

Selen space port
Dajorra system
37 ABY

“-st call, shuttle 35B to Port Ol’val departing from pad seven. Repeat, shuttle 35B for Port Ol’val departing from pad seven. All passengers please proceed to the landing pad...”

The metallic drone of the service announcement was barely audible over the cacophony of the teeming space port, a mass of pushing and shoving bodies that shuffled to and fro with a palpable sense of urgency. The Selenian passenger ports had never been civilized affairs, but now the air reeked of more than sweat and bad temper, it reeked of desperation.

Weaving his way past a hulking Trandoshan and almost colliding with a collective of Jawas, Pib’leni kept his head on a constant swivel, looking out for danger and opportunity alike. His yellow hide mingled with the unwashed greyish browns of an ill-fitting service overall, with a worn leather cap leaving him looking rather unassuming by anyone who might take interest in the small Twi’lek boy. Just another face in the crowd, and that was how he liked it.

Sensing opportunity, the young Twi’lek veered to the side in the stream of alien bodies, passing by stalls selling entertainment and snacks to the various travellers. A distracted Besalisk had just finished paying for a packet of smokes, one hand stuffing his cred chit into a loose back pocket, and now the man was browsing the tantalizing offerings of top-shelf holomags. Without a second thought, he snuck up behind him, deft fingers sliding into the pocket and retrieving the valuable item within without breaking stride.

Pib’leni smiled as he imagined a warm meal and maybe a place to rest for the night, a welcome change to the grueling life as a penniless vagabond, when he felt a vice-like grip snatch hold of his slender wrist. “Not so fast, ya runt!” the gruff voice of the Besalisk growled behind him. “Give it back or you best believe there’ll be trouble.”

Pib turned around to face the leering man, towering above him by several feet, the upper pair of arms crossed over his barrel chest in a disapproving manner. He gulped, sensing the Besalisk’s strength as he squeezed his wrist, threatening to break it like a twig.

“I-I don’t...” he began stuttering a hastily conceived lie when an ear-splitting explosion tossed them both to the ground. The air was suddenly filled with flying shards of transparisteel and hot shrapnel, cutting through the instinctive screams of terrified civilians. A wave of panic spread over the passengers as smoke and dust billowed in through shattered windows, Pib’leni catching faint glimpses of a mangled shuttle burning brightly next to a ruptured fuel truck.

Adrenaline coursing through his veins, the Twi’lek boy regained his footing far faster than the Besalisk still clinging to his wrist and with a sudden yank, he managed to free his captured limb. Setting off with a sprint, he ignored the shaken man’s angry shouts as panic-stricken passengers sought to escape the danger in an unruly tidal wave of stampeding bodies.

Darting between pounding feet and ducking and weaving past terrified folk, he almost lost his life more than once when he stumbled but managed to hobble back onto his feet before the stampede could finish him. Guttural screams and wailing cries sounded all around him amidst blaring sirens, countless others dying under the press of fleeing men and women until he made it out of the space port and onto the commons outside.

What should have been a return to relative normality was anything but.

Whatever oppressing tension he'd sensed in the space port from the moment he'd arrived, it had been simmering in the streets as well and now, like on some collective signal, it had boiled over and engulfed the city in violence. He saw smoke rising from several buildings in the distance, emergency speeders racing towards the scenes with piercing alarms. He saw flickering holo feeds on public boards of angry rioters occupying key junctions and plazas. He saw a man calmly walk up the stairs towards the space port entrance, wearing a shirt of protest and in his hand a metallic sphere that flashed with an unsettling cadence. He saw it best to be elsewhere.

Diving for cover, Pib found safety in a shallow drainage ditch just as the thermal detonator exploded, ending the man's raving calls for revolution. The hot blast wave seared the back of his overalls, Pib'leni curling up into a ball with his hands over his lekku as the terrible violence unfolded. The kind he'd hoped to escape when he came to Selen.

When he finally dared to rear his head, smoke and dust choked the area with a faint rain of ashen filaments staining the ground a pale grey. His ears were ringing and his vision blurred as he stumbled away from the port and to a narrow side street. He walked as far as his legs could carry, his ill-gotten gains still instinctively clutched in one hand while the other bled from a shrapnel cut. The young Twi'lek simply walked until he could walk no more, slumping against a bag of old garbage, unconscious before his head touched the ground.

Selenian side alley

Selen

Dajorra system

1st day of riots

Pib'leni came to with a sudden gasp, the taste of cordite and ash reminding him of a horrid nightmare he'd awoken to. Aching, dull pain throbbed in his limbs as he clambered to his feet and took in his surroundings. The street was as empty as when he'd entered, but the scents and sounds of chaos had thankfully moved further away.

For the moment, he considered himself safe. Whatever that even meant.

Pressing past the small mountain of accrued garbage, the Twi'lek headed deeper into the city, leaving behind the smouldering remains of the space port and the cries of distant sirens.

Travelling cautiously, his body soon recovering from its aches as he got a move on, he let his instincts guide him along the narrow streets and towards his first objective; food.

Judging by the sun's rotation, he'd been out for a few hours and in that time the bustling city had turned from a busy hub into a semi-desolate wasteland. He saw few people on the streets and every shop and diner he passed was firmly shut and barred, or looted and torched. The handful of people he did catch hurried on their way as soon as they saw him, the unrest having turned even the bravest into skittish rodents that scurried in the shadows and shunned the light.

Stomach growling, Pib'leni stumbled down the streets, picking turns at random and letting the faint whiffs of spices and charred fats lead him until finally he found a joint that had not closed its doors. Standing outside it were a pair of burly bouncers, each Gamorran a mountain of flabby muscle and bad attitude. They hardly seemed to notice him as he gingerly walked up, until just before entering the other shifted to bar his way.

"Customer only," the swine-faced guard grunted, his basic as refined as the man himself.

Skittishly, Pib fished out the credit chit and flashed it to the bouncer, his beady eyes inspecting the golden chip before nodding and letting him pass. Inside, a cavalcade of scents and sounds assaulted him, loud music and the scent of heavily spiced dishes momentarily overwhelming him after the long trudge through the barren streets.

Drinks were being downed left and right, with bowls of crude stew disappearing much the same. Boisterous chatter almost drowned out the music and bouts of ferocious laughter thundered over it all as the head chef made merry with one of the patrons at the counter. Feeling very much out of his depth, and not just due to the considerable size discrepancy, Pib swiftly made his way to the counter and clambered up upon a vacant stool. The chef, another Besalisk, ignored him completely while working two hot plates, a grill and a deep fryer all at once, plating up dishes at clockwork speed despite his seeming lack of focus to his trade.

Several minutes passed, with the Twi'lek trying and failing to rouse his attention in various subtle ways and the Besalisk ignoring him completely while bowl and bowl of food departed for the tables. Finally, out of desperation, he raised his voice to let out a shout. "Hey!" he chirped, tapping the credit chit against the counter.

