

Tunca Survival

There was always something a little harrowing about being brought into a dangerous area; the sort of feeling that made her guts churn just enough to be uncomfortable. She wasn't at the helm of the ship that was bringing them in; couldn't see the land or weather outside. It all left a lot of room for uncertainty, and some primal part of the brain didn't enjoy that prospect in the slightest. The only sure thing, at least according to their intelligence and the voice of the gunship's pilot over the passenger-area speakers, was that their landing would be devoid of enemies.

She felt Keira's hand squeeze hers reassuringly. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," the Zeltron nodded, voice thick with muted apprehension. "Just the usual jitters."

"I wasn't aware that Miss Arronen could *get* jitters," Cora mused quietly to his husband.

Ruka glanced at the Pantoran with a sort of imploring '*talk quieter*' expression, catching Qyreia's glance over her shoulder as he did so. She definitely heard. For his part, Cora did seem to take note as well and instantly went quiet, despite that the comment was a compliment, if a little off-handed. Their craft shuddered and shifted underfoot, causing them to put their hands out to the walls or the speederbikes strapped down in the center or the compartment.

"Sorry for the turbulence, folks. We'll be putting down shortly. Confirmed we'll have a quiet landing; no hostiles in sight."

The reassurance was at least mildly helpful to Qyreia, though she managed to keep much of it tucked away. Even so long after her medical scare and her reacceptance of her preternatural Zeltron-isms, there were still plenty of days she wished that she could go back to being able to suppress it all. But then she thought about all the times it had brought her closer to Keira and Ruka and so many other close friends since, and it sort of evened out. Her eyes went to her wife, the pale skin hidden by layers of the same sort of winter clothing the Zeltron wore.

She swallowed back another nervous pang as she felt the familiar shudder as the ship dipped low to land on what might have been called ground. Though, as the doors opened to an expanse of white, that moniker seemed ill-suited for what was ostensibly just a lot of ice.

What was more surprising was just how dark it was outside, with the repulsor jets whipping up a steady knee-high dust of snow just visible from the ship's internal lights. Beyond that, it would take some time for the group's eyes to adjust.

Ruka nudged the Galerian Quaestor as they looked into the icy gloom. “You sure you want to come with us?”

“I thought *you* were coming with *me*,” the Zeltron shot back, smirking despite how her eyes belied her still-roiling internal emotions. “If you’re getting cold feet now, they’re not gonna get any warmer out there.”

“I do believe she’s challenging us,” Cora chuckled, his noble upbringing showing through in the momentary comment.

Ruka grunted in resigned acceptance and, almost cockily, flicked his hand toward his speederbike, undoing the ratchet straps with an invisible, simultaneous touch. *Just* his bike though. “Don’t take too long getting your bike, *crovja*,” he mocked amiably as he turned on his bike’s repulsors and eased it out onto the frozen ground.

“Cheeky mother fracker,” the Zeltron muttered with a grin before turning her gaze to Keira. “Shall we?”

The Force user waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t try and drag me into this. He’s *your* work-husband.”

He’s also technically my boss, but who kneels for who? Qyreia kept that thought internal, rolling her eyes and smirking as she zipped up her coat against the biting air outside that fought against the warm air of the gunship interior. Mother Nature was winning, though. She finished putting her cold weather outfit into its proper order, manually unstrapped her speederbike, and eased it off of the vessel and into the cold dark outside. Of course, when Keira looked back to check on her wife’s progress, Qyreia couldn’t help but add some dramatics, lamenting the “hard labor” and “if only I had some *space magic* to do it *for me*.”

It was hard to tell which of the three Force users rolled their eyes hardest. Counting Cora into that was almost unfair to him though, as he seemed to delight in teasing his Mirialan husband. The light reverie was promptly broken though by the radio-voice on their communicators from the pilot.

“First village is about a hundred fifty Krill north. You sure you don’t want us to just drop you off there?”

“We’re sure,” Qyreia responded. The four of them had been over the plan in detail several times already. “We’re hoping to run into any stragglers from Zainab; maybe put down a frack-monster or two while we’re at it.”

The pilot understood a perimeter patrol when he heard it. From behind the cockpit canopy, they could see him offer a friendly, lazy salute as the engines’ noise picked up. “Roger that. *We’ll be on this frequency if you need anything. Be advised though: there’s a helluva snowstorm rolling in.*”

“There a direction on that?” Qyreia asked as the ship gradually lifted from the ground.

“You’ll see it once we’re gone. Trust me.”

The air whipped up ever more snow, and the quartet put their goggles over their eyes to keep the ice shards from snapping against their vulnerable eyes. The doors to the gunship shut, and the lights that had just bathed the area in illumination quickly faded away along with the roar of the engines.

For a moment, as the snow dust settled, all that could be seen was darkness.

It was a long minute before the group’s eyes properly adjusted. When they did though, they were met by a spectacle that couldn’t be seen in any of the cities.

Stars. Innumerable stars, almost as clear as if they were on a starship out in space, filled the night sky. Without the light or air pollution of the urban districts, there was nothing to block out the spectacle to the naked eye. Off in one corner of the horizon, faint blurs of green waxed and waned against the inky blue-black of the sky. Off in another part of the horizon though, the stars were missing, and the sky seemed far more gray than the rest of the expanse.

“I believe that’s our blizzard the pilot spoke of,” Cora said, shifting the goggles onto his forehead. There was a certain but subtle envy from the others in the group, noting pointedly how his cold weather clothes seemed... *thinner* than his counterparts’.

