**Auction Hall**

**Refuge**

**Somewhere along the Hydian Way**

She smiled at him, fingers resting on his arm to hide the indicator light on the prosthetic. He smiled back, the expression reaching his black eyes as he raised the paddle.

"We have one million, do we have one point one?" The auctioneer's voice carried effortlessly, the accent clearly Corellian. The Lasat was not a nerf merchant, warbling his words and filling the space between with fragments to keep the pattern going. Billions have been across his podium in his career, and the only time he saw nerfs was after it had been perfectly prepared and served with all the precision of a surgeon. His eyes caught the sight of another paddle going up, a sneer crossing the face of the man, peering across the crowd, trying to make out his competitor. "One point one million, do we have one point two?"

He raised his paddle again, seeming to pay more attention to the woman at his side than the auction itself. The dress was as bespoke as was his suit, the embroidery subtle and hiding beneath the clean lines.

*I am convinced that we are here only because you wanted to see me in this.*

He winked at her slowly like a lounging housecat, half a smile still on his lips. She wasn't exactly wrong.

"We have one point two, do we have one point three?" The auctioneer watched the crowd, his spotters turning their heads to make sure no one else raised their paddles. "Going once..."

The other bidder, a pale man with deep scarring across his face crossed his arms, leaving the paddle in his lap. "One point two million credits, going twice."

The auctioneer looked to the Hutt, who shook his head at him as he drew his breath through a long flexible pipe, exhaling colorful smoke. "One point two million credits, going three times..." The auctioneer paused before bringing the gavel down. "Lot thirteen sold, for one point two million credits to Master Fastblade." The spotters moved from their corners, stepping toward the podium to collect the lot and move it backstage as the auctioneer continued. "As we mentioned before, we shall have a brief intermission for refreshment before concluding with our final collection. Please enjoy."

The crowd murmured as the lights brightened some, most slowly getting to their feet and maneuvering away from their seats. The pale blue Twi'lek tilted her head at her companion, the man having combed his hair carefully to obscure the left side of his face. He nodded at her, then looked at the back of the room, seeing the tall Shaevalian. He looked uncomfortable, having had to switch out of his normal attire for this event. "Well then." He motioned with his hand. "That went well."

She tried to smile at him, but it didn't feel right. The countermeasures down in the vault were exceptionally difficult, and would not be defeated stealthily. She almost got caught investigating that. They would have to take their prize in transit, if it was at all possible. She had eyes on the paths that they took with the last fifteen lots, but it seemed randomized, and frankly, they needed more time to come up with a plan. She shook her head at her husband, trying her best to keep the emotion from her eyes. She knew how badly he wanted lot sixteen.

"Karabast." The curse came quietly from under his breath. The entire room was covered with bleeding edge surveillance technology. He chose his words carefully, knowing full well that they were all being watched and listened to. "That would have been a nice prize, but..." He paused, thinking. "If we have to blow it all on sixteen, then so be it." She nodded at that, then turned her attention off to the side of the room, beyond the gold-draped Ithorian and her Dug bodyguard.

"Is that...'' She looked back at the Consul. He followed her gaze, then started walking in that direction. She moved quickly, slipping her arm in his as they walked. She listened as he muttered under his breath, a cavalcade of half formed curse words that escaped his lips only when his carefully laid plans went some sort of sideways.

"Fastblade?" He turned his head, lifting a flute of effervescent liquid from the tray as the waitress moved past. A droid stepped between the two, the metal chassis covered in a suit much the same as an actual servant would have worn. Bentre narrowed his eyes, looking past the protocol.

"Master Maxim Fastblade, of Ralltiir." The droid spoke. "May I present..." It paused, waiting for Bentre's response.

"I didn't expect to see you here." Bentre blinked.

He only raised an eyebrow in response. His companion smiled at Bentre, half chuckling as she spoke, her auburn hair swaying near the hem of her dress as she moved. "Well, it has been a while since you've been to Ralltiir."

"So you've been the one spending fortunes on this collection." Bentre laughed. "That... actually makes sense now."

"Well, we did need some new decorations." She explained. "And they have quite a few prizes on the block today."

"Anything in particular?" He gritted his teeth as he asked, knowing the answer before he asked.

"Lot sixteen." Fastblade spoke, the words echoing in between his head and his ears. Bentre nodded, half to shake the sensation away, half to sort out his next words.

"I would appreciate it very much..." He started.

"Yes." The word reverberated in his brain. Bentre nodded, taking half a step back, lowering his eyes a degree before turning and walking away. This was not the place for formalities, nor was he the sort of man to really appreciate them.

Bentre moved through the crowd as it started to fill the room back up, the low din of people making plans, murmuring about the next few items, telling stories about the others in attendance. Bentre turned toward Tasha'vel, his voice low enough to hide beneath the crowd. "Tell Taka he's here. This changes everything."

Tasha nodded. "Surely he will..."

