

## “Reaching Conclusions”

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In his quarters onboard the Rebel MC80 Mon Calamari Cruiser *Crescent Star*, Flight Officer Hentil “Quiver” Yanilr’s head pounded him awake from the inside out. As if that wasn’t bad enough, there was also some horrible noise assisting with this task from the outside, assaulting his brain on every possible front.

He moaned and slowly opened his eyes to locate and silence the external blaring, but moving his head to look hurt almost as much as hearing the noise did. Fortunately the awful noise stopped a few excruciatingly long moments later. From below, the bunk bed moved slightly and then was still again.

The throbbing in Quiver’s head slowly trended toward bearable, though he realized with dismay that he couldn’t remember anything about last night, not even how he got back to his quarters after spending the evening with some friends. He knew they’d gone to the Bacta Tank, the ship’s downtime establishment and a favorite of the pilots, to have some drinks. If the hangover was this bad then he must have had a positively great time, and Quiver hated it when he couldn’t keep those types of memories. He did remember Darin being there, so Quiver would ask him for a recap.

He moved just enough to peek over the edge of his top bunk down toward the bottom one. From his vantage point above he saw his best friend and wingman sitting on the edge of his own bed and rubbing his eyes after turning off the bedside alarm. Flight Officer Darin “Thumper” Stanic had turned on the small reading light at the head of his bed to illuminate the dark room, and even that soft glow hurt Quiver’s eyes. He squinted.

“Hey, Thumper,” Quiver managed to say in quiet greeting. “I’ve got one nasty hangover.”

Darin stopped rubbing his eyes, looked up at Quiver just long enough to throw a vicious glare at him, and then he stood and walked to the closet.

“Huh? Did you just glare at me? What for? Don’t take your morning crankiness out on me,” Quiver said. It was an effort for his muddled brain to get the words out correctly, and his mouth still felt like cotton. Though Quiver was certain Darin heard him, Darin never responded. Thumper simply grabbed a general duty uniform from the closet and took it and his morning toiletries into their room’s shared refresher to change and get ready for duty.

Quiver had very reluctantly dragged himself out of bed and turned on the room’s light by the time Darin came out of the ‘fresher. Quiver knew this routine: if Darin was feeling cranky, then he’d toss his nightclothes on his bed instead of putting them away, grab a datapad from his desk and walk out early to get breakfast, perfectly content to not say a word unless Quiver asked him a direct question. On particularly bad days, Quiver would have to block the door to the corridor to get Darin’s attention enough to get an answer. After being rudely ignored earlier, Quiver had a hunch this was one of those bad days, so he stood directly in front of the door and

waited. Luckily it gave the throbbing in his head a chance to subside a tiny bit more.

“Hey, bud, c’mon, stop being such a disgruntled Gamorrean,” Quiver said as Darin wordlessly fulfilled his “bad morning” routine and yanked on his boots. He looked like he’d barely slept. Darin’s blond bangs were disheveled, and his uniform looked like it had been thrown on without much care as to its appearance, which wasn’t a good sign. Similar things had happened the last few days during Darin’s latest struggle with a nasty bout of homesickness and depression over missing his late parents, sister, and friends, and it had been bad enough that he’d gotten in trouble with Lieutenant Weas for his head not being in the game and letting his duties slide. It looked like Darin was going down that same path again today, but CC would be able to straighten some of this out at breakfast now before Darin crossed paths with Weas. Hopefully that would help him avoid another reprimand.

And speaking of breakfast... “Do me a favor, okay?” Quiver said. “When you get to the mess hall, will you get me a cup of caf so I can get rid of this hangover? I’ll be there in a minute.”

Darin didn’t respond. Instead, the eighteen-year-old stepped right up to Quiver on his way out and abruptly stopped toe-to-toe with him. Quiver had half-believed Darin was going to plow right through him. The smaller pilot waited a moment, but when Quiver didn’t step aside, Darin looked up at his lanky roommate with another furious, green-eyed glare and hit Quiver in the left upper arm near his shoulder.

For a fairly light punch, it hurt a whole lot more than Quiver expected it to. “Ow!” he yelped in surprise, jumping away. Darin took the opportunity to step around his wingman and through the door. “What the hell was that for?!” Quiver demanded, but Darin was already gone, and the door slid shut behind him.

“Damn it,” Quiver muttered, rubbing the spot where Darin had hit him. It stung like crazy, much more than Darin’s roughhousing hits ever did. Quiver pushed his sleeve up and saw a large bruise in that exact spot that had already turned an ugly mosaic of black, purple and some green. It would have taken longer than the handful of seconds that had elapsed since Darin had hit him for the skin to turn those particular colors, but Quiver didn’t remember getting it earlier.

He gently rubbed it more to soothe it, annoyed at the lousy luck that happened to put the bruise right where Darin had just hit him. What had he done to deserve that punch, anyway? And how had his tried-and-true method of eliciting a spoken response from Darin failed this time? And where were some painkillers and caf, or better yet, caf with painkillers as an added ingredient? Quiver briefly considered selling such a concoction on the ship; it would be an easy way to make a small fortune. Maybe he could tractor Darin into helping and doing the brunt of the work if his crankypants wingman ever lightened up again and stopped hitting him.

Quiver found a sympathetic ear to listen to his problems as he moaned woefully to himself while getting ready for duty. At last he was all set for breakfast. Strangely CC hadn’t yet stopped by to meet him for that activity, so he walked to her quarters a couple doors down the corridor.

After pressing the door chime, Quiver heard a couple muffled voices inside the room before the door opened. Lieutenant Ikoa Fyndcap, CC’s roommate, stood there, blocking the doorway. The small, brown-haired woman nonchalantly put her hands out to each side and used them to lean on the door frame. “Oh, hi, Quiver.”

“Hi, Ko,” Quiver replied, still a bit sluggishly. The corridor was too bright, and he ran a hand through his messy blond crew cut to try to increase the circulation to his brain. “It’s breakfast time. Is CC here?” He looked over Ikoa’s shoulder into the room.

“No I’m not!” Flight Officer Chryse “CC” Cerac yelled from somewhere inside the room. She sounded mad about something. Strine blink, what was with people today?

Ikoa never took her sights off of Quiver. “No, she’s not,” Ikoa repeated in a normal, even casual voice.

“But— I— CC, what’s going on?” Quiver directed the last part over Ikoa’s shoulder into the room, though he couldn’t see CC.

“Tell him I’m surprised Darin let him live!” CC called.

Ikoa dutifully relayed the information. “She’s surprised Darin let you live.”

“Why? Blast it, Ikoa, what’s all this about?”

Ikoa’s answer was summed up in her shrug. “Don’t ask me. I wasn’t there last night. I don’t know what happened, and I want to keep it that way.”

CC’s voice came again. “Tell him I’m thinking of telling Mack and Snubber about everything!”

Ikoa took a deep breath, tapped a finger hard against the doorframe twice, and then put a patient smile on her face before saying to Quiver, “She’s thinking—”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard,” Quiver muttered. “So apparently I’m in trouble. Apparently Darin and CC are angry, and apparently they’re angry *at me*. I just want to know *why* they’re so damn angry today.”

“*Why* we’re angry?!” CC said. She came into view and stood behind Ikoa to talk to Quiver. Now that he saw CC, there was no denying that she was livid. The way her shoulder-length black hair framed her reddened face made her look like a fiery portal into an abyss. “You pull a stunt like that and you can’t even understand what was wrong about it? Don’t you have any shred of decency in you at all?”

Ikoa rolled her eyes, tapped her finger on the doorframe twice more and said over her shoulder to CC, “You know, you were laughing about whatever it was last night when you came back too.”

CC shot a glare at her roommate. That seemed to be contagious that morning. “So I’ve wized up with sobriety,” CC snapped, “which seems to be something that’s too much to ask of Quiver.”

“Look, CC,” Quiver said, “I have a hell of a hangover. Besides the fact that it’s making your yelling hurt, it also means that I don’t remember anything about last night after the first few drinks. Will you please tell me what happened?”

CC stopped for a moment, scrunched her nose and studied Quiver. At last she shook her head. “No.”

“No?!”

