

The background of the poster is a composite image. At the top, a sunset or sunrise over a body of water is visible, with a city skyline in the distance. Below this, three characters are featured: on the left, a man in a brown hooded robe (Obi-Wan Kenobi); in the center, a young man with light brown hair (Anakin Skywalker); and on the right, a young woman with long, curly brown hair wearing a blue patterned garment (Padmé Amidala).

# STAR WARS

## EPISODE I

A NOVEL OF THE ALTERNATIVE SAGA

# THE CHOSEN ONE

BRANDON RHEA

# STAR WARS®

## E P I S O D E I : T H E C H O S E N O N E

BRANDON RHEA

BASED UPON 'STAR WARS'  
BY GEORGE LUCAS

## DEDICATION

To the members of TheStarWarsRP.Com. There are countless elements of this story that are based in that website's lore, without which *The Chosen One* would not be what it is now. Without that website, I never would have grown as a writer. This would just be another cheap knockoff of *The Phantom Menace*, and the Alternative Saga would not exist.

**A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, an evil legacy long believed dead has since been awakened. Even the Jedi, guardians of peace and justice in the Old Republic, are caught by surprise, their attentions focused on political unrest between the greedy Trade Federation and the Republic. Now, the dark side of the Force threatens to overwhelm the light, and only an ancient Jedi prophecy stands between hope and doom for the entire galaxy.**

*On the desert world of Tatooine, far from the concerns of the Republic, a young man is being closely but unknowingly watched over by a strange group of hermits from the Dune Sea. These hermits sense that there is something special about him, seeing an aura of prophecy surrounding his life. This young man's only hope is in the hands of the one that these hermits call the Argus, one who will fall from the sky and help free him from the bind that keeps him in the desert wastes.*

*In another part of the galaxy, Jedi Master Jar Jar Dooku and Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi are charged with protecting Queen Arcadia of Utapau as she seeks to end the invasion of her planet brought about by the corporate greed of the Trade Federation. It is this quest that brings them to Tatooine, where Obi-Wan too senses something in the young man named Anakin Skywalker. Their only hope is to convince Anakin to leave Tatooine with them and become a Knight of the Old Republic, and join with men and women destined to become legends...*

FROM THE SECOND SAGA....  
THE JOURNAL OF  
THE WHILLS

# --PROLOGUE--

## THE KEY

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, there existed a realm called Ashlan Four. Said in legends to be a planet shrouded within the vast expanse of the Ashlan Nebula in the far away galaxy's Unknown Regions, it was truly a land of myth and folklore. It remained a hidden plain of existence, subsisting as a pocket dimension with complexities and truths that proved to be far beyond those of Human understanding. Nevertheless, it was a reality hidden from the universe, a place that could be interpreted in so many ways that the interpretations were infinite. It remained an immense rainbow of every possible color one could imagine, and even some that one could not.

The landscape was lush and vast. The blue and green reality was still one of myths, legends and prophecies that dated back thousands and thousands of years in standard galactic time. For eons, philosophers spoke of a prophecy written by a holy man about a great race of wisdom called the Whills. The Whills, in the prophecy, would follow a great order to a "planet" in the light of the Ashlan Nebula, so the inhabitants could record the story of the galaxy. Of course, there was no planet, but instead a boundless land of mountains, rivers and rolling green hills.

As night quickly turned to dawn near the monastery of the Whills, where the story of the galaxy was kept, the sound of a thousand marching soldiers echoed through the rolling hillside. In reality, however, it was the tremendously echoed sound of one lone horse and her rider galloping over the lush countryside. The rider was draped in a white ornamental robe, a hood covering his head, hiding his face from the bright yellow sun that was rising in front of him. He brought the horse towards the edge of a hill and looked down towards a crystal clear stream a few miles away. Below him, on the bank of the river, he saw one of the small, diminutive Whills performing a task.

Curious, the rider pulled back on the horse, causing it to rear its two front legs into the air and neigh in excitement as if she was aware of its rider's intentions, and quickly began riding down the gradual slope towards the bank of the stream to find out what the Whill was doing. The wind whipped through the rider's hood and through his hair, giving him a slight rush of adrenaline just as it always did.

The rider frequently spent his mornings riding his horse, beginning well before dawn and ending shortly after it. It gave him a sense of normalcy, something that had been severely lacking in his life; from the day he was born on Alderaan to the day he arrived on Ashlan

Four and beyond, nothing in his life had turned out the way he had expected it to. Unlike how other people would have felt, and like he had originally felt when he discovered what his destiny was, that was fine with him.

Shortly before reaching the stream, upon entering a series of ruins, the rider pulled back on his horse. The slope became steeper from that point on, and because he would have to venture off the path to arrive at the bank quicker he decided to keep his horse waiting in the fading and decaying monastery, where once a group of Whills studying the nature of the universe had housed. The horse seemed to nod in approval as she was left to wait beside a stone pillar, knowing her rider would return for her.

The man stepped away from his horse and made his way down the rest of the steep hill in a running fall, brushing his way past the dozens of trees that grew upon the grounds in the clearing that the small Whill sat in. When he finally arrived, the man slid one leg out and came to an abrupt stop, silently ceasing his fall just behind the pudgy brown Whill that was nestled against a tree that reached out and draped itself over the stream in front of them. Even the trees on Ashlan Four were something special - there was a certain quality about them, a certain air of beauty in the vibrant colors that words couldn't describe and the way the wind gently wisped through the leaves.

It was these areas of Ashlan Four that, even after thousands of years, made the man happiest. He knelt down, still not letting the Whill onto the fact that he was there, and brushed his hand through the thick green blades of grass. As he felt the still-wet dew between the tips of his fingers, he paused. He closed his eyes and opened a wide smile, allowing memories to flood back to him. The area reminded him so much of his last mortal home, one that he missed terribly.

He could still feel the wet grass between his toe as he played with his beloved son in the fields of Kal'Shabbol. He could lose all sense of self on those lazy summer days, when there no politics, plotting or war. There was only family. He cherished the sound of his son's laugh as they played make-believe in the forests, remembering what it was like before he had a destiny. Before he was the man he was born to be.

For most people, memories and sensations like that were inextricably linked to childhood, but his childhood was nothing of the sort. There was a time when he was a child and a Jedi on the run, fleeing from the Dark Lords of the Sith who swore to destroy every last living member of the old Jedi Order, the Jedi Order that eventually fell to the Sith when the Galactic Empire came to power. It wasn't until he met the love of his life and the two had a son, his literal namesake, that he was finally able to have those childhood experiences.

When the man looked back up, the young Whill historian was still staring intently into the stream before them. The creature was so fixated on the water that he didn't even notice Ussej stand up and approach him, but it didn't take him long to figure out that someone was behind him. The short, pudgy brown Whill's oval-shaped head and large circular blue eyes turned to look at him for a moment, trying to figure out who the man was. He was somewhat familiar to the Whill, but the creature couldn't place him.

"Who are you?" the Whill asked in the ancient Ashlan language of his people, although he understood the language of Galactic Basic Standard which he assumed the Human standing in front of him spoke.

"I'm a friend," the rider said as he pulled back his hood to reveal his face. "My name is Ussej Padric Bac."

"The Shaman of the Whills," the Whill historian said rhetorically, knowing the name from his religious and historical studies although he had never met the man before.

Ussej nodded to let the young historian know that he was correct. The Shaman was a tall man, a few centimeters shy of two meters, with short, dark blonde hair and blue eyes. He had tan white skin and a faint scar across his right eye from a conflict that took place thousands of years earlier far beyond the most distant stars that could be seen on Ashlan Four. There were times when he longed for those glory days, although he was far more peaceful as the Shaman of the Whills, even though he had lived that life for over three thousand years.

"Why are you here?" the young Whill asked curiously, as very few throughout the previous three thousand years had ever seen the Shaman of the Whills in person.

"I saw you sitting down here," Ussej told him. "I was riding by and thought I might see what you were doing."

"I was watching the time stream," the Whill told him, turning away to continue with his studies.

Ussej looked down below the Whill where the stream was. To his left, the winding body of water was still blanketed in mist, and the stream itself faded into the distance. But in front of them, the water shimmered with gold as the sun reflected upon it. The light hit it just right, and Ussej was able to look at himself in the stream. It wasn't something he could often do, considering he spent most of his time in seclusion away from anything that would let him see himself. Still, as he moved into the shade of the trees, watching as his shadow and reflect disappeared, he wasn't arrogant enough to think that his reflection was the greatest thing that could come out of the stream.

The story of history was long and, at times, one that lacked of any sense. History was something that could be learned, but whether or not it could be understood was another matter entirely. Kings, warlords, prophets, space explorers, Jedi and Sith, along with numerous others, made their mark on the universe in the strangest of events, such as exoduses, wars and other major and minor conflicts. Historians continued to scratch their heads to make sense of some of it, as they were unable to truly understand the historical figures behind the events.

That was where the time stream came in. Within the large flowing stream just beside them, one could look through the clear blue liquid and realize that not only rocks and fish could be seen. In fact, with a trained eye, it was an entire timeline of universal history; not just of the galaxy, but of every galaxy in the vast void of space and time. Standing in one spot for long enough would have allowed one who had been trained to view it to see the entire history of the universe, although the viewer would need to live for an eternity to watch the slow moving timeline pass by in the same spot.

But simply viewing the timeline was not the greatest achievement of the unexplainable divine tool of time. The river moved slowly, as the weather remained calm and peaceful at all times on Ashlan Four, so one was able to look at one segment of time for any number of minutes. Were they to step within that segment of the river, it would appear to them as if time on Ashlan Four, which was meaningless on Ashlan Four to begin with, would stop. They would become an impartial and unseen observer, unless they wished to intervene; they



could watch the events unfold as they had either thousands of years earlier or thousands of years into the future.

There was only man with the ability to enter into the time stream, or bring others into the time stream with him. That was Ussej, which is why he had earned the moniker of the "guardian of forever". Although it was generally frowned upon, Ussej felt that he had a mandate to make his presence known to certain persons throughout time to ensure that events unfolded without outside interference preventing them from unfolding as they should. After all, as the so-called guardian of forever, it was his duty to protect the timeline. The higher powers of existence had a plan for the universe, but protection was still needed.

Only days earlier by his own personal time, Ussej had returned from a brief intervention. A destructive galactic civil war between the tyrannical Galactic Empire and a band of freedom fighters attempting to restore democracy to the galaxy had just ended, and a New Republic was rising from the ashes of the Empire. A dark lord had been vanquished, and the savior of the galaxy had been redeemed from darkness and fulfilled his destiny. The outcome was as Ussej knew it would be, although the events leading up to it unfolded differently as he had imagined. Ussej recognized that although there would be future conflicts, the galaxy was a far more peaceful place than it would have been had the outcome been tampered with.

"What is your name?" Ussej asked the young Whill chronicler.

"Duseuso," the Whill told him, not taking his eyes off of the cloth material on which he was writing the history he saw.

Ussej stepped closer to the time stream and fixed his gaze onto what Duseuso was watching. After a few brief moments the image became clear, and Ussej was able to watch a major historical event unfold. A lone star fighter raced down the trench of a planet-destroying battle station, chased by three other fighters. When it looked as if the lone fighter was to be destroyed, a cargo transport attacked the three fighters, sending two of them into a blaze of fire and debris while the other flew out into space. Finally, two proton torpedoes ejected themselves from the star fighter, and in the blink of an eye the battle station was gone. Ussej knew the battle well, and it was a major turning point in the rebel civil war against the Empire.

"May I see what you're writing?" Ussej asked, curious to see the Whill's interpretation of what they had both just witnessed.

Although slightly perturbed by the disturbance, Ussej took the cloth, unfolding most of it to read what was written. The document was chronicling the life of Anakin Skywalker which, from Ussej's perspective, was a misspelling of the name as he had known the man called Annikin Skywalker. From Duseuso's perspective, Anakin Skywalker was a legendary Jedi Knight during the time of the Old Republic who became a hero of the destructive Clone Wars, but later the oppressor of worlds as an evil dark lord. Ussej kept reading and there was very detailed information on Anakin Skywalker, but Ussej had a different perspective on the similar yet dissimilar Annikin Skywalker.

"Is this for the Journal?" Ussej asked, referring to the collection of historical knowledge known as the Journal of the Whills that was kept in the nearby Whill Monastery.

The Whill nodded his head as Ussej handed the document back to him. The Shaman stretched his long Human legs and arms before slowly sitting down on the bank of the river next to Duseuso, who shifted awkwardly as Ussej seated himself. Duseuso had never seen

legs work in such a way, as he himself barely had any legs at all. The Whill pulled back its lengthy neck in defense, although it did not take him long to realize that being fearful of the shaman of his people was illogical. Instead, he slowly returned to his document, waiting for the silent shaman to say something to break the awkward silence that had fallen over them.

"How much do you know about the time stream, Duseuso?" Ussej asked out of general interest, but also because he wished to make a point about how the stream worked.

"I know that it shows one the history of the universe," the Whill replied, this time not hiding his impatience at the interruption, despite his slow speech patterns.

"That may be true," Ussej told him, "but it doesn't look at things objectively. What I see and what you see when looking at it may not be the same thing."

"What do you mean?" Duseuso asked, the impatience being washed from his face as curiosity took hold.

"The time stream can tell us many things about our past and our future," Ussej continued, "but the historical events are subject to our own point of view. Interpretation is the key, and more than one interpretation belongs in the Journal so future readers can come to their own conclusions."

"Are you saying that my interpretation is wrong?" Duseuso asked, not fully comprehending the dynamics of the stream as Ussej relayed them.

"No, no, of course not," Ussej said as his eyes seemingly popped out of his head, worried that he had insulted the young Whill. "I'm simply saying that I have a different interpretation about the life of Annikin Skywalker, both because I watched the events unfold through the stream and because I associated myself with him on more than one occasion. Even with these associations, my interpretation may very well be wrong, and people might not agree with it. Nevertheless, the interpretation is there, and all points of view need to be understood to fully comprehend history."

"What is your interpretation then?" the Whill inquired, although he had not yet picked up his document.

"I would be happy to tell you," Ussej said with a smile, "so long as you are prepared to treat it as a learning experience, look at the story objectively and document it."

Pulling his cloth document closer and gripping his writing utensil tightly, Duseuso accepted Ussej's requirements, eager to hear the Shaman of the Whill's personal perspective on the life of Annikin Skywalker. The Whill knew that it would be interesting to hear first person accounts on what the young Jedi was like, as the time stream could only tell one so much about a person's personality. Ussej, however, had actually associated with Annikin, giving him a unique, although potentially incorrect, perspective on the matter.

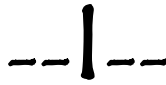
"As you know," Ussej began, trying to make his voice as engaging as possible, for telling a long story, however exciting it may have appeared to be, could become dreadfully boring, "a great Republic governed the galaxy for thousands of years. It was a time when peace, justice, and freedom flourished throughout the star systems. The forces of evil were once suppressed, but not for long. Instead of being eliminated, those bent on destroying the Republic were resigned to hide in the shadows, plotting their eventual revenge."

So far, nothing the shaman had been saying was remotely new to the young Whill, but the way it was being told was far more interesting than viewing the time stream. Looking at images that were open to interpretation could only tell one so much. Duseuso shifted, trying to make himself more comfortable, as he could tell the story would be a long one.

"As this threat continued to build," Ussej continued, "a young man on a remote desert world was about to take his first step towards a far greater destiny. Annikin Skywalker discovered he had a unique affinity for the ways of the Jedi, the guardians of peace and justice under the Republic. Soon, Annikin began an epic journey that would thrust him into the very heart of the ensuing struggle between good and evil, a struggle that began on Utapau..."

# --PART ONE--

## DISCOVERY



## FEDERATION HOSPITALITY

*"For over a thousand generations the Jedi Knights were the guardians of peace and justice in the Old Republic. Before the dark times...before the Empire."*  
- Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi circa 0 BBY  
Journal of the Whills, 14:7

Dark. Cold. Desolate. Space was many things to many people, and very few considered it something to be cherished. To most, it was just another place to transport oneself throughout the galaxy, and that's what the small frame of the *Radiant VII* was doing as it soared through eternity with its destination of Utapau directly in front of it. The *Consular*-class space cruiser had been painted red so potential enemies would recognize its diplomatic immunity granted by the Senate of the Galactic Republic, although that never stopped some enemies from taking shots at it.

Even though the ship was one of great importance, its size would not have been an indicator of it. The cruiser was unable to fit many people, far less than most other cruisers of great diplomatic importance. Instead, a great deal of the ship was attended to by droids that did not require normal living facilities. Many of the droids also served as body guards, and half of the sentient crew also served as guards.

As the vessel approached the blue-white terrestrial planet, a great deal of the planet was blocked out to those in the cockpit by the hulking mass of the *Lucrehulk*-class battleships blockading it on the orders of the corporate Trade Federation. The titanic crafts were nearly three kilometers in diameter and shaped like flattened disk, in the middle of which was a sphere that held the vessels bridge and reactor core. The disk itself was broken in the front to make room for entrances to two enormous docking bays, one of which was supposedly prepared to welcome the *Radiant VII*.

In the cockpit of the *Consular*-class Republic vessel was Captain Maoi Madakor and her co-pilot, Lieutenant Antidar Williams. They had both served together during a battle in the Yinchorri Uprising one year earlier, and Madakor personally requested Williams as her co-pilot once she was given command of the *Radiant VII*. Behind them stood two imposing figures, one an elderly Jedi Master and his younger companion, a Jedi Knight. The Republic crew knew little about the situation that the two Jedi were headed into, although they had been told that the Neimoidian-controlled Trade Federation was outraged by the prohibition of slave labor by Republic corporations in non-Republic territory. In order to try to repeal

the recently passed law, the Neimoidians blockaded the helpless Utapau, hoping that it would cause the Republic to cower to the Federation's demands.

Because the noble and eternally respected Knights of the Jedi Order were the well-known guardians of peace and justice in the Republic, the Republic's Supreme Chancellor Finis Valorum dispatched the two Jedi as ambassadors in the hopes of resolving the conflict. The rhetoric of the Senate had done nothing for the situation other than drown out the cries for rescue and hinder the diplomatic efforts, so it was understandable to the crew why Chancellor Valorum would call upon the Jedi to serve him, although they assumed it was not Senate-sanctioned as their voyage to Utapau was classified at the highest levels of government.

"Captain," the Jedi Master quickly interjected, breaking the thoughts of the crew as they were snapped back to attention, "tell them we wish to come aboard immediately. Then contact Chancellor Valorum on the secure frequency and tell him that we've arrived."

"Aye, sir," Madakor said with a slight, affirmative nod, and within a matter of minutes she received the confirmation signal from the Federation vessel and sent the message to the Chancellor's office on the capital world of Coruscant.

With the vessel making its way towards the lead blockade ship more rapidly, the two Jedi lifted their heads from the veil of shadows that they had been cloaked in, allowing the crew to see the faces of Jedi Master Jar Jar Dooku and Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi. Dooku, who had been Obi-Wan's master when Obi-Wan was an apprentice, was the taller of the two, and he was seventy standard years old. Obi-Wan, by comparison, was only thirty-three. Both had beards, Obi-Wan's golden brown and Dooku's bright white, although Obi-Wan's hair had grown out longer than Dooku's.

Obi-Wan looked out the forward window with a degree of hesitancy; ever since they had dropped out of hyperspace thirty minutes earlier, something had not felt right. It was as if there was a disturbance in the Force telling him to be wary of some sort of phantom menace in the very near future, and that it was something that no one could stop. Obi-Wan knew full well that he would be chided for doing so, but he could not help but raise his concerns to his former teacher and bitter companion.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan said with a worried sigh.

"I sense nothing," Dooku rebuffed coldly and without any hesitation, causing Obi-Wan to feel that Dooku had not even tried to see the situation from the Jedi Knight's point of view.

"It's not about the mission," Obi-Wan continued, ignoring Dooku's belittling tone. "It's something...something elsewhere. Something elusive. I can't quite figure out what it is."

"You're centering on your anxieties again," Dooku scolded. "Keep your concentration in the here and now where it belongs or else you won't be able to effectively carry out this mission. There are times and places for sensing the future, and this is not it."

"Perhaps if you had taught me to be mindful of the Living Force when I was your apprentice," Obi-Wan retorted with a frustrated tone, "I would not have to focus on my so-called anxieties."

"Know your place, Obi-Wan," Dooku said coldly, starting at him directly in the eye to showcase his disappointment as he used to do while they were master and apprentice.

Obi-Wan wanted to roll his eyes, but he knew that it would only worsen a constantly tense situation between the two of them. Obi-Wan awkwardly walked in front of him in the cramped cockpit, seeing the maze of battle cruisers and the lush, green and blue sphere of Utapau hanging against the heavens. The planet gave off a very peaceful image and aura, but that was raped by the steel beasts that had placed their grip on the world. Nevertheless, although he had some apprehension about space travel, space itself was very serene to him, and he felt a sense of calmness that many other Jedi felt when looking into the heavens.

In space, it was as if Jedi slipped into the future and gazed as far as the Human eye could see and saw a vision of the worlds and stars, and all the wonders that could be. They believed that the Force, the energy field binding and penetrating all living beings, was infinite, and so its universe must have been too. It caused the excellence of the Force to magnify and the greatness of existence was made manifest; the Force was glorified not in one, but in countless stars and celestial masterpieces; not in a single planet, a single world of sentients, but in trillions upon trillions of them. Space was an infinity of worlds, and so far Obi-Wan relished every moment of it.

After a few minutes of docking procedures, the beauty of space was replaced by the image of a shimmering blue force field protecting the entrance to the lead battle cruiser's docking bay. In an instant, the field dropped, allowing the *Radiant VII* to slowly and carefully enter the small gap that led to the main docking bay. The battle cruiser's tractor beam took hold and guided the cruiser into the bay where the magnetic clamps locked the vessel into place. Not wanting to waste any time, the two hooded Jedi began making their way through the bowels of the cruiser towards the main hatch.

Believing it would help in the negotiations that they were about to engage in, the two Jedi had studied the recent history of the Federation quite extensively. It was a shipping corporation and cartel that had deals with countless technological and manufacturing planets within its sector of the galaxy to build its own battle droid army, and because of the army the Federation was able to maintain a monopoly over a large amount of trade routes. Their influence in the Republic was also unprecedented, gaining them a purchased seat in the Senate currently filled by Lott Dodd. Originally controlled by a directorate, the Neimoidian people took full control under it under Viceroy Nute Gunray, who appointed his own puppets. It was Gunray who had been the most vocally outraged over the slave laws, and the Republic believed the blockade was meant to be seen as an example to those who opposed him.

Ready to depart, the Jedi waited for the hatch light to turn green to signal that they could leave the *Radiant VII*, and once it did the door was opened and the exit ramp lowered. At that point, they stepped into the bright light of the docking bay, which was somewhat ironic considering the dark and dreary situation they had found themselves in. A few meters from the ramp, a silver protocol droid stood waiting for them and approached.

"I am TC-14 at your service," the droid said in Neimoidian, which the Jedi understood through the use of their universal translators. "We are currently following standard procedure for diplomatic guests. Please wait here for a few brief minutes while escorts are sent down to greet you in-person."

Dooku, having been standing in front, nodded in acknowledgment. The two Jedi then turned to one another with grins, as they both found it amusing that such a sophisticated droid would be used by the Neimoidians. The Federation was never known to favor elegance or

beauty, and protocol droids had a great deal of both. Rather, the Federation was known to favor simple droids such as their lethal B-1 combat droid series. Knowing how arrogant Neimoidians were towards their language and Galactic Basic Standard, they were also not surprised to see the droid speaking Neimoidian.

While they were waiting, Obi-Wan and Dooku took notice of their surroundings. The docking bay was unpopulated with actual life, but it was bustling with many forms of droid technology. B-1s roamed the bay, guarding whatever their masters felt was necessary to guard, and a few droid star fighters also rested overhead. The docking bay itself was a mesh of silver and gray, though they could not see the entire bay as it curved around and seemingly spanned the entire outer portion of the craft. Considering the forces that the Federation had amassed, that did not surprise the Jedi in the least.

Obi-Wan glanced at his former master, noticing that after only two minutes the aging Jedi was becoming impatient. It was a trait he had frequently come to associate with Dooku, and one Obi-Wan felt was unbecoming of a Jedi of Dooku's stature. Born on Dantooine, Obi-Wan had been taken by the Jedi Order from his young settler parents, and he was trained alongside other Padawans his age by Jedi Grandmaster Yoda. He had a brief relationship with fellow apprentice Siri Tachi when he was nearly thirteen, but nothing came of their forbidden relationship as Siri and her master were transferred to the School of Hidden Wisdom on Baltimn. Nevertheless, he cherished the time he had with her, even during his pre-apprentice studies with notable masters such as Cin Drallig, one of the greatest lightsaber duelists of all time. Obi-Wan's abilities with the Force and the blade made him somewhat arrogant during his youth, but under Yoda's guidance he was able to become more humble and reserved.

Despite his potential, when Obi-Wan neared the age of thirteen, it seemed he had little chance of becoming a Jedi Knight as a master had yet to select him; younglings who were not selected by a master to be trained by thirteen were assigned to the Jedi Service Corps. When Obi-Wan found out that Dooku was going to be visiting the Jedi Temple to find an apprentice, Obi-Wan had a fierce duel with one of his competitors, a Zabrak named Bruck Chun, to draw Dooku's attention, although the fierce offensive caused Dooku to pass over him due to Obi-Wan seeming too dangerous. The rejection caused Obi-Wan to be assigned as a miner on Bandomeer in the Jedi AgriCorps, but fate seemed to give him a second chance when Dooku also traveled to Bandomeer for a mission on the same ship.

En route to the planet, the future master and apprentice realized that Dooku's old Padawan, Xanatos, had set a trap for Dooku and was plotting to assassinate him. Obi-Wan helped him avoid being killed, which let Dooku see that Obi-Wan was worthy to be his Padawan. Despite the seemingly good start, Obi-Wan and Dooku ended up having very different views on the nature of the Jedi Order and its relationship to the Supreme Chancellor and Galactic Senate, as well as the nature of the Force itself. This caused an inordinate amount of strain in their relationship, and Obi-Wan's training often became awkward, or downright tense and ferocious. Even so, the Stark Hyperspace War that had ended seven years before the Utapau blockade proved that, when necessary, they could be each other's strongest ally and that they could work together in most situations.

"How do you think Gunray will respond to Chancellor Valorum's demands?" Obi-Wan asked curiously, breaking the silence that had awkwardly been created between them.

"These Neimoidians may be ruthless and heartless, but they're still cowards when you apply the right pressure," Dooku told him after pondering the question for a moment, eventually



repeating what he had read in the Republic's data files earlier in the voyage. "The negotiations will be short."

-----

The bridge of the Federation vessel was massive; six large windows adorned the front which let the commanders within the bridge keep watchful eyes on their fleet, and the planet that rotated quietly behind them. Dozens of Neimoidians and droids were stationed at a line of computer consoles in front of the windows, with the commander, first officer and honored guests having large seats behind the consoles. The rest of the bridge was a pit of computers and blinking lights where dozens of droid workers sat and controlled the guidance and weapons system, as well as maintained the signal that powered all of the Federation battle droids in the area.

Trade Federation Viceroy Nute Gunray stood on the main walkway of the bridge in front of a large viewing monitor, just beside his most trusted adviser Rune Haako. Both were Neimoidians of normal appearance, with green sickly faces and large black eyes. Neither had hair, and large ceremonial hats sat atop their heads, with matching robes flowing down to the ground around their shoulders.

Gunray had been a member of the Federation for years, starting as a trade officer, and quickly advanced in rank when he helped force the Pulsar Supertanker Corporation out of the Federation. Gunray was given the empty seat on the directorate and served as the Senator of the Trade Federation, and he was able to aggressively force the Republic into letting the Federation expand its army with help from former Eriadu Senator Ranulph Tarkin.

Many suggested that the Viceroy acted like a coward during the Stark Hyperspace War, where he supported a Republic offensive against Iaco Stark and the Stark Commercial Combine after the group bombed Federation bacta tankers in the Outer Rim. Others, however, gave Gunray the reputation of being ruthless and cold blooded due to his ordering the assassination of Jedi Master Tyvokka, an act which he furiously denied in public. This and more gained him the position of Federation Viceroy, although for a time he did not have full control over the corporation due to the powers of the directorate.

"What?" the now-sole leader of the Federation asked TC-14, who was speaking to him over the monitor, with a shout in his native Neimoidian. "What did you say?"

"I said the ambassadors are Jedi Knights, I believe," TC-14 responded in the cold metallic voice of a non-personalized protocol droid.

"You said the Jedi would be kept out of this!" Haako shouted. "Now they're here to force us into a settlement. We'll lose our trade franchise because of you!"

"I will speak with Lord Maul," Gunray rebuffed, a chill creeping down his spine at the mere mention of the dark one's name. "Distract them while I contact him."

"Have you lost your mind?" Haako insulted, a bold move for someone who was nothing more than a mere puppet. "Those Jedi can twist your mind and turn your own private thoughts against you. Send the droid."

On the monitor, TC-14 bowed in agreement, and the image faded away as the droid prepared to return to the Jedi ambassadors. Gunray turned around and made his way to the

holographic generator on the far side of the bridge. He always hated having to contact Lord Maul, a self-professed Dark Jedi Master; the dark one spent most of his time on board the Federation command vessel in the chambers that the worker droids had constructed for him in the bowels of the ship, but certain times called for the advice of their self-appointed superior officer.

Within moments, the generator kicked in and the shrouded and hooded face of Maul appeared as a blue computer-generated image. Very little was known about Maul, but his face told Gunray everything he needed to know: Maul had no ideals, simply hatred. The dark lord's face was covered in red and black tattoos, and the bulges emanating from the top of his pitch black hood indicated that he was a horned Zabrak. To some, Maul looked like the devil of Hell spoken of in Corellian mythology, and that was enough to worry many of the timid Federation commanders.

"I told you never to interrupt my meditations," Maul growled at Gunray, as well as Haako when the latter approached the generator. "This had better be worth my while."

"It is, my lord," Gunray assured in as calm a tone as he could muster. "The ambassadors sent by Chancellor Valorum are Jedi. They are here to force us into a settlement."

"I am well aware of this," Maul informed them with a sadistic grin that told the Neimoidians that he had known that the ambassadors would be Jedi for quite some time.

"You knew?" Haako demanded to know. "You didn't tell us they would be Jedi. You've betrayed us!"

"You seem more worried about the Jedi than you are of me, puppet," Maul laughed, the noise created from doing so sending terror into Haako's heart. "I am amused."

A subtle smile remained on Maul's shrouded face. Gunray understood by that and by Maul's comments to Haako that the dark lord was a man to be feared. Gunray glanced towards his chief associate with an angry gaze that pierced Haako's eyes and caused him to back down from his tirade, eventually leaving the area so Gunray could continue the conversation without interruption. Haako, however, remained close enough to hear what Maul had to say, not wanting to give up his right to be at least somewhat included in the conversation. After everything he had done for Gunray and the Federation, he felt he deserved at least that much.

"What will you have me do?" Gunray asked the dark one in a consciously submissive tone.

"The Jedi have arrived earlier than I expected," Maul informed him, much to Gunray's surprise. "We must accelerate our plans. Begin landing your troops."

"Is that legal?" the Viceroy asked.

"I will make it legal," Maul rebuffed coldly and without hesitation. "Let the Jedi do what they need to do. They are crucial to our plans."

As the hologram disappeared, Gunray breathed a sigh of relief. He had first come into contact with Maul two years earlier, and they became allies when Maul promised to make Gunray the sole leader of the Federation, as well as unlimited expansion for the Federation's army. Gunray accepted the offer and one year later, during a summit on Eriadu, the Federation battle droids guarding the directorate opened fire on the members, all of whom

were not Neimoidian. All of the directorate members were killed save for Gunray and Senator Dodd, both of whom were conveniently absent, and after the assassination Gunray filled the empty seats with his puppets. After the passing of the slavery laws, Maul once again rendered assistance in planning the blockade, which Gunray felt had so far been a tremendous success.

Although Maul had given his orders, the Viceroy had other ideas and motives. He would surely follow the order to begin landing troops on the surface, as that was the moment he had been waiting for since the invasion was planned, but he would not let the Jedi live. His concern was regaining the right to use slave labor in the Outer Rim, not the concerns of Maul and whatever his intentions were with the Jedi. Being the businessman he was, Gunray was worried about the corporate bottom line, and he would not simply sit by and watch as his own interests were threatened by Maul's outside influence.

-----

The docking bay began feeling colder than it previously had as Obi-Wan anxiously awaited the arrival of their escorts. Normally, he would have been somewhat more patient, but he was beginning to join Dooku in becoming frustrated with the wait. Obi-Wan wondered what the Viceroy was up to, and the Jedi Knight's thoughts drifted towards the files they had been given on Gunray. The Viceroy, and the rest of the Federation hierarchy, may have been ruthless, but he was also extremely cowardly when it came to external threats. Had he somehow found out that Obi-Wan and Dooku were Jedi, Gunray could have perceived their arrival as a threat, possibly confirming the elusive feeling that Obi-Wan had felt before the ship docked.

"Is it in their nature to make us wait this long?" Obi-Wan asked somewhat worriedly.

"No," Dooku told him, the feeling of worry being mutual between them. "I sense an unusual amount of fear and deception for something as trivial as a trade dispute. Fear in situations like this leads to rash decisions and bold action, and both of those would prove threatening to us."

Obi-Wan could not help but agree with his former master, giving him the feeling that there was a much deeper plot in the works than just a simple blockade. He could not help but wonder what the Jedi Council would think when they heard of his suspicions. Many of the twelve members, save specifically for Qui-Gon Jinn and Silas Lasek, did not usually take criticisms of their initial investigations very well. It was the pitfall of the Jedi becoming comfortable and complacent following the extinction of the Lords of the Sith a thousand years earlier.

The Jedi Knight's fears were seemingly confirmed when he felt another strange, haunting disturbance in the Force, its source very close by. He looked over to Dooku who had a somewhat distressed look on his face, although he could tell the Jedi Master was straining to hide it more effectively than Obi-Wan would have been able to. Within seconds, however, both of them knew what the other was thinking, and they quickly put their hands on their belts.

In the blink of an eye, an explosion rocked the area, sending the two Jedi to the ground skidding towards the wall. They immediately covered their face, protecting themselves from any debris that was flying their way, and after a few moments they looked up to see what was left of the *Radiant VII* burning in the docking bay. The Jedi leapt to their feet and pulled their lightsabers off of their belts. Obi-Wan had a standard hilt with an azure blade, and he

had nearly mastered the defense combat form of Soresu. The hilt was primarily a silver shaft where the crystals that operated the device were placed, and black areas throughout the hilt gave it some character while the red activation button rested three quarters of the way up the shaft. At the bottom were six cubical spikes that Obi-Wan felt added additional character, symbolizing that he was peaceful and elegant yet unpredictable.

Dooku, on the other hand, used a far less common and nearly unused style of hilt for his emerald blade, which made him even better known throughout the Jedi Order. The curved hilt of old-style fencing had been used thousands of years earlier during the Order's golden age, and it allowed for more precise movements and increased flexibility during combat. The style also proved to be a challenge to opponents, as the user of the blade would be able to strike at different angles than a normal hilt allowed.

Both Jedi looked around the bay as they heard a slight hissing noise and realized that the battle droids that had been nearby were noticeably absent from the area. At first, they could not ascertain where the noise was coming from, but as they whipped around they watched as gas began to slowly flood the room. The flow of gas increased as more poured out, and it was clear to them that they were about to be victims of a desperate assassination attempt. Obi-Wan knew that they had to survive to report such events to the Jedi High Council, as it would prove that there was more to the situation than had originally met the eye.

"I'd say this mission is past the negotiation stage," Obi-Wan quipped under his breath.

As the two Jedi held their breaths, the yellow-green glass still flowing from the vents, a squad of B-1 battle droids formed up on the other side of the door. The heads of the B-1 line were designed specifically to look like the skull of a dead Neimoidian, and the intent of the Federation was to use the models to frighten an enemy. The droids were also color-coded based on their programmed skills and on their ranks.

The lead battle droid, designated Green One for the assassination of the Jedi, reacted as the holo-emitter it was asked to carry lit up and beeped. At first, the droid raised its blaster, thinking that it was one of the Jedi. It quickly realized, however, that the noise was coming from its own device, and as it activated the holo-emitter the shimmering blue holographic image of Nute Gunray appeared.

"They should be dead by now," Gunray hissed. "Eliminate whatever is left of them."

"Acknowledged," Green One said in Neimoidian as the hologram faded away, after which he quickly turned to one of the other droids. "Check it out, Green Six. We'll cover you."

Green Six acknowledged the order and slowly began to make its way towards the door. As the droid approached, it activated its bio-scanners so that it would be prepared for if anything came from within. As the droid cautiously opened the door, the deadly yellow cloud flooded the hall, and the droids cocked their weapons as the smoke moved through the gray steel corridors. Suddenly a humming noise could be heard, and two blades flew out from the smoke, slicing down two droids before flying back into the cloud.

"It's them!" Green One shouted. "Blast them!"

Within a nanosecond, the droids had raised their weapons and shots rang out into the room. Each shot was deflected back with a graceful and artful ease and skill as Obi-Wan and Dooku deflected the attacks. They emerged from the smoke and quickly began cutting down the droids in front of them. One by one, the droids fell to their Jedi assaults. Green One

attempted to back away from the fight, as it knew that Gunray was watching its holo-transmissions through its sensors from the bridge of the ship. As it prepared to contact its master, however, Obi-Wan's blue blade sliced through its neck, effectively destroying the droid and cutting off the bridge's link to the small skirmish. Like an unstoppable force, the two Jedi had worked in unison, destroying each of the droids that had been sent to kill them.

The Jedi's ears caught wind of a metallic sound rolling down the hall on their right side, and they realized that destroyer droids, more advanced than B-1s, were being sent after them. Deciding to flee, Dooku and Obi-Wan thrust their hands forward as if to grab hold of the air around them and made their way into a deep, albeit brief, concentration. Subtly twisting their wrists, they drew the powers of the Force into themselves like a waterfall flowing freely over the Organa Falls of Alderaan. When the power reached its peak, they manipulated the Force and the universe around them, unleashing its power as they burst into a superhuman run throughout the halls; the destroyer droids were left to try and ascertain the location of the Jedi Knights that they had lost.

At the end of the long hall, out of sight of the destroyers, the two Jedi slowed their run, not wanting to waste their energy for too long considering they would need a great deal of it to escape the ship alive. They rounded a corner, hoping to find a way off of the ship, but instead they were confronted by a much larger threat: dozens upon dozens of B-1 and destroyer droids standing in front of them, with even more rolling and marching in from behind and from doorways to the side. They were effectively surrounded, but to make matters worse Gunray himself arrogantly strode through the line of droids to see the Jedi face to face. It was clear to them that when protected by well over one hundred droids, Gunray felt no reason to be afraid. He believed the Jedi had been backed into a corner, and that gave him the confidence he needed to confront them.

"Nice escorts," Obi-Wan sarcastically remarked, partially out of a need to push the Viceroy's button and partially out of a desire to showcase Gunray's deceit. "You sure are the hospitable type, aren't you?"

"I wanted to make sure that the negotiations were as comfortable for you as possible," Gunray quipped as a retort, still not speaking in Galactic Basic due to his beliefs on the superiority of Neimoidian. "I trust you enjoyed your stay here."

"It was splendid," Dooku nodded with a grin. "We really must do this again sometime, but right now we must be going."

Dooku turned to Obi-Wan and let out a faint cough to get his attention. Obi-Wan turned and saw Dooku playing with his beard, and it took him a moment to realize that the Jedi Master was speaking in code. Dooku was indicating a precise command by stroking his beard and tapping his eye lids, one that Obi-Wan had learned many years earlier during the Stark Hyperspace War. It would be a challenge to carry out, although they had been in worse situations before so he was confident that they would be successful once again.

"Kill them!" Gunray shouted, prompting the droids to raise their blasters.

"Not today," Obi-Wan forcefully rebuffed before thrusting his lightsaber into the ground.

With Dooku following suit, the two Jedi spun in place and cut two swaths in the floor. The circular holes quickly gave way and they fell to the next level, tucking and rolling to avoid being injured. The battle droids on the floor above them opened fire through the hole, but

as Obi-Wan and Dooku anxiously ran they were able to make it out of range. That, however, did not change their situations, as a small squadron of battle droids burst out of a nearby security center, immediately firing upon the ambassadors.

"It never ends..." Dooku muttered with a sigh, his age beginning to catch up with him.

Getting back into the fray, Dooku joined Obi-Wan in cutting down the half dozen or so droids that emerged to meet them. Noticing the extensive security camera network being displayed in the security room on a dozen different screens, the two Jedi forced passed two other droids and cut down the remaining security droids stationed in the brightly lit security center. Deactivating their lightsabers, Obi-Wan quickly ran to the door and shut it, although he did not have the codes to lock it. In the interest of quick improvisation, Obi-Wan grabbed a blaster from one of the fallen droids and shot out the locking console, which would hold any droids on the other side out of the door out of the security center, at least for the time being.

"Can you find your way through their network?" Dooku asked as Obi-Wan was sitting down in front of the computers, not knowing much about Obi-Wan's computer skills.

"I should be able to," Obi-Wan told him. "What am I looking for?"

"We'll know it when we see it," Dooku said, which did not reassure Obi-Wan as he took that to mean that Dooku was also attempting to improvise.

Obi-Wan scanned numerous images throughout the ships, but it took him a few minutes to reach a video feed that caught their attention: thousands upon thousands of battle droids and dozens of hover tanks and troops transporters being loaded onto large troop transports to land on the planet. The Multi-Troop Transports especially caught their attention; also called MTTs, the transports were capable of carrying over one hundred battle droids each. A rack would extend from the face of the transport, allowing the droids to be deployed directly into combat if need be. The face of the transport was reinforced with case-hardened metal alloy studs and was designed to smash through enemy walls to reach its target.

"It's an invasion army," Obi-Wan gasped, having not anticipated such a course of action.

"This is an unusual move for the Trade Federation," Dooku expressed, also having been caught off guard by the impending invasion. "We must warn Queen Arcadia and contact Chancellor Valorum."

"Maybe if we ask nicely," Obi-Wan suggested, "we could hitch a ride with our friends in that landing bay."

"Agreed," Dooku said, much to Obi-Wan's surprise. "We'll stow aboard separate ships and meet on the surface. Maintain communication silence until we reach the planet."

"Understood," Obi-Wan acknowledged.

"Now find the fastest way to get there," Dooku told him, prompting Obi-Wan to immediately begin searching a map file that showed the layout of the vessel, although he noticed Obi-Wan looking up near the ceiling. "What is it?"

"There," Obi-Wan said, pointing to a vent on the far side of the room. "That bay is only one floor below. We can use the ventilation system to get there undetected."

Dooku let out a faint chuckle, happy to see that the simplicity of something such as a ventilation system would be able to help him avoid being shot at anymore. He made his way over to the vent and Obi-Wan shot up from his chair behind him, and the two started to force a few loose chairs over towards the vent. Dooku was the first to stand up, and Obi-Wan helped him up. Although Dooku would not admit it, he needed the boost due to his age, but he was too proud to acknowledge it.

"I'll see you on the planet," Dooku said as he began to crawl up to vent. "For our sakes, let us hope that we aren't wrong about this course of action."

"You were right about one thing, though," Obi-Wan told Dooku with a smile. "The negotiations were short."

"I'm sorry," Dooku coldly replied, stopping dead in his tracks after Obi-Wan's comment, "but were you trying to be funny?"

"I beg your pardon?" Obi-Wan asked, confused as to what Dooku was attempting to insinuate.

"Save your humor for someone else," Dooku told him as he rolled his eyes and began crawling through the cramped, dusty shaft.

Obi-Wan was not far behind him, although he was sure to give Dooku enough room to where they were not bumping into one another. Obi-Wan felt somewhat defeated by the fact that his former master had brushed him off once again, but he knew that he had to concentrate on the mission and put his disappointment behind him. It was something he frequently had to do, and he always tried to look past Dooku's remarks and try to see that his former master only wanted what was best for him. Unfortunately, however, Obi-Wan generally came to feel that such ideas were only wishful thinking.

-----

Infuriated that he had underestimated the Jedi, Gunray returned to the bridge where he would await further word for them. He immediately began to pace the walkway once he arrived, but was interrupted when Maul's dark presence silently but terrifyingly made its way onto the bridge. It did not take a genius to figure out that Maul, a tool and weapon of absolute hatred and corruption, was entirely displeased with him, and Gunray knew for a fact that death tended to fall upon all those who wronged the dark lord.

