

Battle on the Ice

The Selenian village was behind them. Perhaps she was moving a little too fast, but the blizzard had moved on, and time was no longer on their side. *I just hope the main assault group took care of things. Otherwise, we're about to walk into a proper karking mess.* Her hands flexed on the control grips, feeling out the safety covers for the speederbike's blaster cannon. She might not have brought her big 'frack-you' rifle, but she still had some potent firepower.

"Think we should slow down?" Keira cautioned, her voice fairly clear behind the Zeltron despite it echoing in her earpiece comm for Ruka and Cora's sake. "How far do we have yet to go?"

"Making good time. Despite the twists and turns, we're halfway to Zainab already." Qyreia tapped at the GPS-guided map on her datapad, mounted on what passed for a dashboard for ease of viewing. "Surta's route is spot on. We've avoided a lot of drop-offs and stuff."

"*And stuff?*" she heard Ruka chuckling over the comm.

She smirked as she called back, "Listen here, butt-buckler, I learned *space* jargon as a trader and smuggler. You want fancy terrain feature Sithspit, go talk to a cartographer."

She felt Keira's grip tighten, her voice not echoing on the speaker. "Butt-buckler?"

"Y'know... because how he and Cora... *do business.*"

She could *feel* her wife's eyes rolling. "That's terrible."

"Dunno," the Zeltron chuckled. "They seem to enjoy it."

As she spoke, the Mirialan and his Pantoran husband brought their own speederbike up alongside Qyreia's. Even with her many survival accouterments slowing down her vehicle, it was still keeping up a good clip. Ruka's was still faster though, less weighed-down as it was.

"*You know we can still hear you, right?*" Ruka shot at her. His tone was rough, but the mood he was giving off was one of his usual amused irritation.

"And am I wrong?"

"*Oh my.*"

Ruka ignored his partner's embarrassed titter as he refocused the conversation. "*How far until we reach the surveyors?*"

“I don’t know! They didn’t exactly give us a tracking fob for any of ‘em! Buncha guys hauling scientific equipment, they could be at Zainab, or they might’ve peeled off to go look at seals on the coast or something.”

“And it’s not like we can easily spot tracks like this,” Keira added.

The Force user wasn’t wrong. With the northern hemisphere still in the midst of winter, the arctic continent was swathed in near-perpetual dark, save for the vague twilight of noon — which was still many hours off — or the offerings of light from dancing auroras and twinkling stars. A view of Boral, Selen’s sole moon, was evident on the low horizon, just starting to make its low arc into the sky. With such conditions though, and the speeds that they were traveling at, following tracks would have required cybernetically-enhanced levels of eyesight. Even augmentation through the Force could only do so much. Besides, the scientists used repulsorcraft. There was hardly a trail to follow anyway.

Qyreia knew what the Mirialan Proconsul meant though. “I hope we find them too, Ru. We just need to keep a sharp eye out. Keep your magic radars up.”

“Qyreiami, we love you, but it’s. not. magic!”

“You schuttas move things around with a thought, heal people with a touch — albeit slowly — and shoot *litteral lightning bolts* out of your fingers! That’s magic, Ruka!”

“*It’s the Force,*” Cora attempted to correct her, the gravity of the situation confounding his grasp on the pair’s awkward humor. “*It’s a living energy...*”

“Oh, go drink a mana potion,” Qyreia shot back, laughing, trying to abate the darker headspaces that always came with these kinds of missions.

Some chuckles came forth, even from Cora, though his tone suggested that the reference may have gone over his pink-haired head. And then the quiet returned, Ruka holding formation close to Qyreia’s bike, sometimes alongside, sometimes just behind. The route so far was good. No sense in messing with something good.

It was about the only thing good up in the frozen wastes. The blizzard might have been gone, and the sky a beautiful panoply of colorful light, but they were still going into a bad place. As they got closer and closer to Zainab, the mercenary started to check into the main Arconan channel. Things sounded positive, going the right direction, but not good.

Creatures everywhere.

We need a medical team at building two, eight, and twenty one.

