

I stood there for a moment, stunned by her statement, and stunned by the number of people around her who seemed convinced she was right.

"Do you remember what you are running from?" I asked, keeping my eye on Seva, who was undoubtedly Sevarril Arraln.

"Memories fade, but what use do we have for the faces that we fear?" She asked hypothetically, waving my words away. "We are safe here in the glow of the giants. That is all that matters. The past is forgotten, and it has forgotten us."

Around her, some nodded, but most simply remained silent. A few, however, frowned, shook their heads minutely, or even looked away. There was a clear fear of whatever was outside, and while a few people disapproved of sticking their heads in the sand, I still needed to prove I wasn't something to be scared of. If I wanted to help these people without incurring trauma, I needed to convince either Seva or the majority of her people that going with us, or at least letting us help treat them, would be better for everyone.

"You say forgotten, yet you still cling to your lightsabers, your Hearts," I said, gesturing to the aged cylinder on her hip. "If the past was so pointless, why do you still cling to them?"

"They are connected to us, part of us," she responded, with a tone that said it was obvious and that I was silly for asking. "They call to us, like the life of the cave and the powerful feelings of the tribe."

I debated mentioning the Force, but trying to explain the nebulous subject was difficult with a normal person, never mind a group who were so significantly addled. They obviously felt some of it, the way she described feeling the strong emotions of the other tribe members was obvious, but it was clear they had already forgotten most of it. It was likely better to ignore it for now, at least until we knew whether the memory loss was permanent.

"Of course," I finally answered, before shifting the topic to try and change tactics. "You have done well to survive and flourish in a place like this."

Flourish was definitely an overstatement, but they had done more than just survive. I could see that twenty-seven people were standing around us, and I could hear at least a few more hiding inside the reinforced hut. They had clearly grown in size, and judging by the state of the village, they had done a decent job carving out meager lives. If it weren't for the fungus tainting their success, it would be very impressive.

"The cavern provides, if you are willing to work," she said with a confident smile. "Everything you might need exists around you, and we have learned to live in the light of the giant's glow."

"But we have intruded on your space without warning," I pointed out. "Allow us to make up for that. We have food and supplies, and we are happy to share."

For a moment, I thought Seva would refuse, as she clearly wanted to. But behind and around her, the villagers muttered in excitement, both at the concept of new food and the idea of supplies.

"...very well, we are not too proud to turn away food," she admitted. "But if we are going to accept, you must take off your armor and eat with us."

"That isn't possible," I said, shaking my head.

"Why are you so desperate to remain faceless?" she asked with a frown.

"The air is incompatible with our bodies, we cannot take our helmets off without getting very sick," I explained. "I apologize, but it's not possible."

"...We will try your food. If it harms us, you will not like the consequences," Seva said, pausing long enough that I was worried she would push for more.

"Understandable," I agreed with a nod. "We must return to the cave entrance, where our supplies are being kept."

"You may send some of your people, the rest may remain here."

I chewed my cheek to keep from responding directly, holding back from responding to her immediately. I did not like her making demands, but I needed to try to defuse this calmly, if I wanted a chance to treat them without conflict. Instead of telling her to get bent like I wanted to, I only nodded before turning around. Before I could order anyone to go, Corvak raised his hand.

"I'll go, this talking stuff is not my strong suit anyway," he pointed out, before Mara stepped forward as well.

"I'll go with him," She said. "I can guide us back in case we get lost."

"Alright, request a repulsor cart if they can get one," I suggested with a nod, before toggling my external speakers off. "Pass on the order to have Commander Frost sent down from the *Triumph*, have him move in armed with stunning, disabling, and capture equipment. I want them waiting in the tunnels, ready to engage."

"What happened to not attacking them?" Tatnia asked, just barely beating out Corvak

"I said I didn't want to, not that I wouldn't," I pointed out. "Right now, I consider these people incapable of giving informed consent, which means we treat them until they can. If it comes down to it and we can't get them to agree to treatment, then we will resort to force. If, after that, their memories don't come back and they want nothing to do with us... Then we will leave them alone, as horrifying as that may be. "

Mara and Corvak nodded when I was done with my explanation, and they very quickly left, the latter of the two eagerly picking his weapons back up, including his enchanted beskad. Once they had walked out of sight, I turned back to face Seva. I was surprised to see that behind her, the reinforced hut was now open, and people were stepping out. One was an elderly

woman, moving slowly and with great difficulty, while five more were children, including the Twi'lek boy. Someone else had returned to the fire pit, slowly rotating the slightly unevenly cooked lizard creature.

Rather than continue to speak, Seva gestured for me to follow her, walking to a covered semicircle. After a pause, I followed after her, using the comms to tell everyone that they needed to be polite and try to get a feel for the situation. As Seva stopped and sat, I realized she was sitting on a couch from their ship, covered in moss and hides. Once she was comfortable, Seva gestured for me to do as well. Ahsoka followed me under the roofed space, sitting beside me while the rest of my people sat around the fire, gently talking to some of the others. Seva looked at Ahsoka with a raised eyebrow, wondering why she had followed, before spotting the two sabers on her hips.

"Ah, this is Ahsoka Tano. She is my partner," I explained, emphasizing what I meant by partner by putting my arm around her for a moment. "She is a Jedi, which is why she has her own Hearts."

"I can see that," Seva confirmed with a nod. "It is strange, I have never even considered the concept of having two Hearts. How does that work?"

"I have had two Hearts for most of my life," Ahsoka explained. "It is what came most natural to me."

It was a vague, nondescript answer, but again, it was better than diving into the complex topic of the |force. We had more than enough on our plate already, we didn't need to make it worse by including a meta lesson on a cosmic-scale ESP field.

