

“Finders Keepers”

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“You realize that every time we do this, we’re risking our lives for what could be nothing more than a box of clothes?”

The question went unanswered for a moment as Senior Trooper Adalira Tyfdel finished pinning her dark brown hair low enough so her large white Rebel fleet trooper helmet would fit properly. When she was done, she looked sidelong at the Twi’lek who had just taken a seat beside her in the assault shuttle.

“Only you would bring up something like that mere minutes before a mission, Gli’han,” Adalira grumbled.

“Give me a break. We’ve been sitting here in orbit for an hour just waiting. I’m bored out of my mind.” Senior Trooper Gli’han slouched against the back webbing of the collapsible seat. His light pink skin combined with the fleet trooper’s soft blue uniform top, black vest and grey pants made fashion divas run for cover lest he be contagious. The tops of his lekku were tucked protectively beneath his modified helmet while the ends were draped almost haphazardly over his shoulders. “And besides, that doesn’t make it untrue,” he remarked. He pulled his DH-17 blaster pistol from its holster and checked it over for what Adalira figured had to be at least the fiftieth time on this flight.

Adalira shrugged. “It’s not like we don’t need clothing and fabric. Every new member needs a uniform. Besides, think about it: Intel told us about this Imperial supply convoy coming through this system sometime. We board a ship and steal their cargo, which, for this example, let’s say fits your hypothetical and is a mere box of clothes. We send those clothes out to the Intel spooks in the field, so they can use them to do whatever they do and blend in wherever they are so they can tell us about more clothes-carrying convoys in the future.” Her voice grew dry while she muttered the last words, “It all works out.” True, the Rebellion was desperate for even mundane supplies like clothing, but now that Gli’han had started her mental train down that track Adalira hoped whatever cargo they ended up going after would be a little more worthwhile. Like ammunition. This particular squad’s specialty was ship boarding, and they’d stolen their share of useless cargo in the past that wouldn’t have been worth their spit let alone their lives or limbs, as well as things she was proud to have played a part in obtaining.

But whatever the cargo awaiting them was, the Rebellion had asked her and the squad to which she belonged to take that risk to get it. And so she would. She’d known what she was getting into when she joined and resolved to serve the Alliance however she could. This would be no different than any other day, any other mission.

But blast, now she couldn’t get the prospect of dying for clothing out of her mind. Damn that Gli’han. She needed a distraction.

“What are you doing over here anyway?” Adalira asked Gli’han offhandedly. She unholstered her own pride and joy for ship boarding missions, a Bryar pistol, and gave it a cursory inspection for what was probably the sixtieth time that flight. She’d already checked the

standard DH-17 holstered to her other hip. “You normally sit with your fire team.”

“Yeah, but Watri’s got that crazy look in his eye again.”

Adalira glanced over at Watri across the seating area. Sure enough, the Gungan was busy fiddling with something. His helmet— complete with two slots cut out of the top to accommodate his eyestalks— was upside down on his lap, and he was hunched over it, working. His long ears were tied back at the nape of his neck.

Adalira watched him for a moment and then blinked. “Did he just attach a small knife on the inside of his helmet?” she asked in a low voice.

Gli’han shook his head but refused to look in that direction. “I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.”

“You really need to do something about him.”

“You want me to do something about a being who just found *yet another* available area to carry *yet another* vibroblade on him?” Gli’han snorted. “Forget it.”

The shuttle gave a small lurch, and the throttled-up engines sent vibrations tingling through Adalira’s boots from the deckplates. The intercom from the cockpit crackled to life, and the pilot told them, “The Imperials have arrived in-system. The convoy’s much smaller than Intel thought it would be: all we’ve got to choose from are an Omega-class freighter and an Action Six transport. The Quakes are starting their ion runs on them.” Quake Squadron was the group of Y-wings that typically came along on these types of outings. A necessary evil, unfortunately.

Sergeant Verik Gress, usually referred to as “E” by his squad, stood and mashed down the nearest intraship intercom button. “Get us over to that Action Six and get us attached to it as soon as it’s clear enough,” he said to the pilot.

“Copy that. It’s a little rough out here at the moment.”

