

STAR WARS

The background of the cover is a dynamic illustration of three Stormtroopers in a dark, industrial setting. The trooper in the foreground is in a crouched position, aiming a blaster. Behind him, another trooper is also aiming a blaster, and a third trooper is visible in the background. The scene is filled with sparks and a bright blue light source, creating a sense of action and conflict.

FOOL'S BARGAIN

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It had been drizzling as the stormtroopers of the Imperial 501st Legion assembled at their various jump points for what all hoped would be the final battle of this latest war. By the time the orders had been given and the individual companies began to make their way to their parts of the assault line, the drizzle had widened into a full-scale storm, complete with driving winds and a sky nearly black enough to turn the twilight of the city and surrounding countryside into full night.

"Looks like something out of a bad legend," Choral of Unit Aurek-Four murmured from the right-hand line of stormtroopers seated on the rack benches against the wall as the disguised troop carrier rolled cautiously along the quiet city streets.

"What does?" Dropkick of Aurek-Three asked from half a dozen men down the line.

"What do you think?" Choral countered, nodding toward the viewscreens showing the scene out the transport's nose.

Behind his helmet faceplate, Twister, unit commander of the four-man group designated Aurek-Seven, frowned slightly as he studied the image. Choral had a point, he had to admit. The fortress rising out of the ground at the edge of the city had always had something of a ghostly, unreal air about it. Now, as brief glimpses of the gray-and-red towers came to them between the city's buildings, the whole scene lashed by winds and surrounded by sporadic flashes of lightning, that sense of otherworldliness seemed even sharper.

On Twister's left, his unit-mate Watchman gave a soft snort. "Personally, I've always liked tackling legends," he said. "It's so much fun to let the air out of them." He gestured toward the viewscreen. "I just hope the son of a lizard is actually in there."

“Well, if he isn’t, this is going to be a serious waste of effort,” Cloud grumbled from Watchman’s far side. “Especially with the Eickaries finally on the move. If it were up to me, I’d give them another month to chase the Lakra back into these reinforced beetle holes of theirs, then drop all two hundred of ’em into piles of rubble and go home.”

“And how many more Eickaries would die in another month of fighting?” Shadow, Aurek-Seven’s fourth man, asked from Twister’s right. “If we’re going to arm a people and then turn them loose against oppressors, we have a certain obligation to see they don’t just go charging into a meat grinder.”

“I understand that,” Cloud agreed. “But Kariiek is *their* world, after all, not ours. After putting up with the Warlord and his thugs all these years, it seems to me they should have the honor of kicking them out.”

“Kicking them out or executing them,” Watchman said. “I imagine Eickarie common law will demand a particularly gruesome death for the Warlord.”

“I’d buy a ticket,” Cloud said dryly. “That still doesn’t explain why we don’t just blast the whole fortress to rubble. Getting buried by a few tons of rock ought to be a gruesome enough death to satisfy even the Eickaries.”

“I’m sure the generals have their reasons,” Twister said, putting just enough edge to his voice to warn the other three to drop the subject.

“I know,” Cloud muttered, apparently not yet quite ready to let it go. “I just don’t think this guy is worth any more Imperial lives than he’s already cost.”

Twister didn’t answer. The others took the hint, and the conversation finally subsided.

But the question, he could tell, was still weighing on them. It was weighing on everyone in the transport, for that matter.

It wasn't just the forty men of Aurek Company who were involved in this. Not by a long shot. There were hundreds of Imperial troops setting up for battle, including three more companies of the 501st. Most of them were out in the woods and plains on the other side of the fortress, preparing for a straight-in assault with massive air and ground support. The Empire of the Hand was making a serious effort to capture the tyrant who had oppressed this world and its people for the past fifty standard years.

But why?

Cloud had a point. Strong though these ancient Eickarie fortresses were, they hadn't been designed to withstand the kind of firepower the Empire of the Hand could bring to bear. If Intelligence thought he was in there, a couple of hours of serious bombardment would turn the fortress into a heap of charred rock, dead Lakran mercenaries, and an equally dead Warlord. Once the leader himself was out of the way, the remaining pockets of resistance would be easy enough to deal with, especially with the whole planet finally united against the mercenaries. It would be quick, efficient, and a lot easier on the stormtroopers and other ground soldiers.

Obviously there was some very important reason why the Empire of the Hand wanted or needed the Warlord alive. The question was: what was that reason?

Mentally, Twister shook his head. The typical soldier, he knew, wouldn't even be having these thoughts, or at the very least would be keeping them to himself. Soldiers were uniformly taught to accept orders without question and to carry them out without hesitation.

To a certain point, of course, that was true of Imperial stormtroopers as well. But only to a point. This wasn't Palpatine's Empire, and the stormtroopers lining the transport's armored sides weren't simply the unfeeling, unthinking killing machines he had once unleashed on the Republic. The elite troopers of the Empire of the Hand were selected for intelligence as well as combat skill, trained to walk that fine line between obedience and initiative, between honest question and unquestioning trust.

Slowly, Twister sent his gaze across the forty armored men seated silently around him. He'd been with Aurek Company for nearly six years now, two of them as Aurek-Seven's commander, and in that time he'd learned that there was very little Imperial stormtroopers couldn't accomplish once they set their minds to it. They had been ordered to go in and capture the Warlord, and he had no doubt they would succeed. None of them, certainly not Twister himself, needed to know the reasons behind the order.

But the questions remained.

"One minute," the driver called.

There was a soft flurry of activity as the stormtroopers made one final check of their BlasTech E-11 blaster rifles and other equipment. The transport slowed to a crawl, and the rear doors swung open. Silently, in groups of four, the stormtroopers began to drop out into the downpour, slipping away to their assigned positions through the deserted streets.

Aurek-Seven was the last unit out. Twister hit the ground in a jog, taking a couple of steps to brake himself to a halt as he gave the area a quick scan. The buildings rising around them showed only a few lights, and were as silent as the streets themselves. "Looks like the Eickaries have

figured out that the Warlord's vicinity isn't a healthy place to be," Cloud commented from beside him.

"Let's hope so, for their sake," Twister said, finishing his visual scan and checking his bearings. "Move out."

Their designated position was two streets away, in a narrow alley between a five-story apartment house and one of the city's many grimy, low-class cantinas. From that location, according to the surveillance holos, they should have a view of the eastern approach to the building designated Watchtower Two.

The two watchtowers were a peculiarly Eickarie military concept, one that most of the stormtroopers didn't think very highly of. Disguised as ordinary apartment or office buildings, they were in fact high-tech sentry and spy stations for the fortress two kilometers away at the edge of town, connected to it by armored underground passageways. In the not-too-distant past, when vicious tribal warfare had been a part of Kariiek's everyday life, the watchtowers had allowed whoever was currently occupying the fortress to keep an eye on members of opposing tribes in the city for trade or social calls or possibly a sneak attack. When the Warlord had taken possession of all the fortresses, he and his mercenaries had used the watchtowers in much the same way, except that to them every Eickarie was a potential member of the opposition. Many a dissatisfied citizen, complaining privately with a friend in the street about the Warlord's cold-handed rule, discovered too late that he had been observed, recorded, convicted, and sentenced, sometimes before the conversation was even over.

The watchtowers themselves were of no particular strategic value, given that the recently formed United Tribes Command already had control of the city itself. Their importance, and the reason most of the stormtroopers

considered them a bad strategic concept, lay in the tunnels connecting them to the fortress. If Aurek Company could capture either or both watchtowers, they would have a vector into the Warlord's refuge that wouldn't involve running the gauntlet of heavy defenses arrayed against the rest of the Imperial forces gathered outside the city.

Of course, the Warlord wasn't stupid, either. He would certainly have rigged as strong a set of defenses in those tunnels as he could manage, including mines, booby traps, and as many blasters and Lakran mercenaries as he could squeeze in. But this was the 501st Legion, the legendary "Vader's Fist." They'd handled worse in their long history. They would handle this, too.

Aurek-Seven reached their target alley, and Twister gave it a quick look. Spaced out along the base of the apartment building were half a dozen stairways leading down to garden apartments or small shops, all dark, while the cantina was showing only the normal security lights of a closed business. No one was visible anywhere. Holding his blaster rifle high across his chest, Twister slipped into the alley, the others fanning out behind him.

They were nearly to the cantina door when a flicker from his helmet's sensor display strip caught Twister's eye. "Watch it—someone's in there," he warned the others, shifting his BlasTech to point in that direction as he gave the display another look. Unfortunately, with the pouring rain skewing the infrared data and wiping out any chance of a gas-spectrum analysis, there was no way to distinguish between a harmless Eickarie and a seriously hostile Lakra. "Stay sharp."

He'd barely finished the warning when the cantina door swung open and a young Eickarie male stepped out into the alley, the rain cascading off the glistening band of black scales that curved over the top and sides of his otherwise

mostly green face. He was dressed not in the usual brightly colored layered evening robes but dark, close-fitting slacks, low boots, and a loose serape jacket. "Good evening, Imperials," he said in passable Basic. "May your tribe find joy."