"Viceroy," Maul hissed, causing Gunray to jump as he spoke, "I commanded you not to interfere with the Jedi."

"Yes, my lord, yes you did," Gunray told him, "but I thought - "

"Who are you to think?" Maul growled, albeit calmly and somewhat artfully for someone who claimed to be a Dark Jedi Master. "Your sole purpose here is to do what I tell you, and for betraying me you will be punished immediately. I am temporarily in full command until you return...if you return."

Maul raised his hands, and two of his guards immediately stepped towards them and grabbed the Viceroy forcefully by his shoulders, dragging him out of the bridge screaming and pleading in agony to be spared. Maul had specific punishment techniques that he used

for certain levels of failure, and he was to be sure that Gunray received one of the more severe ones for nearly derailing a plan that had been in motion for years. Though he despised taking command, preferring to keep to his meditations and dark studies, Gunray's stupidity would force him to acquiesce and assume control over the fleet.

"My lord," a crew member shouted from the bit below Maul, "there's an incoming transmission from the planet."

The dark one nodded his head and the view screen before him came to life, revealing the face of Queen Sabé Arcadia of Utapau. The Human queen, who was twenty-five years old, was tall and slender, her regal elegance showing as she sat on her throne. Arcadia was dressed in a long, pinkish purple robe, one that was more casual than formal in terms of traditional royal clothing on the planet. Her long brown hair fell freely from her head to just below the shoulders, flowing down her beautiful face. Normally a woman who always had a smile on her face, the tense situation caused the queen to stare at Maul with a look of grim determination and resolve.

"Queen Arcadia," Maul said as he bowed, faking respect for someone he would just as soon kill were it not for the specific plans for the invasion, "I'm honored that you've graced me with your presence. It is a great pleasure."

"You will not be so pleased when you hear what I have to say, Lord Maul," Arcadia said, brushing him off immediately to let him know what her position on the situation was. "Your blockade of our planet has ended."

"I was not made aware of such a failure," Maul said in jest, knowing where she was going with her comments. "If I look behind me, I am certain that I will still see dozens of Federation vessels in position around your planet."

"I have been given word that the Senate will be voting on the blockade in a matter of days," Arcadia informed him, much to his amusement.

"And you know the outcome already?" Maul asked in a quip. "With foresight like yours, it's a wonder why the Republic even bothers to hold votes."

"Enough of this pretense!" Arcadia shouted, although she quickly retreated and regained her composure. "I am aware that the Chancellor's ambassadors are with you now, and that you've been commanded to reach a settlement."

"I know nothing of any Jedi," Maul told her, noticing her surprised reaction at his consciously made slip of the tongue. "You must be mistaken."

"We'll see," Arcadia said with certain finality, although still processing why he would show his hand by mentioning the Jedi, "but the Federation has gone too far this time."

The queen ended the transmission from her end, and as the picture faded away, Maul turned from the screen with a grin. However, he could tell that the crew did not share in his amusement. Once more emboldened by what he perceived to be a betrayal on Maul's fault, Haako stormed towards him, his chest puffed up and his confidence having risen.

"You told her that the Jedi were here!" Haako shouted. "Now she knows that you were lying about the ambassadors."



"I am well aware of the repercussions of my choice of words, puppet," Maul informed him, "but it was a purposely made slip-of-the-tongue."

"But - "

"Trust me, Rune Haako," Maul said, his yellow-red eyes piercing the Neimoidians as Maul leaned in closer, "everything is proceeding exactly as planned."

With the queen's suspicion level raised, Maul assumed that they would neglect monitoring what was happening in orbit and begin deliberating over their next course of action. This prepared Maul to give the Federation exactly what they wanted: a surprise invasion of Utapau. First, the Federation would have to ensure that all communication on the planet was disrupted. Only then would the helpless world be cut off from the Republic, and only then would the planet be Maul's for the taking. It would be a glorious day indeed.



## INVASION

*"There were things she could not do, watch when people suffered or sit when something had to be done, or run, hide, and ignore, but there were things she would do without any hesitation. That spirit forged the fire of rebellion."*

- Mon Mothma, Second President of the New Republic  
Journal of the Whills, 15:2

Queen Arcadia sat silently on her throne, reflecting on what Maul had told her only minutes earlier. Ever since the blockade began she had feared that war was inevitable, and now that fear was coming to pass. This was all despite every bone in her body telling her that there was no such thing as an inevitable war. Perhaps there wasn't. But if it was true that war was not inevitable, yet war was coming to Utapau, then only one conclusion could be drawn - she had failed her people.

Her father, Veruna, had told her when she was still a small, optimistic girl that failure was a highway to success, perhaps even more than actual success was. He told her that failure would allow her to avoid such a thing happening again, to allow her to earnestly seek truth and further success.

It certainly didn't feel like it.

Her failure only served to make her feel even worse about herself, especially now. Though Utapau was a peaceful and virtually pacifist society, more and more elements in her government were encouraging their planet into a war of defense. Arcadia herself despised war. To the twenty-five year old queen, war was counter-productive and futile. She felt that, were she given the credits the Republic had spent on its wars in its twenty-five thousand year existence, she could furnish every sentient man, woman, and child with necessities fit for a king.

Even though such a moral outrage angered the queen, she knew it wasn't the worst of it. The shallow and fraudulent state of fake patriotism supported by the government and carried by the most ignorant of people was the ugliest of things. That wasn't to say that patriotism itself was bad; it was those who would wave a flag as if it was true courage, deny their government's wrongdoings and remain ignorant to the reality of the galaxy that disgusted her.

Freedom did not just come through the sword; every war had significant drawbacks to freedom, with rights being chipped away and squandered by the very people sworn to protect them. War in the interest of freedom was hypocrisy, and Arcadia wanted nothing of it. After all, it made no difference to the dead or the people whose rights were stripped away if war was fought for totalitarianism or liberty. In the end, the rights were still gone and the people were still dead.

Utapau itself was the capital planet of the Chommell sector - and it was far too peaceful for war. The planet was a special natural wonder, a planet without a molten core, an enigma to even the most talented of scientists. Its vast plains, thick forests, pristine oceans, and immense systems of flowing waterfalls spoke of an unspoiled purity, one she did not want corrupted. Nor did she their culture.

The Humans of the planet were renowned for their enlightened and artistic lifestyles and for their aristocratic class system of the monarchy, the nobles, and the common class. Though other planets had similar systems, Utapau lacked a lower class. Intellectual maturity rather than biological age governed whether one was capable of leadership, a policy that came about when monarchs were forced to take the throne in their teenaged years.

Humans weren't the only inhabitants of Utapau, however. Beneath the Aquarian Ocean, north of the royal palace, lay the seat of the warrior-like Gungan Empire. The Humans of Utapau rarely had contact with or spoke to the Gungan people due to disagreements going back hundreds of years, despite the fact that the Gungans were believed to be the original species of the planet.

Arcadia herself was the daughter of the late King Veruna Arcadia, who was assassinated for his highly controversial policies. Many constantly reminded Arcadia of her father's failures, but she did not like to talk nor think about them. She concerned herself with serving the people, not her or her late father's interests. The people continued to trust her even after these two years, as far as she knew, and she was determined not to let them down. She was determined not to repeat the mistakes of her father.

The House of Arcadia had ruled Utapau for centuries. Originally a house of warriors that had fought against the Gungan Empire centuries earlier, they eventually became politicians. After filling the void left by an heirless monarch, the Arcadias ruled Utapau from then on, generally holding the respect of the people. There were, however, exceptions. Veruna was the most prominent member of the family to squander that respect after Utapau became a player in the interstellar plasma energy market. When high grade plasma veins were discovered below the streets of the capital city of Ogana, Veruna and Senator Malus Palpatine decided to build a plasma mining and refining center in the heart of the city.

Because Utapau was not fond of trade, however, they allowed the Trade Federation to purchase the plasma only at a fixed cost. But the Federation sold Utapau short by selling it to others at a marked-up price, taking advantage of Utapau's lack of experience in the interstellar market. Utapau demanded to be freed from the contract, and though Veruna agreed, he feared a military response. To prepare for this, Veruna expanded the Space Fighter Corp and founded new starfighter squadrons to defend the planet. These moves, however, were highly unpopular with the people as it was perceived as an attempt to suppress dissent and expand the size of the planetary security forces, creating a police state. In retaliation, Veruna was assassinated.

Arcadia then took the throne, beginning immediately to override some of her father's actions by reducing the size of the military. She did, however, despite the unpopularity of

the move, keep one of the star fighter squadrons for defense. For this, she received threats, prompting her to create a legion of handmaidens and body doubles trained in defense. Fortunately, the threats subsided and Utapau returned to his peaceful state - before the blockade.

The blockade worried her. It worried or more than anything ever had before. When she rose to power, Arcadia had promised not to allow violent conflicts, but now she knew, she knew she would have to break it. And it was entirely her fault. She had worked with Palpatine to draft the law banning the use of slaves in the Outer Rim; undoubtedly this was why the Federation chose Utapau to blockade. While she did not regret freeing thousands of slaves, she could not help but wonder if Utapau would not have been targeted had she not become involved in the affairs of the Galactic Senate...

"Your majesty?" came a calm, soothing voice that jolted the queen from her reminiscing into the present. "Senator Palpatine has asked you a question."

The queen smiled sheepishly at Governor Sio Bibble, leader of the capital city of Ogana, too bashful to offer up an apology. Instead, she simply nodded her head, waiting for Palpatine. The senator offered up his own comforting smile at her over the holo-emitter as he continued.

Arcadia considered herself lucky not to have to work with a corrupt senator, a common trend among most members of the Senate. Palpatine was her mentor, someone who was always there, someone who dedicated himself to helping her through the rough parts of her rule and aiding her with her more difficult decisions.

"As I was saying," Palpatine continued, returning to his more serious expression, "how could what Maul said be true? I have assurances from Chancellor Valorum that his ambassadors did arrive. It must be the...get...gotiate...bassadors..."

Palpatine's blue holographic form sputtered and faded away, though for a moment it seemed the transmission would restore itself, but to no avail, finally disappearing altogether. Arcadia hid the worry that filled her mind, though it was evident on the faces of Governor Bibble and her other advisors. The queen licked her lips as she prepared to speak, hoping what she thought wasn't trust.

"What happened?" she asked, masking the dread in her voice with a stoic air. Captain Panaka, however, was already checking the communication sensor. The dark-skinned, heavily armed man, the queen's head of security, worked deftly to uncover what had happened.

"Check the communications array," Panaka signaled to one of the guards at the door, who saluted and left to carry out orders.

"A malfunction?" the Governor Bibble inquired with a suspicious countenance that told Arcadia that he, too, shared in her worry.

"Finished a diagnostic this morning," Panaka said with all the urgency of a dead rat as he shook his head, checking some more things on a series of switches and wires hidden in one of the throne room's pillars. "Probably jammed."

"A communications disruption can only mean one thing," Bibble reminded them. "Invasion."

Arcadia already had her hand to her head as her thoughts raced. She had already known this was true, but hearing her governor confirm it... It made her almost faint. A Federation invasion had the potential to destroy the peaceful culture of Utapau. The task would be so easy for the battle droid army. Utapau's lack of proper military forces, she knew, were insufficient to war against the droid army - an army that would soon be marching to victory. But she would not lose hope. She couldn't. Hope that Utapau would be victorious, and more hope that the Federation would cease their invasion. She prayed, begged, that the attack would cease.

"I know we are all expecting an attack," Arcadia told the assembled delegation, keeping her voice steady and calm, "but I still can't believe that even the Federation would go this far."

"The Senate will revoke their trade franchise altogether," Bibble reminded them, as if trying to make himself believe it. "They would not even need slaves because they would lose their right to even exist! If we remind them of this, we may yet be able to rely on negotiation."

"Negotiation." Panaka repeated in monotone, shutting the control panel and checking his blaster, which was habitual for him even outside of times of need. "Negotiation...without communication."

Arcadia sat resolute, forcing herself to weed through all of the possible alternatives, consequences and outcomes in her head. She did not like or approve of any of them, but she particularly loathed the idea of having to wage a war, even if it was one of defense. Were Utapau truly threatened, she would protect her people. She knew when she took the throne that there were things she could not do, but that there were things she could force herself to do...if ever she had to. Until that time came, though, she would only prepare for defense through nonviolent means. Finally, with that in mind, she was ready to give her verdict.

"I will not condone a course of action that will lead us to war..."

-----

It was twilight. The forested coasts of the Aquarian Ocean, hundreds of kilometers from any city, were calm, as they always were. Then the waves began to ripple as three Federation landing crafts dropped from the sky, breaking through the clouds, looking for an empty place to land. Starfighters buzzed through the sky, searching for anyone that might have witnessed their arrival. The Federation had a great deal at stake, so they could not afford being spied on. The element of surprise was crucial.

A C-9979 landing craft wobbled. The elephantine ship carrying its troops slowed, trying to regain its trajectory as a blue beam of light sliced through its underbelly and a waterfall of droids plopped into the water. The craft shook, finally veering off and gaining speed as it plunged to the earth. Before it did so, however, a figure dived into the lake beneath. The Jedi Knight remained below the surface as he swam tirelessly toward shore, hoping to avoid being spotted by any droid patrols - and protect himself. The water turned orange for a moment as the transport exploded on impact with the ground.

Out of breath, Obi-Wan surfaced, gasping in a breath of air before surveying what his little maneuver had accomplished. He grinned in satisfaction before jumping on a nearby bank - then the smile was wiped from his face. The transports just kept on coming, endlessly, so that the loss of the one was as a drop in the bucket. Battle droids rode back and forth across the plains and woods on STAPs, looking for any sign of a possible assailant. To Obi-

Wan's chagrin it dawned on him that the droids would be programmed with enough brain power to inform them that the destroyed landing craft was not a random malfunction. Mumbling at himself for not thinking of that sooner, Obi-Wan turned away from the coast and darted into the forest.

-----

Beside a nearby landing craft, the droid commander known as OOM-9 stood atop an Armored Assault Tank, or AAT, and looked out over the vast army of transports soaring across the ocean and forests. Though OOM-9's programming did not allow for any form of emotion, the droid knew that it would have felt pleasure at the sight of the invasion force preparing to head towards its first targets. The droid considered how long it would take to accomplish their initial objections before completing their primary goal of capturing Queen Arcadia in Ogana, but OOM-9 became distracted by the diminutive holographic image of Lord Maul that appeared on his tank's holo-emitter.

"Yes, Lord Maul?" the yellow and tan droid commander asked the figure, who even over a tiny hologram looked as imposing as he did in person.

"What is the status of your invasion, Commander?" Maul asked.

"My patrols are prepared to head to New Centrif to disable the last communications transmitter," the commander told him. "We will move through Harte Secur and Spinnaker before taking Ogana."

"Excellent. And OOM-9, the Jedi ambassadors are no longer aboard this ship," Maul told the commander, his voice harsh yet calm, creating a paradox in the droid's processor. "If you come in contact with them, your orders are to let them continue on their way."

"Yes sir," OOM-9 immediately responded, not understanding why Maul would want two Jedi assassins to continue through a restricted military zone towards what was likely Ogana. Nevertheless, the droid was programmed to follow orders, despite its ignorance as to the reasoning behind the order.

-----

Kilometers away from the droid commander, Dooku could barely catch his breath. He ran as fast as he could through the forest, wheezing with each step. Every bone and muscle in his body ached, an agonizing pain that pierced his legs as he frantically tried to run faster. A series of monstrous troop transports emerged from the mist behind him, knocking down trees and slaughtering countless animals as they lumbered through the forest.

Dooku was one of the oldest Human Jedi Masters in the Order, and he had only been sent on the mission to Utapau because of his skills in negotiation. Had he known that he would be making an escape attempt like this, Dooku likely would not have agreed to make the journey; it had been some time since he used his combat skills in actual action. Unlike him, however, Dooku knew that Obi-Wan was likely having no trouble making his way through the area, considering he was forty years younger than his former master. Dooku envied the Jedi Knight for nearly nothing, but being in the physical prime of life was an exception.

Dooku, who had been born as the Count of Serenno, had known Obi-Wan for many years. When Obi-Wan first became Dooku's apprentice, Dooku felt that the boy was reckless and arrogant, more so than most students. The Jedi Master tried to transfer his apprentice to

another master multiple times during the early years of their training, but each time it was rejected. He had no choice but to train Obi-Wan to the best of his abilities, but Obi-Wan always seemed to resist his master's teachings.

Obi-Wan had once told Dooku that he considered their mutual friend, Qui-Gon Jinn, to be more of a mentor than Dooku. It did not bother the Jedi Master at first, until he found out that Qui-Gon was teaching Obi-Wan different philosophies than Dooku's own, but he refrained from saying anything in hopes of spending less time with the boy. Even with Qui-Gon's training, Dooku did not believe that Obi-Wan would pass his trials and become a Jedi Knight due to the boy's constant arrogance. Despite his reservations, however, the Jedi Council had knighted Obi-Wan.

Just then Dooku noticed, a few meters in front of him, a young creature squatting down on the ground. The creature was an Otolla Gungan with a long bill and flaring nostrils, dressed in an ornate piece of light armor and cloth littered with broken jewels. The Gungan held a clam that he had retrieved from a nearby pond, and as he began to eat it his fin-like ears perked up. He suddenly noticed the troop transports, and Dooku, headed straight for him, nearly leaping into the air in bewilderment.

Although momentarily frightened, a slight grin swept across the Gungan's face and his eyes opened wide. Leaping into action just as the machines were about to overrun the aging Jedi, the Gungan dove onto Dooku and held him to the ground while the transports passed over them. The roar of the crafts and the heat of their engines was intense on their ears and skin, but after a few moments the Gungan looked up to find that the transports were continuing on their way through the trees.

"Damn," the creature said in his native tongue as he stood back up, having never seen anything like the MTTs before.

Looking down at the aching Jedi Master, the Gungan reached out his hand to help him up, but Dooku swatted it away. The creature did not know why Dooku rejected the offer to help after the Gungan had saved his life, but either way the creature knew that what the Gungan gods required of the occurrence. He would not let his first opportunity for freedom in two years pass him by after having sacrificed so much.

Before the Gungan could even speak, Dooku slowly stood up once again and watched as the war machines made their way into the distance. The Jedi Master began to walk again, not even so much as acknowledging the Gungan who had saved him. Although such emotions were frowned upon by the Jedi Order, it frustrated Dooku that some frog creature had to save him when he should have been able to run from the transports himself. He would never admit it, being too proud to admit that he had been saved by what struck him as a lower life form.

"Hey, wait a minute!" the Gungan shouted, this time in the common language of Galactic Basic with what seemed to be a distinctive Coruscanti accent. The Gungan was startled by how fast Dooku whipped around to look at him, and as the Gungan began to speak Dooku grabbed him by the cloth on his clothes and slammed him up against a tree.

"You almost got us killed!" the Jedi Master barked. "Are you brainless?"

The Gungan had little tolerance for someone who showed such disrespect, he never had. He grabbed Dooku by the wrists and pushed him back into the mud, becoming angry that he had ever decided to help such a stubborn person. Then, adding insult to injury, the man

dared to question his intelligence as if he was some tadpole that had just crawled out of the pond. In fact, it was the Jedi Master who was unintelligently trying to outrun a war machine instead of simply ducking to the ground.

"I'm talking to you," the Gungan said as Dooku stood back up and brushed himself off, "so clearly I'm not."

"The ability to speak does not make you intelligent," Dooku scowled. "Now get out of here."

"Who do you think you are?" the Gungan asked, peeved that the Jedi Master was continuing with his tirade. "I'm not some lower life form you can kick around. Besides, I saved your life. You owe me a life debt."

"You saved my life?" Dooku asked with a laugh that bellowed out of his lungs in a mocking tone that would have stung even the hardest of people, despite the fact that he knew the Gungan had truly saved his life.

"I pulled you away from those steel beasts," the Gungan reminded him. "You would have been killed. The gods demand that your life belongs to me now."

Before Dooku could so much as argue the existence of whatever mythical gods the creature believed in, which he fully intended to do, two STAP bikes emerged from the mist, flanking Obi-Wan as he ran furiously through puddles of mud and water to escape them. Dooku immediately noticed that Obi-Wan had his lightsaber in his hand but was not using it. He rolled his eyes, knowing exactly what Obi-Wan had done. As a series of blaster bolts rained towards him and the Gungan, Dooku pushed the creature into the mud and pulled out his own emerald blade, deflecting the enemy fire back to the droids. The two STAPs were quickly startled by the incoming fire and did not have time to maneuver before their bikes exploded from the blaster impacts.

"Sorry," Obi-Wan said after he stopped running, place his hands on his knees while panting which Dooku considered to be poetic justice, "the water fried my weapon."

"You forgot to turn off the power again," Dooku told him. "It won't take long to recharge, but you can't keep making these careless mistakes. You're a Jedi Knight now, not a Padawan."

"Well...", the Gungan sighed before allowing Obi-Wan or Dooku speak, the creature letting out his frustrated regret as he realized he had lost the chance to gain favor with his people. "I suppose you've saved my life now. Our life debt has been settled..."

"Who's this?" Obi-Wan asked, also believing the Gungan to be a lesser life form, although he quickly sensed that this was not the case when he recognized him to be a Gungan.

"A local," Dooku said coldly, "now let's get out of here before anymore droids show up."

"Wait," the Gungan said before they could get on their way, realizing that he hadn't yet lost his opportunity to reclaim his honor and curry favor with the other Gungans. "If you're looking for refuge, then the safest place would be Otoh Gunga in the Aquarian Ocean. It's where I grew up."

"A city?" Dooku asked, suddenly intrigued by what the Gungan had to offer them.



"Could you take us there?" Obi-Wan asked, although somewhat hesitantly as he had no idea what they would be walking into.

"It's the least he could do after what he just put me through," Dooku chuckled, finding himself to be funny despite Obi-Wan and the Gungan disagreeing entirely.

Obi-Wan gave Dooku a subtle hand gesture as a way to tell the Jedi Master to back off. Obi-Wan knew that Dooku became easily irritated by those he looked down upon, and it was clear to the Jedi Knight that Dooku looked down upon the Gungan. While the creature did strike Obi-Wan as odd, in both looks and in the regal mannerisms of which he walked and talked, he recognized that the Gungan had something to offer them and that it was not a coincidence that they found one another. The Force rarely made things happen by accident.

"On second thought, no," the Gungan said with a grin that puzzled the Jedi, although the creature knew full well that he would be able to get what he wanted from them because of their obvious need to find a safe place to hide. "I've been banished, so I can't take you there...unless, of course, you'd be willing to grant me a small favor."

Before any of them could respond, they all jolted as they heard a rumbling in the distance that sounded to be growing louder and closer. They looked upwards and could see the tops of trees falling and crashing to the ground as the war machines continued to plow their way through the forests. Overhead flew dozens of droid star fighters headed towards the north, presumably on their way to Oona. Obi-Wan and Dooku both turned to each other and shared the mutual astonishment of seeing so many forces moving through. It was clear to them that the Federation was not simply interested in attacking the planet, but rather occupying it indefinitely. The Jedi would need a safe refuge in order to survive.

"Do you hear that?" Obi-Wan asked the Gungan, moving closer to get in the creature's face.

"Unfortunately," the Gungan replied, refusing to back away as Obi-Wan approached.

"That is the sound of a thousand terrible things headed this way," Obi-Wan told him, exaggerating in order to make his point. "If they find us, they will kill us. Is that what you want?"

The Gungan was nearly offended by what he perceived to be Obi-Wan's suggestion that he wanted them dead, although he quickly realized that the Jedi Knight was only trying to prove a point. It was, of course, a moot point. The Gungan could easily hide in the forests from the Federation forces for as long as he needed. He had spent two years adapting to and becoming familiar with the terrain. The Jedi, on the other hand, were newcomers. They had no idea how to hide or adapt to the area. They would be killed within days, if not hours.

"Your point is well seen," the Gungan admitted, albeit with a refusal to grant them what they wanted unless they were to grant them what he wanted, "but you need to do me this favor."

"What favor is that?" the frustrated elder Jedi Master grunted, effectively humoring the Gungan as Dooku had no real interest in knowing that the creature wanted.

"As I said a moment ago," the Gungan began, "I was banished from my home. I need you to help me gain favor with my people so I can return without punishment. It's a relatively simple task."

The creature had planned to return home with Dooku to show that he had saved Dooku's life. It might have given him enough of an argument for his return to Gungan society, but Dooku's actions negated that. The Gungan didn't want to demand a favor out of them, but he had no choice. Two years was too long to sit around in the forests, especially considering who he had once been within his home. He was more than happy to help the Jedi, but he couldn't avoid asking for their help in return.

Unsure how they were going to proceed, the two Jedi locked their eyes together, having a silent conversation without verbalizing anything or even using the Force. They both knew exactly what the other was thinking; Obi-Wan was willing to help, Dooku was ready to make his own way to safety without the Gungan. Dooku was about ready to say no, much to Obi-Wan's disappointment, but the sound of more tanks rolling towards them distracted Dooku, giving Obi-Wan the chance to speak first.

"Alright," Obi-Wan said, prompting Dooku to snap his neck around and meet Obi-Wan with a piercing gaze that expressed his absolute disdain for Obi-Wan's actions. "We'll do whatever we can."

*Oh thank the gods*, the Gungan told himself as Obi-Wan agreed. It was a small mercy, to be sure, but it would make a lot of difference. Nothing, at least not right now, felt more fulfilling than the creature's sense of gratitude, nor did the idea that he would be able to make a difference for his people again. The inward satisfaction it provided would give him added strength, something he would need when he faced judgment from his people.

"Before we leave," Obi-Wan said, after the creature began to walk towards a clearing in the woods, the Jedi's words prompting the Gungan to stop walking, "what's your name?"

"Jar Binks," the creature said with a sense of righteousness and entitlement, "Crowned Prince of the Gungan Empire."

-----

Arruinda, mayor of New Centrif, wiped a cold towel across her face, hoping that she could calm the anxieties that were about ready to make her convulse in panic. Beads of sweat poured down her face, her heart racing like a tusk cat on the planet's western plains. Fifteen excruciatingly long minutes had passed since she received the word that part of the droid army was advancing towards her city. The mayor, a sixty year old woman of plain and wrinkling features and mayor for two decades, knew that there was not an adequate defense force to protect the city, and that the Federation's goal was to cripple one of the last remaining sources of planetary communication.

In a cruel twist of fate, her people had been frantically trying to make contact with the capital city, which she was sure the Federation wanted to prevent; this could only have been more true once they found out the droid army was advancing. Their efforts to communicate with Ogana increased a thousand fold once the droids approached, but the communications blackout was causing them to have difficulty in doing so.

The elderly woman sighed, letting out all of her pent up frustration at her certain death as she approached the window of her seventh-story office to overlook the streets. The town square below her bustled with frantic activity from her dedicated security forces. They knew the odds of survival as well as she did. Even some armed citizens approached the square, a source of pride for the mayor in such a difficult time. Even so, the Federation army that was

approaching numbered in the hundreds, if not thousands. New Centrif was in the dozens. Not even the Jedi's Force could save them from that.

With a steady precision that would worry even the steadfast of commanders, the droid army arrived at the locked durasteel gate of the city. It was in the center of the wall that surrounded the settlement, though the edifice would do them little good.

-----

OOM-9, atop his AAT, led the force. With the press of a button on a control panel, Maul's holographic image shimmered to life in front of the droid. Maul did little to hide his eagerness at an update, having invested so much time leading up to this moment.

"Lord Maul," OOM-9's cold robotic voice said, "we have arrived at New Centrif."

"Destroy the communication capability of that settlement," Maul demanded, his tone reflecting his great satisfaction at what was being accomplished. "These people must not get word back to the government."

"Right away, Lord Maul," OOM-9 replied as the hologram fizzled away.

"Open fire!"

-----

From her secure office, Arruinada watched in horror as the droid tanks began to bombard the fortified gate at the entrance to her city. Within moments, the gate exploded in all directions, but the droids remained stationary and quiet. On the ground, Colonel Sotab Jacoma of the Utapau Security Forces stood with his men in confusion. His only thoughts were on the stationary droids, wondering why they were not moving.

But then they started their march. Jacoma's olive skin was dripping with sweat when the droids were still stationary, feeling that something wasn't right, but it was once they were on the move that he truly became frightened. Their march, their robotic clinging and clanging, their emotionless features; for droids with such a simple purpose, the horror that they inflicted was most complicated.

Jacoma had seen simulations of battles, but it was nothing like this. He told himself that nothing can truly prepare someone for the horrors of the dead and the dying. Nothing can truly make someone understand just how senseless and cruel life can be, and how easily life could be taken away.

School children playing war games with their friends would talk of the glorious days of the Mandalorian Wars, the Great Territorial War, the New Sith Wars and all the wars in between. Either things had changed since then, or those children were being fed lies. Holo-dramas about ancient wars showed the honorable soldiers rushing into combat against the evil Sith, dispersing their ranks to make sure that no enemy was left alive. The men ran through the battle fields of distant worlds; soldiers helped their fallen comrades and tended to the wounded. They ran to and fro across numerous worlds, defending freedom and liberty.

Utapau was nothing like that. Men were not gallantly running across the battle field. Instead, the droid armies of the Federation pounded their metal heels into the lush green

grass, corrupting the innocence of the world. The droids marched side by side in a cold, calculated formation, so precise that only the computers controlling them could allow for such a feat.

Finally, Jacoma couldn't wait anymore. Forcing his men to watch the advance was psychological torture. Even he couldn't bear it. Clutching his blaster, he said a prayer and thought of his wife and infant daughter. He knew, as did everyone, that he would never see the two most precious things in his life ever again. But for Utapau, some sacrifices were worth it. For the freedom of his people, there were things worth dying for. Raising his blaster into the air, which caught the attention of all his men, Jacoma was ready to do just that.

"For the queen!" the colonel's voice roared as his troops surged forward towards their impending demise.

The band of men, barely enough to fill a platoon in a fully sized army, began advancing. The first few men, shouting with their captain as he sounded the battle cry, charged forward, diving toward any cover they could find. A building to one side, a mass of crates to another, they flew behind anything they could as the first wave of red lances sizzled towards them. The captain himself crouched behind a statue in the midst of his men, keeping his head down as the droids launched their initial barrage. The metal soldiers slowly advanced with a rhythmic clicking of their joints, the thudding of their metallic feet rumbling on the ground.

Jacoma breathed deeply as the first lasers began to thud and sputter about him. Many hit the statue he was crouching behind, its arm cleanly shot off and its stony face decimated. He felt the heat of the blasts on the back of his neck as beads of his own sweat dripped down his face. He slowly peered upwards toward the rest of his men behind him and saw at least five collapse into screaming, bloody heaps of singed flesh and burnt bone. They had been caught in the open by the attackers, and the smell of flesh cooking so close to him made the captain gag.

Taking a deep breath of courage, he crouched upwards and spun around the side of his statue, loosing as many shots from his weapon as his trigger finger could muster. As he leaned out, though, the smoke of battle and fumes of lasers stung his eyes. Firing blindly, he kept a steady wave of green lances zooming towards the enemy. As the first billow of smoke that hit him cleared, he began to open his eyes wider, crouching a little more into his cover while losing fewer aimed shots at the oncoming metal onslaught.

Fires burned on both sides of the road, flickering left and right about the corpses that littered the way. Of the fifteen or so men who had charged ahead of him, Jacoma could only see three left alive, and only one of those was still in a pose remotely similar to standing. The man was bent over, cradling one arm close to him, using his other to operate a pistol over the top of a crate he was huddled behind. His uniform was bloody, his face contorted in pain.

The two other men that made up the living three were badly wounded. In fact, the captain could only tell they were alive by the way they screamed in pain, their chests shaking. One had only two red stumps where his legs had once been, and he screamed in shock as blood trickled from where he lay. Within a couple of seconds he had passed out, either from shock or blood loss. The third was close to death too, a large metal fixture piercing his chest. His face was contorted in a silent scream, coughing up blood as he tried to call out, but whether it was for help or death could not be made certain. The others were all dead, what was left

of them barely recognizable as Human. Pieces of them were strewn across what had once been the grand main road of New Centrif.

Still looking up, Jacoma heard a clank as a metal ball with a small red light bounced on the ground a few feet from the man with the pistol. Jacoma was able to see his eyes widen in shock, before the captain turned away as the grenade exploded. The explosion engulfed the poor soldier, and the wash of heat radiation washed over the captain as he dove backwards. He caught a glimpse of the statue toppling over as he moved, and as he hit the floor he could feel blisters stinging the side of his face that had been caught in the blast.

Realizing he was out in the open now, Jacoma tried to push himself to his feet. He gingerly went to lean on his forearms, before realizing that the statue had toppled over onto his legs. He was trapped. Propping himself up as best he could, he cast a glance with his good eye to what he thought would be the remaining men fighting behind him, only to find the same carnage as before. Just as great a number of corpses and body parts littered the street that led to the mayoral offices. This time, though, he could see only a handful of survivors cradling horrific injuries, and some who were still running from the droids. It seemed the droids had at least put the suffering out of their misery. All except Jacoma himself.

With what little energy he had left, he twisted around to see the droids approaching. Their march was close now, almost deafening. As his gaze rested upon them, he saw them merely feet away. It seemed they either had not noticed him or, seeing him trapped and defenseless, had seen no need to shoot him from afar. As the first row reached him, a droid that bore a slightly different color scheme to the rest, which the captain guessed counted as a rank insignia, stopped, the other rows marching on towards the building. Jacoma would have guessed that this was a lieutenant or captain, having seen the commander direct the battle from its tank behind the marching death bringers.

The droid looked down upon him, its black visual receptors, emotionless, meeting Jacoma's pained open eye. Without so much as a grunt or titter, the droid angled its rifle down towards the captain. Before it fired, though, Jacoma brought his left arm, which had been by his side, up to reveal a metal sphere nestling in the palm of his hand. He clicked a button with his thumb and a red light began flashing on the top. *Three*. With what Jacoma could only link to Human alarm, the droid leveled its rifle and shrugged back instantly. *Two*. Jacoma smiled weakly. *One*. The grenade exploded, and Jacoma was free of the metal beast that now had his home world firmly clamped between its jaws.

Far above the fray, Arruinada's jaw dropped as she watched her friends and townsfolk become engulfed in the explosion. The droids cut through the few defenders that were left like they were nothing, fixated on reaching the communications array just past the town square. The large satellite dish would likely be destroyed within minutes, and they still didn't have a single through to Ogana. With precious little time, the mayor demanded results.

"Do you have a signal yet?" Arruinada asked, forgoing formality and choosing not to hide the terror that rolled off of her tongue.

"A faint one," one of her technicians replied.

"That's better than no signal at all," she told him. "Start sending the signal to Ogana now."

The technician nodded and began working the computer behind them to prepare the transmission. Arruinada wouldn't be able to speak directly to the government, but she

would be able to send them a message to let them know what was happening, provided the transmission array wasn't knocked out sooner. It was their only chance to let Queen Arcadia know that the planet was being invaded, so the mayor felt that she had a grave responsibility and could not afford to fail.

"Queen Arcadia," Arruinada began once the technician gave her the all clear, "this is Mayor Arruinada of New Centrif. As we speak, our city is being invaded by the droid armies of the Trade Federation. They are attempting to destroy our communications array to block out all planetary communication. We do not have the manpower to - "

Just then her sentence was broken as the door to the room burst into pieces, and technician after technician was gunned down by the droid forces that had managed to make their way into the office. Arruinada dove behind her desk and grabbed a gun from one of the drawers, firing back in a desperate attempt to stay alive.

The defense was futile.



## OTOH GUNGA

*"Then spoke up the noble Jar, exiled son of the old leader.  
He took it upon himself to help the Jedi, and they, in turn,  
were able to help him in the most important of ways."*

- Alexander Arcadia, King of Utapau  
Journal of the Whills, 15:4

Humans were interesting creatures. They would go through time worrying away their lives while fearing the future, discontent with the present and unable to take the idea of dying. But as Arcadia's father used to tell her, things like worry, doubt, and fear were the enemies that would slowly claw away at the Human soul and bring even the strongest of people down to the ground and turn them into dust before they finally died from what they had feared for so long.

The queen could feel herself turning into dust.

Panaka had insisted that she stay in her throne room for protection. She had nothing to do but sit in fear or watch out the enormous panoramic window in horror as the Federation tanks rolled through her streets. It was an outrage, but she could do nothing about it. Droids stomped on the grounds her family had fought to defend for centuries, raping the once-noble Utapau existence. She wanted them to be punished, but there was nothing she could do. The entire planet was completely helpless; their enemy may have been the Trade Federation, but their peaceful ideals had yet to act as their friend.

"Your highness," Panaka called out, standing next to a computer console on the far side of the room. "You'll want to take a look at this."

The queen nodded solemnly, turning away from the window just as more troop transports pulled through the nearby town square. Arcadia lethargically sauntered towards the security captain, wanting nothing to do with what he was about to tell her. Nothing anyone could say would bring any happiness. Nothing anyone could say would bring back the dead.

"What is it?" the queen, impatient and angry, asked.

"We received a message from New Centrif," Panaka told her. "Pulling up now."

Arcadia looked away, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening outside before the

message appeared, but Panaka was too quick. She immediately looked back at the image on the view screen, her jaw dropping at what she was seeing. Mayor Arruinada, whom Arcadia admittedly did not know that well, was nearly drowning in her sweat, a nervous wreck from whatever was happening. The queen's stomach tied itself in knots. She prayed for it to not be true, but she knew what was happening.

"Queen Arcadia," the distraught and overwrought New Centrif mayor began, "this is Mayor Arruinada of New Centrif. As we...city...armies of the Trade Federation. They are...destroy...unications array...all planetary communication. We...man power..."

The signal fell dead, and in Arcadia felt sick. Even though the communications was all that went down, she knew in her gut that the mayor and most people in the small outlying settlement were dead. Every one of those deaths was another failure on Arcadia's part, and it was becoming unbearable.

*How am I going to live with myself after this...?*

The young queen let out a sigh and leaned against a thin wooden pillar beside her. She clasped her hands together, her eyes looking downwards in thoughts and prayers for the continuing mess she had gotten herself into. All over the planet, people were suffering. It was all because she had decided to get involved with galactic affairs. Senator Palpatine had nothing but the best intentions when he suggested it, but she wished he had never asked. Too many were dead, Arruinada included. The mayor had given up her life to warn the government that the droids were coming, but that message had to have been recorded hours earlier. It was too late at this point.

Arcadia's face was one of beauty - but, as with all beauty, there were those that could sully it. The Federation caused her beauty to be replaced by expressions and features of obvious worry and fatigue. She hadn't slept for days. The sorrow she felt was immense. There was no way she knew of to move forward away from her sorrow, but for the sake of her people she would have to.

*How long do I have to be counseled by my soul when my heart is filled with nothing but sorrow? How long will it be hung over me?*

Just as she was ready to get back to work, the queen was thrown forward into a wall. Panaka jumped atop her for her protection, and other guards were thrown crashing through the windows to the grounds below. The fall would kill them instantly. A horrid explosion had rang out, scattering all of them. The queen looked up in anger as she saw bits of limbs and clothes near the shattered door from where some of the guards had been scattered. Insult was added to history when a squadron of battle droids stepped over them, pointing their guns at the queen and her advisers.

"Target captured," the lead battle droid said to the others. "Begin processing."

-----

Emerging from the thick mass of trees and plants, Jar and the two Jedi finally arrived on the shores of the Aquarian Ocean. The indomitable and seemingly endless span of water seemed to race after the sun that was resting high above the horizon, creating a dazzling yellow reflection that painted itself across the faint blue sea. Some men would travel great lengths to admire the height of mountains or the wonders of the stars, but to so many others, including the Gungans, it was the mighty billowing sea that was the most



impressive.

Jar stopped as his feet touched the wet sand, the waves coming in and out around his legs. He inhaled deeply and took in the crisp salt air, listening to the birds sing and the nearby creatures go about their daily routines. There was nothing better than the ocean for him, especially now after having been away from it for nearly two years. It would be difficult for him to return home after so long, but he had to help his new friends.

"Friends" was a term he used loosely. Obi-Wan seemed decent enough, but Jar had listened to Dooku's mocking remarks for hours, even though the Jedi Master thought he was being coy. The comments served to fuel Jar's natural anti-Human instincts, instincts that he had taught himself to ignore long ago despite all of the problems that Humans and Gungans had with one another. It was useless to live in the past, even though Dooku served as a constant reminder that the past was much closer to him than he believed.

Gungans were the native species of Utapau. The Humans didn't come until much later, around the end of the Jedi Civil War nearly four thousand years earlier. A Republic monarch called Elsinore den Tasia, from a distant and long forgotten world, sent an explorer across the galaxy and the explorer discovered Utapau. The Humans settled the planet, and cultural differences caused a great deal of tension between the Gungans and the newly settled Humans.

Open conflict between the two species was rare, but they did engage in a civil war that sent the Gungans to the bottom of the sea, allowing the Humans to rule the surface. The act, while causing much more tension between the two races, did serve to unify the Gungan cities into a stronger alliance, but prejudices developed that cut off the two species from each other entirely. Trade agreements lasted for a few years, but quickly died away.

"How much longer?" Dooku asked as the two Jedi met up behind Jar, the aging Jedi Master doubling over the catch his breath after having walked for so many hours.

"We're going underwater," Jar said hesitantly, wondering what type of response it would elicit from Dooku. "I hope you can hold your breath."

It took him a moment, but Dooku's eyes flickered with frustration when he realized Jar's last comment was pointedly directed at the Jedi Master. He didn't think his opinion of the Gungan could get any lower, but Jar seemed intent on proving him wrong. Jedi were always taught to respect all life forms, regardless of what they were, but after so many years of seeing lower life forms get in his way, Dooku had enough of that teaching.

Jar took a deep breath before stepping further into the water. It was freezing to Humans, but to Gungans it gave a cool and refreshing sensation that seemingly replenished a much desired nutrient that hadn't been consumed for two years. As the cool tingling that crept up his spine slowly subsided, he took in one final whiff of the salt air and dove head first into an oncoming wave that arched high above the water before crashing down onto the shore. As the sea was momentarily calm, Jar stuck his head back up from the water, just as the Jedi were preparing their breath masks.

"My people don't like outsiders," Jar told them frankly, "so don't say I didn't warn you if you go in expecting hospitality."

"Don't worry," Obi-Wan quipped, thinking about his brief stay on the Federation ship as he was about to fasten his mask, "this hasn't been our day for hospitality."

As another wave came, the three travelers dove within and began their descent down through the waters. Jar swam gracefully, extending his arms longer and faster than the Jedi were able to. The Gungan felt right at home, but after only a few minutes the Jedi began to feel the strain of the swim and the pressure of the water. It was more uncomfortable for Dooku, but the thirty-three year old Obi-Wan was also having his fair share of trouble with the pressure. The Force could only do so much to aid against physics.

They angled steadily deeper as they swam, and the light was drifting away at an uncomfortably rapid rate. Obi-Wan kept looking behind him, hoping that the light wouldn't keep disappearing, but he knew it was futile. Turning to Dooku, Obi-Wan could see the lack of amusement written across his old master's face, and the Jedi Knight couldn't help but share in the sentiments. The swim was taking too long, and Obi-Wan didn't know how much more ocean pressure the two Humans could take. It was hard to have second thoughts about what they were doing, considering the alternative meant traipsing around the woods with the Federation, but Obi-Wan was coming very close.

Then, before they realized how close they were, a blinding white flash overcame them from ahead, glowing brighter than the two Jedi were prepared for. Obi-Wan instinctively shut his eyes, and when he opened them again he realized how foolish it was. The ocean's salt water trapped itself inside his eyes, and it stung in a small yet annoyingly noticeable amount of discomfort. The white aura in front of them was still all-consuming, but they were able to start making out figures in the light.

At last, after minutes of being surrounded by the inescapable luminosity, Otoh Gunga came into their view. The city was a vast web of hydrostatic bubbles, bubbles which kept the water out while allowing life forms to enter through. Anchored to an underwater cliff, the city's bubbles were interconnected, each one allowing passage to numerous other parts of the city. Each bubble was distinct, and the Jedi were beginning to make that out, as well as the Gungans that were going about their lives inside of the complex.

Jar swam faster to reach the main bubble, and positioned himself upright before slowly gelling through the bubble. Obi-Wan and Dooku glanced at one another, sharing a mutual intrigue and worry as they were unable to determine what was going to happen when they too entered the city. Following the Gungan's lead, the Jedi swam through the bubble and emerged standing on the other side, somehow only slightly damp.

