Into the deadly wild

Another long trip over. Taranae sighed as she sat at the rear of the *Fortitude*, her personal pursuer enforcement ship. The trip to Naboo to see her mother was always a nice break from routine, and this time had been no different. It felt strange every time she had to dress differently to blend in on the planet. The last thing she needed was for her mother to be under scrutiny for harbouring sith. Now she was back into her uniform as she wondered how long the trip back to the Anchorage would take. She had had to divert as recent reports detailed enemy activity on her chosen route for her return, so she decided to head towards Hoth and then plot a direct course for the Anchorage from there. The ship was on autopilot and she was taking a brief rest from the console, reminiscing about her younger days and how she became the person she was now. If it hadn’t been for that chance meeting with brimstone on the surface of Ziost, she would never even have left the relative safety of Naboo. She was only a short time from reaching her navigation point just outside of Hoth’s surface and rose from her reverie, heading back to the cockpit. A sudden klaxon sounded and she raced the rest of the way to the front of the ship. Not knowing what to expect. She knew the sound was a proximity alert, but had no idea of what the ship was in close proximity to. Leaping into the pilot’s seat, she eyed the console and started to punch buttons, bringing up the report. A large asteroid appeared on her view screen and seemed to be closing on the *Fortitude* at a very rapid pace. Thumbing a switch, Taranae took the ship out of autopilot and grabbed the controls, wrenching the ship to the right to try and steer the ship away from the asteroid’s collision course. On the viewer, the object loomed large and she was unsure of being able to move the ship out of the rock’s path in time. A bone jarring impact confirmed her worst fears, and the ship shook and spun like a leaf being tossed around in a hurricane. Taranae struggled with the controls which failed to respond. Brining up another display, she tried to judge which part of the ship the asteroid had hit. Just then, another klaxon sounded and a loud hiss became audible from the rear of the craft. Turning, her face became a mask of dismay as she realised that the impact had taken the shields offline and caused a hull breach. The cold air of space now began to hiss and seep its way into the interior of the vessel, replacing the oxygen inside with a cold, unforgiving vacuum bereft of any breathing capabilities for Taranae and she knew her time was now limited. If she failed to find a way to stem the flow of freezing air, she would die as asphyxiation took its toll and she froze in her own ship.

The ship spun wildly out of control as Taranae realised with horror that her trajectory had taken her into the gravitational pull of Hoth. She felt the ship accelerate as it began its downward descent and the planet loomed large as life in her viewport as it passed time and time again as she struggled to the back of the ship, looking for a way to ensure her oxygen level kept within safe levels and she could still breathe. Grasping a panel that covered one of the circuits and judging it to be thick enough for her needs, she opened it and tore it from its hinges. She held it out in front of her as she slowly approached the break in the hull as she began to gasp for air. As she neared, she could feel the pull of the vacuum outside and she let the panel go. It instantly flew at the break; the outside pressure pulling it tightly against the bulkhead. The hiss decreased to a very low pitch. The warning klaxon stopped, letting her know that life support was functioning properly again and supplying her with much-needed oxygen once more. This time it was not being lost to the vacuum of space. Taranae breathed a sigh of relief. Heading into the rear of the craft whilst trying to remain standing proved a little difficult, but eventually she found the hatch she was looking for and opened it, grabbing a welding torch from its confines. The ship was accelerating rapidly, and she knew that if she did not act quickly, her only chance of survival would be gone. She ignited the welding torch and began to weld the door panel patch onto the bulkhead, thus sealing the leak. The progress was slow, but eventually she shut off the torch and inspected her handiwork. The patch was weak but it would maybe hold as she put into action the next part of her plan.

