

## Camping in Comfort

By *Tanorath-drgn*

“Really? Camping?” I remarked, rolling my eyes as I settled into my chair. “You know this is the first bit of leave we’ve both had in more than a year and you want to go and roll around in mud?”

“Well, it’s spring back home and you’re always on about finding time to smell the flowers, so I would like us to smell them.” Fiora retorted, her brightly lit office contrasting starkly with my dim quarters. The lights had been fried recently in an altercation with a few pirates, so all I had was my less than good table lamp.

I ended up snout-clawing. “No, that is a metaphor, you knob. You do know that I very much hate camping, right?”

“Says the frontline soldier.” She quipped, sarcasm practically oozing out of my terminal’s speakers, “Come now, I put up with that ridiculous car of yours, it’s time for you to put up with camping.”

“Fiora, my ship has flushing toilets and air conditioning...no, we have *climate control*. I don’t do ground ops for a reason.” I replied with a snort, “Besides, even when I drive with you, we always end up somewhere nice that you like too. What’s in it for me?”

“For one thing, my camping lights work.” She replied flatly, obviously referring to the non-functioning lights. In fact, the controller unit was actually in pieces behind my chair. I had been trying to repair it up until she called with her idea. “And don’t you like mucking around on dirt tracks? There are several around the area that you can drive around on.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, “Ah yes, and I can haul you and your bags there while I’m at it, right?”

“Think about it this way. You can stay closer to the tracks where you can have your fun while I get myself some fresh and non-recycled air. Then we can cook over a campfire and have some drinks.” She replied, ignoring my jibe.

“You see, the point of having a big engine is that I can go home immediately and not stay the night and feed the bugs.” I replied flatly, “But if that is what you want to do, I will go with you.”

“Somehow, I don’t think you’re terribly enthusiastic about this.” She remarked, snorting, “But at least it’ll get us into an area with no civvie phone reception too.”

I felt my ear-frills perk at the mention of no reception. “Ah! So no calls to fix stupid things, only actual emergency comms?”

“Thought you’d like that. Yes, that means that we can both properly get away from work!” She replied with a toothy grin, “And I’m sure you’ll like the drive there too. I’ll show it to you on the Nav when we meet to pack.”

“Alright then. I’ll make sure the leave is confirmed and we can plan this properly.” I replied with a nod.

She snorted and nodded. “Somehow, I think you’ll find some way out of the camping bit, but I’ll take what I can get.”

I chuckled as she waved and ended the call after I waved back.

Grumbling, I found myself putting down some of my hard-earned credits to buy one of those high canopies that latch onto the rear of my ute, making sure that it was compatible and double checking to make sure I hadn’t bought a tiny one. I also bought a small foldable bed and a few boxes for my things. After a few afterthoughts, I also bought a minifridge and an air conditioning unit that plugged into the battery pack of the ute. Of course, I also double checked to make sure my leave dates were correct.

Once I organised to pick everything up on the way home from the spaceport on my first day of leave, I grabbed my torch, flicked it on and continued inspecting the controller unit for the lights, marking any damage with a red marker.

I ended up snapping a few photos of the damage with my comms unit and sending it to the maintenance technician on duty. Knowing that he was busy with more important tasks, I went to have lunch. While I had originally planned to pack my things as I would be going on leave right after the ship put in for maintenance at the Rakata Shipyards in the Home System, I couldn’t really get too much done with the lights not working anyway.

Halfway through my lunch, I received a ping from the technician telling me that someone had fixed my lights and that everything had been reassembled. I sent her a short note with my thanks before finishing up and heading back to my cabin.

As usual, things had been tidied up and all the broken components were placed neatly in a box by the door in the corridor, ready for collection. I pushed it against the wall so that it wouldn’t get in the way before heading into my cabin.

They had vacuumed the area and wiped everything down, which was nice. What was nicer, though, was the fact that the lights were working again. This meant that I could dig up my bag and pack my

things. While I would have liked to leave everything behind, I also had to take my laptop and backup my data as the ship was overdue for a major software update that would clear all the nonessential data in the database. Naturally, I had made sure that the crew was informed too and everyone else was doing the same, or I hoped that they would be anyway.

I found myself taking way longer than expected to pack my things: a definite sign that I wasn't getting to use my leave often enough. That didn't matter, though, since I was all packed and ready to go. I ended up doing a walk around the ship, noting down any issues and such on a form that would be passed on to the overhaul team to have everything rectified. Perhaps they might even fix that toilet on deck seven that nobody could get working.

