

OPERATION:

WHITE

EYE

Southern Tunca

Ba'Tzic Ice Sheet

Kelse knew before the runner came.

It was a change in the chill, the deep, cold ache that throbbed in the dry, swollen joints of her old bones. The hurt had plagued her for years, rising like a glacial murmur when the chill grew deeper, the Wind more frigid, the skies darker. In the far, misty reaches of her memory, she could remember her father complaining of the very same ache before his end. It was one of the reasons that she had intended for this expedition to be her last cycle on the sheets before returning to the southern crevice. There, the Cold was never as bad. She could warm her weary bones in respectful indolence, growing fat in the years she had left. A lofty goal for any An'Nsi, especially one as old as she.

But, the frost that bit her now stifled that dream. The storm had been an unpredicted one. For her people, wise in the ways of sky and sea, that was a sign of bad things to come. A fierce blizzard, roaring over the ice-sheet, the crevices, the melt blowing to the south east. The Wind that it brought was the coldest that she had known in sixty cycles of light and dark. Bitter, piercing, undeniable. She had watched men and women lose ears and noses in seconds, eyes crackling to jagged shards in their sockets, in winds milder than those that blew outside. It was a lesson that she knew better than most.

It was a chill that she had been preparing for all her life. A cold that she had always known would come. Culturally, the An'Nsi were not people to beat around the drift, Kelse even less so than many of her tribe. The Wind and storm could bode one thing only.

The runner was a young boy, still light in his snowshoes. Kelse knew him by the sound of his stride, the light huff of his breath, the clumsy slip by which he entered her crack in the crevice. Kelusio. She had helped to birth him, 14 cycles in the past. Now, he found an old crone wrapping her hands in thin bands of sielskin, already bundled in the wampacloak she had flayed for herself so long before. She knew that he wouldn't look her in the eye; not many would, to be fair.

"What is it, child?" Kelse asked, her voice crackling like flurries on dry ice. She listened to his awkward pause as he took in her bundled state. That, and the sight of her pike, held casually in the crook of her lap, its wickedly-barbed point already tied to the bone-white haft.

"Berjric did as you asked, taking stock of the pikes and the massif-sleighs. He said we have enough to take three...three dozen? He...he also said they wouldn't make it more than five miles, not unless the storm blows out," the boy piped. As she turned her face towards him, she saw his gaze flicker upward, curiously, before quickly dropping.

"The storm is a friend, not a foe, child," Kelse answered warmly, without even a trace of doubt in her old voice. "Even if it will likely spell our end."

"T-Then why? Why the hunters? Why the pikes? Why now? Why-..."

"Why your father?" Kelse interrupted with a slight hum, looking deep into the flinching child's face. She saw the understanding beginning to dawn there, the realization of her grimness. She knew that his father, a very young man himself, would still have already begun to arm himself, even before she called. Every An'Nsi would know. "We warriors must answer our call, child. As we swore. As our fathers and mothers swore. And their mothers and fathers. And their mothers and fathers. By our bones, and the ice, and our Sister Bright in the night sky. We swore."

Kelse knelt, running a gnarled, hide-wrapped hand through Kelusio's hair, over the light striping that marked his tawny flesh. A beautiful boy. His voice had been so strong when his mother brought him to the cold. She would have been proud. Kelse's fingers closed over his hand as she bent to murmur into his ear.

"The Cold finds us all, my child. Eventually. We must simply go to meet it sooner, for the Winds return, and the time to pick up our pikes has come," Kelse murmured, pulling away. In the youth's hand, she left a gift. A long, cold, pikehead, hand chipped from volcanic glass, razor-edge gleaming. "And *you* must remain. To tell those who come looking. And remind those who come after you. We heeded the Wind. So must they...when their own time to meet the Cold has blown in, on the ice."

Kelse smiled, gleaming white teeth to the dead, white eye in her left socket. Snowblind and frozen, when she was hardly past his age. So many cycles before. Then, taking her pike in hand, she strode out, into the crevice proper. The others were already beginning to gather. In a few minutes more, they departed into the cold. And their band was not alone for long. Soon, they met another handful of An'Nsi, trodding solemnly through snowy winds. The handful became a dozen. Then, dozens. Their line grew long, trailing over a landscape as beautiful as it was hostile. In the storm, great drifts of snow blew and coiled like waves of crystalline water, baring the warped, wind-weathered expanse of ice and black volcanic stone beneath. The landscape was washed into a monochrome relief of stark white, black ice and rock, blinding to look at but impossible to tear the eyes away from.

