

## “Erosion”

by Katie Zajdel

thumper@coronasquadron.com

<http://www.coronasquadron.com>

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A bolt of red lightning seared through the thick grey clouds of the planet Thule, sending an eerie, flickering light over the windblown landscape. Silhouettes of tall, natural rock spires flashed briefly into existence before being thrown back into the twilight gloom. The closest spire was too far away to tell if any of the native bioluminescent moss was growing on it, but even if it was, its feeble glow wouldn't have done more than act as a dim, fuzzy spot of attempted hope in this depressive atmosphere.

The wind was picking up, blowing the fine-grit sand like pinprick torpedoes into the four grey-clad beings as they marched doggedly on. In the front, considered their leader more in the New Republic military database than within the egalitarian confines of the team, Inga Sellen shielded her eyes and hoped that Relpoek wasn't going to get blown away before they made it to their rendezvous.

She checked her chrono. Fifteen minutes until their pickup transport would arrive. And it would be just in time, too. They'd far overstayed their welcome on this Force-forsaken rock, and she expected their pursuers to catch up with them at any moment.

The footsteps of the others behind her were muffled by the sand and the wind, so she glanced back to make sure everyone was still there. As she expected, Relpoek, the green Toydarian medic, was having trouble flying in this increasingly strong wind. His deceptively light body wasn't doing him any favors now. His wings were flapping furiously, and he was needing to hold on to and be towed along by Grawurra, their black-furred Wookiee sniper. Sellen pulled an energy bar out of her belt pouch and passed it back to Grawurra, who understood the intent and in turn handed it to Relpoek. It was one of their last ration bars, but Relpoek always needed them to compensate for his high metabolism.

Grawurra was also helping Telnak hobble through the shifting sand. Telnak Daux was their Quarren pilot— Sellen felt the best pilots by far were the ones whose species were hard-wired to think and move in three dimensions— and she was squinting through the blowing sand, scanning the thick clouds above, searching for their arriving pickup shuttle as she kept a hand pressed hard to her injured side.

The four of them called themselves the AT-STs, short for “All-Terrain Sneaking Troops.” Sellen had pushed hard for their first choice, the AT-ATs, or “All-Terrain Alliance Troops,” because it sounded a bit classier, and Force knows they needed all the class they could get. Her superiors hadn't allowed it, saying that the Rebel Alliance hadn't existed for years and using the term would be confusing and misleading. In turn, she'd argued that the NR from “New Republic” was a nightmare for creating good acronyms so they should be allowed to use acronym-friendly vowels from their founding organization. Somehow she had lost that argument.

Despite the second-choice name, she was proud of this team. There truly was no terrain that could stop them. Something was high up in the treetops or on a cliff? Grawurra could climb up to it. A conduit's access door was underwater? Telnak had it covered. Relpoek's wings were

quite useful in many situations where they needed to cross ravines or get to something out of reach. And Sellen, well, as a human she didn't have her teammates' talents for not being landlocked, but with the right clothing and codes she could easily blend in at any First Order facility.

Being an AT-ST required an odd mixture of total independence and complete trust. The nature of their group meant they had to split up a lot and rely on the fact that they all could perform their individual tasks alone and not die. So far, they'd managed it. They were always being called on by their commanders to be the pathfinders or infiltrators on worlds in the Outer Rim or even the Unknown Regions where intel was scarce and no one knew exactly what to expect. They were damn good at their jobs, too. Get in, gather intel, and get out, usually at a predetermined pickup time and place, and always while incommunicado from start to finish.

Yes, so far they'd managed to not die. Well, most of them. Previous teammates had become casualties along the way, and Sellen really didn't want Telnak to be added to that list.

"How you holding up?" she asked Telnak, raising her voice to prevent her words from being whipped away by the wind.

Telnak tore her bright blue eyes away from the overcast sky and met Sellen's gaze. "I'm just wonderful," the Quarren bit out.

There was a grunting sigh from Relpoek. "I already told you I was sorry for forgetting the location of Quarrens' lungs," he said through a mouthful of the energy bar. "I thought I was helping you breathe by doing compressions there. It's not my fault your second stomach or whatever that organ was is in the spot where most rational beings keep their lungs."

"How can you forget something that basic?" Telnak demanded.

Relpoek tried to roll his large eyes but quickly blinked hard as sand lodged in them. "Believe it or not, remembering so many medical details for more than four different species is not simple."

Telnak glared at Sellen. "I told you before, Sell, we need a medical droid with us instead of him. One whose brain isn't taxed by so many *insignificant details*."