Pantorans, Qyreia thought, reminding herself of Leeadra, who was likely also partaking in the arctic shenanigans. *I hope she’s okay*. “We should probably get moving.” She mounted her bike, Keira hopping in close behind. “And no offense, but if Cora can drive, it might be best if he be up front.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because no amount of your Force powers will protect your thighs from freezing.” Qyreia patted the chassis of her vehicle. “I’ve got heating blocks on mine, and some nice wind-screens to give me at least some protection.”

Cora put a gentle hand on his husband’s shoulder. “And I *am* better predisposed to the cold.”

Ruka’s expression said there was a light, humorous jab mixed into the comment — an inside joke for the Mirialan that enjoyed so many things *hot*.

“Ay ay, okay.” He put an arm around the shorter Pantoran’s shoulder. “Though I’m not sure how much of a windbreak you’ll make.”

Keira huddled close to her own near-human windbreak, keeping her voice low while the two men loaded onto Ruka’s bike. “Will *you* be alright?”

“So long as you’re keeping me warm like that, I’ll be astral.”

The little bit of positivity made a sizeable boost in their moods as they took off. The heating system on Qyreia’s speederbike made for slower going than it otherwise would have been, but it was a small price to pay for preventing frostbite in the frigid arctic conditions. In any of their other normal uniforms or armor, the few minutes outside of a climate-controlled environment would have already spelled doom for their fingers, if not whole limbs. Even with their cold weather attire, they could still feel the chill biting at the fringes of their senses. The equipment wasn’t there for comfort, after all; it was for survival.

Riding across the dark expanse created its own sort of challenges. The high-beams on the prow of the mercenary’s craft helped to spot some of the larger moguls — lumpy deformities in the otherwise pristine-white ice — but the bleached landscape allowed so much more to go unnoticed. If it weren’t for the map displays and just a little help from the Force user sitting behind her, they might have fallen down a bottomless glacial crag, or sped over an unsuspecting dropoff. And of course, the big gaps had to be crossed.

Ruka and his disposition toward the Force meant that everyone got a *lift*, followed by him jumping across. While Keira and Cora were perhaps only mildly bothered by being lifted, the Zeltron was not remiss in giving him a *look* before heading off again.

All the while, the lightless dark void loomed larger. Closer.

“*Won’t be long now,*” Ruka said steadily over the comm. Qyreia looked back over her shoulder just long enough to see him motion off to their left.

He might’ve been referring to the snow that the engines kicked up as they sped over the snow-covered ground if it weren’t for the flakes streaking through the cones of light from her high-beams. They all knew about the cloud, for frack’s sake. But as the streaks grew more and more numerous, it wasn’t long before the darkness, ambiently lit by stars and aurorae, almost suddenly became a sheet of white in front of their faces.

Even Qyreia knew they had to stop.

Against the buffeting wind and drawing their speederbikes closer together, they huddled in conference.

“How far are we?” Ruka almost yelled over the all-too-literally white noise.

Qyreia pressed clumsily at the GPS screen with her thick gloves. “Still another thirty clicks out,” she half-shouted back. She squinted against the snow, briefly taking off her goggles as though that would help her see through it better somehow. “Gonna be a helluva walk.”

“How long do you think it’ll last?” Keira asked, her features still covered by her goggles and scarf.

“It moved fast, but it was a big cloud... Hours? A day? I dunno, I’m not a karking weatherman.”

Ruka nudged her shoulder. “Will you be alright if we keep going?”

“It’s not my first time on an ice sheet, Ru.” She paused, feeling mildly uneasy as the white haze around them. “Don’t suppose any of you have picked up any of those *things* on your radar?”

Cora balked, confused. “Radar?”

Ruka just rolled his eyes. “The Force,” he sighed. “And no, *knegiceza*, I ain’t felt anything.”

“Me either,” Keira chimed in. There was a certain hesitance in her voice, if only perceptible to the Zeltron that knew her so well. Gloved hand grabbed gloved hand and squeezed. Under her face covering, Keira managed a soft smile; something her wife could faintly feel in the air.

Cora was turned away, peering into the dense snowfall, but the Mirialan saw the gesture. Were it not for their goggles, Qyreia might have seen the direction of his eyes, but each of them were all temporarily lost in their own little moment. With the storm raging around them though, that moment could only last so long.

“So should we make camp then?” Cora suggested through a particularly harsh gust in his face, touseling the few pink strands of his hair that poked out from under his hood.

“We need to at least try to keep going,” the Zeltron shot back tersely, perhaps too much so. “We need to finish this perimeter sweep so we can get on to Zainab.”

She looked at Ruka for backup, but if not in the slump of his shoulders, then she could feel his protective apprehension radiating off him. Sometimes it seemed like he did so more for her than for his own husband. Her shoulders squared almost instinctively, and a hand rested atop the rifle slung across her chest. The Mirialan wasn’t about to get away with it so easily. The movement seemed to snap him mentally away from the sentiment though, and he silently acquiesced.

“Okay. But how we gonna go about that, *ccqeea*? Ride?”

“Two on the warm bike,” she told the Proconsul. “We’ll hitch yours to the back of mine. Other two will walk. We’ll rotate to make sure people stay warm.”

“Did you perchance have someone in mind for the first shift?” Coras asked as the mercenary made for her bike, pulling out a cable from the emergency kit and a thermal blanket from her survival kit.

“Keira first. You and Ruka can draw straws or icicles or whatever the frack you want to decide.”

While the men quietly and politely argued who should get on the speeder — Ruka leveraging his martyr complex and Cora his resistance to the cold — the lady Force user approached the laboring Zeltron and drew close enough to be heard without having to yell over the wind.

“I can do this, you know.”

Qyreia kept close but kept working as she hooked up one end of the towing cable. “I know.”

“I’m not fragile.”

