

A Garden of Stones

By Essik Lyccane

**Lyra-3K-a: Moon of Thillon
Temnos Excavations Mines
Upper Levels**

The air was filled with a swirling grey dust as they approached. It billowed up from the mines, rising from each shaft like the exhaling breath of a giant. Even after several thousand years of development, mining was a constantly messy job, with a constant risk of cave ins, explosives and the risk of triggering a tremor. What had been built there was constructed to simply fill a gap and fix problems over offering a truly perfect system. If a flaw was found, something would be bolted into place and life would go on. That was why the entrance to each elevator shaft was surrounded by a network of extractor pipes, snaking about it like some misshapen pipe organ or the metal guts of an engine. Typically this place would have been kept clear to help prevent dust contamination spreading to the base, but that rule had been quietly lifted in the wake of the recent tragedy.

A gaggle of tired and pale faced miners had clustered about the elevator. Each expression was gaunt, offering a distant half-seeing stare which penetrated through the layers of dirt and dust which caked their faces. Not all of them were standing. Some clutched broken arms, others lay on the floor, moaning where the splintered bone of their legs was jutting through clothing stained dark with body fluids. The worst of them, those no longer capable of moaning, had been quietly pressed to one side. A few medics hurried about them, helping with whatever meagre resources they had on hand, and knowing that no more help would be coming to these people. Not while the Brotherhood continued to bomb Lyra colony into ash.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, the surviving miners parted, allowing for a pair of tan armoured Lyra Sec officers to march past. Some complained, a few offered approving growls at the sight of them. It was the first sign any of them had seen of any serious response to the attack, even merely a token investigation.

“Es still down there,” one miner said, gripping the arm of one officer as they passed, “I ‘erd him laughin’ as we ran. Bastard enjoyed this.”

“That’s what we want to confirm,” the officer said, firmly removing the hand of the miner but giving a discreet nod of his impassive helmet, “If he’s still alive, we’ll drag them back up here in chains.”

An approving noise followed the guards as they pulled open the elevator door’s rusting handle and stepped inside. It shuddered, swinging slightly before jolting into motion and sending the two officers plunging down into the hollowed out tunnels beneath the moon. They were silent for

a time, until the more animated of the two looked back up toward the dwindling light overhead and then his compatriot.

"They're out for blood," he said quietly, "We'll be lucky to get him back through that lot."

"And if someone bombed your home, would you not be?" his compatriot answered, his words undercut by the slight vibrations of the patchwork floor beneath him.

"I'd be out for bringing him in for a fair trial. Something tells me that they're not about to wait that long. You'd better have a damn excuse to help him get back up there in one piece."

The second officer did not answer, and instead reached toward his right arm. The man's gloved hands seemed to phase through his clothing and the movement was accompanied by a bright flash of light. The other officer shielded his eyes, and as the light faded, a very different figure was left standing in his place.

"A warning would have been nice, you know," the "officer" grunted, a slight chuckle underlining his words as he looked the gand up and down, "And now you have to think of an excuse of what to say if someone sees you."

"Essik is sorry, but he has come to truly detest that device," the gand replied, the shivering motions of his exoskeleton made to emulate speech sending minor shudders through the ramshackle lift, "It was likely never made with compound eyes in mind. Speaking of which, where did you find your disguise?"

"Locker room," answered Ka Tarvitz, as he pulled the helmet free of his scarred features and ran a gloved hand through his greying hair, "And before you turn blue, there was a spare set. I didn't have to knock anyone out."

Essik said nothing, instead offering some thanks for small mercies as Tarvitz withdrew a rebreather from his belt and fitted it into place over his mouth. They had been lucky enough to snatch a pair from an emergency locker before coming into sight of the traumatized miners, giving the two an excuse to say next to nothing and avoid blowing their cover. Essik could rely upon his unique biology to stroll through the heavy clouds of mineral dust which had been thrown up into the caverns. He did not fancy the chances of anyone relying upon a good set of lungs to last long down there. That at least offered them something to work with, and hopefully a means of flushing out their prey.

M'eero "Trip" Trippani had been one of the most sought after specialists within the Collective beneath their overall leadership. He lacked the unifying force of will that Oligard projected or the talent of a field commander that Crimson had displayed, but he was uniquely dangerous. Trippani was quiet, stealthy, and displayed an unhealthy love of explosives without the restraint of any basic morality. Now he had just helped to kill several hundred miners, with little to no help

save for a bag filled with explosives and a trigger mechanism. The only thing which had given Trippani away was his need for theatricality, broadcasting the Arx national anthem across all comlink signals. If it wasn't him, someone was doing a damn good impression of his typical antics.

"Look, you're still sure you want to talk?" Tarvitz said, breaking the silence between the two, "He's not going to change his mind."

"We will see," Essik answered, looking down in irritation at the white smears already forming on his clothing from the rising clouds of dust, "His profile suggests that he joined the Collective due to Pravus' xenophobic purges. That at least gives Essik something to work with, and he would rather not turn this into a fight if it can be avoided."

Tarvitz's shoulders seemed to sag at those words, but he did not argue against Essik's decision. They had a backup plan if things truly went wrong, but this was a rare chance to try and talk someone into defecting while they had no way out. Even Trippani would not have stuck around for this long if he had an easy means to escape without being mobbed by vengeful workmen.

