

## “When Push Comes to Shove”

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

Darin Stanic eagerly jogged through the kitchen while carrying his bag of donri gear. “Bye, Mom!” he said in passing.

“Darin, wait,” his mother said. “If you’re going to the park, take your sister along.”

Darin stopped halfway to the door when he heard those words, and all his eagerness drained away. “What? No! I don’t want to!”

Ginala didn’t seem to pay much attention to the twelve-year-old’s protest and continued paying the bills at the kitchen table while five-year-old Shiori clung to her arm to “help.” “Too bad. You’re taking her.” Shiori’s face lit up at these words, and she gleefully ran into the next room to find her shoes. Her long black curls bounced on her shoulders as she did so.

Darin dropped his donri bag. “But Moooooom, we’re going to play donri! Just me and the guys. She gets in the way! Why do I have to take her? Why can’t Dad? Why can’t you?”

Ginala glanced up and said sternly, “Because you’re going to. This is not a discussion.”

“This is so unfair!” Darin ranted. “You’re ruining my fun! I don’t want to babysit her!”

“Enough,” Ginala said. “It wouldn’t kill you to be a little nicer to her. You know she idolizes you. Why can’t you try to get along?”

“‘Cause I don’t *want* her to id’lize me. I don’t want her to bother me. I just want her to leave me and my friends alone,” Darin said in a huff.

“Darin,” Ginala replied with a tired sigh, “we’ve been over this again and again. She’ll be your sister for your entire life. You’re not going to get rid of her. Your life will be a lot easier once you learn to get along and be halfway decent to her instead of making her into your enemy.”

Darin gave up on trying to talk some sense into his mother; he was close to being late as it was. “Fine, I’ll take her. If I *have* to.” He heaved an exaggerated sigh and rolled his green eyes before calling in aggravation, “Come oooooon, Shiori! Hurry up already!”

Shiori came running into the kitchen, grinning, holding a small bag of toys and obviously ready to go. “Bye, Mom!” she said on her way past. Then she took Darin’s hand and tried to pull him out the door. “Let’s go, Big Brudder!”

“Knock it off, Squirt!” Darin snapped, yanking his hand away from her. He grabbed his bag of donri gear, brushed his dark blond bangs aside in irritation and followed her out the door.

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“Got tractored into watching Shiori, huh?” Cohen Nuuren asked with a grin when he met them at the park.

Darin glared sideways at his best friend. “Don’t remind me.” They walked to the edge of the small field where they usually played their pickup games of donri, and he pointed at the

ground. "Okay, Shiori, here's your spot. You stay right here and play with your little thumper dolls or whatever they are."

Shiori obediently sat down in the grass. "Will you play with them with me, Darin?"

Darin wrinkled his nose in distaste. "No. I'm going to play donri now."

"After that?"

"No."

"Can I play donri too?"

"No! Now just stay there and don't move or Mom'll kill me." Darin walked away with Cohen to get ready for their game.

While he geared up, when the rest of his friends came, and then when the game started, Darin would periodically glance over at Shiori, but she seemed perfectly content to play by herself in the spot he had told her to stay in. As the game went on, he soon forgot about her.

That is, until one point about halfway through when he heard some faint sobbing and a teary voice calling, "Darin!"

"What is it now?" he asked, grateful that play had been momentarily stopped for another reason. Did she fall down and scrape her knee or something stupid like that? He looked over at her and was surprised to see some teenagers standing around her.

"What? Hey! What are you guys doing?" he said as he walked over to them.

They didn't seem to hear him; instead, the three teenage boys continued laughing at Shiori, taunting her, grabbing her small Cracian thumper figurines and holding them out of reach. She was crying and obviously frightened.

Darin took off his helmet to see better and dropped it on the ground as he strode up to them. "I said, what are you guys doing?" he demanded again.

The boys looked at him in slight surprise, then laughed. "What's it to ya?" one said.

"We're just playing with the little crybaby girl," another replied.

Darin pushed his way into their midst and grabbed a figurine out of the hand of the nearest boy. "Give those back and leave her alone."