“I know...” She wasn’t *trying* to avoid her wife as she shuffled over to the other speeder, trying to find someplace to hook it to before just deciding it could be looped around the forward outrigger.

“Then why does it feel like every time some bit of hardship crops up,” she half-snarled through her familiar lilt, “you put me on the bench? *We share* the burden...!”

“*I know!*” Qyreia nearly barked back, checking her volume when she saw how close the men still were, however muffled their voices might be by the wind. She clamped down harshly on the cable and drew Keira aside. “I know, really. I haven’t forgotten. And I know how tough and strong you are, but at the same time I have to *worry* about you whenever you’re out in the poodoo with me.”

The thick glove made it awkward when the Zeltron pawed — however briefly, even nervously — at the belly of Keira’s jacket. Her hand instantly withdrew, but it allowed some of the Force user’s fire to abate.

“But you also know as well as I do that in these situations, we don’t have time to argue every point,” she continued with an almost sad air. “So just as much as I expect you’ll carve through anything that tries to get close to *me*, I need you to let me be just a little bossy if it means I can protect *us*. Okay?”

Keira was about to answer when a flinch from her wife told her, as much as the shift in the Force, that Ruka and Cora were done discussing. Or arguing. Whatever they wanted to call something so civil. Instead, the half-breed merely nodded as the men stepped into the circle.

“Cora will ride first,” Ruka said with only a mildly gruff tone to the revelation. “Said that each pair should have at least one person that was familiar with traveling over snow and cold.”

Qyreia smirked behind her face cover. “So you’re going to guide us then?”

“No,” he grumbled back as he hoisted Cora onto the bike. There was a certain humor in his voice now. “You are, *knegincezami*.”

It was in no way an insult to Ruka, but at the same time Qyreia was momentarily paralyzed as much with a small burst of pride as much as the worry of responsibility. *Frack, can my emotions just not karking do this to me right now?* She managed to compress her reaction down to a nod, however curt and bashful, while she and Ruka helped Keira get seated in front of Cora.

“Pardon the intrusion, Lady Keira.”

“By all means, Mister Ya’ir. You’re doing wonderfully at blocking the breeze that was going up my back before.”

While the two chatted politely, Qyreia and Ruka shared an understanding look, expressionless behind their cold weather gear but no less translated by familiarity and the Zeltron’s empathic link. With the riders mounted, the walking pair checked their gauges and began the dull process of walking through the whiteout, Keira directing the speeder several paces behind them, with the empty speeder in slow and steady tow. The headlights on the lead bike offered at least some solace to Ruka and Qyreia as they stepped across the unfamiliar terrain, piercing the frozen fog just enough to see the ground directly in front of them, though their silhouettes played madly against the haze as though beams of darkness cast from their very bodies.

Any talking was done through their comms. It let them keep their voices down, in case the caxettes had advanced hearing, but was also easier to hear through both wind and thick headwear. Unfortunately, it took only a few brief conversations for both pairs to get tired of listening to the others’ talk, so the practice quickly died away.

Those on the bikes could talk; those walking just had to put up with the silence of white noise.

On and on they trudged, the going slow for the sake of caution. The ground itself was a sturdy combination of permafrost and hard-packed snow, with only the occasional drift of piled powder causing any real break in their step. Ruka would occasionally put up a fist — a classic hand sign to *halt* — and look around as though he were sniffing out the air. *Sniffing out the Force, more like*, Qyreia mused as she watched the spectacle. *Though he’d be frackin’ hawt with some dog ears, I bet. Like them boys in the Eastern Expanse graphics.* She chuckled a little, arms hugged tightly to her torso where she could afford to. While she wasn’t quite cold, the chill had started to work its way through to the inner layers, fighting the insulated body heat she was working up.

“S’not there for comfort,” she reminded herself, feet moving as she saw Ruka make the motion to continue forward. “S’ta keep from freezing.”

Once they were moving again, though, she was fine. Not comfortable, but fine. A friendly nudge from Ruka kept her from drifting off into monotonous complacency.

“You alright, *crovja*?” he asked, leaning in to be heard without having to yell.

“Fine. Just tired. Cold.” Her hands flexed around her rifle. “Adrenaline worn off since the initial push. Now it’s just... *this*.”

His head seemed to bob under the snow gear, stuffed thick with all his hair. “I can put you on the speeder. I’m sure Cora or Keira would be fine with taking over.”

She shrugged. “Nah, I’m fine.”

“Qyreia...”

“Don’t *Qyreia* me. This isn’t some martyr complex thing.”

“Mhm.”

“Alright then, fracker, why don’t *you* go take a break?”

“Because I’m not tired.” He angled his goggles her way. “But you are. So...”

“So go eat a bantha dick. Not all of us can just soak up space-mana like it’s an energy drink shot.”

Qyreia’s feet tromped faster, getting ahead of the source of her irritation, leaving Ruka wondering why she was so touchy. A tug at the back of his mind served as a reminder from his husband: *let her go*. She would be fine. She wasn’t totally out of sight, and none of the Force users could sense any danger. Not yet, anyway.

‘*Are you alright?*’ Qyreia heard somewhere between her ears and her conscious mind. Keira usually warned her with a look or something, but in the snowstorm, that was a little difficult.

I’m angry at Ruka for being an overbearing schutta like he usually is. Needed some space.

Is that why you stormed on ahead?

Yeah.

Can you slow down so I can see you?

...Fine.

Thank you, dear.’

The Zeltron took a half step, pondering turning around versus just slowing her gait as she looked over her shoulder toward the white ball of light that, on the other side of

the curtain of snow, was the two headlights on her speederbike. Her next step was at the nearing its apex when there was a sharp feeling in her head — a leftover link from the not so distant mental conversation with Keira — immediately followed by Ruka's looming shadow and the bark of his voice, incoherent for the brief moment she heard anything.