"May your tribe find wealth." Twister gave the traditional reply, frowning as he notched up his helmet's vision enhancers. It was hard to tell in the gloom, but he couldn't see any of the color fluctuations in the orange facial highlights that conveyed most of the Eickaries' emotional information. The young alien was calm and composed—not the usual reaction of a simple citizen suddenly and unexpectedly coming face to face with four Imperial stormtroopers.

Which implied either that the Eickarie was drunker than he had any right to be this early in the evening, or else that the encounter wasn't as unexpected as it appeared. "May I ask what you're doing here?" he asked the native.

The orange highlights turned a dark pink, the equivalent of an ironic smile. "Odd," he said. "I was about to ask you the same question."

He lifted a hand before Twister could answer. "But this is no place for a conversation," he went on. "I am certain you would be more comfortable inside."

"We appreciate your concern," Twister said, making a subtle hand signal. Around him, he could sense the movements as the others casually turned into an outward-facing defensive square. Despite his fifty-year record of brutal tyranny, and despite the recent alliance of all of Kariék's major tribal leaders, the Warlord still enjoyed a small but not insignificant degree of support among ordinary Eickaries. Some were collaborators, whose profits and lives would be at risk if he was finally overthrown, but most were

simply people who feared and resisted change of any sort, even change for the better. If this was a trap . . .

“Apartment building,” Watchman murmured from behind him. “Slow and casual.”

Twister cautiously turned to look.

The empty stairways leading down to the shops had stopped being empty. Each of them had sprouted three or four Eickaries, all dressed in the same dark clothing, all armed with blasters or antique tribal projectile weapons or grenade launchers.

All the weapons, of course, were pointed at the stormtroopers.

“As I said,” the first Eickarie repeated calmly. “This is no place for a conversation. Please: the first stairway?”

Twister pursed his lips, his mind sifting rapidly through his options. Under normal circumstances, he would already have used the tongue switch to click on his comlink headset and call for backup. Aurek-Four and Aurek-Nine were one alley away and could be here in ninety seconds.

But in this case, the entire Imperial attack force was under strict comlink silence. The Warlord had a highly sophisticated comm-detection system, and even with the Imperials’ encryption rendering their communications unreadable he would likely be able to triangulate on any signals and so deduce his opponents’ locations. If he hadn’t already been tipped off about tonight’s attack, that would pretty much do the trick.

Alternatively, Twister could order his men to open fire, trusting their armor to withstand the Eickarie assault long enough for the threat to be neutralized. But the sound of weapons fire coming from the shadow of his watchtowers

would be far more compromising than even triangulated transmissions.

Besides, the Imperials were here to free these people, not kill them.

"As you wish," he said, hand-signaling his men to stand easy.

"You sure we want to do this?" Cloud asked quietly.

"If they were on the Warlord's side, they wouldn't have invited us in for a chat," Twister pointed out. "They'd have opened fire and been done with it."

"Just because they're not on his side doesn't mean they're on *our* side," Watchman reminded him warily. "And I don't like the fact that our sensors didn't pick them up skulking around in there."

"The rain might have interfered," Twister said, looking at the display strip. The Eickaries were registering just fine now.

"It didn't interfere with *him*," Watchman reminded him, nodding toward the lone Eickarie still waiting calmly in the downpour for his captives to make their decision.

"We can ask them about it inside," Twister said, making it an order. Cloud was right, he had to admit; he *wasn't* at all sure he wanted to do this. But at the moment, there didn't seem to be a lot of other options. "Lower your weapons and let's go."

The stairway led down a dozen steps into a small tailor's shop that looked as if it had been abandoned years ago. Inside, a dozen more Eickaries were waiting in a circle against the walls, all of them as heavily armed as the ones outside. The young spokesman circled around the four

stormtroopers as they filed into the room, crossing to a rusty seam-sealing table and hopping up to sit on it. “I ask again,” he said, looking at each of them in turn. “What are you and your fellows doing in our city tonight?”

“Is this the hospitality of the Eickarie people?” Twister countered, trying to remember everything he’d read about the local culture on the flight here two months ago. Up to now Aurek Company hadn’t had much direct interaction with the natives, but he had a feeling that the next few minutes were more than going to make up for it. “To ask questions before we have even exchanged names?”

“Do not reply!” an older Eickarie along the wall warned sharply, his orange highlights shifting to red and then purple. “He speaks left-handed, seeking your name to offer in trade to the Warlord.”

Twister frowned; and then it clicked. *Left-handed* was Eickarie slang for a lie; *right-handed* the corresponding term for the truth. “I do not speak left-handed,” he insisted. “If there’s a question I’m not permitted to answer, I’ll tell you that. But I will never speak left-handed to you.”

The older Eickarie sniffed. “And would not a left-handed speaker also say he would never—?”

“Peace, Ha-ran,” the Eickarie seated on the table cut him off. “His question about our hospitality, at least, is right-handed.” He looked back at the stormtroopers. “I am Sumil,” he said. “And you?”

“I am called Twister,” Twister told him. “These are my unit-mates Shadow, Cloud, and Watchman.”

He turned to look at Ha-ran. “And with respect to your tribe and its princes,” he added, “if you believe we’re here to make any trades with the Warlord, you haven’t been paying attention to the events of your world over the past eight months. Our people have been fighting tirelessly at

the side of the Eickaries, working to tear the Warlord's grip from your throat."

"Then why do you physically assault his stronghold?" Ha-ran spat. "Why not simply destroy it with him inside? Why do you risk your lives to meet him face to face?"

Twister grimaced behind his helmet. Everyone on the planet seemed to be wondering the same thing tonight. "Why did you risk your lives to meet *us* face to face?" he stalled.

It was not, as it turned out, the best thing he might have said. "We called you here to learn what you are doing," Ha-ran said, his highlights turning nearly black. "And to perhaps seek an accommodation with you. Is that what *you* seek with the Warlord?"

"What sort of accommodation could we possibly want with him?" Watchman objected. "We came to this world to destroy him."

"Did you?" the old Eickarie retorted. "Or did you merely seek to conquer him?"

"For what reason?" Watchman persisted. "What could he possibly have—?"

"Watchman," Twister said quietly.

The other broke off. "We don't know why we're here tonight," Twister told Ha-ran honestly. "None of us is high enough in the counsels of our tribe's princes to be given such answers."

"They are called 'generals,' not princes," Su-mil put in. "And you have no tribes, but only the single Empire of the Hand. Do not patronize us, stormtrooper."

Twister turned back to face him. There was something vaguely comical about the Eickarie's stance, a small part of

his mind noted, sitting up there on the sealing table with his feet dangling half a meter off the floor.

But at the same time, there was a strength and resolve in his eyes and posture that silenced any inclination toward laughter. “You’re right,” Twister acknowledged. “I was merely attempting to speak in terms your people would be familiar with.”

“We are familiar with many terms,” Su-mil said.

“As I now understand,” Twister said. “I ask your forgiveness for my unintended offense.”

For a moment the other studied him. Then, his orange highlights faded to amber. “My forgiveness is given,” he said. “You admit, then, that you seek to meet the Warlord face to face?”

“Our orders are to penetrate the fortress and take him alive,” Twister told him. “As I said, I haven’t been told the reason behind those orders.”

“Then let me tell you what we think,” Su-mil said. “We think your Empire of the Hand is hoping to make a bargain with the Warlord—a fool’s bargain, which will bring ruin on all who raise a hand to it. We think you have united the Eickarie people this way solely to obtain a stronger bartering position for yourselves.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Twister insisted reflexively. “I can’t believe my prin—my generals would do such a thing.”

“Why not?” Ha-ran demanded. “Are the plundered relics and treasures of the Eickarie people worth nothing to you who travel the stars?”

“Or perhaps the Warlord is already an ally of yours,” Su-mil added. “None of the Eickaries has ever seen him outside his armor. For all the evidence we have, he could even be a human like yourselves.”

Twister took a deep breath. Unfortunately, that was another very good point. As far as he knew, none of the Imperials knew what kind of being was walking around inside the Warlord's fancy armor, either.

But the possibility that it could be a renegade Imperial had never even occurred to him. "I don't know the reasons for my orders," he said. "But this is my third campaign for the Empire of the Hand, and I've studied the histories of many others. Certainly my leaders have made mistakes, but I have never known them to betray those who trusted them."

"So for you it comes down to a matter of trust?" Su-mil asked.

"Ultimately, that's what it comes down to for any of us," Twister told him. "Trust in your leaders and allies, and loyalty to those who have put their trust in you."

He gestured toward the door. "And right now, there are soldiers out there who have put their trust in us, relying on us to protect their flank from attack. I would humbly request that you allow us to leave and fulfill that trust."

For a long moment the room was silent. Su-mil eyed him, his highlights subtly changing shade as he considered. Then, suddenly, they returned to their original orange. "I offer a bargain of my own," he said. "In the dungeons of this fortress you seek to penetrate are hundreds of Eickaries who have been imprisoned over the years by the Warlord and his soldiers. Most committed no offense but to resist his tyranny. Will you commit yourself and your fellow stormtroopers to releasing them before you carry your battle to the Warlord's inner stronghold?"