The words were punctuated by a hard maneuver that the shuttle’s inertial compensators couldn’t adjust for quickly enough and a jolt and a shudder from some sort of weapons hit. Gress staggered and managed to throw himself into his seat before he fell. Adalira gritted her teeth and glared lasers at the closed cockpit door, then reluctantly broke off her reflexive daydreams of taking her Bryar pistol and unleashing cathartic rays into the ship’s control area.

“Blasted flyboys better get us there in one piece,” Gli’han growled.

With difficulty Adalira swallowed her agreement and harsh criticism of the pilot, and she managed to reply blandly, “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Gli’han turned to stare wide-eyed at her. Adalira glowered defensively at him and muttered, “If you so much as make one single ‘who are you and what have you done with Tyfdel’ crack, I will space you right here and now.”

“Then in the interest of keeping air in my lungs, I’ll simply remark that for you of all people to say something so... almost neutral about those insufferably cocky bus drivers concerns me. Are you feeling all right? What brought about this change?”

Adalira shrugged. “We have to rely on those bla— on those flyboys to get us in and out all the time. Even people as dense as them have to sense how much our squad doesn’t like them. I made a resolution to give these egomaniacs the benefit of the doubt sometimes and see if that nicer attitude gets through to them and makes them treat us better.”

Gli’han looked skeptical. “I don’t have to do that too, do I?”

Adalira didn’t have a chance to reply before Sergeant Gress called, “Listen up, people!” His voice echoed in the sparse seating area; of the sixty-eight available seats, only thirteen, counting Gress’s, were filled by the squad of fleet troopers.

Gress stood at the forward end of the seating area as if to dare the assault shuttle to knock him off his feet again. He was laughably skinny, leading to the constant and merciless ribbing by his people that he only existed in two dimensions. The standard fleet trooper helmet looked ridiculously bulbous over his narrow frame. In an attempt to look more physically imposing he had grown a beard which he kept closely cropped, but in Adalira's opinion it didn't work at all and may have even backfired on him.

All the members of Party Crasher Squad, as they had informally dubbed themselves, gave him their attention. Gress continued, "We're incoming on an Action Six. Action Six. Go."

The Party Crashers immediately started spewing information as they refreshed their memories on the details of that particular type of ship.

"Bridge is in forward dorsal area."

"Living quarters in the cylindrical dorsal tube."

"Docking bay on bottom."

"One hold in the aft and one in the fore."

"Weak defenses. No weapons."

"Up to twenty crew."

A Wookiee growl and rough rumblings explained in Shyriiwook the number of decks.

Gress nodded. "Good. Comms to Tac Com One for squad channel, Tac Com Two for your individual teams, and Tac Com Three for the task force channel. Primary objective is securing the cargo. Secondary objective is taking the whole ship intact. Fire Team One." He paused just long enough to seek out Senior Trooper Heilyn before continuing, "You'll come with me along the starboard side. Fire Team Two." This time he looked at Adalira. "You've got port side. Fire Team Three." Gress made eye contact with Gli'han. "Up to a thirty second delay, then come on whichever side seems to need help the most. Your discretion. Get ready, everyone."

Gli'han rose and went back to within melee range of Trooper Watri and the rest of his fire team. Adalira glanced over her own team and found them all to be looking pretty normal. Trooper Sloan Ferike yawned in apparent boredom. Trooper Padraic Eithne was rushing through the last of his superstitious rituals. Finally, Trooper Breccikka snarled and impatiently loaded his bowcaster. The Wookiee sported only several belts and the black vest that disappeared into his fur ever since he had dyed all the hair jet black. Breccikka was everything in physical intimidation that Sergeant Gress was not. Adalira almost felt sorry for an Imperial on the receiving end of a stealth Wookiee, or even one that looked like the wookified version of Darth Vader. Depending on the particular environment, Breccikka could fit either bill. The one thing she didn't know was where Breccikka got all that black dye so often, but she never asked and merely chalked it up to payoff from his sabacc addiction.

Each fire team stood together and held on to straps high on the walls for balance as the shuttle continued its shuddering, jolted approach to their target. The assault shuttle— she thought *Star Ray* was its name but she frankly didn't care— was an old Beta-class assault shuttle, heavily modified after it was captured from the Imperials in the early days of the war.

