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*Dandoran*

*Py'zah the Hutt's Summer Palace*

*Parking Area*

The four ran down the tarmac, between rows of shuttles and transports, shouting and blaster fire following them. Tucked under the big Chiss's arm was a white-haired Ewok in a red hood, wriggling fiercely for freedom. Just ahead of them was a purple Twi'lek in a fetching dress and a Mirialan in a scuffed servant's attire and jangling manacles.

**"I do not understand! I thought the auction was going well!"** bellowed Stres'tron'garmis, keeping the struggling Bub in check as they neared the *Ladies Delight*.

"Weeeeeelll," said Vicxa over her shoulder, wincing, "we ran into some trouble."

"I requested Vix, ahem, insert herself as extra security. In case Principate forces tried to steal the gem," added Tali Sroka, wincing.

"It isn't my fault they thought that's what I was doing too!" shouted the short archeologist. "I tried to tell them!"

Strong sighed as they neared the landing ramp to his Nubian J-Type, the crew arrayed around the struts with blasters beginning to lay down covering fire.

**"And young master Bub?"** he asked, holding the Ewok up by the scruff, unconcerned with the little furball's twisting to try and gain freedom.

The two women looked at one another as they ascended the ramp, Tali shrugging, Vix beginning to chuckle.

"Well, you see..."

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*Several Days Prior*

*The Citadel, Selen*

**"Dandoran, my Lady? I fear I am unfamiliar with it,"** rumbled the Chiss, brow furrowed as he looked at the holodisplay. An oily-looking Hutt was on display at the moment, the image

flickering over to show a very Hutt-like palace, grand in size and angular. It shifted again to a strange-looking crystal as his Consul spoke.

“A small world in Hutt space, home to Py’zah the Hutt,” Lucine Vasano’s lip twisted in momentary disgust. Arcona’s proximity to Hutt space meant more regular dealings with the cartels than any of them particularly cared for. “What matters is that,” she gestured as the display showed the crystal once more, “an item going up for auction, Darling. Something both our trade partners in the Principate and those pirates are trying to get their hands on.”

He raised a dark eyebrow, “You wish me to obtain this item for the sake of our allies, then? I see! A Hutt auction, I shall wear a suit I do not treasure dearly, as I suspect I will need to burn it afterward,” he said with a nod.

“...yes, for our allies,” stated Lucine, her voice neutral, eyes calculating. “You will be provided means to bid on the item, but do watch for unsavory types trying to steal it, my dear Garmis.”

Strong simply bowed, fist over heart.

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“Dandoran? Is there a reason you’ve taken interest in that Hutt infestedt backwater?” Tali Sroka inquired of the flickering hololith of Lucine Vasano who managed to look immaculate even over the holonet; as always.

*“The situation between the Severian Principate and the Revenants has been deteriorating faster than expected, but an opportunity has presented itself there. We’ve finally begun to understand what is fueling their conflict and I believe it would be in Arcona’s interests to intervene.”*

“You vant us to stage some sort of assassination?” Tali felt a tug of disgust at the corner of her mouth.

*“Nothing so vulgar, darling, merely the acquisition of a certain artifact that has come up for sale by the proprietor. A crystal, likely connected to the Force, and one which I feel ought to be studied more closely. It would be unbecoming of us to allow potential enemies to obtain weapons or knowledge we knew nothing about,”* the blue-tinted Lucine spoke infuriatingly politely. *“The war with the Collective taught us that much,”* she added with the faintest hints of venom.

“Obtain a crystal? That can be arrangedt. How much time do ve have until the auction? I needt to get the team briefed andt plan the mission.”

“Ah,” Lucine began, momentarily left without clever words, *“The urgent nature of this is why I contacted you directly...”*

Tali sighed and rubbed her temples. "It's tonight, isn't it?"

*"Heavens no, our intelligence network has far improved since last time. You have until tomorrow."*

"Generous," Tali replied dryly. "Is there anything else I need to be aware of?"

*"As a matter of fact, there is. I have given a similar mission to another of our trusted operatives, he will be assisting you in this vital undertaking."*

Tali raised a quizzical eyebrow. Her words were leaving out volumes.

*"I've assigned General Garmis to the task at hand as well. I am sure he will prove a most useful ally."*

"Strong?" Tali blurted, perhaps a bit more forcefully than she'd intended. "If this is a stealth mission, he might not be—"

*"Oh no, he will be bidding for the item at the auction, just like the others. Although with a considerable backing from our creditors."*

There it was again, the omissions were glaring. Tali had long since become fluent in Lucine-to-Basic translations.

"So what am I supposed to do?" she pressed.

*"Whatever you feel is necessary, darling. Just make sure the auctioneer accepts our offer. You know how I feel about rejection."*

The faintest of shivers ran down the Twi'lek's spine as the sickly sweet syllables rolled off the Consul's tongue. It was time to get serious.

"As you wish, my Consul," Tali spoke in a breathless monotone that had served her well back when she served others with a collar around her neck. There was no collar nowadays, though she still sometimes wondered how far she'd actually come.

Lucine's palid facsimile flickered into nothingness and her office fell silent once more. A moment later a light flashed on her console, informing her of a datapacket's arrival; schematics for the Hutt's palace. She would have to make arrangements, and the time she had to do them forced her hand. Wrangling Voidbreaker into supporting her would take too long—herding Nexu was sometimes easier—which unfortunately left her relying on 'consultants' as Yumni Ha liked to call them. Luckily for her, there was one such consultant right here on Ol'val.

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“Sabacc! I win!”

The jubilant exclamation was followed by a melodious chuckle and the scraping of chips across a cheap plastic table. Cards were soon being reshuffled and bottles clinked on the pavement as the two opponents enjoyed their favorite libations; light beer for the Mirialan, and fruit juice for the Ewok.

Tali rounded the corner, deftly sidestepping a moist clump of something she preferred not to think about, and laid eyes upon the pair of unlikely card sharks. The Mirialan was short, but the Ewok was shorter still. Sitting across each other in cheap garden chairs with a grimy plastic table between them, the two seemed to have gone through a fair number of beverages already, judging by the number of empty bottles littering the street.

The Mirialan’s short hair ended in red highlights, illuminated by the harsh overhead street lumens that bathed everything in a sterile off-blue hue. Her left forearm, equally red though chipped in places where the paint had flaked off, glinted as she shuffled the deck and dealt a new hand, the servos of the cybernetic whirring and clicking imperceptibly. A brown nerfleather jacket hung across thin shoulders, falling short of her waist and leaving a section of a black leotard visible. The bodice in turn joined a pair of comfortable slacks that hung so low at her gently curving hips that a portion of green skin peeked between the two.

Across the table, and with feet dangling firmly off the ground, sat a chubby Ewok Tali had seen occasionally operating alongside Strong and assisting in unlikely ways. His golden eyes were sunk deep within the fuzz of his face, and the white of his fur had taken on an artificial glow from the street lights. He held in his paws a full set of sabacc cards, though barely, and if she was not gravely mistaken, Tali could see some stains of his previous fruity beverages matting his chin.

“I hope you’re not taking advantage of him,” Tali began, the Mirialan perking up ever-so-slightly at the sudden sound. “He’s still technically a minor.”

“One, he’s old enough to kill shadow beasts, he’s old enough to slap some sabacc,” Vicxa Varis replied over her shoulder, relaxing upon realizing it was not the enforcers or a creditor who’d found her—this time. “And two, he really seems to enjoy the game. So who am I to tell that fuzzy face ‘No’? I mean look at him, and his wee chubby paws trying to hold on to all them cards,” the Mirialan cooed.

Tali rolled her eyes and stepped closer. The self-styled treasure huntress was a recent acquaintance, but she’d proven surprisingly capable, if not a bit eccentric. But on Ol’val, that seemed to be the norm. “I have a job for you, shouldt you vish a few extra credits—” she picked up one of the spent bottles of light beer and sniffed it, immediately recoiling with revulsion, “—perhaps for some *actual* beer.”

"I'm not strapped for credits," Vicxa replied cheerfully, nodding at the pile of various nicknacks on her side of the table. Tali could make out a few credit chits sticking out of the random collection of debris. "I've no clue how he got all that, but he is *not* as good at sabacc as he is at hoarding." Vicxa added, slapping down two cards, drawing a fresh pair and locking eyes with the Ewok.

"Your move, *Bubby*."

The Ewok let out a startled grumble, looking at the table, his cards, the pot, the cards again and then tossing them all away to draw a full new hand. The colors and numbers looked pretty and he was lost staring at them for a while, before a sharp cough from his opponent snapped him back to the moment.

"Bub," he stated, laying down his cards face up.

"Twenty-two? Impressive," Vicxa mused. "The Force really is strong with this one." She turned towards the Twi'lek with a leery grin. "Isn't that something you lot say when someone's really lucky?"

Tali chose not to deign that with a reply as the Mirialan began laying down her own cards.

"Twenty-one..." she sighed, shaking her hand. The Ewok's eyes lit up, only for her to produce one more card she'd kept palmed and laying it upon the table. "Aaand twenty-three."

"Nub..."

"Real close, Bubby, maybe next time," Vicxa stated empathetically as she clawed over her winnings and turned her attention fully to the Twi'lek. "Something tells me this is important, though. Or else you'd probably have left by now. What do you need?"

Tali produced a small puck from the folds of her cloak and held it up, the holoprojector coming to life and showing a lazily rotating image of the Hutt compound schematics.

"There is something very valuable inside this place," Tali explained in a hushed tone. On Ol'val, walls famously had several pairs of ears. "Andt I needt to make sure to acquire it. The vault is locatedt beneath the residence, but there are service entrances close to vhere the restrictedt area begins. I shouldt be able to get you inside that vay, but the rest is up to you."

"You do know my expertise is old temples and such, right? I mean, the design is definitely dated, but it's no temple..." Vicxa replied, examining the blueprints.

"Fine," Tali scoffed, palming the projector and turning away. "I'll findt someone else. Shouldt have known breaking into a Hutt's private vault wouldt be too difficult for you."

“Private vault? Hutts?” Vicxa perked up, suddenly appearing far more sober than a second ago. “Why didn’t you lead with that?”

“The architecture didn’t tip you off?”

“Fair enough...” the Mirialan admitted. Perhaps she had miscounted her drinks today. “Fine, count me in. When are we leaving?”

“My shuttle departs tomorrow,” Tali said, tossing her the projector. “Staff is expected to arrive five hours before the guests.”

Vicxa ran a thumb over the projector puck as the Twi’lek turned around and left. It promised to be quite the undertaking, burglarizing a Hutt vault. Probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience, that.

*Especially if one failed.*

The thought chilled her spine just a tad. Maybe, upon reflection, she might have use of someone who was exceedingly capable with the Force, and fit into as small spaces as herself. Her eyes shifted to the Ewok, still glumly staring at his almost-winning hand.

“Hey! How would you like to have *all* the play chits you could possibly need?” she offered with a grin she reserved only for selling the worst of ideas.

“Yub-Nub?” the Ewok growled excitedly. The game was back on.

