

# **A Kind Word**

Baime wasn't waking up. In truth it never slept. The metropolis of glimmering beaches had been sounding off with speeches, music and celebrations throughout the evening, as streamers blew lazily in the wind. The roughly hewn stone streets had been covered by masses of bodies, moving between stores, casinos and entertainment facilities, or following other party goers. Apparently, this was an average weekend for its populace. Usually, that would have made it a haven for pickpockets and criminal scum, but by some small miracle, the Vatali Empire had managed to escape that particular curse. Quite how it had managed this was beyond Essik Lyccane but, after his visit to Nar Shaddaa, he was hardly ready to complain about such a thing.

The gand had spent most of that morning waiting in one of the less travelled squares of Baime, sitting on a public bench and watching its populace come and go and they pleased. With so many others rushing past, with places to go or people to find, he had been left undisturbed with his own thoughts. Most of these had reflected more on the recent past, and how much had changed in the space of a mere few years.

Once an Admiral of the New Republic and decorated veteran, Essik had found himself without a government to serve. Decades of service had been undone in seconds, and his efforts to wage a guerilla war had been abruptly ended when Corellia's senator claimed Essik's fleet for his own planet. He had refused, citing their string of victories and the First Order's inept strategies, only to be immediately discharged under some special order for getting in the senator's way. The Jedi had taken him in following that, or at least he hoped that they intended to do. He had been focusing upon this for most of the morning and avoiding exactly why he was in Baime, biding his time and awaiting the verdict of Clan Odan-Urr's leaders.

Essik had expected his acceptance into the Clan to be an easy matter of drafting him into the fleet. He had served the Jedi during the Clone Wars, Ka Tarvitz vouched for his skills, and he had personally assisted in the destruction of a Collective recruitment facility on the Smuggler's Moon. Instead, it seemed they were unsure just what to do with him.

The wars Essik spoke of were written off as myths, or their records had been destroyed in the New Republic's insane effort to deny its own history. Without that history, without that proven service, others had been dubious of his capabilities. He could not entirely blame them. To most, Essik looked like little more than a borderline caricature; a white carapaced gand, short and on the weightier side of rotund, dressed in a three-piece suit and a bowler hat. It was an image he had actively

cultivated to make others underestimate him, and it had served him well. He had never expected that he would need to so openly reject it simply to have others even recognise his skills.

So, here he was, left to watch and wait until called upon, and consider just what the future would hold for him. There were, admittedly, worse places to do it. His current resting location was an older part of the city, a single paved square roughly forty feet across and flanked on one side by more modern structures. To the other three, the once imposing Grand Theatre shaded it against the sun. A small circular fountain in the form of a rearing Argis stood in the centre, and had been dry for little over a century. Only leaves and rainwater pooled at its base now. The Theatre had served as a small hub for the city's nobility for years, and had changed hands several times now from what he knew. Now its future was in question, at least according to the tour brochure he had procured.

Leaning heavily on his cane - another damnable sign of his age - Essik's compound eyes tracked the small parties passing through the square. They were an eclectic bunch to be certain, mostly off-worlders, a few traders, and a small handful of city residents. A number groaned, clearly suffering from the effects of heavy drinking, staggering about with the support of other dazed individuals. This made it all the easier for him to pick out the truly unique ones among their number, a small family standing just apart from Baime's other citizens.

Essik didn't know enough about the Vatali Empire to truly comment on its nature, but he would have staked everything he owned that they were a part of the ruling elite. While they lacked jeweled finery, they carried themselves with the straight-backed self-importance he would have expected of Imperial Governors or their ilk. Were the trio of well dressed and remarkably well muscled Sephi standing in defensive positions about the group not enough of an indication of their status, those who passed them by did so with bowing difference. One of them, the matriarch of the group he assumed, was pointing up toward the Theatre behind her and making gestures, to those nearby, speaking with animated enthusiasm. Essik suppressed a chattering laugh as a young child among one group attempted to mimic a gesture of their parent, only to be scolded by a sibling. No matter the species or social standing, some relationships simply didn't change.

