

“Hard Time”

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

Disclaimer: *Star Wars* is not mine. All characters in this story are original.

The silence was deafening.

In turn, the deprivation— or overload— or both simultaneously— of such a favored sense was maddening.

Oh, sure, the Rebel Alliance claimed they didn’t practice torture. That was the official party line. It made for good PR. But this was proof-positive that they, in fact, *did*.

Flight Officer Quiver Yanilr paced in another tiny circle in the bland holding cell of the brig. His senses desperately needed something to do, and the one alcoholic drink he’d had right before getting thrown in there wasn’t nearly enough to dull them. But he was fortunate to be sharing this cell with his best friend; that and that alone guaranteed he wouldn’t go stir-crazy in there with nothing to do and no one to talk to.

It was well past time to take advantage of that. Quiver stopped, regarded his companion seated on a sleeping berth a meter away, took a deep breath, and yelled, “Aaaah!”

Flight Officer Darin Stanic jumped high enough at the outburst that Quiver considered asking if he was part repulsorlift. Darin snapped his eyes open, and the initial look of panic was instantly replaced by anger when he saw Quiver just standing there, obviously not being maimed or spontaneously combusting. “Quiver!” Darin yelled back. “*What?*”

Impressed that he’d gotten his wingman to actually raise his voice, Quiver took full advantage of the attention. He leaned back against the wall. “I’m bored, and it was too quiet.”

Darin sputtered for a moment, apparently having too many things he wanted to say at once in response. He finally settled on looking at his wrist chrono and said, “We’ve been in here for all of ten minutes, and you’re *bored?!?*”

“Yeah.” Quiver kicked restlessly at the door to the cell. “And you were being boring just sitting there doing nothing.”

“This is the first time all day I’ve had a chance to sit and do nothing, and I’m trying to take full advantage of it.”

“But then it’s too quiet and boring,” Quiver insisted. “Hey, I didn’t tell you what Presden told me in the mess hall today—”

“No. No no no,” Darin cut him off. “No stories. Don’t talk to me. Just leave me alone for a while.” He closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall.

Quiver was nearly offended. “What? Why? Don’t be a spoilsport. Can’t we at least get time moved out of molasses-in-vacuum mode while we’re stuck in here?”

Darin didn’t reply, aside from turning so his back was more to Quiver. He seemed to flinch a bit when a scrape from the altercation, though mostly hidden under his blond bangs, pressed against the wall, but he shifted his position to compensate.

Quiver snorted. “Hmpf. Fine.” The lanky starfighter pilot resumed his pacing around the cell. He and Darin had been roommates— in a less fortified room, of course— for long enough now that Quiver knew how to regain Darin’s attention through loopholes in whatever flimsy

constraints his wingman imposed on him. And he would regain Darin's attention. Few things in the galaxy truly bothered Quiver, but being ignored by his best friend was one of them, especially in a setting like this where it was his only option for entertainment.

Quiver took another deep breath and converted it into verbal wisdom benevolently imparted to the universe. "I can't believe how unfair this is. And adding insult to injury, it means I didn't win the squadron betting pool of the next pilot thrown in the brig. I was so sure it was going to be Slurry. He's due. Great odds on him too. He never comes through for me. But it's still unfair. Those Navy guys started it. I was minding my own business with my own drink when they started being dumb. But do they get in trouble? Do they get thrown in the brig? Noooo. The MPs are all like, 'Let's grab the starfighter pilots and toss them in the brig, 'cause you know those Coronas are always causing trouble so it has to be their fault, not the innocent widdle Navy bus drivers. They would never do such a thing.' And our esteemed Commander Mackin won't believe me, because he never believes me when I say I didn't do something, so he'll just let us rot in here all night when I could be in my nice comfy bed instead, where I have complete control of the thermostat and—"

"Quiver, I swear I'm going to finish what those Navy guys started," Darin growled without opening his eyes. "Maybe then my time in here will at least be justified. What part of 'don't talk to me' did you not understand?"

Quiver scoffed, though he was inwardly pleased that his tactic was working. "I wasn't talking to you, Flight Officer Grumpy. I'm talking to myself. Better company anyway."

This time Darin did open his eyes, and he glared at Quiver. "Another one of your loopholes! You know perfectly well what I meant. You always do this, and it drives me crazy! Right now I really, really wish you hadn't talked me into going and getting a drink tonight. Quiver, listen. In your ramblings to the galaxy just now, you were right: Mack *isn't* going to believe you. But he's going to believe me, or at least he'll be more inclined to believe me. And right now I'm angry and tired and trying to mentally sort through what really happened in that brawl with the Navy personnel and why the hell I jumped in to help you *yet again*. I think in this case those guys really did start it and that might let us, and more so you, off the hook, but your pestering me with your loopholes and everything is making me not want to figure it out and defend you to Mack. So either leave me alone and let me work this out and calm down enough to *want* to get you out of this, or by all means keep yammering on and I can guarantee that we'll both spend the entire night in this cell, and I'm going to be very inclined to physically make you stop talking long enough for me to get some sleep." Darin finally ended his tirade and shut his eyes again.