The mountainous chef shifted with surprising grace to leer at him, his wide greasy face focused entirely upon him while his four arms continued their work unabated. The gaze was piercing and for a moment Pib thought he'd made a grave mistake. Yet, there was no violence or retort, only a slight softening in his expression that turned into a query.

Pib pointed at one of the bowls and at a pint of bantha milk, failing to give voice to even the simplest syllable. The chef grunted and gave a gruff nod, returning to his work without a further sound. A few short minutes later, the Twi'lek had his order and he dug in with gusto.

The hot meal was all that he'd hoped for, and more. Perhaps he might survive this place yet.

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The meal had gouged a deeper gash into his illicit finances than he'd presumed and it quickly became apparent that 'special pricing' had taken effect. The few places he'd found that were open were strictly guarded and raised their prices tenfold, if not more. What he'd taken as a sudden windfall was turning out to be little more than funds for survival and even then he was looking at running dry in a day or two.

Making his way through the quickly darkening city, the calls for curfew droning in the background, the Twi'lek found himself heading down an alleyway when a trio of shapes appeared at the next junction. Their dark silhouettes were painted against the pale halo of a flickering streetlight, enlarged by optical illusion and a racing imagination. He gulped as his steps idled to a halt, the trio advancing towards him like silent spectres.

He could press past them, perhaps, but their implacable advance set off all manner of warning bells in his mind, crying out for caution. He hesitated and managed another three paces when the shape on the left pulled something from his pocket. Something sharp.

"Hey you," a rough voice called to him. "We saw you at the diner. Been looking all over for you. Hope you didn't spend all the creds on that chit yet..." The dark implications were left hanging in the air amidst a hollow chuckle, the sound bouncing off the duracrete walls and sending ice running down Pib's spine.

His feet felt like lead as he turned to run away, pulse drumming in his ears as panic swept over him. The first few steps were agony, like he was trudging through tar, and each heartbeat he expected to feel a sharp pain in his back, or a hand grasping his shoulder.

"Oh, don't try to run, you'll just die tired!"

The threat of death sent adrenaline coursing through his body, washing away the petrified stillness. Bolting away at speed, the small lek-head ran as fast as he could, heedless of direction with the howling laughter of murderous intent on his heels.

Drawing ragged breaths, his lungs on fire, he rounded another corner and fell. His feet were shaking, as were his hands, mouth gulping hungry lungfuls of air as he tried to get up once more. The scraping sounds of three pairs of feet closed in behind him, the laughter having mercifully died down, though he feared it would only mean more pain before the end.

Struggling on, he pushed against a hab wall for support and hobbled along, stumbling and falling like a drunkard on a week-long binge. The steps closed in behind him, unrelenting and implacable, until a heavy boot slammed into his back and pinned him against the cobbled street.

"As I said," the voice panted, "you'll only die tired..."

“Hand over the chit and we’ll go easy on ya. Make it quick,” another, lower tone added.

With shaking hands, he reached for his vest pocket to pull out the credit chit when another sound caught his attention. The clatter of plastoid on stone and the whirring of a charging blaster.

“You there, freeze!” a sharp, male voice called out.

“Sithspit, it’s the coppers!” the second voice cried, the weight on Pib’s back relenting enough for him to draw breath unimpeded.

“I said freeze!” the man repeated, before firing his weapon.

A pale blue flash illuminated the nocturnal street, the stunbolt sailing past the ruffians’ heads, but having the desired effect. “Scram!” the leading voice cried out and as one, the trio scarpered back into the shadows.

The plastoid steps closed in with trained precision, Pib still clutching the credit chit in his hand as he lay on the street and shivered. He was too tired to run or fight.

The man knelt beside him and nudged him on the shoulder. “You alive?” he asked, his voice the friendliest Pib had heard in days. He managed a faint nod.

“The streets aren’t safe anymore, lad. C’mon, I’ll get you to the feeding hall. It’s safe there. These thugs don’t dare attack the Citadel directly,” the man stated, before aiding the Twi’lek to his feet and down the street towards a glowing sign that read *Communal Feeding Hall 37*.

Communal feeding hall 37

Selen

Dajorra system

3rd day of riots

The pilfered credits had not lasted long, but they’d filled his stomach more than once and that was all he’d hoped for. The situation on Selen, however, had quickly turned hopeless. What people, him included, had thought to be the outburst had turned out to be but the spark. In short order, total chaos had engulfed the city as security forces, acting on strict orders to limit the use of lethal force, struggled to maintain even their own supply lines let alone enforce peace on the streets.

Nearly all institutions had been attacked, officers of the law assaulted in their homes and even firefighters and first responders pelted with rocks and bottles as they tried to do their jobs. Nowhere was safe and it seemed like the city itself had a collective deathwish, straining at the seams as it threatened to tear itself apart.

It was no place for a young orphan, but Pib'leni had determined to survive. He had made that choice when he'd crawled out from beneath the shot-up corpse of her grandmother and escaped the life of a mining slave aboard the disposal vessel that'd hauled the mutineers' remains to be incinerated. He had survived worse than this and would be damned if he let a mutiny he had no part in be the end of him.

For those with past possessions, morals and integrity, this was a dangerous and disturbing time. A time where much, if not all of those things would have to be relinquished in order to survive. But Pib'leni had never been encumbered with such things and like the water flowed, he too adapted to his surroundings, twisting to accommodate what was demanded of him so he might see the next dawn.

Running a cheap plastek spoon in a figure-of-eight pattern in the pale blue gruel that constituted a quarter portion of his rations, the yellow hued Twi'lek sighed defeatedly. The air within the public cantina hung heavy with the scent of desperation and the idleness was clearly not sitting well with other patrons either. The tension was palpable, anger and resentment gathering in the corners where whispered voices exchanged dark thoughts and sentiment. It was places like these where the next wave of protesters would burst out from, joining those who already controlled the streets.

Pib had chosen to weather the storm, but the wait was killing him. He'd thought running from danger was bad, but sitting cooped up inside this bland, bureaucratically efficient feeding hall was even worse. It was driving him insane, little by little, and at times he felt like joining those dark discussions. Yet he always caught himself before he could do something to brash. He'd resolved to survive and this was not his fight.

"Excuse me, young man, but do you know where I could find a cup of caf?" a wizened voice sounded behind him, almost startling him had it not been for the gingerly kindness of its tone. Turning around, Pib'leni saw a weary old man smiling at him, layers of wrinkles lining his deep worn face.

"Over there, by the counter?" Pib'leni replied, gesturing at the line where greasy workers handed out meager rations for a token price.

"Ah! I see, thank you. Such a helpful lad," the Human nodded approvingly. "Here, for your troubles." He extended him a flimsiplast envelope, marked with a nondescript black V on the industrial grey.

Pib accepted the reward with mild confusion and watched as the man hobbled away towards the cantina line without a further word. Somehow feeling like he ought to be hiding it, the Twi'lek slid the envelope beneath the desk and carefully pried open the seal, pulling out a full ration wafer and a card no larger than his palm. On one side it bore the same marking as the envelope, but on the other were odd symbols he could not make heads or tails from, blocky and angular like a poorly drawn maze.