She raced forwards again and jumped into the pilot’s seat. Glancing at the controls, she could see the schematics that flashed up reporting that the support strut on the side of the ship had been smashed off by the impact. So the only thing making her spin had to be the impact and the inertial thrusters which were obviously damaged. Reaching under the console, she removed panels and began to rewire the controls, trying to bring the thrusters back online. As she touched two wires, she saw a spark and the ship bucked. She breathed a little more easily now, as she noticed that the yaw of the ship had changed and she twisted the wires together. Rising and sitting in the seat once more, she gave an experimental test of the controls and sure enough, they responded. Slowly but surely she managed to wrestle the ship’s controls until she had cancelled out the spin, but she could in no way halt her downward trajectory towards the planet’s surface. As she watched horror-stricken, flashes of light and flames began to form on the front of the ship and she knew that the craft had entered the atmosphere. The controls seemed to act of their own accord and she found that no matter how hard she tried, the ship was not going to respond to her touch again. She was thrown to the floor as the bucking of the ship became too strong for her to remain standing. The heat became intense due to the entry being made at the wrong angle, and Taranae began to wonder if the ship would break up and disintegrate. By some sheer force of luck, it seemed to raise its nose and the heat lessened as the atmospheric shielding began to take the brunt of the heat as they descended rapidly. Getting back to her feet, Taranae managed to pull herself back into the seat and stared worriedly through the window. The ship was through the atmosphere now, but the worst was still to come. Clouds obscured the view below as the ship plummeted towards them. The terrain underneath could be rock, mountains or snow and Taranae hoped for the latter. If she hit a snow field, her chances of survival would be greater than if the ship flew into a mountain range of which there were many littering Hoth’s surface. The clouds came up to greet her and all became grey as they wrapped around the ship, causing all visibility to be lost. Nose down, the *Fortitude* eventually began tocease its shaking. Once again Taranae gripped the controls and tried to pull up the nose of the ship. They responded slowly, and she could feel the nose lift, but the angle was still too steep. There was no way she could land at this speed and trajectory. She braced herself as the clouds parted and the sight she was greeted with made her heart leap. Everywhere she could see was covered in snow. The whole area seemed to be one giant snow field and she estimated that there must be around twenty feet of snow to cushion the fall. The control panels behind her began to fizz and spark as the speed and pressure threatened to rip the hull apart, and as Taranae prayed, the snow greeted her with open arms. The nose of the craft sank deep, seeming to hit a hard surface below the snow. The ship dug deeper than expected, and barrelled along the ground at a fantastic rate, kicking up snow and creating a huge rut behind the stricken vessel. The ship slowed its momentum after a while and came to an abrupt halt as it smashed into a huge rock hidden below the surface. Taranae’s last view was of a snow covered viewport as she was thrown forwards from the force of the impact and into unconsciousness as her head hit the control panel.

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The sun shone over the landscape, illuminating the form of a heavily damaged ship, half buried in the snow that had eventually halted its forward momentum. A huge, natural formation in the rock below the snow had finally stopped the craft as the nose hit it at alarming velocity, even though the ship had been slowed significantly beforehand as the snow acted as a makeshift parachute. The rear smoked and the support strut was missing, somewhere in the depths of space now after being smashed off in the collision. In all directions the snow laid thick and white, with animal tracks crossing it in places. The indigenous Hoth life had obviously taken interest in the scene at some point, but seeing nothing worth staying around for, they had wandered off to do whatever it was they normally did on this harsh, forbidding planet.

Groaning, Taranae opened her eyes and felt the immediate pain from her foot. Trying to move, she found her ankle trapped under the console of the ship and blood on her face. Lifting her hand, she attempted to locate the source of the blood and found a gash above her right eye. She was lucky; any lower and she could have been blinded. As it was, the cut was insignificant and a quick wave of her hand with the help of the Force closed the wound. Looking around the cabin, she located a long, strong piece of metal that had broken free in the crash that she could use to lever the console off her injured limb. It was a little far for her to stretch, try as she may, so once more the Force aided her as she channelled it and the metal rose into the air and travelled across the space between them until it landed at her side. She knew she had to preserve her powers, as if she used them too often, it would be a while before she recovered enough to use them again effectively. Grabbing the metal, she wedged one end under the console near her foot and braced herself as she used the other end to raise the heavy object. As the console raised, the pain in her foot intensified and she let out a scream worthy of any wampa roar. Outside a nearby tauntaun that had strayed too close bellowed in fright and fled at the sound of her voice. She dragged her foot from under the wreckage and shuffled backwards to get herself clear.