As her step came down, realization dawned a hair's breadth before her foot found nothing but air.

Wind and snow were forgotten as every bodily reaction was to reach, claw, and scramble for purchase. Chunks of age-old ice broke under heels and gloved fingers as the merc less slipped and more fell down into the cold, dark crevasse that, for how tight it seemed to squeeze to either side, let her slip further and further down. Everything was just a dark blur, flashing the pale streak of light against the blizzard above, then dark again.

Then everything just *stopped* with a jarring, grating sound of metal on crushed ice. Qyreia's heartbeat was pounding like a hummingbird's wings, her body paralyzed as much by the awkward, twisted position she landed in as she was by the utter dread that if she moved, she'd go right back to falling. Her scarf, hat, and goggles were all so jumbled from the fall that she wouldn't even have known what direction she was facing if not for how her rifle jammed into her back.

Frackpoodookarksleemo...

Her ears rang; a sort of high pitched whine that was most definitely from her head slamming into the ice wall once or twice. Her breath was shallow but fast — the only way to keep up with her racing heart.

Okay. Okay, Q ol' girl, don't move. Don't move, you don't know how deep this goes.

Because this wasn't her first time on an ice shelf. She also knew just from watching nature shows that sometimes the cracks and crags went down deep, bored and twisted from melt and drift. People disappeared. She didn't want to think if it was because the holes were so deep, or because the speed of their fall shot their viscera through apertures too small for someone to fit through whole.

Whatever was in front of her face seemed to turn a lighter shade of dark momentarily, and could faintly hear voices, muffled and distant, but definitely her companions.

She breathed.

Her fingers clung tight to the ice as she inhaled, carefully.

“He-... H-... *Heeeelp!!!*”

Her body shifted slightly, and her muscles all seemed to flex simultaneously, but she didn't drop any further. There was a lot of muffled noise then, and she could hear the ice grit that they kicked over the edge falling onto the surface of her parka.

When she felt her *everything* seem to slip away from the ice, she nearly had a heart attack until she realized that the unseen grip was taking her *up*. *Don't move. For the love of karking god, don't move or they might lose concentration and drop you or something.* And she wasn't sure how lucky she'd get on a second fall.

Arriving on the surface was disorienting. She wasn't sure how they were orienting her until she felt the solid ground on her back and the weight of her rifle, still on its sling, lay awkwardly at her side. Then there was a rush. The sounds were loud and crisp, especially once Keira decided to stop trying to *fix* the hat and just pulled everything off of the Zeltron's head. It was nice to breathe properly again, even if it hurt to suck in the sub-zero air.

"Qyreia? Love, where are you hurt? Can you speak?"

Cora cautiously put a hand on Keira's shoulder. "Perhaps give her a respite to..."

Keira snapped a snarl at the Pantoran, protective and yet somehow controlled for its feral demeanor. The Firrerreo was showing in her; rare given her usually stoic demeanor. Cora backed off though, huddling close to Ruka while the pale woman attended her wife.

"I'm okay," Qyreia groaned, trying to right herself, but held to the ground by her Force user. "A bit banged up, but I'm not completely destroyed."

"Can you stand?"

"I think so." It was awkward and rife with more aching noises from the Zeltron, but with a little manual help from Keira and Ruka, she was back on her feet. Examination of her clothes left something to be desired.

"You have tears *everywhere*," Keira said with a modicum of frustration.

"I don't feel any holes though." She contorted slightly to try and see, ending up seeing her rifle and picking it up. There were quite a few gouges in the metal, and the body would need a complete refinishing, but it looked like everything was where it should be. "Baby, you just saved my life in a way I never want to experience again."

"Cute," Keira monotoned as she finished her inspection. "I don't see any holes though, since you asked."

"I'm good to keep going..."

"You are getting right on the speeder," Ruka said firmly.

Qyreia looked through the snow that managed to lodge itself in her wind-whipped hair at Keira, who only gave her a look that said there was no arguing the point. Sighing, she looked around for her head coverings. “Fine. Where’s my goddamn hat and…”

Keira handed them over, still tightly in her grip from before.

Almost embarrassed, Qyreia reached out and took them. “Thanks.”

“You have frost on your eyelashes,” she observed.

“And my ears are screaming from the cold. So wha-?”

“They very pretty,” Keira continued, stepping close and pulling aside her face coverings to kiss the Zeltron. In the background, Cora and Ruka found something else to do for a moment. When the women’s lips finally separated, Keira let out a quiet, shuddering sigh. “I was worried I lost you for a second. And… over something just… so stupid.”

Whatever indignation Qyreia might’ve held onto after the kiss melted away. She knew that feeling all too well. Her arms wrapped around Keira’s shoulders and squeezed tight. “It’s okay,” she whispered, voice shuddering less from the cold than from welling emotions and the come-down from the sharp adrenaline spike of the fall. “We’re still here.”

“Not to cut in,” Ruka said from his position off to the side, “but this storm’s still going, and your ears are starting to turn *redder*, as if that were possible.”

“He’s right,” Keira muttered, easing out of the embrace that she was so enjoying. “Come on. Let’s get you on that bike and put your headgear back on.”

Nodding, the Zeltron shuffled over toward the speederbike, more and more aware now of the soreness imposed by the fall. She put on her hat, her scarf to cover her face, and once on the bike itself pulled up the parka’s hood for good measure. The goggles stayed off a moment longer. She liked her pretty frost-caked lashes and the awkward feeling of how they briefly clung together when she blinked. Meanwhile, the Force users gathered around to debate their next move.