Need reinforcements in sub-level two.

The sounds of lightsabers mixed with blasters and slugthrowers, mingled intermittently with roars, growls, and barked battlecries invoking the various 'gods' that the fanatics worshiped. There was not a lack of action, even after so many hours. Clearly Alla'su and her ilk had used the last year wisely. Conversely, it showed a marked lack of action by Arcona, who was once again playing reactionary cleanup.

After some minutes of this silence spent roiling over the pervading situation, Ruka leaned forward in his bike's seat. "Do you see that up ahead?"

While everyone squinted from behind their goggles, Qyreia noted first the spinning silhouettes of what were very probably windmills set against the aurora overhead. "The wind farms?"

"No, further to the right."

Cora pointed almost as soon as the Zeltron saw it. "There's light ahead!"

Qyreia's eyes narrowed, bringing her rifle up and using the scope to get some magnification. The bob and sway of the speeder threw off the view, but she adjusted well enough with the familiar weapon. What she saw did not make her happy.

"Fire. Something burning..."

"Can you see what?" Keira said, voice thick with cautious anticipation.

The others waited momentarily while she focused, working against the movement of the bike, but the longer she stared, the more her eye adjusted to the light of the image in her scope. "Two vehicles. One of them is on fire. The other is half on its side... There's a lot of movement around it."

"Can you see what it is?"

"Can you *sense* what it is?!" she shot back, more than a little frustrated. "I'll give you three guesses; the first two don't count."

Ruka growled something under his breath, but acquiesced the point. They were still at least a mile out; likely more. He couldn't sense anything, much less pick out the particulars. With a little less anxiety to his verbal pacing, he turned his attention back to Qyreia, her rifle still steadied on the windshield of her speeder, still pointed at the distant spot of light.

"Do you have a plan?"

Qyreia's lips tightened behind her mask. She kept thinking of Keira. She wanted her close; wanted her to stay out of the fight; wanted her to not do any of the things she knew that her Force user of a wife would do. She wanted her to stay away from the siren screeches that so potently called to those of a parental persuasion. Atolli played back

through her head, and their recent trip to a doctor to scramble the genetic material of their eggs together and put the result into Keira.

If they hurt Keira...

Her teeth grit together. “We go in fast and hard. Cora.” She glanced over at the Pantoran, close enough that even in the dark she could make out his features under the celestial light show. “Honest question. I’ve never fought with you. What are you good at?”

His eyes narrowed, as though not looking forward to the prospect of a fight. “I am proficient with my lightsaber, but I can also protect us through the Force; perhaps aid our fight through... it is called battle meditation.” He paused, trying to think of anything else that might help. “Perhaps I can link with the creatures; attempt to control...”

“No!” she barked back. Ruka was halfway to saying something similar, but the Zeltron’s reaction was far more potent than anything he might’ve put forth to his husband. She had to backpedal a little when she saw his reaction. “Cora... They do things to people. You know that well enough.” She cast a glance at Ruka. “Whatever you do, don’t try to get inside their heads. It... It can’t end well.”

Cora felt Ruka’s hand on his knee, a brief touch of consolation before returning to controlling the speederbike. “V-very well.”

“You two go for the vehicles,” Qyreia said flatly, returning to her solicited plan. “Maybe we can save some people that way. Me and Keira will work from one side to the other.”

A general murmur of assent came from each one. The Zeltron’s wife added a squeeze around her waist for added effect.

Qyreia sighed. “And this may sound bad but... get angry.” Her fingers flexed on her bike’s trigger covers. “If we can’t tune them out, then the only way to not be affected by their mind-game Sithspit is to hate them so much that they can’t call us to their side.”

Cora definitively seemed opposed to this. “Qyreia, I am a *Jedi*. Hate is... well, it is anathema to our way of...”

“Then I won’t apologize to Ruka if I have to *shoot* you!” she barked back. “You wanted a plan, there you go!”

