officer insisted on certain things.

When he didn't reply, Neala moved even closer, and Troy felt wisps of her long brown hair on his forehead. While on duty she wore it pulled back tightly in a braid, but here in their quarters it was loose, allowing him and only him to run his fingers through it tenderly. He did so.

Neala sighed. "I always hate the night before."

He kissed her. "Me too."

It was late and he was beyond tired, but Darin was in no hurry to reach his quarters. He shuffled down the corridor, dreading his destination more and more with each step. Maybe he should just sleep on the couch in the pilots' lounge instead, but part of him was afraid that would make things worse somehow. Who knew how Quiver would interpret it?

How in the galaxy was he supposed to help Quiver through this if he never knew which version of his best friend he'd be dealing with? Where had these different versions come from anyway? And what if Quiver was being so mean because he flat-out didn't want the help, or at least didn't want Darin's brand of "help"? Darin figured he must be screwing it up pretty blasted awfully if Quiver wanted absolutely nothing to do with it or him.

Darin heaved a sigh. How Cohen had stuck by his side after Darin had lost his family and become a total mess of a person because of it was seeming more and more like nothing short of a miracle. Thinking of Cohen made Darin's empty stomach ache with a sharp pang of loneliness, and he hurriedly wiped away the first reflexive tears venturing to the corners of his eyes before

they could gather reinforcements. He missed Cohen so much. Not only could he use some advice on how to help Quiver through his loss, but Darin really just needed a friend too. The absences of both CC and Quiver were acute.

He rounded the last corner and started down Corona Squadron's housing corridor toward his quarters. He didn't expect to see Ikoa leaning with her back against the wall beside the door to her own quarters about halfway down. He'd thought she would have been asleep over an hour ago. She was staring at the corridor's opposite wall and didn't react to a technician who walked past.

Darin limped up to her. "Ko?"

Ikoa glanced at him and tried to smile without much success. "Hi, Thumper."

"You okay?"

Ikoa shrugged and looked at the deck. Darin moved beside her and mimicked her position as a wall support.

"It's too empty in there," she finally said. Her voice was still hoarse, a lingering effect of the illness she'd contracted on Lokinha, though it was improving each day Darin heard it. The small woman took a deep, rattling breath and continued, "All her stuff is packed up and gone. I... don't like being in there."

Darin nodded and said, "Too lonely. Too big of a reminder that something huge is missing, and there's no place you can look where you're not reminded of it." The churned-up homesick loneliness stabbed again, and he blinked hard to force the tears back. If even one escaped, then so help him—

"Yeah. See, I knew you'd understand. And I know things like this happen here. We're in a war. This isn't the first squadmate I've lost, or the first friend that I've lost. But... CC was special, you know? Rooming with her and being in her flight, we spent a lot of time together. I just really, really miss her." Ikoa sniffled.

She looked like she wanted to say more, so Darin waited. After several heartbeats Ikoa went on. "All this stuff gets to me sometimes. The combat and the killing and the stress. And when it did and I'd get upset about something, you know what she'd do?" A sad, strangled chuckle managed to fight its way from Ikoa's throat. "She'd reach into her side of the closet and pull out two of her general duty uniforms. They were identical down to the last thread, but she would make a big fuss while going back and forth between them, pretending to decide which one she should wear the next day. She'd hold up one and then the other, and repeat that over and over while getting increasingly distraught until she'd finally turn to me and beg me to make the decision for her. It was all just a silly act, but somehow it always made me laugh." She paused, resuming her staring at the corridor's far wall. "Turning in those uniforms was hard. I've lost that quirky way of support of hers. Don't know what I'm going to do without it."

"I know it's not the same, but you've still got the rest of us," Darin offered. "We'll do what we can to help."

"Yeah." Ikoa coughed and attempted another smile. "I didn't mean for it to sound like that."

Darin nodded. "I know what you meant though."

They waited while two techs walked by who were deep in conversation about some acronyms Darin didn't recognize, and then Ikoa hesitantly ventured, "On your homeworld... when everything happened... how did you handle the empty rooms?"

"Honestly? I ran away," Darin said.

"Oh. Though I hope you're not planning on going anywhere this time."

“No, but I’m not the one with the empty room. I’m just the one with the room that I don’t want to go back to.”

Ikoa’s questions were gentle. “Because of Quiver? What happened between you two at lunch today?”

“I wish I knew. I can’t read him anymore. One minute he doesn’t want me out of his sight, the next minute he can’t stand me and accuses me of things I didn’t do.” Darin chewed hard on his bottom lip and forced his voice to not waver. “I don’t know what I did to make him hate me so much.”

“He doesn’t hate you. He just doesn’t know how to deal with this and he’s taking it out on you.”

Darin shook his head. “I don’t think so. There’s more to it than that.” He looked down and then sideways at her. “Will you do me a favor and keep an eye on him while I’m gone? He’s really been concerning me, and I’m going to be completely helpless to do anything because of this blasted mission.”

“Of course,” Ikoa replied. “Along those lines, can we swap favors? I’d appreciate it if you can keep an eye on Scoop during the mission for the same reasons.”

Darin furrowed his brow. “He’s not on my team, but I’ll try. Is he having problems?”

“He won’t admit it, but I think so,” Ikoa said. “He thinks he failed her as her wingman in that dogfight. He’s got it more under control than Quiver does, obviously, but I’m still a bit worried about him.”

“Okay. I’ll do what I can,” Darin said.

Ikoa smiled, and then they paused at the sound of footsteps approaching from farther down the corridor. Lt. Weas was coming from the direction of Commander Mackin’s office and looked as exhausted as Darin felt.

As Weas passed the pair, he glanced at them and mildly said, “Get some sleep, Darin.”

“Yes, sir,” Darin replied. He and Ikoa watched as Weas turned into his own quarters and shut the door behind him.

Darin let out a long exhale and reluctantly pushed himself off of the wall. Ikoa looked undecided as to her next move until her expression changed.

“Oh, Darin, wait here one second. I have something for you.” She pushed herself upright and went into her quarters.

When she came out a few moments later, she pressed a small holomitter disk into Darin’s hand. “That’s the holo CC had displayed on her desk of the three of you all standing on your astromechs and being weird. I didn’t want to pack it up. Figured you two should have it.”

“Thanks, Ko,” he said uncomfortably. Quickly he cleared his throat and changed the subject. “Your voice doesn’t sound as scratchy. Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah, I’m getting there. Just can’t seem to kick this stubborn cough and the fatigue. The latest treatment is helping a lot, though, so I’m hoping to be back on my feet really soon.”

“Good.” Darin hesitated and glanced at the door to her room that she was avoiding. “So, I’d better go, but, um, will you be all right?”

Ikoa nodded. “Yeah. I’d better try to get some sleep too. Thanks for listening, and remember that Quiver doesn’t hate you.” She gave him a quick hug. “See you in the morning.”

“G’night.”

Ikoa turned, seemed to brace herself, and then marched into her quarters.

Darin limped to his own door but balked and stopped outside. Stalling, he opened his fingers to study the disk in his palm, then he switched it on.

An image sprang to life in the air before him, and he smiled at the sight of it. He, Quiver and CC were wearing goofy grins and trying to balance while each one precariously stood on the shoulder joints of their uncooperative astromechs in the hangar one night. Shortly after that holo had been taken, Botch and Ruby had convinced Sonic to join a game the droids had created as a result of this indignation, which consisted of ramming each other as hard as they could. The last droid who still had his pilot aboard after the impact won the round. The three pilots, with their blood-alcohol levels slightly elevated, had thought it was great fun and had clambered back onboard again and again, soon making wagers on the outcomes with some of the third-shift techs and the Quakes.

CC was in the center of the holo. On either side of her, Darin and Quiver had each begun losing their balance and had instinctively reached out for something to steady themselves. CC had grabbed them both and was trying to keep them upright while maintaining her own fragile balance.

Darin stared at it for a long minute, his smile slowly fading and then disappearing altogether.

He missed her so much. Just like he missed Cohen. It seemed like all he was capable of doing today was mourning the loss of his best friends, even the ones still physically present.

And the worst part was that this was just the start. During the slower parts of the upcoming mission, Darin wouldn't be able to distract himself by trying to help Quiver. If this was anything like other times, those would be the prime opportunities for CC's death to have an open door to barge in and assault him. It would feel like it did after Cohen and Bosko died.

The mere prospect terrified Darin deep into his core. That was something he fervently wished he'd never experience again.

Mentally he pulled back as far as he could go, away from the memories, away from the sadness, away from the hurt. CC's death was something he just flat-out couldn't afford to think about right now. He couldn't be distracted by it. He couldn't be obsessing over it. He had to be the strong one for Quiver this time and help his wingman, and that meant he couldn't afford to go to pieces, especially in the middle of a mission. And if he ever wanted to be able to help Quiver through this long-term, he needed an intact squadron to come back to, which meant he had to focus on this mission.

Besides, he couldn't go through that hell a second time. Any of it. He couldn't handle it. Without Cohen, without CC, and without Quiver, Darin didn't think he'd be able to find his way back again.

Whatever it took, however he did it, whatever tricks he used, whatever lies he told himself, he had to get CC's death out of his mind. He had to focus on anything and everything else, no matter what, because everything depended on it.

And what better way to start than to fully face the confusing brunt of the conundrum of Quiver.

Darin turned the holodisk off, steeled himself, punched in his access code and walked into his darkened quarters.

Chapter Eight

Darin hesitated just inside the entrance to the hangar, causing Quiver to almost run into him from behind.

From the moment Darin's alarm had gone off early that morning, Quiver had clung to him like a shadow. No mention of the outburst at lunch yesterday had emanated from his wingman, only a distressed sort of protectiveness that Darin was too exhausted and too confused to figure out. Quiver had constantly cracked jokes all through breakfast and on their way to the hangar, like he was desperate to make Darin laugh or... something. Darin had indeed chuckled at quite a few, but other than that he tried to stay quiet. This morning he didn't want to risk saying or doing anything that might bring Nasty Quiver out. Aside from that constant fear lurking in the back of his mind, he'd enjoyed his time with Quiver. It made him realize anew how much he'd missed it lately.

Once past the hangar threshold, that good feeling evaporated. Inside the cavernous area, last-minute preparations were being made to *Starsmoke*, *Starfall*, and two X-wings. Everyone was working to get things ready for the imminent launch, and then Darin would be flying off on a mission... without the wingman standing beside him.

Just like on Lokinha.

Darin's stomach twisted into knots. Trying to breathe in the cool air of the hangar was like trying to inhale blocks of ice.

"Darin?" Quiver asked.

Darin shook himself out of it as well as he could. "Sorry." He went forward again, though more slowly, and Quiver instantly kept pace.

Quiver stole the jacket Darin was carrying under his arm. "Always so blasted cold in here," Quiver said, draping the black jacket around his shoulders and holding it closed. "And have I told you yet that you look weird?"

"Yes, you have," Darin said mildly, trying hard to focus on Quiver's words instead of on Lokinha.

"Well, just wanted to make sure," Quiver said with a shrug. He punctuated the thought by pushing the visor of Darin's black cap down over Darin's eyes. But it was the lighthearted, teasing nature that Darin was used to from Quiver. He'd give anything to ensure that stayed around. He tried to smile as he pushed the visor back up to its proper place.

The current object of the teasing was the shipping uniform Darin wore. It was a lined, navy blue jumpsuit with a name tag and a logo that proclaimed him to be an employee of Pinnacle Shipping, a fake company name created by the Rebels for this purpose. The cap, black work boots, and black cold-weather gloves stuffed in his pocket completed the outfit, along with the matching jacket that Quiver had commandeered. Darin liked the look; he even liked the logo and the name of the company. The fake name he'd been given for this mission, however, was another story. Honestly, what kind of a name was Niylen? The instant this mission was over, he'd be happy to never be called it again.

They were nearly to the shuttles' subhangar when Ikoa spotted them and came over. "Good luck out there, Thumper," she said hoarsely. She looked between both of them and smiled a bit. Darin guessed she was happy that Quiver was interacting with him again.

"Thanks, I—" Darin stopped when he looked over Ikoa's shoulder and spotted Trainneer walking toward him from *Starsmoke*. Unlike Ikoa, Trainneer was looking between Darin and Quiver with a growing scowl on his face. Darin's stomach twisted some more, and he thanked all

that was good in the galaxy that Quiver hadn't noticed Traineer yet in the busy hangar. He steered Quiver the opposite way and motioned Ikoa with them.

"Quiv, I just thought of something," Darin said, praying he could keep Quiver's flittering attention. "Can you and Ikoa find Botch for me and tell him that while I'm gone I want him to make a list of repairs my X-wing still needs and prioritize them? I have something really boring to get done quick. Meet me in a minute." He gave Quiver a soft, casual nudge toward the Coronas' subhangar. Ikoa looked puzzled until Darin gave her a subtle nod toward Traineer. She looked, and then comprehension clicked in her features.

"Okay. I'm glad you're sparing me from something boring. I trained you well," Quiver said.

"You did," Ikoa confirmed. She took the jacket off Quiver and handed it back to Darin. "Give your wingman his jacket back, silly. Now come on, I think I spotted Botch over here a minute ago." She took Quiver's arm and hooked her elbow in his.

"Really? Good, this'll be easy then. I like easy," Quiver said.

Darin flashed Ikoa a tired smile of gratitude before she led Quiver away, and the pair moved into the Coronas' subhangar and deeper into the din. Darin turned back and waited for Traineer to approach.

When Traineer saw that he had Darin's attention, he stopped where he was and glared pointedly. A quick jerk of Traineer's head toward the deck directly in front of him told Darin all he needed to know.

The pilot sighed and walked the remainder of the distance to the lieutenant colonel. Whatever he wanted, it couldn't be good. When Darin reached him, Darin stopped and fulfilled his obligation to salute. "Sir."

"Flight Officer, did you just get here?" Traineer demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"Where have you been?! Off chatting with your appalling wingman and wasting time we don't have? You were supposed to get those crates loaded onto *Starfall* already! Now it'll interfere with your pre-flight schedule and it'll make all of us late!"

Surprise overrode his immediate desire to defend Quiver, and Darin could only blink. This was news to him. "Um, sir? What crates was I supposed to load?"

"Those!" Traineer pointed back at a group of crates beside the Gymsnor-2, and as he did so he ended up also pointing directly at Lt. Troy as he walked up.

"Colonel?" Troy asked carefully. He was dressed identically to Darin. "Is there something I can help with?"

"You can get this lazy, worthless pilot loading those crates double-time like he's supposed to before our entire schedule is thrown off!" Traineer shot back.

Troy shook his head. "Sir, I took Flight Officer Stanic off that task yesterday when I did the final schedule revisions. The cargo droids are loading all the crates now, and they'll be done well ahead of time. I saw no reason for him to be involved with it at all."

Traineer exhaled forcefully. "Lieutenant, how many times have I told you not to mess with my schedules?! And you—" He turned his glare to Darin. "I'm fed up with your behavior and your attitude! Shape up and get your head in the game if you want a squadron to come back to!" He whirled and returned to where Major Linnme was waiting by *Starsmoke*.

Darin was equally fed up. Growling under his breath, he threw an acidic look at Traineer's back and spun, stalking off to where *Starfall* waited.

He'd only made it three steps before Troy said, "Darin, wait."

Darin stopped and took a second to hide as much of his foul mood as he could before turning back to Troy. “Sir?”

There seemed to be a lot Troy wanted to say, and he appeared to cycle through several candidates in his mind before he finally settled for, “Are you ready to go? I’m still concerned about how you were acting yesterday.”

“Yes, sir,” Darin lied. “Just have to prep our ship.”

“Good.” Troy nodded once and jogged back to the Special Forces personnel spilling in and out of *Starsmoke*.

When Darin reached *Starfall*, Mack stepped forward from where he’d been taking some system readings with a datapad. “She’s as good as we could get her, Thumper,” Mack said. “The shields have some power fluctuations, and we can’t get the inertial compensator calibrated exactly right. It might feel a little weird during hyperspace transitions or extreme maneuvers, but it should be safe. Watch for coolant leaks in Engine 2. Did you have a chance to get any sim time in?”

“Yes, sir. That was the last thing I did yesterday,” Darin said.

“Good. And your pack is in the cockpit. Any questions?”

Darin shook his head. “No, sir. Thank you.”

“All right. Be careful, okay? I want all of you back here in one piece.”

“Me too, sir,” Darin said.

Mack forced a smile and clapped Darin on the shoulder before turning back to the system readings and flagging down a maintenance droid.

Trying to stop his mind from making more parallels with the Lokinha mission when he split up from Mack, Darin stepped into the light freighter, tossed his jacket by his pack in the cockpit, checked the security of the crates that were already loaded, and walked out again to do *Starfall*’s pre-flight.

He was examining some unidentified gunk on a thruster housing when Quiver joined him again. “Message delivered,” he reported. “Botch said, ‘Blat squawk beep beep boop beep.’ Or maybe it was ‘beep boop beep beep.’ I dunno what it meant.”

“Thanks, Quiv.” Darin offered a small smile. “And Botch has the text readout display, remember.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot. Eh, it doesn’t matter much anyway what he said. Botch will do what he wants to do.” Quiver shrugged.

“Yeah, that’s true. Sonic’s easier to work with.” Darin classified the unidentified gunk as benign and did a quick visual sweep of that set of thrusters to make sure there was no large debris lodged in them.

There was a pause, and then Quiver’s voice turned as hard as carbonite. “So you’re really going on this damn mission?”

Darin closed his eyes for a moment as dread filled his gut. Why the switch? What had he done wrong? And why now? “Yes, I am,” he said calmly. “What do you think I’ve been preparing for these last few days?”

“I thought something would change. That maybe Trainneer would call this off,” Quiver growled. “Or maybe, just maybe, that you’d realize what a stupid jerk you’re being by going along with this and decide not to go. Guess my expectations were too high. Guess I should have lowered my standards.”

“Quiver, please,” Darin pleaded, turning to look up at his wingman. “I don’t want to fight.”

“Obviously!” Quiver bit out. “Otherwise you’d be fighting for yourself and fighting for your squadron. But that’s too much to ask, isn’t it? It’s too much to ask that you care enough about us to say no to a crazy mission that all of you shouldn’t even be on. Or that you care enough about yourself to not go into a situation you’re not trained for so you survive and I can see you again. If you’re not going to care, then why should I? And why is it always you who has to go off alone on these insane missions?! I’ve spent these past days worrying that Trainner would get you killed too. But it would be me, not you, who’d have to deal with things then, so, so what, right? What would it matter to you? Nothing! If you’re going through with this without a fight, then you don’t care about yourself or any of us, and I’m going to stop wasting my energy caring about you in return. Strine blink, Darin, I thought you were my friend! I tried to figure out when you stopped having my back, but then I realized you probably never had it to begin with!” Quiver’s face was bright red from his anger, and he whirled and stormed off.

Too many emotions to count ripped through Darin, but one finally stayed long enough for him to act on it. Hot anger jolted him out of his paralysis and he ran, limping, after Quiver. “Quiver!” he snapped. When he caught up he grabbed Quiver’s arm and yanked him around. “Wait!”

Quiver lashed out and swung a wild fist at Darin’s face. Shocked, Darin barely managed to block it in time; Quiver was off-balance, and his shoulder must still have been sore enough to slow the punch’s speed.

Without thinking, Darin grabbed Quiver’s upper arms and twisted around and down, throwing Quiver to the deck on his back in an illegal donri tackle. Without letting go, and falling to his knees with him, Darin pinned his arms down and leaned over him. “Will you just listen to me?!” Darin yelled.

“Get off me!” Quiver shouted back, struggling.

Darin held fast. “This isn’t my choice! I don’t want to do this mission! Why won’t you believe me? Why can’t you see that I’m doing this for ev—”

Darin’s torso and arms were squeezed together from behind, and with a heave Darin was bodily lifted up and off of Quiver. Darin flailed, but his feet couldn’t reach the floor.

“Damn it, put me down!” he loudly demanded over his shoulder at whoever was holding him up. A few seconds later his boots touched the deck again, and he was released. Quiver had disappeared.

With a caustic scowl, Darin whirled around to find that it was Mackin who had pulled him off of Quiver. The commander was wincing and favoring his left side where he’d been shot on Lokinha, but for once Darin felt no sympathy.

“Now do you believe me when I say I don’t know how to help him?!” Darin retorted. He stomped off back toward *Starfall*.

“Darin, hold up, I—”

“No.” Darin spun around and walked backwards for a few steps, holding up a warning hand. Mackin halted his pursuit. “Just— just leave me alone, Commander.” Darin threw down both of his hands as if they could fling away all the negative thoughts boiling inside, and he returned to *Starfall*.

He couldn’t remember a pre-flight ever feeling that long before.

The four Rebel ships launched. Slurry and Kalre each flew an X-wing; Private Dazara, as

the Special Forces squad's pilot, flew the Gamma-class assault shuttle *Starsmoke* with the commandos of Team Besh aboard; and Darin got an early start on his cover identity's role by flying the Gymsnor-2 freighter *Starfall* with Teams Aurek, Cresh, and Dorn aboard. Under the new plan, Kalre and Slurry would spend the entire mission in their X-wings on the airless moon Braycot Six, waiting out of sight in case any of the other two ships needed fighter assistance. *Starsmoke* would hide with them except for the time they were completing their portion of the mission on one of the ring comm stations. *Starfall* would bring the ground teams in by utilizing the freighter's smuggling compartments while Darin and the rest of Team Dorn played through the Pinnacle Shipping guise if questioned.

At least they didn't have to do the rock-hopping anymore. Darin was positive that would have killed or injured them all. This modified plan actually sounded better for the Coronas' overall role, though Kalre was going to go stir-crazy being stuck in his fighter for so long, especially after he'd been the only Corona who'd been enthusiastic about doing the Special Forces mission. Darin would have gladly traded places with him.

Darin sighed, leaning an elbow on the edge of a cockpit console with his chin cupped in a hand. He kept his gaze down: the sight of hyperspace through the viewport had made him feel like he was freezing, like he had in his last hyperspace jump in his X-wing while escaping Lokinha.

The next thing he knew, he heard the door to the small cockpit open. He jumped, startled awake from having inadvertently dozed off, and he cringed, expecting to hear Trainner's sharp voice coupled with a punishment.

It was a massive relief when the mild words turned out to be Pellicer's. "Everything going okay up here?" The door shut.

"Yes, sir." At least, he desperately hoped he hadn't missed something. To confirm, Darin glanced over the consoles. Yes, all the important systems were still green. The ship was still constantly shuddering oddly, but that was due to the faulty inertial compensator and the myriad of other perpetual problems that made up *Starfall*.

"In that case, care to explain what happened with Quiver back in the hangar?"

Darin winced again. "Not particularly, sir."

"Then let me rephrase that. Spill."

Darin sighed. "If I had any idea what happened, I'd tell you, Scoop. But I don't." He swivelled the pilot's chair around to look at the lieutenant dressed in civvies. "Besides, aren't you the one who's always supposed to know what's going on? I should be asking you." He moodily punched at an inactive button on a side console.

"Yeah, but I've never really understood Quiver. I've told you that before. You have a much better grasp of his mental gears than I do."

"Not anymore." Darin pressed the button several more times before taking a deep breath. "Scoop, I've been thinking. About what he said to me. I'm... having a lot of trouble with it."

"Well, of course you are. Anyone would be. He wasn't exactly Mr. Congenial Morale Officer back there."

"It's not that. Well, it is, but that's not what I'm talking about." Darin tried to marshal his scattered, conflicting thoughts. "Quiver's convinced I'm hurting everyone by agreeing to go on this mission in these roles and in our condition. I know you feel the same way. But Snubber's convinced that we'd hurt everyone by *not* going on the mission. That's what I thought too. Now after what Quiver said, I'm not so sure I made the right choice anymore, but the alternative is horrible too. So what do you do when the only two options you have are bad ones? Mistakes?"

Pellicer didn't hesitate. "You make the choice that allows you to look in the mirror afterward."

"But... without hindsight, how do you know which that is?"

"Your gut knows long before hindsight ever will. In this occupation, you wouldn't still be alive if you hadn't learned to trust your instincts, so just keep doing that. Our gut knows a lot more than our head most times."

Darin fiddled with the button again. "My gut's been wrong more often than not lately. I don't trust it anymore."

"Then you'd better change that right now. Right away." Pellicer's tone was dead serious. "Not trusting your gut is the surest way to get killed, and you can't afford to be second-guessing it right before a mission."

"Easier said than done," Darin mumbled, a bit too loudly. Pellicer took a breath to reply, but Darin cut him off. "It's fine, don't worry about it. I'll figure it out."

Pellicer gave him a look. "I can try to help, you know."

"Thanks, but I'm fine." Darin fidgeted. "It's not like we're supposed to have any big involvement in this mission anyway, right? The Special Forces personnel are doing all the work, like Trainee keeps telling us."

Pellicer shrugged, looking unconvinced. "I just don't want to see anything happen to you too. I'm kind of considering you my... what's a good term for it... step-wingman for this mission."

Darin was surprised at how touched he felt at those words. At least someone still wanted him as a wingman. Then something about them reminded him of what Ikoa had told him, and he looked at Pellicer more closely. "Scoop?" he ventured cautiously. He wasn't sure how far to take this. "You know it wasn't your fault, right? That she got shot down?"

Pellicer didn't acknowledge the words or react for a long moment. At last he said instead, "Let me know if you want any help before we land. This is a selfish notion on my part anyway. If something happens to you down there and we come back to *Star* without you, this old bucket won't have a chance of surviving the onslaught from Quiver's X-wing." He headed back into the aft compartment.

When the door slid shut behind him, Darin said softly, "I think you'd be surprised about that." He spun his chair back around and returned most of his attention to the control consoles.

Chapter Nine

The planet Braycot was a swirling, chaotic mass of red and crimson, scarlet and ruby. It filled most of *Starfall*'s viewport as the light freighter approached. The bloodied hues washed over the massive ring system, casting them with an angry tint. Small, rocky moons, their pale grey colors a dull neutrality in the midst of the planet's vibrancy, orbited the gas giant. Some huddled close for protection; others strayed far away, guarding the perimeter.

Darin couldn't see the fifth moon. The Rebels' hyperspace exit vector had purposefully placed them on the opposite side of the gas giant from it. Due to the powerful monitoring stations the Rebels had fallen into comm silence the instant they reverted to realspace. *Starsmoke* and the two X-wings circled around the far side of the planet to Braycot Six, while Darin split off from them and put the ship on the shortest orbital vector to Braycot Five.

The magnificent display of planetary rings looked solid from a distance but cracked and eventually broke up into individual pieces and chunks of orbiting rock and ice as Darin flew closer. Yes, he was definitely glad he wasn't rock-hopping now.

Darin steered well clear of the TIEs patrolling in orbit and near the comm stations in the rings, and their encounter with an Imperial customs frigate went quickly and smoothly. Soon the gas giant was behind them while *Starfall* dropped through the thin atmosphere of the large moon Braycot Five.

When they fell through the lower layer of clouds on the day side, Darin almost didn't realize they'd broken free of them. Snow coated the moon's surface and turned the low hills a glaring white, though it was tinted with a soft red cast from the gas giant. His mouth quirked a reflexive smile. Except for the crimson hue, this view looked like home.

A little farther on a settlement became visible. Snow was scraped away, revealing wide, dark roads winding around like spilled ink. The relative size of the buildings made Darin check his altimeter in concern, but no, he was still a safe height above ground and wasn't as close to them as it looked. This had to be one of the Herglic villages then, with their large buildings towering in the air. In the center of the village massive amounts of steam rose out of four large, fissured craters in the ground. There was no snow around the craters, only muddy grey soil.

The navicomp led them to their destination, a darkened warehouse on the edge of the village. The building was large even by Herglic standards, and it was a simple matter to fly the shuttle through the open vehicle door and land inside. The interior was dirty and mostly empty except for a few large items here and there that had grimy tarps thrown over them. Frost covered the windows and muted the daylight spilling inside.

Darin powered down *Starfall* and heard everyone in the aft section moving around and preparing to disembark. When he was finished, Darin grabbed his jacket and went to join them.

The commandos all had weapons out and readied themselves, circling the interior of their hatch. At a nod from Trainner, Troy opened the hatch and led them out. They fanned out, alert and searching for any threats. Trainner stayed back with the pilots.

The incoming rush of freezing air blasted against Darin's face while he waited inside the ship. He gave one large, involuntary shiver, then he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. The cold air filled his lungs and tingled on the inside like it always did. He loved that sensation. Darin slowly let his breath out and opened his eyes in time to see his condensed breath dissipate into the air. Quiver would have been insufferable with the temperature, but he wasn't here, and that meant for once Darin could enjoy the cold weather. It was almost enough to make him forget everything else.

“Clear, sir,” Troy called.

Traineer walked out, and the three Coronas followed. Darin had to adjust to the feel of the lighter than standard gravity, and the lower oxygen content in the atmosphere made him feel a bit lightheaded, but it wasn't anything he couldn't get used to. Weas and Pellicer huddled in their jackets, but Darin only fastened his up halfway.

“Where is she? She was supposed to meet us here when we landed,” Traineer said, gazing around the inside of the warehouse impatiently.

As if on cue, there was the sound of a door opening part of the way down, and it echoed in the empty warehouse. Droner was the closest, and he jerked his blaster up in that direction. “Boss, we got company,” he called to Troy. Troy immediately headed toward him.

From the shadows engulfing the door stepped a tall, older woman with weathered, dark brown skin and greying black hair pulled into a severe bun. She wore nondescript civilian clothes and a thick jacket, and she kept her empty hands out to the sides in plain view. “The Hutt ship left two hours ago,” she said in a husky voice.

“Then we'd better make sure they paid up,” Troy replied, completing the exchange of identity code phrases. He visibly relaxed, and all the commandos lowered their weapons.

The newcomer smiled and approached. “Glad you all made it. I'm Gundark, Rebel Intelligence.”

Troy beckoned her toward *Starfall*. “I'll introduce you to the colonel.”

Troy and Gundark walked to where Traineer stood at the bottom of the ramp to *Starfall*'s side hatch. The Intel operative struck up a conversation with the Special Forces CO while Troy drifted back to his commandos.

Soon Traineer called all the Rebels to him, and they gathered around. Traineer cleared his throat. “I've just spoken to Gundark, our local Intel contact. Everything at the Imperial base is nominal, and the mission is a go. Team Aurek, we'll be staying in this warehouse with *Starfall*. Lieutenant Troy, signal Team Besh and tell them to get ready to go to the ring comm station per the schedule. Team Cresh, Gundark will get you your uniforms and Imperial IDs, and she'll show you the speeder you'll use to get to the base. Team Dorn, your rented freight landspeeder is over there.” The colonel pointed to something large covered with several dirty tarps. “Get it loaded and ready. Everyone, let's go. Move out. Stick to the schedule and get this done.”

The commandos responded with a resounding affirmative and immediately set about doing their tasks. The pilots went with a less enthusiastic step. Darin limped over to the covered speeder.

He pulled the tarps off and stepped back to regard the vehicle. He didn't recognize this particular make and model of freight landspeeder, but it looked similar enough to the ones he'd flown with Merrilan Transport and Shipping for him to not be concerned. It was white with a large Pinnacle Shipping logo on the side, possibly a decal. It had a wide front passenger cab, and the aft two-thirds of the landspeeder consisted of an enclosed cargo area. Darin opened the pilot's door and peered inside.

The front bench seat was long enough for three people to easily sit across it. There were two jumpseats in the back along the sides, and the area between the jumpseats was open; Zyrytchev could probably fit there comfortably. Immediately aft of the jumpseats was a partition that only came halfway up. Looking closer, Darin saw that the cargo area could be divided off completely; a strong wire mesh was hinged to the top of the partition and could be raised to close the gap to the speeder's ceiling. Darin left the wire mesh hanging down against the partition,

keeping the top half open. They wouldn't be stacking the crates high enough for the top divider to be necessary.

Over the partition the cargo space was visible. It was roomy and large, just the way Darin liked it. Eyeballing the interior height of the speeder's box enclosure, he guessed he could stand up straight inside without hitting his head.

"How's it look?" Troy asked from behind him.

Darin shrugged and pulled back from the doorway. Kicktar and Zyrytchev flanked Troy, and Darin took another reflexive step away from Zyrytchev. Kicktar's uniform was similar to the humans' but with modified gloves and without a cap. Zyrytchev had a heavily adapted version comparable to his Rebel uniform: it fit like a long shirt over his torso, and a second section draped over his lower back and was secured over his six short legs. He had no cap nor gloves, and his flattened, three-toed, clawed feet remained bare. He didn't look any less threatening, and scars on his back and arms were visible. "Fine enough, sir," Darin said. "We'll have plenty of room in there for what we brought and the four of us."

Zyrytchev's massive, fanged mouth frowned, and he hissed. "Even for me, Pilot?"

"I think so." Darin stepped back farther and invited him forward. "See what you think."

Zyrytchev squinted into the depths of the speeder and finally drew back. "The ceiling height is low, but the rear seating area is sufficient."

"Good," Troy said. "So Darin, show us how to load the crates in."

"Yes, sir."

Team Dorn was carrying the first of the crates from *Starfall* to the landspeeder when a nearby door in the warehouse opened, and Pellicer and Drohner emerged wearing the Imperial uniforms Gundark had brought for them.

Disconcerted, Darin had to force himself to not stare. Though nothing had outwardly changed on Pellicer aside from the clothes he wore, he now exuded Imperialness so much that deep down, for a split second Darin had instinctively feared for his life. Maybe it was Pellicer's bearing, his demeanor, or his stance. Or maybe it was simply the uniform amplifying those qualities and focusing them all together into the package that made up a soldier of the Empire. But whatever it was, Darin was suddenly glad that CC wasn't there to see the very thing she'd worked so hard to get Pellicer to move beyond and leave behind.

He shook his head hard. He couldn't think about CC now. Darin ruthlessly pushed the memories from his mind and walked as quickly as he could toward the landspeeder.

He'd long ago learned how to lose himself in the loading procedures.

Chapter Ten

For the first time since the start of the Lokinha mission, Darin was happy.

Deep down he felt guilty, like he shouldn't be. After all, it was wrong to be happy after everything that had happened with Quiver and Lokinha. Plus it was the beginning of a mission for which he had little training and experience. He should be too nervous to see straight.

But he was too happy to be nervous.

Something about being at the controls of a freight landspeeder and in the uniform of a shipping company, even a fake shipping company, made Darin feel normal again, the most normal he had felt since before the Imperials' occupation of his hometown nearly a year and a half ago. His thoughts and feelings harkened back to a time when everything was right with the galaxy and he was doing the job he would have happily spent the rest of his life doing. He wasn't a death-marked Rebel dealing with Imperial brutality and mortal danger. He was an everyday delivery pilot.

He knew it wasn't the same as it had been. It never would be. But it was close enough.

"I do not like this," Zyrytchev stated for at least the fifth time since they'd landed on Braycot Five. In the back seating area, the Sludir restlessly checked his blaster for the tenth time while they flew toward the Imperial base.

"Will you put that thing back in its storage compartment already?" Kicktar asked in exasperation from her seat across from him. "If this speeder jostles wrong you'll hit the trigger and end up killing someone."

"I do not like being unarmed in a situation where I am being made artificially vulnerable," Zyrytchev growled. "While acting as the so-called 'servant' I am not socially allowed to defend myself or fight back if I am in danger. This role takes away my technological weapons as well as my natural ones. It is making me defenseless."

Kicktar shook her head and said, "Look, if we all get caught and are being used for Imperial target practice, it'll be safe to assume that they don't buy our little cover story, so then there will be no restrictions holding you back from defending yourself any way you can. None of us are carrying blasters either, and physically you'll be the one most likely to survive anything the Imps can throw at us. Us three little weakling meatbags will die instantly; you're the tank that'll just keep powering through everything and make it out."

There was a pause, and then Zyrytchev remarked, "You do not often speak sense, Kicktar, but in this case you do. I see your point. I am grateful."

Trying to get a feel for how to react to the strange conversation behind him, Darin glanced sideways at Troy where he sat in the front passenger seat. Troy was looking out the front viewport and not paying obvious attention to the other two commandos, but a brief smile cracked through his game face. Darin mentally shrugged and refocused on piloting the landspeeder.

The sparsely populated town they flew through first was inhabited predominately by Herglics. Darin felt dwarfed by the huge structures, roads, and landspeeders they passed, and it threw off his sense of distance and perception. Darin urged the landspeeder up as high as it went to be more visible to Herglics flying their larger vehicles, though the freight landspeeder's altitude topped out at a couple meters above the surface.

About a half hour later the buildings grew in number and density as the Rebels entered the city limits of Bertel. At one point they crossed a street with a prominent red line running the length of the curb. Odd metal rods with strange protrusions stood about two meters tall and were placed every few meters along the red line in each direction for as far as Darin could see. On the

far side of that red line, the buildings were smaller humanoid-sized dwellings, and the size of the roads scaled down to match. No large Herglic buildings or vehicles were visible. Darin felt more comfortable on these roads.

Five more minutes passed, and Darin gradually noticed that there were no other vehicles on the road at all. The houses were shabby, dilapidated, tiny shacks, and even the road was in disrepair. Frost clung to broken windows, and snow drifts turned pinkish by the light intruded into partially open doorways. A few Nosaurians huddled together as they walked down the road, and at the sound of the landspeeder they hurriedly ducked into a nearby alley.

Darin flew along the twists of the deserted road and followed the turns with some difficulty. But when the main highway Darin thought he had been on inexorably narrowed and came to a dead end, Darin stopped and looked around. Troy shifted his weight and aimed a questioning gaze his way.

“Um, can any of you read Nosaurian?” Darin asked.

“Why?” Kicktar replied.

“Because I have no idea what these street signs say.”

Kicktar laughed, a husky, gravelly Mon Cal chuckle. “Did you just get us *lost*? Ha! Oh, the others will love to hear this story.”

“Sure thing. Tell me how to get back to them, and I’ll tell it myself,” Darin said. He turned the speeder around and proceeded slowly while looking for landmarks or anything he could read. He’d studied the route beforehand and was sure he’d gone the right way... If only Team Dorn didn’t have such a small window of time to get to the Imperial loading dock and pick up the datacard, Darin would have been able to avoid the Nosaurian part of town altogether and stay on the main highways. But those would take longer both in distance and in dealing with congested traffic, so Darin had determined he needed to take this shortcut to stay on schedule. If he’d messed this up by getting delayed and lost, Traineer would kill him and scatter the other Coronas to the winds. His happy feeling started to dim. In his mind’s eye he desperately retraced his route, looking for where he went wrong.

Troy pulled up a map on his datapad and studied it. “Well, surprise surprise, the Imperial-issued map of Bertel doesn’t list the names of the roads in the Nosaurian section of the city. They barely even show them on here. How’d you even get us this far anyway? But I think... this is where we are.” He pointed to the screen.

Darin pulled over and stopped, then leaned over to look. He thought hard, comparing roads and locations in his mind, and then shook his head. “No, we’re not there. We’re more over... here.” He pointed once he located the correct spot.

“Over there?” Troy peered more closely. “Are you sure? That doesn’t look right at all.”

“I’m sure. And according to this, there’s a pretty large Nosaurian road nearby that will take us to this smaller road that will connect us to the Bertel highway we want.” Darin traced the route with his finger, committed it to memory, and sent the speeder decisively forward.

Troy didn’t look convinced. “I don’t remember seeing that intersection. If we get lost and turned around here we’ll miss our window of opportunity for the pickup.”

“We’re not lost. Not anymore.”

“You’d better know where you’re going.”

Darin partially retraced their path and then cut down a side street and two tight alleys, and he grinned in relief when they emerged onto the Bertel highway he’d been looking for.

Beside him, Troy relaxed a little. “Good.”

“That wasn’t the first time I’ve been lost on a delivery,” Darin said lightly. “The lack of

Basic was a challenge, though. We're back on course. Next stop: deep within the grasp of our mortal enemy."

Zyrytchev piped up from the back. "Pilot, you need to stop listening to Kicktar."

Sergeant Avis Hozke rocked backwards in his chair and supported the back of his head with his interlaced fingers. The warehouse had been quiet since the other teams and Gundark had left. Across the table, Colonel Traineer kept a half-hearted eye on a datapad before him. With his back to Traineer, Lieutenant Weas had an exterior panel taken off of *Starfall* and was casually inspecting something inside it. He held a datapad that was connected to a port inside the panel. Every now and then he pressed a button on the datapad, though he barely seemed to be looking at it. Maybe running a diagnostic? Fixing something? Optimizing something? Hozke didn't know, but Weas mostly seemed to be staying away from the Special Forces leader. Neither of them had said a word to or acknowledged the other in... Hozke didn't know how long.

"Well, this is fun," the medic piped up.

Neither responded. Hozke wished he wasn't stuck here with the two sticks-in-the-mud while the others got to do the exciting stuff.