"Hey, you'd better watch it, little boy," one of them warned. "Get lost."

Darin could still hear Shiori's muffled sobs, and then he did something he had never thought he'd do. Standing in front of her, Darin glared up at the teen and said, "*No one* picks on my sister. Go away!"

The teens laughed again. "Wow, this dumb little kid thinks he can tell us what to do!" the apparent leader said. He looked back at Darin. "If you know what's good for you, you'll get out of here." He shoved Darin hard.

Darin caught his balance and stubbornly planted his feet. "Are you deaf, you stupid Gamorrean Espo?" he retorted. It was the one of the worst insults he'd learned in his twelve years there on Craci IV to aim at another human boy. "I said leave her alone!"

From off to his side, he heard Cohen approaching, asking in confusion, "Darin? What's going on?"

The teen Darin was talking to apparently wasn't used to being spoken to that way, especially from a kid. He roughly tried to push Darin out of the way, but Darin grabbed the boy's shirt sleeves and held on long enough to prevent being shoved away. Darin was off-balance, though, and the teen apparently was tired of this. Before Darin could recover, the teen yanked his sleeves out of Darin's grip and punched him in the face.

Darin's whole head felt like it had exploded from the impact, and he staggered back

before being caught from behind by another of the teenagers. He saw the bully advancing on him and, terrified, he instinctively kicked the person holding him as hard as he could.

That kick came at the same time Cohen performed something of a flying tackle on the person holding Darin. Cohen and that boy went down, and Darin was spun around again as the boy first tried to hold on for balance and then let go.

A fist connecting painfully with his stomach stopped Darin as effectively as a duracrete wall would have, and he cried out and doubled over. The bully was pulling his arm back for another swing, and out of sheer desperation Darin wildly swung at his face with a fist.

He hit, and Darin didn't think his hand had ever hurt so much in his entire life. It was enough to keep the bully at bay momentarily, even though he didn't seem that affected by Darin's weak, unskilled punch. Darin wondered if he could use the hard donri scoop strapped to his arm to—

The third boy came up and grabbed Darin, pinning his arms to his sides and also standing on one of his feet to keep him in place and prevent another kick. Darin struggled frantically to get free, but he couldn't. All he could do was hear Shiori crying nearby, hear Cohen scuffling on the ground with the other boy, and watch as the bully stepped closer to put an end to him right then and there.

Then he heard one more thing: an older voice shouting, "Hey, you kids! What's going on? Stop that right now!"

The teenagers jerked their heads in the direction the voice was coming from, and then they scrambled away and took off running, leaving Darin, Cohen and Shiori behind. After the boy let go of him, Darin couldn't stay balanced on his feet and fell backwards to the ground.

From that direction, Lirs Tuhnyn, one of their friends with whom they'd been playing donri, nervously led an adult Twi'lek up to the threesome. The Twi'lek demanded, "What were you kids doing, fighting like that?" Then he looked at Darin, and his tone of voice shifted into a softer but still gruff one. "Are you okay, kid?"

Feeling tears sliding down his cheeks despite his furious attempts to prevent them, Darin started to nod but stopped when that movement caused his head to hurt even more. He sniffled, ran a sleeve across his nose and saw that the fabric came away with a red streak. He brought his knees up to his chest, rested his forehead on them and cradled his throbbing hand while he bit his lip hard to stop it from trembling. Darin also kept his sleeve pressed against his nose, hoping it would stop the nosebleed. His stomach, his head, his hand, even his foot... he'd never felt so all-around awful before.

"You kids shouldn't have been fighting," the Twi'lek mumbled. "Good thing your friend here came and got me." Then in a normal voice he asked, "Where are your parents? Do you need me to get them?"

"It's okay, mister," Cohen replied. "I'll go with him to his house. It's not far. Thank you though."

The Twi'lek walked away, and Cohen gently shook Darin's shoulder. "Darin? Come on, buddy, let's go. Can you stand up?"