The elevator's wheels ground to a halt, squealing as brakes long overdue replacement attempted to close about the metallic cabling. As the doors swung open, its occupants were greeted by a scene of sheer devastation. The cavern had once clearly been a major hub of activity, filled with loading bays for labour droids and racks of mining equipment. Much of this was now buried under rubble, with only the occasional crack of some splintered metal jutting up from between various boulders. Small trickles of broken stone fell from the cracked ceiling, where misshapen durasteel support struts were attempting to still hold it aloft.

"Won't last long," Tarvitz muttered to himself, reaching out with the Force to probe the area ahead, "If we're going to do this it'd better be quick."

Patiently waiting for him to probe the nearby area for threats, Essik carefully ran a finger about the door's edge, testing for pressure pads or the edges of an automated laser mine. He started to rise up and was about to ask Tarvitz if he had sensed anything, when he realised that they were no longer alone. Amid the devastation, a lone circular black orb was hovering and watching them. It was moving carefully, its lone photoreceptor fixed squarely upon the elevator.

"Good afternoon," Essik said, raising his hat in greeting, "Do you have a moment to speak?"

The droid did nothing, but out of a grill in the side of its body, a slow drawling voice emanated across the cavern.

"That's far enough. There's enough denton packs beneath that elevator to send your skulls into orbit," the voice said, excited as if on the verge of laughing, "So, talk."

“Essik assumes that he is speaking with Mr. Trippani?” he asked, opening his arms to make it clear that he was unarmed.

“The one and only,” Trippani giggled, “You boys are lucky that this thing is synched up to a spare comlink I found. Otherwise I would have just let the droid’s automated trigger set off those bombs.”

“Of which we thank you,” Essik continued, ignoring an eye roll from Tarvitz as he stepped closer to Essik, “but we are here with an offer to help you walk away alive.”

The droid swivelled in place, rotating in the air as if irritated by this gesture before turning back to Essik. “Alright, make your pitch.”

“We want you to switch sides if possible.” Essik said bluntly. He wanted to see Trippani’s response, expecting a giggle or even a sudden death thanks to the explosives. Instead there was no answer.

“We know of how the Iron Legion turned upon you,” Essik continued, “We know of your love of explosives and of revenge. We are offering you both, but with our backing rather than the Collective.”

“And just who is this us?” Trippani demanded, the tone forced as if he was exaggerating every syllable. It was the sort of performance Essik would have expected of someone with a set audience in front of him.

“The two standing before you, the New Republic, and those out to ensure that the Iron Throne pays for its crimes,” Essik said, omitting Clan Odan-Urr’s name in all of this, “Not everyone has quite forgotten and forgiven their actions.”

“Interesting,” the droid turned on the spot again, “And what does tall dark and one-eyed have to say about this?”

Tarvitz said nothing, folding his arms as he glared at the droid before realising that he needed to speak up. “I’m with him. I don’t disagree with him at all.”

“But you don’t like me either,” Trippani said, tutting to himself, “I can’t say that I’m a fan of you either. I’ll tell you what, let the gand go alone, and we’ll speak about this face to face.”

Essik exchanged a glance with Tarvitz. This was not fully a part of their plan in any regard. If things went wrong, Tarvitz needed to be there to fight their way clear.

“I see that...” Essik started, only to be interrupted by what sounded like a raspberry being blown through a speaker from the droid.

“No negotiations, he goes, you come, or I blow us all to kingdom come!”

Tarvitz stormed forward, lunging toward the droid as he exited the elevator in a rush, only for it to snap back out of reach.

“One more step,” it said, hovering just above Tarvitz’s outstretched fingers, staring down into his face, “Just one, and boom!”

Tarvitz glowered but withdrew his hand, stepping back into the elevator without taking his eyes off of the droid. It left them with few choices.

“We have a deal,” Essik agreed, “I will join you, we speak, and we go from there.”

“Excellent!” Trippani chattered, “No guns, remember and alone!”

The droid swung back, heading for one of the few remaining tunnels which had not been covered by rock and waited there. Essik took a few tentative steps out of the elevator, his heart skipping a beat as he half expected the ground to explode beneath him in that moment. There was no telling just how many tricks that Trippani had waiting for them.

“This way, go up the tunnel and twice to the right,” the droid directed as Essik passed under it, “The droid will stay here to make sure that the big one goes back up the elevator.”

Essik risked one last back look at Tarvitz and then set off in the direction instructed.

The instructions were easy to follow. Essik took off down the tunnel, reaching toward the end without any true difficulty. Occasionally he would pass one corpse and another, some killed by the cave in, others by slugthrower rounds. Before long, a figure took shape out of the mist, a towering individual with the distinct ears of his species.

“Hello there,” Trippani said, halfway between a cheerful greeting and a sneer beneath a rebreather stolen from a miner. Essik tipped his head in response and then stepped forward.

“Essik is sorry, but he has a confession to make,” the gand said, opening his coat to reveal the handle of his pistol, “He lied.”

“So did I,” Trippani smirked, levelling his gun at Essik’s head.

“Ah, but did you lie twice?”

Trippani looked on in confusion for a moment, before a stun bolt struck him in the chest, fired out just from under Essik's elbow. The man crumpled, falling face first into the dirt.

Sirra took shape behind Essik, the Padawan lowering her pistol and beaming up at Essik.

"Well, that was easy," Essik said, before turning to the Sirra, "Please help Essik disarm him and tie this one up. We need to interrogate him."