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### *Day of the Auction Dandoran*

The pair of Arconans cut quite the sight as they entered the Hutt palace, drawing more than their fair share of looks. Strong appeared at ease, his high collared black jacket tailored to fit comfortably while still making it clear that his bulk was one of muscle and functional strength. The red insignia of Arcona on his breast only stood out more on the field of midnight, and even more with the lithe purple arm hooked through his own.

Where Strong looked comfortable with the situation, anytime his sweeping gaze moved far enough left to catch sight of his companion he seemed to grow visibly more nervous, a smile tugging at his lips that was less confident than what he showed those who were sizing the duo up as they entered. Tali was of above-average height, coming nearly to the big man’s shoulder, and with a dancer’s build and grace, not to mention a dress cut to her knees, along the sides in violet with light blue trimmings, a floral pattern just visible in the fabric. With a golden headpiece

hooked around her ear cones and across her forehead, the Twi'lek was getting a fair number of stares herself.

"Vell, ve seemedt to have made an entrance," she spoke quietly, golden eyes taking in the array of typical Hutt hanger-on's. Gamorreans snuffled about at various doors, mercenaries in mismatched armor, bounty hunters trying to appear aloof in darkened corners. Dozens of armed people were scattered through the entrance hall of Py'zah the Hutt's palace.

**"I am used to being tactically assessed when entering a place such as this, my lady, but I do believe you have drawn more attention than I,"** rumbled Strong, trying to keep his voice to a low roar. He glanced down at her, his stoic features softening. **"I must say, I was surprised you wished to accompany me on this task, though I welcome your charming company nonetheless. And, while I fear I must be repeating myself more than is appropriate, you look absolutely beautiful. Considering the company we are to keep at this auction, I hope you will not find it inappropriate that I do not stray far from your side,"** he reached over to lay his hand over the one she had holding his arm, giving it a light pat while his eyes cut towards the crowd.

They moved down the steps from the entrance, carefully navigating the crowd towards a door on the far side of the hall that was flanked by guards. The two were both familiar enough with decorum from vastly different backgrounds to know that it would be for the best to pay their 'respects' to their host if they were to avoid problems. The guards looked at them with grunts but did nothing to stop them, though just inside the door a robed Twi'lek, burnt orange in color and thicker in the middle than most of his kin, did step up to them. His yellowish eyes skipped over Tali, lekku twitching oddly before looking Strong up and down.

"You are the representative of Arcona? The financials have checked out, the great Py'zah is pleased one of our neighbors is finally deigning to take part in one of his auctions," the majordomo inclined his head towards the Chiss.

**"Indeed, We are,"** stated Strong, his voice even and clear. **"We would also pay our respects to your master, as is proper. Is there a queue?"**

The orange Twi'lek stiffened, eyes skipping back to Tali and then back to Strong anew, clearing his throat and stepping aside, one arm sweeping towards the broad throne at the rear of the room.

"My master welcomes you to Dandoran, representative...s...of Arcona," he choked out, head bowed.

A small contingent of well-dressed figures was bowing and turning away from the Hutt as they approached, their clothes not dissimilar from Strong's own formal uniform. From the way the group's leader held his chin up in the air and tried to look down on the pair of non-Humans, despite being shorter than both Chiss and Twi'lek, they smacked of Imperial remnant. His gaze

flicked over the pair before pausing midstep, causing his gaggle of accountants and guards to awkwardly shuffle to a stop.

"I recognize that symbol on your chest, Csillian," the man stated in a clipped manner, his voice trying, and failing, to emulate the classic Coruscanti accent so many Imperials were known for. "I would trust that our trading partners to the Galactic East would have the Principate's best interests at heart. We are, of course, stronger together, are we not?"

"We may discuss such matters later," responded Tali, eyes looking past the Severian, "it would be an insult to keep our host waiting."

Strong fought to keep his face straight, inclining his head slightly towards the Principate official before moving forward, making it clear that he was moving on regardless of the former Imperials standing in front of him.

"How I missed being treated like arm candy," hissed the Twi'lek.

"Which is foolish of them, and will make our winning of this auction all the sweeter, my dear Tali," whispered Strong, his voice a low rumble. He looked to the Hutt as they came within about half a dozen feet, and bowed, fist over chest, "**Mighty and corpulent Py'zah! We are honored to be invited to your grand palace, and humbled in your allowing us to take part in this evening's festivities and auction! My Lady of Selen hopes this is but the first of many such mutually profitable ventures that Arcona and your Family engage in!**"

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"Your magnitude graces us with their presence," Tali added with a practiced curtsy, while blotting out the greasy stench that wafted to her nostrils in the Hutt's proximity. Had she still possessed a working gag reflex, it would have been in hard use.

"De wanna wanga," Py'zah rumbled with a Huttese drawl, a fat hookah mouthpiece in the corner of his mouth belching sickly sweet smoke as he spoke. It smelled vaguely of pineapple—and ham.

Tali had no desire to press for further pleasantries, and the faintest of tugs on Strong's cuff told him as much. Their mandatory introductions over with, the pair made their excuses and backed away, leaving the lord of the planet to wallow in his opulence. Everything around them reeked of the same, the interior of the chambers decorated with more credits than taste. Gaudy gold decorations clashed with impractically thick velvet carpets dyed a rare shade of pink Tali was fairly certain involved doing unspeakable things to some poor flightless bird. Precious metals were not spared even in the doors themselves, which necessitated unflattering hinges to support their own weight.



Tali found herself smirking as she glanced back at the Hutt, feasting upon a palanquin that threatened to crumple under the strain. Perhaps the designer *had* had an eye for detail after all.

She had no luxury to linger on that amusing thought as a smartly dressed man approached them, the pressed cut of his uniform jacket so sharp she reckoned one could cut a lemon on it, and distinctly at odds with his soft face. He was in his early thirties, balancing youthful confidence with a sense of experience, a dangerous combination if she ever saw one, and judging by the smug air of aloofness, a member of the Severian Principate delegation.

“Ah, esteemed representatives of Arcona,” the man smiled in greeting, bending politely at the waist in a curt bow. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Commodore Istvaan, youngest commodore of the 2nd Fleet. I’ve heard much from our envoys, though I hope tonight’s auction will be *less explosive* than the festivities you’ve hosted thus far.”

Tali bit her tongue. It was the Severians who’d brought those terrorists in their wake—though it stung her pride to have seen Arconan security measures fail at catching them all the same. Strong could sense her annoyance and stepped in with a polite smile, offering a hand.

“General Garmis. Always a pleasure to see a fellow man of the martial path,” he said. “I mirror your desire for a peaceful auction, and a civilized bidding.”

“Quite, though I am dismayed, the security appears to be leaking here as well,” Istvaan replied dryly, peering past the towering Chiss at another form across the room. Tali turned to see whom he was looking at, while Strong maintained unflinching, unsettling eye contact. “A *rat* appears to have slipped past the guards.”

A melodious giggle drew Tali’s attention to the man he was referring to, a gaunt individual with long black hair and dressed in a gaudy brown fur coat that hung off his thin frame like a pelt. A pair of escorts, a Twi’lek and a Togruta, giggled at some anecdote he was sharing. She would have been forgiven for assuming it was mere politeness, but something about the warmth in their voices hinted at genuine amusement.

The lanky man turned, his features equally disheveled as his unkempt mess of hair, though the longer she beheld him, the more she began to suspect the motley look was a carefully crafted facade. The casual eyeshadow was smeared just *too* perfectly and the inebriated exhilaration of his wild gesturing seemed almost choreographed. The escorts were buying it, hook, line, and sinker, but it left a sour taste in her mouth—or perhaps she’d merely inhaled the Hutt’s hookah.

“Revenant scum,” Istvaan spat. “I’d have half a mind to end his misery right here,” he muttered, drawing attention to the finely built vibrosaber belted at his hip. Strong shifted imperceptibly, squaring his stance to react in case he went for the blade. Istvaan seemed to notice and his demeanor melted back to smug joviality. “But we are a civilized people, are we not, General?”

“Yes. We are all civilized, Commodore,” he rumbled in reply. “We will meet again at the auction,” he added with finality.

“Looking forward to *dueling* with you, like gentlemen,” Istvaan smiled and left.

Once he was outside earshot, Tali spoke her mind.

“What an insufferable little twerp.”

“Do you believe his counterpart any better?” Strong inquired, nodding at the disheveled man now armed with twin cocktails of a colorful nature.

“They both play their roles,” she replied. “Appear what they want us to see. I don’t trust either of them.”

“And you, lady Sroka?” he asked innocently.

She gave him a searching look before replying. “I trust myself very much,” she side-stepped the question with a dancer’s grace.

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*Rattle-rattle-rattle...*

*Thunk!*

“Sorry.”

*Rattle-rattle-rattle...*

Vicxa Varis felt her cheeks redden as she pushed the serving cart along, the thing piled so high with food containers she could barely see past it. The stowaway within rubbed his head with a furry paw, mumbling something to soothe its injured spirit at being carted around like this. It was hardly the proper ride for a fierce hunter like himself, but the Mirialan had insisted, and the lure of her promised booty was hard to resist.

Dressed as a menial servant, Vicxa kept as low a profile as she could while passing deeper into the secure parts of the vast network of service tunnels that extended like a termite mound beneath the palace. Numberless servants, indentured and hired, milled about like ants within the confines to realize their master’s will. Judging by the number of staff serving or preparing food, the will of their master was not too complex, Vicxa judged as the fifth runner carrying a plate of appetizers fledged past.

Infiltrating such a sprawling and disorganized mess had been simplicity itself, at least with the credentials Tali had provided her. With a few well-timed distractions deployed, such as an unfortunate surplus order of easily perishable meats threatening to go to waste unless *someone* came to help, she'd even managed to bypass most of the initial screenings that might have picked up on the Ewok's presence. Already so deep inside the palace, she did not imagine there would be much security before the sealed-off area around the vault.

As she rounded the next corner, she realized she had been gravely mistaken.

A Zabrak of impressive size and armament held up a palm as she and her cart came into view.

"Oi lass, you new or somethin'? Herbie's feedin' pen is just past here, don't think yer wantin' ta go in there," he stated in a bored tone, a thumb thrusting over his shoulder at a doorway with a unique smell wafting out from. He took in the way she looked at the entry and grinned, "Quite the stench Herbie puts out, yeah?"

"H...Herbie?"

"Lord Py'zah's pet rancor, lass! Door leads to his feeding area and pen, well as tha bridge Lord Py'zah uses ta go check on his shinies. Course, bridge is one of dem telescoping ones, only a couple people can use it, and everyone's code has a different, eh, timer on it. Wrong person uses tha wrong code and \*snap\*," he snapped his fingers with a grin, "bridge will retract while Herbie is feedin'. Security measures and all that!" The Zabrak paused in what he was doing to pick at his teeth, inspecting and flicking it away before eyeballing the stacked trays on the cart. "What you doin' down here, anyway?"

