

Vexed

By Malfearak Asvraal

"Brace that column," Malfearak Asvraal asked the droid at his side, pointing to the time-worn pillar hanging at a precarious angle over them. It was a wonder the structure was still holding, cracked and twisted as it was. It looked like a light breeze could knock it over. In fact, the entire antechamber looked like it was about to collapse in on itself. Large chunks of stone littered the ground, matching wide gaps in the ceiling through which the moonlight shone. The walls fared no better with roots and vines and critters having tunneled through them long ago, forcing their way into the chamber. Everything was dry and dusty now, dead or dying. Whatever humidity or organic matter had drawn flora and fauna alike, it was long gone. That didn't matter though. What interested Malfearak was the raised dias beneath his feet. Even if it was covered by debris and a millennia's worth of dust, he could make out rune-like engravings that piqued his interest. He had to get a better look at it and to do so, they'd have a bit of cleaning up to do, starting with that pillar.

"Do I have to?" moaned the old, beat-up Viper Droid, speaking in binary code through panged chirps and whirrs.

"That thing will come down hard otherwise," the archeologist explained, "Best if we control when and where."

The droid, V3-X, let out a whining chirp, which Malfearak had come to recognize as its version of a conceding sigh. "Destruction of ancient architecture, unfortunate."

“Yeah, I know. I don’t like it either,” he admitted. He and the droid had that in common, at least. They both had great respect for the past—one through nurture, one through programming—and they avoided causing damage whenever they could. Unfortunately, they didn’t have much of a choice in this situation, and, besides, that thing was bound to come down one way or another.

The droid floated up to the pillar, its repulsorlift engine giving off a soft hum as it moved, then pressed its chassis against the stone. Malfearak held his breath as the column shifted and teetered ever so slightly, causing dust to cascade from it.

“Careful,” he said.

“I push, you catch?” asked V3-X.

Malfearak cracked a smile and shook his head as he moved into position at the base of the pillar. That droid had some serious gaps in its programming but it was a good companion, focused and constant, with a sharp analytical mind when it came to archaeology.

“You won't let it crush me, will you?” There was genuine doubt in its inquisitive bleeps.

"Come on, Vex, when’s the last time you got banged up on my account?"

“Yesterday.”

“Oh yeah,” Malfearak snorted. “Well, ready or not, here goes nothing.”

V3-X let out another whirr, this one half-confirmation, half-panic, as Malfearak ignited his lightsaber and sliced through the base of the pillar at a precise angle intended to direct its fall. The droid pushed up with dome and chassis both, its repulsorlift engine roaring, fighting against the weight of the structure bearing down on it. It wasn’t enough. The whole thing was coming down fast, too fast. If the column hit the ground at that velocity, the impact and the ensuing tremor were sure to bring the rest of the place down, not to mention that V3-X was about to get crushed. Malfearak closed his eyes and held both hands out, one hand still gripping the ignited lightsaber between two fingers and his thumb. Drawing the cool night air into his nostrils, he reached out to the Force and slowed the pillar’s fall with its aid. Man and droid working together, they brought it the rest of the way down at a controlled pace and once it was low enough, the droid disengaged and moved out from underneath. Sweat pearling on his forehead, Malfearak maneuvered the debris out of the way through the Force, gliding it towards the far end of the antechamber, away from the central dais. Once the pillar was safely discarded, he got to clearing out the dias, displacing the rest fallen stone.

The droid also got to work chirping and whimpering. Someone who wasn't used to working with V3-X could have mistaken those sounds for whining but Malfearak knew he was already analyzing the markings on the dias even as it cleared out dead roots with its long, languid limbs.

"Too much dust," it announced before floating up to the center of the dias and increasing the intensity of its repulsorlift. The burst of air displaced by the antigravitational emanations of the engine kicked up a thick veil of dust. For a long moment, all Malfearak could see were dancing shadows and specks of dust flickering in the moonlight. He whipped the growing film of dust from his visor with the back of his sleeve and narrowed his eyes, trying to make out shapes until he found the droid's system lights. As the dust settled more of its dark, banged-up dome. Then the dias appeared, cleared away, almost pristine if it wasn't for the ravages of time. Thankfully, the runes and patterns were easy to make out and define. Some were worn away, but it was nothing a profile scan and electron microscopy couldn't resolve in due time.

"Good job, Vex," he said, rapping his knuckles against the droid's plating.

"Not bad for such an old clunker." A sharp, cracking voice spoke from the entranceway. V3-X whirred aggressively at the unflattering description.

"Kolar, you old pirate, what a lovely surprise," Malfearak said as he veered to greet the newcomers with open arms and a crooked smile under his helmet. It was a lie and not a good one at that, but what was dialogue without meaningless pleasantries? The truth was he'd sensed their presence the moment they had set foot on Naimara and he'd heard the massive, goat-faced Gran and his crew lumbering up from a mile away thanks for his sensitive hearing.

"Yeah, yeah, you knew I was coming," the Gran croaked in broken basic.

Malfearak chuckled as he spoke, "Well, you didn't exactly hide your intentions. Your three eyes all but lit up when I told you where I was going."

Kolar grinned through his visor, "Can't blame a fellow for knowing an opportunity when he hears one."

"No," the archaeologist admitted, "No, I can't."

"So, huh, find anything good?" Kolar stepped forward, his big head turning this way and that as he took in the place. His goons fanned out into the chamber behind him, six of them in total, all wearing matching flight suits and helmets that had a certain grungy practicality to them. They were armed with an array of weapons, some with carbines and pistols. One, a bigger fellow, was aiming a heavy repeater straight at him. Kolar for his part sported an ion disruptor, a mean piece of machinery. He fingered it with a webbed finger as if it were scratching a pet.

“You got here early, big guy,” Malfearak answered. “Just finished tidying up the place.”

“Are we gonna make another mess?” chirped V3-X.

“Well, that’ll depend on your boss here, Clunks,” Kolar said. There was a tinge of amusement in his voice, underpinned by the threat in his words.

Malfearak motioned to the raised dias behind him, “Look, Kolar, unless you can pawn off a piece of rock to some collector, I don’t reckon you’ll find much—”

A blaster bolt hit Kolar’s visor dead center leaving a big, smoking hole where his face had been. The Gran collapsed in a heap. Weapon and helmet clattered against the stone floor while everyone kind of stood there, too dumbfounded to react. Malfearak wheeled in on the droid, eyes wide.

“Vex, what was that about?” he asked, his voice a shrill blend of surprise, panic, and anger.

“He called me Clunks,” the droid answered flatly, mimicking a human shrug with his limbs.

He just looked at the droid, mouth agape with incredulity. That was new.

Someone barked something in a language he didn’t understand and a pinprick in the Force warned him to bring his lightsaber up.

It sure looked like they were gonna make another mess after all.