Twister felt an unpleasant shiver run through him. He wasn't trained to negotiate with these people. He certainly wasn't authorized to make tactical arrangements with them.

Trained to walk that fine line between obedience and initiative . . .

"I'm not sure I can commit to such a promise," he said carefully. "My orders are very clear, and the lives of my fellow soldiers lie in the balance. Most of the fortress's outer defenses are controlled from the Warlord's inner stronghold; the sooner we can capture it, the sooner the battle will be over."

"We will certainly release the Eickarie prisoners," Shadow added. "We just may not be able to do so before we face the Warlord."

"I understand your conflict," Su-mil said. "Let me perhaps make the bargain sweeter to your lips. If you will right-handedly make to me this promise, I will lead you inside the fortress along a path the Warlord knows nothing about."

A murmur rippled through the assembled Eickaries, an echo of the stir Twister could sense going through his own men. Apparently, Su-mil's offer had taken everyone by surprise. "What kind of path are we talking about?" he asked. "Is it nearby? Surface, aerial, underground?"

"Do not tell him!" Ha-ran snarled. "This is *our* fight, not theirs. *Our* responsibility, not theirs."

"It is nearby," Su-mil said, his large eyes unblinkingly on Twister.

"This is a fool's bargain, Su-mil—"

"Be silent, Ha-ran," Su-mil said calmly, cutting him off. "For here, and for now, I command. What say you, Imperial? I will not tell you more until you have agreed."

Twister took a careful breath. *Obedience and initiative . . .* "I have no authority to bind anyone but myself and my unit," he told the Eickarie. "But if you can indeed get us in past the Warlord's defenses, I pledge that Unit Aurek-Seven

of the Five-oh-First Stormtrooper Legion will do whatever we can to assist in the release of your prisoners.”

“And I’ll bet we won’t be helping you alone, either,” Shadow put in. “The commander will definitely want to know about this.”

“Yes,” Twister said. “We can’t risk using comlinks, but I’ll send one of my men back to contact Aurek Company’s commander and report on our situation and your offer.”

“We cannot accept more delay,” Su-mil warned. “Already this discussion has devoured precious time.”

“Three of us can go with you right now,” Twister offered. “If the commander decides to send in more forces, they can catch up.” He gestured to Cloud. “Get back and report the situation, and strongly urge that he send in backup. Su-mil, can they come here to get directions to this secret back door?”

“I will leave two of my soldiers behind to guide them,” Su-mil said.

My soldiers. Twister felt a new shiver run up his back. This wasn’t just some group of vigilantes or gang of would-be plunderers, then. That could be good, or it could be very dangerous.

But at the moment, he had more important things to worry about. “Go,” he told Cloud, giving the proper hand signal to confirm the order. Cloud nodded acceptance; crossing the room, he stepped through the circle of Eickaries and headed out again into the rain.

Twister looked back at Su-mil. “I have made the best bargain that I can,” he said. “The decision to accept or reject it is now yours.”

Again, Su-mil seemed to study him, as if there were anything he could learn by staring at stormtrooper armor. “I

accept," he declared, lifting his right hand and tracing out a complicated pattern in the air. "I, Su-mil of the Family Meen-tris, Clan Sav-ro, Tribe Hu-shi-crive, do make this bargain with you."

"And I, Jorm Whistler Mackenni of Unit Aurek-Seven of the Five-oh-First Legion of the Imperial Stormtroopers of the Empire of the Hand, make this bargain with you," Twister replied in turn. It felt strange to speak his real name while in full armor, but the situation clearly demanded it. "Where exactly *is* this back door?"

Su-mil's highlights went pink in another Eickarie smile. "It is directly behind you," he said. "Unknown to the Warlord, this particular fortress had *three* watchtowers."

"Four centuries ago, the Cro-sal-trei tribal chief commanding the fortress found himself attacked by two other tribes," Su-mil explained as the three stormtroopers and twenty of the Eickaries made their way down the dark tunnel. "When it was clear that the battle was lost, he and his family and supporters attempted to flee. Unfortunately for them, the attacking tribes knew about the third watchtower and were able to trap them inside the tunnel."

Twister winced as his foot crunched something underfoot. Another bone, probably. The floor was littered with the things, along with rusted twists of metal and occasional scraps of brightly colored clothing. "It would seem they lost that battle, too."

"There was no battle," Su-mil said. "The attackers merely sealed both ends of the tunnel and left them here to die."

Behind Twister, Watchman muttered something. "Would you have preferred many have died in unneeded combat?" Su-mil demanded, half turning to glare at the other.

“Please keep your voice down,” Twister said, throwing Watchman a warning hand signal. Confined inside a narrow tunnel, outnumbered seven to one by a group of Eickarie paramilitaries with the Warlord’s mercenaries not all that far away, was not the time to have a discussion on military ethics. “There might be listening devices at the other end.”

“They will hear nothing,” Su-mil said, still glowering. “The tunnel is heavily protected against detection and attack. We may seem primitive to you of the Empire of the Hand, but we are not savages.”

“I never believed that you were,” Twister assured him. That explained why they hadn’t picked up Su-mil’s soldiers until they’d emerged onto the stairways. The entire watchtower building probably incorporated the same sensor-blocking materials as the tunnel itself. “Why didn’t the next owner unseal it and put it back in operation?”

“It was not known what survival equipment the trapped enemies might have taken inside with them,” Su-mil said. “It was therefore thought prudent to leave the tunnel sealed for at least a year. Unfortunately, before that year ended the victors were overthrown in a sudden attack by yet another tribe.”

Twister nodded his understanding. “Who didn’t know anything about the third watchtower.”

“Correct,” Su-mil said. “And they could not learn otherwise because their victims had already altered the floor plans. This newest group of occupants unwittingly repeated the omission with their own diagrams, and the truth has been hidden ever since.”

“How come *you* know about it?” Shadow asked.

“The family who had the honor of the first tribal leader’s final defeat was mine,” Su-mil said, an unmistakable note of

pride in his voice. "It is a history that has been passed down among us."

With an eye toward holding it as a trump card against some future enemy, no doubt, Twister decided. Little could they have anticipated what sort of enemy that would turn out to be.

"Air vent coming up on the right," Watchman murmured.

"We need to be extra quiet now, Su-mil," Twister warned. "Vents are good at piping sound places where you don't want it to go."

"I see no vent," Su-mil said, craning his neck forward.

"It's recessed," Watchman told him. "But I can see the eddy pattern in the dust."

"You see remarkably well," Su-mil said, lifting a hand over his head and tracing out a pattern with his fingers. Abruptly, the muffled noises of Eickarie footsteps and the softer sounds of weapons rubbing against clothing ceased completely. The aliens became shadows moving in the darkness, quieter even than the stormtroopers.

The vent was there, all right, its grille recessed just as Watchman had predicted. Twister gave it a quick check as the group filed past, but didn't spot any evidence of the warning sensors any reasonable tyrant ought to have installed there. Apparently, the Warlord really *didn't* know about this tunnel.

They were twenty meters past the vent before Su-mil spoke again. "Your companion has remarkable eyesight," he murmured. "I could not see the vent myself until we were within three arms' reach of it."

"Our helmets incorporate various types of sensors," Twister explained. "Watchman is the unit's tech specialist,

which among other things means he has a more advanced set."

"Tech specialist," Su-mil repeated as he looked more closely at Watchman. "I have heard the term, but always assumed it merely meant one who dealt with weapon and vehicle maintenance."

"Not at all," Twister assured him. "You'd be amazed at some of the things they can do."

"We're getting close," Watchman warned.

Twister took the hint and stopped talking. A hundred meters of silence later, they reached the end of the tunnel, blocked by a heavy-looking metal door, gritty with the corrosion of age. For a few minutes the others stood by as Watchman and Shadow examined it, consulting between themselves in clipped technical phrases. Their consultation complete, Shadow pulled out his tube of flash paste and began stuffing it carefully into the cracks around the door. Twister touched Su-mil's arm and motioned him and his soldiers back to a safe distance.

The paste worked with its usual gratifying speed and efficiency, burning the door's edges far enough back for the two stormtroopers to pry the panel free and drag it out of the way. Beyond the door was a second barrier, this one composed of stone blocks cemented together by slabs of grayish mortar a good centimeter thick. "I don't suppose you and your friends had a plan for getting through this one, did you?" Twister murmured to Su-mil as Watchman ran his fingers experimentally over the mortar.

"Of course," Su-mil said, reaching beneath his serape jacket and pulling out a tube of his own. "Catalytic mortar solvent. Of no use against modern structures, but it should be effective against materials of this era."

“We’ll find out in a minute,” Twister said, passing the tube to Watchman. The other unsealed it and began laying out a thin bead along the grayish lines, and a soft sizzling sound wafted its way into the silence. A minute later the blocks began to sink slowly downward as the mortar separating them softened and trickled down the sides of the stone like melted candle wax. Two minutes after that, the process was complete, with the wall reduced to nothing more than a simple stack of discolored blocks.