I made all my arrangements, mostly just informing the port carpark that I'm coming to collect my ute and making sure my backup apartment keys hadn't been blown up during one battle or other. While the door was biometric, it's always good to have a hardware backup.

The hand over to the docking captain was pretty routine as the ship was put into spacedock and we all disembarked. A few maintenance personnel stayed to help, voluntary, of course, but the rest of us disembarked to clear some leave.

While people chatted on the shuttle about their plans, I found myself tapping away on my laptop, finishing up the last of my administrative work before we landed. While I still managed to make some light conversation, I was stuck staring at the screen most of the time. However, I did find time to watch as we approached the Homeworld, looking at the air and land traffic down below in the towering cities of metal and glass: a monument to our achievements and a sight that I will never tire of.

The shuttle pattered to the Alkonas Spaceport, which was set some distance away from the city of Alkonas itself, mainly to make sure people weren't bothered by the noise. I lived in the next city, Teradon, but the I.D.A.F. used mainly this port, so I usually drove down and parked here. The Force had their own carpark here anyway, so it was quite convenient, aside for the two hour drive.

We set down relatively quickly and once the usual immigration checks were completed, we were free to go. While most made a beeline for the maglev station, I gave them a wave as I grabbed my duffel bag and strolled towards the carpark.

Around me, shuttles came and went from the various landing pads, with people embarking or disembarking, while there was an occasional wooshing noise when a shuttle took off or landed, their wings automatically folding once the landing sequences were complete. There was the ambient chatter from the various citizens coming and going, while soldiers from the various departments came and went, some nodding to me in greeting and I nodded back.

As usual, I had my biometrics checked at the carpark before they had my ute trundled down from the storage area by the automated lift. On the way down, they had it sprayed down too, to clean off the months upon months worth of dust that had doubtlessly accumulated.

I thanked the Operator before I unlocked the doors and hopped in. The good thing about parking here was that they would charge the batteries in the hybrid system up for you if you gave them advanced notice, so there was no headache about trying to get a grid connection before I started the vehicle.

That being said, they don't charge it that much either, just enough to get it going. Besides, I had to force the setup to be a mild hydrogen-electric configuration anyway when I did the engine swap. This meant that the engine turned over and rumbled to life immediately, with the electric supercharger already whining. The sudden noise caused the Operator to jump and I couldn't help but give it a rev as I flicked the radio on to stream some music from my comms unit. I also turned on the nav system in case the route home had changed.

Once I was done putting in the detours that I would have to take to collect my camping bits, which included a foam mattress, I set off on my drive home.

While the drive was mostly uneventful, there was a huge traffic jam due to an accident on the highway, but that was cleared in relatively short order. Besides, since I had the ground clearance and four wheel drive, I simply drove off the highway and kept going till I passed the jam. I ended up rolling back onto the shoulder and accelerating before merging back into traffic. Luckily, none of the police officers saw me, else I would have been issued an infringement notice and probably a vehicle non-conformity sticker.

As I floored it and merged back into the first lane, a short voice message came in from Fiora, "Did you just spray mud all over the bus?"

"Probably." I replied, sending it along as I cut into the lane and continued accelerating, knowing that I would have to make up for the lost time so that I could make my stops and still be on time.

Fiora didn't reply as I made my trip, picking up the extra tall canopy for the tray, some toiletries, the mattress and some linen on the way. Before all that, though, I stopped by a self-service carwash and gave the tray itself a good clean, making sure it was spotless before I cleaned the rest of the vehicle, then proceeded to drive very slowly and conservatively to pick up the canopy and bolt it on so that the tray would stay clean.

I ended up late anyway, but not as late as I would have been if I dallied. I made sure to toss my clothes in the laundry and start the machine before going to have a shower. Fiora would be a while, since I knew that she would be picking up the groceries for the trip too.

Knowing that we would only set off on the morrow, I bought some crackers before turning one of the dining room chairs round to sit and watch the people come and go down below in the streets, some in the air with assisted flight, while sipping a glass of whiskey and munching on said crackers.

It's good to be home.

"Tano'rath, you lump, come and help me carry the food in!" Fiora hollered not five minutes after I had settled down to sip my drink.

Sighing, I covered my drink after putting it down and got up. As expected, she was already putting things down in the kitchen and beckoned for me to follow. I nodded and ended up spending the next few minutes carrying things up from trolley that she had pushed home.

Since we lived in an apartment complex, there was also a small trolley return point where we pushed the trolley to once it was empty.

We caught up over a few drinks and while I tossed my laundry into the dryer and she tossed hers into the washer. While her stories mostly revolved around office politics and squabbles between the other scientists in her lab, mine were about battles and strange new worlds. She mentioned something about regretting not joining the Fleet, but I told her that she really wasn't missing much, other than the giant risk of being shot, stabbed or beaten to death.