For a moment, Essik thought about his own family back on Gand. He hadn't seen them in years, decades even, save for the occasional family visit on Coruscant. While there was no exact one-to-one comparison to be made with other species, but in their terms, he would have been a grandfather. Great grandfather even, given the last news he was given prior to the New Republic's fall. He shifted uncomfortably against the hardened wood of the bench, and removed a datapad from his jacket

pocket.

Scrolling up through the more recent messages, he paused at one marked for his personal attention, and opened it once again. The letter was brief, overly formal even by the standards of his species, as if written to a complete stranger. Were it not for the fact it was signed with the Lyccane sigil, he might even have ignored it entirely. One of his blood relatives, a girl he hardly knew, had been deemed worthy of speaking with her foremost name. They were inviting him back, out of formality more than anything else, to witness the ceremony and give his blessing. The date was marked from three days ago, and Essik had yet to answer it. He had never benefited from any close attachment to his family, and this did not change that fact. It felt less like an attempt to accept him back into the fold than a summons now that he had nothing else left to him in the wider galaxy.

Raised voices shook Essik from his melancholic thoughts, and he inclined his head, quickly focusing on the source of the disturbance. A group of men were making their way through the thinning crowds and had stopped in front of the nobles. At first, he mistook them for another group of dignitaries, as each was clad in borogue finery, albeit of a different nature than what he might have expected. Then he noticed how the regal designs closely resembled body army, and the slender rifles in their hands. They closed on the group of nobles, rapidly encircling them. The matriarch turned to face the new arrivals, confusion written across her features at this turn of events. Confusion soon turned to caution as another of their number moved to address them, someone not clad in the ceremonial garb of the other Sephi, but the rough beaten durasteel of a combat veteran. Essik hadn't spotted him until the moment the other gun-wielding figures had fanned out, but he moved with the relaxed certainty of a hired killer.

Essik leaned forward, grabbing his cane tightly as he looked from one face to the next. The other figures - soldiers of some sort he assumed - were evidently on edge. Each charged with either the enthusiasm of being caught up in a greater moment, or something their own thoughts. Only the mercenary seemed to be enjoying himself, barely bothering to hide a satisfied smirk as he handed a datapad to the matriarch, one hand resting on the pistol at his belt as he spoke. His fingers drummed on the handle of the weapon, eyeing up each of the bodyguards in turn, looking for an excuse to use it.

It was an all too familiar scene for Essik. He had seen it twice before, in times when others hungered for greater power and sought to secure it for themselves. As he watched, the soldiers began removing the bodyguards' weapons and forming up to march them away, parents and children alike. He could recall a time when those making arrests had worn the skull-faced helmets of the Empire's Stormtrooper corps.

He had lost friends during those purges of potential dissidents, people dragged into an Imperial prison system never to be seen again.

Essik realised that he had unsteadily risen to his feet, his body acting on instinct as memories of Inquisitors and COMPNOR units harassing nonhumans came to the forefront of his mind. He almost paused at that moment, tempted to return to his seat, but pressed on anyway. If he was wrong he would merely be making a fool of himself, but if he was right, well, perhaps he would be able to prevent the past repeating itself. If he was truly lucky, perhaps he could do so without anyone losing their lives.

“Hello there!” he called out to the mercenary leading the escort, lifting the bowler hat from his head and waving it, “Essik certainly didn’t expect to see you here!”

The soldiers faltered mid-stride, as did their captives, looking in bafflement at the gand striding toward them. For a moment the mercenary’s face was confronted with frustration, before it returned to being an impassive mask.

“Can I help you?” he grunted, folding his arms and looking down at Essik as he approached. He was a Sephi like the rest, but heavily built and with unusually bleached patches of skin where tattoos had almost certainly once been.

“Yes, it’s good to see you again!” Essik answered, loudly and brightly as he could, his carapace shuddering with the rapid vibrations of his speech, “How many years has it been, fifteen, twenty? It was during that business with Palpatine, wasn’t it?”

The mercenary gritted his teeth, glaring at Essik’s expressionless face, before momentarily glancing behind him at his prisoners. The entire procession had halted as Essik walked up in front of them, and passers-by were now stopping to watch the scene playing out. Essik’s yell and journey past the fountain had gotten the attention of some, and more had halted as he had invoked the name of the late Emperor. Decades dead or not, mere mention of the Sith Lord still carried weight. The mercenary had just gone from having a discreet and swift arrest anyone could mistake for an escort, to having a full audience.