At last the shuttle stabilized, and Adalira picked up the telltale hum that indicated its tractor beam was engaged. Shortly afterwards, the side of the elongated shuttle physically impacted something, harder than usual, and the sharp clang and deep reverberations thrummed through the entire ship and even the bones of Party Crasher Squad. Adalira caught herself scowling at the pilot's clumsiness and tried to erase her expression. Then all was still.

The intercom popped with static and announced, "Action Six is ioned and

nonoperational. Tractor beam engaged. Capture system engaged and in the green. You're good to go."

The spacious seating area echoed with a chorus of clicks of blaster safeties coming off. Fire Teams Two and Three preemptively covered the closed hatchway while Fire Team One hastily worked the controls to cut through the Action VI's hull on the far side of the hatchway. Finally they announced their success. Within seconds the hatchway was open with a hiss of air, leading directly into the other ship. It looked like the interior of a darkened corridor. Emergency lighting struggled to flicker on.

Without hesitation Sergeant Gress led Fire Team One through the opening and into the Action VI transport. Adalira and Fire Team Two were right behind him. Whatever was waiting for them on the ship or in the ship's cargo holds, Adalira resolved to do her duty like she'd promised long ago.

The fleet troopers advanced quickly but cautiously toward the bridge, covering each other and always conscious of where the nearest cover— usually shallow doorways— was. The ship was deathly silent, her computers and machinery asleep from the effects of the ion bolts. It never ceased to feel creepy to Adalira, and the Wookiee of Death at her back didn't help matters.

At the first opportunity Adalira led her team down a cross corridor to the port side of the Action VI while Sergeant Gress and Senior Trooper Heilyn continued with their team on the starboard side.

In the stillness Adalira picked up footsteps running their way from down a nearby corridor. She motioned to her team and leaned around the corner as little as possible while raising her Bryar pistol. Through its night-vision scope she saw a frantic Imperial running in their direction, though he hadn't yet seemed to notice the team of Rebels around the corner ahead. Adalira took aim.

She was about to squeeze the trigger when the entire ship lurched under her feet. She staggered, and luckily Trooper Ferike pulled her back before she fell into the open corridor intersection and view of the Imperial. Breccikka had remained on his feet, but Eithne hadn't and Ferike had gone down to one knee.

Tac Com Three crackled over Adalira's headset, containing only the chagrined word, "Oops."

And then Adalira's stomach bottomed out and she realized there was nothing under her feet anymore. The ceiling was closer than she remembered too.

An anxious look back at her teammates confirmed her dread: all of them were floating in midair like her. Vehement curses rolling over Tac Com One from the rest of the Party Crashers informed her that the artificial gravity had been lost everywhere on the Action VI.

Those damn clothes had better be worth it.

Adalira anxiously tried to stabilize herself against the wall but pressed a little too hard with one hand and accidentally sent herself floating gently backwards into Ferike. With nothing to stop him or hold onto, he in turn helplessly floated into Eithne and sent him slow-motion into the far wall, where he twisted around enough to catch himself. Breccikka stretched his massive frame and was barely able to steady himself in place by bracing his fingertips on the ceiling and his toes on the deck, though his vest billowed out like a sail. Adalira fought back a curse as she struggled to get control over her position and location before the approaching Imperial did and caught them defenseless. She'd never enjoyed zero-g training. Hopefully the Imperial was worse at it than her.

Tac Com Three had erupted with admonishments, including one that ranted, “Quake Six, *watch your fire!* We have friendlies on that ship!”

“I wasn’t aiming for them! Sorry, I overshot! No harm though, right?”

This time Adalira couldn’t hold back her under-the-breath curse at the idiotic pilot. She tried to put it out of her mind as she quickly struggled to get her team physically stable and prepared for the approaching Imperial. She wondered how close he was now. By floating he could be completely silent. They could be dead before they knew it.

She almost succeeded at ejecting her pilot-bound rantings from her thoughts, too, until a private transmission came in from Gli’han and asked, “So. How’s that ‘benefit of the doubt’ resolution working out for you?”

Trooper Krepl Watri felt nothing under his feet. Like the three other members of his fire team, he was floating in the disabled Action VI transport’s corridor. Unlike them, he wasn’t flailing around like a gumfish on land.

Gli’han and the two Human troopers, Vahe and Caradoc, looked ridiculous as they desperately tried to stabilize themselves and put their feet back in contact with something. They cursed the loss of the artificial gravity.

