

# Tribal Relations

By A'lora Kituri

*Thump thump thump.*

Unified in purpose, the countless elders, warriors and tribesmen of the Latharg caste clashed spears against shields, staves upon rock and fists upon palms. Omens, whether good or ill were meant to be celebrated; the coming of an outsider was particularly foreboding. Clutching a staff decorated with hanging trinkets that jingled with each thrust, the eldest chanted a verse in his native tongue.

<<As the skies tear asunder, the stars turn to flame. Falling to the earth, it is us who will bear witness; for the Outsider has come.>>

Basking the gathered tribesmen in a warm, orange glow, the fires emanated their warmth from the braziers. Set in a tight circle around the elder standing atop the sacred stones, the fires crackled and reflected in the elder's gaze. Cascading around the wizened man, embers danced in spirals as if someone had agitated hundreds of fireflies. Contrasted between the warmth of the fire and the cold of a long, sullen night, the old man bade the ancestor gods for a good sign—for the arrival of the Outsider was always in question. Would it be their salvation, or their downfall?

As prophesied, the doomed carcass of an LAAT/i ignited gloriously when it broke through the atmosphere. Spinning on its axis, metal and duraplast sheared off its hull to be left behind in its wake—a blazing trail of fire that marked its passage. Tilting his head, the elder watched the spectacle with a range of emotions; fear, hope and anticipation were in equal measure when the staff was released from his grasp to clatter against the sacred stones collected at his feet. Tears rolled from their ducts when he realized that the world, as he knew it, was at an end.

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*Weightless, like a feather.* It was an odd sensation, waking to feel not the bruised, crushed ribs against the hard ground, but a tingling sensation of wind brushing across the surface. Pricking the skin like thousands of needles, the harsh gusts caused the Togruta's nerves involuntary discomfort. Blurred, incomprehensible shapes began to emerge in her vision, but she regained the feeling in her arms before sight. Instinctively reaching for the ground, A'lora's hands passed through the open air without incident.

Her sight, hearing and smell returned in a sensory overload of information. She could smell the pungent odor of charred meat, hear the howling winds and taste blood on her lips. Most of all, she could see that there was no ground below her—just a deep, dark crevasse leading to depths unknown. Hanging like carrion for the vultures was the best analogy she could think of for the situation, for it was clear from the hanging bones that others had met a similar fate.

The timbre of wind chimes reverberated through the entire furrow, the sound amplified tenfold from her current position just off the edge of the abyss. Next, the sound of chanting came into focus, as it

became clear that someone was approaching on the nearby ledge. An old man, holding aloft a staff not dissimilar to hers climbed the wood-lined path to stand amidst the bones. Still chanting, the man—a Kaleesh, she recognized—drew a long-handled knife.

Most, unaccustomed to the shamanistic ritual or beliefs of a primitive culture would take the act as a threat. Drawing the blade closer, he inspected the alien—soft, lavender skin with white markings that he assumed to be indicators of a tribe and strange tails, the likes of which he had never seen. Regularly, former “Outsiders” would scream and beg in their own dialects before meeting an end. This one remained stoic, and unlike the others dressed in much the same style of garb as Latharg caste warriors. The similarities to his own caste intrigued him, and he kicked a foot at the beam that held the primitive device over the ledge, forcing it to swing its prize over solid ground.

A’lora hit the ground with a *thud* after the bindings were cut. Dirt and grime smeared across her arms and legs, but she had grown accustomed to the grit from decades of living as these people would. Grabbing hold of a familiar staff from among the bones, she used it to prop herself up to match the shaman’s veiled gaze. In it, she saw nothing. Not a flicker of emotion was evident in the few uncovered areas of the elder’s face.

Asking a question—or was it a command?—in the guttural Kaleesh dialect, the shaman formed a marker with his outstretched hand; a single digit extended in the universal gesture that the Togruta was expected to go *somewhere*.

“What will I find?” She asked, receiving only a blank stare in return. Unamused or uncaring for whatever the outsider had to say, his padded feet started down the wood-lined passage through the forest. Taking a moment to scan the area for dangers before following the elder, neither her ultrasonic spatial awareness nor her precognition found signs of sudden movements large enough to pose a threat.

The village itself, was as one might expect of a primitive society living on the fringes of the Outer Rim. It reminded her of the villages on her homeworld; isolated, thatched huts and strung-together construction came together to form something resembling a large community. Seated on the edge of the chasm, the Latharg caste—as she was able to deduce the name from the elder’s language—seemed to be a clan of warriors.