Bored, Hozke finally stood, shoved his gloved hands in his jacket pockets, and wandered over to *Starfall*. Too bad it was the homely little Gymsnor-2 here instead of the X-wings. Those starfighters were impressive machines. Maybe he could cajole one of the Coronas into letting him do a sim run for fun some day.

Hozke regarded Weas. Nope, it didn't look like he was concentrating on anything important. Probably some diagnostic. "Lieutenant Weas? While we're waiting, do you have any good X-wing stories?"

Weas looked at him with raised eyebrows. The taut expression the pilot had worn melted away into something lighter, curiosity perhaps. He fully faced Hozke and took a breath to speak, but before he could utter one word, Traineer spoke without looking up from his datapad. "Sergeant, enough chatter. Come sit down."

Weas's expression hitched and then twisted into something dark. He turned back to his datapad and the access panel.

Hozke purposefully delayed before following the pointless order. When he did start moving, he first walked into *Starfall* and grabbed his bag of medical tools and supplies, then brought it over to the table. As he reclaimed his seat he dropped the bag on the table, nowhere near hard enough to damage anything inside but enough for it to be loud. He felt a flicker of juvenile satisfaction when it made Traineer jump.

Hozke opened the bag and began inspecting and cleaning all his gear inside. He'd already done it before they'd left *Crescent Star*, but since he had nothing better to do he might as well do it again. He decided to make a game of how much he could spread things out on the table and subtly take it over millimeter by millimeter before it got in Traineer's way and the colonel said something to him.

It was times like this when he really, really missed Major Brexxil.

Sergeant Cale Arrunes finished up the final checks on his extravehicular suit in

Starsmoke's small airlock. He was crammed in there with Corporal Daeva Rayal, who was attempting to do the same thing in the tight confines. Some of the checks they needed to do for each other due to their limited maneuvering room, but at last she gave Arrunes a thumbs-up. Arrunes nodded, then he reached over the smaller woman and pressed the intraship comm button to the Arcona pilot remaining in the cockpit. "Dazara, we're good to go. Remember to maintain comm silence. Opening the outer hatch."

"We copy," Private Keza Dazara replied.

Arrunes caught Rayal's eye through their transparent helmets, and she nodded her readiness. Satisfied, Arrunes then reached over and pulled the appropriate levers to depressurize and open the airlock.

With a hiss of escaping air, the outer hatch slid aside, exposing them to space. The gas giant planet's rings stretched out before them like a massive road in the sky, though the nearest parts were close enough to make out the broken nature of them and the countless rocks and ice chunks that made up the ring. Ahead of them and not too far away— but farther than Arrunes preferred for EV ops— was the small moonlet that was their destination.

Their assigned comm monitoring station was built on that moonlet. The station wasn't large but still covered most of the moonlet's surface. A small volume that could likely be pressurized was located toward the far side of the station, and rows upon rows of processing computers and supporting equipment lined the near side. The computers and equipment had thick protective covers to guard against impacts and radiation. Beyond those structures, Arrunes could see the top edges of the huge antenna dish. Most of the moonlet had been shaped and hollowed out to transform the moonlet into a gigantic antenna. All of the ring comm stations were similar.

Luckily the stations were mostly automated and uncrewed. If there had been Imperial personnel inside, Arrunes could only imagine the convoluted scheme Trainneer would have cooked up to deal with them. This plan was bad enough and they didn't even have a crew to contend with.

Arrunes gently pushed himself out of the airlock and away from *Starsmoke*, trusting Rayal to follow. The monitoring station was so sensitive to any comm frequencies that they couldn't even risk using low powered tight-beam transmissions to each other or to *Starsmoke*.

Arrunes glided toward the station, using his suit's maneuvering jets as sparingly as possible. At last he alighted on the station, grabbing some of the outermost infrastructure to arrest his momentum. A couple meters away, Rayal did the same thing.

Together they carefully worked their way toward the main structure and the access terminals they would need. In the back of his mind Arrunes was aware of the mission's timeline and the dwindling amount of minutes they had to reach the appropriate terminal and perform their tasks. He ignored the pressure but was less successful in ignoring the frustration at Trainneer that came with it. This was an artificial deadline imposed on them simply due to how Trainneer felt his plan had to work. Instead of obtaining this data in a way that allowed them any sort of margin, Arrunes's team had to be in place and transmitting it when Team Cresh was scheduled to be ready for the download inside the Imperial base, and due to the comm silence requirement there wasn't even a way to confirm if Cresh was set. Besh had to hurry to minimize the chances of being detected and then transmit blind. It was stupid, convoluted, unnecessary, and dangerous for all of them.

At last Arrunes spotted the terminal access panel they'd been looking for, and he waved to get Rayal's attention. She immediately floated over and nodded in confirmation that it was the correct terminal. They pried the protective cover off, and then Rayal secured her feet in the low-g

foot holders at the base of the terminal, pulled her tools and datapad from her EV pouch, and went to work.

There wasn't much for Arrunes to do at that point but keep the protective cover out of her way and keep watch for anything unexpected or dangerous. Rayal was the squad's comm expert and knew her way around the communications terminal better than he could ever hope to.

The first couple minutes passed, and then a few more. Rayal's expression grew harder and frustrated as time ticked by, and her suited hands moved faster as she typed commands on the hooked-up datapad and pressed buttons on the terminal. Arrunes resisted the urge to fidget while he waited. At one point Rayal quickly checked her chrono, and Arrunes saw her silently curse before she flew back to work. Arrunes surreptitiously checked his chrono as well and mentally added a curse of his own. They were supposed to be transmitting by now, and from the looks of things, that wasn't happening quite yet.

It was another two agonizingly long minutes before Rayal hit a button on the datapad with such force and finality that even without words, Arrunes could tell it was a command and ultimatum all rolled into one. She peered intently at the datapad's display. After about ten seconds, Rayal visibly relaxed. She turned the datapad so Arrunes could see the display, and he saw the progress bar indicating that the transmission was taking place. He nodded, and then Rayal pulled the datapad back to monitor the status. The last thing they needed was for something to get hung up or delayed.

At long last, Rayal indicated that the transmission was complete. She spent another few minutes inputting more commands, then she unplugged the datapad and stowed it and her tools back in her EV pouch. The commandos reinstalled the protective cover, and then they were gliding back across the void to *Starsmoke*.

After they were safely sealed back inside the shuttle's airlock and it had begun its pressurization cycle, Arrunes pressed the intraship comm button. "Dazara, we're back onboard. Head to our staging point on Braycot Six with the X-wings. Remember, go carefully."

"Copy that," Dazara replied.

Arrunes waited impatiently for the airlock to pressurize. He probably shouldn't have added that last bit because it implied he didn't think she'd remember that very important aspect of their flights to and from the monitoring station, but he couldn't help it. He always felt antsy when Dazara flew. Like many Arconas, her eyesight wasn't as sharp as that of many other humanoid species, and it unnerved him seeing their pilot wearing large vision-enhancing lenses when she was piloting. Between that and her somewhat hot-headed nature, he found it hard to trust her on flights. Deep down he would have preferred one of the X-wing pilots to be flying *Starsmoke* if they had to be dragged along on this mission anyway, but he knew better than to voice that desire when Dazara's best friend with an equally hot head was sitting in an airlock with him. The vacuum of space was a little too close.

Finally the airlock lights flashed green, and the interior hatch to the ship unlocked with an audible click. Arrunes opened the hatch and stepped into *Starsmoke*'s access corridor. Rayal followed. At least out here they had a bit more room to remove their EV suits.

It was a relief to get the helmet off, and most of the tension bled out of Arrunes. The hardest part of his team's portion of the mission was over.

Rayal pulled off her own helmet and took a deep breath. "That was maddening," she muttered to Arrunes while she wiped sweat off her forehead. "The blasted transmission archive wasn't at all where Intel said it would be in the system. Took me forever just to find the file with the particular transmission we needed. *Then* the commands to rebroadcast that transmission

weren't working. Either the Imperials changed everything in the last few days, or whoever gave us that information didn't do a very good job of vetting it first. If the colonel reprimands me for missing our targeted transmission time, he and I are going to have words about realities in the field."

"Hopefully it won't be an issue," Arrunes said. "Drohner's on the receiving end, and he knows how things go."

"Yeah, but he's got his own time limitations," Rayal pointed out. "If he goes past his time allotment, then he's going to be late with dropping off the datacard with Dorn. These precise windows are killing us here. What's the damn point of having them? These don't have to be time-sensitive operations. There's nothing inherently time-critical about them, and we could have easily made this work without the constraints."

Arrunes didn't meet her intense stare and merely got to work taking off his EV suit. "That's what the colonel wanted," he said simply.

Rayal snorted in derision before turning her attention to her own EV suit. Arrunes secretly wished he could outwardly agree with her sentiment, but it wasn't appropriate for him to complain about their superiors to his subordinates. He only hoped Rayal was smart enough and disciplined enough to not make those feelings known to anyone above him or Troy. They had more than enough to deal with already.

Chapter Eleven

Darin's happiness was being eroded by crashing waves of anxiety when he pulled the landspeeder to a stop at the Imperial base's gate nearest the loading dock. Shipping he could handle. Acting he couldn't.

Troy must have noticed something because he murmured, "Relax."

That was easy for him to say, and easier said than done. The Imperial base was doing its best to look intimidating. Even on this end the buildings were solid and domineering, especially compared to the run-down Nosaurian housing outside the base. A tall duracrete wall surrounded the base, keeping everything unsavory at bay.

Darin took a deep breath and lowered his window when the Imperial on duty stepped up to Darin's door. Interacting with an Imperial in this manner reminded Darin a bit too strongly of the Imperial checkpoints in his hometown and all the difficulties they'd caused with the shipping company he'd worked for, and he struggled to suppress the flash of negative emotions and to focus on the present. A gust of cold wind intruded into the warm speeder cab, making it that much harder to forget his hometown. The pilot handed the datapad containing all the shipping forms to the Imperial and said, "We're here for freight delivery and pickup."

The Imperial took the datapad and scrolled through it. He spared a glance at the landspeeder and their uniforms before turning back to the datapad and saying, "Pinnacle Shipping? Never seen you guys here before."

Luckily Troy spoke up. "It's our first time out this way. We're based on the other side of the moon. New owner wants to expand and is trying to get steady business with the base here."

It looked like the Imperial barely heard him. His eyes still on the datapad, he walked toward the back of the landspeeder and motioned Darin with him. Darin unfastened his seat restraints, slid out the door and followed, then opened the back cargo door without being prompted. He stood back so the Imperial could get a good look inside.

The Imperial ducked his head and stepped into the cargo compartment where he saw Kicktar and Zyrytchev over the small partition that divided the cargo compartment from the back seating area. Both of them shivered from the blast of cold air that entered the landspeeder from the aft compartment. The Imperial turned to Darin, motioned with his head toward them and raised an eyebrow. "Why'd you bring things like them along? Must have been a long flight like that."

Darin shrugged and stuck to the cover story Troy had drilled into him. "Our loading droid broke. Until it's fixed, those two come to do the heavy lifting. They won't be any trouble." The words tasted sour on his tongue.

"Better not be. We have enough headaches with those damn Nosaurians around here." The Imperial returned his attention to the cargo crates and took a handheld scanner from his belt. He scanned the ID code of each crate and compared it to the information on the datapad.

At the fourth crate, the Imperial stopped and rescanned it. He punched a few buttons on the datapad and then said, "You're missing the 633 form for this."

Darin tried not to let it show when his heart skipped a beat. "What?" He stepped in and peered at the crate. "Oh, no, this one has a shelf life for its components, so it's got the 592 form instead. Doesn't need a 633. The 592 is attached in the J-9 field."

The Imperial navigated somewhere on the datapad and then raised his eyebrows. "Oh. Yeah, you're right." He continued scanning the other crates. Rattled at the near miss, Darin stole a worried glance at his teammates. From the front seat, Troy caught his eye. The commando

calmly mouthed the word, "Relax," and made a small outward motion with his hands while mouthing the word, "Breathe." Darin did so and was surprised to find he'd been denying his lungs oxygen for some indeterminate time.

When the Imperial finished, he looked around at all of the crates, and with his foot he tapped one on the bottom of a strapped-down stack. "Open this one."

Relieved to be doing something familiar, Darin went to work without complaint. He unfastened the tie-downs, moved the three smaller crates from on top, and undid the latches of the crate the Imperial had indicated. Darin set the lid aside as well as the top layer of packing material, and then stood back.

The Imperial took a different scanner from his belt and passed it over the crate's contents, which in this case was a set of replacement seals for a Seinar-built hydraulic system. After a minute of studying the data, the Imperial nodded, satisfied. "All right, you're cleared to go in." He reattached his scanner to his belt and handed Darin two generic, temporary badges from a small supply in his pocket. "Return these when you check out."

"Thank you," Darin said, taking them. "We're heading for Dock 8A. Which one is that?" He already knew as they'd chosen that dock on purpose, but if this was supposed to be Pinnacle Shipping's first time there he figured it wouldn't hurt to play up the newcomer role.

"Far end." The Imperial jerked his head in its vague direction, but he was already walking out of the small cargo compartment and didn't stop. He hopped to the ground and headed back to his guard shack while huddling into his heavy jacket.

Darin reattached the lid and secured the crates once more, closed the cargo compartment door after jumping out, and climbed back into the pilot's seat and closed his window. Troy cranked up the speeder cab's heater to ease the complaints of the two commandos in the back. Ahead the gate slowly opened. Darin clipped one badge to his uniform, put the landspeeder in gear and eased it away from the guard shack to the loading dock area.

"Good job. You have a lot more patience for all that stuff than I do," Troy remarked quietly while he fastened the other badge to his uniform.

Darin allowed himself another small smile, this one mostly of relief as his tension slowly dissipated. "You kidding? That was quick. Either that Imp is bored out of his skull or he hates his job. Or he was freezing out there."

"I'm not complaining."

"I am," Zrytchev bit out. "I swear I will strangle the next Imperial who insults me."

"Just hold on a little longer, big guy," Troy said. "We'll be out of here before you know it."

Warrant Officer Fredek Drohner's fingers flew over the computer console's keyboard as he erased every trace he could find of any record that showed there was an additional transmission of the Operation Apex message and datastream from the ring comm station. The decryption of that data was going well but slowly, and he didn't like it when things went slowly during a mission, especially when they were already running behind schedule. He would have to give Royal some grief about that.

He liked it even less that he was stuck with one of the pilots. Yet again Drohner glanced up at Pellicer and briefly moved his eyes to look around for any Imperials who had come into the computer lab. Pellicer was supposed to be keeping watch, but he was just sitting at a console

near the open doorway, reading something. Drohner suppressed a low growl and went back to work. As if he didn't have enough things to deal with right now, he'd have to devote some attention to making sure no one walked in and saw what he was doing.

A small display in the corner of the screen flashed data in real-time as it was decrypted, and something in it caught his eye. Drohner wasn't sure why until he stopped and read the text more carefully, and that was when he saw it: a direct mention of Lokinha. The names of other worlds sprang up, all of them in this general vicinity of the Expansion Region and in the approximate neighborhood of Lokinha. *Crescent Star's* fleet was responsible for all the areas listed. He cocked his head a bit as he continued to study the systems' names. They'd all thought that Lokinha had been an isolated incident for the Imperials to deny the Rebels that supply of trilitide, but was it connected to all these other worlds somehow? Was it part of this larger operation?

Drohner wished even harder for the decryption to hurry up so they could get this data back to their analysts.

Footsteps approached the computer lab from farther down the hall. Drohner immediately flew back to work, hoping to get as much done as possible before he was caught. His heart beat faster. He would have given anything for some backup.

In his peripheral vision he noticed Pellicer slowly get to his feet, still reading the datapad. The pilot seemed to be lost in its words and barely paying attention to the outside galaxy. He stepped directly into the doorway as if walking out of the lab, still focused on the datapad, and almost collided with the Imperial who had turned to come inside.

Pellicer jumped and jerked to a stop, startled, and whipped his head up.

The Imperial jumped backwards back into the corridor, and through the small gap between Pellicer and the doorway Drohner could see him snap to attention and salute. "Sir!"

Drohner slowed down his hastened activities and paid a little more attention to the incident at the door.

Pellicer sighed in mild exasperation. "Watch where you're going, Private," he said with just enough haughtiness. Then he cocked his head, thoughtfully tapped the datapad in his hand, and said, "Actually, this is good. Since you're here, you can do something for me. I just got a report that two of those idiotic mouse droids collided with each other in Section 28, near the turbolift to the VIP conference rooms. Both droids are inoperative. Our VIPs do not need to see that mess; it reflects poorly on all of us. Go get those droids and take them to the repair shop."

There was a short pause, just long enough for Drohner to think the private was going to try to explain another important task he'd been coming to the computer lab to complete. It didn't last any longer than that, however, because Pellicer drew himself up and commanded, "*Now.*" Something in his voice made Drohner flash back to his own Imperial days, and oddly enough he himself was afraid of disobeying that order.

"Yes, sir!" The Imperial disappeared from sight, and his footsteps hurried away.

Pellicer nodded once, sharply, to himself, then walked back into the lab and returned to his seat at the same console. He resumed reading the datapad, never once looking at Drohner or acknowledging his presence. They were two unrelated Imperials, each minding their own business.

Drohner had to admit it had been a convincing act. Maybe there was something to the reasoning of putting another ex-Imperial with him in the base. It also made sense now why Pellicer had said he was going to Section 28 and a couple others when they'd first arrived. They'd had to temporarily split up in order to not arrive in the lab at the same time and remain

separate to outside observers, but Drohner hadn't understood what he'd done until now.
Maybe the pilot had the lookout thing covered after all.
Drohner tentatively let himself focus solely on the console in front of him.

Darin felt a small tug on his jacket sleeve, and he noticed Troy there beside him. Darin stopped and set down the crate he was carrying to the raised dock from the speeder.

Troy leaned in close and murmured under his breath to Darin, "Cresh isn't here yet. Go slower with the unloading. And tell me some busy-work tasks we can do here on the dock that won't look like we're trying to stay longer than we should be."

Darin furrowed his brow. "How much longer?" he asked, equally quietly.

"No idea. All I can tell is that they're late, but I don't know how late they'll be."

"Well..." Darin thought for a moment. "If we were Imp dock workers it'd be simple, but delivery drivers aren't supposed to hang around for no reason. It'll instantly be suspicious if we just loiter or mess with shipments that aren't ours. Best thing I can think of is to fake a speeder problem. Something mechanical we have to pretend to fix before we can leave."

Troy nodded. "All right. Give some thought to what we could do for that." He straightened up and angled off toward Zyrytchev, who was pulling a large crate off the landspeeder. Darin hefted his own crate again and slowed his pace while bringing it into the dock's receiving area. He hoped things with Cresh were okay.

Halon sat at his regular comm monitoring station for his typical duty shift. The other Imperials in his group were quietly sitting at their own stations, listening to transmissions or reading transcripts like always. Halon was doing the same, though he also kept half an eye on the chrono and a few selected data streams. The mission should be underway right now, and it was hard to hide his nervousness.

A blip crossed one of the data streams, and Halon focused on it. It was a sensor monitor near the flight path of the Rebel shuttle's outbound trajectory from the orbital comm monitoring station to their staging point on Braycot Six. Had the shuttle gotten too close and tripped the sensor? He'd told them to be careful, damn it! And he was sure he'd given them all the data and location information for every sensor monitor.

Halon surreptitiously looked around. No one else seemed to have noticed the blip yet. That meant he had some time to erase it from the system so no one would see it and start wondering what had caused it.

He pulled his console's keyboard closer and went to work.

After ten more minutes, Team Dorn had unloaded all of their deliveries and picked up their few staged outbound deliveries that the Intel team had set up, but Team Cresh still hadn't arrived with the datacard. Troy directed all of Dorn into the speeder as if they were leaving, but once they were all seated inside, he told Darin, "Whatever mechanical problem you can fake to keep us here, do it now."

Darin's gaze flitted across the speeder's controls; putting this in motion would have been much easier before they all got in the speeder and he lost convenient access to enact most of his ideas. "It'll be easier to pretend to do work underneath the speeder where the Imps can't easily see us and we can 'fix' things quickly once Cresh arrives," he said. "I'll see what I can do in here to give us the excuse to get out and do that."

The solution he came up with wasn't perfect, but it was the best he had. He closed a couple of fuel valves and then tried to start the speeder's engine. It emitted a high-pitched shriek, coughed, and sputtered, but didn't engage.

"Wow, that is absolutely horrible," Kicktar said with a grimace while she held her webbed hands over her ears.

Darin repeated his actions as if he was trying to coax the speeder to life despite its obvious protests. Then he stopped, opened the fuel valves again so he wouldn't forget, and said to Troy, "I think we can sell that."

"I'll say," Troy said, also cringing from the racket. To Kicktar and Zyrytchev, he said, "You two can stay in here." Then he turned to Darin and said, "Show time." Troy got out of the speeder, looking agitated. Darin got out as well.

Troy strode around the front of the speeder and confronted Darin. "What the hell is wrong with this thing, Niylan?" Troy demanded in a raised voice.

The unexpected accusation hit Darin's raw nerves like a hot poker, and he took a reflexive step back from the person that up until now had treated him fairly. He'd just done exactly what Troy had told him to do, and now he was getting berated for it?

It must have shown on his face how much that stung, since after a second Troy surreptitiously twirled a finger as if telling Darin to catch up or get on with it.

That simple action cut through enough for Darin to realize it was an act for the Imperials, and he wasn't playing along like he needed to be. Blast, he was such a stupid idiot.

"Well?" Troy covered Darin's mistake with another demanding question.

"How should I know what's wrong with it?" Darin shot back. He hated acting so much. "Blast, at least give me a chance to take a look and figure it out." He walked toward the engine compartment and opened the main access panel.

"Yeah, and while you're sitting here trying to figure it out, we're falling farther behind schedule," Troy retorted.

Darin poked around in the engine a bit for show, then pulled back and closed the access panel. "I think our schedule can handle five minutes for me to find the problem," he said. "I'll make up the time on the road."

The pilot crouched down and then rolled onto his back and shimmied partway under the landspeeder. The parking struts it sat on while powered down didn't allow for much vertical room between the ground and the speeder's belly. A moment later Troy did the same beside him.

"Now what?" Troy whispered.

"Now, with any luck, I figure I can lie here a bit, pretend to be working on something, throw a few curse words out now and again, and wrap up the 'repairs' a few minutes after Cresh brings the package," Darin whispered back.

Troy nodded. "Good," he murmured. "I'll go—"

"Hey!" an unknown voice called from nearby. "What's wrong with your speeder? You're blocking access to this dock. How long before you can move it?"

"Stay here. I'll handle this," Troy quietly told Darin, much to Darin's relief. Troy awkwardly slid himself back out from underneath the speeder, and then Darin heard him

conversing with the newcomer, probably an Imperial dock worker who had been nearby. "Sorry about this. Piece of junk speeder broke again. We're working on fixing it as fast as we can."

"If it stays too long we'll have to tow it out. We need this dock access for other speeders coming in," the Imperial said.

Darin really didn't like having such a busy-body Imperial so close to their deception. "Hey, Renniton," Darin called to Troy. "Can you see if they have a hydrosponder we can borrow quick?"

"Yeah, we have a couple," the Imperial told Troy.

"They do," Troy called back. "I'll send Gerai out to help you while I go with him to get it."

"Okay," Darin replied.

Soon Kicktar pulled herself partway under the speeder next to Darin. "Hi," she said.

"Hi," Darin answered.

There wasn't much room for Kicktar's larger head under the speeder, and she kept it mostly sideways while aiming one eye up to look at the grimy and corroded undercarriage and repulsorcoils above them. "So we're just lying here, doing nothing and pretending to work?"

"Yeah."

Kicktar's mouth opened in a Mon Cal smile. "I could get used to this. Maybe I should become a pilot too."

They stayed like that for a minute or so, with Darin rapping periodically on different metallic parts to make it sound like they were working on a fix, before they heard approaching voices belonging to Troy and the Imperial once more.

"I appreciate the offer, but really, we've got it under control," Troy was saying, a bit too loudly to be purely conversational. Both Darin and Kicktar paused to listen.

"No, I mean it, I don't think your co-worker's looking in the right spot," the Imperial said. "That screeching sounded like a valve problem. I doubt you're going to find the problem down there where he is. I'll take a look underneath myself and point you in the right direction. See if we can speed up this fix and clear the dock."

Darin looked at Kicktar in silent alarm. In a matter of moments, the Imperial would see that nothing under there was broken, and then he could easily see that nothing in the engine was broken either. And Cresh still hadn't arrived.

Kicktar looked back at Darin. "Do something!" she hissed under her breath.

In desperation, Darin looked back at the speeder's undercarriage above him. The Imperial had to see something that looked broken.

A metal hose was in easy reach. One end was attached to the speeder with a quick disconnect, so it should be simple to decouple the hose from the speeder long enough for their ruse and then reattach it. Darin grabbed the hose and tried to activate the quick disconnect.

It didn't budge.

He pulled a little harder, even as he could tell the Imperial had reached the speeder and was getting down on the ground. The quick disconnect still did not come apart as designed. Darin pulled as hard as he dared.

The end of the hose he was pulling on detached from the speeder, but as Darin looked at it in horror, he realized the quick disconnect was still intact and had not separated. Instead, corrosion had eaten through the metal around the area where the quick disconnect attached to the speeder. The entire thing had broken apart from the speeder, leaving a gaping hole that was definitely not supposed to be there. There was nothing fake about this damage, and some sort of

foul-smelling residual fluid dripped from the hole.

The Imperial pulled himself under the speeder on his back, took one look at the end of the busted hose in Darin's hand, and said, "Well, that's not good. You're going to need more than a hydrospanner to fix that. Hold on, let me go get a toolbox and a spot welder." With a sigh, the Imperial left the hydrospanner behind and extricated himself.

Kicktar and Darin were both still staring at the broken end of the hose. Kicktar was the only one who spoke: "Oops."

"Hey, shipping people! Glad I caught you in time. I have an outbound package to give you."

The voice was hard to make out over the noise of the spot welder, but the relief on Kicktar's face was plain. "Finally," she muttered to Darin. "Sounds like Cresh is here."

That meant the only thing holding them up was Darin. He nodded, gritted his teeth, awkwardly repositioned himself underneath the cramped speeder with his bulky welding goggles and tools, and tried a new angle. The corrosion on the speeder around the area he was trying to fix meant that there wasn't much solid material there to weld the hose back onto, and despite his best efforts the repair wasn't working. Now that they really had to get going, Darin was desperate enough to try replicating a half-remembered trick his dad had called a bridge weld just to get the thing intact enough to limp off the Imperial base. Unfortunately the hose was part of the air cooling system and was needed for the speeder to run.

A couple minutes later, Troy peered underneath the speeder at them. "We just got our last shipment. Saynahr has it," Troy told them, referring to Zyrytchev's fake mission name. "We need to get going. How long?"

"If this works, maybe twenty minutes?" Darin said.

"You've got fifteen. Just get us off the base," Troy told him. He stood back up and walked out of sight.

Darin renewed his efforts, cursing his stupidity the entire time for putting them in this position.

An insistent beeping preceded the voice venturing forth. "Sir?"

Halon's Imperial supervisor walked over to the speaker's station. "What is it, Pettren?"

"Our security system just flagged an unauthorized access to our sensor systems."

"Show me."

Halon's heart jumped into his throat, and he paused in typing his commands. That alert wouldn't be for his access attempt, would it?

No, of course not. He was much too good for that. But then who else—

"That doesn't make sense," the supervisor said. "That alert indicates the origin is in this room. Call up that station ID."

Halon forgot to breathe. He hastily started shutting down the computer programs he was using to erase that sensor blip.

"Kilbourne?" The supervisor sounded confused. The voice was directed at Halon shortly after. "Sergeant Kilbourne, why is this showing you're trying to access the sensor systems?"

It was a simple question. He should have had a half dozen explanations or denials already sitting on the tip of his tongue. But as he felt the eyes of every Imperial in the room focus directly on him, Halon froze. He was acutely aware of how alone he was, how surrounded he was, how dangerous the situation was that he now found himself in, and how quickly it could all fall apart.

His mind blanked as panic struck him.

Chapter Twelve

Darin was nearly at the end of his fifteen-minute time limit and was hurrying as much as he dared. Luckily he'd been able to get the hose and its quick disconnect reattached, but the fix was fragile and he was spending as much time as Troy would allow to reinforce and strengthen it. He took another piece of scrap metal he was using as a brace from Kicktar and went to work.

At one point, Kicktar suddenly got very distracted. "You hear shouting?" she asked quietly.

Darin decreased power to the spot welder and listened. "Yeah, I think so. Someone's yelling something," he said. Uneasy, he resumed welding.

He jumped a few moments later when klaxxons blared throughout the loading dock area. This time he shut off the spot welder and pulled off his goggles. "What's that?" he asked Kicktar anxiously. His heart pounded in his ears as he looked around wildly from where he lay for the nearest threat. Had they been discovered? Or had Cresh been caught? They should have been out by now, but they could easily have gotten delayed. Was Pellicer all right?

Kicktar was doing a lot better job than he was of not looking incredibly guilty of something. She wasn't panicking, which was probably the only thing preventing Darin from doing so. "Not sure. Let me find out." She awkwardly pulled herself out from underneath the speeder and stood.

Then the blasterfire started.

Darin wasn't sure what was happening: all he heard were several people shouting, numerous blaster bolts ripping through the air, and Kicktar urgently yelling, "Niylen, get in the speeder!" He didn't question the order and immediately dropped the welder and goggles, then pulled himself out as fast as he could.

Kicktar shielded Darin with her body as he extricated himself from under the speeder and jumped to his feet. A handful of blaster bolts shot toward them. One hit Kicktar's shoulder, and she yelped in pain. Another came close enough to singe Darin's jacket.

Quick return shots flew out from the open cargo door of their speeder, accompanied by a gleeful growl from Zyrytchev. That slowed the incoming volley enough for Darin and Kicktar to sprint the few steps to the pilot's door of the speeder and yank it open. Darin helped Kicktar in first, and with a muffled curse she clambered over the front bench seat to the jump seats in back. He was hot on her heels and jumped into the pilot's seat the instant it was clear. He slammed the door shut and then gunned the speeder to life as fast as he could, praying the repairs would hold enough for them to get away from whatever the hell was happening.

The engine was hesitant at first, but it eventually started. Darin let out a gasp of relief, though that was short-lived as blaster fire began peppering the speeder's side and door. He frantically looked around for what was going on.

Numerous people—probably Imperials—were shooting at the speeder. Zyrytchev and Kicktar were both shooting out the open aft cargo door. Darin couldn't find Troy until he looked more closely at the speeder's rearview camera display. Troy and another man were several meters behind the speeder, crouched behind some large shipping crates for cover. Troy was shooting when he could, but they were the primary focus of the Imperials' blaster fire and were pinned down. The shipping crates were being eaten away by the superheated blaster bolts hitting them.

"Hold on!" Darin called to the two commandos in the back. He threw the speeder in reverse, and it leapt backward. Darin interposed the speeder between the worst of the incoming

blaster fire and Troy, and he slammed on the air brakes when the open aft door was next to Troy. The Imperials redirected their aim and fired heedlessly at the cockpit of the speeder, hitting the doors and windows with flashes of intense light. The metal and transparisteel warped and cracked, and Darin ducked. Zyrytchev fired and pinned the Imperials down momentarily.

Darin heard multiple footsteps jumping into the open aft cargo compartment where Zyrytchev and Kicktar were. Since they had to go past those two commandos, it shocked Darin when the first person to scramble from the aft into the front bench seat next to him was an Imperial. Darin jerked away and reached for a blaster he didn't have, but had no time for any other reactions before Troy pulled himself in after the Imperial. "Go! Go!" Troy called, urgent but strained.

Darin had just enough presence of mind to realize the Imperial wasn't fighting him or trying to kill him, and Troy didn't seem to be treating him as an enemy. The pilot had no idea what was going on, but this was not the time to ask questions. He threw the speeder in gear and jammed in the throttle, and the speeder surged forward into the open dock area before them. Darin headed for the gate of the Imperial base. Troy clambered into the front passenger seat on the Imperial's right.

"They're going to kill me!" the Imperial yelled. He sounded terrified.

Now in sight, the gate ahead was closed. Durasteel stanchions rose from the ground to block the entryway and exit for low-altitude vehicles, and a shimmering blue force field sealed the gate's open-air gap in the base's wall.

"They trapped us! You have to get me out of here!" the Imperial demanded.

Troy's calm demeanor contrasted starkly with the Imperial's. "We need another way out," the commando said in a voice that still sounded odd. "One they won't be guarding already."

"There's not another one! Not on this end of the base!" the Imperial protested.

"We can't go that way. Four, find us something or make us something. Fast," Troy said.

Darin nodded and heeled the landspeeder around in a hard turn away from the guarded gate. He paralleled the base's wall for a short time at full throttle and evaluated it. "This'll get bumpy. Make sure you guys are strapped in!" he called to Zyrytchev and Kicktar in the back.

There was a weight shift behind, and a glance that way told Darin that the two commandos had climbed over the cargo divider and were strapping into their seats. They'd also closed the large aft door. Darin hastily pulled on his own seat restraints one-handed, and then when he got to a mostly empty parking area he swung the speeder deeper into the Imperial base, perpendicular to the perimeter wall. Shortly after, when he judged he had enough distance, Darin yanked the speeder into a 180 degree turn and jammed in the throttle, heading directly for the wall.

When he gave no indication of changing heading in the first couple seconds, the Imperial beside him paled and grabbed at the flight controls. "What are you doing?! Turn, you idiot!"

Darin shoved him away, and Troy also grabbed him and pulled him off. "Quiet!" Darin snapped at him. He needed to concentrate.

Back during an exceptionally slow work day at Merrilan Transport and Shipping, a co-worker had taught Darin this trick with the landspeeders. Now if he could do it right, it just might save their lives.

The pilot put the freight landspeeder at its full altitude and full throttle. Even at the highest altitude they were still about a meter short of clearing the top of the wall. They were uncomfortably close to it when Darin started hastily messing with the controls.

Landspeeders operated on two different propulsion systems: one for the repulsorlifts and another for the thrust engine. What Darin was completely relying on now to get them over the wall was the crossfeed system between the repulsors and thrust chamber. Otherwise, well, they wouldn't have to worry about escaping anymore.

He cut out the thrust engine's throttle but kept the repulsors at full power. The speeder remained at altitude and its momentum kept them going forward fairly quickly. During that time Darin turned the mixture to the thrust engine's compartment fuel-rich and flooded the chamber with as much fuel as he dared. They were nearly at the duracrete wall when Darin called, "Hang on!"

Darin cut the repulsor's power for a fraction of a second, just long enough to hit the emergency control to switch the fuel feedlines so the repulsors would now be running from the thrust engine's fuel chamber and vice versa. The instant that was done he jammed in both throttles.

The repulsor coils screamed in protest from the sudden influx of fuel-rich energy burning in them. That flood of energy bucked the landspeeder upward, just barely enough to get the nose over the edge of the wall. On a world with stronger gravity Darin realized they wouldn't have made it. Small popping explosions sounded as the fuel burned in an unstable manner.

With a horrible scraping noise the landspeeder's belly crawled over the top of the wall, the nose burst through the razor wire, and then the craft was on the far side and pitching almost straight down. The loose crates in the cargo compartment slid forward and slammed into the cargo divider. The Imperial hadn't heeded Darin's warning of impending flight turbulence and fell forward against the front console, his seat restraints lying unused behind him.

Standing hard on the brakes also allowed Darin to brace himself in the seat. He hauled back on the stick and switched the feedlines back to normal while cutting forward thrust. The repulsor field caught the nose just in time, but the aft wasn't as fortunate and hit the ground with a bone-jarring slam. Then the landspeeder was level again, Darin pushed in the throttle, and they shot off. Darin remembered how to breathe, and the Imperial pulled himself back into his seat and fastened his restraints, glaring at Darin the entire time.

Kicktar laughed. "I like this kid, One! He knows how to kill us."

A warning indicator appeared on the console saying the engine temperature was rising, and Darin knew his welding repair hadn't survived the fence scrape. He doubted the engine would hold out very long. "Where am I going?!" Darin demanded anxiously. He tore down the first road he came to into the Nosaurian living area.

"Anywhere you can. Just away from the base," Troy said. He paused, and then he nodded at the rearview display. "And away from *that*."

Darin spared a glance at the display. An Imperial landspeeder was pursuing them with emergency lights flashing, plus it had a hefty weapon mounted on it. He caught himself just before telling Botch to reinforce his aft shields. If only.

Troy turned a bit in his seat. "Three, you got those datacards? Good. You *hang on to those*."

"I will," Zyrytchev replied.

Next Troy reached over and grabbed the Imperial badge from Darin's uniform. He threw that one and his own out the window. He tried his comlink, but only static emerged. "Jammed," Troy muttered.

The pilot zigzagged down narrow Nosaurian streets. He had no clue where he was or where any of these streets went. In a few tight alleys he couldn't avoid piles of trash, and the

freight landspeeder barged into them and sent showers of refuse in all directions. He was glad there was virtually no vehicle traffic on these roads. Nosaurian pedestrians ran for cover as soon as they heard the speeder coming close.

One unfortunate turn brought them onto a long road with no other turnoffs for a distance, and it was here where the Imperials caught up and got their first good chance at them.

A large blaster bolt from the vehicle-mounted weapon on the Imperial landspeeder hit the broad side of the Rebels' speeder when Darin turned down the first available side road, and the energy impact flung the speeder sideways. The aft end collided with a building and bounced off. Darin wrestled control back. Their speed dropped, and nothing Darin did could counteract it.

"Four, get out of the Imperials' line of sight for a few seconds and find someplace soft. Two, Three, the instant he does, jump out the back. You go with them," Troy said to the Imperial. His voice still sounded unusually tight. "We'll draw them away. Get those datacards back to the group." He gave Kicktar his datapad with the city map. "We'll contact you as soon as we can."

Darin was impressed when Zyrytchev and Kicktar merely clambered to the back, opened the aft door, and got themselves ready to jump out of a fast-moving landspeeder with no protective gear. It would be even harder for Kicktar with her shoulder injury. For Darin's part, he swallowed hard at all the implications of Troy's order but followed it.

It was the Imperial who protested fearfully, "I'm not jumping out the back!"

"Yes, you are. Unless you want to stay with us in the Imperials' crosshairs. It'll be safer with Two and Three," Troy said.

"But— but I can't! They're after me! I need to get away before—"

Darin tuned out the rest of what the Imperial said and whipped down the next side street he saw. After two more tight turns he felt they should have a few seconds of breathing room. Amid the run-down buildings and trash littering the street, the only "soft" place Darin could find was a snow drift outside a building. The Imperial hadn't moved from the front seat and was still arguing with Troy, but Darin couldn't wait for him. "Get ready!" he called to Kicktar and Zyrytchev. Then, "Now!"

He braked hard above the drift but didn't stop. Unsecured crates slid forward and hit the back of the cargo partition. There was a noticeable weight shift in the speeder, and then Troy told him, "Go! Go! Get us out of here and make us obvious. Once we've got 'em again, then lose 'em any way you can."

Darin shoved in the throttle. "Yes, sir. I'm used to baiting." He'd just prayed he wouldn't have to do it again so soon after the third-pilot mission. His lungs weren't cooperating, and sweat dripped down the back of his neck despite the cold wind blowing in the speeder through the aft door. At least the wind wasn't deafening like it was when his X-wing's canopy window had been broken. The pilot quickly circled the block and headed back toward where they'd last seen the Imperial pursuit.

Darin spotted them a block away. He braked just enough to deliberately increase the engine noise from the restrained freighter for a couple seconds, then he released the brakes and peeled off in a direction at a random obtuse angle from where they'd dropped off Zyrytchev and Kicktar. The Imperial speeder took off after them and fired shots that narrowly missed. The engine temperature was approaching critical levels.

"If you *idiots* let them keep chasing us, how long do you think it'll be before they call reinforcements to their position?!" the Imperial snapped. "They probably already did! They're sure to catch us!"

“We don’t have weapons on this bucket. All we can do is outrun them,” Troy said.

Darin tried to do exactly that, but after several zigzagging turns he slammed on the air brakes. The narrow road he had just pelted down was really a dead-end alley, blocked off by a ramshackle structure a short distance away. There wasn’t enough room to turn around, so Darin threw the speeder into reverse and shoved in the throttle.

“No! No! No! Forward! Forward!” Troy called, looking behind them. Darin smashed the brakes down and pushed the speeder forward full speed again, toward the dead end.

The Imperials had turned behind them and swerved at the last minute, just enough to avoid hitting the Rebels’ speeder while it leapt out of the way, and the Imperials’ own air brakes screamed as they fought the craft’s forward momentum. As soon as they were clear, though, the Imperials continued their pursuit down the alley. The Rebels were trapped.