“No. You’re not going to slink your way out of this with that lame excuse! You know full well what happened, and I won’t let you play innocent on this one!” CC was pretty worked up, and she even stepped closer to try to get more in Quiver’s face. To do that she started to push her way through Ikoa, who was still between Quiver and CC in the doorway. Ikoa shoved back, sending CC a step backwards. CC stopped advancing but continued her tirade. “It crossed more lines than I can count, and even though I’ll get in trouble too, I’m going to tell Mack or Snubber about it as soon as I figure out which one will kill me less. I’m also going to apologize to Darin, and the only way I won’t tell Mack or Snubber is if you apologize to Darin too and really own up to what you did. Now go away.” CC spun and stalked off in a huff out of sight somewhere within the small room.

Quiver stood there, agape. Ikoa gave a small sigh and said wryly, “Well, looks like it’s

going to be another fun-filled day, huh? See you later, Quiver.” She pulled back into the room and closed the door.

Quiver remained standing there, looking at the closed door in bewilderment. “But– but I really don’t remember what happened,” he said in a plaintive voice. The door did not respond.

When Quiver arrived at the mess hall for breakfast, Darin was not at their usual table. In fact, Quiver didn’t see Darin anywhere at all. That was odd, but what confused Quiver even more as time went on was that CC never showed up for breakfast either. She’d never been so mad at him that she’d skipped a meal before. It was the most boring breakfast Quiver had experienced in quite a while and therefore one of the quickest.

He was almost done with his food when Lieutenant Jayke “Chopper” Forsgren walked by, heading for the exit. Unlike most of the squadmates Quiver had seen that day, Chopper seemed to be in a pretty good mood. Chopper caught sight of Quiver, then he did a double-take and came over to Quiver’s table with a huge grin on his face.

“Wow, you’re still alive!” Chopper said.

“Not you too,” Quiver grumbled. “Why are people saying that? Why should I be dead?”

“Damn, but that means I owe Kalre money.” Chopper looked disappointed for a second, but he quickly got over it and started laughing. “Ah, blast it, Quiver, it was worth it! That was quite a show!” He jovially clapped Quiver on the shoulder of his bruised arm, and Quiver shied away.

“Hey, watch it.”

“Oh, right, I bet that arm doesn’t feel too good, huh? Sorry. But that all totally made my week. I had no idea Darin made such good fun for us! For such a wimpy, timid little rookie I never expected him to go quite so ballistic, especially over nothing, but that just opened up a whole slew of fun we can get out of him. You should do it again sometime! Sometime soon!”

“Wait! Chopper, what are you talking about?” Quiver reached forward, grabbed Chopper’s sleeve and pulled him down into Darin’s vacant seat across the table.

It took a moment for Chopper to be able to speak through his chortling. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, what happened last night? What did I supposedly do to Darin? I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember? How can you not remember?”

“One too many drinks.”

“What? Ha! Damn, Quiver, you’re missing out!” Chopper finally got his voice under control. It was unnerving seeing the arrogant, solidly-built pilot so full of mirth, and that almost scared Quiver more than anything CC or Darin had done that morning. “I’m truly sorry that you don’t remember that, especially since you had the best seat in the house. Tell ya what. I’ll give you the complete rundown of last night’s events for twenty credits.”

Quiver gaped at him. “Twenty credits?! Why?”

“Because that’s how much money I’ll be paying Kalre once he sees you walking around in one piece. I want to break even on this.”

“But sharing the event in great detail will allow you to relive it and get that wonderful, euphoric enjoyment all over again. Wouldn’t that be worth twenty credits?”

Chopper shook his head. “Nope. Kalre doesn’t take payment in warm fuzzy feelings. Besides, I can relive it in my own mind anytime. Unlike you. In fact, I think I’ll do it right now.” Chopper settled back in his seat, and a faraway look fell over his face while he began to grin

again.

“Okay, okay, look,” Quiver started. He paused as it suddenly dawned on him that he couldn’t borrow money from Darin like he always did. The prospect of being truly broke for the foreseeable future was frightening, but he’d have to deal with that later. “I don’t have twenty credits right now, but I’m desperate and CC and Darin won’t tell me what’s going on, so... um... how about you never lose that bet with Kalre? Would the twenty credits you gain from him without losing any suffice as my payment?”

Chopper perked up. “I’m listening.”

Quiver leaned forward again, thinking hard and thanking the caf for fueling the firing of some neurons and allowing a small amount of coherent brain activity. “What was the bet you made? The exact bet?”

“That Darin would seriously injure you or beat you up either last night after he left or first thing this morning. I bet he would. Kalre bet he wouldn’t.”

“All right... all right... okay,” Quiver said. Blast, sorting this out in his head was making it throb again. “So I’ll have to look injured.”

“I can make you look injured. It’ll be realistic, too,” Chopper offered.

“Hell no,” Quiver retorted. “You’re not going to beat me up for show.”

“Are you sure? I’ll do it for free.”

“No way. I’m not *that* hungover. What about if I fake an injury? Get some bandages or something, have Kalre see me in them, you get your money, and then I disappear for a while so I can ‘go into bacta’ and ‘get cured’? How about that?”

A smirk slowly spread across Chopper’s face. “I like it. Good plan. But we have to act fast so Kalre doesn’t happen across you before we’re done, so let’s get going. Maybe we can borrow some bandages or an air cast from Medbay.”

Quiver nodded and took his food tray to the washing station, then he joined up with Chopper on the way out.

“So what type of injury do you want?” Chopper asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Quiver replied. “But why don’t you tell me what happened last night while we’re on the way to Medbay?”

“No can do. Not until payment’s in my hand. I’m not running a charity here,” Chopper said.

“Come on, Chopper,” Quiver pleaded. “You’ll get the money. I’m running out of time, though. CC threatened to tell Mack or Snubber what I did unless I apologize in detail to Darin.”

Chopper gave a low whistle. “Well, more motivation to get me my money quick, huh? And you’d better warn her to keep the rest of our names out of it. You were the leader. We were just along for the ride. I didn’t even know what you were talking about when you were setting it up.”

Quiver sighed. “Okay. Yeah. But you’d better spill the details as soon as you have agreement from Kalre that you won the bet. I don’t want to get stuck if he doesn’t happen to have twenty credits on him at that moment.”

“All right, deal, on the condition that you don’t do anything afterward to tip him off about this little plan, or you’ll owe me forty: twenty to pay Kalre and twenty for the details on last night.”

“Fine.”

“Like I said, we’re doing a first aid refresher for some of the pilots,” Quiver told the

Zabrak clerk manning the front desk in Medbay. "I'd just like to borrow an air cast and a few bandages. You'll have them back by the end of the first duty shift today, good as new."

The corporal crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "Pardon me for thinking this sounds like an... odd request, sir."

"You're right, it does sound odd. I totally agree with you." Quiver was starting to get a little frantic. Everything depended on this, and this clerk wasn't budging. "And it's actually *meant* to be odd. Unusual. Out of the ordinary. Because—" Because why? "—Because it's an exercise in taking minimal medical equipment out in the field and maximizing its use for different types of injuries." Quiver even impressed himself with that line. "If we crash and have little to no medical equipment available, this training will teach us how to make the best use of whatever we've got, in unconventional ways if necessary."

The corporal shook her head. "Sir, it's not like this stuff's made of hydrogen and can be found anywhere. We run short on it a lot. It's valuable. And we can't just give it out for any random thing in case it gets lost. Bring back something in writing from your CO, and then we'll talk. Until then, medical equipment has to stay in Medbay if it's not on a patient."

Chopper leaned in toward Quiver. "My offer still stands," he muttered quietly.

Quiver ignored him and snorted at the corporal's stubbornness. "Okay, fine," Quiver told her. "I guess you don't want the fighter pilots who are protecting you to survive, but instead slowly bleed to death on some Force-forsaken mudhole. I see." In some ways it was almost the truth: if he couldn't find out what happened last night, he was half afraid that he wouldn't survive to see another day from the way some of his squadmates were acting, though he wasn't sure if it'd be Darin or his commanding officers who would be the death of him. An anxious knot grew in his stomach. He didn't know what to do now.

With no other arguments or ideas, Quiver left with Chopper. They were out of Medbay and a few steps down the corridor when an idea stopped Quiver in mid-stride. "Wait a minute, that's it." He slowly grinned. "We don't need Medbay. We've got the survival packs in the X-wings. I can get the medical props from there."

Chopper looked dubious. "You're going to mess with a survival pack? Better not let anyone see you do that: you're in enough trouble as it is. Why not just take the things out of a first aid kit in the hangar or mess hall or something instead?"

Shaking his head, Quiver replied, "You kidding? Those are way too visible. The survival pack from my X-wing will be much easier for me to get to unnoticed and unquestioned, both for taking the things out and putting them back."

