

A bright blue flash preceded the black-clad man's appearance in the corridor. No sound accompanied it besides the expected clatter of armor and noises of impact as the man slammed into the bulkhead back-first before collapsing to the deck, then silence and the flickering lights up and down the corridor became again the only source of illumination.

Major Kharoc Garrlan picked himself up, gingerly testing himself for debilitating injury as he did so. Picking his black F-11D blaster carbine off the deck and snapping the foregrip into its extended position, he grimaced behind his black storm commando's helmet as he took in the corridor he found himself in. The design was definitely Imperial in origin - he'd spent too long on too many Imperial ships and stations to not recognize it - but the state it was in spoke volumes. Shattered wall panels revealed dangling or damaged components, cables and obvious jerry-rigged repairs were common, and debris was simply shoved to the side to leave a passable corridor. Picking a direction at random, Garrlan started moving down the corridor, flicking the lamp attached to the muzzle of his blaster on to better light his way.

Suddenly, the ship's battlestations klaxon started sounding its mournful tone and the ship started shuddering under a series of impacts. Garrlan cursed and picked up his pace before finally encountering another living being. Unfortunately, it wasn't one of the crew.

Or, at least, that was his impression, given the completely alien appearance of the being. Tall and humanoid, with some sort of carapace or living armor attached to it, the being hissed something before a snakelike creature wrapped around its right arm slithered down to its hand. The snake stretched itself out and stiffened to almost a staff-like form before the warrior let out a yell and started charging. Garrlan raised his blaster rifle and took aim before letting loose a pair of shots. Both shots landed dead center of mass, splashing against the armor of the alien... and doing exactly no damage. Backing up quickly to keep what range he could, Garrlan aimed again, fired, and landed a shot right in the center of the "sniper's triangle," where a nose would be on most species. The creature collapsed to the ground, and Garrlan let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding -

- just in time for two more of the aliens to round the corner. Muttering a curse, Garrlan pulled a grenade from his belt and threw it down the corridor before ducking into a side corridor. As his mind flew through tactical options - most of them involving finding a way away from this place, he heard a welcome noise, that of lightsabers igniting and engaging in combat. Garrlan poked his helmeted head back around the corridor and saw a trio of lightsaber-armed figures fighting with and dispatching the two aliens. Two of them he didn't recognize, but the third he did as she rammed her blue saber through the second alien to die.

More than the corridor they fought in, the state that Atyiru Caesura Entar was in said that this ship and all on her had been in a long, grueling, grinding fight that they were slowly losing. Her clothes were dirty, smudged and torn. Bruises and dirt smeared all over the normally carefully cleaned - well, he wasn't sure if she was still a clan Consul. But the point remained that her haggard and exhausted appearance was light years away from the air that the version of her that Garrlan normally saw. All

three Force-users aimed their lightsabers at Garrlan before Atyiru coldly spoke. “Who are you, trooper?”

That, too, was different. This Atyiru was suspicious and hard. Letting his rifle dangle by its sling, Garrlan reached slowly up and unsealed his helmet. His nose was filled with the battlefield smells of smoke, ozone, and charred meat that any soldier quickly forced themselves to learn to ignore. “I am Major Kharoc Garrlan, Arconan Expeditionary Force, ma’am.”

At the mention of the AEF, Atyiru’s face tightened around her mask. “There hasn’t been an AEF in years. Try again.”

That staggered Garrlan. Whatever was going on here, it was worse than he’d thought. “It’s...” He trailed off, sighing. “It’s a long story, ma’am. May I suggest we find somewhere else so I can explain?”

At that point, a comlink beeped. One of Atyiru’s guards reached to his belt, lifting the device to his ear to listen, and nodded. “Boarding parties have been destroyed, Consul,” he said. “The Vong cruiser was driven off.”

Atyiru glanced up. “Damn. That means they’ll be back with reinforcements within the hour. Order hyperdrive repairs expedited over everything but life support.” She looked back at Garrlan. “Your armor is that of an Imperial storm commando, but we never had a storm commando unit.”

Garrlan nodded. “I can explain, ma’am. And I suspect time is of the essence.”

After a moment, she lowered her blade but gestured at her guards. Both men walked up to Garrlan, their sabers poised to fall if he resisted. One of them reached over and took his rifle, sidearm, utility belt, and helmet. Disarmed but not restrained, Garrlan elected not to press the issue and allowed himself to be marched off.

A few minutes later, he found himself seated in a comparatively clean conference room. The guards had remained with him while they waited, and shortly thereafter Atyiru came into the room, accompanied by an equally haggard Arcia Cortel. Rather than an Arconan uniform, she was dressed in the uniform of an admiral of the old Galactic Empire, another change that threw Garrlan for a loop.

But then, he’d known things would be different. Once the two women were seated, he started to explain what had happened.

