

--XIII--

WHAT YOU TAKE WITH YOU

"The memory of Eden still haunts us all."
- Zios Malachor, first Bendu High Priest
Journal of the Whills, 1:27

This is stupid, Annikin said to himself. Not even twenty-four hours after marching through the nighttime desert, he was already on yet another trek through the desert, this time in the blistering heat of midday Tatooine. Only he, Sarus, and Obi-Wan remained in the Dune Sea; the rest of the group returned to the moisture farm in a speeder that the Ophuchi had brought out into the desert. Things got a little heated when they saw the speeder, considering they had all but dragged themselves through the desert on foot, but Sarus tried to explain to them that the journey through the Dune Sea was meant to be a test to see just how dedicated they were to finding out what he had to say.

Dooku, as per usual, was none too pleased. He went off kicking and screaming, infuriated that he was forced to walk through the desert when the Ophuchi had brought a speeder to their location, but Obi-Wan was able to calm him down somewhat. The Jedi Knight had to trick his former master into the speeder, as he knew that Dooku would have never returned to the Lars homestead without him. The Jedi Master had no desire to spend time with the Lars family or the other outsiders by himself, even if he didn't particularly enjoy Obi-Wan's company either.

Annikin was surprised, at least at first, that Obi-Wan had stayed behind instead of returning to the minor comforts of the moisture farm. He assumed it would just be Sarus and himself, which Sarus seemed to have wanted to avoid interference from anyone else as they made their way to an unknown location near the Ophuchi sanctuary. Obi-Wan never once considered leaving Annikin behind; he made a promise to keep Annikin safe, and letting him out of his sight wouldn't have helped keep that promise. Besides, there was no way he could return to the farm and tell Shmi that he left her son with a hermit in the desert. No, he would stay with Annikin as long as he had to. He didn't trust Sarus at all.

The lack of trust wasn't a secret to Sarus, but it wasn't a concern either. Sarus's goal was to help Annikin come to terms with his destiny so he could ultimately fulfill it, not to be trusted by Obi-Wan. Still, he couldn't help but respect the Jedi Knight. It was the open mindedness that Obi-Wan showed, especially when compared to the Jedi who trained him, that was truly commendable. Sarus could only help Annikin for so long, so he knew that the young man would need someone to guide him once Sarus's job was done. That person was Obi-Wan.

While Obi-Wan and Sarus pondered their thoughts about one another, Annikin's mind kept drifting back to the cave, the words of the prophecy whispering through his thoughts. It was all just so preposterous. He wanted to scream, he wanted to run away and never look back, bury himself in the sands so Sarus could never find him and so destiny would never come knocking at his door. Despite this, he knew that Sarus would never give up his beliefs and so he could never escape his desire to see the prophecy fulfilled, so Annikin figured he might as well just hear what the hermit had to say. After all, just because he listened to Sarus didn't mean what he had to say was true. It didn't mean he necessarily had to fulfill a destiny he didn't even believe he even had.

It was too bad Sarus didn't feel that same way. Annikin had spent the last few hours hoping to every higher power that anyone ever believed in that Sarus was a complete lunatic who was simply deluding himself into believing something that had absolutely no truth to it. He prayed to the heavens that Sarus would just go away, that he would realize he was wrong about Annikin, and that everything could just go back to normal. Annikin never liked change; throughout his life, he preferred to keep things the way they were and not have his life's status quo be upset in any big way. Adapting to a change like this just didn't seem at all possible. He didn't know if he could handle it.

Sarus was well aware of Annikin's apprehension, not just about the changes that would be coming to his life because of his destiny but about any sort of change. Very few people truly liked change that they brought on themselves, and some were so fearful of it that they did whatever they could to keep things exactly how they were. That could be both a blessing and a curse. They would never have to know any pain that could come with taking risks, but at the same time they could never progress. They could never grow.

Some were so fearful that that didn't matter to them, but that was far too dangerous. Fear was the devourer of all men's souls, one that made them susceptible to all of their hidden demons and the darkness within them. When consumed with absolute terror, one of the only places a person could go was straight into the lion's den, and very rarely were they able to claw their way back out. It was why anyone who was purposely headed into the belly of the galaxy's beasts needed to know the plagues that they dreaded, or else they would never be able to accomplish their necessary tasks.

If all went well, Sarus would be able to show Annikin how true all of that was. He was once again dragging Annikin along the so-called necessary path, pulling all of the right strings in order to make sure that Annikin's universe unfolded the way it should, but Sarus had no regrets. In his mind, nothing could change the destiny that Annikin would fulfill. For that reason, Annikin had to be prepared for it, and if preparing him for it meant Sarus had to drag him through what was required of him then the hermit leader knew that it was the right course. There was nothing to be apologetic about.

Annikin pulled on the hood that covered his head, adjusting it to try to keep more of the blinding light from the suns out of his eyes. It was excruciatingly hot, so much so that the three of them actually had to wear hooded cloaks just to keep the suns from scorching their skin and to keep the light out of their eyes. It didn't make sense, considering it only made it hotter, but at least they would be protected from the ultraviolet radiation that far too many people on Tatooine succumbed to.