They walked silently, into the storm. Into the snow. Into the blinding day. And in the distance, they heard a scream.

Zainab

Catacombs

Ice and fang. Blood and snow. Rime and blade. Frost and gore. Light and Dark. *Change*. Sera could feel it all, before they even landed. She could sense the disaster brewing outside, as sure as she felt the storm buffeting their landing craft, the bellowing Wind that shook inch-thick durasteel like claws rattling against soft, thin flesh. It was much like the titanic sandstorms that she had grown up with, dark walls that swept the landscape, natural cataclysms that could

reshape the face of thousands of miles. But, in this storm, there was something different. Something *alive*. Just as alive as the creatures that ran within it.

Ice under her feet, fangs at her back, as she sprinted through darkness, heavy breaths smothered by the snarls echoing behind her. How many caxquettes had there been? The song had started to hit them as soon as the craft touched down on the outskirts of Zainab. The beasts had apparently beat them there. Had already begun to kill, and eat, and breed. Those among the Arconan strike team with access to the Force had begun to counter the song immediately. Just as they had learned to do at Atolli and Celeste. Telepathic bonds could help block the biological signal, dampening the worst of its effects. Rhy lance had an intensive scientific description of the idea. Sera just thought of it as drowning the song with a song of their own. It mattered not how deep and dark the enemy's chorus was. They would fight through. They had before; now, there was no other option.

Blood and snow. Snow, blowing in sideways, in roiling drifts that buried Zainab's streets and collapsed its outbuildings under an oppressive, smothering weight. The low rumble in the ground beneath likely didn't help. Internal heating systems that would normally fight the blizzard had been crippled by the loss of global power. That meant while the Arconan legion fought through the streets, they marched through snow up to the knees or hips. Snow that was already drenched by the blood of Zainab's citizens, scientists from the nearby facility, the ill-fated members of the city's police force. Husks of torn meat and sinew, piteous splatters frozen to the concrete where they had been devoured, bones split for their marrow, skulls shattered and sucked dry. Sera refused to let those horrors discourage her. Slowly, their forces made progress through the streets...even if they had yet to find any citizens to rescue. The Caxquettes assaulted them at every turn, but she and Qyreia had arraigned some of the best forces from Blindshot just for their response. Men and women that they had fought with and trained personally. They would hold. They would prevail.

Rime frosted the silvery blade of Sera's dagger as she turned it in her hand, counting the milky eyes glowing in the darkness ahead of her, following the loping motion of the caxquette's movement. She felt its hearts hammer, hot breath fogging in the frigid chill as it pounced for her throat, but she threw herself into a frantic slide at the last moment, lashing out instinctually. The maneuver worked, blade finding thick, muscular flesh. It pierced through with a wet *scilk*, sawing through the tendon until she heard an audible *snap* within the caxquette's leg. The Zabrak rolled out from under her ham-strung opponent, slamming her foot back into the crippled with crushing, amplified force. Bone snapped, flesh split, and the caxquette howled as it collapsed...but not for long. Stepping close, Sera pressed the hilt of her saber to the back of the creature's head and depressed the activator, burning-yellow blade boiling through one of its milky eyes. Another one down. But...the creatures were legion, and they were not alone. It was not their numbers that had overwhelmed the Arconan lines. Instead, it was the citizens of Zainab. Marching through the streets like frozen ghosts, limbs cracking and flesh blackening under frostbite, eyes blinded by ice and snow, bare feet bloodying as they charged the Arconan forces. They had been taken by the song, more potent than it had ever been before.

Ruka's orders had been to hold back from lethal force for as long as they possibly could. Their goal was to save the city, prevent the overloaded steam lines from detonating and blowing the entire ice sheet into the lower atmosphere. That goal did not entail the wholesale slaughter of

Zainab's citizens. The soldiers of the AAF had followed his word dutifully...even as the Zainabians pierced the first line, hacking with kitchen knives and pounding with chunks of bricks and bloody ice. Then, the enthralled Selenians had started to mix in with the hordes of charging caxquettes.

Frost coated Sera's armor, her blade, her cloak, freezing the gore that stuck to her in a grotesque array of crimson and black. Caxquette blood, mostly. Alongside her own, seeping from a plethora of minor wounds, some half-healed, some bleeding free. She felt the cold, biting, threatening on the edge of her consciousness, but it was held at bay by her grip on the Force. As long as she could keep her focus, the Zabrak could keep her temperature regulated, even. Beyond that, Sera could waste no time attending to herself...and even that level of self-control could not be wasted. She couldn't leave the others alone, not with the actual battle still being fought above. Through dozens of feet of concrete and permafrost and eons-old ice, she could still feel them faintly. Still feel that the battle hadn't been lost. Even after their line had been breached, even after Ruka, his voice strangled, had issued the order to switch to lethal fire...even after everything, they were still holding out. Just as they had trained. Just as they had vowed.