As he raised his head to ask the man what it was supposed to be, he could not find him any longer. It was clear he hadn't come in for caf. Brow furrowing, he tried to think but found the stifling atmosphere within the cantina to be too hot and humid for his liking. He needed fresh air.

Eschewing the dregs of his portion to the disposal, he pocketed the ration wafer and headed outside, passing by another faceless guard posted outside the feeding hall to keep the ruffians out. He'd never had a chance to thank the one who'd saved him, but they all looked so alike he figured it didn't really matter anymore. Even so, he could not help but slow his steps and inspect the soldier a little closer as he passed by, looking for any identifying mark he might recognize.

The guard shifted.

For a moment it looked like he was staring back at him, as if he knew about the card, but he chose to say nothing and in a few quick steps the Twi'lek boy had rounded the corner and vanished.

Pib stopped running a few blocks later, having made sure he was no longer being followed, and pulled out the card. Sitting down on an upturned packing crate, he inspected the item first this way and then that, turning the symbol around but finding no sense in it. Finally, he brought it up and raised it against the sun.

Squinting, he could make out more blocks, pale and somehow embedded into the material itself. The new ones added to the old, filling out grids and forming a pattern he realized mimicked the streets of Selen.

The sense of pride and accomplishment at completing this seemingly trivial test of intellect was the best high he'd felt in days, if only as it broke the monotony of an endless wait. Eager for more, he ran out to the edge of a nearby plaza where he distinctly recalled seeing a broken down map of the area.

Sure enough, he found the shattered plaque amid some rubble and in a few short moments he'd managed to align the pattern with the map, the arrow notch of the 'V' symbol lining up with a particular building not too far from where he was.

Pib glanced at the sun and then back towards the Communal Feeding Hall he'd sheltered in for the past few days. He still had a few good hours of daylight and somehow, the thought of returning back into that soul-sucking realm of greasy greys and bland gruel was far less appealing than a spot of adventure.

Making up his mind, Pib sat off in the direction the mysterious map had pointed, the ration wafer nestled against the almost spent credit chit in his pocket. With daylight keeping the worst of the opportunists at bay, he swiftly made his way to a lesser part of the habitation district, the buildings growing increasingly decrepit as he went. Arriving in the shadow of a

dormant industrial colossus, he pulled out the map once more to regain his bearings and faced a nondescript hab that had definitely seen better days.

Cheap paint flaked off the weatherworn duracrete and rust bloomed on the hinges, a familiar scent of decay and poverty oozing out from the cracked windows. Passing by sunpaled graffiti and dodging a pile of shattered transparisteel, Pib found a doorway that looked like it might have been used slightly more recently than the rest. Inspecting further, he found a familiar 'V' notch scraped next to the door and felt another thrill of excitement.

With only slightly trembling hands, he grasped the rusted handle and pushed the door open. Pale dust drifted down as he stepped inside the darkened hallway, finding another 'V' at the stairwell leading into the basement. Casting a glance over his shoulder at the warm Selenian sunlight beyond, he took a moment to gather his thoughts.

This could be a very bad move he was about to make, but the intriguing secrecy was too alluring. After all, had the man wished him harm, there would have been countless opportunity for an ambush already. Steeling his mind, the young Twi'lek took the first step down the stairwell and slowly descended into the darkness.

The blocky, spiraling stairwell brought him down a level or two until another 'V' guided him forward, the symbol glowing faintly in the dark with internal luminescence. Another door, one of rusted durasteel, blocked his passage, but beneath the chipped glint at its base he could see rays of light spilling out. Pressing his head against its surface, he listened intently and heard faint murmurs and the unmistakable clatter of cutlery.

Was this some manner of underground dining joint the old man had guided him to? For such a simple operation, they had chosen a very obfuscated means of marketing. Something told him that could not be it, but he had come this far; it would be foolish to turn back now.

Testing the door and finding it unyielding, Pib slammed his fist against it with a dull clang. The reaction within was instantaneous, as the murmuring ceased and the clack of cutlery ended at once. Cautiously, lock bolts were drawn open and the door opened to a glint, allowing more light to spill through.

A looming shape soon blocked that light.

"Who are ya? Whadda ya want?" the silhouette asked, roughly but with a hint of politeness.

"I got this card from a man in the Feeding Center," Pib responded, holding out his 'invitation'. "My name's Pib'leni. Can I come in?" As if to add its own insistence on the matter, his stomach gave a light growl.

The silhouette turned away and a few words were exchanged before the door creaked open some more to allow Pib to pass. Stepping into the light, the Twi'lek was met with a surprising sight. The entire place was illuminated by yellowish glow strips, casting a warmer ambiance than the Feeding Center's sterile white. Rows of tables had been lined inside the vast basement, crates of supplies and foodstuffs scattered to the sides where people picked and

chose what they wished to eat. A pleasant soundtrack of unfamiliar music played in the background, the words somewhat hard to hear over the returning hubbub, but the melody strong and easy to remember.

A small podium stood at the center, where a pale figure stood discussing matters with a concerned looking citizen. Pib had no way of discerning what was said, but judging by the gestures, the man was desperate for medicine which the person at the pale one happily provided.

“What is this place?” he asked the silhouette who’d turned out to be a Falleen.

“This is our little sanctuary,” the man replied with pride. “One of many in the city, living under the Citadel’s very nose,” he added with no small amount of amusement.

Pib wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that, but nodded all the same. “You, serve food here?” he inquired, casting a hungry glance at the crates and people liberally helping themselves to their contents.

“Indeed we do,” the Falleen nodded, “but first, there is someone you ought to meet.” He gestured towards the pale man at the podium who’d just finished business with the citizen. Leading Pib towards him, the Twi’lek could see his paleness was not just a condition of living arrangements as his Umbaran features became apparent.

“This is Zyl, he’s what we might call our leader,” the Falleen explained. “I know some don’t trust Umbarans, but you can trust Zyl. He’s been of great help to all of us.”

“Indeed so and a wise lesson in general. Judging someone by their race is no way to lead your life, or to think another lesser for it,” Zyl agreed with a soft, soothing voice.

Pib’leni chose to merely nod, feeling out of his depth in such matters of philosophy.

“Now, who have you brought to us this time?” Zyl mused, though clearly expecting no reply from the Falleen. After moment’s awkward silence, Pib took the hint.

“I am Pib’leni. I was, uh, summoned?” he handed over the card he’d received earlier.

Zyl inspected it and smiled, before handing it back with an approving look on his face. “Clever boy. I knew Meetu wouldn’t have sent me an imbecile.”

Pib blinked at the harsh words, feeling a bit taken aback by the drastic change in tone. It was clear the Umbaran picked up on it as well.

“Forgive my directness,” he apologized, “but as I said, judging someone by their birth is wrong. However, by their merit is another thing entirely. You, my little Pib’leni, have proven to be resourceful and courageous. These are good qualities, excellent qualities in fact.”

