

# Flashfreeze

*"Karabast."*

Yumni Ha was not one for cursing, but the expletive seemed appropriate considering the circumstances. Not two hours earlier had she landed outside Zainab, delivering much-needed supplies and a crew of engineers to help fix the geothermal power station, when a blizzard of frightening proportions had swept in and grounded all flights. As the snow and ice mounted, choking out ion engines and burying lesser craft alive, she'd patiently waited for the storm to pass, counting the lost credits as her working freighter lay stuck in its moorings.

As the temperature continued to drop, the shuttle port itself, ruggedized as it had been against the elements, began to suffer malfunction and the very coolant pipes that kept the pads thawed began to burst. Popping off like pipe bombs, Yumni counted at least three such explosions, two tearing chunks out of civilian shuttle craft and the third dousing a fuel tanker with supercooled water that froze it solid in a heartbeat, leaving its twisted corpse held in the icy grip of an arctic god.

That last one had broken the heating for the cargo hub they now sheltered within.

Had that been the only calamity, it would have been bad enough. The old gods, however, had other ideas. As the blizzard choked Zainab's streets, sowing chaos and confusion among the residents hurrying for shelter, a wave of violence had surged forth. Cultists, dubiously armed, but deadly in their conviction, had raised their banners and declared the city under King Youtl's control.

Yumni had no perception of who that King was, but having a passing familiarity with the planet's struggle to rid itself of the so-called 'old gods', she could hazard an educated guess. Even so, the troubles were not done mounting.

Emerging from the frozen wastes, like shadows amidst the raging storm, came horrific beasts like mutated arctic fauna, storming the periphery and hunting down any they could find while the cultists besieged the local security services downtown. There would be no relief, and with monsters on the prowl, Yumni had no desire to stay and wait for rescue.

A self-made woman such as herself would not have it any other way.

Had it just been up to her, she would have thrown the shuttle port regulations into the gale force winds and taken her chances with flying away, but the forced hesitation and

indecision had seen the landing gear frozen solid to the platform. *Esperanza* was a true workhorse, but even she had her limits and lifting the entire platform with her was asking too much.

The legs would need to be thawed out, but with monsters prowling outside, it would be a suicide mission. It was at times like this she found her aversion to droid labor haunting her, if only for a moment. Stuck inside the shuttle port cargo hub, the pilot and a gaggle of engineers considered their options and did not like what they had to play with. Still, it was either a break-out attempt or a slow death by hypothermia and although patience was one of her many virtues, Yumni had long since decided she was not one to accept the inevitable.

The foreman of the engineers, a swarthy Selenian by the name of Azuk, hefted a hydrospanner over his shoulder and took a long drag from a stubby cigar.

"That's a sound plan, but I have one small concern though. What you're suggesting is, we take all the risk to cut your ship loose, and in exchange, the ones who don't get eaten by those beasts get to maybe ride away? Assuming you don't bail on us the moment your ship gets off the pad," he grunted. "Begging your pardon, miss Ha, but that don't sound like an equal division of labor right there."

Yumni had expected as much. It was not always easy to make the working class understand that division of labor was not based on the amount, but value of the work.

"None of you are trained pilots," she explained with the patience of a mother. "At least not good enough to survive taking an XS Stock light freighter off the pad in such weather without crashing into the flight control towers the instant you were airborne. If you intend to survive, my ship is the only option and I its only pilot."

Azuk took a long drag off his short cigar, letting the smoke vent through his nose in a long twin stream. "Maybe so, miss Ha, but we've been *frakked* over by people with fancy titles to need some here collateral before signing for a gig. And the gig you're proposin' is sounding mighty expensive."

"I am open to proposals, then, mister Azuk."

"Ain't that one of them ion grenades on your hip? Now, I hate rustbuckets as much as the next red blooded man, so I ain't gonna ask why you carryin' one of them around. That said, I bet such a device might dissuade you from takin' off in a hurry. Lest we cut your engines at a crucial moment."

Yumni looked the man square in the eyes, her expression utterly unreadable. "If those are your terms," she said, taking the grenade off her belt and handing it over—followed by her blaster pistol. "You might need this one as well."

The man seemed genuinely surprised, choking momentarily on the thick smoke. “Well then,” he said, clearing his throat as he grabbed the blaster and handed the grenade to his second in command. “Looks like we’re in business.”

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The winds whipping around the cargo hub rattled the sensor wands, antennae clattering against antennae while guylines twanged under tension. Out there in the whiteout, the monsters prowled with ceaseless hunger, and the cries of horror of the deck crews already caught fresh in their minds.

The handful of survivors ventured into the open in a huddled mass, hydrohammers and vibrodrills aloft like spears against cavalry, though all of them knew full well they’d make one lick of a difference against the nightmarish creatures. Hurrying along amidst scattered cargo crates and freshly formed snow banks, Yumni led the way towards her ship with the engineers in tow.

Snow and ice clogged her goggles, the chill making her motions sluggish, but at least they had not been spotted—yet. Halfway to the freighter, crossing a patchwork of speeders tossed around like toys by the blizzard’s first wave, their luck finally ran out.

There was no warning, no howl to alert the others, or even to strike fear into its prey. There was only a sudden crack of ice breaking under heavy tread, and the blood curdling scream of the last engineer as he was snatched off his feet by a giant shadow.

“Run!”

The command was superfluous, everyone already sprinting like mad to get away from the beast while it finished its first kill, the screams ending with wet tearing snaps just beyond their sight. Yumni bolted for the safety of her ship, or at least its relative safety. She had no reason to believe those monsters could not tear through spaceship hulls given their prodigious size.

