

--XVI--

MEASURE OF A MAN

"The measure of a man can be found in his measure of devotion to the people he cares for the most."

- Saint Michael of Kal'Shabbol
Journal of the Whills, 1:01

It was always hard to say goodbye, especially to friends. Annikin never really had to say goodbye to anyone before. He'd always had very few friends, and no one he knew had ever left or even died, for that matter. Now he was beginning to find out how hard it could be, even if he'd only known his new friends for five days.

The suns were beginning to set. It was a fitting tribute to the closing of their time together. The orange and red atmosphere painted by the setting suns on the sky reflected against the queen's repaired vessel, setting a peaceful tone as they stood in front of the ship on the outskirts of the Lars homestead, preparing for their departure from a less than peaceful stay on Tatooine.

What Annikin couldn't imagine, though, was that, considering where they were headed and what they had to do, they'd likely look back fondly on their eventful time in the desert wastes. They may not have liked Sarus, but there was real evil afoot. Obi-Wan had to brief the Jedi High Council about the Guardians of Lettow and the existence of the Ophuchi, while Arcadia had to try to save her planet. Neither would be particularly easy, especially for the queen. The weight of an entire world was literally on her shoulders.

Binks and Dooku had already headed inside, as had the rest of the crew. Annikin said his goodbyes to the Gungan, regretting the fact that he wasn't able to get to know him better. He seemed like a noble creature, outcast from his people without justification. Annikin could only hope that Binks would see better days ahead and be able to return home.

On the other hand, Annikin refrained from saying anything to Dooku. He'd considered speaking to him to try and mend whatever rift had somehow formed between them, but after everything he'd seen he knew that it would never happen. There were always arrogant people in the galaxy. If he'd only met Dooku then his opinion of the Jedi Order would've been beyond low, but thankfully Obi-Wan was with him. If the rest of the Jedi were cut from the same cloth as Obi-Wan, then it had a bright future ahead of it, unlike if it was more than similar to Dooku.

Now only Annikin, Obi-Wan, the queen, and Logan remained, as did Artoo and Threepio. The two droids had spent the last few days chattering amongst themselves. It was strangely Human the way the two droids seemed to bond, like nothing Annikin had seen before. Droids typically didn't associate like that, but these two seemed to hit it off.

"Farewell, Artoo," Threepio said. "Do take care."

Artoo beeped a farewell reply. The little droid turned around and started rolling back up to the ramp, ready to be de-activated until arriving on Coruscant. Artoo stopped on the ramp and the two droids briefly exchanged a few more words, but Annikin wasn't listening. With the droids knowing it was time to leave, that only made the moment sink in for Annikin. This was it. His friends were leaving, and he'd be returning to a normal life.

He nearly laughed out loud at that idea. Nothing in his life would ever be normal again. As much as he wanted to believe otherwise, demanding that Sarus never show his face again didn't mean that the hermit would magically listen to him for once. He knew they hadn't seen the last of one another. Sarus was too stubborn, arrogantly clinging onto what he wanted like a spoiled child who didn't want to listen to his parents when they told him that he'd done something bad.

Unfortunately, Annikin couldn't give Sarus any sort of punishment. The nonsense would continue, and he'd never be able to escape Sarus. All he could do was ignore him. It was almost an incentive to leave, but he wasn't about to cave in and run away. He would deal with Sarus in whatever way he had to. He'd drag him back to the sanctuary himself if the situation called for it.

"I guess this means goodbye then," Annikin finally said. No one else wanted to say it, but he just wanted to get it over with.

"I still don't feel comfortable leaving knowing that those people could still be looking for you," Obi-Wan worried aloud, having seen what Lilith and her followers were capable of, and still not knowing about Maul's existence.

"They're gone," Annikin said. He was touched, but he couldn't help but feel that it was paranoia, even if Sarus himself would return. "We saw them disappear. Besides, you can't stay here and protect me forever. You have a lot of more important things to do."

Arcadia smiled, knowing that Annikin's last words were somewhat directed at her and the situation on Utapau. Annikin had been very supportive of her, trying to fix the hyperdrive out of the goodness of his heart so they could complete their mission. She stepped closer to him and hugged him, eternally grateful for his generosity. It reminded her that there were truly good people in the galaxy.

"Thank you, for everything," the queen said with an incredible sincerity as she ended the embrace, something rarely seen in political leaders.

"I hope everything works out for you," Annikin told her.

"So do I," Arcadia replied. She flashed a weak and forced smile, knowing that the odds of successfully saving her world were not in her favor.

"And don't let some insane hermit intimidate you into being something you're not," Logan said as he reached out and shook Annikin's hand.

"I don't plan on it." Annikin said.

"I heard he was here earlier," Obi-Wan asked, concerned that Sarus would keep trying to force Annikin into believing in the prophecy. "What does he want now?"

"He wanted me to race one of my rivals," Annikin said. "He said that if I won, I'd be released from my family's sharecropping contract so I could leave Tatooine and become a Jedi."

At that, Annikin couldn't help but laugh. When he spoke with Sarus hours earlier he was angry, furious, in fact, that Sarus had come back after Annikin demanded that he leave. He still was, but now he was beginning to find it funny that Sarus actually thought Annikin would go along with what he'd proposed. Part of him wanted to, but it wasn't going to happen.

Still, Annikin wanted desperately to race Sebulba again. The Dug cheated him a year earlier, and the slighted racer wanted to prove that he could actually beat Sebulba. If he won, he could even pay off some of his old debts, particularly his gambling losses with Greedo. On the other hand, though, he would only be playing into Sarus's hands, and likely forcing himself into a situation where he'd have no choice but to follow Obi-Wan to Coruscant or else be dragged along behind him.

"What did you tell him?" Obi-Wan asked, curious as to whether Annikin would accept the offer.

"To go to hell," Annikin put it bluntly. "I'm not going anywhere."

Though he knew he'd get a mouthful from Dooku if he ever mentioned this to him, Obi-Wan would have likely agreed to take Annikin to the Jedi Temple, as futile as trying to make a nineteen year old a Jedi would be. The Jedi tradition was to never accept anyone outside of infancy for Jedi training, as individuals older than that began to form attachments, a dangerous element of life for a Jedi that could lead to the dark side.

Obi-Wan didn't give it much thought until now, but after Arrakeen he could feel how strongly the Force was with Annikin. At first he believed it was just the powers of the Force nexus within the Arrakeen ruins, but that feeling didn't go away. The nexus seemed to amplify his awareness of Annikin's potential, something he hadn't noticed beforehand.

Even still, Annikin certainly wasn't the strongest individual he'd felt within the Force. There were Jedi Masters far more powerful than him, as they'd spent years working to manifest and harness the abilities that they'd been born with. It was likely, though, that if Annikin had been born in the Republic, the Jedi would've detected him much sooner. The Order made a point to seek out and locate infants attuned to the Force, as they couldn't afford to hope that parents would know to bring their children to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant until made aware.

While Obi-Wan would never try to force anything upon Annikin like Sarus had been doing, nor did he even begin to think he could understand the validity of an ancient prophecy, there was a chance that Annikin would make the choice to accept an offer, not a demand, to travel to Coruscant. The odds of the Jedi Council even being willing to speak with Annikin were astronomical, but if there was one thing Qui-Gon taught him it was that there was no such thing as a coincidence.

Things happened for a reason, and Obi-Wan suspected that there was a reason Annikin, someone a random desert hermit believed to be a savior, was the one who boarded the queen's ship days earlier. Did that mean Annikin was destined to save the galaxy, or even destroy it as the Lettow said? Absolutely not, at least in Obi-Wan's point of view, but it was possible that Annikin could be an asset he couldn't afford to ignore. He would ask Annikin if he was open to it once, and he would support whatever choice the young man made. He would never try to force a belief onto him.