"Just a minute," Darin managed. He sat still for a short time, trying to catch his wind and will the throbbing in his head to stop. Finally he reluctantly raised his head, keeping his eyes squeezed shut before venturing to open them. Cohen was studying him in concern, then Cohen got to his feet and offered Darin a hand to pull him up. Darin took it and, wincing, rose and straightened up.

Shiori had been hiding behind Cohen, and once Darin was standing she ran the two steps over and threw her arms around Darin's waist, sobbing anew.

"Ow! Shiori, stop—" Darin started to say, but then he broke off and looked down at her. "Are you okay?" he asked more gently.

Shiori nodded with her face buried in Darin's side, and she hugged him more tightly. Darin flinched at the squeeze on his hurt stomach but didn't say anything to her.

Lirs spoke up uncertainly. "You guys all right? What happened?"

"We're fine," Cohen said. "Those Espos were just messing with us. We're going to Darin's house to get him a bacta patch, though. Sorry about the game, but we'll finish it tomorrow. Can you do me a favor and pack our gear up and take it home with you? My mom will pick it up later."

Lirs nodded, then he stared wide-eyed at Darin. "Your nose is bleeding."

"I know," Darin answered, running his sleeve across his nose again and sniffing hard. His mouth tasted funny.

"Did they hit you?" Lirs looked like he couldn't decide if he was awestruck or scared to death. "You're gonna be in so much trouble!"

Darin cringed. He didn't even want to think about that.

"Okay, thanks, Lirs," said Cohen genuinely at the same time he gave the boy a back-off look. Cohen put the dropped thumper figurines into Shiori's bag and guided Darin and a still-crying Shiori out of the park.

Once they were out of earshot of the rest of their friends, Cohen quietly asked, "Okay, Darin, what was that all about?"

Darin looked at him in slight surprise. "You didn't know?" Cohen shook his head, so Darin continued, "They... um... Those guys were picking on Shiori and wouldn't leave her alone. When I told them off, they punched me." He felt a bit ashamed to admit what he'd done. What had he been thinking? He didn't even like his sister! Why had he been so stupid as to try to stand up to bullies for her? Cohen would think he was an idiot.

Instead, Cohen just grinned at him. "Sounds like what I do when someone's messing with Prilo or Hashik."

That allowed a tentative grin to form on Darin's face. "Thanks for helping back there."

Cohen dismissed the gratitude with a wave of his hand. "Anytime. You know that."

By the time they reached Darin's house, his nose had stopped bleeding but he still ached all over. As he limped down the front path with Cohen, Darin said, "I'm just gonna sneak into my room. I don't want my parents to find out."

Cohen turned an incredulous, brown-eyed look on him. "How in the galaxy are you going to hide this?"

"I don't know yet. I'll think of something. I just—" Darin couldn't say any more before Shiori took off running.

"Mom!" she called. "Mom!"

"No! Shiori! Don't say anything!" Darin called quietly and desperately, but she was already through the door.

Before Darin could decide whether to try to run or not, Shiori appeared again, dragging their mother behind her out the door. "Shiori, I don't understand what you're telling me," Ginala was saying. "Now calm down and—" She saw Darin at that moment and stopped. "Darin! What happened?!" Ginala was beside him in an instant. "Are you okay? You're bleeding!"

"I'm fine, Mom," Darin said evasively, but his words were quickly drowned out by Ginala.

"Let's get you inside. You've got blood all over you!" She took Darin by the shoulders and steered him into the house. "I knew that sport was too dangerous for kids to play. I've told you over and over to wear your helmet and face shield. What happened?"

It was Shiori who answered in a tearful rush. "I was playing in the park and some mean boys came over and were being mean and Darin protected me and they hit him!"

Ginala sat Darin down on a kitchen chair and wet a towel. She looked at Darin with a mixture of skepticism and something else Darin couldn't recognize. "This wasn't from donri? This was from bullies?"

"Mom, I just— ow!" Darin yelped as she knelt in front of him and began to clean the blood off his face.

"You're going to have one nasty black eye," Ginala said. "Is anything broken?"

"No. I'm fine."