Chopper shrugged. "Fine, whatever. If you're going to mess around in the hangar, though, give me a few minutes' head start. I'm going there too to calibrate the laser cannons with Kalre, and I don't want to show up at the same time as you or he'll get suspicious. He's supposed to be down in the hangar now to do that, so don't let him see you before you're ready."

"Don't worry. I've pulled enough pranks to know how to skulk around unnoticed in the hangar," Quiver said. Honestly, did Chopper think he was some sort of amateur?

With that, Chopper walked off. Quiver hung back for a few minutes and tried to use the time to work out the plan in his mind. It was hard to do so, though, because all he could think about was the valuable lesson he was learning that morning: if the hangover is really bad, then it's best to stay in bed.

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Lieutenant Steen "Snubber" Weas, Executive Officer of Corona Squadron, took a long look around the squadron's subhangar and was pleased to see things running smoothly. The

maintenance crews were attending to the X-wings as per the schedule, and some of the pilots were already starting their required duties here as well. Except... Steen narrowed his brown eyes when he spotted Quiver talking with Kalre and Chopper. Knowing those three, there was no way that was anything but time-wasting chitchat, and with an aggravated sigh Steen walked over to them to break it up.

“You wouldn’t think he can pack a punch, but he really can,” Quiver, whose back was to Snubber, was saying to Chopper and Flight Officer Kalre Unatel as the XO approached. “I guess it really *is* the quiet ones you have to watch out for. Totally embarrassing. If anyone asks, I got it in a brawl with a big, burly fleet trooper, okay?”

“Damn, remind me to stay on Darin’s good side,” Kalre said. “Talk about a senseless grudge...”

“Ha! See?” Chopper grinned and elbowed Kalre in the ribs. “I told you that would happen!”

“Fine, fine,” Kalre grumbled. The Rodian shot a sideways glare at Chopper. “You win. I’ll have to—”

“What’s going on over here?” Steen interrupted as he came up to them. “Don’t you three have anything better—” He broke off as he saw that one of Quiver’s lower arms and wrist was bandaged and had an air cast placed over the wraps. It was resting in a makeshift sling. “What? Quiver, what happened to you? And don’t even try telling me a fleet trooper did this.”

Quiver jumped at Steen’s words, spun around, and looked wide-eyed at him. Quiver’s face was pale, presumably a side effect of whatever painkillers he’d gotten for this injury. “Oh, um, hello there, uh, sir. Heh, this? Oh, this is nothing. I— uh—” He glanced at Chopper, who narrowed his eyes a bit at him, and then looked back at Steen. Steen tried to remember if he’d ever heard silver-tongued Quiver stammer before. “That is, I— fell out of bed this morning. Totally embarrassing. Landed on my wrist.”

Kalre scoffed and flattened his two antennae a bit. “Blast it, Quiver, if you let him win and get away with this nonsense you’ll be running scared for the rest of your life.”

Quiver whirled to Kalre. “I am not scared of him!”

“Sure you aren’t. Damn, you lost one little fight and you’re already crawling on your belly to avoid another confrontation, and against wimpy *Darin* no less? You’re a fighter pilot! Stand up for yourself! Take charge of the situation! Here, since I can’t see you fixing this on your own, I’ll help and show you the easy way to do it. Force knows you were too much of a coward to fight back when it happened.” Kalre turned from Quiver to Steen and said, “He fell out of bed this morning because Darin pulled him out of his top bunk while Quiver was still sleeping. Then he hit Quiver in the arm when Quiver stood up. It was so bad he had to go to Medbay.” Kalre looked back at Quiver. “There. You’re welcome.”

“What the hell are you doing?!” Quiver snapped. He shoved Kalre’s shoulder with his uninjured arm.

“Enough! Stop it!” Steen ordered before Kalre had a chance to push back. He looked Quiver up and down, trying to figure out if this was one of Quiver’s exaggerations. The cast made a pretty compelling argument, though, and any facial clues were lost in the angry glare Quiver was aiming at Kalre. It was as rare to see Quiver angry as it was to hear him stammer.

“Flight Officer Yanilr,” Steen said to get Quiver’s attention again. It worked, and with every second that passed Quiver seemed to get more and more uncomfortable in Steen’s presence. That was another indication that something was very much out of the ordinary. Quiver usually had a damn good sabacc face for pranks and story-telling.

Steen briefly considered the situation. Quiver's evasions were getting them nowhere, and Steen wasn't used to having to pry words out of Quiver. So, enough of that. Snubber pulled out his comlink and dialed in the non-emergency frequency for Medbay. After a moment a rough Zabrak voice answered, "This is Medbay, Corporal Fabritek speaking."

"Good morning, Corporal. This is Lieutenant Steen Weas of Corona Squadron. I understand one of my pilots was in there this morning?"

"Pilots? Um... oh, right, sir. Tall guy, blond hair, talks a lot? Yes, he was here not too long ago. He's a hard one to forget. I told him we'd need something in writing from his CO if he wanted those extra medical supplies. Will that be coming, sir? Should I get them ready?"

It was just like Quiver to pamper himself and try to get more than he needed or deserved. "No, I think we have all we need at the moment. I just wanted to get confirmation, and I'll follow up with the doctor later. Thank you, Corporal. Weas out." Steen closed the frequency.

The only other possibility was that this was a prank of some sort, but Quiver should have enough sense to not go so far as to use their limited medical equipment for a joke. And why would Medbay personnel have been willing to play along with a prank? That made no sense. They were professionals and had better things to do with their time.

Unfortunately, that left only one conclusion. Steen had never thought he'd see the day Darin lost it toward Quiver, but he could also completely understand what it felt like to want to smack Quiver sometimes, and Darin had to spend a whole lot more time with Quiver than he himself did. And besides, Darin had been acting off lately: he'd been more withdrawn than normal, losing sleep, easily distracted, and generally apathetic. Steen had had a stern talk with him the other day to warn him to shape up and stop letting his moods affect his duties or there would be repercussions, but now things looked like they'd just gotten much worse.

"So Darin did this to you?" Steen asked slowly.

"Sir, I—" Quiver looked from Steen to Chopper to Kalre before looking helplessly back at Steen. Kalre snorted in disgust.

"I'll take the lack of a 'no' as a 'yes'," Steen replied. "Now, care to tell me *why* he did it?"

Chopper cleared his throat, and Kalre had a small spasm that sounded like it began as a laugh but ended as a cough.

"Um, well, sir, I— I don't really know," Quiver faltered.

Steen didn't believe that at first, but then again, Quiver did have a way of not realizing when or why he made someone angry. The XO would just have to find out from Darin then. "Fine. How long did the doctor say you'll be out?"

"Oh, this was just a precautionary thing for a few hours, sir. I'll be back to normal before the duty shift is over."

"I'll get with the doctor to be sure unless he already sent me his notification of your Medbay visit. In the meantime, cut back on your duties if you need to, and I'll work this with Mack. We'll take care of things from here."

"Sir, wait, please, you don't need to—" Quiver began to say, but Steen had already turned around and was walking toward Darin's X-wing while entering another frequency on his comlink.

The commander's voice sounded over the comlink a moment later. "Mackin. Go ahead."

"Sir, it's Steen," he replied. "We, ah, might have a discipline problem with Darin. I'm going to talk to him now. Are you in your office in case we need to pay you a visit?"

"What? Yeah, I'm in my office. What's going on?"

“It seems to have been an incident with Quiver. I’ll find out more in a minute, sir. Either way I’ll let you know.”

“All right, thanks, Steen. Out.”

Steen pocketed the comlink and walked up to Darin’s X-wing a few seconds later. Darin was in his open cockpit working with the mechanics on calibrating the laser cannons.

“Flight Officer Stanic, I need to talk to you,” Steen said.

Darin glanced down at him and then exhaled softly. “Yes, sir.” There wasn’t much energy in his voice. He climbed out of the cockpit, descended the maintenance access ladder, and stepped up to the XO. “Yes, sir?”

Steen didn’t like the bags under Darin’s eyes, his somewhat rumpled appearance, or his overall lethargy. “You look like hell, Flight Officer,” he said sharply.

Darin cast his eyes down at the deck. “Sorry, sir.”

“And didn’t we recently have a very pointed discussion about some personal issues affecting your behavior and you not pulling your weight as a result?”

Darin winced a little. “Yes, sir.”