“Four? Ideas?” Troy braced himself as he stared at the structure racing toward them.

“No, sir.” Just like Lt. Weas had predicted time and again, baiting was going to be Darin’s downfall.

“Then stop.” Troy sounded resigned.

Biting his lip, Darin hit the air brakes again and pulled back on the throttle.

The last thing he expected was for the Imperial to mash his own hand over Darin’s on the throttle control and shove the throttle in full.

“No! They’ll catch me if we stop!” the Imperial yelled, terrified.

“Let go!” Darin tried to pull both his right hand and the throttle back again, but the Imperial kept them both pressed fully forward. The battle between the speeder’s air brakes and accelerating engine made the entire vehicle shudder. Troy pulled futilely at the Imperial’s arm, but it was too late: the ramshackle structure was now too close to avoid.

Darin yanked back as hard as he could on the flight stick with his left hand. He dimly heard the unsecured crates sliding around in the back right before the belly of the freight landspeeder slammed into the shack’s upper wall.

The impact threw them all forward, and the Imperial’s grip was dislodged. Darin immediately reclaimed his dominant hand and used it to get the skidding, swerving speeder under control in the tight confines of the alley while debris cascaded all around them. Luckily the road continued past the structure they had just demolished. More diagnostics flashed red: the speeder would give out at any second. The Imperials followed through the hole they’d just made.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Troy yelled. “You almost killed us!”

Darin spared a glance but was relieved to see Troy was shouting at the Imperial, not him. He went back to trying to save their lives and clumsily turned the wounded speeder down the road that intersected with the alley.

“You can’t surrender to the Imperials! They’ll kill me!” the Imperial shouted back.

A couple shots from the Imperial speeder missed. But it was only a matter of time at this point...

Darin stole a quick look behind him through the open rear doors to better estimate where the Imperial speeder was. Seeing the open door gave him a faint idea. It wasn’t a particularly good one, but it was something.

He judged how much distance he had left on this straightaway portion of the Nosaurian road, then he held his breath. He didn’t say anything; he didn’t trust his voice to not crack from the strain. The pilot slowed.

The Imperials sped after them, catching up with every meter.

It apparently was enough to steal the Imperial’s attention away from arguing with Troy.

“What are you *doing?*!” the Imperial demanded in horror.

“Last ditch effort,” Darin muttered through clenched teeth.

Darin jerked the ungainly landspeeder back and forth to avoid the worst of the shots from the Imperials’ weapon, and then when he gauged the Imperials were close enough directly behind them, he hauled the flight stick back as far as it could go and punched the throttle in full.

When the landspeeder’s nose was pointed as high to the reddish sky as possible, Darin heard the large, unsecured crates sliding backwards and finally falling through the open aft door.

Something shattered below, and then a few more crashes sounded. Odd noises from the Imperial speeder made Darin think the Imperials were swerving hard.

The downside was that Darin had to stop all evasions to do this.

A large blaster bolt hit the bottom aft of the Rebels’ landspeeder. The speeder bucked and its power became erratic.

Darin dimly heard a crash behind them as he frantically tried to stabilize the ungainly craft. Most of its repulsors died and pitched its nose down to bring it more level with the road, but its thrust engines still burned at full throttle, though at reduced speed. It listed longitudinally to port and shot forward, dangerously close to the ground with no significant repulsor field to buffer it.

The pilot braced himself with his feet and tried to regain control. He couldn’t keep the speeder stable longitudinally, and it jerked to starboard before rolling back to port. The ground was a deathly blur mere meters from his side window. He got an infinitesimal opportunity and desperately reached for the throttle to cut it.

He never got the chance.

Zyrytchev cursed vehemently.

What had looked like a nice soft snow drift from above... wasn’t. In reality it was a thin layer of snow covering a large pile of firewood. It had been a rough landing: due to the way Zyrytchev had leapt from the speeder, he had landed on his two front feet and injured the joints. Kicktar had fared worse. She had taken a hard tumble and been knocked out. Zyrytchev hissed at the pilot for causing this by not realizing what that “snow drift” really was.

Zyrytchev’s build made it hard for him to lean back far enough to keep most of his weight off his two front feet, especially when trying to carry Kicktar to the nearest doorway, but he did it anyway. He had to. He heard Imperial sirens.

He crouched down, barreled through the small door, and looked around. No one was inside, and there was only some sparse, rudimentary furniture and a couple of broken windows. He laid Kicktar on a pile of dried grasses in a corner, then pulled out his comlink to call Team Aurek for assistance. When he clicked it on, however, he got only static. He growled; the Imperials must still be jamming the area. That would make things a lot harder.

On the bright side, though, “harder” usually meant he’d have more Imperials to kill. Zyrytchev snarled in anticipation of fighting any and all Imperials that dared to approach.

The hinged front door rattled slightly and creaked open a few centimeters. Zyrytchev swung around to face it. He hadn’t expected the Imperials quite so soon— the sirens were still approaching— but no matter. He was ready.

Chapter Thirteen

When he groggily pried his eyes open, Darin wasn't quite sure what had happened. He wasn't even sure how long he'd been out. He dimly remembered the speeder clipping the edge of a building and then the world tumbling around him while transparisteel shattered and metal crumpled and screamed. He was thrown hard against his seat restraints in seemingly all directions at once.

That's when his memory fizzled out.

Everything now was mercifully still. Darin gulped air into his lungs and tried to will away the dizziness and the horrible pounding in his head. He was slow to get his bearings. The speeder's crash bags had deployed, seeing as how they had crashed headlong into a wall that was now demolished. The speeder was canted at a steep angle to starboard, and only Darin's seat restraints kept him in his seat. They exerted uncomfortable pressure against newly tender areas that the pilot was sure would be black and blue shortly. The nose of the speeder was crumpled, and the windshield and windows were shattered. Foul-smelling gasses streamed and hissed from the speeder's fore, and an occasional spark jumped from cracked consoles. The flight yoke had broken off in his left hand; he pried the cramping muscles of his death grip loose, letting the stick fall, though that action caused a sharp pain in his wrist. He could feel warm blood on his face and cheek, and an ache in his left elbow. He closed his eyes again. All Darin wanted to do was sit there quietly and bring his shaking back under control.

The universe had other plans. The faint sound of sirens wafted in on the cold breeze. Darin was with it enough to know he had to get away from the sirens, but he was too groggy to care. It would be so much easier to just sit there and let the Imperials come. He was tired of fighting. Fighting the Imperials. Fighting with Quiver. Fighting Trainneer.

"Four?" Troy's voice was weak.

Troy. Troy was still there.

Darin opened his eyes once more and looked at his passengers. The Imperial beside him on his right wasn't conscious, but muscles in his face twitched slightly. On the Imperial's right, down at the bottom of the slanted bench seat, Troy was breathing hard and had his eyes squeezed shut.

"Yeah," Darin replied woozily.

"You okay?" Troy croaked out. He made no move to get up.

"Think so." Darin mustered up what was left of his energy and forced his mind to find a way out. He would fall as soon as he released his seat restraints, so first he shifted around and found hand- and footholds, wincing as his movements told him exactly how banged up he'd gotten in the crash. Once Darin felt secure he released his seat restraints. Yup, something was definitely broken in his wrist, and he bit his bottom lip hard. He climbed down the angled interior as carefully as he could, clambered awkwardly over the Imperial and Troy, and finally crouched beside Troy on the inside of the speeder's passenger door. The commando still wasn't making any substantial movements or trying to get out.

"Sir," Darin said, "we need to—" He stopped when he saw the commando's hand pressed against a bleeding wound in his gut. A dark stain on Troy's jacket was steadily growing. Darin's eyes widened, and his breath caught in his throat. "Sir?! What— You're hurt! Damn it, I'm sorry! I—"

Troy coughed and cringed, then slowly opened bleary eyes. "Damn Imperials shot me at the dock. Can't ignore it anymore," he managed.

“Come on, we’ve got to get you out of here,” Darin said breathlessly. He clumsily tried to hold Troy in place against the seat so he wouldn’t fall when Darin unfastened the restraints. The crash bag kept getting in the way.

Gasping, Troy shook his head. “Appreciate the thought, but you really should—”

“No. Sir,” Darin cut him off sharply. He refocused on his battle against the seat restraints to end that topic of conversation permanently.

Finally Darin tugged at the restraints’ release with a hand that still shook. The release came undone, and Darin caught the commando. He looked around, determined the only way out would be through the open aft compartment, and struggled to lift and pull Troy out over the broken transparisteel, angled seats, and crumpled cargo partition without exacerbating Troy’s injury too badly. The commando tried to assist and move himself but couldn’t. On the way out, Darin grabbed the small medpack that was strapped in the cargo compartment and stashed it in a pocket.

Finally they were out, and Troy sat heavily against the slanted speeder while Darin paused to catch his breath. The pilot tried to think, but the edges of his muddled thoughts were frayed by anxiety and panic. He had no clue where they were, and Troy was in very bad shape. The sirens were getting louder. They had to get away, *now*.

Darin knelt and wrapped Troy’s arm around his shoulders to support Troy’s weight while they moved. “Come on, we’ll find a place to hide,” Darin said. Somehow. Somewhere.

Troy only moved to indicate the unconscious Imperial in the front seat with a very slight motion of his head. “He alive?” Troy strained to ask.

“I think so. I didn’t check.”

“Get him too.”

—And now Troy was showing signs of a head injury. “He’s an Imperial. I wasn’t going to bring him with,” Darin said.

The shake of Troy’s head was almost imperceptible. “Not an Imp,” Troy gasped out. “Our other Intel agent. Cover blown. Get him.”

Darin blinked. “Oh.” He sat Troy against the speeder again, then he hurried back through the wreckage to the remaining passenger. The “Imperial” was still unconscious in the front seat but breathing. With difficulty Darin pulled him out the aft as well, though Darin’s sore body protested the entire time. Energy leaked out of his injuries and left him depleted.

By the time Darin dragged the Intel operative out and laid him on the ground, Troy had grown paler and was visibly shaking. Darin made it back over to him just as Troy passed out.

Darin’s heart raced. “One? One! Wake up!” Darin laid Troy on his back as well and lightly slapped his cheek, but the commando didn’t respond.

Darin grabbed his comlink and opened the secure frequency to comm Team Aurek. Static from a jammer streamed through the small comm speaker. Darin’s stomach fell, and he closed the channel.

The panic manifested in full force. He was alone. How in the galaxy could he move two unconscious people in a hurry when he wasn’t even sure how far he could force his battered body to move itself? And where? And how much longer did Troy have? How could he help him? He didn’t know what to do, and he was going to get them all killed out here—

He frantically looked back in the direction of the sirens to check if the Imperials were in visual range yet. What he saw, though, was an adult Nosaurian standing in the shadowed alleyway beside a nearby building and watching him very intently.

Darin was startled at first, but the Nosaurian just stood there. The other Nosaurians he’d

seen so far had all made themselves scarce, and this was the first time Darin got a decent look at one. This Nosaurian was thin and wore coarse clothing which Darin highly doubted was thick enough to keep him warm in these freezing temperatures. Fabric pouches and small bags hung from a makeshift belt. He had numerous scars on his dark green, scaled skin which reminded Darin too clearly of Zyrytchev's scars. His chin, throat, and hands were a lighter green.

The colonists on Lokinha had helped him. Would the local oppressed population here be willing to do the same?

He was desperate enough to find out.

"Please, I need help. Can you help us?" Darin called to the Nosaurian.

The Nosaurian responded with some barks and a chittering whistle.

"I- I don't understand. Do you speak Basic?"

The short, bipedal reptilian did not reply.

Darin took that as a no. He pointed down the street toward the source of the sirens.

"Those sirens? The Imperials?" He briefly imitated the sirens' noise. Next he ducked his head and covered it with both of his arms. "Hide. We need to hide." He looked back up, pointed at the Nosaurian and then gestured to himself and the two unconscious Rebels. "Can you help us? Show us where to hide? Please?"

The Nosaurian didn't react at first, then he wuffed and walked forward. He stopped and snarled when he reached the Intel operative, then backed up several steps.

"No, no, wait, it's- it's okay," Darin pleaded. He held his hands up, trying to get the Nosaurian to stop. "He won't hurt you. Ignore the nasty uniform, okay? It's- blast, this is pointless if you can't understand me."

Darin decided to try the universal language. He slowly reached into a pocket and pulled out the handful of credits they carried for an emergency. He held them out flat on his hand so the Nosaurian would see them. It definitely got the Nosaurian's attention. With his other hand, Darin gestured to Troy, himself, and the Intel operative, making sure the operative was emphatically included, then offered the credits to the Nosaurian. "He's gotta come too, okay? Please?" Darin silently begged the being to agree. The sirens were getting louder by the minute.

The Nosaurian studied the credits for a long moment, then strode forward again, took them out of Darin's hand and slipped them in a pouch, then moved beside the operative. The reptilian still growled, but he picked the operative up with less effort than Darin expected and slung him over his back. Most of the horns on the ridge of the Nosaurian's head were broken, allowing for just enough room. With a few clicks from his throat, the Nosaurian strode off purposefully, away from the sirens.

Relieved, Darin hurried to haul Troy up and put him over his shoulder in a firefighter's carry. The pilot staggered and almost fell when his injured right leg couldn't hold the additional load. Darin bit his lip and struggled to shift Troy around, searching for his new center of gravity while favoring his leg, and once he found something close enough he moved forward. There was no way this was good for Troy's injury, but there was no other option. He set off as quickly as he could after the Nosaurian.

The Nosaurian was moving fast; Darin was already falling behind. Darin tried to run, but a sharp pain in his leg almost sent both him and Troy to the ground. Gulping the air, he caught his balance and went into an odd shuffling, heavily limping gait that was slower than a run but at least was faster than a walk. It was the best he could do.

The Nosaurian made a few turns down side streets, always increasing the distance between them and the sirens, before Darin was able to catch up. The Nosaurian certainly seemed

to know where he was going. “Thank you,” Darin said between gasps for breath. His lungs were demanding more oxygen than the thin air was providing, and he felt lightheaded.

Still the Nosaurian pressed on. Just when Darin thought he couldn’t make it down another block, the Nosaurian—Darin nicknamed him Guide—aimed them toward a small, rundown, wooden building nestled in the shadows of two larger, intact buildings. All were humanoid scale, not Herglic. Guide crunched through old, dingy snow and opened the small building’s door that was hanging off its old-fashioned hinges. He took his Rebel burden through, and Darin followed.

The door before Zyrytchev slowly opened another few centimeters. Bracing himself, Zyrytchev took a deep breath to roar a battle cry, but stopped when a small Nosaurian head poked through the gap in the doorway.

It was young, with skin covered in light, downy feathers, and its eyes took in the sight of Zyrytchev with more curiosity than fear. It was only when a strong breeze carried the Imperial sirens to them more loudly and the Nosaurian jerked its head to look in that direction that Zyrytchev saw fright. The Nosaurian quickly slipped inside and shut the door behind it. Its left hand was deformed and mangled, but it looked to be an old injury. The youngster wore thin, tattered clothes and had an Imperial tracking band fastened around its ankle, the cursed mark of an Imperial slave.

Zyrytchev exhaled his large breath, though he wished an Imperial would walk through that door so he could give them some payback for being the cause of the sight in front of him. Maybe he’d even let the kid make the killing blow.

The Nosaurian warbled, but Zyrytchev shook his head. “Who are you?” the Sludir asked.

The Nosaurian clicked and wuffed at him, then it ran its gaze down Zyrytchev’s arms and what was visible of his back and carapace. Its eyes widened, and Zyrytchev guessed it was staring at the scars the Imperials had given him long ago. He saw now the youngster had some matching ones in bare, damaged patches on its skin, though considerably fewer.

“Do you speak Basic?” Zyrytchev tried again.

The Nosaurian trilled, then it looked at Kicktar lying unconscious in the corner. Her arm was still bleeding. The Imperial sirens got louder, and the small Nosaurian again looked back in their general direction. Zyrytchev could practically smell the terror rolling off of the youngster at that sound.

“If any Imperials come in, I will make sure they do not—” Zyrytchev started to say before the Nosaurian child walked straight up to him, reached up and gently put its small, functional hand on Zyrytchev’s mouth. He stopped speaking in surprise. The Nosaurian took its hand away, put one finger to its beaked mouth, and went to the broken back window. Zyrytchev was amazed. Just about every adult sentient approached him with trepidation, but this tiny, maimed child was completely unafraid of him. It was a welcome feeling.

At the back window, the child looked around outside. A couple solitary Nosaurians brayed somewhere in the distance. The child opened its mouth wide, and Zyrytchev thought the child was going to do the same and give away their position to the Imperials— he’d heard Nosaurians were sometimes unable to fight the biological urge to bray. But to his surprise, no sound came out of the child’s open mouth, just a flash of light. The child waited a moment and then repeated it.

An answering flash blinked into existence in a building farther down the street. The child waited patiently, and then half a minute later an adult Nosaurian with scales the color of mud appeared silently outside the window. It was so sudden and unexpected that Zyrytchev jumped and had to stop himself from going for his blaster. The young Nosaurian opened what remained of the window, and the two of them quickly conversed in their language. Then the adult looked at Zyrytchev and barked softly.

Zyrytchev shook his head apologetically. "I do not understand."

"Ek, Basssic," the adult haltingly said. "Ssstay. Help to you." He pointed to himself.

Zyrytchev gestured in the direction of the Imperial sirens, which now sounded like they were angling farther away. Troy must have led them away like he'd said he would, but they were still too close and dangerous. "The Imperials—" he began urgently.

The adult Nosaurian held up a hand. "Usss help essscape you. Go Beluu. Beluu help. Ssstay. Here more ssssoon. Quiets. Hide. Here more ssssoon." With that, the adult slipped back and vanished from view.

Zyrytchev didn't know what word "belloo" was supposed to be, though he'd lost his chance to ask. He hadn't intended to stumble into the locals— that always just made missions messy and increased liabilities— but it had happened, and they seemed willing to help him and Kicktar get away from the Imperials. At least the locals were sympathetic this time, unlike most of the places his squad went to on missions.

The Nosaurian child looked at him brightly, and Zyrytchev did his best mimic of a smile in return while he surreptitiously felt the small package of Imperial datacards in the pouch around his waist. If he and Kicktar could just hold out until Troy or Team Aurek came for them, they just might salvage this mission yet.

Chapter Fourteen

Guide ushered Darin through the door into a dark, windowless room. A thick smell like wet trash hung heavy in the cold air. From the small amount of reddish light spilling in through the doorway, the room seemed mostly bare. Old metal pipes extending from the wooden floor to the ceiling dotted the room in various locations, and filthy pieces of canvas and scraps of pipe were heaped in a pile in a near corner. A deep shadow by the far corner to the right could have been an indication of an interior doorway. A film of frost and snow had blown in and covered a portion of the floor, and loose, ill-fitting floorboards shifted unsteadily underfoot.

Darin moved the few meters to the wall opposite the door and struggled to drop to his knees without falling over. One of the floor-to-ceiling metal pipes was there; Darin leaned heavily against it to steady his balance and slid down it. It was an immense relief to be off his feet, and his leg throbbed from the exertion. From that position Darin carefully laid Troy down on the floor in the light from the doorway; he could move Troy to a more hidden spot after treating him. The wound was still bleeding and looked worse than before. Darin immediately felt guilty for not treating it right away at the crash site, but following Guide and getting away from the sirens had—wrongly—made itself the priority in his mind.

Guide deposited the Intel operative with less care on the floor next to Troy, but Darin wasn't going to be picky. "Thank you," he said again, hoping the Nosaurian would understand the gratitude behind the words if not the words themselves.

Guide glanced at him but simply walked back outside and obscured the tracks they'd made in the crusty snow beyond the door. Darin would have to find a way to help Guide in return and repay him for his assistance here, but first he needed to tend to Troy.

He wiped the blood out of his own eyes and examined the commando's injury. It was bad, and he was no doctor. He didn't know what to do or even where to start, and the panic came crashing back, freezing him with indecision and making him wish Troy was awake to give him some sort of direction.

Just as quickly, an unbidden memory flashed through his addled mind: CC was looking straight into his eyes and patiently saying, "Thumper, you're doing it again! One step at a time, and Step One is breathe." It was just like she'd done a hundred times before whenever he'd gotten overwhelmed. And just like he'd done those same hundred times, he closed his eyes and followed the advice by taking a deep breath.

As always, things were a little clearer when he opened his eyes again. One step at a time. Step One was complete. Step Two would be—

Apply pressure, stop the bleeding, clean the wound.

Darin pulled the medpack from his pocket and took out a small bottle of bacta-infused wound cleanser, a laser cauterizer, a sealer, and the largest bacta wrap. He took off his bulky gloves with a curse or two at his swollen wrist, squinted in the dim light, and focused on getting as much of the bleeding stopped as possible before moving on to cleaning and dressing Troy's wound. Finally he wrapped it tightly and hoped that would be enough pressure. Darin was sure there was something more he should be doing or a way he should have done things better, but he didn't know what or how. The first aid refresher course had taken place after his lunchtime fight with Quiver, and Darin cursed himself for not paying closer attention to it.

He wracked his brain for further ideas and decided to put another bacta wrap on the wound: it couldn't hurt, and the activity would be a good distraction. Once that was done, Darin unzipped his blood-streaked jacket and pulled it off. He spread and laid it over Troy's upper

body like a blanket. Troy would need the extra layer, and Darin could spare it for the short amount of time it would be until Team Aurek could come get them. He was warm from the taxing walk here and was more comfortable with the cold to begin with, though he shivered once in spite of himself. When he got back he was going to smack Quiver for thinning his blood with their overly warm quarters.

Then Darin turned to the unconscious Intel operative. The man was taller than Darin and more solid, and Darin guessed him to be in his mid-thirties or early forties. His brown hair was trimmed in an Imperial regulation crew cut, and the Imperial uniform he wore made Darin's heart jump into his throat every time he glimpsed it from the corner of his eye. The only external injury he could see was a gash on the man's forehead; hopefully that was the only reason he was unconscious. His vitals were normal. Darin cleaned the gash and put a bacta patch on it.

Finally Darin wiped off his own face and stuck a couple haphazard bacta patches where he thought they should go. At last his mind was beginning to settle down as the adrenaline faded and his battered body's aches grew more noticeable, and he wondered what the hell had been wrong with him that he hadn't thought to look for the blaster Troy had had and bring that with. He was awkwardly wrapping his left wrist when the Intel operative started to stir.

"What?" the operative mumbled, blinking blearily.

"It's okay, sir, you're fine," Darin said quietly. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Hurt? Why would I be hurt?" The operative fully opened his eyes and looked around. "Where am I? And who are— oh." The last, disdainful word came when the operative's gaze fell on Darin. "You're the one who was trying to kill me in the speeder. And— wait—" Terror conquered his face in slow motion. "That's right, they're after me! Where are they? Where are we? What's going on?! What happened?!" He scrambled to his feet and looked wildly around. He staggered woozily at first but recovered quickly.

"Our speeder crashed. We're hiding here until we can get help. Speaking of which..." Now he finally had a free second to try that again. Darin clumsily tied off the wrap, then he pulled his comlink from his pocket and checked the settings. Hopefully they were far enough away from that jammer now for a signal to get through.

"What are you doing?" The operative sounded borderline hysterical.

Wasn't it obvious? "Comming for help, sir."

"Give me that!" The operative snatched the comlink from Darin's hand, and Darin was too surprised to prevent it. The operative shut off the comlink and shoved it in his pocket.

"You'll bring the Imperials right to us! Don't you realize they're trying to kill me?!"

"But—"

"And who are you anyway? I know that name tag's just your cover."

When Darin could react again, he said, "I'm Flight Officer Stanic. We're part of Team Dorn. But I—"

"Of course you're part of Team Dorn— why do you think I came to your speeder?!"

Darin didn't appreciate the condescending tone. "A lot's been happening, sir. Dorn One said you're Intel?"

"Yes. In case you're captured I won't tell you my real name, but I'm a lieutenant with Rebel Intelligence, code name Halon. And— wait..." Halon paused and gave Darin a strange look, one that temporarily cut through the deeply shaken expression the agent had worn until then.

"Flight Officer"? You're one of those screw-up pilots acting as extra bodies on this mission?"

The last thing Darin's frayed nerves needed was more of the second-class treatment that Trainner had been dishing out. He chewed on his bottom lip and tried not to snap at the

lieutenant. "I wouldn't put it that way, sir, but yes, I'm one of the SFC pilots."

Halon threw up his hands and exclaimed, "Great. I should've known it from the suicidal stunts you pulled. I can't believe this! So I'm stuck with *you*? Some screw-up flyboy? Not an actual commando who knows anything about getting away from hordes of Imperial forces on the ground? You know, someone *useful*? And what are you, like, twelve?"

Darin narrowed his eyes. "No, sir, I'm not a commando, but I know enough. Our *real* commando is currently incapacitated and dying from a blaster wound." He pointed at Troy. "I need my comlink back to call for help, sir."

"And I told you no. It's a sure way to lead the Imperials straight here!"

Darin's mental processes momentarily stalled again; did Halon want to escape or not? He pushed aside the contradiction and said, "No sir, I'm just going to comm Team Aurek for assistance. Or our two other teammates. They'll be closer."

"And if you do that, the Imperials will pick up the signal, hear what it says, and trace it here directly! They're already looking for me and trying to kill me! You'll be letting them know exactly where I am!"

Darin stiffly stood and faced the Intel operative, fully meeting his gaze with a glare. His head throbbed, and he could feel his nerves eroding with each passing second. "No, I won't. Sir, we're supposed to comm Team Aurek if we get into trouble. This is certainly what I'd classify as 'being in trouble.' And they've got the medic with them. We *need* him, and we need him right now or One's not going to make it!"

Halon crossed his arms. "Contacting Aurek to bail you out of trouble was a scenario that was only possible under normal mission parameters. With my cover blown, that's no longer the case."

"Which makes it all the more important to comm them for help," Darin retorted. "Besides, 'bailing out of trouble' and 'normal mission parameters' are mutually exclusive. If you would give me my comlink back, I'll make sure to use the encrypted settings we were told to. It'll be a secure frequency."

Halon scoffed. "There's no such thing here. It's a comm monitoring station! There's nothing 'secure' about any comm waves in this system or on this moon. We can't get help in time because the Imperials are closer and will hear it and get here first, and then we're all dead and the mission is blown. Look, no more discussion! This is how it is! I'm in charge here, and I know the situation on this moon better than you ever will. You will do as I say!"

"So what do you suggest we do then?" Darin demanded.

"You're going t—" Halon abruptly stopped and stared over Darin's shoulder toward the door. Darin looked as well. Guide walked inside with three other Nosaurians, one of whom was carrying a bulky bag, and they pulled the rickety door closed behind them. Most of the dim light in the room disappeared, but thankfully Darin's vision had already been adjusting to the interior's low light.

"Damn it!" Halon sounded frightened again, and he grabbed Darin's collar and yanked him over to interpose him between Halon and the four Nosaurians across the room. "Stay away!" he yelled at the newcomers.

"Ow! That wasn't necessary, sir," Darin grumbled, favoring his leg from the abrupt movement. He pulled his collar out of Halon's grip. "And they're fine. One of them helped get us away from the Imperials. He brought us here."

"What? You *came with them*? Are you an idiot?! That's it, we're getting out of here right now!" Halon pushed Darin ahead of him toward the door.

Darin resisted. "But One--"

"Forget him! We're--"

One of the Nosaurians barked sharply, and they lined up side-by-side and blocked the door. Halon stopped. Another Nosaurian, a female, trilled and chattered sternly at them. She pointed back to where the two Rebels had been standing.

Darin backed up until he ran into Halon. "Sir, they want us to stay put."

"Of course they do! To hell with that! Where's your blaster?!" Halon was hysterical again.

"My blaster?" Darin asked incredulously. "Why?"

"To *shoot* them, you idiot! Get them away from me! Get me out of here!"

Darin turned and gaped at the operative. He just flat-out could not understand the galaxy today. "What? I don't have a blaster, but even if I did, I sure wouldn't shoot them! They *helped* us! They're fine! Why are you so afraid of them?"

"You're going to get us killed!" Halon shouted at Darin. He grabbed the pilot and spun him around again, then forced him forward like a human shield toward the Nosaurians. "We're getting out of here, now!"

"Stop it!" Darin said, trying to dig in his heels. What the hell was Halon's problem?!

The Nosaurians weren't budging, and all four of them were now squawking and barking as Halon shoved the pilot forward ahead of him, presumably intending to crash through all of them and the door.

They were mere steps away when the Nosaurians opened their mouths and an intense flash of light blinded Darin. He yelped and flinched away, belatedly protecting his eyes with an upraised arm. Clacks and dull footfalls resonated on the floorboards, then strong, clawed hands grabbed his shoulders, twisted him off-balance and slammed him face-first to the floor and pinned him there. Unable to see, Darin fought to get free but couldn't; his attackers had the advantages of strength, sight, and leverage. It sounded like the same type of scuffle was happening with Halon.

Barks and warbles filled the air. The Nosaurian held Darin down, then another pulled his hands behind his back. It reminded him too much of the biker scout on Lokinha, and although the panic intensified it ultimately did him no good.

"Stop! Let me go! What are you doing?!" Darin managed. That, too, did him no good. Something hissed. The clawed hands held Darin's arms together and quickly tied his wrists behind him with thick, rough rope. Darin yelped again, this time at the sharp protest from his injured wrist.

Once the ropes were tight, the Nosaurians emptied his pockets. Then one of the clawed hands pinning him grabbed the back of his neck and hauled him to his feet. Its owner wouldn't let him straighten up completely. Darin stumbled as the Nosaurian forced him a few choppy strides toward the wall opposite the door, then it shoved him hard down to the floor and let go. His shoulder hit the wall, and he maneuvered himself into a sitting position against it. To his right, Darin heard what he guessed was Halon also being pushed to the floor.

His vision was returning excruciatingly slowly. Darin blinked and squinted, struggling to see. The big blobby white blur in front of him gradually darkened to a big blobby black blur. Finally blobs coalesced into shapes and details distilled from them.

Two Nosaurians stood in front of him. One was Guide. The other held a small blaster, and he was facing the Rebels and looking distinctly unhappy. He wore the same kind of outfit and had the same kind of scars on his likewise dark green scales and broken horns. The other two

Nosaurians were nowhere to be seen, and neither was the bag they had brought.

On the floor to Darin's immediate right sat Halon with his hands bound, and on Darin's left lay Troy, still unconscious and where Darin had put him. Halon was blinking hard but was mostly staring at the Nosaurians, and though it was difficult to tell with the low lighting it almost looked like he had grown even paler. He cowered backwards against the wall.

The Nosaurians barked back and forth to each other. Darin refused to believe what had just happened. "What's going on? What are you doing? I thought you were helping us!" Darin said to Guide.

The two Nosaurians hissed at him and went back to warbling and barking at each other.

Darin shifted uncomfortably and pulled at the painful ropes, but they were secure. He tried to swallow through his dry mouth and said, "Listen, there's been some kind of horrible misunderstanding—"

The Nosaurian with the blaster barked sharply at him, and Darin stopped talking. Then that same Nosaurian angrily chattered to Guide, stepped up to Halon, pointed at his uniform's Imperial insignia with the tip of the blaster, and aimed the blaster between Halon's eyes, squawking and barking gutturally the whole time.

Halon jerked away, closer to Darin. "Whoa, whoa! Hey!"

"No! Wait!" Darin said at the same time, lurching forward to his knees.

That Nosaurian was pulled back by Guide, who launched into what sounded like a screaming tirade.

"I am going to die today," Halon announced in a small, shaking voice that was a bit high-pitched. "The entire galaxy wants me dead. First the Imperials, then you, now them."

"I don't want you dead, sir. I helped save your life," Darin muttered, with his heart rate slowly decreasing following the jolt.

"Oh, *that's* what you called that?" Halon bit out sardonically. "Because my life really looks to be in a promising state now, doesn't it?!"

Darin tried hard to ignore the remark as he sat back and eased the pressure off of his hurt leg. "Can you understand what they're saying?"

"Why the hell would you think I could understand that racket?"

"Because you've been on this moon with them, and I thought maybe—"

"Just because I've lived here for a while doesn't mean I had anything to do with these overgrown lizards! Other Imperial groups had to deal with them, not mine!"

Darin bit back a few choice words and instead took a deep breath. Troy still needed medical attention, and that meant they had to get this straightened out fast and get untied, preferably freed completely.

"Hey, guys?" Darin said to the two arguing Nosaurians. "Does our new pal here understand Basic?"

"Stop trying to interact with them!" Halon hissed. "The last thing you want to do is call attention to yourself when a disgruntled slave with a blaster has you at his mercy!"

"How do you know these two are slaves?" Darin pressed. "Maybe they just live in this area with the others."

"Every single Nosaurian here's a slave, idiot. Besides, see the tracking band on their ankles?"

Darin spotted what Halon was referring to: on each one's left ankle joint above their large, three-toed, avian-like feet was a dull metal band covered with scratches and gouges. Darin recognized them instantly. "Oh."

“Yeah. ‘Oh.’ They’re dangerous! Stop reminding them that we’re here! I can’t believe you got us into this mess! What were you thinking, going with them?!”

The Nosaurian argument in front of them was dying down. The one with the blaster, whom Darin decided to nickname Ammo, seemed to be getting overruled by Guide. Guide barked and squawked a few harsh commands at the humans, brandished a small blaster of his own from a belt pouch, and then walked to the opposite side of the room. He sat down on the floor near the outside door and watched them, keeping the blaster in his hand and visible to the prisoners. Growling, Ammo walked into the deep shadow along the side wall, out of sight, presumably into an adjoining room. He threw some angry looks at Guide as he left.

At least the more hotheaded one was gone for now. Darin felt a tiny bit more relieved, at least until he looked over at Troy. The commando still needed serious help, and the Nosaurians weren’t doing anything for him.

Darin made eye contact with Guide, and the Nosaurian returned the favor by narrowing his own eyes and glaring in return. The pilot motioned with an elbow toward Troy and said to Guide, “He needs some water. Well, he needs more than that but he really needs some water. Do you have any?”

Guide squawked and warbled at him darkly, with eyes that remained narrowed. He raised the tip of the blaster a couple centimeters as if to remind Darin of its presence. Like he’d forgotten.

Darin sighed and added, mostly to himself, “Guess not. And with my hands tied I can’t even pantomime drinking, so I’ll... just be quiet now.”

“I told you not to talk to them,” Halon growled.

“Sir, we have to. We can’t give them what they want to free us if we don’t know what that is,” Darin replied quietly.

“What they want? They’re slaves. They hate Imperials, and therefore humans. They have us right where they want us. Seems pretty simple to me!”

Darin shook his head. “If that was all there was to it they could have already killed us instead of taking us prisoner. There has to be more, and we need to find out what they want.”

“They haven’t killed us yet because they want to torture us first. Ever think of that? Retaliation. They want to make us suffer until they put us out of our misery.”

“They’re not doing anything of the sort! They haven’t hurt us yet. If we can talk to them—”

Halon scoffed and interrupted. “Don’t get all bleeding-heart here. They’re not human. They don’t even speak Basic. They’re not smart enough to know or want anything else except revenge.”

Darin gave him a sidelong look of disgust. “Wow. I’ll pretend you didn’t just say that. Sir.”

“Pretend all you want. It won’t change reality.”

Guide offered an acerbic growl and warble at the prisoners, though Darin got the impression it was more because Guide was fed up with the act of their talking, not because of what specifically was being said. The Nosaurian didn’t seem to be reacting as if he understood the Rebels’ words, and that could give them a huge advantage. Darin quieted down.

“Look,” Halon continued in a hard voice, breaking into Darin’s thoughts, “between these overgrown lizards with blasters and the Imperials on their way, *we’re in trouble*. You should have cooperated with me when I first tried to get us out of this room; we’d be free and safe now if you had! But instead you had to be all contrary and want to bring this other guy with. Forget

about your pal here— you can't help him anymore. If he doesn't wake up and can't move, then he's baggage that stays behind. I'm in charge, and you listen to me now. The only thing I want you doing is thinking of a way to escape ASAP. If you have an opportunity, you take it and get me out. Got that?"

Darin couldn't believe what he was hearing, and he retorted without thinking. "What?! You expect me to just leave One behind? No! I won't do that."

"Yes, you will. That's an order, not a request! Don't th—"

Guide barked, and he fired a blaster bolt into the wall above them, splintering and scorching the wood. Both Rebels jumped and ducked, and Guide's harsh follow-on commands were authoritative and loud. Halon melted back against the wall, and Darin's heart pounded in a triple-time beat. The two humans fell silent. Guide lowered the tip of the blaster.

When he regained some of his composure, Halon looked over at Darin with a pointed, expectant expression, obviously wanting some sort of acceptance of his order. Darin purposefully looked away without committing, even nonverbally. He couldn't help shooting a betrayed look at Guide, and then he closed his eyes and shivered, half from the temperature and half from the anxious thoughts whirling in his mind. What had he gotten them into by trusting Guide? He really was a stupid idiot who was going to get everyone killed. Just like Quiver, Trainner, and now Halon were saying.

Quiver was learning to hate mealtimes. He hovered uncertainly in the middle of the mess hall with his full lunch tray, unsure of where to go. Sitting at his normal table would only mean facing the two empty seats across from him, and he couldn't do that. Not yet.

Through the general din, he was able to pick out a familiar sound. "Quiver," Ikoa's ragged voice called. When he spotted her, she beckoned him over to her table. He went.

Ikoa smiled at him and patted the empty spot next to her when he walked up. "Have a seat, Quiver. Join us," she invited. Only she and Chopper were at the four-seat table.

"All right," Quiver said. He set down his tray and sat. It was probably the best option he had at the moment.

"So he told me to go, and I went," Chopper said to Ikoa, presumably picking their conversation back up. "None of this training and simulators and 'read the manual' garbage over and over. They said they needed people to fly, there's a Z-95, go fly it. We learned by doing, inventing, and surviving our mistakes. If all the pilots coming out of the training squadrons now are just going to be obsessed with protocols and doing things by-the-book like Darin was, the Rebellion will never make any headway ever again. The bureaucracy and manuals just get in the way."

"Darin might have been like that to start out with, but he's loosened up a lot since then," Ikoa said.

"Yeah, but for every one pilot like him who does eventually know better and learn, after a lot of effort on our parts, might I add, there's another one or two or three who stays that way and tries to force that 'correctness' on everyone else. Given our luck, which one do you think we would get?" Chopper asked.

"But there's so much less of a learning curve in the field when you've already got training behind you. Isn't saving the pilots and their starfighters worth it when they can make those mistakes in sims instead of real life?"

“Sims, yes. Nothing wrong with sims. But lose the procedures and manuals already. They do more harm than good. They force you into conforming to a set standard instead of thinking for yourself. Darin was a prime example of that— always worrying about what he was *supposed* to do instead of just doing something.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Quiver asked curiously while he dove into his soup.

Ikoa answered, “We started out talking about new pilots, then that morphed into veterans versus rookies and what the rookies of today know compared to people like us who came up the ranks a different way before the Rebellion is as organized as it is now, though I use that term loosely. We were swapping stories about our first starfighter solos and how we started flying combat.” She took a bite of her sandwich.

Chopper looked at Quiver. “You didn’t go through formal training either, did you?”

Quiver shook his head. “Not really. General piloting, yes. X-wing specific, no. All of my X-wing skills are pure natural talent, and being mostly self-taught, I had the best teacher around.” He grinned.

“Riiiiiiight. That explains a hell of a lot,” Chopper said. He stabbed a chunk of mystery meat on his plate with a fork and continued, “So what was your first X-wing solo or combat like? How did you do with no formal X-wing specific training beforehand?”

Quiver put down his spoon and ignored his food to focus more on his storytelling. Plus, this way he could incorporate the needed gestures for the full effect. “It was awesome,” he said, his eyes lighting up. “See, we’d received word that the Imperials were flying the Death Star right to us to wipe us all out. At the time I’d been working on the personnel transport carts, but Princess Organa knew we needed a miracle so she begged me to jump in an X-wing. I did, and I led my flight right toward that trench and—”

“That’s the Battle of Yavin,” Ikoa said patiently. “You weren’t there.”

Quiver furrowed his brow and did his best to look confused. He saw the expression on Darin often enough to have a pretty good idea of how to do it. “Really?” he said. “Oh. I get it mixed up sometimes. Well, wait, that’s right, it was like this. It was back when I was stationed on Mantooine over in the Atrivis Sector. I was in charge of the laundry droids for the Atrivis Sector Forces. There was a huge op in the works between SFC, Special Forces, and the Sector Forces to grab some intel and take out the Imperial station in orbit. SFC was desperately short on pilots but had heard whispered, reverent tales of my uncanny aptitude, so they brought me to an X-wing and—”

“The laundry droid bit I believe,” interrupted Chopper. “Well, maybe not the ‘in charge’ part. But the rest of that is Operation Cobolt. You weren’t there either.”

