

“And it's just another of those boring days,” the Leox sighed as he made his way through the remains of the town he and group, along with a couple of others, occupied to keep the last inhabitants safe from the raiding hordes of the Dracokins roaming those lands. So far none of the scouts had found more than traces of the enemy, but the signs of earlier battle were undeniable: no burned buildings, but encased in barely melting ice. People, young and old, defenders and townsfolk alike were frozen solid, left as reminder of the self proclaimed lords of this stretch of land.

What once had been a prosperous town settled in the foothills of a mountain range had been reduced to a few couple of residences for the miners, and of course the mine itself, the sole reason twenty mercenaries were hired to protect the settlement.

Climbing up one of the guard towers, he spend the next couple of minutes with cheering up the watchmen, giving some advice about how to operate the heavy machine gun his squad had installed. “Basically, you just pull this lever here,” he indicated the metal handle on the right side of the gun, “switch this button to 'F' and depress the trigger until there are no targets left, no ammo left or the barrel glowing red. The latter is the worst option, but at least that'll keep you two warm,” he chuckled and offered them some cigarettes, before dropping down the four meters back onto the ground, bracing his landing with the practised ease any felines, both half bloods and purebreds, possessed.

“You old showoff,” a gruff voice chided Kiono, followed by a heavy blow across his shoulders, rattling his plate armor. “Other people climb down, you always jump.”

“Yes, and you don't go upstairs in the first place, you fat bloke,” the Leox returned and punched his commander in the chest, before looking up to him. The rhino was towering over his second-in-command, standing almost two and a half meters tall with shoulders almost just as wide, even more so when armored. “What's on your mind, chief?” Kiono added as he noticed a bit of uncertainty in the Rhino's posture.

A heavy, rumbling sigh escape the barrel chest of the taller being and he nodded down the road leading from the tower down to the walls and the gate. “You know about the newcomers?”

“Five mercs, two female, three male, as far as I know, right?”, Kiono returned thoughtfully.

“Correct, but I have no clue about their actual skill...”

“Oh, I see,” the Leox sighed, “take them out one by one and check them out? Gotcha... Where are they right now?”

Rounding the newcomers up wasn't much of a problem, most of them were already sitting in the only tavern, easily distinguishable due to the fact they were the only ones around at the moment. Kiono looked them over sceptically, a wolf met his eyes for a brief moment, another wolf stared him down, but one just stared into the distance, yet her ears were sharp and turned towards him. 'Attentive, yet absentminded,' he thought as his gaze lingered on the pale mustelid for a few moments longer than on the others.

“Well, now look what the winds brought to this lovely place... a bunch of roughnecks eager to earn some cash and maybe get hired, eh? So, why don't we start with introductions? I am Kiono Hiemalis, second-in-command of the Arctic Heavies, we are the strongest unit here and therefore we say who does what.”

The two wolves turned out to be twins and huntsmen hailing from a small town known for their hunters and skinners, relaying on each other since they were born.

An elderly elk introduced himself as “Alonso Mancanares, emergency doctor from Liustiklinn.”, along with his mute companion, a shy, nervous caribou.

“And you are?” Kiono asked the last of the newcomers, nodding to the mustelid.

“Tiro Forken, field medic,” the grey furred weasel briefly said and leaned back again to look out of the window, watching the dance of the snowflakes, occasionally obscuring the sight with a puff of smoke.

After they got billeted on the tavern's rooms, sorted by gender, they went into the cold winds and light snowfall that permeated the town during most of the year. Kiono, the Rhino, clad in arctic camo and segmented plate armor and armed with machine pistols, and a elderly hyena with a red and brown-streaked apron were already waiting for them.

"We split up in teams of two to see what you are able to and how good you are at it," growled the towering rhino and pointed to the pair of grey wolves, before marching off, followed by the hyena who picked the doctor and his assistant, leaving the Leox and the marten alone.

"I'd have send you along with our doc, but we already have more than enough medics at the moment," Kiono said with an apologising smile, before nodding towards the gates. "So, what other skills do you have? Tell me a bit about you and why you came up here."

Tiro shrugged lightly and pulled her long scarf tighter around her neck. "I am a good tracker and know how to handle my rifle," she answered with a nod over her shoulder to the long weapon strapped across her back. "And I need money."

For a moment it looked like the Leox was attempting to continue with the small talk, but something told him he would meet deaf ears on that topic. Together they crunched through the ankle deep snow, towards the gates. "We're out for a little walk, won't take too long," he told the guards, signed them out, before stepping through a smaller door.

The next quarter hour went past without much talking, Kiono had only asked her occasionally about certain tracks and her medical skills, yet the answers stayed as short and precise as they had been so far. "Not much of a grant talker, aren't you?" he asked and glanced over to her, keeping a close look on her expressions.

"Nope," was the predictably short answer, her face remained impassive, only her whiskers twitched lightly in the cold breeze. "It's going to snow soon, and hard," Tiro muttered and tugged her scarf over her face while staring at the darkening sky. Gazing ahead, she stepped away from the Leox' side to slightly alter her course down the passage through the snowy forest.