Light poured out from all directions of the platform that the three now stood upon, as well as the walls of the bubbles which let out more of a glow than an actual burst of light. The air was breathable, which the Jedi had been somewhat concerned about, and as they began to descend from the platform they found that their clothes were drier than they expected. They assumed that it was from passing through the bubble, but there was no way to be sure. What they could be sure of, however, was that Jar's warning was correct. The Gungans clearly did not like outsiders. The scattering of the Gungans in the area and their cries of alarm told the Jedi that much.

"Home sweet home..." Jar mumbled in his native tongue as he watched his nearby brethren whisper to themselves and continue to scatter.

"Hey you!" a raspy, inhospitable voice called out before Jar could even begin to admire the city he once called his home. "Stop right there!"

Jar jolted in shock as he heard the voice, spinning around to look into the eyes of the

darker-skinned, rougher looking Gungan who approached on an aquatic mount. Jar's eyes grew narrow in anger as he saw the mounted Gungan, having had a tense history with him in the past. It was this particular Gungan who had helped to exile Jar so many years ago. It was this particular Gungan who helped set Jar up and cause his banishment. It was an act that could never be forgiven.

"You," Jar nearly growled. "I demand that you - "

"You're not in a position to demand anything, Binks," the Gungan shouted in a sharp and mocking tone, making a pointed and not so subtle jab at the fact that Jar no longer held his royal title. "You're going to the council, and you're looking at a lot more than banishment this time."

Obi-Wan and Dooku looked at one another, realizing that the reception was colder than they had expected. While Jar had warned them not to expect any warm welcomes, they didn't expect to be confronted by the guards and brought before the Gungan High Council in such a manner. While the council was their destination, they had hoped to arrive more peacefully than being escorted by armed guards. It didn't necessarily put a kink in their plans, though it significantly altered their perception of the Gungan's views on outsiders.

"And just who are you?" Dooku asked, directing his query at the mounted Gungan.

"He's *Captain* Tarpals," Jar interrupted in disgust as Tarpals dismounted, "a mercenary hired by the High Councilor to do his dirty work. He's scum masquerading as an honorable officer."

It came out of nowhere, a punch that slammed into Jar's stomach like a charging kaadu. Jar grabbed his gut, the artificial salt wind of the city completely knocked out of him. His knees buckled and he crashed to the ground, having been unprepared for the force of the other Gungan's fury. Jar looked up at the rogue captain looming above him, a certain anger flickering in the aggrieved prince's eyes as he did. Tarpals had brought so much pain into Jar's life that part of him wanted to wrap his hands around the captain's neck and squeeze the life out of him, but his morals caused him to stay his hand.

"Strong words coming from an exile," Tarpals scowled, grabbing an electropole weapon from his mount.

A long, pointed spear, the electropole derived its name from its charged tip that emitted a distinct electric charge when placed in close proximity to another object. While an insulated hand-grip protected the wielder from the electric effects, the shock of an electropole could pack a serious amount of punch, and Jar knew it was not a weapon to be trifled with. His resolve stiffened, however, reinforced by the anger within him. He would not back down now.

Like a kettle of Ansionian tea brought to a sustained boil, all of the pent up rage and frustration that were coursing through the exiled prince's veins rose to the surface. Just as the electropole came crashing down towards him, he put up his arms in a cross and blocked the descending weapon, knocking the other Gungan to his feet and tearing the pole from his hands. Jar brought it towards Tarpals's neck, but Tarpals kicked his legs outward, knocking Jar backwards. The captain planted his wide, webbed feet onto the ground, using them as a base to lurch forward and whip back up on to his feet in a manner not dissimilar to a suddenly uncoiled spring.

Another guard approached, but Tarpals didn't give him the chance to help. The Gungan captain ripped the guard's pole away from him and swung at Binks in a wide arc, the electrified tip crackling loudly as he did so. Jar's eyes bulged from their eyestalks as he ducked to avoid what could have been a fatal blow to the head. He bolted back up, angling his arms and the pole straight up to deflect another attack by Tarpals. With a swift precision, Jar pushed the pole back and rotated his wrist to prepare for his first attack.

Emboldened by the captain's tenacity, Jar spun around like a dancer at the Galaxies Opera House performing a pirouette, finally stabbing forward only to have his attack deflected. He surged forward with a duck and slash, catching Tarpals by surprise. As the electropoles collided, sparks flew and the electricity crackled. Tarpals reversed his pole for a swift parry of Jar's weapon, but instead their weapons and arms locked together in a tug of war that could have resulted in either of their deaths if their blades hit the right spots.

Tarpals stood resolute, firmly gripping the pole with his right hand above the left. The pole angled up and away from his left side, held across his body in a common enough pole-arm stance. In fact, it was too common, and Jar realized this. Just then, Jar saw his opening. It was a risk, but what he could gain from it was tremendous. Finally, he let go, not just of his pole but of his rage, his hope, his fear of exile. All of it fell with his pole, tumbling to the ground in a manner that caught Tarpals off guard. As the captain looked down, Jar's left foot flew forward with a snap and kick, colliding with Tarpals's arms. The captain lost the grip on his own pole; as the upper part flew out of Tarpals's right hand and back towards Jar, the exiled prince lunged forward, planting his extended left foot near Tarpals's right shoulder while grabbing the upper end of the pole with his right palm.

Holding steady, Jar reached his left hand out and grabbed Tarpals by the earflap, using his right hand to press the tip of the electropole onto Tarpals's throat. Tarpals completely lost his grip on his pole, finding himself totally at Jar's mercy. Tarpals squirmed in agony, his eyes stricken with fear that Jar would have his revenge and take the captain's life, but Jar had no interest in doing that. Tarpals grabbed the pole, hoping to force it out of Jar's grip, but the exiled prince was determined not to let the captain go. He pulled the weapon against Tarpals's neck even harder, ensuring that Tarpals would not be able to worm free without inadvertently killing himself. Tarpals was forced to crouch down, although he was not fully kneeling.

"Drop your weapons," Jar shouted, his voice cracking as he gave the order to the small crowd of anxious guards that had gathered near and around him. "Drop them now."

The guards had no desire or intention to comply, but Tarpals's eyes told them to obey. He had no interest in dying, especially at the hands of someone he despised as much as Jar. Besides, Tarpals knew that Jar's grip on him was not rock solid; all locks could be broken. The captain simply needed to wait for the right time before making his move, and then he would be able to finally bring Jar one step closer to the punishment that the prince deserved.

The two Jedi, on the other hand, stood in stunned silence. Dooku nearly had to reconsider his opinion of Jar. For the few hours he had known the Gungan, Dooku thought he had no skill and no use whatsoever, although for a moment he felt that he was clearly mistaken. Of course, he would not allow himself to be wrong. The new information he had about Jar's abilities was justified with the thought that primitive creatures living in swamps would have to be physical in order to survive from other predators. Obi-Wan, though, was also surprised. He didn't doubt Jar's intelligence like Dooku had, although the Jedi Knight's wide eyes and cocked eyebrow still spoke to the fact that he had not seen the combat skills

coming.

Finally, after a few moments of silence, Tarpals found his opening. Jar, arrogantly believing that he had defeated the Gungan captain, loosened his grip on Tarpals's ears and pulled the electropole back a few inches away from the captain's neck. Not hesitating, Tarpals dropped his knees to the ground, causing Jar to inadvertently release his grip on the captain's ears. With Tarpal's head safely away from the electropole, he used his moment of opportunity and surprise to dive forward. Landing on his stomach, he kicked his feet outward into Jar's gut, forcing the exiled prince to the ground.

Tarpals leaped to his feet, running over to where Jar landed. The captain kicked Jar's electropole, which had fallen out of his hand, off to the side, all while sticking his hand out so one of his guards could throw another electropole to him. Tarpals caught the pole and leaned down, pointing the electrified end of the pole at Jar's neck in a moment of reverse déjà vu. Jar made little effort to fight back, rubbing his head after hitting it hard on the steel floor below him.

"You're good, Binks," Tarpals said, his confidence having returned to him now that the exiled prince had been bested, "but I was always better."

Jar scoffed weakly at the stinging comment. He wanted desperately to become angry and to kill the captain, which he had desired to do for some time, but it would have been a mistake. Jar remembered well what his father once told him: he who angers you conquers you. Tarpals had already proven he could do that, so Jar felt no reason for it to continue. He would go before the council and hear what they had to say.

Seeing the defeat in Jar's eyes, Tarpals pulled back on the electropole, albeit somewhat hesitantly. The captain snapped his fingers, and in an instant a guard approached Binks and placed a pair of hand clamps around his wrists. Two other guards did the same for Obi-Wan and Dooku, the latter of whom considered putting up a fight before deciding that he was in no condition to do so considering the strain that had already put on him. He too accepted the fact that the council would be their next venue, and it was something that Obi-Wan, on the other hand, was counting on. The road to Ogana had to carry them through the chambers of the Gungan High Council, as it was their only means of escape.

-----

Gunray stumbled and fell back onto the side of his desk, his face bruised with rivers of dark blood pouring down all sides of his sickly green head. His large eyes were inflamed like balloons, a side effect of the sheer force of Lord Maul's anger and hatred. Gunray should have expected such torture after he willingly and openly defied the orders of the Dark Jedi Master, but even the pain was not enough to cause him to admit to a mistake. He still worried that the Jedi would disrupt the Federation's plans, and he had little faith in Maul's abilities as a commander. That was one thing, however, that he knew not to say out loud lest the torture become death.

The Viceroy coughed, thick patches of green blood flying outwards as projectiles onto the durasteel floor below him. The Neimoidian struggled to get back to his feet, but Maul was relentless. The Dark Jedi picked the viceroy up by the shoulders and struck him in the gut with his knee, sending Gunray to the ground once more only to loop and see Maul's cloaked frame towering over him. Gunray wailed in pain as he grabbed his aching muscles, the cries furthering Maul's enjoyment.

The Dark Jedi Master stood firm, his resolve resolute. All he wanted was a simple, albeit forced, apology from the Viceroy, yet Gunray was reluctant to admit any sort of mistake. Maul had no idea why, but it mattered very little to him. The torture amused him and was always disappointed when a session had to end when a victim caved. He was particularly pleased to be able to torture Gunray, something he had wanted to do to the petty annoyance for many, many years.

Maul looked down at the cowering Neimoidian and saw in his eyes the fear that he had seen in so many previous victims. In order for such fear to manifest, Maul always need a dramatic display of force and a mock psychological imbalance to make the victim fear that he was insane and could kill them at any second. It wasn't all that hard for him to pretend. In fact, he enjoyed every moment of the insanity, as it allowed himself to fully unleash his rage upon those he despised.

Gripping the edge of Gunray's desk with all of his strength, Maul forced it off of the floor and threw it against a wall. The display let out a loud and ear-piercing crash of distorted and twisting metal as it impacted, the nails-on-a-chalkboard screech caused even Maul to wince. The impact on the wall knocked Gunray's portraits and ancient relics off of the cold silver plating, the viceroy putting his hands to his ears to dull the noise.

The Viceroy stumbled forward towards the broken desk, using it to prop himself up. Maul nearly went in for another blow, but he stopped himself as Gunray looked as if he wanted to say something. Anything Gunray could say at that point would amuse Maul, so he was willing to let the Viceroy state his piece for just a short moment.

"Do you think you are brave for this, Maul?" Gunray asked spitefully. "Coming in here and fighting someone? Brave men don't torture one person who can barely mount a defense."

"Bravery doesn't exist," Maul proclaimed with a laugh as he moved in closer, forcing Gunray back up against the mangled desk. "It's an illusion created by men who wish to anoint themselves as kings. But at the first sign of trouble, these supposed noble men will do anything for one little answer."

"You're disgusting," Gunray said, spitting at Maul's feet.

"You're one to talk," Maul said, ignoring Gunray's show of disrespect. "Look at you, forcing a blockade on a planet, and for what? Because the glorious Republic told you that you can't own another man's life? Because it hurt the bottom line? Maybe I am disgusting, but at least I'm not a hypocrite."

Gunray, fumbling on the twisted metal as Maul moved closer, did his best to stand up. In his mind he was screaming in absolute fear and he knew Maul could sense it with the Force, but he fought as hard as he could to make sure that his exterior lacked a look of fear. Even if Maul knew about the hidden fear, Gunray could at least show a strength and resilience that was, admittedly, out of character for him and most Neimoidians.

"You surprise me, Gunray," Maul told him, backing off to let the Viceroy stand up a bit straighter. "You Neimoidians are usually cowards. I would've broken any of your men an hour ago, but you've held on. Why?"

"I don't fear you," Gunray lied, his voice cracking from the trauma to his throat.

"You're a damned liar," Maul said in retort. "I can see it in your eyes, and I know you know

it. What you don't realize is that all eyes tell a story, and that story is fear. Fear attracts the fearful and those foolish enough to believe that they're fearless. It brings out the strong, the weak, the innocent and the corrupt, such as yourself. Fear is my strongest ally. It tells me everything I need to know about a victim. Would you like to know your story, Gunray?"

"Go to Hell," the Neimoidian spat weakly, barely able to get the words out through his bloodied mouth as the blood continued to stream out.

Maul smiled, giving an out of character gesture of his own by patting Gunray on the shoulder. That hospitality, though, quickly faded. Maul lifted his leg and spun around, his foot impacting the Neimoidian's face. Gunray fell to the side and let out a loud and deep moan as the pain began to become unbearable. Maul doubted that the surprisingly resilient Viceroy would tell him such.

"I am Hell, Viceroy," Maul said with a malicious grin, piercing Gunray's gaze with his yellow-red eyes that served as a sinister look into his mind and story. "Never forget that."

-----

Deep inside Otoh Gunga, a cadre of Gungan guards led Jar and the Jedi through the halls of the city towards the chambers of the Gungan High Council. The two Jedi were in awe of their surroundings. They had seen many advanced civilizations before with remarkable architecture, some of them under water, although they had never seen anything quite like Otoh Gunga. How anyone, even an aquatic species, was able to build such structures underwater was a mystery to them, but they didn't dare to ask. Their presence was already causing enough disruption. They had no desire to insult the people.

The city was founded by a Gungan leader named Gallo nearly three thousand years earlier atop the remains of the Gungan city of Spearhead. The construction followed the unification of the Gungan tribes following a war between the tribes. After the unification came, Gungan populations from half a dozen different cities came together and decided to live in Otoh Gunga, which meant "Old Gungan" in the native language. Throughout the years, the population skyrocketed into the millions, necessitating constant expansion in the city. For the most part, they all lived in harmony with one another.

While the Jedi were showing how impressed they were with the city, Jar had a feeling of nostalgia. He had not been in the city for two years, and his warm smile, even in the face of certain death, let everyone know how refreshing it was to be in his home again. He had been raised in the monarchical residences, only a few kilometers from their current location, as the son of His Royal Highness Gorgr Binks, the leader of the Gungan Empire before his death nearly ten years earlier.

Jar had been deemed too young to rise to the throne, so Rugor Nass took his place and always looked down upon him. While Jar's banishment was a direct result of his own actions, he always suspected that the punishment was intended to solidify Nass's rule over the Gungan people. Jar always wanted to return and confront Nass, but he never found the courage to do so.

The door to the High Council chambers stood before them, prompting the group to stop and wait for the members of the council to decide that they were ready for them to enter. Jar didn't expect a warm welcome, although he knew that the Jedi had an important mission to complete and he would do what he could to help them. The odds of the Jedi being able to do anything to fulfill their promise of helping him gain favor was slim at this point, so he

figured if he helped them escape arrest they would be able to make good on their vow at a later date. Escaping the city somehow was much better than facing the execution he would likely be sentenced to, but he would face that if need be.

The Gungan guards led the group through the doors and into the chamber once the council finally decided that it was ready to see them. A long circular bench sat all across one side of the large bubble, with one seat higher than the rest for the High Councilor. Each seat was occupied by a Gungan official, every one of them dressed in ornate official robes that represented their respective positions.

The higher seat was occupied by a heavier Ankura Gungan, Rugor Nass, who looked like he had never been as thin and muscular as Jar was. His neck was nearly non-existent, as his head and shoulders seemed to merge together from the fat. The Jedi could immediately tell from the look on Nass's face that he was not pleased to see outsiders, but an abnormally wide grin stretched across his dark green face once he saw Jar.

"Thank you for seeing us, High Councilor," Obi-Wan said with a bow, followed reluctantly by Dooku with his own bow. "It's imperative that we speak with you about the Federa - "

"Silence!" Nass shouted, spit flying from all sides of his face as he screamed. "You cannot be here. This army is up there is not our concern."

"As you seem to already know," Dooku said as he stepped forward, standing side by side with Obi-Wan, "a droid army is about to attack Ogana. We must stop them."

"We don't care about them," Nass said in a tone that told Dooku that he was someone who had been in a fair share of disagreements with the Humans of the planet, "and they don't care about us. They stole our sacred crystal, but they refuse to even acknowledge that they took it! They cannot be trusted."

"We sympathize," Obi-Wan said, giving a warm smile in the hopes of reducing the tension in the chamber, "but once these droids take control of the surface they will take control of you and your people."

"I do not think so," Nass said with a grin, almost as if he knew for a fact that the Federation would not do anything to the Gungan people.

"You and the Humans form a symbiotic circle," Obi-Wan told the High Councilor while scratching his own beard, intrigued that a person of power would reject such an obvious fact that could help those he served. "What happens to one of you *will* affect the other. You have to understand this."

"We do not care about the Humans," Nass angrily shouted, putting a particularly disgusting emphasis on the last word, "or your problems!"

Dooku had little patience for what he perceived to be the arrogance of a completely insignificant person. The Jedi Master moved his concentration away from the discussion that Obi-Wan continued to have with Nass, instead focusing on channeling the Force around him so he could briefly and subtly influence the Gungan leader's mind. When he had latched onto enough of the figurative universe around him, Dooku subtly and nonchalantly waved his hand in front of him, hoping that the Gungans were truly as weak-minded as he believed them to be.



"Then send us on our way," Dooku told him as he gestured with his hand, his voice highly suggestive to create added influence.

"We will send you on your way," the High Councilor echoed mindlessly, prompting looks of concern and surprise from the other members of the High Council.

"We could use a transport," Dooku continued, still waving his hand as he spoke.

"We will give you a bongo," Nass decided, not noticing Jar's confusion behind the Gungan guards. "The fastest way to Ogana is to go through the ocean core."

"Thank you for your help," Dooku said as he and Obi-Wan bowed, ignoring the maliciously wide grin on Nass's face when he spoke of the ocean core. Dooku was satisfied that his trick was successful, although he was not particularly pleased at the attitudes of the Gungan leaders as he and Obi-Wan made their way towards the door.

"What's a bongo?" Obi-Wan whispered to his former teacher.

"Hopefully a transport," Dooku replied, not assuaging Obi-Wan's fears.

"Wait," Jar shouted, prompting the Jedi to turn from their path towards the door and notice that he was still chained and held by the Gungan guards. "They're setting you up. You'll never survive the core without my help. Get me out of this and I'll go with you."

Dooku was ready to keep heading towards the door, not wanting to allow Jar to travel with them to Ogana. Obi-Wan, however, knew better. He didn't know about the potential dangers in Utapau's oceans, and they had no idea where they were headed. Jar would undoubtedly be able to render much needed assistance if they brought him along. The only other option was to stand by and let him be killed for doing nothing more than returning to his home after so many years.

"We're short on time," Dooku reminded him, seeing what was going through his former pupil's mind.

"Time spent here can help us later," Obi-Wan said with his own reminder, "and we'll need a navigator to get us through the ocean core."

"You're losing focus," Dooku said with an edge, becoming irritated over Obi-Wan's constant need to involve himself in "pet projects" that had little to do with them.

"Your sensitivity to the Living Force is not your strength," Obi-Wan replied as he turned back towards the council, a hint of annoyance in his voice. "What is to become of Jar Binks?"

"He was exiled from here," Nass said, "and he broke our laws by coming back. He is to be...punished for his crime."

"He has been a great help to us," Obi-Wan informed them, "so I hope the punishment will not be too severe."

"Pounded until death," Nass said, cackling with glee as the words escaped his oversized lips. He had no concern for Jar's well being, only satisfaction in the thought of the Gungan's brutal death.

Dooku could barely keep his eyes from showing his surprise and disgust. He had expected that Jar would receive some sort of punishment, but not a rather elaborate and painful death. He turned around and saw the look of defeat on Jar's face, but what surprised him the most was the feeling of concern that had actually manifested itself in his own mind. Only moments before, he had little concern for the Gungan's safety, but he wasn't about to let him be executed for, admittedly, helping him and Obi-Wan.

*Play along if you know what's good for you*, Dooku said in Jar's mind. The Gungan heard the call and looked around in all directions, confused as to where the voice came from until he looked back at Dooku. The Jedi Master nodded his head to let him know that the voice was his, and to hopefully lessen the Gungan's anxiety.

"I saved his life," Dooku told the High Councilor, hiding the sour taste that the words caused. "He owes me a life debt. Your gods demand that his life belongs to me now."

"Binks?" the High Councilor asked in bewilderment, noting the surprised looks that crossed over the faces of the other members of the council. "You have a life debt with this person?"

Jar nodded his head, realizing what Dooku meant when he told him to play along. Had he not heard the voice, the exiled prince would have undoubtedly protested simply to clear his name, as the life debts had been cancelled out, but it didn't matter. He had promised only a few minutes earlier that he would help the Jedi, and if that meant navigating through the ocean core then that was exactly what he would do. Besides, the look on many of the council members' faces told Jar that he may have gained some, if not an extraordinarily small amount, of favor with them.

"His worthless life is yours, outsider," Nass decreed, rolling his eyes and flicking his wrist towards Jar as a sign of disrespect. "Now be gone with him!"

-----

Twenty minutes passed by, and Jar was beyond relieved. Had the Jedi not intervened, he likely would have been sitting in a jail cell by now, if not being pounded to death with the heaviest stones the Gungan soldiers he once served with could lift. He felt that he truly did owe the Jedi a life debt after they stuck their necks out for him, so he would offer them, even Dooku, whatever help they needed.

After the three had boarded, the bio-engineered bongo submersible shot out of the bubble that housed the Gungan dock and made its way towards the ocean core that would take them to Ogana. Jar sat hunched over at the controls, re-familiarizing himself with their functions and abilities. He had not piloted a bongo for nearly five years, but he always felt that he had been skilled with operating them so it did not take long for the necessary knowledge to come flooding back to him.

The small ship was mostly a moving yet shielded electrical generator, as it was the only way that the Gungans could assure its effective operation underwater. It was designed to mimic a species of predatory squid to thwart potential threats, but that species of squid was long since extinct. The long tail of the triangular craft rotated as a propeller, connected to the generator which allowed it to move through the water.

Inside the hydrostatic bubble that created the cockpit, Obi-Wan sat next to Jar while Dooku sat in the seat behind them. Obi-Wan watched intently at the waters ahead to ensure that

the Gungan did not miss any of the dangers lurking within the murky deep. Dooku, on the other hand, felt that the entire operation was a disaster waiting to happen. He assumed Jar's navigation skills would be useful to them, but he couldn't help but feel as if the Gungan High Councilor had set them all up to die. On the other hand, they both could have been wrong about Jar's skills, as the only talent the Gungan had shown was the ability to fight, and that came with the territory of living in the forests. Why Obi-Wan felt the need to go out of his way to carry on with these pet projects was a mystery to the gaining Jedi Master.

"Why were you banished, Jar?" Obi-Wan asked, breaking the silence that had befallen them. The Jedi Knight was very curious about why a crowned prince would be exiled from his home, as it was not a story often heard.

"I don't like to talk about it," Jar told him. He brushed off the question as if it had never been asked, and his tone hinted at embarrassment.

"Please," Obi-Wan said in a tone that gave Jar some assurance, as the Jedi Knight was hopeful that the Gungan would share the secret with him. "We promised that we would help you. Anything you can tell us would help us do that."

Jar's eyestalks gestured in bewilderment. He had half expected both of the Jedi to kick him out of their way once they reached Ogana. They promised before reaching the city that they would somehow help him, and he assumed that their helpfulness quota with him had been filled when they saved him from execution. It was a pleasant surprise, one that made him more open to sharing his past with them, although not fully open.

"I, uh," Jar began to admit, but he hesitated before finally conceding to Obi-Wan's request to talk about his exile. "I wasn't paying attention."

"You were banished for not paying attention?" Dooku laughed. The Jedi Master was barely able to contain his amusement. He had never before heard of a banishment for something that seemed so simple and foolhardy.

"I was guarding an ancient relic," Jar snapped, sick of Dooku's constant mocking of him. "It was my duty as the Crowned Prince. A female colleague named Scortora approached me. I had been watching her for months ever since we started serving together. She said all the right things and....*distracted* me for too long. When I went back to my post, the relic was gone."

Jar could still see the orb's empty case as if it was right in front of him. He had seen Scortora on numerous occasions and believed she wanted to mate with him, which was why he allowed himself to become distracted. When he returned and saw that the relic was gone, though, he realized that she had purposely distracted him and that she was working with the Human government. Scortora was immediately executed for treason, but Jar was still banished from Otoh Gunga forever and stripped of his title of Crowned Prince.

"What was the relic?" Obi-Wan asked.

"You Humans would call it the Kaiburr crystal," Jar exclaimed, and he quickly recognized that he put too much emphasis on "you Humans". "My people believe that its healing powers come from our gods, but the Human government claims it was brought to this planet by a minion of a Dark Jedi called Xendor. Whatever the truth may be, the Humans wanted it badly enough to manipulate one of our people into letting them steal it."

Obi-Wan looked behind him and glanced at his former Jedi Master. The two shared a mutual look of concern when they heard the story. When they were both Padawans, they had learned the tale of Xendor, the first Dark Jedi to break away from the Jedi Order. It was only a few centuries after the formation of the Galactic Republic, so the information on Xendor was limited. It was known, though, that the Kashi-born Dark Jedi was one of the most infamous in history.

Xendor was expelled from the Order because of his intent to practice the dark side, and after his exile he made his way to the Unknown Regions. In the decades that followed, he gathered a group of Dark Jedi and formed the Legions of Lettow, using them in an attempt to destroy the Jedi on Coruscant. The Legions were destroyed and Xendor was killed, with no one knowing what happened to his minions. It was possible that Xendor had found the crystal while in the Unknown Regions. Many mysteries were held in that sector of the galaxy, and a Force-laden crystal with the power to heal could have been one of them.

Before Jar could continue, there was a loud thump on the stern of the bongo and the ship jolted forward. The group spent a few frantic seconds looking all around the craft, finally realizing that something struck the craft again as it lurched sharply to one side. They turned around and watched as a massive opee sea killer hooked onto them with the massive tongue that shot out of its abnormally large jaw. The bongo lurched backwards, quickly headed towards the mouth of the immense creature.

"Hit that red button," Jar shouted to Obi-Wan, who immediately complied when he saw which control the Gungan was referring to.

A rear weapons system activated when Obi-Wan pushed the button, and a massive canon emerged from the metallic structure of the craft's stern. Jar pushed the throttle of the vessel forward, and while doing so he unleashed an array of torpedoes at the creature's midsection. The sea killer collapsed onto a rock face in pain, but it was only momentarily stunned. It stood back up and charged at the bongo yet again.

"Well this is fun," Dooku muttered from the back, wiping sweat from his forehead as he continued to feel that the trip was becoming a disaster. He noticed that even Jar and Obi-Wan were becoming frantic, losing hope in the situation as it continued.

Before anyone could make another move, another larger creature emerged from the shadowy depths. This sando aqua monster caught the sea killer in its own titanic jaw, crushing its skull and devouring parts of the large creature that it dwarfed in size. The long, eel-like predator grabbed the sea killer with its claws before swallowing it relatively whole. As the aqua monster licked its lips, it did not even notice the bongo continue to move past it deeper into the core.

"There's always a bigger fish," Obi-Wan quipped. The comment, this time, forced even Dooku to smile considering the implications.

With the threat of the creature gone, Jar banked hard to the left and took the vessel deeper into the abyss. The light in the bongo became darker the deeper they moved, but it didn't affect Jar. He was relatively familiar with the route to Ojana, and once he found it the vessel dove further and made its way through the entrance to a cave that would, pending no further predatory interruptions, bring them to the rivers on the edge of the city.

# --IV--

## ESCAPE

*"Oh dear, he has always been such a cocky droid. From what I gather, it all started when he saved the queen's ship, just before I met him. It was as if it was meant to be."*

- C-3PO, assistant to Luke Skywalker  
Journal of the Whills, 15:7

War was a dirty business. The people of Utapau learned very quickly that they were beyond fortunate for not having been touched by an outside war since the Mandalorian invasion of Ogana during the Great Sovereign Crusades, a cataclysmic war between the Republic and the Third Sith Empire. It had been over thirty-five hundred years since that war, so no one on Utapau had been able to fathom the untold consequences that bloodshed of that magnitude could have.

That all changed in only a matter of hours.

Boundless columns of battle droids marched down the main roads of Ogana. STAPs and droid starfighters flew overhead, and MTTs stood guard outside of the city. Under orders direct from Lord Maul, no one was to leave or enter the city. The dark one hoped that it would prevent the Jedi from reaching the queen, but little did he know that the Jedi were rapidly approaching in the rivers instead.

The city of Ogana was one of many on the planet. One thousand years before the Federation first laid their treacherous eyes on Utapau, the city was engulfed in a long and difficult civil war with other settlements. It wasn't until the reign of King Jafan in Ogana that the conflict ended, the settlements unified and Ogana became the capital. The Humans of Utapau existed in peace with one another from that point forward.

Ogana had a unified and harmonious architectural structure, which came about after strict planning and extensive rebuilding from the Mandalorian invasion millennia earlier. If one was to stand at the highest point in Ogana, they would have been able to see the city stretch out towards the horizon. It was a vast architectural triumph with high stone walls, gilded green domes, peaked towers and sculpted archways. Sunlight reflected off of the surface of the roofs, and the architecture was a companion to the lush green world. The immense flow of the waterfalls kilometers away allowed for a soft and distant backdrop for anyone who took the time to listen for the beauty of the planet.

It didn't take much for that beauty to be raped. Battle droids and destroyers made their way into each building and pulled out the citizens from within. All throughout the streets, people were herded into packs and brought towards the edge of the city. There was mass confusion and panic. People were shouting in fear, not knowing how to handle what was happening.

One woman lost her calm demeanor and turned to face her battle droid guard, grabbing its metallic neck. In a pre-programmed defense maneuver, the battle droid designated as Blue Seven pulled the trigger on its blaster and the woman fell to the ground. The people in the area screamed and huddled together, hoping that there would be protection in numbers. In the end, they had little choice but to continue down the streets at the droid's orders.

On the outskirts of the city, various structures were taking shape while under rapid construction from droid workers. They were large, fenced in concentration camps with barrack buildings and guard towers visible even from the furthest quarters of the city. The camps would be used in the subjugation of the city, and more camps would be constructed in the rest of the planet's settlements to house those citizens as well. Battle droids would herd numerous people into them, the droid's emotionless faces and programming not allowing them to show remorse for their actions.

Just outside of the royal palace, the claw-footed landing legs of a *Sheathipede*-class transport shuttle touched down on the streets. Manufactured by Haul Chall Engineering, the ship was shaped like a soldier beetle to frighten enemies. The craft was flown by an automatic pilot so the cabin space could be increased, and it was only used for planetary travel or to ferry passengers to and from starships in orbit.

The engines on the transport deactivated, prompting a hatch on the port side to unlatch itself from its hold and allow the docking ramp to descend towards the stone ground. Nute Gunray limped down the ramp, with Rune Haako just behind him. The Viceroy was bruised, battered and forced to walk with a cane as his leg had been broken by the torture at the hands of Lord Maul. If anything, it taught him not to openly disobey the Dark Jedi again.

Gunray grimaced at the pain from the torture, but he couldn't help but chuckle at the Federation's swift and resounding victory over such feeble people. He took in the fresh air of the morning, having tasted nothing but the cold and metallic stench of space travel for months. While Utapau was certainly different than his home world of Cato Neimoidia, a much moister yet temperate world than this, Gunray could feel a sense of calm on the once-peaceful world. It put his mind at ease, and the soft gentle breeze of the morning helped him forget about the pain that he endured hours earlier. As OOM-9 approached, however, the Viceroy quickly remembered why he had landed on the planet in the first place.

"Viceroy," OOM-9's robotic voice called out, "we have captured Queen Arcadia."

Before Gunray could respond in glee, his attention turned to the grand staircase at the foot of the palace, resting only a dozen or so meters away from him. Queen Arcadia, her advisers and handmaidens all emerged from within and began making a descent down the stairwell towards the streets below. Each of them was held at gunpoint by a battle droid, and they all did their best to show a lack of emotion in the interest of professionalism. Gunray could see through their veiled disguise, though, and could very clearly see the worry that was subtly etching itself across their faces. Appearing strong in the face of adversity was noble, yet also foolish in such a situation.

Arcadia bit her tongue to avoid gasping. Hordes of her people were being pushed through the streets like animals towards their cages. She had watched the horror of the siege that

was now ending from her throne room, desperate to find a way to end it all while knowing it was far beyond her power. Panaka and his men had tried to mount a defense, but Arcadia called them back. She knew it was a futile resistance when her forces were so severely outnumbered, and she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she had ordered them to their deaths.

"We've brought you out of your chambers for one purpose, your Highness," Gunray told her once the royal party finally arrived in the streets.

"I was not 'brought' anywhere, Viceroy," Arcadia denied, her tone cold and harsh. "This is *my* planet and I do not recognize any authority other than my own."

"It's bad enough that you cut off all communication," Sio Bibble said before anyone could respond, his normally peaceful tone far more aggravated than the queen's, "and it's bad enough that you pretended that your blockade was legal, but to land an army here and occupy us? How will you explain this barbaric act to the Senate?"

In his decades of politics, Bibble had never seen anything quite like the invasion of his planet. He was a learned man, a philosopher and an outspoken pacifist, but he did fully recognize that there came a time when one would have to defend the sovereignty of their planet from treacherous acts such as this. As the Governor of Ogana, he offered sound advice to both Veruna Arcadia and, for the last few years, Queen Arcadia as he sat at the head of their respective Advisory Councils. He dealt with regional representation on a daily basis, also meeting with town officials from Ogana. Many felt it would be a boring job, but he couldn't think of anything else he would rather do.

"The queen and I will sign a treaty," Gunray replied, his voice ripe with sarcastic arrogance as he knew full well that any such treaty would be a sham passed as being legal. "It will legitimize our occupation here. I have assurance that it will be ratified by the Senate."

"A treaty?" Bibble shouted, his anger reaching a boiling point and the disgust in his voice becoming uncontrollable each time the Viceroy spoke. "In this blatant act of war?"

"I will not cooperate," Arcadia insisted without a hint of fear in her voice, although her confident demeanor truly masked the grave fear that she felt beneath the surface.

"Now now, your Highness," Gunray said confidently, "I have heard stories of your compassion. In time, the suffering of your people will persuade you to see our point of view in this matter."

As Gunray spoke, Arcadia winced as she heard a scream coming from the distant corners of the city. She couldn't bring herself to wonder who was screaming or why, knowing that the truth would undoubtedly help to bend her resolve. That was something she simply couldn't allow. In the face of such dreadful danger, she couldn't afford to have her will broken by someone as slimy as the Viceroy of the Trade Federation.

"Do what you want," Arcadia defiantly commanded, fully aware of the repercussions that such a statement could have.

"If that is your wish," Gunray said with a nod as he turned towards the droid OOM-9. "Process them, Commander."

"Acknowledged," OOM-9 replied, rotating towards another battle droid. "Red Five, take

them to Camp Four.”

The battle droid nodded its metal head in affirmation. Red Five and its fellow battle droids gathered Arcadia and her advisers into a smaller group before moving them towards the concentration camps. Gunray’s reddish orange eyes followed them away. He couldn’t help but find himself filled with immense satisfaction. Things were going perfectly for him, save for the unfortunate session of torture. Soon, his plans would be complete and the Republic’s anti-slavery law would be overturned. It was only a matter of time.

It wasn’t until walking through the city square that Arcadia realized the magnitude of the situation they were in. The plaza was littered with hundreds of battle droids and tanks. Droid starfighters landed and took off like clockwork, refueling before heading towards other settlements. Arcadia knew that New Centrif had been one of the first to fall, and Panaka had told her only a few minutes earlier that Harte Secur and Spinnaker had also fallen to the Federation’s might.

The queen lowered her head in shame as she walked, realizing the mistakes she had made in both policy and personal judgment. She wanted to admit that, despite his misguided reasons, her father was right when he made the decision to expand the planet’s security forces, but something was keeping her from fully accepting that reality. She wanted to believe that the negotiations could have been different and it was more her own failing than diplomacy’s failing, but part of her still yearned to say that if she had trusted in her late father’s judgment then the invasion might have been repelled.

Departing the plaza, the group turned down a side alley that would take them to Camp Four. Despite being under construction, enough of it was completed to house a few hundred prisoners. STAPs hummed overhead as they passed back and forth. The group couldn’t see them, but their enlarged shadows were cast against the sides of the building. They weren’t an imminent threat, but it reminded the queen and her advisers that the droids were everywhere they could imagine.

Suddenly, Red Five brought the group to an abrupt stop, going silent and motionless for a few moments. A man, draped in a brown robe and hood that obscured his face from the view of the droids, stood directly in their way. He looked only at the ground, prompting the droids not to perceive him as a threat for the time being. The entire group stared at him for a moment, all of them trying to ascertain what exactly the man was doing.

“I’m looking for Queen Arcadia of Utapau,” the figure said, his voice ripe with sarcasm as he raised his head to give them a clear view of the face of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

The queen shifted uncomfortably, fearing that Obi-Wan was an assassin sent to kill her. His mysterious actions caused all of the advisers, including Panaka, to become slightly agitated, as they also felt that the queen was being targeted for assassination. Of course, Arcadia’s visible lack of comfort was an indicator to Obi-Wan that he had found the queen, so he smiled wryly as he prepared his next move.

Without warning, Obi-Wan threw his hood behind his head. His hand stretched outward as he called his lightsaber into it with the Force, activating it as soon as the metal touched his palm. The Jedi Knight dove into the air and gracefully somersaulted forward, slicing through Red Five with his blue blade like butter. As Obi-Wan cut down battle droid after battle droid, Dooku and Jar jumped down from a breezeway overhead. Dooku ignited his emerald blade and Jar brandished an electropole he had taken from the bongo, which they had abandoned in the rivers less than an hour earlier.



Arcadia watched as the three rescuers fought, cutting down more and more droids in a matter of seconds. Just as the Jedi were butchering the last of the droids, Arcadia turned suddenly and saw a tank pull up at the edge of the alley and rotate its tank towards them. She tried to scream out as she turned away, but it was too late. The tank shot its cannon and a large red bolt of energy flew past her and into the building beside her. The queen was thrown down another, smaller alleyway and could begin to smell the stench of charred corpses. She knew instinctively that some of her advisers and handmaidens had been killed, but she wasn't about to let herself collapse in despair.

Having landed on her stomach, the queen abruptly turned back over, only to find that she was staring up the barrel of a gun being held by a battle droid. She dove away, landing on her stomach again and bracing herself for the cold, stinging blast of the droid's weapon. Instead, she heard the unexpected sound of electrified metal, followed by a light thump on the ground below her. The queen once again turned back over, finding Jar standing above her after having used his electropole to destroy the droid.

The Gungan reached out his hand, helping Arcadia to her feet. The queen looked at him strangely, having never seen a member of his species before. Even stranger was the look on Jar's face as he held her hand for a moment. He noticed a large ring on her finger, one that had a familial crest that Jar knew he had seen before. The rounded-off arrowhead shape was familiar to him, but he didn't know why. It would likely come to him in time, but for now he had more important matters to worry about.

"You're a Gungan, aren't you?" the queen asked, which Jar replied to with an affirmative nod. "What's your name?"

"Jar Binks," the Gungan told her as he turned back around, walking towards the rest of the group where the Jedi had successfully destroyed both the droids and the tank that nearly killed the queen.

"The prince?" Arcadia asked, the name familiar to her. The question promoted Jar to stop and wonder how the queen even knew who he was, although he did not turn back around.

"How do you know me?" Jar asked. He was able to trust some Humans, such as Obi-Wan, but the fact that the planet's Human leader knew him was cause for some concern. He wanted to overcome the prejudice that he naturally held against the queen, but for now that was impossible.

"I once heard my father mention you," Arcadia replied. "Why is the Crowned Prince of the Gungan Empire in Ogana?"

"I haven't been a prince for a long time," Jar said scornfully, "but I'm sure you and your father knew all about that."

Arcadia cocked an eyebrow, her face showing the insult that Jar had thrown at her. She had no idea why, but she could tell that he was bitter. She had never encountered him before so she knew well enough that it was not because of her, but it wouldn't have surprised her if her father had wronged the Gungan somehow.

"Your Highness," Obi-Wan called out when he spotted her, running towards her with the other Jedi and the queen's entourage. "We must leave the streets immediately."

"Who are you?" Arcadia asked, suddenly much more hopeful than she had been before the Jedi and his group had come to save her.

"My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi," Obi-Wan told her before motioning towards Dooku, "and this is Jar Jar Dooku. We are Jedi Knights and ambassadors for the Supreme Chancellor. You've already met our Gungan friend, I see."

"Your negotiations seem to have failed, Ambassador," Governor Bibble scoffed.

"The negotiations never took place," Dooku retorted, prompting a great look of concern on the governor's cracked and aging face. "It's urgent that we make contact with Coruscant."

"They've knocked out our communication," Captain Panaka said as he stepped forward from the crowd of guards. He had been far too distant from the queen's proximity and it nearly caused her death when the tank arrived. He would not make that mistake twice.

"Do you have a transport?" Obi-Wan asked.

"In the main hangar," Panaka pointed out, motioning to a nearby entryway. "This way."

Panaka quickly lead the group through the entryway and into a secured building, or at least one that seemed secure. After a few series of halls, they arrived just outside the hangar bay, and the queen's royal vessel was noticeable immediately. The J-type 327 Utapauan royal starship was a craft reserved for use only by the sovereign people of the planet. With no weapons, the small silver starship perfectly embodied the glory of the royalty and the noble spirit of the common citizens of Utapau. The glory of the design was perverted, however, by the sight of over two dozen battle droids guarding it and the starfighter pilots that had worked in the bay.

"There's too many of them," Panaka whispered.

"That won't be a problem," Obi-Wan exclaimed, nodding to Dooku who shrugged off the comment and shook his head at what he felt was Obi-Wan's continued displays of arrogance.

"Your Majesty," Dooku interrupted, "under the circumstances I suggest you come to Coruscant with us."

"Thank you, Ambassador," Arcadia respectfully declined, "but my place is with my people."

"They will kill you if you stay," Dooku said bluntly, forceful enough that the guards became worried for the queen's safety even more than they had previously.

"They wouldn't dare," Bibble objected, outraged at the suggestion.

"They need her to sign a treaty to make this invasion of theirs legal," Panaka informed the Jedi. "They can't afford to kill her."

"There's something else behind all of this," Obi-Wan told them. "There's no discernable logic in the Federation's move here. Our feelings tell us that they will destroy you."

"They can kill you and appoint another ruler," Jar Jar reminded them as he spoke up from behind Obi-Wan, "one who *will* sign their treaty."

A flash of alarmed washed across Bibble's face. The governor held no true prejudice against the Gungan people, but he had always heard that they were arrogant and selfish. It came as a surprise to him to see Jar make such a bold yet more than likely true suggestion, but he was glad that the suggestion was made. Bibble had almost demanded that the queen stay on Utapau, but his instincts suddenly told him that the Gungan was right.

"Perhaps he's right," Bibble told the queen. "Our only hope may be for the Senate to side with us. Senator Palpatine will need your help. I'll stay behind and help maintain order in the Council of Governors. They'll need us to keep the planet from falling into complete chaos and disarray."

Arcadia momentarily turned away, keeping her thoughts and her emotions to herself. She had to think hard about whether she wanted to leave her people for the capital of the Republic. One of the first things she had told herself when she succeeded her father was that she would never abandon her people under any circumstances, but the question in her mind was whether or not she would truly be abandoning them by leaving. She may not be on the planet if she left, but she would be in a place where she could actually try to save their lives. Utapau, unfortunately, was not that place. Coruscant, on the other hand, might very well have been. It was her only option and she had no choice but to take it.