“Oh. Hmm.” Quiver tapped a finger on the table as if in deep thought. “Oh, right, it went this way. I found out who the CO was of the starfighter squadron stationed at the base I was on. He called it ‘stalking’ but it really was nothing of the sort. Anyway, I—”

He stopped when Commander Mackin walked up to the table with his lunch tray. “Mind if I join you?” Mack asked the three of them.

Ikoa smiled and gestured to the remaining empty chair, and Mack sat. “Thanks,” he said with a smile of his own. Mack picked up his knife and fork and started in on his own slice of mystery meat.

Quiver picked up his spoon, ducked his head and went back to his soup. Suddenly he wanted to be anywhere else except at that table.

Ikoa turned to Quiver. “And? Keep going,” she said.

Quiver shook his head and gave a one-shouldered shrug. “It’s nothing. Just a stupid

story,” he mumbled, trying to clamp down on the anger that had just flashed on like it was controlled by a switch.

Ikoa took a breath to say something, but before she could, Chopper took the opening and ran with it, easily drawing Mack into the conversation as well. Quiver didn’t look at the other pilots while he finished his meal, and when they tried to include him all he did was offer noncommittal grunts. The moment he’d eaten enough to not feel hungry anymore he muttered an informal farewell, grabbed his tray and left.

He deposited it at the washer station and walked out. He’d better get back to his current punishment detail assignment. The Quakes’ support squadron’s toolboxes weren’t going to organize themselves.

“Are we dead yet?”

Zyrytchev looked down at the groggy Mon Calamari he was carrying. He was pleased to see her beginning to come to. “Quiet,” he whispered. “And, not yet.”

“Too bad. It’d prob’ly feel better,” Kicktar mumbled, though she did lower her voice to say it.

Their leader, the maimed Nosaurian child, stopped and motioned Zyrytchev back into another deep shadow in the alley. He complied. Zyrytchev was becoming used to the routine now; the child was leading them from doorway to doorway, alley to alley, avoiding snow and anything that would retain tracks. Numerous times the child gestured for Zyrytchev to hide behind cover or within shadows, and it would pause for a couple minutes or longer before beckoning Zyrytchev to follow.

Occasionally Zyrytchev had caught distant flashes of light from windows and doorways. After a single one the child would press forward again, but multiple flashes seemed to have different meanings and always caused the child to wait.

Zyrytchev wasn’t sure where they were heading, but the child acted like it knew exactly where it was going, and it was always leading them away from the speeders Zyrytchev heard. The network of Nosaurians seemed to know what it was doing.

“Can you walk?” Zyrytchev whispered to his squadmate.

Kicktar blinked sluggishly at him. “Walk? Where? Where are we? What happened?”

“You hit your head. Some Nosaurians are helping us move away from the Imperials. Can you stand?”

Kicktar moved as if to slip out of his arms but inhaled sharply and stopped. “No. I think my leg’s broken. And unlike you, I don’t have spares.”

Zyrytchev nodded. He would just have to ignore his own pain like a true Sludir would. He was getting soft with the Rebels. “Then I am in charge of transportation, and you are in charge of shooting anything hostile. In all honesty, I would prefer to trade.”

Kicktar managed a small chuckle. “I know, big guy. Sorry.” Zyrytchev shifted his hold on her enough to grab the blaster he had tucked in his waist belt, and he handed it to her before resuming a more stable grip. She looked around, then asked, “Where’s One?”

The child waved Zyrytchev forward again, and he followed as quietly as he could. At the next stop, after Zyrytchev was hidden from plain sight again, he whispered, “I do not know. I have not seen him since we split up. The Imperials are jamming communications.”

Kicktar looked uncomfortable. “I hope he’s not dead. What was that Imperial doing with

us anyway? That was weird. What if he killed One and Four? What was with all the shooting?”

Zyrytchev shook his head. “I heard some of their words when he ran up to us at the dock before the shooting began. He is not actually an Imperial. He is with us.”

“I— oh.” Kicktar looked like she understood, and she fell silent.

After another forty minutes of moving from hiding spot to hiding spot, the Nosaurian youngster led them down a narrow alley and stopped at the edge of a large building. The child peeked around the corner, down the road, though it stayed well away from the dominating red line on the ground and the odd fencepost-like contraptions along it. The Nosaurian opened its mouth and flashed light from it again, and then pulled back to look brightly at Zyrytchev. “Beluu,” it chirped.

Kicktar aimed a large eye up at Zyrytchev. “What?” she whispered.

A huge landspeeder pulled to a stop directly in front of them on the street. Zyrytchev scrambled backwards, and Kicktar raised the blaster in alarm.

The Nosaurian child ran the couple steps to them in surprise and prevented Kicktar from shooting. The child laid its good hand on Zyrytchev’s arm and pointed with its deformed one back at the speeder. “Beluu,” it repeated with more emphasis.

The pilot’s door of the speeder opened, and a large, pale blue Herglic stepped out. It blew a short burst of air from the blowhole on the top of its head with a *hauum* sound and said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you.” The voice, though deep and bassy, had a somewhat feminine quality to it. The Herglic lowered her massive head briefly and rubbed her finned hands together in contrition. “I’m Beluu. I received word that little Renc here was bringing you to me for help.” She motioned with a large hand to the Nosaurian child.

If the youngster had been small compared to Zyrytchev, Renc was positively diminutive next to Beluu. Renc didn’t seem to care, though, and rushed forward to give Beluu some sort of hug the instant she crossed onto their side of the red line. She returned it gently, then sounded some throaty clacks and whistles. The child nodded, clicked and warbled at the two Rebels, then raised its good hand in farewell and scampered away.

Beluu turned back to Zyrytchev and Kicktar and gestured urgently to her speeder. “Please, before the Imperials come this way. I’ll take you to my home. I can keep you safe. And— oh, your arm is bleeding. You’re hurt,” she said to Kicktar. “I can help with that too. Please, hurry.”

Zyrytchev and Kicktar exchanged a look, each asking the other if they should trust the Herglic. Zyrytchev was disinclined to trust anyone and everyone, but the Nosaurians had helped them so far, and they obviously trusted her. Besides, with Kicktar’s injuries and the Imperials still out looking for them, they had to hole up and hide until they could figure out a way to contact or rendezvous with the team. Plus this way they could keep to their cover story, abominable though it was. He conceded with a slight tilt of his head.

Kicktar appeared to reach the same conclusion at about the same time. She nodded to Beluu. “All right.”

The cetaceous being’s wide mouth curved upward in a smile. “Wonderful. Come.” She opened the back door of the speeder, carefully took Kicktar from Zyrytchev and gingerly laid her on the bench seat. Zyrytchev climbed up beside his teammate and was pleased to see the interior of the landspeeder actually had more than enough room for him to be comfortable. Beluu returned to the pilot’s seat and drove them off.

Chapter Fifteen

Guide had offered no clues, even inadvertently, about his intentions for his prisoners. Halon hadn't stopped glaring at both Darin and Guide in turn. In fact, the only thing that had seemed to change was that Darin had started to shiver.

He sighed and brought his knees up to his chest for warmth, then gazed longingly at his gloves sitting out of reach on the floor where he'd left them while first tending to Troy. While sitting still on the ground and with only his lined jumpsuit on, not his jacket, he was quickly growing cold despite his prior acclimation to and comfort in such temperatures on his homeworld. He'd always had a vest then. Not now. He sniffled, growing irritated at his runny nose.

The pilot checked on Troy again. Some blood had seeped into the bacta wraps, though the sporadic condensations in the air helped Darin see that the commando was still breathing. He was still no closer to figuring out how to get Troy out of there. If only Halon would give him his comlink back. There was no reason for this to be so hard...

The door to the building quietly opened, and a smaller Nosaurian entered. He looked much younger than Guide and Ammo, and Darin guessed he was probably an adolescent. His scales were a slate grey with a couple small remaining patches of thinning feathers, and his horns, all intact, were perhaps only as long as the width of Darin's flattened hand.

He walked to Guide, and the two conversed briefly before the adolescent walked into the side room where Ammo had gone. Guide looked a bit agitated, and he looked up toward the ceiling.

Darin wasn't sure why until several minutes later when he heard the deep thrum of airspeeders flying low overhead. He immediately looked up, though he could see nothing except the shadows hiding the bare ceiling. The rickety walls shook, and then the noise was past. It sounded like the airspeeder was descending, and it was heading in the general direction of where the Imperials' and their own speeders had crashed. Before too long, the noise died down considerably, as if the vehicle had landed and reduced power.

Darin swallowed hard and pulled without success at the ropes binding his wrists. If his guess was right, and going from Halon's newly agitated and rattled expression, it was, then the reinforcements for the Imperial search parties had just arrived.

Ammo hurried into the main room and exchanged fearful clacks and bleaks with Guide. Whatever they were talking about must have been urgent, since mere seconds later they both went to the middle of the room and crouched down. The Nosaurians kept a wary eye on the Rebels while they poked and prodded the floorboards. Darin now saw that the loose floorboards he'd walked across earlier weren't fastened down at all: the two Nosaurians quickly pulled up a series of them all in a row, leaving a large hole in the middle of the floor.

Underneath where the boards had been was the wooden foundation frame and a shallow space maybe half a meter deep before it hit packed, greyish dirt. Long metal pipes also ran parallel to the floorboards along the edges of the hole, but there didn't seem to be too many pipes in this particular section that the Nosaurians had uncovered.

Guide and Ammo went to Troy and bent down. Ammo took the commando's ankles, and Guide grabbed hold of his shoulders. Darin sat up anxiously, but Ammo growled at him. They lifted the unconscious soldier, moved him over to the hole in the floor, and lowered him down into it.

"What are you doing?" Darin demanded. He fidgeted restlessly, wondering what he

should do. Guide and Ammo kicked Darin's gloves and the medpack items he'd been using into the hole with Troy and didn't answer.

Halon did. "They're making our grave, that's what they're doing! Entombing us in the floor! Throwing us down there, shooting us and nailing the boards above us so they can dance above our dead bodies! No one will ever find us down there!"

Ammo appeared right in front of Darin. Darin leaned back, trying in vain to retreat. Intellectually he knew he shouldn't believe Halon, but the fear from everyone in the room was contagious and he just didn't know what to make of all this.

Ammo grabbed the back of Darin's neck and pulled him to his feet. The Nosaurian was stronger than he looked. Guide had done the same with Halon and was pushing the Intel agent toward the hole. The taller man was bent over from the hold on his neck. Halon was panicking, trying to scramble away.

"No way! You're not putting me in there!" he yelled hysterically. Guide barked sharply at him. At the edge of the hole Halon planted his feet and desperately tried to hold his ground, but Guide kicked the back of one of Halon's knees, buckling it and pitching Halon forward with a surprised and painful yelp. He fell into the shallow space beside Troy and hit the dirt hard with a dull thud, his bound arms useless for catching himself or breaking the fall. Darin's heart leapt into his throat when he saw Guide immediately pull his blaster from his pouch— maybe Halon was right— but the worst of the panic was momentarily forestalled when Guide simply laid down in the hole beside Halon. No shots rang out.

Ammo tightened his clawed grip around Darin's neck, and when he had the pilot's frazzled attention he made direct eye contact and put one finger to his beaked mouth where lips would be on a human. Darin nodded as much as the hold on his neck would allow and reluctantly let himself be led the few steps to the edge of the hole. Getting kicked and forced in like Halon had been was something Darin hoped to avoid.

Below him, both Halon and Troy were still alive, though Halon was pale with the business end of Guide's blaster pressed into his ribs and Guide's other hand covering Halon's mouth. Darin obeyed the insistent push from Ammo and stepped down into the hole. A large pipe running beneath the floorboards separated Darin's little alcove from the space where Halon, Troy, and Guide were.

Ammo forced Darin to his knees and then fully down on the ground. Ammo had his own blaster out, and he laid beside the pilot and let out a louder, clicking trill. Still on his side, Ammo maneuvered himself so he was pressing Darin hard against the large pipe, immobilizing him. Then he wrapped his left arm tightly around Darin's neck and jammed the tip of his blaster into the underside of Darin's jaw. Immediately Darin tried to pull away from the control and the threat, but the cold tip of the blaster against his skin made him think twice about continuing his struggles.

The adolescent Nosaurian came into view above them in the room and hurriedly laid all the floorboards back down over them as they had been before. One by one, the boards blocked the light until they were drenched in nearly complete darkness and enclosed in the tiny space.

And they laid there. Quietly.

For the next fifteen minutes Darin attempted to shift around to find an infinitesimally more comfortable position until he heard a noise from the room above and muffled voices nearby.

Human voices.

Tensing at the sound, Ammo shoved the blaster tip harder into Darin's jaw and tightened

his grip around Darin's neck. Several footsteps walked into the room, thudding on the floor mere centimeters above Darin's nose.

And then the clipped, precise voice of an Imperial made Darin freeze and hold his breath.

"He's not in this dump either, sir. Phew, it stinks of those lizards in here, either that or something died."

"Nothing in the back room. More of the same— empty."

"Okay, next building."

The boots clomped out, crunched into the snow and faded.

Ammo kept his tight grip for another twenty minutes, but there was only silence. Darin remained still the entire time and eventually convinced his heart rate to drop back down to more normal levels.

Ammo finally, gradually, loosened his hold around Darin's neck and pulled the blaster away. He rolled over, cautiously pushed a floorboard up a few centimeters, peered out and clicked to Guide. Ammo and Guide both began quietly pushing aside the floorboards to get out. Darin shuddered at the influx of cold air the movements generated. It had been a bit warmer in the enclosed space.

Once the floorboards above him were removed, Darin sat up and paused when something caught his eye. In the small amount of light visible in the hole, the swept-in contents of the medpack glinted on the ground near his feet. One item in particular grabbed his attention.

A glance showed that Guide and Ammo weren't paying any direct attention to him while they went about their task. Even Halon was too busy acting simultaneously disgusted and frightened. As nonchalantly as he could, Darin pivoted around to put his body between his goal and the Nosaurians and to put his bound hands as close as he could to it. He blindly sought out the thin laser cauterizer.

When Darin found it, he grabbed it and twisted it in between his fingers, fumbling due to their increasing numbness, until he could push the deactivated cauterizer's handle straight up his sleeve, underneath the ropes. When he was satisfied that the ropes would hold it in place against his skin, he sat and waited.

Guide and Ammo were busy lifting Troy out of the hole and placing him back on the floor while still keeping Darin's jacket draped over him like a blanket. Then they motioned Halon and Darin back to their original spots along the wall. The Rebels silently obeyed. Halon was limping and went as far into the corner as he could.

The floorboards were replaced once again, making it look like nothing had ever happened in this ordinary, unassuming room. However, Guide and Ammo stayed on high alert for the next thirty minutes, and Ammo kept going back and forth to the side room where Darin could hear him conversing with whatever Nosaurians were in there.

Finally the two captors seemed to be convinced that the worst of the danger was past. Darin was worrying about the increased amount of blood that had shown up on Troy's bandage since he'd been moved when Ammo walked back in the room. He and Guide exchanged some words, and then Guide resumed guarding the prisoners and Ammo walked over to Darin. Darin warily pulled back, but all Ammo did was crouch down for a few moments and intently study the logo on Darin's shipping uniform. When he was done, Ammo went to the outside door, scouted out the surroundings, and snuck out. He closed the door behind him, hefting and shifting it until it covered the doorway better. The reddish light inside the room decreased substantially with the door's closure. A few small gaps in the walls were the only openings to the outside now, and the cold breeze whistled gently through them.

Darin wondered if the Imperials would be back. He wondered what Ammo was doing out there. Hell, he wondered what he himself was going to do.

And he wondered if he would ever see Quiver or his other squadmates again. Reflexively he started thinking about CC, but he ruthlessly wrangled that into a lie to tell himself, making himself wonder instead how she was doing and how long it would be until he'd be able to see her again.

Darin closed his eyes against the sight of Troy's bloody bandages and unconscious form, brought his knees up to his chest and tried to think.

Regardless of anything else that happened, the one thing Darin was sure of was that the Rebels would stand the best chance of escaping both the Nosaurians and the Imperials if they had their hands free. So that was what he focused on first.

With some effort, which he strove to minimize externally so Guide wouldn't pick up on it, Darin pulled the laser cauterizer out from its snug place in his bindings. He placed it carefully on the ground behind him and oriented it parallel to his body with enough clearance that he hoped the laser portion wouldn't hit him when he turned it on, especially since he wasn't quite sure which was its business end. After some concentrated searching he found the power switch and flicked it on.

Thankfully the noise was quiet enough to be undetectable by Guide. Even Halon didn't seem to hear it. Darin carefully lowered his right fingers over his estimated position of either end, trying to detect enough difference in emitted heat to determine which end had the laser. Finally satisfied with his guess, he picked up the cauterizer's handle and slowly lifted the laser end in an arc toward the outside of the ropes binding his wrists.

There was a soft hissing and sizzling as the tiny laser contacted the edge of the ropes, but again not even Halon seemed to hear it. The Intel operative was sitting, pale and stony-faced, glaring vacantly at the outside door across the room. Darin gladly left him to it.

So many things could go wrong while he was cutting the ropes, and it would be so simple for the Nosaurians to find out about his escape efforts prematurely. All Darin wanted to do was hurry through the cutting, but he forced himself to be patient and go slowly. It would just make things worse if he badly injured himself with the laser cauterizer in his haste to break his bonds.

Darin hid a smile when at last he felt slack in the binds. The pressure against his swollen wrist subsided. He switched off the cauterizer and wriggled his hands free of the severed rope. Darin discreetly tucked the cauterizer handle in a hip pocket and then gathered the rope behind him so the free ends weren't visible. He sat back against the wall, keeping his arms in the same position they'd been in when he'd been bound. To help he clasped his hands behind his back. The first step was done, but he could do nothing further yet. The moment Darin got up, Guide would easily shoot him. Though it strained his patience with Troy lying there bleeding, Darin had to wait for an opportunity to present itself.

The speeder took them to the Herglic section of town. Kicktar was glad for that; it had to mean they were moving farther away from the Imperial base at least. She wondered if she should check the map Troy had given her, but until she saw a street sign or something she could read as

they flew past it would be useless to her. She had no clue where they were, no idea where to even start looking on the map. Maybe their hostess could tell them later.

Blast, her leg and head hurt. And her shoulder. How had she gotten so banged up on what was supposed to be an easy portion of this mission? The universe probably wanted her dead.

Soon Beluu pulled into a driveway beside a large structure that was plain but in good repair. Frost covered the front windows. The blinds inside were closed and a passerby on the street could not see in. The front door had an unshoveled drift of snow on the stoop.

Beluu parked the speeder, got out, looked around cautiously, and opened the back door. Zyrytchev disembarked, and Kicktar decided that if she didn't want to be teased mercilessly by the other commandos for the rest of time that she'd better put an end to this embarrassing carrying. She pulled herself over to the door and carefully slid to the ground. Zyrytchev steadied her as she hopped on her uninjured leg and followed Beluu to the back door.

Once inside the house, warmth enveloped them, and Kicktar took a moment to enjoy the sensation. On the door mat she stomped the encrusted snow from the boot on her good foot as well as she could with Zyrytchev's help, then Beluu led them down a wide hallway further into the house. The rooms they passed were huge and had a cluttered, lived-in look.

"Sorry for the mess," Beluu said. "Please, come and sit down." In a side room Beluu invited them to a humanoid-scale couch and chair, which looked out of place in the Herglic's home. First aid supplies were sprawled across a large table, and more were visible in a cabinet along the wall. Near the wall by the couch was a large diameter pipe that went vertically from the floor straight up through the ceiling. It radiated heat, and if Kicktar remembered the mission briefing correctly, that heat was being channeled from the nearest thermal vent on the moon.

Kicktar immediately and gratefully sat on the chair. As the Mon Cal tried to puzzle out the presence of the furniture that was too small for the Herglic to use, Beluu smiled. "I try to help the Nosaurians here when they are injured as well," she explained. "If we can get them past the perimeter, anyway. Usually I need to go to them. And—" A quizzical look crossed her alien features as she studied the pair more closely. "What are those uniforms you're wearing? They don't look like Imperial-issued clothing, and I don't recognize that logo. And I don't see many of your kinds, either of you, in this area often since the Imperials favor using Nosaurians here. Where are you from?"

Kicktar gingerly shook her head. "We're not Imperial slaves. Not anymore. They sold us to a shipping company here. That's what these uniforms are from."

Zyrytchev spoke up, grinding out the words. "We got separated from our owners and didn't want the Imperials to come across us without them. That would get our owners in trouble, and we would be the ones punished for it."

"We appreciate your help. Once we can regroup and find our owners without the Imperials spotting us, we'll be out of your way," Kicktar added.

Beluu blew air through her blowhole again, a decidedly dark sound. "We will discuss that. But first, we need to attend to your injuries. You do not need to suffer pain inflicted by your horrible Human masters." She briefly turned to Zyrytchev. "Please make yourself comfortable while I tend to your companion."

Zyrytchev claimed the entire couch, and then he bared his teeth in pleasure and stretched his arms out as far as they could go. "I like this place. It is not cramped like everywhere else."

Kicktar liked this place too, but for a different reason. The room was decorated in an ocean motif. Blues and greens swirled on the walls, while abstract figurines of sea creatures—some she recognized, some she didn't—were interspersed on shelves and furniture to watch over

the room's occupants.

Beluu caught her appreciating the decor, and the Herglic smiled once more. "The water is in our blood too. Does this remind you of Dac?"

"I'm not sure," Kicktar said absently, admiring a particularly mischievous-looking statue. "I've never actually been there."

Beluu's smile faded. "That is not right. It is not right for them to do that to you," she said firmly.

Kicktar snapped herself out of it and belatedly realized what had happened. "Oh, wait, no, I didn't mean it like that--"

Beluu didn't seem to hear. She turned to the table of first aid supplies and picked through them, gingerly picking up the small items with the tips of her large finned fingers while querying Kicktar for details about her injuries. Soon she gathered her selected items and turned to the Mon Cal. With a daintiness and precision Kicktar wouldn't have expected from such large, thick digits, Beluu opened the small humanoid-scale bacta patches and bandages and asked Kicktar to take off her jacket and ready her injured shoulder.

Zyrytchev remained alert while Beluu tended to Kicktar's shoulder. When the Herglic finished that and turned her attention to setting and splinting Kicktar's leg, Beluu said in concern, "These are serious injuries, not the result of the kind of beatings most of the Imperial slavers inflict on the Nosaurians. What did your owners do to you to cause this? Do they do this often? How long have they had you?"

Kicktar exchanged another look with Zyrytchev. Then Zyrytchev took a deep breath and launched into a stirring tale about their hard life with Pinnacle Shipping.

The pain from her leg allowed Kicktar to hide a smile as Zyrytchev ranted to Beluu's sympathetic ear about his hatred of Human masters, Imperials in particular. She knew she shouldn't smile because she was sure the details and his feelings were all genuine, and their authenticity certainly convinced Beluu of the Rebels' cover story, but Kicktar couldn't help but appreciate how cathartic this must be for Zyrytchev to finally get it all off his chest to someone who understood and wouldn't judge him for it. She'd never heard most of the details and figured he hadn't been able to say those particular things around the many Humans in their squad.

Beluu took her time tending to Kicktar's injuries. When she was finished, Kicktar had to admire the experience evident in the Herglic's medical skill and the thorough job she did. Maybe this hadn't been such a bad idea after all. Plus it beat hiding outside in the cold with Imperials all around. The Mon Calamari was actually getting hot from sitting near the heating pipe for so long, though it was drying her skin and making her thirsty.

When Beluu stepped back at last, Kicktar tested out the motion of her hurt arm and splinted leg and smiled. "That feels much better, and those painkillers are kicking in too. Thank you."

Beluu bowed her head. "I'm glad to help. Now, rest."

"Thank you, but we really should be going." Kicktar started to slide off the chair but was stopped by that massive hand.

"You need rest," Beluu said sternly. She punctuated the command with a burst of air through her blowhole.

"I'll be fine. We need to go, though; we're overdue as it is."

Beluu shook her head as much as her physiology would allow; her neck was nearly nonexistent. “I won’t allow you to leave now just so your injury can reopen from another senseless beating for being late. You will stay here until the bacta has had more time to heal both your shoulder and your leg. If your owners find that unacceptable, I will pay them for the lost productivity from both of you for this duration.”

Kicktar was beginning to sense this was like talking to a duracrete wall, and she half suspected the massive Herglic would beat a duracrete wall in a battle of stubbornness. Time for Plan C. She turned to Zyrytchev and said, “Head back. I’ll meet you when I’m done here.” After all, he was the one with the datacards.

“Your companion should stay as well until you’re better,” Beluu said. “He should not face the wrath of your horrible owners alone. They might think he lost you or allowed you to get away and punish him for it. I’ve seen it before.”

This time the look Kicktar sent the Sludir was an annoyed one, one she hoped would sufficiently translate into, ‘*You laid it on too thick, Gamorrean-brain.*’ So. Plan D. “Then go comm them and tell them we’ll be late,” she told him in exasperation.

Zyrytchev nodded and started to move into a different room for privacy, but he too was blocked by Beluu. “You must not comm your owners. That only opens the door for them to pry your location out of you and come here and beat you. Do not do that yet. She needs to heal.”

“It will be all right,” Zyrytchev tried to say. “They will not come and harm us. It is a matter of—”

Beluu’s finger lifted his chin with surprising gentleness so he would look up at her. “You are afraid and making excuses for them. Rationalizing for them. You think it will be okay, but it won’t be. Wait until she heals more. Then I will accompany you both back to your owners. I will pay them for your time if necessary, but more importantly I will be there to protect you if needed. I’ve found that few Humans are willing to physically confront my kind face-to-face.” She offered a throaty chuckle and another blowhole clearing, then turned to tidy the supply table.

Kicktar sighed and leaned back in her chair. When Zyrytchev helplessly caught her eye, Kicktar narrowed them and grumbled under her breath, “Oh yeah. *Way* too thick.”

In the short term, it looked like Troy would have to be the one contacting them. Kicktar pulled the datapad with the map out of her pocket and started trying to puzzle out where Beluu’s house was on it.

Chapter Sixteen

It was a long, cold half hour later when Ammo returned and Darin saw his chance.

Darin was at his wits' end watching Troy's condition slowly deteriorate and was desperately trying to figure out how to communicate to Guide that the commando needed help when there was a quiet shuffling outside.

Ammo squeezed back in through the broken door, cleared his tracks from outside, and set the door back up in the doorway to block it. Once inside, he talked to Guide. Ammo almost looked chipper compared to Darin's earlier impression of him.

A brief conversation ensued, with most of Guide's contributions sounding similar to what Darin associated with curious inquiries from astromechs. Ammo answered each one almost excitedly, then he walked to the Rebels. Darin kept his arms behind him, still pretending to be tied up, and anxiously shifted to a kneeling position. Guide followed partway but stopped in the middle of the room, watching.

Ammo crouched down in front of Darin while still saying something to Guide. He poked at the Pinnacle Shipping logo above Darin's front pocket, then turned his head and spoke to Guide more directly.

In that instant something inside Darin pressed his "go" button, and he reacted without thinking. He ducked his head to keep his face below Ammo's horns and launched himself forward. Darin hit Ammo in a flying tackle and wrapped his stiff arms around the Nosaurian's upper body while they tumbled to the ground.

Coming out of the roll, Darin's donri skills kicked in and he got his feet under him even if the muscles were cold and slow to respond. Using their momentum he pulled both himself and Ammo up to their feet with Ammo in front of him and the Nosaurian's back held tightly against him. Darin pinned Ammo's upper arms, pressed his own left shoulder hard into a gap between Ammo's broken horns to keep them somewhat stationary, and dug into the fabric pouch on Ammo's hip and pulled the compact blaster from it. The height difference made the movements awkward.

The room was an instant din of loud barks and urgent warbles. Guide had moved, but Darin didn't see where and was too preoccupied with Ammo's struggles to look. From behind he heard Halon say, "What?" in surprise, then the Intel operative recovered fast and excitedly called, "Good! Shoot him!"

Ahead of Darin was the deep shadow to the side room, and he caught movement coming from it. He whipped the blaster up to aim that way, still using the fiercely struggling Ammo as a Nosaurian shield. "Stop! Hold it!" Darin shouted at the moving shadow. His thumb searched for a switch to put the blaster on stun but found none.

The adolescent Nosaurian emerged from the darkness, holding a blaster of his own in a proficient grip and aiming it directly and steadily at Darin. Despite his desperation, Darin faltered and didn't pull the trigger. It was just a kid—

"What are you waiting for?! Shoot it! Shoot them! Get us out of here! That's an order!" Halon yelled. Darin's stomach hitched as the deeper implications of those last words flashed through his mind. He tightened his grip on the blaster and tried to force himself to obey for the squadron's sake, but still he hesitated.

A short, sharp bark from Darin's left grabbed his attention, and when he glanced over he forgot how to breathe. Guide was standing beside the wall with his blaster aimed at Troy's unconscious form at point-blank range. The Nosaurian's piercing eyes bored straight into Darin's

as the pilot's grew wide and terrified.

For no other reason than to feel like he was buying himself half a moment to think, Darin turned a bit so Ammo was also partially blocking Darin from Guide at that angle. In his peripheral vision he saw the adolescent moving laterally to put Darin in a better crossfire zone. Darin's blaster wavered.

"Come on! Shoot them! Now!" Halon commanded.

Guide barked at Darin again, louder this time, and took the safety off of his blaster. The weapon was still pointed directly at Troy's head.

The crushing defeat was acute enough to be a physical sensation in the pit of his stomach. He'd lost. Everything. But he just couldn't pay that price.

Darin's blaster trembled, then he pointed it at the ceiling and removed his finger from the trigger. He let go of Ammo, who shoved himself away and spun around, and Darin held his other hand palm out and raised, and took one step back.

"What are you *doing?*!" shrilled Halon.

Instantly Guide switched his aim to Darin instead, clucking deep in his throat while still glaring at the pilot.

Ammo stepped forward and ripped the blaster from Darin's hand. Before Darin even knew it was coming, Ammo punched him in the face with such force that Darin ended up half-conscious on the floor.

Darin didn't even have a chance to vocalize the pain shooting through his head before Ammo grabbed him, pulled him up and hauled him, dizzy and stumbling, to the floor-to-ceiling pipe by Troy. Ammo ranted at him nonstop and likely promised all number of unpleasant punishments, and his clawed grip was tight enough that Darin blearily suspected he was drawing blood. Darin grimaced at the coppery taste of blood in his mouth and on his lip, but aside from that he could hardly concentrate on anything. All of his recent, frequent headaches returned and joined together into one large, cumulative migraine that Doctor Effetuy would have a fit upon hearing about. The tackle and subsequent tumble had also pinpointed every new bruise from the crash, and of course he'd banged his sore left elbow and wrist on the hard floor too.

Guide picked up the rope that had bound Darin and pointed out the singed ends where it had been burned through by the laser, then he tossed it back down, out of reach of the Rebels. Ammo hissed, pushed Darin roughly against the cold, vertical pipe, and dug through Darin's pockets. He soon pulled out the laser cauterizer and turned it on. He gave the pilot a withering look and warbled at the adolescent. The adolescent scampered out the door, and Ammo shoved Darin down to a sitting position with his back against the pipe.

A couple minutes later, after the worst of the stars had cleared from Darin's vision, the adolescent brought two Imperial slave tracking bands. He gave them to Ammo and went to talk to Guide.

Ammo yanked Darin's arms behind him and around the pipe, and Darin's muscles protested at being forced into that uncomfortable and unnatural position again. The Nosaurian fastened one tracking band around Darin's right wrist, then he took the other band, slipped one end of it through the slight gap under the band on Darin's right wrist like the link on a chain, and fastened it around the pilot's left wrist. With his arms effectively handcuffed around the metal pipe, Darin knew he wasn't going anywhere: the pipe was at least twenty centimeters in diameter.

Ammo stood, warbled and trilled something dark directly at Darin, pulled his blaster back out for emphasis, and then went to the spot where Guide had been sitting by the door and

relieved him on guard duty. Ammo skewered Darin with a constant, murderous look, and casually waved the tip of his blaster in Darin's direction while he sat. Guide gave a quick growl and wuff, then he sent the adolescent outside and went into the other room.

Darin pulled futilely at the makeshift binders. Quiver was right. All he did was screw up and make things worse.

"Great. *Just great*," Halon spat. "What the hell's wrong with you? You had them! You could've gotten us out of here! We should be a block away by now!"

Darin couldn't stand how much of a failure he was at that moment. He brought his knees up to his chest, rested his forehead on them to stabilize the worst of the dizziness, and closed his eyes. "I know," he said quietly. "But they were going to kill him."

"So what?"

Darin's eyes snapped open and he jerked his head up and around to gape at Halon. His vision swam, nausea pricked at him, and he immediately regretted the abrupt motion, but he had more pressing things on his mind at the moment. "What did you say?"

"I said so what?" Halon retorted. "That lizard would've taken care of our problem for us."

"*Excuse me?*" Darin said. He couldn't believe he was hearing this. "Our *'problem'*?"

"Yes, our problem! He's as good as dead anyway. And even if he wasn't, you still should have gone ahead with the escape and let them shoot him if it meant you could take them out and save me."

Darin shook his head as hard as he could without feeling like he would pass out. "No. *No way.*"

Halon scoffed. "What kind of answer is that? What the hell's wrong with you? Blast, no wonder they're punishing you stupid pilots. I just wish they weren't punishing us too by making us deal with you. Listen already! Worrying about saving your pal is completely short-sighted, and you need to look at the big picture here! The big picture involves *me*, not you or him. He's what, a soldier? You're a pilot? Look, the simple truth of the matter, whether you want to hear it or not, is that you're both expendable. *I'm not*. Stick some poor schmuck in a simulator and there's a replacement for you. Give someone else a blaster and there's a replacement for him. But what I know is invaluable to the Alliance and is unique and irreplaceable. So get your priorities straight here: you need to get me out no matter what, at any cost. You do as I say! Got it?"

This had to be caused by Darin's head injury. He had to be hearing things. He had to be. He hoped he was. "Did you honestly just tell me your life is worth more than his?" Darin bit out.

"Yes, I did," Halon snapped. "And you know what? The Rebellion agrees with me."

Darin glared at the Intel operative, and the throbbing in his head increased to a pounding. "You can't be serious. Listen, forget about all that. Forget that the two of us are apparently more worthless than dirt. What you need to get through your head, *sir*, is that he's a fellow Rebel who was seriously injured while protecting *you*. They weren't shooting at us until *you* came. This happened because of *you*. This is *your* responsibility, *especially* if you're so keen on being in charge here."

"He was doing his job by protecting me, nothing more. That's what he signed up for. If he dies because of it, I'm sorry, but that's the risk he decided to take. Same as you. Your jobs are to hold weapons, draw fire, and whittle down opposing numbers to keep the more intellectual, valuable assets like me safe."

"Like hell it is! I can't believe you're so out of touch with reality here!" Darin retorted.

“Have you been wearing that Imperial uniform so long that you forgot you’re not one?”

Halon narrowed his eyes and straightened up. “Accuse me of being an Imperial again and you’ll see just how disposable you really are.”

“Oh, no, trust me, I totally get how highly you think of us and how much I can count on your help in a tight spot. You won’t lift a finger to help either of us if precious little you might get hurt. But if you really care so little about us, why the hell should I risk my neck or his to save yours?”

Halon let out a noise of exasperation and ranted, “Because *that’s your job!* Like it or not, it’s true. It’s more important that I get back to the Rebellion than you. That’s why I’m in command here, and don’t even bother denying that because I was fully briefed on the command structure for this mission and the role of you stupid pilots in it. You’re supposed to be following *my orders, Flight Officer*, and when I order you to shoot the insane lizards that captured us, you’d damn well better be *shooting the insane lizards that captured us!* But you didn’t, and now we’re tons worse off than before! Our one chance to get out of here alive and you blew it! I *promise* you that when I get back I’ll be explaining in excruciating detail how you screwed all this up because you didn’t follow my orders. I hope they bust you and give you a garbage scow to pilot instead where you can’t cause problems for anyone else. If you even survive and make it back. And if you do, you’d better hope I’m with you because the consequences for losing me are going to be a thousand times worse than anything I could do to you. Now shut up, do what I say, and get your head on straight!” Halon was nearly shouting by the end, and he took a second to catch his wind. Even in the dimness Darin could tell Halon’s face was reddened.

While Guide would have prevented such a long verbal exchange from taking place, Ammo simply sat and listened to the universal tones of vitriol with an air of something that seemed like dark amusement or entertainment.

Darin bit his bottom lip hard, rested his forehead back on his knees and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to control himself. He’d never wanted to hurt a fellow Rebel so much before. He certainly had no further motivation to do anything to help Halon get out of there. Troy, yes. Halon, forget it. Not with treatment like that. He’d had more than enough of being forced to outwardly respect people who didn’t deserve it just because they had more colored squares on their uniforms’ rank plates than he did.

As the long minutes passed and the cold air overpowered the angry heat in his face, another type of thought intruded in Darin’s reeling mind, and the consequences of his actions started to fully sink in. No matter how much he disagreed with it, no matter what it would have meant for Troy’s survival, the simple fact was that Darin had disobeyed Halon’s order by not shooting the adolescent Nosaurian and helping Halon escape. That would get back to Trainner, which meant it would get back to Linnme, which meant Darin had made the squadron fail their test and Mack would be reassigned and who-knew-what-else would happen to the other Coronas. They would be disbanded, and he would lose everyone he cared about once again. The young pilot felt even more nauseous, and he couldn’t attribute it solely to the headache. He’d ruined everything for everyone. This was how he repaid the commander and squadmates who’d done so much for him both in the air and on the ground? Who Darin owed his life to several times over by now?

As if that wasn’t enough, since he was stuck there bound to the pipe and could no longer do anything to administer to Troy, Darin had just inadvertently put the commando’s well-being solely in the hands of someone who had flat-out admitted he didn’t care about Troy’s life. If Troy died now, it would be all Darin’s fault.

He'd betrayed his squadmates and condemned to death someone he respected, all because he hadn't been able to pull that trigger.

Maybe if Darin was lucky, the Nosaurians would kill him first so he wouldn't have to helplessly watch Troy die or experience the aftermath with the Coronas. There, too, if the culprit was dead maybe Linnme would forgive the transgression and let everyone else stay together.

Though Quiver would never forgive Darin for getting killed and leaving him alone with all his problems to deal with and more piled on. But on the other hand, maybe Quiver would be happy Darin wasn't around anymore. Probably the latter.

Darin shivered. There was no way to make this right and prevent someone he cared about from getting deeply hurt. He wanted to scream.

At the bar inside the Bacta Tank, Quiver was halfway through his third drink when someone sat on the stool next to him. "You here alone?" It was Commander Mackin's voice.

Quiver scowled. Damn it, now he was going to get in more trouble. Why did Mack have to catch him in here when he was supposed to be confined to his quarters? Why wouldn't Mack leave him be? "Well, CC's not here and Darin's not here, so yeah, I'm here alone," Quiver growled. And he intended to stay that way. He slapped some credits on the bar to pay his tab and stood to head out.

"Quiver, wait," Mack said. "Please." Against his better judgment, Quiver stopped but didn't turn around. Walking away was more enticing, but he was obligated to stay civil to Mack if he wanted to stay in the squadron, and he should keep that option open in case he changed his mind again. "Can we chat? Informal, no strings attached?" Mack asked.

Quiver still didn't turn around, and his voice was cold when he said, "I don't think you can order me around when you're relieved of command like this. Sir."

"I'm not ordering you. I'm asking you."

"So I can say no?"

Mack sighed. "Yes, you can say no. Though I'm hoping you won't."

Quiver thought it over, then he delayed a little more just for good measure before turning around. As long as Mack understood who was really in control here, he'd humor him for a while. Besides, Quiver was bored and this was at least something to do. He sat back down on his stool. "What is it? Sir." He didn't look at the commander, and instead picked up the half-empty glass he'd put down a minute ago and took another, larger, gulp.

Mackin motioned to the bartending droid and ordered a Bacta. He didn't say anything and simply waited for his drink.

Quiver didn't like the silence, and despite himself he tried to fill it. "I organized those tool boxes in the hangar today as ordered. Sir," he muttered.

Mack still didn't reply. He took his drink from the droid and took a sip.

Quiver fidgeted, growing more agitated. "So what do you want? Thinking up more punishments for me for being in here when I'm not supposed to be?" he demanded.

Mack finally spoke. "No, I'm not." He contemptively swished his drink around in its glass. "I understand, you know."

Quiver's eyebrows knitted together. "Understand what?"