The vertical compression following the loss of the mortar had left a small gap right at the tunnel ceiling. Twister checked his sensors, confirmed that the air flowing in on them wasn’t poisoned, and gave Watchman a hand signal. The other nodded back, already pulling out the fiber-optic spyscope from its compartment on his belt. He plugged one end into the jack on his helmet and slid the other up through the opening. For a few seconds he moved it back and forth, examining whatever was beyond. “Looks like an old torture chamber,” he said quietly. “Probably unused—lots of dust.”

“Keep it quiet anyway,” Twister said, nodding. “Go ahead and—”

He broke off as a handful of the Eickarie soldiers brushed past him, politely but firmly shouldering the stormtroopers aside. Reaching up through the gap, they got a grip on the topmost blocks and started pulling them inside.

Watchman looked at Twister, his stance one of silent protest. Twister sent him an equally silent calming gesture; reluctantly, the other stepped out of the aliens’ way.

The Eickaries had removed the first tier of stones and were starting on the second when the comlink activation ping sounded in Twister’s headset. “All units: *attack!*” a voice ordered.

“Better snap it up, Su-mil,” Twister said as a flow of orders and tactical reports and the faint sounds of weapons fire began to come from his headset. “Aurek Company’s started its attack.”

“They are working as quickly as possible,” Su-mil replied, his orange spots going a little darker with a sudden emotional intensity. “Does this mean they will send no reinforcements to us?”

“I don’t know,” Twister said, touching the tongue switch that shut off his comlink again and motioning the others to do the same. They couldn’t afford to get distracted by the sounds of a battle they weren’t a part of. “I could call the commander and ask, but that might compromise our position.”

“Then do not do so,” Su-mil said, the orange going darker yet. “If we must do this alone, we will.”

Three minutes later, the Eickaries had cleared away enough of the stones to allow passage. Shadow and Watchman went first, darting one at a time through the gap with their BlasTechs held ready. Su-mil was right behind them, the rest of his soldiers filing through with him before Twister could find a gap in the flow.

He finally got inside and nudged his way through the circle of Eickaries to the door. Shadow and Watchman were listening at the panel, Su-mil standing close behind them. “Report,” he ordered, trying hard to keep his annoyance at the Eickaries out of his voice. The three stormtroopers were clearly the best equipped of the group to lead the way into possible danger, and Su-mil surely knew it.

Still, as Cloud had pointed out earlier, Kariék *was* their world. He supposed that gave them the right to go rushing foolishly forward in its defense.

Watchman lifted his helmet away from the door. "Lots of activity out there," he reported. "All of it a fair distance away, though. From the echo pattern, I'm guessing there's a fairly wide corridor leading straight out from us for five to fifteen meters and then intersecting with a cross corridor."

"The noise is probably reinforcements heading to the watchtowers," Shadow added. "I can't see any other reason for so many people to be this far underground, especially with a major attack under way above."

Twister turned to Su-mil. "You know where the dungeons are?"

"To the right," Su-mil said, gesturing with that hand. "They should not be far."

Twister nodded. If they could avoid the mercenaries and keep the element of surprise, there was a chance they could spring the prisoners and be on their way to the Warlord's inner stronghold before the Lakra tumbled to the fact that they had intruders in their midst. "Is that door locked?"

"It was," Shadow said, swinging the panel open a couple of centimeters.

Twister got a firm grip on his BlasTech. "Go."

Shadow opened the door another couple of centimeters, peered out, then pulled it wide and ducked into the corridor, Watchman and Su-mil right behind him. This time, Twister managed to get ahead of the rest of the pack.

The corridor was wide, low-ceilinged, and dimly lit, with the cross corridor Watchman had deduced about eight meters ahead. The sounds of thudding Lakran feet filled the air, echoing off the stone walls and making it difficult to get a fix on direction or distance. Still, Twister thought as they hurried toward the cross corridor, the entrances to the other watchtowers ought to be at least a couple of corridors away

from their current position, and both of them somewhere off to their left. If the infiltrators could make it to the cross corridor undetected, they would then be moving away from the main focus of activity as they headed for the dungeons.

They were nearly to the cross corridor when their luck ran out.

The six armored mercenaries who came thundering along down the cross corridor nearly ran down Shadow as he started to ease his helmet around the corner. There was a screech of surprise from one of them as they skidded to an uneven halt that left them spread out in a line across the intersection. They fumbled with their blasters, trying to bring them to bear on the unexpected intruders.

Watchman and Shadow were already firing, their BlasTechs sending a rapid-fire stutter of blaster bolts into the torso plates of the two Lakra at their end of the line. Automatically, Twister focused his attention on the other end of the shooting gallery, sending a multiple burst of fire across that mercenary's chest. Beside him, Su-mil was firing at the Lakra beside Twister's opponent, the heavy thuds of his projectile weapon forming a counterpoint to the high-pitched whine of the Imperial blasters.

It was only as his target Lakra began to stagger under his assault that Twister realized that none of the other Eickaries was firing.

Which left two of the Lakra completely unopposed as they brought their weapons around.

The first salvo caught Twister squarely across the chest. But with their weapons still in motion only a small number of the energy bolts actually connected with his armor, the rest under- or overshooting him. There was a sudden gurgle from behind him as one of the Eickaries apparently caught some of the wild shots—

Then Su-mil shifted his aim, abandoning his original target and booming a pair of rounds into each of the as-yet-untouched Lakra.

It wasn't nearly enough to stop them, not as fully armored as they were. But unlike the BlasTechs, the projectile weapon packed a heavy punch. The impact sent the two Lakra staggering, deflecting their own fire into the ceiling for perhaps half a second.

Half a second was enough. Watchman and Shadow had finished off their opponents and now opened fire on the two Su-mil had just rocked back on their heels. Twister shifted his fire back to his original and not-quite-silenced enemy, noticing Su-mil do the same with his.

Three seconds later, it was all over.

Shadow and Watchman were out in the cross corridor straddling the smoking Lakran bodies as they checked both ends of the hall. "Clear," Watchman announced. "But it won't be for long."

"Acknowledged," Twister said, looking behind him at the Eickaries.

They were just standing there, some of them twitching a little, others fingering their weapons uncertainly, all of them staring at the dead enemies.

Enemies they themselves hadn't lifted a finger to help kill.

Twister let his gaze linger another second, then turned to Su-mil. "You called them soldiers?" he asked pointedly.

Su-mil's orange highlights had gone a dusky brown. "They froze with surprise," he said, his voice unreadable. Explanation or excuse, Twister couldn't tell which. "I apologize for their failure. It will not happen again."

"I'd really like to believe that," Twister told him. "Unfortunately, I don't think I can take that chance."

"Do you mean to go back on your promise?" Su-mil asked bluntly.

Twister hesitated. The Eickaries placed great store in promises made between those who had exchanged full names. But at the same time, he had a mission and orders of his own to deal with. "We'll still free your prisoners," he said. "But only *after* we've captured the Warlord."

Su-mil didn't answer. Twister eyed him another second, giving him every opportunity to argue his case. "Then you had best depart," the Eickarie said at last.

"Footsteps," Watchman snapped, he and Shadow stepping back into the partial cover of the corner.

"Direction?" Twister demanded, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he moved forward to join them.

"Could be either," Watchman told him, swiveling his head back and forth. "All these echoes—"

"Never mind." Twister cut him off, coming to a sudden decision. The bulk of the Lakra would still be congregating off to their left to oppose Aurek Company's attack. Therefore, he and his unit would go right. "Head right. Maybe we can skulk our way past them."

He stepped around the corner and hurried down the corridor, the other two stormtroopers forming up behind him. Ten meters ahead, another corridor cut across theirs at an angle. They could hear more thudding footsteps, some of them definitely coming closer—

"Halt!" Su-mil's voice barked suddenly from behind him. "Lower your weapons!"

Twister turned, sheer surprise bringing him to a stop. Su-mil and his soldiers had poured into the corridor behind the Imperials and assembled themselves into a classic two-tier firing wall. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

And then, ten meters behind the Eickaries, a dozen Lakra suddenly appeared around a corner, surging down the passageway toward them like a bad-tempered river. There was another burst of noise from behind him, and Twister turned back to see another mercenary squad appear from the angled corridor ahead.

Unit Aurek-Seven of the 501st had been trapped.

"Lower your weapons to the ground," Su-mil repeated, lifting his rifle to point squarely at Twister's face. "Do it now, or you will die."

There didn't seem to be many options. "Do it," Twister growled to Shadow and Watchman, crouching down and setting his BlasTech onto the floor.

Shifting his rifle to a one-handed grip, Su-mil lifted the other hand above the heads of his soldiers and gestured toward the approaching Lakra. "Fellow servants of our Glorious Majesty!" he shouted. "We have captured them!"

