

*Who We Stand For*

*Threader's Place* had not been the same for a long time. The proprietor, Threader, had managed for some time to maintain his business despite the world seemingly falling down around them. As a "second-hand" shop — though the Zabrak would never admit to it — the cheap prices kept more than a few people clothed when the charity offerings slowed or halted altogether. None of it seemed to faze Hobojim, or as Lezli liked to call him: Jim.

As many other early autumn nights were in Estle City, the air was invasively hot, and the repeated brown-outs had made air conditioning as unreliable as it was expensive. A barred, open window sufficed in the meantime. Between studies at the university and work at *Les Lekku*, Lezli's only real respite from the growing calamities was in watching Jim a few floors below, listening to his deep, haphazard humming and the amusing if aimless ramblings that went along with it. Despite the heat, she liked to have a cup of tea during these moments of idle entertainment. Of all the things that were in short supply, water and dried leaves weren't among them, so the thing that was a luxury in so many other places was a mild solace for the human.

The evening silence was rent with the muffled *cracks* of what sounded like gunfire, and Lezli couldn't help but pull her knees to her chest in her seat on the windowsill. "Really? Violence now? What next? Don't we have enough trouble to deal with?"

In spite of the late hour, she saw several people dart through the streets, clearly ignoring the curfew that the government had imposed. Jim, not surprisingly, seemed unfazed by both the foot traffic and the curfews. A homeless man can't be told to go home, right? Still, it seemed odd. She'd seen vandals and supply raiders — nothing big enough to worry over — but more and more she saw people leaving their homes, shouts ringing out in the distance.

*I should call Eidel. Maybe she knows what's going on..*

Eyeing Jim one last time, noting how he'd paused his rambling for an apparent nap, Lezli slipped away to the small wall-mounted communicator. Disconnecting the palm-sized disc that served as speaker and microphone, she brought it back over to her spot at the window.

"Call Eidel," she quietly commanded the machine.

She had to be quiet. The walls weren't particularly thick, as the saying went. What little she earned from her job at *Les Lekku* was split between school, the apartment, and food. Miss Sroka, her boss, would sometimes bring in extra food if her and her co-worker Baast were looking thin. For Lezli, that was all the time. The university was even struggling a little bit, and most of the cafes and small restaurants on campus had closed. *At least that tuition isn't being wasted on sports teams; especially at a time like this.* As she listened to her friend's ringtone,

the tight confines of her apartment neighborhood seemed safer than the entertainment district at the moment, where she could see lights that weren't the norm for the area.

*"Wassup sexy?"*

"H-hey Eidel. How you doing?"

*"I'd say better now that I've heard your voice, but things are getting weird out here. You at home? I mean, I know you are — caller ID, duh — but are you okay?"*

"You mean other than you still calling me 'sexy' on an open call?"

*"Girl, I've seen what your momma gave you, and this lady likes. I'd say you should come over, but I might ask if I can crash at your place tonight."*

"The rallies getting that bad?" Eidel had mentioned folks gathering in her area late at night to vent their frustrations, but she'd never seemed legitimately worried about it.

*"I've been hearing glass breaking, and then there were the gunshots a few minutes ago... I dunno."*

Hearing the subdued anxiety in her voice made Lezli worried. "You heard those too? Were they close by?"

There was a pause that was much too long to not worry Lezli. "Yeah," Eidel squeaked out. "Can I come over?"

"Yes! Make sure you're safe when you leave. If there's anyone else that wants to hole up here for a while, they can come too. Tell them to pack a blanket though; I've only got the one set for myself."

*"Thanks Lez. I'll be over in a bit."*

"Sure thing. Stay safe."

As the line went quiet, the bookish student could hardly believe what was going on. Times were tough, sure, and she'd tightened her belt like everyone else and then some. The plague was horrible, but they'd survived. Somehow all of it — the famine, disease, and crime — were all a fault of the Citadel. At least that's what some of her classmates were touting. *They also seem to have forgotten the planetary invasion. Didn't see any of them enlisting. No, it's all the Citadel's problem to fix things.* She wondered if Baast had any information on Selen's history, particularly before the Citadel became the focal point of power in Dajorra and on Selen in particular. She wondered when it was the Selenians stopped having any semblance of self-sufficiency.

Discovering the finer points of Selenian history would have to wait though. Lezli grabbed a knife from the kitchen counter and began prepping her small apartment for one or more guests. Knowing Eidel, who was one of the woman's more frequent flings, she might bring at least one or two other friends along. Lacking a firearm of any kind, the knife was Lezli's best form of defense in the interim.