"When you can draw, from memory, the complete schematics of four different types of starships, then come talk to me," Relpoek said dismissively. "Until then, keep me on your good side if you want your wound dressing changed out on the ship. Probably lots of sand in there by now."

"Only if you were too incompetent to wrap it properly in the first place to keep it clean," Telnak growled. But then she fell silent. One of her favorite hobbies was grousing at Relpoek, who didn't actually forget things like the locations of major organs in his patients, and it concerned Sellen that Telnak stopped so soon. Her blaster wound must be worse than she and Relpoek were letting on. Either that or the blasted headaches that had plagued all of them except Relpoek since landing on this rock were getting to her again.

Sellen looked at Grawurra. "Have you heard anyone coming behind us yet?" she asked.

Grawurra shook his head, but rumbled an invective at the rushing air around them making it next to impossible to hear anything downwind. He pointed out if the First Order troops had figured out how to program their sensors to compensate for the oddly electric atmosphere, they could easily detect the four of them and catch up well before the New Republic shuttle arrived.

"Yeah, I know. Just keep an ear out as best you can, okay?" Sellen asked. There was a queasy feeling starting to form in her stomach. She checked her chrono again: ten minutes. Ten minutes until they'd be off this rock and safe.

Sellen turned back around to keep leading them into the strengthening wind storm toward their rendezvous point. She briefly brushed one arm against the belt pouch holding several datacards, mostly to reassure herself that they were still there. They were the reason the team was on Thule. They were the reason Telnak was bleeding from a First Order stormtrooper's blaster wound. They were the reason the First Order was trying to find the team. They had to get these datacards to New Republic Intelligence. Maybe even to General Organa. Sellen's superiors wouldn't like that, but something told Sellen that General Organa might make better use of this odd information than New Republic Intelligence would.

A couple weeks ago, Sellen's superiors had caught some whispers of First Order activity on this world. No New Republic records of the planet existed even though Grawurra swore he'd heard the name somewhere before, so the AT-STs had been called in and dropped off with the instructions to "find out whatever they could." While there on Thule, the AT-STs stumbled on a First Order base that seemed to be getting food from surrounding farms and sending it to what sounded like a very large military base elsewhere; so large that it sounded untrue, with hints of a weapon that sounded utterly terrifying, and Sellen didn't terrify easily.

Not only that, but the AT-STs had also encountered what seemed to be ancient Force-related... "stuff" that Sellen couldn't make heads or tails of. She only knew that the old ruined facilities were located fairly close to the First Order base, and physical proximity to the ruins aggravated the dull, pounding headaches everyone but Relpoek were experiencing. Things there felt... wrong. Like an oil slick on her soul or cold fingers on the back of her neck. She had no idea what it meant, if there was a connection to the First Order base, or anything like that. She just felt this was important, and the New Republic needed to know about it. The Resistance probably did too, despite the fact that it would make her superiors grumpy. Well, too bad for them. They weren't the ones being chased on this wretched planet.

At five minutes before rendezvous, they finally reached the pickup coordinates. A medium-sized spire dotted with pale green moss rose above them. Sellen uneasily watched the forks of lightning above and edged a little farther away from the spire.

Telnak wavered on her feet for a moment when they stopped, then she sat down in a barely-controlled collapse. Sellen started toward her in concern, but Relpoek was already at her side to tend to her wound. Blood had soaked heavily through the bandages, and the look on Relpoek's face did not ease Sellen's concerns. The queasy anxiety inside of her grew.

Sellen and Grawurra turned their eyes skyward to watch for the shuttle. Though being dispatched from all the way on Hosnian Prime, its punctuality was never a concern.

...Until now.

Sellen watched her chrono as the time to rendezvous dwindled and ran out. The post-rendezvous time began to steadily increase.

Sellen checked Grawurra's chrono, but it matched her own.

She told herself not to panic. She told herself they were just late, that they'd had a minor issue en route or something and would be there at any moment.

But they weren't.

The post-rendezvous time kept growing.

The pickup had never been this late before. The pickup pilots knew how important it was to be on time: more than once they'd had to pull the AT-STs out of a firefight or a tight spot where seconds had meant life or death.

Sellen caught Grawurra's eye, and she could tell his thoughts matched her own: something was wrong.

“Sell, where are they? We need them,” Relpoek said in a calm yet tight voice. Sellen knew what that tone meant, and her breathing quickened as she glanced at Telnak’s pallid skin. The Quarren was lying down, and her own breaths looked shallow and rapid.