For a moment Kiono was puzzled, before he gazed ahead, a narrow shallow crossed half of the path, forming a pitfall. 'She's good,' he thought, yet acted as if unaware of it.

"So, you are pretty good at reading tracks, grant you that... our scout will be shocked when he learns how quickly you found his trail." Once more his warm words met deaf ears, only a barely perceptible nod answered the praise. "But how good are you at reading the snow itself? Tell me about natural occurring hazards." While the Arctic Heavy talked, he lit a cigarette and offered one to the weasel as well, finding something she finally accepted.

"Apart from avalanches caused by the mining charges?" she shrugged and blew smoke out of her nostrils, looking around briefly, before turning her head back to the path ahead. "Tree wells are a danger in the woods, especially when you are going fast and don't... look out!" The last words came as a surprised shout, the first time she had raised her voice since she had arrived in the camp.

While they talked and walked, the Leox had steered straight towards the trench. He had dug it himself and knew it was a trap for cars, but also worked on people, something he was about to demonstrate himself!

Turning his head to gaze at Tiro, he walked on, crunching through the dense, just ankle deep snow. One step later, he felt the ground give under his tread. He leaned backwards, swung his arms around, but he was already too far and pulled the other leg into the trap as well, ending up to his naval in soft powder snow. "So much for snowy hazards," he grumbled. His grumbling was joined by an unfamiliar tone, something warm and friendly, a giggle from Tiro! It lasted only for a few seconds, before it ended as soon as it started.

"Come, take my hand and let me help you out," she said with a soft smile.

Taking the offered hand, Kiono considered to pull her in as well, but decided against this course of action, he had some more aces up his sleeves. "Thanks," he grunted and climbed out of the pit, stomped his pants and boots clean, before continuing to walk by her side. "So much for Arctic specialist," he muttered under his breath, only to see another smirk form on the short muzzle of the weasel, twice in so many minutes. He was getting somewhere, even when it was costing his dignity.

"We've almost finished our round," Kiono told Tiro after another half hour of mostly silent walking. The weasel exhaled and rolled her shoulders, tugged her rifle into a more comfortable position as she leaned against a tree. "I think your choice of camo is bad," she told the Leox with a straight face, "your cloudy sky camo might work in a snowfield, but in the woods, useless."

Bristling, the Leox bared his fangs and stepped closer. "Said the one leaning against a snow laden tree..." He pointed upwards to the snow heavy branches. As Tiro looked up briefly, Kiono yanked his empty hand down, a gesture commanding the flakes to shift, subtly but enough to loose their grip on the tree limb. With the cracking of wood and groaning of a small avalanche the tree lost its entire load of snow and crushed down on the unsuspecting weasel, knocking her off her feet and onto all fours.

It took her a few attempts to shake her head free. "Not again," she sighed and struggled and squirmed, trying to get up, but the snow had compacted heavily on her back, too heavily to be normal. "Get off me!" she snarled and tried to gaze over her shoulder, fully expecting Kiono to sit on her!

"Why?!" the suspected evil-doer asked, kneeling down in front of Tiro. "Stepped on your hands? I am not that evil..." He sounded seriously hurt now.

"Just help me out..."

"You forgot to say please," Kiono teased and plopped a snowball right onto her head, mushing it down gently into her hair. "But as I said, I am neither evil nor mad at you..."

Quickly he dug the buried lady out, pulling chunks of compact snow off her back and legs. "There you go!"

"Talking about going... Go to the heaven so you can hide yourself!" She launched herself from the snow, wrapping her arms around the Leox' midriff, bruising her shoulder on his plastron, and almost knocking him over!

Sadly Kiono was made of sterner stuff and knew how to keep his footing. He had braced himself against a tackle as soon as he saw her tensing up and just caught her charge. "You should watch your mouth, Tiro, or I have to wash it with snow!" Chuckling, he made a quick step backwards, grabbed her by the waist and threw himself onto his back, using the tension and pressure of her to toss her away, sending her tumbling into a pile of snow.

Jumping up to her feet, Tiro dropped the rifle and charged again. "You'll pay for this!"

"So, after you've seen our camp, lemme show you the ways you'll patrol most of the time," the towering rhino told the couple of wolves. "You know, we might look gruff and tough, and we are both, but when we're off duty, we are just like.... two kids stuffing each other with snow?" Disbelief colored his voice at the scene ahead, Kiono, with snow in his ears, hair and face, had Tiro pinned to the ground, attempting to wash her face with flakes. "Eat this, you sly weasel!" he laughed... until a shouted "Report!" from his chief brought him up to his feet and to attention.

"We just had a little..." He didn't came much further, Tiro kicked him in the back of his knees, before pouncing on his back, showing his head into the snow.

"Disagreement," she finished his sentence and got up again, dusting herself off, holding the Leox down with a foot on the back of his head.

"Back to the camp, pups! On the double!" the rhino snapped, shaking his head. "Looks like Kiono bit off more than he could chew.." he sighed under his breath, watching him scramble up to his feet and give chase to the running weasel. .