Though he couldn't quite shake the feeling of contradiction, the beaming praise put a smile on Pib's face, the Twi'lek nodding in agreement. "He said there was food here?" He pointed at the Falleen. "I can pay," he began pulling the credit chit from his pocket when the Umbaran flashed a sign of protest.

"No need, boy. Everything here is free. We're all brothers and sisters of Selen, after all. This food was taken from our seas, reaped from our lands and collected from our shores. Who else should it belong to but us?"

Pib wasn't quite sure he followed what grand ideal Zyl was trying to explain, but gave an agreeing expression nonetheless.

"Come, let us feed you and I will tell you about what and who we are," Zyl suggested, placing a thin hand upon his shoulder and guiding the Twi'lek towards the waiting foodstuffs. It was a suggestion he'd been waiting to hear since he got here.

After stocking up on a variety of goods, the two sat down at the end of a long table, the Falleen having returned to his gatekeeper duties. As Pib dined, Zyl explained that for a long time Selen had been run by the corrupt leaders of the Citadel. They'd taken their food and their young, forcing men and women alike to serve and fight in wars that furthered only the Citadel's own ambitions and goals, yet served no purpose to the People.

"We, the People of Selen, have finally had enough and are throwing away our shackles. The city may burn, but with it the Citadel will as well. They cannot contain us forever and already, their power is crumbling."

Pib raised his head from a bowl of food he'd been glued from the moment it was filled, the taste so superior to any ration he'd been subsisting on. "So, like a slave revolt?"

Zyl gave an amused smirk. "I suppose that would be one way of saying it," he agreed. "Sounds like you've had experience?"

The spoon slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor, the Twi'lek staring blankly through the Umbaran. Zyl recovered quickly and placed a comforting hand upon his shoulder, pulling another spoon from a common rack on the table and offering it to him.

"Apologies, young Pib. I did not mean to cause you distress," he sighed.

"N-no, it's... it's alright," Pib finally managed to reply as his shaking hand picked up the offered spoon. "And, you're right. I do have, uh, experience. My grandmother, she died in a slave revolt. We all did." He'd suddenly lost all appetite.

Zyl squeezed his shoulder and offered a consoling look. "I'm terribly sorry to hear that, Pib. I shouldn't have pried. But perhaps you can see why we too must fight for our freedom, even if it is risky."

Pib gave a half-hearted nod.

“As long as you don’t get them all killed,” he muttered.

“Get them killed?” Zyl looked genuinely surprised. “What do you mean?”

“We didn’t revolt on our own. A Twi’lek Jedi came to ‘help’ us. She and a Human, must have been a medic, they tried to break us free. But they led us into an ambush,” Pib’s words were hollow, his stare empty as he at the same time struggled to recall and suppress the memories.

“Jedi?” Zyl inquired, even more intrigued. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, she had a lightsaber and everything,” Pib insisted. “But, she ran away when we got ambushed...” he added solemnly.

Zyl caressed his smooth chin with the back of his digits before speaking. “I suppose you deserve to know, then, that we’ve suspected the Citadel to be secretly run by Jedi and others of their ilk. It would explain how those who do so little have accrued to docile servitude of so many.”

“B-but, the Jedi aren’t like that,” Pib insisted, “are they?” he added with a hint of apprehension.

Zyl’s thin lips turned into an empathic smile. “If only you knew what they are capable of, young Pib. If only you knew. But I ask you this, my young friend, if we now serve them and they take from our labor that which they need and we do not have a say in our regard, what relationship does it closest resemble?”

Pib’leni looked up at him, his mind weighing his words until he averted his eyes once more and gave his defeated reply. “Master and slave.”

“Precisely,” Zyl agreed, “and that is why, you see, we too must fight our masters. Why we must fight the Jedi. It could be that whoever this Jedi was that you met, she was only interested in stealing you for herself. To lead you into a new life of servitude that she sold to you as freedom.”

“S-she couldn’t have! T-Tali was so kind to us and she wanted to help,” Pib’leni sobbed in protest, unwilling to believe they’d all been deceived.

Upon hearing the name, Zyl pulled out his datapad and browsed a long list of names before tapping a file open with a soft smirk. “You say her name was Tali? I’m afraid I have some bad news, young Pib.” He turned the pad around to show a dossier collected on a pleasantly smiling purple Twi’lek, detailing her position, traits and other personal items. “She works for the Citadel. A cunning manipulator. Last I heard, she was trying to convince my comrades to

stop their rightful protests and instead shackle themselves to the Citadel's rule somewhere in the Ring. I wish it were otherwise, but..."

Pib looked at the picture displayed upon the datapad, the familiar face immediately recognizable as he recalled the caring tone of her voice and the faint scent of lavender in her passing. She'd seemed so kind back then. So genuine. But...

Tears welled into his eyes, a choked sob blurring his vision as his hands began to shake. The datapad slipped from his grasp and clattered onto the table. "S-she promised..." he whispered hoarsely, squeezing his eyes shut. "She promised we'd be free. That we'd be safe..."

A silver pearl rolled down his yellow cheek, bitter and painful.

"She lied to you," Zyl sighed, shaking his head and reaching out with a handkerchief to wipe away the tears. "Just like they've been lying to all of us. It wasn't your fault, my boy, they have deceived so many for so long. You couldn't have known."

He stayed with the grieving Pib until another citizen approached to request his presence, the Umbaran patting the Twi'lek softly on the back and urging him to finish his meal. It was a struggle, but he managed. Belly full and mind teeming with conflicting emotions, he stared into the middle distance until deceptively, sleep claimed him.

"How are you feeling?" Zyl's innocent question roused him back from his slumber, the Twi'lek yawning groggily as he awoke.

"Miserable," he replied truthfully, feeling parched and in pain. The hollowness of betrayal had gouged a deep hole within him and the pain was as bad, if not worse, than he'd faced when his grandma had died.

"Here." Like a mindreader, Zyl presented a glass of pale liquid, its scent pungently fragrant.

Taking a sip, Pib at first recoiled at the taste, but Zyl urged him for another gulp. The milky substance was still bitter to his tongue, but soon enough a warm pleasantness began to fill his belly and the pain receded, if only slightly.

"Thank you," he replied softly, genuinely grateful for having at least someone on his side.

"I'm sorry I caused you this much misery. I know that facing the truth can be so much more painful than living in the lie. Many choose it at first, but after they see the truth..." He paused and smiled. "The voice of the People cannot be silenced forever."

"No, it's – it's fine. I just didn't think she'd do such a thing."

"We never suspect those who offer us their aid. Especially seemingly without reward. I've learned to be most wary of the altruist who claims they're doing something out of the

goodness of their hearts. Hmph, in my experience, they're the ones who really want to take you for a ride."

Pib nodded thoughtfully. "But what about you? You haven't asked of anything in return?"