"Your highness," Obi-Wan began, "I'd like a moment to speak with Annikin in private, if you would permit it."

The queen nodded in agreement. Considering everything that had happened, especially regarding the Jedi and the prophecies about the Force, it was obvious that they had a great deal to talk about and not enough time to talk about it. Still, she wasn't about to tell him that he couldn't. Obi-Wan saved her life, and the lives of her crew. The least she could do was allow him a few more minutes for a conversation.

Arcadia and Logan made their way back up the ramp, offering Annikin one last parting smile. Obi-Wan walked with Annikin away from the ship, not wanting anyone to overhear the conversation, least of all Dooku. Hopefully Annikin wouldn't think Obi-Wan was doing Sarus's bidding or anything of that sort, but rather realize the Jedi Knight was just making a simple offer.

"I know you don't want anyone telling you what you're supposed to be," Obi-Wan carefully said, "but I've felt the Force within you. I didn't realize it until Arrakeen, but I do now. If you want to make the choice, I'm sure the queen would allow you to come to Coruscant with us. The odds aren't in your favor, but considering everything that's happened I could try to persuade the Jedi Council to at least test you. It could help you understand more about who you really are."

Annikin chuckled again. He knew what Obi-Wan was getting at, which was a far cry from what Sarus would try and say, but a Jedi's life just wasn't in Annikin's future. Besides, he'd first have to race Sebulba, and if Obi-Wan was expected to wait for him then that would only hold the queen up. There were far more important things going on in the galaxy than him, and his new friends had to leave. There wasn't any way of getting around that.

"Thanks for believing in me," Annikin said, making sure his sincerity was heard. "It means a lot, but I think I'll stick closer to home for now."

It was disappointing for Obi-Wan to hear. Part of him did want Annikin to be tested at the Jedi Temple. There were few Jedi he chose to confide in, least of all Dooku, but he felt that he and Annikin had developed a bond over the last few days, one that he hadn't felt with anyone else before. It was the makings of a strong friendship, though he understood Annikin's choice.

It was completely understandable. The Jedi Knight, ready to say goodbye, reached out his hand and Annikin took it, a final gesture of friendship before departing.

"Take care of yourself, Annikin," Obi-Wan said.

"You too," Annikin replied, the departure difficult for him just as it was Obi-Wan.

Annikin backed away as Obi-Wan made his way back up the landing ramp. The long walkway retracted after the Jedi Knight was safely aboard, its locking mechanism letting out a faint thump as the door was pressurized for space flight.

The blue flames of the engines roared to life. Sand danced around behind it, flying away as the intense heat kicked it up off the ground. The ship began to rumble, a normal occurrence when a vessel was about to lift off, and finally it slowly rose above the ground. The ship's landing gear retracted back into the hull of the ship as the craft gained more elevation.

Finally, it turned and rocketed away, fading into the setting suns. Annikin let out a sigh as he watched it move further into the distance; part of him wished he could be there, traveling the galaxy from one adventure to another, but he believed with all the fabric in his body that their destinies were far more important than his.

As the ship disappeared from sight, he was alone again. For what would later seem like a split second, he'd been in the company of heroes and some of the galaxy's most powerful people, but now that was over. Now all he could do was live his life, trying to avoid the influence of Sarus as best he could.

If only the Force really was watching over me, Annikin thought.

The suns finally set beneath the horizon, blanketing Anchorhead in almost total darkness. Normally street lights were left on for the guards the Hutt Cartel employed to watch over the settlement and protect Jabba's fortress, but barely any of them were around. A group of sand people were spotted scouting around the town earlier in the day, so naturally, being the aggressive tyrants they were, Jabba's underlings ordered over half of the fifty or so guards they had in the settlement to go after the raiders.

Little did they know that the sand people they saw were only Ophuchi in disguise.

Ray'kele was able to move through the settlement with ease, considering the twenty or so guards that remained were mostly congregated in and around the fortress. He'd escorted Sarus to a nearby building, where the Ophuchi leader would wait for his signal before making his own move. Ray'kele was in charge of what was about to transpire, even if he was reluctant about it.

Rounding a corner, the future leader of the clan met up with the rest of his men, a dozen of the strongest Ophuchi that were uninjured following the attack the day earlier. Part of him thought it was foolish to bring so many men on what could end up being a suicide mission. They'd already lost fifteen men, women, and children, nearly a sixth of the entire clan. How many more lives could they afford to spare? If they kept with their current course of action, there was no telling how many Ophuchi would be left.

Ray'kele's second-in-command for the mission, Elijah, was a young, unassuming nineteen-year-old who had a strong future in the clan, potentially as one of Ray'kele's closest advisers once he became the clan leader. The two appeared to be the exact opposite of one another; Ray'kele was tall and muscular, with brown hair complemented by brown eyes, but Elijah, with his blue eyes and blond hair, stood a few inches shorter. Nevertheless, they saw eye to eye on a number of things, so Ray'kele felt he could trust him. The night's events would put that to the test and see if Ray'kele was right.

"Is everything ready?" Ray'kele asked. His impatience was beginning to show through as he tapped his foot over and over again while he stood, just wanting to get everything over with so he could go home and help his people rebuild.

"Yes sir," Elijah replied, almost remorseful in his tone. "Are you sure about this?"

In all honesty, Ray'kele had no idea. He'd always trusted Sarus and he'd always put his faith in him, and vice-a-versa. There was never a moment up until a few months ago that he would actually doubt his leader, but he'd been noticing something was changing in Sarus, and none at all for the better. They had known for a few months that the Chosen One's time of awakening was beginning, but Sarus was taking things far more seriously than the rest. It was important to take galactic salvation seriously, of course, but Sarus was turning into a fanatic. There was a fine line between genius and insanity, and Ray'kele wasn't quite yet sure if Sarus had crossed that line. He had to believe in his master, at least for now, and trust in his wisdom.

"I have faith," Ray'kele said, hoping to convince Elijah, but more so trying to convince himself, that it was true. "Now let's move."

"Won't Sarus be coming with us?" Elijah asked, surprised that their leader hadn't yet joined them as they were preparing to move out.

"He's injured," Ray'kele reminded him, though he didn't think it was much of an excuse anyway. "He'll come in after we capture the Twi'lek."

Elijah's confidence in returning from the mission sank to a new low. True leaders were supposed to stand out in front of their men and lead them into battle, not wait in comfort and watch from afar while their men were fed like lambs to the slaughter. Perhaps Sarus wasn't the leader everyone once thought he was.

The power was already off at the homestead. The entire family was tired after the events of the last few days, especially Annikin. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to sleep. There was just too much on his mind, too many emotions swirling about that he couldn't even think straight, least of all sleep in peace.

He was finally alone now, leaning against the main hut outside of the homestead. He was still looking out over the distant mountains where he last saw the ship. Part of him hoped that it'd come back and take him away from the one place where Sarus could still have a hold over him, but it wasn't going to happen. They were on their way to Coruscant to save an entire world.

Just the thought of someone having so much pressure on them like that was unimaginable. He couldn't even begin to dream what it'd feel like to really have the weight of an entire galaxy on his shoulders. He'd felt that pressure earlier, but it was nothing compared to what Arcadia was going through. He was afraid of the possibilities of the future, but she was under the gun. She knew what it was like to be faced with that kind of situation.

No one else on Tatooine did, and that's why he was truly alone. He had his loved ones, but they couldn't comprehend anything that he'd been going through, and he knew they wouldn't try. It was insane for someone to try and convince themselves that they

understood what Annikin was feeling. No one could, not unless they were in a similar situation like Arcadia was.

