***Qyreia on the Fly***

The burning and scrutinizing stare she was giving the vessel seemed to be having mixed reactions to the Hutt that had asked her to test pilot the thing, an odd mix of anxiety and annoyance. Qyreia wasn’t in the habit of flying strangers’ ships, and a time machine – if it really was one – was *definitely* not in her repertoire. She wondered if she could even make it work, but this space-slug assured her that it used very simple controls.

“So you just want me to test this thing? No side missions or anything?”

“No,” he responded in fluent, deep-voiced Basic; an oddity for Hutts in her experience. “Just choose a moment in time, travel there, then return with your report.”

“And try not to mess with the past, right?”

“Unless you accidentally want to become your own grandmother,” the Hutt shrugged, chuckling a little at the thought. “That would require *quite* the time investment in the past.”

“Yeah… Don’t think you’ve gotta worry about that.”

He showed her the inside of the ship – a small shuttle whose hold was almost completely taken up by the machinery for the time-travel circuitry. What little space remained was given over to a couple weeks’ worth of supplies. Despite her misgivings, the Hutt wasn’t kidding about the controls: the cockpit had only one additional panel with a very user-friendly layout. Choose the date time, confirmation to lock it into the system, and engage the drive. According to her patron, the device would only handle the time displacement. It was up to her and the ship’s standard navigation controls to go anywhere else.

After checking for any other emergency essentials – mostly weapons – she was given clearance to depart. “Hoo boy,” she sighed, “let’s hope I don’t turn into a creamy red paste. Too many holovids end that way when it comes to this stuff.” Once sufficiently away from the lonely station that she had initially landed on, she finally started to consider where in time she would like to go. *Warring periods are exciting, but likely to get me blown up. That nixes… quite a lot of history. Don’t have any real funds to play with, so making investments is out. Oh well. We’ll figure it out when we get there.* The Zeltron placed a finger on the time marker, closed her eyes, and typed out some random keys.

“Five hundred sixty two years, huh?” she said, looking at the indicator screen. “Well, I guess it’s as good a number as any.”

Without further delay, she spun up the temporal drive and waited for the inevitable explosion. The viewport seemed to follow a similar pattern to that of hyperspace, though instead of the white lines turning into a bluish tunnel, there was instead a violent shaking and a blinding white flash before everything jolted to a sudden and vicious halt. Qyreia was thrown from her chair as the inertial dampeners went offline completely, though the artificial gravity was maintained, resulting in a very hard landing against the console’s base which knocked her out.

How long she was out was anyone’s guess. When her eyes opened, she was met by almost pitch black, the lights still out in the shuttlecraft. Achingly, she stood and looked outside to see the stars that she had been looking at before the jump, all appearing to be in relatively the same locations.

Her eyes were still settling – and trying to let the pounding in her head subside – when she heard a noise toward the rear of the ship. Qyreia spun quickly to face the threat, only to go reeling from the fresh, searing pain in her skull. *Okay, maybe I just imagined the noise. My brain is clearly not in good sorts right now.* When she heard the noise again, her hand instantly went for the pistol at her hip, bringing it up with shaky hands. *That kriffing landing… can’t hold a blaster to save my life right now.*

Beyond the cockpit hatch, against the light from the hold moved a pair of large silhouettes that, upon seeing her, jumped in surprise. When they started talking, she instantly heard the distinct tones and sounds of Huttese. One figure seemed particularly intent on talking to her, so she took a chance and turned away for a moment to activate the overhead lights. Sure enough, there were two Hutts staring her in the face.

“Um… hi.”

The larger Hutt said something long and seemingly inquiring, only able to make out the word “Zeltron” in his stream of speech. When Qyreia only responded in Basic, the second, smaller Hutt came forward.

“I am sorry; my friend can understand Basic,” the feminine-sounding Hutt said with only a slight accent, “but he is not very good at speaking it. I am Ajla, this is Umbhar.”

“Qyreia,” she responded, lowering her blaster a little more.

“We are scientists” Ajla continued, weaving past Umbhar into the narrow passage, “doing a planetary survey, when we came upon your ship. It appeared to have been hit by an electromagnetic pulse, but there were no other ship or weapons signatures that we could find. When we caught your life sign…”

“Thank you… for your help.” Every word made her wince with pain. “Not to abuse your kindness, but you wouldn’t happen to have… ooh! some extra-strength painkillers would you?”