Just as Annikin adjusted his hood, he saw what he could only assume was their destination, the place Sarus, for whatever reason, refused to tell them that they were going. The Ophuchi leader seemed to enjoy the mystery of it all, but now that it was in sight there was no way to deny what it was. The ruins of Arrakeen were even more impressive than they

appeared to be when Annikin saw them as just a mere speck from the Ophuchi sanctuary hours before, when Sarus told him about how he had gone to Arrakeen as a boy and found out about his own destiny. Annikin didn't want to admit it, but he had no other choice but to figure that Sarus was taking him there for a similar reason.

From the angle they approached the ruins, just the structures were more impressive than anything Annikin had ever seen, though he had seen very few things of that sort in his life. Numerous structures stood on the slope leading up to a small plateau, each made of tall pillars filled with cracks and structural damage that made it a wonder the whole ancient city didn't crumble to the ground. One ancient temple was built right into the rock face, very similar in appearance to the interior of the Ophuchi sanctuary. Annikin assumed that was where they were headed, but Sarus kept walking.

Ever since arriving at the Ophuchi sanctuary hours before, Annikin had seen a number of impressive sights, but nothing prepared him for what he saw when he rounded the rock face and found what was on the other side. It hit him like a ton of durasteel plating, nearly knocking the wind out of him considering the sheer magnitude and the utter impossibility of it all. He rubbed his eyes. It had to be an illusion, or maybe even a delusion brought on by exhaustion or dehydration, but when he moved his hands away from his eyes he could still see the extraordinary discovery in front of him.

A stream of water.

How was it possible? It simply couldn't have been real. Of course there was water in the Ophuchi sanctuary, but it was underground. The temperature was much cooler under the surface because the rays of the suns weren't able to affect it like they did the surface. This water, though, was actually on the surface. It was staring him right in the face. All of the water should've been evaporated. No, there shouldn't have even been water. The drought that had been going for nearly two decades made sure of that. No amount of Ophuchi mysticism could make water appear in the middle of the desert.

"I can't believe what I'm seeing," Annikin muttered. He didn't intend for anyone else to hear it, but Sarus still did, as did Obi-Wan. The Jedi Knight was just as shocked as Annikin.

"That's what you wanted, isn't it?" Sarus suggestively asked, though neither Annikin nor Obi-Wan picked up on the insinuating tone with which the Ophuchi leader spoke.

"More than anything," Annikin said. If only there had been water across the entire planet, he and everyone else living there would have had a much better life. It was the key to the conditions that they were all living in. How could no one have discovered this earlier?

Sarus let out a faint chuckle after turning away from his two dumfounded followers. *All part of the plan*, he whispered to himself. Annikin had to see the sight to help with his growth, to help learn about how to help other people. No doubt the young man was already itching to run back to Anchorhead and tell everyone about what he found, which he certainly was. Annikin could only imagine what other sources of water the settlers could find if they trekked out into the typically uninhabited parts of the desert.

Passing a small boat that appeared to be settled on the edge of the pool of water, Sarus kept walking towards their ultimate destination within Arrakeen, still surprising Annikin and Obi-Wan who assumed that the water or something closer to it was what they had journeyed to Arrakeen to see. In actuality, where they were headed was at the ruins-littered top of the rock face that they had rounded to get to the water. It was there that the ancient

Temple of Desire could be found, one built by the ancient ancestors of the Ophuchi in the great order that preceded it. In fact, the entire settlement of Arrakeen, built before the entire region became uninhabitable, was built by members of the order.

As they stepped onto the large set of steps that would take them to the top of the cliff, Annikin and Obi-Wan were able to catch a glimpse of the Arrakeen settlement on the far side of the pool of water. While there were some ruins in the distance, most of the structures had yet to crumble apart completely; they had been used by the Ophuchi far later than the ruins themselves.

The top of the staircase showed them the Temple of Desire, only a few meters away from where they stood. The entrance was built into the rock face they stood in front of, much like the structure that they passed coming into the settlement. An archway stood at the entrance to the temple; a gold all-seeing eye had been carved in the center of the archway. It seemed to be staring directly at them, but more specifically staring directly at Annikin. It was as if it was looking to draw him in. He tensed up, gulping at the sight of it. The idea that the temple was watching him, that it knew who he was and what he was supposedly supposed to do, was disconcerting.

Sarus, though, knew exactly what it meant. It was a sign of being able to clearly see everything about yourself, being able to see your deepest desires, your darkest secrets, your strongest fears. It meant being able to see through the things that could hold you back and prevent you from moving forward in your life or, in Annikin's case, the things that could keep someone from fulfilling their ultimate destiny. Only through open eyes could one confront the darkness of the galaxy, because they first had to overcome the darkness within themselves that would consume them if they let it.

"What are we doing here?" Annikin asked. He had an idea as to what the answer was, but he didn't want to make too many assumptions.