Sellen pulled out her comlink but hesitated. She caught Grawurra’s eye again. Just because she was considered on flimsi to be their “leader” didn’t mean she undertook drastic actions unilaterally.

Grawurra gave a small nod, then without a word he jumped onto the spire and started to climb. Sellen held her breath as she watched him, recalling the numerous spires they’d seen get struck by lightning so far. His black fur made him nearly invisible against the grey sky, so it was hard to see him when he reached the top and pulled out his macrobinoculars with one hand and gripped his sniper rifle in the other. He scanned the bleak landscape behind them. His silence told Sellen that he hadn’t spotted any First Order troops yet.

But that could change the moment she opened the comlink if they detected and traced the signal.

Sellen gave the clouds one more pleading, searching look, praying for a New Republic shuttle to come plunging down through them with apologies and a funny story about being waylaid. When the sky still was filled only with blue and red bolts of lightning, Sellen fought down the queasiness in her stomach and opened a secure comm channel.

“AT-STs to Aurek One, come in.”

She waited.

“AT-STs to Aurek One, come in. Over.”

Only static responded.

“Sell.” Relpoek’s voice was urgent now, which Sellen hadn’t heard since their previous teammate had died. The Toydarian’s hands flew into a frenzy of activity that rivaled his wingbeats as he fought to keep Telnak alive with his limited equipment.

Sellen dropped to her knees at Telnak’s side, though she had no idea what she could do to help. She gripped the comlink harder as if she could squeeze a message out and force it to get through to their overdue pickup shuttle. She opened the channel again. “AT-STs to Aurek One, respond! Emergency!”

From his lookout post high up on the spire, Grawurra trilled down a warning. Five First Order speeders were heading right for them. Fast. He stowed the macrobinoculars and raised his sniper rifle to sight down its scope.

Sellen’s stomach dropped. In other tight spots, they’d known that all they needed to do was hold out for X amount of time more, and their rescue would be there for them. But that wasn’t happening now. She had to face the fact that their rescue might not be coming. And that meant they probably wouldn’t get out of this one. Not all of them, anyway.

The thin datacards felt like a horrible weight in her belt pouch. If the four of them were the only ones who knew anything about this First Order weapon, she couldn’t imagine the damage that would be done if the knowledge died with them. It had to get to someone else. It had to.

Sellen quickly glanced around. The single spire was the only cover for kilometers in any direction. They would be easy pickings for the First Order troops.

She looked down at Telnak. The pilot was barely breathing now, and Sellen could tell Relpoek was fighting a losing battle. Even if the medic could somehow miraculously stabilize her, she wouldn’t survive the upcoming fight with the First Order troops.

More than anything else in the galaxy, Sellen wanted to not make this decision, but she

had to. She briefly squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them, pulled the datacards from her belt pouch, and stuffed them inside one of Relpoek's belt pouches.

"We'll hold them off," she told him tightly. "I don't think they saw you back by the base, but they saw me and Grawurra. These datacards need to get to the New Republic or lots of people could die. Do what you can to get off-world with them or transmit them, even to the Resistance."

"What are you talking about? I can't leave Telnak now," Relpoek muttered distractedly, still trying to save her.

"She won't survive the next few minutes," Sellen said, her voice hitching. "You heard what Grawurra said is coming. You're the only one who's got a chance."

"Too bad. Find someone else," Relpoek grumbled. He continued to work.

Grawurra's first blast from the sniper rifle cut through the air. There was a distant screech, and then Grawurra fired again. Engines revved and sped toward them. They were out of time.

Sellen gave one last look at the still-shuttle-less sky, then said, "Sorry, Rel." She stood, gripped Relpoek by the back of the collar and pulled him away from Telnak, sealing the Quarren's fate. Relpoek struggled in surprise. Then Sellen adjusted her grip, reared back, and threw the light Toydarian as high into the air as she could. He gave a startled yelp that was quickly ripped away. The wind caught him and blew him upwards even farther as his wings fought for some amount of control, then he was lost into the overcast gloom above. Not even a flash of blue lightning showed his silhouette.

Grawurra was continuing to fire his rifle, and the First Order troops were now in range and were shooting back at his stationary position. Sellen pulled her own blaster from its holster, crouched in front of Telnak, and started firing for all she was worth. She was much better with hand-to-hand fighting than shooting, but with as outnumbered as they were, if it got to the point of hand-to-hand then they'd already lost.

Despite Sellen's and Grawurra's best efforts, they were quickly overrun. The last thing she remembered was praying that somehow, some way, all of this hadn't been for nothing.

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*The End*

Revision A

3-5-20