

# Over a Meal

By

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Three crewmen sat huddled around a small dining table, in the dim, flicking light of the shuttle cabin. Two humans, and yellow skinned, fish-like being made up the group. They all wore heavy coats, shivered, and grimaced as they ate their meals of cold, canned rations.

“Damn, it's freezing in here. If we can't turn up the thermal units, can't we at least heat up our rations?” Birks, a young man around twenty four, complained.

“I told you, the main generator is shot,” Zanik replied, glancing at his with large, green glassy eyes. “All we have is reserves. As long as we're stuck out here, we can't spare any power away from the thrusters. We'll have to make due with the minimum life-support.”

“Just our luck, stranded on a short range shuttle with no frigg'n hyperspace.” Birk continued.

“We fared better than rest of the crew still trapped on the Galldonna. Or the ones who tried the escape pods.”

“Do you think any of the pods got away?” Asked Sora, a woman in her early thirties.

“I don't think so.” Zanik replied, “The Korb had too many ships. The pods that didn't get snatched up by tractor beams were getting shot down by their fighters.”

“What do you think they'll do with the crew?” She wondered.

“I don't want to think about it.” Zanik shook his head. “One almost got me in the corridor. I'll never forget those eyes. It four of them, they glowed green. When I looked into them, there was nothing there. Just... Soulless. All in all, I think we're damn lucky to have made it this far in one piece.”

“Lucky?” Birks disagreed. “Those fighters blew the shit out of us! That's why we're sitting here in the dark, wearing freeze gear, and eating cold slop. Remember?”

“I know, Birks. You keep reminding us. Maybe you should spend less time complaining, and more time trying to fix the com-link, and getting us picked up.”

“And maybe if you knew how to fly this tin can, the Korb wouldn't have shot us full of holes!”

Zanik flared his gills, “Screw you, Birks. We could have left you in the hanger, and let those screeching nightmares tear you apart!”

“At least it would have been quicker.”

“Would you two knock it off?” Sora interjected. “We all did the best we could. We're alive, that's the important thing. So let's just stay calm and focus on solving this. Besides, your wasting oxygen with all this yelling.”

No one spoke for a few moments as they poked at their ratios.

“Speaking of which, how are the oxygen levels?” Zanik asked.

Sora glanced at him, and returned her eyes to her meal, “They're holding.”

“For how long? You weren't very clear about how badly the oxygen processor was damaged.”

Sora slowly finished chewing before replying. “I was able get it partially running. It should be fine as long as the power reserves hold out.”

Zanik nodded his head. “Birks, how long before we rejoin the space lane?”

“Three days,” He replied.

“Three days!” Sora exclaimed, panic seeping into her voice.

Birks and Zanik both looked at her with surprise.

“There's an asteroid field I had to navigate us around,” he answered. “It was that or head back to where we left the Galldonna, and hope the Korb have left.”

“What about the communications array? How long before that's fixed and we can call for help?”

Her tone was growing impatient.

“It got messed up pretty bad, I don't know how long.” Birks began to fidget, unsure why he was being interrogated.

“Well, what the hell are you doing just sitting here, you should be back there working on it.”

Sora was leaning across the table now, glaring at him

“Crite, Sora. I'm doing everything I can. I need a break too.”

“We're all going to be dead if we don't get us rescued, and you want to take a break?”

“Sora, take it easy.” Zanik placed a yellow, leathery hand on her shoulder. “The power will last until we reach the space lane, and even without the com-link, we still have the distress buoy we can launch.”

Sora slumped back in her chair and sighed, “Of course. I'm sorry, Birks.”

Birks just gave her a look and went back to his food.

Sora looked over her shoulder and gave a nervous glance towards the engine compartment which also housed the oxygen processor. She stared at her ship mates for a moment, then decided to change the subject, “Being down in the engineering level, I don't think I ever had a chance to chat with either of you before we all got struck on this shuttle together. Do either of you have families?”

“I was married,” Zanik answered. “But my wife died in a shuttle accident.”

“God, I'm so sorry.”

He nodded, “It was a long time ago.”

“Did you have any children?”

“No, but we always wanted to.”

Sora looked over at their navigator, “What about you, Birks?”

He glanced at her, still annoyed from before. But he answered, “Nah. Not really the marrying type I guess.”

“What about you, Sora?” Zanik asked.

“I have a husband and a ten year old son back on Neubarra Prime. I have to see them again, that's the only reason I was able to make it to the shuttle bay, past all of those monsters. That's why, no matter how banged up this ship is, I **have** to make it home.”

Zanik smiled at her, “Don't worry, you'll see them again, I promise.”

Birks rolled his eyes and picked up his tray. “Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to give the Com-link another shot.”

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A few hours later, Sora sat hunched over on a crate back in the engine compartment. She had tears streaming down her face as she looked at the holographic image of her son and husband. She looked over at the ruined oxygen processor, and cursed it. She had salvaged everything she could, but it was no use, the device was damaged beyond repair. The air supply would only last three people another twenty four hours. A far cry from the three days it would take to reach the space lane.

She walked over to a control terminal and ran the projections again, but the computer had no sympathy. There was no way around it; three people would not make it. But **one** person could survive for the three days.

It was one, or no one. Even then, it was slim odds of getting picked up. She knew drawing straws was the only fare way to decide who got that chance. But she just couldn't accept the idea of never seeing her family again based on a draw.

Birks and Zanik were good people, she realized. But neither of them had any one waiting for them back home, she tried to justify her logic to herself. Sora hated herself for feeling this way.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Sora walked over and locked the hatch to the engine compartment. Returning to the control panel, she entered a command to siphon the air from the rest of the ship. The computer flashed red with a warning, but she used her engineering clearance to override it. She looked at the hologram of her family again, and fighting back another wave of tears, pressed the start command.

She prayed Zanik and Birks could find it in their hearts to forgive her, she doubted she ever would.