Vicxa's eyes flickered to a sign above the door, proclaiming it to be the lair of *'Prince Herbert, the twenty-fourth of his name'* before looking back to the guard, "Ah, uh, well they told me to bring food down! Toooo make sure all you guards got fed! Have to keep up your strength in case anyone does something dumb, right?" she asked, thinking quickly. A thump sound from inside the ceiling caused the two's conversation to pause, the guard looking up thoughtfully for a moment before the smells of a hot meal caught his attention again.

She'd barely finished saying the word 'fed' before the horned soldier was grabbing a tray with the most energy he'd displayed since she got down.

"The best news I've heard all night, luv! As to people bein' dumb...well," he flashed her a toothy grin, "anyone dumb enough ta go this way is gonna be rancor meat, ain't they? Hells, we don't even bother closing' up this door, pity the fellows who can't read Huttese I suppose," he said with a chuckle and shrug, walking past her with several food containers stacked up. "I'll see to the boys in the guardroom next door, you should probably start headin' back tha way ya came, only thing down that way," he nodded past the door he'd been standing guard at, "is big teeth."

"You catch all that?" she whispered down at the trolley, hearing an affirmative, muffled 'Yub' in response. She pushed forward a few feet to the edge of the door, squinting as she looked through to the space beyond. Her stomach dropped as she spotted a pair of pig-faced Gamorrean with shock pikes at the ready flanking a chubby Rodian who was throwing chunks of meat down to a massive beast below, catching it with his gaping maw.

At the front of the cart, peeking through a gap in the decorative cloth surrounding it, Bub Bub's eyes lit up. *This was a beast worthy of being prey!* Or...he turned an idea over in his head as the guards began backing away, escorting the handler. One pushed his pike forward as 'Prince Herbert' tried to take a swipe, shocking the rancor and pushing it back with a yelp. Bub's eyes narrowed into a glare at the Gamorrean, grumbling to himself in Ewokese. The guards and handler reached the door, giving Vicxa a curious look which she responded to by gesturing at the trolley, "Uh, dinner time?"

Happy snorts came from the guards, who left their pikes propped to either side of the door and grabbed several containers of food each, before shuffling off to the same door the other guard had. The Rodian muttered something in Huttese and followed his escort to the guardroom, waving off the Mirialian's offer of food.

"Well what now," she mused aloud, before feeling the cart move under her hands, and spotted her white-furred partner in infiltration scampering past the door. "*Bub!*" she hissed, following quickly, snatching him by the back of his jerking and bringing them to a halt just inside the chamber. As they stopped she caught a flash of movement off to her left. Windows ran the side of the rancor pen, showing half a dozen guards digging into their newly acquired meals. "Sith-spit! Bub, we can't go this way, even if we can get past the rancor the guards will notice!"

Bub looked up at her, gesturing down into the rancor's den to another door. It was wide, made of rougher stone than the other parts of the palace she'd seen, covered with claw marks and questionable splotches on the walls. The floor was a massive grate, a large turn wheel, and a valve along one wall suggesting they flushed it out regularly instead of cleaning up after Herbert. The door set opposite of them wasn't designed to keep the rancor out, in fact, it looked large enough to give the beast easy egress. There was a large gate in place at the moment, but Vicxa suspected that would drop the moment an alarm went off at the vault. "Yub yub!"

"Yes, that probably *is* where we need to go, but we can't get past....Prince Herbert," she said the name with some amount of disbelief in her voice, "without the guards noticing!"

With a hiss the bridge suddenly retracted in on itself, leaving only a few feet poking out from the doorway and causing both of them to shuffle back a bit.

"Also that," she sighed.

She watched the Ewok stretch to his full height and turn his head slightly, as if cracking his neck, and stepped to the edge of the hall, where Herbert would easily be able to see the small furball.

“Maybe it hasn’t notic—”

“Bub nub!” shouted Bub, much to Vicxa’s chagrin.

The rancor turned its misshapen head up towards the Ewok, sniffing the air and beginning to stomp over, possibly more curious than hungry after its feeding. At least, that’s what the treasure huntress hoped. She was ready to snatch up her fuzzy friend and run when she noticed he was holding one hand up, palm out, with his eyes closed as if concentrating.

“Oh, oh no, is this one of those Force things? Bub, now is not the ti—”

The rancor approached slower, craning to its full height to sniff at the Ewok in apparent confusion, though it didn’t seem hostile. Vix watched transfixed, almost not catching the sound of something in the ceiling again, glancing up in question.

*Is someone up there? Could just be the plumbing I guess.*

“Buuuub,” spoke the Ewok, quietly, comfortingly, a smile on his face as he slowly opened his eyes, the rancor coming closer, “Bub, bub...buuuuub nub, buuuuub nuuuub,” he mumbled for a time while Vicxa scanned the room.

“Bub!” declared Bub, tugging at her jacket, looking up at her proudly. She stared uncomprehendingly for a few seconds, before following his pointing paw to the rancor, who was curled on the pen floor snoring. Bub thumped his chest proudly and grinned up at Vix.

*‘Bub mighty hunter! Bub find treasure with green girl friend!’* she heard in her head.

“I’m sorry, girlfriend or girl friend, little guy?” she asked with a concerned chuckle.

Bub gave her a confused look and waited for her, staring at the open expanse where the bridge should be.

Vix stared at the controls to the bridge, poking at the buttons while Bub leaned precariously over the ledge, staring down at the sleeping rancor with shining eyes.

“I think it needs a code cylinder,” she muttered with a sigh, then looked around instead.

“You have to be kidding me,” muttered Vicxa, looking up towards the ceiling of the pen for any options...or anchor points as she drew her pistol. A flicker of movement drew her gaze left, to where the Zabrak guard she’d first met was standing with horns against the window staring at them, eyes wide and food forgotten. “Oh, oh no, come on! Bub we’re about to have company!”

She'd no sooner said that when the world went dark, the lights flickering off all around them. Everything seemed to stop, even the ventilation circulating the questionable scents of a Hutt palace died for several breaths. As it did, the guard room lit up with scarlet light, the sound of blaster fire a distant cry through the windows, before everything came back on. She stared; the guard that had spotted them was no longer to be seen, just a red smear down the glass, as a quartet of darkly armored figures swept the room with short blaster rifles, before one motioned them all forward with a gesture.

*What have you gotten me into, Tali!?* *Those guys look like stormtroopers on steroids, oh no, no no no...*, the woman thought with dread, directing her gun to the criss-crossing girders that supported the palace above were. With a sound quieter than a shot but still loud to her ears, a grapple hook shot up and over, anchoring the line. She gave it an experimental tug and nodded, "Come on, Bub, we're doing this the fun way!"

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The lights went out in the palace hall, and all across the room were the sounds of blasters being drawn, of knives being unsheathed. A distinct lack of alarming shouts accompanied all of this, despite the abruptness of it all.

The Arconans had been near an edge of the broad hall, keeping mostly to themselves. Tali had barely had time to sweep the area with the Force for imminent danger when she felt the familiar grasp of Strong's hand on her shoulder, pulling her back till she felt the polished stone of the wall against her back. After nearly a ten count, the lights came back on, exposing many a delegate's embarrassed expression as they sheepishly stowed away weapons.

Strong was looking over his shoulder, before relaxing and turning back to his companion.

"Apologies, I fear my bodyguard training may have been...overzealous," he murmured, looking down at the Twi'lek with purpling cheeks as he realized he'd penned her in against the wall. "A system failure, perhaps?"

"More likely the prelude to something wrong," she sighed in response. From just past one of Strong's thick arms, she saw Commodore Istvaan looking...smug.

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"An interesting reaction, but I approve," an amused man spoke up beside the two Arconan delegates. "I do much prefer an instinct for passion over pain, but it seems you are in a distinct minority," he added with a poignant gesture at the other attendees who ashamedly reholstered their armaments. As Tali and Strong untangled themselves from each other and turned their attention towards him, the motley man made a flamboyant bow, spreading the tails of his fur coat for added effect.

“Allow me to introduce myself, I am Count Stebic, although I suppose the title is more of an honorary remnant nowadays,” he mused. “Difficult to be the Count of a House that lies in ruin, you see,” Stebic added jovially.

“So sorry to hear that,” Tali replied, side-stepping past Strong’s protective arm that still lingered. “It must have been a terrible loss, but you seem to be managing quite vell.”

Stebic’s eyes caught hers, his a color of such intensely deep maroon they were almost black. “Not a terrible loss to the galaxy,” he admitted bluntly. “A bunch of slavers to the last. Glad to be rid of them, even if they’re kin. Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do.”

Strong furrowed his brow. “Are you implying that you had a hand in your own House’s undoing?”

Stebic let out a melodious chuckle, shaking his head in amusement. “A hand? I suppose that’s one way to put it, my big blue friend.” He ran a finger across his chin, nodding to himself before smiling at the Chiss and leaning in conspiratorially. “It was *I* who rid the galaxy of them, every last one of them,” he half-whispered.

The Chiss blanched, if only a little. Slavers were indeed a blight upon the galaxy, but to commit such an act upon one’s own House? He found himself conflicted.

“That seems like quite an extreme solution, Count Stebic,” Tali said, putting words to Strong’s thoughts.

The Human inclined his head, scrunching his lips thoughtfully. “Perhaps,” he admitted nonchalantly. “But if you’d seen what I had, you wouldn’t have let them get away with it,” he added with a voice as cold as Pantoran stone.

Tali and Strong stared at him, unsure what to make of the man, but his demeanor had shifted once more towards the jovial. To him, it seemed, it was all a grand old time.

“Ah, but let’s not spoil the mood here! This is a fine party after all and we should enjoy it as our host intended, not stand around with stakes up our backsides...” He spoke loud enough that Istvaan surely couldn’t have missed it, glaring as he was only a few meters away.

“Now, I did not quite get your names?” Stebic continued, the faintest smirk on his lips as his eyes darted back from admiring the effect of his barb on the Severian commodore.

“Tali Sroka,” Tali replied curtly, though she had to admit Stebic seemed far more affable than his opposite number. Even so, she reminded herself of the fact they were, for all intents and purposes, her rivals tonight.

“General Stres’tron’garmis,” Strong rumbled, propping a meaty hand in Stebic’s personal space for a shake. The Human took it with some measure of humor, though his grip was barely stronger than Tali’s by comparison.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, and I hope your evening will be productive,” his eyes drifted to a Mirialan waitress carrying a tray of alluring cocktails. “If Py’zah lacks for entertainment, I’ll have to suggest you face that bucketbrain in arm wrestling. They tend to enjoy a show of physical skill,” he said to Strong before slipping his hand from the Chiss’s grip. With a flamboyant display of footwork that looked precariously close to tripping, Stebic pirouetted around into a bow and retreated after the waitress.

“What a curious fellow,” Tali muttered.

==

“Bub?” asked the Ewok looking up at the strange thing in her hand, before she grasped his jerkin with her free hand and pulled him in towards her leg. Getting the message, he wrapped both stubby arms around it and held on as Vicxa kicked off. “YUUUUUUUB!” he exulted as they swung through the air, memories of vine swinging back home coming flooding back. “Bub yub nub!”

“Glad you’re enjoying yourself,” she said with a smile, some of the tension leaving her at the sight of the ecstatic Ewok after they landed on the other side. A gated door stood before them, leading to a wide ramp down.