...just in case.

The noise outside was growing closer as the minutes dragged by and the young woman slowly ran out of things to keep her occupied. Keeping the knife and communicator module nearby, she made another cup of tea and set up shop by her window once more. Only then did she realize that the sounds of rioting were no longer just coming from the entertainment district. It was coming from down her street — the other end of the residential district. It was coming from below in the Capac Ring.

And the noise was not the only thing filling the air. The acrid smell of smoke filtered in like sour milk; that sickly smell of buildings alight along with whatever was inside of it. Lezli tried to imagine the wails in the background were sirens and not the smouldering alternative.

Footsteps clattering haphazardly down a street that was usually a respectable sort of quiet alerted her to a distant cavalcade of people. At first it was little more than a trickle. One raucous individual was followed by two; then four and five; then a dozen marched forcefully down the tight avenue. It was at a point that even Jim, up until this point huddled under some sort of tattered blanket, rose and returned the fervor with his own brand of gruff and incoherent curses directed at these new sort of vagrants.

“Wer'tcha der'n makin' dis hur racket?! P'ple 're sl'pn!” *Whatcha doing making this here racket?! she mentally translated. People are sleeping!*

Initially these passersby ignored him. As the crowd grew thicker, the responses became less indolent.

“Go back to the gutter old man!”

“Can't you see there's a revolution going on?!”

“Maybe you should be marching with us instead of sleeping, gramps!”

Lezli had heard it all before — this talk of bringing a change to the power curve; “revolution” they called it — but this wasn't a revolution, and she leaned forward, fear creeping in when she saw a group stop and surround the old bum.

“Maybe he's not marching 'cause he's with the Citadel.”

That caught more attention than the observing student would have liked. Meandering protesters gravitated quickly toward the accusation and the accused. To his credit, Jim not only ignored the accusations, but likely did not know what the angry mob was even talking about.

“Ah s’id git! ‘M sl’pn hur, ‘n dis’n rikit ‘s gun git p’ple ‘n trubble.” *I said get! I’m sleeping here, and this racket’s gonna get people in trouble.*

Whatever Jim said to them seemed to fall on deluded ears as the noose of people tightened around him. “I think it’s time we show this Citadel sympathizer what happens to enemies of the people of Selen.”

Lezli Errander watched in horror as the chaos closed in on the old man. She tried banging on the window to get their attention; tried screaming through the limited gap that she could open it; but over the din, it all seemed to be but a whisper outside. Within the apartment, her tea cup clattered to the ground, rattled by every raucous fist slammed against the thick window pane. From her high vantage, she could see fists and kicks descending on the old man.

“Frack this noise,” she muttered, grabbing a tiny canister of mace she kept on hand for late night walks as she dashed out the door.

Her heart pounded in her ears so loud that it was hard to tell if it was the rapid stomp of her feet on the stairs that she was hearing. *Why did I have to pick an apartment so high up?* Despite being on the interior of the building, the outcry from the streets had grown so loud that the very walls seemed to vibrate with cacophonous jeers. When she reached the front door, all she could see was a wall of people, fists pumping into the dark skies, illuminated by the streetlamps and ambient luminescence from the windows all around. Somewhere underneath the hateful screeches was the dull, wet thumping of flesh beating bloody flesh.

She tried to push he way in. She tried to find a way around. Every effort was met with resistance in all forms save for direct confrontation. Listening to each sickening sound inflamed her chest. *I’ve gotta do something.* Going against her more educated thought processes, she backed up all the way to her building, bent low, and surged toward what looked like the best gap in the throng.

Elbows and hips crashed into her shoulders and sides of her head, roughly guarded by her forearms as she fought to keep her momentum. A few people were knocked over by the smaller woman as she knocked them off-balance from behind, and just when Lezli thought she was out of steam, she was met by a flash of light before finding herself in the open space out in front of everyone. A quick glance to her left showed a trio of the rioters kicking at the prostrate Jim, curled up in a protective fetal position. One of the assailants showed a clear gash on his face, clearly a result of the shiv on the ground just beyond their circle of pain.

Before she could be grabbed by the crowd and pulled back into the condition of being an observer, she leaned forward once again, clumsily grabbing up the makeshift dagger before tackling two of the combatants with a shoulder-check. When the third member of the gang turned to face her, she rewarded his attention with a burst of her pepper spray, grateful she'd gone with the not-quite-illegal potency product.