The Pantoran turned his gaze aside, muttering something about her not forgetting what side she was on, but the sound of the air rushing by drowned out most of it. Keira’s arms flexed around the Zeltron again — a mix of worry and understanding in one gesture. It was a welcome feeling, just having the Force user so close, but they were already so close that she had to set aside the sentimentality and refocus on the coming

fight. She gave the scene another perusal through her scope before setting the rifle to hang by its sling in her lap.

“There’s at least a dozen of ‘em. Can’t make out what types they are, but I’ll bet they’ve got a breeder in among the fighting ones.” *That’s how they always do it. Kill and eat the ones they can’t capture. The rest either join the throng or become incubators.*

They crested a low rise in the icy landscape, revealing more of the scene than previously available to their vision. A trail of debris and a gash in the snow and rocks led up to the burning hulk of a utility repulsor-truck. Its partner was stationary, turned on its side with creatures bounding and tearing at the exterior, where pointy objects and the rare *crack* of gunfire poked out. Smoke trickled up from the lead truck’s engine and repulsor generators, but otherwise seemed intact.

At least at a distance.

Qyreia also spotted her first target as they came down the short, gentle slope.

“I’ve got this one off to the left here,” she said over the comm as she veered away. “You guys make for the one that’s not burning.”

“Roger,” came Ruka’s terse reply. If there was one person Qyreia wasn’t worried about when it came to using hate on the caxquettes, it was the Sith.

For the moment though, she had one patrolling the edges. Whatever it was, it was on four long legs, and thick with fur of some kind. Whatever it was, it heard the whine of her bike’s engines as she revved toward it and turned to face her down. Just in time for the blaster cannon to go off in its face with a ruddy orange flash of light. The follow-up pair of energy bolts tore into its body; potent enough to tear into its vitals and leave it slumping onto the ground as the bike careened past.

Keira shot a glance over her shoulder at the body. “Think we found our survey team?”

“I’d bet creds.”

Off and away, Ruka rocketed toward the vehicles. Unhampered by slowing down for Qyreia’s bike anymore, he tore across the ground toward the besieged truck. A mental note flashed through the Force to heave a twisted plate of metal from the ice, speeding it through the air ahead of his speederbike and into the body of one of the caxquettes lingering around the burning hulk that were feeding on bodies. By the light of the flames, he could see hooved quadrupeds with sickeningly sharp antlers and fangs that likely weren’t part of the origin species’ dental work. Some sort of large slithering creature dipped in and out of the wreckage, bringing out a body or part of one.

He outstretched his hand and turned the burning truck onto its side, crushing the legged snake thing, while Cora’s lightsaber ignited in brilliant green. Alerted to this new

presence, the creatures let out a series of shrieks that seemed to rattle the heads of the attacking near humans. Ruka grit his teeth against it, remembering Qyreia's warning. The Pantoran behind him wavered, but was pulled back by a strong grip from his husband.

They had to make it to the truck.

Qyreia watched the initial contact with a semblance of joy. *Good work, Ru. We'll be there shortly.* Her reverie was stopped short, though, by Keira's pointed finger jabbing out over her shoulder.

"Do you see that up there?"

The Zeltron's eyes narrowed to see two of the deer-like creatures hammering away at a sheet of metal, solitary and shifting as though there were something underneath that was holding it in place.

"There's people in there," Keira said before her wife could ask.

She knew what was being asked, even though it wasn't being said. Her teeth ground together. "Okay. I'll make a pass and you take out what's left in the confusion."

A nod rubbed at her back. "I love you."

Qyreia smirked weakly. "Don't you karkin' die on me."

And then she leaned into the bike. The outriggers lined up with the cervid creature and the blaster cannons screamed just as with the first caxqette. Lined up as they were, the one visible on the left took the barrage full in the flank, practically pushed over by the energized gas projectiles. That was when Keira leapt from the bike, her silvery blue saber igniting as she spun end over end, the Force surging through her legs to catch her high-speed fall. The body of the deer-thing hardly fared so well, left behind with a glowing shear through its back that nearly cleaved it in two from the Ataru practitioner's spinning assault.

