***The Frozen Spice***

*Why am I doing this? I don’t like Hutts, I don’t like the cold, and I* ***really*** *don’t like that there are other folks out here that might wanna shoot me. I’m not too happy about the contact keeping this cargo’s contents a secret either. Damn ice-ball.*

Hovering over the frozen rock known as Hoth, Qyreia sat at the cockpit of her borrowed shuttle, scanning the planet and maintaining as low of an energy reading as possible. She had even turned down the internal temperatures to give off less of a heat signature. “F-f-f-frack,” she shivered through chattering teeth. These scans were time consuming, but she didn’t want to be caught off-guard by any of these other potential search parties; the Mandalorians especially.

Once satisfied that the area was clear and that she had found the crash site, the lone mercenary began the slow, stealthy approach toward the planet. Once in the atmosphere, she had to activate all of her systems simply to keep them from freezing over. It was nice to be warm again though, so Qyreia wasn’t about to complain. *The* *Shinny Luck* was half-buried in the snow when she landed nearby, various broken pieces of the ship strewn along the tremendous scrape in the terrain. She had seen the dilapidated remains of Echo Base in the distance, complete with the frozen skeletons of toppled AT-ATs, but all seemed quiet.

“I just hope I got here in time,” she said, throwing a parka on with some gloves before lowering the hatch. The heavy metal hit the icy snow with a deep *crunch* that sent a cold shiver up the Zeltron’s spine as she tucked the stock of her carbine into the pit of her shoulder, cushioned as it was by the thick coat. She checked her field of view, but saw nothing hostile on the horizon. “Let’s get this over with,” she huffed, a thick cloud of steam pouring from her lips into the frigid air.

Every step made a soft crackling sound as her feet broke through the thin layer of ice atop the drifting snow beneath, some steps proving deeper than others when she would sink up to her knees in the deeper divots. The downed vessel had thankfully compacted or torn up most of the loose snow, leaving a relatively easy path despite the occasional hiccup. Soon enough, Qyreia was at the breach in the vessel, staring into the darkened maw.

She took a few hesitant steps inside. The snow from without was reflecting a fair amount of light, and so the mercenary could see a fair way in. Not noticing anything imminently dangerous, she risked announcing herself. “Hello?” she called down the darkened corridor. “Anyone there?” Only silence greeted her, prompting a few more steps forward. “My name’s Qyreia. I’m with Naga Sadow, of the Brotherhood. Rix sent me.”

That last sentence seemed to evoke a response, as a faint sound like a gasp echoed off the wind-swept walls. Qyreia stood there, waiting, and after several long moments with the cold wind still whipping at her back, she saw motion down as the far end of the hall.

“Don’t shoot!” came the high-pitched, gravelly voice of a Rodian. When he stepped forth, he was confirmed as one of the green, big-eyed creatures, of a height with Qyreia but more stocky, if only slightly. “Rix sent you here?”

“Well he didn’t send me to a tropical beach with scantily-clad servers, I know *that* much. You got the cargo in here?”

“Over in the hold. I might still be able to get it open, if there’s enough power.”

“Well come on! It’s colder than a Wampa’s sex life here.”

The Rodian led the way toward the cargo hold, just a little ways down and through a hatch. Inside there were several large pallets, each distinctly too large to man-handle into her ship’s hold. The expression on Qyreia’s face must have been particularly poignant, because her new companion hastily pointed out an anti-gravity dolly laying on its side in the corner. Not wanting to wait any more than she had to, she directed the Rodian to start moving pallets while she opened the cargo door.

That proved to be a bad idea.

Without the landing gear down, the door creaked and groaned as it scraped and pressed into the icy rock beneath it, forcing the mercenary to manually halt it before it bent inward on itself or caused a major incident. No sooner had she halted it than her eyes met those of the smuggler just coming down from the ramp of Qyreia’s ship.

“Son of a ruskakk,” she muttered as they both raised their weapons and started firing at each other.

Qyreia had the advantage of cover, and the smuggler’s pistol-fire fizzled ineffectually against the Rodian’s hull. Her counter-fire met the smuggler right between the shoulder blades as he tried to retreat back into the Zeltron’s ship. His friends, hanging out around a small transport on the other side of the icy clearing, were soon roused from their casual conversation and were firing into the downed ship’s hatch.

In short order, things went from bad to worse, and worse to downright strange. A squad of Mandalorians ran and rocketed over a nearby ridge into the general area, hitting the smugglers from behind and redirecting their attention long enough for Qyreia to get the Rodian to cros the no-man’s land between them. He was just about to return when another ship landed on the snowy plain, a group of well-armed Talz pouring forth and laying down their own fire on the two warring groups. All three would take the occasional pot-shot at the mercenary and the spice-moving survivor, which Qyreia would generously return, with interest.

When a Mandalorian rocket made its way across the field to explode at the back of the cargo hold, Qyreia decided she’d had enough of this fight, and told the Rodian to finish loading, his safety be damned. Providing covering fire from the hatch, Qyreia kept her charge safe from immediate harm simply by keeping their enemies’ heads down, occasionally managing a decent shot against the bobbing and weaving enemies.

The last pallet was being loaded when a tremendous roar tore through the air amidst the blaster fire. Seconds later, a huge Wampa burst from around the corner of the downed ship and tossed the Rodian aside like a ragdoll. The monstrosity was about to finish the job when Qyreia opened fire. The first few shots only singed into its thick fur, but when it charged, it took a full burst of energy bolts to the face. She rushed to the Rodian and helped him to his feet, thankful that he was unharmed, if only because she might not get paid otherwise. When they had regained their feet, they could see that several more Wampas had barreled into the other groups, creating confusion in the brutal melee.

“Let’s go,” she said quietly to the Rodian, helping him push the final pallet into her ship while the others were largely distracted. The few shots that made their way toward the pair went wide, and usually only served to attract the attention of a Wampa or one of the other groups. Wanting to attract as little attention as possible, Qyreia kept her finger off the trigger and made quick work of buttoning-down her ship and taking off from the cold planet.

What few pickets the various teams had left in orbit were too busy rushing to their comrades’ aid to notice the lone shuttle zipping away into the black. As soon as she was out of the immediate gravity well, she put in the coordinates for Nal Hutta and got into hyperspace as quickly as her engines would allow.

“*That*,” she said as soon as the blue tunnel of hyperspace had overtaken them, “was the *weirdest* fight I have *ever* been in.”

“Agreed,” the Rodian chuckled. “Thank you for getting me out of there. If you hadn’t shown up, I’d probably be Wampa fodder right now.”

“Just try not to crash on ice worlds, or swamp worlds, or any other Force-forsaken world next time, okay?” She shivered. “I’m *still* fracking cold.”

The Rodian only laughed as they made their way toward safety and payment.