

This was not exactly the most promising first mission for a freshly-assigned special forces squad commander, he reflected.

Captain Kharoc Garrlan, a former Imperial Storm Commando, had been surprised when the representative of the Dajorra System Defense Force had approached him with a job offer. Garrlan had been surprised again when accepting that offer had landed him back on the deck of an *Imperial II*-class Star Destroyer, the *Eye of the Abyss II*. The Destroyer appeared to be very well kept; Dajorra had to be unusually wealthy for a single system polity far off the beaten paths in the Outer Rim, to keep as large a defense force as it did.

Garrlan himself been assigned command of a newly-assembled squad of special forces troops, and spent a month running them through training exercise after training exercise, dropping them on various planets in the system, doing boarding and counter-boarding exercises, everything he could think of to keep them sharp.

As such, when Command had tasked them to strike what they described as a terrorist cell operating on the outskirts of the Estle City Spaceport warehouse district, he'd been confident that his squad would have been more than sufficient to handle the targets as described.

When his first fire team got wiped out in a matter of seconds, he realized that he hadn't been hitting the target Command had described. The locations were right, and the beings described as the ringleaders were present and seemed to be in command. What hadn't lined up with what Command had told him was that the ringleaders were Force-sensitives, armed with lightsabers, and that they had a full company or so of mercenary troopers with them to support whatever plan they had.

The rest of his squad had sold themselves dearly; all but two of the ringleaders were dead and the mercs were down to a reinforced platoon. The bad news was that the only DDF commando still up and fighting was Captain Kharoc Garrlan himself. He'd drained and discarded the WESTAR M-5c blaster rifle he'd been issued and picked up one of the E-11 rifles the mercenaries were carrying, and his dark grey commando's armor (as opposed to the glossy white of a regular Army trooper) was marked in a couple places with char marks. He hadn't been hit vitally yet, but the injuries were slowing him down.

The light-fight had dragged on for some time, and with the "terrorists" blanketing every comm frequency he could think of with some fairly powerful jamming there was no way for Garrlan to call in support, be that troops from the *Abyss* or the local Army garrison, or a couple of airspeeders or starfighters to provide cover for an escape, or even to see if there was artillery or artillery he could call on. He still tried occasionally to send a message through the jamming, but so far it had just been one more thing to do while draining another blaster of charge trying to give himself enough cover to escape.

It was in the middle of just such a call that he realized that what he'd thought was an alley was actually a space in the middle of a U-shaped building. He pivoted to try and get out, but the leading group of mercenaries rounded the corner and started sending hot light in his direction.

Garrlan took cover behind a large durasteel waste container and started spending the last of the charge in his E-11 as carefully as he could. He took down a few more mercenaries before the remaining two ringleaders showed up and started swatting aside his blaster bolts with their lightsabers.

The E-11 spat fire a couple more times before cutting out entirely, and Garrlan side-armed it at the two Force-sensitives (more for his own morale than with any real anticipation that it would connect and do damage) before drawing his sidearm - an SSK-7 heavy blaster - and pegging shots from it downrange. The sound of the blaster discharge stood out from the chatter of the E-11s, a deeper *blam* as opposed to the *tchew* of the carbines. Further, many less-experienced marksmen would tend to simply fire as fast as their weapon would cycle, whereas Garrlan's fire was metronome-steady, as the commando took an extra moment or two to correct his aim before firing again.

It wouldn't make a difference in the end, he knew, but it was in his nature. He would sell himself as dearly as he could, in the hopes that the damage he and his team inflicted would be enough to cause these terrorists to call off whatever they had planned, or at least slow their plans down enough to where another DDF unit could finish the job Garrlan's commandos had started.

One of the lightsaber-wielders, a Cathar, gathered herself to leap at Garrlan, and he readied himself for the end.

So when a turquoise-and-white blur dropped between the terrorists and him, throwing out a hand in a gesture that sent the whole group falling backwards a couple of meters, it was the absolute last thing the commando expected to have happen.

The turquoise cloaked form dropped their hood to their shoulders and a white-gloved hand came out from underneath it, holding what looked like another lightsaber hilt. The long white braid shook out to lay down the cloaked being's back, and a female voice that sounded like it wanted to be friendly came from it. "Stop this now. You can't escape, and I would rather not have to kill you all."

The Cathar snarled as she leapt to her feet. "No! You and that monster on the Iron Throne tried to kill us all, and now you have the arrogance to say you *don't want to*?" She reignited her lightsaber and leapt at the turquoise-cloaked woman, and the two met in a flurry of lightsaber blows. The other surviving ringleader was only a couple seconds behind the Cathar. The turquoise-cloaked woman - a Miraluka, judging by the cloth across her eyes - met their blades with her own, and quickly went on the offensive. Garrlan matched the Miraluka, but directed his attention at the handful of remaining mercenaries. He charged, blaster pistol up and aiming, and he managed to drill two more mercenaries with headshots before he was among them, stripping a corpse of its blaster rifle before scything fire at the survivors.

The lightsaber battle was short and brutal, but Garrlan hadn't even noticed it was over until he saw the Miraluka woman jump into the middle of the remaining cluster of mercenaries. Her blade flashed a couple more times, and finally the alleyway was still.