The body had barely hit the ground when Keira was already moving toward the metal sheet. "Hello? Who's under there?"

Two pairs of eyes looked out from the shadows under the plate: two scientists holed up in a deep divot that made for fantastic cover, but a poor means of escape. "Are you h-h-here to help?"

The Force user breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes. Stay right there." She keyed her comm. "Qyreia, I got them. Two members of the survey team."

A striped hand, bluish from the cold, shot out and grabbed at Keira's ankle, the grip weak from the frostbite. "N-not s-s-survey."

Keira balked. “What?”

The Zeltron, meanwhile, continued on, scanning the battlefield, only to note too late the fresh trio of shapes charging toward Keira. She could see Ruka and Cora had already made it to the downed repulsor-truck — Ruka focused on a storm of floating blades that shredded at anything that tried to come close, Cora’s emerald blade dispatching of anything that made it through the death cloud.

They can handle themselves, she thought as she leaned hard into her turn, drifting jarringly to turn toward the monsters moving toward her spouse. “Keira,” she shot over the radio, “check your left.”

And follow my shots.

The high-pitched, rhythmic *prwo prwo prwo* rocketed forth, once again catching one of the creatures in the flank, and wounding a second, though it continued forward toward Keira. *Dammit*. She tried turning again, but a large, dark shape caught her attention from the corner of her eye. The bike slowed, and she took a moment to take a better look, forgetting momentarily about Keira.

What she saw looked like an odd mix of the deer-like creatures and a cow: the same thick fur and spindly legs, but lacking the horns, and grossly distended in the belly. It seemed to watch as it perused the bodies, searching for something. *A viable host*. Qyreia’s eyes narrowed. *It’s a breeder*. She looked back to Keira, who was already dealing with the uninjured caxqette, battering it with an unseen force that seemed to send up a wash of snow — a sort of shockwave that staggered it enough for her to leap into range with her lightsaber. She cleaved off the antlers, then she took off a leg. The outcome was foregone.

“Don’t die on me,” Qyreia whispered as she turned her gaze back on the pregnant beast. “I’m gonna make sure this schutta’s not gonna make any more of these *fracks*.”

Gunning her engines, the Zeltron began speeding toward the brood-beast. Mere seconds passed before she was met by a silhouette from the direction of the burning hulks.

It leapt, and in an instant, she was thrown from her bike in a heap, bouncing and tumbling over the snow-covered ice.

That makes twice in one night, was all she had time to muster in her head as she spun on the ground, sore and battered, just in time to catch the creature about to lunge again. She twisted her rifle out from the snow, not even noticing how the barrel was shattered before she fired. It was close enough. The blast of red sheared a thin claw-tipped arm clear off; enough of a shock to stagger the thing’s attack and stop it just short of landing on the mercenary.

Its teeth were still in range though, and it quickly snapped out, catching heavy boots on both its chin and snout as it snapped fruitlessly at its prey. Qyreia was barely keeping her boot's grip on the creature that looked like some cross between an enormous seal and an eel — thick, almost fat, with an almost dog-like snout but with an oddly finned tail — and what would have been four arms, had she not shot one off, that were joined at a sort of shoulder and elbow, and a long, thick claw at the end that was as likely used to help control land motion as it was for ripping apart its prey.

Whatever it was spawned from, it was one hundred percent ugly.

She tried to swing her rifle around towards its face, but an arm shot across her body to smack the blaster aside. The same arm drew back in attempt to spear her, since she still kept out of the creature's maw, but she twisted her torso to have the limb embed itself into the ice where she had just lain. So strong was the jab that the creature visibly could not free itself, and for a moment, Qyreia felt some confidence.

That was until it started pushing and pulling at the same time with its legs, twisting its head so that she was sandwiched between the trapped arm and its snapping jaws.

Her legs burned from the strain, pushing and twisting to keep her feet on its face in what might have been a comical act in a holo. Here, staring into the salivating, sharp-toothed expanse, it was another matter entirely. She tried to draw her pistol, but she could hardly find pause enough to pull it from her leg holster, much less line up a shot directly therefrom.