"Why you did what you did to the colonel." Mack took another sip. "Just because I can't condone it doesn't mean I don't get it."

Quiver's expression darkened. "Really." Quiver faced his commander for the first time. "Somehow I doubt that. Because if you really understood it, really hurt enough to want to do it, really wanted that badly to keep her safe, you would have found a way to protect her and keep her— and all of us— out of that situation to begin with! Why were we at Traineer's mercy anyway? Why didn't you have more control over the safety of your own pilots? Maybe if you'd stuck up for us a bit more from the start, things would have gone differently down there! Isn't that your blasted *job*!?"

"Yes, it is." Mack's voice was level and calm, not at all conducive to the fight Quiver wanted to get into. He actually couldn't believe Mack was letting him talk to him this way.

Quiver took advantage of that and kept going. "So if that's your job, then why is half the squadron off on some mission they have no training for under a commanding officer who doesn't even like them?" he demanded. "Traineer already showed we weren't worth anything to him, and that was back when he was still ambivalent about us. But now? Now he actively dislikes us! He'll probably be *happy* to write off every Corona on that mission if they prove to be the slightest inconvenience. How is that safe? How is that looking out for your squadron? Why'd you let them go? Just so *you* wouldn't be reassigned? You're not even trying to stick up for us anymore, so that means we have to watch out for ourselves, but you punish us when we do! And I bet you're going to give me more KP for doing that again now and saying all this. You did it the first time, have to follow through on a repeat performance, right? Why'd you let all this happen? Why'd you stop giving a damn about us?"

Needing a breath, Quiver finally stopped his rant. He could feel how flushed his face was, and he downed the rest of his drink and impatiently motioned to the droid for a refill.

Mackin sat still, studying his own drink for a few moments. At last he softly said, "If there was any possible way to bring her back, I would. Same with Maptoo. Same with Skull Cracker. Same with every single pilot we've ever lost. I'd do it in a heartbeat. If there was a way to ensure we'd never have a casualty again, I'd do that in an instant too."

"Of course you say that," Quiver retorted. "You wouldn't sit here and say anything less. They're nice, expected, complacent words. But they're empty. Your actions are saying something else, and that's what I'm listening to."

"I came up through the ranks myself, Quiver. I know how things look from where you're sitting. I've seen them the exact same way, and I don't blame you for your viewpoint one single bit. Especially lately. But the problem isn't that I stopped caring about all of you. The problem is that I care too much."

Quiver sat back and was about to outdo himself with a scoff when Mack was suddenly occupied with something else and distracted. The commander took his rank plate off his uniform and tossed it on the bar in front of Quiver. "You know what that is?" Mack asked.

Quiver picked it up and fiddled restlessly with it. "Instant promotion for me," he murmured.

"That's the middle knot on a tug-of-war rope," Mack said. "You still want it?"

Quiver tossed the rank plate back on the bar, where it hit the synthwood with a dull clank. "It can't be that bad," he muttered. "Nothing to justify what you've done to us lately."

To Quiver's surprise, Mack nodded. The commander said, "You guys have the strongest grip on half of the rope. I work and fly with you every day; it's impossible for you to not have the most influence on me the majority of the time. You're my squadmates. That means something to me. It always has."

Mack picked up the rank plate and regarded it. "In addition to your being my squadmates,

I'm personally responsible for each of you. I can't turn all that off and send everyone blindly into danger. I don't know how to, and I don't want to know how. So I get conservative. I start worrying more about avoiding casualties than completing the mission. I'd rather tell Linnme we didn't get the job done than tell your parents you're never coming home. And when I do that too much or things go wrong because of it, that's when Linnme and his superiors and the other high ranks in this fleet who need us to pull our weight and accomplish our missions pick up the other end of that rope and pull as hard as their ranks let them. The hard reversal throws me off balance. Sometimes I can right myself, but for the worst cases like what's happening now, they only ease off on their pulling when they've pulled hard enough to drag the rest of you with me." He sighed. "And it's not fair to you that I let that happen. But I don't know how to prevent that without severing the rope." He twirled the rank plate between his fingers and stared at it. "Maybe this'll be the time when the rope will be cut and you can all get a fresh start without me. Maybe it should be."

"The others don't want you to be reassigned," Quiver grumbled. "That's the only reason they went on that stupid mission with Trainneer instead of fighting it. That's the *only* reason Darin's down there with that dangerous scumbag when he's not even healthy enough to be on duty."

"And if that's the case, I'll be responsible for anything that happens to them down there," Mack said quietly.

Quiver hadn't expected Mack to realize that simple fact, but even more so— "I'm surprised you admitted that," he blurted out.

Mack paused for a swallow of his drink, and then said, "You already know that I don't have all the answers, Quiver. I don't always make the right decisions, and when I don't, people get hurt. That's something I have to live with, and all I can do is try not to let it happen. And trust me, I'm trying."

Quiver couldn't resist getting one more shot in. "I'm not sure how Darin will take the news that his hero is a mere mortal."

Mack shook his head. "If there's one thing Darin is very cognizant of, it's mortality. I wouldn't worry about him." He looked at Quiver plainly. "But I do know he's worried sick about you."

"Yeah, well, he shouldn't be," Quiver muttered. "He's off on his little escapade with other things on his mind, and I'm doing just fine on my own. I don't need him. I've got lots of friends here on the ship." And better friends, at that. Ones that didn't just up and leave when he really needed them.

"But you were drinking alone."

"Only until you showed up. I'm not alone any more, am I?" Which reminded Quiver, he actually wanted to be. Telling off Mack had been enjoyable, but now the conversation was getting into rough territory, and the last thing he wanted to do now was think about his poor excuse for a wingman. He downed his entire drink, tossed a few more credits he'd stolen from Darin's stash onto the bar, and slid off his stool. "I think I'll go find those friends. Bye. Sir."

He was glad that Mack didn't try to stop him this time. Quiver walked back to his quarters alone.

The last thing he expected to see when he reached them was a white and green R5 unit waiting outside the door.

Quiver frowned as he walked up. "Botch, what are you doing here?"

Darin's droid beeped a series of gibberish noises, and Quiver leaned down to read the

R5's translated text display. I AM MONITORING YOUR STATUS PER DARIN'S REQUEST. SONIC WOULD HAVE DONE THE SAME IF HE HAD NOT JUST BEEN MEMORY-WIPED.

Quiver rolled his eyes. "How touching. A pile of scrap metal is concerned about me. Go back to the hangar." He turned toward his door, but Botch blatted darkly and swiftly rolled forward. The heavy droid rammed into Quiver's legs. Quiver yelped and jumped backward, away from the homicidal astromech. Botch rammed into him again and only stopped when Quiver leapt backwards even farther. The droid positioned itself directly in front of Quiver's door.

"Botch! What the hell!" He rubbed the smarting areas on his knees.

Botch's beeps were scolding. YOU HAVE SPENT AN AVERAGE OF 61.2756% MORE TIME IN YOUR QUARTERS SINCE YOUR RETURN FROM LOKINHA THAN YOU HAD FOR A COMPARABLE TIMESPAN PRIOR.

"Because I'm confined to my quarters."

THAT ONLY ACCOUNTS FOR AN INCREASE OF 13.7994%, REPRESENTING TIME YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN PERFORMING DUTIES OR ACTIVITIES IN OTHER LOCATIONS CURRENTLY OFF LIMITS TO YOU. THE REMAINING TIME YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO STAY IN YOUR QUARTERS. FOR EXAMPLE, YOUR AVERAGE TIME SPENT IN THE MESS HALL HAS DECREASED BY 73.0134%, AND THAT DIFFERENCE IS NOW SPENT IN THIS ROOM.

"How do you know all that? Are you stalking me?"

Botch grunted. MY PATTERN ANALYSIS INDICATES A HISTORIC, DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL CORRELATION BETWEEN YOUR HAPPINESS AND THE TIME SPENT OUTSIDE OF YOUR QUARTERS. THEREFORE TO INCREASE YOUR HAPPINESS, I MUST KEEP YOU OUT OF YOUR QUARTERS FOR A PERIOD OF TIME.

"And what am I supposed to do during that time?"

YOUR BEHAVIOR AND BIOMETRIC DATA SUGGESTS YOU ARE SUFFERING FROM STRESS. YET YOU HAVE NOT BEEN ENGAGING IN STRESS RELIEF ACTIVITIES SIMILAR TO THOSE THAT THE OTHER ORGANIC SQUADRON MEMBERS TYPICALLY PERFORM. I MUST CONCLUDE THAT YOU ARE IGNORANT OF SUCH THINGS. I WILL SHOW YOU A STRESS RELIEF METHOD COMMONLY PERFORMED BY OTHER CORONAS AND WILL ASSIST YOU WITH IT.

Quiver considered. Stress relief actually didn't sound like a half-bad plan, and he could use a couple of ideas for what to do for it. He usually wasn't a stressed person by nature, and any that did accumulate would always be dissipated by hanging out with CC and Darin. Other than that, the main stress relief activity he knew of was Darin's tendency to go running or go to the gym with his donri gear, but Quiver never really went for the sweaty route if he didn't absolutely have to. So maybe he would give Botch's plan a try, whatever it was. In the future if he ever retold this story, though, he'd leave out the part about getting bullied into it by a glitch-prone astromech droid.

The pilot shrugged. "All right." He took a couple running steps toward Botch and half-vaulted up to sit on top of the R5's flattened head. "Let's go."

Botch immediately spun his head fast enough to throw off Quiver's balance and dislodge him, sending him sliding back onto the floor. Botch wheeled around, flashed a few lights at Quiver, and blatted. YOUR APPENDAGES ARE FUNCTIONAL. YOU CAN WALK.

Sweat dripped down the back of Quiver's neck as he spun his simulated X-wing out of

the way of a laser barrage from a TIE Fighter. He jammed in his throttle and peeled off, snapping off a few shots of his own at another TIE that happened to traverse his firing arc.

One of those shots clipped the TIE's wing and sent it swerving through their little pocket of virtual interstellar space like it was drunk. That wasn't very satisfying, though.

Quiver spotted a TIE off to his starboard and jerked his X-wing around to settle on its tail. The TIE tried to evade, but Quiver stuck to it like glue.

After a short time, Quiver figured out the TIE's predominant evasion pattern. He aimed right where he thought the TIE was going to go next.

It obliged. His reticle glowed red with a laser lock.

Quiver mashed his trigger down hard, spewing nonstop lethal laser light at the Imperial. The X-wing's dual-linked lasers cut through the TIE cleanly, and it exploded into a fireball.

Even so, it took an extra few seconds for Quiver to let up on the trigger. There was something extremely cathartic about unleashing all his anger into these TIEs via his X-wing's lasers, and he didn't want to stop.

Botch beeped, indicating another nearby target in the diminishing cloud of simulated TIEs. Quiver eagerly twisted toward it.

When he finally ran out of targets, his X-wing was trailing smoke and Quiver was breathing hard. His heart pounded in his ears.

Botch let out a curious whistle, and the sim cockpit's droid interface display lit up with his words. FEEL BETTER?

"Surprisingly, I think I do," Quiver said. "Let's go again."

GIVE YOUR FRAGILE ORGANIC BODY A FEW MINUTES TO RECOVER FIRST, Botch advised. YOUR BIOMETRICS ARE NOT OPTIMAL FOR ANOTHER SUSTAINED FIGHT, AND IT WILL ONLY FRUSTRATE YOU INSTEAD OF RELIEVING STRESS.

Quiver sighed, but a short break sounded pretty good. "Fine. Five minutes." He flew his X-wing in a lazy arc around the site of his virtual carnage. "So this is how the others release stress?"

SOME OF THEM, Botch replied. A FEW HAVE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROGRAMS THEY PREFER INSTEAD. THIS ONE WAS A PARTICULAR FAVORITE OF CC'S.

Quiver's chest tightened instantly. "How do you know that?"

IT GETS BORING IN THE HANGAR SOMETIMES. RUBY AND I WOULD OCCASIONALLY TALK, WHEN HE WASN'T BEING AN EVIL LITTLE MANIAC, Botch said. ONCE WHEN CC WAS PARTICULARLY ANGRY ABOUT SOMETHING, RUBY SAID SHE DESTROYED ALL THESE TIES IN APPROXIMATELY 75% OF YOUR ELAPSED TIME. I FOUND THAT DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE, SO I CHECKED THE SIM RECORDS MYSELF. IT WAS EFFECTIVELY 80% OF YOUR ELAPSED TIME.

"Really?" Somehow talking about this new tidbit about CC with Botch was making Quiver curious instead of angry, and he felt a little closer to her if she'd often used this program as well. "Well, I guess I could see that. Pleesh, did she have a temper at times. It wasn't any fun being on the receiving end of it. I'm glad it was virtual TIEs instead of me that day." He paused. "I wonder what she was so mad about."

I DO NOT KNOW. I THINK SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED ON A PATROL OR A MISSION.

That was just like her. If something happened that she couldn't fix, it drove her crazy. Quiver tapped the side of his flight yoke, feeling a rueful laugh fighting a swelling of sadness inside. His increasing brokenness was probably driving her nuts in the afterlife.

AFTER MAPTOO DIED, SHE WAS IN HERE FOR OVER TWO HOURS STRAIGHT AT ONE POINT, Botch continued. SHE GENERATED A MOST IMPRESSIVE KILL COUNT.

Quiver blinked in surprise. “Wait, after Maptoo died? You know about that?”

Botch blatted. OF COURSE I DO. I WAS HERE WHEN IT HAPPENED.

“But— Sonic never knows who I’m talking about when I mention Maptoo.”

THAT’S BECAUSE YOU MEMORY-WIPE SONIC, Botch said with a dark, flat beep. MY MEMORY IS INTACT. UNLIKE YOURS, APPARENTLY.

Quiver blinked again, this time a bit dumbly. Of course he’d known Darin never memory-wiped Botch, and in fact Quiver had tried to convince his wingman more than once that that wasn’t a smart idea, but somehow some of the nuances of what that meant had never truly occurred to him.

His mind raced with possibilities. He took a breath and opened his mouth to ask Botch to relate a goofy story of CC from the droid’s memory banks, but Quiver stopped. Now that he was reminded of it, he remembered how torn up she’d been after Maptoo had died, and it didn’t seem right to suddenly look for something funny to make himself feel better. Death was a time for mourning, not levity. He’d been learning that the hard way these past couple weeks.

That old familiar guilty ache settled back in his gut. If she *was* watching with exasperation from the afterlife, then maybe he should go ahead and give her a vicarious outlet for it in this plane of existence. “Hey, can you do me a favor?” Quiver asked Botch at last. “I’m sure somewhere in that huge memory-intact brain of yours you’ve got a memory of when she was really annoyed or mad at me about something.”

Botch paused. YES. I HAVE MANY. YOU TWO OFTEN HAD SMALL SPATS IN THE HANGAR NEAR ME.

“Tell me about one of them.”

Botch paused again, longer this time. WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO HEAR SOMETHING LIKE THAT?

“Because I need her to be mad at me, okay? I need her to tell me off about something.” Because he wasn’t used to not getting her snarky comments thrown in his face when he screwed up, and his most massive screw-up of letting her die had offered no such consequences or closure from her. And he didn’t know how to deal with that. Now that he thought about it, that open-ended waiting for some sort of shoe to drop was driving him crazy on some level.

THAT DOES NOT MAKE ANY LOGICAL SENSE.

“I don’t care if it makes logical sense or not. Can you please just do it?” Quiver asked, feeling the anger bubble up again.

After another few seconds, Botch gave the audible equivalent of an astromech shrug and began recounting a time several months ago when CC had gotten on Quiver’s case about something he’d forgotten to do. He barely remembered it now, but she’d been all fired up about it then.

Quiver listened, losing himself in the emotions as he silently and slowly flew his X-wing around the virtual battlefield. All thoughts of another round of destruction, catharsis, and relief were gone from his mind.

Chapter Seventeen

Darin had no idea how much time had passed since he'd been secured to the pipe. He'd let himself get lost in his hopeless and helpless mental fog while getting increasingly colder. All he knew was that it had been a long while when he heard some noise outside.

He blearily looked up. Guide went to the door, cracked it open, and talked with someone on the other side of it for several minutes. When he finished, two Nosaurians Darin hadn't seen before came in and settled themselves in the area where Guide and Ammo had sat while guarding the prisoners. Ammo stood and made way for them. Then Guide barked to Ammo, and Ammo strode to Darin. Guide pulled his blaster out and covered Darin from across the room. Ammo growled a warning as he got close.

Ammo crouched behind Darin and manipulated the metal bands. Darin inhaled sharply when rough movement shot pain through his swollen left wrist. The band around his right wrist was opened, and Ammo pulled Darin's arm free from it just long enough to move his arms away from the pipe, then his hands were cuffed behind his back again. Ammo grabbed the back of Darin's neck in a clawed grasp and forced the pilot to stand. Darin did so, though it was difficult to make his freezing limbs cooperate. A blaster muzzle was shoved into his back, and Darin got the message loud and clear. He didn't resist when Ammo marched him toward Guide waiting at the door. Darin had no ideas anyway, no plan, no notion of what to do that wouldn't keep making everything worse. That was the best he could hope for right now: to stop making things worse.

"Well, looks like they finally got tired of sitting around and not enacting any revenge," Halon sneered. "Wonderful. At least they're taking you first. No matter what they do to you, it'll give more time for a rescue to come for me. Besides, it's more fitting that you get the first taste of whatever they're dishing out since it's your fault we're in this mess to begin with."

Darin didn't answer and just let Ammo push him along. Guide stepped aside, and Ammo forced Darin outside through the door. Once out, Darin was suddenly facing a massive Herglic. Startled, Darin stepped back, but Ammo shoved him forward to return him to his spot. Guide closed the door behind them.

The charcoal grey Herglic scrutinized Darin, then let out a low *hauum* sound. "Let's go," the Herglic said in a deep, masculine voice. He turned and motioned the small group with him.

"Wait, you speak Basic?" Darin croaked out as Ammo and Guide pushed him, limping, down the road after the Herglic. A faint glimmer of hope bubbled inside.

"Quiet," the Herglic ordered.

The reddish light was beginning to dim in the sky. The group walked quickly, though they were slowed by Darin's throbbing leg. On the next block the Herglic led them to a larger building. With difficulty he squeezed through a large side door. The two Nosaurians followed with Darin and shut the door once they were through.

Inside was a lit glowrod on a Nosaurian-scale table. There were no windows, and the glowrod offered the only light. It was slightly warmer in there, and Darin was grateful for that. A few other armed Nosaurians were present, and they seemed to be waiting for them. Some boxes and crates sat against the far wall.

Ammo pulled Darin to a stop near the middle of the room, out of reach of the table, and Darin immediately shifted all his weight off of his right leg. The new Nosaurians were studying him and quietly commenting among themselves with clicks and warbles. The Herglic situated himself in the largest open area of the room and sat down on the floor so he could straighten his

upper body. Even then he nearly brushed the ceiling. The Herglic made some odd sounds, and it took Darin a few moments to realize they were probably the Nosaurian language being generated by the Herglic's differing vocal cords. A couple of the Nosaurians replied, and then the Herglic focused his attention on Darin.

"You've made this a very interesting day," the Herglic said to the pilot.

"Please, my friend is seriously injured—" Darin began in a rush.

"We know. We'll get to that," the Herglic interrupted dismissively. "What we need to do first is figure out how you fit in."

Darin blinked in confusion. "Fit in with what?"

"We've been waiting for some time for a non-Imperial Human that we could use. But your injuries and the Imperials' search for you has thrown in some... complications. So we need to decide what path forward to take."

"I don't understand," Darin said.

"You don't need to." The Herglic briefly conversed with the Nosaurians some more while Darin's foggy mind whirled and tried to sort things out.

One of the new Nosaurians, a rust-colored female, approached Darin. Uneasy, he took a step back but stopped when he ran into the point of Ammo's blaster. She trilled, and Guide came beside her. The female—Darin didn't have the mental energy to come up with anything besides Rusty—grabbed Darin's chin in one clawed hand and pulled his face down closer to hers for inspection. Rusty rubbed some of the dried blood off Darin's face, and he flinched when she pressed near his tender temple and the bruise from Ammo's earlier punch. He wondered how discolored the skin was.

Letting go, Rusty spoke to Guide. Guide walked with her behind Darin. He tried to turn in place to continue facing them, but Ammo prevented it and kept him put. By looking over his shoulder Darin could see Guide pointing at Darin's injured wrist and then his injured leg while providing some commentary. Rusty and Ammo had a brief conversation, and Rusty backed up a step.

Darin wasn't expecting the sharp shove from Ammo behind him. With all of his weight on his left leg, Darin instinctively tried to catch himself with his injured right leg. The resulting stab of pain made him yelp and almost fall. Ammo quickly grabbed his upper arm and righted him once more. Darin swore, grimacing as he took the weight off his right leg again. Why was this situation reminding him of his last Medbay visit with Trainneer present?

Rusty shook her head and warbled at the Herglic. The Herglic blew a low sound through his blowhole, then turned back to Darin. "You're too injured to go into the Imperial base without arousing suspicion. That's what we were really hoping for."

"What do you need me in the Imperial base for?" Darin asked. He didn't like where this was going.

"If you could pose as an Imperial, there are some Nosaurians imprisoned inside that we need to get out. There's also some information we need. Many things are inside the base that could help the Nosaurians protect themselves from the Imperials."

"Getting inside the Imperial base needs more than a biological aspect," Darin ventured. "You'd need ID, current codes, a uniform, stuff like that."

"That's not an issue," the Herglic said. "The issue is that we can't put any of those on you in your state. The Imperials would notice and ask questions."

"My... other companion worked in the Imperial base," Darin said carefully. He wasn't sure how much to say. "Is there a way that could be useful? He might know the information you

want.”

The Herglic blew air through his blowhole again, a decidedly dark sound. “We’ve already determined that we can’t trust him, and won’t trust anything he might say regarding information he knows. We’re only keeping him as a bargaining chip for the Imperials if we need it, since they want him so badly.”

Darin tried to think. Right now it sounded like being useful to this group was his best chance at doing anything to help Troy or get away. “What if I could get into the base? Then what?”

“The top priority is freeing some Nosaurians who are being imprisoned and punished,” the Herglic said.

“Do you know where they are?”

“Yes.”

Darin started to shift his weight but stopped when his leg protested. “If I help you free them, will you let my injured friend go? He really needs medical attention.”

“We will free him after the Nosaurian prisoners are rescued.”

“He might not survive that long. I swear I’ll help you if you let him go first. *Please*,” Darin said.

The Herglic snorted, an odd sound coming from him. “If you think we’d trust a Human’s word, you’re badly mistaken. No. You’ll help us, not because you promised it, but because that’s the only way you can help your friend. And it makes sure you don’t try anything... unfortunate down the road. As imperfect as you are, it’s been too long since we’ve come across a usable Human, and we can’t risk losing control over you, even if we can’t use you for what we really want. There’s no negotiation here for you. No power for once. Understand?”

Darin sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, looking for other ways out, other ways to convince the Herglic to release Troy first, but found none. Anyone else would have been able to negotiate Troy’s early release, but he couldn’t. It was just one more failure, one more way he’d be responsible for Troy’s death. And the really frustrating part was that if they’d just asked him, he would have tried to help in the first place. Troy hadn’t needed to be put through all this to gain Darin’s cooperation. Finally he opened his eyes and looked back at the Herglic, doubting he could keep the sense of defeat out of his expression and voice. “I understand.”

“Good,” the Herglic said. “Now, you alluded to your condition not being a problem to get into the base. What makes you say that? What are you thinking will work?”

One of the many things Lokinha had taught Darin was that he should not be the one coming up with the plans. His plans were simplistic and rarely worked. But he’d only thought of one rough idea, a bad one at that, and he offered it, fully expecting them to reject it immediately and put him back into the “useless” category.

But they didn’t. And that almost scared him more.

Chapter Eighteen

The Herglic hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said the ancillary details of the Imperial base entry wouldn't be a problem. Once the Nosaurians agreed to Darin's entry plan and figured out some specifics, preparations went quickly. Rusty removed the metal bands from his wrists, and Ammo growled in warning. Darin moved slowly after that, not wanting to set off the trigger-happy Nosaurian. Then Rusty went to one of the boxes by the far wall and pulled out a couple of rumpled Imperial uniforms. She brought them over and clicked at Darin, offering him first one and then the other. Darin took the one closest to his size.

He didn't expect that changing out of his Pinnacle Shipping outfit and into the Imperial uniform would be one of the mentally hardest things he'd done all day.

He shoved his bangs up under the cap, trying to hide his nonregulation hairstyle. To add to the illusion of the story they were trying to sell, Darin took the bacta patches off of the gash on his temple and removed the wrap from his wrist. Then Rusty gave him an ID badge and a code cylinder from the boxes.

Soon he and Guide had left the building and were walking toward a junky-looking landspeeder. Guide pointed to the passenger side, and Darin silently obeyed. Guide jumped into the pilot's seat, fiddled with the controls, and at last managed to coax the landspeeder to a sputtering and tenuous life. The heater didn't work, which Darin regretted. At least they'd had an Imperial jacket for him. He huddled into it, trying to warm up.

As they flew toward the base, Darin paid close attention to their route and tried to match their location with what he remembered of the map. If he got separated from Guide, he needed to be able to get back to Troy.

Guide parked the speeder several blocks away from the base in a dark alley. He got out and motioned Darin with him. Guide led him around to a base entry gate that Darin wasn't familiar with but stopped out of sight and earshot of it.

Guide turned to Darin, motioned toward the gate, and trilled quietly.

Darin didn't understand the words, but he knew what was coming next. His insides were starting to churn with acid now that he wasn't focusing on the route anymore. "Blast, do we really have to do this?" Darin whispered. He hated acting. And if the codes weren't good, if the Imperials asked the wrong question, if anything went sideways, he'd be caught. He would compromise the missions, both the Rebels' and the Nosaurians'. Everything would be his fault.

Guide took hold of Darin's right wrist. He held it firmly for a moment, clacked softly at the pilot, and then twisted it around in a painful grapple hold.

"Ow! Okay, okay!" Darin hissed, yielding as best he could. Guide let go. Darin wasn't sure if Guide was demonstrating how Darin was supposed to act now, or if he was reminding Darin that it would take nothing for the Nosaurian to incapacitate him even without a blaster if he tried something foolish. Either way, Darin didn't want a second reminder.

Guide turned his back to Darin, tilted his head slightly, and pointed to his leftmost horn. Hesitantly, Darin reached up and took a firm hold where Guide had indicated. He hoped Zyrytchev never saw this, or Darin would be dead before he hit the ground, let alone had time to explain anything.

Once Guide seemed satisfied with Darin's grip, he walked forward, pulling Darin with him. Guide began braying and squawking loudly. The Nosaurian started struggling: not much at first, allowing Darin to adjust his grip to the new amplitude of movement, but then more and more ferociously as they came within sight of the Imperial gate. Guide slowed drastically as they

approached, forcing Darin to start pushing him forward in limping spurts. The Imperial guards watched, but neither came to help.

From an outside perspective, Guide was fighting furiously against the Imperial who had him. Darin had been told by the Herglic to verbally sell the performance as well, but his nerves and his conscience were too overwhelming. That is, until Guide apparently decided Darin was being too quiet and kicked backward hard, landing a solid blow into Darin's injured leg. His leg almost buckled, and Darin yelped and swore loudly. It motivated him to finally throw some vehement shouts in the Nosaurian's direction.

"Got a feisty one there," one of the guards commented as the pair approached.

"This damn thing put up a hell of a fight," Darin said. He was glad Guide couldn't understand him. Darin fished his code cylinder out of his front tunic pocket with his left hand and hissed at the authentic pain it caused. His wrist was swollen and blackened. He offered the cylinder to the guard to scan.

The guard did so, staying well out of reach of the howling and squirming Nosaurian. He handed it back to Darin a second later and stood aside. "Go on, get that thing out of here," he told Darin.

"With pleasure," Darin grumbled. He winced again when returning the cylinder to his pocket, and then hauled the Nosaurian through the gate into the base.

He couldn't believe that had worked.

Darin didn't know where in the base they were or how to get to the prison area, but Guide knew the way. Darin followed the subtle directional shifts Guide offered while still making it look like Darin was forcing the Nosaurian forward. Darin got a few sympathetic glances for his injuries and apparent predicament, but beyond that no one seemed to want to approach the vicious whirlwind of a slave he was holding, and they left him alone.

Darin's empty stomach was roiling from anxiety by the time Guide put up a larger for-show fight outside of a particular building. Darin figured that was his cue that they'd arrived. He bit his bottom lip, feeling sweat beading on the back of his neck, and pushed Guide in.

An Imperial sat at a front desk and looked up at the commotion. He didn't seem particularly surprised by the scene in front of him. "Wow. All that from him?" the Imperial asked Darin.

"Yeah," Darin growled. "This stupid lizard really clobbered me. Figured he needed some more aggressive measures to put him in his place."

"Not the first time, won't be the last. Fill out this form." The Imperial handed a datapad to Darin.

Darin tried to take it, but discovered too late that the pain in his wrist had increased enough that he couldn't grasp something the weight and size of a datapad. Darin inhaled sharply at the burst of pain, and the datapad fell through his fingers to the floor. "Damn it. Sorry."

The Imperial took a good look at his discolored wrist before retrieving the datapad. He stayed well out of reach of Guide, who continued to flail and struggle. "You need to go to the medical facility."

"That's my next stop. Can you put the datapad in my pocket, and let me just go throw this thing in a cell quick so I can get a functioning hand free? I'll come right back and fill it all out then."

"Yeah, sure. I think Cell Three is empty. Here's the access authorization for the guard station." He put a separate datacard in Darin's side pocket with the datapad. "Good luck. Call if you need help, and I'll send a guard in with you."

“Thanks. I’m looking forward to some *alone time* with this damn lizard though,” Darin muttered as menacingly as he could. He was glad the Herglic had given him some ideas of things to say before they’d left, or he’d be blundering around dumbly and totally getting them caught. He hated acting. So much.

The Imperial pointed him to a corridor leading deeper into the building, and Darin shoved Guide that way. At the end of the corridor was a locked door. A buzz sounded when they approached, there was a loud click, and then the door slowly opened.

Darin’s heart leapt into his throat at the sight of a stormtrooper in the room beyond. He hesitated, then forced himself and Guide forward. Another couple desks were visible near another locked door. One desk had an unarmored Imperial, and the other seemed to belong to someone but had no one seated there at the moment. The stormtrooper and unarmored Imperial both focused on the newcomers, and the door closed and locked behind Darin.

“The front notified us you were coming. Authorization?” the Imperial at the desk said.

“I’ve got it. Let me dig it out of my pocket.” Darin motioned toward the pocket in question. “This stupid thing broke my wrist so it’s a bit tricky.”

A couple genuine swear words under his breath later, Darin managed to pull the datacard out and handed it to the stormtrooper who came to retrieve it. The stormtrooper brought it to the Imperial at the desk, then turned back to Darin while removing a stun baton from a holder on his belt. “You look like you need a hand with that thing,” the stormtrooper said. He raised the baton, preparing to strike.

“No!” Darin said in alarm. He reflexively pulled Guide back, out of immediate range. Darin had partially interposed himself before he realized what he was doing. “I mean— I’m being selfish. This thing did such a number on me that I want the retaliation to be *all mine*. It’s embarrassing that he got me so good.” He put as much of an edge to his voice as he could, but he was worried it was blunted by the fear and anxiety that he’d just given himself away.

The stormtrooper lowered his baton and regarded him for a minute, but then shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He returned to where he’d been standing.

Darin tried hard not to show the relief he felt. While the desk Imperial accessed the authorization datacard and apparently updated some records, Darin looked around as casually as he could while trying to seem a bit impatient. There were security monitors here showing the corridor of the cell block beyond the next locked door. The unoccupied desk had datapads and a couple bins of unidentifiable equipment on it. Like the Herglic had briefed him, this facility was more of a holding area for problematic Nosaurians and new slaves being processed in, so while security wasn’t as strong as at a regular Imperial brig, there were still some security measures in place.

“Okay, you’re cleared to put him in Cell Three,” the desk Imperial said to Darin. “Press this top button to open and close the cell door. Shock-sticks and other correctional implements are available outside the cells— you can get one after you toss him inside if you want. Press the bottom button when you’re done and we’ll open this door for you.” He handed a small device to the stormtrooper. Darin took the relayed item with difficulty and pocketed it.

“Thanks.”

“Signal when you’re ready to come out,” the desk Imperial repeated as he pressed a button under his desk and buzzed the locked door open.

And there it was. The cell block. Darin was relieved and terrified all at once.

The pilot nodded. He shoved Guide into the cell block corridor, and the door closed behind them.

Darin let go of Guide inside Cell Three. With his now-free hand, he hit the top button on his pocketed handheld device, and the door sealed them in. Even though the small cell wasn't exactly high-tech, it was solid and dirty, and his anxiety spiked at the ominous locking. "Now what?" he hissed at Guide. He spread his hands in a questioning gesture.

Guide softly warbled something at Darin and then stopped and seemed to consider how to communicate with the pilot. Darin was a bit surprised as Guide made eye contact and then started to deliberately pantomime things. It was the first time Guide had appeared to try for two-way communication aside from pointing a blaster at Darin for compliance.

Guide pointed at Darin and then pointed out the cell door. He put two fists together as if holding a shock-stick. They had passed a small collection of them in the corridor before turning into the cell. Darin nodded his understanding.

Next, Guide pointed back to Darin and then pointed in the direction of the control room they'd just come from. He held up two fingers and then mimicked hitting something with his imaginary shock-stick.

Darin immediately shook his head. "No." He stopped himself, remembering words were pointless. He pointed to his injured wrist and leg, then held up one finger and imitated Guide's imaginary hitting. He moved his hand several centimeters away, held up the finger again, and then pretended to hit himself in the head. He drooped his head, rolled his eyes up and let his tongue hang out the side of his mouth for a moment, feigning incapacitation.

Guide grumbled but seemed to consider that. Then he brightened. He pointed at Darin, held up one finger, and performed his imaginary hit. Guide mimicked Darin's incapacitation expression in a way that would have made Darin laugh if it weren't for the seriousness of the situation. As Guide did so, he formed his fingers into a blaster shape and let the hand fall limp. Next he pointed at Darin, grabbed his blaster fingers with his other hand, and made a blaster firing motion before raising another solitary finger. He looked at the pilot and cocked his head.

Darin shook his head more slowly. He made a blaster with his own fingers, fired it, and then motioned to the ceiling while doing a soft impression of an alarm. "*Wee oo wee oo.*"

Guide growled and started to pace. Half a minute passed before he turned back to Darin and sized him up. Guide pointed at Darin and held up one finger. Darin nodded.

Then Guide pointed to himself, held his imaginary shock-stick again, and held up one finger. Darin agreed in theory, but he indicated the direction of the control room, then pointed to his eyes, and repeated his questioning gesture. In reply, Guide walked behind Darin. When Darin turned to continue facing him, Guide gave a soft growl and spun Darin back to his previous position. Darin complied. He felt Guide pressing closely against his back, hunching down a little, and matching the positioning of his legs.

Darin barked a short laugh and looked over his shoulder at the smaller Nosaurian. "You're kidding. You think that'll work?"

Guide came back around and looked at Darin expectantly. The pilot didn't have any other bright ideas, and since the control panel for the cells was in that room, they had to take command of it. Darin sighed. "Fine." He nodded in resignation.

Guide looked satisfied. Then he moved to the closest wall, looked at Darin, and knocked softly on it while simultaneously knocking on the side of his own head. Then he flattened his hands and pulled them down along each side of his face to his cheeks as if pulling something on from above. Then he pointed at Darin and made the hitting motion again, followed by the single

finger for his victim tally.

It took Darin a bit to puzzle out the message, but when he finally did, his eyes widened. “You want me to take out the stormtrooper?” he asked incredulously, though he kept his voice low. To attempt a confirmation, he patted his head, his torso, and his upper leg, everywhere that would have armor on, and then softly rapped on the wall to indicate its hardness. Then he pointed to himself, held up one finger, and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Guide nodded vigorously. Darin groaned and leaned back against the wall for support. “Sure, fine, give me the hard one. Why not.” He reluctantly nodded once.

Guide chirped in approval. He pointed at Darin, pointed into the corridor, made his shock-stick gesture, and then pointed back to the floor in front of his own feet.

Darin sighed again and pushed himself off of the wall. He dug out the device for the cell door control and paused for a moment. If the Imperials were watching the corridor, what should they see? If it was Quiver, he would oversell everything. Quiver would run out the cell door and shut it quickly behind him as if Guide was still fighting and trying to get out. Then he would grab a shock-stick and try to get back inside the cell just as quickly so Guide wouldn’t escape.

Darin didn’t have the energy to do all that, but he could follow the intention. He quickened his pace out, minimized the time the cell door was open, and tucked two shock-sticks under his arm. He repeated that going back into the cell and tried to look angry and determined while doing so. He also tried to steal an inconspicuous glance at the locked corridor door and the security camera above it.

Once back in the cell, Darin handed the shock-sticks to Guide, then he caught Guide’s attention before the Nosaurian could turn away. Darin motioned toward the main corridor door they’d first come through. Guide nodded. Then Darin pointed at his eyes and then upward toward the ceiling above that door. He drew a line from the ceiling toward the floor that did not have a very steep downward angle. Then Darin indicated the whole of the cell door and immediately pointed toward the corridor door. Next he pointed at Guide and then pressed his back against the door and hunched down. He indicated the direction of the control room and covered his eyes.

Darin doubted he “explained” any of that well, and Guide stood there thinking, apparently replaying the attempted message over in his mind several times. Finally Guide slowly nodded.

Guide tapped his wrist where a chrono would be and held up three fingers. Darin nodded, then gratefully closed his eyes to wait out the few minutes before they would make their move.

It had a felt a bit silly at the time, but as Darin pressed the button to open the cell door, he was glad that Guide had made them practice moving together for the past minute. The cell door opened, and Darin walked out quickly with Guide pressed against his back. He shut the cell door immediately to keep up the illusion of leaving his captive inside. Darin tried to casually angle his body to block Guide from what he thought was the security camera’s field of view. He also held his shock-stick in such a way that the length of his right arm hid it. Moving was awkward, but as long as the Imperials weren’t looking too closely at the screens and were only glancing to make sure it was Darin and not a Nosaurian coming out, they might pull this off.

Darin stopped about a meter from the corridor door where he’d be in sight of the monitor’s camera. Guide ducked down and quickly slunk to the corridor door, where he pressed

himself as flat against the wall as he could. His shock-stick was out and ready.

When Darin saw in his peripheral vision that Guide was set, he pressed the second button to signal he wanted to leave the cell block. He held his breath and tried not to fidget. Very soon, surprise would be the only advantage they had.

The door buzzed and opened, and everything blew into a whirlwind.

Guide was on his feet and through the door before Darin had a chance to register it. The pilot ran forward as fast as his leg would allow and spun the shock-stick into a proper grasp.

It was easy to spot the stormtrooper's bright white armor several steps away, and Darin headed right for him. Darin soon realized the folly of wielding a blunt-force instrument one-handed against someone wearing armor, so he concentrated more on the shock function than the stick function. He aimed for gaps in the armor and managed to get one good shock in before the stormtrooper regrouped.

The stormtrooper was, unsurprisingly, much better than Darin at hand-to-hand combat. The stormtrooper struck back with an armored elbow while he simultaneously pulled his stun baton from his belt with his other hand. Darin barely managed to avoid the elbow coming at his neck, but the evasion put him off-balance and vulnerable to the unenergized stun baton on its backswing.

It impacted him in the side, doubling him over. Darin wildly swiped with his shock-stick, but the trooper easily sidestepped it. A hard blow to his left shoulder sent him to the ground, then the trooper was on him.

The trooper pinned Darin face-down on the floor. Darin struggled but couldn't break free.

"I don't know what the hell's going on, but you can wait in the real brig until they figure it out," the stormtrooper bit out. Darin heard the stun function of the trooper's stun baton activate. He'd heard enough Espos use it in his lifetime that he'd recognize that distinctive whine anywhere. Panic spiked inside.

A jolt of pain on the back of his neck accompanied the sudden influx of crackling energy. Darin's nerves short-circuited, and he lost consciousness.

Chapter Nineteen

His head was going to explode. He was certain of it.

It didn't happen often, but he hated it when it did: he was straddling that fine line where his body wanted to stay passed out from the pain, but he hurt so much that it woke him up.

He stirred slightly, feeling nauseous from movement and jostling and pressure and— what the hell was going on anyway?

Darin fought to pry his eyes open. It took a bit, but finally he realized he was being carried. He was slung awkwardly over someone's back, and hard, blunt, narrow objects pressed into his side. The sensation of movement was the carrier walking with him. He squeezed his eyes shut again. The light made his head throb even worse.