Garrlan straightened up, finally having a moment to really look at the Miraluka that had just randomly come to his rescue. She was a few centimeters shorter than he was, but massed decidedly less, even had he been wearing light clothing and she been wearing a suit of Phase IV commando armor. She "looked" back at him, smiling. "I'm glad I was at the spaceport when your mission was scheduled to start. When the jamming started I figured something had to be wrong." She started stepping over the bodies of the mercenaries in Garrlan's direction. "Where's the rest of your team?"

Garrlan deflated. "Dead." He shook his head to clear it. The adrenaline was draining from his system, and he needed to stay focused as much as he could. And now this woman seemed to know more about his mission than he did, which was *never* a good sign. "Don't take this the wrong way, miss, I'm grateful you were able to help, but... *who are you?!*"

The Miraluka cocked her head, before she suddenly seemed to understand. She turned her lightsaber off and hooked it to a belt around her waist, before holding her hands out in a peaceful gesture. "I will explain that later, Captain. For now, we should find the jammer these people set up and shut it down. Once we're in a secure area I can-" Her words became a buzz as Garrlan saw one of the mercenaries behind her sit partway up and weakly toss a metal cylinder at them. *Frag grenade*, Garrlan's mind reported even as fresh adrenaline started to hit his system. He shouted a warning even as he started forward. The Miraluka woman was already turning, as if she had had eyes in the back of her head to see the grenade herself, but Garrlan was close enough to her that before she could do more than turn, he was already tackling her. He twisted in midair to point his armored back at the grenade as the two of them slammed into the ground.

He felt a flash of heat, then nothing as he went unconscious nearly instantly.

A few fuzzy images were all he'd remember of the next days, most of them nearly obscured by being immersed in a familiar pinkish ooze - a bacta tank. Finally, he woke up, hearing/feeling someone knocking on the transparisteel tank he was in. A couple of forms were outside, but he felt someone tugging on the hose connected to his air mask. He looked up, seeing the top of the tank open, he kicked his legs.

A few moments later, he had been transferred to a bed in the military hospital he had found himself in. He'd been in the tank for several weeks after a Two-Onebee droid had removed several pieces of shrapnel from his back. The burns hadn't been bad and wouldn't scar, but he had a few good puncture scars from the shrapnel to add to his collection. (Imperial soldiers, even elite commandos, rarely if ever were given the option for bacta abrasion treatments to get rid of scars sustained in combat.)

A couple days after being pulled from bacta, Garrlan awoke to find the Miraluka that had jumped into his fight standing in his room, staring out the window at Estle City and quietly singing to herself, something about a man who made candy out of “tomorrow” and “dreams.” Garrlan really didn’t listen to music much himself, and he quietly shook his head at what he could make of the lyrics. She turned, smiling again. She did that a lot, Garrlan was noticing. “Glad to see you awake again, Captain.” Garrlan elected to let that one pass. “You did an incredibly brave thing - if also somewhat foolish, given that I could simply have thrown the grenade safely away with the Force.”

Garrlan had sipped from a glass of water left by his bed while she spoke. “Just... doing my job, ma’am.”

The Miraluka waved a hand in dismissal. “Your job or not, I have few enough people that would do that for me as unhesitatingly as that.” She cocked a head. “I looked into what happened to your team. That mission...” her face crumpled slightly. “I owe you an apology. Your people should not have walked into that as blindly as you did.” Despite being blind, she must have seen his confused expression. “My intelligence teams knew exactly who was in there and what their skills were. I don’t know who decided to brief your team on them as simple terrorists and not as the Force sensitives they were. I will have words with whomever did and sent your people in like that, believe me.”

Garrlan was only more confused now. “I’m sorry for repeating myself like this, ma’am, but again, *who are you?* ‘Your people?’ How do you know so much about military operations?”

She smiled again, chuckling. “I’m sorry, I forgot you hadn’t been briefed in yet. But I should tell you before I do this, that if I do, you will be transferred from your Division to a classified unit. You will retain your commission and pay, but you will be operating outside of the normal chains of command and taking on far more dangerous - and more important - missions than this one.”

Garrlan looked at the Miraluka woman, unconsciously straightening in his bed, realizing that this woman held far more authority than he’d ever thought. “I accept, ma’am.”

She smiled. “Congratulations then, Captain Garrlan. You now work for me.” She paused, obviously remembering something. “By the way, I’m not sure if you’ve realized it yet, but I noticed that today was your birthday when I checked your service record.”

Garrlan blinked. “It is?” After losing the better part of three weeks being unconscious in bacta, he had honestly forgotten.

The Miraluka nodded. “Indeed it is. I’ll be having a few people come by later; you’ll be able to order a new set of armor to your liking as well as select your own personal weapons to be prepared by our armorers. Plus I’ll have someone come by to take a special dinner order - I wouldn’t inflict hospital food on my worst enemy, and certainly not for their birthday!” She smiled widely, and Garrlan couldn’t help but smile a bit in reply.

“Now, as for the rest of it. My name is Atyiru Caesura Entar, and I am the Consul of Clan Arcona.”