

## The Cripple

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Ensign Riley was very excited. After three boring weeks onboard the GTD Bastion, he would eventually see action. The days of uneventful patrol duties were over. He had heard from Lieutenant Cramer, that the crack pilot Martin "Quickshot" Slotty would arrive tomorrow at 0800. Wherever Quickshot was going, there was action.

Riley just couldn't wait to tell the news to his comrades. He was in such a hurry, that he arrived as first guest in "Carl's Casino." As he really had reason to celebrate, he ordered a beer and leaned his back to the bar, gulping down most of the beer at once. After a heartily burp, he recognized, that he wasn't the only customer any more. An old man was sitting at one of the tables. He was staring in the void before him and drooled on the floor.

Disgusted, Riley approached the barkeeper: "Why don't you tell 'Droollip' to stay out of this place, while people try to enjoy themselves?"

"You should treat him with more respect, boy."

"Respect?" snapped Riley. "People have to DESERVE my respect. People like Martin 'Quickshot' Riley, my idol," he added with a smile.

"You know nothing, son. Your idol wouldn't even live today without this man."

"You are kidding. What could this old man have done to preserve Quickshots life?"

"First of all, this 'old man' is only three years older than you..."

"But he has white hair and wrinkles!" interrupted Riley.

"He was badly injured while saving Quickshot. But let us start in the beginning: 'Droollip,' as you call him was an ensign just as you are now. His callsign has been 'Thunderlip' and that's what I prefer to call him. Well, two years ago Thunderlip was stationed on this ship, in the same squadron as Quickshot. Quickshot however had a reputation, as he already scrapped over one hundred Vasudan fighters. Thunderlip on the other hand was a bloody novice, with no kills. Such as you are now, I might add.

"The Vasudan and Terran aces had some kind of codex of honour. They were trying to find out, who was the best. Challenges were thrown and taken. High Command was not amused and tried to stop this nonsense, but to no avail. The aces still met in freespace to fight one another one on one.

"Quickshot was a good pilot, and still is, but at that time he was arrogant too. That was the reason, why he was not the squadron leader when he got an escort order. The flight group consisted of ten pilots in Apollos. They were ordered to escort two freighters. Near their route the Vasudan ace Drom Shrill Trak was lying in wait. He contacted the flight group and issued his challenge to Quickshot. It was only a short jump away. The squadron leader insisted in Quickshot staying in the group because he feared an ambush for the fighters. Furthermore Drom Shrill Trak was known to always have a wingman by his side, to help out if things looked grim.

"But Quickshot was a hot spur and not to be stopped. He wanted to show his skill and broke from the formation. Even threats from the squadron leader were in vain. Quickshot made the jump and let his comport open.

So the rest of the flight group, with the rookie Thunderlip among them, could hear what was about to happen next. The dishonourable Drom Shrill Trak indeed had his wingman with him. Every time Quickshot came in position to shoot at one of his opponents, the second was firing at him. Quickshot was in real trouble. But his squadron leader still believed this to be a trap to lure the escorts from the fighters away and ordered everybody to stay. Everybody obeyed. Everybody except Thunderlip that is.

“Thunderlip was fully aware that he was far from being a good pilot. But he reckoned that Quickshot was doomed without help. Crying ‘It ain’t fair’ he too jumped to the battle area. And not a moment too soon as it turned out. Due to medium damage on his ship, the first systems on Quickshots Apollo started to fail. As Drom Shrill Trak moved in for the final blow, a barrage from Thunderlips’ ship caught him. Thunderlip had caught him off guard. But now the angry Vasudan turned to meet the new threat. His dogfighting skills were more than a match for Thunderlip, but Quickshot got the time needed to finish off the Vasudan wingman. As he then turned to take on Drom Shrill Trak, he saw in terror what had happened to Thunderlips’ ship. It was burning and drifted steerlessly through space. In hot rage he jumped at the ship of Drom Shrill Trak. It was a long intense fight, but at the end Quickshot prevailed. By the time it was over, a new terran squadron arrived, called to the spot by Quickshots and Thunderlips squadron leader. Thunderlip was barely alive when they brought him back. He was badly burned and virtually every bone was broken. But he made it. He now is what you see there. But Quickshot underwent a change too. He recognized that he would have died without the heroic sacrifice of Thunderlip. He no longer was hunting for personal fame and glory. He learned to be accountable. NOW he is a good pilot.”

The barkeeper did not tell Riley that HE has been the squadron leader who was responsible for this sortie. And that he was stripped of rank for this incident.

Riley looked thoughtful at Droollip/Thunderlip. Then his comrades entered the bar. On seeing Droollip/Thunderlip one shouted: “Urgs. That disgusting old man again.”

“Shut up at once!” barked Riley. “You should treat him with respect. Not many people know it but he really deserves it. . .”

[Edited by “The Eishtmo” Quinn Lazerus]