*Wide enough for a Hutt.*

Off to their left, though the wall muted much of the sound, blaster fire could be heard, as well as cut-off shouting. She glanced knowingly at her partner.

“If we can get to the vault first, and get in...maybe they’ll get stuck in a shoot-out and we can nab the crystal,” she murmured aloud.

*‘Bub want to fight! Mighty warrior!’* she heard in her head.

“Yes, Bub, you’re very fierce, but we aren’t here to...earn glory or whatever. Just grab the gem and go...oh now what!?”

She turned back to the gate, noting the controls were disarmingly simple. A single button, set below a circular grill, with a screen above it demanding input in Huttese. She gingerly pushed the button in and heard a click and buzz, the screen switching to a steady line.

“Huh,” she said aloud, watching the line jump as she spoke, “Oh, oooooh....oh poodoo. Voice activation. Probably needs the Hutt’s voice patterns to...open?” she tried the last word in



Huttese, the screen flashing briefly as if checking it, before flashing back 'invalid input; improper wavelength' at her.

She stared, was...was the security code just a demand from the Hutt to open the thing? Vix grimaced and looked down at Bub.

"Don't suppose you can mimic a Hutt you've never heard, huh?" she asked, flipping her wristlink open. The Ewok shook his head, "Yeah, didn't think so. Looks like we're gonna need an assist..."

==

Strong let out a short grunt as the man calling himself Stebic departed, "Odd indeed," he rumbled lowly. "He seeks to ingratiate himself with all but the Principate party, perhaps to dissuade people from betting against him. Not an unheard-of tactic in the auctioneering world."

Tali followed where he'd gone, already words deep with some cultist-looking types and seemingly managing to get on their good side. If she didn't know any better, she'd have said the man was strong with the Force, but perhaps he was merely talented in other ways. Though to be fair, despite the slightly haggard clothes, he *had* been perfectly charming—not to mention having an agreeable stance on slavery. The sound of Strong clearing his throat snapped her back.

"You were staring, miss Sroka."

"I vas not!"

"You were, and quite obviously so," he pressed, with a hint of humor.

"So what if I vas?" She blushed.

"If his intentions are to undermine the confidence of other bidders, then it is likely he attempted the same on us. We should not let him influence our decisions."

She huffed, visibly annoyed. "You're saying that like I don't know how the game is played."

"I have no doubts about your abilities—"

"But?"

"Erm..." It was the Chiss' turn to turn a shade more purple as he searched for the correct words. "I... merely wish to ensure your safety. Sometimes we forget, even our strengths have limits."

Her lips pressed into a line, annoyance palpable. Worst of all, he had a point. “Vell ve are vorking *vith* the Revenants, so it’s not like ve’re not on the same—,” her hushed reply was cut short by a crackle in her comms. The connection was dodgy, but it was local. That meant only one possible caller.

*“Tali, we’ve got a problem.”*

“Excuse me, for a moment,” Tali smiled at her companion, fleeting past his bulk to have the call in private—or as private as the venue allowed. Once out of earshot, she pressed the comms again and whispered a reply. “Vhat is it? I thought you couldt handle this.”

*“Yeah well, you didn’t mention the rancor and the spec ops and the passcodes. Ancient ruins only tend to come with one of those three, at a time anyway.”*

Tali blinked, twice. Had she not been so tight on time, she might have pressed for an explanation, but that would have to be for later. “Vhat do you needt?” she pressed.

*“Looks like the Hutt’s got the door wired to their voice. Won’t open without a sample.”*

“Can’t you just slice it?”

*“Slice it? Oh why didn’t I think of that... maybe because there’s no access panel! Just a voice grille and a tiny screen. No, wait, Bub! I didn’t mean slice like... It’s rayshielded you—!”*

Sounds of a lightsaber igniting, followed by an Ewokese warcry, a hiss of plasma and a hard tumble crackled over the comms line into Tali’s earcone. She could only imagine what had just transpired.

*“He’s got more bravado than brains, is that something all you Force-users have in common?”*

“One, he’s not familiar vith tech. Two, shut up. Three, vhat do you need from me? I can’t turn into a Hutt even if I vantedt to.”

*“Well you’re closest to him. Use your Twi’leki ways or Jedi tricks and get him to whisper sweet nothings into your comms.”*

Tali bit her tongue. Great, as if Strong questioning her abilities wasn’t enough. Now her hired help was bossing her around. “Fine, I’ll get you your voice sample, just hang tight.”

*“Well it’s either that, or head home empty handed, and I really hate adventures without souvenirs.”*

The line was cut before Tali had time to throw another barb. Today was getting better and better. Barely had she formed the thought, when a swift fanfare of blaring f’noncs drew her attention back to the main hall. Swiftly returning, she arrived just in time to catch Py’zah’s majordomo

clearing his throat to make a formal announcement.

“The great and powerful Py’zah declares that the ballroom be cleared for the next phase of the evening’s festivities. Prospective pairs are to step forth, who would wish to partake, and display their physical prowess for the amusement and entertainment of the great Py’zah,” the orange Twi’lek announced.

Strong straightened his back, tugging at the hem of his jacket and flexing his neck. If Stebic was to be believed, he would gladly face off against others in well-meaning games, if it meant gaining favor with the Hutt. His eyes found Tali standing across the room and he gave a confident nod. Hers was less so.

“Veteran guests to lord Py’zah’s halls will be pleased that tonight there won’t be any bloodsport, for in their endless magnificence, the great and powerful Py’zah has decided to indulge in the artistic. Display for us all the mastery of your physique through dance, and gain lord Py’zah’s favor to cast the final bid upon any item of your choosing.”

The confident smile vanished off Strong’s face and was replaced by mild confusion. His eyes darted over the Count Stebic, but the Human seemed equally surprised, though recovering quickly as he ventured out to smooth-talk a lithe Togruta to join him. On the other side, he caught the faintest twitch of irritation in Commodore Istvaan’s eye, a gaunt-faced aide walking up behind him and whispering something in his ear. The man looked a bit unsettled, but acquiesced. Removing their jackets, the pair stepped onto the clearing dance floor with the aide assuming the role of the female partner.

Stebic had found no trouble in convincing the Togruta to join him and with the red-skinned woman’s hand carried in a graceful hold, he too joined upon the floor to make musical battle for Py’zah’s favor. Opposite the widening gap between them, Tali let out a soft sigh and stepped forward. He did not need to ask, nor did she. As one, they closed the distance and assumed a classical stance, mirroring that of Istvaan and his partner.

“I trust the call was not too important,” Strong murmured under his breath.

“Oh, no. It was... business as usual,” Tali lied through her teeth. “Just *Quaestor things*.”

Whether he believed her or not, he did not question her as the music began, a handful of other couples having joined the floor and every pair by Stebic caught equally flatfooted by the tempo and swing of the music. There was no warm-up, no gentle easing into motion. The music demanded cavorting, and the dancers’ unquestioning compliance.

Before he’d even realized it, Tali had shifted her footing, affording him the space he’d need for his footwork. She was not going to let the Count get ahead. Bolstered by her determination, he threw off his jacket at once, tossing it aside as the pair sprang into motion, meeting head on the cadence of breakneck notes that the jizz wailers threw at them.

Istvaan was slower to respond, but adapted to the demands of the moment. Together with his partner, they swiftly caught up as they worked like a well-oiled machine, their polished dress shoes tapping on the wood flooring while their eyes remained intensely locked with the other. Their footwork was almost mechanical, impeccably sharp as they twisted and turned, heels clacking, toes tapping, hands slapping as they changed places in an immaculately choreographed pirouette that saw them pass each other by so close their shirts were grazing. There was a purity of form to their display that would have been hard to match even for Jedi.

Count Stebic was an entirely different beast, though a wild monster he'd grown into. The shaggy coat still hanging on his back, the wiry man threw himself to the whims of the music with wild abandon, his eyes closed as the rhythm moved his body like a puppet, jerking this way and that and his partner doing her level best to keep up. Sweat was pouring down his face, unkempt black locks matting on his forehead. It was raw, primal, and savage, and the pair made it look outstanding.

The Arconans had danced before, at parties and formal events. Sober or otherwise. They had also sparred and outright fought one another on a few occasions. They had a rhythm and understanding of one another's movements and capabilities. Though they had vastly different education in dance. In this case, Strong was simply keeping up with the Twi'lek who was spinning and moving, leading him through steps he was regretfully not as practiced with as he would have liked.

Then again, whoever expects to have to jizz-swing dance for a Hutt's amusement?

He wasn't thinking about Istvaan or Stebic as he would take both of Tali's hands and bend a knee out forward for her to spring off of, flipping over backward in a blur of purple and violet, lekku arcing gracefully. He wasn't thinking about Py'zah the massive and greasy, nor their task giver, the Shadow Lady. He was just focused on keeping his eyes on his dance partner, something he had found all too easy in recent months as it was, of them going out, sharing meals, even the Selen spring festival.

Their bond had been growing for some time, and it showed with how well they moved together, Tali leading the way. She looked so alive to the Chiss he couldn't help but smile as he grasped her by the waist and lifted her, leading into another tumbling flip, this time over his tall frame. She landed easily, even in heels, and he felt the pressure of her back against his, a nudge against his shoulder with a lekku a hand motion in his peripheral vision prompting the big man to kneel. She spun around him, the back of her knees meeting his bent right leg and falling backward in a display of agility and trust, his left arm coming up to catch her just below the shoulders, his eyes glowing as he met her golden ones. His right hand cupped her calf and pushed it up, her arms going back to pivot and handstand over and back to her feet. She came down and spun, her body lowering before an abrupt stop.

He could see her jaw tighten in annoyance at something before she turned and put her hands on his forearms, a lekku and her eyes both gesturing towards one side of the dance floor. He gave the slightest of nods and spun her, keeping pace as he put her where she'd directed him. She let go with one hand, leaning with her grip and turning her profile to him, her free hand reaching out and deftly snatching the end of an on-looking Human woman's hairpin. The woman blanched as her hair fell, and Tali used her leverage on his arm to pull herself back in, her back against his chest as she held the so-called accessory up, just long enough for Strong to see it was a narrow, and likely sharp, knife. Flipping it in her grip she looked up at him, head craned back, and, giving him a sly wink, brought the knife down swiftly. He saw her repeat the motion before she spun the knife to hold the blade and offered it back to the woman, who took it with a dumbfounded look.

Tali did a quick glance at the dancefloor, noting the sweating Stebic had tossed his fur coat at some point, and wondering briefly if the slender Togruta hadn't been wearing more a moment ago as well. Istvaan and his partner looked almost in pain, such frivolities as dance did not seem to suit the serious man. She twitched a lekku towards the majordomo, the meaning clear enough to her Chiss partner who resumed the dance properly. They spun back towards the entrance to the throne room, the doorway large and wide, giving Py'zah a clear view even if he wasn't monitoring the holocams.

He lifted her with one arm hooked under her arm, tossing her effortlessly around as they would have often in training, over his hip, as the music began to peak. Tali rolled with it, catching the ground with one flat palm and spinning herself first to face Strong, a look of subtle disgust, quickly dismissed as she flicked her eyes downward, and turned herself back towards the watching Hutt and his Twi'lek majordomo.