“Of course!” Ajla turned to her – if the Hutt identified as *her* – compatriot and, Qyreia assumed, asked for him to get some pain medication. He returned shortly with a small hypospray, clearly not meant for use on the more robust Hutt physiology. “It is only a light dosage, but we find these sorts of medications work better in an environment where drinking water might be scarce.”

“Smart idea,” the mercenary said, taking the device and injecting herself. The drugs took relatively quick effect, and thankfully were just what Ajla had said: mild. From what Qyreia could tell, there were no side effects; clearly this was akin to the tablet-forms of over-the-counter remedies. “Oh, that’s *much* better. You said you were doing planetary surveys?”

“Yes. We are actually just about to return to our station to meet up with several colleagues, if you would like to join us. It would give you time to recover and do any necessary repairs to your vessel.” Ajla looked back, “That is, to say nothing of your impressive hyperdrive.”

The Zeltron turned toward her controls. *Right, the “hyperdrive.” I wasn’t exactly planning on this.* She checked through the systems, and everything seemed to be working, even going so far as to boot up her engines and extraneous systems. “Everything *seems* to be working, but I wouldn’t mind the break.”

Seemingly overjoyed at her acquiescence, the two Hutts returned to their ship and led her to a rather familiar station at a not-too-distant planet. *Well I’ll be. That mad scientist’s shop has been around for a while it seems.* When they docked, Qyreia expected to see a plethora of creatures in lab coats carrying around specimens of all types. What her eyes met was the largest collection of Hutts she had ever seen; that there weren’t any lab coats was a minor let-down by comparison.

*There’s gotta be at least thirty of these giant slugs slithering around here!*

Despite the many filthy smuggler dens she’d been in before, the prevalence of Hutt odor, even in the large space of the main atrium, was almost debilitatingly overpowering. Since the vast majority of the creatures were at least twice her size, she maintained a good nature about it. When the pair she had inadvertently met gave her some nasal filters, she inwardly praised whatever higher power there was for these two Hutts. She was thrown off of her game again, though, when Ajla excitedly grabbed her by the hand and pulled her toward the gathering, leaving Umbhar behind, much to his apparent disappointment.

Ajla promptly proceeded to introduce Qyreia to every Hutt in the room, and vice versa. The poor Zeltron knew that she would remember only a handful of names, but seemed to be allowed to use “Oi chuba!” or “Hey you!” as an understood alternative for those that did not understand Basic, which was roughly over half of the crowd. An alien, much less a Zeltron, seemed to be quite the anomaly for these beings, and for a time she was the center of attention, though thankfully these Hutts had a sense of propriety and didn’t overwhelm her. Qyreia was bad enough with parties; she didn’t need to be squished in the process.

The forum started on its own, some of the Hutts giving small presentations, while others perused some of the findings their colleagues had found in their travels. Ajla seemed to be particularly interested in showing everything to Qyreia, and it became somewhat apparent to the humanoid that there was more to this than simple scientific interest. After feigning to need to use the refresher, she slunk away to get some space.

It was almost worrying when Umbhar showed up on the balcony she had been resting on.

“Hey Umbhar! How’s the party going for you?”

His expression showed a mix of disdain and pleading as he said a slurry of words in Huttese, too quick for even the sharp-eared guest of his to catch the meaning.

“*Oi chuba*, slow down there. I can’t understand you.”

He grabbed her arm, which she resisted, until she saw that he was trying to shower her something. The Hutt pointed at her, then down into the Atrium at Ajla, hesitating for a moment to think about how best to describe the next part. His miming of what Qyreia could only assume was vigorous kissing was enough for her to get the idea.

“Waitwaitwait… You think… Ajla is into me?” The Hutt nodded. “Whoa dude! No offense to you or her, but I’m not into Hutts.” Then it dawned on her. “*You* like Ajla though, don’t you?”

Umbhar nodded and his expression softened exponentially as he looked down at his partner, lovingly. Regardless of her ability to read space-slug facial expression, Qyreia knew that she had messed up a very tenuous situation, and despite her complete lack of awareness on the matter thus far, she somehow felt responsible and wanted to make it up to the big softie before her.

