

## A Common Foe

The wind howled as it hurled the snow sideways and into the face of the Snowtrooper's Tauntaun. It was getting dark quickly almost as if the light were racing him, and he was losing. FO-099 could not help thinking to himself how ridiculous this entire situation was. Why on earth was he the unlucky one who got sent out to patrol these desolate ice wastes? There was absolutely no way that anybody was out here...or alive at least. The Tauntauns breathing started to get shorter and much shallower, and the snow dunes were beginning to look endless. FO-099 had been out patrolling almost the entire day...and the day was clearly about to be over. A shrill realization of panic begins to engulf FO-099's helmet. What if he wasn't going to make it back? It was hard enough getting back to the captured base in daylight. The bombardment from the ISD had destroyed the beacon at the blast doors entrance so it was very difficult to find your way back. To make matters worse, the frigid darkness was starting to crawl across the landscape cutting down visuals to conditions most pilots wouldn't even consider flying in with instruments. The blizzard conditions were also scrambling comms adding another complication to FO-099's assignment that day.

FO-099 realized he needed to get back, and fast. His life and his furry scaled friends depended on it. "Hang in there buddy, just keep moving or were both icicles." FO-099 encouraged. The Tauntaun moved swiftly through the snow but you could hear the panting getting more desperate. Visuals were deteriorating fast, the temperature was dropping rapidly and temperature conditions were worsening by the second. FO-099 was lost on a bleak and desolate planet in the outer rim. Dread was flooding his mind. It was then he heard the screaming of tie engines in the atmosphere above him. He scrambled for his transponder "This is Trooper FO-099, I need vectors to base or an evac! How copy?" ....silence... "Please this is Trooper FO-099 I am unable to find Echo and need vectors for an evac!!" .... "I AM GOING TO DIE OUT HERE!" ....No response at all, not even static or a broken message. Despair flooded the troopers head. The Ties were not in range and that may have been his only chance. He quickly trained his ears to try and follow the direction the Ties were going. He yanked the reins on the Tauntaun and they started in that direction. "This is our last shot buddy. SERE didn't prep me for these sort of conditions.." FO-099 mumbled. Was this really going to be it?

The light was about to be gone and temperatures exceeding -60 were running close behind that creeping darkness. "Wait what's that?!" The light began to fade and bend around what looked like a large hill or ridge. "Oh please let that be it! Go buddy! Let's go! You get me there and I will give you all the food you could ever eat!" The Tauntaun trudged through the snow bellowing loudly and clearly in pain, but it never quit. The very survival instinct of an animal rearing its head in a last ditch effort to avoid a frigid and never ending sleep. As they got closer, no lights were visible but a noticeable dark spot became more pronounced in his vision. The disheartening issue though, this was nowhere near the size of what was left of the Echo Base blast doors. This was clearly nothing more than an ice cave. "Well it beats being out in this ice hell." FO-099 thought to himself. He could at least get shelter from the knife winds of Hoth and attempt to stay warm using whatever he could find. He didn't want to use that Tauntaun as he felt that they were in this together. No way was he going to use his friend as a last ditch survival sacrifice. Talking to that Giant ice lizard was keeping him sane, helping him avoid the sense of isolation.

The Tauntaun bellowed, its echo a haunting sound as it bounced off of the walls, but they had made it into the cave. Their chances of survival had just skyrocketed, but there was still danger. The cave was desolate and dark. Ice stalagmites and stalagmites filled it. The walls were rough and the ground dry, but frozen solid. It was empty and the air was still. It didn't matter to FO-099 or his Tauntaun though, they were just happy to be out of the wind. FO-099 thought about what could be inside, maybe something he could hunt and eat? Every trooper that was briefed before arriving at Echo was informed of the wildlife that was on Hoth. The rebels had left in a hurry, stripped it cleaned, but more importantly, left all the doors open. Troopers were briefed to expect the unexpected as Vader and his group had only stormed one section of the base. It had been two days since that had happened and they were still combing the area looking for any intelligence or tech that could have been hastily forgotten. I mean that is why FO-099 was out in that sector in the first place. They had read a watch log stating that a high value Rebel Commander was sent to the sector he was sent to scout. That was before the probe droids had sent word to the ISD. He was looking for what that Commander could have been after. With the brutal conditions however, tracking was almost impossible. It seemed like a task destined for failure. Busy work for a trooper that had nothing to do and a task assigned by a micromanaging superior. "Dank Farrik I would give all my credits away to be mopping the bridge right now." FO-099 said out loud. His Tauntaun turned to face him almost acknowledging what he said. It snorted almost as if the his trusty companion was agreeing, but it laid on the floor curled, breathing slowly and recovering from a full day of patrolling. The wind outside the cave became this dull hum and there was no light anymore. It would be far too dangerous and a death sentence to leave. The Tauntaun groaned and closed its eyes. "Yeah me too." FO-099 responded. It hit him like a ton of bricks as the adrenaline faded, he was exhausted. He still had a decision to make, push further into the cave or remain in the familiar area of the cave entrance. He had heard stories that many cave systems ran into Echo base as it was constructed quickly and never fully mapped. Rebels were constantly patrolling and would sometimes find Hoth wildlife inside the base.