“Hold it off, I need to warm the engines!” Yumni called out to Azuk, the man nodding and doing his best to rally his men along a perimeter of scattered cargo modules. The terrified men threw themselves behind the barricade, for what little use it would have against the unseen predator, and waited.

Behind them, the Kaminoan trader dashed up the landing ramp and into the freighter’s cockpit, beginning takeoff procedures and cycling the engines to clear them off the ice and snow. Thankfully, the *Esperanza* was no small craft and her engine bank matched her size. Lesser craft had choked to death, but with some careful shepherding of power

reserves and a modified start-up sequence, the drives sputtered to life one after the other.

Outside, seconds ticked by agonizingly slowly. Adrenaline was a poor substitute for warmth, but it would have to do, as the men shivered with fear and encroaching hypothermia. The comms piece in Azuk's ear crackled to life, finally ending the wait as the next phase of their plan was enacted.

"Break her free, go go go!" the foreman shouted, sacking a trio of workers to clear out the landing gear. Vibrodrills bit into ice with savage force, saws cutting and hammers smashing at the ice with the strength of men possessed, but there was so much to clear out. Azuk and the remaining men peered into the haze with nervous hearts, seeing shadows move as imagination and paranoia took hold.

"Where are you, bastard?" the foreman muttered, clutching the blaster pistol with both hands. Wiping snow off his brow, he tried to suppress the shivers and the dull aching in his ears that almost sounded like music. Almost.

He didn't know how long he was out, suddenly waking up like he'd suddenly fallen asleep, but he knew there were shouts of alarm. Turning sluggishly to see the cause, he saw his second-in-command pulling his hydrohammer from the pulped skull of a fellow engineer. The scene was so utterly bizarre, his mind could not make sense of it, but as he held up the ion grenade and pulled the pin, he needed no further explanation.

The DC-17 spoke, spitting sapphire bolts that struck the man in his torso and wrist, the ion grenade tumbling into the snow. With seconds left, he fired in desperation, bolts splashing into the snow around the explosive as the timer reached zero. A bolt struck the grenade's casing the instant it detonated, marring the expanding field of ionizing energy into a crackling web of particles that lashed out in violent spikes.

Half the *Esperanza* shut down, losing power in a catastrophic manner as the ion blast overloaded her systems. The surviving portions hiccuped and sputtered, the internal imbalance blowing fuse banks and frying couplings as the venerable ship writhed in pain.

Azuk could not comprehend what had made the man act like that. He had a family back home, had it meant so little? He shook the thought from his mind, now was not the time.

"You two," he pointed at the closest men. "Get that ship loose, *now!*"

Reaching for his comms, he did not have time to press the transmission stud when Yumni's voice already sounded in his ear.

*"Give me two minutes. Then proceed."*

Two minutes, Azuk grumbled. They would not last that long.

The monster emerged from their left flank, once again pouncing on the outermost man who'd strayed too far from the others. His valiant effort to swing a circular saw at the beast was easily avoided, and the beast closed its jaws around his waist, dragging him screaming into the storm.

The next attack came mere moments later, this time with enough warning the engineer managed to stab the beast's paw with his fusion lance. What would have been a lethal strike to a man only drew a sharp cry of anger from the Caxqette before its paw swiped the man's head off its shoulders, the blood spray freezing solid before it hit the ground.

"Ready."

"Scatter!" Azuk cried out, firing the only ranged weapon they had at the beast. Panicked, every man fled into cover as best they could, hunkering into cold hovels to either freeze to death or be dragged out by hungry jaws.

Left as the only visible target, Azuk took aim and fired, before turning tail and running for his life. The Caxqette snarled, the blaster bolts like flies against its thick obsidian hide. Enraged, the beast charged at the foreman, slaving maw yawning to rend him in two.

Feet pumping on pure adrenaline, Azuk ducked underneath the *Esperanza's* engine bank, slid across the packed snow and vaulted inelegantly over the frozen corpse of an upturned cargo skiff. Bracing his hands against the wreckage, he kept on firing at the Caxqette, though each sting only enraged it further. But that had been the plan all along.

"Now!" Azuk called into his comms, switching his aim from the beast to the coolant vent and blasting it with sapphire bolts. Sparks showered off the metal as plasma bit into durasteel, the vent groaning under pressure before suddenly bursting in a geyser of erupting water.

Up in the *Esperanza's* cockpit, Yumni hammered the throttles, the ion engine banks whining in protest as they struggled to respond to the sudden command. The landing gear creaked, the entire ship shuddering as violent vibrations rumbled through ship and pad, but all of that was inconsequential. All that mattered were the results.

Azuk watched in horror as the Caxqette pounced at him, the prodigious beast leaping through the air with speed and agility it had no business possessing, but even an alchemical monster could not outrun the wind. The backwash of the *Esperanza's* ion engines blasted through the geyser of water, windchill freezing the water to a supercooled state. The instant it touched the Caxqette's hide, it froze solid, droplets blossoming into ice like a million explosions caught in holopic.

The beast cried out, but it was already too late. Before Azuk's very eyes, the massive creature froze over, its body cocooned in solid ice. Crashing onto the landing pad, only its tail still twitched and moved, swishing this way and that in pain and confusion.

*"Now. Now is your chance!"*

It took the man a moment to respond to Yumni's voice over the comms, the surviving engineers emerging from their hideouts with hydrohammer and vibrodrill, setting upon the beast with a vengeance. Like ants crawling over a mighty reek, the frenzied workers hacked and smashed, breaking and cutting until the monster was no more.

Panting, ragged and shaking, Azuk regrouped his men and set them after the freighter's legs. They had an opening now, but more monsters would soon come. Up in the cockpit, Yumni knew the terror of this day had not yet been tallied in full. The power company would surely expect *her* to pay compensation for the lost workers' families...