Zyl broke into a soft chuckle and ruffled his lekku with well-meaning amicability. "Did I already say you were a clever boy? If not, it bears repeating. I do indeed have a small request. Nothing much, just a simple and safe thing that you could do to help us."

He presented a small parcel and slid it across the table to him. "I would need you to take this to the [INSERT VENUE HERE] and present it to a Togruta with pink lipstick. Think you can do that for me?"

Pib looked at the unassuming parcel and nodded. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Good. You'll be of great help to all our brothers and sisters, young Pib. I see great things in your future," Zyl smiled with a warm, gentle tone that was so at odds with his appearance.

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Finding his way to the club was hardly a chore, though for some reason he'd chosen to hide from the squad of soldiers that were patrolling the streets to keep rioters at bay. It wasn't something he'd thought about at the time, but staying away from them just felt *natural*. After all, if what Zyl had told him was true, there's no telling what they could have done to him if they knew he was carrying contraband.

Arriving at the club, he snuck inside and sought out the Togrutas. A handful of partying females were present, but none wore pink lipstick. Figuring they might not be here all the time, he chose to wait, but after a long while became parched. Heading over to the counter, he ordered a glass of water while keeping the parcel beneath his vest as best he could.

Turned to observe the dance floor for any new arrivals, it took him long moments until he realized the bartender he'd spoken to was also a Togruta, a man with blue skin and pink lipstick. Sheepishly returning to face him, he pulled out the parcel and slid it across the counter. "This came for you," he spoke softly, barely audible over the blaring music.

The barkeep smirked as he whisked it away beneath the counter, pulling out a small glass into which he poured a milky substance that looked eerily familiar. "Thanks mate! Here, on the house. We People's gotta stick together, eh?" he winked, sliding the shot over to him.

Pib nodded with a stupefied grin on his face, raising the glass to his lips and drinking it down in one go as he'd seen done in holos. The ardent taste felt far more agreeable this time and the familiar mellowing that followed was as welcome as an old friend. Smiling, he left the club and headed out, traversing a few blocks in the quickly darkening city until he came to a crossroads.

To the left, he could return to the Communal Feeding Hall he'd spent the last few nights in. To the right, he'd find his way back to the underground den and his new friends. He'd seen lodgings there as well, so he figured he might get to stay. But what if he didn't return to the Feeding Hall? Would someone get worried? Would anyone even remember he'd been there?

He shook his head. They probably didn't even remember his face, let alone care that he'd gone missing.

Turning right, he ventured past darkened alleys at a brisk pace, reaching the rundown hab by the time the Selenian sun dipped beyond the horizon. Zyl was more than pleased to hear of his success and offered him a place to stay. A bowl of warm food was provided and together with a number of others he sat down at the long tables to dine.

He'd gone halfway through his stew when Zyl took to the podium and spoke up so that they all could hear.

"Brothers, sisters, fellow Selenians. This marks the end of the third day of our revolution and we have accomplished much already. I hear our fellow brothers and sisters have taken control of yet more supply depots and cut off the Citadel from its bloodlines. Soon, we'll have a stranglehold on them and they will either flee or submit to our mercy. But the fiend has not stayed idle! Patrols have intensified in our area, and we have answered in kind. Though it pains me to see Selenian blood spilled on our streets, we cannot let this distasteful sacrifice be left undone, for it serves a far greater purpose; the freedom of us all. Our brave brothers and sisters, daring blaster bolt and stun baton alike, ambushed and defeated a force of the Citadel's pawns. Today, we have brought one of them before you, so that she may beg for mercy of the people she's wronged."

Zyl gave a gesture and a pair of burly workers hauled a bound and cuffed soldier up to the podium, a bag placed upon her head. Her armor had been tarnished by soot and blood and in places the panels had become loose, leaving her form protected only by the black bodyglove beneath. The men pushed her down to her knees and stepped back, allowing Zyl to inspect the prisoner.

Before he could even say a word, boos and angry hissing filled the room, furious citizens in uproar over the sight of their oppressors brought to their Sanctuary, even if in chains. Some of the most eager lobbed pieces of food at her, choosing vengeance over their own hunger.

Zyl raised his hand in protest and the worst of the shouting died down. "Now now, my friends, we are not the Citadel. We do not judge without due course and we respect our fellow Selenians." Tenderly, he peeled back the sack off the soldier's head, exposing ochre hair tied in a ponytail and a pair of emerald eyes that were quite agreeable within the Human's feline face.

“Do you know why you are here, sister?” Zyl asked the wide-eyed prisoner who still remained gagged. The woman was peering around her in panic, shaking her head and clearly fighting back tears. She couldn’t have been more than five years Pib’s senior.

“You’ve committed crimes against Selen and her people. You’ve sided with the oppressors and given your service to the Citadel.”

The woman shook her head furiously, tears welling in her eyes.

“LIES!” a sharp voice barked from the crowd. “She lies!”

“Understand, sister, that we do not judge by your admission, only by your actions,” Zyl continued, ignoring the outraged man’s cries. “We are also prepared to show mercy to those who repent.”

Trembling, she turned to look at him, but continued shaking her head.

“I see,” Zyl sighed. “The indoctrination runs deep. The Citadel has ways of swaying people from their own interests and making them mindless pawns.” He shook his head and extended an expecting arm. Within seconds, a vibroknife had been handed to him and he brought it down to the woman’s neck.

There were cheers from the crowd. Pib’leni felt a tremor in his gut. He didn’t want to watch.

“I ask you one final time, sister, and consider your choice before you answer. Have you committed crimes against Selen and her people?”

The girl let out a pained whine, screaming into her gag as hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Any beauty had left her distraught features, reddened by panic and fear. Her terror stricken eyes peered blindly into the crowd of murderous intent, finding nothing but hate or glee, except in one face. A young Twi’lek boy sat still in his seat, looking on with genuine sadness in his gaze. He mouthed silent words and nodded softly.

The soldier turned to look at Zyl and nodded, the motion careful and constrained by the vibroknife still near her jugular.

“So you admit you’ve wronged us?” Zyl pressed. Again, she nodded.

“Do you wish to confess?” Again, a nod.

The knife moved to her cheek, back of the blade pressing against her skin as Zyl snapped the gag free and knelt down beside her. “Go on then, confess your crimes to us all and plead your case. The Tribunal of the People shall cast its vote.”

She gulped a few hungry lungfuls of air before beginning, her voice trembling and shattered. "I-I have wronged you. I have served the Citadel and raised arms against you." She paused to collect her breath.

"I thought I was doing it for the right reasons, but I realize I was lied to and I shouldn't have done what I did. Please, let me live. I never meant to hurt you. I only wished to serve and do the right thing," she sobbed, head slumping down in a defeated sag.

Zyl turned to the people and raised his hands. "What say you? Is her repentance genuine? Does she truly believe to have wronged us? Shall we forgive her transgressions, as benevolent People, and guide her to our embrace? Or shall we show her steel and fire, like the Citadel has shown those of us who've dared to demand for better?"