Her knife was in her boot. No different a situation as her pistol.

A metallic *clack* called her attention as the creature made another push. Her eyes looked at the cylinder, then at the monster. *That'll work!*

Seeing how her eyes moved, the caxqette twisted, trying to ready a cross-strike with another spear-like arm, but it threw the thing off balance and she forced it back by inches with her legs, compressing its already beleaguered snout and forcing the leg back down to the ground.

It was enough breathing room to grab the lightsaber — to practically tear it from her belt. There wasn't room to swing the thing. She glared into the creature's black eyes, pointed the business end at its forehead, and jammed her thumb down on the activation switch.

Red light erupted forth, clearing the short breadth of open air and pouring into the monster's brain cavity like a hot knife through butter.

Qyreia held it there, almost marveling at the weapon while the caxqette shuddered, almost preternaturally trying to push one last time before completely collapsing with a heavy, bodily *thump* onto the snow. Her heart raced, and for a moment she was sure she would be dead — *was* dead — until she pulled away, the glowing sword still radiating

crimson in her hand. She looked at it almost curiously, turning her hand over to examine the weapon she'd only ever used in rare sparring matches up until then.

Might never block a blaster bolt, but you frackin' get the job done, I'll give you that.

Keira's voice in her ear called her attention back to reality, and she brought up a hand to her earpiece. "Say that again?"

"Are you frackin' nuts?! Are you alright?!"

She nearly cried, she was so relieved to hear Keira's voice. Laying in the snow were the dark, lumpy shapes of the creatures that had tried, and failed, to take on her lover. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." She looked over toward the overturned truck where Cora and Ruka were finishing off the last of the monsters that had been trying to get into it and the scientists that were audibly yelling from within. "Ru? Cor?"

"We're good, crovja."

Her eyes went to the bloated creature that still lingered, as though it knew it couldn't get away. "You guys clean up. I've got one more schutta to take care of."

A smattering of chatter rattled off in her ear, but she cut the line. This one was personal.

She let the blade deactivate and hung the lightsaber back on her hip, drawing her hefty blaster pistol instead as she approached the creature. It didn't run. Just stared at her, watching. She was just a few paces out of reach of its tentacle-like appendages — ovipositors, most likely — when she stopped. What might have once been a deer cry came out as a soul-twisting groan that felt like it reverberated in Qyreia's head.

The creature looked pathetic, head downcast while it tried in vain to cast its spell one last time. When the noise finally ceased, its eyes looked up and saw the pistol aimed right between the bulbous black spheres.

"If Alla'su can hear this, tell her the red schutta is coming for her."

A single shot was all it took to finish the job, and the distended body dropped to the frozen ground in a weighty heap. Qyreia was half-surprised that its abdomen didn't burst open with eggs on impact, but she was glad that it didn't. When she heard footfalls behind her, she waved them away.

"Stay back," she said as she pulled a Denton charge out of her equipment. "This won't take long."

Her thumb pressed the button, and the red ring started to glow, a soft chime indicating the explosive would detonate soon. Qyreia spun on her heel and, seeing Keira, grabbed her wife's hand and jogged away as fast as her aching body could manage. There was a satisfying feeling in the knowledge that the explosion that sent shockwaves

across the white powder and up their spines all but liquefied, if not dematerialized, any and every part of the creature.

Keira sized the Zeltron up, worry evident on her features, given how her goggles were set on her forehead. “Are you alright?”

Qyreia grumbled. “Rifle is borked, but I’m otherwise alright.” She saw Ruka waving, and she returned the gesture, turning her comm back on after a look from her spouse. “So how’re those scientists you rescued?”

“That’s just it,” Keira said, motioning to the half-frozen humanoids walking toward them. “The Gotal is a scientist, but the Selenian girl... she’s a local to here.”

Qyreia inhaled sharply. Something was off. “Alright. Let’s get them warmed up. Maybe they know something that we don’t.”

For now at least, they were safe.