Six months ago, from his perspective, a Dajorra Defense Force patrol had detected unusual energy readings coming from Arcona Secundus. Garrlan, along with several others, had been sent to the planet to investigate. They found some sort of artifact, what basically had appeared like a mirror set into a large stone ring. The mirror had not reflected any of the activity taking place before it, however, which had mystified the Arconan team until they discovered a small case of written notes in

Old High Galactic. The notes said something about the mirror not reflecting light but “other Threads of Time,” essentially giving Arcona a means to glimpse alternative timelines. Or pass through them, as Garrlan had discovered when he’d tripped from a loose rock and slapped his hand to the mirror.

It took longer to tell than expected, simply because of the many questions that Atyiru and Arcia gave, especially about the events of the last twenty years or so. When Garrlan was finished, the two of them leaned back and started to go over the differences between the history he’d explained and they one they had apparently experienced. No Galactic Concordance, just a series of Imperial and neo-Imperial warlords and super-weapons thrown at a New Republic, until the Empire was reduced even further than the one Garrlan knew. No First Order, a mostly successful New Jedi Order, and now these extra-galactic creatures known as the Yuuzhan Vong.

What was most concerning was that, despite the fact that Vong scouts had apparently been in the Galaxy, infiltrators studying galactic society for decades, the Empire and the Republic had been caught flat-footed by the invasion, and now...

“We’re almost all that’s left,” Atyiru whispered. “The Empire still has a handful of systems, the Republic is running for the Unknown Regions... but of the Brotherhood, only this ship and a couple of others are all we have. Maybe a few hundred survivors out of millions.” Arcia reached over and clasped the Miraluka woman’s shoulder, as she visibly pulled herself back together. “But if we have a chance to save your galaxy, we have to take it.” The leader of the Arconan Remnant nodded. “Admiral Cortel, once this ship is combat ready, I want us in hyperspace. We’re going home.”

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Twenty-seven hours later, the battle-scarred form of the *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer *Invicta* arrowed into a low orbit around Arcona Secundus. In the Command Information Center, buried deep within the armored hull of the ship, Kharoc Garrlan stared in horror as scans came in from the other planets in the system. Selen was little more than a cinder. A massive crater stood where the Arconan Citadel and Estle City should have been. Strange life-form readings from Eldar, according to the sensor tech sitting at the console, indicated the planet was being “Vong-formed,” which meant that a response from the Vong to *Invicta*’s presence was probably already en route. Admiral Cortel snapped out orders, preparing her ship for what was likely to be a final stand. Atyiru came over, and lightly laid a hand on Garrlan’s armored back. “It’s time.”

The same energy reading Garrlan remembered had been detected on the planet’s surface, and every trooper and Dark Jedi not needed to fight in the void was being loaded onto *Invicta*’s remaining landing craft, along with the last of their armored vehicles. Atyiru was gambling everything she had on getting Garrlan to the surface and finding a way to activate the device as a way back to his timeline, in the hopes that they could put the warning of their timeline to good use.

Vong starships appeared from hyperspace as *Invicta's* landing fleet took off. Waves of plasma were met by point-defense blaster fire, and heavy turbolaser and ion cannon strikes were countered by artificial singularities. Vong and Arconan starfighters danced in the void between their capital ships, and a precious few stayed close to the landers as they made for the surface. The transports slammed down outside the cave as quickly as they dared, and troops in camouflage uniforms unlike the ones Garrlan was familiar with, armed with older-model blasters such as E-11s and A280s. Barricades were erected and heavy weapons assembled as Garrlan led most of the Dark Jedi into the cave system.

Soon enough, they found the mirror device and the writings that had accompanied it, and several of the Dark Jedi were going over both as quickly as they could. Rumbles from above were closely followed by comlink chatter about the Vong troops having arrived. The Arconan soldiers were selling themselves dearly, but it was only a matter of time before they were overrun. A few Dark Jedi in heavy armor headed back the way they had come, intending to fight the Vong as they entered the caves and were forced to use close-quarters where the lightsabers would have an advantage against the Vong's few ranged personal weapons.

Atyiru stood beside Garrlan, a datacard folio in her hand. "This contains all the tactical data and intelligence we have on the Vong. Hopefully your people can make good use of it." A strange expression crossed her face. "And when you see... me, tell me that I said to take good care of her people for me."

Garrlan took the datacards, unsure of how to reply to the Miraluka when a cry of success came up from the group around the mirror device. As they stepped away, one of them gestured Garrlan over. "Major, we need your help." Garrlan stepped over as the man explained. "We think we can find your home timeline by matching the signature you have in the Force with this device. I can't promise this will be easy on you, but-

Garrlan shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Do what you need."

The man stretched out a hand and Garrlan knew only blackness.

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Garrlan awoke in an all-too-familiar sickbay. The room struck him as incredibly clean and overly staffed when he felt someone next to him. He looked over and saw a much cleaner and well-kept Atyiru Caesura Entar, who reached a hand over on his shoulder. "Glad to have you back, Major."

Garrlan sighed. "Good to be back, ma'am. I just wish I had a more cheerful story to tell."