As he stumbled away in abject pain and temporary blindness, Lezli rushed to the struggling vagrant's side, kneeling by him and keeping her back to the wall. "Jim, are you alright?!" He continued to resist unintelligibly, forcing her to restrain him enough to at least get his attention. "Jim! Listen to me! I'm here to help. You need to calm down."

Shaking and with blood caking him from scalp to beard, he peered at his would-be savior through puffy, bruised eyelids. "B'hind ye."

"Behind me?" she muttered as she turned just in time to take a heavy glass bottle to the head just above her brow, cracking one of the lenses of her glasses in the process. Dazed, she crumpled on top of Jim, her head dizzy as she felt the hot, wet sensation of blood start trickling down her face.

"Seems like we've got another traitor in our midst," she heard the familiar antagonistic voice through the concussive haze.

The scraping sounds of his steps seemed somehow clear and loud, as though the crowd was quietly watching and waiting. As the steps grew nearer, her grip tightened around the shiv just as she felt the man's hand grip at her collar and jerk her up onto her knees. The positioning was perfect.

Likely he was going to espouse some string of anti-Citadel sentiment and use her, like Jim, as an example. In being tackled earlier though, he'd missed her arsenal showcase. Just as Lezli was turned about to face him, she thrust the mace into his face and let fly with a close-range spray into his open and waiting eyes. Wheeling her other arms around, she embedded the shiv into his thigh with a meaty *thump*, pulling it out just as quickly only to lean back onto her rear so that she could send him reeling away with a bicycle-kick to the groin. In her head, she imagined the whole audience wincing and withdrawing. It brought some satisfaction through the pulsing pain in her forehead.

Jim's quivering hand made its way to her jacket and tugged at her sleeve, turning her attention back to her original goal. His breathing was low and raspy, and it seemed impossible but he looked worse than before. Still recovering from her own foray, Lezli crouched behind him and grabbed him by the armpits, dragging him toward a concave corner of Threader's Place's exterior even as the crowd started to once again tighten around them.

The homeless man smelled foul and was sticky with who knows how many months of grime collected on his person, but the university student clung to him all the same, openly brandishing her arsenal to ward away any overt antagonization. There were way too many to fight though, and this was hardly within her curriculum of study. She was also down to one or two more sprays of mace left in the small canister.

“Well Jim, it’s been nice knowing you,” she said as she tried to control her heavy breathing from the earlier exertions. “I’m Lezli by the way. I live in the apartments across the street.”

The old man seemed just lucid enough to hear and understand what she said, responding with a short, gruff laugh and a nod.

As if things weren’t bad enough, the sound of the crowd was slowly being enveloped by a heavy buzzing noise, like a thick musical bass half-submerged in water. *Great, now I’ve got auditory hallucinations.* But the crowd was backing up as well, and her curiosity was only just getting the better of her when the spotlight beamed harshly overhead, arcing over her and spiraling steadily through the crowd.

*“By order of the Keadean Confederacy, you are to cease and desist. Those who refuse will be detained.”* The loudspeaker voice screamed over the sound of the hovering gunship that Lezli had seen on the news when the invasion hit.

Wavering somewhat, the crowd inched forward, testing the military’s threats. After a few moments, the crew above were clearly irritated by the lack of respect and responded in kind, firing one of their beam laser turrets into the pavement, cutting a wide arc along the fringes of the crowd. The crowd was already rushing away when the second LAAT/i arrived on the scene, its own spotlights flaring brightly into the scurrying mass.

No of them approached Lezli and Jim. For the moment at least, they were safe.

“Lez!” The female voice carried over the din of scrambling humanoids, and slowly but surely, a blonde woman with two other females filtered through.

“Eidel,” she said, struggling against the hobo’s weight. “You came just in time.”

“My stars, who’s this mongrel?”

“Folks call him Hobojiim, but... that’s not important. Help us up. We need to get inside.”

Eidel looked up at the gunships hovering overhead. “I’m inclined to agree. Alright hon, upsy daisy.” She motioned toward the other two women. “Can you two get him?”

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As the other two struggled to get the delirious man to his feet, Eidel guided the wounded Lezli back to her apartment building. Even once they were all behind the safety of the security doors and heading up the stairs, they could hear the ragins sound of panicked footsteps outside and the same orders over the loudspeakers. It would be a long night in Dajorra before the world was back to normal. Lezli knew it.