Quiver stood there for a moment, unsure how to react. His first thought was to make a quip that would tell Darin in no uncertain terms to lighten up, but the little voice in the back of his mind, so frequently ignored when a good joke or prank was on the line, caught his attention long enough to think twice. The little voice argued that Darin sounded pretty serious, even more than he usually did, and maybe an offhanded wisecrack in reply would not be welcome just now. Besides, the little voice continued, what if Darin was right and he could get Quiver out of that ISB-designed, Palpatine-approved brig when Mack finally came to talk to them?

Quiver dug in against the little voice. Even if Darin could perform such a miracle, Quiver reasoned, the cost was too high. That would require leaving Darin alone for an extended period of time, which in turn would drive Quiver mad from lack of interaction and stimuli. What good would freedom be if his mind was too far gone to embrace it?

The annoying little voice brought up the example of long-range patrols alone in his X-

wing, and how Quiver's sanity had survived those relatively intact, depending on whom one talked to.

Quiver's rebuttal was that he had his droid to talk to during the patrols, and that was the only thing that kept the craziness at bay during those infernal things.

In response, the little voice started a name-calling war that Quiver enthusiastically participated in until he realized he was actually calling himself all those names.

Now that the initial irateness was out of the way, Quiver considered his options. Maybe the little voice was right. For once. It was better to get out of the cell and thus be able to go to his quarters and the mess hall and enjoy all of the limited, so-called "comforts" the Rebel capital ship could offer. So he'd have to be quiet for a little while and leave Darin alone. So what? He could do this. It wouldn't kill him. Darin was quiet all the time, and he was still alive. And if Darin could do it, Quiver could certainly do it. No big deal.

Slightly surprised at the realization of the No Big Deal-ness of it all when the prospect had previously seemed so terrifying, Quiver grinned smugly to himself. He mentally settled in to do what Darin did by default: not talk.

The first thirty-seven seconds were occupied by mentally congratulating himself on his insight and accomplishment. The next forty-one seconds were spent thinking about not talking and wondering if he was doing it right and if his brain was supposed to be so wound up during this time and maybe Darin had some tips for how to do it better. But he couldn't ask Darin, so Quiver began pacing again.

The minutes ticked slowly by, each one more monotonous than the last. It grew difficult for Quiver to keep his comments to himself and not engage with his wingman in some way, especially when Quiver fixated on the thought that Darin must know a secret that made this "quiet" stuff easy. How in the galaxy could something so simple be so blasted hard?

Distressed, Quiver opened his mouth to say something to Darin, but the words died unspoken when he caught a glimpse of the closed cell door. A few laps later, Quiver took a breath to ask Darin a question but again stopped prematurely when he spotted the cell's hard, unpadded shelf that served as a sleeping berth. He did some more laps and silently willed Darin to hurry up and figure out what he needed to figure out so this nightmarish purgatory could end. But Darin stayed still, eyes shut, apparently thinking, and not paying any attention to Quiver.

Quiver desperately grasped at anything he could use to occupy his mind during the interminable sameness. He counted his steps. Then he counted them using scattered, half-remembered numbers in alien languages. Then he ran through his list of better-remembered pick-up lines and curse words in alien languages. Then he paced backwards. He made up stories where he, the hero, was the one who made that trench run shot on the Death Star, and because he was a much better hero than reality had provided, he even managed to fly to Imperial Center the day after and capture the Emperor, which ended the war and led to parades and statues and holidays in his honor...

Quiver had just gotten a new class of starship named after him for his wartime accomplishments when the accolades began to get redundant and boring. Besides, what good was a fun story like this if he couldn't tell it? If only he could share it with Darin, it would grow exponentially and get better and better, but as it was, it felt limited and restricted in his mind and lost a lot of its luster and enjoyment.

But maybe he could tell it soon. They had to have been in the cell for hours already.

Except Quiver's chrono reported it had only been about fifteen minutes since Darin had given his ultimatum.

Quiver's stomach sank. All that, and only fifteen minutes had gone by?

He couldn't believe it. This wasn't working. As badly as Quiver wanted to get out of the brig, if he kept up this "quiet" nonsense he was going to explode.

After another thirty seconds he could stand it no longer. He prepared to let out a feral whoop whose sole purpose would be to break the oppressive silence and possibly Darin's last shred of patience, but before he could, the silence was broken by something else. The door to the cell whooshed open, and Commander Mackin stood in the doorway. The leader of Corona Squadron looked distinctly unhappy.

Quiver didn't even care about the sour look on his commanding officer's face. He was just thrilled to have something *happen*.

"This had better be good," Mack grumbled.

Darin had stood and stepped over to stand beside Quiver. The anger had melted from the younger pilot's face, replaced with the soft, reserved friendliness Quiver was more used to seeing on him. Darin caught Quiver's eye with a look of gratitude, and then Darin faced Mack, all respectful politeness and deference that Quiver had never quite mastered. With his messy blond crew cut and constant grin, Quiver never looked the part anyway. "Sir," Darin said, "allow me to explain exactly what happened."

Quiver barely heard the details of Darin's narrative. He was too busy marveling that he had survived the ordeal and realizing that, sadly, Darin was probably going insane every day from hardly talking. Quiver didn't know whether to respect or pity Darin for dealing with such a burden.

He decided that as soon as they were released, he'd buy Darin a drink. That would also be the perfect opportunity to tell his friend about the *Quiver*-class starfighter.

The End

Revision A
6-16-16