They would hold. Sera had faith in every one of them. They just needed to *hold*. For, she could feel something laying ahead of her. Something alive...intelligent...and powerful. Perhaps, if she could just manage to reach it, destroy it...

The Arconans had still been fighting when Zainab began to rip itself apart at the seams. Partly savaged by the bewitched civilians and ravenous caxquettes, their line was still reforming chaotically when the earth began to split. The earthquakes that had only rumbled before suddenly *jolted* as an unthinkable force shot through the stone. Wide fissures ripped open in the frozen concrete, the earth itself moaning in agony as pipes broke and vast plates of ice and stone shunted against one another. From the cracks, enormous jets of steam burst into the sky, blasts of heat and vapor that boiled man and caxquette alive as *something* hit the ice below. Builds collapsed, and the wind shrieked around them as the snowstorm reached its crescendo. Sera had been running to the others, Qyreia at her fore, Ruka and Zuza and Tali in her sights. Then, the ice beneath her feet had given way. The Zabrak disappeared before their eyes, falling from the blizzard's blinding light into the darkness below. In the whirl of her fall, she heard Ruka cry her name, his voice lost in a rush of air and a blast of something heat from the crevice below...emanating from a terrible, ruddy red glow within the earth itself.

But the Force wasn't done with her quite yet. Glancing painfully off the side of the crevice down which she had fallen, Sera tumbled through a shattered gap in the ice, sliding through pre-shaped caverns and broken tunnels before falling into an even darker pit. One that was far, far older than the sewers. An ice-bound barrow, obviously shaped by conscious hands, even beneath dozens of feet of permafrost. Sera had scarcely little time to examine her surroundings by saber-light before the caxquettes had come, shrieking at her heels. But, the walls were carved, the ceiling cut into a smooth arch, each surface faceted by a multitude of tiny runes. Sera was no anthropologist or linguist. Ancestors damned, she would hardly pick up an e-text without being convinced or bribed to do so. But, she didn't need to be to recognize the runic script that she had first seen on Atolli, carved in desperate, terrified, two-handed strokes. The ancient tomb ran up against the modern underworks of Zainab, tertiary steam infrastructure, and electrical conduits fried by the

storm. Ancient carvings, broken into darkened hallways strewn with discarded construction equipment and research gear. An offshoot from the nearby research site, perhaps? If the workers had stumbled on the ancient catacombs while extending the power network, it would have explained a great deal.

Another tomb. Another prison. But, for whom? Sera could feel them somewhere ahead. Beyond the song, clawing at the bulwark of her soul, beyond the snarl of the caxquettes scrambling over the corpses of their kin that she had left behind, beyond the echoing pulse of life and death in the city above her, she could *feel Them*. There was a dividing line in her mind between the rhythmic pulses that made up life and the piercing strength of something, or someone, that was beyond her typical definition of life and death. Like Atyiru, in a way...but far older and more enigmatic. It called to her, a singular note that rose above the din, through the storm.
Light and Dark.

Change.

Sera had dreamed of it. Of rain and blood. Snow would just have to do. Fate lay ahead; now was her chance to shift it. Before any more of her friends were hurt, or her men were killed. Sera ran. She ran through the tomb, through hand-carved halls of eons-old frost, past swathes of blood that had been frozen since before Iridonia's seas had shifted to sand. She ran until ice turned to stone, fresh-hewn, marked now by new blood and new corpses. And, when she reached the caxquettes...she fought.

They came alone, at first. That, Sera could handle. The beasts were incredibly dangerous, unpredictable, but she had learned how to fight them; savagely, quickly, before they could snare and pull and overwhelm. The tight space actually worked to her advantage. It kept the largest of the caxquettes constrained, slowed, allowing her to slip in and cripple them or strike a lethal blow with her saber or long, sapphire blade. That strategy only worked when there was one of them, of course. The tunnels around her twisted and bent, forking and branching wildly. It presented the beasts far too many opportunities to flank. Once they started utilizing them...well, Sera could only use her vambrace's flamethrower to block a passage so many times. Only the speed with which she ripped through the caxquettes before her prevented the Zabrak from being surrounded. And that speed wouldn't last forever.