It was pitch black and he hadn't made any noise, but he saw a light flicker on in the stairwell beside him. Cliegg and Owen emerged, somehow having known he was out there. Owen stood in front of Annikin, but Cliegg leaned up beside his step son on the hut. If there was one person who'd be able to help him feel better now, it was Cliegg. Shmi would certainly be able to comfort him, but it was Cliegg who told him about making his own choices the night before. It helped put things into perspective, even if Sarus was likely still planning something.

"You all right, son?" Cliegg asked, hoping there was some way he could help even if he couldn't understand what he was going through.

"Yeah," Annikin lied, sighing as the words came out. "I'm just not sure where to go from here anymore."

"What do you mean?" Cliegg asked.

"I'm just never going to escape from this," Annikin said with remorse, wishing he'd never run away from Cliegg and followed Sarus in the first place. "Sarus won't stop coming back, no matter what I say."

"We won't let him," Owen said unexpectedly. "No one's going to harass you anymore. No one except me, of course."

Owen jokingly grinned and Annikin arched an eyebrow. He'd never heard Owen say anything like that before. It almost seemed like...genuine compassion. This was a side of his older brother he'd never seen.

"First you give me a pep talk," Annikin said, recalling their brief conversation earlier in the day, "and now you're actually showing some real concern. Not that I'm complaining or anything, but what's with the new attitude?"

Owen chuckled. Annikin wasn't the only one who'd been doing some soul searching over the last few days. Particularly when Annikin was out in the desert and Owen and his parents had no idea where he was, Owen looked back on some of his mistakes and finally realized them. It took him far too long to recognize what he was going through.

"What you said about why Beru left me," Owen said somberly, "about how I have trust issues, it really got me thinking about how I'd been acting after my mother died. I guess I was keeping people away because it'd hurt less if they ever went away. It took me not knowing where you were or whether I'd ever see you again to realize that. I'm sorry."

Jubilant at the newfound relationship between them, Annikin walked towards Owen a bit and slowly reached out his arms. It was strange, or rather downright awkward, but it was something he should've done a long time ago. Owen did the same and, slowly but surely, their arms made it around one another, and they embraced in a strong brotherly hug for the first time either of them could ever remember. Cliegg beamed with pride, his aging face awash with pride and joy.

"Now this is more like it," Cliegg said, more than thrilled that his sons were finally acting like brothers after so many years, but there wasn't time to celebrate.

It came out of nowhere. A flash of pulsating light swept past them, and a colossal explosion created a brilliant ball of fire in Anchorhead, one bigger than any fire the trio had ever seen. Even from a distance, they could feel just how massive it was. They could see just how intense it was, as for a brief second night became day. They instinctively turned their heads away and ducked, but it was too far away for them to have to really worry about being hurt.

The explosion came right from the town square, centered on Jabba's fortress. The Hutts wouldn't be pleased at all; no one, especially the Hutts, took uprisings against their rules lightly. Whether or not they'd actually be able to figure out who it was would be another story, considering just how slippery the obvious perpetrator was. For Annikin, though, and for whatever reason, it didn't take a hyperspace theorist to know who was behind the attack.

"Sarus."

That was all he had to say. The words fell out of his mouth almost by themselves, his mind not needing any real time to rationalize the thought. It just seemed right. It was accompanied by a strange sensation, something Annikin had never felt before, a feeling that the answer to the question of who was behind it was just immediately put into his head and out came the words.

"How do you know?" Cliegg wondered.

"I don't know," Annikin admitted. "I just do."

His eyes darted from left to right. His thoughts were a jumbled mess as he tried to figure out how and why the answer was so obvious to him. He may have known Sarus was capable of a lot of bad things, but until a moment ago he never would've thought that Sarus would do something like this.

Even so, he may not have known how he knew Sarus was behind it, but it didn't take him long to decide what he was going to do about it. Everything Sarus had done so far revolved around Annikin, and he had no other reason to believe that this time was any different. No matter how many people were injured or killed in that explosion, Annikin couldn't help but feel guilty, as if he'd set the explosion himself. If he wasn't around, if he'd simply accepted Sarus's offer to race Sebulba, then that explosion never would've happened.

He ran, like so many times over the last few days, but instead of running away from his fear it was time to run towards it. Sarus couldn't be allowed to do this. Annikin knew full well that Sarus was doing this out of some sort of twisted loyalty to Annikin in the hopes that Bib Fortuna or even Jabba the Hutt himself would set Annikin free from the sharecropping contract, but all the hermit was doing was bringing the full wrath of the Hutt Cartel not just on Annikin's own family but the Ophuchi as well.

Annikin nearly flew down the stairs to the garage. He landed on his feet at the bottom and sprinted for a cabinet on the other side. He threw open the doors and grabbed a blaster rifle from within, loading it with an energy pack before stuffing another pack in his jacket pocket in case he needed to reload. Cliegg and Owen came down the steps. Their eyes widened, not expecting to see this.

"What are you doing?" Owen asked.

"You're not going in there," Cliegg insisted bluntly, not even giving Annikin a chance to explain itself. Cliegg simply wouldn't allow it.

"I'm the only one who knows what he wants," Annikin said, cocking the rifle as he headed towards the steps again, though he stopped and turned around once he reached them as he knew he hadn't heard the end of this conversation. "I'm the only one who can stop him."

"And what's that?" Cliegg demanded to know.

"Me," Annikin reminded him. "He wants me. He's trying to free me because I refused to race Sebulba, so now he's playing hardball."

"Then you're probably playing right into his hands," Owen said. If he were in Sarus's position, he probably would've done the same thing so it seemed only obvious that Sarus was trying to draw him in.

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," Annikin told him, for the first time admitting that he did have the power, even if it wasn't from the Force or some sort of divine prophecy, to help people and change things for the better, though he wasn't consciously aware of his newfound change in attitude. "I won't let him hurt anyone else."

"I'm not letting you go in there alone," Cliegg told him, grabbing a gun and two energy packs from the shelf. He wasn't about to let his son run into the line of fire alone. To his surprise, but also his great pride, Owen followed suit.

"Neither am I," Owen echoed.

Annikin grinned. For the first time in his life, he felt he could fully depend on his stepbrother for help, and as always knew he could rely on Cliegg. He was petrified about running into the situation, considering what he'd find or be faced with was one giant question mark, but at least he knew he never had to do something like this alone. Even in the middle of the desert, there were people who cared enough about him to run into a burning building or maybe even a war zone. He took one deep breath, his chest puffing up and outward, before finally saying what he never expected he'd have to say.

"Let's do this."

The center of Anchorhead was in shambles. The explosion that ripped through Jabba's fortress and the empty nearby buildings only moments earlier was the discharging of a powerful explosive Sarus had provided the Ophuchi strike team with. It had been covertly planted on the great, arched double doors of Jabba's urban fortress and primed to go off, the detonator now comfortably nestling, with the trigger depressed, in the hand of the strike team's leader, Ray'kele.

Almost as soon as the explosion had shattered through the eardrums of the citizens of Anchorhead, the Ophuchi team was on the move. Broken down into three squads, the first two squads ran into position, their varied weapons ready to fire. The first squad, designated Aurek and consisting of three Ophuchi men and Elijah, formed up on the left side of the door, now bent, broken, and melted in a mess of metal. The second squad, Besh, which was also four men strong, mirrored them on the right side of the door. They awaited the order from Ray'kele to burst in, guns blazing.

Ray'kele himself was lying in wait with four men under his direct command, designated Zerek squad, about twenty meters from the door, at the side of the square and kneeling behind a low wall, their weapons leveled at the center of the door. His head was bent and he was counting under his breath. He looked up in time to see the smoke clearing enough to make out the large black hole made from the bomb.

The hole was immediately filled with panicking, hulking figures. Two Gamorrean guards, each cradling a blaster rifle charged out of the door, snorting and waving their rifles around the square, looking for whatever had caused the explosion.