Watri fought the urge to smack them all in the head. The short-sighted Humans and Twi’lek were cursing something that actually gave them a huge advantage. It was the best thing they could have asked for if they wanted to get to the bridge quickly and with the Imperials flummoxed and distracted.

“Yousa wanten speed, Gli’han,” Watri said in his deep, rough voice. “Dat ‘xactly what yousa getten now!” With that, the Otolla Gungan holstered his blaster and quickly ran his slim fingers over the numerous vibroblade sheaths on his belt and modified bandolier to ensure all the blades were secure and wouldn’t get jarred loose. Once he was satisfied, he easily pulled himself to the nearest door frame, lined himself up as well as he could to parallel the corridor walls, and pushed off the edge of the door frame with his powerful legs, diving headfirst through the air like a torpedo.

“Wait! Watri!” he heard Gli’han hiss, but Watri ignored him. If they would just follow his example they could keep up.

Watri instinctively streamlined his body as much as possible while he flew down the corridor. He angled toward the opposite wall just enough to eventually grab it and push off again in one fluid motion, repeating that over and over. Maneuvering in microgravity wasn’t exactly the same as swimming, but it was the closest he could come to feeling like he was in his element since the day he’d left Otoh Mandassa and had been forced to *walk* excruciatingly slowly everywhere. Walking was so boring, so inefficient, so two-dimensional. How could beings that needed to walk have ended up in power in the galaxy? They couldn’t even breathe underwater naturally without killing themselves. And *they’re* the ones who made the rules?

By zipping down the corridor in this fashion it only took a few seconds for him to nearly catch up to Sergeant Gress and Fire Team One. Just before he did, however, he heard blaster fire close by and to his left. Over the comm Tyfdel said, “We’re engaged with an Imp in a cross corridor. Careful with shooting— the blaster kickbacks and microgravity are making this hard!”

Watri pulled himself to a halt at the next door frame and easily reversed his direction

toward the sounds of the shooting. It was up to him to clean up the stupid Humans' messes. Again. The idiotic Human pilot who caused this had disrupted all of Watri's squadmates and left them floundering unless he did something about it.

At the second cross-corridor down Watri saw the flashes of blaster bolts at the far end. It was a relatively short cross-corridor, maybe a dozen meters long, and it branched out from Watri's corridor laterally toward the port side of the ship only. The Imp was barely visible about two-thirds of the way down holding onto a door frame; he was focused solely on the far corner around which Fire Team Two was hiding, and his back was to Watri. The Imp fired a few times in Fire Team Two's direction.

Watri keyed his comm but kept his voice quiet. "Tyfdel, yu keepen wit distracten him. But no firen in fife seconds. My getten him for yous."

Watri unsheathed a hefty vibroblade from his belt and held the blade in his billed mouth. Facing down the lateral cross corridor, he gently pushed himself backwards until his back softly impacted the longitudinal corridor's wall. He found a couple handholds to keep him in place momentarily. Watri carefully pulled his stubby, bare feet up and planted them flat on that wall, then he looked down the cross corridor and lined himself up. He had one chance at this.

When his five seconds were up, Fire Team Two's blaster fire ceased. Watri pulled on the handholds behind him to compress his entire body in front of his planted feet, and then he let go and pushed off the wall as hard as he could. Once more the Gungan torpedo silently flew headfirst through the air. In the second or so that he had in transit, he pulled the vibroblade from his mouth.

His aim was a little off, but he was still close enough to reach his left arm out and hook the Imperial around the neck before flying past. The pair instantly went into a tumble and bounced off the corridor wall and floor, but Watri kept his wits and immediately pinned the startled, flailing Imperial against him from behind. A quick, expert thrust with the vibroblade ensured that the Imperial wouldn't bother them anymore. Watri pulled the knife free and pushed the dead body away, then easily stabilized himself in the corridor again. The Imperial's drops of blood became perfect spheres as they floated like a morbid solar system.

The members of Fire Team Two were staring at Watri even as they tried to gain control of their mobility. Eithne had even ended up upside down above them all.

"And you couldn't have just *shot* him?" Ferike asked.

Breccikka barked something about how Ferike should realize whom he was talking to.

"Yousa welcome," Watri grumbled. He wiped the blood off his vibroblade and sheathed it.