“You’re mistaken,” the mercenary continued, “I’ve never worked with a gand before, and-”

“Oh come now!” Essik interrupted, tossing his hat lightly with one hand and openly leaning on the cane, “Essik never forgets a face, even if he is terrible with names. What was it, Sarrad? Mikhal? Kilhar?”

“None of those,” the mercenary muttered, “It’s Jubei Lohgun. Know anyone by that name?”

Essik leaned back, looking at the sky as his mandibles twitched, imitating what most species would do when mouthing details under their breath, trying to recall half-forgotten memories. It was a delaying tactic, and quite an obvious one at that, but it was having the desired effect. Such arrests required that they were decreed from a position of power, of total authority the victim could not hope to question. It was just as needed to keep prisoners in line as it was his own troops. By having a doddering old fool speak over him and hold them up, that was being openly challenged; and with every passing second Essik kept them there, they gained more of an audience.

“Quite possibly,” Essik admitted after a minute of feigning efforts to remember others, “What about Coruscant?”

“Enough of this!” one of the Sephi soldiers behind them growled, “We have an arrest warrant, now stand aside!”

Lohgun whipped around, fixing the soldier with a withering glare before he could add anything more. Essik had, admittedly, been hoping to drive at least one soldier to breaking point eventually but, with the mention of an arrest warrant, that gave him something to truly work with.

“Truly?” Essik said, feigning ignorance before pressing his hat against his chest and taking a bow “Then Lyccane apologises for his inconvenience, such matters are certainly of great importance. Though, might he ask, who are you charging?” He made a show of looking about at the growing crowds, as if expecting someone else to step forward, before looking at the small group of nobles. “Well, not these people, surely?”

“Out of the way, gand,” Lohgun hissed, and Essik noticed out of the corner of his eye that one hand was resting on his pistol again, “Unless you want to be taken in for treason as well.”

“It’s treason, then? How interesting,” Essik said, rather loudly for the crowd’s benefit, and then pointed toward the youngest children, “And you’re saying they’re guilty of this as well? Do they even know what means? Actually, a better point, do they even know how to commit treason?”

“We don’t have to answer you.” A soldier said bluntly, but Essik noticed that he was avoiding his eyes, or looking directly at the prisoners. Good. That meant at least a

few of them were not comfortable with this.

“No, you don’t, but you’re going to have to answer someone. Perhaps a lot of someones, a whole Empire of someones. You see, when armed men start to arrest whole families for treason, people start to ask questions. Usually ones about where their friends and relatives are, and if they’re alive. Or what happened to certain leaders when they suddenly disappear from public life. You will need to answer them or more will join in..” Essik looked down, as if finally noticing the holstered pistol Lohgun was petting, taking a step back and gesturing to it, “Or were you just thinking of shooting anyone who asks questions and be done with it?”

No one answered this time, not even a demand for him to shut up. Lohgun was seemingly trying to think of the best way out of this situation, or at least to regain control of the conversation. He clearly hadn’t expected to be confronted on this matter, and the fact the soldiers were looking increasingly uncomfortable as Essik spoke only reinforced this fact. In these cases, it was usually only the true fanatics you needed to worry about. Usually, the sort who were paid enough not to care or had swallowed so much party dogma that they had stopped thinking. At least that was what he hoped was the case. The alternative was that this group was acting alone, perhaps even merely using the uniforms of official guards. If he was wrong, then attempting to shame them wasn’t going to do a damn thing, and he was going to end up with a blaster bolt burned through the middle of his head.

“So, what are you fighting for exactly?” he continued, trying to provoke some other response from them, “Truth, justice, freedom, a stronger Empire? And you think that the best way to go about this is by keeping dissidents at gunpoint?”

“Shut up,” Lohgun growled, dropping all pretences of restraint, “And get lost now, before we take you in as well.”

“Why? Is Essik making too much sense?” he continued, keeping his voice level and taking a step toward Lohgun, “The last empire which tried to make itself great by imprisoning anyone it saw as a threat failed. It didn’t even outlive its sole Emperor, and its every moment wasn’t spent improving itself. No, its time was spent trying to quash one insurrection after another. Essik should know, he was one of those who dedicated his life to the Rebellion which opposed it; and all he sees now are Stormtroopers with new uniforms. Tell Essik, please, do you also plan on destroying worlds to prove a point, or will you merely settle for razing cities?”