On closer inspection, the ankle was broken and a large cut was across the entire foot where the weight of the wreckage had cut into it. Taranae sighed as she realised that she would have to use her reserves of Force power to ensure she could at least stand to be able to have any chance of surviving this terrain. She waved her hand across the break and screamed once again as the bone clicked into place and began to knit together. A moment or two later she inspected the damage. The cut had scarred and that worried her. It meant her Force powers were very weak and she would have to be careful if she was to survive. She relied on her powers as well as her proficiency in combat and this would make her more susceptible if she had to fight. She stood, tentatively at first, but she was able to put weight on the ankle. Making her way to the rear of the cabin, the damage didn’t seem as bad as she first thought it would be. The strut was gone and would need replacing and some of the circuitry was fried. She would have to find materials to repair the strut and rewire all the circuitry, but she would need parts for that too. Casting her mind back, she recalled the last trip she had to the surface of Hoth. Somewhere on this planet, secreted in an icy cave was a crashed, abandoned star destroyer. She recalled that some guards from the ship still patrolled the ship, lest it fall into rebel hands, but all in all it was her best chance to find the materials she needed to repair her ship.

Digging around in the back of the PES, she searched for her arctic survival backpack that she still had left on the ship from her previous visit. It took her a while as the crash had scattered items all over the area, but after a while her hand closed on what felt like the strap of the back under a large pile of broken circuitry. Standing, she eyed one of her most prized possessions and opened it. An abundance of fur met her eyes and she took out a tauntaun fur jacket, trousers and boots; the perfect survival clothing for this specific planet. The tauntaun were native to Hoth, and had learned to survive its harsh climate with their thick, warm fur. But also where there were tauntaun, there were wampa, their natural predator enemies. Not even Jedi or Sith desired to meet one of the beasts, and they were to be avoided at all costs. As Taranae pushed her arms through the sleeves she recalled that last visit and shivered. It had almost cost her and her team their lives, but luckily they came away unscathed. Donning the trousers and finding her pair of gloves at the bottom of the backpack, she looked around for her visor which she eventually found among the debris. She checked she had everything and as a last thought, picked up her scanner. It would be invaluable in finding the crevasse that led to the cave where the destroyer was located.

She made her way to the front of the ship once more and reached under the part of the console that had not collapsed. After a lot of fumbling around, she felt a small switch and flicked it on. A red light flashed on and the sound of a beep began at one two second intervals as the light pulsed on and off. This was another chance she had, and was happy to see her distress beacon was still operational at least. Crossing to the communications console, she tried to broadcast.

“Mayday, mayday. This is Taranae Rhode of the pursuer enforcement ship, the *Fortitude.* I have been in a collision with an asteroid and have made a crash landing on the planet Hoth. My co-ordinates are-“she glanced at her scanner, “thirty-two degrees North, twenty-one degrees East. Please respond.”

She waited for any response, but getting none after some time, she set the message to repeat and headed towards the exit.

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The door slowly opened, its movement hindered by a build- up of snow. Taranae emerged, her shoulder heaving against the door as she used all her strength to force her way through. She squeezed through the remaining gap and stepped into the deep snow, her feet sinking a few inches into the soft covering. She dared to glance at the rear of the ship and nodded to herself as she at least saw what she expected to see. No strut and smoke coming from the rear where the circuitry was fried. It was a difficult fix, but not impossible as long as she could get the parts she needed. The *Fortitude* had been through a lot worse and survived, she’d get through this too, Taranae was sure. She closed the door behind her to make sure no animals decided to make it their home while she was away and stared at her scanner, attempting to get her bearings. From the readings she received, the cave was due west of here. She glared at the vast expanse of snow between her and her destination as though it was her mortal enemy. She knew that the trek would be a tough one, and if the weather became worse, she would have to find shelter quickly. The snow fields did not account for the weather at all. She set off west at as brisk a pace as the snow would let her, casting glances around for any tauntaun in the vicinity. If she could lure one close enough, maybe she could hitch a ride to the cave. It would save her both time and energy in the long run, which she may need for when she arrived at the cave.