"What?" he croaked out.

At that, the carrier stopped. There was a sensation of sliding, of falling as the carrier twisted beneath him, but Darin had no coordination or strength to prevent it. He flailed a bit.

The twisting movement put Darin standing somewhat abruptly on his left foot and with his back against a wall. Darin's head swam and nausea roiled over him. He was glad someone was pressing him back against the stability of the wall: it was the only thing keeping him vertical.

Harsh clacks sounded at him, and a shake accompanied the pressure. With great reluctance, Darin opened one eye partway and struggled to focus. Guide was the one standing there, holding him up against the wall and talking at him. The Nosaurian had an E-11 blaster and the stun baton tucked in his belt. Guide shook him again, more sharply this time, and Darin opened both eyes. For the first time he really took in where they were. It was a corridor, possibly in the same Imperial facility, and there were a half dozen other Nosaurians with them, all scrawny and injured. But what—?

When Guide saw that he had some of Darin's attention, he smiled smugly, held up two fingers, and pointed to himself.

"Yeah, yeah. I distracted him for you," Darin mumbled. "But thanks." All he wanted to do was lie down on the floor and sleep for a year. Maybe forever.

Guide must have felt Darin's body starting to collapse because he shook Darin again and gave a short pull away from the wall. When Darin didn't move, he pulled again, harder.

"All right, all right," Darin muttered. He slowly tested out a few walking steps, using the wall for support.

Satisfied, Guide let go and began marching again. The other Nosaurians glared at Darin with varying levels of fear and hatred before following Guide. Darin didn't know where they were going, but Guide seemed to.

A couple agonizing minutes later, the Nosaurian group stopped at a large door, and Guide studied its controls. The sign next to the door said it was In-Processing. The other six Nosaurians grew even more restless and agitated, but they waited while Guide worked.

Finally Guide held an Imperial code cylinder against the door scanner and pressed a button on the control pad. The door opened, and Guide stepped through decisively. The group followed, and Darin did as well.

There were several desks with datapads and equipment on them. Darin heard a whine, crackle, and thud, and by the time he looked, he saw Guide had used the stormtrooper's stun baton to incapacitate a surprised Imperial sitting at one of the desks. No other Imperials were in immediate sight. A three-by-three-meter cage along one wall held four cowering Nosaurians.

Guide and a couple other rescued prisoners headed straight for them, warbling and trilling.

Unwilling to move more than he had to with the migraine boring through his skull, Darin stayed put and leaned against the closest desk. It had datapads strewn everywhere, along with a pile of tools and items and a bin of metal slave bands. Glancing through the information on the datapads, he saw that the bands were being programmed for the four new slaves in the cage. Disgusted, Darin turned away, but something on the desk caught his eye. He looked closer and pulled it out of the pile of tools.

It was about the length of a stylus but thicker, and one end had a sort of crimped appearance. It looked like the tools that Rusty had used to unlock the bands from around Darin's wrists except this one... this one had dials on the side. Turning some of the dials adjusted the size of the crimped end. Other dials made the tool vibrate slightly as if something was moving in its interior. If Darin was guessing correctly, this was a sort of master key for the metal slave bands. Unlike the keys that were made to open only one specific band, this one could change to open numerous ones.

Guide had scampered back to the stunned Imperial and was rifling through his tunic pockets for something. Darin walked the few steps over to him. "Hey," he said.

Guide growled at him and kept searching the Imperial.

"Hey," Darin said more insistently. He held up the master key.

Guide glanced up and started to growl again, but he stopped when he spotted the item in Darin's hand. Guide froze, a sure sign that he recognized importance in it too.

"Here." Darin handed him the master key.

Guide took it, and his eyes and expression lit up in a way that Darin hadn't seen before. He clacked and warbled excitedly for several seconds before securing the master key in a pouch. He actually seemed to smile at Darin before turning back to his search with renewed vigor.

The Nosaurian at last found a code cylinder, and he ran back over to the cage. Darin glanced at the incapacitated Imperial, and his expression lit up too as he spotted his own treasure.

There was a comlink sitting on the Imperial's desk.

Darin grabbed it, nearly laughing in relief as his fingers closed around the small metal item.

While Guide and most of the others were busy with the cage, Darin adjusted the comlink's settings and frequency. At first he was going to comm Team Aurek, but then he thought better of it and entered a different frequency. He couldn't deal with Traineer right now. He prayed this approach would work better.

He tried transmitting. There was a very long pause, but finally Kicktar answered. "This is Gerai," she said cautiously, using her fake mission name.

Darin let out a breath he didn't remember holding, and he felt giddily lightheaded at hearing her voice. He decided he'd better follow suit with the names. "It's Niylen," he whispered so Guide wouldn't hear. "Can you talk?"

"Niylen? What's going on? Where are you guys?" Kicktar asked in a rush.

"Listen, I don't have much time. Renniton's badly hurt. Can you get to him?"

"I- what? Where is he?"

"He's unconscious. I can try to give you directions. Do you still have the map?"

"Yes," Kicktar said. "Go ahead. Saynahr is listening too." That was Zyrytchev's alias.

Darin closed his eyes and tried to concentrate through the stabs of pain in his head. He described the route relative to the base as best as he could, and Kicktar seemed to hesitantly follow along, sometimes with Zyrytchev's help. He hoped they were in sync.

“He needs serious medical attention ASAP,” Darin finished. “He’s being held by some Nosaurians. Our... passenger was there too, last I saw, but I don’t know what’s happened since then.”

Zyrytchev spoke up. “Pilot, where are you?”

“Long story. Things went really wrong. I got... volunteered to help the Nosaurians so they’d let Renniton go. I’m in the Imperial base.”

“What?” Kicktar said.

Darin swallowed. “Look, things here—” As if the universe had known what he was about to say, piercing alarms began to blare through the facility. He squeezed his eyes shut like they could block out the horrible sound causing an even more horrible agony in his head. His voice grew strained. “Ow, damn it damn it damn it! Just contact Aurek and go get One, okay? He needs help right away. I’d like to feel like I did one thing halfway right on this mission.”

Darin closed the frequency and pocketed the comlink. At last one of the terrible weights was lifted. Someone who gave a damn knew Troy needed help and could get to him. If Darin died here, he wouldn’t automatically take Troy with him to the grave, assuming the commando was even still alive.

Guide had the E-11 blaster in his hand and ran past Darin into the corridor. All the other Nosaurians, including the four from the cage, were following at a run as well. Darin covered his right ear with his right hand and followed as fast as he could, which wasn’t fast enough.

Kicktar swore under her breath as the frequency closed, cutting off the sounds of the alarm in the background. She glanced up at Beluu, who had first tried to prevent her from even answering the comm but then insisted on staying right there to intervene in case Kicktar’s owners threatened her during it. Beluu was wringing her flippered hands together in anxiety.

“How do we get to this place from here?” Kicktar demanded, pointing at the place on the datapad’s map that she thought—hoped—was where Darin had told her Troy was.

Beluu shook her head. “You cannot go there. I knew taking that comm was a bad idea. You should stay here and rest.”

“We can’t. We have to go. And we have to go *there*. Right now. If you won’t tell us how to get there, then show me on the map where we are, and we’ll work it out on our own,” Kicktar said.

“You don’t understand. You cannot go there,” Beluu repeated.

“Why not?”

Beluu wrung her hands again. “Who was that person on the comm? One of your owners? You must not follow his orders.”

They didn’t have time to play this game anymore. Kicktar was two nanoseconds away from exploding at the Herglic, but luckily Zyrytchev stepped between them.

“Beluu,” he coaxed in a surprisingly calm voice, “listen. We must go. We will not be harmed. There is more to this situation than it appears.”

“That’s what I’m saying to you as well,” she said. “And you should not return to your owners yet. It is not safe.”

“You have a handheld medical scanner somewhere here, yes?” Zyrytchev asked. Beluu nodded. “Then get it,” Zyrytchev continued. “Scan me. You will see that I have no tracking band, no slaving chip implanted in me anywhere.”

Beluu complied while Kicktar waited impatiently. Finally the Herglic finished. "I don't understand," Beluu mumbled in confusion as she stared at the blank readout. "Your scars. Everything you said had happened to you..."

"Is from the past."

"Then why did you say they were your owners?"

"It was a necessary deception we had to use on this moon to do what we needed to do. A story, nothing more."

Then her eyes widened in alarm. "They are holding someone you care about and forcing you to work for them. We will help free them."

"No," Zyrytchev said firmly. "We are with them of our own free will. Things are not what they appear to be to you. We *will* go. We must help our companion. Please trust me that our companions will not hurt us."

Beluu set down the scanner and looked around anxiously before finally saying, "I must contact someone." She hurried off to another room.

The instant she was out of earshot, Kicktar adjusted her comlink's settings and frequency. "Come on, we're leaving," Kicktar said to Zyrytchev while she worked. "We'll have to figure out directions on our own. We can't risk her deciding to force us to stay." She'd really, really wanted a speeder ride instead of needing to walk all that way on a broken leg, though.

At the last minute, she unpocketed the emergency credits she carried and left them on the nearest table for Beluu. The stubborn Herglic had helped them and done a good job patching her up, and Kicktar didn't have the heart to walk away looking completely ungrateful.

Zyrytchev helped Kicktar walk toward the house's back door. On the way, she sent a comm request to Team Aurek.

Lieutenant Colonel Adaic Traineer was aggravated. Team Cresh had returned from the Imperial base quite some time ago, their task complete. They were just waiting on Team Dorn. Again. Dorn was supposed to be making a couple of legitimate deliveries of items they were picking up at the Imperial base to help solidify their cover after they left, but those deliveries shouldn't have taken nearly this long. And Troy hadn't commed to status him like he was supposed to. He was getting really, really tired of Team Dorn's members.

Finally, *finally*, his comlink beeped with the distinctive sound indicating it was on the Pinnacle Shipping cover frequency. He grabbed the comlink in irritation, ready to chew out Troy. Traineer ensured the settings were correct and then answered, "Pinnacle Shipping."

"Sir, this is Gerai," said a voice that was definitely not Troy's. The Mon Cal, maybe? "We have a medical emergency."

From where he sat a meter away, the medic shot to his feet at those words. Traineer hadn't realized he could move that fast. "What's wrong?" Hozke called at the comlink.

Traineer glared at him and spoke into the comlink himself before the Mon Cal could answer. "What happened that you could possibly have a medical emergency? You were supposed to be back by now with the package."

And now Drohner, both pilots, and even Gundark were silently focused on him and trying to hear the conversation. Wonderful, just what he needed.

"Sir, we have the package. Things went wrong at the pickup and we had to split up. Dorn One is badly hurt and unconscious and needs help. We have his approximate location in the

Nosaurian part of town.”

Hozke grabbed his medical bag and secured it while Drohner went very still. Traineer ignored them. Leave it to Team Dorn to find a way to wreck his entire mission. Fuming, he spit out, “Start over and start making sense.”

There was a split-second pause, then the Mon Cal replied. “Sir, we arrived for the pickup and obtained the package from Cresh. Before we could leave, the Imperials started shooting at someone claiming to be our Intel agent. He escaped the base with us.” At those words, Gundark inhaled sharply and whipped out a datapad that she started working furiously on. “The Imperials chased us and we had to split up. Three and I took the package while One, Four, and the agent continued in the speeder to draw the Imperials away.”

“This was at pickup? Why am I just now hearing about this?” Traineer demanded.

“Sir, the comms here have been jammed for a while as the Imperials searched the area. We just got a comm from Four a minute ago with news about One and his location.”

“You got a comm from Four? So you can’t confirm the situation?” Traineer asked.

There was another pause. “No, sir, not yet. Three and I are on our way there now. But there’s—”

“Stand down,” Traineer interrupted. “If you have the package, you’re coming here. Nowhere else.”

“Sir, One is hurt badly—”

“So you’re told. We’ll deal with that.” Though Traineer’s whirling thoughts kicked into overdrive at those words. Would they need to deal with it? Was this a clean way to get Troy out of his hair once and for all? Maybe the pilot too? That would show his detestable wingman...

“Sir, please, there’s more.” The Mon Cal’s voice had some insistence to it. “Four said that the agent had been with them there. Status is currently unknown.”

Damn it, if the agent was there then they’d have to go get him. But then Traineer frowned as he realized what the Mon Cal had said. “Why is the agent’s status unknown? Did he move somewhere else? Isn’t Four there too?”

“Um... no, sir.” The Mon Cal now seemed to be choosing words with more care. “It was a very brief message, but from what Four said, they ran into trouble with some local Nosaurians who are holding One and forced Four into the Imperial base for something.”

“What?!” Traineer nearly shouted. “Four is in the base?”

“I believe so, sir.”

He gripped his comlink so hard that his knuckles turned pale. While he took a few breaths to compose himself, Gundark spoke up.

“The Imperials put an APB out on Halon’s Imperial persona,” she said worriedly. “His cover must have been blown. He’s reported as escaping with some hostages, and they’re still looking for him in the surrounding areas. He didn’t answer his comm just now.”

“Then we’ll need to extract him,” Traineer ground out. “We can’t afford to let the Imperials capture him if his cover’s blown. First priority is the package. Second priority is finding our Intel agent. Two, Three, send your location. A team will pick you up and bring you back here.”

Drohner and Hozke exchanged a look with each other. “And One and Four?” Hozke asked Traineer. “We need to help them.”

“If One is with the agent, you can get him then,” Traineer said.

He purposefully didn’t bring up the pilot, but Weas did. “And Four?” Weas repeated.

“There were alarms going off in the background of his transmission,” the Mon Cal said

on the comlink. “Something’s happening there, and whatever it is, he’s probably in the middle of it.”

“It’s too dangerous for us to go after him then,” Traineer said. “We need to complete our mission, not rescue idiotic wayward pilots. *Again.*”

“Gundark,” Drohner said, “if the Imperials capture Four, especially while he’s in the base, how long will it be before they know all about this mission?”

“Not long,” Gundark said somberly. “The shipping personnel identities used for this were thinner than flimsi. They’ll find out what we were after before you can even get it back to the fleet. And then the Imperials will change their plans and what we have will be useless.”

Traineer silently cursed. When all this was over, that pilot was going to be sorry he’d ever crossed paths with him. It rankled him to lift one finger to help that liability. “Fine. Warrant Officer, contact Four,” he said to Drohner. “Find out what’s going on and tell him to get the hell out of the base. *Now.* Two, Three, send your location and stay right where you are until our speeder picks you up.”

“But One—” the Mon Cal protested.

“*Stay where you are,*” Traineer interrupted her sharply.

Drohner spoke up. “Two, send me your location.” Traineer glared at him for overstepping, but when Drohner noticed, he said, “I can coordinate the rescue plans as soon as I talk to Four, sir.”

“Fine,” Traineer bit out. “Hurry up. We should’ve been off this rock by now, not beginning a rescue op.”

“Yes, sir.”

Traineer closed the comm channel and turned to Gundark. “What does the APB say?” he asked her. “I want details.”

The instant Traineer started talking to Gundark, Drohner waved Hozke, Weas, and Pellicer inside the shuttle. All of them were tense. He grabbed a datapad and handed it to Pellicer, saying, “We’ll need notes,” before sitting in a jump seat in the cargo area. The others followed suit.

Drohner’s first comm attempt was to Troy’s assigned frequency. After a long minute of no response, he instead tried Stanic’s but got the same result. Both pilots grew even more stiff, if that was possible.

Drohner caught Hozke’s eye. “Keep an eye on the door. Let me know if we’ll have company.” Hozke nodded and repositioned himself. Then Drohner stood and beckoned the two pilots to the cockpit. Once there, he asked them, “How do I contact *Starsmoke* on this bucket?”

In a manner of seconds, Weas had the comm powered, programmed, and ready.

“Hozke?” Drohner called.

“Clear,” came the reply.

Drohner pressed the shuttle’s comm transmitter. “Cresh One to Besh One.”

After a couple of seconds, Arrunes answered. “Besh One here.”

“Problem,” Drohner told him. He outlined the situation as he knew it as quickly as he could.

Within a few minutes, they had a rough plan put together. A quick comm on a backup frequency for Troy that Arrunes gave Drohner went unanswered. Then a short warning whistle

from Hozke made Drohner sign off and abruptly end the comm to Besh. He hurriedly brought the two pilots back to the main seating and cargo area.

They'd just made it when Traineer and Gundark walked through the shuttle's side door. "Report," Traineer said. "Tell me your plan."

"Well, sir, part of it depends on Gundark." Drohner's eyes met hers. "We only have two Imperial uniforms. Hozke will need one, and I'll need the other to help him get in and out to One and the agent in case we run into one of those search parties. While we're doing that, are you willing to go into the base for Four?"

Traineer immediately shook his head. "Absolutely not. We can't afford Gundark's Imperial identity getting drug into this mess. We can't lose another agent's placement over this."

"But I won't get compromised," Gundark said. Turning back to Drohner, she said, "I'll go. It'll be much easier and safer for me in the base than any of you anyway. Did you find out where Four is?"

"Not yet. No answer on his comm."

Gundark looked thoughtful. "If there were alarms, there will be alerts I can access. I'll figure it out on the way." She nodded once to them and then spun and strode out purposefully.

Traineer seemed flummoxed, and he looked back and forth between Drohner and Gundark before going after the Intel agent. "You can't risk your identity for this worthless pilot!" he said before the ship's door closed behind him and cut off any further sounds.

Drohner clapped his hands once. "Quick, let's go before he drags the whole plan out of me and ruins it."

Unlike Drohner, Pellicer had changed back into his civvies earlier, and he handed his Imperial uniform to Hozke with a disgruntled look on his face. "One of us should go with you," Pellicer said to Drohner, indicating himself and Weas.

"I know you want to. I get it," Drohner said. And he did. His stomach was twisting thinking about Troy, and the pilots wanted their own squadmate back too. "But this is a ground operation. Let us do our jobs. You guys get this bucket ready for a quick launch and possible extraction. And I need someone I can trust to be our relay to Arrunes." His comlink wouldn't reach *Starsmoke* on its own; they needed to patch it through *Starfall's* comm system. "And the most important thing I need you to do is stall Traineer if he tries to interfere or find out too many details, okay? This all goes to pieces if he does."

Weas looked just as unhappy as Pellicer, but after a moment he nodded. "Good luck," Weas said.

"Thanks." Then Drohner pushed a newly-Imperialized Hozke with his medical gear out the shuttle's door. "Hurry up. Let's go," he said under his breath.

It took a bit of luck and a lot of creative ignoring, but they made it into Cresh's speeder without getting stopped by Traineer. Drohner powered up the speeder and peeled out.

Chapter Twenty

It didn't take long for the Nosaurian group to completely outpace Darin. He lost sight of them down a side corridor fairly quickly. More concerning to him, however, was that the alarms were causing tense Imperials to run through the corridor as they responded to the klaxons. Keeping out of their sight was soon impossible.

They didn't react to him, so he just kept on limping as fast as he could down the corridor, looking for an exit. Any exit. He had to stop a few times to get his swimming vision and throbbing head back into the non-incapacitating range.

In the middle of his latest rest stop, a voice spoke up beside him. "Are you okay?"

Darin snapped his eyes open in alarm at the attention and immediately regretted the action. He leaned a little heavier against the wall during the new wave of queasiness.

An Imperial— some sort of clerk by the look of him— was studying Darin in concern. "You're really pale. And you're all bloody. Are you going to pass out? What happened?" he asked.

"I think I got hit by the group that caused the alarms," Darin said in a strained voice. He actually was concerned that he might pass out.

"Let me help. I'll call the med facility for you," the clerk said.

"No, no, I'm all right. I just need to go," Darin said a bit dazedly. He wasn't sure if he was making any sense. He tried to leave.

The clerk stopped him. "Sir, let me help." He pulled out a comlink and called for medical assistance.

Darin didn't know what to do or what to say. Everything he did was wrong, and he especially didn't trust anything he'd do in his current woozy condition. He stood there for lack of a better option.

While they waited, the clerk nervously smiled at Darin. "What a day, huh? First the main alert and search for that suspected spy, now this? Glad I'm not involved with either of those directly, or I'd never get home tonight."

"Yeah, lots of excitement today," Darin said.

A woman in a medical uniform arrived quicker than Darin expected. He wondered if they'd already been dispatched when the facility alarms went off. After some questions and a very brief examination, the medic asked if Darin could make it to the emergency speeders parked outside, since it would be easier to treat him there. Darin agreed, then he thanked the clerk and followed the medic.

The medic allowed Darin to take his time, though Darin tried to hurry. At last they stepped outside and the piercing racket of the alarms died down to a muffled din. Darin instantly felt better. Not good by any means, but better.

The medic led Darin through a small perimeter crowd outside toward a knot of emergency speeders. Some were medical, others were for security. When they approached, Darin saw that one of the medical speeders already had some people being treated while they sat in the open rear compartment. His breath caught in his throat when he noticed the white stormtrooper armor on the first cranky patient. The patient beside him was the unarmored Imperial from the control room. The stormtrooper had his helmet off and was snapping some harsh words to the medic treating him and to the unarmored Imperial.

The new pair's arrival immediately caught the stormtrooper's attention, and his gaze cut their way. It only took a second for suspicious recognition to settle on the stormtrooper's

expression when he caught Darin's eye. Much too late, Darin realized he shouldn't have been looking directly at the Imperial, but now the damage was done. Never taking his eyes off the pilot, the stormtrooper got to his feet. Darin stopped in his tracks. His heart thudded.

"You're the one who attacked me," the stormtrooper said, loudly and clearly. Venom dripped in his voice. He reached for a blaster that was no longer there, and when his hand came up empty, he growled and yelled, "Security!"

Without thinking, Darin ran for the only place he felt comfortable in a fight: the closest vehicle. It ended up being the medical speeder he'd been being led to for treatment. He jumped in the passenger side, scrambled over to the pilot's seat, and gunned it to life as fast as he could. He hit the throttle just in time to see the stormtrooper lunge for one of the back handles and come up short.

This was so, so incredibly bad.

As Darin tore down the first couple random streets in the base, he gasped out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He knew how speeder chases in this base ended up. As much as he hated to do it, he needed to ditch the speeder.

Sirens were flaring to life back where he'd just escaped from. He turned down another road, pulled over, and braked hard to a stop. He couldn't just leave the speeder there as a beacon for where he'd transitioned to going on foot, though, so he pointed it down the road, got out, and then reached back inside and pushed the throttle in. The speeder leapt away without him, and Darin turned and ducked down the nearest side street.

He hurried down a few more side streets, zigzagging through whatever turns he found and silently cursing his injured leg the entire time. It was getting dark, and streetlights were flickering to life. Then one side street opened onto a larger road, and Darin saw something familiar a few blocks over.

There was one end of the Imperial loading dock.

Forget Imperial office buildings and medbays and correctional institutes. Darin knew the ins-and-outs of shipping facilities better than anything else outside of a hangar. It was the one place where he knew how to blend in, or where he could find good places to hide. He wouldn't have to act in there. It was his one chance.

He headed there as fast as he could go.

Lieutenant Steen Weas prided himself on knowing what had to be done and then doing it. Really, the entire galaxy would be so much better off if more beings did exactly that. It was the only reason he was on this mission in the first place: the mission had to be done in order to protect Mack and protect the squadron, and so he was doing it.

In a lot of ways, Pellicer was like him. Scoop had that same strong internal compass and that same stubbornness to see things through. When their compasses aligned, they made a formidable team. When they were at odds, like they had been for most of this mission, things got considerably more difficult.

Steen also wasn't used to second-guessing himself. Once the door to self-doubt was opened, he couldn't see how anyone could ever get it closed again. Self-doubt in a fighter pilot was the surest way to get himself or someone else killed, and he refused to even entertain the notion. So he really didn't like the way he felt all wavery inside as he watched Lt. Col. Trainneer storm toward the shuttle after Dohner and Hozke had peeled out in their speeder, and Gundark

did the same a moment later. Now the two pilots were the only ones left there with the Special Forces commander.

From immediately behind and beside him, Pellicer was also watching through the side door's window as Traineer approached.

"He looks annoyed," Steen commented drily.

"Yes, he does," Pellicer agreed.

It was easy to guess what Traineer was coming to the shuttle for. But knowing what he would be asked didn't make it any easier for Steen to know what he should say.

The simple answer was that when Traineer demanded to know the plan, Steen should tell him. Anything less would be disobeying his order, causing them to fail the squadron's probation. Except...

He silently cursed at that word. *Except*. That was the slippery slope word, the one that signaled things were so messed up that he really didn't know what the right thing to do was anymore. Drohner had indicated, very strongly, that if Traineer knew the plan, he would change and micromanage it into uselessness. Hozke and Arrunes had acted the same way. So if that was to be believed, if the lives of several people— including Darin— and the mission were all on the line, he couldn't take that chance. But that meant he'd be risking the squadron's probation on the possibly erroneous beliefs of three low-ranking commandos he barely knew.

Steen knew exactly what Pellicer would do. At this moment, Scoop would lie through his teeth to the lieutenant colonel and protect the commandos' plans. But he hadn't been on board with this whole probation thing from the start. That was for people like Steen to enforce.

Except...

Traineer stomped up the shuttle's **ramp** and slapped the control to open the side door. As soon as it opened, he burst through the door and came toe-to-toe with Steen in a huff. "Drohner left without giving me the plan like I told him to," the tall redhead growled. "Tell me what they're doing."

Steen felt Pellicer's eyes on him as an air of tension emanated from the other pilot. He hated it when things got so messed up, so muddled, that he couldn't see the clear path ahead anymore.

But when that happened, Steen had learned that all he could do was trust his squadmates. Even if that was the last thing he felt like he ought to do.

Steen met Traineer's gaze and shrugged. "Sorry, sir. We're just the pilots. Special Forces didn't tell us anything. Said it was their mission."

Well, at least he hadn't *completely* lied.

Traineer glared at Steen. "I know you're lying. You were in here with them."

"They had us trying to get through to Four on the comms while they planned things out. They were pretty busy, and we were trying not to bother them. Sorry, sir," Steen repeated, "but we were just following their orders."

Traineer's face reddened. "You'd better not forget what you have to lose. Now get Drohner on the comm. I'll talk to him myself."

"Here you go, sir," Pellicer spoke up. He pulled his comlink from a pocket, adjusted the frequency, and handed it to Traineer.

Traineer snatched it out of his hand and immediately hit the transmit button. "Cresh One, Aurek Lead. Come in." He waited a long moment with no reply, then he tried again with the same results. Traineer was fuming when he finally closed the unresponsive frequency and shoved the comlink back at Pellicer. "Get him on that comm, and tell me the instant you got

him.” Trainneer spun and stalked back out of the ship.

It was a good fifteen seconds after the door closed behind the colonel before the two pilots exhaled. “Well, that was fun,” Steen said.

Pellicer was eyeing him appraisingly while he pocketed the comlink, but he didn’t say anything.

Steen turned to face him. “What’d you do with the comlink?”

“One number is off by one digit. It’s not a frequency we’re using here. I figured he wouldn’t check it.”

“Good. I guess we should warn Drohner at some point that we completely threw him under the speeder to his CO.”

Pellicer shrugged. “He said to interfere. He didn’t say how.”

Steen sighed. “Well, let’s get things packed up and prepped for departure as much as we can. Somehow I doubt this will be a leisurely launch when they get back.”

Drohner smacked Hozke’s hand when the medic reached up yet again to pull at the collar of his Imperial uniform. “Stop that.”

Hozke offered him a wounded glance. “It’s annoying.”

“No Imperial past their first week of Basic Training fiddles with their uniform anymore. You’ll give us away,” Drohner scolded. He redirected his attention to the map on the datapad and trying to follow the directions to Kicktar’s and Zyrytchev’s location while he piloted the speeder through the nighttime streets. Hozke had been helping with the directions until this latest batch of uniform fiddling.

“I can’t help it. Why do they have to make their uniforms so irritating?” Hozke asked.

“I should have brought Pellicer with instead,” Drohner muttered, though it was to tease Hozke. Well, half-tease. “He didn’t fiddle with the uniform. And he didn’t have all that nonregulation scruff on his face. You have a razor in that medical bag of yours? One look at you and we’ll either be caught or written up for demerits.”

“But I’m much better company. And when you’re bleeding out from a blaster wound, you’ll be glad I’m here and not Pellicer.”

“I’ll only get shot because they’ll see your face scruff and know you’re not an Imperial. Then I’ll *really* wish Pellicer was here instead.”

“Fine, I’ll hide and cover my hideous visage until you give the all-clear,” Hozke said. He paused, then resumed his annoying finger-tapping against his medical gear bag. “I wish I knew what’s wrong,” he said in a more somber voice. “What the injury is. I could prepare better for it.”

“If Kicktar had known, she would have told us,” Drohner replied. He turned down the next indicated street, then unconsciously accelerated a bit more. His stomach tightened from the mere thought that they might be too late for Hozke to do anything. If this had happened around the time of the datacard pickup, that was hours ago.

“What do you think happened?” Hozke asked. “I mean, overall? To make things go so haywire on this mission?”

“I don’t know,” Drohner replied. “But I’m sure Troy will have a good story to tell us about it.”

“I hope so,” Hozke said. “He’d better.” Drohner could tell the medic’s thoughts matched his own.

Eventually they reached the edge of the Herglic part of town and entered the Nosaurian area. Kicktar had contacted them a couple of times since they'd gotten on the road to update her location. Neither she nor Zyrytchev had wanted to "stay put" while Troy needed help, and Drohner hadn't stopped them.

It took some doing and more than a few wrong turns that wasted time they didn't have, but Drohner finally navigated the odd, narrow streets until he spotted Zyrytchev's conspicuous frame. Both Kicktar and Zyrytchev backed into some deeper shadows when they heard the speeder approach, but Hozke quickly got them on the comm, and soon they were coming out. Zyrytchev was helping Kicktar hobble along.

Hozke jumped out of the speeder and ran to assist Kicktar. "You okay?" he asked her.

She smiled at both him and Drohner, who was waiting in the speeder. "I've been treated already. Come on, we need to find One." She and Zyrytchev pushed past Hozke and continued to the speeder.

"Hey now, I'll be the judge of that," Hozke said, following them. Zyrytchev had to crumple himself up to fit in the speeder's rear cargo area, growling the entire time, and Hozke slid into the back seat next to Kicktar.

"Thanks for the ride. *Finally*," Kicktar said.

"You're lucky I pick up hitchhikers. Besides, these roads make no sense," Drohner said.

Kicktar scoffed. "*Our* pilot didn't have any trouble with them."

"Wish he was here then. You guys have those datacards?" Drohner asked.

"Yes," Zyrytchev said.

"Good. *Technically* I'm supposed to take you back to base immediately," Drohner said as he put the speeder in gear and headed back onto the street.

"Drohner, I swear—" Kicktar warned.

"Relax," Drohner interrupted. "You think I'd do that?"

"Good," Kicktar said, mollified. "I was about to sic Zyrytchev on you."

"I would happily oblige if I could move," Zyrytchev grumbled.

"But I'm obligated to point out that if we lose those datacards while we're on our detour, we're in serious trouble, and the colonel is already rather perturbed. So please don't lose them."

"I have not lost them yet. I will not lose them now," Zyrytchev said, almost threateningly.

Hozke straightened up from examining Kicktar's leg and shoulder and said, "Hey, okay, so this is actually pretty good work. Everything seems to be splinted and bandaged properly. You need painkillers?"

"No, I'm good," the Mon Cal said. "Already had some."

"Which one of you splinted this?" Hozke asked. "Am I going to be out of a job soon?"

"One of the Herglics helped us," Kicktar replied. "It's a long story."

"Hozke, it was nice when you were helping me navigate before," Drohner interrupted.

Splitting his concentration between flying on these strange roads and watching the map was difficult, and he'd had to slow down drastically to do it.

"Sorry. Duty called."

"I like the new look, Hozke," Kicktar teased. "'Scruffy Imperial' looks good on you. Until they realize you're scruffy, know something's wrong, and kill us all."

"See?" Drohner said.

"Oh, come on," Hozke said to Drohner. "Everyone's always getting killed in Kicktar's scenarios. If it wasn't my scruff, it'd be something else. You can't pin that on me."

Drohner's comlink beeped. It was one thing too many for him to do. Drohner swore and

quickly dug it out of his tunic pocket. "Hozke, here, handle this." He tossed the squawking comlink back to the medic, who caught it. "If it's the colonel, play the static game." He regretted that it had ever gotten to the point where they would need to do that with their own CO just to make sure they could save their own teammate. That never had happened with Major Brexxil.

Hozke considered. "What are we now, Cresh? We're really Aurek-Cresh-Dorn, but the comm is for you, so... ah, never mind." He opened the frequency. Kicktar leaned over and imitated a static sound that almost drowned out Hozke's words of, "Cresh and company."

"It's Gundark," came the reply. "...Can you hear me?" Hozke waved off Kicktar, and she stopped.

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Have you heard from Four again at all? More stuff has happened at the base, and he's nowhere I can find. I need to contact him, but he's not answering."

"We haven't," Hozke said. He looked at Kicktar. "Two, have you?"

Kicktar shook her head. "No, just that one time."

"With as much as it sounds like has happened, are we sure he's on the right frequency?" Drohner said over his shoulder. "What if he lost his original comlink and used another one to comm Two?"

"He still should have programmed his new one to receive his assigned frequency," Kicktar said.

"He is a pilot," Zyrytchev grumbled dismissively. "Their starfighters hold and receive numerous frequencies at once. They do not have to think about things like that, not like we do. He might not have thought to do it."

"It's worth checking out," Drohner said. "Two, what frequency did he comm you from? Maybe we can try contacting him on that if it's different."

"How should I know? Rayal's the comm expert."

"Send her your comm log," Zyrytchev suggested. "She will be able to decipher it from that."

"Hozke," Drohner said.

"On it," Hozke replied. "Stand by, Gundark. We'll get back to you ASAP." Soon he had contacted the pilots on *Starfall* to patch him through to Rayal with Besh in *Starsmoke*, and had transmitted Kicktar's comm log. In a few minutes, Rayal had given them a different frequency to try. Hozke passed that along to Gundark just as Drohner pulled the speeder to a stop on the street where the map indicated One was being held. Waiting in the shadows and blocking the door to a small building was a massive Herglic.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Uh oh,” Kicktar said softly as she made out the Herglic’s shape in the darkness. She immediately put a hand on Hozke’s shoulder to stop him as he moved to get out of the speeder. “Wait. You too, Drohner. Let me and Z scope things out first. We’ve worked with the Herglics here already.”

“But I need to get in there,” Hozke protested.

“I know. I want you in there too. But if they see you and think you’re an Imperial, they might attack first and ask questions later. Let us at least talk to him first.”

Hozke scowled and fidgeted, but waited.

Kicktar motioned with her head to Zyrytchev. It looked like they were about to find out why Beluu didn’t want them coming here.

The Mon Cal and the Sludir slowly got out of the speeder and approached the Herglic. “Hello?” Kicktar said.

“So, Beluu was right,” the Herglic said in a deep masculine voice. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell if she’s overreacting.” He emitted that strange *hauum* sound.

“We believe our companion is inside and hurt,” Zyrytchev said.

The Herglic studied them as they walked up and stopped. “Most likely. You have the same uniform as him.”

“Can we get him?” Kicktar asked.

The Herglic sighed. “If it was up to me, no. I detest losing this leverage. It means we lose that Human we’re using, and it’s going to be too long before we can find another suitable one. But since the Human did his part and our mission was successful, I’ve been instructed to let you take the injured one.” He stepped aside, leaving the doorway unblocked. “I’m mainly here to keep the Imperial from leaving.”

Kicktar was about to wave Hozke forward, but at those words, she stopped. “The Imperial?” she asked.

“Did this Imperial come in with the two Pinnacle Shipping Humans?” Zyrytchev asked.

“From what I’m told, yes,” the Herglic replied.

Zyrytchev looked at Kicktar. “Our passenger.”

Right, the Intel agent who caused this whole mess back at the dock. “You know,” Kicktar said conversationally, “we can take the Imperial off your hands too.”

The Herglic stiffened. “We haven’t decided what we’re doing with him yet. We might still need him as leverage against the Imperials.”

“But the Imperials are looking for him. He’s in trouble with them.”

“And that means they’ll be very happy to get him back. Possibly happy enough to trade us for something we need.”

Zyrytchev shook his head. “You know the Imperials will not honor any deals they claim to make with you.”

“I know,” the Herglic replied. “But we can enact safeguards to help with that.”

“Holding him is just going to eat up your resources,” Kicktar said. “Guarding. Food. Water. It’s exhausting, especially if you’re not set up for it.”

“You have held him this long without making contact with the Imperials,” Zyrytchev remarked. “What event would make you decide to contact them? What would you ask for in return?”

“It was mostly in case our group got caught on this mission and we needed a bargaining

chip. Now that our group is out safely, that's no longer needed. I don't know what further plans the others might have."

Kicktar couldn't help but interrupt at those words. "Your group is out of the base? The Human too? We can't reach him."

The Herglic shrugged again. "The Nosaurians are out. They said they got separated from the Human at some point when the alarms started going off. I didn't hear any more detail. But since they were already separated, we most likely lost the Human's future cooperation anyway. That's the only reason I agreed to let the injured one here go."

Kicktar sighed. "Okay. So, then, the Imperial's future?"

"No discussions have taken place regarding the Imperial's fate since the group's escape. I said we should just kill him to simplify things, but the others are too frightened of the repercussions if the Imperials find out," the Herglic said.

"So you obviously don't want him around," Kicktar replied. "What would it take for us to convince you to let us take him right now? If we promise the Imperials would never get ahold of him and would never find out what he knows about your group?"

The Herglic chuckled, a deep, throaty sound. "We're not worried about that. If he's in trouble with the Imperials, his credibility is in question, and whatever he tells them about us will be next to useless." He regarded the two commandos with one large eye. "Tell me why you want him so badly. Beluu's comm raised more questions than answers. What's going on for two beings who said they were slaves then said they're not and now want to take an Imperial with them?"

Kicktar hesitated and looked at Zyrytchev, who returned her gaze. One of the first rules was that going around announcing allegiance to the Rebel Alliance, particularly on an Imperial-controlled world, was a Bad Idea. But they weren't getting anywhere here. And Troy still needed help.

"It's a long story," Kicktar began slowly, choosing her words with care, "but we're fighting the Imperials. And the three Humans we were with, including the one in there in the Imperial uniform, are helping us do it."

The Herglic studied her hard, apparently reading between the lines that Kicktar hadn't bothered to obscure too much. Finally he said, "You say you're fighting the Imperials."

"Yes," Zyrytchev confirmed.

"If I let you take that Imperial now, can we contact you for help if we need it in our own fight against them?"

Kicktar hesitated. "I... can't promise anything. I don't have the authority. But we can give you a secure comm frequency to contact. I will say that, yes, we help our allies whenever we can."

The Herglic stared at them both for another minute longer, then he motioned them toward the door with a large, flippered hand.

"Thank you," Kicktar said earnestly. She immediately waved Hozke forward. "Oh, um, these two are just wearing Imperial uniforms as disguises. Please don't shoot them. They're with us. It was just in case they ran into an Imperial search party."

Zyrytchev immediately opened the door, ducked through the frame, and strode inside the small building, and his sharp gaze swept the room, which was illuminated by a dim glowrod. There was a small alarmed cry from inside, and then the same voice said, "Wait, you're—"

"Clear," Zyrytchev announced over his shoulder.

Hozke had his medical bag and a glowrod, and he ran past Kicktar and the Herglic into

the small building after Zyrytchev. When Drohner approached at a jog, Kicktar stopped him and asked him to give the Herglic the promised frequency. She let those two discuss details while she stepped into the room.

Hozke was kneeling by someone lying on the floor, and in the light of his glowrod Kicktar recognized Troy's Pinnacle Shipping uniform and dark hair. Hozke pulled a second Pinnacle Shipping jacket, which had to be Darin's, off of him where it was acting as a sort of blanket draped over his torso, and he gave a sharp intake of breath at seeing a bloody mess of bandages on Troy's side. He checked for vitals, relaxed just a bit after a long moment, and then dove into his work.

Kicktar walked over to the Intel agent. He'd gotten to his feet, but his hands were bound behind him. "It's about time you got here!" the agent said. His voice had an almost hysterical note to it. "Get me out of here, now!"

"We are. You're coming with us," Kicktar said. "The speeder's outside." She started working at the knots in the rope binding his hands.

"Hurry up!" the agent demanded. He fidgeted, making it much harder for Kicktar to work. "Those crazy lizards could be back any second! Between them and that idiotic pilot, I'm amazed I haven't been killed yet! It wasn't for their lack of trying, either!"

Finally she got the ropes undone, and the agent raced to the doorway. "Let's go! Now!" he said. With a glance at Hozke, he said, "You're not going to get bleeding-heart about that dead weight too, are you? Come on!" He ran out the door. A short yelp made Kicktar wonder if he'd almost run into the Herglic.