But Sera refused to flag. Refused to falter. There was a light ahead, a chance that she needed to take. She had failed to take it before. Failed to protect her friends on Atolli. Failed to prevent what had happened in Celeste. Each time the Gods had surfaced, thousands had perished in a litany of blood and woe, and there had been nothing that they could do to stop it. Now...now was her chance.

Change.

The caxquette reached out, a human-like hand extending from a serpentine limb, peaked with claws that flexed and twitched and snapped for her throat. Sera cut the limb down, one slice at a time, rolling forward past its flailing stump to shove her sapphire blade through the hollow of the monster's reptilian throat. As it flailed back, she lashed out with a Force-amplified kick, crushing

its skull into the neck and throwing the beast backward, clear of her path. She was so close now. Boots pounding another corner, she found herself confronted by a new sheet of ice, flanked by rows of monitors and electrical cables on both sides. The equipment was drenched in blood, caked in the remnants of the scientists or workers that had once operated the station; Sera could not tell if it was a research site, set up to monitor the site or some kind of power conduit. Whatever the case, she felt *It*, somewhere through the sheet of ice, pulsing with a faint and undeniable light. Whatever she was searching for lay just ahead. So, as was her nature...she charged, punching one hand forward to shatter the ice with an amplified blow of her gauntleted fist. It shattered like glass.

And beyond it was darkness, not light.

Sera couldn't halt her momentum, even as her precognitive senses screamed in harsh warning; the ice beneath her boots was too slick to stop her progress. The Zabrak's speed carried her forward, tumbling freely into the waiting void. She fell past wires, dangling free, and snarls of black chains, reflecting the glow of the sun far above. The pit opened towards the surface, apparently. Perhaps it was another crevice, ripped open by the earthquakes still rumbling through the continental frost? It was difficult to tell while tumbling head-over-heels. Sera focused on righting herself as she fell, angling her feet down as Ruka had taught her. Even exhausted, wounded, and half-frozen, she focused the Force into her lower musculature, deftly absorbing the enormous momentum of her landing...even if it left her doubled over in exhaustion.

The last of Sera's energy was focused into her senses. Feeling the chamber around her...the power lingering within it, and the power of the being that it held. Slowly, the Zabrak shifted her blue-eyed gaze upward, examining the pit. It was perfectly circular, pierced by eight arched doorways, leading back into the catacombs. Far more accessible entrances than the one that she had chosen. A floor of pure, carved, crystal clear ice had been cracked to pieces, pierced by cracks that vented jets of steam into the air. At its center lay a sarcophagus, carved from obsidian, wrapped in chains that seemed to have been cut from the same volcanic glass. It was empty.

"Curious. Not who I was expecting to find me first." a voice piped from behind the Zabrak. Whirling, she drew her dagger and saber, leveling both at the source of the voice. It...*He*...looked like a Devaronian, with starkly pale skin and a pair of umbral horns, just as dark and glossy as the volcanic glass that had held him entombed. And, He was smiling toothily, an expression that was chilling when combined with the blank expression of his sightless white eyes. "I thought the other two would send a cultist for sure, bowing and groveling and sniveling. Not surprising for them to miss the mark, of course. Those two were always so *blind*..."

"...what?" Sera questioned, breathing heavily as she circled around the musing figure. She retained her loose battle stance, step sliding, weapons held high. The man followed her almost lazily with his eyes, turning in a slow, steady circle.

"Ah. I suppose I failed to introduce myself, then? You may call me Youtl, oh blood-soaked one," He rambled, tapping a finger to one horn. Then, his brow furrowed, gaze settling intently on Sera's face. Even though she was sure his eyes were blind, she could *feel* them upon her, even

truer than the chill that she was no longer able to suppress. "Oh. I see. You don't understand...but you are *perfect*."

Sera's brow furrowed as He took a step forward, weapons rising. "And you're *dead*," she hissed, charging into a volley of attacks. She opened with a kick, intending to sweep the faux-divine off his feet and pin him to the ice with her blades, but He nonchalantly stepped out of the course of her attacks, dodging with smooth, unconcerned steps around her flurry of blows. At the last moment, as she prepared to bring her saber down through His throat, thrust one hand forward; only a screamed warning in her mind prepared Sera to flinch away at the last moment, protecting herself from the blinding flash. Still, she drove forward, ever on the offense. Sera couldn't afford to slow, to stop, to hesitate. Not when she could still feel her friends above her, fighting with all they had.