A couple of hours into the journey, Taranae finally spotted the crevasse in a huge wall of ice. The skies had darkened and snow had begun to fall. She was thankful that she would soon be able to take shelter as the storm picked up and the snow became horizontal, covering her visor. She had to stop time and time again to wipe the snow from her face and even through the furs, the cold was beginning to bite. Reaching the gaping opening in the wall of ice, she pushed inside and was greeted with warmth. She marvelled at how it could be so cold outside, but once you had just a little cover, the warmth hit you like a wall. She shook herself free of the accumulated snow on her clothes and removed her visor. Her face was reddened where it had not covered due to the abrasiveness of the wind and snow and was flecked with snow which was rapidly melting. She took down her hood and placed the visor in her backpack. Shunning the furs she wore, she also stashed them in her pack and hid them in a small crack in the wall behind an outcropping so they could not be seen from the main access point. It was warmer here, and if she needed to fight she would need to be able to move freely instead of being covered in heavy furs.

Her breath caught in the air as she moved steadily forwards, casting her eyes this way and that for any sign of movement. She knew once she reached the cave on the other side of the crevasse that the remote guns on the destroyer would begin to track her, so she had to come up with a plan to get past them. The path through continued for quite some time, but she reached the cavern without an encounter with man or beast. The area was exactly how she remembered, a cavern totally covered in ice with the object of her quest directly in the middle. She was still awestruck at the sight of such a huge ship hidden in the cavern where it had landed; a hidden base of operations for Imperial forces. The ice had formed around it in time and it had been shaped and fashioned as it covered the ship so it would remain hidden, even from enemy scanners whilst under the ice. As Taranae stepped forwards, she sensed movement from the ship and ducked quickly behind an icy boulder. The guns had sensed movement and tried to track her. She was glad now that her powers had returned on the long trek here and she decided to give the guns something to aim for. Hopefully this would cause a distraction so she could sneak inside whilst the guns and the ship’s inhabitants were occupied.

Gesturing, Taranae targeted a large ice outcropping on the far side of the cavern and it broke free, beginning a small collapse. The guns immediately trained on it, something Taranae knew they would do after her previous visits. At the sound of the cracking ice, movement came from the ship too. Around twenty soldiers rushed from the rear towards where the small landslide was happening. They had no idea they were searching in the wrong area for whatever had caused it as Taranae silently moved forward and slipped into the ship through the small hole she knew was on the lower hull near the other end of the ship. Pulling herself up and through the gap, recollections of her past visit came back to haunt her. Looking around, she realise that this is where she and her sister had been brought for torture and electrocuted with electrical bolts. She quickly passed the area to where she knew communications was located and glanced around the door carefully. There was one man in uniform, fiddling with the control panel in the centre of the room. His back was towards her, so she crept up behind him and struck him neatly on the side of the neck with the edge of her palm. The man slumped to the ground, unconscious and Taranae breathed a sigh of relief that she knew teras-kasi. Kneeling, she looked under the panels for anything that could be of use to her and found numerous open wiring circuitry. She began taking only the parts that she needed, having memorised which wires and boards would get her ship operational again. She realised she needed something to carry all these things back to the ship and her mind recalled a room with supplies and a gravsled. Taranae took what she needed and carefully headed back to the opening. She dropped through and crept towards the area where she knew the sled was kept. Reaching a hangar bay, she placed the parts on the ground and covered them as best she could. She pulled herself up so just her eyes crested the edge of the sill into the hangar bay and looked around. The guards were not present, obviously still searching the area and she pulled herself into the hangar bay. She could see the gravsled by a wall to the left and she sprinted across to it. As she reached it and her hand grasped the controls, a voice behind her made her start.

“My, my. What do we have here? I sense you are strong in the Force and I presume that was your little ‘diversion’, yes? Now I ask myself, ‘What would she want with a gravsled?’”

Taranae slowly turned to the sound of a lightsaber igniting. The face she met was battle-scarred and had a malicious grin. The zabrak spun her lightsaber in her hand and asked again “Why do you need a gravsled, little thief?”

Taranae sighed, “I don’t want to fight. I just want to get parts for my ship and leave. Please don’t anger me or it may be the last thing you do. If you attack I will defend myself, and I don’t want to hurt you.” She finished the last sentence with a grin as her hand came to rest on her lightsaber.

The zabrak glanced at the position of Taranae’s hand and grinned.

“I could kill you before you even ignited that.” She declared.

“The question is, dare you put that to the test?” Taranae replied.

The lightsaber hissed as it swung towards Taranae. She gestured and her foe’s arm stopped in mid swing.

“Now don’t tell me you didn’t see that coming,” Taranae remarked as she thumbed the switch on her own lightsaber and brought it up in an arc from her waist, decapitating her enemy. “I did.”