The first wave of Lakra picked their way past the bodies of their comrades at the intersection and came to a halt behind the Eickaries, their weapons trained warily on the natives' backs. Leaving the rest of his squad on guard, the mercenary leader strode through the group to Su-mil's side, shoving aside anyone not quick enough to get out of his way. "What have we here?" he growled in a voice that sounded like rocks being run through a fruit blender, the heavy blaster in his massive hand holding steady on Twister's chest. "Imperial stormtroopers. An interesting catch."

He looked sideways at Su-mil. “*If* they were indeed caught,” he added pointedly. “Who are you, and what are you doing uninvited in His Glorious Majesty’s home?”

“I am Su-mil.” Su-mil’s aim shifted slightly, as if he no longer needed to keep as close a watch on the Imperials now that the Lakra had arrived. “I am a loyal subject of His Glorious Majesty, who finds heartache in the invasion of my home by Imperial intruders.”

“That may be as it may be,” the squad leader said. “Why are you here?”

“Ah, that is a tale of extreme Eickarie courage,” Su-mil said proudly. “We found them on the street, clearly intent on attacking our Glorious Majesty’s home. They pointed their weapons at us and demanded we lead them inside.”

Twister frowned. That wasn’t at all the way it had been. What was Su-mil trying to do, make himself and his friends look more heroic?

“And you did so?” the Lakra prompted.

Again, Su-mil’s aim twitched fractionally to the side. “We showed them where the tunnel was hidden and brought them through it,” he said.

“How?” the Lakra asked. “Both towers were guarded.”

“There is an unguarded entrance.”

“You will take us to this entrance as soon as these enemies have been secured,” the squad leader said ominously. “Did more of them come in?”

“No,” Su-mil said. “These three were all we brought in.”

“Yet others may follow,” the Lakra said, turning halfway around and giving a brief order in his own language. One of the mercenaries grunted a response, and a third of them turned and hurried back the way they’d come. Again

stepping carefully over the bodies of their fallen comrades, they returned to the corner where they'd first appeared and set up a defensive position. "And these?" the leader continued, gesturing back toward the dead Lakra. "What happened to them?"

"The Imperials shot them down," Su-mil said, his voice contemptuous. Again, his weapon shifted. "I and my people played no part in the slaughter."

"Despite these weapons you carry?" the squad leader snapped, his voice suddenly heavy with suspicion. "And how do you come by them, if the invaders merely stopped you on the street?"

Su-mil's weapon shifted aim again. "The weapons are ours," he conceded. "We told the Imperials we would agree to assist them." Once more, his aim shifted. "But we would never use such weapons against our Glorious Majesty and our fellow servants."

Twister grimaced. He was a traitor, all right, a traitor to his own people as well as to the Imperials who were bleeding and dying to try to help them. And a shameless smooth-talker on top of it, standing there looking calmly at his victims as he pointed his weapon at Twister's left eye.

His *left* eye?

Twister stiffened as it suddenly clicked. The weapon's apparently arbitrary movement wasn't arbitrary at all. It was, instead, Su-mil carefully alternating his aim between Twister's left and right eyes.

Left-handed: a lie. Right-handed: the truth.

Quickly, he ran back through the conversation, this time paying attention to where the weapon had been pointed at each exchange. *We have captured them—a lie. I am Su-mil—the truth. I am a loyal subject of His Glorious Majesty—a*

lie. We found them on the street, clearly intent on attacking our Glorious Majesty's home—the truth. They pointed their weapons at us and demanded we lead them inside—a lie. We showed them where the tunnel was hidden—the truth. I and my people played no part in the slaughter—a lie. We told the Imperials we would agree to assist them—the truth.

We would never use such weapons against our Glorious Majesty and our fellow servants—a lie.

And for the first time since Aurek-Seven had run into Su-mil and his soldiers, Twister felt a tight smile creasing his face. A clever and resourceful fellow, this Su-mil. And he was obviously hoping Twister and his fellow Imperials were the same.

Because it was suddenly clear what the Eickarie had in mind. He'd told the truth about an unguarded entrance into the fortress, but the Lakran squad leader had jumped to the conclusion that that entrance was connected to one of the two known tunnels. The fact that he'd sent some of his troops back to guard against any further intrusion from that direction was proof.

Which meant that if Aurek Company *had* sent reinforcements, they might be emerging any moment now into the middle of a split enemy force.

Both parts of which were facing the wrong direction.

Reaching out with his tongue, he touched his comlink switch. "Cloud: report," he murmured, pitching his voice low enough to be inaudible outside his helmet.

Cloud's voice in his ear was the most welcome thing he'd heard for days. "We're in the room beyond the wall," Cloud's voice came promptly in his ears. "Situation?"

"Pinned to right of first cross," Twister said, sensing Shadow and Watchman stir slightly as their comlinks came

on and they picked up the news of the approaching reinforcements. "Enemy split: four-eight. Friendlies pinned with us to right."

"Acknowledged," Cloud said. "On our way."

"It's good to know the Glorious Majesty has such loyal supporters," the Lakran squad leader rumbled to Su-mil with only a hint of sarcasm. "You will put your weapons on the floor now."

"But we face very dangerous enemies," Su-mil protested, his weapon shifting to Twister's right eye. "We cannot know when it will be necessary to fire."

"The Lakra will do any firing that is necessary," the squad leader assured him, turning his blaster away from Twister and pressing the muzzle against the side of Su-mil's neck. "Now. Put down your weapons."

"You'll have no trouble on that score anyway," Twister said, lifting his right hand and pointing his forefinger straight at Su-mil's right eye. "When you see your friends falling in front of you, you'll know the time of death has arrived."

"Silence!" the squad leader spat, sending a baleful glare at the stormtroopers. From Twister's headset came a pair of acknowledging double-clicks as Shadow and Watchman confirmed his veiled order. "Very soon now, you will be begging for the time of death to be allowed you."

"Countdown: three," Cloud's voice murmured in Twister's ear.

"Oh, I don't know," Twister said proudly, raising his voice to fill the corridor and help cover any inadvertent footfalls. "Somehow, I don't think so."

And as the last word rang through the air, a group of white-armored men boiled into the corridor behind the Eickaries.

Twister didn't wait to see any more. Even as the reinforcements began firing at both ends of the split Lakran force, he and the rest of Aurek-Seven threw themselves flat onto the floor.

Leaving a direct line of fire between the mercenaries behind them and the Eickarie firing wall.

Su-mil had promised that his soldiers wouldn't freeze the next time. He was right. Twister hadn't even gotten a grip on his dropped weapon when the hodgepodge of Eickarie weapons opened up, laying down a blaze of fire at the Lakran squad. By the time he had scooped up the BlasTech and rolled over ready to use it, the battle was over.

He scrambled hastily to his feet. "Report," he called into his comlink.

"Clear," Cloud's voice came back. "No casualties."

The same, unfortunately, couldn't be said for the Eickaries. Of the twenty soldiers Su-mil had brought in with them, six were on the floor, four writhing silently in pain, the other two already dead. Even outnumbered as they'd been, the Lakran squad had given a good account of themselves.

At least, he hoped all the casualties had been caused by the Lakra. It would be very unfortunate if some of the rescuers had accidentally overshot their targets.

"This way, Twister," Cloud called. Twister looked up from the Eickarie casualties to find the rest of the stormtrooper squad moving back along the corridor toward the intersection where the newly dead Lakra were lying. "The company's meeting heavy resistance in the tunnels," he went on. "New orders are to attack from this end and try to break up their defenses."

Twister looked at Su-mil. The Eickarie was standing over the body of the Lakran squad leader, his eyes on Twister, his

orange highlights gone dark again. "I'm sorry, but we can't do that," he told Cloud. "I made a deal with Su-mil to clear the dungeons first."

Cloud stopped short, turning around to look back at his unit leader. "Twister, this was a direct order," he warned.

"Understood," Twister said. "Good luck. We'll join you when we can."

One of the other stormtroopers had paused beside Cloud. "Yet you said you would not help us," Su-mil reminded Twister quietly.

"That was when I wasn't sure I could rely on your soldiers," Twister told him. "You've now proven that I can." A movement caught his eye: Cloud and the other stormtrooper had finished their conversation, and Cloud was jogging back down the corridor toward them as the rest of the stormtroopers resumed their march in the other direction. "I hope you're not here to argue," he warned as Cloud came to a halt in front of him.

"Hardly," Cloud assured him. "I decided that if they can manage without three of us, they can probably manage without four."

"And whole-unit court-martials are so much more efficient?" Shadow said dryly.

"Something like that," Cloud agreed. "Let's move."

Su-mil detailed three of his soldiers to take their dead and wounded back into the relative safety of the tunnel. Then, with Su-mil and Twister in the lead, the twelve remaining Eickaries and four stormtroopers set off for the dungeons.

They met no further resistance. Apparently, the squad that had burst in on them from this direction had been the last Lakra who hadn't already been summoned to either the tunnel defenses or to the surface. Alternating his attention between the distant battle reports, his helmet sensors, and the hallways themselves, Twister wondered if he dared hope that even the dungeon guards might have been called away to active service.