“And yet here you are, again, looking dead on your feet and barely fit for duty. If you don’t pull yourself together you’re going to make a mistake here or in combat that will cost someone their life. I thought you understood that when we went through it in detail, but I guess not. So what happened this time? What’s the cause?”

Darin’s answer came reluctantly. “Rough night, sir.”

“Would this have anything to do with Quiver?”

Darin’s face immediately flushed bright red, and he obviously clamped down on some sort of strong emotion before muttering, “You know about it too, sir?” He still didn’t make eye contact.

“Did you think I would *not* find out? I want your side of the story, Flight Officer. What happened between you and Quiver this morning?” Steen demanded.

“This morning?” With a shrug, Darin answered, “Nothing really, sir. I was too mad to do much.”

Over Darin’s shoulder, Steen spotted a couple of the mechanics working on Darin’s X-wing trying to surreptitiously loiter nearby and overhear. They were snickering quietly to themselves. A warning glare from Steen chased them away, and then he resumed. “I know something happened this morning. Now what did you do to him?”

“I just hit him in the arm, sir.” Darin’s voice got considerably angrier as he grumbled under his breath, “Though he deserved a lot more.”

Steen studied Darin for a long moment, taking in that comment and adding it to the sight of Quiver in an air cast, and then he said, “All right, Flight Officer, let’s go see the commander.”

Darin’s eyes widened, snapped up and met Steen’s at last. “The commander? Sir, for what?”

“For hurting Quiver. You know better than that.”

Darin looked incredulous. “But sir, I didn’t hurt him!”

“You just told me you hit him this morning.”

“That was nothing! We roughhouse harder than that. He kicks me harder than that under the table during meals!”

“Then we have a more serious problem than I thought,” Steen snapped. Apparently the formerly-amiable roughhousing trend had gotten way out of control somewhere along the way if it had escalated to Quiver needing medical attention as a result.

“If he’s not in trouble too, then this isn’t fair, sir.” Darin crossed his arms.

Darin’s protests were not having a positive effect on Steen. “What makes you think this is open for discussion? I don’t want to hear another word out of you until we get to Commander Mackin’s office,” ordered the XO. “Now let’s go.”

“That’s what I was told, sir,” Steen said.

Commander Quentell Mackin glanced at Darin as Steen finished his report. The younger pilot looked ready to explode. Mack couldn’t remember very many times when he’d seen Darin like that. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Flight Officer, care to comment?”

Darin nodded while he took a couple of deep breaths. Finally he managed to bite out in a barely controlled voice, “That’s not at *all* what happened this morning, sir.”

“Go on.”

“I did not pull Quiver out of his bunk. I avoided him from the time I woke up until the time I left. When I was trying to leave our quarters, he was blocking the door and wouldn’t move. So I punched his arm. It wasn’t a hard punch at all. That got him out of my way enough so I could leave, and I did. I haven’t seen him since. If he’s going around telling people that I pulled him out of his bunk out of spite and caused him to get a cast, he’s lying and I swear I’ll—”

“Flight Officer!” Mackin silenced Darin with the sharp words. “You’d better take a breath before you dig yourself a deeper hole.”

Darin quieted, and Mack suppressed a sigh. Normally he would believe Darin’s word over Quiver’s, but... “Tell me, then why did he feel the need to go to Medbay this morning and get treated?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Maybe you honestly didn’t mean to hit him hard, but isn’t it possible that you didn’t realize your own strength, so to speak?”

“No, sir.” Darin shook his head adamantly. “I didn’t hit him *anywhere near* hard enough to require treatment. Maybe he ran into a wall or something dumb like that after I left. I don’t know.”

Steen piped up. “You said he deserved more than you gave him, Flight Officer. Sounds to me like you really did want to see him get hurt. Maybe you’re fooling yourself into thinking you didn’t hit him that hard when you really did.”

Darin bit his bottom lip and took another deep breath. “Sirs, I did not hit him that hard this morning. And besides, I didn’t pull him out of his bunk, either. Even if the hitting is a grey area, the bunk is black and white. I didn’t do anything like that. If he said I did, he’s lying. He didn’t fall out of his bunk the entire time I was there. I didn’t physically touch him until he was already up and blocking the door.”

Mackin furrowed his brow and said, “Noted. But why did you say Quiver deserved to be hit?”

“Because he—” Darin abruptly stopped, then he looked at the floor. His face reddened, and he chewed on his lip while shifting his weight. Mack studied the reaction in puzzlement until Darin muttered, “No reason, sir. I guess I just woke up in a bad mood today and couldn’t shrug off Quiver’s annoyances like I usually can. I have no excuse.”

Mack’s brow furrowed deeper. That was a subject avoidance if he’d ever heard one, and Darin was a master at those.

Steen didn’t seem to pick up on it. “You’ve been having a pretty high number of rough moods lately, Flight Officer,” he said. “I told you before that they can’t keep interfering with

your duties.”

“Sir, I know. I understand,” Darin replied in a strained voice. “I’m trying.”

“Then I expect you to try harder,” Steen said. “Whatever you’re doing isn’t working if it’s escalated into you hitting your wingman.” He looked at Mackin. “Maybe we need to be taking a harder stance on this. The problem’s not getting fixed.”

“I want a better idea of what went on first,” Mack told him, though unfortunately that course of action was becoming more likely. Then he looked at Darin and said, “Here’s what we’re going to do. Lieutenant Weas will follow up with the doctor who treated Quiver to find out how badly he’s injured and when he’ll be back on duty.” Mackin glanced at Steen to make sure he understood the order, then continued. “Until things settle down and we get a little more information about what happened, I don’t want you near Quiver, Flight Officer. Because of that, I can’t send you back to your quarters and I don’t want you in the hangar, so you’ll stay in here with me for a while. I’ve got some things you can do.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Darin answered with a sullen, “Yes, sir.”

Steen left to contact the doctor, and Mack gave Darin some datacards to organize. Darin sat at the small table in Mackin’s office and wordlessly got to work. It would be another half hour, Mack figured, before he could try prying the reason for Darin’s unusual hostility out of him again.

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Fifteen minutes of silence later, Darin’s comlink beeped. He fished it out of his pocket, opened the transmission, and grumbled, “Stanic.”

“Hey, Darin, old buddy, lis—”

Quiver’s voice was cut off as Darin closed the frequency and shoved the comlink back in his pocket. Mack raised an eyebrow and said mildly, “That didn’t seem like something you’d normally do just because you’re having a bad day.”

“This is an abnormally bad day, sir.” Darin went back to work on the datacards.

“Care to tell me what’s really going on?”

“No, sir. It’s... personal.” Color came into Darin’s cheeks.

“Well, that’s something you’d better get over pretty fast,” Mack said while returning to his own work. “Whatever it is, it’s obviously causing a huge problem, and I’m not letting you out of this room until we’ve made progress toward solving that problem.”

Another five silent minutes passed, and then the office’s door chime beeped. “Who is it?” Mack called. If it was Quiver, he needed to prepare himself for some fireworks.

“Flight Officer Cerac,” came the response.

Mackin relaxed. “Come in, CC.”

The door opened, and CC stepped into the room. “Sir, I—” She stopped and broke off when she saw Darin and sobered. “Oh. Um, well, sir, I was coming to tell you what happened with Quiver and everything, but I guess...” She trailed off.

“We’re looking into it,” Mack replied. “There are different versions going around about what happened between those two.” He indicated Darin.

CC glanced at Darin and actually looked a little frightened. That was odd, but she’d probably heard the story from Quiver about how Darin had beaten him up. Mack was just about to ask her for any first-hand knowledge of the situation when CC spoke up first. “Sir, can I... is it okay if I speak to Darin outside for a moment?”

Mack shook his head. “No. He’s not allowed out of this room. If you want to talk, it has to be in here or you’ll have to wait.”

CC paused and uncertainly looked at Darin again, and when Mack did the same he was surprised by what he saw. Darin was fuming, and he was refusing to look at CC. She timidly approached the table and said quietly, "Darin, I—"

"I do not want to talk to you, CC," Darin interrupted with a growl. "Go away."

"Then don't talk. Just hear me out."

"No. Not after last night." Darin was still avoiding looking at her, and he had a death grip on a datacard. "My fuse is really, really short right now. Leave me alone!"

Mack didn't have any idea what was going on, what— if anything— "last night" had to do with this morning, or why Darin was mad at CC now, but maybe it would shed some light on Darin's behavior toward Quiver since those three were always joined at the hip. He cautiously kept watch for any sign that Darin might get violent toward CC too, though Mack had never previously thought such a thing would have been possible.