"You said you wanted to learn more about yourself," Sarus reminded him. "This temple is where that can happen."

"Here?" Annikin asked as he looked around, trying to brush off the significance of the ruins and convince himself that nothing could possibly come of their visit there. "What could possibly be here? These ruins look centuries old."

The old hermit sighed. Annikin would simply never learn. Not everything was as it seemed, whether it was people, places, or anything else for that matter. One had to look deeper to find the true meaning and significance in something. The whole truth was never on the surface. Annikin had to learn that or else he would misjudge virtually everything he came across in his life, including himself.

"This is your problem, Annikin," Sarus frustratingly told him. "You have no faith in a larger picture. You've never learned to look deeper, to think outside the box. Until you let go of your two-dimensional view of reality, you can never grow into the man you're meant to be."

"The man *you* say I'm meant to be," Annikin said more forcefully than he had actually intended, but he wasn't about to let Sarus convince him that this was all meant to be. "I'm not here because I believe you. I said I wanted to know what you think you know about me. That doesn't mean I'm actually going along with you."

"Yes, of course," Sarus said with a grin, knowing that wasn't true. Deep down, Annikin had

to know that the prophecy was true and that he was the Chosen One. No rationale Human being would have stayed with Sarus and ventured further into the middle of the desert just because he was slightly interested in something he didn't believe in. Part of Annikin clearly believed what Sarus had to say.

"So what are we supposed to do?" Annikin asked. Standing around arguing about the prophecy wasn't going to accomplish anything.

"We' will do nothing," Sarus told him, turning towards the temple. "You will go into the temple alone and find the information you're looking for."

"Out of the question," Obi-Wan griped.

Up until that point, the Jedi Knight had refrained from saying anything. He actually had said very little since his argument with Dooku earlier in the sanctuary. Most of what was happening was between Annikin and Sarus, and Obi-Wan had no desire to get involved in any arguments they had over the validity of the prophecy. He was only with them to make sure Annikin was safe, and letting him wander into an ancient temple alone was not Obi-Wan's definition of 'keeping him safe.'

"You have nothing to worry about, Master Kenobi," Sarus assured him, completely understanding the Jedi's concerns. "As Annikin said, these ruins are centuries old. There is no one here, and there are no dangers that he needs to concern himself with. I have been in there myself, alone, so I can attest to that. He just can't be afraid."

"I must protest," Obi-Wan reiterated.

"I understand that you're concerned, Master Jedi," Sarus told Obi-Wan. "I know you find my views to be extreme, but keep in mind that my goal is to help Annikin fulfill his destiny. Marching him to his death would be rather...counterproductive."

Every fiber in Obi-Wan's being told him that this was a terrible idea. He had half a mind to grab Annikin, return to the Ophuchi sanctuary, and demand a speeder return them to Anchorhead, but he hesitated. He did feel that Sarus was a complete and utter fanatic, but it was true that he was a fanatic about helping Annikin become the Chosen One. Obi-Wan had no doubt that it was Sarus's intention to see Annikin bring salvation to the galaxy, so putting Annikin in danger was not something the Jedi Knight believed Sarus would do. He didn't like the idea, but considering Sarus's own beliefs and the reassuring nod that Annikin directed at the Jedi Knight, Obi-Wan wouldn't protest any further. He would, however, hold Sarus personally responsible if anything went wrong.

"Can you tell me what I'll find?" Annikin asked once Obi-Wan backed down from protesting.

"Only what you take with you," Sarus vaguely replied.

Can't he just give me at least one straight answer for a change? Annikin asked himself. He was beyond tempted to actually blurt it out, but he knew that it would only complicate the already tense relationship that he and Sarus seemed to have, or at least the tense feelings Annikin had for the Ophuchi leader.

Even though Sarus said that there weren't any dangers that he needed to worry about, Annikin wasn't about to walk into an ancient temple by himself without any way to defend himself should there be something that needed defending against. Annikin threw off his

hooded robe, knowing he wouldn't need it anymore. The jacket and shirt that he'd been wearing for the last two days now would be enough to keep him warm inside the rocks. Annikin pulled back his jacket and unsheathed a four inch knife that he'd been carrying on the back part of his belt, checking to make sure it was sharp enough to defend him. When he was satisfied, he sheathed it again.

"Why don't you let me hold onto that for you," Sarus suggested, hoping that Annikin would refrain from taking a weapon into the temple for his own good.

"Not on your life," Annikin said with a laugh. There was no chance that he was going into the temple without a way to defend himself, although he didn't seem suspicious of Sarus's offer like Obi-Wan did. Obi-Wan did not believe that Annikin would actually be in danger, but the suggestive tone in Sarus's voice seemed to tell the Jedi Knight that there was an underlying reason for the offer.

Sarus kept himself from letting out a sigh. There were certain factors that signaled deep-seated fears in a person; refusing to relinquish a weapon in the face of someone assuring one that there was no danger signaled not only a lack of trust in the person saying it, but a lack of trust in oneself. There was no trust in oneself to take a risk. If Annikin had taken the risk of going in unarmed, it would have paid off for him. Now, Annikin would realize he had much to learn about himself.