That finally pushed things too far. With a blue of movement, Lohgun dragged his pistol free of its holster and levelled it against Essik’s head. Essik had barely registered his actions before he found himself staring down the gun’s barrel, with

Lohgun's finger tightening on its trigger. Essik kept very still, allowing for the scene to burn itself into the memory of the surrounding crowds. With his hat in one hand and cane in the other, no one could claim that he had been holding a weapon at the time, or that Lohgun had acted in self-defence. Then, Essik stepped forward once more, until the gun's barrel was pressed against the carapace plating of his forehead.

"Or perhaps it will just take gunning down one decrepit man standing in your way to satisfy you," Essik said quietly, with none of the exaggerated merriment of his initial exchange, "But please, go ahead and shoot if you can think of no other way to accomplish your goal. Essik just prays that you will know when and where to stop killing others."

The ghost of a smile passed Lohgun's face. His finger pulled back on the trigger, and the shriek of a blaster bolt screamed through the air. Lohgun fell forward, almost landing directly on top of Essik, his body paralysed from the stun blast. One of the soldiers behind him looked down at the weapon in his hands, his expression one of disbelief at his own actions. Two more shots rang out, downing the soldiers who had brought their own weapons to bear against Essik as Lohgun fell, quickly flooring them.

Silence fell over the square. No one moved, seemingly unsure of what to do next. Then Essik stepped forward, and pulled the pistol free from Lohgun's unconscious grip, handing it to the nearest soldier.

"You will not want to be here when he wakes up," he said, turning to the wider crowd "None of you will. Essik suggests you go back to your homes and wait this out and, if you please keep an eye out for any other military units moving into the city."

"And what then, fight them?" someone called out from the back of the crowd. It could have been an enthusiastic question, but there was an almost accusatory tone to it.

"No, please, just stay alive. Help one another if possible, but stay out of harm's way and leave this to those trained how to fight." Essik turned toward the soldiers as he spoke. They still appeared uneasy, but they were listening. "Essik would not ask you of this if he had a choice, but he does not. This noble family, can you please help escort them safely out of the city?"

The foremost of their number, the one who had stunned Lohgun, looked at him in surprise. "We just tried to arrest them, and now you're trusting us?"

"You actually thought about the orders you were being given and changed your mind," he said with a modest shrug, "It's a remarkably rare quality, and a sign you

will do the right thing when it comes down to it. Essik will not ask you to fight, simply to prevent others from dying, and escort these people out of the city,” he turned to the nobles “if those of House...”

“Keldra,” the matriarch said with a curt nod, “And we accept. This was intended to be a quiet day with little public attention, we did not bring enough guards to fight a war.”

The rest of the crowd was departing quickly now, apparently taking Essik’s words to heart. By the time the bodyguards had retrieved their weapons, and the soldiers had bound Lohgun and the soldiers who had stayed at his side, they had all but disappeared. The square seemed ominously quiet without them, but now the background noise was gone other distant sounds could be heard. Those of sirens, yells and even the odd shriek of blaster fire. It seemed that the comment of “fighting a war” was hardly an exaggeration by any means.

“Then Essik wishes you good fortune in escaping Baime,” the gand said with a bow, before replacing his hat, “If not that then to find somewhere to wait this out.”

Essik turned to leave, but as he did the same soldier from before spoke up again. “You’re not joining us?”

“A kind word was enough to make you see sense.” Essik replied, his mandibles widening in his closest approximation to a smile, “Perhaps the same can be true of others who have thrown their lot in with this insanity. Essik can do more good here by staying in the open and speaking with them, than he can fleeing for his life.”

Wishing them good fortune he turned, hobbling away and marching past the fountain as he left the square. He felt strangely light-headed, as if drunk. The sense of uselessness, of age and doubt, had been washed away as he had stared down an enemy’s blaster barrel once more. Perhaps he couldn’t carry a blaster, perhaps he didn’t have troops to command, but he could still prevent people from making the same mistakes others had so many times before. If that saved even a few lives, that would be enough.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Essik set off into the city, waiting to see how far his words would get him.