“I think we should perhaps take a rest,” Ruka said, mostly not-looking at Qyreia when he said it.

Keira peered out into the dark. “How far away are we from the village?”

“Not far,” the Zeltron said thoughtfully. “We should keep going.”

Ruka turned on that. “You’re hurt. You need to rest.”

“And I am,” Qyreia shot back, almost sarcastic as she patted the bike’s chassis. “I’m on riding duty now.”

“You know what I mean, *crovja*.”

“And he’s right,” Cora chimed in. “If not because we’re your friends and we’re worried, then... Oh, Qyreia, don’t make us play rank or position over this. Please, you need to rest properly.”

They could still see her eyes, and so were witness to the sharp look she gave the Pantoran. “There’s no ‘us’ in the rank game here, Cora. You’re not the Proconsul.”

“But he’s my husband. I get a say...”

“You get a *say* in what happens within the walls of your *fracking* household,” Qyreia snapped, fighting back a wince in her ribcage as she spoke. “Your nobility Sithspit stopped the instant you left Kias’s space, and you sure as *kriff* aren’t *co-Proconsul* with him.”

Memories of Eldar flooded back. Of Cora trying to play the diplomat, but instead merely ending up trying to be the talking head in a conversation with a religiously patriarchal society. Memories of cutting the Pantoran off during negotiations because she saw that happening. Because the Sardinians needed to know who was actually in charge, and they could either deal with that fact or get karked.

Cora, however, was as near to livid as she’d ever seen him. His pretty features weren’t nearly so obscured by clothing as everyone else’s, but even so, his emotions were apparent on the wind.

She needed to cut him off yet again. “The village is at most another hour away. You can all walk, or we can pair it off; I don’t care. But I’m going. We have a job to do, and more people are dying the longer we sit around here measuring our egos.” Her eyes, framed in ice, went to Ruka. “And if someone wants to *fight* me over it, he’s damn well welcome to try.”

Keira, for her part, stepped defensively close to the Zeltron. It was Qyreia’s battle — her challenge, even — but much like Cora supported Ruka, she supported her Red Qek. What was more, while Ruka might’ve been able to catch on, she knew it all too well from one of the Zeltron’s chief complaints at the end of any day in the Brotherhood: it was one mundane against a whole bunch of Force users that too often came with a superiority complex. They both saw it happen when they were in Naga Sadow, and again to some extent in Arcona. If Qyreia felt cornered, things could get messy.

Whatever he did or did not notice though, Ruka seemed to relent. He might’ve argued the point if it were just him and the mercenary, but it was a belaboring point when it became a team battle. And he didn’t like the look of how close the Zeltron’s hand hovered near her hip.

“Alright. We’ll keep going.” He looked to his husband. “We’ll do a full switch, ay? You walk with Keira and I’ll hop on with Qyreia?”

There was a palpable sink in the stomach that could be felt when he mentioned Keira's name; a feeling that the Zeltron quickly suppressed, but not before it could be quietly picked up on by the group. The women shared a glance and the merc relented without a word. Cora seemed no less perturbed by the prevailing attitudes, but he likewise acquiesced, watching as Ruka mounted the bike behind Qyreia. The red woman took a moment to don her goggles, wiping away the frozen condensation on her face before becoming faceless once more.

Some expressionless glances were exchanged, and they set off, Cora leading just ahead of Keira. The ice crag that Qyreia had fallen into was, despite its depth, not exceptionally wide, and the Force users were easily able to simply jump over, while their mercenary throttled the lead speederbike to clear the short distance before losing any sizeable altitude off the ground or losing the trail bike.

Once beyond the crag, the journey resumed as before. Ruka was as mercifully quiet as the enemy was in their patrol sector. After so much time spent on edge, their nerves were starting to fray. Looking at a chrono — the only way to tell the time between the snowstorm and the perpetual dark of the northern winter — only showed how late it was. That only made the feelings worse. There was a plan to hit the main settlement, for sure, but there was still the need for containment; a need for what the four of them were doing right now. The snowstorm grinding them down to a crawl didn't help.

After some time spent in silence with such worries turning over and over in their heads, Ruka finally broke the silence, amiable but careful of the hairpin trigger Qyreia seemed to be on.

“Ay *crovja*, are you okay?”

“Sore,” she grumbled back, legs clenching the bike to maximize her ability to suck up thermal energy from the heating block. “Not gonna lie, that fall karkin' hurt.”

He smiled under his scarf. It was friendlier than he'd expected, but it wasn't exactly what he was talking about. “Fair. You fell a good ways down.”

“How far d'ya think? Couldn't see anything at the time.”

He shrugged, a little anxious to get back to his original question. “Thirty meters? Fifty? Ay, I dunno. That's not what I was asking about anyway; not that I don't care...” There was a pause, a nervous one on his part until he realized that Qyreia was waiting for him. “You uh... you been nervous since we got out here, especially with Keira, and not in any way I ever seen you before.”

The Zeltron sort of hunched over in her seat, shoulders shrinking in protectively. Not hostile though. Ruka tried again.

“You don't need to tell me, ay. But if there's something I can do to help...”

“Now’s... not a good time, Ru,” she said quietly, audible only for Ruka’s proximity over the wind and the sound of the engine beneath them.

“Because they might hear?”

“Because of what might be out there,” she said hesitantly. She looked through the fog of ice and whined, frustrated and conflicted. “Those *things*. They look for... Their mind frackery is extra potent for parental types.”

The Mirialan huffed a chuckle. “Never really took *her* for the motherly type.”

Qyreia’s posture shrank a little more; enough that he could tell something was off.

“Wait... *Knegiceza*, I’m not sure I understand. Are you saying... you? She?”