"Then I'll plead our case to the Senate in person," Arcadia decided, much to the dismay of many of her guards and handmaidens that still followed behind her.

Bibble acknowledged her decision, not needing to say anything as he knew Arcadia could tell that he had absolute confidence in her ability to convince the Senate of their plight and to reverse it. Stepping forward, the governor pushed a button next to the door and the hangar bay entrance slid open. The entire group, sans the governor, walked through and Bibble watched the queen intently. He knew that it could be the last time he ever saw her, but if there was one thing he knew for sure it was to never underestimate an Arcadia.

"We'll need to free those pilots," Panaka reminded them as they walked through the hangar, pointing to the group of pilots being held on the ground by the battle droids. The pilots weren't needed for their trip to Coruscant, but they would be useful later if a retaliatory attack was launched.

"I'll take care of that," Obi-Wan told them, walking towards the pilots as Dooku led the rest of the group to the droid guards at the starship's boarding ramp.

"Halt," the lead guard, designated Yellow Fourteen, monotonically stated as Dooku approached it. "State your intentions."

"I'm an ambassador for Supreme Chancellor Valorum," Dooku told the droid, "and I'm taking these people with me to Coruscant."

"You're under arrest," the droid shouted, its pre-programmed orders telling him to either arrest or kill the Jedi ambassadors per Nute Gunray's recent orders.

The droids didn't even have an opportunity to draw their weapons as Dooku's blade came to life and cut them down. On the other end of the hangar, Obi-Wan dispatched the droids that were guarding the pilots, who jumped to their feet and quickly ran into the halls away from the gunfire. The guards and handmaidens boarded the ship, followed by the queen and Jar. Dooku and Obi-Wan momentarily stayed behind to deflect the laser bolts being fired at

them, but they too ran aboard as soon as everyone else had done so.

The ship's ramp closed just as the vessel thrust itself out of the hangar, making its way through the blue, sunlit sky towards the blockade in orbit. They bid farewell to Utapau as they rocketed towards the darkness of space, the pilot arcing the ship towards the imposing cluster of Federation battleships standing between the queen and Coruscant. The pilot, Ric Olié, couldn't help but be concerned, and nor could the two Jedi or Panaka as they entered the cockpit.

Sensor lights and alarm warnings on the pilot's console began to have a near seizure, each one screaming for them to turn around and avoid being blown into the oblivion by the Federation vessels. The Jedi, but more so Obi-Wan, knew that they would survive, or at least were hopeful that they would. Obi-Wan couldn't imagine that the Force would have brought them this far in the mission only for everyone, especially the queen, to die in vain. There were tremors of the dark side, but he couldn't imagine that it would overpower the light side in such a blatant manner.

"This is where the fun begins," Olié quipped, although he had no time for laughter or even the slightest bit of amusement as the alarms started to give him a headache. "Hang on!"

Dozens of deadly lasers bolts flew at them, many of them pummeling the bow of the ship. The craft rocked back and forth, the sensation sickening to those inside. Olié tried to fly with evasive maneuvers, but it was hard to keep a ship of that size and design moving so erratically. He had practiced in combat simulations dozens of times, but Olié found that the real thing was far more challenging than he would have thought.

One group of cannon fire continued to slam into the center of the ship. An explosion ripped through the hull, but a force field automatically covered the hole it made. Still, the damage had been done, and the shield generator had weakened over seventy-five percent. The ship's structural integrity was beginning to fail, and it would spell certain death for all aboard if the shield generator wasn't fixed. They would be a sitting duck for the blockade vessels to rip through.

In the main droid holding area, an alarm that Olié had sounded started to flash. Half a dozen astromech droids activated on command and rolled out of their stasis units towards individual tubes that sucked them out of the craft and onto the hill. It was only a matter of seconds before the droids were blasted away one by one, which even the seasoned Olié hadn't anticipated. The small and maneuverable droids were incredibly skilled at working on the ship, but not under these conditions.

Each droid worked diligently and quickly for as long as they could, feeling no fear in their metallic and pre-programmed computer shells, but they were nearly all blown away. Finally, only one remained, the rest being blown away in a cloud of shattered metal and fiery debris. The crew in the cockpit watched through a view screen, figuring that the situation was hopeless and that they would all perish.

The small blue and white R2-series droid, only waist high, was designed to work around space vessels as a diagnostic and repair unit, and so far he was the only one of the droids who was successfully completing that mandate. Just as all hope seemed lost inside the ship, the droid managed to connect the final relays and activate the shield generator. The droid turned to see the blockade before letting out a worried beep and heading back into the ship.

"Power's back!" Olié exclaimed in hopeful excitement. "That little droid did it! He bypassed

the main power drive. Deflector shields are at maximum."

"Move in close," Dooku commanded, suggesting a maneuver he had once performed during the Stark Hyperspace War. "Hug the hull of the battleship. They won't be able to hit us without hitting themselves."

The ship dove in close to the hull of the battleship, flying only a few meters above it. The ship it flew over couldn't fire as the royal vessel was too close, and the other blockade crafts ceased their fire. It wouldn't do them any good to destroy one of their lead vessels just for one craft from the surface, especially when they had no idea that the queen was aboard it. They may have had a hunch, but without conclusive evidence it wasn't worth the risk.

Finally, the vessel rocketed past the blockade ship and blasted into hyperspace. Olié had already programmed the coordinates to the far end of the system, where they could compose themselves and set a course for Coruscant. Olié turned to his controls to get an idea of how bad the damage was, while Obi-Wan stepped up beside him and began looking through the star charts on a smaller monitor. The diagnostic on the ship's systems took only a few moments, and despite Olié's best hopes something was terribly wrong.

"There's not enough power to get us to Coruscant," Olié said with a sigh, slamming his fist into the console in anger and disgust. "They hyperdrive engine's leaking."

"We'll have to land somewhere to refuel and repair the ship," Dooku said, he too becoming more and more frustrated, even more so than usual, as the situation continued.

"Tatooine," Obi-Wan mentioned, pointing towards the planetary info on his small viewing screen. "It's a desert world and probably our safest option. It's small, out of the way, poor. The Federation has no presence there."

"How can you be sure?" Panaka asked, for some reason doubting Obi-Wan's knowledge.

"It's controlled by the Hutts," Dooku told the captain as Obi-Wan stood back upright. Dooku had been to Tatooine once before on a mission to capture a wanted bounty hunter who had murdered a Jedi. The mission was a success, although he had hoped never to return to that desert rock.

"You can't take the queen there," Panaka shouted, furious that the Jedi would even suggest something he found to be so blatantly stupid. "The Hutts are gangsters. If they discovered her, then it - "

"Then it would be no different than landing on a system with a Federation presence," Obi-Wan reminded him. "That severely limits our options. The benefit of Tatooine is that the Hutts are not looking for her, which gives us the advantage here."

Panaka rolled his eyes as the ship dropped out of hyperspace into the edge of the Utapau system. The Jedi's logic was flawed, and Panaka knew it. Even so, he knew that they wouldn't back down from their positions, and the queen would likely trust the much-touted "wisdom" of the noble Jedi Order. There was little use in him trying to change the situation they were about to head into. All he could do was make sure that the Jedi didn't get the queen killed. Whatever happened to the Jedi, though, was not his concern.

"Set course for Tatooine," Obi-Wan ordered.

Olié had already started to program the coordinates for Tatooine as soon as the Jedi mentioned, figuring it was their best option as well. When the navigational systems completed the computations, Olié finished programming them into the helm and brought the ship back into hyperspace where it blasted towards what would hopefully be safe refuge on the desert planet.

-----

For the first time, Nute Gunray looked into the throne room in Utapau's royal palace. He had been on the surface for hours, but he had other administrative matters that required his attention. As he stepped inside, he understood exactly why the throne room had the reputation it did across the planet. Magnificent ancient tapestries hung from the walls, and numerous busts of rulers from the House of Arcadia lined the hall leading to the entryway.

Setting his cane aside, Gunray slowly rose onto the seat of Utapau's power, letting the warm sun's rays grace his neck from the window behind him. It was amazing how quickly things had changed, and not just changes in power. The last he had seen the queen, she was being escorted to the concentration camps. Not even thirty minutes later, he received a report that she had disappeared and might have made it past the blockade.

No sooner had he thought about how Lord Maul would take the news did a holographic image of the Dark Jedi appear before him. Gunray knew that Maul would not be pleased for allowing the queen to escape, especially after he had already failed him earlier. If there was one comfort the Viceroy had, however, it was that he was on the surface and Maul was in orbit. There would be no immediate punishment for the failure.

"Report, Viceroy," Maul said in his usual cold tone, but he allowed his eagerness to manifest itself in his voice.

"We control all cities in the north, Lord Maul," Gunray told him, masking his fear over the impending admission of losing the queen, "and we're headed towards other settlements."

"Destroy all high ranking officials," Maul ordered. "Do it slowly and quietly, except for Queen Arcadia. Has she signed the treaty?"

"She has disappeared, my lord," Gunray hesitantly admitted. "One cruiser escaped the blockade, as I'm sure you know."

"The Jedi?" Maul's irritated voice asked, although the question was more rhetorical than anything else. "Find her immediately. That treaty must be signed now."

"The ship's out of our range," Gunray said. "It's impossible to locate."

"Maybe for you," Maul laughed with a sadistic grin as the hologram faded back into the nothingness it came from, leaving the Neimoidian Viceroy to ponder exactly what Maul meant.

Rune Haako, on the other hand, knew exactly what it meant. Maul himself would look for the queen wherever she was hiding, which boded well for the Federation. Maul would not be able to interfere for what could be days, so they would be free to further their own interests rather than those of the Dark Jedi Master. It was exactly what they had been waiting for.



## ALLUSIONS

*"The secrets of the galaxy are not for all men to see, but only for those who seek them. That is the way of our hidden Order within an Order, a council of protectors."*  
- Caecum Veritas, Jedi Master circa 1,000 BBY  
Journal of the Whills, 11:9

*Chu'unthor*, the flagship of the Jedi Order, gallantly sailed through the hyperspace lanes towards its destination of Coruscant. The ship, which was carrying three prominent Jedi Council members home from a mission on Ansion, was a massive two kilometers long. There were very few non-Jedi crew members in the vessel, as most of the jobs were carried out by Jedi Padawans, as well as Jedi Knights with limited experience.

The ship, a profound achievement in Jedi engineering, could hold up to ten thousand Jedi students, but there were certainly not that many Padawans in the Order. Workshops were provided so they could construct and maintain their lightsabers, and meditation chambers gave everyone on board a place to be one with the Force and focus on their mental abilities. Jedi healing was taught in the medical wing so Jedi would know how to properly heal themselves or others during unfortunate situations.

The gigantic vessel was once a hidden Jedi Praxeum constructed by a somewhat unorthodox Jedi Master. He had named it after a Wookiee Jedi Knight of the same name who fought during the Great Sith War four thousand years earlier. The ship was later adopted as the Jedi Order's flagship, as the High Council desired a space-based academy. Once it was integrated into the Jedi Order, it was fitted with an extensive library of texts covering the plethora of Jedi teachings, sciences, historical annals, galactic literature and encyclopedias. It was truly a breakthrough in Jedi ingenuity.

Numerous chambers on the highest level were built with open domed roofs to alleviate the sense of confinement and loneliness that long voyages could bring. The result was a stunning and radiant effect that all hoped to see during their classes and training sessions, but only few were privileged enough to train in the higher levels. When the ship was stationary, numerous sights could be seen: planets, stars and distant galaxies all seemed to be within arm's length, as if the Jedi could reach out and hold whole worlds within the palms of their hands. By always having space within eyesight, it reminded the Jedi Padawans that a Jedi's mandate was to serve all existence rather than their own selfish wants and desires.

While the hulking mass of the space faring academy sailed through the currents of hyperspace, two blades crossed in combat in one of the exposed sparring chambers covered only by a transparisteel dome that allowed anyone within it to gaze into the depths of the heavens. One purple and the other blue, the two blades danced around the wide open chamber in a spectacle of light and prowess as their wielders held them tightly. Jedi Master Mace Windy held his guard while Jedi Knight Ki-Adi Mundi futilely tried to strike against him. The attack was one that Mace frequently saw coming, as the two often dueled with one another. They were two of the best swordsmen the Jedi had to offer, and almost everyone knew it. It was for that reason that they enjoyed sparring against one another, always wondering who would be the victor by day's end.

The dark-skinned Mace Windy was from the planet Haruun Kal, and after the death of his parents he was turned over to the Jedi. He was taken to Coruscant when he was six months old, and he remembered nothing of his parents or his home planet. Like many other Jedi, he was trained by Jedi Grandmaster Yoda when he was a smaller learner. Around his thirteenth birthday, Mace became the Padawan learner of Master T'ra Saa.

During his training, Mace became aware of his rare ability to detect shatterpoints within the force and how these brief moments and individuals would affect all of his future actions. With his unique ability, he was able to see parts of the future, including the building of his signature violet lightsaber. His power and potential also saw him appointed to the High Council at the age of twenty-eight, making him the youngest Jedi to ever sit on the body.

Mundi was also something of a legend amongst his peers. He entered the Jedi Order at the age of four, far later than most, and matured into a well respected Jedi Knight under Yoda's guidance. While in his fifties, he had yet to take on an apprentice, as he had been too busy with his assignment as the Jedi Watchman over his home planet of Cerea. Despite his rank, Mundi still was given a seat on the Council, an unprecedented move considering all members of the Council had historically been Masters.

In the match, Mace stepped forth and swung his blade into the high guard. Mundi took one step backwards, angling his wrists to hold his blade horizontally in front of him. Both Jedi smirked before Mace rushed his opponent with incredible speed, which gave Mundi very little time to sidestep and deflect before mounting his own attack. The Jedi Knight thrust his weapon forward, aiming at a spot on Mace's chest, but the Jedi Master flawlessly avoided the advance. Mace stepped to his right and stuck his foot forward, tripping the Jedi Knight onto his back.

Mundi managed to tuck and roll before Mace brought his blade down towards him. The Cerean's face scrunched up in annoyance, not at his opponent but at himself for falling into the trap. Within a split second, though, Mundi rose from the floor and held his blade in defense once more. This time, he knew he had to remain more reserved and hold up his defense before trying to strike back.

Just as the Knight predicted, Mace attacked once more, but Mundi's plan changed. Instead of blocking any attack, he leaped backwards towards the wall directly behind him, barely avoiding Mace's downward strike that cut a swath in the floor below him. Mundi's feet landed on the wall and he instantly launched himself forward into a leap, soaring over and above Mace's head.

The Jedi Master spun around with his blade ready, having expected a more unorthodox move from his counterpart. Mace, too, launched himself forward with a thrust from the Force, his boots lifting off of the ground just before he landed in front of the Knight. Their



blades clashed and crackled against one another in a rhythmic motion. Mace slashed upward, and Mundi followed with a parry. The Master slashed downwards, and his subordinate again followed his every move.

As the two Jedi dueled, the diminutive green frame of Master Yoda entered the gymnasium. Standing less than two meters off the ground, Yoda frequently astonished those who did not know him by revealing he was the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order, following in the footsteps of famed Grandmasters like Banik Kelrada during one of the many conflicts with the Alsakan Union and Damien Nightblade during the Great Territorial War. Yoda pressed on his wooden walking stick as he watched the two Jedi spar, knowing full well that Mace was far superior in skill to Mundi. Even so, he greatly admired Mundi's resolve, however futile it may have been. Yoda simply watched with a smile on his face, waiting patiently for the dueling Jedi to finish their session.

The duel continued in the same pattern it had been for the last minute, with Ki-Adi defending against each of Mace's attacks, but Mundi saw an opening in the Jedi Master's pattern. He sensed that Mace was readying himself to lunge forward, and the instant it came, he sidestepped and immediately responded by slashing his lightsaber towards his right where the Jedi Master stood.

For the split second it took to sidestep, Mundi thought he had the victory in reach. His confidence sparked and he couldn't help but grin as he thought his triumph was imminent, but just before his strike reached its target he felt a sharp pain on his right ear. It took him a second to realize he was falling towards the floor and that his lightsaber had fallen out of his hand, but once he smacked against the ground he caught up with the situation. Mace had tricked him into believing he had a chance of launching a successful attack, and instead easily defeated him with a simple strike from the elbow to the Cerean's right ear. Mundi looked up as his victorious foe, who was extending out his hand to his opponent.

"You did well, Ki-Adi," Mace said as Mundi graciously took his hand, "but you're too overconfident. You can't always take shortcuts."

Mundi knew that his superior was spot on in his assessment, so all the Knight could do was simply nod as he rubbed the side of his head. Still groggy from the beating, he knew that his day to beat Mace would arrive soon enough. They had practiced against one another for five years every other week, and Mace was always the victor. Mundi often came close, but it was never close enough.

"Yes, Master Windy," Mundi said with clear embarrassment, "but I'll get you next time."

Mace laughed off the comment in good fun, but as he and Mundi turned around his laughter immediately turned into a serious look of respect once he caught side of Yoda. The two Jedi approached their master and bowed in respect, a gesture which was returned by a nod. Yoda signaled for Mundi to leave, however, wishing to speak only to Mace. The Jedi Knight caught the gesture and left for a nearby refresher.

"Still compete, do you?" Yoda asked, his voice reflective of both his curiosity and approval. It was refreshing for him to see two of the more senior members of the Order continuing to train as if they were younglings.

"Every two weeks," Mace replied, still trying to catch his breath as he spoke. "He's determined to beat me."

"To victory great resolve often leads," Yoda mused aloud, though his voice was distant as if he was thinking of something else. He turned slowly, leaning on his cane for balance, and began to walk through the open gymnasium door into the wide and open high-ceilinged corridor on the other side.

"I agree," Mace affirmed as he followed the Grandmaster out into the large gray hallway, one that was still vibrant due to the large amounts of light that poured into it, "but I don't think that's why you wanted to talk to me."

"Always astute," Yoda chuckled.

Mace stopped walking when he realized that the humor was covering up the Jedi Master's worry, and the abrupt stop caused Yoda to do the same. For a moment, Mace believed that the conversation would be about his Padawan, Padmé Naberrie, but Yoda's deep worry told him otherwise. Mace knew there could be only one explanation for it, as it was a topic he too had given much thought in previous days.

"Is this about the report from the Armed Services Committee?" Mace asked with a highly curious inflection, wondering what else could have possibly been bothering the Grandmaster so much.

"It is," the eight-hundred and seventy year old Jedi Master replied, pausing to think back on his sources. "Dangerous and disturbing are these rumors in the Senate. Little we know of Kamino and its intentions."

"We know it's near the Rishi Maze," Mace replied as well as he could, "and that they conduct cloning experiments that would be illegal if they operated in the Republic. Now they're supposedly creating a clone army to invade the Republic."

"Heard these rumors as well, I have," Yoda confirmed, though he could tell that Mace, like himself, believed that they were more than simply rumors. "More of the puzzle is there still to discover."

"Do you think this has anything to do with the Si - "

"No," Yoda snapped, cutting Mace off before he could finish the sentence. "To do with the truth, this does not. Further investigation do we require."

Yoda was surprised that Mace had asked him that question. There were very few people who knew the truth about the subject, and those who did rarely spoke about it. Yoda and Mace were two of those few who knew about it, and they had only spoken of it a few times. Yoda's personal experiences taught him not to speak of them or get involved, as it only led to dangerous situations for the Jedi.

"Agreed," Mace told him, but he was still not completely convinced that what he had asked was wrong. "I'll go to Kamino and find out what I can. With luck, I'll be able to get the Senate whatever they need to stop the army."

The Jedi Grandmaster nodded, agreeing to Mace's declaration. While an invasion of the Republic did not seem out of the ordinary considering how many times it had happened over the years, Yoda believed that there was something more sinister behind the creation of this army. He too was not convinced that his dismissal of those of whom they did not speak was accurate, but he knew full well that the dark side had been clouding his ability to see the

Force lately. It was as if they were bordering close to the proverbial end times that the religions of their ancestors often spoken of.

"I'll notify my Padawan," Mace told him. "She'll remain on Coruscant while I'm on assignment."

"How is her training?" Yoda asked curiously, purposely shifting to a more upbeat topic than the potential of galactic armageddon.

"Very well," Mace told him. "Padmé's learning quicker than I'd imagined. She's the best apprentice I've ever had by a long shot."

"An exceptional student, she is," Yoda complimented, "and an even greater Jedi will she become. Bright is her future, despite her tragic past."

Mace nodded in agreement. He had taken Padmé as his apprentice five years earlier when she was thirteen, although he had found her on her home planet after her parents had died. It was a similar story to his own, so he felt drawn to her and knew he could relate to her tragedy. From the moment he decided to officially train her, he recognized that he had an exceptional student. It wasn't often that an apprentice would master the ways of the Jedi so quickly, but every few years there was one. Sometimes, such as Padmé's case, it was a good quality, although it could often time lead down the path of darkness.

Before Mace and Yoda could walk off in their separate directions, with Mace preparing to fetch a starfighter and Yoda intending to return his meditations, the door to a small crew office opened, shooting straight up into the ceiling with the intensity of a repulsor-lift. Just as it did, a young tan-skinned Jedi Knight named Geith emerged from behind it. Behind him was a group of technicians dutifully working on and monitoring the ship's systems, and a small holographic protector that remained in the center of them reminded Mace and Yoda that it was used as a small war room during times of turmoil. Mace was not often aboard the vessel, so he could only assume that the last time it was used in combat was during the Stark Hyperspace War.

Holding a datapad, Geith stepped out into the bright hallway to speak with the two Masters, as he had been assigned to assist them with anything they needed during their brief stay. Geith, a Human with rust colored hair, was a native of the Tibanna gas mining facility of Cloud City on Bespin, where he had been recruited into the Jedi Order as a young boy. He was somewhat strangely dressed for a Jedi of his era, wearing a full blue tunic with blue gloves very much reminiscent of the standard dress for Jedi during the Jedi Civil War. Geith felt it reflected the golden age of the Jedi, an era that had long since passed when the Order was far nobler.

Many Jedi took note of the twenty-seven year old Knight's opinion and his choice of attire, but they chose to do nothing about it. In their opinions, while he was somewhat arrogant, his belief that he was upholding the best principles of the Jedi Order was of little concern to them. Some even agreed with his assessment, but they chose to remain silent out of fear of embarrassment because of it.

"Masters," Geith exclaimed once he finally left the offices, "I just wanted to let you know that we'll be arriving at Coruscant in just under an hour. Is there anything else I can do for you while you're with us?"

"Nothing more do I require," Yoda said in thanks, pleased with Geith's performance.

"Have the docking bay prepare a starfighter for me," Mace replied, but he conveniently omitted why he needed one. "I won't be going home today after all."

"Right away, Master," Geith said, punching a few commands into his datapad so the docking bay would be able to instantly prepare a fighter. "Padawan Hadaack will be there to assist you with whatever you need."

Geith bowed and returned to the offices, but he couldn't help but wonder why Mace was changing his pre-arranged itinerary. Jedi Councilors certainly didn't need to answer to one Knight, but he still preferred to be told things. He knew that no communication had been received from the High Council, considering messages had to travel through his office, so Mace clearly had his own matters to attend to. Whatever they were was not Geith's business, but as the door closed behind him he couldn't help but be curious.

"I'll report back to you once I make contact with the cloners," Mace told the small, pointed-ear Jedi Master. "I'll try not to be long."

"Not authorized is this mission," Yoda reminded him. "In our best interests it will be for you to quickly discover the truth about this plot."

Understanding exactly what his superior was saying, Mace bowed in respect. As the two separated, Mace made his way to the nearest elevator shaft to take him to the hangar. Once he stepped inside the shaft, he could feel the ship rock slightly before returning to a feeling of normality. The ship had clearly dropped out of hyperspace, as was standard protocol when another vessel was preparing to enter or exit the docking bay.

As the elevator descended towards the lower levels, Mace tried to figure out what to expect when he arrived on Kamino, but it didn't take him long to realize that he knew nothing of the planet beyond what he told Yoda. Although there was pertinent information in the Jedi Archives, which he would likely read on his voyage to the Wild Space planet, he would still likely encounter many surprises on the world.

Once it came to a somewhat abrupt halt, the elevator opened its doors and Mace stepped out into the hangar. It was a vast and wide open area made mostly out of the same gray material as the rest of the ship. The floor was completely transparent, allowing anyone who stood upon it to gaze at the stars or hyperspace trails below them. The furthest wall on the port side of the ship was also opened, covered only by a shield that kept the bay pressurized. In the distance, a large star flickered, and a few dots on its surface pointed out that there were planets in the system.

When he noticed that Mace had entered the hangar, the young long-haired Padawan Crispin Hadaack looked up from his work station and walked towards the Jedi Master. A docking bay technician was not a job that Crispin had expected. As the Padawan learner of Rana Quemmin, a Jedi Master Mace had frequent disagreements with, Crispin eventually came to tolerate undesirable assignments, especially considering the Order believed all of its people should learn to understand the common man and his skills. Crispin wasn't thrilled, feeling he was above such menial labor, but he still carried it out to the best of his abilities.

Mace watched Crispin with some suspicion, but he never fully understood why he often did it. It was nothing personal, but rather Mace felt the young man needed somewhat of an attitude adjustment if he was to become a Knight. Crispin was highly respected throughout the Jedi Order, but he was also arrogant in his beliefs and actions despite his skills.

"Master Windy," Crispin said as he approached, "your fighter is ready."

"Thank you, Padawan," Mace said as he began to walk towards the small craft on the far left side of the hangar.

The small *Delta-7* starfighter that was floating above the docking bay floor was an evolutionary descendant of the ancient *Aurek* fighter. Surrounded by a hyperspace ring that allowed it to travel long distances, it was a sleek interceptor given to Jedi for use during reconnaissance missions, but it was fitted with weapons for when the situation called for them. The red color of the triangular starfighter represented the diplomatic immunity that it had been granted by the Republic Judicial Department.

Stepping into the cockpit, Mace placed the standard gold headset of a Jedi pilot onto his bald head so he would be able to communicate with the small R4-series astromech droid in the cavity on the left wing of the vessel, as well as anyone else who contacted him during the flight to Kamino. After checking over the pre-flight checks that the Jedi technicians had carried out satisfactorily, Mace ignited the engines of the starfighter and blue flames shot out from the rear engines as they roared to life.

The craft rose higher above the glassy surface while the other people in the bay cleared the area. Once they were safely on the other side of the walls, the shield dropped and Mace rocketed forward into space. Moving to a safe distance, he caught the roar of *Chu'unthor's* engines as it shot back into hyperspace, and moments later he too ignited his engines and picked up the currents of a hyperspace lane traveling towards the Rishi Maze where he would find Kamino. What he would find on the planet was another story entirely.

# --VI--

## TATOOINE

*"And it is written; only a storm can create a rainbow."*

- Ussej Padric Bac LXIV, Bendu High Priest  
Journal of the Whills, 14:9

A few hours outside of Utapau, the royal starship rocketed through the shimmering currents of the hyperspace lane that would carry it all the way to Tatooine for safe refuge. The ship left conventional existence as soon as it made the jump into hyperspace, accelerating so quickly that it rendered the conventional notions of velocity irrelevant. The entire universe compacted into one blue-shaded and high-speed blur of a tunnel, cutting off the entire craft from any normal method of scanning and detection. This proved helpful, considering the Federation was undoubtedly scouring the galaxy for them.

Inside, the passengers and crew couldn't help but be thankful. It was only through the skill and luck of one little R2 droid did they manage to escape from being blasted into nothingness by the scourge of the battleship guns in orbit of their home. Most of them had been hesitant about getting on the ship in the first place, but they trusted their queen's judgment when she decided to leave. They thought it was a mistake as soon as the craft reached the blockade, but the R2 unit heroically and thankfully proved them wrong.

Panaka, having left his men in crew quarters so they could rest up for their time on Tatooine, still didn't trust the judgment and experience of anyone but himself, particularly the Jedi. He was a well trained and reasonably level-headed man who was educated off of his home world of Utapau. Panaka served for many years as a member of the Republic Judicial Forces, the small military force the Republic had to offer, where he gained combat experience against pirate raiders. The experiences proved beneficial when he went home and joined the Utapau Security Forces, using them to eventually climb the ranks to where he was now. It had been an honor to serve both the queen and her father, but he favored the queen much more than her controversial predecessor.

Now, he stood before his queen once again, alongside the two Jedi and the small astromech droid that had saved their lives. Utapau didn't utilize droids to a large degree, preferring manual labor to machine labor, so he didn't realize until only a few hours earlier how truly valuable a droid could be. The fact that they weren't dead was a testament to the abilities and usefulness of the small blue and white droid beside him.

"It's an extremely well put together little droid," Panaka told the queen, breaking his

generally stoic and monotonic voice to offer an expression of gratitude to the droid. "Without a doubt, it saved the ship and our lives."

"It's to be commended," Arcadia ordered. "What is its number?"

"It says," Panaka said as he leaned down to see the number on the back while the droid let out a small whistle, almost embarrassed over so many people fawning over the relatively simple task of repairing the ship, "R2-D2, your Highness."

"Thank you, R2-D2," the queen said with a smile before turning to face the two Jedi who were standing in the corner, as she knew that they too wished to speak.

"Your Majesty," Obi-Wan began, "we've set a course for a remote desert planet called Tatooine. It's a system outside the influence of the Trade Federation. We will be able to make repairs and then travel to Coruscant."

However reasonable Panaka may have been, he simply couldn't agree with Obi-Wan's assessment. Panaka knew from experience that the Hutts were extremely dangerous and would love nothing more to have a ruling monarch as one of their prized slave girls. The captain had come into contact with them enough times to realize this, considering many of the pirates he encountered during his time in the Judicial Forces worked for the Hutts. The Jedi's idea was foolish, to say the least, and Panaka could only hope the queen would trust in his judgment.

"I can't agree with the Jedi on this," Panaka said boldly, a direct challenge to the much-touted wisdom of the Jedi Order. "Tatooine is a violent world ruled by the Hutt gangsters. I know you're well aware of them, so you must know how risky this is."

"You must trust my judgment, Majesty," Obi-Wan said, trying to reflect a sense of wisdom and profound experience into his voice. He wasn't about to use the Force to manipulate the queen into agreeing with him. He felt he could get her to agree with its aid.

Arcadia leaned back on her makeshift throne to think over whether or not it was an acceptable risk. On one hand, the Hutts were a dangerously violent people and she could be in grave danger if they discovered her. On the other hand, though, she had to get as far away from the Trade Federation as possible. Making her way to a Republic world with a Federation presence was far more dangerous. There was only one clear option.

"Alert me once we reach Tatooine," Arcadia commanded, acknowledging her decision to follow the course that the Jedi had already set.

Captain's Panaka's head dropped. He let out a deep sigh as his shoulders sagged, distraught that the queen would choose an action he found so blatantly stupid. The best he would be able to do was protect her at that point, but if there was danger from the Hutts, or anyone else, then he couldn't imagine his dozen or so security officers standing much of a chance.

-----

Tatooine. It was the planet of limitless sand, or so many travelers had said. The desert rock was said to have been one of the oldest planets in known space. Because it orbited two stars, it was completely covered in deserts and rock formations. The planet was so brightly lit that, to those from a distance in space, it would appear to be a third star when looked at from the right angle. Tatooine was initially discovered this way. Explorers believed that they

had found a trinity of stars in one system, only to be amazed when they found a planet.

Very little of Tatooine was habitable to Humans outside the northernmost quarters of the surface. One could only stay in the other regions for so long before succumbing to violent temperatures and harsh sandstorms. Only one percent of the planet was covered in surface water, but fossil records showed that it did once have large oceans that eventually dried up. Numerous geological features were uncovered because of this, and the famed Dune Sea became a wasteland that, to a degree, was still somewhat habitable.

Dozens of sentient species called Tatooine their home, but they were all immigrants from other systems. Most of the non-Humans tended to spend their time in cantinas where they could gamble in drink, two of the few things anyone could do on the surface. The majority of the gambling was on swoop racing, one of the most dangerous sports in the entire galaxy let alone Tatooine. Most of these species were also employed by the vile Hutt Cartel.

In the cockpit of the queen's ship, nearly a day after the queen had given her blessing to continue on course, Panaka still dreaded their inevitable arrival. It would only be a few minutes until they arrived, but he was still having a minor internal panic attack. He had no idea what they were going to face on the surface, and he wasn't looking forward to finding out. Tatooine wasn't the friendliest of worlds, after all.

Gazing out the transparisteel window in front of him, Ric Olié watched as the planet grew larger and larger as they approached. Dooku and Panaka both stood behind him, looking over his shoulder at the ground map he Olié had brought up on his console's monitor. There weren't many large settlements where they would be able to make repairs, but that wasn't much of an issue. They had decided hours earlier that they didn't want to attract attention, so they would try one of the smaller towns in the habitable region.

"Land a few kilometers outside of this settlement," Dooku ordered as he leaned over the pilot's chair and pointed towards the location on the monitor. "Anchorhead."

Olié nodded and rapidly punched in the coordinates for the landing. It didn't take him long to realize, though, that the short range navigational sensors had been knocked offline. Switching to manual, an additional control panel slid out from beneath the main console, and from within it emerged a control stick. Olié grabbed hold of it and began their descent, angling the vessel in just the right position so it would enter the atmosphere without bouncing off or burning up.

Even with the slight risk, the seasoned pilot was able to guide the ship through the atmosphere with relative ease, at which point he turned his attention to the map still displaying beside him. The navigation sensors may have been down, but he had a fairly good idea of where he had descended to so he could successfully guide the ship to Anchorhead without too much trouble.

-----

Down on the surface of the Outer Rim world, the binary suns scorched down upon the wasteland with a ferocious intensity. The day was hot and laborious to travel through, and even the locations who were used to the extreme heat felt exhausted despite it being only 15:00 standard hours. The suns themselves bored into the skin of those who dared to enter into its malicious rays, not caring for the silent torment that came with it. Even so, very few ventured out into the midday suns on such a day unless they had to. Needless to say, not many people found a reason to make themselves go outside.



One such person was Annikin Skywalker, a young nineteen year old man sitting at a booth in the back of the local Anchorhead Cantina. Annikin had a relatively muscular build, mostly from working with heavy moisture farm equipment for most of his life. With short hair, combed and flipped up in the front, he stood at nearly two meters in height. Annikin was respected in Anchorhead for being a man of character, but he tended to avoid interacting with people unless he knew them well or felt they needed help. He much preferred keeping to himself, probably a result of spending so much time working on the moisture vaporators on his family's moisture farm a few kilometers from Anchorhead.

Annikin took a sip of his water, savoring the refreshingly cool feeling as it slid down his throat. Some might have found it barbaric, but water was a treasure on Tatooine. There wasn't a single rain storm in the habitable area for nearly twenty years, and no one knew why. All they knew was that moisture farming was becoming harder and harder. Many farmers were already forced to use what money they had to move off world, lest they die of thirst and starvation in the scorching heat. Annikin himself intended to leave as soon as he could, having had enough of the giant ball of sand.

Turning to the window, Annikin looked out into the settlement. It was one of the oldest on the planet, having stood for over four thousand years. It was originally a mining facility used for organizations like Czerka Corporation, and it was abandoned and resettled numerous because of the ore's poor quality. Czerka abandoned it because of the hostility from the Tusken Raiders, and the low quality ore, nearly collapsing the settlement.

Despite the hard times, the people were able to make it a successful center for moisture farms, but it began to decline again because of the drought. But even the rainfall couldn't have changed the fact that the Hutts wrapped their greedy fat hands around it, placing Jabba the Hutt in control of nearly the entire planet. The disgustingly obese slug built a fortress right in the center of the town. People couldn't walk anywhere without being reminded that Jabba essentially owned their lives. It was disgusting, and Annikin knew it was the closest thing to being a slave without actually having chains around his ankles.

The young farmer had heard many stories about the settlement's glory days. One of them was from a Republic pilot that he and his friends met at a cantina when they were children. The pilot told them an ancient legend about a powerful Jedi Knight named Revan who landed in Anchorhead during the Jedi Civil War. He found a hidden star map that supposedly told him the location of an ancient super-weapon. Annikin knew that there was once a Jedi named Revan, but he didn't know what to make of the story itself. If it was true, then he wouldn't have seen that coming. He always saw Tatooine as insignificant on a galactic scale and couldn't fathom the idea that it held such great importance to the Jedi Knights.

Annikin tilted the glass back and took the final sip of water, slamming it back down on the table as he licked the few drops of water that were still on his lips. He shouldn't have spent his little personal money on something he easily could have had at home, but he couldn't have continued on with his day without a glass of water. He had experienced the devils of dehydration before, and it wasn't something he intended to live through again.

He was nearly to the door when he noticed the Rodian barkeeper behind the counter turn and pierce him with a look of disgust from his bulbous black eyes. The green-skinned Rodian was strange looking to Humans, just as every member of the reptilian-like species was. The Rodian had a distinctive face with multifaceted eyes, ears resembling a horned instrument and a flexible snout. A ridge of flexible spikes was visible on their skull, most different in volume. It was an odd appearance to many non-Rodians, but most assumed

that Rodians felt the same about Humans.

"Wanta dah mole-rah?" The Rodian asked in Huttese, the language of the Hutts and numerous other sentient species in the Outer Rim Territories.

"You know how it is, Greedo," Annikin said, becoming visibly annoyed at the Rodian's question and insensitivity, despite the fact that he did owe Greedo money from lost swoop racing bets. "We all barely have money to make ends meet. I'm thinking about getting back into racing soon, so I'll pay you when I can."

"Keel-ee calleya ku kah," Greedo grumbled, disappointed in Annikin's continued refusal to pay up. "Tah pee-chah ah kulkee flunka. Tah-koh tee womp rat e'nachu!"

"I'm gonna end up as womp rat food?" Annikin laughed at the absurd insinuation. "You obviously haven't seen my race if you think I need to go back to racing school."

"Koochoo!" Greedo shouted in an incredibly insulting tone.

Annikin nearly jumped over the counter, ready to direct his anger through his fist and into the Rodian's teeth. Normally, Annikin wouldn't have let someone call him an idiot and let them get away with it without at least a verbal retort, but the heat from even inside the building was taking its toll on him. He had no desire to get into a fight with Greedo, even though it wouldn't have been the first time. Annikin always assumed that Greedo would one day come to a bad end, so the fight didn't matter much. He never would have wished death on anyone, but Annikin wouldn't shed any tears once some disgruntled person decided to shoot the Rodian.

"Stay out've trouble, Greedo," Annikin said as he left the cantina.

He didn't stay long enough to see anymore of Greedo's reactions, seen as how they were always more insults at protests at the lack of payment. Annikin didn't care much about the debt, as he knew he could handle the Rodian if he lost his temper. The bet had nothing to do with the Hutts, so there was no one to enforce it or even care about the fact that it was made. It was solely between the two of them.

Still, he couldn't help but feel bad that he owed someone something. Annikin tried to be as honest as possible and wanted to keep his promises, but the hard times on Tatooine left him devoid of any real amounts of money. The most he received was enough to buy parts in the shops for the farm, and maybe a glass of water or alcohol every so often. It wasn't an easy life on Tatooine, so he had to make do with what he had. Unfortunately for Greedo, that meant not paying owed debts.

Annikin kicked a couple of pebbles across the street, but became distracted when he heard a rumbling in the distance. Looking up, he saw a massive yellow block of sand coming towards the settlement from kilometers away. He hadn't heard about a sandstorm, something that was usually the case as they were incredibly difficult to foresee. They were far too common for his liking, especially since the drought rendered the land even more dry than normal, so there was always constant damage in the surrounding areas.

It was strange, though, how large this one was. It was one of the largest he had seen in recent years, which was certainly a cause for concern. All he could hope was that his family was safe on the farm. Annikin would end up staying in the basement of a building in Anchorhead, which was the smartest move he could make at that point. Trying to travel

three kilometers back home was far too dangerous in such inhospitable weather.

Hearing a roar from above, Annikin's neck jolted upwards just in time to see a large silver space ship fly over the settlement, heading directly towards the storm. His eyes widened as he realized what was happening. The ship wouldn't have time to turn because of its speed, and if it hit head on then there was virtually no chance of anyone onboard surviving. The sandstorm would devour the vessel whole, leaving only bits and pieces of the twisted metal and shattered bodies in its wake.

Annikin ran to the edge of the town where his speeder was parked, hoping to get a better view of where the ship was headed. He started becoming jittery, sweat dripping down his brow as he tried to ignore the idea of the unspeakable painful deaths the people would endure in the ship, but there was cause for hope. The ship finally banked to the left as it made its way closer to the storm, but it was still too late to avoid it completely. There was no way a ship of that size would be able to steer clear.

His fears were quickly confirmed. Even though the ship was turning, its rear engines grazed the storm ever-so-slightly. It was just enough, however, to cause significant damage to its propulsion systems. Whoever was piloting the vessel attempted to speed up, but that didn't exactly help the situation. Despite being able to fly for at least a kilometer and a half away from the storm and towards Anchorhead, Annikin could see the blue glow of the engines fade away. Only a few moments later, the ship nose-dived, but straightened out just in time to skid onto the surface of the desert.

Dozens of nearby townspeople heard the nearby commotion and began pouring out of the stores and stopping their walks through the town. None of them, not a single one, did anything besides point and stare, whispering amongst themselves about what happened. Rumors would likely be started about the exact cause, considering gossiping was one of the only ways to keep oneself entertained and in-the-know in such a miserable town.

Annikin wasn't one of those people. He high-tailed it to his speeder and thrust it forward towards the crash site. Debris from nearby settlements was already blowing towards him. He zigzagged around metal flying at him like shrapnel from a grenade. One wrong turn could have killed him, or at least severely injured him. That wouldn't have exactly helped the people in the vessel, so Annikin was extra careful. Normally, he wouldn't even have headed out into the storm. If not for the craft that was only a few meters in front of him, he would have already been in a store cellar hiding from the fury that was about ready to overtake him and the ship.

It may have been a considerable risk to his own life, but he had to find out if the people inside the ship were safe. If they were, he couldn't risk them trying to foolishly evacuate and futilely attempt to escape the impending mayhem from the storm's wrath. Such a stupid move would only lead to their deaths. Annikin had been through more than his fair share of storms to know that the best thing to do was to stay indoors rather than risk being caught outside, but this was a risk he was willing to take this time to help others who might have needed him.

After the brief kilometer and a half trip was over, Annikin leaped out of his speeder and sprinted towards the ship. The storm was only a quarter of a mile away, and he could already feel the sand burrowing into his skin. His vision was becoming obscured and the roar of the storm caused a disorienting feeling inside of him. It was as if the sounds were coming from all directions, or like some sort of monster was approaching from all sides. As many as said before him, it was as if the universe was composed only of noise and he was

in its chaotic and brutal center. The epicenter of a storm was not a place where someone would want to be.

It was a matter of seconds before the storm would rip him into dozens of pieces, strewing him across the desert wastes to become wild bantha food. Annikin jumped up and reached a metal rod on the side of the vessel, using it to pull himself up the smooth steel hull as he looked for an entrance hatch. He frantically searched every plate of the hull, finally finding one near what he assumed was the cockpit. He tried to force it up, but it was stuck together from the crinkles in the hull caused by the crash.

Time was short. The storm was ready to overcome him and he still wasn't able to find a way in. Sweat flowed profusely from his entire head, his hair soaked in his own nervousness. Annikin had raced the fiercest racers in dozens of swoop races for the better part of eight years and found himself in an uncountable amount of life or death situations because of it. Not even that scared him more than this storm. Nothing could shake him to the very fiber in his bones more than the calamitous howl of the thunderous pandemonium that was about to be the death of him.

Annikin ripped a small tool from his belt behind his jacket and slammed it into the cracks of the hatch, slowly ripping one side up to let it move on its hinges. Just as he started to duck down, his speeder flew up from the ground and barely missed his head. The situation was finally at a do-or-die point. He either had to get in now or die. There was no third option in a storm of such ferocity, and he had only a precious few seconds to save his life.

The storm reached out its hand to rip Annikin from the hull of the ship, but he would allow nothing of the sort. Not even bothering to give the wave of sand one final look, Annikin jumped down onto a set of crates below the hatch before slamming it shut behind him. The ship began to jolt and rock from side to side. Annikin felt nauseous as the ship nearly fell onto its port side, but he stopped himself from becoming sick.

A scream from a nearby room. Shattering glass in the next corridor. Crates in the storeroom falling and opening, and nearby vents bursting to let steam out in all directions. The rumpus of noises throughout the ship was deafening, and the situation was critical. The storm was much wilder than Annikin had imagined, and it raged on for minute after death-defying minute. He may have thought he was safe once he dove into the ship, but he was quickly realizing that he may still very well have fallen into death's trap. Perhaps he should have stayed in Anchorhead after all.