No such luck. At Su-mil's murmured warning, he and Shadow swung out around the last corner to find two armored Lakra standing at attention beside a massive metal door, blaster carbines slung over their shoulders.

A direct assault on the dungeons was apparently the last thing anyone in the Warlord's command structure was expecting. The two stormtroopers got off a solid volley before the guards had time to do more than scramble madly for their weapons. As the blaster bolts shredded the mercenaries' armor, Su-mil stepped out of concealment and finished the job with a pair of shots from his projectile weapon. "We must hurry," the Eickarie said as the two Lakra thudded to the floor.

"Wait a second," Cloud said as Watchman headed for the door. "We agreed to get you to the dungeons—"

"You agreed to assist in freeing the prisoners," Su-mil cut him off. "Come. Now."

"Twister?" Cloud asked, his mind clearly on their comrades fighting in the tunnels a quarter of the fortress away.

"You heard him," Twister said, suppressing his own impatience. "Come on."

The outer door opened onto a wide landing from which a dozen steps led down to a large, circular cavern with more

locked doors spaced around its circumference. "How fast can you open them?" Su-mil asked, looking around.

"Very," Watchman assured him, stepping to a desk at one side of the landing and picking up a knife-blade-shaped data card. "All it takes is the key."

"Go," Twister told him, turning the muzzle of his BlasTech toward the door they'd entered through. "We'll watch for trouble here."

With the key in hand, the release did indeed go quickly. But as the imprisoned Eickaries began to emerge, blinking, into the brighter light of the cavern, Twister could sense that something was wrong. Many of them, not surprisingly, cringed back at the sight of Watchman's armor as he opened their doors, staring with the same fascinated suspicion at the other three stormtroopers grouped together on the landing. More baffling was the fact that they seemed to be avoiding not only their fellow prisoners but Su-mil and his soldiers as well.

It was Shadow who caught on first. "They're all from different tribes," he murmured.

"And they were captured before the United Tribes Agreements were put together," Twister said, a sour taste in his mouth as he understood. "Which means they're still fighting their petty little tribal disputes."

He thought he'd been speaking quietly. Apparently, not quietly enough. "Our disputes are *not* petty," Ha-ran insisted, glowering up at the stormtroopers from his position at the foot of the stairs.

Twister frowned down at him. After his loud complaints in the tailor shop, the older Eickarie hadn't said a word during the trip through the tunnel. As Twister thought about it, though, he realized that, silent or not, Ha-ran had always been close at hand, hovering at Su-mil's elbow.

He was just wondering what that might mean when Ha-ran started up the steps, his gait suddenly stiff. "Move away," he ordered the stormtroopers, gesturing them back. "Su-mil?"

Su-mil was instantly at his side, taking his arm and assisting him up the steps. "Was he hit?" Shadow asked quietly.

"I didn't think so," Twister said, looking Ha-ran up and down. There certainly weren't any bloodstains or scorch marks on his clothing.

"He is merely old," Su-mil said, gesturing the stormtroopers back as he and Ha-ran reached the landing. "Older than you realize. Move back, please. Prince Ha-ran wishes to address the prisoners."

Twister felt his jaw drop. "*Prince* Ha-ran?"

Ha-ran ignored him, turning instead to face the mass of Eickaries below. "*Ha-ran mish-ra hee-sae sha-kae drof-si-shae-ral*," he called, holding a hand out over the crowd.

Twister frowned in concentration. Aurek Company had gotten a two-day crash course in the main Eickarie trade language on the trip here, which had so far served him fairly well in his limited contacts with the natives. Unfortunately, Ha-ran was going way too fast for him to keep up.

Apparently, the others weren't doing any better. "Where's a protocol droid when you need one?" Cloud muttered as Ha-ran continued speaking.

"He said, 'I am Ha-ran of the Family Mish-ra, Clan Sha-kae, prince of the Tribe Si-shae-ral,' " Su-mil said softly from beside them. " 'I am here to speak of the present and of the future.' "

Cloud stirred. "Twister, we don't have time for speeches."

“Quiet,” Twister ordered, gazing at Ha-ran with new eyes. Eickarie princes rarely went into combat, and never without fifty thousand soldiers along for the ride. This was definitely one for the record lists. “Go on, Su-mil.”

“ ‘The present is that we are in our final battle against our oppressors,’ ” Su-mil continued, translating, as Ha-ran’s proud voice echoed from the dingy stone. “ ‘But unless you embrace the new future that we the United Tribes of Kariiek have forged, we will be no better off than we were before they came.’ ”

“I don’t get it,” Shadow murmured. “Why do we even care what a bunch of shaggy prisoners think? Shouldn’t they be grateful enough at being sprung that they’ll do what they’re told?”

“You do not understand,” Su-mil said, his orange patches going a dark yellow. “These are not ordinary criminals or even ordinary opponents to the Warlord’s tyranny. Many of these Eickaries are nobles and elders, taken as hostages to ensure the good behavior of their tribes.”

“It didn’t work very well, did it?” Watchman put in. “Hostages or not, pretty much the whole planet signed on to the United Tribes Agreements.”

“The Warlord might still choose to execute them, or use them as living shields to ensure his own escape,” Su-mil pointed out. “That was the reason we feared your unexpected attack, and why I insisted they be freed before the Warlord was routed from his inner sanctum.”

“I understand,” Twister said. “You couldn’t just let them be slaughtered; but you also couldn’t afford to let them come out and try to pick up their lives where they left off. If they did, you might slip right back into the old cycle of endless tribal warfare.”

Su-mil looked closely at him. "That is indeed the danger," he confirmed. "You are more perceptive than I had realized."

"And you in turn are rather deeper than I realized," Twister returned. "Let me guess: none of these prisoners is from your own tribe?"

"That is correct," Su-mil said. "The most important are from Ha-ran's tribe and its allies, which is why he volunteered to come with us tonight. Of all those who might have spoken to them of peace, he has the greatest chance of convincing them."

"How's it working?" Shadow asked.

Su-mil gazed down at the crowd. "Not well, I fear," he conceded. "Those of the Tribe Si-shae-ral are listening closely, but many of the others seem impatient and closed-minded. They may believe it to be a deception."

"In the meantime we have a job of our own to do," Cloud said grimly. "And I don't think we can afford to hang around here any longer."

Twister nodded reluctant agreement. From the running dialogue of orders and reports streaming through his headset, it sounded like the rest of Aurek Company was in an uphill battle back in the two main tunnels. "He's right, Su-mil," he said. "We'll have to leave you to sort things out on your own."

He was starting to turn away when a sudden thought struck him. "Unless," he went on, "you'd like to invite them to come along and see what can be accomplished by people who don't fight among themselves."

Su-mil's highlights went to a shade of green only slightly lighter than the rest of his face, the Eickarie version of a frown. "You refer to the soldiers of your Empire of the Hand?"

“Of course,” Watchman said, catching on. “We’ll show them how we work together to defeat the Lakra who subjugated them.”

“And maybe even capture the Warlord along with it,” Shadow added.

Su-mil’s highlights warmed from green to pink in a tight smile. “They might indeed find that instructive,” he agreed. “Perhaps Ha-ran should invite his tribesmen to assist, as well.”

“Why not?” Twister agreed casually. “I’m sure they’d enjoy watching history in the making as the Hu-shi-crive and Si-shae-ral tribes overthrow the Warlord.”

“I will suggest it.” His highlights fading back to orange, Su-mil turned and began speaking quietly to Ha-ran.

Twister gestured to Watchman and Shadow. “There has to be an armory around here somewhere for the guards,” he said. “Go find it.”

The others nodded acknowledgment and left. “This had better not take long,” Cloud warned, his hands fingering his BlasTech restlessly.

“Understood,” Twister said, gazing out on the crowd and trying to gauge their reaction to Ha-ran’s new suggestion. “But if this works, I think it’ll be worth the wait.”

It worked, all right, and faster than Twister had expected. Faced with the possibility that some other tribes would grab more than their share of the glory, the newly freed prisoners barely let Ha-ran finish his comments before they were clamoring to be allowed to assist. At Twister’s suggestion, the prince split the new fighting force into three groups, with each group lining up along traditional tribal alliances as much as possible. By the time the squads were ready, Watchman and Shadow had the guards’ armory open.

Five minutes later, they were ready. Two of the groups, under Shadow's and Cloud's command and bolstered by some of Su-mil's soldiers, headed toward the two tunnel exits where Aurek Company was still trying to break through the Lakran resistance. The third group, including Twister, Watchman, and the rest of Su-mil's force, headed inward toward the Warlord's central stronghold.

"I do not trust the apparent safety," Su-mil commented as the group slipped through the empty corridors. "Surely they must expect an attack in this direction."

"That depends on whether anyone's figured out yet how we got in," Twister told him, keeping a sharp eye out for trouble. "Remember, the first report from the two squads that had us pincer'd would have indicated the attack had come from a secret way in through one of the known tunnels."

"And since the first report was also the last," Watchman added, "we've got a fair chance of getting pretty far in before they figure out what's happening."

"But surely they will not assume that the attackers at those tunnels will not break through," Su-mil objected. "Surely they will be prepared for more fighting."