Darin's protests just seemed to fuel CC's stubbornness. She set her jaw and didn't budge, and she sounded more forceful when she said, "Listen, I'm trying to apologize to you for that. I'm sorry. I really am. That should never have happened."

"You're damn right it shouldn't have!" Darin slammed the datacard on the table and jumped up, then he seemed to remember he couldn't leave so he strode to the other side of the small room away from CC.

Mackin breathed a little easier until CC doggedly followed Darin and said, "I know. It was wrong to begin with, and I definitely didn't think it would go that far. I feel really bad about it."

"Good! I hope you do! Though I'm sure you don't feel as rotten as I still do!"

CC blinked, and her voice became small. "Probably not. But—"

Darin angrily spun to face her with his back against the wall. "And this isn't helping!"

CC now looked confused. "What's not?"

"This! I keep running into people who keep laughing at me for getting so mad about it last night. Have you ever been relentlessly teased for being upset about the worst thing that's ever happened to you? Or told that it was nothing, just get over it already? No? Let me tell you how *wonderful* it feels. I can't avoid those people in a closed environment like this, so I keep getting reminded of it over and over again. Where am I supposed to go where no one I know will run into me? The vacuum outside? I can't get off this blasted ship, so I can't get away from it! And now I can't leave this room, but I can't get you to leave either so I'm stuck in here listening to you reopening that wound with no way out. I'm sick of being trapped and cornered like this, and I'm sick of everyone using me for their own amusement! Blast, I get it already, I'm a horrible, broken, awful squadmate for not already being all healed and tough and moved on, and every mistake is my fault because of it. And the fact that you and Quiver did this when I trusted you and thought I could talk to you about my problems and considered you my best friends? Then you do *this*? I can't sit back and laugh this off. I just can't. I just want everyone to leave me alone. So honestly, when I say I want to be left alone, what does it take for people to actually *leave me alone*?!"

CC stared at Darin as he caught his breath. She looked as shaken as Mackin felt; he had never heard Darin go off like that on anyone before, let alone one of his best friends. There was an uncomfortable silence for a long moment, and then Mackin walked up to them.

Mack tried to keep his voice easy. "All right. Darin, why don't you get back to those datacards. Take some time to relax and settle down. CC, come with me."

The commander led CC out into the corridor and closed the door to his office behind

them. He turned to her and quieted his voice so it wouldn't carry too far or back into the room. "Why don't you enlighten me about what happened last night. I don't think I have the whole story."

CC shifted her weight and grimaced but nodded. In an equally soft voice she began, "Well, sir, last night after we got off duty, some of us went out for drinks at the Tank..."

"As you know, yesterday evening a bunch of us grabbed some drinks at the Tank," Chopper had said to Quiver. They'd escaped to the pilots' lounge after Lt. Weas left them alone to go talk to Darin in the hangar. "Time passed, we drank, we drank some more, we were having a good time. A really good time. We got rowdy enough that the bartender said we had to either go into one of the back rooms or leave, so we commandeered a back room and had it all to ourselves. Darin was the most sober out of all of us because he wasn't drinking much, and we started to get on his case about it."

Quiver vaguely remembered that much. It had been good-natured teasing, and Darin had smiled and nodded and amiably ignored them like he always did. Darin had been having a rough stretch lately, and he never drank too much when he was angry or depressed. Quiver knew enough to know there was some reason for that decision embedded in Darin's past, but he'd never pressed for details. The past was a very sensitive topic with his wingman.

Chopper had continued, "Last night we latched onto that game particularly hard, and a few of us started talking off on the side. I was complaining to you about what a stick in the mud your wingman is, and CC said he can be pretty fun when he's a bit happier. Since just offering Darin more drinks wasn't making him happier or more fun, you and CC started brainstorming other ideas to loosen him up.

"You lit up with this idea that you seemed to think was on par with figuring out how to get the Emperor to surrender unconditionally. You said something about how if the reason he was sad was no longer there, then he couldn't be sad anymore and would be happy. Then you said something like how we had to find a way to convince him that some sort of Imperial activity was over? A planetary occupation, I think?"

Quiver's stomach had plummeted to depths he hadn't realized it could reach. "Oh, no," he'd whispered in dread. "Tell me you're joking and I didn't actually say that."

"How could I be making that up when I don't even know what you were talking about?" Chopper had retorted. "I don't know what occupation you meant."

Quiver did. About a year ago, Darin's homeworld had unexpectedly been invaded by the Empire, and the occupation had caused the deaths of his family and two closest friends. It was the reason he'd joined the Rebellion, partially with the hope that someday it would help remove the Imperials from his homeworld, and Darin had struggled with the emotional fallout of the occupation to various degrees every single day Quiver had known him. A difficult resurgence of that struggle had been the cause of the recent rough stretch that had gotten him in trouble with Lt. Weas. That reprimand had started another downward spiral, and CC had talked at length with Darin to convince him it was okay for him to still be sad and there wasn't anything wrong with him because he wasn't "over it."

If Quiver had made light of that terrible event somehow, he would join the club in wondering why Darin hadn't killed him.

Ironically, Quiver remembered Darin hadn't wanted to go to the Tank last night, but he and CC had convinced Darin to go in an effort to get his mind off of everything.

Chopper had gone on, seemingly oblivious to Quiver's growing distress. "Anyway, you

said you had a plan, you just needed help from a girl who would play along and who Darin didn't know. I knew someone in the main part of the Tank that I thought would fit the bill, so I went and got her. You told her you wanted to help your wingman feel better and asked if she would go over to him, talk with him a bit, act a bit interested, and then eventually drop something into the conversation. I forgot the exact words, but it was something like saying she was from the Craci System, and wasn't it a great thing that the Empire recently packed up and left? She agreed to do it in exchange for a couple of drinks, and you and CC coached her on a few more details she could add and then sent her over to him.

"It took a while, but eventually Darin warmed up to talking with her. We were all kind of spying on them from a distance to see if it was working. Then at one point mid-conversation, Darin got this stunned look on his face. Eventually he snapped out of it and started firing off a million questions to her. I don't think I've ever seen him look so excited in his life."

Mackin interrupted CC. "Wait a minute. You guys lied to Darin and convinced him his homeworld was safe and independent again?" The volume of Mackin's voice dropped further into the quiet, no-nonsense, angry range. "When you of all people know how hard that's been for him to deal with? When you know how much it still affects him?"

CC winced and nodded miserably. "At the time we... thought it would help. We were just trying to cheer him up, sir, and after that number of drinks it seemed like a perfectly good idea. Obviously we were very, very, very wrong."

Blast it, where was he going wrong with this squadron? The stocky pilot wearily rubbed his face with a hand. "Go on, then. And I certainly hope this story starts improving very, very, very soon."

The look on CC's face diminished any hope of that being the case. "Well, sir, that shift from quiet to excited was exactly what we were waiting for. Quiver and I went over to their table. Darin's in this kind of happy frazzled state, and he's trying to ask her more questions, tell us his good news, and figure out how to verify it all at once. He was bouncing from topic to topic and emotion to emotion like a Chadra-Fan on caf. Quiver decided this was the perfect opportunity for Darin to have a few more drinks since he was happy now, but that was when Darin fixated on needing to verify if the woman's story was accurate and what exactly had happened on his homeworld. Darin tried to leave to go do that, and Quiver didn't want him to go now that all this work to get him happy and have some fun were coming to fruition, so Quiver kept blocking him from leaving the back room we were in. A lot of the others thought it was funny watching Darin try to get past Quiver, but none of them knew why Darin was so focused on leaving. It just looked like Darin didn't want to stay and enjoy the party and was getting increasingly unreasonable about it.

"Finally Darin had enough and demanded that Quiver let him leave. I didn't hear exactly what they said to each other after that, but somehow Quiver let slip that there was nothing to verify because he'd made the story up, and so there was no reason for Darin to go and he should stay and have fun with everyone now that he was finally happy. That... was when things got ugly. Darin started yelling, Quiver was oblivious as to what the problem was, and everyone else was laughing at the show and making fun of Darin for overreacting so much about staying at a party. Then Darin threw a pretty wicked punch at Quiver. With as drunk as Quiver was, I'm surprised he managed to get his arm up to block it in time, but I kind of think he was already going backwards away from Darin, lost his balance, and started falling and flailing at the same time, so his arm just got in the way on accident. Anyway, Quiver's lucky it hit his upper arm and

not his face. All of us laughed at Quiver's ridiculous flailing and fall. Darin stormed out, and that's the last I saw him until just now."