"Zerek squad, take them out!" Ray'kele shouted, without a second's hesitation, depressing the trigger of his own weapon, a blaster rifle, and the red beam lancing towards the chest of one of the Gamorreans.

An array of blaster bolts and projectiles from Zerek squad zipped across the square behind that of the Ophuchi strike team's leader and peppered the two green swine bipeds, both of whom squealed in shock before their gently smoking bodies collapsed to the floor with a colossal thud, befitting of their weight.

"Aurek and Besh squads, go in red, go in red!" Ray'kele called to the two teams flanking the doors, in cover.

The point man of each squad knew exactly what that meant, and each took one of the few grenades they had, arming it and tossing it through the doors. Two loud bangs later and both point men leapt forward, their weapons shouldered, and burst into the doorway, kneeling on either side of the hole that had. They began firing into the room as the second man in each of the two teams ran to provide fire, standing behind the first man and firing into the darkened entrance hall.

Ray'kele leaned onto the balls of his feet, his breath held, as the first two pushed inside, the two standing fell to their knees and the next two from the squads span around to fire into the room that was lit by muzzle flashes and red blaster streaks. The sounds of Gamorrean squeals and human shouts accompanied the firefight. Before long the last member of each squad, one of which was Elijah, pushed inside, firing as they went, as the gunshots began to subside. Elijah himself leaned out of the door, looking towards Zerek team.

"Ray'kele, the entrance hall is secured, you're clear to approach!" he shouted out to them.

"Zerek team, move!" Ray'kele shouted as he jumped up and over the wall. He didn't need to hear Elijah's confirmation twice.

Ray'kele led them into the cavernous, dark entrance hall, the smoky smell of battle slamming against his nostrils as he burst in, his rifle leveled. Almost to his surprise, Elijah had surpassed his expectations as his second-in-command, with the four men of Besh squad formed up facing towards the corridor leading to the throne room, a closed door at the far end of the corridor being the target of the four men's weapons. He noticed one Ophuchi warrior, from Aurek, face down on the floor, amongst a number of Gamorreans. The other two men of Aurek squad flanked the door, and Elijah knelt, beckoning to Ray'kele.

"Fill me in," Ray'kele said, bending down next to his second in command.

"Once you felled the two door guards, we burst in and took down the initial guard party of

Gamorreans. We lost one," he gestured the dead Ophuchi warrior. "Straight shot to the head, he was dead before he hit the ground. The four guards also managed to seal the door to the throne room before we took them out. We don't have enough explosives to blow it, but there is a keypad next to it if we had some way to hack it."

"Very well done, Elijah," Ray'kele said, "And we won't need to try and hack it. Sarus's contact provided the codes to the throne room lock system. We'd better get moving, before the rest of Jabba's henchmen turn up and pin us down in here."

Ray'kele turned back around in the direction that he'd run in from. He pointed to the fifth man in Zerek, signaling him over for a new assignment. As the man ran over, Ray'kele tried to ignore the pain he was feeling. After so many Ophuchi had already died in the sanctuary attack, it pained him knowing that yet another was dead. Perhaps Sarus truly didn't know what he was doing. His actions could be the death of all Ophuchi.

"You're now transferred to Aurek team," Ray'kele said, handing him a datapad with the codes on it. "Take these and input them into the door keypad."

"Yes sir," the newest Aurek squad member said.

"Aurek," Ray'kele called out, raising his voice to the rest of the room, trying to sound more enthusiastic about the mission than he really was in the interest of morale, "flank the door. Besh, take the left side of the corridor. Zerek, you take the right. We'll go in green. Fortuna may well be covering in there. Target all Gamorrean guards. Only target bounty hunters and smugglers that open fire on us. If they don't fire, ignore them. There's no need to make more enemies than we already have. We open fire as soon as the doors open, so I want Aurek providing covering fire as Zerek and Besh push in. Let's go, boys!"

The point man with the datapad began rapping on the keypad next to the door as the rest of his squad flanked it, Elijah next to him and the other two kneeling on the other side. Nobody primed grenades this time. In a line along one wall, Besh team knelt, their rifles shouldered, leveled at the center of the door. Zerek mirrored them on the opposite wall of the corridor.

The lock system flashed green and the door slid open with a hiss. The throne room was more cavernous and dank even than the entrance hall. There was more furniture and debris inside, though, which was good for the Ophuchi, as it meant more cover for them in the firefight. And they would definitely need it; if their estimates were correct there would be almost twenty more forces between them and Fortuna.

Ray'kele depressed his trigger and began firing through the doorway, and the rest of both Besh and Zerek squads followed suit. Projectiles and laser bolts zoomed through the open door and connected in the throne room, some with hulking Gamorreans, other with walls or the items of furniture that littered room.

In the chaos that began to ensue, Ray'kele called, "Zerek and Besh, push into the throne room!"

The eight men, two at a time, prepared to bolt into the room and dive behind a large metal table that sat near to the door. The first man of Besh stood and caught a blaster bolt squarely in his chest for his trouble, falling to the floor, coughing and spluttering.

"Damn you Sarus," Ray'kele muttered under his breath as he watched the man fall, struggling to stay alive as he laid on the floor.

Luckily, the first man from Zerek managed to make it to the cover, ducking behind it. The shot Ophuchi was still alive, but without medical aid he would not remain that way for long. Either way, he was out of the battle now and the Ophuchi needed to take the throne room.

The second pair stood, both making it through the doorway, although one of them took a bolt to the shoulder as he dived behind the cover. Then it was Ray'kele's turn. He sprang to his feet, firing through the door as he went, targeting instinctively at any position from where bolts lanced at him. He knew one of his blasts at least had hit its target as he heard a loud pig like squeal and a thunderous thud followed swiftly after. He slid to a halt in a crouch behind the cover and saw the wounded Ophuchi shaking in pain, clutching his bleeding shoulder. The Besh squad member who had made his dash with Ray'kele hadn't made it to the cover. Soon after, the last two men made their own runs.

The man from Zerek, firing as he ran, lingered in one spot a little too long and ended up being struck repeatedly in the chest with the bolts of Jabba's guards. The Besh man managed to come to a stop beside, Ray'kele, however.

"We're now Zerek squad," Ray'kele said, gesturing at himself and the other three uninjured Ophuchi.

"What...what about...me...sir?" the injured Ophuchi struggled to get out.

Ray'kele tried to smile as he comfortingly and gently placed his hand onto the young man's bloodied shoulder. It was hard pretending that everything would be alright. Ray'kele's eyes were puffing and turning red. He could barely keep from crying. Was this really salvation? He couldn't understand how the galaxy would be saved if everyone kept dying in the pursuit of salvation.

"Listen, listen to me Emmanuel," Ray'kele told the dying man, choking up as he spoke. "You sit tight here until the firefight is over. We'll get you a medic and you'll be just fine."

The dying boy was only nineteen years old. So young, so innocent, so unprepared. It just wasn't fair that he would have to die. He knew it too, but he tried to ignore the growing numbness taking away all feeling across his body, tried to ignore his slowing breaths, and tried to ignore the bright white light he was beginning to see at the end of the tunnel. All he had left was hope, hope that Ray'kele's promise would in fact be true.

"Zerek team, covering fire!" Ray'kele shouted back to the doorway once he stood back up from where Emmanuel lay. "Aurek, push inside and take cover behind the benches to the left!"

Peering out of the various angles from behind the table, the four men began laying down more fire into the Gamorrean guards, getting some hits and forcing the others to take cover as the four Aurek men ran to take cover behind the benches.