Eventually, the both of us went to pack, still chatting about recent events as she folded her clothes nicely and stacked them neatly in her bag while I tossed everything into my duffel bag. I noticed that she had actually gotten a tent and two sleeping bags, but decided not to comment for the time being.

While I'm not usually an early sleeper, I decided to turn in earlier than usual so that I could enjoy my bed for longer. Judging from how quickly the lights went out, Fiora was of the same opinion.

We slept well and woke refreshed early the next day. Fiora beat me to the kitchen and had already started cooking breakfast when I walked out, still in my sleeping clothes and yawning. She already had her laptop open and waiting for me with the route to the campsite drawn in in red. She waved at me as I walked out and I waved back, pausing to give her a hug before going to look at the route.

"Dirt roads huh." I remarked, looking at the maps, "Oh, and since you beat me to it, what's for breakfast?"

"Toast, bacon and some vegetable chutney that I sampled in the store yesterday. It's quite tart, I think you'll like it." She replied, nodding, "and yes, I thought you'd like the tracks."

"Yeah. Looks like good fun." I replied, nodding, as I went and set the table before making tea. "And I'll be happy to give it a try."

Fiora smiled and nodded, turning her attention back to cooking.

Breakfast passed mostly quickly as we were both used to eating in a hurry. This meant that we managed to leave early. Fiora naturally narrowed her eyes at the sight of the canopy and later, the bed in my ute and I couldn't help but grin.

As she hopped in, she simply rolled her eyes at me. "I knew you'd find a way around it."

"I am an engineer. Obviously, I would find a way to make things comfortable." I replied with a chuckle as I fired the engine up. "Either way, last chance to go back and take anything that you might have forgotten."

"I checked my things before walking down." She replied with a snort, "Besides, you're more likely to forget things than me."

"I packed the booze, extra clothes and toilet paper. We're good to go." I replied, before accelerating out of the parking spot. "Let us move with purpose and speed."

"You're fucking ridiculous, Tano." She remarked, snorting.

I dismissed the comment with a wave of my hand as I had the navigation system overlay the route to the campsite on the HUD that was projected the windscreen and we set off on our way proper.

The drive was indeed quite fun, especially after leaving the city and merging onto one of the backroads, snaking its way through the Enrat National Park, taking us through a coniferous forest before winding its way up a mountainside, following the natural contours of the land. While I was quite tempted to skid the ute around the hairpin bends, I remembered that I had a few bottles of good whiskey stashed in the back, bottles that I had literally fought tooth and claw to acquire since I had bought them when I was out in space, so I drove normally. Besides, the mountainside gave us a stunning view of the forest at large, with the birds soaring over the treetops and the rivers meandering through the park while the steel and glass of the city glinted in the distance.

I couldn't help but remark, "Been a while since I saw so many trees."

"Almost three years off-planet and that's the best you can come up with?" Fiora retorted with a laugh.

"My life is simple." I replied with a snort.

She chuckled, "Yeah, that I know."

"Aye, so if I see trees, I talk about trees, dear." I replied with a cackle as we came up to a bend.

“Don’t you dare!” She snarled, as she doubtlessly saw me downshift and rev the engine.

Cackling, I revved it hard, already having left it in rear drive only, skidding the ute around the bend as she screeched and threw the tissue box at me. Meanwhile, I was too busy leaving tyre marks and a small cloud of smoke as we went around and accelerated away.

“You said that I could have some fun.” I remarked, still grinning as she smacked my shoulder.

“You know I hate that!” She retorted, but smiled anyway. “But I missed you and your being an idiot.”

“I guessed as much. So, did you remember to check the weather forecast?” I replied as we continued down the road.

“Yeah, might be a bit cloudy, but otherwise we’ll have three nice sunny days.” She replied, settling back in to read her ebook.

The rest of the drive went relatively smoothly as I went slow so that we could enjoy the view. We stopped a few times at a few lookout spots to get photos of the landscape. I began considering having one of the photos printed so that I could put it on my desk on the ship. After all, there were no forests for me to walk around or fly around in on the ship.

We eventually rolled into the camping site that Fiora had booked, complete with a lookout of its own, letting us gaze out over the valley where the forest lay. The site itself wasn’t really anything special, mostly made up of a grassy clearing with a few tracks worn in by tyres and the like by other campers. Surrounding us were more pine trees and the scent of pine hung fresh in the air. The main track was just a short distance away, and we could still see the mountainside that it hugged.