-----

There was no vantage point from which to watch a sandstorm where one would have been able to marvel in its epic scale and respect the power that it held. No matter how anyone looked at it, a sandstorm was nothing more than a maelstrom of chaos replete with a thousand different methods of killing. No one could awe in its might because the might was only its way of killing innocents who did nothing to deserve such a violent death.

From a ridge two kilometers away from the storm, the crashed vessel looked like nothing more than a brightly lit speck near the horizon. The small group of hermits that had gathered to watch the storm, however, knew full well what it was. Although anyone watching them would have little choice but to wonder why, the hermits took a great interest in the ship and genuinely feared for the safety of those within it, particularly the young man who had raced towards it only minutes earlier.

Still, it was a moment they had been waiting for, so some couldn't help put a smile on their face even as the silver speck was completely engulfed in the storm's rage. Some would have considered a smile to be sinister, a vile representation of a disgustingly out-of-touch people. The leader of the group knew otherwise. The crashing of the starship was a time to rejoice, not feel sad. Damage to a ship and what would hopefully be only minor injuries was a miniscule price to pay on the road to galactic harmony.

Prophecy was the leader's word of the day. Some saw prophecy as destructive, but he saw it as a beautiful thing. Why anyone would fear prophecy was something he could never understand. It was his sworn duty to ensure that certain prophecies were brought forth. He was given a mandate by an ancient shaman when he was not but twenty years old, and it was something he had strived for throughout the last thirty-three years.

The leader stepped out away from the group, pulling up his hood to shade his eyes from the scorching sun. Sandstorms may have been destructive, but they did little to fix the heat and the blinding white light that bounced like a ball off the surface of the desert. The man was of medium build, his blue eyes still directed towards the ship. He had not shaved in days, having been engulfed in meditation. He had sensed a turning point such as the arrival of the ship nearly a week earlier, hence his need to center himself in meditation.

The man simply couldn't remove the smile from his face. He was witnessing a moment he had dreamed of for years. Hundreds of others before him had awaited such a moment and believed it would happen in their lifetimes, but only he and his men were the ones fortunate enough to actually see it happen. The crash of the starship meant only one thing, and that was the beginning of a chain reaction that would save them all.

"Fear not for the coming of the blessed son of prophecy," the hermit leader muttered, quoting a passage written by a hermit leader who had lived and died hundreds of years before he was even born. "The whole of life, weary of past transgressions, can finally cry out that the Argus has arrived to break free the manacle of slavery."

With one parting smile towards the crash site, which was finally starting to move into the clear from the storm, the hermit pulled tightly on his wool hood to secure it and adjusted his thin turquoise scarf that protected the skin on his upper chest from the sun. His heavy brown robes may have seen absurd to most, but the hermit and his men had become used to the heavy clothing. Feeling a few degrees hotter was a small price to pay compared to the price that the son of prophecy would begin facing in only a matter of days.

# --VII--

## ANNIKIN

*"My mother once told me that Annikin Skywalker's generosity helped restore her faith in the galaxy."*

- Alexander Arcadia, King of Utapau  
Journal of the Whills, 15:3

A few minutes earlier, and the storm had been at its worst point. The wind still screeched across the land, digging its long pointed nails into the ship and scratching them across the hull. Nearby Anchorhead was already a mess, too many buildings bowing to the roaring storm as debris swirled about the air and was strewn for kilometers on end. But soon, things were becoming quiet. The roaring began to cease, and Annikin could hear people start to move around outside the storeroom that he had found himself in.

They were all likely relieved that the ship survived in one piece, hopefully with only minor injuries, but Annikin wasn't ready to celebrate. The sandstorm came from the same direction as his home, and he could only imagine what happened to it, as well as Anchorhead for that matter. He couldn't let himself think such things, though. All it did was cloud his mind from the task at hand, and that task was to make sure everyone inside the ship was safe.

Annikin moved away from the corner that he was crouching in, quietly stepping over to the sealed doorway to listen. Leaning his ear against the cold metallic wall, he could still hear noises from the other side. They weren't frantic enough to make him think that anyone was seriously hurt, but there seemed to be a lot of moving around. They were likely frantic over the unfamiliar situation, considering the ship didn't look like it came from anywhere that someone would have to worry about a sandstorm.

He hit a button on the side of the door to open it, but the door didn't even make a sound. It remained stationary, refusing to acquiesce to his request that it open. The ship was probably in the middle of lockdown procedures. Were Annikin an off-worlder, he probably would have done the same thing. Locking down a ship wouldn't do anything to help in a storm like the one that was finally leaving the area, but it would go a long way to make naïve people feel more secure in an alien situation.

Even as Annikin tried to find the door's manual release, he couldn't help but watch his mind draft back towards the storm that was raging a few kilometers away. They were loud devils, and while the sound was somewhat muted from the hushed vessel, he could still hear it wail

like a beast in agonizing pain that simply refused to die. It represented everything that was wrong with the miserable, sandy rock of death.

The desert may have seemed peaceful enough to an untrained ear, even despite the blistering suns bearing down on them, but there was no such thing as peace on Tatooine. No one could be complacent lest they were preparing to die. Sandstorms, poisonous reptiles, Tusken Raiders, Hutts, mercenaries; it didn't matter where anyone traveled in the dunes of the planet. They would always be someone's prey. Even the sentient predators that practically lived in the cantina and race tracks knew that there was always a bigger creature waiting to devour them alive and consume their essence, sometimes just for twisted gains and pure sport.

It wasn't exactly a pleasant idea to think of. Annikin, trying to block it out, pulled a tool from his belt and sliced it into a small mesh of wires just above the floor next to the door. His mechanical skills had always exceeded the average of people his age. He didn't know why he had those skills, considering they just seemed to come to him over time. With hard work and practice, he was able to make himself even better, which came in handy as he fiddled with the manual release. Even so, he wasn't always able to do what he wanted to mechanically, and he proved that as the group of cables let out a spark that sent his hand flying back in a lick of pain.

Before he could start again, the door slid open from the other side and three guards stood before him. They looked around the storage room, having heard a noise from within, but initially found nothing. It wasn't until they looked to the floor did they find what they were looking for: Annikin, an intruder on their ship that had to be taken down. Annikin tried to stand up to explain, but the guards tackled him to the ground. His head hit the metal surface with a loud thump, leaving a bruise the size of the Outer Rim on the back of his head. He didn't have time to do anything about it, though, considering he was flipped onto his stomach and being put into handcuffs within seconds.

It was bad enough that his arms were already twisted into an unnatural position that would've made a hardened space pirates twinge, but to make matters worse the guards flipped Annikin over again and he landed on his arms. They immediately started going to sleep, the tingling being replaced quickly enough by the pain in his head and his arms. He had no idea where these people were from, but he was beginning to wonder if their culture was against assuming good intentions before attacking them.

Then Annikin realized that there was a humming emerald blade from a Jedi's lightsaber being pointed directly at his face. That was completely unexpected, considering everything he knew about the Jedi. He couldn't help but ask himself, weren't the Jedi supposed to be noble warriors fighting for the common man, not arresting them? Perhaps this older distinguished-looking gentleman wasn't a Jedi, but merely had the weapon of one.

Jedi or not, Annikin was frantic. He looked from corner to corner, seeing the guards standing there with guns raised and realizing that no one was going to save him from the assumptions of the off-worlders. At this point, he was thinking that he *really* should have stayed in Anchorhead, but he kept reminding himself that he was just trying to do the right thing. He raised his hands up slowly, trying to let everyone see that he was unarmed and defenseless to their attacks. The uncontrollable spasms of fear gripping his hand were probably a good indication of that as well.

"Wait, wait, wait," Annikin shouted desperately, even though he knew he was likely begging in vain. "I can explain. Seriously, put that thing down. Please."

The older Jedi, Dooku, couldn't help but be amused at Annikin's cries for help. Here was a young man trying to exploit their situation by coming aboard in the interest of scavenging a wreck site. Dooku assumed that Annikin even hoped they were all dead, considering how much easier it would make his scavenge work. The Jedi Master wasn't going to allow anything of the sort. He wasn't about to die on a planet he swore he would never return to.

"I will do no such thing," Dooku snapped, letting Annikin know exactly who was in charge of the situation. It wasn't Annikin and it wasn't the guards. It was Dooku, or so he thought.

"Jard!" snapped another voice from behind the Jedi Master. "Let him go. Can you not see that he's no threat to us?"

Looking away from the lightsaber, Annikin watched as Obi-Wan briskly ran into the room, half embarrassed and half disappointed in his former master's actions. Annikin could tell immediately that Obi-Wan, also wearing the distinguished style of a Jedi, was far less uptight than his older counterpart. Annikin knew full well, though, that he wasn't exactly in a position to judge him considering the only thing he knew of them was that one jumped to conclusions and the other preferred to assume good faith. He had learned hard lessons in judging a holonovel by its cover, so he always made sure never to do it again.

"He intruded in our ship," Dooku reminded the younger Jedi Knight. "Surely you're not suggesting we just let him go?"

"He's just a young man," Obi-Wan continued, keeping his tone calm despite his continued frustration with the bitter old man. "I'm sure he was only trying to escape the storm."

Dooku shook his head and chuckled, but nonetheless complied with his former pupil's demands when he decided that it simply wasn't worth it to argue this one. At a certain point, Obi-Wan became more naïve than Dooku could have imagined, but he didn't know when that point was. It was as if the young Knight thought that if he believed in the good in people, despite seeing the worst in everyone on a daily basis, then he would somehow be able to save the entire galaxy from itself. It was, admittedly, noble to him, but at the same time it was beyond foolish.

One of the guards leaned in and, unlike last time, gently leaned Annikin over to remove the binders around his wrists. Annikin immediately swung his arms out once they were released, not wanting them anywhere near each other as they had been. Obi-Wan offered a warm and apologetic smile as he reached out his hand, and Annikin took it gratefully. He wasn't sure what he thought about the Jedi Knight, but at least he could tell that he had more hospitality than Dooku.

Annikin watched Obi-Wan stare at him, sensing the curiosity that the man held. Annikin was also curious as to who all of these people were, and that was only fueled when Obi-Wan pulled part back of his robe to inadvertently give Annikin another fleeting glimpse of a lightsaber. Annikin had never seen one before Dooku nearly killed him, much less seen one on a Jedi. Even though he didn't know if they were Jedi, he figured that there was a good chance they were. This gave him an interesting perspective about them.

"I'm Obi-Wan Kenobi," Obi-Wan finally said as he extended his hand again, breaking the silence that had befallen the tiny storage compartment. "Who are you?"

"Annikin Skywalker," Annikin replied, shaking Obi-Wan's hand as a sign of initial and



hesitant mutual respect. "I, uh, I'm here to rescue you."

"Rescue?" Dooku scoffed, not even attempting to hold back his amusement as he shook his head and grinned. "Does it look like we need rescuing?"

"No," Annikin said, his momentarily excited tone defeated by the mocking cynicism of the angry old man in front of him. "Well, maybe. I - "

"What?" Dooku asked interrogatively. "You thought you would play hero today? We have no use for a hero right now, boy, so be on your way."

Dooku's bitterness flew out of his mouth like a raging rancor, plowing into Annikin's self-esteem and knocking him down from the pedestal that he had, admittedly, inadvertently placed himself on. His actions were noble, even if Dooku didn't know it, but Annikin did let himself become carried away for a moment. Still, he couldn't understand why Dooku was so quick to judge him. Annikin didn't know very much about the Jedi, but from what he understood they were supposed to be non-judgmental about all forms of sentient life, no matter who they were or where they came from.

Years earlier, that same Republic pilot who told Annikin and his friends about the Jedi who found the Star Map on Tatooine also told them a bit about the Jedi. Those in the Order were supposed to avoid feelings of self-pride and superiority over others. If anyone, Jedi or otherwise, began feeling superior or even inferior to others, they began falling prey to some form of self-pride. Jedi learned to guard against these feelings, but clearly Dooku, assuming he was a Jedi, wasn't an ordinary member of the Jedi Order.

"How could he possibly be on his way?" Obi-Wan asked. "For all we know, opening that door could kill us all right now. Need I remind you that the reason we're in this situation to begin with is because of that storm?"

The aging Jedi Master opened his mouth to try to give some sort of angered response, but he quickly realized that he didn't have one. Dooku simply turned away and left the store room, embarrassed and defeated by his former apprentice's conduct. Dooku truly believed that Obi-Wan was a poor example of a Jedi Knight and that the Jedi Order shouldn't be so quick to believe in and support those that were of no value, which is exactly how he saw Annikin. They would eventually find that he was right, and he would be there to happily watch as they admitted they were wrong.

Annikin couldn't help but be amused by Dooku's defeat. The elder man had already tried to mock him, so it made Annikin feel better seeing him beaten at his own game. It was something he would have likely said himself if it wasn't for the fact that he only knew Dooku for a few minutes. While his respect for Dooku was low, Annikin could at least tell that Obi-Wan was someone he could respect considering the Knight's attitude and way of dealing with people. He could easily get along with him, assuming they had the time to get to know one another. That didn't seem likely.

"Well, young Skywalker," Obi-Wan said once he finished watching Dooku leave, "you're welcome to wait out the storm with us in here."

Annikin started to answer, but before he could Panaka turned a corner and entered the storeroom. Annikin noted the dark red and blue armor and gear that the captain carried, as did the guards that had tackled Annikin, so he assumed that it reflected the people's darker culture. That assumption wore itself away, though, as Annikin looked around the corner of

the storeroom into the hallway. The interior was a metallic silver and white, giving the ship an elegant look. They were clearly a complex people, whoever they were.

"The crash knocked out our hyperdrive completely," Panaka sighed, having already vented his displeasure a few moments earlier by chewing out Olié over the crash. "All other systems are in safe operating limits, at least for now. We'll have to refuel and repair the engine."

"Damn," Obi-Wan said, placing a tired and frustrated hand on his forehead to rub his temples.

Annikin's mind wandered for a minute while Obi-Wan and Panaka continued on about how they could fix the engine. Of course they would be able to find some parts in one of the other space ports on the planet, but Annikin had fixed enough engines in his life to know that he didn't need to waste so many credits on brand new parts. Granted, he had never tackled something as complex as a hyperdrive engine, but he had already told the outsiders that he wanted to help them. He wasn't about to go back on his word when he was in a position to do something about their situation.

"I'll take a look at it," Annikin interrupted, becoming more and more interested at the prospect of tinkering with alien engineering.

"You?" Obi-Wan asked ever-so-curiously, yet using a tone of voice nowhere near the mockery that Dooku would have slung Annikin's way. "How?"

"I've never met a busted engine I couldn't tape back together," Annikin said with confidence probably unbecoming of someone in his position, but confidence nonetheless. "I may not be able to make it good as new, but it'll get you wherever you need to go."

Obi-Wan nearly refused Annikin's offer to help, but in the end he could ask himself only one question: what was the harm in letting Annikin try? If the young man couldn't fix the engine, then the only difference it would make would be the loss of a day or two which, considering their current predicament, was likely only a fraction of the time they would have to spend on Tatooine if they were to attempt to find the parts. If Annikin was successful, though, then the rewards would be greater. There was no sense turning away a potentially competent resource, even though Obi-Wan knew that Dooku would have completely disapproved of his decision.

"Alright," Obi-Wan said, noting Panaka's indifference to the matter that likely stemmed from the fact that Panaka would be guarding anyone who worked on the ship. "Follow me to the engine room."

Annikin nodded and followed Obi-Wan into the hallway, where they found Dooku with a clear sign of disapproval on his face. Dooku had obviously been listening in on the conversation and Annikin wanted to confront him over it, but he bit his tongue and kept following Obi-Wan down the hallway. There was no sense trying to argue with someone as stubborn as the Jedi Master.

Much like he had seen from just looking around the area of the storage room, the entire ship was a bright metallic mesh of whitish silver deck and wall plating. Annikin did his best to hide the fact that the environment was completely foreign to him, not wanting the outsiders to get any sort of wrong idea about what he could handle or what his intentions were. Even so, he couldn't help but show the shivers that came to him. What likely seemed

comfortable to the outsiders was freezing to him, considering how he was used to the harsher climate of the desert wastes.

Turning a corner, Annikin followed Obi-Wan into the small and simple engine room. It was bathed in light like the rest of the ship and it was an array of blinking controls, sparking wires and the smell of leaking engine fuel. The entire room was virtually empty, save for the T-14 hyperdrive generator sitting in the middle. Annikin had the specifications for them in an engine design book he had purchased years earlier, but he had never seen one up close before. Regardless, he had a good feeling that he could repair it given the condition it was in. He would just need a few days to do it, possibly even a week.

"I think I can help," Annikin said, striking an optimistic tone. "I'm gonna have to shut off all other systems, though, including environmental."

"Where do you propose we all stay, then?" Obi-Wan asked, not wanting to doubt Annikin's plan but nevertheless having to question him on the logic of it.

"You could stay at my farm," Annikin suggested, although he had no idea how his parents would react to the idea. "It's about a kilometer and a half from here and we've got some space in the lower levels."

"Your family wouldn't mind?" Obi-Wan asked. He was unwilling to intrude in someone's home and impose upon their hospitality, however desperate the situation was.

"I doubt it," Annikin assured him, but he knew it was only a half truth considering the instinctive distrust of outsiders amongst the citizens of Tatooine. "I've got to go back to get my tools and specs anyway, so we might as well all go together."

"You go on ahead," Obi-Wan told him, looking out the nearby port window to see that they were finally in the clear of the storm. "We'll have to clear up a number of things here before we meet you there."

Obi-Wan could sense Annikin's alarm. The young man wasn't particularly adept at hiding his feelings, so the Jedi Knight saw clear through him. Knowing that Annikin's fear rested solely on his family and venturing back out into the storm, Obi-Wan stepped over to a computer console and activated the external sensors. Annikin moved in behind him as Obi-Wan configured the scans to get a glimpse of the immediate area. The sandstorm was definitely gone, and it just missed his home. Annikin let out a deep sigh of realize, the weight of an unpleasant sense of doom being lifted off his shoulders.

"You should be on your way," Obi-Wan suggested, compassionately enough so Annikin didn't get the idea that the Jedi Knight was trying to get rid of him.

"You know, my mother won't mind you all staying with us," Annikin told him with a somewhat hesitant and nervous tone, "but the rest of my family won't be as welcoming to the idea of outsiders. It'd probably be easier to convince them if you came along."

"I understand," Obi-Wan said, showing off a faint smile as he recognized that Annikin's tone suggested he thought highly of him, "but first I must secure approval from the queen."

"The queen?" Annikin asked. He suddenly found himself even more excited at the prospect of helping these people, considering how important the crew of the ship must have been.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied, albeit somewhat reluctant to share more information with someone he barely knew. "We're carrying Queen Arcadia of Utapau, but you mustn't let anyone find out about that. It's imperative that our presence here remain discreet."

Annikin understood their position, but he was still stunned to hear that they were carrying the monarch of a whole planet. He could tell by Obi-Wan's hesitancy that the Jedi Knight didn't want any questions on the subject, so Annikin respected the need for privacy. Even so, the fact that the ship was carrying a monarch furthered his belief that Obi-Wan and Dooku were Jedi. Because Obi-Wan didn't want to share anymore, however, Annikin decided not to ask about it just yet. He would have to find the opportune moment.

"Come on," Obi-Wan said, quickly shifting the subject away from Annikin's intrigue as he stepped across the hallway to where the queen had been staying on the voyage. "Let's speak with the queen."

"Come in," a voice called out after Obi-Wan rang the chime on the door.

His hands shaking, Annikin followed Obi-Wan through the door. He hadn't been nervous when Obi-Wan told him about the queen and he didn't think he would be nervous, but he was certainly wrong about that. As much as he liked to consider himself as someone who could rise above petty little fears like making a fool out of himself in front of powerful or famous people, he knew that he wasn't. He and most everyone else were in the same position when it came towards that sort of thing.

The young farmer had only been in a situation like this once before, when he was once in the presence of Jabba the Hutt after winning a swoop race. His nervousness had been more like fear of physical harm, considering all of the despicable things Jabba had done to people over the years, but Annikin's detest for the crime lord helped to mask that fear. He didn't have the luxury of hatred to help him this time.

Walking through the door towards the monarch of an entire world was a much different experience, and his nervousness clearly showed. He had hoped to avoid embarrassment, but he realized that as Obi-Wan bowed in respect he had neglected to do so. Annikin's face turned bright red as he bowed down quickly, nearly tumbling forward because of how fast he tried to make up for his mistake. He couldn't imagine how the queen felt about him, but he assumed that she wouldn't be pleased.

Arcadia's full lips curved upwards in a smirk, amused at Annikin's noticeable gaffe. It was refreshing for a change, considering most of the people she dealt with were stiff political hacks who had memorized royal codes and procedures decades before she was even born. It was nice to see someone so genuine and inexperienced in the realm of partisan nonsense in front of her, despite the fact that she had no idea who this person was.

Realizing he had been wrong about the queen's reaction, the redness faded away from Annikin's cheeks, but he couldn't say the same thing about his general nervousness. Now he was afraid that he would mess up again, and would the queen react the same if he did that? She may have been amused this time, but that didn't mean she would do the same next time. Then Annikin started to worry that his worrying would cause him to make even more mistakes, which would just lead to more embarrassment.

*Someone shoot me and get me out of this,* Annikin thought to himself.

"Queen Arcadia", Obi-Wan finally said, prompting Annikin to let out a sigh of relief as they

got on with it, "allow me to present Annikin Skywalker, a local of these parts. He risked his life to make sure we survived the crash."

"You have my thanks, Annikin Skywalker," the queen said with a thankful nod, but she was somewhat taken aback by Annikin's sweaty appearance. Perhaps she had underestimated just how treacherous the planet-wide desert was.

"My lady," Obi-Wan interjected, rapidly changing the subject to something more important, "our hyperdrive generator has been disabled by the crash and the storm. Annikin believes he can repair it, allowing us to forgo finding a new engine somewhere on the planet, but he'll need to turn off all of our systems. This includes the environmental system, so he's offered to let us stay at his home, with your permission."

Arcadia slumped back on her makeshift throne. The last few days were already bad enough as it was, what with a planetary invasion and a crashed starship to deal with. Adding insult to her injury was the damaged hyperdrive. If they were unable to repair it, the odds of her getting to Coruscant would be slim. She would end up having been better off staying on Utapau. They had no money that would be acceptable outside of the Republic to purchase repairs parts or a new engine with, so Annikin seemed to be their only option. She wasn't entirely comfortable letting a stranger operate on their systems, but if he was guarded then Arcadia felt that she had very little to lose by letting Annikin try to help.

"Very well," Arcadia agreed, albeit somewhat reluctantly, "but it will be difficult to pay you, Annikin. We're only carrying Republic credits."

"I came here to help," Annikin said, taking no offense to the misconception, "not to look for a profit. I'll do it for free."

Obi-Wan and Arcadia both looked at one another, perplexed by Annikin's generosity. It wasn't often in any corner of the galaxy to find someone who would agree to help total strangers in such a manner without asking for some sort of profit in return. Arcadia couldn't help but blush at her presumption, even though she knew that it wasn't a gaffe that she should have foreseen. Most other people would have demanded payment. She had dealt with them far too often for her liking, so it seemed she had started to just assume it's what people would want.

"Alright," Arcadia told him, dropping her more formal tone in favor of a casual and friendly one. "I'll let you try. Master Kenobi, you're free to make the arrangements."

"Thank you, Majesty," Obi-Wan said, bowing as he finished. "I'll go with Annikin to his home and speak with his family to ensure that they are comfortable with this."

"Then I wish you good luck," Arcadia said, "and thank you, Annikin."

"You're welcome, Your Highness," Annikin said, his tone still timid despite the casualness of their entire conversation.

"You're not from the Republic, Annikin," Arcadia warmly reminded him, "and you're doing us a huge favor by fixing our ship. You can call me Sabé."

Annikin nodded, taken aback by such a drop in formality. Had he referred to someone like Jabba the Hutt as anything as "your greatness" or anything else of the sort, he was liable to be executed. It was strange to see a planetary monarch talking on such a personal and

informal level, but he supposed that was just her personality. Perhaps there were political leaders out there who were real people as opposed to stiff corrupt hacks.

Obi-Wan gave one parting bow, and Annikin followed suit without any embarrassment or tripping over himself. The two turned from the door and Annikin did his best not to beam with pride. He had impressed a monarch of an entire world, but he didn't want to seem as if he was a small child meeting an idol for the first time. He hid his reaction once they left the room and saw that Dooku had been listening. The Jedi Master, as per usual, seemed to greatly disapprove. Annikin decided not to acknowledge the bitter old man and instead kept walking towards the exit ramp, but Obi-Wan was stopped when Dooku forcefully put his hand upon the Jedi Knight's shoulder.

"You're trusting our fate to a boy we do not even know," Dooku lectured scornfully, his brow raised in confusion over his former Padawan's apparent lack of judgment.

"I'm not trusting our fate to him," Obi-Wan said, defending the actions that he knew to be appropriate. "I'm giving him a chance to prove himself. If he can do this, we won't have to worry about finding money and paying a repair shop in some spaceport."

"You're getting sidetracked again," Dooku remarked, his tone one of chastisement and everlasting disappointment. "You must stop getting involved in these pet projects of yours. This boy will not amount to anything and you'll just be wasting our time."

"Stop telling me what I should and shouldn't be doing," Obi-Wan spat, he too becoming frustrated as their short debate went on. "I'm not your Padawan anymore, and I'll get involved with 'pet projects' if I want."

"You're right about one thing," Dooku mockingly told him. "You're not a Padawan anymore, but you should be. You clearly have learned nothing from me."

Obi-Wan very nearly continued their debate, but the Jedi Knight came to his senses and decided it wasn't worth it. He knew that Dooku was wrong and that letting Annikin help could have great benefits. Qui-Gon Jinn had always taught Obi-Wan that there were no coincidences. The Force made things happen for a reason. Annikin was clearly meant to help them escape from Tatooine, and Obi-Wan wasn't about to defy Qui-Gon's teachings when Annikin was there to help them.

More disappointed than Dooku was, Obi-Wan turned away without saying a word. He wouldn't allow the Jedi Master to say another word either. Obi-Wan had enough of his blustering former master and was becoming fed up with him more often, but he had never felt more irritated than how he just felt during the brief debate. Not only did Dooku demean Obi-Wan for trying to see the individual worth in others, but he also mocked Annikin's desire to help them. Obi-Wan hadn't expected something like that to annoy him so much, so he did his best to try not to let it affect him. Becoming upset would only cloud his judgment.

At the nearby doorway, Annikin stood in waiting for the Jedi Knight. Obi-Wan very clearly noticed Annikin's defeated look and realized that the young moisture farmer had overheard the conversation with Dooku. The Jedi Knight tried to hide his embarrassment, but the resentment on Annikin's face made that harder. Annikin had done nothing but offer them kindness, for which Dooku offered nothing but bitterness in return. Obi-Wan smiled in an attempt to reassure him, placing a friendly hand onto Annikin's shoulder to comfort him.

"Don't worry about him," Obi-Wan optimistically told him. "He just doesn't think we should

worry about anything other than our mission.”

Annikin tried to nod in agreement, but it didn’t make him feel any better. He couldn’t understand why Dooku would chastise him like that, considering all he wanted to do was lend a helping hand. He wasn’t concerned with their mission, whatever it was, but rather that they were given the chance to complete it. Was that a crime? He couldn’t imagine why anyone would think it would be. Dooku clearly had, though, and decided to take out whatever frustrations he had within him on someone else he deemed to be below his own personal standards. If what he had heard about the Jedi was wrong and such a trait ran rampant in their ranks, then maybe they weren’t as noble as they would have him believe.

Even before Dooku ever laid his angry eyes on him, Annikin was used to being preyed on by those that perceived him to be weak. His family was one of sharecroppers for years, and their home was owned by Jabba the Hutt. Like all members of the hermaphroditic species, Jabba would prey on those he felt were weak whenever he needed some sort of amusement. This unfortunately meant that the Hutt would go after the sharecroppers that worked for him by raising taxes or ordering armed searches of their homes. Other families may have been in worse shape than his, but that didn’t take away from the pain of the fact that they were always prey to predators without any justifiable reason. All he was able to do was ignore it and concentrate on the moment.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” Annikin told the Jedi Knight, but it was clear to them both that neither of them were as enthusiastic as they had been before Dooku’s tirade.

Obi-Wan, ready to get as far away from his former master as possible, pressed the large red button on the nearby wall that controlled the hatch. A few lights blinked and a small alarmed whined, but they were just responding to the sandstorm that was now kilometers away. The sensors on the ship were testy little things, but both of them knew that there was nothing to worry about anymore. The howling of the winds had died down and debris was no longer flying through the air like bullets from ancient weapons, so it was safe to begin trekking towards Annikin’s home.

When the hatch finally slid open and Annikin walked through it, Obi-Wan took a moment to sense the thoughts that had made their way to the surface of Annikin’s mind. He could tell that the boy was truly hurt by what the elder Jedi had said. Obi-Wan felt sorry for Annikin, knowing that all he wanted to do was help people in need. It was a noble quality, but it was one that had fallen victim to many people like Dooku in the extensive span of history. He knew he would have to talk with Dooku about it again, lest he allow Annikin to go back on his agreement due to not being able to work in such mentally abusive environments that Dooku tended to create.

-----

A change in the weather was enough to recreate the world in and around anyone, forcing someone to adapt to new extremes, new ideas and new ways of thinking. It forced others to see how different people lived in comparison to how they themselves lived, and it caused them to appreciate the finer things in life. It allowed them to see just how lucky they were to have certain pleasures that others didn’t have the luxury to use.

Central air conditioning was one of those many luxuries that Obi-Wan begged to have. He knew Tatooine was a desert, but he never imagined the heat would be so unbearable. He was, of course, able to use the Force to lessen the effects of the torturous rays of the suns piercing through him, but the Force could only do so much. Jedi tunics and robes were not

an appropriate way of staying cool, which he quickly found out. What he would give for a sonic bath was incredible.

Annikin and Obi-Wan had been walking on foot through the kilometer or so of desert between the crashed starship and the homestead of Annikin's family for nearly half an hour. They could have been there nearly thirty minutes earlier, but Annikin's speeder had been torn asunder by the storm's ire. Annikin should have seen that coming, but he had been so fixated on getting into the ship that the thought never occurred to him.

*Dad's gonna kill me*, Annikin thought to himself. Speeders were hard to come by considering their cost, and he knew it was unlikely that he'd have one of his own anytime soon. Unless he wanted to walk on foot from the farm to Anchorhead every time he needed to leave, Annikin would have to share with his stepbrother, who would be none too thrilled over the turn of events considering the tense relationship the two always shared.

Obi-Wan uses his robe to wipe away what felt like a gallon of sweat from his brow. He was more thankful than ever that Annikin had offered them a place to stay. If they had been forced to live in the ship with no cooling system, it would have been torture for everyone. That was especially true for those who didn't have the luxury of using the Force to avoid the more drastic effects of the heat. Despite Obi-Wan's thanks, as the finally approached the homestead, he couldn't understand how they would all fit inside. It seemed to be one small hut protruding out of the desert sands that could barely house Annikin's entire family.

Annikin, on the other hand, knew full well how they would all fit. Contrary to what it seemed from the outside, the homestead was a large complex that could fit dozens of people inside of it. Located on the Great Chott Salt Flat on the outskirts of the Jundland Wastes, the homestead was a deep sunken pit with numerous workshops, garages and rooms that all of the guards, handmaidens and everyone else on board the ship could stay. On the exterior, dozens of vaporators were scattered across the acres of property, each one trying desperately to pump out what little water was left underground.

As the two approached Annikin's humble abode, three individuals ran out from the main dome that served as the home's entrance. The two elder peoples, one man and one woman who Obi-Wan assumed were Annikin parents, seemed frantic and distressed, probably as a result of not knowing where Annikin was during the storm. The younger man, however, seemed more disappointed than worried, and he had a demeanor that expressed his lack of surprise at seeing that Annikin had been elsewhere during the storm.

Shmi Skywalker-Lars was a small and petite woman with shoulder length hair placed into a neat bun behind her head. She ran out away from the others towards them, throwing her arms around Annikin in thanks for his safe arrival. She hugged him tightly, relieved that her son was safe. She wouldn't be able to bear it if something happened to him, especially if it were such a meaningless death in a sandstorm. She always felt that her son was capable of so much more, so she wouldn't be able to forgive herself if something happened to him before he was able to fulfill whatever life had set out for him.

Standing at the entrance to the homestead, the tall and slim brownish-haired man named Cliegg Lars, Annikin's stepfather, was also relieved to see that his stepson was safe. He thought of Annikin as his own, so he too wouldn't have been able to bear it if something had happened to him. The storm had been gone for nearly an hour, and each passing second was torture. Not knowing where one's child was would take its toll on anyone.

Owen Lars, the strong-looking man of nearly twenty-four years, was surprised to see a



stranger walking with Annikin. Obi-Wan noticed the powerful look of displeasure on the young man's face. Owen was never fond of outsiders or their ways on Tatooine, so his face became red with annoyance when his own stepbrother was seen bringing one towards their home. Owen never trusted Annikin or his judgment, so this only served to fuel his belief that Annikin was a reckless and arrogant person who couldn't help but get into trouble.

"Who the hell is this?" Owen blurted out when Annikin, with Shmi still clinging to him, finally arrived at the entrance. Owen little regard for the fact that the person he was so clearly verbally attacking was standing right in front of him.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," the Jedi Knight said in pleasant discourse. He had no desire to confront Owen over his comments, despite how rude and uncalled for Obi-Wan may have believed them to be.

"He's part of the crew of a ship that crashed about a kilometer from here," Annikin interjected, knowing that anything Obi-Wan said could antagonize Owen's prejudice of outsiders. "The storm damaged their hyperdrive so I offered to help fix it up, but they'll need a place to stay when I shut their systems down. I was thinking they could stay here."

"Here?" Cliegg enquired, unsure about whether he wanted to let a group of outsiders stay on his cherished family property. "On the farm?"

"How many of you are there, Mister Kenobi?" the kindly Shmi asked, expressing a tone that reflected she understood the crew's needs and one that sounded far more welcoming.

"About fifteen men and women," Obi-Wan replied, double checking in his head to make sure he included everyone aboard the queen's vessel.

"I don't think we can accommodate that many people," Cliegg said before starting to turn back towards the homestead entrance, politely trying to brush off any chance of allowing them to stay. Owen shot a satisfactory grin towards Annikin, as Owen was pleased to see that his father did the sensible thing in not allowing the Jedi Knight and his people to stay on their farm.

"Mr. Skywalker," Obi-Wan said, prompting Cliegg to turn back around while Annikin put his hand to his forehead in a worried fashion. "I - "

"Lars," Cliegg said, correcting Obi-Wan's forgivable mistake. "Cliegg Lars."

"Mr. Lars," Obi-Wan continued, nodding his head ever-so-slightly to acknowledge Cliegg's name, "I can assure you that we will not take up room. We'll all be willing to help you around your farm, or do whatever else you might need. It's the least we could do if you offer us your hospitality."

Cliegg turned towards his wife, and they both considered the proposal. It wasn't vocal but rather done through a series of eye gestures, so Obi-Wan wasn't able to understand anything. Cliegg was incredibly skeptical of outsiders, but Shmi seemed to be less than concerned. She fully trusted her son's judgment and, in the end, so did Cliegg, even if Owen didn't. Cliegg had come to greatly care for Annikin and was able to see in him what Shmi had always been able to.

Not only that, but there was a great deal to be cleaned up around the property. Even if the storm hadn't hit the main complex of the property, there was still damage in the further

acres of it. If it hadn't been for Shmi's reassuring presence and her profound respect for her son, Cliegg may very well have turned them away. When push came to shove, however, he believed or at the very least hoped that their presence would be beneficial to him.

"Alright," Cliegg agreed, much to Owen's obvious dismay, "but you'll have to arrange the garage as your quarters. We don't have anything else to offer you right now."

"The garage will do fine," Obi-Wan said as he bowed towards the entire family once again. "We greatly appreciate your hospitality."

Annikin returned Owen's formerly sarcastic grin with a pleased demeanor, happy that Cliegg had accepted Obi-Wan's offer so quickly. Annikin had known his stepfather for nearly ten years, ever since he and his mother first met and eventually got married, so Annikin knew that Cliegg was not as warm to outsiders as he could have been. Even so, Cliegg was never as bad as Owen, who always seemed to have a great distrust for anyone who wasn't from his birth planet of Tatooine. Annikin could see it written all over Owen's face as his stepbrother approached him, leaning in close.

"We need to talk," Owen shouted, grabbing Annikin's arm and ripping him away.

Disgruntled, Annikin very nearly resisted Owen's tug that pulled him into the stairwell leading to the covered hut, but in the end Annikin knew resistance would only cause more trouble. If Owen wanted to rant, Annikin generally let him rant. It was the nature of their tense relationship ever since they came into each other's lives. Owen would rant and Annikin would ignore him. Annikin always became upset in the beginning, because he was always much younger than his stepbrother and felt that he was being attacked, but after awhile he simply let Owen harass and harangue him. Trying to defend his actions to someone as arrogant as Owen wouldn't change a thing.

Owen stopped pulling Annikin once they reached the bottom of the stairs. He became angrier and angrier as he pulled his brother down the steps, and he put no effort into hiding it. Annikin could never really figure out why Owen had such a strong distrust of outsiders, but he never wanted to ask because he had told himself he wouldn't be the one to ever start their arguments. It may have meant never figuring it out, but it really wasn't important to him. All he knew was that Owen was a man who wanted to help others, just those he trusted, despite the fact that he always complained that no one ever helped each other. Owen very rarely walked the way he talked.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Owen grunted. "You have no idea who these people are or what they want."

"All they want is to finish their mission," Annikin tried to assure him. "I trust them, for the most part, and I don't see why you can't just assume they have good intentions."

"They're outsiders, that's why," Owen quietly shouted in an angry whisper so his father wouldn't hear his prejudice. "Whenever outsiders come around, they arrogantly think they can save us from our 'oh so horrible' lives. Well I like my life and I don't need some Coruscanti educated or elitist Alderaanian telling me that they're my savior."

"They're not like that," Annikin said, nervously diverting his gaze towards the ground.

"Oh really?" Owen asked sarcastically, his voice reminding him of the same condescension shown to him by Dooku less than an hour earlier. "The whole hour you've spent with them

told you that, huh?"

"You know," Annikin barked as his eyes shot back up to meet Owen's gaze in frustration at the ridiculous accusations, "you always bitch and moan that that the biggest problem around here is that no one helps anyone. Now I've offered to help them and they've offered the same to us, but you want to turn them away? I think the better question is, what the hell's the matter with *you*?"

Owen shook his head. *Where did I go wrong with this kid?* Owen thought to himself. He always vocalized his distrust of outsiders, but he never really said why. He may have been able to fix Annikin's naivety, but his lapse in judgment seemed to prevent that. Annikin could have tried to learn the truth about outsiders, but he was too idealistic for his own good. Owen always recognized that, but he never really vocalized it as he should have.

"I guess I'm just not so quick to trust people I don't even know," Owen's voice bellowed out, the condescension and mockery in his voice clearly evident.

There were so many times that Annikin just wanted to hit his brother but stopped himself from doing so. This was one of those times. Owen just couldn't help but make stupid and baseless attacks against him and the outsiders. Owen's paranoia was unfounded, and Annikin knew that the others on the ship could be trusted, even if he couldn't fully trust Dooku to be a hospitable guest. For whatever reason, Owen simply couldn't see it. As the frustration reached a boiling point, Annikin someone say something he never expected to hear. Then he realized the words were coming out of his own mouth.

"And you still wonder why Beru left you?" Annikin had asked coldly and mercilessly.

That was Owen's breaking point. His face turned bright red as he slammed his younger stepbrother up against the wall, the force of it cracking part of the material that held the wall up. He loathed talking about how Beru Whitesun, his girlfriend of many years and the love of his life, had left him. Owen met her years earlier in the Mos Eisley spaceport and the two fell in love with one another. They were engaged to be married before Beru broke it off, saying that Owen had trust issues. Owen dismissed them and instead tried for some time to find a more acceptable reason for her leaving, but he couldn't find one.

He still couldn't accept, though, that he had issues with trust. He had no idea why Beru would think that when he trusted her with his entire heart. She took it and squeezed the life out of it as she left, almost without remorse for how Owen would feel. The way he saw it, the break up came out of nowhere. He thought they had been perfectly happy up until the moment he saw her speed away, the last time he had seen her.

Owen turned back towards the top of the stairwell as he kept pressing Annikin against the wall. Shmi stood above them with a disapproving look, a look both Owen and Annikin had come to find familiar when it came to their arguments. Owen released his grip from Annikin's jacket, not even bothering to look back at Shmi as he turned away from his stepbrother to leave himself to his thoughts.

Annikin watched Owen intently, almost regretting what he had said. Even so, he believed every word of it. If any good came out of it, it would be that Owen reconsidered who he had become. Whether that came to pass, Annikin knew that his stepbrother was still a stubborn man who had too much trouble keeping any semblance of a peaceful relationship with any other person, regardless of who it was.

"He's so arrogant," Annikin told Shmi as she approached. "I tried to be his brother, I really did, but he wouldn't let me in. I tried to be his friend, but he didn't want that either. I don't know what to do with him anymore."

"He's been through a lot in his short years," his mother reminded him, placing her hands atop his shoulders as she looked him square in his bright blue eyes. "First his mother died and then Beru left him. He'll come around eventually. You just need to give him more time."

"I've given him nine years," Annikin told her resentfully, as if he was acknowledging that those years had been a waste of time. "If he hasn't come around by now, I can't see him ever doing it."

"He will," Shmi assured him in that tender way that mother's always seemed to be able to express. "It may take some time, but he will. Trust me."

Annikin tried to smile and take comfort in her assurances, but he knew it was very likely that she was wrong. He had known Owen for all those years and had been his stepbrother for most of them, and even now there was still so much hostility and tension between them. There was too much bad blood to make Annikin believe they could have a brotherly relationship or even a friendship.

All Annikin wanted from Owen was some compassion and respect. He desperately wanted that from an older brother figure, but Owen strayed further and further away from that possibility every day. All Annikin figured he could do was follow his mother's advice and give Owen more time, regardless of how much time he had already invested in trying to make their time together work.

When he tried to think about, Annikin realized that he just didn't know anything about Owen, nor did Owen know anything about Annikin. Annikin's best friend, Kitster Banai, had a very close relationship with his own brother. They could tell someone their favorite foods or favorite colors, even what music they liked to listen to on their Listen Anytime, a new piece of music equipment that played a wide assortment of music.

Even now, at nineteen years of age, Annikin would give anything to know what that felt like. It wasn't so much someone he could go play with, which was what he wanted when he was younger and had first met Owen, but he wanted someone who he could trust with his life. He wanted a "wing man", so to speak, someone who would always be there to support him and someone who would always have his back. He would give Owen as much time as he needed to be capable of having that sort of relationship with Annikin, but Annikin couldn't help but worry that something bigger would come between them and they would never have the opportunity to connect with one another as brothers should.

# --VIII--

## ORDINARY WORLD

*"For better or for worse, Obi-Wan Kenobi helped shape the man Annikin Skywalker became during the war."*

- Kyle Katarn, Jedi Bendu Master  
Journal of the Whills, 15:11

Cliegg's chest expanded as his lungs inflated with the air that the warm breeze brought through the open window. He inhaled deeply, taking in the soothing feeling of the balmy environment as he stirred in his bed beside his wife. Eyes still closed, he kept his concentration on the affable weather that had greeted him almost every morning for decades. There were slight shifts in the morning weather from time to time, but for the most part they remained constant. Cliegg had no complaints.

The aging farmer opened his eyes and allowed the first rays of the morning's sunlight to hit him. He stirred again as he wanted to stay in bed for a little while longer, but he knew that there was work to be done. He always enjoyed an honest day's work, something that seemed more and more uncommon in the galaxy, but was never one to enjoy getting out of bed for it. Even so, it was something he did every day, albeit after brief fights with his fatigue. He somehow managed to win those fights every day.

Such fights were becoming more and more commonplace. As he stepped out of bed, Cliegg could feel his bones ache and his joints crack as he stretched out his arms. It was harder to be a farmer the more he aged, but he still fought through the pains that the aging brought with it. He was only forty-seven standard years old, and he had been a farmer for forty-four of them. Only a three year stint in the Republic Judicial Forces kept him from away from farming, much to the chagrin of his father who did not want his family to have anything to do with the Republic that was so far away from them.