Now it was clear why she had cut her own dress, at least to the Chiss, who had noticed her extend the knee-length slits up to her thighs, as she dropped to the floor with her legs extended in opposite directions in a display of agility and flexibility that the other dancing couples simple couldn't match. Strong sank slowly behind her to a kneeling position, the music ending as Tali leaned back, reclining against his broad chest with one arm resting on his knee. They could both see the majordomo rapidly darkening in color, obviously flustered.

From the other chamber, they could hear Py'zah's guttural, greasy laugh as the dance came to an end.

"Gi Shatta Gasha!" shouted the Hutt, clapping their hands awkwardly, or at least as much as they could with their bulk. "Odan pon, Twi'lek'i, ho ho. Ona auk-tion Buntala-buntha!"

Tali glanced down at her wrist, suppressing a wince as she heard a distant cry of victory before the line went dead. She only hoped her dance partner hadn't noticed. From the way she felt his chest moving against her resting head, she wondered if he could have even heard it over his own blood pounding.

*Doubt me if you dare*, she had a moment's thought with a hidden smirk.

The majordomo cleared his throat and stepped forward, "The mighty Py'zah was honored by all of your dances, though," his eyes flickered to the blue and purple pair who were getting to their feet, the Chiss feeling sweat running down his back now that it was over and a wide smile on his face, "the display of skill from the Arconan delegation seems to have caught his favor! As such, he is now declaring the auction, open!"

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"—Open!"

The door lock clicked, stirring the Ewok and Mirialan from the doldrums of guarding an empty hallway. Long minutes had dragged past with nothing of use chattering from Vicxa's communicator, so much so she'd opted to just use a length of detonite tape to adhere the thing straight onto the door controls. Bub had dutifully guarded the way they'd come, fully expecting a security detail of some sort to catch up to them at any moment, but none had materialized.

This raised more questions than it answered, and even without deeper knowledge of such security systems, Vicxa suspected the kill-team must have scrambled the alarms somehow to isolate the vault. Precious time had been wasted standing around and waiting for Tali to get them the pass-phrase they needed, and as the door cycled and began to open, she decided to make up the lost time.

"C'mon, bud, the vault can't be far now. Maybe if we're lucky, and those bucketheads get too trigger happy, we can get in, nab the crystal, and get out before they notice."

"Bud? Bub!" The Ewok looked confused.

"No, I mean... like buddy."

"Bub?"

"Friend?"

"Bub!" the Ewok exclaimed, realization dawning.

"Glad we cleared that one out," Vicxa sighed as she yanked the communicator off the control panel and fitted it back on her wrist. Bub was already heading through the door and into the next chamber that seemed far more ornately decorated than the more utilitarian corridors they'd come along thus far.

Rows of portraits, all of various Hutts Vicxa had a hard time differentiating, lined the corridor on both sides. A fine trail of what she hoped was just slime coated the central walkway, with a finely

crafted portal at the far end, flanked by gilded sculptures of artistically handsome Hutts holding up a cornucopia of wealth.

“Oh yes, this must be it,” she muttered to herself, watching the Ewok charge ahead as fast as his stubby legs would allow, the portal recognizing his approach and irising open into a vast vault beyond, filled with glittering treasures. A small landing awaited just outside the portal, a walkway leading gently to the vault’s center where, under a display case of thin transparisteel, their prize awaited. All around it, rows upon rows of lesser items were stored in similar display cases, with the curved ceiling of the vault extending up high and painted with frescoes of Hutts past, and the great deeds that had won them these fine prizes.

Even casual skepticism cast doubt on their authenticity. Especially the ones where Hutts had personally led any sort of military action.

“Stop!” a sharp, feminine voice snapped the same instant Bub’s foot touched the landing, the Ewok halting in confusion. “The walkway’s tripwired. You can’t just go charging in like a mudhorn, ya dimwit!”

“You didn’t say anything about laser traps, Cihun. I thought Gish had deactivated them all!” A burly Besalisk growled, halting in her tracks from charging straight for the crystals.

A small Sullustan offered a curt response while tapping at his slicer pad before shrugging and waving dismissively at the cavernous vault.

“He says they’re on a separate circuit and he’s lost access. This is a job for an infiltrator, not a slicer,” an amused Umbaran explained as he crawled out from within a freshly-melted air vent, dropping onto the vault floor far off to Bub’s left.

It seemed none of the others had noticed the Ewok just yet as they began discussing their next move. By all signs, it seemed they were confident nobody else was even aware they’d made an attempt at the vault.

“They came in through the vents?! Sithspit! We could have come in through the vents,” Vicxa hissed in annoyance, huddling next to the Ewok and peering over the handrail at the other team. They were a rather unlikely sight, that much was sure. An Umbaran, a Sullustan, a Besalisk and a Human—no, there was something off about the woman who’d spoken first. A faint lisp in her voice, the clammy skin that looked a bit too rubbery. A Clawdite, perhaps?

Even as she pieced together that particular puzzle, another dreadful thought rose to the surface of her psyche. This gaggle of misfits hardly looked like the elite kill-team of stormtroopers they’d seen glimpses of before. But if these were not the same people, then that meant—

**Boom!**

A section of the vault roof blew clear, uncovering a maintenance hatch previously covered by painted plaster. Before anyone had a chance to react, save for Bub cloaking himself and his girl friend from sight, a quartet of heavily armed stormtroopers dropped from the ceiling. Jetpacks activating, they were left hovering in mid-air, blasters drawn and aimed squarely at the ragtags.

“Drop your weapons, Revenant scum!” a stern, modulated voice demanded. The lead trooper brandishing a pair of pistols at her foes, while on either side of her, a male and female both carried carbines and a hulking fourth, held aloft by a struggling jetpack set to overcharge, hefted a Z-6 rotary cannon.

For their part, the ragtag group of Revenants was only lightly armed, except for one. The Besalisk carried four carbines on her own, which she aimed one at each of the stormtroopers while her comrades dived for cover behind the closest display cases.

“How nice of you to drop in, *sister*,” the Umbaran yelled in greeting, drawing an Enforcer pistol and racking its slide. “I was beginning to wonder when we’d meet again!”

The stormtrooper growled, both pistols snapping towards the insolent Umbaran. “Do *not* call me that, you traitor! I should have gunned you down on Vassyk IV when I had the chance.”

“Yes, you should have, but then what would mother think? Family reunions would be so awkward.”

“May I slay him now?” The heavy stormtrooper asked in a dull, brutish tone, his cannon already spinning up. “Just give me the word, commander.”

“Try it, buckethead, and I’ll swat you all from the sky like mynocks!” the Besalisk yelled, her blaster carbines humming dangerously.

“Easy there, Yeta,” Cihun tried, hurriedly patting down the pockets of her vest for something. “Let’s not start a shootout if we can avoid it.”

Yeta cast a dismissive look at the Clawdite. “I only start fights I know I can end. Who’s gonna cry for a few more Principate lap dogs?”

“Well I, for one, would prefer to still have a sister at the end of this—” the Umbaran spoke up.

“How touching, Konor, if only I could say the same,” his sister sneered from up high.

“—so perhaps we can make a deal?” Konor continued, ignoring her Severian sister’s barb.

“The Principate does not deal with pirates!” one of the troopers chimed up.

“Only deal I make is direct deposit of plasma,” the heavy trooper rumbled in support.



Their leader was silent for a moment, before raising a placating hand at her own to keep them in line. "What do you propose then, *brother*?"

"You leave and let us take the crystal, since we got here first, and next week I'll pop over and let you have it for a week. Joint custody, I think it's called?" Konor smirked, earning an irate blaster bolt to the display case he was covering behind. The transparisteel shattered into a thousand brilliant shards that rained upon the Umbaran, but the man just laughed it off. "Careful, Vikka, that anger can't be good for your blood pressure."

"Can I kill him now?" the heavy trooper asked, his jetpack starting to struggle even more. "I really want to."

"Don't bother, Lars, I will skin him myself," Vikka sneered.

"Over my dead body!" Yeta growled, firing a warning shot from one of her four blasters and cracking the face of one of the airbrushed Hutts.

"This," Lars grunted, shifting his rotary cannon towards the Besalisk, "can be arranged."

Still perched in relative safety behind the railings of their small landing, Vicxa and Bub observed the two oddly familial teams exchange insults with mild confusion. The situation did not seem to be diffusing anytime soon, however, and Vicxa knew the Hutt's security couldn't be delayed indefinitely. They would have to make their move sooner than she was entirely comfortable, but sometimes you had to risk it for a biscuit.

Bub's beady little eyes were locked on target, the glittering gem that sat on a pedestal above all other shiny things. He wasn't sure what the big people were yelling about, but nobody seemed to be making a move. Which meant they didn't want the shiny rock, he decided. With a shrug he slipped under the handrail that he and the green girl had been huddling behind.

"Bub!" she hissed as he scurried, remembering what the slicer had said about laser tripwi—

That was, predictably to Vicxa anyway, when the alarm went off. She lunged under the rail after Bub, just in time for the portal to the vault to cycle shut behind her. Shouts from outside could be heard immediately.

"Who tripped the alarm!?"

"How incompent are you pirate frakks!?"

"Oh if anyone set that off it was one of you jack-booted nerf herders!"

"Wait, the tripwires were *inside the vault*, Konor," stated the slicer, staring dumbly at their datapad. "Who just went in there?"

The two teams looked at one another, then over at the vault.

“Yub nub!” came a faint cry through the door, prompting Lars to cut his sputtering jetpack and land with a heavy thud, his eyes dilating and going wide.

“No, no, no, no,” he muttered inside of his helmet, backing up a few steps. His squad looked at the big man, concern clear in their body language.

“What’s wrong with Lars? Guy’s been around since before the Fall of the Empire, some pirates should be no big deal,” asked one over the squad’s comms.

“Did you hear that shout, from inside the vault?”

“No, no, this is not, I’m not, no!” They could all hear the heavy weapons trooper muttering.

Across from them Cihun the slicer shuffled forward, getting on their tiptoes to look through one of the windows looking into the vault.

“What the he—” they began to ask, before a white, fuzzy face pressed against the glass.

“YUB!”

“I KNEW IT!” shrieked Lars, his rotary cannon beginning to spin, drawing a bead on the vault door, “You won’t eat me you furry little bastard! Not like Johannes and Berk!”

“Lars, what are you doing!?” shouted the squad lead, hitting the deck as the heavy weapon spat blaster fire, stitching across the vault door and blackening the glass while the pirate’s slicer scrambled away.

“Looks like we’re fighting!” called out Konor, moving to cover behind one of the statues.

“Blast it all,” Vikka sighed, “move to flank, keep Lars alive, watch for that four-armed pi—” her orders were drowned out by the sound of a heavy gate falling and a roar that echoed down the hall.

“Oh what now?”

“Is that a karking rancor!?”

Princer Herbert, twenty-fourth of his name, stomped down the hall. An alarm had roused him from his peaceful nap, causing the shadow rancor to wake feeling quite cranky. The gate had dropped, and shouting had drawn the big creature’s attention.