Fiora immediately set to work pitching her tent and tossed me what was presumably mine, which I tossed back into the back seat. “Ah, yes, observe my genius!” I declared, opening the back of the tray and showing her my bed, bags and a few bottles of good drink. “No tent for me.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She replied with a sigh, “and I knew you’d find some way out of the camping part.”

“Ridiculous? This is good stuff! It’s even heated because there’s power from the battery pack!” I added, grinning, “We’re an advanced race, there’s no reason to sleep in a *tent!*”

“The point is to be closer to nature, Tano.” She replied, snorting, “but I won’t stop you.”

I shrugged and she went back to pitching her tent and I ended up giving her a hand before grabbing a shovel from the ute and digging up the old ashes from the fire pit. We ended up sharing a mug of cold sweet tea from the mini fridge in the ute once that was done. “Surely you can’t complain about the refreshing drink?”

“No, but I’m also sure that half that fridge is beer.” She replied, laughing.

I snorted as we sat on a pair of foldable chairs. “For once, no, actually. There’s some beer, but I also brought a fair bit of tea and some soft drinks. I know you don’t like beer.”

“I don’t mind the lighter ones.” She replied with a shrug as she stretched, “Feels so strange to sit down and not have something to do.”

“Aye, tell me about it. I’m not used to such giant open spaces anymore.” I replied with a chuckle, “Not to mention air that’s actually fresh.”

We ended up sitting and just letting time pass as we sipped our tea. Fiora mentioned wanting to go on a hike the next day, but since we had spent half of today just getting here, we both agreed that we should just rest and do whatever we wanted.

I ended up unfolding the table and putting out the cutlery and the like. While we could have used disposable paper fare, I had brought a set of proper cutlery and plates, albeit plastic ones, but since they were regular reusable fare, everything had some weight to it and we wouldn’t have to worry about the wind blowing things away.

I set about unpacking the already marinated meat for dinner as Fiora tossed some charcoal into the fire pit, along with some fire starters. The first thing I noticed was that she had portioned everything out nicely already and picking out the right portion was no issue, since everything was labelled neatly, a habit probably from her job in a lab.

Along with the boxes of meat in the cooler bag, there was also a box of salad. I couldn’t help but crinkle my snout in disgust as I pulled it out and she laughed. “Don’t worry. I won’t make you eat it!”

“You better not.” I replied with a chuckle as I went and put as many of the perishables in the fridge, while the rest went back into the cooler bag and I tossed some of the cold packs into the fridge too, to swap out in the morning.

“Not as if you’ll listen to me.” She grumbled, flicking her tail as she tossed more coals into the fire pit before pouring a generous portion of fire starter on it and tossing a lit match into the mix, starting the fire far more spectacularly than strictly necessary with a flash and a loud woosh. The firelight glinting off her garnet red scales did make for a nice view, though.



I snapped a photo and showed it to her. “You always look good in firelight, by the way.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” She replied with a snort. “But the complement is appreciated.”

I shrugged as I brought out some sauce to add to the meat skewers after they were cooked, before rummaging in one of my boxes and coming back with a bottle of whiskey. “Flattery, no, whiskey yes.”

She cackled at the sight of the bottle. “Yes indeed! Is that a new one?”

“Yeah, I got it when we went to one of the outposts for a resupply run. I haven’t seen this in the Inner Colonies and I hear it’s quite good.” I replied, setting the bottle on the table along two glasses. “Very smooth, apparently, but also has some spice. Interesting stuff.”

We ended up sipping the drink while watching the meat cook, exchanging stories from our times away. The meat, not being resequenced, actually smelt like meat and more importantly, smelt delicious. Dinner was had in short order as we enjoyed the drinks more, pausing to toss all the trash into a bag to take back with us.

As both of us were still a little tired from travelling, Fiora retired to her tent and I went to bed. While she shifted around, sometimes shifting her entire tent a little, making quite a bit of noise, I simply turned the heater on and slept in my bed. The mattress was a little thin, but that wasn’t the end of the world.

The only problem, really, was the fact that we found out the next day that the weather forecast was wrong and all the rain on the planet came. The hike got cancelled, obviously, and we ended up huddled in my ute cooking food over a portable stove for the rest of the day. So much for driving on the tracks later in the day...

It was miserable, even Fiora admitted it. There was mud everywhere and her tent nearly flooded. She ended up packing it all up and we left a day early. It was agreed that we would instead go home, wash up and go out for a nice dinner.

While the holiday really wasn’t what we had hoped it to be, we still enjoyed being away from work for the rest of the leave period. Besides, we enjoyed each other’s company too. I also extracted a promise from Fiora not to go camping the next time.