"And, *there it is*. I knew I sensed it true. You burn so bright, so recklessly..." He chuckled, shoulders rolling. "What did you expect? To kill a god through sheer will? You will need to do better than that, Brightness."

Sera hissed through her teeth as He sidestepped another one of her thrusts, smoothly flexing one long, spidery hand. As he did, the shadows that crept in the pit swirled forward, plunging Sera into pure, unbroken darkness, smothering and oppressive. His laughter echoed through it, seemingly all around her, voice rattling like claws over a tombstone. "Our subjects named me God of Light and Dark...God of the binary. That is why you suit me so well, Brightness. Are you sure you want to fight me?"

Even in the darkness, Sera could feel Him. Youtl's presence resounded in the Force, an easy dividing rod to center her sense upon. Lunging, Sera grinned as she thrust her shoulder into His gut, throwing Him back with a Force-amplified shove. "Is that answer enough, Katka?" she retorted, thrusting her left hand forward as he stumbled back. Her vambrace let loose with a gout of amber flame, forcing Youtl to dodge and roll backward, the glow of the fire driving the darkness back for at least a few moments.

"Yes. I can see it within you, Brightness. The Light you claim. And the Dark you use, when it suits you. Are you so blind that you can not see it, too?" He taunted further, though Sera was no longer listening. She followed him with abandon, sweeping into another flurry of blows, each strike growing closer and closer to landing. With no weapons and no caxquettes, Youtl had nothing to fall back on. Each time he threatened to blind her or consume her in darkness, Sera stepped forward, driving him back against his sarcophagus.

"I know what my master taught me. The Light and Dark drive me. In balance, I am free" Sera panted, grinning triumphantly in the God's face, her saber raised high. "All I see a God of fools. Just like the others."

Youtl said nothing. Smiled. And then, he did exactly as Sera had done to him; he stepped into her guard, catching the hand that held her saber in a steel grip. The other...her placed directly over her left eye. Her senses cried out against the attack, but there wasn't anything she could do. She had pressed too close, too fast, too soon.

"*And that's the thing about the light, Brightness.*" Youtl murmured, his voice sibilant. "*It is so easy to go blind.*"

The hand around her saber squeezed. Bone crushed. Metal crumpled. The sudden, enormous agony was nearly enough to drive her to her knees. In contrast, the hand over her eye did nothing.

And then, there was Light.

Blooming. Like the Irixta, Iridonia's sun, rising on the horizon. Harsh and hot and bright. It bore down without mercy. And Sera couldn't flinch, couldn't blink, couldn't look away. As Youtl let go of her ruined hand, he took her horns in a vice-like grip, holding Sera in place as her agony turned to desperation, her sight turned to ash, and light blinked into darkness.

Sera *screamed*.

When he released her, the Zabrak doubled over, even as she fought with all she had to stay standing, to refuse to let him see her on her *knees*. She couldn't. The pain was incomprehensible. Overwhelming. Nevers gave way, and Sera crumpled to her side, hands clutched over the steaming socket, blood and clear, boiled fluid seeping through shaking fingers.

Youtl smiled coldly, crouching by her side, placing one hand on her shoulder, still quivering in shock. When he spoke, it was in a gentle, sing-song whisper.

"I will not make this easy for you, Brightness. Above you, your friends are dying because of me. Around this planet, tens of thousands more will die as well, for my benefit. And, released, I will see to it that this world suffers. It remembers the truths that it used to know: of Light and Dark. And I will leave you alive to see it all. To feel the loss. To feel the hurt. Maybe, when you next see me, you will have made your choice. *Light. Or Dark.* Then...then, you will have learned to see."

He smiled one last time. But Sera split that smile in two with a slash of her dagger, sending Youtl reeling back with a sudden gasp of pain.

"I...will see you. On...my honor."

Youtl stumbled back to the wall. With Sera's one good eye, she could see dark blood seeping between his fingers, the cut reaching from brow to lip...just barely missing his eyes. And, above, she could hear something shifting in the battle. A call of horns. A swell of voices. Hundreds and hundreds of voices.

Sera rolled over, hands falling from her face. Youtl spoke no more and did not linger. Stepping into one of the side doors, he disappeared into the shadows of the catacombs. Sera could feel his presence, slipping into the distance, just as she could feel the new arrivals above, streaming into the battle...and how many of her own friends were no longer fighting, no longer breathing.

Sera's breath grew shallow. She shivered on the ice, blood seeping slowly from her mangled hand, deadened eye, the score of wounds across her body. Darkness slowly closed across her vision. Her one eye slid shut.

And yet, she still managed to smile.