“Alright bub, here’s what we’re gonna do.” Umbhar looked at her and said a few Huttese words. “Yes ‘*we.*’ Get over it. Now the way I see it, I jumped in on your game, so I’m going to un-jump it. I’ll go down there, and when she starts getting all personal again, I’ll get overbearing and… dare I say it, *romantic* with her.” Umbhar said some words again that sounded like he took offense to that. “Nothing against Hutts, Umbhar. Romance isn’t a thing I’m really into; doesn’t work out too often for me.” He shrugged in understanding. “Okay. We’ve got a plan.

Qyreia was the first to head downstairs, but Ajla was nowhere to be seen. Much of the discourse had turned to more raucous partying, including a holovid screen that was displaying lyrics to the music while Hutts went up and sang. *Ooh, that looks fun*, she thought as she passed by. Repeated inquiries led nowhere, and she motioned to Umbhar as told her as much. They had almost given up the search when one of the other Hutts (that thankfully knew Basic) said that Ajla had gone to the refresher to look for her Zeltron friend. The duo took that as their cue and dashed over – as much as a Hutt and Zeltron *can* dash.

When they arrived, there appeared to be something going on already. *Are they fighting or fracking in there?* When she peered in, she saw Ajla resisting the advances of another, larger Hutt. Qyreia had barely turned back to tell Umbhar when he burst into the small space and proceeded to thrash the would-be suitor into a well-beaten heap. *I didn’t even know their tails could* do *that*, she marveled. Taking to the shadows, she hid while Umbhar escorted Ajla back to the party, seemingly very interested in each other. *They’re almost cute together. Except… Hutts.*

With a quick break to actually utilize the refresher, and take a cheap shot at the beaten Hutt, she returned to the party well behind the amorous pair. No sooner had she shown up, though, than she was ushered with pushes and Huttese encouragement up to the ad hoc stage where the microphone and music were. This was the Zeltron that doesn’t like parties. Yet, up on that stage, her school days on Zeltros and those many hours of singing in the shower came surging up, and she belted out whatever song those Hutts threw her way. They also threw drinks her way, and she wasn’t one to deny liquid courage.

Out on the “dance floor,” she could see Umbhar and Ajla very thoroughly enjoying each other’s company. Qyreia also learned that Umbhar’s earlier display was *indeed* a miming of Hutt kissing technique, prompting her to take an additional two drinks before returning to singing. The night passed as such, the Zeltron finally sneaking away as the Hutts either fell asleep or found amorous partners for the evening. She didn’t even get to say a proper goodbye to her two friends.

The shuttle was still somewhat tumbledown from the earlier shaking, but it was all in working order. With great care, she guided the vessel out to empty space away from the station and, making sure she was *very* thoroughly strapped in, started up the sequence to take her back to her own time. *That was enough of an experience for me*.

The landing into her own time-stream was just as rough as the alternate, but buckled in as she was, Qyreia didn’t suffer nearly as much injury. A quick call to her mad-scientist Hutt confirmed her arrival back to where she was supposed to be. She docked and stepped down the ramp, only to have the Hutt looking at her like he’d seen a ghost.

“What?”

“You look like, as the humans say, hell.”

“You ain’t so pretty yourself.”

“Did it work?”

“Oh yeah, it worked,” she said, rubbing her head. The pain medication was wearing off, but the alcohol was keeping some of the pain at bay.

“Well,” the Hutt continued, “that would explain what I found while you were gone.”

“What?” *Crap, did I leave my dirty mags on the bunk again?*

“This,” he said, holding up an image tablet. On it was a tremendous group of Hutts, including Ajla and Umbhar, flanking one lone, small Zeltron woman. One that looked very familiar.

“Huh. I guess they left this when they sold this station to you,” she mused, looking closely at the picture. It already seemed a distant memory despite that she had just returned.

“Sold it? Ajla and Umbhar are my *progenitors*.”

Qyreia gulped. “Those are your *parents*?”

The Hutt nodded. “What did you do?”

She thought about it for a moment, then merely patted the Hutt on the shoulder. “I got *them* to do *each other*.” She laughed. “I guess that makes me the reason you’re here.”