Mack had a pounding headache by the time CC finished. It was one of those headaches he got whenever he felt the desire to scream and strangle some of his pilots but knew he technically couldn't. Instead he closed his eyes, rubbed his temples, and started counting to ten.

"That sounds pretty close to what Chopper told me happened," said a subdued voice from behind Mackin. He looked over his shoulder and saw Quiver standing a few steps away.

Mack turned to fully face Quiver. "Flight Officer Yanilr," he said in a low voice, "if what Flight Officer Cerac just told me is true, then you and your accomplices are in some pretty deep trouble. I— wait, I thought you were injured." There were no bandages or air casts on Quiver's arm like Steen had said there was.

Quiver shook his head. "No, sir, I'm not. Not aside from the bruise where Darin supposedly clobbered me last night. I was wearing that cast this morning to fool Kalre."

The headache pounded a little harder. "What in the galaxy *for*?"

The lanky pilot squirmed. "It's a long story, sir, but the upshot is that I drank so much last night I couldn't remember what happened. I didn't know why Darin was so mad at me this morning. Chopper agreed to tell me if I helped him win a bet with Kalre. That's why I was wearing the cast and bandages. I was never treated at Medbay, and Darin didn't do anything to me this morning. He's actually been nicer than he had any right to be. I've been trying to apologize to him, but he keeps closing the frequency on me before I can get that far."

The commander heard CC snort in disgust, and he took a few moments to work things out in his mind. He wasn't sure whether or not to believe Quiver really didn't remember the events from the previous night or if he was just trying to use that as an excuse to get off light. "You couldn't remember what happened? Do you still not remember?"

Quiver shook his head again. "No, sir, I don't. But the stories seem to match as well as any totally drunken accounts can, so I'm inclined to believe it. And if it's true, which I have to assume it is, I feel really bad about it."

"And you should," retorted Mackin. "I can't even express how upset and disappointed I am with all of you over this. I just can't. Regardless of your drunken intentions, you shattered a personal trust that was extremely hard to build. Normally I'd make you work out interpersonal issues between yourselves like civilized adults, but this is something that's going to affect the entire squadron, so I don't have that luxury. That new lack of trust can get someone killed in the split-second decisions that happen in a dogfight, and Darin's mental state as a result of this is going to affect his duties even more than what's been going on with him lately. I'll go over this with Snubber and determine the appropriate punishment by the end of the shift, and I'm not going to go lightly on any of you. If I had any sense I'd disallow alcohol for a while."

Then Mack turned to fully face Quiver. "I think Darin's hit a saturation point right now. Judging by how angry he rightfully is and a desire to not see him snap at an inopportune moment, I'm going to reschedule things to keep you two away from each other as much as possible until things cool down, including finding him a different wingman and roommate. In a squadron like this it isn't practical to expect you two never to cross paths, but I hope you'll be smart enough to know how to handle those situations when they come up. Speak up now if you're not. I'll give you a hint: it involves leaving him alone. Completely. In fact, keeping your mouth shut altogether when near him would probably be best for all concerned. After a few days I'll let Darin decide if he wants the rescheduling and reassigned wingman to become permanent."

Quiver's eyes widened in fear. "What? Sir, please, don't do that! I'll--"

"It'll be for Darin to decide," Mackin interrupted with finality. "Both of you are dismissed."

CC somberly saluted and walked off, and Quiver hesitated before he did the same and joined her. With a sigh, Mack walked back into his office. He knew things were bad when Quiver admitted to being sorry about something.

Darin was sitting at the table, glowering at the datacards he was slowly and unenergetically sorting as if they were the cause of his misery. Mackin sat down at his desk and found a message on his computer console from Steen saying that none of the Medbay doctors had treated Quiver that morning. Blast, he needed some painkillers for his head. Steen's message went on to briefly relate his conversation with the Medbay desk clerk about why Quiver had been there in the first place, and Mackin had to admit that the unconventional uses of limited medical supplies actually might be something good for the Coronas to do. He made a note of it by his console. If he could only figure out a way to better direct Quiver's imagination and focus his energy into productive things, it would be such a help for the squadron.

Normally Mack would have asked Darin for some ideas of how to accomplish that focusing for his wingman, but this was definitely not the time. Mack watched Darin for a short while, then made up his mind.

"Darin," he said. When Darin paused in his work, Mack continued, "You're free to go if you'd like, on the condition that you don't hunt down Quiver or any of the others and exact revenge. For the next few days you'll be flying with Ikoa and rooming somewhere else; I'll let you know exactly where once I get things arranged. I want you to stay away from Quiver as much as is practical. I've told Quiver to leave you alone too. The people involved will be getting punished for their actions, so there's no reason for you to try to do it yourself. Understand?"

Darin's general glower didn't lessen, and all he did was nod. "Yes, sir." He got up and walked out.

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Later that afternoon the new temporary wingpair of Ikoa and Darin completed their escort patrol of *Crescent Star's* fleet. The patrol itself had been uneventful and almost completely silent except for when Ikoa asked Darin a direct, duty-related question, and even then his answers were an exercise in minimalism. Darin was always the quiet sort, but this seemed extreme. Ikoa was used to chatting to pass the time, and the lack of that had made this flight drawn-out and boring. It had been hard to keep herself focused.

What confused Ikoa the most was right before the patrol had started when a couple of Quake Squadron pilots and a mechanic had spotted Darin prepping his fighter, laughed, and made some odd-sounding comments to him. He'd been talking to Ikoa a bit before, but after those comments Darin had clammed up and gotten a lot more sullen, and it had bled over into the patrol. That whole seemingly antagonistic experience with the Quakes and mechanic was quite different from the easy, friendly relationship Darin usually had with everyone in the hangar.

Ikoa had debated during the entire patrol whether to ask him about it, and finally decided not to. Not when whatever had happened had apparently been bad enough for Mack to split up Quiver and Darin into new wingpairs. Not when Darin had loaded ordnance at his easy disposal.

When their patrol ended, they landed in the hangar, powered down their fighters, and left their helmets and gloves in their cockpits. Ikoa met up with Darin, and both began walking to the locker room to take off the rest of their flight gear. Maybe that would be a better time to talk to him and make sure he was okay.

Getting from the hangar to the locker room proved to be more challenging than normal. First Ikoa spotted Quiver working on his own fighter nearby. He had noticed them land and was watching them with a disconsolate look on his face, like he wanted to come say something but couldn't. Darin saw Quiver not too long after Ikoa did, and once he had, Darin pinned a venomous glare on Quiver and altered his course to put another X-wing between Quiver and Darin's path out. Ikoa looked back and forth between them in concern while she adjusted her course to stay with Darin.

They hadn't taken more than fifteen steps past that buffer X-wing when Kalre came into sight. He laughed upon seeing Darin and said, "Look out, Ikoa, Darin goes ballistic over nothing. Don't get in his way if he snaps! Mack'll have to put you in protective custody too like he did with Quiver. Actually, I'm surprised Mack cares so little for your own life."

That drew the attention of Chopper, who popped into view near Kalre and laughed as well. "Hey Darin, our new plan is to put you in an X-wing in front of an ISD and then tell you something really awful, like space is black or offer you a drink in the Tank. We figure you'll take out the ISD by yourself in no time, and we can sit back and watch the show. Again. Blast, you're so sensitive. And we all know the best starfighter pilots are the super sensitive ones. Oh, wait. They're not. Toughen up already."

Ikoa didn't understand what they were talking about, but Darin must have because his face flushed while he set his jaw, looked at the deck, and walked faster. It reminded Ikoa of the similar experience before their patrol, and it had to all be related to the whole fiasco that had gone down in the Tank. Ikoa put a comforting arm around Darin's shoulders.

Darin immediately and angrily shook her arm off and pulled away, then stalked off with a growl. He altered his direction to one of the side hangar exits, not the one leading to the locker room.

Hurt and confused, Ikoa watched him for a short time but didn't follow.

"Thanks, idiots, that was really helpful," she snapped as she walked past Chopper and Kalre, who had erupted into a fresh burst of laughter at seeing Darin storm off.

"It's not our fault if he takes innocent remarks and goes Death Star over them," Kalre said. "He's got to learn to toughen up or he won't last here anyway."