"If anything happens to him," Obi-Wan whispered into Sarus's ear, making sure that Annikin wasn't able to hear what he was saying, "I will hold you personally responsible."

As Sarus regretted Annikin's choice, and Obi-Wan pondered all of the ways things could go wrong, Annikin himself was doing the exact opposite. He kept his knife behind him as he started walking into the ancient temple, its floor and walls covered in sand and dirt, giving it a run down and less than elegant look that he always assumed temples had. He was ready to throw his hand behind his back and grab the knife, ready to defend himself at a moment's notice. He couldn't help but think he would need it.

The light at the end of the tunnel he was in began to fade away. No longer could he hear Obi-Wan and Sarus speaking with one another, and he couldn't bring himself to look behind him to see if he could still see them. For all he knew, someone, perhaps even Sarus, was following him. He'd rather not know and be caught by surprise than face whatever may have been stalking him, whatever force was out to get him.

Seconds seemed like minutes, and minutes seemed like hours. The time was moving by unbearably slow. Annikin breathed heavily, his chest rising and falling. He tried to convince himself that it was just the air getting thinner as he moved deeper into the cave and, with it, somewhat lower underground, but somewhere, deep down, he knew that he was just deluding himself. He was afraid, something that he liked to pretend he never felt. It was hard to deny that he was scared now.

Nearly ten minutes went by before the tunnel finally opened up, revealing what finally resembled how Annikin had always pictured ancient temples. Somehow, torches had been lit, a number of them lining the walls almost as if to guide Annikin's path. How could there be lit torches unless someone in this temple knew he was coming? Annikin pulled his knife out of its holder, instead placing it in the inside pocket of his jacket. This just all seemed wrong. There was no way he was alone here.

Passing through the room, walking atop a stone walkway lined with pillars that were, in

turn, adorned with torches to further light his ways, Annikin made his way deeper into the temple. He could hear a faint roar, something unlike anything he had ever heard before, but he knew it wasn't an animal. Instead it sounded like water, running water, just like he'd always imagined it would sound like, but he knew he had to be wrong. Then again, there was water on the surface, and there was moisture in the Ophuchi sanctuary. Could that mean there was even more water here?

The water ended up being of little concern to him, at least for a few moments. Now he knew why he was in the temple. The walls in the newest tunnel he entered were lined with symbols, some of them also written on the Ophuchi cave, but unlike the symbols from hours earlier these were carved into stone. These walls were manufactured by sentient hands, not natural forces, and the stones were carved with a specific intent to tell the same story that the Ophuchi caves told. The dove, the symbol of the so-called Chosen One, repeated over and over again. Annikin didn't want to admit it, but Sarus sent him in here alone because the hermit clearly believed that 'Annikin Skywalker' was written all across the walls.

And then the hieroglyphics and symbols abruptly ended. The stone walls were replaced by the dirt and sand, just like on the tunnel into the temple. This tunnel opened up, and Annikin stepped into a cave. He could still hear the sounds of the seemingly running water that he heard earlier, but it didn't sound like it was coming from where he was, but it was much closer, as if he could reach out and touch it.

"What is it with these people and caves?" Annikin mused aloud. He'd had his fair share of caves lately, and he had no desire to see another one for a long, long time, if ever.

Annikin stepped through a crevasse in a nearby wall, and he finally found what he had been hearing for the last ten minutes. Water, running water, not just a pool of it, but a waterfall. A waterfall, like nothing he had ever seen before, smaller yet similar to the ones that Arcadia had told him littered Utapau for hundreds upon thousands of miles of countryside. He never imagined, though he always hoped, he would be able to see something like this. Now he had the chance, but he couldn't help but wonder what the catch was.

Either way, he wasn't about to keep this a secret. He'd just made one of the greatest discoveries in the modern history of Tatooine. He had to tell everyone, not just his family but everyone. He would rally the people of Anchorhead, of Mos Espa, of Mos Eisley. He would rally everyone in every settlement he could, and he would hope that they could find a way to harvest the water to change the lives of everyone on Tatooine. He could only dream that there was more water deeper in the caves and temples and not just here, because if it was just in this cave then it wouldn't be the miracle he'd hoped.

The majesty of something most people believed so simple was overwhelming. Annikin had to place his hand on the cave walls just to keep himself from tripping over in glee. He beamed one of the largest smiles he'd ever smiled. He looked around, watching the deep blue water glitter both in the pool and on reflections on the walls. The water fall surged from its source, dumping more and more water into the cave chamber. He could barely contain himself, barely stop himself from diving in and enjoying it. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life.

Then she appeared.

Dark brown hair, light brown eyes, a striking complexion; the young woman, no older than Annikin, emerged from the water, scantily clad in clothing that barely covered her slender body. She whipped her hair around to the back of her head, brushing it back from her

forehead as she slowly, seductively emerged from the water, her eyes fixed directly on Annikin.

