

“Permanently”

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Darin struggled to catch his breath and wiped tears from his eyes. “What’re we laughin’ ‘bout again?” he asked through the tail end of his hysterics.

“I have no idea!” Quiver said with glee. The three of them burst out laughing once more.

When he’d gotten a little bit of motor control back, Darin slapped another handful of credits down on the bar and motioned for the bartender in the Bacta Tank to refill their drinks yet again. CC draped an arm over Darin’s shoulder and around his neck, and she leaned off-balance on him. Darin almost lost his balance as well. Why were bar stools so high and back-less? It was too easy to fall off even when sober.

“I like you, rookie!” CC said with a glazed grin. “You buy us drinks, you let us prank you, you put up with Quiver... yer awesome. Hey! You know what we should do?” Her eyes widened, and she giggled conspiratorially. Then she put a finger to her lips, leaned in close to her two best friends and stage whispered, “We need a *secret handshake*! A Secret Trio Handshake!”

“Ooooh, I like that!” Darin said eagerly.

“Shhhh!” CC scolded, looking around furtively. “Secret!”

Quiver snorted, though it was distorted by some light laughter and a gulp of his new drink. “Aw, hell, CC, handshakes are kids’ stuff! We can do better’n that! We’re... us!” He leaned forward clumsily. “Lissen, I know someone. I tell ya, we should all get tattoos!” He beamed, awaiting recognition of his idea.

CC and Darin stared at him open-mouthed for a moment, then they both started laughing again. “That’s awesome!” Darin said.

“Let’s do it!” CC agreed.

“Right now! Let’s go!” Quiver slid off the bar stool, staggered a bit, and finally caught his balance. Darin and CC followed suit, and Quiver led them out of the Bacta Tank and into the MC80’s maze of decks.

He got lost twice, but he finally got them to the quartermaster’s office. The third-shift quartermaster on duty looked up, bored, as they entered, but soon she smiled. “Well, Quiver! Long time no see!”

“Treszel! Good ta see ya,” Quiver replied.

“What brings you here? Need something?”

“I gotta tell ya, Trez,” Quiver said. “We’ve all been... uh...”

“Drinking,” CC supplied helpfully.

“Right! Drinking. We’ve all been drinking, and we decided we wanted tattoos. Matching tattoos. Just the three of us. Will ya do ‘em for us? Thumper’s got money.”

“I do?” Darin asked. “Oh, wait, I guess I do.”

Treszel watched them in amusement, then she motioned with her head behind the counter. “Come on in back.”

She led them to a table that was partially blocked by the equipment shelves, then she took a seat that allowed her a good view of the counter. The three pilots each grabbed other chairs. The quartermaster leaned back and said, "So, matching tattoos. What do you want them to look like?"

The three Coronas stared at her blankly. "Um... identical?" Quiver said at last.

"Exactly how drunk are all of you right now?" Treszel asked.

"Very," Quiver said.

"Very very," CC confirmed.

Darin's eyes lit up. "Hey, guys, we should get an X-wing and Alliance redbird!"

Treszel shook her head. "I won't give anyone any tattoos that are blatantly Rebel. It's for your own safety when you sober up."

Darin's face fell. That would have been awesome.

"X-wing targeting computer display and kill markers!" CC said.

"The words 'I hate the Empire'!" Quiver said.

"I still like my redbird idea," Darin said despondently.

"The words 'Quiver is great!'" Quiver offered.

"The words 'Quiver is annoying!'" CC countered.

"The words 'Drinks are on Darin!'" Quiver said before he was lost to a bout of snickering.

CC punched him in the arm. "Leave Thumper alone!"

"Okay, okay! Guys!" Treszel interrupted. They gradually quieted and turned to her. "Dare I even ask where you want these tattoos?"

They looked at her blankly again. Treszel sighed and said, "All right. I have an idea for a design that I think you'll all like when you're coherent. And we'll put them on your lower calves; that seems to work for Special Forces. Now who's first?"

"Rookie goes first!" Quiver and CC immediately said in unison.

Darin's face fell even farther. "Aww."

"Take your right boot off and roll up your pants leg while I go get my equipment."

Darin was ready to go when Treszel came back a couple minutes later with a box of supplies, a small hand-held machine and a datapad. The quartermaster pointed to a chair immediately on her own left. "Will one of you other two come sit here, please?" Quiver was happy to oblige.

First Treszel cleaned and prepped the area on Darin's lower leg, then she chatted with him and the others while she drew a design on Darin's skin with a stylus. She stared a lot at Quiver's upper sleeve and at the datapad as she did so. When she finally seemed satisfied, she pulled out her inking needles and loaded one into the machine. "Normally this stings a little, but the alcohol might give you an advantage there," she told Darin.

"*There* you guys are!" said a faraway voice. "CC, I've been looking all over for you! You know we go on duty in fifteen minutes?"

Darin groaned; now that the voice had woken him up, he was aware that he had an awful headache. He rolled over, trying to escape it. His bed was extremely hard and uncomfortable, and he was stiff.

“You guys too! Quiver, Darin, come on! Blast, how much did you have to drink last night?” A hand shook his shoulder vigorously.

“Ow,” Darin moaned when that caused his head to throb more. “Go ‘way.”

“Yeah, Ko,” CC muttered from nearby. “Go ‘way.”