Bentre interrupted her. "Only he knows what his plans are." He grumbled. "I can't make our plans reliant on his generosity." She nodded at him, stepping away as the soft chime of the bell warned them that the next lot would come soon.

Slipping through the crowd, she moved toward the bar, waiting for a moment as the line evaporated, eye's staring at the brilliantly colored bottles, lit from beneath to cast their exotic colors toward the ceiling. The Shaevalian stepped next to her. "Ma'am?"

She smiled as the bartender handed a Cathar his drink, looking to her. "A spiran caf and a straight triple pour of Whyren's Reserve, please." She waited for the bartender to nod, then turned slightly, watching across the hall and through the doorway to see the Auctioneer make his way to the podium. "The Lion is here."

His eyebrow went up. "Ma'am?" She paused, seeing something out of the corner of her eye, turning slowly to take a better look. A pale purple skinned Twi'lek leaned against the wall, a small black astromech turning it's dome in response to something she said. Tasha tilted her head, her lekku twitching a polite greeting, getting a half smile and a slurred lekku response.

"The boss wants you to see what you can find." She took a step in the other Twi'lek's direction. "And find out if Kojiro knew." Movement behind her caught her attention, turning to see her drinks were ready. Picking them up, she turned back and found her gone. "Of kriffing course."

"Pardon?" Darkhawk lifted his own glass to his lips, the rich amber liquid swirling in the crystal. She shrugged off the question, then moved back toward the auction hall. He watched her move away before clicking on his own commlink earpiece. "Ty?"

The response came back staticky, half-clipped and garbled, Darkhawk moving toward the huge transparisteel window at the far end. He didn't like letting the auction hall out of his view, but this was somewhat more important. He cursed the limited range of the tiny encrypted link, but it was supremely useful at times. "Ty?"

"Oh, that’s better, I read you now." The reception came through much better this time. "You remember the...'' He paused, his eyes falling across yet another security sensor. "You remember that huge weird alien ship that I've docked with a few times uhhh… back home?"

Darkhawk could almost hear the Duros' facial expression twist with confusion. "What are you on about?"

"Think it through." He took a sip, swallowing before continuing. "Is it out there?"

"Ain't nothing out here that size, boss."

Darkhawk thought for a moment, his mind racing through the options. "Can you do an IFF scan for any friendlies that we didn't already know would be here?" he tapped his finger against the side of his glass as he waited for a response, watching as another man with long silvery hair moved toward him. The Shaevalian raised his glass at him. "Did you know?"

Kojiro's eyebrow peaked. "Not until a few minutes ago."

"What did you ask?" The Duros replied at the same time.

Darkhawk raised a finger, responding to one at a time. "Nothing Ty, you got anything?"

"There's only one that we didn't see at the rendezvous." Ty coughed across the comm. "Pretty sharp Seinar. Looks pretty souped up. I don't think I've seen it before." Darkhawk nodded, as if the Duros could see him, then closed the link.

"He didn't tell you?" Darkhawk chuckled as Koji shook his head.

"I mean, he reached out when he landed, but I'm not entirely sure where he is." Koji shifted his weight. "Plans Aurek through Dorn are shot. They knew who would be in attendance, I suppose." He watched the Shaevalian as he calculated. The security in the vault was exceptional, and there was almost no chance to get inside without raising the alarm and getting quite messy. "We're going to have to rely on Esk."

Darkhawk nodded at him. "The way things have been going, I don't think we brought enough for Esk." Ten million credits worth of financial instruments came with them in three camtonos when they registered, locked securely away in the vault along with several other bidder's stakes. The auctioneers weren't going to take promissory notes from obsters and syndicate types, and it was smart to not let strangers have access to who they were exactly. Hard currency was the play. Darkhawk snarled. It would be supremely easier to just drop the pretense and take what they came for. "Would that a dagger could solve it."

Kojiro nodded, eyes darting to the side quickly. "I don't know everyone here, but the Hutt is serious business. There's three Black Sun captains, a Pyke Syndicate boss, and all manner of dangerous around." He paused, eyes gliding across the crowd in the distant hall. "We better hope that Esk works."

A murmur went up in the hall, a cocktail waitress pausing in the doorway with a shocked look on her face before making her way to the bar to refill her tray. Darkhawk cast a sidelong glance at Koji, then moved toward the bar. She stood there, leaning on the polished wroshyr as the bartender filled more fluted glasses for her. "One lot!" she murmured at him. "I've never seen one lot go that high!"

Darkhawk drained the last sip of his glass as he stepped closer, raising it so that the bartender could see, waiting for his nod before relaxing his arm. He let half a smile cross his face before engaging. "There's a lot of money on this boat today."

She chuckled back. "I know. I'm used to seeing idle hands with a lot of money, but that guy just bid enough to buy everything that already came before."

Darkhawk tilted his head, then looked in the direction of the hall. "How much was it?"

