

[Back To Index](#)

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Contributions To The Cause

by [Alison Glover](#)

Han Solo rolled, fetching up behind a stack of packing crates as a shower of blaster bolts impacted harmlessly on the bulkhead beside him.

The blasts also hit the floor and ceiling of the narrow corridor and the crates.

But not Han.

They didn't hit any of people beside or behind him, either, a fact which delighted him, but which also stretched the bounds of possibility way beyond their elastic limit. And although Luke had been practising hard with the Force, Han didn't think he was that good.

Not yet, away.

This was hardly the time or place to speculate on Luke's growing abilities. Han settled for yelling, "Kid, was that you?"

"You mean Luke?" a female voice called. Alyn, one of the Alliance's technical types. "He's helping Hobbie get to the bridge."

Hobbie was the only member of the boarding party to have been injured so far. Not from being shot, though; a fusillade of blaster fire had brought down a stanchion which had landed on his leg.

So, Han thought, if it's not Luke deflecting these bolts, what are the Imperials playing at? Is this a trap?

The boarding party's mission was to capture an automated cargo ship, and the blasters were being fired at them by battle droids, not storm-troopers. The Imperials were covertly building up some of their sector bases, bringing in new weaponry and communications gear under the guise of normal supply runs. Putting live personnel on ships like this would have blown that cover, but long range scans couldn't differentiate between battle droids and cargo handlers.

Battle droids weren't used much nowadays. If programmed to be bright and adaptive enough to survive combat situations, they tended to be unpredictable and had been known to turn on their controllers. If not, they were the opposite, too predictable to be effective, except when they could overwhelm by sheer weight of numbers.

These ones, it seemed, were not particularly bright. They'd fallen very quickly for a faked distress call broadcast on a Imperial frequency. But Han had expected them to be programmed to shoot straight.

Han could have stayed on the *Falcon* with Chewie, manning its guns, and keeping an eye out for Imperial vessels. However, he doubted that the droids' inaccurate aim was fate's reward for his being here. That wasn't altruism or heroism on his part; he simply hated waiting around. Besides, the quicker this ship was captured and the share of its cargo that he and Chewie were going to deliver loaded into the *Falcon*, the sooner Han could get his precious ship, his partner and himself out of here.

He picked off another droid and glanced round at Dokril, the mission commander, who'd ducked down beside him behind the crates. The rebels had found out about these shipments because, before he'd joined the Alliance, Dokril and his team had worked for the armaments consortium with whose products this ship was loaded. Dokril still had contacts there. It could be that he was setting them up.

But it wasn't likely; his wife was back with the Alliance fleet.

Dokril was aiming at another droid. Han looked at his blaster with professional interest. It looked like one of the standard Blastech DLT-19s that the Alliance often used because they were robust, reliable and easy to obtain. But it had a larger barrel than usual, a custom targeter and range-finder attached, and its grip had been modified to fit Dokril's hand. Dokril was a big guy, as tall as Han and much broader; he held the weapon easily in one hand.

But before he'd pulled the trigger, there was a clatter as the droid hit the deck.

Sylla, a young Commando, slid up beside Han. She grinned at him, looking pleased with herself.

"Good shot," Dokril said. "How many droids left between us and the main cargo bay?"

Sylla's expression became distant. Through her visor, Han could see the flickering colours of the holo-display relayed to her helmet from the reconnaissance drone that was scouting ahead of them.

"Only two." She gave a feral grin. "Seems they've been doing some thinking. They've raided the cargo, and laid anti-personnel mines in front of the cargo bay doors. Looks like three SM-11 shrapnel mines."

When triggered, shrapnel mines simply spewed out sharp pieces of scrap metal at high velocity. Not at all sophisticated, but they would make a hell of a mess of anyone not in full combat armour.

Dokril didn't seem concerned. "Are they laid properly?"

"Yes, sir. I can clearly read the 'face this side towards enemy' labels."

"And the droids are behind the mines?"

"Yes, sir."

"What about the serial numbers? Can you read those?"

"Increasing magnification... yes sir." Sylla reeled off a string of numbers.

"Okay, let me just check the mines myself." Dokril focused on his own visor, on which Han could see reflected the squat, round image of a mine. "Good. Send the drone in close enough to trigger them." Some anti-personnel mines didn't trigger unless they were stepped on; obviously these ones had proximity fuses.

"Do you really want to waste a perfectly good remote?" Han objected. Capturing this cargo would help, but the Alliance was perpetually short of equipment, and throwing any piece of junk past the mines' programmed trigger distance ought to set them off. "It'll be shredded."

Dokril grinned. Smugly, Han thought. "I'm not going to waste it - especially not when I helped build it. Don't worry. The SM-11s are very directional."

"I know that. But the safe direction is not the 'this side towards enemy' one."

"It is on these ones." Yeah, Dokril's smile was definitely smug.

"How'd you - " But Han didn't get the chance to finish that. There was a flash, following by the roar of an explosion, and the shriek of metal being torn and rent.

Han grimaced. Just as well Chewie was back in the *Falcon* - the noise had been hard enough on Han's less sensitive ears.