The remaining eight able men of the Ophuchi attack force took turns providing fire, but the Gamorreans and a few of the bounty hunters were able to return fire, creating a stalemate that halted the Ophuchi attack. Worst of all, there was still no sign of Bib Fortuna, but Ray'kele knew that Sarus had a backup plan for him. The young Ophuchi took a comlink off his belt, clicked on it, and whispered the prearranged order: Sarus needs your help.

If the Ophuchi attack was the ace in the hole for Annikin's rejection of the proposed swoop race, then message's recipients were the ace in the hole for the ace in the hole. Ray'kele, despite his doubts, still felt a surge of renewed determination as he gave the order. He may not have been thrilled about what was happening, but if Emmanuel and other Ophuchi still had to die, he knew that it should at least be a cause worth dying for: Annikin Skywalker.

Bib Fortuna, Jabba's Twi'lek domo, was safe from the attack. He was sitting comfortably in the fortress' control room, a very secure antechamber of the throne room, consisting of the chair he was sitting in and a number of screens that allowed him to watch each stage of the Ophuchi attack.

The few monitors dedicated to the throne room bore his attention, and although they had lost a lot of the Gamorreans, his soldiers in there had halted the Ophuchi advance and would easily keep them at bay until reinforcements arrived, or push the invaders back themselves. Until then, Fortuna could only rely on the Gamorrean guard captain and another Gamorrean body guard for protection.

Also in the control room for protection was Kalyn Farnmir, a bounty hunter who'd been working for Fortuna over the last few weeks. Despite her buzzed blond hair, the Human female was remarkably alluring. Her features, combined with the black armor that covered everything below her head but her arms and the back of her shoulders, painted a seductive picture of someone who didn't quite seem to fit in this line of work. Her silver pistols were holstered, but she kept her hand on top of them in the event she needed them. Her presence let Fortuna breathe a sigh of relief in an otherwise tense situation.

The Twi'lek grinned as he watched more Ophuchi crouch lower and closer to their cover. They wouldn't hold out for long. Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Ophuchi leader whispering into his comlink, and the result of this left the domo most displeased.

It appeared that the Ophuchi had approached some of the bounty hunters in the office in advance of this attack. In what was clearly part of a prearranged agreement, two of the bounty hunters who had been hovering towards the Ophuchi raised their weapons and began firing bolts into the backs of Gamorreans who were attacking the crouched Ophuchi.

By the time the remaining Gamorreans realized what was happening, they were either dead or dropping their weapons and putting their fat green arms well above their snouted heads in a gesture of unconditional surrender. The Ophuchi stood and prepared to check that the guards were unarmed, but the two bounty hunters gave them no chance, gunning the gigantic pig-like creatures down.

In his seat, Fortuna let out a squeal not unlike his disgusting green servants. After being so confident about forcing the Ophuchi out, the execution-style murders of the Gamorreans just outside his door completely unnerved him. The bounty hunters weren't accustomed to taking prisoners, which the sweating Fortuna feared he'd soon know all too well.

"Contact our reinforcements, tell them we have traitors, and tell them to hurry up!" the Twi'lek said in Huttese, receiving only a grunt from his guards as a reply as he began speaking to himself.

He could only pray that the reinforcements would arrive within the next few minutes. He tried to rationalize what was happening, muttering under his breath in an effort to convince himself that he'd be safe in the antechamber. The door could only be opened from the inside, and the chamber could withstand virtually any explosives that the Ophuchi had. All he had to do was sit and wait for the reinforcements, or so he'd try to convince himself. Even so, he knew was just kidding himself if he believed he was right.

Ray'kele stood up from his cover with the rest of his men. His weapon still ready to fire in case they were double crossed, Ray'kele stepped gingerly around the carcasses that littered the floor, leading his men over to the two armor-clad bounty hunters who probably saved all of their lives.

"Good work," he said to them in appreciation, "and not a moment too soon."

Neither of the bounty hunters said anything, and no expression could be read from their faceless helmets. Still, the way one of them hefted his weapon and the other only holstered one of his pistols told Ray'kele all he needed to know about what they were thinking.

"Sarus will pay you the balance once we have Fortuna," he said, before frowning as he realized there was one noticeable absence. "He also told me to expect three of you."

Ray'kele's conversation with the bounty hunters played out on the monitor in front of the Twi'lek domo. Beads of sweat rained down his smooth tan head, sliding onto the prehensile tentacle-like brain-tails that grew from the base of his skull.

"Schuttas!" he spat before turning to the Gamorrean captain. "Where are my reinforcements!"

A panicked snort was all the captain said in response, telling Fortuna that the guard couldn't contact them. The reinforcements were undoubtedly on their way, but they had no idea just how urgently they were required. As far as the domo knew, they could still be hours out.

"Then it seems my guards are useless," Fortuna angrily shouted, slamming his fists on the desk he sat behind as he looked over at Farnmir. "You will get me out of here safely?"

The bounty hunter said absolutely nothing. She was normally a jovial person, far more so than most bounty hunters considering it was never her desired line of work and she had to make the most of it. Now, though, she kept to her orders and remained completely emotionally detached from her assignment.

"I will pay you double!" Fortuna continued in Huttese, desperation creeping into his cracking voice.

The young woman sighed. She couldn't abide his whining, but orders were orders. Luckily she'd soon make it out of this trash dump and go onto better work. And finally it was time to do just that, to get back to her life instead of this miserable assignment. Still, she was well paid, and she imagined she would end up getting that double payment from her employer if she was successful here.

Ready to leave, the bounty hunter drew two pistols from his belt. Fortuna smiled, taking this as a sign of her acquiescence. Instead she fired each one once, striking each of the Gamorreans before they hit the ground with smoking holes in their heads. She then pointed one pistol at Fortuna as she paced over to the door, hitting the door's release with her free hand to let the Ophuchi who'd hired her inside.

Outside the fortress, its corner of the settlement was completely abandoned. Anchorhead was like a ghost town, seemingly devoid of all life. Annikin had never seen anything like it, even on a normal night when most people stayed inside anyway. This was something different; the usual faint sounds of nearby speeders were gone, and even the music that could normally be heard coming from the cantina had stopped playing. All he could hear was the soft sound of the nighttime breeze and the occasional sound of blaster fire coming from the fortress.

Flanked by Cliegg and Owen, neither of whom were thrilled with the fact that Annikin had indeed decided to run into the middle of a war zone, Annikin stepped through what used to be the entrance to the fortress, now a gaping hole at the front end of the building. Durasteel plates hung from the new entryway, and sparks were flying everywhere.

The interior of the fortress was no better. Half of the grand foyer on the other side of the former entryway was still smoldering, with the other half quickly becoming consumed by flames. They ran through as fast as they could, ignoring what was on either side of them. Looking at everything, seeing the danger all around them, would only make them want to turn around more than they already did. Tunnel vision would take them all the way.

Annikin hunkered down behind a pile of rubble once he made it through the next door, and Owen and Cliegg quickly followed suit. It was quiet here as well. The small battle had moved deeper into the fortress. All that remained here, bathed in smoke, were the bodies of fallen combatants. Not even a single Ophuchi remained this close to the entrance.

Still, they couldn't be too careful. Annikin coughed as his eyes scanned the area, not quite sure what he was looking for. This whole situation was far above his pay grade. All he could do was improvise and hope the Ophuchi weren't stupid enough to fire on him. Jabba's guards, on the other hand, were a different story entirely.

"This is stupid," Owen whined. "There should be Ophuchi crawling all over this place."

"Sarus is arrogant enough to only bring a few people," Annikin reminded him. "He thinks the will of the Force is behind him."

"Religious fanatics on a holy mission," Owen chuckled. There was nothing more dangerous than zealots who believed they were on a mission from some sort of god. There was no telling what lengths people like Sarus would go to so they could achieve their goals.