"Oh, they will," Watchman said, suddenly putting up a hand. "And I'd say they're prepared for it right about here."

Twister peered into the gloom as the group came to a halt. Three meters ahead, the corridor they were traveling along opened up into a large, high-ceilinged room whose stone walls were decorated with colorful flags and imprint shields. Probably those of the last tribe to own the fortress, Twister guessed, before the Warlord had come in and booted them out. There were several long and heavy-looking wooden tables laid out throughout the room, with equally

heavy wooden chairs surrounding them. In the wall directly across from their corridor was a large metal door.

"It is the storm banquet chamber," Su-mil identified it, keeping his voice low. "A place for feasting in comfort and safety when the spring storms endanger the towers."

Twister nodded. According to the floor plans the Eickarie leaders had drawn for them, the fortress's inner stronghold was a round room completely surrounded by a larger circular area that was broken up into four segments. From the curve of the wall he could see from where they stood, it looked like this storm banquet chamber was one of those four circular segments. "We're almost there," he said. "Booby-trapped?"

"Not too seriously," Watchman said, his helmet moving back and forth as he examined the room. "There's a scent of explosives: grenades under some of the tables or chairs."

"Command frequencies?" Twister asked.

"Nope," Watchman said regretfully. "No carriers, either, so I'm guessing they're not remotes. Probably fused with proximity triggers."

"Too bad," Twister said. With remotes, the Imperials could often find and lock down the control frequencies, rendering such devices useless. There wasn't much they could do with proximity fuses except identify and locate them. "I guess they're learning. What else?"

"Two sniper hollows, one on each side of the door behind those long banners, with one Lakra hiding in each," Watchman said. "The door itself is running enough current to kill a bantha, and the Warlord probably has fifty Lakra inside the stronghold with him. Aside from that, it seems pretty clear."

Beside Twister, Su-mil stirred. "Do we simply stand here?" he demanded.

"Patience," Twister advised, frowning across the room at the electrified metal door. There was something about this whole thing that didn't feel quite right. "He's trying to locate the grenades."

One of the released prisoners growled something. "He says that is not possible," Su-mil translated.

"Tell him he'd be amazed at what's possible for the Empire of the Hand," Twister said, still studying the door.

Su-mil turned to the other Eickarie, murmuring in their trade language, and Watchman stirred. "All right," he said. "There are grenades beneath those chairs"—he pointed at two of the ones closest to them—"that end of that table"—he indicated one of the tables to the right—"and those chairs there and there," he finished, pointing to two chairs on opposite sides of the hidden sniper hollows. "Those last two are probably there to blast anyone trying to sneak up on the snipers from the side. There are a few more, but they're off to the sides, away from our optimal attack vectors."

"Okay," Twister said, running his eyes across the blast points and working out a sequence. The sniper and underchair grenade combination was a trick they'd seen the Lakra use before: if an attacker came in high, the sniper would get him; if he came in low to avoid the sniper, he was right in position to take the full brunt of the grenade blast. "We'll send the Eickaries back a ways down the corridor and blow the two closest grenades. The blasts should give us enough cover to move in toward the door, avoiding the booby-trapped table. Once we're in front of the door, we'll use whipcords to grab the two chairs on the sides, pull them in front of the sniper hollows, and detonate their grenades. That should either take the snipers out of the game

completely or at least slow them down long enough for us to get the door open.”

“Sounds good,” Watchman said, shifting his BlasTech to one hand and getting his whipcord thrower ready. “Su-mil, get them back.”

Su-mil gave a brief order over his shoulder, and the rest of Eickaries backed up a few steps. “How do we detonate the grenades?” he asked, making no move to join the rest of his people. “It will not be easy to shoot through those chairs.”

“Just watch,” Twister said, wondering if he should insist Su-mil go back with the others. But the young Eickarie would probably refuse, and they didn’t have time to argue. “Watchman?”

“Ready,” the other said.

“Go.”

With a faint hiss of compressed air, Watchman’s whipcord snapped outward toward one of the two booby-trapped chairs. The grapple on the end caught the backrest just above the seat, and with a flick of his wrist Watchman pulled backward. The chair tipped sideways toward him and toppled onto the floor, putting the heavy wooden seat squarely between the stormtroopers and the hidden grenade.

As the room echoed with the thud, Twister lobbed a concussion grenade over the edge of the seat into the path of the other grenade’s proximity sensor.

The double blast was deafening, or at least it would have been without the sonic cutoff protection of their helmets. The physical effect on the room was equally spectacular, the force of the blast rocking everything in its path and sending clouds of splinters and dust into the air. The sound of the

blast had barely faded away before Watchman disengaged the grapple and fired the whipcord into the second of the nearest rigged chairs. Another yank, another toppled chair, and a second blast and cloud of debris joined the first.

Half a heartbeat later the two stormtroopers were on the move, cutting across the room at a sharp angle to avoid the booby-trapped table, then cutting back and braking to a halt directly in front of the electrified door. Twister had his whipcord thrower out, fumbling his BlasTech slightly as he tried to handle both devices at once.

“Pull the chair over,” Su-mil’s voice shouted in his ear. “I will detonate it.”

Twister blinked in surprise. Su-mil had followed right behind them and was crouched between the two stormtroopers, his own weapon held ready. “Right,” he shouted back, setting down his BlasTech and firing his whipcord. The grapple caught, and with both hands free it was a simple job to pull it over and drag it to just in front of the hidden sniper hollow. “Go!”

Su-mil fired, and Twister winced slightly as the edge of the explosion slammed into him, threatening to knock him off his feet. He glanced into his rear display, confirming that his armored body had shielded Su-mil, just as another blast rocked him from the other direction. “Clear,” Watchman called. “Cover me, and I’ll start on the door.”

“Right,” Twister said, scooping up his BlasTech again. The grenade’s explosion had ripped the concealing banner from the wall, revealing a concave metal door with narrow viewing and firing slits in it. Nothing seemed to be stirring within; apparently the grenade had punched enough stuff through the openings to knock the sniper inside at least temporarily out of commission.

They hadn't been so lucky with the other sniper, though. Twister turned to see a heavy blaster poke its nose through the lower slit, swiveling toward the intruders by the door. "Get behind me!" he snapped to Su-mil, swinging up his own weapon and firing a burst across the viewing slit.

There was no effect. The blaster continued to track toward them—

And then, suddenly, a withering hail of fire erupted from the corridor. The Eickaries whom Su-mil had sent down the corridor for safety were on the move, targeting the Lakran sniper as they charged across the room.

The Lakran sniper reacted to the new threat exactly the way Twister would have expected a trained soldier to. Abandoning his attack on the stormtroopers, he shifted his aim to the advancing Eickaries, and several of them toppled over with grunts or shrieks of pain as his blaster began to take its toll.

But there were too many of them, and the Lakra had too little time. Even as Twister added his BlasTech's firepower to theirs, three of the former prisoners made it all the way across the shooting gallery. With their backs pressed against the wall to either side, they jammed the muzzles of their weapons into the slits and fired half a dozen bursts each. There was a single dying stutter from the sniper's weapon, and then the muzzle abruptly tipped upward and slipped back inside.

"Sha-mees craa shes-ayi," Su-mil called. "I have praised their valor in your name," he added to Twister. "I trust that is acceptable."

"Absolutely," Twister assured him as another pair of Eickaries ran to the quiet sniper hollow, firing a few volleys into the slits to make sure it stayed quiet. "Add our thanks

for the timely assist, and then tell them to spread out and stand guard while we get this door open.”

Su-mil called out another order, and the Eickaries obediently spread out across the room, pushing over tables and chairs for cover and digging in for combat. Old rivalries or not, Twister thought wryly, there was nothing like a common enemy to draw people together.

He shifted his attention back to the door. Watchman was kneeling in front of it, his BlasTech on the floor beside him, nearly finished assembling the components he would need to safely short out the current. “Status?”

“Almost ready,” Watchman reported.

Twister nodded and turned back to Su-mil. “Another minute—”

He broke off. Su-mil was staring at the door, his highlights a very dark green. “What’s the matter?”

“This door,” Su-mil said slowly. “There is something not right about it.”

Twister felt a tingle at the back of his neck. One soldier with a bad feeling might be nerves or overreaction. Two soldiers with the same bad feeling was something worth paying attention to. “Can you tell what it is?”

“No,” Su-mil said, his highlights going a shade darker as he frowned a little harder.

“Hold it a second, Watchman,” Twister said, his eyes running methodically across the door. The sensors still read it as solid metal charged with a high-voltage current. The lock? No; that looked all right.

He looked around the room where the Eickaries were preparing for battle, painfully aware that precious seconds were ticking away. The Warlord would have to be both deaf

and stupid not to realize his sanctum had been breached, and no matter how badly his mercenaries might be pinned down he would absolutely find a way to shake some of them loose to deal with this threat.

In fact, they were almost certainly on their way. Twister glanced back at the corridor they'd come in by, half expecting to find a mass of armored Lakra already marching toward them. But the corridor was still deserted, as far back as he could see.