Like any other man attracted to Human women, much like Annikin was, Annikin couldn't take his eyes off of her as she batted her eyes and smiled. He backed away nervously, not knowing what to do or say. Despite how gorgeous she was, part of him wanted to run away. No matter how strong his desire was to not be alone, his fear of taking that step was just as strong. It was something he could never overcome, and it killed him inside. When the only people to help fill the lonely void he felt were his few friends and his parents, he couldn't quite feel whole. He always wanted someone, someone to be with, someone to love, but he could never strike up the courage to actually talk to someone.

"It's not every day someone comes knocking on my doorstep," the young woman said, sizing Annikin up, looking over every detail on his body. Annikin wanted to do the same to her, but he strained himself looking up and away from her.

"Is that so?" Annikin asked, laughing a nervous laugh. He just wanted to run away and avoid the entire conversation. It was one of the most uncomfortable situations he'd ever been in.

"I'm Eden," the woman said, smiling as she tried to reassure Annikin that there was nothing he had to be nervous about. "What brings you here, handsome?"

"Well, I..." Annikin said; he could barely talk, he could barely even mutter a word. *What's the matter with me? Just say something!* he shouted to himself. "You see, this crazy guy, he told me - "

"It's okay," Eden said, laughing and biting her lip as she watched him mumble and trip over every word he knew. "I'd love the company."

Annikin's eyebrow cocked as he tried to back away a little further, only to hit the rock wall behind him. There was something suggestive about the way she spoke those last words, something that made Annikin think she was almost seducing him. Why would she do that? He had no idea who she was, and she certainly had no idea who he was, at least he assumed. Either something strange was going on, which wouldn't have been the first time in the last two days, or she was just incredibly lonely after being in the temple for so long, presumably by herself.

"So," Eden continued, moving in closer; she placed her hand on his shoulder and began rubbing it, making Annikin somewhat uncomfortable but, at the same time, somewhat flattered, "what can I do for you?"

"What do you mean?" Annikin asked. In his confusion he turned around to face her, as she'd moved behind him to rub his shoulder. Her hand fell off his shoulder as he turned.

"You obviously want something from me or you wouldn't be here with me right now," she said. "I can give you anything you want..."

Eden wasn't wasting anytime coming onto him. She lowered her head and smiled for a moment before pushing her body up against his, standing on the tips of her toes as she moved in closer to his ear. She leaned in close, smiling and biting her lip again, whispering seductively in his ear.

"...anything."

Annikin felt like he was about to pull a muscle as he did everything he could to look away from her. It wasn't that she wasn't beautiful, and it wasn't that he didn't want to take her up on her offer, but something just didn't feel right. There was an allure about her, one that was doing everything it could to pull him in. He wanted it, not so much her but the feeling that he was with someone, the feeling of no longer being lonely, but he couldn't. This just wasn't right. He didn't even know who she was.

"I'm okay," Annikin said with an uncomfortable nervousness as he slid against the wall, moving away from her again and trying to make his way back towards the crevasse he came in through. "Yeah, I'm fine. I think I'll go now."

He turned away to finally leave, turning away from something he had desired for so long, but she wasn't prepared to let him leave. Eden grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him back, pushing their bodies together once again. Once more she stood on her toes, rubbing her hand up onto his chest beneath his shirt.

"I see how lonely you are," Eden said, trying to comfort him, nearly moaning the words out to try to get Annikin to break. "Give in to your desires. They can release you. I can release you. Only I can give you what you really need."

And finally she went in for the kill. Pushing her toes up further, moving in closer to Annikin's face, she brought her lips towards his. Annikin stood motionless, nearly in shock from what was happening, trying to make a decision about what to do. He didn't know her, but did that really matter? He had no idea if he should be running or just giving into it. After all, what harm could he do if he just kissed her, if he just let the moment take its course and become whatever more passionate moment it became?

Even so, he just still couldn't shake the feeling that this was all wrong, that Eden or something else was up to no good, so his better judgment kicked in. His better judgment worked against all his instincts, telling him to stop. It told him to walk away from exactly what he wanted, and he wasn't happy about it.

"No!" Annikin shouted, pushing her away before she could kiss him. "What's your problem?"

As Eden caught her balance, she stepped away further, enraged and disgusted by his rejection. How dare Annikin reject her, it was unthinkable! After all she had just offered him, after everything she was prepared to do for him, he simply threw it all away. What's worse, he threw her away. The look of sheer unabashed anger on her face was something Annikin had never seen before, almost as if the girl was unstable. Perhaps his instincts were wrong and he never should have wanted to give into her in the first place. Thankfully his good sense prevented that.

"You're the one with the problem, Annikin!" she shouted. "You're so pathetic you won't even touch me. Stop being afraid or you'll always be alone."

"I'm not afraid!" Annikin protested, but deep down he knew it was a lie. He was always afraid of taking big steps and risks. This was no different.

"Oh really?" she posed. A sadistic smile crept across her face, and the way she asked the question confirmed what Annikin had suspected: something wasn't right. Someone was up to no good. When the light in the chamber suddenly died away, he knew for certain that

someone was out to get him.

