

“Convergence”

by Katie Zajdel
thumper@coronasquadron.com
<http://www.coronasquadron.com>

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CC, Quiver and Darin walked down the street together, looking forward to their much-needed R&R. The sky was blue and full of warm sunshine, and the marketplace was filled with friendly voices and the clamor that went with people selling goods on the sidewalk.

Quiver pulled them to a stop at a fruit stand and he and Thumper began looking through the mouth-watering fresh fruit while CC stood at the side of the stand and continued reading about the city on her datapad. Suddenly her eyes lit up and she jerked her head up. “Quiver!” she called in a voice somewhere between mischievous and gleeful.

He looked at her and she beckoned him over. CC pointed out what she had seen on the datapad and he started laughing. “That’s great! Where?” She pointed to another place on the datapad screen and Quiver’s grin got bigger. He straightened up, then asked, “So how about I buy lunch,”—to emphasize, he tossed the piece of fruit he was holding up in the air and then caught it—“and we can pack it up, go out there and make a day of it?”

“Sounds good!” Her grin matched her voice.

Darin distractedly looked up at them from the other side of the fruit stand. “What’s going on?”

Quiver smoothly changed the subject. “I’m buying lunch. Pick out what you want.” He walked over to Darin and began bagging some fruit. A few minutes later they were heading purposefully down the street, though Quiver and CC wouldn’t tell Darin where they were going to have their “picnic lunch.”

They soon reached the outskirts of the city and the countryside started infringing on the duracrete. A couple of kilometers farther on, more fields became visible around them and the breeze picked up a little, no longer blocked by the buildings. Along the way, Darin pointed out field after field that would be suitable for a picnic, but either Quiver or CC always decided against it and kept them going.

At one point Darin wrinkled his nose as the wind brought an odd smell to him that seemed familiar somehow, though he couldn’t quite place it. “What is that?”

“What’s what?” Quiver asked.

“That smell. I can’t remember what it is, but I’ve smelled it before.”

“Probably Quiver’s ego,” remarked CC.

When they rounded a bend in the road, though, Darin saw what was causing the smell and also realized why it was familiar. A ranch was up ahead, with some small buildings near the road and some greyish-brown creatures in a fenced-in area in the back. A sign beside the road

proclaimed the place to be the area's best source for Cracian thumpers.

Feeling suspicious now, Darin stopped. "Uh, guys? Why did we walk all this way?"

Quiver came back and amiably draped his arm over Darin's shoulders, and then used that leverage to push Darin down the street. "We're going for a thumper ride."

"What? Wait, I don't like riding. I'll just meet you back at—"

"Come on, Darin!" CC said lightly. "It'll be fun!" She came back and assisted with pushing Darin until he uncertainly began moving forward on his own again.

"I don't know. . ." he said hesitantly, but by then they were at the turnoff to the buildings.

"This is gonna be great! Wait'll we tell everyone what we did!" Quiver said with a grin as they followed the signs to the office.

CC looked back and winked at the lanky pilot. "Just remember which Cracian Thumper is ours so we come back with the right one. I don't want to explain to Mack why Thumper no longer fits in a cockpit."

"Well, there you go," Quiver answered as he put Darin in a headlock. "If ours gets lost, we just make all the thumpers get into the cockpit until we find the one that fits."

"Yeah, very funny," Darin mumbled as he elbowed Quiver in the side to get him to release his head. Quiver did so just as the door to the office opened and a man stepped out.

The man smiled a big, friendly smile. "Well, hello there! What can I do for you today?"

"We'd like to rent three thumpers for a couple of hours to take a ride," said CC.

"You've certainly come to the right place! We've got the best thumpers around. Would you like to go on your own or have a guide?"

Quiver and CC simultaneously answered, "Alone," just as Darin said, "Guide." The man looked at them in puzzlement, and CC said, "Thank you, but we won't be needing a guide. We'll be fine."

Darin looked at his squadmates like he was even more unsure about this, but the man didn't seem to notice. He just nodded and motioned them toward the back where the stables were. "So," he asked while they walked, "how much experience have all of you had riding?"