Ignoring Owen's quip, instead remaining intensely focused on getting to wherever Sarus might have been, Annikin stood back up from their cover. Cliegg and Owen looked at one another with panic in their eyes, trying to reach out and grab Annikin before he could get out too far, but they didn't have enough time.

"Get back down here," Cliegg demanded in a hushed tone. "We don't know what's in there."

"They won't kill me," Annikin said, perhaps a bit too cocky for his own good.

"No," Cliegg reminded him, "but last I checked, you weren't the Gamorrean messiah."

He had a point. Still, they were inside the fortress without so much as a scratch. That in and of itself was the clearing of the biggest hurdle. Annikin wasn't about to turn back now. Besides, looking in every corner of the room, looking through the smoke that was clearing from the floor, he couldn't miss the fact that most of the fortress's guards were lying in pools of their own blood.

"I don't think that'll be a problem," Annikin said, keeping his eyes momentarily fixated on the nearest Gamorrean corpse.

Cliegg tried to call out, but Annikin was already on the move. The aging farmer wanted to get out immediately, knowing it was all too dangerous for their own good, but he wasn't going to leave unless all three of them left. He had no choice but to keep up with Annikin, hoping that the boy would come to his senses and get the hell out of dodge.

Instead, Annikin kept up his slow, steady trek through the smoky fortress. He scanned the next room, more bodies littering its floor. He heard a cough, more of a gurgling really. At first he couldn't see it, but the bloodied and battered body of Emmanuel revealed itself when the fog of smoke parted. Annikin ran over to him, as did Owen and Cliegg. The young man put his hand under Emmanuel's head, trying to help him sit up, but he slowly lowered it back down when he saw it was causing the dying man more pain than he needed to bear.

"You'll be fine," Annikin frantically lied, taking off his jacket and placing it under Emmanuel's head. "We'll get you help. Just hold still."

"You...you're with us," Emmanuel said softly, but wide-eyed with a clear admiration for the man he saw as the savior of his people, struggling to get the words out with blood slowly dripping down the side of his mouth. "He said you wouldn't come, you couldn't come. Are you here to save me?"

"Yeah," Annikin lied, choking back the emotions that were overcoming him, trying to give the young man who was no older than him one last sense of comfort before he passed. "Yeah I am."

"I want to see my wife...my baby daughter," Emmanuel said with a smile as he thought of his young wife and his month old baby girl, praying that he would be saved. A sadness overcame him, the idolization in his eyes giving way to tears as he knew that he would never leave this place. "I never wanted this. We never..."

Emmanuel's voice trailed off. Annikin panicked, gently shaking Emmanuel's shoulders thinking he'd died, but the young man wasn't dead yet. He grabbed Annikin's arm, surprising Annikin with his intensity, his passion, his will.

"Make my death mean something," Emmanuel said, pleading for his dying wish.

He slowly loosened his grip on Annikin's arm, his hand falling down Annikin's side. Emmanuel's eyes fluttered. He struggled to keep them open, desperately trying to stay alive. Despite all the carnage and destruction around him, all he could see were the smiling faces of his family, and that thought stayed with him as the light flickered out of his eyes as they closed for the final time.

Annikin's whole body momentarily went numb as he stood back up. He'd seen death in the Ophuchi sanctuary and in the fortress, but he'd never actually watched a man die before. There were no words. All he could hope for was that Emmanuel went peacefully without any pain. That's all he could hope for anyone.

"Why'd you tell him you were going to save him?" Owen asked. He'd been surprised Annikin lied like that, preferring to tell people the truth instead of coating reality with sugar.

"Better to lie than to tell someone they're a goner," Annikin told him.

"Well he got what he deserved," Owen spat, not crying any tears over the Ophuchi losses in the battle. "They all do after this."

"How can you say that?" Annikin asked, shocked that his brother could be so cold. "Look at him. He was my age. He wasn't anything like Sarus. One bad egg doesn't mean the whole batch is rotten."

"Maybe," Owen admitted, "but after everything that's happened over the last few days, why would you want to help these people?"

Why do I want to help these people? Annikin wondered. What is it that made him suddenly want to risk life and limb in the service of people who barely knew, of people who willingly allowed themselves to be led by a mad man? Did that matter? Was it really all that important what their leaders did? No, no it wasn't. Nothing he'd seen suggested that there was anything wrong with the Ophuchi themselves. Someone just had to get Sarus out of the picture, sooner rather than later.

"Because maybe I'm the only one who can," Annikin started to recognize, giving some ground in his anti-savior stance, albeit subconsciously.

He still thought the galactic savior idea was ridiculous, but if he was in the position to help people, no matter who they were, then that's not something he could give up in good conscience. Besides, he truly believed that Sarus didn't represent the whole of the Ophuchi people. He'd seen too many good people just trying to live their lives in the sanctuary. It was Sarus, not them, who brought this upon their people.

Turning away from the fallen Ophuchi's battered body, and the disapproving looks from his family, Annikin once again headed towards the next room, moving deeper into the fortress in the hopes of finally finding Sarus and somehow putting an end to all of this insanity.

Before he could walk through the next door, though, he was confronted by an Ophuchi guard. The gruff-looking middle-aged man was armed with a blaster he'd picked off from a dead Gamorrean, but he hadn't yet raised it up at Annikin, per Sarus's orders. He'd only been commanded to turn Annikin away, but he was prepared to do what was necessary to follow through on his agreement to keep Annikin out of this whole affair.

"Get out of my way," Annikin demanded.

"Sorry sir, Sarus's orders," the guard, Hadriel, said. He slowly started to raise his blaster, not aiming directly at Annikin but putting it up just enough to persuade Annikin to leave. "I can't let you in there."

Annikin nodded his head, seemingly conceding to this setback. He turned away from Hadriel, but it was only a deception. As the guard lowered his blaster back down to his side, Annikin swung back around, reaching out his fist and knocking it square between Hadriel's eyes. The guard stumbled backwards and tried to grab hold of the side of the doorway, but he fell to the ground, losing consciousness. Annikin rubbed his fist as Hadriel fell, not expecting the impact of the punch to hurt so much.

"Nice hit," Cliegg chuckled as he and Owen watched in amusement.

"Holovids make that seem so easy," Annikin jokingly replied, still wincing from the pain of the bruised bones in his fingers.

Annikin again raised his blaster, slowly stalking his way around the knocked out guard and into the next room. He took his eyes off of his family, which proved to be a colossal mistake. Behind him, two blaster shots rang out. He whipped around, but he couldn't see anyone. Owen stood in front of him and he clearly hadn't fired any shots, and no one else seemed to be in the immediate vicinity. In fact, there didn't seem to be anything wrong at all, but that was a gross error in judgment. It was then that he saw it.

The blaster fell from his hands. It seemed like slow motion as it fell, impacting on the ground beside him. Annikin's whole body grew cold. He heard a scream bellowing throughout the room. He didn't even realize it was he who was screaming.

"Dad!" Annikin desperately shouted.

Cliegg fell to his knees. Owen tried to catch him, but the whole thing took both of them by surprise. Owen made sure that his father didn't completely fall to the ground, even though he still wasn't completely sure what was happening. He pulled back his father's jacket and saw blood beginning to pour out from two spots on his chest. He'd been shot in the back from a shot so nearby and so powerful that it'd made holes in the front of his chest as well.

He gasped for breath, struggling to hang on. Annikin slid onto the ground beside him, holding him up from the right side while Cliegg did the same from the left. He was gravely injured and needed medical help immediately. Annikin kept looking around, trying to figure out who or what fired those shots, but his eyes kept darting back to his wounded father, all of their faces panic-stricken. They had no idea what the outcome of this would be, but they could all agree that Cliegg needed to leave immediately.

"Sarus...," Annikin muttered. He clenched his free fist. His face started to scrunch in anger. He could almost feel his hands wrapping around Sarus's neck.