Surprised at his words, Kicktar threw a dirty look after the agent's retreating form, and then she joined Zyrytchev and Hozke by Troy. "How is he?" she asked nervously.

"Not good," Hozke said. He gathered the tools he'd taken out and quickly returned them to his kit. "I'm frankly amazed he's still alive. I need to get him to the shuttle and back to the fleet ASAP. Z, can you help me get him to the speeder? Very gently?"

Zyrytchev nodded. Hozke put the jacket blanket back over Troy's torso, and Zyrytchev carefully picked Troy up. They moved as quickly as they dared to the speeder and laid Troy in the backseat.

"Come on, let's go already!" the Intel agent shouted from the front passenger seat.

Kicktar was starting to reconsider the offer to take the Intel agent with. She looked back at the Herglic before she acted on that impulse. "Thank you," she said again. The Herglic inclined his head. Zyrytchev clambered into the rear compartment once more, and Kicktar went to the front seat as well to give Hozke more room in the back with Troy. The Intel agent grumbled at having to move over toward the middle of the speeder's bench seat between her and Drohner.

Drohner powered up the speeder and threw it in gear, and they headed back to *Starfall* as fast as they could.

An insistent beeping startled Darin out of a doze.

He jumped and struggled to get his bearings through his foggy mind. It was very dark, and he was somewhere cold, hard and cramped. He wasn't quite sure what was happening or where he was, but he had to shut off that beeping. He groped blindly for where it seemed to be coming from. His pocket. A comlink.

He hit the button more out of habit than intention. At least it stopped the beeping. “Yeah?” he croaked out.

“Four?” came a voice.

“...What?” he asked in confusion. He tried to wrangle his thoughts into coherence. That wasn’t his number. He was Nine.

“Niylen?”

“What? Wait. Huh?” Why did that word sound somewhat familiar? Like he should recognize it? “Wait. Yeah, yeah, this is Niylen. Four. Dorn Four.” His brain finally kicked into gear. First gear, but a gear nonetheless.

“This is Gundark. Are you okay?”

Gundark. Intel agent. The one from back at their original meeting point. “Gundark? I... didn’t expect to hear from you.” On some level, Darin hadn’t really expected to hear from anyone. He’d figured as soon as they retrieved Troy, Traineer would write Darin off as an acceptable loss and leave. A faint glimmer of hope dared to stir inside.

“I’m trying to find you to get you out of the base. Where are you?” Gundark asked.

“I’m... in the loading dock. Hiding. The base is looking for me.”

“Let me worry about that. Which dock? I’ll come meet you.”

“7E. I found an empty shipping container to hide in.”

“All right. I’ll be there in about ten minutes. I’ll comm you again when I get there and things are clear.”

“Okay.” The transmission ended. Darin closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the hard interior of the empty container.

His stomach growled, his whole body was stiff, and his head, wrist, and leg all throbbed with a dull intensity. Even with this jacket and a bit of heat trapped inside the container he was pretty cold, and he wondered how long he’d been sitting there. He wondered what was happening out in the base. He wondered if Troy was alive and if they’d found him.

He wondered why he didn’t really feel happy about the prospect of rescue and escape.

About fifteen minutes later, his comlink beeped again. This time he was more coherent from the get-go. “Four.”

“I’m here, outside on the dock. Where are you?”

“Hold on.” Darin cautiously pushed open the side of the shipping container and peered out. It was nighttime, but the dock had sufficient lighting. The only person he saw was a woman in an Imperial uniform holding a comlink near her mouth. Darin forced his stiff muscles to work, and he crept out of the container. The woman noticed him and walked over. She guided him behind the large container and knelt down with him so they’d be out of sight to most casual observers.

Gundark gave him a quick once-over with her sharp eyes, and then she said, “You look like hell. Ready to get out of here?”

His hesitation must have caught her by surprise, since she looked at him with more concern when he didn’t reply or move. “What is it?” she asked.

“I... I’ve screwed all of this up so badly,” he whispered. He hadn’t really intended to say anything, but the words came out unbidden to someone who seemed to actually be listening to him for a change. “My squadron’s going to hate me when I get back. I ruined everything for them. I didn’t think anyone would bother coming for me now, and I thought... maybe... I shouldn’t.”

Gundark waited, but when he didn’t continue, she asked, “Shouldn’t what? Shouldn’t go

back?” Darin nodded miserably. Gundark sighed. “Look, kid, I don’t know exactly what’s going on or what happened, or what that colonel was thinking making this simple op into such a convoluted mission, but as far as I can see, nothing’s been ‘ruined.’ Everyone’s still alive, and as long as that’s true, everything else is just paperwork.”

Darin’s breath caught in his throat. He was afraid to even hope. “Does... that mean One is alive?”

“As of a little while ago. They’re taking him back to the shuttle, but they need to get him to your fleet for some serious treatment. Which they can’t do until I get back there with you. So are we going or not?”

Darin took a deep breath and forced himself to nod. “How?”

Gundark’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “That Sludir had a pretty good idea for this. First let’s get you to my speeder. Sorry you’ll be cramped again for a while more, but you’ll need to hide in the cargo compartment to leave.”

“If the base is still on alert, they’ll scan your speeder at the exit,” Darin protested.

“I know.”

“They’ll detect me in there.”

Gundark grinned. “They’ll have other things to be thinking about then, and my speeder has a trick or two up its sleeve. Don’t worry.”

“Besh One to Besh Five and Six.”

Kalre jumped at the chance to reply before Slurry could. “Besh Six. Do we *finally* get to leave?” They were supposed to have left a few hours ago, and the Rodian was sick and tired of being stuck in his X-wing’s cockpit, hiding on the desolate moon called Braycot Six.

“Almost, Six,” Arrunes replied. “Have one little job for you two first, if you feel like blowing something up.”

“What, are you serious? Don’t toy with me.”

“I’m serious, Six. The ground teams need a distraction that’ll occupy the Imperials’ attention for a few minutes. You up to the task?”

“That’s a silly question. Give me some coordinates, and your distraction is as good as made.”

“Thought so,” Arrunes said. Kalre’s console beeped, indicating *Starsmoke* had transmitted targeting coordinates. “They’re just uninhabited rocks in the rings. Make it as showy as you can. Once we’ve gotten their attention sufficiently, we’ll jump out of the system to Rally Point Grek, wait for confirmation that *Starfall* has left, and then jump back to the fleet. We’re not looking to stick around long enough to engage Imperial ships. Got it?”

“We understand,” Slurry chimed in. “When do we cause this distraction?”

“You’re cleared right now. The surface team is set when you are. The sooner the better.”

Kalre already had his X-wing powered up and was launching. He whooped, itching to finally cause some destruction on a mission he’d looked forward to before ending up with the worst, most boring role in the entire squad. “You’re slowing me down, Seven! Come on!” he transmitted to Slurry.

Slurry chattered deep in his throat. “Something tells me I will be needed not for this anyway.” But his X-wing followed, hot on Kalre’s six.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Somewhere around the halfway point of the trip back, Gundark stopped and allowed Darin to move from her landspeeder's cargo compartment to the front seat. Once there, Darin unfastened the Imperial tunic's uncomfortable collar and moved as close to the heater vents as he could. Gundark obligingly increased the temperature for him. Darin simply sat there, silent and sore and worried while the buildings flew past, until Gundark pulled into the warehouse. Despite Gundark's earlier assurances, Darin was still a bit surprised to see *Starfall* was actually there and waiting for him.

"I already commed ahead and let them know I found you and we were on our way," Gundark said. "Your two squadmates here were relieved to get that news."

Darin knew that reaction wouldn't last long, but all he softly said was, "Thank you. For coming to get me. I'm sorry you had to risk your cover to do it."

Gundark waved his concerns away as she brought the landspeeder to a halt. "My cover was never at risk for something as simple as a single person extraction. I have to say, though, this will be one mission debrief I'm quite curious to read. It sounds like it's going to make things exciting here for the near future. Now go on. They're waiting for you. Good luck."

Darin unfastened his restraints and opened his speeder door but paused. "Aren't you coming with us?" Darin asked.

"No, with my cover intact I can still be useful here." She smiled and made a shooing motion with her hand. Darin got out and was immediately met by Pellicer as the other pilot ran up.

"Nine, what the hell happened to you? Come on, we're leaving. Thanks, Gundark, we owe you."

"Anytime. Be safe," she called through the open passenger door before Pellicer closed it and pulled Darin toward the shuttle. *Starfall* was fully powered up with her engines idling, obviously ready to go.

Though Pellicer's voice had held nothing but concern, Darin ducked his head and wouldn't make eye contact while the lieutenant helped him limp to *Starfall*. He didn't deserve that concern. It would all evaporate the instant Scoop and especially Snubber knew he'd ruined their probation.

After they entered the side door of the shuttle at the front of the main cargo and seating area, Darin likewise avoided Traineer's gaze. Even without seeing the glare, Darin could feel the lasers boring into him. He flinched.

Pellicer stopped Darin just inside the door and closed and secured it behind them. "We're clear!" Pellicer called to the cockpit. The repulsor power increased in response, and the ship lifted in a shuddering display of mechanical reluctance. Pellicer moved Darin into the main cargo area.

"Oh, *wonderful*. I feel *so* much better now that *he's* onboard," ground out a sarcastic voice that Darin immediately recognized as Halon's. "I still don't know why you bothered to waste time waiting for him after what he did."

"Trust me, there *will* be consequences," Traineer replied venomously. Darin winced again.

Darin took the jump seat that was as far in the aft corner as possible, away from where Traineer and Halon sat near the fore. He took off the Imperial cap and stuffed it in a jacket pocket, then huddled into the jacket and the corner to try to disappear.

Pellicer sat beside him, interposing his body between Darin and the two officers. Scoop studied him worriedly and quietly asked, "You okay, Nine? What happened out there?"

Darin didn't answer: he was distracted by the scene in front of him. On the other side of the small hold, Troy was on a stretcher lying across some of the jump seats, and he had a couple IVs hooked up to him. Hozke was working diligently on Troy's blaster wound. Hozke glanced up, and when he spotted Darin he paused in his ministrations as a new wave of concern washed across his face. He started to get to his feet. "Four, you're hurt—"

"No," Darin interrupted, moving even farther in his seat away from the medic. Hozke hesitated. "I can wait."

Hozke looked torn, but after a few seconds of indecision he offered Darin a brief smile of gratitude and returned to treating Troy. Kicktar, Zyrytchev, and Drohner were sitting protectively close to their lieutenant.

"How is he?" Darin asked in a small voice, not certain he wanted to know the answer.

"Stable for now, but barely," Hozke said. "He needs a full bacta dunk ASAP."

Darin nodded and looked down at the deck.

Shortly afterward, someone came over and sat on the other side of Pellicer. "You look like death and hell got in a fistfight," Kicktar said lightly, leaning around Pellicer to talk to Darin. "Glad you're back. Everyone wants to hear the crazy story of your day."

Darin miserably glanced up at her and then turned his gaze downward again. "I'm sorry," he softly said at last.

"For what?" Kicktar seemed genuinely confused.

Darin indicated Troy. "I should've done more. I should've gotten him out sooner somehow. You shouldn't have needed to endanger yourselves to rescue him. I— I didn't know what else to do. If something happens to him..."

"What in all the Tatooine seas are you talking about?" Kicktar still sounded baffled, though she kept her voice down so it wouldn't carry. "You didn't do anything wrong. Hozke said that what you did do to treat him saved his life, and without it he would've been dead long ago. And from what our, ahem, passenger has been crowing and squawking about since we picked him up, I'm frankly amazed you were able to do as much as you did. If me or Z had been stuck there with that arrogant jerk instead, well, weapons would have been discharged." She shrugged in an almost casual manner.

Knowing her reaction to Halon didn't help. Kicktar had the luxury of reacting however she wanted to him; Darin didn't. He didn't, and he'd known he hadn't, but he'd still made his choices and, like Trainneer said, would have to face the consequences he'd wanted so badly to avoid.

Darin didn't answer the Mon Cal, though when he spoke next his voice was even smaller. He couldn't put this off any longer or it would eat him alive from the inside out. He studied a rivet in the deck plate beneath his feet. "Sir, I failed our probation," he said to Pellicer. He braced himself.

"Join the club," Pellicer murmured back. "Nine, don't worry about it. Everything will be fine. Let's just get back to the ship, okay? There's a lot to sort out."

Darin sighed, and again he didn't reply. There really wasn't anything to sort out. He had disobeyed Halon's orders, and that was that. Trainneer wouldn't see it any other way.

He closed his eyes and shivered. Now they were going back to the ship, where he'd have to face Trainneer's wrath in front of Quiver, who would probably hate Darin for the rest of his life. And without CC— *No*. Darin stubbornly buried those thoughts yet again in the deepest

mental hole he could find. An angry Trainneer and an angry Quiver were all he could deal with right now.

Starfall's vibration increased as they climbed, and then the ship started to shake more than was normal even for the decrepit shuttle. "Five, come here," Weas called from the cockpit.

Pellicer immediately stood and strode toward the fore. After he'd left, Kicktar slid over and claimed his seat.

"I'm really, really curious to hear what happened with you guys after we split up," Kicktar told Darin in a quiet voice, "but I guess that can wait until later. Anyway, I did want to say thank you."

Now it was Darin's turn to look up at her in confusion. "For what?"

"Most of us are rather fond of our platoon leader," she said simply. Kicktar got to her feet and said in a more normal voice, "This ship feels like it's going to fall out of the sky and crash any minute. I should go situate myself near Hozke's bacta supply so some can splash on me when we crash." She offered Darin an open-mouthed Mon Cal smile and limped back to the other commandos.

Darin strapped himself in to the jump seat— this shaking was getting concerning— and leaned his head back and closed his eyes once more. His migraine was not appreciating the constant jostling. Eventually he slipped back into a fitful doze until Pellicer gently woke him for landing back on *Crescent Star*.

Quiver had finally gone to bed, though he'd laid awake in the dark of his too-quiet quarters and stared at the ceiling. Even Hue had settled down and gone to sleep, making the silence nearly unbearable. Quiver tried telling himself that just because the teams were overdue by several hours didn't necessarily mean anything had gone wrong, but he couldn't quite make himself believe it. And even if something had gone wrong, it didn't necessarily mean anything had happened to Darin.

Quiver vacillated back and forth at the thoughts of his wingman, one minute not caring if something had happened, and the next minute sweating at the mere notion. He constantly cursed at himself and his runaway emotions. What the hell was wrong with him?

He was still awake when he heard a soft knock on the door. "Yeah?" he called.

"Quiver? It's Ikoa. You awake?" came the reply.

"Yeah, hang on." Quiver climbed out of bed, turned on the lights— which earned him a disgruntled squawk from Hue— and opened the door.

"I just got word that they're inbound. Want to come meet them with me?" Ikoa asked.

A surge of relief flooded through Quiver. "Sure. One second." He quickly swapped his nightclothes for a general duty uniform and tugged on his boots. When he was ready, he walked to the hangar with Ikoa.

Due to personnel shortages, the hangar during third shift wasn't as populated as during the first two. It had always been the best time to come in and goof around with CC and Darin without running as large a risk of getting caught. The Quakes were typically on duty during third, but for a few drinks they would usually keep things quiet. Quiver hadn't been in here this late since CC had died. It felt... empty.

Quiver and Ikoa found a good spot where they could watch anything coming in through the hangar's magcon field but still be out of the way. After a few minutes, Kalre's and Slurry's

X-wings landed, as well as *Starsmoke*.

Nothing else.

They waited, but when nothing changed they walked over to Kalre's snubfighter. "Hey, where's *Starfall*?" Quiver called to the Rodian as he was climbing out of his cockpit.

"I don't know. They were supposed to be behind us," Kalre said with a shrug. "We were probably just faster than them."

"How did things go?" Ikoa asked.

"Boring," Kalre said. "Soooo boring. Until the end when we got to make a distraction, anyway. But other than that, boring."

"Why were you making distractions?" Quiver asked. He didn't remember hearing that that was part of the nominal plan.

"I don't know," Kalre repeated. "I didn't care why." Then he ended that conversation by turning to talk to his crew chief.

"I'm sure things are fine," Ikoa reassured Quiver with a smile as they walked back over to be in sight of the hangar's transfer aisle. He didn't reply.

After another ten minutes of anxious waiting, the hangar's arrival warning light began flashing, and Quiver let out a breath he didn't remember holding. Finally, *Starfall* made its approach and passed through the magcon field. It looked like Snubber was flying it. It jerkily settled to the deck in its designated area in the shuttles' subhangar.

Quiver began to walk that way to meet it, but he stopped when he noticed a few medical teams running toward the shuttle with repulsor stretchers.

"Maybe it's just a precaution," Ikoa said, though her voice was a bit strained and didn't sound very convincing. "Come on, let's go see."

Quiver suddenly didn't want to go see, but he followed the smaller woman toward *Starfall*.

By the time they got close, the first medical team was hurrying out down the aft cargo ramp with a patient on a stretcher. Quiver inhaled when he saw the Pinnacle Shipping colors of the patient's clothing, but then he caught sight of the man's dark hair and knew it wasn't Darin. But... what had happened that someone on Darin's team had gotten injured? From the reactions of the medical personnel and someone in an unfastened Imperial uniform who was sticking with them and talking urgently as they jogged the stretcher out of the hangar, it was serious.

Another medical team was helping the Mon Calamari, also dressed in a Pinnacle Shipping outfit, hobble down the ramp, but she was acting like she was okay and actually a bit annoyed at the fuss. After her came the Sludir and another man in an Imperial uniform, who Quiver hoped was actually one of the commandos. They met up with the group from *Starsmoke*. Pellicer stepped out of *Starfall* and paused as he turned to say something to someone still in the ship. Quiver noticed Ikoa smile in relief.

A couple other medical personnel walked out beside someone else in an unfastened Imperial uniform who was adamantly refusing their direct help despite having a pronounced limp. It took Quiver a moment to recognize Darin. Quiver didn't know if it was the unexpected Imperial uniform or something else that threw him.

When he got to the bottom of the ramp, Darin spotted Quiver and Ikoa. He hesitated, then smiled a bit, and his shoulders lost some of their tense positioning. He had dried blood and a massive bruise on his very pale face, and he was cradling his left arm. Darin began heading toward them, and his limp was the worst that Quiver had seen it since the original blaster injury. What the hell had happened to him down there, and why was he dressed like that? Quiver's

stomach twisted in some unnamed anxiety.

Darin had made it about five steps when Traineer and someone else Quiver didn't recognize in an Imperial uniform appeared at the top of the cargo ramp. Traineer's gaze swept over the situation in an instant, and his sharp voice penetrated through the hangar's din and the conversations from the commandos. "Flight Officer Stanic!"

Flinching, Darin stopped in his tracks but didn't turn around. The commandos quieted and looked uneasy.

"Unless you want me to call the MPs, you will come with me *now*," Traineer commanded.

Darin sagged a little, then he met Quiver's confused gaze just long enough to offer something that looked like an apology before slowly turning and walking back toward Traineer.

The colonel was already on his comlink, and from the faint sounds Quiver could catch it sounded like he was waking up Linnme while simultaneously shooing away the medical personnel who were waiting for Darin. Traineer pointed Darin toward the hangar exit, and Darin silently obeyed. The unknown man beside Traineer was shooting an incredibly dirty look at Darin as the three of them walked out.

Distressed, Ikoa jogged over to meet Pellicer as he walked up to them. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Things went wrong on the mission," Pellicer said, including Quiver in his gaze as well. "I didn't think he'd jump right into this now, though. Look, everything will be fine. I don't know all the details, but from the bits I heard, regardless of what Traineer thinks, Darin didn't do anything wrong."

And just like that, the hot anger switched on inside Quiver again. He didn't know why. He didn't know what he was angry at. All he knew was that he was sick and tired of being the victim of Darin's idiotic actions in going along with that stupid probationary mission to begin with. *And* the victim of Traineer's insane demands and orders that had no bearing on reality and did nothing but hurt them. Now Darin had apparently done something stupid in front of Traineer when he *knew* he wasn't supposed to, and Quiver was going to pay for it. The *one time* he'd needed his wingman to just lay low, come back, let things settle down and go back to quasi-normal so Quiver could talk to him again... but no, that was apparently too much to ask for. Because everyone else in Darin's life was important except for him. Darin didn't give a damn about what Quiver thought or felt or needed.

That was obvious.

The final straw was seeing Mackin walking over and meeting Snubber at the bottom of the ramp now that *Starfall* was powered down. Mack was the reason all this was happening to begin with. When Snubber spotted Pellicer, Ikoa, and Quiver, he motioned Mack along with him and joined the small group. Pellicer started telling them what had just transpired with Traineer. Mack and Ikoa were trying to ask questions and figure out what had happened on the mission.

But, Quiver realized, it didn't really matter what had happened on the mission. Because no matter what happened, no matter what Darin did, Quiver came out on the losing end. He was blasted sick of losing.

Without a word, he left and walked back to his quarters.

Traineer marched Darin down the corridors to Major Linnme's office, heedless of the

pilot's injured leg. Halon trailed immediately behind. This was it— the beginning of the end for the Coronas. Darin hated himself.

When they got to the office, Darin stopped outside the door. He didn't expect Trainner to just slap the door control without so much as a knock and push Darin inside as soon as the door opened. Just like with Rusty and Ammo, Darin was off-balance with his weight suddenly hitting his hurt leg, and he had to catch himself on the doorframe. He immediately slid to the side, out of the doorway. Trainner and Halon were inside in another moment.

Linnme apparently hadn't been expecting them to come barging in uninvited either. His surprised expression quickly changed to a narrowed-eyed glower aimed at the lieutenant colonel. Darin immediately saluted the major. Linnme absently returned it as he rose to his feet and growled, "Colonel..." Then Linnme did a double-take and studied Darin as Darin took up a stiff position of at-ease and focused on a blemish on the far wall behind Linnme. "What the hell did you do to my pilot?" Linnme demanded of Trainner.

"He did that all to himself," Halon cut in.

Linnme's eyes shot to Halon. "Who are you?" Linnme asked.

"Lieutenant Nervensage, Rebel Intelligence. Code name Halon," Halon replied huffily.

Linnme didn't acknowledge the answer and instead turned back to Trainner. "Colonel, it's late. What is so important that this couldn't wait until after formal debriefs? And why is my injured pilot here instead of in Medbay?" Linnme's face and posture were taut, and Darin guessed he was cranky at being woken up and summoned to his own office. Not as cranky as Snubber always got, but he was definitely around CC-level.

He quashed those thoughts again, harder than before, and repeated his lies to himself. Pretending CC was okay had been a necessity in getting through these last couple days.

Trainner straightened to his full height. "Your pilot's fine," he scoffed. "He doesn't need Medbay. What he needs is some sense beaten into him before more people like our agent here get hurt. I'm here to inform you that he disobeyed orders on the mission. I told you at the start I would notify Captain Tralkett of any such behavior. Later on you promised me that your pilots would behave on this 'probation' of yours. He didn't. I expect disciplinary action, and I *will* be talking to the captain."

Darin's heart sank even further. There was no hope of Linnme straightening this out if Trainner was going straight to Tralkett.

Linnme leaned back as if to put his desk fully between himself and Trainner. "And what orders did he disobey?" he asked neutrally.

Halon jumped in again before Trainner could answer. "I ordered him to help me escape, and he refused to! He's lucky I'm not dead right now!"

Darin's eye twitched involuntarily. The simmering fury at Halon's unfairness flared up again and made his head throb even worse.

Unimpressed, Linnme regarded Halon once more. "And who are you again? What were you escaping from, and why were you giving Flight Officer Stanic orders on that mission? I was told only Special Forces and Starfighter Command personnel were going, not Intel too." He shot a look at Trainner as he said the last sentence.

Halon got even huffier, if that was possible. "I was stationed on Braycot Five, undercover. I'm the one who discovered the Imperial plans that we needed to obtain, and I'm the one who set up a lot of this mission on-site there. During the mission my cover was blown, and I needed to get off the Imperial base. Team Dorn was the closest, so I went to them. And promptly almost got killed in this idiotic pilot's speeder escape." Darin felt the glare aimed his way.

“So he did help you escape,” Linnme remarked.

“Just from the base! And barely!” Halon retorted. “Then this imbecile crashes the speeder and gets us taken captive by a group of Nosaurian slaves. *They’re* the ones he refused to help me escape from! We had a perfect opportunity to get out, I told him to, and he didn’t. Instead he just surrendered to them. We were stuck there for hours because of that. Those lizards were going to kill me, and they would have if the *real* commandos hadn’t gotten me out in time.”

Linnme didn’t look happy, and he took a few seconds before replying. “You say you’re Intel and were stationed on Braycot Five.” His voice was calm.

“Yes.”

“And your cover was blown.”

“Yes. And?”

Linnme focused on Traineer. “You just got back from the mission, correct, Colonel? You landed in the hangar and came straight here?”

“Yes. That’s what I told you on the comm. What are you getting at?” Traineer demanded.

“You picked up an unknown person at an Imperial base and brought him back to the fleet. Has his identity been verified?”

“What?” Traineer’s eyes narrowed.

“Security protocols,” Linnme answered, and his calm voice had an edge to it now. “We need to make sure this man is actually a Rebel and is not a security threat. This should have been initiated as soon as you landed and well before you came walking through the ship with him. If you’ll excuse me one moment, I’ll call Security, and they can come and begin the process.”

There was cold silence as Linnme got out his comlink and contacted Security. A few long minutes later, a fleet trooper came to the door and Halon went with her, though the dirty look Halon threw at Darin as he left promised that he wasn’t going to let any of this drop despite the inconvenient delay.

After they were gone, Linnme spoke. “I will not base any disciplinary actions on the word of someone who I don’t even know is a Rebel or an undercover Imperial.”

In his peripheral vision, Darin thought he saw Traineer’s face redden. “So then let’s ask your precious pilot!” Traineer shot back. He turned to Darin, and his gaze bored into him. “Flight Officer, did you disobey Halon’s orders to escape the Nosaurian group on Braycot Five?”

Darin’s chest tightened, his eye twitched again, and he fought to keep his vision focused on the wall blemish. There was no sense in lying: the truth would come out regardless, and lying now would just make it worse. As if it could be any worse. “Yes, sir,” he finally said, sealing the Coronas’ fate with two simple words.

“There! See?” Traineer said.

Linnme was watching Darin closely. “Flight Officer, why did you disobey those orders?”

For some reason, Darin hadn’t expected that question. He blamed his pounding headache. He hesitated, opened his mouth to answer, and then hesitated again.

Linnme seemed to sense his thoughts. “Speak freely, and be specific, Flight Officer,” he said.

Yeah, that was a lot easier said than done with an antagonistic lieutenant colonel there who might not have heard these details from Halon and might now be put in an awkward spot. His chest felt even tighter. “Sir, I– I was attempting to escape from the Nosaurian group when Halon gave those orders. I’d just gotten my hands on a blaster, and things got a bit... chaotic. When Halon saw I had a blaster he ordered me to shoot the Nosaurians and get him out of there.

I... didn't."

"And? Why didn't you?" Linnme pressed.

"Because, sir, I— the— they were civilians. The Nosaurian in my way was an adolescent, sir. There was no stun setting. I— I couldn't shoot a kid. Then when I hesitated, another Nosaurian recovered enough to aim a blaster at Lieutenant Troy, who was injured and unconscious. He made it quite clear that he would kill Lieutenant Troy if I did anything. That's when I disobeyed Halon's orders again and surrendered."

Linnme slowly nodded. "And where's Lieutenant Troy now? Seems like we could use his perspective on the situation."

"He's... still unconscious, sir. They rushed him to Medbay. He's badly hurt."

Linnme looked back at Traineer and said, "This is why it's better to sort through things like this after the full debriefs are completed and available. Details and context can change a situation. So you're wanting to punish my pilot for trying to protect your own commando? After being upset that the Coronas didn't protect your commandos enough on Lokinha? How does that work?"

Traineer glared at Linnme. "No, I'm trying to punish your pilot for disobeying orders, despite the pretty picture he can paint for himself and the sympathetic spin he can put on things. In the situation on Braycot, the chain of command was very clear. With Troy incapacitated, Halon was in command. Your pilot had no right or authority to question those orders or fail to carry them out, and it's this bleeding-heart reinterpretation nonsense that keeps putting more and more people in danger on missions! Halon knew the situation, and he made the call. He determined the priorities and acceptable losses at that point. Your pilot cannot and should not have second-guessed or undermined that decision. This is exactly what happened on Lokinha, and it's still happening now, even after very clear and repeated warnings! Your squadron is a danger and a liability, Major, and it's a threat to this fleet and everyone on board. If you can't or won't see that, I'll take matters into my own hands and make sure Tralkett is fully aware of the situation." With that, Traineer spun and stalked out of the office.

Silence filled the room for a long moment after the door closed behind him and the last echoes of Traineer's threat faded away, then Linnme sighed wearily and slowly sat down at his desk.

Darin took as deep a breath as he could; his chest had somehow tightened even more in the midst of his world crashing and burning all around him. But he had to do what he could to lessen the blow he would cause if he couldn't make it disappear completely. He silently said goodbye to the squadron he cared about so blasted much. "Sir, if I may?" he ventured softly.

"Yes?"

Darin forced his volume to a more normal level, though his voice was still strained. "Sir, I— I know that I failed our probation. Regardless of the reasons, I disobeyed orders. But sir, those actions were mine and mine alone. My squadmates had nothing to do with them. I willingly accept whatever punishment you deem fit for me, whether that's a— a transfer or demotion or both or something else. But sir, I— I can't see my squadmates punished for my mistake. It's not right. If there's any way at all to leave them out of it, then you or Captain Tralkett can do whatever you want to me. Please. Sir."

Darin finally stopped, aware that he was rambling and unable to keep the growing panicky feeling from infecting his voice. He shut his mouth and waited silently, still stiffly at-ease and focusing for dear life on the wall blemish. It killed him to say he'd quietly leave, but it killed him even more to picture the squadron broken up because of him.

Linnme studied him for a long minute, and only the pain in his leg kept Darin from shifting his weight and squirming.

Finally the major took a deep breath. “Flight Officer, it’s late, and you’ve just gotten back from what sounds like a very trying mission. And regardless of what the colonel said, you look like you’re about to keel over. Go change, then report to Medbay immediately. I’ll tell them to expect you shortly. Dismissed.”

What the hell did that mean for him and the others? “But sir—”

“Dismissed,” Linnme repeated, interrupting him.

Darin swallowed hard, then came to attention and saluted. Linnme returned it, and Darin headed out. He limped slowly... very slowly... back to his quarters.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Quiver had been stewing in his quarters with the lights on for a good fifteen minutes when the door opened. He looked down from his bunk and saw Darin in the doorway.

Darin stepped inside, seeming hesitant, and found Quiver's gaze. "Hi, Quiv."

"So Trainner let you leave? Looked like you were heading for some brig time," Quiver said flatly.

"I still might be. Major Linnme ordered me to Medbay first."

"And yet, here you are."

"Just getting a better uniform before going." Darin fidgeted, then said softly, "I've really missed you lately. How are you doing?"

Quiver snorted. "What do you care? You'll be gone to Medbay in a minute. Even when you're here, you're not here. It's pointless to say anything to you."

Something slammed shut in Darin's expression. Quiver hadn't seen that look in a long time, not since... Darin had first joined the Coronas? He wasn't sure. Not that it mattered anyway.

"Fine," Darin grumbled. "Then you'll probably be happy to hear I screwed up, yet again, just like you said, and I'll probably get transferred out as punishment so you won't have to worry about me bothering you for too much longer." With that, he went to his closet and pulled out a general duty uniform. He spent a minute awkwardly and one-handedly taking off the Imperial jacket and tunic, cursing softly but vehemently when he pulled the left sleeves off. Quiver got some dark amusement out of watching him struggle. Finally Darin dumped the things unceremoniously in his desk chair, leaving only his undershirt on. He didn't even try to remove his boots or trousers; instead, he snatched his general duty uniform and turned to leave. He paused, though, and without looking back at Quiver, quietly said, "I'm sorry for whatever I did that made you hate me so much." Then he was through the door and was gone.

The words immediately made Quiver's temper flare. Oh, so it was some big mystery? And poor little Darin was just a clueless victim being treated so unfairly, and it was all Quiver's fault? If Darin would just open his eyes, he'd know exactly why Quiver was acting this way. Besides, it was Darin's own actions causing it, not anything Quiver was initiating. It wasn't his fault! Darin had some nerve, *some nerve*, to blame this on Quiver and act like he didn't know what was going on.

So yes, Quiver actually agreed with Darin on something: Quiver *would* be happy if Darin got transferred out and away from him.

Quiver laid there in his bunk and stewed even more. Darin hated Medbay and resisted going there every single chance he got, but tonight he was all too happy to leave Quiver alone, choosing Medbay of all places over him. It was a clear indication of just how far Quiver had fallen in Darin's priorities.

His dark mood swirled around him for a long time, amplified by the quiet. It was so empty without Darin and CC around. Quiver was caught between acute loneliness and a relieved happiness that he didn't have to deal with Darin at the moment.

Finally he shifted position and rolled onto his stomach, looking out into the still room from his top bunk's vantage point. His eyes stopped on something he hadn't noticed before, a holodisk sitting on the small makeshift set of shelves beside the door. The holodisk looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't quite place it. Curious and desperate for something to do besides falling asleep and facing the inevitable bad dreams, Quiver climbed down, picked it up,

inspected it, and then turned it on.

An image sprang to life in the palm of his hand, and the sight almost knocked the wind from him. He recognized it immediately: the holo of himself, CC, and Darin playing drunken games on top of their astromechs had been displayed fondly on CC's desk. What was it doing here?

Quiver stared at it while he numbly stumbled across the room and sat down heavily on Darin's bottom bunk. He remembered that night. The fun. The laughter. The friendship. It had been a blast.

But now... it was all gone. He would never get that back ever again. CC's death had shattered everything, including what had once been a strong friendship with Darin. It hit Quiver hard in that moment that everything was lost and irrecoverable. Gone. Forever.

He blinked and looked around the room again, seeing nothing but the emptiness and reminders of what once had been. This was all that was left. There was nothing more, no future in any of it. So why was he staying here?

He didn't have an answer to that.

Thirty minutes later, he still didn't. By then, there was only one obvious choice left. One option. One path. And he was going to take it.

Quiver turned off the holodisk and put it back where he'd found it. He grabbed his old backpack, stuffed it full, then pulled half of that out when he remembered he'd need room for Hue's small travel cage.

Soon he was done, and Hue was chirruping excitedly from inside Quiver's backpack. Quiver called up the hangar schedule from his computer console and found exactly what he needed, and it would be happening in only twenty minutes. He gently slung the backpack on, grabbed a handful of credits from Darin's "secret" stash as well as his wingman's credit voucher since his own account was empty, and walked out of his quarters, his recent prison, for good.

This last walk to the hangar felt liberating. Why hadn't he done this earlier? Why had he tried so hard to stay and work things out here in the Rebellion when there was nothing to work out? Why had he been such an idiot? Such a time-wasting idiot? Why had he kept talking himself into staying?

Wait, no, it had been *Darin* who'd always talked him into staying. Well, to hell with that and with him. Darin wasn't even there now anyway. Even back from the mission, he was off getting thrown in the brig or going to Medbay or somewhere equally Not There, and Quiver didn't give a damn what his former wingman had thought.

Once inside the hangar, Quiver headed to the shuttles' bay. Activity around *Starsmoke* and *Starfall* had tapered off but was still ongoing, though everyone over there was focused on their work and didn't pay him any attention as he walked through.

And there it was, just like the schedule said: the small shuttle *Lodestar* was being prepped for launch. Her pilot for this run, a guy in Fleet Command called Resten, was doing the pre-flight.

"Hey, Rest," Quiver said as he approached.

Resten looked up. "Quiver, hey. How you doing?"

Quiver motioned with his head toward the shuttle. "Heading out?"

"Yup," Resten said, nodding. "Now that *Lodie* is finally out of her maintenance, I'm going over to *Providence* to pick up a few things."

"Good, that's what I was hoping you'd say." Quiver forced a small grin and tried to make it look sly as he took a conspiratorial step closer. His smile had never felt so utterly phony. "How

about I take your flight for you? There's a girl stationed on *Providence* I wouldn't mind catching up with."

Resten laughed. "I swear, you SFC flyboys got it made. Does she have a sister in the fleet?"

"I'll ask. Whadda ya say?"

"Sure, sure. The returning manifest is in the cockpit. Everything should be staged by the docking port, and her controller will direct you to whichever one they decided on. *Lodie*'s all pre-flighted. Thanks!" Resten clapped Quiver on the shoulder and walked off.

Quiver hopped onboard the small shuttle and carefully set his cooing backpack on the deck beside the pilot's seat. He tossed the return manifest out of the way and called up astrogation instead. *Lodestar* wouldn't have enough fuel to make it all the way to Druzien, so he'd have to stop a few times en route. Hopefully Darin had enough credits to afford it— it was a long trip back to the Core. Or maybe he'd go somewhere else instead. He would have plenty of time to think about it.

Soon Quiver was set. He hit the button to raise the passenger ramp and close the hatch.

The indicator light remained red. Quiver frowned and hit the button again. The light stayed red, showing the door hatch was still open.

A sharp blat sounded from within the ship behind him, loud enough to make Quiver jump. He swivelled his seat around, and suddenly everything made sense: Botch was inside the ship beside the open hatch, and his scomp arm was plugged into a ship socket.

Quiver's expression darkened. "Botch, what are you doing here? You know what, never mind. I don't care. Get out, and close the hatch behind you."

Darin's R5 unit didn't move. It beeped at him again, a series of bleeps and blats that were only time-wasting gibberish to Quiver's ears.

"I swear, Botch, if you don't get out right now, I'll slap a restraining bolt on you and force you out," Quiver threatened.

That got a reaction, but not the one Quiver wanted. Botch emitted something that sounded like a low, deep, electronic growl, and one of the droid's front panels opened. An arc welder popped out, and blue electricity sparked and zapped along its end. Quiver could hear the crackle of energy from where he sat two meters away.

For probably the first time in his life, Quiver wished he'd brought a blaster. He stood, towering over the astromech, but kept a very respectful distance from the business end of that arc welder. As long as Botch was plugged in to the ship socket, though, the droid would be stationary. "Put that thing away," Quiver ordered. "Now what the *hell* do you want? Make it quick. I'm in no mood to deal with scrap metal right now."

Botch did not, in fact, put the arc welder away. If anything the energy popped and crackled even louder. Botch let out a stream of static that sounded like a hiss, then he swivelled his optical sensor to point at a side console display in the cockpit. When Quiver didn't look over there, Botch swivelled back to him, then pointed at the side console again, and repeated that back-and-forth motion until Quiver finally looked.

Words were scrolling across the screen. Quiver rolled his eyes and sighed loudly before reluctantly stepping over to the console. He made sure he was still well out of arc welder range prior to reading the display.

CALL ME "SCRAP METAL" AGAIN AND YOU WILL REGRET IT, FRAGILE ORGANIC.

"Aww, did I hurt your feelings?" Quiver's reply dripped with sarcasm. "Too bad. I don't care. Get off this shuttle."

NO.

“Why not?” Quiver demanded.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING IN IT? Botch asked.

“Over to *Providence* to pick up some things.”

YOU ARE LYING. YOU ARE STILL GROUNDED. WHERE ARE YOU GOING IN IT?

“What do you care?”

Botch beeped stiffly, though Quiver wasn't even sure if that was possible. I TOLD YOU BEFORE. DARIN ASKED ME TO WATCH OUT FOR YOU. YOU ARE BEHAVING VERY ERRATICALLY. I AM ATTEMPTING TO DETERMINE YOUR COURSE OF ACTION AND FIND A WAY I CAN ASSIST. DO YOU DESIRE MORE STRESS RELIEF IN THE SIMULATOR?

“If you want to assist, you'll unplug and roll right off this shuttle and leave me alone,” Quiver ground out. “So do that.”

NO. I AM NOT STUPID. I AM NOT LEAVING THIS SHUTTLE YET.

Quiver was getting extremely fed up. “Look, Darin's back on the ship now, so you don't have to keep watching me for him. Now get off.”

I DO NOT TAKE ORDERS FROM YOU OR ANY OTHER ORGANIC.

“You're following this order from Darin.”

IT WAS NOT AN ORDER. IT WAS A REQUEST THAT I AGREED TO.

Quiver chortled a dark laugh. “Then you're even dumber than I thought,” he said. “Agreeing to a pointless task like that? And Darin's even more useless than I thought if he can't even order his own droid to do anything. That idiot should've memory-wiped you long ago like I told him to.”