It was time for an evening snack.

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“Sold, for twenty-seven thousand credits to the lovely Mon Calamari lady and her Quarren escort,” the slick auctioneer, a Zeltron with enough grease in his hair to rival the Hutt in sliminess, announced. “Isn’t it nice that love can find a way, ladies and gentlemen?” There was some polite laughter, though little else.

“Our next item comes from lord Py’zah’s personal collection. A selection of fossilized Krayt Dragon eggs. Make for the perfect conversation piece in any living room—or the starting point for illicit genetic experimentation. Who are we to judge? Bidding will start at forty thousand!”

Tali observed the proceedings with baited breath. What was taking them so long? She’d not heard from Vicxa in what seemed like ages, and the auction was already in full swing. Were the crystals even in the vault any longer? Had their plan failed and the two been captured? Why was Count Stebic smiling at her like he knew what was going on? And why had Istvaan excused himself for so long? Something was wrong, she simply knew it. Not just through the Force, but on a primal, instinctive level. Something very bad was going to happen any moment now and—

**“Congratulations, lady Sroka, on your excellent performance on the dance floor. May I offer you a celebratory beverage?”** Stres’tron’garmis inquired politely, holding out a colorful cocktail complete with a bendy straw. A Pink Lekku, her favorite.

“I,” she paused, lost for words as she was rudely yanked away from her mounting dread, “couldn’t have done it without you, Strong. Thank you, you danced quite excellently.” She smiled and accepted the drink. Its cool, refreshing taste helped take the edge off her worrying, or perhaps it was the prodigious alcohol percentage.

**“You are too kind, lady Sroka,”** Strong replied, trying his best to hide his blushing. **“You move with the graceful purpose of a nexu. All I had to do was try to keep up.”**

Now it was her turn to assume a darker shade, her lips preoccupying themselves with the bendy straw, buying her a few precious moments to form a response. She needn’t have bothered, as the hurried arrival of the majordomo caught everyone’s attention who was not currently caught up in the bidding. The orange Twi’lek made his way to lord Py’zah’s podium from where the fattened Hutt was observing the proceedings, and after a flamboyant series of expedient bows of respect, he leaned in close to whisper something in the Hutt’s ear.

Lord Py’zah was an impassive creature, exuding an aura of bloated indifference to their surroundings as if no mortal qualm could truly bother someone whose future was as safe as theirs. Throughout the evening, Tali had observed the Hutt only consume lavish meals and occasionally entertain a few choice lackeys vying for their lord’s favor. Whatever the majordomo had just told them, she reasoned, must have been quite severe as the Hutt visibly jolted, flabby folds jiggling from the sudden movement.

A foul belch erupted from Py'zah's lips, though Tali could almost have sworn she heard a word spoken in Huttese as well. All the same, the majordomo nodded, bowing down and backing away while letting out an ink cloud of praise at his master before scuttling away. Py'zah returned to his latest meal, some form of skewered amphibian, but despite their best efforts at hiding it, Tali could tell the Hutt was now far more alert than before.

**“Bad news?”** Strong murmured in as low a tone as he seemed capable of. **“The previous auction was not too auspicious. Perhaps there may be another altercation. We would be wise to be ready.”**

Tali nodded, though she knew fully well what an *altercation* would mean. For once, she'd loved to have her subordinates handle things, but it seemed she was as luckless as the casino's owner.

*“Where are you, Vix?!”* she muttered to herself.

==

“Commander?” asked one of the troopers, glancing over at Vikka, “Not sure we got the ordinance and the vault is sealed tight again because of the Revenant scum.”

His point was further proven as both he and one of the pirates sent a couple blaster bolts down the hall at the rancor's knobby legs, to little effect. Well, other than making it roar in annoyance as it steadily closed in.

“Hey don't pin this on us, we didn't bring a fracking Ewok, you bootlicker!”

Vikka glared across at her brother, who was watching the rancor stomp forward, biting back a curse.

“Squad, fall back...someone grab Lars, we're regrouping. Let the Commodore know things are going to get loud upstairs,” she ordered. Across the way, the pirates were being shoved back through the vent by their Besalisk, who struggled her way through last.

By the time Herbert lumbered up, his potential meals had made themselves wisely scarce, causing the rancor to grunt and grumble.

“Yub! Bub nub!” came from the vault, Bub's faced pressed against another window, staring up at the rancor in wonder. The shadow rancor lowered his face down, breath misting over the glass as it eyed the little white fuzzball, sniffing as it felt Bub caress their mind with the Force once more. Herbert made a happy growl, reaching one talon-tipped finger against the window in confusion.

“Well we’re not dead,” stated Vicxa, staring up at the gem she’d been asked to secure. “And its right there...think we can get out of here, Bub?” she asked, looking back to see the Ewok firmly against the viewport, ‘communing’ with the rancor. “Riiiiight, not a lot of help th...ere...what’s that smell?”

She blinked, her vision getting hazy.

“Bu..b? Nub....nuuuuu,” she heard the Ewok state before he thumped to the floor, prompting Herbert to roar as his new friend disappeared from view. Vix followed suit, the floor rushing to meet her as the vault filled with a faint mist of gas. “Frack...”

==

“This is taking forever,” Tali muttered as yet another pointless bauble was successfully sold off to the highest bidder. “I’m getting a drink.”

“**Please, allow me,**” Strong offered politely, already moving towards the bar before the Twi’lek had even managed to get off her seat. In certain situations, the hunk of a man had a Jedi’s reflexes.

As he made his way past the throng of potential bidders, his ears perked up at the familiarly melodic sound of a jovial Human. “—bunch of Empire sympathizers to the last. Glad to be rid of them, even if they’re kin,” Count Stebic regaled to a pair of Wookiees who seemed enthralled by his presence, nodding approvingly. “Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do, I’m sure you’ll understand.” The Wookiees growled appreciatively.

Strong scowled. He knew that man had seemed duplicitous. The more he observed Stebic move and gesture, the more his suspicions deepened. He carried himself in a carefree way, but he suspected it was all a forgery, an elaborate mask he put on like camouflage to hide his true nature. He was not sure what that nature was, but he did recognize the tinge of veracity when he spoke of murdering his own kin. He was probably far more dangerous than Istvaan, despite his ostensive lack of armament.

“There you go, a Corellian Sunrise and a Cloud Car. Anything else, sir?” a polite barman inquired with a winning smile, interrupting his contemplation.

“**That will be all,**” Strong said as he picked up the drinks and headed back to his date—companion! Yes, they were here on a mission. How could he keep forgetting such a thing.

“—don’t want your excuses, Vikka. Be ready to move when I—”

Strong halted, staring at Commodore Istvaan who’d just lowered a finger from his earpiece and stared back at him. His hand slowly moved for the grip of his saber, the Chiss’ knuckles tightening on the stem of the cocktail glass, almost breaking it.

"H-hey now, aren't we all enjoying ourselves tonight or what?" the Commodore's aide interjected, realizing the impending confrontation. "Would be a shame to ruin such a delightful evening."

"**Yes, excuse me,**" Strong grumbled, stepping away from the Commodore and hurrying back to Tali. It seemed underhanded tactics were not the Revenants' sole domain, and for a moment he'd thought the Severians at least somewhat principled.

"What took you so long?" Tali asked, accepting the offered drink from the stern faced Chiss.

**"I fear I was ensnared in a web of treachery,"** he began, suddenly deadly serious. **"I overheard Stebic retelling the story he told you, but this time his family were Imperial sympathizers. And it appears Istvaan may be readying himself for... something. We should be ready for anything."**

Tali felt a faint lump in her throat, one that couldn't be washed away with a delightfully balanced Coruscant Sunset. "Treachery?"

**"Foul play and underhandedness, in gross violation of the sanctity of this benign auction."**

"We're dealing with Hutts, they're all crim—"

**"It does not matter!"** He surprised even himself with the forcefulness of his tone, causing Tali to visibly recoil and splash some of her drink on her hand. **"A thousand apologies, lady Sroka, I did not intend to startle,"** he said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing her hand dry. **"I just could not contain my frustration at these guests betraying our host's invitation to their own house in such an insidious manner."**

Tali felt her jaw squeeze stiff. "Yes, about that..." She got no further when a wave of applause heralded the majordomo taking the stage once more.

"And now, the main event!" shouted the majordomo, a sharp-toothed grin on his paunchy face. "A crystal...with mystical properties, oooh," he waggled his fingers and chuckled. "Sought after by wise men and fools alike for hundreds of years, only one as great as Lord Py'zah had the fortitude to uncover it! And this prize," the chubby Twi'lek grinned wider, more viciously, "comes with a bonus. No extra charge."

More like he had the funds to bankroll an expedition, thought Tali with gritted teeth. She had a bad feeling about this.

With a handwave, the majordomo stepped to the side, his gesture a cue for someone else. The lights dimmed, and the floor slid open, a platform rising up to display the crystal, set on a fine wire display with lighting. Around the room, murmurs arose, and out of the corner of his eye

Strong could see both Stebic and Istvaan straighten up. They were all here for the same thing, it seemed.

"This may be more costly than we expected, my lady," he rumbled in Tali's earcone. She sighed and nodded as the platform completed its ascent, exposing the 'bonus'.

Blast!

Sitting uncomfortably on the platform was a Mirialan woman in shackles, connected to the floor with a thick chain. She looked dazed, but slowly coming to.

"What? Bonus?" she blinked in confusion, squinting past the lighting to try and see the crowd. "I'm not...for sale, you son of a..." she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to stop the world from spinning.

I'm never doing knockout gas for fun, that's for certain, she groaned to herself.

She recoiled when she opened her eyes, the majordomo's orange face looking malevolent in the low light.

"Consider yourself lucky, girl," he hissed, grabbing her by the chin, his gaze raking down her form, lingering on her curvy hips. "Master Py'zah is giving you a chance to be bought by a caring owner, rather than keeping you for his own pleasures. Be grateful, I advised he keep you for himself...or for the guards."

Vix gave the man as much of a glare as she could muster. Her head was clearing, but any effort to lash out was negated by the heavy chain keeping her hands down.

"Oh, I'm gonna get out of this and make you regret...uh..." her vision swam, "fraaaaak. B...bub?"

"Your little friend was sent to the kitchens. Ewok tartare is such a rare delicacy," the Twi'lek stated in a low whisper, delight clear in his voice as he stood and turned to the crowd.

"This delightful young woman attempted to deprive you all of this prize tonight," he gestured first at Vicxa, then at the crystal. "Since she seems so enamored by it, we felt it would be cruel to separate her from it! So, the bidding will begin at ten thousand credits! Though..." the Twi'lek turned to look back at Vix as if having a sudden idea, "you, my dear, may yet avoid...indentured servitude, if you simply tell us who hired you. I highly doubt a creature like yourself had the means to do this on your own, even with your furry little pet."

"Steal?" murmured Strong aloud. He thought he recognized the woman on the platform, he was certain he knew of her from somewhere. "How underhanded...but I will not stand for slavery. My mission is still clear," he stated, more to himself and Tali. "I shall bid, as was my task, but the girl will be released," he assured his companion, looking down at her. "Are...are you alright, Tali?"