Ikoa ignored them and continued on to the locker room alone. After she arrived she realized it might have been best that Darin wasn't there: someone had stuck some flimsi notes on his locker with cartoon drawings of explosions and odd joking comments about overreactions, over-sensitivity, and using orbital bombardments to kill an insect. She took them down and threw them out before she went to her own locker.

She was almost done taking off her flight gear when Quiver poked his head in the locker room. He looked restless and uncharacteristically stressed. "Can we talk?" he asked.

Something in his voice caught Ikoa's attention. She took a longer look at him while absently hanging up her flak vest and ejection straps. "Sure. I'm guessing it's about Darin?"

Quiver nodded while he came in. "How did he seem just now? On the patrol?"

Ikoa shrugged as she sat on one of the long benches to put on her general duty boots. "Barely said two words the whole time. You'll have to tell me if that's typical or not."

"Well, it kinda depends," Quiver said softly. "Sometimes it's normal. Other times it's not. This would be one of those 'other times', I'm sure."

"Chopper and Kalre were laughing at him in the hangar just now. He got upset."

With a wince, Quiver said, "Yeah, I saw."

"It happened before our patrol, too, with a couple of the Quake pilots and one of the

mechanics.” Ikoa sighed. “Look, Quiver, like I said, I don’t know what happened and I don’t want to know. Whatever it was, though, people are going after him about it and Darin’s taking it really badly. They’re saying he’s blowing up over nothing, he’s too sensitive, and he doesn’t belong here because of it.”

Quiver shook his head. “They’re wrong. He’s not blowing up over nothing. He was blowing up at me for what I did, but I guess no one else really knew why he was so mad, so all they saw was an out-of-context reaction and jumped to conclusions. Besides me and CC, no one there had a clue about the history and what was even going on to make him lose it with me. And blast, CC had *just* managed to convince him to cut himself a little slack and that he wasn’t dooming the squadron or being a bad squadmate by being sad like Snubber had implied. Now this comes along, and everyone is telling him the same thing as Snubber without even realizing they’re doing it— that he shouldn’t be feeling like he’s feeling and he’s wrong for doing it. I really, really messed up this time.” Quiver started to pace, and Ikoa couldn’t help but feel sorry for him with as hurt as he sounded. It was unusual coming from the easygoing jokester of a morale officer who usually convinced himself that everyone loved him. “How can I fix this when I’m under a restraining order and he won’t listen to me anyway?”

“Um, well...” Ikoa thought for a moment. “I don’t really know. Could you do something nice for him, something that might help make up for what happened? You know, something that will help get his mind off of it all?”

Quiver shook his head. “No. Not really. The damage is already done. I can’t undo it, and any nice things obviously coming from me won’t even reach him without getting squashed on sight.”

“Then if you can’t undo whatever damage was caused, is there a way you can lessen the impact of the damage? Or prevent more from hitting?”

“But that—” Quiver started to say. Then he abruptly stopped and appeared to be thinking hard for a moment before raising his eyebrows. “That might work. Thanks, Ko. I owe you one.” He turned and strode purposefully out of the locker room.

Ikoa raised her eyebrows as well but then smiled a little, closed her locker, and headed off to the rest of her duties. Hopefully whatever idea Quiver had would work out.

The late hour that night found Quiver sitting on a shipping crate inside the hangar, waiting. He really should have been asleep hours ago, but this was the last piece he had to put into place and it had to be done that night. Besides, his quarters felt strange and empty now that Darin was rooming with Lt. Weas, and he didn’t want to face that quite yet.

At last the two Y-wings came through the ship’s magcon field and landed in their subhangar. Quiver stifled a yawn and watched as the two Quake Squadron pilots and their gunners powered down the fighters and got out. They started walking toward the hangar exit.

Quiver hopped off the shipping crate and intercepted them. When he reached the group, he singled out one, Flight Officer Wayals, and said, “Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“As long as you make it fast. I’m tired,” Wayals replied. The other three Quakes continued on without them, and Quiver beckoned Wayals over to a spot in the hangar out of everyone’s way.

“So what’s this about?” Wayals asked when they stopped. “You planning another party in the Tank? If you’re bringing Darin we’d better stock up on *real* bacta beforehand.” Wayals grinned. “I still can’t believe how much he went off the deep end just because you tried to get him to stick around and have fun. Part of me still thinks it’s hilarious, and another part is kind of

scared to cross paths with him in case he thinks I'm looking at him funny and he comes after me."

"Not another party," Quiver said somberly, "but actually that whole incident is what I wanted to talk to you about. I know you've been teasing him about it. That has to stop. Right now. Stop spreading rumors, stop laughing about it with your buddies, everything. Untell anyone you told it to, too. It ends here."

Wayals barked a surprised laugh. "What? You're kidding, right? That was the funniest thing to happen on this floating bucket in ages. Why in the galaxy would you think I'd want to stop talking about it and having fun with it?"

"Because it's not what you think it is." Quiver took a deep breath. Even after saying this part to all the others as well, it wasn't getting any easier. "You all think he violently overreacted to us just being friendly and wanting him to stay at the party, but that's not at all what happened. He *underreacted* to me crossing a line I should never have gotten near, let alone blown past."

Wayals shook his head. "Yeah, I'm not buying it. I can't imagine a line like that."

Quiver swallowed hard. "That's because it's a pretty personal line, and he's pretty private about that type of thing to begin with. He was so mad at me because just a few minutes before, I purposefully made him believe the Imperials had freed his homeworld when they actually didn't. Then I told him I was just kidding. That's why he was angry."

That made Wayals stop and stare at Quiver. "Seriously?"

Quiver nodded. The hot shame boiled in his stomach. Again. He'd do anything to avoid this awful feeling, and usually did.

"That's really messed up," Wayals said disdainfully. "That's a pretty horrible thing to do to someone, actually. Seriously? Wow. I used to think you were fun, Quiver, but if this is the kind of thing you think is fun to do, to your own wingman no less, then maybe I should really rethink that."

The sharp sting of personal rejection was just as bad this time as it was the other times it had happened during these talks that day, but with difficulty Quiver forced himself to swallow the words that reflexively bubbled up in his own defense to make everyone like him again. If he downplayed the situation at all or they thought he wasn't serious about this, they'd go back to believing Darin overreacted. He stood there silently.

Then Wayals's gaze grew sharper. "Wait, so because of you, I've actually been laughing at Darin for caring about his home planet? Great, now *I'm* the insensitive jerk. I'd better apologize to him in the morning."

"Wait, before you do that..." Quiver cut in. "I'm... not sure how well he'll react to finding out I've gone and blabbed something like this to a bunch of people. Like I said, he considers it pretty personal, and he didn't share it with very many people on board. Instead, unless he brings it up himself, can you just let it drop? Completely? As if it never happened? I think it'll be better if he doesn't have to get reminded of it more, rather than having a bunch of people randomly come up and apologize and make him think about it again and again, especially when he starts wondering how they would know to apologize. Does that make sense?"

Wayals considered that for a few moments and seemed to be going back and forth internally. "I don't know," he said at last. "I'm not sure that's the right thing to do. It feels like covering up one mistake with another."

"Can we at least try it my way for a couple days first? Then if Darin doesn't seem to be getting past this, you can all apologize to your heart's content and blame me for this error too. At this point I doubt he'll ever want to speak to me again anyway, so I probably don't have much to

lose.”

Wayals sighed. “Fine. Anything else? I want to get out of my flight gear.”

Quiver shook his head. “No. Thanks.” He stepped back, and Wayals walked off.

A wave of exhaustion hit him as he watched the Quake leave. It had been a long afternoon and evening. Luckily most of the people he had talked to were sympathetic and sided with Darin once they knew the full story, and they had promised to stop teasing him. Predictably, Chopper and Kalre hadn’t been so magnanimous, so Quiver had resorted to blackmail with them. He’d been keeping the information about their last R&R and the unfortunate speeder rental in reserve for when it was truly needed, and this seemed like the right time to play that card. With as angry as those two were at him now, Quiver suspected it would work to get them off Darin’s back.

He hoped so. He would give anything for things to go back to normal.

Corona Squadron climbed out of the simulators the following day. Ikoa had felt odd flying with Darin as her wingman, and it was obvious he was having some difficulties too, but they came through all right. She figured Quiver was probably having a harder time adjusting to flying with Mackin.

Ikoa joined up with Darin in the midst of the simulators afterward. “I think we weren’t doing too badly there toward the end,” she said. “We just needed some time to get used to each other.”