The crowd broke into a jubilant roar, one Pib found hard to not get swept in.

With a wide smile of approval on his face, Zyl reached down and grabbed the girl by the ponytail, hauling her up to her feet while she winced and struggled. "You've cast your vote and I duly serve your will," he declared, slicing off her hair and bringing the vibroknife up to her throat.

"You served the Citadel," he stated, the woman letting out a pained squeal. "But we've forgiven you." Angling the blade, he pulled it down the front of her armor, expertly cutting open the chest plate and all the way to her groin. The two men stepped up and each grabbed a half of her armor, ripping and tearing it off her body until she stood stark naked before the crowd, trembling like a leaf in the bright spotlights.

The girl continued to wail, attempting to cover her nudity but having her hand snatched away by the wrist as Zyl pulled it up in a triumphant gesture. "Tonight you are born anew, sister. Do not hide your past, but embrace your future. What you once were is no more. Let the past die. Tonight, you become part of the People and you will serve Selen again."

Beside the stage, the two men stuffed the armor and bodyglove into a burning barrel, letting the flames claim her material past.

A roughspun robe was brought up and Zyl draped the young woman in it, tying it around her waist with a leather band. "Welcome, my sister, back into the fold," he greeted her with a wide, warm smile.

The girl stared at him with eyes wide in terror, unsure of what she was supposed to say and blurting out the first words that came to mind. "T-thank you."

Underground hideout
Selen
Dajorra system
4th day of riots

Pib'leni awoke contently, his mind still awash with the sights and sounds of the celebration that had ensued after the girl's confession. They'd all made merry and eaten and danced to their hearts' content, the sour taste of impending violence blissfully forgotten. He hadn't seen much of the girl after she'd been re-robed, a bowl of food and some drink having been pushed into her hands and then choralled away to the sidelines.

Now, with folk starting to awake, he had a more unobstructed view of the basement they'd rested in and swiftly found a bundle of roughspun cloth that looked suspiciously like her. He didn't know what it was he wanted to even say to her, but somehow he felt a burning need to converse with someone new; someone who hadn't been part of this for longer than him.

Rising up from his bedding, the yellow Twi'lek sat off towards her sleeping form, gingerly tiptoeing past a minefield of dormant bodies. Snores and grunts sounded around him while the lights were still low, only a few others having woken up at this hour to start their daily routine. He was almost at the girl's side when he felt a hand reach around his ankle and almost pull him down.

"Good morning, young Pib," Zyl greeted him with a yawn. "I hope you slept well."

The Umbaran's actions and tone felt somehow at odds, at the same time amicable, yet restraining, but he knew this was not the time or place to raise concerns. "Well," he replied swiftly, glancing over his shoulder as others began waking up as well.

"Good. Good, I was afraid this would be too cold a place for someone like you, but I'm glad I was mistaken. However, there is something I wanted to discuss with you."

"What is it?" Pib made conversation, though every cell in his body wanted to just be done with this man and get on over to the girl before – she awoke. With a soft yawn, the former soldier opened her eyes and stretched, smacking her lips before rising to her feet. Each lost second felt like an eternity wasted as he watched another walk up to her with a bowl for washing and leading her away.

"...ke you to get our message across to a wider audience. Would you be willing to help us out?" Zyl's voice filtered back past his thumping heart, the young Twi'lek shaking his head to clear his senses.

"Did you hear me, boy?" Zyl inquired, cocking his head.

"Y-yeah, sure. Whatever you want," Pib'leni replied with a sense of urgency, wishing nothing more than follow after the girl before she vanished.

"Splendid! I knew I could count on you. Now, let us get some breakfast!" Zyl chuckled amicably, rising up and placing a firm, yet caring, hand upon his shoulder and leading him towards the tables. With one final longing glance, Pib caught a glimpse of the girl as she was taken to a refresher, leaving him feeling somehow empty again.

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The work he'd half-heartedly signed up for turned out to be unlike any Pib had ever done before. He was taken across the city to another subterranean dwelling where he was met by a Twi'lek woman of a bright pink hue and a crew of stage personnel bustling around what appeared like a set for a holoflick.

It soon became clear what was expected of him, as a pair of kind helpers took him back stage and roughed up his visage with some soot and make-up as well as dirtying his clothes 'just so'. By the time he returned, the other Twi'lek was shooting her scene, digging through rubble while sobbing in heart-wrenching despair. Each crease on her grief-stricken face was visible in the close-ups while her bare fingers bled against the shattered duracrete. Finally, she managed to push aside a larger slab of the same and the moment she did, her hands flew to her mouth with a broken gasp. Sinking to her knees, she let out a wailing cry, tears flowing freely as she cried the loss of her only child.

When the scene ended, the tears stopped and the woman stood up as if nothing had happened, retreating into a make-up room for some 'enhancements'. The woman orchestrating the show, a Zeltron with rather flamboyant neon-green hair, called him up to the stage.

"And now for some close-ups!" she demanded, instructing Pib to be buried beneath the rubble to mimic the scene from before. He soon found himself pressed in at all sides by duracrete debris, the final slab blocking out all light and leaving him in a claustrophobic prison. When it finally was withdrawn again, all he could do was stare in shock at the bright light and the invading camera that was shoving a macro lense into his face.

"No no no! I thought you said this kid could act, Z! He's terrible!" the Zeltron chided, the Umbaran shrugging it off and walking up to him. Kneeling down next to the buried Pib'leni, he offered an understanding look on his face as he began.

"Pib, I am terribly sorry to have to ask this of you, but... Remember how your grandmother died? Yesterday when you told me about her, could you do it again?"

Pib stared back at him with utter confusion. "W-why? I – I can hardly breathe and... and..." the floodgates opened without a conscious thought, the memories rushing in as tears welled up in his eyes anew. Zyl gave a pained smile and nodded to the Zeltron, the woman ordering a second take and the rock was placed upon him again.

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"CITIZENS OF SELEN! SEE WITH YOUR OWN EYES THE MISERY BROUGHT UPON US BY THE CALLOUSNESS AND BESTIAL NEGLIGENCE OF THE CITADEL!"

The holo was being broadcast on all available channels, thousands of displays around the city showing the same grainy footage of a distraught mother digging out her son from a ruined building.

“SHE HAD NO PART IN THIS WAR. SHE NEVER ASKED FOR IT, NOR WANTED IT. NEVER VOTED IN FAVOR OF VIOLENCE. AND NOW HER HUSBAND LIES DEAD ON NANCORA AND HER CHILD CRUSHED BENEATH THE CITADEL’S COLD STONES!”

The woman finally peeled off the final slab and shrieked in horror, the footage showing the mangled face of her child, streaks of tears having cleaned the dust off his cheeks before he’d died. The soft, prepubescent cheeks contrasted sharply with the twisted visage of pain etched upon them.

“BROTHERS! SISTERS! WE CANNOT LET THIS STAND! JOIN US AND DEMAND ANSWERS! DEMAND JUSTICE! DEMAND LEADERSHIP THAT IS OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOP—!”