*“Dank farrik...”* Tali groaned to herself. Why did all her plans always end in chains and daring bailouts?

“I’m, fine, just... bid. Let’s hope our opposite numbers realize they can’t hope to win,” Tali muttered, trying not to meet the Mirialan’s bewildered gaze.

The Chiss nodded and raised his hand, still holding a half-finished Cloud Car in it. **“Ten thousand!”** The game was on.

The game ended before it had even started, the majordomo looking around the packed auction hall with some confusion. Surely someone had a higher bid than fifteen thousand? Lord Py’zah grumbled with annoyance, this was unacceptable.

“T-the last bid was fifteen thousand, do I hear sixteen?” the Twi’lek stammered as he shuffled onto the stage once more in a vain attempt to entice buyers. “Fifteen and a half?” His eyes flitted to Count Stebic, hopeful of a raise.

Tali followed the majordomo’s gaze and was as shocked as he when the man simply shook his head and reclined next to a Zeltron woman who immediately handed him a drink. With disbelief, the majordomo switched his attention to the other high roller he knew was interested in the crystal, but he was far too busy talking to himself.

Tali furrowed her brow. She could see Stebic’s jaw twitching behind the cocktail glass. He wasn’t drinking, he was talking. They both were talking.

*Drop down.*

She did not hesitate, guided by the Will of the Force, she threw herself flat on the ground as an ear-splitting explosion ruptured the back wall of the auction chamber in a shower of splintering wood and gilded upholstery. A cloud of dust and smoke billowed into the chamber, shocked bidders scrambling for cover and the exits, while four shapes strode in almost casually, one towering above the rest and hefting four blaster carbines in each of her meaty arms.

“I love it when a plan comes together,” Konor sighed, taking a long drag off a short cigar and tossing the stub into some posh socialite’s drink.

“Ya know, our plan was to get the gem while it was still underground,” Cihun muttered.

“Plans change, but they all come together in the—,” Konor’s cocky smile was abruptly wiped off his face by a near miss, the Hutt’s security scrambling into action.



The Besalisk seemed all too eager to finally face a challenge and charged right in towards the Gamorrean guards when a pair of metallic clacks caught their attention. Something small bounced off the auction floor, cylindrical and flashing...

A second detonation rocked the room in as many moments, drawing screams of panic from the thoroughly disoriented crowd. A quadruplet of heavily armed operators in sleek, unmarked stormtrooper warplate rushed inside, guns at the ready.

"Oh *karabast*," the lead trooper spat as she laid eyes on the pirate commander. "You *again*?" "Late to the party as always, sis?" Konor coughed, clearing his lungs off the dust and his eyes of the flash-bang.

"Oh, I'm not here to party, I'm here to bring the house down," she growled.

"I-it's not here, is it?" Lars muttered, snapping his repeater around left to right. "I swear if I see that thing again I'm gonna..."

"Can it, big guy, eyes on the prize," one of the troopers added. "We're 'bout to get a whole lot else to shoot at."

He couldn't have been more right as more of the Hutt's security rushed in, Py'zah having managed to slither away at the first sign of trouble. Only the majordomo remained to defend the lord's honor, clutching the crystal in his hands with a small holdout blaster pressed against it like a hostage.

"Stand down! Everyone stand down, or I won't hesitate to blast this gem to smithereens!" he cried, eyes wild with raw self-preservation. "You're all in here for it, aren't you? Well if you don't leave right now, nobody will get it!"

"Whoa, easy there, fella. Let's talk about this—" Konor began.

"Kill him," Vikka nodded to the team's sharpshooter who leveled her blaster at the majordomo.

"No, wait!" Konor shouted in alarm, but the trooper had her orders.

The majordomo fell—before the trooper had even pulled the trigger. He hit the auction platform hard, the crystal slipping from his grasp and rolling into the midst of the audience, the bolt meant for him striking a Mon Calamari in the chest. His wife screamed.

The auction hall was drowned in blaster fire.

==

*Shink...shink...shink...*

Bub blinked, eyes hazy and head pounding.

"Buuuub..." he muttered, looking around in confusion.

*Shink...shink...shink...*

"But-uh chef! Ve has to shave it before flay it, no?"

"No-no, Petrio! You have to take the knife," the chef paused in his sharpening of the blade and grinned at his subordinate, "and make a verrry clean cut through sie stomach. Then, you pull all the guts," he made a ripping motion, "and shove in all sie seasonings and vegetables, yes? Then, we wrap it in sie foil, and broil it."

"But...but the hair, chef!"

"Bah, part of the presentation is preserving as much of its appearance as possible!"

"Ah! I see! You are brilliant!"

"Ja, ja, I know--vait. Where...where did sie entree run off too!? PIETRO YOU FOOL! YOU VERE MEANT TO VATCH IT!"

"I am a-sorry chef!"

Bub half stumbled, half scurried out of the Hutt kitchen. He wasn't sure of everything that was said, but he knew cooking speech when he heard it. He also thought he heard shooting. A lot of shooting. He suspected he'd find green girl friend wherever all the blaster fire was going off.

He wasn't disappointed, the dark hallway was getting lit by flashes of red, green, and blue from the door at the end of the corridor. When he poked his head through he saw Vix chained to the floor, causing his fuzzy brows to furrow in annoyance.

And then he saw something shiny slide across his vision, among soft-boots and armored ones alike. His eyes shined; the pretty rock from downstairs!

"Yub yub!" he shouted to no one in particular, diving into the crowd, stubby stature letting him keep an eye on the crystal as it was punted around the room. More than a few guests lost their footing as Bub, trusting in the Force to protect him, refused to move aside from any dangers he sensed. He was locked on target, so the knee high furball would pause for half a step when the Force said there was trouble, throw up a barrier around himself, and watch some poor soul's foot connect and slide right off, usually sending them sprawling to the ground.

A Human hit the ground in front of him, in an Imperial uniform. He was shouting orders towards the nearby stormtroopers when Bub used his gut as a springboard, propelling himself through the sea of legs and towards the shiny.

It was almost...almost...

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"You're welcome, Hutt-licker," Vicxa growled, retracting her leg and picking up the keys to her bindings off the fallen majordomo's belt. The Twi'lek stared at her in shock.

"Y-you saved my life, I... Why?"

"Because even scumbags like you deserve life, it's your own to waste," she muttered, fidgeting with the manacles. Her cybernetic was being unco-operative, again. Maybe she should start mending it better.

The terrified Twi'lek scrambled to cover behind the display case as more blaster fire raked the podium. Pressing his back against the plinth that mere moments ago had contained the valuable crystal, he looked down at the struggling Mirialan.

"Here, let me..." He offered his hand.

Vicxa gave him a sour look. "Fine." She handed him the key.

"Thank you, you have no idea how much *poodoo* I would be in if," he shuffled closer to the bonds, and tossed the key away, "Master Py'zah thought me weak! Thank you for this chance to redeem myself, thieving scum!" He cackled, before dashing off the podium and disappearing into the crowd.

"You bastard!" Vicxa cried after him. "You double-crossing, nerf-frakking, head-pee...!"

**"Ahem, good evening, miss Varis."**

Vicxa jumped to, as much as she could being bound to the floor anyway. "Oh, h-hi, uh... Might-y?"

**"Strong,"** he corrected. **"Please refrain from such insults in the presence of lady Sroka. She would be most offended. She is such a gentle spirit."**

"Yeah, I can tell..." Vicxa murmured, glancing past the mountainous Chiss at the scantily clad Twi'lek telekinetically ripping a gilded curtain pole off the wall and spinning it about to bash a Gamorrean guard twice her size off its feet. "Gentle, yes... Say, would you mind finding a key for me? I hate to ask for favours, but I'm in a bit of a bind here."

===

A battle cry came from where he'd seen the green girl, one that Bub was familiar with, ears perking up.

**"YOU DARE TRY AND LAY HANDS UPON THOSE UNDER THE PROTECTION OF HOUSE GARMIS, FIEND!"**

*Big man!* Bub's face split into a grin, dusting himself off and making his way towards them.

He made it past a green, meaty leg just in time to watch the Chiss lift a Zabrak in ornate robes up by his throat. The man was kicking at the air, grasping the muscled forearm holding him aloft.

"Come on...man...you've already got the purple tail-head sch—ack!"

**"If you value your life, you will not use such language,"** spoke Strong, more calmly than anyone would expect. **"And you would be wise to not treat women as commodities, your life would be much improved. However much of it you have left,"** he finished with a growl, cocking his arm back and hurling the man. He sailed, horns first, into one of the stormtroopers that had gotten a bit too close to Tali for the big man's liking.

She shot a look at him, one that he suspected he understood, and lifted his hands up in apology.

*Yes, yes, I know you do not need my help,* his expression seemed to say, earning himself the barest twitch of a smile from the Twi'lek.

**"I fear we are at a loss for time, Miss Varis. With the crystal misplaced, I suspect the auction is at an end, and this is growing more violent and dangerous by the minute."**

"No joke! Find that key yet?" she asked with hope. Vix watched as Strong turned, cracking his neck and squatting down to grasp the chain with both hands, his muscled arms clearly straining. "Oh...wow, I don't think that's gonna wo—"

The chain gave, Strong grunted, and Vicxa found that while she was still shackled, at least she wasn't tethered to the platform anymore. A meaty hand grabbed the back of her jacket and lifted her to her feet with surprising gentleness.

"Wow," she breathed, taken aback before cracking a smile, "No wonder Tali likes ya, huh?"

**"P...pardon!?"** he sputtered in return, face turning purple with blushing. "I, I am, ah, uh."

The Chiss was rescued as he felt a tugging at his pant leg, looking down to see the broad smile of...

**“Bub Bub!?”** the man asked, confused.

“Hey little guy! You’re alright!”

**“You know Master Bub?”**

Bub gave green girl a thumbs up, then looked up at blue man, holding both arms aloft and hopping, “Bub!”

**“Yes, yes,”** sighed Strong, reaching down and lifting the Ewok to place him on his shoulder.

**“Mistress Sroka, perhaps we should fall back for now?”**

“OH NO ITS BACK NO NO NO!” they heard one of the stormtroopers screech in alarm, his weapon going from trying to suppress the large, four armed pirate to simply spraying the room. Strong thought he could hear the man sobbing. Any shots that came near the trio were stopped, a splash of cascading energy over the shield Bub had erected around them.

“Hey, Konor, that’s the dumb schutta that set off the alarms downstairs!” shouted Cihun to his boss.

“I did not do that! That was Bub!”

**“Why were you...it can wait! Tali! We need to leave before one of our charges is injured!”** shouted Strong.

Blaster fire intensified, immolating tapestries and hanging curtains that soon blazed bright and threatened to set the entire auction hall aflame. The Hutt’s supply of Gamorrean meat shields appeared as relentless as its appetite and though she enjoyed beating down the sort of scum she’d only a few short years ago been expected to service, she could tell the Chiss had a point. Lucine would not be happy, but then again, she was not sure if the Consul was even capable of that most days.