"Truly amazing," She said, her hand reaching down to her own saber, though she left it clipped to her belt.

"Seva, could I ask... the mushroom growing on your shoulder. Do you know what that is?"

"My seedling light?" she asked, reaching up to touch it, the spot that her fingers met growing brighter for a moment before dimming. "It is the gift of the cavern, a light to see in the darkness. Do growths like the giant ones not spread out over the surface?"

"No, these giants are pretty unique," I responded, casting a look at the massive mushrooms glowing above us, no doubt shedding spores around us as we sat here. "We've never seen anything like this place."

"It has always been like this," She assured us, the confidence in her voice disconcerting to say the least. "We have always been blessed with seedling lights, just like some of us have always been holders. The idea that there are others who do not have them... it is surprising."

"Have... Have you considered that your inability to remember who you are, what you are running from... might be caused by the seedling lights?" Ahsoka asked, causing me to wince inside my armor, wondering how she might react.

She focused Ahsoka with a long look. For a moment, I could see the woman from the holorecording, the powerful Jedi Master who had led her people away from the Empire. Then, as quickly as she arrived, she faded away.

"Would it matter? she asked, not bothering to challenge the explanation. "We are safe from what chased us, and we have everything we could need. The giants above us and the life around us provide, and we are safe, protected by the cavern."

"At the cost of who you are," Ahsoka pointed out. "At the cost of the memories of why you ran, of who you ran from."

"If you have come here to convince us to abandon our home, you may as well leave," The older woman said, her voice tight as she stared down Ahsoka. "We will not. This is where we belong. The children of the tribe were born here, and they will grow here."

Something about her statement caught in my mind, and I repeated it twice to myself before I figured it out.

"You don't even remember who the children's parents are," I said, eyes wide. "You are forgetting everything, even the memories you make here. It's why you haven't been through the tunnel in so long."

"There is nothing through the tunnel but poison. Useless metal and poison," the infected leader responded harshly. "And the children are raised by everyone. It is better that way."

"Even if they forget their parents?" I asked, suddenly finding it hard to keep my cool. "Even if their parents forget them?"

"Those of us who are unique share their looks with their children," She explained, referring to the alien members, of which there were a handful. "The rest of them are raised by the village."

I stared at her for a long moment, my brain trying to come to terms with what she was saying, her dismissive tone adding another layer to my frustration. Sure, raising children with help from friends, family, and even a tribe like setting wasn't necessarily bad, but simply accepting it as normal and waving away the consequences, especially when someone was clearly trying to help.

Corvak's plan was starting to sound more and more appealing.

"What could we do to help you?" Ahsoka asked. "We have medicine, we have resources. We could help you regain your memory. If you don't want to come live with us, we can help you find someplace safer."

"We don't need help," Seva responded, standing from her seat, looking down at us with eyes hard and full of denial. "We are better off here, better off without the loss, without..."

She trailed off, sitting back down in her seat. Her eyes were filled with sadness for a long moment before it faded away again.

"We are better off without the reminders of what is out there," she finally said after recovering from what looked like a flash of memory. "There is nothing for us out there anymore. This is our home."

Rather than continue, Ahsoka connected to me with the comms, keeping her external speakers off.

"Deacon... the message said she lost her husband before they came here," Ahsoka said, connecting through our suits. "What if her desire to forget that is pushing her deeper?"

"It's possible," I admitted with a frown. "Either way, I'm starting to think this is not going to end well with her as she is."

While we were talking privately, Seva saw it as us giving her the floor, and she continued to speak.

"We may have to sacrifice some things, but with our memories gone, how would we even know what we were missing?" She pointed out. "The cavern and the giants provide us with everything we need, and leaving would only invite suffering. We are safe here, under the glowing canopies."

"If we asked the others if they would like to be treated, cured, and shown the world outside the cavern, would you let them leave in peace?" I asked, giving her one last chance. "Or would you try and stop them?"

The moment the question left my lips, I already knew the answer, it was written plainly on her face. This was not going to work, she was not going to budge, and there was no way we could convince her to let us help directly.

As if picking up on my shift of intention, Seva tensed, preparing to do something, maybe shout for the others, or maybe even attack us, but judging by the way Ahsoka tensed as well, it was clearly not something good. I charged and fired a Paralyze, the green spell streaking across the gap between us and slapping her in the chest. Seva was just starting to rise out of her seat, beginning to stand when the spell hit her, and she dropped back down, locked up by the magic.

Ahsoka immediately looked around, hands on her lighstabers, looking for anyone who might have seen what I did, but people seemed pretty distracted by the rest of the team around the fire. She moved closer, standing right behind me to block the light as I focused a healing spell into the now paralyzed leader, focusing on her head and her shoulder.

For a long, tense moment, I was stuck wondering if Restoration would be able to handle a living fungus infecting someone's body. I dumped more and more mana into her, the seconds stretching by.

At nearly thirty seconds of casting healing magic, the purple marks on her body began to fade, wiped away by my spells. Like receding water, they vanished closer and closer to the fungal growth on her neck, until finally it reached there too. The roots of the infection withered, the double fist chunk of fungus peeled and fell away, leaving behind sores and grooves on her skin where it had merged with her. In another moment, those faded as well.

The entire time I was healing her, she was staring at me with wide, scared, angry eyes, struggling against my spell and failing as I cast it repeatedly. When the mushroom started pulling away, all of that vanished in an instant, and she dropped into unconsciousness like someone had cut the power. When I let the paralysis drop, she sagged back into her seat, Ahsoka turning and catching her before she could fall to the stony floor.