The only thing Annikin could do was run, run away just as he had been doing the last few days. He pushed his way through the crevasse and ran back through the cave and into the tunnel that would lead him back to the temple. He ran and he ran as fast as he could, running from his desires, his deep-seated fears, from everything. All he'd been doing lately was running. Was he just exercising common sense, or did that actually say something about him? Was he afraid of what was happening, or was he actually afraid to face what was happening? There was a difference, after all.

For a moment he stopped running. He leaned over and put his hands on his knees, panting and wheezing from being out of breath. He'd only run a hundred meters or so to get back into the main temple area before barely being able to breathe. It wasn't until then that he knew just how tired the last few days had made him. That didn't bode well if someone was following him, but he turned back around for a moment to check. Thankfully he appeared to be alone, but he thought that same thing before Eden appeared.

As he turned back towards the tunnel that would lead him back to Sarus and Obi-Wan, Annikin tripped and landed on a soft object. His horrified face contorted as he saw the ghastly sight, the soft object he tripped on not actually an object at all. He pushed himself up with his arms and lunged backwards, now able to see it as clear as day: the lifeless body of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Annikin's heart stopped. He started hyperventilating in shock when he saw the lifeless gaze of the Jedi Knight, looking up towards the ceiling above where he died. Obi-Wan's eyes spelled fear, as if something more horrible than a Jedi Knight could bear witness was what killed him. Annikin trembled and looked around again, hoping to find some sort of indication as to how Obi-Wan died, but there was nothing. There wasn't a single clue that told him how this could have possibly happened.

Then Annikin looked closer at the Jedi Knight's corpse and pulled back Obi-Wan's robe. It was then that he saw what happened. He wanted to scream as he saw the gaping, bloody hole in Obi-Wan's torso. Annikin's neck whipped his gaze away, not wanting to see anymore, but he looked back down at his fallen newfound friend. He brushed his hands against Obi-Wan's open eyes, closing them, giving him peace once and for all after being brutally murdered by some sort of invader, someone who was likely still in the temple.

He wanted to scream out. He wanted desperately to tear down every symbol of every dove, serpent, and anything else that littered the walls of this Force-forsaken temple. There was no way he could even remotely begin to accept the possibility that he was the Chosen One now. The fact that he couldn't even save one person, a friend, derailed all chance of that. Sarus was clearly wrong about him.

It was amazing how quickly everything could change. He knew the conflict that Obi-Wan had come to Tatooine to escape from was bad, but he didn't realize it was so bad that this invader, who Annikin assumed was connected to the conflict, would follow them and murder Obi-Wan over it. The fact that he'd lost a friend somewhere along in the bitterness of the conflict, one so far away from him, was numbingly painful when he thought about how he was supposed to save an entire galaxy. There wasn't a chance of that anymore.

"Some savior I turned out to be," Annikin muttered.

A tear began to roll down his cheek, making it halfway down his face before he stopped it

with his finger and wiped it away. If only he could've wiped away the pain of loss. It took a murder to make Annikin realize it, but Obi-Wan had shown more of an interest in him than virtually anyone before, outside of his parents. The Jedi Knight showed him true friendship while others bickered over galactic conflicts and ancient prophecies. Obi-Wan was open with him about the Jedi and his beliefs, all while seemingly believing that Annikin was capable of so much more than a farmer's life. He doubted he'd ever be able to find a friend like that ever again.

The tears began to flow more fully down his cheeks as he stood up. He had to leave immediately. If he was able to make it back to Sarus and the Ophuchi, assuming they were still alive, then perhaps he'd be safe. Annikin looked at his fallen friend once last time before turning towards the tunnel to safety, but before he could he felt a strangely cold sensation run up his spine. It tingled, creeping up his backside, a feeling he could only describe as the cold tinge of death. He turned around to try and see what it was, but every torch lining the wall blew out.

Annikin tried to run, but out of nowhere a massive gust of wind knocked him clear across the room, slamming his head against the wall. He slowly tried to touch his head, but it stung too much to do so, though he could feel that there was blood on his hands. He tried to stand, but another harsh gust pinned him against the wall. He was immersed in darkness and bleeding from the head. How could the situation possibly get any worse?

And then he heard it. It was the sound of metallic breathing, a sound so awful that it could strike fear into the hearts of the boldest soldiers as if it was a knife being plunged deep into their hearts. The breathing was coming from a figure lurking in the shadows, one that was finally illuminated when a crimson lightsaber, the color of the very blood on his hands, ignited and revealed the dark, armor-clad figure of the invader. He was the shell of a man who might have once been human, and his armor was a circuit board of lights and electricity. He was at least two meters tall, if not more, and his black robes flowed outward as he walked towards Annikin. Most disturbing of all was that he had a face forever masked by a bizarre metal breath screen covered by a large black helmet.