The lifeless body dropped silently as Taranae turned to the gravsled again, ignoring her deceased opponent. Climbing aboard, she switched on the controls and guided it out of the bay. Returning to the parts she had hidden, she loaded them aboard and keeping herself and the searching troopers apart by skirting the other side of the huge destroyer, she made her way to the rear where she found just what she was looking for. The ship had been damaged as it landed on Hoth, no doubt due to being tossed about by the storms that frequented the surface. This part had been ripped open, exposing bulkheads and supports. One of the detached supports looked a perfect fit for her ship. She concentrated and the piece levitated and gracefully moved onto the gravsled. Making sure it was secure, she headed towards the exit of the cave, ever watchful for the troopers returning to their posts.

The crevasse was only just wide enough to allow the passage of the sled, and Taranae made slow progress. Eventually reaching the end, she hopped off the sled and retrieved her belongings from behind the outcropping. She was dreading the return trip, but she knew her life depended on getting the *Fortitude* operational once more. Dressing once again in her furs, she set out on the arduous trip. The weather was kind to her and she was met by glorious sunshine as the sled exited the crevasse. As she travelled, a herd of tauntaun scattered in all directions as she neared and she cursed. Typically they were around when she didn’t need a ride. It was slow going with the sled over the soft snow, the sled not being known for speed, but she made steady progress and was soon back at the crash site. She was surprised to find someone in furs checking the ship as she approached, and she felt inside her clothes for her lightsaber. As she drew nearer and the figure turned around and dropped his hood, she smiled in relief. Kelly Mendes, the Battle Team Leader of Apostles of Syn stood beside the ship, waving.

“Am I glad to see you, Kelly.” Taranae said. “This will make my job a whole lot easier.”

“A passing patrol picked up your beacon and message Taranae.” She replied. “We honestly thought you’d been taken, or worse killed by Jedi.”

“You should know that I don’t go down that easily.” She smirked back. “Does Callus know you’re here?”

“Yes the Dread Lord sent me. He wanted you back as soon as possible and in one piece, so he sent me as soon as we found out. She’s damaged pretty badly, isn’t she?” she said, indicating Taranae’s ship.

“Nothing we can’t sort out together,” She replied “but it would have been difficult on my own.”

Kelly opened a communicator. “Ok I found her. We’re repairing the ship and we’ll return in it. Hang around while we carry out repairs then you can be our escort, Vanessa.” She spoke into the comm.

“Is my sister up there?” Taranae asked, shocked.

“Yep. She insisted. And she can be *very* persuasive. Callus said she could come just to save his ears.” Kelly laughed.

“Ok I got it.” Came the voice over the comm. “Tell Tara she needs to be more careful. I want her back in one piece so I can kill her for being an idiot.”

“Calm down, Vanessa! Think yourself lucky she’s alive.” Kelly said and closed communication.

“Ok Kelly, let’s get this sorted.” Taranae said and moved the gravsled close to the rear of the ship. Help me attach this strut then we can start on the electrics inside.”

“Oh, that’s where the smoke is coming from. I did hope you hadn’t had a fire on board.”

“No. I was lucky in that respect. Just fried circuitry; nothing I can’t fix.”

The two friends hoisted the strut into place, concentrating hard. As Taranae held it in place, somewhat shakily, Kelly made sure it was secure by means of the welding torch and connected everything else. Then they went inside, taking the wires and circuit boards with them. Taranae shut off the homing beacon, its purpose now fulfilled, and thanked whoever was listening that she had it installed. She joined Kelly to the rear of the ship and they chatted as circuit boards were set into place and wires were connected.

After a few hours, Taranae sat at the controls and started the *Fortitude*. Hummed and both she and Kelly smiled at a job well done.

Opening a channel, Taranae spoke to Vanessa. “Repaired and on our way, Nessa. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Great! I’m starving up here. I wonder what’s for dinner. Meet you soon, sis.”

The ship lifted off gently, snow sloughing off in all directions as it released its icy grip on the hull. Taranae angled the thrusters and took the ship away from the planet of her nightmares at long last. As the ship disappeared into the clouds, a lone tauntaun gazed quizzically skywards at the vanishing dot.

THE END