They continued advancing, and Fire Team Two clumsily mimicked Watri's method of moving through the corridors in the microgravity. He again resisted the urge to smack them and impress upon them how easy this was. They were at least moving forward. Too slowly, yes, and too loudly as they constantly collided with the walls, but forward nonetheless. As fleet troopers they'd gotten soft.

Surprisingly they encountered no further Imperial resistance on their way to the bridge. Near the bridge they rendezvoused with Fire Teams One and Three, who were traveling together and also were doing their best to move like Team Three had first seen Watri do. A couple of them looked queasy from the weightlessness. Watri ignored the scathing glare Gli'han aimed at him.

When the teams met there was a nearly tangible uncertainty emanating from most of the

squad members. Many of them looked nervously from Sergeant Gress to the door leading to the bridge and back again. On nearly every other mission they had always been confident, determined and ready to storm the bridge, but on every other mission they'd had gravity allowing them to move quickly and naturally. Even Gress seemed concerned and was apparently forcing his thoughts as fast as possible past Plans B and C all the way to the depths of Plan X and maybe even Plan Y for the best way to do this.

Trooper Eithne tentatively spoke up. "Sarge?"

"Yeah?"

"I might have an idea."

By the time he'd finished hastily outlining it, the Party Crashers were alternating staring between him and Watri. Gress furrowed his brow and turned to Senior Trooper Heilyn. "What type of lock are we facing? Can you time it right without giving the Imps on the bridge tons of notice to prepare?" Gress asked.

Heilyn peeked around the corner for a glance down the corridor at the door to the bridge and then pulled himself back into the cross corridor they were gathered in. "It looks like a standard lock. I should be able to open it on command once I hack through without giving the Imps too much warning. That's if they don't have anything additional added to it, especially from the inside. We could delay and toss some flashbangs in first, but if there's an Imp by the door they could easily get swatted right back at us."

Gress next looked at Watri. "It's a pretty unconventional way to soften up the bridge resistance. If it works, even with the element of surprise you'll be very vulnerable until the rest of us get in. What do you think?"

Watri threw a brief glance at Eithne. Humans were crazy. Why were they always putting him in danger? The only reason he was on that ship at all was because the idiotic Humans on Naboo had given Palpatine his initial political power all those years ago and caused all this. Caused the Empire. And he had to fix it.

He'd have to trust Heilyn's lockpicking expertise and timing if he didn't want to be seriously injured before even getting inside the bridge. Plus the rest of the Party Crashers would need to get their acts together and move quickly to help him before he could be overwhelmed. He had to trust his Human squadmates a lot in his line of work, but this situation would be a leap of faith akin to cliff diving.

Lucky for them he loved cliff diving. It looked like he would have to— yet again— save the Humans from themselves and clean up their mess. Get them out of trouble. That was his lot in life. At least he got to kill Imperials as part of the deal. That was his lot in life as well, and the much more enjoyable one at that.

Watri's large mouth parted to bare his teeth in a feral smile, and his eyestalks lowered slightly. He pulled a vibroblade out and said, "'Vulnerable' not in mesa vocabuwords. But mesa no wanten brightbooms. Daysa only cause mui problem."

Ferike reached over, pulled Watri's blaster from its holster and handed it to him. "This time just shoot first, okay?"

The Party Crashers soon got into their new positions. Heilyn worked intently on breaking the electronic lock to the bridge door while one of his squadmates helped keep him in place and the others guarded them and kept close for immediate support inside. Breccikka and Watri floated beside each other in the middle of the corridor about ten meters away from the bridge door. They had a clear line of sight straight down the corridor to it. The three other troopers from

Fire Team Two stayed with them on either side, and the remaining troopers from Fire Team Three guarded their backs. Everyone but Watri still moved clumsily and uncertainly in the weightless environment.

A few moments later Heilyn looked at Breccikka and Watri and nodded. Watri took his blaster in one hand and a vibroblade in the other and partially somersaulted forward to put his feet in midair behind him. The three Humans from Fire Team Two braced themselves against the lower part of the corridor walls and each other with Breccikka's legs in the middle to keep the Wookiee as stable as possible in that spot. Breccikka grabbed Watri's belt at the small of his back in one hand and placed his other massive paw flat on the bottoms of Watri's feet.