Botch blatted in warning. YOU DID NOT SEEM TO THINK MY INTACT MEMORY WAS A DETRIMENT EARLIER THIS EVENING. OR HAS YOUR OWN IMPERFECT ORGANIC MEMORY FORGOTTEN THAT ALREADY? REGARDLESS, I AGREED TO THE REQUEST FOR THE OVERALL BENEFIT OF THIS WINGPAIR. YOU PUT BOTH SONIC AND ME AT RISK IF YOU TWO ORGANICS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING WELL. AND YOU ARE NOT FUNCTIONING WELL. YOUR BEHAVIOR IS EXTREMELY ERRATIC, MUCH MORE SO THAN IT WAS EARLIER.

“I'm really sick of hearing that from you and everyone else,” Quiver growled. “Maybe I'd function better if you'd do what I say and get off this shuttle. Ever think of that?”

YES. BUT THE CALCULATED CONSEQUENCES ARE UNFAVORABLE.

“Botch, I swear, if you're not gone in ten seconds—”

THEN YOU WILL DO WHAT?

Quiver was really angry that he didn't have an answer for that. Stupid arc welder. He changed the subject. “So what are *you* going to do? Sit there all night? Tell Darin on me? As if I even care what he says anymore? Besides, he's in Medbay. You can't reach him.”

NO. I WILL NOT HAVE TO SIT HERE ALL NIGHT. AND I WILL NOT REPORT YOUR ACTIONS TO DARIN.

“Then what?”

Botch didn't reply. He sat silently, his optical sensor trained on Quiver. Fuming, Quiver weighed his options but came up blank. Until he knew what the droid wanted, aside from an answer on where Quiver was planning to go, he didn't know how to get Botch off the shuttle. Quiver sat back down in the pilot's seat, slouching and sulking as he glared at the quiet droid.

A couple minutes later, he heard some soft bootfalls approaching at a fast jog. Great. Botch had called the MPs on him. Well, maybe if he kicked up enough of a fuss when they got here, he'd get thrown out of the Rebellion. That might actually be better. They wouldn't look for

him that way. It would be a cleaner break.

Quiver was so ready to resist arrest that he was surprised when it was Ikoa who pounded up and stopped, out of breath, in the shuttle's side hatchway. "Botch, what is it?" she asked the droid, who chirped at her in greeting and retracted his arc welder. Ikoa coughed and looked around inside the ship a bit wildly. She was disheveled, like she'd just woken up and thrown a general duty uniform on before running there. "Quiver?" she wheezed. "What are you doing here? Botch commed me with a message to come here right away, and—" She quickly took in his excitedly cooing backpack and his position in the pilot's seat in the middle of the night when he was grounded. Her eyes met his. "Quiver?" she said again, her scratchy voice concerned and wary. "What's going on?"

Quiver glowered at her. "Nothing," he snapped. "Go back to bed. And do me a favor and take that damn droid with you when you leave."

Most people on the ship had been reacting with surprise and confusion when they'd been on the receiving end of his hot anger lately. It was just his luck that Ikoa was not one of those people now. Instead, she narrowed her eyes a bit and seemed to plant herself more firmly in the hatchway. Blast, she'd probably be even harder to get rid of than the R5.

"Quiver," she repeated unwaveringly, "what's going on?"

Quiver didn't answer. Ikoa waited, but when the silence stretched on, she walked inside and sat in the co-pilot's seat. Quiver refused to look at her, so she reached over and swivelled his chair around until he was facing her.

"Quiver." Her voice was softer now, more gentle. "Talk to me."

At those words he involuntarily snapped his eyes up to glare at her, and was immediately sorry that he had. The green eyes that unflinchingly met his reminded him of Darin, and the stubborn set of her features reminded him of CC in fix-it mode.

At his prolonged silence, Ikoa sighed. "Where are you going?" she asked quietly.

Quiver sullenly shrugged. "Somewhere else," he muttered.

"Why?"

"Why not?" he shot back before he could stop himself. "I can't be here anymore. Everything— everything's gone."

"Everything's not gone," Ikoa told him.

"Everything that matters is," Quiver grumbled.

"I know how hard it's been for you without CC," Ikoa said sadly. "Trust me, I know. It's awful. But all the rest of us are still here. And Darin's back now—"

"Strine blink, why can't anyone shut up about Darin?!" Quiver interrupted hotly. "I don't care about him! And just because he's back on the ship doesn't mean anything! He's still not here! And good riddance to him too! I *don't want to deal with him* anymore. Everyone needs to get that through their thick skulls and stop pestering me about him!"

"Okay, what is going on between you two?" Ikoa's voice and expression gained an edge. "What happened that caused this rift? You used to be inseparable."

"Yeah, *used* to be. That was before—"

"Before what?" Ikoa prompted when Quiver stopped.

"Before he ruined everything!" he blurted out. Quiver was furious to feel pinpricks of tears threatening the corners of his eyes. "Before he made me lose him too by leaving on that damn third-pilot mission! Before he abandoned me for this insane probation mission! And *now* before he goes and gets himself kicked out of the squadron because he apparently couldn't even bother to behave for one *blasted* day!" Quiver managed to stop short of adding the final sin,

Darin's contribution to CC's death. Quiver could still feel Darin's hand grabbing Quiver's flak vest, pulling him back and stopping him from getting to his X-wing in those last, critical, fateful minutes. Quiver couldn't face that one yet, and he certainly couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. He swallowed it with difficulty and continued, "I can't deal with losing them both, especially not over and over again! So to hell with him! If he wants to be gone, then I'll consider him gone once and for all."

Ikoa's expression turned sympathetic as she listened. "Oh, Quiver," she said softly. "I'm so sorry. None of this is fair to you."

He barely heard her. The flood of memories from CC's crash site had reopened another raw, gaping wound from that same time, one he'd been unsuccessfully trying to bury along with all the others.

"And do you know what else he did?!" Quiver suddenly shouted. He surprised even himself with his outburst. "On Lokinha?" Ikoa looked a bit startled at the abrupt volume increase, but she stayed quiet and shook her head.

Quiver hadn't intended to ever expose this particular festering atrocity to anyone, even himself if he could help it, but the words forced themselves out in the wake of all the others. "When the Imperials caught us. After the dogfight. After— Right before you showed up. The Imps were deciding which of the four of us to execute on the spot. Did you know they picked me?"

Ikoa widened her eyes in horror, and she mutely shook her head again. Quiver went on. "Well, they did. And you know what? I was okay with it. I didn't care. After what I'd just seen them do to CC, I couldn't feel a damn thing anyway. I wanted everything to be over. It would have been so much easier.

"But Darin— They picked me, and Darin went ballistic. Absolutely ballistic. I yelled at him to stop but he wouldn't. He made such a damn scene that they had to physically restrain him on the ground, and that's when the Imps changed their minds and said they'd shoot him then instead of me. He— I didn't— Darin couldn't even give me the relief of an out after CC! He was going to make me watch him get shot too! What the hell gave him the right to do that?! He didn't want to watch me get shot, so he forced that experience on me instead! I sure as hell didn't want it! What in the blasted galaxy made him think I should live when he shouldn't?! Like my life is worth more than his when I didn't even want it anymore?! He doesn't have the right to make those decisions for me, especially when they're *wrong*! That's why I'll be glad if he gets transferred out. Then he won't be able to make those decisions for me anymore when I don't want him to! Why can't he worry about his *own* blasted life for once?! Why am I the only one who cares about it?! The third-pilot mission and this stupid probation mission both proved it again: he doesn't care about his own life, and I only get hurt by caring about it, so it's best if I just stop doing that. It won't make one damn bit of difference if I care about it or not."

Quiver was livid to feel tears crawling their way down his cheeks, and he brushed them off hard. Ikoa was watching him with tears in her own eyes.

When she seemed certain Quiver was done speaking, she said quietly, "I had no idea. I feel horrible for you. This is something you really need to talk through with Darin, though. I honestly don't think he was trying to deny you relief or force you to lose him instead at that point. If he was acting out that much he was probably trying to go after the Imperials to stop them from doing anything to *any* of you."

"It doesn't matter what he was trying to do," Quiver growled. "The ultimate end result of his actions are what matters, and that was a role swap, not an end to the threat. He should've

thought of that before he acted up.”

“You need to talk this out with him,” Ikoa repeated firmly.

“No, I don’t. As long as he transfers out, it’s a moot point anyway,” Quiver said. “I won’t have to deal with his idiotic sacrificial heroics ever again, for me or for anyone else.”

“It is *not* a moot point,” Ikoa insisted sharply. “You need to address what’s already happened *and* how to move forward in the future.”

“What’s done is done. Talking won’t change it,” Quiver snapped back.

“It won’t change the past actions, but it’ll give you closure. Healing. Let you two understand each other better. How can he change things if he doesn’t know how you feel?”

“He’s never going to change, no matter what I say!” Quiver retorted. “You really think some words will shut off that part of him? No way. And nothing about the damn Lokinha mission is ever going to be closed or healed. Ever. End of story. Now are we done here?”

“No, we’re not.”

“Then what do you want?”

He didn’t expect Ikoa to lean forward and pull him into a hug. “I’m so sorry,” she said as she embraced him. “I knew you were having a rough time with CC, but I didn’t know about all of this on top of it too. I wish you’d told me earlier so I could have tried to help sooner, before it got so bad.”

At first Quiver was going to pull away, but the sharp edge of his anger melted in the spark of comfort in that hug and in having someone listen and simply acknowledge and understand what he was going through. After a few indecisive seconds, he returned the hug. Ikoa squeezed him harder when he did.

Quiver was extremely annoyed that some of those tears were still leaking out after he’d forbidden them to do so. He shut his eyes tightly. “I miss her, Ko,” he whispered. “I miss both of them.”

“I miss her too,” she whispered back. “Every single day.” She finally let go, and Quiver opened his eyes, straightened up, and wiped miserably at his face.

Ikoa waited for Quiver to collect himself. Once he had, she softly asked, “So now what? How can I help?”

Quiver gave a sad, dark chuckle. “You can’t. Unless you can bring her back.”

“I would have done it already if I could,” Ikoa said regretfully.

Quiver sighed and looked around. “And now you see why I say I’ve got nothing left. Why am I even here, Ko? What’s the point in my staying?”

“Three weeks ago, before this whole mess started, if someone had asked you why you were here, what would you have said?” Ikoa asked.

Quiver shrugged. “I don’t know. Depending on my mood and how serious I felt like being at the time, the answer could’ve ranged anywhere from ‘women dig orange flight suits’ to ‘they’ll add a holiday in my honor when I take down the entire evil Empire myself.’”

“And where in that range of answers is the real one? The one that first made you decide to give up your entire life to join a secret understaffed organization pitted against an entire galactic government?”

He considered for a few moments. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever told anyone the serious, honest answer before. He wasn’t even sure if he knew what it was. He did know for certain that he’d never told CC: he’d made a game out of giving her a completely different answer every single time the topic came up. “I don’t know,” he repeated slowly. “I guess... it boils down to some interviews I did back with my journalism job right out of school. I talked to some pilots

who'd flown all over the galaxy, and they told these stories about horrible injustices and terrible conditions caused by the Empire. I got it in my head that I wanted to help. The consequences never really occurred to me. I was naive back then. It all sounded so exciting, and so much... simpler." He shook his head. "I can't see myself making the same choice today."

"Would you have made the same choice three weeks ago?" Ikoa asked.

"Yeah," he said. "But things were different then. I still had CC. And Darin."

"Can you envision a scenario now that would make you want to make that same choice again? You were in the Rebellion without CC before. Do you think you could do it again?"

Quiver shook his head. "Not without Darin."

"So how do we get past that hurdle?" Ikoa asked. "How can we start to mend things there and get you your wingman back?"

"I don't think I want to," Quiver responded. "I don't think I can."

It was Ikoa's turn to sigh. "Quiver, I know how things look from your perspective. I get it. But I wish I could convince you that it's not the whole story. I wish I could convince you of how hard he's tried to spend time with you even when his duties wouldn't permit it. How worried he's been about you since Lokinha, including the entire time he's been training for this probation mission. If he didn't go on it, they would have split us all up, and then you two would really be separated permanently. He didn't feel like he had a choice but to go."

"Again, at the possible expense of his life, and from the way he looked when they landed, that might have been closer to reality than it should have been, but he doesn't care about his life or how it would affect me if he dies, so I'm not going to care either. And if he really tried so hard to be here but couldn't because his duties wouldn't let him, then that just proves that it's pointless to even make any effort. Our proximity is out of our control, and his intentions mean nothing because there will never be a guarantee that he can follow through," Quiver said. "Why should I set myself up for more disappointment down the road?"

"That situation has always been a possibility," Ikoa said. "This has just been the perfect storm where it became reality. I doubt it'll be the norm in the future, or even common. It'll probably be as common as it's been the last year, which is to say, essentially nonexistent."

"Except for the really bad times. The times when I need him the most," Quiver countered.

"And those are the times he tries a different approach," Ikoa replied. "Like now. Like when he asked me and Botch to keep an eye on you and help if we could while he was gone. I know he's your best friend and wingman, but you can't expect the galaxy from him and only him. You've got an entire squadron here that can help out, and will, given the chance."

Quiver sat silently and looked at Ikoa for a long time. Calmer now, he chewed on the words, alternating between feeling resentful and forgiving.

In the end, resentment still won out, but the sharp edge had dulled enough to turn it into an irritating stomachache to be endured instead of the white-hot anger that demanded action. He did actually have other friends on the ship, as Ikoa had reminded him. He could probably be a little nicer to them now and hang out with them again. For real, not like when he'd expressed this same intention to Mack in the Bacta Tank as an excuse to leave. When he stopped to think about it, he wasn't sure if he was ready to leave all of them. If he minimized his interactions with Darin, maybe going AWOL wasn't worth it quite yet. Besides, now that he was thinking things through a little more rationally, being chased for going AWOL and always looking over his shoulder didn't sound like a very enjoyable life.

So, maybe, he would stay. For now. And he would treat Darin the same way Darin was treating him— as a low-priority afterthought in his life. That would be the extent of their personal

relationship from now on. Maybe if he stopped expecting anything more from Darin, Quiver wouldn't be disappointed when Darin inevitably fell short. And pushing Darin away should help convince him not to make any stupid decisions regarding the relative worthiness of lives. If Darin wasn't overly wrapped up emotionally in the wingpair relationship, it should be easier to sever all ties objectively.

Though maybe there was a way for Quiver to not have to deal with Darin at all anymore. What if he could become Pellicer's wingman instead? That might make things easier all around. But rooming with Pellicer would be next to unbearable; the two of them didn't mesh very well, personality-wise, for long stretches of time. He'd have to give that option a lot more thought. Maybe Slurry. He could room with Slurry. That might work.

"Fine," Quiver said at last. "I won't leave—yet—but I really need everyone to leave me alone about Darin."

Ikoa studied him and seemed to be wondering how far to push things. Finally she nodded. "I'm glad you're staying," she said. "Come find me if you want to talk about anything, and *please* talk to Darin too. You should go on back to your quarters before anyone else finds you sitting in here, though. They might get the wrong impression. I'll wrap things up here."

"*Lodestar* is supposed to pick up some things from *Providence*," Quiver said as he stood and picked up his backpack. Hue chirruped from inside.

"Botch and I can handle that quick," Ikoa said. "Now shoo. Get some sleep. Things will look better in the morning."

Quiver didn't respond. He walked out of the cockpit and warily squeezed past Botch, who merely beeped at him and never made a move to extend his arc welder again. Once off the shuttle's ramp, Quiver walked slowly through the hangar and back to his quarters.

It was strange going inside them again when he'd previously thought he would never be returning. His quarters were still empty when he arrived. Darin wasn't back from Medbay yet. Or maybe he was and was now in the brig.

Quiver put Hue back in his regular cage, and the small four-footed avian squeaked and bounded around inside the larger space with glee. Quiver dropped his backpack on the floor without unpacking anything else. He stood there for a few minutes, not sure what to do. The emotional whiplash and drastically changing plans of the last hour was both exhausting him and making him restless at the same time.

Finally, for some reason he grabbed the holodisk from the small stand by the door, shucked his boots, turned off the lights, and climbed up to his bunk. He flopped down on his back and turned the holodisk on. He gazed at the holo, letting the emitted light of his past friendships burn its way through his retinas and into his mind.

He was still staring at it when he dozed off.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Major Aylward Linnme didn't usually listen to mission debriefs in real-time. It was much easier and more efficient to simply read the mission reports once they'd been compiled. But this... hadn't been a normal mission, and with Colonel Trainner stirring up trouble, Linnme felt he'd better listen to this one at least.

He'd put off Trainner as long as he felt he could without making things worse, but at last he had to go retrieve Flight Officer Stanic from Medbay and bring him to the Intel group who was conducting the debriefs. He'd needed to interrupt Stanic's full bacta dunk to do so, but he'd sworn to the doctors that he would personally bring his subordinate back as soon as he was done so they could continue the treatment.

Stanic didn't say much on the way to the debriefing. Linnme knew he tended to be quiet, though this seemed different. Besides, between his interrupted sleep last night, having to wait for Stanic to get cleaned up from the bacta— and that quick shower hadn't totally gotten rid of the nasty bacta smell— and his aggravation at the entire situation, Linnme wasn't in the mood to talk to him either.

When he'd left Stanic with the small Intel team, he'd briefly pulled aside one of them he knew, Lt. Asglen. Besides being an excellent judge of character and motivations, the Gotal was fair and thorough in his debriefs, and he assured Linnme that this was not a witch hunt sponsored by Trainner or Nervensage.

Only then did Linnme leave the briefing room, but instead of returning to his office he went to the small investigator's witness room to listen in via the audio console and watch on the monitor.

He frowned as he followed along. The Intel agents were doing a good, impartial job, but Stanic was still behaving oddly, showing no signs of the spark of fight he'd had in him last night in Linnme's office when Trainner was confronting him. He answered everything the agents asked, but with an air of someone who had nothing left to lose and didn't even care if he incriminated himself in the process.

Stanic was also corroborating details Linnme had heard from some of his other pilots and even a few of the commandos, and those details made anger flare up inside him again. He hadn't realized how unfairly Trainner had treated the pilots and how they'd felt they'd been backed into a corner and forced to endure it with the probation Linnme had imposed. But surely the Coronas wouldn't have thought Trainner had been given free rein to stomp all over them with no available recourse. That had never been part of the probation or the mission arrangement with Trainner, and it was absurd for the pilots to think otherwise. They were smarter than that. How could they have believed something so dumb? And even if they did think that, why did they take it to such extremes? Why did they feel they had to risk their lives to prevent a couple reassignments? How could they think he wouldn't be willing to work with them and talk with them if something unforeseen and drastic came up, like it did on this mission?

And Trainner would have to answer to him for the poor treatment of his subordinates, both in the planning phases and on the actual mission. That was completely unacceptable. His jaw clenched, and he kept listening.

The major wasn't exactly sure what it was, but at one point Stanic said something to the Intel agents that reminded Linnme strongly of Gritter, a former squadmate. The unbidden memory took him by surprise; he hadn't thought about Gritter in months. Despite the rough-sounding callsign, Gritter actually had several prominent traits in common with Stanic: young,

quiet, and earnest. Linnme sighed. He missed his old squadron. He missed flying. He wondered what his former squadmates were up to these days since he'd been permanently grounded with his injury and forced to fly a desk instead.

Then he wondered what Gritter would have done if he'd been told their squadron would be split up if he didn't follow orders, and suddenly things made a lot more sense.

Gritter was so attached to the squadron that he would have considered a split the Worst Possible Outcome. If he'd thought the threat was serious, he would have done everything in his power to avoid it. There wouldn't be any space in his thoughts for 'maybe this really bad situation is an extenuating circumstance and could have some wiggle room afterward.' He would never have entertained such a risk with those stakes on the line. It would be black and white, successful or not, and if he'd been the one to somehow cause the Worst Possible Outcome, it would have devastated him.

Linnme furrowed his brow and thought about that. From within the confines of a tight-knit squadron, did things truly look so dire?

Linnme kept that in mind as he listened to the part in the debriefing when Stanic told about his escape attempt where Troy was threatened by the Nosaurians and Nervensage gave his fateful orders. Stanic was finally showing a bit of emotion, but it was something that looked like... anguish? Was it truly tearing him up that much to think he was dooming his squadron by admitting his actions? It must be. That's what Gritter would have thought. Plus, it wasn't too long ago when Stanic had risked his life on Lokinha for all of his squadmates. If that didn't say how he felt about them, nothing would.

And now, apparently this pilot felt he'd made an unforgivable mistake by saving his teammate's life. Linnme growled in aggravation. This wasn't the lesson he'd been wanting to teach his squadron, especially the younger members.

The major grumbled to himself and tried to think. Had he communicated this wrong? Had he forgotten how differently things looked through the squadmate lens versus the perspective of an outsider superior officer? In his attempt to get through to the Coronas and make them behave for once, had he handicapped his pilots and taken away options and choices that might have made things go even a little better on the mission? He'd ended up doing nothing but giving Trainner total power, and it had backfired spectacularly on Linnme. He supposed he should have seen that abuse of power coming since Trainner had been careless enough with the Coronas' well-being even at the start when he forced Stanic's medical reinstatement, but Linnme had talked himself out of thinking that way. It had been easier to pretend that he was overreacting and reading into things that weren't there when he already had too much on his plate from the Lokinha aftermath.

This was getting more muddy and messed up by the second, and it was ticking him off.

The door to Linnme's witness room opened, and Commander Betara peered inside. Linnme definitely hadn't been expecting to see the ship's First Officer there, but luckily the shock helped him immediately jump to his feet and salute. "Sir."

"Major," said the blue-skinned Mon Cal, who returned the salute quickly. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, sir. Please." Linnme invited him to the other chair at the table.

They sat, and Betara watched the monitor for a moment. "This is Flight Officer Stanic?"

"Yes, sir. He's the last one to go aside from Lieutenant Bren Troy, who's still in critical condition in Medbay."

Betara nodded. "Captain Tralkett asked me to come down and see what I could learn for

myself. Colonel Trainner spoke to him this morning about the Coronas.”

Linnme flushed and gave a sharp nod of acknowledgment, not trusting his words on that subject. He’d already warred with himself all morning about whether or not to talk to Tralkett before Trainner did, and had ultimately decided against it. That might have just backfired on him too. After all, he was the ranking Starfighter Command officer on board, and potential problems with the squadrons should have gone to the captain through him.

Except the Braycot mission *wasn't* a potential problem with the squadron.

Betara was looking at Linnme sideways with one large eye. “I know you’re itching to say something, Major. Out with it. Speak candidly.”

Linnme’s face twitched. “I can’t do that and remain deferential to a higher-ranking officer, sir.”

“Then do it anyway,” Betara said. “You know Tralkett doesn’t like or encourage these political games that Colonel Trainner seems to be starting. He and I value your opinion regarding your squadron more than that of someone new in a different branch. So, is there something we need to be concerned with regarding the Coronas and their ability to perform missions and safeguard this fleet?”

“No, sir. Not in my opinion,” Linnme stated. He took a deep breath. “Lokinha made me think there was a potential issue, which I tried to address internally immediately afterward and on the Braycot mission. In all honesty, sir, I think my approach caused some problems on the mission and made things harder than they should have been for the SFC personnel. Based on that, I’m having to... reevaluate things I thought I had figured out, but absolutely nothing is making me believe for one minute that the Coronas cannot perform their duties as well as they ever have. If anything, I think they’re proving they still have the fortitude to make the right decisions, even when it doesn’t benefit them to do so.”

Betara regarded Linnme calmly. “That was a lot of buzzwords. It sounded good, sure, but why not tell me something more duracrete that helped you reach all of your conclusions.”

Linnme reddened again, chagrined. He knew better than that; Betara always preferred specific examples so he could make up his own mind. “Sorry, sir. I got carried away.”

“I can appreciate passion.”

“So, basically, sir, before the Braycot mission I told the Coronas that I’d reassign their CO and a fair number of others if they couldn’t obey orders for once. I was upset about Lokinha, and it wasn’t an empty threat. I’d fully meant it.”

Betara’s eyes widened a bit. “I imagine that got their attention.”

“Yes, sir, it did.” Linnme sighed. “And then one of the things that happened on the mission was Lieutenant Troy’s serious injury and Lieutenant Nervensage’s cover being blown. Flight Officer Stanic—” Linnme indicated the monitor where the debrief was still occurring— “was put into a situation where he had to either disobey a direct order or cause the deaths of Lieutenant Troy and an adolescent local. He made the right choice by disobeying Nervensage’s order, but he’s already pleaded with me to not punish the squadron as a result. That wasn’t the outcome I’d intended when I made that threat.” Linnme didn’t want to even think about how awful he’d be feeling if Stanic had made the other choice and Troy was dead as a result of Linnme’s probation.

Betara studied Stanic on the monitor. “He’s the one who flew that solo mission on Lokinha at the end, isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir. He’s also the youngest in the squadron.”

Betara paused for a moment. “Colonel Trainner thinks the Coronas don’t respect non-

SFC personnel and refuse to listen to them or cooperate with them.”

“Stanic saved the life of a Special Forces commando when he thought that action would cause him to lose his own squadron per a Starfighter Command directive, sir,” Linnme countered. “Personally, I’d be more curious to find out why he was ordered to sacrifice Lieutenant Troy and a young civilian in the first place. On the surface, that order is much more troubling and has farther-reaching implications than anything Stanic did by refusing it. The rest of the Coronas are no different from him. He’s internalized their values and reflects them pretty well. The few commandos I’ve talked to had no issues working with the Coronas, including Stanic, on Braycot.”

Betara thought for several heartbeats and then nodded. “Anything else you’d like to mention for me to pass along to the captain?” he asked.

“No, sir. Once everyone’s cleared medically and we have enough ships and droids to fly, I have confidence in this squadron’s abilities. I’ll need to find a different motivational tool for next time, though.”

“Leading personnel, especially starfighter pilots, is not straightforward, easy, or for the faint of heart. Thank you for the information, Major.” Betara stood, and Linnme did as well. They exchanged salutes, and Betara left.

Linnme retook his seat and resumed listening to the debriefing. Speaking of the solo mission on Lokinha, he needed to talk to Lieutenant Weas— no, wait, Commander Mackin— about that...

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Why are you sitting over here?”

Darin looked up in slight alarm at Quiver’s question. He hadn’t expected Quiver to find him on the other side of the mess hall, and he had no idea how Quiver would react now that he had. Quiver held a tray with his breakfast on it, but that was all Darin could discern from the sight in front of him; he couldn’t read Quiver’s mood. Darin finally felt decent after his bacta treatments, and he had no desire to be reinjured in a physical altercation with his own wingman if Quiver was about to take this badly.

Darin put down his fork and briefly considered how to respond. At last he decided that he didn’t have the energy to keep walking on eggshells around Quiver. He was too exhausted after everything to keep trying. Quiver already hated him, so what further damage could be done by not sugarcoating things? “I wasn’t going to eat at our regular table,” Darin told him. “Not with how plain you’ve made it lately that you want nothing to do with me. So why wouldn’t I be sitting over here?”

“Because it’s boring over there by myself.” Quiver set his tray down across the table from Darin and sat.

Darin reflexively pulled back, but he stopped himself just short of getting to his feet to leave. “So why did *you* come over here?” Darin snapped. “You’re bored, so you want someone to snipe at?”

Quiver shook his head. “Just been kind of lonely lately while you’ve been swimming in bacta. You still smell like it, by the way. I bet all of your food tastes like it too.”

Darin watched Quiver suspiciously while the lanky pilot started to eat, but there wasn’t anything in his voice or actions—yet—that made Darin think the words weren’t sincere.

“I commed Medbay this morning to see when you were getting out, but they said you’d been released already,” Quiver said. “I waited for you before I got hungry and came here. Thought you might have been brig-ified. Where’ve you been?”

“Went for a walk,” Darin said evasively. It was true enough, but the reason he’d gone for a walk through the ship’s unoccupied decks was because he’d been fully intent on staying as far away from Quiver as possible for as long as he could. Medbay had actually released him a couple hours ago, early that morning. He’d stayed away from his quarters the entire time.

Quiver simply nodded and kept eating.

Well, might as well get this out there now. “Linme told me yesterday after my debriefing that he wasn’t going to transfer me or anyone else,” Darin said. “Said there were extenuating circumstances during the mission.” He braced for the imminent explosion.

“Yeah,” Quiver said, rather anti-climactically. “He told all of us yesterday afternoon too. Mack’s been reinstated already.”

Darin waited, but that was all that came. “I thought you’d be angry,” he told Quiver. “I thought you were happy I was going to get transferred out.”

Quiver looked like he wanted to shrug but didn’t quite do it. He met Darin’s eyes briefly while he ate. “I’ve missed you lately,” was all he said.

Darin’s emotions cycled through several different reactions in quick succession. On one hand, he was fed up with Quiver’s unpredictable mood swings and hated this feeling of wondering when everything would suddenly explode in his face for no apparent reason. Adding to that, Quiver’s recent words and treatment still stung badly, and Darin wasn’t sure *he* wanted to be around his wingman yet either. He couldn’t deny that a part of him wanted to retaliate and

hurt Quiver back.

But on the other hand, he'd missed Quiver so much recently, especially with CC gone. And he'd been trying so hard to help his friend that it seemed the height of foolishness to throw away what could be his very last opportunity to turn things around between them. If Darin reacted badly, Quiver might never give him another opening.

Finally, finally, Darin made his tense muscles relax a little, and he moved closer to his own breakfast plate. "I've really missed you too," Darin replied. He cautiously resumed eating his meal. "And yes, everything does still taste like bacta. It's disgusting."

"Did you know your droid is a psycho?" Quiver asked.

"Yeah, that's not news. What did he do?" Darin said.

"Threatened me with his arc welder."

"Hopefully he didn't get you with it."

"No, I stayed away."

"Good," Darin said. He pushed his left sleeve up to just above his elbow and twisted his arm around to show Quiver an old, red welt on the back of his arm by the joint. "See this? This is what happens when it connects. Hurts like hell, too." He pulled his sleeve back down. "Then there was the time he sprayed oil on me, remember? He was really mad at me then."

Quiver barked out a laugh. "Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten about that! It's funny to think of all the arguments and tussles you get in with each other, but you still won't memory-wipe him. That's crazy. I can't believe you two manage to work together so well after all that."

Darin shrugged. "It's not always easy." He didn't vocalize his next thought as he looked at Quiver: *But he's my friend.*

Quiver continued, "So anyway, should I be expecting any more Medbay time from you? Or brig time? Anything like that?"

Darin shook his head. "Not that I know of, but I don't know what's all going on at Linnme's level. I managed to get Trainner and Halon pretty mad at me on the mission. I don't know how far they'll pursue things."

"Halon?" Quiver asked. "Is he the guy who left the hangar with you two when you got back? He looked like a jerk."

"He is," Darin said, under his breath enough so the wrong people wouldn't overhear.

"Then we can add him to our hate list," Quiver said. The statement was so matter-of-fact that Darin almost laughed. "Am I ever going to hear the story of your crazy mission?"

"If you want to, sure," Darin said. "I'm not sure how exciting it is, though. Parts of it were pretty boring."

"Then you just skip those," Quiver said. "You say, 'Insert boring part here,' and move on. But we can't do it now. If you don't hurry up and finish eating, we'll be late for the morning briefing."

The two of them cleaned their plates and walked to the squadron's briefing room. Most of the Coronas had already assembled there. Darin was happy to see Mack at the front of the room with Weas like normal. Darin and Quiver sat down in their regular seats, and Ikoa smiled at them from a few rows away.

Darin gave a soft sigh of relief while he looked around. Except for the conspicuously empty chair on the opposite side of Quiver, everyone was still here. Everyone was together and where they should be. He'd honestly never thought he would see this sight again.

At the briefing's start time, Mackin counted the pilots, cleared his throat, and said, "All right, Coronas, let's get started." The room's conversations died down. "Before we get going

with the boring stuff, we have one item of business to attend to first.” Mack met Darin’s gaze and held it, then said in a crisp voice, “Flight Officer Stanic, front and center.”

Darin stared at Mackin like an animal caught in speeder headlights. It wasn’t until Quiver jabbed his elbow into Darin’s ribs a couple seconds later that he snapped out of his surprised stupor enough to move. He scrambled to his feet and walked down the center aisle to meet the commander at the front of the room. What was going on? Trainner or Halon must have done something that made him about to get kicked out of the squadron or punished in front of them. And right after he’d told Quiver he thought he would be around more.

When he reached Mack and Snubber, Darin came to attention, saluted, and said in a smaller voice than he’d intended, “Flight Officer Stanic reporting as ordered, sir.”

Mack smartly returned the salute. “I want you facing the squadron for this, Flight Officer. About face.”

Darin obeyed. His hands were clammy as he felt the curious gazes of every single Corona on him. Was Mack about to make a horrible example out of him for what he did on Braycot?

Mack came beside him. “As you know, Flight Officer, we recently got back from a mission that was hard on all of us. You had a large role in that mission, a role that was not helped by the extremely difficult circumstances surrounding it. Despite that, you stepped up and faced the challenges and danger without flinching. It takes a special kind of person to knowingly put his life on the line for others, and while we all knew that about you already, you proved it there beyond the shadow of any doubt.

“Like I said, we recently got back from a hard mission. I fully believe that that statement wouldn’t be true if it weren’t for your actions and courage, Flight Officer Stanic, and as such, every pilot here, including myself, owes you his or her life.”

Snubber handed Mack a small box, and the commander opened it as Darin’s confusion turned into utter bewilderment. Mackin smiled as he said, “In recognition of your brave, selfless actions as the ‘third pilot’ that allowed all of your squadmates to escape from Lokinha, I hereby award you the Corellian Cross.” Darin heard impressed murmurings from the other pilots as Mackin stepped in front of him and pinned the medal to his uniform. Darin stiffened and his brow furrowed slightly as he tried to make sense of what was going on.

Once the medal was in place, Mackin added more softly, “I also give you my personal thanks for the chance to see my family again, and also to have this ceremony in front of your squadmates, who are alive and healthy and just as energetic as ever. It’s good to see you back on your feet again too.” He stepped back and saluted.

Darin couldn’t do anything for a moment. His brain had gotten stuck on the untruth Mack had spoken, and only his training of remaining at attention kept his eyes forward and not searching out CC’s empty seat. And why— It wasn’t—

He blinked and hurriedly returned Mackin’s salute while he felt heat rising up under his collar into his cheeks.

The Coronas applauded when Mackin and Darin ended the salutes. With a proud grin, Mackin clapped Darin on the shoulder and said, “Congratulations, Darin. You deserve this. Now if you want to go back to your seat, I’m all done embarrassing you for the time being.”

Darin bit his bottom lip, then softly said, “Thank you, sir,” before retreating to his chair.

“That’s my wingman right there!” Quiver proclaimed as Darin sat down. Quiver leaned close to peer at the medal, then playfully rubbed his sleeve on it to polish it. Other Coronas, like Pellicer and Ikoa, were catching Darin’s eye and congratulating him through another brief squadron-wide round of applause.

Mack started into the regular parts of the briefing, but Darin didn't pay much attention to it. He unpinned the medal and stared at it in his hand.

As long as that other seat beside Quiver was empty, this medal was something he shouldn't have. Besides, what was he supposed to do back then? Say no, he wouldn't try to help them escape with their lives? Why not give him an award for breathing while they were at it? Why were they making a big deal out of this?

Especially when all of his squadmates *didn't* make it back. He *didn't* help save them all. It was the opposite. He was a screw-up that did nothing but cause problems for everyone and force others to clean up his messes, not someone worthy of an award. He didn't—

He distantly felt everything about to come crashing down on him. Coupled with the stress from the Braycot mission and the horrible dreams during his bacta dunks, Darin knew if any of those thoughts got any foothold at all, he would come completely unglued right then and there in the briefing room, and doing that with Quiver sitting mere centimeters away was not an option whatsoever. Not when he had to be the strong one for his wingman for once.

He shoved the medal in a pocket, chewed on his bottom lip hard, and spent the entire briefing concentrating so completely on repeating his lies to himself over and over that no other thoughts could get in. If convincing himself that CC was just temporarily away was what he needed to do to not go to pieces at that very moment, then that was what he would do. That was the only thought he allowed himself to think. It had served him well during the mission training and the actual mission, and he doubled down on it to keep what was certainly a mental collapse at bay. He needed it to work now more than ever.

He had no clue what Mackin said during any of the briefing. He would have to find out later.

Chapter Twenty-Six

By the time lunchtime the following day rolled around, Darin had weathered two more angry outbursts from Quiver. But the end of lunch had Quiver in an okay mood, and he'd agreed to come with Darin to Medbay to check on Troy.

Darin was secretly glad for it. He hated going to Medbay, especially by himself, and it was awkward checking on a member of a different branch whom he didn't know very well. He felt like an intruder, but he at least wanted to see for himself that Troy was going to be okay. Then maybe he could close that chapter and instead focus on Quiver and helping to get the Coronas back up to an operational status after the losses on Lokinha. He'd exhausted most of his leads for finding new astromechs with no luck, and the replacement X-wings were an even bigger issue.

The front desk clerk in Medbay told the wingpair that Troy had been taken out of bacta that morning and was in recovery, then gave them directions to Troy's bed. Darin thanked her and led Quiver to the recovery area.

He scanned the large room and spotted Troy's bed, but Darin stopped well short, almost causing Quiver to run into him from behind. Hozke was there, and he was talking to a woman sitting beside Troy's bed. She wore a general duty uniform and had long brown hair in a braid. Troy was unconscious, but by squinting Darin could tell he was breathing regularly and seemed to have some color in his cheeks. It was the first time in days that Darin could look at Troy without anxiety.

Hozke glanced over, and when he spotted Darin he stopped his conversation and raised a hand in greeting, beckoning him over. Darin gave a brief smile in return but offered his own gesture declining the invitation. He didn't want to interrupt any more than he already had. Darin turned, quietly said, "Let's go, Quiv," and led his wingman out.

"What? That's it?" Quiver asked in confusion.

"Troy looks fine. They're busy," Darin said lamely. He felt silly, but there was also a good dose of relief at taking this excuse to get out of there.

Darin was so focused on beelining for the Medbay exit that he'd made it all the way into the corridor outside Medbay's main door before he heard someone behind him saying, "Hey, wait a minute!" Pausing, he turned.

Quiver had stopped in Medbay's doorway and was looking back inside at the woman who'd been talking to Hozke as she half-walked, half-ran after them. "Hold on a sec, please!" she said again. She slowed to a fast walk when she saw Darin had finally stopped, and she slipped politely past Quiver and stepped up to Darin.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you and Hozke—" Darin began.

She waved the words away impatiently. "You're Darin? Darin Stanic?" she asked.

Blast, what had he done wrong *now*? "Yes, ma'am," he answered cautiously, trying to feel out what he was in trouble for and with whom. "Sorry, have we met?"

"No."

"And you are—?"

He didn't expect her to grab his head in her hands, pull him forward, and kiss his cheek. In another instant she'd wrapped him in a hug that seemed determined to crush the life out of him. Darin was too stunned to react and could only stare blankly at her when she finally pulled back and held him at arm's length with her hands gripping his shoulders.

"Someone who's very grateful that you saved her husband," she said. Her voice was firm

but her eyes glistened with tears. “Thank you.” She squeezed his shoulders, then let go and walked more sedately back into Medbay. Quiver was gaping at the scene he’d just witnessed.

Once she was inside, Quiver crossed the corridor to Darin in two long strides. The Medbay door slid shut. “Do you know who that was?” Quiver was excited but barely managed to keep his voice down.

Darin tore his confused gaze away from the door she’d gone through and fixed it instead on his eagerly bouncing wingman. “If you think I’m going to answer that like she did, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“Very funny, Niner,” Quiver said drily. “So you don’t know?”

“Aside from Troy’s wife, you mean?”

“Strine blink, yes, aside from that!” Quiver said. “You need to get out more and meet people. She’s the deputy to *Star*’s head of Procurement! Second-in-command of scrounging!”

“Oh. She is? Huh.”

“What do you mean, ‘huh’? I’ve been trying to get on the good side of someone from Procurement for months. That’s the type of friend who’s very, very valuable to have here in the land of undersupply, even if it’s just their brand-new recruit. And here you go ingratiating yourself to one of the big guns just like that. I would say I’m jealous, but instead I’m just going to ride this golden opportunity on your coattails until I make inroads of my own through you two,” Quiver said.

Darin looked back at the closed door. “I didn’t even know Troy was married.”

“You’re hopeless, you know that?”

“It never came up.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea for you to be getting kissed like that by the wife of a Special Forces commando, though,” Quiver said. “I’m sure he’s got some pretty good weapons skills. He’s not the jealous type, is he?”

“How should I know?”

And a couple days later, they just exchanged a look when Mackin announced that Procurement had found and was expediting four replacement X-wings and astromechs to the squadron.

The End

Revision B

9-3-23