Not only was his age a factor, but the drought that had been going on for nearly twenty years. Before the rain stopped falling, there would be months on end when the sands would blossom with food-bearing plants. The wasteland would see an eruption of green, creating a charming oasis that was less than a square kilometer in size. It took a great deal of work considering the environment that it would be grown in. Now, moisture farming had been turned into literally farming for water, using pumps to take the planet's now most precious resource out of the ground rather than relocate it for use in vegetative growth.

It was because of his family that Cliegg actually got out of bed every morning. Had it not

been for Shmi lying next to him each and every day, he probably wouldn't have wanted to keep working on the moisture farm. The endless drought had taken its toll, but moisture farming was the best way he knew how to support his family. They were worth the sacrifices that came with it. Providing for them was the most important thing he could do.

Cliegg met Shmi at a market in the spaceport settlement Mos Espa where she had been working for a Toydarian in a junk shop, as had Annikin. While they weren't slaves, Cliegg knew that they felt like they were, as they had no other place to go. That was, at least, until they met Cliegg and Owen. Cliegg was immediately taken with Shmi, and years later she told him that it had been the same with her. One year after they met, they were married, and Shmi and Annikin moved in with him on the farm.

Shmi wasn't Cliegg's first wife, though. Years earlier, his first wife, Akia, fell ill due to the drought. She died from an internal infection caused by her immense exposure to the binary sunlight, which left Cliegg feeling powerless. He had no idea how to raise his son on his own, but he and Owen were able to pull through and survive until they met Shmi. At that point, life became much easier for them.

Even so, the relationship between Owen and Annikin was never what Cliegg had wanted it to be. He and his brother Lee were inseparable as children and that relationship remained intact until Lee found work off-world and left the desert wastes. Cliegg wanted his son and stepson to have that same connection, but instead Owen constantly pushed Annikin away. Cliegg tried to talk to Owen about it numerous times, but Owen would never open up to him. For that reason, Cliegg always went above and beyond what he felt was necessary to be a good father to Annikin, hoping it would give the boy some sort of male figure in his life for support.

There was nothing to say about Annikin's birth father. Shmi told the boy that he was a navigator on a spice freighter somewhere in the Outer Rim. Cliegg never mentioned the story, nor did he say anything else regarding Annikin's paternal parentage. It wasn't his place to talk about such a private matter, regardless of the fact that Shmi had forbid him from ever saying anything about it.

Slipping into his work clothes for the morning, Cliegg slowly made his way out of his bedroom and into the large pit that was dug into the ground at the center of the homestead. He looked around and heard nothing from any of the surrounding rooms, so he could only assume that everyone was still asleep. He knew that Owen, however, was already up working on his chores, considering his son was always the first one up and the first one to finish all of his work.

There was so much work to be done around the farm that he didn't know how he and the others would be able to complete it. The outsider crew probably wouldn't be that helpful. Cliegg had no doubt that they would not put in their fair share, but rather work as little as possible just to say that they were doing something. He had no great expectations that a lot of work would be done. Still, he would make sure that Annikin finished his chores before working on the ship. Chores around the farm were far more important to Cliegg than some hyperdrive generator on a starship from far, far away.

"Annikin!" Cliegg shouted, trying to arouse his stepson's attention. "Annikin!"

Cliegg was still rubbing his drowsiness from his eyes, moving his neck back and forth from side to side to loosen his muscles. He wandered through the main pit as he was doing so, still seeing no sign of Annikin or anyone else. He shouted Annikin's name again, but his

shouts did nothing except echo back at him, mocking his futile efforts. He should've known that Annikin would renege on his responsibility to do his chores, so Cliegg knew that it was his own fault for allowing such an oversight.

Before the aging farmer could call his stepson's name again, Cliegg stumbled backwards. Arcadia's head shot out of the cooling well in the center of the pit, startling the farmer. He shook his head to shake off the surprise. The silence in the entire area, particularly when he was shouting for Annikin, made him think that no one was around. He didn't expect to see someone pop out of the cooling well, or anywhere else for that matter, so quickly.

When Arcadia had first arrived, she had been dressed in an elegant blue and silver dress the shimmered as the binary sunlight hit it. Cliegg was struck by her beauty, having never seen someone so ornate and innocent yet bearing the weight of the galaxy on their shoulders. He assumed she was some sort of member of a noble class, having no idea that she was the queen of an entire world, so he was taken aback by her current appearance. The young monarch was covered in dirt and water, her hair soaked with sweat from what was a clear effort to fix the faulty cooling unit. Cliegg didn't expect to see her of all people working so diligently, so he was pleasantly surprised.

"Sorry," Arcadia said sleeplessly as she traded one tool from the ground above her for another. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, no, it's alright," Cliegg insisted, trying to brush off his momentarily scare with an overly macho voice that ended up working against him when he realized how fake it sounded. "Heh, it takes a lot to make this old man jump. What are you doing down there anyway?"

"Your son told me that the cooling unit needed fixing," Arcadia replied, trying to hold back a smirk once she realized that Cliegg didn't expect to see her working. "I figured I'd take a look at it for you."

"I'm impressed," Cliegg admitted, although he wasn't going to let onto the fact that he regretted judging her before he even saw what she was capable of doing. "I wouldn't have pegged you to be the type to actually get your hands dirty. I guess I misjudged you."

"People have a habit of doing that sometimes," Arcadia said, although what normally would've been a jubilant smile was instead a half-hearted one with a hint of sadness indicative of her reference to the ongoing Utapau crisis. "But, my father raised me to be self-sufficient. He told me 'Sabé, self-reliance is the only road to true independence'. I've always tried to remember that since."

*Who is this woman?*

That's the only thing that ran through Cliegg's head as she spoke. One thing that Cliegg frequently saw when he fought for the Republic was the greed and the elitism that ran rampant through the streets, creating a state of poverty and despair simply so the privileged few could garner more money, more prestige and practice more vices that stifled the freedom and muzzled the comfort and habitability for the people. Cliegg's assumption about Arcadia, which he could see was likely based on prejudice rather than fact, was directly routed in that. He may not have been as vocal and as untrusting as Owen was, but he could see clearly that he was pretty close to it.

"Good advice," Cliegg said, although his attention shifted once more as he started looking

around the compound yet again. "Have you seen Annikin this morning?"

"He went with Kenobi back to our ship," she told him, carefully making sure that she didn't use the term "Master" in front of Kenobi's name so they could rename incognito. "He wanted to get started as early as possible."

"He's gone already?" Cliegg asked, this time not hiding his emotions as he allowed his irritation to channel out through his voice. "If he doesn't get those chores of his on the south range done by midday then there'll be hell to pay."

"Oh, those are already finished," Arcadia told him, nearly giggling at Cliegg's surprised reaction. "We all woke up a few hours ago to help him out. Well, all of us except for Dooku, who's still sleeping. The rest of us wanted to make sure Annikin was done with his responsibilities before helping us. I hope you don't mind."

Cliegg stood half still for a moment, a blank expression covering his face. He was bewildered enough as it was after misjudging Arcadia, but nearly all of the outsiders? That was completely unexpected. Even after allowing them to stay at his home, which had more to do with his wife's reassurances than his own trust in them, Cliegg had given into the stereotypes that said outsiders were lazy, freeloading warmongers that wanted nothing more than to sit around at their secret meetings and plot their next sinister schemes. He would certainly have some interesting stories about these people to share with the other farmers in the area, assuming any of them believed what he had to say.

Leaving Arcadia to finish her work, Cliegg turned away and turned his attention towards the garage. As he entered, he expected to find it empty, but instead he found the elderly Dooku snoring in the corner of the droid holding area. Cliegg let out a slight chuckle. *Maybe I was somewhat right about them*, Cliegg bemused to himself. It wasn't a particularly big deal, though, considering there were nearly a dozen people out on his farm getting the chores done in what would probably be well less than half the time that he and his family could've finished them in. If everything went well, the work would be done within the next few hours, leaving plenty of leisure time that the Lars's were rarely able to experience. It would be the first time in years that he would have a break from work, and for once he felt that it was well deserved on his part.

Leaving holding area, where Dooku continued to snore like the four-legged reptilian dewbacks that lived in the desert wastes around the homestead, Cliegg made his way for the steps that would take him up onto the desert's surface. He stopped in his tracks, though, when Owen started to charge his way down, the young man nearly knocking over a shelf as he ran. Owen was clearly upset over something, but Cliegg couldn't imagine what it was. Outsiders or not, the people were getting their chores done for them, which Cliegg would say was cause for celebration. Owen, as Cliegg remembered soon thereafter, was easily flustered if something broke his routine or sense of normalcy.

"Dad!" Owen shouted, disregarding the fact that Dooku was asleep in the corner. "We need to talk. Now."

"What is it?" Cliegg asked somewhat reluctantly, knowing that he was about to get an earful as he continued to walk up the staircase with his son.

"That frog guy is out there doing my work!" Owen shouted in infuriation. Owen had little regard for outsiders, but the amphibious Jar Binks gave him the creeps. To Owen, what he was feeling wasn't prejudice. It was just common sense and behavior.



"And?" Cliegg asked, despite the fact that he knew the answer to his question, as they reached the top of the staircase and began to feel the morning's cool breeze become far more course and hot as it gave way to the eventual blistering temperatures that the rising suns would bring.

"What do you mean and?" Owen demanded to know. "Just what am I supposed to do all day? Curl up on the couch with a hot glass of blue milk and call it a day?"

"Son, these people woke up hours ago because they wanted to help us," Cliegg said in an effort to reassure his son, but he wasn't exactly able to put in that same effort when he tried to hold back his partial amusement at the dismay. "That's hardly cause for being stubborn and pigheaded."

"Stubborn? Pigheaded?" Owen scoffed, not understanding why his father was suddenly becoming soft on outsiders when he had known him, in the past, to be far more vocal in his negative opinions towards them. "I'd bet my entire month's share of peggats that they're out there thinking that they're our saving grace."

"Owen - "

"And how can you even let these people roam around our farm?," Owen blurted out, blatantly ignoring his father's opinion on the matter. "We don't know what they're capable of, and we're certainly even less sure about what they want."

"I want you to shut up," Dooku bellowed out from the garage below, though he was still half asleep and his voice indicated that so the two Lars men ignored his rude interruption.

Before giving Owen an answer, Cliegg panoramically looked around his farm. The entire crew of the starship was pulling their fair share, each working on numerous jobs. Royal handmaidens worked with tools to repair damage on a few of the moisture vaporators that dotted the landscape, while the royal guards worked the pumps themselves to drill the water from the ground. It clearly wasn't an easy task for them, but they each did it to the best of their abilities. For Cliegg, it was one hell of a sight to be seen. Cliegg looked further into the distance as well and, sure enough, the Gungan was doing the repair work that Owen had been assigned. Had he been younger, Cliegg likely would've beamed with pride, but all he did not was simply feel a great deal of gratitude.

"Listen, son," Cliegg finally said, "I know you don't like it when something breaks your normal routine, but these people aren't our enemies. Let them help out and they'll soon be gone. Everything will be back to normal."

"But - "

"No buts," Cliegg commanded firmly, trying to avoid becoming verbally irritated. "Let them be. It's only for a few days."

Owen had no response for his father other to storm off even more frustrated than he had been when they first started their argument. Most people on the planet had a negative view of off-worlders, but Owen took it a step further. He had an outright hatred for them, especially the ones that they had welcomed into their home. Whatever Owen's reasons, Cliegg could only hope that Owen would one day see why the aging farmer let the outsiders stay at their home and why allowing them to work would probably turn out to be a positive

thing rather than a negative one.

Owen was the only one who knew why he had such a strong hatred of outsiders. Put simply, it was because of his mother's death. Of course, outsiders had not exactly been the direct cause, but he still blamed them for it. Over the course of thousands of years, dozens of companies like Czerka had come to the planet and plundered it for their own selfish and capitalistic gains. Every single one promised that their presence would make life better for the people of Tatooine, which is why Owen believed that outsiders thought of themselves as Tatooine's savior. The constant raping of the natural desert was, in Owen's opinion, the reason for the drought, and the drought was what caused his mother's death. He could never forgive outsiders for that.

Just thinking about it made his blood boil. As Owen approached the vaporator he was meant to be working on, the one that Jar was working on instead, his hands curled up into fists. He wouldn't actually strike the Gungan, but it took every fiber in his body to keep from doing so. Owen desperately wanted someone to take out all of his pent up frustration on, and Jar was the closest one to him. Nevertheless, he would heed his father's warning, although he couldn't guarantee that he would keep his mouth shut.

Industriously cranking at a number of loose screws with his wrench, Jar didn't even notice Owen approach. The work and the scorching heat kept him from paying attention to anything else, but he eventually did notice the farmer approaching. Setting the wrench down, Jar drank half of one of the dozens of water bottles that littered the ground around him. The environment wasn't suitable for Gungans, so he had to take a drink of water every few minutes, using a considerable amount of it.

"You must be Owen," Jar said as he finally stood up, extending his hand to introduce himself to Human who was now standing in front of him. "Annikin said you'd be joining me. I'm Jar Binks. It's a pleasure."

Owen's face scrunched with disgust when he saw how much of his family's precious supply of water was being used, but Jar didn't notice. Instead, the Gungan only noticed the young farmer ignoring the hand that was extended with no other thought behind it than the prospect of friendship, but Owen continued to ignore it and instead started to pace around to the other side of the vaporator.

"Good for you," Owen bitterly told the Gungan, refusing to make eye contact with him which left the exiled prince perplexed and somewhat offended.

"It took me awhile to get the hang of this contraption," Jar said, changing the subject and approaching Owen far more hesitantly and reserved than he had initially considering the attitude he had just been shown. "I think I have it under control now if you want to give me a hand with the pumping."

"I don't need any help", Owen argued, still not letting himself look the Gungan in the eye and instead inspecting every inch of the vaporator that he could reach, "so why don't you just hop on back to the homestead and let me get some real work done."

Hop on back to the homestead? *Who in the name of Gallo does he think he is?* Jar asked himself. In his mind he was shouting obscenity after obscenity, verbally bombarding the farmer and pounding his soul into whatever hole the arrogant snake slithered out of. Just when Arcadia, Obi-Wan and Annikin were starting to change his mind about Humans, Owen decided to use a racial slur against him. Had his face been capable of turning red with rage,

it likely would have. The only question he could ask was whether Owen was the norm amongst Humans, or if it was the others.

"I'm sorry," Jar roared, "have I done something to offend you?"

"There are so many ways I could answer that question," Owen laughed, clearly enjoying himself while toying with the former Gungan monarch.

"Pick one," the Gungan demanded.

"Alright," Owen agreed, finally meeting the Gungan's gaze as he stormed up to him to look Jar directly in the eye as they spoke. "You were born somewhere other than Tatooine. Happy now?"

"Don't let anyone fool you," Jar began after taking one silent moment to calm his nerves, knowing that if Owen kept going he would likely cause the Gungan to explode in anger. "Stubbornness actually does have its helpful features. You always know what you're going to be thinking tomorrow."

Collecting his water bottles but leaving the tools for the despicable farm animal of a man to use on his own, Jar fumed as he stomped off towards the homestead. He would have to find Cliegg to get a new task considering Annikin was off at the ship, but anything would be better than having to stand around with Owen and be insulted just because he wasn't from Tatooine. He had enough to worry about without Owen acting like an arrogant and prejudiced monster.

-----

An explosion rocked the southern quarter of Ogana. Screams rumbled through the streets. Dozens were dead. The Federation was responsible, no doubt. There were so many people actively rebelling across the city, for now surrendering their pacifist ideals to save their planet, that the Federation had started to indiscriminately bomb any suspected dissenting locations. They couldn't have cared less about what the galaxy thought of what they were doing. The way they saw it, everything was going to go according to their designs. The Senate would bow to their will and the anti-slavery measures would be overturned, and Utapau might possibly become a Federation-controlled world. They fully intended to see it through, but there were some people who weren't exactly ready to let that happen.

"This is *our* city!"

The ringleader of the ongoing rebellion cried out in both excitement and rage, and his voice echoed through the burning streets of Ogana. At first glance he would appear to be a beggar, someone adorned with ragged clothing and with a face covered in sweat and grime. It wouldn't be until one looked at the hundreds of screaming people before him would they realize that the entire city was in the same dire straits as he. The Federation invasion had cut off all utilities, and having been forced from their homes caused the people to start putting together clothing and supplies themselves using anything they could find, even from dumpsters and other fallen citizens.

It was no way to live, but that was why everyone was there, in the town square, crying out with the same rage that the rebel ringleader had. They leered their hate-filled eyes towards the Ogana Royal Palace that sat only a kilometer away, resting beautifully next to the waterfalls that mightily poured into the catch basins below, all while the mere presence of

the Trade Federation raped the architectural wonder and historical significance of the ancient domed seat of power. The people would have nothing of it.

The townsfolk forced torches and pitchforks into the air, the ring leader standing in the fountain in the center serving as a rallying cry for them. The city may have been under Federation control, but there were still small pockets like this few-square kilometer nook of the southern quarter that had yet to fully fall under siege. After all, it took more than three days to secure an entire history. The military occupations stored in the annals of history could easily tell someone that much.

Even before the ring leader of this small pocket of resistance barked his order to move against the battle droids that were slowly stamping their robotic legs through the streets towards their location, the group was starting to move out. The Federation was a poison to their city, a stain upon civilization that desecrated everything that it touched. The slimy hands of the Neimoidian slugs had destroyed so much in the three centuries that it existed. These rebels had no intention of letting it continue.

On a side street adjacent to the crowd, one that took up its arms and prepared to physically remonstrate against the droids that were no doubt going to overtake them, Sio Bibble moved as a shadow through the night. The buildings were boarded up from citizens who had tried to hide, but they were now in camps or, worse, dead. The governor couldn't look at the buildings, many of them tainted with the blood of people he was supposed to help protect and lead. Every spatter of crimson blood was a reminder of his failure.

But as his lost queen would say, failure was a highway to success.

Certain measures had already been taken to ensure that their failure would not be everlasting, nor would it be the final nail in the coffin of Utapau's civilization. His black hood wrapped around his head to cloak his face and blend him into the lightless back street, one marred and charred with battle damage and stricken with the ghosts of the Federation's damnation, Bibble was headed towards insurrection. It was a path he thankfully wasn't taking alone. His pacifist nature wouldn't allow him to be so bold by his lonesome. Ironically enough, it was up to a larger band of pacifistic government officials to begin the insurgency.

The governor turned abruptly, noticing a small group of battle droids headed his way. Luckily he was already where he needed to be, only a few meters from his destination, a damaged home belonging to the brother of one of his staffers, both having been senselessly murdered at the hands of the Federation's treachery. The invasion had only been going for a few days, but Bibble's people were already estimating casualties in the thousands. New Centrif itself was completely destroyed, the only semblance of civilization being the charred remains of the city's formerly glorious architecture and the damned mechanical constructs of the Federation camps.

Bibble slowly looked behind him, trying to remain as nonchalant and indiscriminate as he possibly could. The battle droids could turn the corner at any minute, and he had no doubt that their memory cores were programmed with his image for their facial recognition software. If they didn't have a standing order to shoot him down on site, then at the very least they would have to capture him. For the life of him he couldn't figure out which was worse: was it a quick and painless death or torture at the hands of the Federation?

Confident that nothing and no one was following him, the governor leaned against the structure's wooden door and gently tapped on it to gain entry. Just the tap wasn't enough, of course. A few seconds later, he tapped three more times, and after another few seconds

he tapped twice. It was incredibly simple and, to everyone involved, beyond absurdly ridiculous, but still necessary. They had to have some sort of code, if it could even be called that, or else any old knock would gain anyone entry, including battle droids.

The lack of a response worried him. The sweat that had already been dripping down his forehead from the walk was intensifying. His breathing became heavy and his chest expanded up and down, so much so that he had to put his hand over his mouth just to avoid being too loud. He had no idea how well battle droids could hear, so he had to be cautious. Hopefully he wasn't walking into a trap, or even worse...an already executed massacre, one that would have left his colleagues bodies strewn across the home for him to unfortunately see.

Thankfully that wasn't the case. The door opened slowly with barely an audible creak, and a dimly-lit glowrod shining a few meters outward slowly stuck itself out from behind the door, being held open by the twenty-nine year old Utapau-born Lieutenant Chamberlyn, one of the leaders of this newfound resistance against the Federation. Chamberlyn was a tall and imposing Human of over two meters, dwarfing the elderly Bibble by a long shot. The lieutenant's eye patch, leaving only one brown eye visible, from when he lost his eye a training accident a decade earlier matched well with his dark red and black Security Forces garb, but he was normally more collected. His disheveled appearance was in stark contrast to the normally straight-laced and composed demeanor. If there was ever any doubt that the occupation was taking a toll on everyone, this would be enough to set any such disbelievers straight.

"You're late," Chamberlyn muttered, dispensing with the formalities in favor of quickly ushering the governor through the door and into the meeting area where other members of this new rebellion had gathered. "I told you to be here at 23:30."

"Know your place, Lieutenant," Bibble quietly snapped, put off by the rudeness of the acting Security Forces head even in the midst of such dire straits.

"You're not in my hierarchy," Chamberlyn retorted as he resisted the urge to slam the door for nothing more than dramatic effect, something he found to be useful when dealing with politicians who had a chip on their shoulder. "Besides, we don't have time to try to one up each other. We have a job to do, so let's just get it done. It doesn't matter who's in charge."

The old man ignored him, mostly because he knew he was right, as he stepped into the shockingly damaged home. It was dark, a sign of the desperate times of hiding and subterfuge they were living in. The room was dirty, damp, old; it was so old that the brick walls had started to crack, obviously having been that way before invasion. That part wasn't much of a surprise, as some in Ogana felt such a style was quaint so long as the overall building was structurally sound. Bibble looked up to see where the little light in the room was coming from, finding that it came from the sole window above him, one that stood behind the lights that no longer had any energy flowing to them. The light itself seemed contaminated somehow, like the room was begging to be plunged into darkness and to be left alone to rot.

Following Chamberlyn away from the door, the governor proceeded through the main hall, the cold stone floor sending a shiver up his leg. He couldn't help but shake. He may not have actually been able to feel the cold through his boots, but that didn't matter. The look of death was enough to give anyone the chills. The night was cold enough as it is, the visible breath leaving his shivering mouth being evidence enough of that. What a tragedy it

was to have to go through this in one's own city, let alone one's own planet.

The two leaders of the new resistance continued through the complex, not one part of it giving Bibble any hope. He stepped onto the steps leading to a makeshift meeting room, each step bringing louder and louder creaks and cracks that were uncomfortably noisy. They slowed their descent, but that only made the loud noises louder and longer. Hopefully there weren't any battle droids nearby, or else...

There wasn't any time to think about that. They sped up their walk, knowing it made little difference, into the broken-down underbelly of the home. The drywall was already coming apart both from a general lack of maintenance and the constant booms of explosions that were probably ready to tear the house apart at its seams. The rest of the area wasn't any better; they nearly had to leap across the floors once they were off of the steps to avoid falling through holes where floorboards once were, the wood scattered across the room.

The night was taking its toll. Bibble leaned forward, placing his hands on knees as he went. He wheezed from exhaustion, his expanding and contracting lungs raising his upper body up and down as the air went in and out of his mouth. Chamberlyn stopped just as the governor was standing back up. The old man needed only another moment or two as he put his hand up against the archway near the bottom of the stairs, the opening beneath the archway being the only source of light at the bottom of the house. They couldn't afford to light their glowrod or even candles. The heat might have set off any sensors the battle droids had.

Finally they arrived at the meeting, where only two others had gathered. They had to keep their numbers low to remain discreet, but their hope was to soon gather all of the insurgent citizens in the city and, perhaps, the planet under one banner to try to force the Federation off of their world. It was a bold move, one that odds said would probably fail. That wouldn't stop them from trying, of course. They couldn't stand aside and watch as their people died knowing that there was something they could've done to try and stop it. Such an idea was unthinkable, especially to someone like Bibble whose job was to watch over Ogana.

"Governor Bibble!" came the suddenly excited voice of Horace Vancil, the queen's political and economic adviser on the Advisory Council, who, along with Chief Architect and fellow council member Hugo Eckener, was already seated around a small circular table where they would hold tonight's exchange. "We were beginning to worry that they'd captured you. Thank goodness you're safe."

"Where do we stand?" Bibble cautiously asked. It was important to him that they skip the pleasantries and get right into the evening's business, even if he was afraid of what would be said, but he nevertheless offered a conciliatory smile to let the economic chief know that he wasn't ignoring his kind words.

"All security force members are behind us just as Lieutenant Chamberlyn assured," Vancil replied, his tone far more somber than it had been when he saw Bibble first enter the meeting space. "We've tried to reach out to the Gungans, but they don't want to speak to us. They still accuse us of stealing that damn crystal."

"Most of the Advisory Council is in hiding," Eckener began, continuing where Vancil left off when the latter diverged onto his momentary Gungan tangent. "Minister Graven has been arrested and likely faces execution."

*Not Ruto Graven...*

The governor had high hopes that Graven, the Assistant Minister of Internal Affairs for the queen, would join their efforts, but that didn't seem likely considering his current predicament. The aging Bibble assumed that Graven would want to be a part of it for the same reasons they were all part of it: their own failures. Each of their positions had something to do with what was currently taking place in the city streets and across the planet, weighing them down with so much remorse that they were willing to give up their peaceful virtues just this once in order to expel the invaders.

Whereas the kindly old governor was meant to lead Ogana, a city he no longer had any power over, Vancil was meant to advise the queen on the politics of running the planet. Just the mere thought of his failure petrified him, so much so that he couldn't help but break out into a cold, nervous sweat, one so cold that it began to feel uncomfortably hot. Such was the nature of the paradox they called the Invasion of Utapau. He pushed up the bottoms of the voluminous sleeves on his heavy, black overcoat, one that he now realized he probably should not have worn, and tried to wipe the sweat out of his combed-over white hair.

Vancil couldn't imagine anyone in the galaxy feeling what he felt right now. He failed to foresee the repercussions of the queen taking up Senator Palpatine's offer and aiding with the passage of the anti-slavery laws. He knew the Federation would be angry, but he never believed it would come to this. He knew he shouldn't blame himself, but as the queen's adviser he felt it was his fault that the planet was involved and his fault that they were now living under a constant siege.

On the other side of the table, Eckener leaned forward with his hands against the table and sighed, believing that the regret was hurting him more than it was the others. As the Chief Architect of the planet, the elderly Eckener, losing much of his gray hair and adorned in a thick dark red overcoat similar to the one worn by Vancil, was tasked with protecting the planet's art, history, and architecture, all while continuing the expansion of civic life. Every bomb that went over, every spatter of blood on the streets, and every blaster shot slamming into the walls of the city reminded him of how he was failing in his duty. The natural wonders and architectural masterpieces of the last few millennia were being threatened in ways not seen since the Mandalorian invasion in the Great Sovereign Crusades. He could only hope that history would treat him better than Raul Obiurgo, the infamous Chief Architect during that cursed war who took his own life over the very same regret that Eckener was feeling now.

"And how are we militarily?" Bibble asked to finally break the silence and snap the others out of their regretful trances, despite not wanting to hear the answer to his question considering he knew full well that it would not be pleasant.

"We're down to fifteen percent combat ready personnel," Chamberlyn told him; the lieutenant was displeased, but he wasn't in a position like the others were so he had no reason to lower himself into regretful self-pity. "We're bringing more out of hiding, so hopefully we can boost that number up."

"Any estimates as to what that will bring us to, Lieutenant?" Vancil asked, still acting as he would were he in the presence of the queen and someone was giving her this information. It was important to him that he too had all of the information he needed, especially since any military counter-attack could affect the queen's public perception even while she was off the planet, a fact that the people still had not found out about.

"No more than thirty percent," Chamberlyn replied, mentally bracing himself for the peeved reactions from the politicians that would likely follow.

"You can't be serious!" Bibble shouted louder than he should have. He lowered himself physically, a subconscious reaction that would do absolutely nothing, other than make him feel momentarily better, if there were Federation forces nearby.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Governor, most of our forces are in the Federation camps," Chamberlyn said, he too raising his tone at the political babbling of someone he privately felt was partially responsible for the entire ordeal to begin with. "If we want to fight the Federation it'll have to be through insurgent strikes. We can't take them on directly, which means we can't attack the camps to free our forces. I wish it were otherwise, but they're too heavily fortified."

"I can't believe it has come to this," Vancil told the assembled men. "Perhaps it was a mistake to become involved with the anti-slavery law. The queen said she wanted to live up to the long-forgotten ideals of Jonathan Bac, but his ideals clearly have no place here anymore."

"How dare you," Chamberlyn scoffed, scolding Vancil for what Chamberlyn saw as near-blasphemy. "Jonathan Bac was one of the greatest men who ever lived. He laid the very foundation that our Republic stands upon. He didn't say 'all beings are created equal, except for the ones needed by corporate interests'. No, he said 'all beings have the right to live their lives as they choose, free from a government that stifles the freedoms and muzzles the self-expression of the people'. Our mistake, Minister, was not foreseeing this conflict."

The last line was met with a pointed gaze from Vancil, as he knew that Chamberlyn was directing it squarely at him, but the minister knew not to argue with Chamberlyn over early Republic history. Chamberlyn wrote his university thesis on Jonathan Bac, the first Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic, so the lieutenant was a strong admirer of his. The former admiral of the Organian Empire and ambassador to the pre-Republic coalition of planets during the Unification War had been dead for nearly twenty-five thousand years, which made it hard for many to appreciate his influence on the Republic that he was responsible for creating. Chamberlyn, needless to say, was not one of these people.

Leaving the men to their own private thoughts, which the lieutenant cared very little about considering they were the political thoughts of partisan hacks, something he felt all politicians after the time of the early Republic were, Chamberlyn left his seat at the table and opened a door on the far side of the room. Behind it was an electronically-sealed safe protected by voice-print identification and a fingerprint scanner. Chamberlyn put his right thumb onto the scanner and the red beam on it slid across his finger. He winced as it shocked him, a necessary side effect to help determine whether it was an actual person or a fake print being used, but he tried his best to mask the minor pain that the shock brought.

"Chamberlyn one-one-three-eight," the lieutenant said, the code activating the internal workings of the safe.

A few moments of computer processing later, the door to the safe slid open. Chamberlyn backed away, prompting the others to stand from their seats in anticipation of what was about to happen. None of them had been told of this, so whatever Chamberlyn had up his sleeves was beyond each of them. Chamberlyn couldn't help but grin. He knew how easy it was to allude the eyes of politicians away from the obvious, and him bringing in what was in that safe was, to him, incredibly obvious.

The mechanical buzz of a small ramp emanated from the safe, and within a few moments



the assembled delegates could see that what was inside was a sleek silver protocol droid, a servant of the Federation. It certainly wasn't Chamberlyn's, as he would never allow himself to have a pretend "Human" serve him. He cared little for droids, particularly those designed to mimic Human behavior like the female-programmed TC-series droid that stood before him and the others.

"This is TC-14," Chamberlyn told the Advisory Council members who moved closer to inspect the droid for themselves, all of them sharing looks of concern considering the obvious source of the droid. "It was programmed to act as a personal assistant to Nute Gunray while he's here."

"I take it from your past tense that you've changed the programming, Lieutenant," Bibble noted skeptically, wary of what he assumed was the plan to use the protocol droid to their mutual advantage.

"That's correct," Chamberlyn continued. "My men found it wandering the streets dazed and confused, for whatever reason. I reprogrammed it so, should we all agree, it can be put back onto the streets and gather information for us when it returns to the Federation base. We can then use this information to help us conduct our strikes. If anyone has any objections, please state them now."

The others turned away and took a moment to talk amongst themselves, their soft whispers unable to reach Chamberlyn's ears. The lieutenant was concentrated more on his plans for the future anyway. His thoughts darted off to an image of a veermok, the large, ferocious primate native to the swamps and woodlands that the group had already pre-decided to name their resistance after. The animal lived around the fringes of the swamp and woodlands where it hunted prey through stealth and surprise, reminiscent of the upcoming insurgent strikes. They avoided the deep water because of their weak swimming skills, much like how the resistance would have to avoid large-scale attacks because of their weak numbers. He could think of no better creature befitting of their organization.

"We're somewhat skeptical of your proposal," Eckener finally stated, sharing the concern that the others had, "but we have no objections to letting you try."

"Then that's it then," Chamberlyn said, standing taller as he was suddenly encouraged by their approval to move forward. "I'll send the droid out tonight and we'll begin our first strikes. Their armies may be strong, but the courage of my men is infinite. The Veermok Resistance is born and ready."

Chamberlyn held out hope that he could succeed, but even he was unsure of himself in that moment. The collective courage of his men may have been infinite but his faith in their ability to fight a battle-hardened Federation army was. He had to have faith in his plan to steal their information, and perhaps he could even bribe Federation members to hand over information. If there was one thing more infinite than the courage of his forces, it was the corruption of the Trade Federation. That could be used to his advantage.

His ears perked up. The bells on the clock tower at the center of the city only blocks away chimed, sending the sound waves throughout the area. It was midnight now and the start of a new day, one that the Federation would hopefully live to regret. The Federation couldn't be allowed another inch of Utapau's land. His men would do everything they could to turn their now-ordinary worlds upside down.

-----

"Goodness gracious me!" the gold-clad protocol droid who accompanied Annikin to the ship shouted as he nearly bumped into Artoo Detoo while walking towards the hyperdrive chamber.

The protocol droid was a tall, humanlike machine, one programmed with the voice of a male and personality traits similar to that of a Human being, if not an always-worried one. He lowered his head, similar to that of a Human's, towards the droid below him, his auditory sensors hearing the beeps and boops that astromech droids generally made. The slim robot was commissioned to fully function as a servant and to blend in perfectly amongst Humans, so much so that his gestures even mimicked those of his masters.

Although he had never seen one before, at least as far as he could recall, the droid's programming recognized Artoo as a small claw-armed tripod astromech droid made of computer lights surrounding a radar eye that sat in the middle of the front side of his dome-shaped head. The protocol droid, on the other hand, was a tall and slender droid of Human proportions with masculine programming. Unlike most protocol droids, however, he lacked a sleek and shiny covering. Instead, he had a dirty-brown surface of rusted scrap metal. Even the older looking Humanoid-like models that came before him were more aesthetically pleasing, and the droid knew it too.

"Oh," the protocol droid blurted out as Artoo let out a series of beeps to introduce himself and ask who the protocol droid was, "I am See Threepio, Human-cyborg relations. It is a pleasure to meet you, Artoo Detoo."

Threepio knew little about himself or his creation, but that wasn't any matter. From what he could figure out on his own, he was activated on Affa by Cybot Galactica on an unknown date. He eventually received a memory wipe and was broken into pieces and trashed on Tatooine, probably because he was of no further use to his former master. He wasn't reactivated until Annikin, his current master, found his discarded and gutted remains in Anchorhead. Annikin smuggled the parts home piece by piece to reassemble Threepio as a servant and occasional worker droid, even though his family didn't and still didn't think it would be of any use. After months of working, Threepio was functional again, but Annikin wasn't able to afford proper droid coverings so he melded together pieces of scrap metal from around the farm. He may not have been the most visually pleasing of droids, but that never interfered with his capabilities.

The two droids made their way down the hall, chatting and chirping away as Annikin and Obi-Wan worked in the generator room. Annikin couldn't help but let out an amused smile as he noticed that Threepio, as he often did, forgot everything he was doing. It wasn't of any matter, though, since all the droid had been doing was removing spare parts from the room. He wouldn't be needed for some time, and Obi-Wan was more than happy to help Annikin with anything he needed anyway.

Annikin wiped the pools of sweat away from his brow. He was used to the heat from outside, but he forgot to prepare himself for the even worse heat that was found within the completely enclosed starship. He looked out from underneath the hyperdrive generator and saw that Obi-Wan was also sweating profusely, the sweat staining the Jedi Knight's tunic that was now uncovered from the robes he normally wore. Annikin could at least be happy that it wasn't just him suffering from the temperature.

"Try opening the airlock," Annikin suggested as a remedy for their plight, pointing towards

the airlock on the far wall while doing so. "It probably won't help, but you never know."

"Alright," Obi-Wan acknowledged. He nearly ran over to the hatch, hoping that something, anything, would stop the miserable heat from killing him on the spot. A warm breeze swept through the room, but considering the temperature they were in the warm breeze felt cool as it hit their faces.

"Nothing like warm Tatooine air," Annikin said wryly, his sarcasm being one of the few things that could keep his mind off of the scorching heat wave.

"I doubt I could get use to it," Obi-Wan admitted.

"I wouldn't hit the swoop track then," Annikin warned, his voice straining as he struggled to loosen an abnormally tight screw from the engine. "If you can't handle it standing still, you won't want to try it going five hundred kph."

"You're a swoop racer?" Obi-Wan asked with a great deal of intrigue as he leaned against the wall next to the hatch, trying desperately to catch the breeze as it continued to whisk through the chamber.

"Not lately," Annikin remorsefully told him, "but I've done my fair share. Hand me the hydrospanner?"

"Of course," Obi-Wan said as he grabbed the tool on the nearby stand and handed it over.

"Have you ever seen a swoop race?" Annikin asked, hoping to work it into a conversation where he could learn more about Obi-Wan. They had been working on the ship for hours, but the heat was so unbearable that they kept their discussion to a minimum.

"They have swoop racing on Malastare," Obi-Wan recalled. "I saw a race a few years back with Jard. They set up explosives on the track to make things, as they put it, 'a bit more interesting'. In a race that started with nine, only four came out without having to go to a hospital or a morgue. I wouldn't want to get mixed up in that."

"They don't usually do anything fancy like that here," Annikin said. "Usually it's just you, your bike and the desert wall, along with a dozen other people. It used to be where racers just tried to beat the best time of the day, but now it's racing against each other. *That* makes things a bit more interesting, let me tell you."

Annikin grew still, exhaling deeply with a sigh as he remembered every detail of his last race nearly a year earlier. Excitement was abound; he was poised to finally win his first championship and make some real money for his family, but the Dug Sebulba, a well known racer throughout the Outer Rim, felt the need to play unfairly. As he and Annikin rounded the last corner of the final lap, the Dug moved in close and nearly blinded Annikin with the steam from his vent ports.

Sebulba raced on and clinched that year's title. Annikin's spirit was crushed, especially considering it was the race that caused him to lose so much money to Greedo. Annikin was so confident in his ability to win the race that he placed money on his win, only to lose so much once he was cheated out of what was rightfully his. If things had only been like they were centuries earlier, where racers were against the clock, Annikin would certainly have had a much better chance at winning the title. There was no way Sebulba could have beaten him in that type of race.

"So how about you?" Annikin asked as he resumed his work, pulling a bundle of wires out from the now-exposed control panel on the bottom of the generator. "What do you like to do for fun?"

"For fun?" Obi-Wan asked, his eyes darting from side to side as he fumbled over what lie to tell so he could keep the fact that he was a Jedi a secret.

"Don't worry," Annikin chuckled as he slid further under the engine, working on a few parts as he continued to talk. "Your secret's safe with me. I won't tell anyone you're a Jedi."

Obi-Wan was left speechless, his mouth inadvertently hanging open as he stood dumbfounded by Annikin's realization as to who Obi-Wan really was. Annikin's comment blindsided him so much that Obi-Wan wasn't even able to hid his dismay. He never anticipated being found out, which was obviously his first mistake, but he clearly also hadn't given Annikin enough credit. Annikin was far more perceptive than Obi-Wan imagined.

"What makes you think I'm a Jedi?" a frantic Obi-Wan asked, his voice exuding the anxious sarcasm he tried to pass off as wit. "Do you have psychic powers?"

"No, but I've got eyes," Annikin said with a glimmer in his eyes, returning the Jedi Knight's sarcasm as he saw right through what Obi-Wan was trying to do. "I saw your laser sword. Only a Jedi carries that kind of weapon."

Nearly forcing his palm to his face in embarrassment, Obi-Wan sighed in concession. He hoped that making the comment sarcastic would have turned Annikin off from the idea and convinced him that it was a nonsensical belief, but there was little he could do if Annikin saw his lightsaber. Obi-Wan should have realized he wouldn't have been able to hide the weapon for that long without it being noticed. Perhaps Annikin's apparent perception was nothing more than penchant for noticing the obvious.

"Well that's not entirely true," Obi-Wan stated regretfully, considering how many Sith and Dark Jedi had wielded the weapon in the past, "but I'm glad my secret is safe with you. No one can know who we are."

"What are you and the queen doing all the way out here anyway?" Annikin asked as he shoved the wires back into the engine, wearing a grin that displayed his satisfaction for having successfully guessed who Obi-Wan was. "You're pretty far away from the Republic."

"Unfortunately, I'm not at liberty to tell you that now," Obi-Wan admitted, "but perhaps later that can change."

"Fair enough," Annikin said, his voice once again strained as he worked to open an even tighter fused hatch on the engine; he still would want to find out more about what the Jedi Order was like, so there was no shame in asking questions about that. "Is it true that you Jedi aren't allowed to love?"

"A common misconception," Obi-Wan explained, kneeling down more to Annikin's level as he began to go deeper into the beliefs of the Jedi Order. "Jedi are meant to love all life, whether those lives are Jedi or Gungans or even the ancient followers of the dark side. That love allows us to live for the benefit of all life, but what we must give up is attachment. Someone who is attached can never know true freedom. Attachment can lead to desire, and desire can lead to the dark side."

"So it's more compassion than anything else?" Annikin asked as he checked the fuel levels on the generator from a gauge he pulled from his belt. He wasn't intentionally trying to look as if he was ignoring Obi-Wan or being dismissive of him, as he was paying attention, but the conversation was also meant to serve as a distraction from the heat and the tedious task of checking on and fixing all of the fried cords beneath the generator.

"Exactly," Obi-Wan continued. "As a Jedi, my compassion extends to all beings in the galaxy. With an open and loving heart, I can direct my compassion for the benefit of the entire universe."

"Have you ever actually fallen in love?" Annikin asked, prying further into Obi-Wan's personal life than he probably should have. Despite being hard at work, what he was hearing intrigued him more and more. Annikin slid out from underneath the generator and sat upright so he could better hear what Obi-Wan had to say.

Obi-Wan was visibly uncomfortable by the question. His face contorted into an awkward stare and his cheeks turned pale before finally altering into a rosy red. It had been so long since Obi-Wan thought of the one woman he ever loved, the one woman he ever went against the beliefs of the Jedi for, and the one woman whom he would have given up everything just to be with. It had been so long since he had seen her, so long since he was able to tell her how he truly felt.

He always told people that nothing came of his forbidden relationship with Siri Tachi when they were not but thirteen years old. Technically, this was true. When they were thirteen and Siri was transferred to Baltimn, nothing came of that relationship, but the relationship that blossomed before the Stark Hyperspace War was one that could have ignited the stars. He loved everything about her – her bountiful red hair, her angelic blue eyes, the dimples on her face when he made her laugh. There was nothing not to love. Unfortunately, he would never have a chance to tell her that again.

"No," Obi-Wan lied, "no I haven't. I've committed to the Way."

"The Way?" Annikin asked as he tried to shove his hydrospanner into a socket on the edge of the generator.

"The Way of the Jedi," Obi-Wan said proudly, despite his past transgressions. "It's our way of life, the very code of behavior we live by."

"I'm not gonna lie," Annikin told him, gritting his teeth as he kept trying to work the tool into the socket. "It seems a bit archa - "

Annikin winced as a surge of pain shot up his arm. The generator let out a calamitous spark, sending tiny sparking flames out from all sides from where Annikin's hand was. He flew backwards and his back slammed into the wall as he let out a fairly audible yelp in pain. He jumped right back up, trying to ignore the tingling ache that the electrical shock had caused in his hand. Annikin looked over the generator again and saw just how much trouble the accident had caused the repair efforts.

"Damnit," Annikin grunted as he rubbed his eyes, realizing that fatigue and conversation contributed to his stupid mistake. "There's a couple wasted hours."

"It's getting late," Obi-Wan observed as he noticed both the sun starting to move towards

the horizon and his own fatigue, likely caused by the heat. "We've been working for nearly twelve hours. We should both rest."