"Would he?" Owen wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Annikin admitted, "but I can't imagine a Gamorrean just shooting one of us and running off."

"We need to get him out now," Owen said. He and Annikin stood up, bringing Cliegg to his feet as well, but the farmer couldn't stand up on his own two legs at this point.

Annikin was ready to run out with Owen to get Cliegg the help he needed, but that's when he started to think, an unexpected moment of realization amidst all of the trauma he'd been dealing with. If he left now, then Cliegg's injury, or worse, would mean absolutely nothing. He'd of been injured or killed for nothing. Annikin was there to stop Sarus, and if Sarus was

behind this then that was all the more reason to keep going and stop him. Annikin would do whatever was needed to get Sarus out of their lives, and to keep him from hurting anyone else, especially his family.

"You go," Annikin said, handing Cliegg completely over to Owen and picking up his blaster from the ground.

"Where are you going?" Owen demanded to know, though he had a pretty good idea of what the answer would be. Annikin kept walking, however, not acknowledging his brother's insistence. "Annikin, I said - "

Owen was cut off before he could finish the rest of his sentence. Annikin was through the doorway and he slammed his fist onto the door's keypad, causing it to slide shut just as Owen was speaking. Annikin pulled his blaster up and unloaded it into the keypad, making sure Owen, nor anyone else, could get in. He had to get to Sarus uninterrupted. Annikin just couldn't keep playing this game anymore. He had to end it one way or another.

Ray'kele's blaster was lodged directly into the back of Fortuna's neck, the Twi'lek leaning up against his desk. They'd been playing this back-and-forth insults game for nearly twenty minutes now, with neither of them accomplishing any of their goals. Fortuna obviously wanted the gun off of his neck and for the Ophuchi forces to leave immediately, but Ray'kele, despite his doubts, held firm.

He'd slammed a new sharecropping contract in front of Fortuna nearly ten minutes ago. Sarus drafted it before the attack began, writing it to include all of the Lars family members except for Annikin. Having a Hutt representative sign it was much easier than trying to have Annikin removed from the pre-existing document.

"Pay dowat jalom konia!" Fortuna screeched, pleading for Ray'kele to wait before doing anything foolish. He was no hardened warrior, but just a bookkeeper, a manager, someone who had no business being in a situation like this.

"No," Ray'kele barked. "I've waited long enough. Now sign the damn paper and we can get out of here."

"Cha skrunee da pat sleemo," Fortuna said, lodging the resistant insult directly at the Ophuchi holding the gun to his neck.

The Ophuchi strike team leader pushed the barrel of blaster harder up against the Twi'lek's neck. Ray'kele wanted absolutely nothing to do with this, but he had to do it. He didn't have a choice. He could never go against Sarus's orders, not after everything Sarus did for him, could he? He just didn't think he was capable of that kind of betrayal.

"Ray'kele!" shouted a voice from the doorway.

Ray'kele's neck whipped to his right to see Annikin stalking in, pointing his gun directly at the Ophuchi's head. Elijah, who'd been guarding the door, quickly brought his blaster up as well, pointing it at Annikin, despite knowing that Sarus would probably kill him if he harmed the so-called Chosen One.

"Ap-xmasi keepuna!" the Twi'lek shouted, begging to not be caught in the crossfire if shots did end up ringing out.

"Put the gun down," Elijah demanded, but Annikin, the fires of determination ablaze in the contrast of his blue eyes, wasn't about to back down. "I said put the gun down!"

"I don't want to shoot you, Ray'kele," Annikin said desperately, knowing that he could never actually shoot him, even if Ray'kele didn't necessarily know that.

"Just stay back, Annikin," Ray'kele pleaded, gesturing his free hand outward to signal Annikin to back up. "Sarus didn't want you to be a part of this."

"You shouldn't be a part of it either," Annikin told him, not wavering in his aim.

"I don't have a choice," Ray'kele struggled to get out, his voice cracking as deep down he knew that Annikin was right. "I swore that I'd do whatever I could for you a long time ago."

"Did you swear to commit murder?" Annikin asked, moving in closer. "Did you swear to be a madman's puppet?"

Ray'kele swore to do whatever Sarus told him to do. He swore to do whatever Sarus said was needed to help achieve galactic salvation. Was this really needed? Was Sarus right? He thought Sarus was always right, at least until the last few days. He couldn't shake his doubts, but at the same time he couldn't shake the doubting of his doubts, however backwards that seemed. He couldn't let go of the memory of what Sarus did for him.

"He saved my life," Ray'kele recited, as if it was some broken rhetoric he used to convince himself that he was doing the right thing. "I owe him everything."

"You don't owe him this," Annikin stressed. "It's too much."

"You don't understand!" Ray'kele shouted. "I have to do this. I have to."

Annikin sighed, exhaling all of his frustrations in one breath. He only had a few options, none of which were very appealing to him. The downside to every one of them was that someone, whether it was him or someone else, would find themselves lying in a pool of their own blood.

Only one option had a potentially successful outcome, at least as far as Annikin could tell. It was the only one that made sense. Ray'kele didn't want this. It was painfully obvious. The stress lines told him that, written across the Ophuchi's face. Ray'kele had to make the choice. Only he could choose to ignore Sarus, just like Annikin did.

Annikin lowered his blaster, effectively lowering any quick defense he would have if Elijah wanted to take a shot at him, but Annikin had to believe he was doing the right thing. He had to believe that the Ophuchi could prove they weren't like Sarus. If they couldn't do that, then everything Annikin was now fighting for, everything Cliegg was wounded for, was for nothing. He'd be fighting for a people who didn't deserve saving, because they refused to save themselves.

"Fine then," Annikin said, keeping his blaster lowered at his side. "If you have enough faith in Sarus to kill for him, enough faith in me, then do it. Pull the trigger if that's what you

really want, but just think about it for a minute. Nothing good can come out of this. If you kill him now, they'll only come after you and your people with everything they've got."

No, Ray'kele couldn't back down, he wouldn't. He'd come too far, done too much. He'd promised to do whatever he could to help in the salvation of the galaxy. Sarus told him this would help, and Sarus knew best, didn't he? That's what Ray'kele had always been raised to believe, what he'd been trained by Sarus to believe. He'd been taught to follow his orders, because this was the time of awakening. There couldn't be any missteps.

But this couldn't be the best way of doing things. How could murder help save lives? It was a contradiction inherent in Sarus's insistence of doing whatever was necessary, no matter the cost. It was a course of action that could very well get all of the Ophuchi killed.

That's why Ray'kele couldn't bear to pull the trigger. Ray'kele wasn't capable of watching while more of his people became lambs to the slaughter with the justification that it was for the greater good, that there was a bigger picture, that everything would work itself out in the end. He couldn't stand aside and watch while the Hutts brought the full wrath of their armies down on the Ophuchi.

There was still the question of his loyalty to Sarus. He'd grown up hearing the words of the prophet Michael, saying that the measure of a man rested on his devotion to those he cared for. He truly cared for Sarus, the man was like a second father to him, but his devotion to his people was stronger. This would be his true measure, the sacrificing of his supposed duty instead of forsaking those he was fated to lead.

"You win," Ray'kele whispered, directing his comment at Annikin. The Ophuchi lowered his weapon, leading to a sigh of relief from the trembling Twi'lek.

"What are you doing?" Elijah asked in surprise. He certainly wasn't shedding a tear over Ray'kele's defiance considering the little faith he had in the operation, but he'd known Ray'kele for years. Defying Sarus was the last thing Elijah would've expected him to do.

"I won't...I can't be responsible for more Ophuchi deaths," Ray'kele admitted.