"I've ridden a few times," Quiver said.

"I'm about intermediate level," said CC. "I've ridden thumpers before and other similar animals. I love riding."

The man nodded and then looked at Darin for his answer. Darin haltingly replied, "I'm not a rider. I'm no good at it."

His wingman just grinned and said to the rancher, "He's from the Craci System," as if that would explain something.

"Really? Is that so?" The rancher looked back at Darin and smiled. "Then I have just the thumper for you."

The man, who introduced himself as Illo, called to some workers to join them as they walked into a stable. The man led them to a stall where a soft brown thumper was munching noisily on its feed. Turning to Quiver, he said, "You can ride Bullet. Don't let the name fool you—he's very good with novice riders." One of the workers stayed behind to get Bullet ready while everyone else continued on to another stall.

Here they found a mouse-brown thumper with white splashed on its face. It was eagerly looking back and forth at the humans approaching it. "This is Cloud. He'll be a good match for you, I believe," Illo said to CC. Another worker remained to prepare Cloud, and the dwindling group followed Illo to a third stall.

They stopped outside of it, and then a thumper calmly raised its head to look at the newcomers. It was grey, the color of their X-wings, and it stuck its nose over the wall for Illo to pet it. Illo obliged and looked at Darin while he did so. "This guy is called Nova. Perfect for brand-new riders." He smiled and said, "And he's one of my best thumpers. You know why?" When Darin just shook his head, Illo continued, "Because he's the only one here that was born and bred on Craci Four. The others are from various other places, but I got Nova direct from there. You just can't beat native stock."

Nova's ears flicked forward at the sound of his name, and then his nostrils opened wide and he turned toward Darin. Nova started sniffing at him, and Darin uncertainly took a step back.

"Aww, look, Thumper's made a friend," said CC.

"So has Darin," replied Quiver, milking the situation for all it was worth.

Illo laughed easily. "Every so often a Cracian will find their way here, and Nova is always able to pick them out. I think he remembers the smell from when he was a baby."

"What? Cracians have a secret smell and you never told me?" Quiver said to Darin, pretending to look hurt.

"Quiver, I thought you told him to shower this morning," CC said with a mischievous grin.

Darin flushed, and Illo laughed again. "It's nothing that humans can discern. I've never seen any other thumper do it, either—just Nova. His sense of smell must be stronger than most." As if to prove the point, Nova turned his attention away from Darin and looked eagerly, almost pleadingly, at the bag Quiver carried.

"Forget it. That's our lunch," Quiver scolded the animal.

"Do you have linto fruit in there? They love it. If you have any leftovers I'm sure they'll be more than happy to dispose of them for you," said Illo.

The last remaining worker was brushing and saddling up Nova while they talked, allowing Darin to ask some questions. "Do you know where on Craci Four Nova is from?"

Illo beamed. "He's from Lone Srika Thumper Breeders in Envira. You ever hear of it?"

Darin smiled slightly and nodded. "I've been to Envira, anyway. How old is he?"

"Six standard years."

Darin nodded again, trying to remember what he'd been doing six years ago. He knew he'd been in school—what else? He hadn't been flying or even working yet.

In no time at all, the thumpers were ready to go, and CC paid their deposit. Illo told them of the trails beyond the pastures that were reserved for riding and also mentioned a few good places along them where they might stop to eat.

Quiver and CC mounted easily and waited while Darin reluctantly took the reins and nervously looked up at the animal. It looked back at him patiently. "Are you sure this is safe?" he asked, anxiety evident in his voice.

Quiver rode up beside him. "Blast it, Darin, it's a whole lot safer than what you do for a living. Come on, let's go! You'll be fine."

Darin didn't look convinced, but he mounted reluctantly with Illo's help. The rancher adjusted his stirrups, showed Darin how to sit and what the basic commands were, and then let them be on their way. From atop Cloud, CC helped Darin get going, and then they rode off down a trail along the edge of the field, with Quiver and CC never passing up an opportunity to make jokes about Darin and the thumpers.