"Still receiving telemetry from the drone," Sylla announced. "Oh, that's useful. Not only have the charges decimated the droids, but there's a convenient hole on the cargo bay door, too."

Once inside the cargo bay, Dokril and his team began opening crates and checking their contents. Han grabbed a loader and started it up. Most of the cargo was going back to the Alliance Fleet, but some he and Chewie were going to deliver to various Rebel cells.

Dokril had taken several laser rifles out of a crate labelled "Blastech E11A Mk II". That, Han reckoned, showed the Imperial's lack of imagination. If they were going to pretend this was a normal supply run, they could at least have re-labelled the cargo as food or uniforms. Fortunately, he and Chewie had a stock of innocuously labelled shipping containers they could conceal these crates in.

The E11 rifles were standard Imperial issue. Dokril opened a cover on the barrel of one, and checked something inside. "Okay, Solo," he said. "Take all these Marks IIs. Aimed manually, they'll work fine, but tell them they'll need to reconnect and recalibrate the targeting sensors before using the auto-aim.

"How - " Han stopped. He'd heard footsteps in the corridor outside.

Footsteps made by two sets of booted feet, not droids. One running lightly, the other a heavier tread. Automatically, Han went for his blaster. Sylla was covering the doorway, too.

"Need a hand to get that lot sorted and loaded?" Luke called.

Han relaxed, not at the sound of Luke's voice, but at what he'd said. Or rather not said. It wasn't one of the innocuous-sounding phrases they'd pre-arranged to use in the event Luke was approaching the cargo bay with a gun to his head.

Luke ducked through the damaged door, followed by Tocher, another of Dokril's team, and said, "Bridge is secure and R2's disabled the auto-pilot, sir. Hobbie's standing by up there - we can jump whenever you're ready."

Sylla lowered her weapon too, grinning at Dokril and Alyn. Sylla didn't have their technical backgrounds. This, she'd explained to Han, made her an essential member of their team. The others, she reckoned, had a tendency to get a little too fascinated by captured technology, and they needed someone like Sylla to guard their backs.

"Communications are still jammed," Tocher reported. He was a young man about Luke's age, but much more solidly built. Tocher and Dokril were two of the most unflappable humans Han had ever met, one reason he'd let himself be talked into this mission. "The ship's computer didn't get any signals through after the firing started. Once we're ready, we'll jettison some debris and send an emergency signal with some faked hyperdrive readouts. With any luck, that'll convince them that this ship blew up by accident, so they'll send a replacement."

"Which we can ambush later." Dokril grinned. "Good. We'll jump as soon as the *Falcon's* loaded."

Han shoved another crate onto the loader. "Okay - how'd you know about these blasters? And about mines?"

Dokril and his team grinned at each other. "Our parting gifts to Imperial Defence Industries."

"Some unsung contributions to the Rebel cause," Alyn added, looking up from the scanner with which she was checking the contents of another crate.

"If you tell me, they won't be totally unsung," Han suggested, although from their smug expressions, it wouldn't take any more prompting to get an explanation.

"The mines were Tocher's idea," Dokril said, replacing the lid on the crate he'd been investigating.

Tocher had plugged a portable interface into the door mechanism. "Hold on a minute - let me get this door open so we can get the loaders through. Ah, that's it." The door slid open jerkily, as the rough edges of the hole blasted through it ground against the bulkhead. He moved to a stack of boxes labelled as communications equipment and started checking them. "When the company I worked for was taken over by ImpDef, I got shunted from designing ore extraction equipment to making anti-personnel mines. I wasn't very happy about that. I made a minor adjustment to the SM production line loading chute, so the mines faced the wrong way as they went past the labelling arm. The line didn't have a sophisticated enough imaging system to detect that. All it knew was that the mines were coming past as usual, so it just kept sticking the labels on them. I made sure they were switched back on all the units that went to Quality Control."

"Most Imperial commanders aren't stupid," Dokril added, "and will test fire some mines regardless of the QC certificate. They'll find out soon enough the labels are wrong. And the SM cases aren't perfectly symmetrical - if you know what you're looking for, you can tell which way round they are regardless of the label."

And obviously you did know what you were looking for, when you checked before setting them off.

"So," Tocher continued, "I changed the production logs to make it look like the line modification happened a year ago, and every mine produced since then is wrongly labelled. They'll probably be able to detect that the logs have been changed, but hopefully not retrieve the original data. Since they won't know what records can be trusted, and won't know if the casings themselves are the right way round, they'll have to check every single mine before they can use them. Should keep a few of them busy for a while."

"And the blasters?" Han thought back to the Death Star, and his frantic charge away from a horde of storm-troopers who hadn't even winged him. Maybe they'd been trying to keep him alive to pilot the *Falcon* so they could track it to the Rebel base. But they hadn't needed to leave both him and Chewie alive. Or Luke. And they'd had plenty of fallen comrades to avenge.

"Ah," Dokril said, rummaging in another crate. "The blasters are a bit more complicated. Those ones - " he indicated the crate Han had put on the loader " - just don't have their targeting sensors connected..."