While he waited, Watri flattened his eyestalks even more and grinned to himself, wondering how many Imperials he'd be able to take out. He tightened his offhand grip on his vibroblade in anticipation.

"Itsa time to give mesa regards to Senator Palpatine," he growled softly.

Ahead, Heilyn held up three fingers. Then two. Then one. Then none. He hit the panel to open the door to the bridge.

At the same instant, Breccikka reared back and threw Watri face-first toward the door as hard as he could.

Watri immediately somersaulted 180 degrees head-over-feet so he was instead flying feet-first at the door. After that, he had only enough time to hope the door would actually open before he reached it and that the Wookiee's aim was good.

Join the Empire! the recruiter had said.

Learn new skills! Protect your home! See the galaxy!

At the time it had sounded amazing, especially in comparison to the low-paying job Karel Pentii was stuck in at the scrap dealer. Performing spacewalks to cut up hulls of derelict ships in orbit wasn't at all where Karel wanted to be, and he hated being treated like dirt by the other employees of the salvage station who would never in a million years deign to do such lowly work. He'd listened starry-eyed to the Imperial recruiter that day and had signed up on the spot. Mere minutes later the redhead had joyfully quit his salvage job.

However, the recruiter had neglected to mention that one of the sights Karel would be seeing in the galaxy was a terrorist Gungan flying feet-first into the bridge of the Action VI transport he was stationed on and wildly shooting everything in sight.

From the moment Karel, as sensor operator, had announced the presence of the Rebel ships at this hyperspace transition point, Captain Lect had been working his hardest to get his ship *Progress* and his crew away unscathed. Karel admired the captain's fierce loyalty to his people, his coolness under pressure, and it was Captain Lect's steadiness that allowed Karel to ignore his own fear during the space battle and do his job. He and the other bridge officers had been trying in vain to get the ship's systems back online since the ion blast. Once they knew *Progress* had been boarded, the captain had handed out emergency breathing masks to each of the six other bridge officers in preparation of manually evacuating the ship's ambient air to kill or render unconscious the boarding party. Karel still had his mask hanging around his neck, though those plans were put on temporary hold when the gravity went out. They had resumed once each bridge officer was strapped in at his console, and had been so close to completion

before the horrible interruption.

The closest crewmember to the flying Gungan was Vinn. He was dead from a blaster bolt before any of them had fully realized the bridge door had been opened, let alone before they could react to the intrusion. The next closest was Harnett. He barely had enough time to reach for his holstered blaster before the Rebel shot him in cold blood. As he died, Harnett let out a short scream that Karel doubted he would ever forget.

Just like that, two of Karel's friends and shipmates were gone.

The Gungan scum's feet hit the bridge's forward viewport and stopped him, then he immediately bounded off in another direction in the bridge, still firing wildly. Now Karel and his crewmates were reacting fully and frantically trying to follow the hasty orders being given by Captain Lect from the center of the bridge. Karel obeyed them without question; Captain Lect would get them through this danger too. He always had.

Along with everyone else, Karel pulled his blaster and fired at the Gungan. He wondered if, like him, the last time any of them had used a blaster was at their periodic firearms requalification. Karel also quickly unfastened his seat restraints with his offhand, readying himself to move the instant it looked like the alien scum got a bead on him. He held the restraint strap to keep himself in place and pulled himself down a bit to use his console as cover.

The Gungan kept firing and bounded randomly all over the bridge, up and down, starboard and port. Several shots from Karel's shipmates narrowly missed. A couple nearly turned into friendly fire, and that made the shooters hesitate.

A blaster bolt from the Gungan hit Karel's roommate, Bhettrek, and silenced the helmsman's quirky jokes and horrible puns forever. Even in the midst of the firefight the sight shocked Karel. Just as suddenly he was snapped out of it by a sharp cry of pain from Terren, the engineering officer. A couple other Rebels moved clumsily through the bridge's entranceway and had just fired at him from behind. Terren returned fire, but the Rebels finished him off before Karel had a chance to re-aim his own blaster and help.

Anger and desperation welled up inside, shutting off conscious thought. Karel saw that the Gungan's most recent microgravity jump would take him directly over Karel in half a second, though the scum was daring to aim his blaster at Captain Lect. Karel let go of the restraint strap and pushed himself upward as hard as he could. He crashed into the Gungan from below, hardly noticing that the area he had just vacated was intersected by lethal light from the Rebels floating beside the entranceway.