"I don't even care I can worry about this tomorrow. There will be daylight and I could continue in the direction of the Ties. I am sure leadership is going to be absolutely thrilled to see me." He whispered to himself. He was having issues staying awake and couldn't tell if it was the extreme cold or just him coming down from all the intense stress. FO-099 got up and walked over to his trusty lizard to check on it. It was still breathing and seemed to be in a deep sleep. It began to breathe deeper and its cadence slowed. "Good for you." FO-099 whispered. He had grown attached to the big furry friend. He was assigned the same Tauntaun everyday he had been there. FO-099 began to walk to the entrance placing his motion sensors. These would pick up any movement and set off a vibration within his helmet. Something he won in a game of Sabacc against some Scout troopers on board the ISD. The idea was the vibration would be enough to alert the trooper, while not giving away his position, keeping the tactical advantage. He paced further back into the cave where the wind was barely heard. He laid down crossing his arms and assuming the position to conserve body heat he had learned at the Imperial SERE school. It was going to be a long night but he knew he could make it. Tomorrow would be make it or break it..

Bzzz bzzz bzzz

The helmet buzzed. FO-099 abruptly opened his eyes in a panic. "What the hell could possibly be in here? What time is it and how long have I been out?" he thought to

himself. The more he thought about it the more he did not want to know. He slowly and methodically reached for his E-11 blaster, making sure to keep noise to a minimum. He crept around working his way towards the entrance and held his breath. He slowly moved deliberately staying low, cautiously moving his head around the giant ice stalagmite coming out of the floor... NOTHING. The Tauntaun stirred and moaned but was still sleeping. Not a sound in the cave other than the breathing of the Tauntaun, that and the sound of FO-099s rapid heartbeat. He sighed a breath of relief but still wondered what would have set the sensors off? Could it have been the Tauntaun stirring in its sleep? It must have been as there wasn't a sound other than the wind in that cave. FO-099 stood up and relaxed and began to walk back to his cozy spot in that frigid cave. He was frustrated that he had been woken up but after checking the time, he had been out for quite a while. "Well the little victories I guess. Got some good sleep so whatever." FO-099 said whispering to himself. Still wondering why the sensors went off he began to walk back to his spot. Maybe they were defective and that's why the Scout guys put it up for grabs?

CRUNCH

The hairs rose on the back of FO-099s neck.

Bzzz Bzz

His helmet vibrated and alerted him again...He was frozen in place, not literally, at least not yet on this frigid wasteland. Something was coming into the cave with him. In fact he started to get a stench unlike anything he had ever encountered. The tension he felt in that cave was unlike anything he had ever experienced. As if he was being stalked and he knew that something was coming to investigate him. The cave was beginning to feel like a cage, and the door was wide open.