Lurching forward, the hulking figure of an armour-clad Kaleesh feinted a thrust at the smaller of his two clansmen—this one, barring a chipped tusk. The tapered spearhead instead rotated around the block, directly through the third combatant’s weakened defenses. Oblique, the angle of the slash still found its mark, lodging between the fifth and sixth rib of the warrior’s leather chestpiece. Blood spurted from the wound, staining the ground crimson as an offering to their ancestral gods.

Although the Kaleesh had mounted a successful attack, the short length of the swordlike Shoni spear forced him to close the distance between himself, and the unwounded combatant. Shaking their spears in applause, the audience revelled in the blood sport. Indicating each of the two combatants, then to a glint of metal on the horizon bearing striking similarities to an intact HH-87 Starhopper.

“You want me to fight... for the starship?” she asked aloud, despite the language barrier. It was clear that the shaman held no wish to see the outsider remain—she had disturbed their primitive culture for too long, already. Grunting with the force at which his scaly arm thrust his staff into the ground, the old man padded into the arena on his toes.

<<A worthy outsider has come to challenge us! Abandon all weakness, and gain favour for our ancestors. Win, or die in the arena. Those who lose and live bring shame and dishonour onto themselves and will be cast out. Bring forth the Outsider!>>

Two clawed hands reached out to grab the High Councillor from either side, lacing their four-clawed digits under her biceps before shoving her into the center. The combatants had already stopped to face the new arrival just as soon as the elder made his command heard. Behind her, the Latharg caste closed off the exit, forming an enclosed “U” around the bloodied arena. The cliff sunk on the remaining side to greet the dishonoured or defeated with a final farewell.

Wasting no time, not for a final signal of readiness, Chipped-Tusk seized onto the initiative. Maintaining a digitigrade stance as he stormed the outsider, the end of the sword-like bill both warriors used as spears remained level with the Togruta’s head. Were she untrained in weapons of similar make, the Shoni sword might have found purchase in the base of her skull. Instead, the end was dislodged from its angle just before contact, passing harmlessly to her left in the same moment that the other end of a quarterstaff butted the Kaleesh in the face. The force of the staff’s impact cracked the right half of his mask above the chipped tusk, revealing the scaly tissue surrounding the warrior’s slitted eyes.

The victorious warrior from earlier, encased in a shell of plated bone, moved to flank her undefended right side. Lacking enough momentum to bring the right end of the staff down in time to block, the serrated end of a Shoni spear tore at the flesh of her thigh before being kicked wide. Deep enough to cut scar tissue, but not to the bone, the wound flowed with blood. Rivulets soaked the bandage-like wraps around her shin, much to the approval of their audience.

One was a bloodthirsty berserker, the other—she came to realize—was the calculating opportunist. Reeling back on his toes, Chipped-Tusk felt the sting of broken tissue around his eye socket. The retreat left him just behind his comrade and former opponent in the arena. Still, he knew that glory was well within his reach, now that the outsider was wounded.

There was something about a shared victory that made him want to vomit.

Raising the spear above his head, angled down so the weight of it would add to its strength, Chipped-Tusk stabbed through the backplates of his comrade. Eyes widening to the betrayal, A’lora caught the glint of anger just seconds before the armoured Kaleesh tossed his own armament to the ground to bring one hand onto the spear lodged in his back, and the other around Chipped-Tusk’s throat. With a pained growl, the spear ripped from his back, bringing sinew and flesh with it. It snapped with a sickening *crack* under the pressure of his claws, all while his opponent struggled to breathe or scream in his grasp.

Exhaustion was taking its toll, the sense of balance becoming distant when A'lora noticed that the cloth wraps were completely soaked in blood. She couldn't interfere when the mammoth of a Kaleesh hung his traitorous comrade over the edge of the cliff and slackened his grip at the same time that Chipped-Tusk clutched for a handhold on the claw around his throat.

Then, he fell.

Retrieving the hooked staff from its place in the arena, the shaman spoke in his own dialect, <<Skjall! The prize, and honour is yours. Go with Outsider, and favour our gods wherever you fight.>>

Was it fate, or the will of the Force? A'lora knew both to be, at times, one and the same thing. As she left that world behind from the cockpit of the HH-87 Starhopper, she turned a glance at the unmoving brute of a man sitting beside her. Sometimes, the Force was a fickle thing, leading its followers to believe one thing while twisting their destinies onto the hidden path.