Turning to Cohen, Ginala asked, "Are you okay?"

He nodded and said, "Yeah, I'm fine." Indeed, Darin realized Cohen hadn't mentioned anything about getting hurt himself; he was only dirty from wrestling the boy on the ground.

"Good. Thank you for bringing him home, Cohen. You're certainly welcome to stay and watch some holovids for a bit while I patch him up. Comm your parents to let them know."

"Okay. Thanks, Mrs. Stanic." Cohen walked into the common room.

"Are you hurt, Shiori?" Ginala asked. When she shook her head, their mom continued, "Then why don't you go watch the holovid with Cohen." Shiori nodded uncertainly, looked at Darin and then followed Cohen.

Ginala finally turned back to Darin. "I'll get some ice and bacta for your eye," she said softly. Then she paused before adding, "I knew all that grouchiness toward Shiori was just an act, and deep down you really cared for her."

She kissed Darin gently on the forehead as she straightened up and went to the freezer, leaving him sputtering in protest, "What? Wait, no, that wasn't an act. I still don't like her! I— I— That hurt! She made me get hurt! You should punish her. You should... um... yeah. Punish her," he finished lamely.

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Darin had turned his light off and had just crawled into bed for the night when his bedroom door opened. The hallway light spilled into the room and silhouetted his father standing in the doorway. "Darin, can I talk to you quick?" he asked.

Darin's stomach sank. He'd been dreading this all day, especially since earlier that evening when his dad had gotten home. He gave a small nod.

The door remained open as Jodeco walked in and sat on the edge of Darin's bed. "Your mother says I'm supposed to talk to you about fighting," he said.

Darin suppressed a sigh and a wince. He'd been right: here came the lecture and the punishment. He'd already told his mom all the details earlier, and he'd heard them discussing it. His dad was so laid-back that Darin couldn't imagine him ever being happy about his son getting in a fight. He hated disappointing his parents, and his gut felt hollow.

Jodeco stole a glance at the bedroom doorway and said in a slightly louder, monotone

voice, "You shouldn't get into fights." He glanced at the door again, then grinned conspiratorially at Darin. "There. That should fulfill my obligations and make her happy," he whispered as he moved closer to Darin and leaned down.

"Now," Jodeco continued in a quiet, serious voice before Darin could ask him to clear up the sudden bout of confusion his dad's actions had caused, "let me ask you something. Did you start that fight?"

"No," answered Darin equally quietly.

"Good," Jodeco said. "Never start a fight. But always finish it." He straightened up but kept his voice at the same quiet level. "Between you and me, I think your mom gave this duty to me now because she wasn't sure what to tell you. Honestly, neither do I. We don't want you to get the impression that we're okay with you running around getting into fights and beating people up, because we're not. But from what Shiori has told us over and over and over again since it happened and from what you told your mom, you were standing up for Shiori and protecting her, and we're proud of you for doing that. As long as you didn't start the fight, you got into that situation for the right reason, and you didn't go too far, you won't be in trouble."

Relieved beyond measure, Darin shook his head. "You don't have to worry about me getting into fights. It hurts too much."

Jodeco chuckled softly and patted Darin's knee before standing up. "Glad to hear it. Good night, Darin."

"Night, Dad."

Jodeco left and closed the bedroom door behind him, and the room was again swallowed by darkness. Darin fought past some residual aches and settled comfortably into bed. He pulled the covers up and nestled his head in his pillow.

Before he had a chance to fall asleep, his bedroom door opened again. Darin opened his eyes, expecting to see his mom or dad. What he really saw, though, was the silhouette of a small girl who was holding an old stuffed animal and quietly making her way to the side of his bed.

"Shiori?" Darin whispered, rolling onto his side to look at her. "You were supposed to be asleep an hour ago. What are you doing in here?"

She stood there beside the head of his bed for a moment, tightly hugging her faded and worn toy thumper. Then she quickly leaned over, kissed Darin on the cheek and hurried out, silently padding on her bare feet. The room fell dark once more.

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*The End*

Revision A  
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