As far back as he could see . . .

He snorted with exasperation. So simple, and so obvious. "Put it away," he told Watchman. "This isn't the door."

"What?" the other demanded, sounding stunned as he looked up.

"It's a decoy," Twister said, pointing behind him. "Would *you* put the door to *your* stronghold right at the end of a long hallway, where your enemies would have a fifty-meter running start to slam a battering ram into it?"

"Or a clear shot for a missile barrage," Su-mil added, his highlights fading again to dark orange. "Of course. The real door will be concealed, and offline with any of the hallways."

Twister nodded. "So let's find it."

It didn't take long. Now that he knew what to look for, he quickly spotted the subtle cracks in the mortar between the stones a couple of meters to the side of the rightmost sniper hollow. "Here it is," he announced, gesturing to the others with his BlasTech. "We must hurry," Su-mil warned as the two stormtroopers started stuffing flash paste around the door. "There may be other ways through which they can escape."

"None that your people know about, anyway," Twister told him, focusing his attention for a moment on the

streaming reports coming in through his headset. "Even if there are, it won't gain them anything. Aurek Company's just broken through both tunnels and are forming up now with Cloud and Shadow and the rest of your people. Another minute and they'll be on their way here."

"You think we should wait for them?" Watchman asked.

"No," Su-mil said firmly, his large eyes shining. "We have come this far. Let us be the ones to present to them the prize."

"Besides, they're still controlling their main defenses from in there," Twister reminded him. "The sooner we take him, the sooner we can shut them down."

Thirty seconds later, they were ready. "Stand clear," Watchman cautioned the Eickaries, who had gathered together in front of the hidden door. "When it goes, it'll go hard."

"And tell them to let us go in first," Twister added as Su-mil translated Watchman's warning. "They'll still have plenty of firepower waiting in there, and we're the only ones in armor."

Su-mil gave another order. "Do not worry," he told Twister, switching back to Basic. "We will do what is necessary."

"Okay," Twister said, taking another step back himself. "Watchman: go."

The other squeezed the detonator, and the flash paste lit up with its usual destructive brilliance. Twister checked his sensors one final time, half expecting some of the Lakra inside to have slipped out through one of the stronghold's other doors and launch a last-minute sortie. But apparently the Warlord preferred to keep all his bodyguards between him and the attackers.

The flash paste hit its final crescendo, and Twister caught a glimpse of the sudden network of stress cracks in the stone before the entire door abruptly shattered into a spray of blackened gravel. Reflexively, he winced back as the shower of rocks washed over him—

Twister was nearly knocked off his feet as the Eickaries surged past him. Screaming in defiance, they charged through the opening.

“Wait!” Twister shouted. “Su-mil—”

But Su-mil had already joined the general rush through the door. “Our world!” he called back over his shoulder. “Our ways!”

With that he was gone, vanished into the stronghold and the heavy weapons fire now coming from inside. Snarling a curse, Twister regained his balance and tried to force his way through the rear of the Eickaries’ formation, listening helplessly to the sounds of gunfire and the screams of the casualties.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the firing ceased. Shouldering his way past the last cluster of Eickaries, Twister finally made it inside.

The stronghold was a scene of carnage. Eickarie bodies were everywhere, some still twitching, others lying motionless with the heaviness of death. Another dozen were still standing, several of them clutching painfully at torsos or limbs. Sprawled on the floor beyond them were a dozen Lakra bodies, the last of the Warlord’s bodyguard. None of those bodies were twitching.

And beyond them, still wearing his fancy full-body armor, was the Warlord himself.

He was lying on his back on the floor, his dark faceplate turned upward, his arms spread to the sides. Standing over

him, his feet pinning the Warlord's wrists to the floor, his projectile weapon held ready for action, was Su-mil.

But his gun wasn't pointed at the Warlord, prepared to deliver the final killing shot that Eickarie honor demanded. It was pointed instead at the semicircle of Eickaries facing him.

His eyes turned to Twister as the stormtrooper stepped through the ring of Eickaries. "I have told them," he said, his voice wheezing; and only then did Twister notice the blackened section of clothing on his left side. "We made a bargain. You freed our people; I have left the Warlord alive."

"Thank you," Twister said, touching his comm tongue switch as he stepped to Su-mil's side and turned to face the other Eickaries. Over by the main status board, he noted peripherally, the thudding of heavy circuit breakers could be heard as Watchman began closing down the fortress's defenses. "Command; Aurek-Seven," he called. "We've penetrated the stronghold, and are shutting down the remotes."

"Acknowledged, Aurek-Seven," a crisp voice came back. "What about the Warlord?"

Twister felt Su-mil sag against his side. "We have him," he told the commander. "Thanks to the Eickaries."

Su-mil was taking a rest break at the rehab room's resistance machine when Twister finally tracked him down. "There you are," he said, coming up behind the Eickarie. "You may not have heard, but the doctors say you're healthy enough to leave here."

"I have heard, thank you," Su-mil replied. "But I have chosen to stay until my injury is completely healed." His highlights turned pale blue with curiosity as he looked

Twister up and down. "Even in a hospital you wear your armor?"

"Orders," Twister said. "Your new leaders aren't very happy that the Warlord hasn't been turned over to them for trial and execution. Some of the people seem inclined to take out their frustration on anyone they catch wandering out in the open."

"It is not only you who are so affected," Su-mil said ruefully. "My role in those events has also been cast in an unflattering light." He gestured around him. "One reason why I remain here instead of returning to my own home."

"Your role was to help end the war and lift the oppression of your world," Twister reminded him.

"That aspect seems unimportant to many," Su-mil said. "All they see is that I made a fool's bargain that cost the Eickarie people their right of vengeance."

"If you ask me, it's this whole right of vengeance thing that's kept your tribes tangled in wars all these centuries," Twister pointed out. "Anyway, whether or not your people understand the bigger picture right now, history will vindicate your actions. *And* your bargain."

"Perhaps," Su-mil said. "But history is a long way off. Until it arrives, I must endure the looks and the whispers and the faded orange of my people."

"Oh, that future might arrive sooner than you think," Twister said thoughtfully. "Your newly formed InterTribal Council has been invited to a meeting this afternoon where they'll find out why exactly we wanted the Warlord taken alive."

"And that reason is?"

"Because, just like you, we had no idea who or what he was," Twister said. "The way he walked around encased in

that armor, we couldn't tell whether he was another Lakra, a rogue Eickarie, or someone from a species we hadn't run into before. And if it was the latter, we needed to find out what he was, where he came from, and whether he was an aberration or whether his whole species liked to go off conquering other planets."

"And?" Su-mil prompted.

"Box Number Three," Twister said grimly. "Brand-new species, not in any of our files. He's been pretty blustery, but we've managed to pry the location of his home system out of him, and we're putting together a task force to head over there and make contact."

"I trust you will be careful."

"Don't worry," Twister assured him. "Even the cockiest people tend to go a little quiet when they find a couple of Star Destroyers cruising by overhead. If they're a threat, we'll find out and deal with them appropriately."

"I have never seen a Star Destroyer," Su-mil commented. "I hope to someday have that privilege."

"As a matter of fact, I think that can be arranged," Twister said, his voice studiously casual. "I've been instructed to ask whether you might be interested in applying for a commission in the Imperial Five-oh-First."

Su-mil's highlights turned dark red in surprise. "I?"

"Why not?" Twister countered. "You're intelligent, discerning, combat-skilled, and able to think on your feet. On top of that, you're willing to trust your leaders or comrades and obey orders even if you don't fully understand the reasons behind them. Put all those together and you've got a pretty rare package, one the Five-oh-First is always on the lookout for."

"And you accept nonhumans into your ranks?"

“Like I said, it’s a rare combination,” Twister said. “As long as your world is a member of the Empire of the Hand, you’re eligible.”

“You assume Kariiek will join you.”

Twister glanced around, making sure no one else was within earshot. “Actually, those negotiations have already started,” he told Su-mil, lowering his voice. “I get the feeling your leaders would like to have a permanent Imperial presence in the system as soon as possible, just in case the Warlord’s people turn out to be as unfriendly as he was.”

Su-mil turned to gaze out the window. “Don’t get me wrong,” Twister warned. “An offer like this doesn’t automatically entitle you to a commission. You’ll have to work, and work hard, before you earn the right to wear the white armor.”

“If I succeed, I will no doubt be perceived by some as having deserted my people,” Su-mil pointed out quietly. “And if I fail, those perceptions will still be there.”

“That’s possible,” Twister conceded. “Even if your leaders decide to join the Empire of the Hand, it may be a long time before the common people really accept that.”

“And so you offer me yet another fool’s bargain,” Su-mil said, his highlights going pink with a wry smile.

Twister shrugged. “Sometimes those bargains work out in the end,” he said. “Think about it, and let me know when you’re ready.”

“I am ready now,” Su-mil said, standing up. “As you no doubt have already foreseen.”

Twister smiled behind his faceplate. “As it happens, I have a transport waiting.”

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