“You know what? I should,” Ikoa said. “You all would get in trouble for being late, and it would serve you right.”

“But you won’t,” Quiver mumbled.

“Do your hangovers want me to start banging loudly on metal?” Ikoa threatened.

“No, no, please don’t,” Darin said, forming the words with difficulty. “I’m up, I’m up.” He struggled to sit up, then he blearily looked around, squinting out through the painful light. He was on the floor of the pilots’ lounge, not a bed. Quiver and CC had claimed the old couch beside him. How had they ended up here? What had happened last night?

Darin untangled his limbs to push himself to his feet, but when he brushed against his right lower leg he winced. “Ow!” Had he gotten a new bruise from Quiver and CC kicking him under the table at mealtimes? It was quite sore, and he gingerly lifted his pants leg.

What he saw surprised him initially, but then bits and pieces started floating to the top of his hazy memory. “Um, hey, guys? Did we... um... get tattoos last night?” He hoped it wasn’t a prank.

“Huh? Did we? Oh, wait, yeah, I think we did! *My idea!*” Quiver sounded more coherent. “But I don’t remember what they look like. I think I passed out from the alcohol before I saw them. If Trez duped us, I’ll kill her.”

“You passed out like a wimp from the pain, not the alcohol,” CC informed him.

Ikoa stared slack-jawed at the three of them. “Tattoos?”

Quiver quickly lifted his right pants leg, then inhaled sharply and stopped. “Strine blink, that hurts.” He went more slowly, then broke out into a grin when he looked at his leg. “Hey, awesome! An eclipse showing a corona, like on our squadron patch! But— wait, something looks a bit different about it.”

Darin studied his more closely; he had thought the same thing. It was unmistakable as an eclipse, and there was no Alliance symbol in the center like on the squadron’s insignia, but even beyond that something wasn’t quite right about the corona’s shape compared to what he was used to on their emblem. He wished his foggy brain could articulate what it thought was different.

CC and Quiver were comparing theirs side-by-side. Even Ikoa was standing over them, looking at the results of their drunken stupor the previous night. “This is weird. Everything about the tattoos are identical except for some slight differences with the shape of the coronas,” CC said. “They match really well, but they’re just different enough to be unique.” She smiled. “I like it! I can’t believe Quiver actually had a good idea!”

Ikoa leaned back a bit, still staring at Quiver’s and CC’s tattoos. “CC, you know, I could swear the corona on yours is shaped and brightened to make a ‘c’ shape stand out on it. Non-aurebesh, though. High Galactic,” she said.

“Huh? Really?” CC and Quiver looked more closely, and Darin moved over to look as well. Sure enough, he now noticed the corona was brighter and slightly larger from roughly 30 degrees to about 160 degrees counterclockwise. It was so subtle, though, that it looked like the typical coronal irregularities visible during a total eclipse.

“Oh, wow, I see what you mean! This is even better!” CC’s smile got bigger, and she looked at Quiver. “Does yours have a hidden picture?”

Quiver looked at his, looked up at Ikoa helplessly, then turned back to his. His eyes lit up a second later. “Oooh, it’s a Q! Look!” He traced the telltale brightened shape in the corona’s light but flinched when he touched his tender skin. “Oh, Trez is so cool.” Quiver, CC and Ikoa all turned expectantly to Darin. “So? What’s your hidden picture?”

Darin tried not to let his disappointment show too much. The others had been so neat with those subtle meanings, but his... “Nothing. My corona’s just a bunch of random bulges and streaks.” Besides, neither of his initials would properly fit on a circle.

“Oh, come on, let’s see it. I bet there’s something,” CC urged. Darin showed them, and they all stared at it for a couple of minutes, obviously thinking hard.

“See? There’s nothing there. I just have a plain, normal one,” Darin said. He began to lower his pants leg. The tattoo was still really neat, but to have had a personalized one...

“Darin, wait,” Ikoa said. “Am I imagining things, or are those two bright upper flares meant to be ears and that one side bulge meant to be the nose of a thumper?”

Darin blinked at the words, then aimed his sights back at his leg. It took a bit of imagining, but he could see what she was referring to. The more he studied it, the more he became convinced that he was looking at the rough, distorted profile outline of a thumper’s head in the corona of his tattoo: the two long ears, the shaggy mane, the pronounced forehead, the muzzle, and even the beginnings of its neck. He smiled, and his smile got larger and larger.

“Rookie, that is *awesome!*” CC said.

“See, this is *tons* better than a secret handshake!” Quiver said proudly.

CC whapped him in the arm. “Secret!” she scolded.

Ikoa rolled her eyes. “You’re all about to be late for duty. And remind me never to get wasted with you guys.” She left.

Quiver snorted. “She’s jealous.”

CC and Quiver got up with some initial balancing difficulty, then they walked to the door. Darin didn’t follow at first: he was too busy studying the tattoo. He’d never really imagined himself getting one before, but something about the situation and the people he was sharing this with made it seem like the most natural thing in the galaxy. It was such a comfortable feeling that he forgot about his headache for a few moments.

CC and Quiver paused at the door and looked back at him. “Hey, where’s our little corona thumper?” CC asked.

Darin smiled to himself, put his pants leg down, and wobbily clambered to his feet. He met up with his two best friends, and all three limped off to report for duty.

The End

Revision A

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