An underworld socialite died screaming just a few steps ahead of her, gunned down by a ruthless Besalisk. Across the room, the stormtroopers had been momentarily driven behind cover as their own fire support appeared *distracted*. The mass of guards and panicked bidders were forming something of a road block between them and the exit, and she didn’t fancy their chances against that sort of firepower.

Centering herself for a moment, she reached out as far as she could manage and fabricated a simple falsehood, a glint of light and a crystalline ‘clink’. The pack of combatants snapped to like sharks to a drop of water, descending upon the location of her illusion, the Severians encouraged by Commander Istvaan’s barking orders.

“Go go!” Tali snapped, tearing off her high heels and tossing them aside to run faster, while Strong hauled Vicxa and Bub in a fairly inelegant double-barrel carry. They managed to slip out of the auction hall and into the main corridor, when a whistling blaster bolt from behind caused them to halt, the bruised Commander limping out from the hall with his sidearm drawn.

“Enough games!” he panted, bleeding from where some lucky scoundrel had managed to cut him. “Give me the crystal, now!”

Strong dropped the Mirialan, urging her to get to safety, before cracking his knuckles and turning to face the irate Human. **“If you wish to have it, you will have to pry it out of that mess inside. We are leaving.”**

“Leaving?” he almost cackled. “After all that? Empty handed? Oh no! I’m not buying that for a second you lying sack of—*uurk!*”

“He is *not* a liar,” Tali stated coldly, hand out-stretched and fingers pinched. Istvaan clawed at the collar of his dress uniform, struggling for breath. “He can be loudt, andt overbearing, oafish, even, but he is *not* a liar, andt I will not have you insult his honor like that. Do I make myself clear, *Commodore?*”

The swiftly blueing Human squeaked something incomprehensible, nodding as much as he could manage.

“Ve all lost today,” Tali growled. “Thank your lucky stars you livedt, vhere others didt not. Ve are done here.”

Istvaan gasped for breath as his windpipe was suddenly un-clogged, collapsing on the expensive carpet in a heap. Strong just followed her passing in awe, the barefoot Twi’lek bloodied from the skirmish and her dress worse for wear, and yet the most enrapturing sight he’d laid eyes upon.

“Yub-nub.”

**“You can say that again,”** he agreed, following in her wake.

The trio emerged into the cool Dandoran air, night having descended and only the walkway lights leading them towards the parked shuttles. Several had already departed, the lucky few who’d had the wherewithal to make good their escape before everything went pear shaped. Rushing towards their shuttle that lay resplendent across the expansive shuttle park, its chromed flanks glittering in the landing pad lights, a sudden thought occurred.

“Vhere’s Vicxa?”

“Very kind of you to send this one running off on her own,” a smarmy voice addressed them, almost lazily. “You really should be ashamed, Mr. Garmis, telling defenceless girls to go alone into dark places.” Count Stebic emerged from the deep shadows cast by a parked Lambda shuttle, an elegant dagger held to the Mirialan’s neck.

“Now, would you be so kind as to hand me the—”

“Oh for Bogan’s sake!” Tali groaned. “Ve don’t have the crystal. How many times do ve have to explain this?”

“You don’t?” Stebic looked genuinely surprised. “But she’d promised... Oh well, nevermind. I’m sure we can find others.”

“Good hunting, now let her go, andt ve’ll all be on our vay.”

**“No,”** Strong grunted, eyes alight with indignant rage. **“He won’t be leaving, except in a cast.”**

“Strong, ve don’t have the time, he...”

**“Has been manipulating us from the start, and threatened to kill one of ours. This insult cannot stand.”**

“Oh, I think you’ll have to just live with it, big blue,” Stebic sighed. “Because I think you’re going to let me go just fine, after I poke a hole in this one’s neck. With the proper care, she’ll live, probably. But if you chase me...”

“You wouldn’t, you’re not a killer.”

**“No, Tali, that’s exactly what he is.”**

“Observant,” Stebic admitted. “I suppose I can let you in on a little secret. I *did* kill my family, but not because they were slavers, or war sympathizers, or pacifists, or any other number of things I’ve said today. No, I killed them, because I *could*, and with Hawee at the helm, we’re going to do *so much more* besides...” His eyes shone with a hunger bordering on the deranged, only now all pretense of amiability dropping like a foul mask. “I hope to meet again,” he smiled. “You two look quite *delectable*.”

“How about *frak off!*” Vicxa snapped, raising her manacled hands to press the Count’s dagger aside while stomping down on his dress shoe with all her might. Stebic screamed to the shattering of two toes, his grip on the Mirialan weakening momentarily. She needed nothing more, as she stepped aside, turned, and delivered a savage knee into his family jewels.

Stebic keeled over, clutching his privates, and tried to crawl away.

"I'm getting *fraking* fed up with everyone thinking I'm a damn hostage!" Vicxa vented, pursuing swiftly and stepping on his dagger hand, pinning it against the ground. "I'm not yours, or anyone's bargaining chip, understood?" she hissed, grabbing Stebic by the scruff of his furry coat. The Human whimpered something between a curse and a plea, Vicxa slamming his face into the pavement before turning to the others. She blew a lock of stray hair off her face and smiled.

"So, we were escaping?"

==

*Dandoran*  
*The Ladies Delight*  
*Present*

The Arconans ran up the J-type's ramp, throwing themselves inside its relative safety. The dutiful crew began immediate take-off preparations while a helpful mechanic snapped Vicxa's manacles off with a plasma torch. Exhausted, but alive, the four adventurers felt gravity shift as the nubian ship took to the air and angled for high orbit, the mission finally over.

**"A shame,"** Strong grunted.

"What was? Not every mission is going to be successful," Tali comforted him. "At least we are still alive."

**"No, precisely that. I know it would not have been noble to strike a downed foe, but..."** He shook his head in frustration. **"I have a feeling we shall have to hunt that predator down before long."**

"Oh right!" Vicxa exclaimed, patting down her pockets and fishing out a slender object that looked like a fancy lighter. "I slipped him a little calling card. Almost forgot to 'send' it." She palmed the trigger plate and a small fireball bloomed to life inside one of the parked shuttles. She passed the two stunned veteran warriors by on her way to the galley, the Ewok having made himself scarce the moment he'd been relinquished from Strong's grasp.

"There's something very wrong with that girl," Tali murmured.

**"She knows her worth, that much is clear."**

Tali nodded, not entirely sure that was the full extent of it, but there was something more pressing on her mind. Something she should have told him a lot sooner.

"Strong, listen, about what happened today..." she began apologetically.



**“It was out of your control, lady Sroka. How could you possibly have predicted the others would have taken such a dim view of your assistant? Although I suppose I do not condone hiring someone as young as master Bub...”**

“No, it’s not that,” Tali interjected with a sigh. “They, vere a bit more than just security. I... hadt askedt Vicxa to steal the crystal. But I hadt no idea she wouldt rope Bub into it! I... Lucine vas so adamant about getting this done right, andt in the endt ve failedt anyway. The least you deserve is honesty, even if it came far too late. I’m sorry, Strong. I shouldt have hadt more faith in us, andt maybe ve couldt have done this without risking others andt actually gotten the crystal.” Her lekku sagged with remorse.

The big man looked troubled for a moment, before nodding.

**“Perhaps we would have succeeded. Or perhaps one of the other two parties that were willing to commit violence would have managed to succeed. And then we would still have nothing,”** he stepped up and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. **“And as petty as this sounds, if young Vicxa was not here, that deplorable Stebic may have survived.”**

He gave her a smile and sighed, **“Lucine interfering is something I should have planned around. I am still often blinded by her more subtle methods. Perhaps we should discuss with her when we return to Selen that she should bring all of us in on a plan when she makes one?”**

With gentle pressure he pulled her in till her forehead rested against his chest, his arms encircling her waist and shoulders, careful not to pin her lekku. He felt her sigh against him.

“I...couldt blame Lucine, but that would be furthest dishonesty, Strong,” she said, looking up at him. “I vas toldt to do whatever I must to obtain the crystal, so I employedt Vix to insure ve came away vith it.”

**“You were told to do this?”** he asked with a raised brow. She nodded, looking more tired than ashamed. She felt him chuckle, a deep rumble that started somewhere in the center of his chest. **“Then my belief stands! If Lucine had informed me that we were taking other precautions, I may have been able to assist in some way. Regardless...thank you, Tali, for telling me. I appreciate your candor and...you.”**

She swallowed, seeing how he was looking down at her, in his arms.

Which was when the comm flared to life, a holographic image of Lucine Vasano upon her throne.

“Darlings! Oh, oh my, am I...interrupting?” she asked with a salacious grin. “I understand you’ve departed Dandoran, I assume everything went to plan?”

"Which plan?" Strong heard Tali mutter as she pulled away from him, straightening her blood-stained dress.

**"Indeed. Which plan, my Lady? I fear we must report that Py'zah the Hutt's summer palace is in complete disarray. I believe Miss Sroka and I made a very good impression on the Hutt, so when things have settled down, perhaps they will entertain negotiations, one on one as it were."**

"And why would we need that, General Garmis?" asked the redheaded woman, leaning forward and narrowing her eyes. "You delivered the crystal into the proper hands, did you not?"

"Proper hands? What hands? You tasked both of us with getting the crystal, Lucine, there was never anything about a delivery."

"Ah, yes, Count Stebic was to fill you in on that part, I assume you met him? Charming man, useless but charming. We felt that it was best to keep the crystal out of Principate hands, and should he be caught with it afterward, well...who would believe a pirate over ourselves?"

"He tried to slit Vix's throat!"

**"He failed to inform us of any dealings, my Lady, and I fear he was engulfed in a ball of flame. Horrible shuttle accident."**

Tali shot a look at the Chiss, eyes going wide briefly.

*Didt he just lie to Lucine of all people? Vhen didt that start!?*

The man stood, hands clasped behind his back and a blank stare on his face. The holographic Consul bored into him with her eyes, before sighing.

"So what you are reporting is a failure to obtain, or deliver, the crystal?"

"To be fair, Shadow Lady...nobody else got it either. Ve think."

Lucine's eye twitched for a moment, before she held up a hand, "We will speak on this when you return to Selen. In person."

The holo faded.

"Oh yes, ve vill," sighed Tali, giving Strong another apologetic look. He simply smiled back and chuckled, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

**"Come, we should find food and fresh clothing!"**

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In one of the rear compartments of the *Ladies Delight*, with the door closed, Bub Bub was crouched in the corner. Glimmering in his hands, as if with a light of its own to his eyes, was the shiny. He sighed as he ran his paws over it, smiling and cooing to himself.

Everything was great. He had his Shiny.

And someday, he'd come back to this place. And get his new Friend.

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Prince Herbert, the twenty-fourth of his name, yawned sadly as the handler threw him food. He grunted, pushing it around the floor of his pen. When he'd woken up his little friend had been gone, and he couldn't smell the fuzzy white one anymore.

With a huff, Herbert settled down to nap, looking despondent to the guards watching him. As he drifted off to sleep, he felt...something...brush his mind, a sense of camaraderie, and snorted happily, before beginning to snore.