As much as he wanted to finish the work, Annikin couldn't help but agree. He didn't want to keep going and run the risk of damaging even more of what he already fixed, so he grabbed his tools and put them onto the counter near Obi-Wan so they would be ready for the next day. He pushed his arms forward, sending the pile towards the corner of the work station. He gave a slight tilt of his head to acknowledge that he was ready to leave, and Threepio and Artoo hurried over to them once the droids realized it was time to go.

Annikin stepped out of the ship first, followed by the Jedi and then the two droids, passing by the two guards that Arcadia had posted the day before. One guard broke his stance of attention only for a moment to close the hatch, but he stood entirely straight like a stick figure drawn by a child and remained at his position to await another day of work by Annikin and the Jedi.

-----

*Why won't this bloody thing just turn already?!*

Arcadia's face contorted as her arms struggled to get a firm enough grasp on the wrench in her hand, which she was using to try to take out a screw out of the cooling well she'd been working on for hours, a cooling well that should have been fixed nearly two hours ago. A few setbacks slowed the repairs, and now she had spent the last half hour trying to get the last damn contraption on its outer control panel back together. She certainly wasn't going to go and plead for help. She had tried too hard all day to do things herself to admit that she wasn't capable of handling it alone.

Annoyance consumed her. Raising the wrench in her hand, she wanted to strike the cooling unit, which meant her irritation was causing her to not think clearly. Luckily for the hours upon hours of repair work, the wrench went flying out of her hand behind her. She turned around to pick it up and probably throw it, but instead she looked up to see one of the members of Panaka's contingent standing on the surface above her. He held the wrench in his hands, having caught it when it flew out of hers, and was staring at her with a sarcastic smile, clearly enjoying having seen her momentarily lapse in judgment.

"Good thing I was walking by, your highness," the security force member grinned, his normally affable demeanor coming across cocky to the young queen. The twenty-nine year old was known for his wit and subtle humor, but Arcadia didn't see his only comment to her quite like that.

"Good thing," Arcadia said with a fake laugh, rolling her eyes at the remarks.

"Do you need help with that?" he asked her, kneeling down so he could jump into the hole that she was working in. His knees nearly came to his chin, a side effect of his nearly two meter frame, and his spiked blonde hair, not covered by the standard cap of a guard's uniform, blended it almost seamlessly with the sands.

"No thanks," Arcadia snapped. She threw her hands up onto the sand above her, trying not to strain herself as her frail arms struggled to pull her back up to the surface. She had no intention of letting an older man help her. She already was seen as being an innocent young girl who needed the help of her all-male Advisory Council to run the planet, and she wasn't about to ask for help on the smaller things too.

"Fair enough, your majesty" the soldier told her, handing the wrench back. "My name's Logan, Logan Amator."

"I've never seen you before all this," Arcadia told him somewhat spitefully considering the somewhat arrogant nature she suspected from him, so she looked away and grabbed a rag, brushing the muck and slime off of her hands. "When did you join Panaka?"

"Right before the blockade," Logan laughed, but there was still some remorse in his voice considering his first assignment was to run like hell away from the planet and help make sure that the Federation didn't kill his queen. "Good timing, huh?"

Arcadia laughed, a laugh that made even Logan smile and feel a bit more comfortable around her. The queen saw this and while she stopped laughing, she still kept a smile on her soft face. Something about his demeanor, now more relaxed than it had been when he first spoke, made her reconsider her first impression of him. She couldn't quite pin it down, but something told her that she had misjudged him. It may have been, as she then thought, that he had simply been nervous and was trying to break the ice.

"I almost didn't join though," Logan continued, his reminiscing clearly not bothering the queen. "I studied law at the University of Coruscant and was on the fast track to work for Senator Palpatine."

"Why didn't you?" Arcadia asked, dropping her tools to the ground so she could use them later. It normally would've been seen as impolite to just leave the tools lying around, but Cliegg had told her a few hours earlier that she could just leave them wherever she needed them next.

"I had my reasons," Logan admitted, but he wasn't quite ready to fully admit what those reasons were.

He had only just met her, and he felt that it may have been inappropriate to confess such a thing. She already had the false impression that he was cocky and arrogant, so there was no sense in telling her that. It was only one of many reasons, though, but it was one of the most important. Still, he held a great concern for the people of Utapau and was willing to do whatever it took to protect the queen and rescue them from harm. He always felt that his desire to make a difference was an important part of his personality.

Still, he wished he could tell her. His frustrated eyes flipped pages of air with every blink, blinks that brought his eyes staring into hers. Her dark blue eyes seemed so innocent and pure that they were like a trance, one that could suck someone in and trust fully in what she said. That was why he felt she was such an effective monarch, one who could relate to the people with her innocence. That innocence, something rarely if ever seen in those who had entered the realm of politics and governance, was something he admired about her, and something he hoped this conflict didn't take away from her.

"Smell that?" Arcadia asked, sniffing in the air as Logan kept looking at her. "Smells like dinner's ready. Cliegg told me they're cooking for everyone. Are you coming?"

"Yeah," Logan told her dejectedly, his shoulders slumping when he realized that she wasn't even paying attention to his somewhat obvious gazing. "I'll be right behind you, majesty."

Logan couldn't blame her for missing what he was doing. It wasn't exactly something she

would expect coming from a member of her royal guard, even though many of them probably took the time to admire her considering the great power and respect that she commanded. Still, he couldn't help but feel somewhat put off, but he still knew that she had no reason to notice it. He hadn't told her anything about his true reasons for being there. He hadn't told her what he *really* thought about her and her rule. Hopefully he would soon be able to do that, but now just wasn't the time.



# --IX--

## DISCOVERY

*"There's a fine line between genius and insanity. I'm no psychiatrist, but it's safe to say Sarus crossed that line the moment he sat down in that bar in Anchorhead."*

- Ray'kele, Ophuchi Clan Leader circa 1 BBY  
Journal of the Whills, 14:5

Dinner was over and the others had already started helping Shmi clean the kitchen and the small dining room. Annikin stood outside, having decided that there just wasn't enough room to help out, listening to the outsiders laughing amongst themselves. It even sounded like his parents had joined in on it, their laughs overtaking the scrubbing sounds and the clamoring of dishes in the sinks. It was curious how Cliegg had warmed up to the outsiders after only a day, but that just spoke of his personality. He was a fairly open-minded person, especially in comparison to Owen. Annikin suspected that he would not find Owen laughing with the outsiders - laughing at them, maybe, but not with them.

Annikin lazily dragged his sluggish and tired self up to the surface, finally allowing himself to take a break. He rubbed his eyes, the fatigue showing itself in gray bags under his eyes. Working in the heat of the confined ship took a lot out of him, and he wasn't looking forward to the work yet to come, especially now that he had set himself back a few hours with his mistake at the end of the day. He wouldn't complain about it, of course. No one forced him to help: he volunteered. He certainly wasn't going to start a job he willingly offered to do only to cry about it and give up. That just wasn't his way, nor would it ever be.

*Damn*, Annikin said to himself. He missed one of his favorite times of day, the setting of the twin suns Tatoo I and Tatoo II. It was already dark, but the pinkish hue of the yellow and orange binary stars still lingered atop the horizon, an enchanting sight that had drawn many a traveler towards it before. Behind him was the rising of the moon Guermessa, the silver lining of the space body reflecting the light from the far off stars to provide just a minuscule amount of brightness to barely shine upon the surface of the planet. It wasn't enough to give anyone enough comfort to venture out into the nighttime deserts, but it was enough for Annikin to stand there with only the light from the homestead helping.

The sunset was always enjoyable to him, but it wasn't his absolute favorite time. It was the evening's cool breeze and the nighttime air, the air nudging softly against his face, wind blowing through his hair. It was cool and moist, sending a shiver down his spine. His skin tingled from the chill, a sensation that always calmed his nerves and made him feel better

about whatever was bothering him. It was probably the same temperature as Utapau normally might be, but on Tatooine it was a rare commodity, something only felt at night when one would normally sleep.

He couldn't help but smile.

Annikin turned his head towards the east as the faint sound of bantha roars and the whines and howls of Tusken Raiders fell upon his ears. The Tusken were a primitive people, dwelling deep in the Dune Sea. No one cared for the savage race that made their home in the brutal wastes - all they did was attack and pillage settlements and homesteads. Reports of murder at the hands of the sand devils had become more and more common over the previous years, but no one was able to make any sort of arrest. How do you arrest a primitive species, especially when you don't know who actually carried out the attacks?

Some people had taken the answer to be hunting them down and killing them. Annikin may have despised them, yes, but killing them wasn't the answer. They were still sentient, even if barely so. No one even knew what they really looked like; the sand people all wore tan robes and spiked masks that made them all look the same, as if they were mindless clones that attacked only on a basic and primordial instinct.

Looking out into the distance, Annikin flinched at what he saw. His jaw locked and his face was visibly tense, his fists curling themselves into balls in a stance that said he was ready to fight anyone or anything that came towards him. He thought he saw a group of Tusken near the crashed ship, visible by moving lights, but as he looked deeper he let go of the fists and relaxed, realizing he may have been wrong by the way they walked.

Annikin grabbed his cheap nightview macrobinoculars off of his belt. He wanted to see a clearer picture of who was there, just in case. The built-in zoom made the figures look like they were standing right in front of him, though they appeared in a static green-like form because of the night vision. If only he could have afforded the electrobinoculars; he would have been able to see the image far clearer. Even so, he could still make out that the figures were the guards at the ship. He laughed as he put the device back onto his belt, his sarcastic and self-deprecating grin acknowledging his paranoia.

He couldn't be too careful when it came to Tusken, though, but it wasn't Tusken he saw. It was actual people, men: real, sane - no savage thoughts. Men who he had no desire to wrap his hands around and strangle. Those Tusken animals made even the best of people furious, but he still knew that they were people and deserved to live, even if they themselves took it upon themselves to decide who on Tatooine they thought should die.

*Damn!*

Annikin smacked himself upside the head, his eyes wincing when he realized that he didn't actually mean to do that. He meant to go into Anchorhead right after dinner. He didn't have the parts he needed to fix his mistake on the engine from earlier, but he knew that Ody's Garage had just what he needed. He'd been worried about the Tusken coming after his speeder if he drove into Anchorhead, so it wasn't until he just thought about the sand people did he remember what he needed.

Turning away from the horizon, Annikin ran back down through the stairwell at the top of the homestead. As he moved through the entryway to the kitchen, he nearly sneezed. The air he breathed into his nose stung, catching him off guard. The juicy and grilled smell of bantha meat, combined with the sweet whiff of Alderaanian brandy given to the family by

Queen Arcadia, was replaced by ammonia and kitchen soap, smells that he always felt somewhat allergic to. His scrunched face while he was trying not to gag or sneeze again probably told everyone in the room that much. Shmi and Obi-Wan turned to each other and shared a faint laugh, while Dooku and Owen rolled their eyes in the corner and Panaka sat at the table as stoic as ever. Annikin always found it ironic; he could race swoops at five hundred kilometers per hour, but the simple smell of cleaning solution send him running for the dunes.

Annikin tried his damndest to ignore it, all while putting in even more facial muscle effort to try to stop from throwing up. He normally distracted himself if he had to go into the kitchen right after supper, and this time was no different. He grabbed his jacket from the chair it was hanging on, throwing it around his back and quickly slipping his arms into it. He tugged on the gray denim coat, making sure it fit straight over his even lighter-gray undershirt. Annikin pat himself across the torso, making sure his wallet-full of small peggats was still in the inside pocket.

"Where are you going?" Shmi asked, her formerly laughing face replaced with a look of worry, the terrifying idea of Annikin being injured by sand people very clearly shown in her dark brown eyes.

"Anchorhead," Annikin said as he turned back towards the kitchen counter, attached to the far side of the narrow room upon the tan concrete wall. "I need to get a few things for tomorrow before the shops close. I don't want to waste any time in the morning."

"Would you like some company?" Obi-Wan asked, leaning forward from his place against the wall in anticipation of Annikin saying yes.

"No, that's alright," Annikin replied, catching Obi-Wan off guard and prompting the Jedi Knight-in-hiding to slowly lean back against the wall, his eyes darting from side-to-side as he embarrassingly tried to play it off as if he hadn't made the presumption. "I won't be that long anyway, and you probably need more rest than I do on this planet."

For a second, it sounded like Dooku let out a faint chuckle from the corner of the table, and Annikin looked over to the displeased Obi-Wan to see that he had heard right. Still, Annikin wasn't about to pay any attention to Dooku, whom he had told himself was an arrogant jerk anyway. Not exactly the pride of the Jedi Order, or at least that's what Annikin assumed of him. How the man was a Jedi to begin with went far beyond Annikin's understanding, and he didn't even want to try to figure that Order out. Once the outsiders were gone, Annikin knew that he'd probably have no further contact with any Jedi ever.

It was times like this, going out during the night on Tatooine even a few kilometers from home, when Annikin wished he had a Jedi's lightsaber to defend him, but he had to make do with what he had. He grabbed a key from his belt and unlocked one of the white and orange cabinets above the sink, inside of which was his own personal blaster pistol. He pulled it out and opened it, checking the ammunition cartridge before cocking it and placing it on his belt. He noted the stares from the others, their unhinged jaws telling him that they certainly didn't expect him to pull out the gun or, for that matter, even know how to operate a firearm to begin with.

"Oh Ani, you know how I hate those things," Shmi said as she approached. She put her hand on his arm, trying to get him to stop from going and put the gun away, but Annikin pulled back and started towards the door, shaking his head as he felt that his mother was being paranoid and overprotected.

"Well the sand people hate getting shot by them," Annikin reminded her as he walked. "That's why I carry it when I go out at night."

"I can send one of my men with you," Panaka offered, darting up from the table and leaning forward on his fists as if he was about to make his way into combat. That characteristically stoic look still hadn't left his face, though.

"Really, everyone, I'm fine," Annikin said as he threw up his hands in an "I surrender" meets "back off" gesture all the while trying to laugh off their behavior. "It'll only take me a few minutes to get there anyway. I'll be back in an hour or so, so don't wait up."

Annikin wasn't going to let anyone get another word in. He turned suddenly and darted up the steps, avoiding any further remarks from those in the kitchen. Owen shook his head and laughed disappointedly, even though he should have seen Annikin's behavior coming. Dooku noticed Owen's reaction, pulling back and arching his gray eyebrows. Did Owen support Annikin in this instance or was he disappointed in his step-brother? Dooku couldn't tell.

"Is he always this confident?" Dooku asked, curious to see Owen's reaction to his own comments to determine how the man felt about Annikin.

"That's not confidence, that's arrogance," Owen told him in a near-sowl, prompting Shmi's worried smile to turn into an displeased frown at Owen's continued derogatory comments.

"You would have taken the guards with you?" Dooku asked, although he suspected he knew the answer to that question. He had gotten a pretty good read on Owen's personality earlier in the day. In fact, Owen was the only one of the family members that Dooku actually liked, and he suspected that he himself was the only one of the outsiders that Owen liked. He had no idea why it worked out that way, though.

"No, but I wouldn't have been as cavalier as him either," Owen replied. "I don't know if he's trying to impress you people or what, but someone needs to knock some sense into him. Gods only know I try."

"I cannot abide arrogance," Dooku said in detest as he shook his head, prompting Obi-Wan to arch his own eyebrow in joyful surprise and curiosity. "It makes my skin crawl."

Obi-Wan spit out his mouthful of blue milk, and the ultramarine liquid began to roll down the front of his beige tunic. He felt a sharp pain in his right side. For a minute he was worried, but then he realized that the pain was coming from the intensity of his own laughter, the irony of Dooku's statement overcoming him.

-----

Annikin coughed, his mouth contorting as he tried to spit out the insistent sand. The sandstorm two days earlier had trashed the settlement, leaving wood and concrete lying on the dusty street. The normally tan buildings were now temporarily painted with brown dirt that the storm's fury had picked up. Even now, at night, shopkeepers and townspeople were still picking up after the damage left in the storm's wake. Their ragged clothing and frail features let him know that they were already not well off.

Frequent sandstorms, but even more so these bigger ones, didn't exactly make life easier for them, or anyone on the planet for that matter. It's just that these people already were

living through economic and social hell. That wasn't the sandstorms, though, but rather the only thing worse: Jabba the Hutt. Thankfully, Annikin was in one of the few parts of the town where he couldn't see Jabba's fortress. It helped him keep his mind off of what the flat blob of skin was doing to the people.

Ready to leave, Annikin picked up the supplies he left on the table near the open door. He'd already paid the Er'Kit store owner, whom he had raced with some years back before they both gave up the sport, for the supplies he needed for the repairs the next day, so he was good to go. It had taken him a bit longer than he'd hoped, so he was sure to hear about it from his always-worried mother.

"Thanks Ody," Annikin shouted into the back of the store. The short, blue-skinned creature turned its thin neck towards him, its gangly stick-like arms waving towards him. Annikin smiled and laughed, always amused by the joyfulness of the shop owner. He and Ody had been rivals when they raced, but once they both stopped racing they were able to become friends, which was certainly for the better. The once-perpetually grouchy Er'Kit, normally stressed by his races, was also able to lighten up, which was probably why they were able to get along after so many years of intense competition.

Annikin stuffed the half-dozen tools into the many pockets of his jackets, not able to hold them all himself. Upon finishing, he rubbed his temples as he let out a long yawn. The day was beginning to really take its toll on his body. As he walked down the street, he rubbed his eyes, shutting out everything else around him to focus on just getting home so he could sufficiently crash. In the darkness, having nothing else to think about and even less to look at in the dim moonlight, he began to ponder about how much longer the repairs would take, what things to watch out for, how to order it so as to be as time-efficient as possible...but then he heard it.

An engine roar. A feeling of confusion. His head snapped towards the sound, eyes wide open. The blinding white light of headlights. A feeling of absolute panic. He couldn't move, he was frozen in place with terror, his mind utterly blank with fear.

Just then, his body kicked into high gear as he finally processed what was happening. It hit him all hard and fast - he only had a few seconds to live. He fought a scream as, with nothing to lose, Annikin just pushed himself off the ground in desperation, diving off to the side and, he hoped, out of the way. Then...time stopped.

The speeder - he could tell it was a speeder now - was still, the people around him were motionless, the roar in his ears grew vague. The only thing that seemed to be moving was him, a whirlwind of energy swirling around him and through him.

He was dead.

That was the only explanation for what was going on. The speeder had already hit him, sending his body flying limply, killing him. Unless the speeder bike's forward-mounted steering vanes had jabbed into him. All this was just some afterlife-shock or his brain dying on him. He expected not to see anything but an infinite blackness, or just nothing. That probably wasn't too long in coming now.

Then it was over. He blinked sand out of his eyes, the sand that had flown up when he had landed on it. His breathing was fast, and he could feel his heart beating in his ears and fingers as he looked at the world sideways from the ground.

He could hear the speeder bike's engine stop abruptly, its pilot obviously realizing that he had nearly killed someone. Annikin's eyes darted around, teeth clicking and clattering together, sweat pouring down him as the terror of what had just happened overcame him. He didn't even notice the silhouette of the driver approach and hover over him.

"I'm so sorry," the driver said, sounding just as panicked and perplexed as Annikin felt. "But...you...how did you get out of the way so quickly? You must have some reflexes, young man. That's normally a Jedi trait."

"Jedi? I...what?" Annikin asked. His voice was hushed, and he barely had any concept of where he was or what just happened. It all took place so fast that his brain was having trouble digesting it all. "I don't know what just happened. Who...who are you?"

The man, now clearly middle-aged, dropped down onto his knees so Annikin could see his face. His balding head reflected the light behind and above them, and his rough features stood in unison with the damaged and tortured state of the town itself. As Annikin saw his dark blue eyes, darker and deeper than he had ever seen anyone's eyes look like before, he had a sense of déjà-vu. He looked away, trying to find something in his mind that told him who the man was, but he couldn't remember, assuming he even knew who he was to begin with.

"My name is Sarus," the man said as he reached out his hand, which Annikin took to stand up. Annikin was a bit woozy and wobbly when he got back onto his feet, but he'd survive. "Pleased to meet you, Annikin. Are you all right?"

Annikin nodded his head in thanks. Once he remembered what he was doing, and his nerves finally began to calm, he checked his pockets to make sure all his supplies were still there. It was hard feeling for them, considering his hands still wouldn't stop shaking, but that wasn't his only priority. It took him a minute, but Annikin's eyes finally darted back towards Sarus when something occurred to him.

"I don't remember telling you my name."

"Perhaps we should go indoors where it's a bit warmer," Sarus suggested. "It gets awfully cold out here at night."

-----

The Anchorhead Cantina was a much different place at night than it was during the day. In the daytime, most patrons were humans who were passing through when they were picking up supplies or going to the market. The nighttime crowd was very different - none of the patrons were Human. From the rare four-eyed Ulaaq Aqualish at the bar, to the powerful, long, gray-necked Ithorian standing beside Annikin at the bar, rocking back and forth for some reason as many Ithorians seemed to do, the cantina was a place brimming with the most unusual of people.

A three-member band of Biths, each equipped with strange instruments whose intricacies Annikin couldn't even begin to understand, stood just beyond the bar on a stage built up higher than the heads of most of the patrons. The large-headed and black-eyed musicians swaggered back and forth, swaying from side to side as they played their music with vigor. Somewhere in the cantina, coming from a hidden surround-sound system, more music bellowed out, playing along with the Bith band. The overbearing bass emanated outward

and filled the cantina with its noticeable vibrations. The sharp clashing of steel on steel drums over the music system hid the lighter, eerier tones that the music had to offer.

Annikin lost himself in the music. The soft tones mixed with the clashing of steel in an industrial tone was not the best music he had heard, but it was still a far cry from the painfully annoying songs of the latest trendy band, Evar Orbus and His Galactic Wailers. To Annikin, wailing couldn't even begin to describe how awful the bands so-called hits were. If he had his way, Annikin would've made the group's newest single called "Lapti Nek", Huttese for "Work It Out," work its way out of existence.

Suddenly snapping Annikin out of his trance, Greedo slammed two waters down onto the table in front of him. With so much water in the small glasses, the force of the slam splashed water through the air, hitting Annikin on the arm. He turned to see Greedo standing there, grinning like an idiot after likely splashing it on purpose. Annikin threw ten credits down onto the table, just enough to pay for the drinks, one for him and one for the mysterious Sarus, as he picked them up off the table.

"U wamma wonka jujumon," Greedo said in a snide tone unbecoming of a person whose job was meant to be customer service.

"Piss off," Annikin spat as he turned away. After nearly being hit by a speeder driven by the strangest person he had ever met, when all Annikin wanted to do was buy a few parts for the next day, he was in no mood to deal with Greedo.

Greedo started to mumble something, but he kept it mostly to himself when Annikin continued walking away and ignoring him. Annikin set the drinks down on the table where Sarus was already sitting, doing so gently to avoid sloshing the water around even further. He wasn't about to throw away money by wasting something as valuable as water.

"So..." Annikin said, "you still haven't answered my question," He remarked as he sat down at the booth across from Sarus, folding his hands together to make it seem as if he was patiently waiting for a response. In actuality, he wanted to rip the answer right out of him.

"Which question would that be, Annikin?" Sarus asked almost jokingly after taking a sip of water, but he realized that Annikin wasn't in the mood for jokes.

"You know which question," Annikin informed him. His tone was harsh, almost cold; Annikin had no desire to sit around and chat. He only wanted answers to his questions, and he wasn't going to tolerate any games.

Sarus's thin lips curled upwards into a smirk, yet another sign of his sarcasm. He almost seemed to be enjoying what he was doing, even though Annikin was clearly getting more and more agitated by the moment. This was only a test, of course, to see how Annikin would respond to him. Sarus had seen Annikin before, noticing how impatient he was. The young man would look towards the future, wanting it to be the here and now while sometimes ignoring the present. This was not constant in Annikin's life, to be sure, but it was a trait he exhibited every once and awhile.

"I've been watching you for quite a few years, my young friend," Sarus admitted, knowing that Annikin probably would be somewhat put-off by the revelation.

"You've..." Annikin started to say before losing his train of thought considering the absurdity of being watched and followed. "Are you some kind of a stalker?"

"I'm sure there are those who might think that," Sarus admitted, understanding full well why someone would think that, "but I can assure you that I'm not. I was tasked with watching you by...well, shall we say, a higher authority."

"What higher authority?" Annikin shouted, not realizing how he was attracting stares from the rest of the cantina. "Why are you watching me? Who the *hell* are you?"

Annikin stopped short of asking another question once he realized that the music was no longer playing. Instead, he heard the deafening silence that accompanied the stares of the band and the patrons, making him realize just how loud he had been talking. He slumped down in his chair, as if that would hide him as his face turned bright red. Sarus chose not to make a remark about the embarrassingly awkward situation, which surprised Annikin, considering the comments that Sarus had been making throughout the evening. At least Sarus was able to show some little bit of restraint.

"Well, you're just full of questions, aren't you?" Sarus asked once the band started to play again and when Annikin sat back up in his seat.

"And I'd like to be full of answers, if you don't mind," Annikin requested, still impatient but minding his tone in order to avoid another abashed moment.

"Not at all," Sarus said. The strange man leaned forward, turning his head ever-so-slightly to the side to make sure no one was watching. He started to speak in a hushed tone, not as quiet as a whisper but quiet enough so no one around them could listen in on the conversation. "Annikin, think back a few minutes to when we first met. Was it really the first time we met? How did you manage to avoid being hit by a speeder that probably should've killed you?"

"I thought I was asking the questions here."

"Annikin, please," Sarus insisted, his words conveying an importance and power that took Annikin by surprise. "Your answers are of vital importance."

"And yours aren't?" Annikin rudely asked of him. "Stop toying with me. I don't have time for this."

"You answer my questions and I'll answer yours," Sarus shrugged

"I don't see why I should bother," Annikin said, though he wanted answers too much, especially about why he couldn't figure out where the sense of déjà vu was coming from, "but whatever. You did seem familiar, but I can't remember ever meeting you. I don't know how I didn't get hit either. I just sorta saw the speeder and felt like I was spinning out of control, then I was on the ground looking at you. I can't explain what happened."

"I can," Sarus vowed. "The great powers of the Force were embedded in you when you were born, not far from here I might add. You might have noticed it in your reflexes or heightened intuition."

Something about what Sarus was saying caused Annikin to stare at him disbelievingly. Annikin had of course noticed his quick reflexes before, as had he noticed his ability to retrieve lost objects that no one else could find or complete other people's sentences, things of that sort. That didn't mean he was sensitive to the Force, though. Some people just had



more heightened senses than others, or so he thought. It seemed normal to him, at least normal enough to where the Force, something Annikin knew next to nothing about, wouldn't have to be added into the equation.

"I couldn't tell you," Annikin lied. "I don't really know much about the Force."

"The Force is a metaphysical and binding power that connects all living things," Sarus said with a nod of apology, forgetting that not everyone was as familiar with the concepts of the Force as he was. "It surrounds us and penetrates us while holding the universe together."

"Are you a Jedi?" Annikin asked, curious as to whether or not he was like Obi-Wan, or if he and Obi-Wan knew one another. Annikin found it odd that this man would approach him around the same time he met Obi-Wan, so there had to be some sort of connection.

"No," Sarus told him regrettably. "Unfortunately, I was never blessed with the same unique abilities as you. I am merely a vessel of knowledge and experience tasked with helping you fulfill your destiny."

"Wait, what?" Annikin asked, the conversation suddenly taking an unexpected turn. "What are you talking about? What destiny?"

"To vanquish the armies of evil," Sarus admitted, believing it was better to get the truth out quickly than try to play around with more indirect answers.

Annikin stared at him with disbelief. The music struck the same dramatic chords as Sarus's words, as if the whole thing had been planned and the band was specifically playing along with Sarus's game. It was a game that Annikin wasn't willing to play any longer. The entire discussion had just taken a turn for the ridiculous, and he wasn't going to sit around any longer and listen to the ramblings of a crazy old hermit.

"That's it," Annikin said furiously, insulted that he'd wasted his time, "I'm leaving."

"You cannot forsake your destiny, Annikin!" the hermit shouted as Annikin walked towards the door, not caring who heard what he had to say anymore.

"Goodbye," Annikin's voice echoed. He didn't even stop or turn around as he spoke. There was no reason to now that he was at the door.

"Ask your parents about the day you were born," Sarus shouted again, prompting Annikin to stop dead in his tracks. "You may find some answers that you're looking for. When you do, I'll be waiting for you just outside."

Now things were starting to get weird. At first, Annikin assumed that Sarus was just making everything up, maybe for money or maybe just because he was bored and had nothing better to do than trick people into having drinks with him and listening to absurd stories. Then he mentioned his parents. Were Annikin the one telling the lie, he wouldn't tell someone where they could go and have the lie disproven. It was as if Sarus actually was telling the truth, and Cliegg and Shmi could shed light on the situation. Was it possible?

-----

The next night, Annikin drifted quietly out of the garage after yet another dinner. Once more, the sounds of cleaning came from within, followed by the laughter of his family and

their guests. The two were becoming accustomed to one another, something Annikin never expected. The night before it was a refreshing sound, but now it was one that filled Annikin with confusion and conflict. Had he not rushed aboard the outsider's vessels, he would've had no reason to go into Anchorhead the night before, and Sarus would have been unable to tell him the destiny nonsense. Annikin would've had no reason to feel so confused, so broken, so upset.

He wandered out to the nearest moisture vaporator, gently leaning his arm against it as he watched out into the evening desert. The sounds of the desert wastes filled the soft night air; the screeches of the womp rat packs running through the area, nibbling at anything the vicious creatures could find, and the hissing of snakes and scorpions that were too close for comfort stung his ears. Cliegg once told him that the area around their homestead had been a near-oasis before the drought, where the sweet scent of moist grass and vegetation filled one's nose with an aroma that those who knew it would've given anything to have back. It was a far cry from the dusty, dirty aroma that now prevailed.

The night was ethereal, the sky filled with countless dots of white flickering lights from all distant corners of the galaxy. When he was a boy, working as the closest thing to a slave in the Toydarian's junk shop, Annikin often dreamed of what it would be like to see those stars. He would fly deep into space, not in a ship but rather he himself would literally float through the heavens, and be the first to see them all. His duty would be to bring order to the chaos, making sure everyone was able to live freely and happily. He would never let anyone suffer, go hungry, or go to sleep worrying about how to support themselves or their loved ones. Annikin believed with every fiber in his being that he would be the one to help all the people of the galaxy.

But it was only a dream, or so he thought.

Sarus's words stirred up those old memories but also confused him beyond belief. He wanted to help people, but not as a prophetic savior. How could he take any sort of pride in what he was doing if he knew that he was only doing it because someone decided he would thousands of years before he was born? How could he possibly deal with the stresses of actually carrying it out when he had to simultaneously juggle the implications of failing in that destiny? It wasn't fair to force him into doing it. He should've been able to do something like that on his own accord, on his own time, and in his own way.

Annikin sighed, unable to find a way to comfort himself. As he tried to get it out of his mind, he could hear Threepio's mechanical joints aching their way towards him, and the droid was clearly worried about him. There was a certain urgency to such a walk, a certain worry, one that Annikin picked up on long ago. Annikin turned, coming face to face with his protocol droid who was so close that it caused the young farmer to flinch. The droid was incapable of facial expression, but Annikin could still tell when he was worried.

"Oh Master Annikin, I must ask you to come indoors," Threepio begged, his butler-esque Coruscanti accent accentuating his fears. "It's too dangerous to remain outside after nightfall. Those dreadful Sand People are everywhere."

"I'll be fine, Threepio," Annikin tried to assure him.

"But Master Annikin," Threepio continued, not taking 'no' for an answer, "might I remind you that the odds of successfully surviving an encounter with a tribe of Sand People is approximately one hundred forty-seven to one!"

"If I promise to be inside in five minutes," Annikin asked, mostly out of annoyance than out of any real concern for Threepio's misplaced fears, "will that make you feel better?"

"Oh please hurry, sir," Threepio implored him. "I have a bad feeling in my circuits about this evening, a very bad feeling indeed."

As Threepio turned around, his metal skeleton clinking across the sandy floor of the surface, Cliegg in turn approached. The handsome yet rugged middle-aged farmer had a distinct look of worry on his face, and his brow was replete with sweat. He had a terrifying idea about what was bothering his stepson, but he couldn't imagine how Annikin could've found out what Cliegg was so worried about him knowing.

"Oh Master Cliegg," Threepio said, stopping in his tracks as the farmer approached, "please make sure that Master Annikin makes it indoors safely. I wouldn't know what to do without my maker! I just..."

The droid rattled on and on just as he always did, but Cliegg let him be. There was no sense trying to shut Threepio up. He could turn the droid off, but the blasted thing would just keep yammering away as soon as he was powered back up. Cliegg was content to let Threepio's artificial mind go wherever it wanted to go, especially if it was off the farm and away from him. He didn't dislike the droid, but he never really saw any need for it on a moisture farm.

Rather than listening to Threepio's incessant rambling, Cliegg stood behind Annikin, hoping to get him rambling instead. Cliegg gulped, the sweat coming down his forehead faster and more intense. He saw in Annikin's eyes the night before a look of dread, and even now he could sense that the giant hand of the galaxy was forcing its weight onto Annikin's shoulders. That could've meant any number of things, but considering Annikin's past... Cliegg feared that there were very few options to choose from about what the boy's worries might be.

"Alright son," Cliegg finally said, not wanting to wait for Annikin to speak up any longer. "Something's obviously bothering you, so let's have it."

"It's nothing," Annikin replied in a barely audible mumble.

"You can't fool me, Annikin," Cliegg said as he put his palm onto Annikin's right shoulder, hoping to comfort the truth out of the boy. "I'm your father."

"Stepfather," Annikin stingingly reminded him, and Annikin could tell very quickly that it had upset the man.

"I thought we'd moved past that," Cliegg said, his voice filled with remorse as he retracted his hand and slumped his own shoulders.

"We have," Annikin assured him, turning around to look his stepfather in the eye. "You're the only father I've ever known. I'm sorry."

"What's wrong, son?" Cliegg asked. He wasn't overly insulted by the comment. He knew Annikin well enough to be able to sense when the boy would say things he didn't mean, although he also had to admit to himself that there must have been a degree of truth in the comment. Annikin wouldn't have said it if otherwise.

"Everything," Annikin said his mind abuzz and his voice slurring in confusion; he could barely look Cliegg in the eye, "or maybe it really is nothing. It's just...there was this weird hermit-looking guy in town last night saying these crazy things about me. I guess I can't get them outta my head."

*Oh no...* The two simple words were the only things that Cliegg could muster, even within himself. The choice word of "hermit" sent his heart racing.

"What kind of things?" Cliegg asked, praying he didn't know the answer to the question.

Annikin couldn't help but laugh. He wanted to let the words out for all to hear, but they were just so absurdly stupid. Destinies? Sensitivity to the Force? Evil armies? It was all so ridiculously made up. How could Cliegg possibly believe a word of what he had to say? It was so ridiculous that Annikin at first thought he was still living a dream, a never-ending torturous dream from Hell.

"Well apparently," Annikin said, hesitating before letting out the next words, "I have a destiny to destroy an evil army. But what really threw me was that he told me to ask you and mom about what happened on the day I was born. I don't have a clue what that's supposed to even mean."

Cliegg's face turned as white as a ghost. Every bone in his body became tense; he was immovable. The day he had dreaded since he first learned the truth about Annikin was here. Shmi had warned him never to bring it up, knowing full well what the consequences of Annikin knowing the truth would be, but he couldn't hide it from him. Annikin knew, or at least he thought he knew, and he deserved to hear the truth from the only man he ever considered to be a father to him. He deserved to know the truth period. Shmi could hate Cliegg for it, but he felt an obligation to tell Annikin the truth.

"It's time son," Cliegg finally told him, the color in his face returning to a normal complexion after a near-anxiety attack.

"Time for what?" Annikin asked. His face began to turn white, as if the anxiety was literally taken from Cliegg and dropped into him.

"The truth."

*Or as I like to call it,* Cliegg quipped to himself, trying to make light of the situation, *motive in your mother's trial for my brutal murder.*

-----

The tool room down the hall from the garage was pitch black. Annikin went for a light panel, but Cliegg grabbed his hand before he could. No one could know they were there, least of all Shmi. Cliegg was already going to have a hard enough time explaining what he had to say to Annikin. There was no way he could explain it to anyone else. He could barely even rationalize any of it to himself. It just seemed so ludicrous.

From a small pouch hidden behind a shelf, Cliegg pulled out a tiny trinket hanging by a thin brown chain. The item was made from japor ivory wood, a rare commodity considering the limited supply of it left on Tatooine, but it wasn't particularly impressive, at least not at first. The snippet of japor was carved as a traditional Tatooine sand symbol, one used by settlers for thousands of years, possibly since the planet was first colonized. It wasn't until Annikin

saw what was in the center of it that he realized it was something more. In the center was the symbol of a small dove, one shackled to the ground. He had no idea what it meant, but it captured his attention. What could it have meant, and what did it have to do with him?

"What's that?" Annikin asked, but he hesitated in actually taking a look at it. He was too scared about what might happen if he placed it in his hand.

"I don't know," Cliegg sighed, slumping his shoulders; he was strangely disappointed that he didn't have all the answers, "but I think it might have the answers to who you are and where you came from."

"Where I came from?" Annikin asked. His eyes grew wider; he was suddenly a lot more worried about what Cliegg was going to say.

"The circumstances of your birth weren't exactly...normal," Cliegg admitted. It was if a huge weight had been lifted off of his shoulders, and he could finally breathe easy again now that he wasn't living with a lie. Still, now that he was finally explaining what he knew to Annikin, that would likely lead to a whole mess of new problems.

"Meaning...?" Annikin asked. *Can't he give a straight answer?*, Annikin asked. He just wished someone would answer him directly for once.

"Meaning that it was the will of the Force that you were born to save the galaxy," Cliegg blurted out, much more forceful than he originally planned.

Annikin's jaw dropped. Was Sarus right? Was Annikin really born to save the galaxy? Maybe Cliegg was just tricked too. That had to be it. It was just a trick by Sarus! He couldn't have been right. Sarus was clearly crazy, but what if he wasn't? *No, that's crazy talk...*, Annikin muttered in his flustered mind before finally looking his stepfather square in the eye. He stepped forward, confrontationally leaning in towards the farmer. Annikin's eyes bugged out. If he wasn't careful, he too would've gone crazy.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Annikin demanded to know. He felt nauseous, nearly ready to keel over and throw everything he'd ever eaten up onto the floor, but he couldn't bring himself to care enough about that. He couldn't get over the fact that he was lied to by Shmi for nineteen years, and Cliegg for nine. It was unthinkable that they would do something like that to him.

"We wanted to protect you," Cliegg said confidently. He may have no longer had the burden of the secret on his shoulders, but he still would've kept it all to himself again if he had to relive everything that had happened.

"Protect me from *what*?" Annikin asked, accentuating the last word. He couldn't understand what he would've had to be protected from.

"The rest of the story!" Cliegg shouted; he wasn't about to have his decision be questioned, least of all by the person who he was trying to protect. "The day you were born, a Dark Jedi tried to kill you and your mother, but the leader of those hermits, Sarus, fought him off. Your mother knew that if she told you this earlier or gave you this japor snippet that there would be people who would either want to exploit your power or kill you. We couldn't live with ourselves if we let either of those things happen, even if it was the will of that Force."

Annikin's whole body grew tense. He felt his throat close and the air stop short; he was too overwhelmed to breathe. His moist hands shook, dripping with the sweat that might as well have been the tears of his shattered universe. There were no words to describe what was happening. He stared blankly at the man that had never lied to him, or so he thought. Everything he knew was a lie. Everything he ever believed was gone. Reality was a myth that he now had to sift through in order to find some semblance of order in his chaotic being.

The boy ran, and his father said nothing.

There was nothing the aging farmer could muster to say that would even remotely help his confused stepson. There was nothing anyone could say. How could anyone rationalize the incongruous absurdity of being destined to destroy an evil army? How could anyone legitimize the idea of destiny period? Cliegg knew this and so did Annikin, but part of the boy still wanted his father to run after him, give him a big bear hug, and tell him everything would be alright. Still, the part of Annikin that had some sense left knew that nothing could ever change what he was feeling. Nothing could ever take those words back and make him feel normal again.

Nothing.

Then again, he could've been wrong. As he ran off, jumping into a speeder headed for Anchorhead where he would confront Sarus yet again, Obi-Wan watched. Flanked by Dooku, Arcadia, and a number of others from the ship, Obi-Wan had overheard the tail end of the conversation. Shmi, who had not heard, also approached, and she was even more confused than the others when she saw her son rush off in a fit of despair. She turned to her husband, tilting her head and cocking an eyebrow in confusion and worry.

"What happened?" Shmi asked desperately, worrying only as a mother could. "Where's he going this late?"

Cliegg looked down at his wife, a woman now distraught in panic. One arm clutched her stomach while the other, shaking, gently covered her mouth. Shmi had never seen her son run off like that, and it honestly terrified her. She had sensed all day that something was bothering him, but she could never get a fix on it. It was something completely new, something she had never hoped to see in her boy, which worried her even more. Cliegg thought about telling her the truth because of that, but he knew it wouldn't help to assuage her fears. It might only tear apart a family.

"I haven't the slightest idea," the farmer lied, deciding it would be best to keep his wife in the dark, at least for now. For all he knew, the whole thing would blow over in a couple of hours, the Force willing.

"Don't worry," Obi-Wan assured them; the Jedi Knight had also noticed something wrong in Annikin throughout the day, so he too was worried about the boy. "We'll find him."

"We will?" Dooku asked. *Why is it always our responsibility?*, the old Jedi thought quietly to himself. Part of him wanted nothing to do with Obi-Wan's pet project, but it seemed he had little choice. It was either go with Obi-Wan on some wild bantha chase, or stay at the farm and avoid making small-talk with the Lars family. The choice was simple. "Oh, right. We will, most certainly."

"I'm going too," Arcadia told them unexpectedly, prompting a number of heads to turn. "If whatever's wrong has anything to do with us, I want to take responsibility for it in person."

"Then I'm going with you," came the handsome voice of Logan Amator from behind her; Panaka wasn't in the area, so he would have to step up and make sure the queen wasn't going off by herself. "Someone tell Captain Panaka that the situation is under control."

"Well it won't be me," Jar spoke up, stepping towards the group that was already jumping into the nearest family speeder. "If you're all leaving, so am I."

Dooku rolled his eyes, but this time he restrained himself from making it too over-the-top and obvious to make sure no one else saw him. The old man rubbed his eyes with his palms, regretting the fact that he almost had a moment away from virtually every member of the crew, but of course the whole bunch just had to go with them. Had he cared enough, he would've likely reminded himself that the ridiculous truly didn't ever end for him.

-----

Annikin maneuvered his speeder through the outskirts of Anchorhead, pushing the engine faster and harder than he ever had before. He considered dropping down to a normal cruising speed so as to not attract attention, but his quiet determination was evident. He was going to get to Sarus as soon as possible. He didn't know how, but he knew that the strange old hermit would be there waiting for him. When Annikin rounded a corner at the edge of the city, his theory was confirmed: there was Sarus, leaning against a building smoking a long pipe, the smoke from it rising into the dark nighttime sky. When Annikin approached, the hermit dropped the smokable substance onto the ground and put the pipe into a satchel that he wore around himself.

"You know," Annikin said, jumping out of his speeder as he spoke, "at first I thought you were making all that stuff up last night. Now I know you told my mother the same thing."

"So you believe?" Sarus asked, determined to convince Annikin that he was saying was the absolute truth, nothing more and nothing less.

"Absolutely not," Annikin snapped in a half-lie, still not sure what to make of any of it, "but you freaked my mother out enough to make her lie to me my whole life. There must be something that made her even remotely believe what you're telling me. What was it?"

Sarus chuckled. As he smiled, he wiped a drop of sweat off of his upper lip, not used to the heat on this part of Tatooine. Annikin would know about Sarus's climate soon enough, but first he had to wait for a few friends. The time was not yet right to bring Annikin where he needed to be brought, but he could at least get the introductions out of the way.

"The answers you seek won't be found in Anchorhead, Annikin," Sarus told him. "You'll have to travel farther than that."

"Then where?" Annikin asked. He wanted to smack Sarus; all Annikin wanted was a straight answer, and no one was giving one to him. Was it so hard to ask?

Sarus looked out past the city line, gazing far into the distance, far beyond the horizon to a point that no one could see from the city. All known parts of the Dune Sea were a barren tract of death, but beyond there, beyond the most distant dunes, lied the closest thing the planet had to an oasis. It was Sarus's home, the only one he ever knew, and the only one

he could ever think of knowing. It was his paradise, his heaven. Annikin would know it too soon enough.