They rode for about a half hour, and while the ride was easy and quiet, it was far from what Darin considered relaxing. CC just kept laughing at him and telling him it would be much more enjoyable if he loosened up, and he just kept telling her it was easier said than done.

When they finally found a good place to stop and eat lunch, they were all hungry and a bit sore. Darin was grateful to be able to slide off the animal at last. CC tied the thumpers to a tree with some long lines so they could move around, and then the pilots sat down to eat.

The fruit was sweeter than they expected, but they ate until they were full and gave the rest to their mounts, who were all too grateful for the treats. The Coronas' conversation continued, but after a while Darin left the talking to Quiver and CC. He lay on his back and closed his eyes, basking in the sunshine washing over him and the soft grass cushioning him, things that were very lacking on a capital ship, and soon he had dozed off.

He hadn't been asleep for more than five or ten minutes when he felt something gently and curiously pushing his shoulder. Waking up, he opened his eyes and found himself looking up into the deep purple eyes of Nova. Looking closer, he saw that Nova's pupils were a dark blood red, almost black, while the rest of his eyes was the deep purple color. They'd always looked brown from a distance. Darin couldn't decide if he thought it was ugly or kind of pretty.

"What do you want?" he quietly asked the animal, a little irritated. "And whatever it is, it had better be more important than my nap. Just consider yourself lucky that you're not blocking my sun, or I'd be *really* annoyed."

Nova had no immediate reply. He just pricked his ears at the words and cocked his head at Darin as if he was likewise trying to decide what he thought about the human's green eyes. He had not yet lifted his head from beside Darin's shoulder.

"So. We start out at almost the same place. But I guess cosmically speaking, an hour's speeder drive away on the same planet would be considered the same place. And now, years later, our paths happen to cross on a distant world that none of us had even heard of back at our starting point. We obviously took much different paths but ended up at the same place at the same time. Life is a strange thing, huh?"

The thumper's ears flicked as if following Darin's words. The pilot sighed and continued his soft, one-sided conversation. "So you're from Envira. I made some shipping runs out there. In fact, that's where I was coming back from when the occupation started. Did you ever see the hot springs on the west end of town? Those are a big attraction there. Otherwise, I'm sorry to say, your hometown isn't that interesting—just a lot of manufacturing plants.

"I wonder when you left. What's your last memory of the planet? Was it still the laid-back, plugging-along place that it used to be, or were you still there when the occupation started and turned everything inside-out? I hope you left before that, so your last memory of it isn't like mine.

"You ever experience an Animal Day? You and all your friends or herdmates or whatever would have loved it. You should tell Illo that he should—"

Darin realized with a start that his voice was now the only one he heard. He sat up, forcing Nova to lift his head up and out of the way before Darin's shoulder bumped his nose, and he looked over at CC and Quiver. They were sitting silently, watching him with curious, amused expressions.

"Don't let us interrupt," Quiver said, motioning with his hand. "Please, continue."

Darin's face turned red with embarrassment. "How much of that did you hear?"

CC shrugged, looking innocent. "All I heard was one Cracian Thumper talking to

another.”

Quiver smirked at Darin’s reaction. “Come on, Darin. So you talked to an animal. Big deal. I’ve heard you talk to your ship before, and don’t forget that you treat Botch like a sentient person. In my opinion, talking to an animal is an improvement because if nothing else, at least it’s alive.”

CC playfully pushed Quiver’s shoulder and said, “Quiet, you! You’re going to hurt their feelings.” She stuck her tongue out at him and then climbed to her feet and went over to Cloud. She pet his neck and started mumbling things to the thumper about how the big mean pilot didn’t know anything and they shouldn’t listen to him at all. Then she mentioned that if Cloud could convince Bullet to dump the big mean pilot in a puddle somewhere, that she wouldn’t say a word. Quiver just rolled his eyes.

Then CC turned to her two squadmates and said, “Now that Darin and Nova have bonded, let’s ride some more. I didn’t pay to sit out here.”

“I like sitting out here,” Darin said, not anxious to start riding again.

“Thumpers don’t get a vote,” she said with a mischievous grin. She untied the lines and stowed them in a saddlebag, then handed the reins to each respective rider. They all mounted and started off again.