The signal was cut abruptly and replaced by a blank Citadel insignia, cold white on a sea of blackness.

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“Gotta hand it to you, Z, that last bit was clever,” the Zeltron chuckled to the Umbaran as they watched their masterpiece take flight upon the holonet. Already it was trending high and peer-to-peer sharing was going haywire.

“Make it look like the Citadel is hiding it from them and they will search it out no matter what,” Zyl replied as if reciting from a textbook.

“And you, our new star, you did wonderfully!” the Zeltron beamed at Pib’leni, the boy sitting silently in a chair off to the side and sipping juice.

He didn’t know how to respond, so merely offered a humble ‘thank you’, before returning to his thoughts.

“With this message, we’ll finally rouse the fires in the bellies of our citizens. They might have wanted to stick their heads in the sand, but they cannot deny the truth much longer. We will see to it that they learn of the truth and that they rise up to lead their own destiny,” the Zeltron waxed.

Zyl gave an amused smirk. “Hmph, maybe we ought to switch occupations. Seems like you’d make quite the firebrand if you put your mind into it.”

“Oh stop it, Z, you know V would never allow it. He chose us all for a reason and we should follow his vision. After all, it has brought us this far, has it not?”

Zyl chose to remain silent, but offered an agreeing smile as if to say the matter had been discussed far enough in public. He offered his congratulations to the director once more, before standing up and heading towards the young Twi’lek boy, who seemed lost in thought.

“Credit for your thoughts?” Zyl offered as squatted down beside him so their eyes were level.

“It’s nothing, just. I keep wondering what happened to her,” Pib muttered absentmindedly.

“Her?” Zyl glanced over his shoulder the Zeltron, but soon realized it wasn’t her he was talking about. “Oh, you mean our new sister? I assure you, she’s being cared to just as well as you have.”

“But, she was working for the Citadel. And you put a knife to her—”

“Listen, Pib,” Zyl cut him off as he clasped his hand between his, forcing Pib’leni to look him in the eyes. “Remember what I told you about the Citadel? About the Jedi?”

He nodded.

“Thing is, I may have left something out of it. Something, that it wouldn’t frighten you. I shouldn’t have done that, but I see you’re far more ready than I thought.”

Pib tried to force a half-hearted response to the praise, but failed.

“This rebellion? It’s one of many. We’re not just one group, but a part of several. The Jedi, the Sith, they’ve controlled so many for so long and now their time is about to come to an end. We’re not just demanding better rights, Pib, we’re firing the first shots in a war. A war that will bring about the end of their unjust rule. And in war, certain liberties must be taken, I’m sure you understand. We can’t win if we’re nice to everyone, that’s how you get enslaved.”

Pib’leni choked at the last word, squeezing Zyl’s hands tighter. “But, she was just a soldier...”

“And we gave her a choice. We let her be free if she chose to. Sometimes, it takes the brink of death to see where our allegiances truly lie.”

“But if she’d said no?”

“Then it would have been her choice. She’d been as bad as any Jedi. Don’t let her appearance fool you. Remember the Jedi that supposedly came to ‘rescue’ you? She looked kind, did she not? And see where that kindness brought you.”

Pib squeezed his eyes shut, choking on a wet sob.

“I know you’re scared, we all are, but together we can do this, Pib. Together we can win. Believe in me and the cause and we’ll make sure no-one else has to die like that. We’ll stop them treating us like animals.” He wrapped his arm around the boy and gave him a long hug, Pib sobbing softly against his shoulder.

“Here, maybe this will help you feel better?” Zyl said, offering a small bottle of the milky white drink.

Underground hideout

Selen

Dajorra system

7th day of riots

The past three days had been a flurry of activity, with raids being organized, more holovids shot and new members introduced into their group. In parts of the city, the Citadel forces had made counter attacks, achieving local victories where they'd brought in overwhelming numbers and firepower. Yet, they were the few and the People were the many, and once the many stopped fearing the few...

Zyl had taken up the role of a father figure in Pib's life, a father he'd never known. Together they'd already done so much for the cause as he'd begun shaping the young Pib as a face of sorts for their entire movement. His features were sympathetic enough to elicit the sort of reactions that served the Umbaran's needs and Pib was all too eager to help, to belong, if it meant he could hear those consoling words afterwards.

His life had been such a mess for as long as he could remember, but finally it began to have structure and meaning. Though at times he'd felt like that meaning might not be the one he wanted, he'd learned to push aside those voices until the war was over; just like Zyl had assured him he had too.

The only thing still nagging his mind was the fate of that Citadel soldier, her ochre hair and emerald eyes etched into memory in a way he feared he'd never forget. Zyl had assured him over and over that no harm had come to her, but though he wished to believe him, Pib found it difficult to shake the feeling that something bad had happened to her.

Sitting at the end of a long table, surrounded by a number that had grown steadily in the past days, Pib found the taste of his food as bland and flavorless as back in the Feeding Hall. His thoughts were consumed by the girl and though he realized his infatuation was not entirely platonic, he could do little to sway his mind. His spoon running a familiar figure-of-eight motion through the goop, he hardly noticed as Zyl took to the stage once more; just like every other night.

“Brothers, sisters, fellow Selenians. This marks the end of the seventh day of our revolution and tonight, we celebrate the breaking storm. Tomorrow, we make our voices truly heard and reclaim the city for the People. We will decry the falsehoods of the Citadel and throw their lies back in their faces. We will take to the streets and push aside the forces of oppression!”

There was a round of jubilant cheering that filtered into Pib'leni's ears as if through a haze.

“This past week has been grueling, my friends, and much has been demanded of you. I fear more will be asked of each and every one of you before this is over, but rest assured we will

prevail! I have seen you all make great sacrifices for our cause and many who once stood beside us are no longer here, but we shall forever remember their heroism and celebrate them as heroes in the new order we are about to create!"

"Though only a young lad, I wish to call your attention to one of our finest members, for he has accomplished many great things in such a short time. Pib'leni, please, would you join me?"

It took him several moments to realize he'd been summoned, roused from his thoughts by the expectant gazes of everyone around him. Sheepishly, he rose up and walked onto the stage where Zyl was waiting for him with a proud smile.

"You've come so far, young Pib, and helped our cause immensely. I am sure your name will be remembered for generations to come. So tonight, I am proud to announce that you shall be named Hero of the People, the first of your kind, though hopefully an inspiration for countless others to come!"

He clapped his hands together and the basement erupted in applause, cheering and stomping in celebration. The tidal wave of sound that crashed against him was deafening and he staggered back but a step, only to find Zyl's waiting arm behind him and keep him steady. Pib looked up at him, but could see no emotion from the Umbaran, his gaze so affixed in addressing the crowd around them.

"As sign of his status, I am proud to offer you this," Zyl stated as he drew out a familiar vibroknife, the same he'd almost used on the Citadel soldier a few nights before. Holding it aloft over his head so that all could see, he offered it to Pib who accepted it with a mix of awe and confusion.

