

They had been hiking for some hours. The last known village in the area was far from Toranga's settlement, leagues of jungle and desert between them. Such was the nature of every remaining population of Kaedeans these days, after their practical extinction. The pockets of plague survivors were few and far, most completely oblivious to the others' existence. Some only established any knowledge of the other by happenstance of overlapping visits to raid the empty, glittering streets of Shihon, or by stragglers coming across the smoke of cook fires asking the trees and stumbling desperately to possible sanctuary.

It was difficult, to say the least, to find just a few hundred people somewhere on the surface of an entire planet. Scans and fly-overs could only do so much in swathes that barely made a dent. Their efforts so far had largely focused on Taikiru and the several leagues surrounding Toranga's camp specifically. There were others, they knew, but they had to find them first to help reestablish the people as a whole, and even then...not every Kaedeans they came across wanted to be "reunited," nevermind any of their help. Off-worlders had brought the plague, and before that, off-worlders had meddled in the conflicts between the Kaedeans and Sardinians for decades.

It was an unfortunately understandable hesitation.

But a planet's worth of area seemed to matter little to the Miraluka and her senses. Every living thing on Eldar was open to her, one with the Force and the Force with them, and so they were connected to her and she connected to them.

She picked a seemingly random direction, heading miles out and with no obvious reason to those following her save her word, and eventually lead them to tiny villages that could barely be called such, little mud and clay homes of two or three for the same number of people, or isolated hunter's nests for one man or woman.

Padding along beside her, Ivoshar whined. He was more sensitive than her dual-purpose guard-and-translator, another Kaedeans named Kawak. She pet at his snout, where his lips were curling back from his long fangs.

"I know," she soothed. She'd sensed the hostility long ago, when first selecting their next destination. It boiled and burned.

They went a little farther, and Kawak hissed something. Farther still, and a blaster rifle shot sputtered and exploded into the ground just in front of her feet, ashing her boots. Kawak cried out angrily, and Ivoshar snarled.

Atyiru merely smiled and opened her arms.

*I am neither here to hurt you nor take you*, she projected into the mind of the sniper huddled in his tree, naturally camouflaged, not that it meant much anything to her sight. The language of minds could be universal, at least on the level of emotion and intent. Words were harder. People

*thought* in the very languages they knew, understood based on words those languages possessed— it was one of Jaxxy's favorite talking points. He could go on for ages. This Kaedean thought in his own script, and did not understand her Basic or Miralukese. But that was why Kawak was here.

"Say this for me: I come to heal," she instructed her guard, gentling his arm where he was raising his own blaster. He was vibrating with the threat too. Kaedeans had always been more tribal — in their social sense, not just a technological one — even before the plague, and they did not trust one another easily. The two smelled completely dissimilar, different bloodlines, different broods, clans, walked different sands and carved different trees. She reminded, "You share the same suns and moons. Say it for me, please, Kawak?"

He grumbled hisses at her, but complied, hooting in that language of theirs her tongue couldn't fold over. Silence, then some hissing back.

"This one do not trust," Kawak relayed. "This one tell go. Go far not come back. Go or die. Smells birth. Birthing will not change this. Go or die."

"Tell him I come to heal."

"I told so."

"Tell him again, please. Tell him I come to heal them all."

"This one will no listen. Leave. We go."

"No."

"Dead walker, dead hatch," sighed the Kaedean, but translated for her again. Atyiru did not wait for him to finish, stepping forward, touching Ivoshar to still him back with a command.

The shot cracked out. Exploded into her shoulder. Nearly threw her down. Her enormous stomach threw off her center of gravity, and she rocked awkwardly, knees wobbling, fell against the closest tightly-packed tree. Ivoshar roared. Kawak hissed.

The Miraluka straightened herself with a sob and stepped forward again. She held out her arms, wide, an embrace open, exposing stomach, heart, throat. Her blood dripped and her injured arm did not raise like the other.

"I come," she repeated, "to heal you all."

And she closed the terrible hole blasted through her bones and sinew into smooth skin and light. The bleeding stopped. Grew tacky in the humidity. The shots had made the jungle but seconds silent, and it buzzed again, except for the hush of the watchers around her.

"I will not hurt you, even if you hurt me. I am here only to heal."

Another voice called out, that anger in the trees again, turned wary now in disbelief.

Kawak shuffled nearer, said, "This one asks why."

"Because," Atyiru answered. "It is right."

Kawak translated. There was silence again, then shuffling. Then a long, slim pallid green body dropped from the boughs like mottled shadow. It unfurled into a very tall, lean Kaedean, differently horned and scaled than Toronga's tribe. It hissed at her.

"This one asks, 'all of us be healed?'"

The Miraluka smiled, and touched his cheek.

"Yes. All of you."

The new Kaedean felt wary still, but she soothed him, offered her blood on her thumb for tasting, felt him relax. He growled and hissed and lead them deeper into the trees. They eventually came upon a few hideaways with several children, all fresh babes, along with a small handful of Kaedean women and men and, perhaps most notably, a few of the very pirates that had been chased off. Those were much more grievously wounded, but many here were sickly.

Families tended to find a way, even in the strangest of places, among those who were called the worst of people. Atyiru did not judge them. That was a thing of Ashla and Bogan. Hers was mercy.

They looked at her. She felt fear. Confusion. Wariness. A small kindle-spark of hope.

She opened her arms again, wide, and smiled.