"... so they work fine manually," Han finished.

Luke glanced up from powering up another loader. "Aiming manually might not be that easy in those stormtrooper helmets. I couldn't see a thing with one on."

Han couldn't resist reminding him, "You are a little short for a stormtrooper."

Luke threw some packing foam at him. "But brave enough to make another trip in the *Falcon*"

Han ducked to avoid the foam. "Okay, okay, you're right. I could barely see either."

"And stormtroopers are trained to sight using the cross-hairs in their helmet head-up displays, rather than relying on what limited normal vision they have." Dokril was checking the serial numbers on some fully automatic models. "These rifles have the logic reversed in their tracking algorithm. Instead of aiming towards the infra-red signal from a person or a powered-up droid, they aim away from it, towards cooler objects like bulkheads."

"So that's why those droids were hitting anything but us," Han said.

"Yup. However," Dokril went on, "something as simple as that, or the disconnected targeters, will only work if the rifle's being fired by a droid programmed to assume the rifle works. Any decent stormtrooper would work out what was going on, and aim manually, despite the difficulty in seeing out of those helmets."

Alyn took up the story. "So we got more creative. I was in medical diagnostics when ImpDef bought out Allied Photonics and turned over it to weapons manufacture." She pulled a sub-assembly out of a smaller blaster. "I knew the sensors they wanted to use on these would be a problem, because they're very temperature sensitive. And as blasters are fired, they warm up. But fortunately, we were specifically told not to fix it. The most important issue, so we were informed at every meeting, was to keep the cost down, so using a better sensor, or adding more cooling, was out of the question. And Sartin, the Imperial bureaucrat ImpDef put in to the run the place had no technical background at all. Couldn't have told a neural net from a nerf; all he cared about was getting things out on schedule." The contempt in her voice was obvious. "It would have been easy to add an extra calibration factor to compensate for the temperature sensitivity. But he never understood the principle, and decided it was an unnecessary complication. So some of these have no compensation factors loaded, and others have randomly varying ones."

"What we hoped," Dokril added, "was that when the Imperials started having trouble with the guns, they'd follow standard procedure and sell them off."

"And then the Alliance could buy them cheaply on the black market, and fix them," Han said.

"Exactly. Though stealing them like this is even cheaper." Dokril was still grinning smugly.

Tocher was looking smug, too. "And this way we get a free transport ship thrown in."

Han shoved another crate into place on the loader. "Imperial standard procedure wouldn't help the storm-troopers either, because all armaments are kept in a common store. The odds are that each time a particular trooper was issued a gun, it would be a different one, with a different fault." Yeah, it would be frustrating enough having a gun that would fire in different directions depending on how many shots you'd already fired, let alone having to deal with another problem the next day. "It'd get to the point where they'd be expecting their guns not to aim straight, and would be confused if they got one that did."

"It'd be worse in some regiments than others," Dokril said. "There are still some good Imperial officers out there, who will listen to their troops and replace faulty equipment."

Han nodded. "But there are also a lot of politically appointed ones, who only know how to make themselves look good by making other people look bad, and won't listen to anything they don't want to hear."

"Just before I baled out of ImpDef, I made some changes to the design drawings programmed into the production lines," Dokril added. "So the later batches have mechanical faults, too, and won't fire straight even if aimed manually."

"Leave that crate open, Luke," Alyn was saying. "I'll start fixing those ones up as soon as we've got the *Falcon* loaded and made the jump to hyperspace. Let me just check these are what they say there are." She opened another crate. "The good thing about idiot Sartin was that his 'me boss, you slaves' management style upset all the staff, even those who didn't have ideological problems with helping the Imperial expansion. Over half the experienced technicians have left."

"And those that are still with ImpDef think we resigned out of personal dislike for the guy, and some are still passing on gossip," Dokril explained. "Useful gossip, like about this shipment."

Han eyed the crates of communication equipment. The Imperials on the Death Star had been very quick to believe that faulty transmitter story, too. "Did you have someone in the communications division as well?"

"Not that we know of. The regional governor put in one of his cronies, who knew a great deal about sucking up to the powers-that-be, and nothing at all about communications, in charge of that section. So problems there could be pure management incompetence. But there are a lot of people who don't necessary support the Empire still working for it." Dokril looked round at his team. "It was easy for us to get out - what few assets we had were portable, and couldn't be held to ransom."

"And we've no families that could held hostage for our performance at work," Tocher added, no longer looking smug but grim.

"No living families," Alyn corrected quietly.

Han nodded. He still wasn't in this out of altruism. Nor, Chewie and Luke's teasing aside, for any Princess, either.

He didn't ever want to encounter another asteroid shower where there had once been an inhabited planet.

Besides, if the jurisdiction of Imperial Customs and Excise were to expand all the way to the Outer Rim, it would put a serious dent in his and Chewie's livelihood.

He steered the loader through the cargo bay door into the corridor. And the sooner this war was over, the sooner he and Chewie could pay off Jabba and get back to business. "Okay, let's get this lot loaded, so we can all get out of here."

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[Back To Index](#)