“She is.” Even with the thick gloves, he could see how tightly she gripped the handles of the bike. “We went and got the procedure done a couple weeks ago; just long enough to get a positive test back to say that the embryo took.”

It was almost as though Ruka’s mind broke — a lightbulb that popped and was still fizzling on some residual electricity. On the one hand, news like this was supposed to be happy! Yet, it was so out of the blue. He knew how Qyreia liked kids, and there were times where her protective streaks even came off as motherly, but she’d never *said* she wanted kids or to get pregnant. Well, it seemed that pregnancy was given to Keira this time, at least. But then there were the caxqettes. They had a way, a *thing* when it came to this. Suddenly the Zeltron’s poignant worry all seemed to make more and more sense.

“*Qyreiami*. I know you probably don’t want to accept help or anything, ay, but I want you to know that we not gonna let anything happen to you or Keira or... Well, you know.”

For most of the ride thus far, she’d kept as much distance from him on the seat as she could. Now though, her posture eased and her back pressed gently against his chest.

A gloved hand patted his knee. “Okay, Ru.”

And with that, they were silent again, but with much of the previous electricity between them subsided, a more pleasant aura filtering between them as they rode along behind Keira and Cora. As before, it was easy to lose track of time without watching a chrono, and it seemed that during the brief spurts that they did, time moved egregiously slow.

It came as some surprise, some time later, when the Force users all seemed to perk up, Keira and Cora readying themselves, and Ruka dismounting to stand next to the speederbike and the Zeltron.

“What is it?” Qyreia asked over their comms.

Keira's voice was the first to reply. *"We can sense life up ahead. It doesn't seem hostile, but it's wary."*

Ruka put a hand on Qyreia's. "Stay here."

"You kiddin'?" The merc flipped some switches, and an angry whine circulated from between the outriggers. "This thing's got cannons. I'll slap anything that's stupid enough to come into sight."

That gave the Mirialan a chuckle. "Not that we can see much."

"Well, then I've got this." She hefted a metal cylinder with some familiar-looking switches and knobs. It gave Ruka some pause.

"Where did you get one of those, *crovja*?"

Before he could answer, Cora's voice came up over the comm. *"They're coming closer. We're going to back up to the bikes."*

"Roger, Cora. I'll be sure not to shoot you."

"Much appreciated," came the somewhat disbelieving response.

Damn, I didn't know Cora could be sarcastic, Qyreia chuckled to herself. As the shapes of her wife and the Pantoran reappeared from the snowfall, she slipped her rifle from her lap and steadied it on the windshield. Ruka and Keira both gave her a funny look as they awaited these mystery beings.

"What? I can shoot in two directions now." She flexed her hand and swung the nose of the bike left and right, opposite of her rifle, for visual example.

It only got her rolled eyes, not that she could see it behind the pair's goggles.

There wasn't much time for additional humor as several shapes started to materialize from the blizzard in the light from the bike. The human-sized blobs coalesced into people, dressed largely in thick skins and furs and toting an assortment of weaponry that was reminiscent of the Keadeans on Eldar: a firearm with one meshed with a bow for another, and spears for the other two. *Probably a slugthrower. Power packs aren't fond of prolonged cold.* As she looked them over, seeing little in the way of technological amenity, she hoped they at least spoke Basic. Some of the Selenian groups at the furthest reaches from the cities stuck to old dialects.

"Who are you?" one of them said loudly as they approached closer — a tall man with narrow eyes that looked to be analyzing them cautiously.

At least it's Basic, Qyreia thought, breathing a sigh of relief. "We're from the Citadel. The geothermal station at Zainab is under attack by..."

“We know,” the man interrupted, pausing to translate quickly for his companions. “We know Zainab. Old things, many kill.”

Ruka leaned close. “Think he’s talking about the gods?”

“Probably the monsters,” Qyreia replied, loud enough apparently that the man heard her.

“Yes! Monster!” he said with mild excitement, happy to hear the word he’d wanted before.

“Have you seen any around here?” Qyreia continued, pantomiming with hand signs as best she could. Simple things like that saved her back when she worked on Kashyyyk; more than she liked to admit.

“No. No monster.” He pointed back into the blizzard behind him and his companions. “No power too. Cable dead.”

“Power?” Keira mused. “All the way out here?”

“There are a few remote stations,” Ruka explained, familiar with the details from the mission analysis. “Places to send messages from when batteries die, or for survey team camps.”

Cora seemed to alight with hope. “Was there any such survey team here?”

“No. Leave morning.” He pointed up into the pitch black snow above the beams of light, showing a grin. “What here morning.”

Only Qyreia chuckled, drawing the attention of her counterparts, but an appreciative counter-laugh from the Selenian speaking to them. When she realized she was the only one of her group making any noise, she translated. “He’s saying ‘what passes for morning around here.’ It’s a joke.”

“Yes. Good happy in dark time.”

“Yeah,” she said, understanding a little too well. “We need all we can get these days.”

He quickly translated the conversation to his friends, speaking so swiftly and in such a flowing tempo that it completely overrode the broken Basic he used, then motioned to the Arconans to follow. “Come. Village close. Rest. Storm go soon.”

There was some hesitance in following the complete strangers. It wouldn’t be the first time if these Selenians turned out to be cultists of one of the many *‘deities’*, posing as allies or just innocent bystanders. It was the problem with insurgencies. Just thinking about it had Qyreia glancing at Ruka. He knew from Eldar. As much as she hated the caxqette monsters, the merc did enjoy the simplicity that they offered: they were

definitively the enemy. There was no confusing them for something else; something friendly.