Feeling its weight in his hands, Pib squeezed his hand around the grip and a sense of calmness and security flowed through him. Knowing that he now had a weapon, and friends, was a relief he hadn't realized he'd been wanting. Turning to look at Zyl, he gave a grateful bow.

"Do not thank me, lad, you've earned it," Zyl smiled with genuine affection and pride as the crowd cheered for their new hero. Turning to face them, he raised his voice once more. "And what is a blade for, if not to weed out the enemies of the People? Bring forth the Citadel scum!"

Pib's elation melted as he saw a badly beaten Citadel soldier dragged on stage, just like before, and forced down on his knees before them. The bag was pulled from his head and he could see the man's nose had been broken, streaks of dried blood caked on his lips. He appeared groggy from the treatment and disoriented by the sudden lights around him, but Pib could not help but shake the feeling he appeared even more in shock at the sight of him.

"Do you know why you are here, brother?" Zyl asked the wide-eyed prisoner who still remained gagged. The man's steely eyes narrowed as he glared at Zyl and nodded slowly.

“Good. You’ve committed crimes against Selen and her people. You’ve sided with the oppressors and given your service to the Citadel.”

The man remained stoic, eyes darting only momentarily to glance at Pib, before returning to Zyl.

“Understand, brother, that we do not judge by your admission, only by your actions,” Zyl continued, ignoring the silence and lack of spectacle. “Know, that we are also prepared to show mercy to those who repent. Do you wish to confess?”

The man was like a rock, unbent and unbroken.

“I see,” Zyl voiced breathlessly. Turning to Pib, he gestured for him to do as he’d seen.

Swallowing his trepidation, Pib moved behind the man and placed the vibroknife to his throat, careful not to accidentally cut him.

“I ask you again, do you wish to confess? Let the People be your judge.”

The man continued to glare at him, unmoving and unflinching.

Pib’s hands were starting to sweat, the weight of the knife suddenly so heavy in his grasp. He could see the man would not yield to Zyl’s demands for a show, but he knew there would be no pleasant resolution from it. Daring to be as loud as he could with only the man hearing, he leaned close to his ear and whispered. “Please, say you want to confess. It’s the only way out of this,” he pleaded.

The man shifted minutely, clearly weighing his options, before slowly nodding his head to Zyl.

“The prisoner wishes to confess! Pib’leni, remove his gag so we may hear his words.”

Gingerly, Pib ran the back of the knife along his stubbled cheek, taking notice of the sickening ease with which its pointed blade parted the gag strap and sliced it asunder. As soon as the obstruction was removed from his mouth, however, the man acted.

Pushing backwards, he thumped his back into Pib’s chest, sending him sprawling backwards across the stage. Rising swiftly to his feet, he stormed towards Zyl while shouting.

“You karkin’ traitors! You’re all a bunch of cowards and liars! The Citadel’s trying to save these people and you poison their ears with your filth!” He slammed into the spindly Umbaran, throwing him off the stage and into a shocked bystander’s lap. Turning on his heels, he spoke directly to the gathered folk. “They’re working for the enemy, deceiving you all! Don’t listen to their lies. Believe in the Citadel. Trust that they will make this war end. They *will* deliver you!”

Wiping a thin strand of blood from his broken lip, Zyl pushed himself back to his feet and barked at the guards. "Seize him!"

"And you," the soldier sighed, turning to look at the horrified Pib'leni who still lay prone on his back. "What the karkin' hell are you doing here? Shouldn't you been back in the Feeding Hall?" He sighed defeatedly, sorrowful eyes filled with despair. The next moment the pair of guards tackled him down, restraining him once more and stuffing the gag back into his mouth.

It was in that moment it hit him. The man had saved him all those days ago, driving away the ruffians who'd tried to kill him! Pib felt like being sick, but events kept rushing ahead, denying his bewildered mind any respite.

"See now the true treachery of the Citadel dog!" Zyl barked, storming back onto the stage. "When offered leniency and a voice, all they can do is bark the lies of their corrupted masters and resort to their baser nature of violence and oppression!"

The crowd, momentarily in shock, regained their eagerness and cheered once again.

"It is clear you do not wish to repent," Zyl stated coldly. "And I regret to inform you that there will be no place for your kind in the New Order." The syllables slipped from lips like ice cubes.

Pib felt a knot tighten in his stomach as Zyl gestured him forward. Hands shaking with a mix of trepidation and adrenaline, he moved up behind the restrained man, now held firmly in place by the two guards.

"I hereby announce you Enemy of the People! And for your crimes, there is only one punishment." He nodded at Pib to proceed.

He knew what he had to do as he brought the knife to the man's throat. The man who'd risked his life to save him. All sensation vanished from his perception. His vision blurred and sounds were muffled, the bloodthirsty cries of the public lost beneath a crystalline ringing in his ears. He only knew he was drawing breath from the rasping of his lungs and the weighty blade threatened to slip from his numbed hands.

"Go on, do it!"

Zyl's barely audible words sounded like from the bottom of a bottomless well.

His limbs were like lead and every nerve unresponsive.

Gripping the knife to prevent it from slipping from his grasp, Pib pressed his eyes shut and plunged the tip into the side of the man's throat. Unlike the strap, the sensation of cutting into

living flesh was anything but smooth. Skin, muscle, sinew and cartilage snagged and tore at the knife in his hand as he sawed it outward with muffled sobs.

He heard nothing, felt nothing, was nothing, until the knife tore free and a warm splatter rained upon his face.

It was then that he opened his eyes to find a red film coating his vision, the crowd jubilant around him and Zyl smiling proudly as blood fountained from the man's severed jugulars. The overwhelming urge to be sick brought bile to his throat and for a moment he almost threw up on the cadaver. Almost.

A soft hand descended on his arm, gently pulling the knife aside and easing him away from the spasming corpse. Zyl remained on stage to give his final speeches while Pib was led to the side by a girl with ochre hair and emerald eyes. He barely registered the sight of weapons crates being broken open and blasters of all types being tossed into the crowd. Soon enough, a hateful chant developed as guns were raised in anger at the Citadel that was soon to fall.

They entered a refresher, where the girl told him to breathe. Pib did just that, gasping from the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The girl wet a wash cloth and knelt down beside him, beginning to dab away the blood from his face with gentle affection, cleaning his features of the murder he'd committed.

"It's alright, Pib," she whispered softly, her voice pleasant and melodic. "You did all that was asked of you. There's nothing wrong in feeling ill. We're People, not monsters."

"T-that man, he," Pib swallowed, "he saved me. I owed him my life..."

"You owed him nothing, Pib," the girl comforted him. "He was a traitor and he died a traitor's death. Just because a wolf spares you from other predators does not make them your friend."

The sentiment echoed Zyl's teachings with a chilling resonance.

"Who are you?" Pib finally managed, tearing his eyes from a tile he'd been staring at blankly.

"I'm Emili," she replied. "My name is Emili Tunt."