Crunch...thud

The snow crunching had stopped and it became apparent whatever it was, is now inside the cave. FO-099 slowly turned looking to the cave entrance...and then he saw it. The dark ominous looming figure of a massive creature standing in the doorway of the cave. It was difficult to see but it appeared to be a little over 3 meters tall and it seemed to be covered in fur. As FO-099 eyes began to adjust in his helmet and to the light difference coming through the entrance he noticed a small pair of cranial horns...and it hit him...A Wampa had wondered in his Ice cave, most likely smelling the Tauntaun. Surprisingly the Tauntaun was still sleeping only a few meters from the Wampa. FO-099's mind raced. "What do I do? Has it seen me? Do I run? Is my Blaster going to be enough on this thing?" FO-099 had heard horror stories of the Wampas on Hoth and couldn't believe he hadn't considered this. In his desperation to get to shelter and survive he hadn't considered the most serious threat he faced once out of the elements. He started to consider his options. He didn't have long or the luxury of time in this situation. He started to consider a less moral option that crushed his soul. "Do I alert the Tauntaun? Do I sell him out to get away? Or do I take the Wampa head on? No.." That Tauntaun had been loyal to him. He had the attachment and remembered all the lectures through training about loyalty and how loyalty was to be rewarded. The Empire valued it, and this may have been some hairy space lizard, but it had done its job and gone above and beyond. It had shown its loyalty to him, he wouldn't dare

betray him. He began to not only worry about his life, but that of his new and unexpected friend.

WAAAAAAAAA!!!!

Just then a sound broke the silence! The Tauntaun had awoken and screamed! It jumped to its feet and bolted in the cave. The Wampa roared, a sound something FO-099 would never forget. The chilling blood curdling scream with so much bass and tenacity. It immediately triggered fight or flight, yet FO-099 was Frozen in fear. It charged the Tauntaun! The Tauntaun Thrashed and screamed and FO-099 quickly and snapping out of it fired his blaster at the monster, but there was no effect as the Wampa grappled with the Tauntaun in its hungry blood rage. The Tauntaun screamed, its eyes widened as the animal came to the realization that this could be the end. To see the sheer panic and dread flood the Tauntaun, it brought a feeling of horror to FO-099. The helplessness and animalistic response and sounds the Tauntaun made in its fight was something that gave you a new appreciation for life. A raw desire to live.

FO-099 fired another blaster shot in the Wampas back but still not much of a response...Blaster shot after blaster shot and screaming from FO-099, yet the Wampa was unphased. Its brutal roars and grunts while it grappled and wrestled with the Tauntaun could only be described as raw power. However FO-099 noticed something. This was taking an awful long time to subdue this Tauntaun. The Wampa seemed to be struggling to get control. Perhaps there was something wrong with it? FO-099 realized this was his chance to save his friend. He had to do something right now or it was goodbye for his furred partner. Carefully and as calmly as he could, ensuring he wouldn't hit the Tauntaun, he aimed his blaster at the back of the Wampas head.

PEWWM

It hit its mark and the Wampa Roared again, the sound felt in FO-099's chest. The Wampa ripped its body around while the Tauntaun Squealed and got loose. The Tauntaun ran back deeper into the cave, as if its instinct had told it that going outside would almost certainly be a death sentence as well. The Tauntaun was out of sight in seconds as it ran deeper into the cave system. FO-099 felt a moment of relief. He had saved his lizard friend and rewarded him for his loyalty, but the relief was short lived because now it was just him and the Wampa. Its beady black eyes fixed on his helmet and breathing audibly loud in frustration and confusion. It rose and stood tall in the cave almost in a primal way to intimidate the trooper. Its stench now flooding the cave and its presence was almost insidious. A true primal apex predator. FO-099 was in its hunting grounds and was clearly the prey at this point. Light began to come slowly into the cave. FO-099 realized he had done it, he had survived the night. All this coming to a realization in what felt like nano seconds. This meant the temps were rising and the trooper could most likely make it to Echo now even without the Tauntaun. He would miss his friend but he survived.

The only thing standing in FO-099's way of survival now was the Wampa. He readied his blaster as the beast stared into his very soul from the entrance. The cave FO-099's cage, and the Wampa blocking the door. He set his E-11 to full power and braced himself gritting his teeth and ready to see what fate had in store for him. He began to ready himself...“If

there is a force...I could use the help right about now." He said under his breath, desperate for any sort of help. The Force was never a part of the Empire but he would call upon any help he could get at this point. "Please if there is a force, would it be enough to beat this thing?" FO-099 said to himself. The light began to pour into the entrance as the morning had officially come... It was then he noticed something peculiar about this monster the light exposed something...it's arm...it had one arm. The wound looked clean cut and as if it had been cauterized...

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