Darin nodded distractedly. “Yeah.” He kept furtively looking around at some of the other pilots as though constantly expecting the next attack on his self-esteem. Nothing happened that Ikoa could discern, except for Chopper and Kalre each giving Quiver a small shove as they walked by him. Quiver didn’t react and continued loitering across the room from the new wingpair, watching Darin like a forlorn pet. When Darin spotted him and narrowed his eyes, Quiver quickly retreated.

Ikoa watched the exchange in concern, but then she blanked her expression and tested out her most casual voice. “So... are things going any better for you today?”

“Huh?” Darin broke out of his offensive defense and directed his attention to Ikoa. “Oh, yeah. There was some first thing this morning, but since then things have calmed down a lot. It really surprised me: based on previous experience I was expecting at least a couple solid weeks of taunting and comments from everyone, but it’s died down really quickly. That’s not normal around here. It’s got to be building up. I’m wondering when it’ll all hit. I’m sure it’s coming.”

The pair followed the rest of the Coronas out of the sim room to the briefing room as Ikoa smiled to herself. Maybe this had something to do with whatever Quiver’s idea had been. “I’m glad today’s been better. Don’t count completely on a build-up and big release later on, though: most of these guys aren’t smart enough to do something like that. They’ll take their immediate gratification, and if they’re not doing that, maybe things are honestly settling down.”

Darin snorted a small, darkly amused chuckle. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Especially about the ‘smart’ part. Quiver in particular.”

“Oh, come on.” Ikoa said it as lightly as she could, but she was instantly worried about Darin’s answer. “You don’t mean that.”

“Actually, Ikoa, this little break away from Quiver is showing me how much stupid stuff I have to put up with from him on a daily basis. It’s... what’s a good word... *refreshing* to not have to deal with it. I’m enjoying flying with you. You *make sense*. It’s so much easier on my brain.”

“But you and Quiver work together so well,” Ikoa prodded gently. “You click with each other.”

“I’m not so sure we click anymore,” Darin replied. “Maybe we’ve run our course and reached the end.” Then they stepped into the briefing room, cutting off Ikoa’s chance to respond. To be fair, though, she realized, she didn’t know what she could have said anyway.

Two days later, Quiver was happy to see that everyone was still not antagonizing Darin. He could tell from a distance that it was helping Darin’s spirits: when Darin landed with Ikoa after their advance patrol that afternoon, Darin was laughing with her about something. A sharp twinge of jealousy bubbled up within the happiness Quiver felt at seeing Darin feeling better.

Mackin walked up to that pair after they had disembarked, and he talked to them for a short time. Darin sobered as Mackin spoke. That was all Quiver saw before Mack turned to head in his general direction, and Quiver made himself scarce.

It was a solid half hour later when Quiver came back into the subhangar looking for his astromech. He couldn’t locate the droid, but he did find something unusual: Darin was sitting on an S-foil of his own X-wing and letting his legs dangle over the edge. He wasn’t doing anything as far as Quiver could tell; he was just sitting there, still in his flight gear, staring out across the hangar and not even looking at the datapad he was holding.

Quiver sighed. He missed hanging out with Thumper so much, and his wingman was having way too much fun flying with Ikoa instead of him. He wouldn’t be able to stand it if his big screw up caused a permanent rift between them.

Anger at himself turned into anger at the galaxy and anger at the circumstances forcing him and Darin to stay apart. Well, to hell with that restraining order. He hadn’t talked to Darin in the last few days, and Quiver was sick of it.

Aggravated into action, Quiver walked a couple steps closer to Darin’s X-wing before he stopped. That got no reaction from Darin, so Quiver went a few cautious steps closer. Then some more. Then some more. Finally when he was about twenty steps away, Darin glanced at him and then resumed his blank staring.

The lack of a glare for the first time since the whole mess began was encouraging. Quiver took a last, careful look around the X-wing’s immediate vicinity to make sure that Darin’s astromech Botch wasn’t nearby to chase him off with an arc-welder again. When it looked like the coast was clear, Quiver walked another couple meters closer and then called up to Darin in a forced casual voice, “Hi, Thumper.”

A moment later Darin answered unenergetically, “Hi, Quiver.”

Darin hadn’t looked at him, but this was farther than Quiver had gotten in days. Quiver decided to keep going for as long as he could. “Hey, um, will you kill me if I come up there by you?”

“Probably not.”

Quiver was willing to take that chance. He slowly moved over to climb up on Darin’s X-wing, then warily approached the S-foil where Darin sat. Still giving Darin a respectable berth, Quiver sat on the associated engine and waited, but a stretch of silence indicated that Darin likely wasn’t going to speak first. He was still gazing at some undetermined focal point.

At last Quiver could stand it no longer. He took a deep breath and said, “I’m really sorry.”

Darin didn’t respond right away. Quiver desperately wanted to move into his comfort zone: talking. He always felt better talking, whether he was explaining away his actions, sharing

his thoughts, asking questions, making a joke, anything. But he bit his tongue to keep it silent. CC had warned him earlier that Darin would likely react very badly to hearing that Quiver didn't remember what had happened that night, and there was no way that would not come out if Quiver started talking, so Quiver decided to follow her advice for once and see if it worked.

Quiver was concentrating so hard on keeping quiet that he almost missed Darin's soft words. "We have that mission coming up. Mack asked me if I wanted to make these temporary flying and rooming arrangements permanent. He told me to think about it and let him know." He indicated the datapad.

Fear settled in a cold knot in Quiver's stomach. Keeping his voice casual was a hundred times harder now. "What did you tell him?" The words still came out squeakier than he wanted.

"I haven't told him anything yet." At last Darin turned to look at Quiver, and his voice hardened. "I put up with a lot from you, and even more when CC is around too. Most of it I honestly don't mind, but sometimes... sometimes it's harder to shrug off. I don't want to be the default brunt of every joke and prank. Every so often it would be nice to get my way, just to occasionally break the routine and make me feel like I actually have some input here. And when I say I need some time alone, I really do mean I need some time alone. I really don't think all that's too much to ask." It sounded like CC's report of what Darin had said in Mackin's office was true.

To Quiver's dismay, Darin wasn't finished, and it got even worse. "And blast, after losing everyone I cared about, it was really, *really* hard for me to open up again, even a little. I thought I was safe with you and CC, and then this happens. I can't even tell you how much that hurt. Not only the trust stuff, not only the renewed guilt that I was broken and wrong for not getting over this faster for the squadron's sake, but... pleesh, Quiver, for a few minutes there I honestly let myself believe I could go *home*. That I could leave all this behind me and go back to a normal life without the constant kill-or-be-killed. Then you said you made it up, and that bubble of hope was gone, and all the stress and anxieties of this life came crashing back in full force, and I just couldn't face the prospect of dealing with it all every single second for the rest of my life."

Quiver hadn't realized all of that, and it made him cringe, imagining what Darin had felt. There was no way Darin would ever want to associate with him again.

Darin continued, "So I start thinking about all of that and I type out one answer for Mack. And yet..." Darin paused, fidgeted, and turned away again. "And yet somehow despite all of that, you've managed to become one of my best friends. Once all the teasing stopped so quickly, I was able to calm down. After I settled down, it started feeling strange not flying with you and not spending time with you and CC. Last night and this morning I didn't know what to do with myself. Rooming with Snubber's not the most comfortable feeling in the galaxy either. I feel like I have to sleep at attention."

Quiver waited for a short time, but Darin didn't say anything further. His stomach churned with acid at all of Darin's revelations. Yes, there was no way Darin wouldn't tell him to get out of his life for good, but regardless, Quiver had to at least try to patch things up. Quiver softly said, "Listen, buddy, I know I really messed up. I know it doesn't seem like it, but I honestly wasn't trying to make light of anything or hurt you. I'm really sorry. I swear it won't happen again. And the other things you mentioned, we can do those. We'll give it a try. It'll work."

More long moments passed with no reaction from Darin. Just when Quiver thought he'd go crazy from the silent waiting, Darin looked down and briefly typed something on the datapad

he held. Darin pressed one final button on it and then got to his feet on the S-foil. As he walked past Quiver to the fuselage, Darin said, "Come on."

Confused, Quiver also stood. "Where?"

Darin didn't break stride and didn't look back at Quiver while he climbed down the fighter's maintenance access ladder. "Help me bring my stuff back to our quarters."

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*The End*

Revision A

2-24-22