The invader was an awesome, threatening shape as he strode towards Annikin, his lightsaber firmly held in both of his hands. For what seemed to be an eternity, no sound could be heard except the loud wheezes coming from the ebony figure's metal breath screen. Annikin wanted desperately to back away, but he had nowhere to go as the invader moved closer. Yet, when Annikin believed that the invader was going to kill him, the figure stopped and lowered his lightsaber, despite keeping it active. Even so, Annikin still felt complete, abject terror as the invader's lifeless mask simply stared at him, causing the icy chill to make its way up his spine again. Annikin could only imagine the person behind the mask smiling a twisted satanic smile, though he would have no way of knowing.

"There is no escape," the deep, booming voice bellowed, created from an artificial voice box in his armor. "Everything you care for, everything you cherish, will be mine."

This was it, the end of life as Annikin knew it. The invader brought his blade up above his head, prepared to deliver the killing blow, and even before it happened Annikin could feel the life being drained out of him. It was as if the invader wasn't simply an assailant, but a dark demon sucking the life straight out of him and weakening him to his very core. Annikin tried to run away as he felt the icy cold presence of the phantom menace torturing his soul, and as the invader brought his blade down toward him he cried out with a scream that seemed to be swallowed up in the sheer darkness of his impending demise.

Closing his eyes to prepare for the killing blow, Annikin felt nothing. He clenched his teeth and fists as he waited for the kill, but he still felt nothing of the sting that the blade should've brought. Instead, he felt a warm hand shaking him and calling his name. Annikin opened his eyes, and as he did he saw the friendly and welcoming face of Obi-Wan standing before him, alive and well, with Sarus standing behind him. Annikin nearly rejoiced when he found that Obi-Wan somehow survived, but then he realized that Obi-Wan was never injured in the first place. Instead, the Jedi Knight and the hermit had heard Annikin's screams and run into the temple to make sure Annikin was safe. And of course he was safe. It was all a trick, an illusion, but one that nearly killed him. He didn't have to look very far to know who was responsible.

"You left me there to die!" Annikin barked, brushing past Obi-Wan and looking straight towards Sarus, the obvious culprit.

"No, I tested you," Sarus corrected, though admitting that he was at least somewhat responsible. "I showed you your greatest weakness: fear."

"How do you know what I saw in there?" Annikin asked him.

"What you saw was a figment of your imagination conjured up by the Force," Sarus told him. You saw your fear play out right in front of you. First there was your fear of taking a risk when you brought your weapon in. Had you left your weapon, things would have played out very differently. Then there was your fear of change. Giving into the girl and your desires would have changed your life forever."

"That's ridiculous," Annikin accused. "I saw her. She was real, and so was that psychopath trying to kill me!"

Or was it? After all, he did see Obi-Wan's lifeless body, obviously having been killed by the invader who in turn tried to kill him. Now that Obi-Wan was standing in front of him, perhaps Annikin didn't see everything he thought he saw. That was the only likely, albeit illogical, explanation. The invader was gone, probably having never actually been there in the first place.

"The girl, her name was Eden, yes?" Sarus asked. Obi-Wan began to listen closely. Sarus clearly knew more about what Annikin saw than either of them imagined. The Jedi Knight was less than pleased that Annikin had been put through all of this.

"How'd you know that?" Annikin asked.

"Thousands of years ago," Sarus began, "in the great order my ancestors came from, there was a woman named Eden. She fell prey to the dark side and became a temptress, a seducer of men, but she killed those who rejected her. My ancestors captured her and brought her here to die. Now her presence is amplified by the Force nexus within these ruins. The Force used her image to test you. You failed."

"How am I supposed to pass a test if I don't even know I'm taking it," an increasingly annoyed Annikin wondered aloud.

"You weren't meant to pass the test, Annikin," Sarus admitted. "You had to fail. That was the only way you would know what weakness to beware of."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Annikin demanded to know. It was all just too much. He

was getting to the point where he simply wouldn't be able to take any of this destiny nonsense anymore.

"I sympathize, Annikin," Sarus said, trying to say anything that could help alleviate the pain that Annikin was enduring. "I truly do. I know this must be hard for you, but it was necessary. There are dark places in this galaxy where few would dare tread because they are afraid of what they will find, but your destiny will take you to those places. You must not fear, Annikin."

If only it were that simple. Annikin would have given anything to not be afraid of what was happening to him, but that just wasn't going to happen. It was absurd to believe that someone could just let go of their fear in a situation like this. Assuming Sarus was even remotely right about Annikin's destiny, letting go of fear simply wasn't something Annikin could do. Nothing made him more afraid than what was happening now.

Hours later, beneath the setting suns that were just beginning to make their way towards the horizon, one lone Ophuchi guard stood watch over the entryway to the sanctuary beneath the sands. Jacob had been moving back and forth between two positions all day; earlier he stood guard directly at the stone-covered tunnel entrance, but as the suns began to set he decided to move up to the surface to take in the splendor of the view. It was something he did virtually every day.