Surprised, the Gungan twisted around in an attempt to get out of Karel's grip while they tumbled in midair. Karel moved with him smoothly, never giving him the opportunity to escape, and raised his blaster, intending to bring it to bear on the alien's head. The Gungan had proven he was okay at maneuvering in microgravity, but Karel had wrestled countless pieces of durasteel in orbit that were larger and more intelligent than this Rebel.

A blaster bolt superheated the air centimeters away from Karel's head at the same time considerably more blaster fire erupted inside the bridge. Startled, Karel hooked his arm around the struggling Gungan's upper body and pulled him close as a shield, trying not to gag on the overwhelming stench of briny fish that filled his nose. Below him five more Rebels had awkwardly floated into the bridge. One put a blaster bolt through Addren at the communications console, three were in a furious lightfight with Captain Lect, and the remaining three were slowly maneuvering and aiming intently at Karel, looking for an opening. Karel ignored them and fired at the three shooting at Captain Lect. The squirming Gungan kept throwing off his aim. He

managed to hit one in the leg.

Within seconds another one of those three Rebels fell to a shot from Captain Lect, but no sooner had the Rebel died than Captain Lect was killed. Though the captain died silently, Karel let out a yelp of shock.

The Gungan took advantage of the distraction and Karel's inability to fully and properly restrain him. A swift jab backwards with one of his lithe wrists caused an incredibly sharp pain to emanate from Karel's gut. He gave a short cry and reflexively pushed away from the pain. The Gungan kicked backwards and used Karel's body to propel himself away, taking the bloody vibroblade with him. Karel's back hit the bulkhead on the side of the bridge, and his free hand immediately covered his stab wound. In the next instant he saw he was the sole target for numerous Rebel blasters, and he frantically kicked off the bulkhead to the nearest corner, where an alcove provided a modicum of cover. He slammed into it and grabbed at a small protrusion in the wall just long enough to kill his momentum and keep himself hidden there.

A somewhat reedy voice called out, "Hold!"

Karel held his breath, but the blaster bolts he expected to mow him down around the corner never came. Holding his breath also eased the agonizing pain in his stomach and kept the reek of ozone and blaster charring from his nose. His hand was covered in blood, and his grey Imperial uniform was absorbing an ever-growing red stain. The sudden silence after the chaos and death screams of the firefight was almost more oppressive to his ears. Death's presence hung thickly in the air, suffocating him. He couldn't think straight. So many of his friends— good people— were gone so suddenly. For absolutely no reason. What the hell had they done to deserve this?! He'd never be able to get thoughts of the slaughter he'd just witnessed out of his mind.

The same voice spoke again and commanded, "Surrender, Imp."

Karel's heart raced. No way in hell was he going to let himself be captured. Terren had told him all about the horrible things the Rebels did to their prisoners. And no way in hell was he going to let *Progress*— his home, and Captain Lect's pride and joy— fall into Rebel hands. He owed the man too much, admired him too much to dishonor his memory like that.

There was only one thing to do: finish carrying out Captain Lect's original plan.

It wouldn't end the way Captain Lect— or even Karel— had wanted, but it had to be done.

A few seconds later, Karel's bloody fingers had finished hastily rigging his blaster to overload. It began emitting a soft hum that grew higher in pitch by the nanosecond. He flung the blaster through the air toward the bridge's transparisteel viewport and then pulled the emergency breathing mask up from around his neck and placed it over his nose and mouth. Wincing at the pain in his gut, Karel maneuvered to aim himself at the nearest bridge console and, more importantly, its seat's restraint straps.

The fast-moving blaster bomb only took a moment to reach the bridge's viewport. He heard a Rebel shout something in warning, and then the trigger-happy scum fired at it. Karel wasn't sure if it was the impact of that blaster bolt on his overloading blaster that did it, or if the Rebel's shot had missed and Karel's blaster had simply reached the overload point. But whatever its flash point was, an explosion burst through the air next to the front viewport. It blinded him momentarily and made his ears ring, and the hot shockwave threw him backwards into the bulkhead.

Immediately there was a high-pitched whistling noise, and every molecule of air around Ensign Karel Pentii tried to pull him forward toward the viewport.

To be continued.