About ten minutes later they reached an open field, and Quiver started looking a little bored. “Can we go faster?”

“No,” Darin said.

“You’ll be okay,” CC reassured him. “Nova’s a really nice, well-trained thumper. He won’t let you fall off.”

“No,” Darin repeated stubbornly. “You guys can go on ahead. I’ll catch up eventually.”

At that, Quiver dug something out of one of his saddlebags and held it up so Darin could see it. It was Quiver’s holocam. “You know, Darin, you looked really cute when you were asleep and Nova was nuzzling you. I’m sure everyone else would have wanted to see you with your namesakes. We just had to take a holo.”

Darin paled. “You didn’t.”

“But you looked so sweet! You had this big, content grin on your face, and we really couldn’t resist. It was such a fitting picture.” Quiver nudged Bullet forward a bit faster.

“What’s it look like?! Let me see!” Without even realizing it, Darin nudged Nova to keep up with Bullet.

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s adorable. You won’t hear the end of it for days.” Quiver gave him a particularly mischievous smirk and went faster.

“Give that here!” Darin again got Nova to come alongside Bullet. He tried to grab the holocam, but Quiver switched hands to hold it on the other side out of reach and then increased Bullet’s speed even more until the thumper was going at a fairly good run.

Without hesitation Darin urged Nova after Quiver and directed him to the side with the holocam. It didn’t look like Quiver was expecting Darin to still come after him, and Darin managed to yank the holocam out of Quiver’s hand. Then CC was right there beside him, easily riding along on Cloud. “See?” she asked. “I told you you’d be okay. This isn’t so bad, is it?”

Now that he wasn’t fully focused on the threat of an embarrassing holo, Darin suddenly realized exactly how fast he and Nova were going. “Aah! Slow down! Slow down!” He grabbed Nova’s shaggy mane, and after a second or two he remembered to pull back on the reins.

Nova obediently came to a fairly abrupt stop as Darin’s forceful pull had commanded.

Darin, however, wasn't expecting it that quickly and was thrown forward a bit against Nova's neck before he could regain his balance. Quiver had stopped a short distance out and was laughing at his wingman's look of panic when he'd noticed their true speed. CC slowed down and then circled back to stand beside Quiver.

Darin settled himself back in the saddle and started looking through the holocam's stored images. He got more and more confused as he went through them, and when he finally reached the last one he looked up and called out, "There's no holo like that in here! Blast it, Quiver, you tricked me! I'm gonna get you for that!"

"It's not there?" Quiver called back, sounding disappointed. "Don't tell me the holocam didn't work! It was such a great picture! Will you pose again for us?"

Darin just muttered to himself, stuffed the holocam into one of his own saddlebags and started Nova walking toward the other two.

He was too far away to see the small, triumphant grin on Quiver's face and was too far away to hear Quiver say to CC in a very low voice, "I'm so glad we took that holo with your holocam. You still have it, right?"

CC nodded slightly and discreetly patted one of her saddlebags. "Yup." Then she looked sidelong at Quiver and added quietly, "You are such a sneak. I can't believe you did that just to get him to go fast."

"You're just upset that you didn't think of it first."

"Yeah," she admitted, "I am."

Darin came into earshot then, and Quiver said to his wingman, "Hey, come on, admit it, that was fun."

"No, it wasn't."

Quiver laughed easily as Darin rode up. "I swear, I don't understand why you'll fly faster than the speed of light but not willingly go faster than a walk while riding."

CC spoke up and said, "You know what we should do, Quiver? Take him to thumper races so he can see that people don't fall off even when their thumpers are going full sprint."

"I just don't trust the situation, that's all," Darin muttered.

"The situation'? Darin, you're riding a thumper. Are you telling me Thumpers are not to be trusted?" Quiver looked disillusioned. "And here I am, flying with one every day. But now I hear that my faith is nothing but a hollow shell!"

"Quiver, you nerf-herder!" Darin said in exasperation over CC's laughter. "Stop it!"

Quiver just smiled and shook his head while they continued riding. "I swear, Darin, some days it's just too easy."

The End

Revision A
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