While the Force users walked, she inched the speederbikes forward, following their guides for what was genuinely, just as they said, a rather short distance. If it weren't for the storm and the quartet of Selenians patrolling, they might have sensed the village earlier. Calling it a village, though, seemed a bit of a stretch by some definitions. What few structures they could make out were primarily animal hide and frames that could have been wood or whalebone. The wispy snow piled in fragile-looking drifts against the surface of each lodge, the only light of which was visible from the edges of their doors and the miniscule air and smoke vents. For its primitive materials, it was a rather ingenious design.

As they came closer to what seemed like the main collection of buildings, their Basic-speaking guide sent the others along and turned to the group of outsiders. "Little room. Take one in home." He pointed to the various buildings as indicator.

Qyreia patted the cargo boxes on her speeder. "We have shelters of our own, but thank you."

Cora motioned to the space around them. "Is it alright if we establish our camp here?"

Simple words, Cora, the Zeltron thought, but their guide seemed to understand well enough.

"Here good." He pointed at himself. "Surta. If you need, ask Surta."

They thanked this Surta before he, like his companions, seemed to disappear into the sheet of white. The wind had subsided somewhat, but the snow was still falling hard, so visibility was hardly improved. Fortunately, Qyreia had packed their survival gear well. She was stopped, however, when she tried to set up her shelter. *Still injured*. It was infuriating, but even Keira was worried enough that she kept the Zeltron on a short leash. Ruka did seem to get a special sort of quiet delight when Qyreia acquiesced to him "cheating" with the shelters.

Admittedly though, it was difficult not to appreciate how easily he made all the components weightlessly spill out of the bag and, just as effortlessly, set all the pieces into place without much more than the occasional, subtle motion of his hands. Even that seemed to be almost for show. Once all the poles were floated into place and the stakes driven into the ice-choked permafrost, all that remained was to throw their gear in and run the heater. Turning off the headlights might have put them into near pitch-black, but it felt so much better on the eyes that the near-snow-blindness they had, even with the goggles.

Inside the shelter, one couldn't walk around without being bent over even for the shorter people, and there was little in the way of free space between them, their gear, and their bedding. But as they laid out their things, the survival heater made quick work of turning the frigid air into something genuinely comfortable.

"This is... surprisingly pleasant," Cora observed as he took off what passed for winter clothing on him.

"*Qyreiami* knows how to go camping." Ruka chuckled as he likewise removed his gloves, parkaa, and the like — just like his female counterparts — but some glances were cast toward the Zeltron and her abraded cold weather gear.

"And thanks to our trip, you know how to set up a tent," she replied with a hint of pride. Down to an undershirt spotted here and there with red, Qyreia felt her wife's hand land gently on her shoulder. "What's up, hon?"

"Mind if I take a look?"

The red woman looked at the men in the tent and shrugged. "Sure. Not like the company is gonna get hot and bothered."

Before either Ruka or Cora had time to react to the comment that seemed almost a jab — more so to one of them than the other — she was grunting as she shifted the garment off, revealing one of her usual sports bras and a motley of scrapes that matched her shirt's stains alongside dark splotching across her arms, shoulders, and ribs. Even her face had a few signs of light bruising, though the scarf-hat-hood combo seemed to have saved her from any cuts or abrasions above the neck.

While the Pantoran seemed to look away out of a sense of propriety, Ruka subtly watched as Keira gently ran her fingers over the damaged skin, a worried yet appreciative sort of look in her ice-blue eyes. The kind of expression that marveled at the creature she beheld; that she could be touched; that she was hers. Ruka knew that look too well: he got the same when he looked at his Jedi husband.

Qyreia, for her part, seemed to try not to focus on it too much, sitting with her back to the pale woman so that she might assess the injuries as she liked while the Zeltron looked over the damage to her equipment.

"Does it hurt?" Keira asked as she touched at one of the weepier scrapes.

The Zeltron hardly winced as she glared at her rifle. "A little." Her tongue clicked off her teeth. "Damn. Scope body is scratched *all* to hell."

"Is it broken?" Ruka asked, almost jarringly reminding Keira that they weren't alone. Qyreia seemed unperturbed as she shouldered the weapon and looked through the sight. She flinched a little at first: the stock was still cold from outside.

“Nooo...?” she said hesitantly. “Alignment looks good too, though I won’t find out for sure until I have to shoot something at range.”

“Perfect time to find out,” he joked.

“I can fix it on the fly.” She pointed at the pair of dials on the scope before returning to begrudgingly assessing the damages. “My poor baby.”

“My poor baby should be resting,” Keira chided with a gentle smirk. “Think we should pull out the first aid kit? Or I can use my *space magic*.”

Qyreia almost pointedly ignored the last suggestion as she dragged the medkit over. “Painkillers ain’t a bad idea.”

A general concern, mild but noticeable, lingered among the three Force users while she popped a couple pills, swigging them down with some water that had been kept liquid by her bike’s warming block. They suggested bacta or bandages or *something*, but she merely passed it all off as unnecessary.

“It’s just scrapes and bruises, guys. You’ve all had them before and I’ll bet you didn’t freak out near as much as you are over me.”

“Ain’t ‘freaking out’, ay. Just...”

Cora paused his husband’s words with a hand. “We’re just concerned and want to make sure that you are well.”

“I’ve had a *lot* worse,” she chuckled as she set the rifle and the medkit off to the side. Keira was having none of that, though, and pulled the pack over to her with a motion of her hand. “Hey!”

“You’re at least getting a spray-bandage on the big scrapes. Infection aside, you don’t want to scab into your shirt, or have those *things* sniffing you out.”