Guarding the sanctuary's entrance was a thankless job. While others were able to move about their daily lives, or even work with their hands in some sort of craftsman job, Jacob stood watch on at an entryway that didn't even need to be guarded. In the thousands of years that the Ophuchi had lived in the sanctuary, he didn't know of a single non-Ophuchi who was able to find it. It was too deep in the desert. No one was insane enough to wander through the desert like that. Save for Sarus, of course. He was one of the few Ophuchi who would actually spend hours walking between their home and civilization. It was a testament to Sarus's devotion to his destiny.

Sometimes Jacob wished he had a different destiny. His life's work would be remembered as the guard of the entryway. He accepted that it was his destiny and carried out the job as best as he knew how, but all he did was stand in the desert, a gun hanging from his shoulders at all time. He wasn't even destined to have any sort of blaster rifle. Instead he was given a slugthrower, something that had generally been out of use for thousands upon thousands of years throughout the galaxy.

Jacob sighed. Thinking about how lowly his job was depressed him, so he tried not to think about it. He spent so much time standing in the desert, away from the rest of his people most of the day, that he didn't even have time to start a family. He was twenty-nine years old, and yet he had no wife and no children to show for it. Most Ophuchi began a family when they were between seventeen and twenty. Here he was, nine years old than the average maximum, and he wasn't even close to being married. It was a shame, but that was just a fact of life.

He turned around for a moment, considering whether or not he should remain to watch the sunset or head back down to his actual post. It didn't really matter; there was no other way to the actual entrance other than going past him, but often times his superiors felt that he should've stayed at his actual post instead of moving up further into the desert. He always wanted to roll his eyes at that, but that would've come with a severe reprimand.

Those Jacob answered to were cut from the same cloth as Sarus; far too many of the Ophuchi leaders were becoming fanatical over their duties, likely because the time of awakening was at hand. They were becoming obsessive over the prophecy, but Jacob saw the supposed Chosen One when he opened the door to the sanctuary when Sarus first brought the outsiders into the desert.

The Chosen One seemed to be nothing more than a confused young man. Jacob could hardly blame him. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to have a destiny like that, but at the same time Jacob couldn't understand the need to treat Annikin like he was a living legend as opposed to a young man who had a destiny no one other than he would be able to comprehend.

Not all Ophuchi were like Sarus and the other leaders of the clan. Most were just like any other person on Tatooine, going about their daily routines, making sure that their families were safe, fed, and as comfortable as possible. The only difference was their religion, but even then the average Ophuchi didn't treat it like it was meant to be the center of their everyday lives.

Religion was a generally private affair, and the Ophuchi rarely actually spoke about it outside of weekly religious gatherings. It was Sarus, specifically, who was bordering on the fanatical. Many Ophuchi were becoming wary of that. They didn't like to think about what that sort of extremism could bring to their way of life. At least to Jacob, it wasn't what the religion gave people that mattered. It was what the people were able to take with them through understanding it that was important. If people began taking extremism from it, then he didn't believe it was doing its job. The Force of Others was meant to guide people throughout their lives, not to burden them.

At this point, though, it didn't matter much. Everything Sarus's fanaticism had been leading to was at hand, so the least Jacob could do was find solace in the prospect of impending salvation. Their religion, whether it was private or extremely public, was about to save them, but more specifically the Chosen One was about to save them. It was likely to take awhile, but everything Jacob had privately believed him told him it was going to happen. He didn't have anything to be afraid of anymore.

Such a thought was incredibly ironic. As he turned around, he jumped when he saw a woman standing before him, her face partially shadowed by a hooded white robe that covered her entire body. He nearly grabbed his gun, but she was a small, slender woman, barely a threat to him at all. He didn't feel like he had anything to fear from her. Raising a gun at her face would've been uncalled for, even if he was incredibly wary of what such a young, innocent-looking woman was doing in the desert by herself. Jacob straightened himself out, trying to avoid looking like he was caught off guard, and prepared to find out.

"Young lady," Jacob began, trying to sound as formal and guard-like as possible, though it was actually the first time he actually had to potentially guard the entryway from something so it was coming across forced and unconvincing, "these parts of the desert are incredibly dangerous. You could be putting yourself in peril by being out this far. What is your purpose here?"

"I'm here to find my boyfriend," the young woman's tender voice told him. "He's the one your leader brought here last night. His mother sent me to find him. She's very worried."

"I'd imagine she is," Jacob said with an added chuckle, buying into what the girl was telling

him. "He should be back soon. I'm sure it would be alright if you waited inside the sanctuary."

"Thank you," the girl said with a nod of her head. "You've been most kind."

Jacob smiled as he turned around, leading her down towards the sanctuary's entryway. Normally he wouldn't have let someone inside without Sarus's explicit authorization, but he sensed that she was sincere. Besides, if he denied Annikin's girlfriend entry into the sanctuary, that would've been an insult to the man who was supposed to be his savior. He wasn't about to do that, so when he reached the entrance he pushed back the tremendously heavy rock, ready to let her inside.

"I meant to ask you," Jacob said as he let go of the rock, making sure that it was safely in place so it wouldn't roll back in front of the doorway as they were passing through, "what's your name?"

"Lilith."