He threw his weapon off to the side, a symbolic gesture to say that he was done with this entire situation, ready to return to his normal life. Annikin watched as he did so. He couldn't help but crack a smile. He'd been worried that his faith in Ray'kele and the average Ophuchi had been misplaced, that Owen was right about them. He'd never been so happy to be proven wrong.

"We're a peaceful people," Ray'kele said as he looked Annikin in the eye, shifting awkwardly and uncomfortably where he stood considering everything that happened. "We always were. Then Sarus..."

"Idealism won't save the galaxy, Ray'kele," came a voice from the door behind Annikin, a voice that called out just as Ray'kele's trailed off, "not when we're at war. Sacrifice is what victory is measured upon."

Annikin's shoulders tensed and his face cringed as he heard the voice. Slowly he turned to face the doorway, locking gazes with Sarus, who'd limped his way into the room expecting that the people he thought were his minions would've finished his dirty work by now.

Annikin had half a mind to shoot him right there and then. Cliegg was off somewhere with a blaster bolt in his chest because of the hermit, and Annikin wanted to make him feel the same pain his father was feeling, but that wouldn't have gotten them anywhere. It took every ounce of mental energy he had not to shoot him dead.

"I should've known you didn't have the stones to do this yourself," Annikin scoffed.

"I was injured," Sarus retorted with a mock sincerity, knowing full well he had no intention of actually participating in a battle that could've ended his life and prevented him from being a further influence in Annikin's destiny.

"So you send the people you claim to lead in here to murder in your name?" Annikin asked, his indignant tone not subsiding. "That's cowardice."

"I didn't do this in my name, Annikin," Sarus reminded him, strongly implying what Annikin had suspected ever since he saw the explosion earlier.

"Oh right, I forgot," Annikin sarcastically replied. "The view's getting a little foggy from the pedestal you threw me on."

Sarus smirked as he walked further into the room, shifting his weight onto his left leg to alleviate the pain that his right felt. He hadn't expected Annikin to be here, but he held out hope that, if he did come, it would've been to join him, not to continue resisting him.

"Your sarcasm doesn't change anything," Sarus told him as he situated himself next to Ray'kele, who took a few uncomfortable steps to the side to stay away from his leader. "There's a reason why you're on this pedestal."

"If you say one more thing about this prophecy then so help me I will kick your - "

"Shut up and listen to me!" Sarus barked, taking a few lunging steps forward towards a startled Annikin as the hermit's patience wore thin. "The Dark Lord is powerful in ways that defy anything you can possibly imagine. If the dark side goes unchecked, then he will walk free across this entire galaxy, destroying everything he touches. This is a cosmic war that only you can end before it's too late."

A few days earlier and Annikin would've been angsty about the weight of the galaxy being on his shoulders, but that was the last thing that crossed his mind now. Annikin leaned forward as he broke out into laughter, holding his side as the words became more and more hysterical. That little speech was the final bit of icing on the cake for Sarus's insanity. Annikin had seen all he needed to know that Sarus truly lost his mind.

"What's so funny?" Sarus asked. He couldn't understand how his dire warning could illicit laughter. The destruction of the galaxy wasn't a game.

"I keep thinking you can't get any more insane," Annikin said, still smirking, admittedly trying to goad some sort of reaction out of Sarus, "but every time I see you I realize you can. I mean come on, don't you get it?"

"Listen to me, son," Sarus said, calming down from his previous outburst and moving in closer to try to connect with Annikin. "I'd hoped you came in here to - "

"No you listen to me, you son of bitch," Annikin shot back, not giving anymore time for Sarus to spew his nonsense. "I didn't come in here because of some prize fight between good and evil or some destiny that can't be changed. This is about you and your actions. Your mistakes. I shouldn't have to clean up after the messes you make in my name, and yet here I am again. First the sanctuary, and now this. I'm done with it. I'm done with you. I never want to see your face again."

Sarus never saw it coming. Those mere last few words carried the force of a cataclysmic punch in the gut, one that nearly knocked the wind right out of him. His eyes blinked spastically for a second, an instinctive recoil to the force of the declaration, like being caught in the middle of a supernova. And then Annikin continued, making a promise that Sarus not only didn't expect, but one that admittedly frightened him as he realized the fierce determination in the young man and what he could be capable of if pushed.

"Now my father was shot back there trying to stop all this," Annikin said, leaning in close to Sarus before continuing in a nearly inaudible whisper. "If he dies, you die."

The Ophuchi leader stood motionless. His feet might as well of been glued to the floor. He could barely process what he was hearing. Did the savior of the galaxy just threaten to commit murder? No, he couldn't have. Sarus must've heard it wrong. It was unthinkable, but was it justified? Sarus couldn't bring himself to believe that, nor could he bring himself to stop believing in Annikin, despite the boy's current attitude. If Sarus had faith in salvation then he couldn't let his faith start to waver because of one emotional outburst.

Ignoring the shock written in Sarus's demeanor, Annikin turned towards the Twi'lek domo, hoping to put an end to everything that had happened. Annikin took in a deep breath, shocked even at himself that he was going to do what he was about to do, barely thinking through the potential consequences, but it was the right thing. He tried to keep his hand from shaking in fear, but it was a losing battle. He was about to feed himself to the sharks, all because he blamed himself for what was happening.

Maybe part of him knew that it wasn't true, but that's not the part he was focused on. All he saw was a fanatical moron killing in his name, and he couldn't let the Ophuchi people suffer for it. Ray'kele had already shown a test of character, showing his devotion to those he cared for the most, namely his people. Based on what he'd seen in the sanctuary, Annikin could feel in his heart that the rest of the Ophuchi, at least most of them, were the same way. It wasn't their fault that Sarus was their leader, but Annikin did blame himself for getting the Ophuchi into these last two dangerous situations.

"These people committed an act of war against you," Annikin carefully admitted to the Twi'lek, a colossal risk in and of itself, "but it's not their fault. It's mine. I'm the one you want to hold responsible. Throw me in jail, run me away from Anchorhead, whatever. I don't care. Just don't punish them because of me."

"What are you doing?" Sarus demanded to know before turning to the Twi'lek as well. "Don't listen to him. He's confused. I don't know why he's saying this."

"Because I'm not like you," Annikin spat, digging it in how far Sarus had fallen from the grace in Annikin's eyes. "I won't let innocent people die for me."

"Don't do this, Annikin," Sarus pleaded, his voice straining, the desperation seeping through as he moved towards having to fall on his knees and beg Annikin to reconsider.

"Do we have a deal?" Annikin asked Fortuna.

"Cha skrunee da pat, sleemo!" Fortuna snapped, rejecting the absurd notion that the Hutts would overlook what the Ophuchi did to the fortress.

The Twi'lek didn't have to say anything more. His combative tone, his choice of words, the grin that crept across his face that let them know there would be blood, it said it all. The Ophuchi had damned themselves, but in trying to save them, in not thinking about what he was doing because of his guilt, Annikin damned himself as well.

Every additional second that he spent inside the fortress was a second he was putting himself into the line of fire. It was the same for the Ophuchi who were still in the fortress. Annikin and Ray'kele exchanged somber and worried looks, each of them beginning to breathe heavier, their shoulders sagging. Ray'kele nodded, and Annikin instinctively knew exactly what it meant.

First Annikin started to back away, sliding his trigger finger back onto the trigger, ready to defend himself if he needed too. He was followed by Ray'kele, then Elijah, then Sarus, who Annikin had half a mind to force to remain, but he was too focused on getting himself out.

They all backed away slowly, waiting for an attack that they knew probably wasn't about to come, but they had to be vigilant now that they all had bull's eyes on their heads. Fortuna remained still, watching them slip through the door. Annikin slammed his fist down onto the controls on the other side, causing the door to slide shut.

Little did he know that as one door closed, another would soon open.