The Zeltron sighed and grumbled, but relented as she slumped her shoulders, giving Keira full access to her injuries. The spray stung somewhat from the antiseptic in the solution but quickly subsided as the spray solidified into a smooth, almost rubbery second skin. It would hold until after they were done out in the tundra. Though the respite from the first sting only came again and again with each successive scrape that Keira treated. From what Ruka saw though, Qyreia barely reacted. A twitch at the corner of her mouth or a subtle flex in her muscles, but no more.

It was hard to tell if she was putting on a strong face, or if it didn’t hurt that bad. Knowing her though, it was probably more the former than the latter. She endured it all the same. What was more, she let Keira start patching even the smaller cuts and abrasions. Given the spray-bandage wasn’t meant for lifesaving first aid, the merc didn’t care as much if it got used up.

She also more or less started to doze off. With the shelter all warm, and the wounds proverbially licked, they all settled in for a short rest. No one fell asleep — not deeply — but their eyes were closed and any conversation no more than whispers while they passively listened to the wind and falling snow against the walls.

Qyreia was the first to wake, such as they were. Keira was wrapped tightly in her arms, a red hand protectively laid over her abdomen. *I can believe we're going to have a kid.* She suppressed the moistening of her eyes at the thought and gave her lover a gentle kiss on the cheek as she slid silently out from under their covers. The pattering and fluctuating sounds of snow and wind seemed entirely gone, so the Zeltron thought to examine the truth of it. She slipped back into her winter gear, save the headwear, and quietly made her way outside.

What she saw was dazzling. Hues of pinks and greens fluctuated in a sort of cloud-like rolling wave in the sky above, faint here and then brilliantly bright. Staring at the spectacle, she completely forgot about the cold nipping at her cheeks.

The soft sound of footfalls on snow brought her eyes back down to see Surta approaching, a small wave of his hand signaling friendly intent. She waved him over and they stood momentarily, side by side, looking up at the sky.

“Storm go.” He glanced at her. “You go now?”

Qyreia nodded. “Soon.” She checked her chrono. They’d been down maybe an hour at most. It all seemed so long, between the storm and the near-perpetual night. Even the noontime twilight was some twelve-plus hours away. “You said there was a survey team here this morning, yeah?”

“Mmh,” he nodded. “Have... hrm... land picture? Can see where go.”

“A... a map? Yeah, sure, one sec.” She stepped back into the shelter, noting how the others were stirring, Ruka even giving her a funny look like she’d interrupted his sleep, and departed just as quickly with a datapad that had their local area displayed. “Okay. So we’re *here*...”

“Mh. And... shurvai?”

“Survey team?”

“Ah, yes, survey team. They go...” He squinted at the lines on the map and fingered a wobbly line across the open landscape toward Zainab. “That way.”

Qyreia zoomed in and let him do it again, this time saving the hand-drawn path to the GPS. For how wiggly the line was, he assured her that it was accurate. After all, just like when the Arconans had made their own way across the tundra, it had hardly been in a straight line.

Once the logistics were done though, they quietly resumed looking up at the sky. “It really is pretty out here.”

“Mmh. Means much when cold.”

Qyreia laughed at what she assumed was another joke. *It’s nice to have something pretty to look at when it’s so karking cold*, she mentally translated. “Fair,” she said, noting the head that popped out of the shelter as she did so. “Speaking of, hello love.”

Keira looked up at the sky and smirked. “I see why you’re so lively.”

“Y’all packing up in there?”

“Just about done.” She pointed at the Zeltron’s head. “You should put your hat on.”

Qyreia laughed again. “Okay. Once we’re all set, I’ve got us a trail to follow. Might find us a survey team between here and Zainab.”

“Awesome.” Keira looked at Surta and gave him an acknowledging nod before disappearing back inside the shelter.

Once that was done, Qyreia looked back to Surta, who seemed to be sizing her up rather seriously. “You’re awfully calm despite knowing what’s happening. Knowing what’s out there.”

“Family live Tunca long time. Know legends of *Micunaintikillan* and *yohirvio* — monsters. *Caxqette*, some name. Know you too, Citadel. Here for help.” He nodded to the speederbikes, eerily visible in the glow of the aurora off the snow. “You stop *Micunaintikillan*, make peace Tunca.” He pointed toward the village, and Qyreia’s eyes widened.

She hadn’t even noticed when she stepped out of the shelter; the aurora had been too dazzling. Previously she thought of the village as just the handful of lodges that could be peeped through the snow by their light. Now, with the snow cleared and light shimmering down from the clear night sky, the handful had become dozens. Some were larger, some smaller, with varying sorts of sign, insignia, or decoration about them. And with the snow gone, there seemed a new life about the place, with dark shapes moving here and there, going between the portable huts or trudging out to what were surely designated latrine areas.

Gotta do your business somewhere, she thought with some amusement. Surta seemed to appreciate her reaction at the full effect of his local populace.

“When done, you go back here. Learn people.”

She smiled at the idea, nodding. “I’d love to.”

As the conversation seemed to naturally conclude, the Force users all emerged, fully clothed and loaded with all their gear. While Ruka *magically* collapsed and restowed their shelter, much to Surta's amazement, Keira handed over the Zeltron's weapon belt and rifle.

"You said you have a plan?"

Qyreia nodded, noting how Ruka looked her way — the Proconsul that knelt for his Quaestor. A light, appreciative smirk tugged at her lips. "We make for Tunca. If we're lucky, we'll be able to catch up with some scientists." She sighed. "Maybe cut down one of these karking 'gods'."

Keira chuckled in the way that said she knew her wife had some mischief brewing in her head. "I know Alla'su is probably begging for a rematch with the Red Qek."

The Zeltron prepped her blaster and slung it across her chest. "Schutta will get one."