"Eighteen million." Darkhawk's stomach sank. They didn't even bring that much with them. Frankly, they shouldn't have brought that much with them to begin with. It was a fallback play, where they figured that they could reclaim it if they had to front the credits to earn the prize. He turned to Koji, concern painted across his face.

"What comes after Esk?"

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"I don't know, and I don't like it." Bentre left the paddle in his lap, watching the bidding war between the Hutt and Muz escalate.

"Twenty Million." The auctioneer smiled hopefully. "Do we have twenty one?"

Tasha leaned in, whispering "We could always go back to my original plan.".

Bentre tried to stop a smile from crossing his face. As much as he would love to let his frustrations out on this whole situation, they still hadn't sorted out how they had gotten the artifacts, so resorting to his favorite flavor of violence would seal that avenue off from them forever. He shook his head, sighing and watching the events unfold.

"Do you remember way back in the day, that Purple Twi'lek on the Nephilim?" She murmured at him.

Bentre turned his head slightly, his mind reaching through the memories. "I...think so?" He squinted slightly, wrinkling his face in thought. "I seem to think she ended up working with Muz for something after?"

"Huh." Tasha mused. "Makes sense, he collects purple things."

"Twenty five million going three times..."

"Wait." Bentre paused himself, mind racing. "Wasn't she some phenomenal slicer?"

Tasha's eyes widened. Bentre emptied his glass, then nodded. "Did you want another drink?"

"Not just yet."

"Our final lot sixteen is sold for twenty five million to Master Fastblade." The Hutt in the side row chortled in annoyance, restraining himself from smashing an underling. The auctioneer brought the gavel down and set it aside. "All guests may feel free to enjoy our refreshments, and entertainment will begin shortly. Our concierges will be contacting you to settle accounts."

"Twenty five million." Bentre breathed out, standing to stretch his legs "What's that work out to? Thirty five million he spent only today?"

"We're in the wrong line of work."

As the white gloved guards moved the lot to the back, Bentre watched as Muz stood and made his way to the podium, speaking with the Auctioneer. A moment later, Tezeib stood from his seat beside him and joined the conversation. Bentre stood himself, nudging Tasha to join him as they moved through the crowd toward the front.

"We should discuss this matter in private, Master Fastblade." The curator nodded, tilting his head toward the crowd of people working their way back toward the bar, the sound of a band starting up in the other room.

"Of course." The voice was deep, gravelly, but it didn't echo in Bentre's head this time. He paused, watching the Curator step the other direction, disappearing through a locked door, Muz and Ashia following.

"Did Koji know anything?" Bentre asked Tasha. "I think I am missing something."

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"More than you know." He stared at the curator.

"We definitely appreciate your custom, sir..." Tezeib began. It was, after all, a princely sum.

"It's not about the money." Ashia interrupted, smiling at him. He looked at her sideways, not sure who to address.

"Your supplier." The voice wormed its way through his ears, rattling around in his head. It was uneasy, his voice like an Ithorian's touching bits inside his brain that he didn't like being rattled.

"I am sure that I do not know what you are talking about."

"Who are they, what do they want?" She stared at him, the smile never leaving her eyes.

"It is my long standing policy to never divulge our sources..."

"You have nothing." Muz spoke. Tezeib shook his head, then looked at him quizzically.

"How do you think Sarcozi the Hutt will feel about you losing one hundred million of his credits? Or how Marquis de Fath will appreciate you misplacing fifty million credits worth of aurodium?" Ashia paused, tapping the side of her chin. "Do you think you'll be allowed to die quickly, or do you think that they will draw it out?"

Tezeib sat back in his chair, chuckling. "Do you know who you are threatening, little miss?"

Muz leant forward, teeth glinting as he laughed, full throated mirth rumbling through the curator's heart, his head.

"Is it, though?" She nodded at the datapad on his desk. "Go ahead, check."

He lifted the datapad, checking the security feed. The gates were closed, the doors were locked. He narrowed his eyes, swiping through the feeds to the interior, his mouth slowly falling open before he set the pad down. "How..."

"You get told to send invites to a clan of sorcerers, and you're asking how?" Ashia waved her hand dismissively, pulling out a chair. "Precious."

The curator blinked, turning his head. It was clearer to him now.

"There's only three outcomes to this scenario." She slipped into the seat across from his desk. "No matter which you choose, eventually we will get what we want. So, you see..." She propped her feet up on his desk. "It's all a matter of if you are worth more to us alive or dead."

He sighed, defeat in his eyes. "What do you want?"

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Muz watched Bentre gingerly slide the top of the crate aside. "No, seriously, what do you want?"

"We're quite ahead of what we wanted." Ashia chuckled, watching the white gloved porters bring crates up the ramp of the courier. They had a name and a frequency to track, their credits back, and a few free artifacts. All that they had to do in exchange is what they were going to do anyway: track the man down.

"Do you even know what this is?" Bentre muttered, staring at his prize. "Of course you do, you always do." Tasha laid her hand on his, looking back up at the eldest Keibatsu.

"What were you here for, anyway?"

Muz only smiled.