"The Dune Sea," Sarus said with an affectionate infatuation that no one could have understood save for his own people. No one saw Tatooine the way his people did, and it was a damn shame.

"There's nothing in the Dune Sea other than sand and barbarians," Annikin ignorantly bellowed. "What could I possibly find there?"

"There are hidden places on this planet that will help teach you the truth about yourself," Sarus admitted, adding to the confusion that Annikin was feeling. "You can never hope to know the threats you face until you reach them. You need to follow me there."

Now things were starting to sound even more ridiculous, yet at the same time even more intriguing. As the second speeder carrying the Jedi and the others pulled up, which Annikin didn't even notice, Annikin still didn't believe the hermit. Still, if there was anything out there in the desert hell that could clear the air about what was happening, he needed to find it. He knew Sarus wouldn't tell him anything further unless he went with him into the Dune Sea, so curiosity got the better of Annikin. He had to know more, even if deciding to go with Sarus was likely the dumbest decision he had ever made.

"Alright," Annikin agreed, just not very enthusiastically, "but I want answers."

"So do we," Obi-Wan interrupted while he approached with the others. "Where were you running off to?"

"Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for all of you to come out here?" Annikin asked, his eyes darting from right to left over and over again as he tried to come up with some sort of way to change the subject away from where he was going. "You're either targets for Sand People or the criminals."

"Well we're here now," Obi-Wan said, "so perhaps you could tell us what's going on with you. Your parents are scared to death right now."

"I'm going with Sarus to the Dune Sea," Annikin admitted, seeing no reason to hide anything after all. They might as well know, considering there was no way they were going to change his mind. "Alone."

"Not alone, actually," Sarus interjected, much to everyone's surprise. "I need you all to come with me on this pilgrimage. There, and only there, can we speak about what needs to be spoken."

"Us?" Dooku asked, not taking kindly to the idea that he needed to embark on a hermitage out into the desert with a hermit he didn't even know anything about. "What could you possibly want with us?"

"I have information that you and the boy needed," Sarus explained, his voice reflecting the perilous urgency that he felt was in the air. "The future of the galaxy depends on it."

Annikin's head slumped down, almost as if someone had loosened the joints in his neck and just let his head fall. Twenty-four hours earlier, had someone said something about the fate of the galaxy he would've laughed them off. Now, after hearing that he was supposed to



destroy the armies of darkness, the idea didn't seem as far-fetched to him. Obi-Wan and Dooku, however, shared a strong confusion, looking at him and Sarus with disbelief and uncertainty. Save for Dooku, though, everyone silently yet begrudgingly decided that they would go with Sarus. They knew it was likely that Sarus was wrong, but if he wasn't then it was information that was vital to the galaxy's future.

"I know what you're thinking," Obi-Wan quietly told his former master after pulling the old Jedi aside to convince him to go, "but this isn't another pet project. If this man means what he says then he has information we need."

"Oh please," Dooku blurted, not concerning himself with keeping his voice down in what he felt was a preposterous situation. "He's a hermit in a desert. What value could he possibly be to any of us?"

"Looks can be deceiving," Obi-Wan reminded the old man, "and you're not going to get the answer to that question unless you go with us."

"I'm not walking through an entire desert just to be swindled by a hermit," Dooku told him. The Jedi Master was steadfast in his decision, crossing his arms and standing resolute. He stopped just short of stomping his feet like a child.

Obi-Wan shook his head, trying to think of some way to convince his arrogant old mentor to go with him. It only took a few minutes to do so, as the proverbial light bulb lit up above his head. Years ago, before the Stark Hyperspace War, the two had been sent on a mission to Manaan, the memories of which were suddenly flooding back to him. They were sent there to investigate the claims of the Selkath, the planet's indigenous species, that the Trade Federation was illegally mining and stealing kolto, a healing product that had become relatively useless since the invention of the superior bacta substance. Dooku fiercely refused to dive to the bottom of the ocean to investigate while wearing only an environmental suit, but Obi-Wan was able to challenge his pride and convince the Jedi to make the dive with him, even though they were unable to find any conclusive evidence that the Federation was up to no good. Still, the challenging of pride was an obvious tactic for one to use against someone so full of themselves.

"I guess if you don't think you can do it," Obi-Wan wryly said with a hint of sarcasm, "then there's nothing I can do to make you go."

"It has nothing to do with my capability," Dooku exclaimed, uncrossing his arms as he was clearly becoming annoyed. The injured tone of his voice told everyone that well enough.

"Then prove it," Obi-Wan demanded. "Go with us and show me that you can make it through the desert. Show me that you're not afraid of a little harsh terrain at night."

If Dooku was anyone other than a Jedi, someone who lacked control over his emotions, odds were he would've hit Obi-Wan. However, he knew better than that, and he knew that Obi-Wan had issued him a direct challenge. It was just like it had been on Manaan, and Dooku realized that he had no choice but to venture out on some worthless mission to listen to whatever it was the hermit had to say. If he refused, he would've looked weak, and Obi-Wan would've won. He would not let that happen.

Annakin nearly laughed aloud when he saw the reluctant look of agreement on Dooku's face, because even though it was an agreement it was a look of clear annoyance and near disgust at what was about to happen. Annakin could only surmise that Dooku was not someone who

cared for the desert sands, or having his pride and his capabilities challenged for that matter. The humor value was something that Annikin desperately needed at the moment.

"Looks like we're all going then," Arcadia said at random, speaking up when no one else seemed to want to after the confrontation between the Jedi, before turning to Amator, who also had not yet said a word but rather was trying to make heads or tails out of what was happening. "Sergeant, go back to the farm and inform Captain Panaka where we're headed and that I won't require a guard."

"I won't let you go out there alone, my queen," Amator said, disagreeing with Arcadia's cavalier attitude. He knew nothing of the hermit, so that combined with Panaka's standing order that no one was to ever, under any circumstance, let the queen go off on her own told him that he had to go with her.

"I'll have two Jedi, a more than capable farm boy, and a warrior prince with me," Arcadia said with a reassuringly warm smile, innocently batting her eyes as if to try and convince him to leave with her kindness. "I think that's more than enough protection, don't you?"

"No," Amator firmly told her, shooting down her hopes at getting him to leave so she wouldn't have to feel like a prisoner anymore. "I'm going with you."

Arcadia stood her ground, but finally rolled her eyes and threw up her arms in annoyed agreement. She was sick of guards following her all the time, but more than that she was tired of the guards listening to Panaka's order to never let her go anywhere unarmed. She understood where the captain was coming from, considering the incident that happened after her father's assassination, but she still wished it were otherwise.

Once it was settled who all was going, Sarus looked over to Annikin, who was becoming increasingly nervous but nonetheless ready to leave. The rest of the group nodded, telling him that they too were prepared to go. With that, the entire group followed Sarus towards the city's gate, ready to make their way into the Dune Sea without having any idea or expectation as to what awaited them once they go there. Still, Sarus knew it would be a time they would never forget, as he had been assured by his superior. Somewhere, the man who instructed him was smiling, knowing that the ball had been set in motion for the coming of destiny. Annikin may have only been on the threshold of destiny, but Sarus was finally about to fulfill his.

Force willing, of course.



## EMPIRES OF THE FUTURE

*"Empires based solely on faith cannot be sustained.  
The empires of the future are the empires of the mind."*

- Bacatine, Last Emperor of Kamino  
Journal of the Whills, 4:17

A storm was coming. Mace could feel it in every bone within his body. His craft had sailed silently through the night, now purposely adrift in the cold vacuum of space, but now he simply sat, watching, hoping that something in his on-board computer could give him some indication of what was happening. He and his R4 unit spent the entire trip scouring the Jedi Archives trying to find some indication of what he might find on Kamino. Just as he feared, the Republic and the Jedi knew next to nothing. It didn't surprise him considering how remote a planet this was, and how abandoned a region the Wild Space area had become.

There was a hurricane on the planet before him. The hulking mass of clouds and rain, illuminated by the binary stars, one an orange-red and the other a radiant blue like nothing the Jedi Master had ever before seen, provided the perfect backdrop to the thunderous events that laid just beyond the horizon. Mace had no idea what these events would be, but his worrisome mind ached to its very core. Something wasn't right here in the light of the Rishi Maze. Something was disturbing the Force.

There was very little time to worry about what could be. Mace prepared his craft for entry into the planet's atmosphere, plotting a course around the savage storms and fierce bolts of electricity that shot down lightning fast, which he could see even from thousands of kilometers away. Still, the planet was a thing of beauty. Beyond the silver specks of dust and rock that made up Kamino's ring system was a light blue jewel lost in space from even the most dedicated travelers. When not consumed by storms, a rarity in and of itself, the planet was a tranquil treasure, blinding men and hiding nothing in its measure. Anyone could get lost in the peaceful seas, rocking on the gentle waves for days on end before realizing how much time had gone by.

Mace's craft still hovered in space, a void that echoed the planet itself. The red star, taking its last breaths as it prepared for a cataclysmic explosion in the next few thousand years that would consume most of the star system, gave off very little light. Instead, the system relied on the serene blue gem of a star, its colors touching even the nebula remnants that were in the region. The bald, dark-skinned Jedi Master yawned, cupping his palm over his mouth to keep from fogging up the cockpit window. The area was blanketed in a peaceful blue hue, one so relaxing that Mace had trouble keeping awake, despite knowing that it was

time to proceed.

Mace signaled to R4 that it was time to begin their descent. The droid beeped and chirped, setting the coordinates it picked up from its scans so the ship could auto-pilot itself to the capital, Tipoca City, a dark beacon in the nighttime waves that sat above the ancient sunken continent that the planet once treasured. As he continued flying above the atmosphere, the ship brought itself to the far side of the world, giving Mace a rare glimpse of a blue binary sunrise from above the surface of a planet.

And there it was.

The majesty hit him with such intensity, considering he did not expect it. A Kaminoan moon, basking in the light of the azure nebula, was floating thousands of kilometers before him, but he could still make out its wonder. The limited cloud coverage, the large continent, the greens and the blues that made up its surface; it was a stark contrast to the water-covered Kamino, but that did not mean it was any normal space body. Strange gravimetric distortions blanketed the atmosphere for reasons Mace did not know. He had not seen any reports of a Kaminoan moon that was seemingly habitable, so he had no idea what might have been causing them or why.

The craft dipped. The view of the moon was replaced with that of atmospheric entry. The craft sailed smoothly through the winds and clouds, and Mace relished it. Knowing what the planet was like, he was prepared for the dangerous storms that he would encounter in any second. Kamino was not a world he would want to spend much time on; for all he knew he was headed into a trap. He would go in and get out as soon as possible.

A jolt. A crash. The slap of wind across the bow. Leaving the atmosphere was rougher than he expected, Mace's craft rocking from side to side. Sweating, Mace quickly pushed a few buttons, taking the craft out of auto-pilot. He grabbed the axel and pulled up. He flew high, sheltered from the thunder and lightning, but that was only for a few moments to allow him time to catch his breath. He looked back and forth out the window, searching for his destination, which he quickly caught sight of the city.

Tipoca City was an architectural wonder, sitting atop the planet's former continent. The domes gleamed and shined brightly as the light from the orbiting moon briefly poked through the clouds, accentuating the gracefully curved walls of the monumental network of stilt structures that seemed to go on for hundreds of kilometers. The buildings were sleek and smooth, but resembled the basic designs of the Wookiee villages high atop the trees of Kashyyyk. The galaxy's planets had much in common.

There was very little time to gaze on the surroundings. The autopilot continued on its course, setting the craft down on a landing pad on the far side of the city. Arfour beeped nervously, at least for a droid. Units such as Arfour were generally seen as having more of a personality than other droids, and it made for quirks in what seemed to be a personality that developed within them.

After setting down, the craft's hatch popped open on his command, and Mace stood up so he could finally set foot upon the landing pad. The winds surged and the Jedi Master stumbled backwards, nearly knocked off the side into the deep, gray ocean below him. Had it not been for his quick legwork, he probably would have been dinner for whatever inhabitants lived in the depths of the strange aquatic world.

The revered Jedi Guardian pulled his hood up, protecting his bald brown head from the

torrential downpour and the gale force winds that were threatening to blow him away to his demise. The weather was disconcerting; it was a sign, a vision, a warning of things to come. There was something on this world, something terrible, something that the Jedi were unprepared for. He had no idea what it was, but he could feel its cataclysmic nature. If they weren't careful, it had the potential to catch them off guard with the intensity of the harsh Kaminoan winds. The Force had to be with them, or else they would be doomed to whatever fate may have been in store for them.

Wasting little time, the Jedi Master began walking towards the doorway that led into vast hallway, but before Mace could make it even a few meters, let alone to the door, the walkway to the hall retracted, cutting Mace and the entire landing pad off from the city. Was it a trap? Something told him it wasn't, but it still struck him as dangerously suspicious.

Mace shook from a sharp jolt below him. Looking down, the entire landing pad began to descend into the bowels of the city, or so he presumed. The little light that the faraway sun provided was lost as the pad moved deeper and deeper, even below the surface of the water. Mace had wondered how a city that supposedly held a cloning center could be so small; it was clear that any cloning center this city had was deep in the ocean, not above it. If it was a trap, it was a perfectly laid one. There would be very few ways that the Jedi Master could escape from below the sea.

Another sharp jolt, again nearly knocking the Korunian Jedi off of his feet, indicated that the descent was over. A doorway closed above him, keeping any additional rainwater from flooding wherever he was. There was no light, and all that could be heard was the soft, nervous chirping of Arfour, and the constant dripping of water from the walls and ceilings.

Suddenly there was the presence of more people in the room. Mace stood still for a few moments, trying to find some sort of indication as to who they were. Each felt similar, as if the same person was standing in three different locations. It was a strange sensation, one that confused him, as he'd never felt something like that before. All life signs gave off differently sensations, but these were far from unique. These were far from normal.

The lights came on, and Mace realized he truly was faced with the same person in three separate locations. Before him were three guards, each pointing a different blaster directly at his head, but they each looked the same. At first he thought they were triplets, ones who were far similar to any normal group of siblings born at the same time, but then he realized they were too similar. No, they weren't triplets. They weren't even unique individuals. They were genetic creations, copied from another source.

They were the clones Mace was looking for.

Despite being taught to respect all life in any form, Mace was horribly disturbed, his brow furrowed and his eyebrows arched in both intrigue and confusion. Though he didn't want to pass vocal judgment on the ideals and values of the Kaminoan people, the very thought of cloning was unthinkable. The Jedi viewed every life as unique, something to be treasured for its individuality, but these three genetic approximations before him desecrated every one of those beliefs. How could a person be viewed as an individual when there was nothing individual about them? How could their very existence be seen as unique when they were created in a laboratory with the DNA of another person? The original host couldn't even be seen as an individual anymore. He sold his uniqueness to science.

Whatever ethical questions had arisen, the clones still stood with their weapons pointed towards the Jedi Master. Mace's instincts told him to reach for his lightsaber and defend

himself, but something about these guards told him that he had no need to fear them, at least not yet. There was no way he could know where their allegiances were or what the plan for their lives were, but at least for now he felt that there was nothing he needed to defend himself against.

"State your purpose," the lead clone demanded; his forcefulness took even Mace aback.

"I'm from the Republic," Mace told him. "I have business with your leaders."

"Follow me," the clone said. "Go only where I go."

Without any further discussion, the clone turned. Mace followed suit, not wanting to give the clones any reason to believe he was hostile or had anything other than the best of intentions. The situation felt tense, and Mace could only assume that the three clones felt the same way. Situations such as those had the potential to spiral out of control. The Jedi Master wasn't about to let that happen on his watch.

The door to the holding area slid open and revealed a long hall, awash with a bright white light glowing with the intensity of a thousand raging suns. The clones led Mace into the blindingly bright area, one that Mace could barely even look at. He kept his hood up and his head down, trying not to look at the lights. It must have been the Kaminoan culture that kept the lights so bright. Most Humans wouldn't be able to tolerate it.

A few minutes passed before the group finally arrived at their destinations. The clones snapped to attention and stood on either side of the doorway, which opened for Mace and Mace alone. The Jedi Master could feel that it was meant for him; no words had to be uttered. He strode inside, hoping he would finally find the answers he was looking for.

At long last, Mace finally came face-to-face with a Kaminoan. The creature before him was tall and thin, its glassy coated almond-shaped eyes hauntingly staring right into his. Its skin was a pale blue luminescent color, and its long thin neck allowed its head to tower over the Jedi Master. From the chair it was sitting upon, the Kaminoan stretched its slender legs and stood up to greet Mace as he entered.

"Master Jedi," the Kaminoan, indicating a second chair in the room as it sat back down upon his. "I am Lama Su, Supreme Leader of Kamino."

"Mace Windy," the Jedi replied, refraining from saying too much until he was able to figure out exactly what was going on. At first he wondered how the Supreme Ruler knew he was a Jedi, but it only took him a second to realize that he had been too distracted by the thought of defending himself that he neglected to defend his identity; his lightsaber was clearly hanging from his utility belt.

"I trust you will enjoy your time here," Lama Su said, watching as Mace remained standing, soaking wet onto the ground. "You have arrived at the best part of the season."

That wasn't something Mace expected to hear, on either count. Not only was the Supreme Leader far more welcoming than he would have imagined, it also struck him as odd that this was the best part of the season for Kamino. If the deluge just beyond the walls was the best, he would have hated to be around for the worst.

"But onto business of course," the Supreme Leader continued, piquing the Jedi Master's interests. "You will be pleased to know that we are ahead of our original schedule: five

hundred thousand units are ready, with two and a half million more well on the way and scheduled for active status within the next two months."

"That's...", Mace began, but hesitated in saying over almost every word that he wanted to have follow it, finding it difficult to comprehend the magnitude of what Lama Su was saying. "...good news."

"I am most pleased that you find it satisfactory," the emotionless Kaminoan continued. "We are perfectionists in our work, and it is very much appreciated when our customers are satisfied with the results. Please tell Master Sido-Dyas that his order will be met ahead of schedule, as he had hoped."

"Master who?" Mace asked; he knew of no Jedi by that name, especially one who would have so recklessly ordered a clone army to be used against the Republic. Why would a Jedi want to help destroy the Republic?

"Jedi Master Sido-Dyas is still a leading member of the Jedi Council, is he not?" Lama Su asked. Now the Supreme Leader's interests were piqued.

"There's no Jedi by that name," Mace replied, although not very confidently. Could he have actually not known who this Jedi was? It seemed very unlikely, but he had come to believe that nothing was impossible.

"Very curious," the Supreme Leader said. "Very curious indeed. By his correspondences, he seemed very proud that we were building the army for him."

For him...for Sido-Dyas? Was it for this person personally, or was it for another source for which Sido-Dyas was simply acting as a spokesperson? None of it made any sense to him. The mystery was only beginning to reveal itself.

"When Sido-Dyas ordered the army," Mace began, shifting uncomfortably in his chair while trying to seem as if he somewhat knew what he was talking about, "did he tell you who it was for?"

"Of course he did," Lama Su scoffed, almost as if the question had been an insult to his organizational and governmental methods. "We would never accept an order without knowing who it was meant for. This army is for the Republic."

For the Republic? Mace wanted to blurt the words out and let everyone in the area know how surprised he was. The Senate Armed Services Committee said the exact opposite. Was the committee wrong, or was Lama Su lying? Mace's instincts told him the former; nothing in Lama Su seemed to indicate that he was lying to the Jedi Master, but rather straightforward and honest, if not somewhat reserved. His mind was in turmoil, his thoughts raging as furiously as the storm beyond the walls.

The most pressing question was who Sido-Dyas was. Was it someone masquerading as a Jedi, someone whose goals were not yet clear? Was it truly a Jedi, perhaps using a pseudonym for fear of retribution? Either way, how could the Jedi Council, the wisest and most powerful individuals of the Jedi Order, not sense this? How could the Senate have missed it for so long?

The implications of an army for the Republic were severe; a thousand years earlier, Supreme Chancellor Tarsus Valorum's Ruusan Reformations drastically changed the

Republic, and the Chancellor had made it clear that his reforms would never allow the Republic to have a standing military again. The reforms had been well received over the thousand years since the end of the New Sith War at which they were created, making this clone mystery even more puzzling.

"Now, Master Windy," Lama Su continued, breaking the silence that had befallen them, "you must be anxious to inspect the clones for yourself."

"I'd appreciate that," Mace admitted, standing up and straightening his robes as Lama Su did so as well. Talking about the clone army was one thing. He had to see it for himself. The anxiety he felt could barely let him keep to a normal, steady walk as he followed Lama Su out of the room, suddenly flanked by the three clone guards once more.

-----

It was a peculiar thing, this rebellion on Utapau. It began on the streets of a Human world. It was being fought in the homes of Human families. It was one of the Human spirit, a spirit that cried out for the freedoms that Humans deserved, as did all of humanity's sentient brothers throughout the galaxy. But this rebellion was being fought in a strange way.

Now it was being waged by an artificial being, and the keys to victory lied within its metal skeleton and its artificial intelligence where the fires of rebellion were still being forged. Walking through the streets was TC-14, the protocol droid captured and reprogrammed by the Veermok Resistance to use in an effort to steal information from the Federation computer files in the Ogana Royal Palace. It was a bold move, especially considering that the quick reprogramming could easily be found if a diagnostic was performed on the droid, but it was one the resistance had to make nonetheless.

Twisted metallic skeletons littered the street, all of them from battle droids that Ogana's citizens had destroyed. The first rebellion in Ogana only hours earlier, the same night that the Veermok Resistance was officially established, lasted until it was broken up by the Federation, but that wasn't before numerous droid forces, and, regrettably, citizens of Utapau, were destroyed. Fires still burned from the destruction, and the citizens seemed eager to actually battle against the battle droid armies. It was amazing how quickly the peaceful people could turn into savages. Such was the nature of Human behavior.

Battle droids were not the only thing that littered the streets. Bodies were strewn across the sidewalks like ragdolls. The Oganian citizens may have been united, but they had no combat experience. Their resolve couldn't be broken, but the battle droids likewise couldn't be beaten. And yet the rebellion continued to be waged. The people still took up the arms that they swore never to use.

"Oh," the protocol droid gasped in Pak Pak, the Neimoidian language that it was programmed to speak by default, "what a mess we've made."

In the far corner of the street, Lieutenant Chamberlyn, the de facto leader of the Veermok Resistance, and his men who flanked him wished to whatever higher power that may have been listening that the protocol droid would just shut up. Chamberlyn wanted to program it to act as dazed and confused as it had been when his men first found it lost, wandering through the streets, but that sort of program would've been easily located. There was no way he could get it as deep into its subroutines as he did its new infiltration program. All he could do was hope that the blabbering idiot of a supposedly intelligent droid wouldn't expose his location.



Finally the droid turned onto another street, bringing it only a few dozen meters from the Federation perimeter. That was as far as Chamberlyn was willing to bring his forces towards enemy territory, at least for now. The Federation, so far as he knew, still had no idea that there was an organized resistance movement amongst security personnel, and he preferred to keep it that way. Of course the political leaders of the movement, in all their blithering idiocy, at least so far as Chamberlyn saw it, wanted to send out messages to the Federation to let them know they were there and that they were coming to get them. Nothing would have been more of a strategic blunder than that, save for marching into the Federation's territory to say hello.

"You two," Chamberlyn whispered, pointing to the two security personnel closest to him, "come with me."

Slowly marching forward, Chamberlyn needed cover as he looked around the corner that TC-14 had gone around. For all he knew there were battle droids nearby, and he wasn't about to be caught out in the open. Discreetly running low to the far side of the small square they were in, he peered around the corner and watched as two battle droids intercepted the protocol droid, leading it back to the Federation base where it would hopefully be able to transmit information to the Veermok Resistance safe house on the far side of the city.

The two personnel that flanked Chamberlyn shared a collective gaze and breathed a sigh of relief. One of them was Esarra Till, the commanding pilot of Utapau's Bravo Squadron. The thirty-five year old red head had no problem taking orders from Chamberlyn, despite outranking him. She was never one to gripe over the job at hand. She had worked as a mercenary for years before becoming disillusioned with the corruption in the galaxy. She had thought that returning to Utapau and joining the Security Forces would be a breeze, but the recent invasion proved her wrong in that respect.

Till jumped as she heard a groan behind her. She jolted around, cocking her gun in expectation for an assault. Instead, she saw nothing, at least at first. It took her a moment to realize that there was a dimly-lit figure beneath a pile of destroyed battle droids. Motioning for her fellow security officer to help her, she started to pull the droids off of it, but she gasped in fright once she saw who she was helping: a Neimoidian.

Chamberlyn turned around just in time to see the gravely injured Neimoidian lying there. Considering how hard he studied the Federation hierarchy over the last few hours, there was no mistaking who it was. It was Rune Haako, one of Nute Gunray's pawns on the Federation Directorate. Chamberlyn's first instinct was to finish the job of whoever attempted to kill the Neimoidian earlier, but he hesitated. It wasn't what he expected to do.

But then it dawned on him. If he had been injured behind enemy lines and the Neimoidians or their battle droids found him, they wouldn't hesitate in shooting his head off at all. In fact, they would probably make a sport out of it. If he was to do the same thing, or if he ordered his men to do it for him to wash his hands clean of it, he would be no different than the Federation cowards who were oppressing his people. He may as well of been a murderer. He wasn't about to let himself become one of them.

"Orders, sir?" Till asked, already putting her finger on the trigger in anticipation of what she thought would be Chamberlyn's obvious command.

"Bring him back to base," Chamberlyn ordered, although he said it more suggestively than

forcefully. He may not have wanted to let himself turn into someone like the Neimoidians, but he still couldn't believe he was actually helping one of them. "We'll patch him up there."

"But sir, he's - "

"You heard me, Commander," Chamberlyn barked. He may not have been thrilled about helping his enemy, but he wasn't about to have his orders questioned.

"Respectfully, sir," Till said, lowering her weapon to comply with the order, even though she disapproved, "I don't believe they'd give us the same treatment."

"Exactly my point," the lieutenant virtuously boasted. "We can't defeat them by turning into them. We're going to help him, so get him out of here."

Despite her strong reservations, Till and her fellow security officer nevertheless complied with the orders, throwing Haako over their shoulders to carry him out of harm's way. She had half a mind to drop him hard enough to kill him and claim it was an accident, but she wasn't about to disobey a direct order. Chamberlyn may have been in charge of the resistance movement's combat operations, but he had never actually seen real combat before. As a former mercenary, Till certainly had, and suddenly she found herself doubting the resistance leadership. She prayed she was wrong, but until she found out otherwise she would go on doubting Chamberlyn. Little did she know that Chamberlyn equally doubted himself as well.

-----

Mace had seen more of Tipoca City than he originally thought would be allowed. Beginning in the hatcheries all the way to the training facilities at the far end of the underwater complex, all of the wonders and complexities of life had been right before him. Some were in test tubes; others were marching back and forth in training to become tools of war and destruction. Still, he couldn't deny that it was an incredible operation, despite the ethical ambiguity of the whole thing.

Jedi were supposed to be nonjudgmental. It was best not to speak if all that could be said was telling others how they should live, but rather one's life, not their words, was meant to be their teaching. Yet he found himself in a situation where he almost couldn't help but judge the Kaminoans. The idea of creating life in a laboratory was abominable to him, but he fought that instinct every moment he was on this planet. Only those who could give up doctrine and dogma, even Jedi ones, would be counted among the wise. Anyone else could not be considered a true pupil of the Force.

His thoughts came from who these clones were, or rather his conflict about what they were. Were they truly simple tools of war and destruction, or were they actually Human? Were they bred to destroy, or they bred with the Human desire to save others? They seemed to be tools, ones who did not find life precious or fear death as all beings did. He had not yet seen the five aggregates of a Human being, or any sentient being for that matter. He had been taught them by his master as a small boy, and no matter how hard he tried he had yet to see them here. Perhaps he just wasn't looking hard enough.

"Would you care to inspect the final product now?" Lamu Su asked, his deep and soothing voice cutting off Mace's contemplations on the finitude of life. "I would prefer to have your direct approval before your Republic takes delivery."

Final product. There was such callousness in the Supreme Leader's voice, one that profoundly disturbed the Jedi Master who was trying so hard to remain impartial. It almost reinforced his opinion that the clones simply were tools, not actual people. If they were people, how could a supposedly enlightened society refer to them in such cold terminology? Such thoughts waged an assault against Mace's sense of what was right and what was wrong.

Continuing the tour, Mace followed the Kaminoan leader through the winding hallways, awash with the same blinding white light that he encountered when he first entered the facility a few hours earlier. He had seen the hatcheries, filled with blinking blue and red lights and green-hued test tubes that were growing the clone infants within them; the educational facilities, with desks in clean orderly rows where students, no more than nine years old, all dressed the same as they all processed the same information that their breeders deemed relevant; now he overlooked a commissary, one filled with hundreds of clone adults, all dressed in identical red garments, ate the same food in the same manner, all with the same expressions and features. The Jedi Master almost expected to see an elaborate series of mirrors that were playing a trick on his mind's eye, but there were none. It was far too real for his liking.

All of it showed him the first of the Jedi aggregates: form. What it did not show him was whether that actually indicated some sort of humanity within them. All beings had some sort of form. Whether it was a Human being or a gundark, there was no such thing as a being without some sort of form. It was far too early to tell if that actually meant anything.

Suddenly the tour stopped, and it only took him a moment to find out why. Below him, dozens of feet below the vast open window that was the only thing between him and the rest of the facility, were clones marching back and forth in formation, taking their orders from older, more experienced clone drill sergeants, all of whom were being overlooked by Kaminoan supervisors. Docks for observation ships were located at the far side, and behind him were lines and lines of clones waiting to receive their helmets from a dispenser at the center of the gray steel floor. Mace had thought seeing the clones who first greeted him was disturbing; the hundreds of clones below him knotted his stomach up.

"And here we have the center for the final states of training," Lama Su finally said, his cold matter-of-fact words still just as unsettling as they were earlier. "As you can see, they are very diligent in both their studies and combat training."

"They seem to take orders well," Mace blurted out, not quite having expected to say that. Was that the best he could come up with?

"You will find they are totally obedient," the Supreme Leader told him, not seeming to notice Mace's embarrassment. "They take any order from a designated superior without question. At first we were only going to accelerate their growth, but we modified their genetic structure to ensure obedience."

Genetic modifications? Even if they these clones were given humanity, which he still had his doubts about, would they even be fully Human? Human beings didn't grow in test tubes, nor did they have any tampering with their genomes. Jedi were meant to respect all life, but how could he respect a species whose sole purpose in life was to play divine creator?

"How old are these clones, then?" Mace asked, curious about the growth acceleration.

"Their outward appearance is twenty-five standard Human years," the Supreme Leader

informed him, which was what Mace had expected based on their physical condition. "Their true age, however, is only eight years. If we had foregone growth acceleration, a mature clone would take a lifetime to grow. Now we can do it in less than a decade. Their perception of reality is that they have lived for twenty-five years, although they know it has only been eight."

"Impressive," the Jedi Master lied. In fact, despite the scientific marvel, he wasn't impressed at all. He wouldn't let himself be, at least not internally. He wasn't going to try and convince himself that he was non-judgmental about this, even if he would outwardly pretend to be for the sake of his mission.

Still, he found the second aggregate: perception. One's perceptions would often confuse their understanding of reality and give them an impression that was completely wrong. Had the clones not exhibited some Human qualities then they would have believed they were twenty-five years old, but they knew it wasn't true. They knew they were actually eight years old. Could that have indicated complex thought? Perhaps, but there was no proof of that, at least not yet. It could have simply been that they were told the truth and they processed it as a computer processed downloaded information.

"I had hoped you would be pleased," Lama Su boasted, feeling a strong sense of satisfaction that the Jedi Order's ambassador seemed to approve of his people's work. "Clones can think creatively. You will find they are immensely superior to droids, and their combat skills are taken from some of the fiercest warriors the galaxy has ever known. Our methods have allowed us to perfect this over the centuries."

The third aggregate: mental formations. It confirmed that they did indeed have the potential to form complex thoughts and think for themselves, which meant that it was very likely they could also perceive they were truly eight years old. If that was true, then it also led to a fourth aggregate: consciousness. They were truly alive, not simply pretend creatures and shells of real sentience. That said, the fifth aggregate was the most important once the other four were in the mix, and he had yet to see that. Perhaps a little more digging into the Kaminoans was in order.

"No disrespect," Mace said truthfully, not wanting to compromise his mission with bad manners, "but why do you clone? Most societies consider it unethical."

"I can understand why they would think that," Lama Su said with a warm, yet somber, smile, the first hints of emotion he had shown all day. "A thousand years ago, we would have said the same. For several centuries, the Kingdom of Kamino ruled throughout the region you call Wild Space, but after the great flood that nearly destroyed us we began to think differently. The last emperor of our kingdom, a wise and powerful ruler named Bacatine, preached science instead of religion, which had been our dominant point of view for years. He felt that it was through science, not religion, that a society would thrive, and that it could be used for the benefit of the entire galaxy."

"Why?," Mace asked, truly intrigued by the Kaminoan history lesson. He folded his hands within his dark brown robes, almost like a child wrapping themselves into a warm blanket as their parents told them a bedtime story.

"The answer lies in Bacatine's own words," Lama Su continued. "'Empires based solely on faith cannot be sustained. The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.' Only genius and intellect, not blind faith, allowed us to create a greater society here and on our moon, Atlantica. Now we clone to preserve and create life everywhere, because if the great

flood taught us anything it was that life is precious and can be taken at any time.”

*Suddenly I understand where they're coming from*, Mace said to himself. While he still personally could not condone cloning, he could at least see why Kamino did it. It was more than simply profit or scientific development. It was about helping people, saving them. All ethical issues aside, if a species was destroyed then cloners such as the Kaminoans could bring it back, perhaps even the same as before they were destroyed. It was highly intriguing. Still, there was a contradiction in their views, one that he would want to see addressed.

“If life is precious, Supreme Leader,” Mace started, not realizing how he was now coming across as judgmental, even if inadvertently, “why are you creating an army?”

“Because that was the job we were paid to do!” the Supreme Leader snapped, not taking kindly to someone attempting to flaunt what they felt was their superiority over him. “We may be scientists, but like all great projects this one came with a price. Sido-Dyas and the original host were very persuasive.”

“I’m sorry if I was rude,” Mace said sincerely. “Who was the original host?”

“A businessman named Jango Fett,” the Supreme Leader said, nodding in recognition of the Jedi Master’s understanding and forgivable faux-pas, yet at the same time giving Mace the impression that the Kaminoan was hiding something from him. “We felt that a Jedi Knight would have been the ideal host, but Sido-Dyas handpicked Fett himself.”

A Jedi wouldn’t let themselves be used like this, the Jedi Master wanted to blurt out, but he restrained himself this time. Lama Su may have been forgiving for one slip of the tongue, but he wasn’t about to press his luck with a second. In fact, the Kaminoan leader seemed almost too forgiving, and Mace couldn’t shake the sense that he was being misled. It was ironic that he had been thinking of the aggregate of perception. As his master once told him, where there was perception there was deception. Was this what she was talking about?

Then suddenly it dawned on him: Lama Su’s deception wasn’t the biggest threat he now had to worry about. It took him a few moments to realize it as he searched the back of his head, but his studies of warrior factions as he was creating his own lightsaber style led him to a number of Mandalorian clan names. One of those was Clan Fett. Could Jango Fett have been one of them? If so, what were the Mandalorians doing in this mess? The fact that one of their possible members was supposedly sponsoring an army didn’t sit well with him. The Republic knew all too well the might of the war-hungry Mandalorian Clans. The Mandalorian Wars nearly four thousand years earlier were something no one ever wanted to see again.

“Where can I find him?” Mace asked. He needed to meet this businessman, as he might have been able to provide clues about Sido-Dyas and the entire puzzle, most importantly any Mandalorian involvement.

“I am not sure where he is,” Lama Su told him, his voice expressing remorse but his mind expressing something...else, something that Mace couldn’t yet determine. “Unfortunately, he refused to stay here, despite our insistence. He returns every six months for more genetic sampling, but he will not be back for another four.”

“Any information would help,” Mace pleaded.

“The Fett Consortium has offices on a handful of worlds,” Lama Su seemed to suddenly

remember, although whether or not that was the case, or if this Fett Consortium even existed, was another matter entirely. "He could be on any one of them."

Mace turned his attention back away from the Supreme Leader, sensing that he wasn't going to be able to get anymore information from him. Whether that was deliberate or just a circumstance of not knowing enough, Mace had no idea. There was something about these people that he couldn't crack; most of the time he could see right through any species, but this one was surprisingly strong-minded. That may have been why Sido-Dyas, whoever he was, chose them. He would've known the Jedi would have no way of getting enough information from the Kaminoan minds.

Instead, the Jedi Master again focused on the clones beneath him. The ones in line had finished receiving their helmets from the dispenser and had joined their brothers in arms on the simulated battlefield. Mace now noticed that the helmets were specially designed to portray battlefield images, which is why Mace could see them performing maneuvers without any visible foe, hologram or otherwise, to spar against. Being able to perform realistic combat simulations using only visual images in a helmet took a great deal of skill.

"Very disciplined," Mace said, finally breaking the awkward silence that had befallen them.

"That is the key to the entire operation. They are disciplined, yet they can think creatively. It is an important combination on the battlefield. Now come, I want you to finally see the final product."

And this isn't the final product? the Jedi Master asked himself. Here he had been thinking that he was already looking at the most highly trained and professional soldiers the cloners had created. Mace followed Lama Su into a lift, one that shot up towards the sky immediately. In just seconds, Mace was able to step out onto their destination, a balcony, and realize why the clones deeper in the facility were not the final products.

Sheltered from the brutal winds and rains outside the facility by a durasteel casing around them, the two watched as hundreds of clones sparred against one another with holographic weapons, seemingly ignoring the howling winds and torrential downpours that would have made it nearly impossible for most other military forces to fight. Suddenly he realized just how disciplined the most elite clones were.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" Lama Su asked as lightning bolted through the sky above them.

Mace looked up to see the Supreme Leader beaming with pride. It reinforced Mace's belief that there were no ethical complications involved, that the Kaminoan conscience was far different than his own. He couldn't deny that the warriors before him were magnificent, and he knew that they would perform their duties with a brutal efficiency were the Republic every to need them in war, but the thought of that sent a shiver down the Jedi Master's spine. It seemed that his apprentice, who for so long had told him how the Jedi needed to be more pacifistic, was right all along.

-----

Everything was a blur. Where was he? Was this death? Never having believed in an afterlife, that idea didn't sit too well, nor did it make any sense. Everything should have been black and full of nothingness, but instead there were faint images of a ceiling, and the barely audible sound of voices coming from nearby. No, it wasn't death. It was captivity.

Rune Haako groaned as he rose up from the bed he was lying upon. He had no idea where he was or how he had gotten there. The last thing he remembered was being escorted back from his transport to the palace when a number of Humans attacked him. They destroyed his droids, assaulted him, and left him for dead. He may have helped to orchestrate the subjugation of their world, but that was no way for supposedly civilized people to treat one of their new overlords. It was just plain rude and disrespectful. They would all be killed for their outlandish behavior.

Haako tried to rise to his feet, but instead he fell flat onto his face on the floor. He struggled to move forward, fighting what felt like paralysis. Of course, he wasn't paralyzed, but rather his legs were tightly chained to the bed so he couldn't move. With his hands, free of restraints, he pushed up on the floor and slid back onto the bed. This time, he sat up, which he was capable of doing with the restraints, instead of trying to stand up.

With his vision getting back to normal, he could finally make out the room he was in. It was rundown, with exposed wood and metal framework throughout it. There were no lights, but instead the night was being lit with candles. Moisture dripping from the ceiling led him to believe he was underground, perhaps in some sort of rebel headquarters. The dark, dreary gray of the area gave him little comfort. The entire building seemed like it had been hit by a bomb, which meant it probably was. The citizens of Utapau would never have allowed any part of their prized world become rundown like this.

He had no idea what his captors would do with him, their future overlord. Were he in their position and a force had subjugated Cato Neimoidia, his treasured home planet, he would likely see to it that they were promptly and brutally executed. The Humans of this world may have claimed to have been enlightened and peaceful, but they were already rebelling in the streets. They had already tried to kill him. He had no doubt they would finish the job now that they had him just where they wanted him.

The door handle began to jiggle, sending a bead of sweat down Haako's head. This could have been it. An armed guard could have walked right through and shot him in the head. Instead, an unarmed man, so far as Haako could tell, strolled into the room, immediately commanding Haako's attention. The Neimoidian didn't mean to give the man the satisfaction of feeling in control, but considering Haako could have very well been killed there was little he could do about his own nerves.

"I'm Lieutenant Chamberlyn of the Utapau Security Forces," the man finally said, turning to reveal his overly-intimidating eye patch to the Neimoidian captive. "You can save the introductions. I already know who you are."

"Dook nata vosas?" Haako asked, purposely avoiding Basic and instead speaking in his own language out of spite.

"You can also save your Pak Pak for someone else," Chamberlyn growled, clearly having no intention to play any sort of games with his prisoner. "I know you can speak my language. Considering your situation, I suggest you do it."

"I said, what do you want?" Haako asked, knowing that if he complied then he might have a chance at surviving this encounter.

"To heal you," Chamberlyn said, the shock in his voice as the words came out rivaling the shock Haako felt, "which we've already done, hence why you're awake."

"You likely poisoned me," the Neimoidian accused. He couldn't imagine the Humans treating him with such dignity as to actually heal the wounds that their own people inflicted.

"The thought did occur to me," Chamberlyn admitted, slamming a medical kit onto the table in front of him out of frustration for what he had done to aid and abet his enemy, "but I'm better than you. I wouldn't kill someone who can't defend themselves, even if that person was one of the masterminds behind the subjugation of my home and the mass killings of my people."

He had to be lying. There was no way an Utapau military officer would actually give aid and comfort, if one could call being chained to what might as well of been a concrete bed, to his enemy, let alone one of his enemy commanders. There was no way Haako was leaving the room alive. He was sure of it.

"What will you do then?" Haako asked, although he wasn't very comfortable in finding out the answer. "Give me a chance to defend myself and then butcher me?"

"I thought about that too," Chamberlyn admitted once more, lowering his head and wiping off the sweat from his brow as his sad, crumpled features almost seemed to say that he was regretting his decision. "In the end, though, I decided we're going to hold you here where you can't hurt anyone else."

"You cannot simply - "

"I could either hold you here," Chamberlyn threatened, grabbing the Neimoidian's bruised shoulders in a fit of rage that he couldn't control, "or I can let my men kill you like I know they want. I'm going out on a limb for my enemy here."

Chamberlyn's eyes twitched. He suddenly realized what he'd done and released his grip. He never meant to physically assault the Neimoidian like that, nor did he mean to threaten him. Still, what was done was done, and it may have been effective. If it made Haako realize how perilous his situation was, then Chamberlyn had done his job.

"But why are you doing this?" Haako asked, rubbing his now-bruised shoulders to take away the pain from Chamberlyn's iron grip.

Chamberlyn turned away and knocked on the door, signaling that he was ready to leave. A guard on the opposite side unlocked and opened it, but before walking all the way through Chamberlyn stopped and considered the question posed to him. He had already said he was doing it because he was better than Haako, and yet the Neimoidian didn't and couldn't realize that. Perhaps that was the problem.

"It's not in your nature to understand," Chamberlyn said, turning back around to face the Neimoidian one last time. "Now you should show me some respect. I dragged you out of the battlefield. I can throw you back in."

The door slammed shut in front of him, leaving the Neimoidian to ponder his own thoughts. There were few things more disturbing to him than to find in someone he detested a moral quality which seemed superior to any morals he himself had. That introduced a dangerous question: did Haako not care, or was he afraid to admit that Chamberlyn was right? But that idea was preposterous. Of course he didn't care. There was no way he could have thought his captor was right. He wouldn't allow it.



-----

Mace stepped through the door into the landing area, flanked by Lama Su and two of the clone guards who had originally greeted him a few hours before. His visit was interesting, to say the least, if not incredibly disturbing. His views on a number of scientific and ethical issues were in conflict, as were his beliefs on being non-judgmental. Ever since he and the Supreme Leader had left the balcony overlooking the final clone training arena, he kept telling himself over and over that if the Kaminoans were happy with their practices then that was good enough for a Jedi Master.

"Thank you for the tour," Mace said, politely nodding as he turned back around towards the Kaminoan ruler. "You've been very accommodating."

"It was no trouble," Lama Su replied, returning the polite gesture. "It is always a pleasure to meet a Jedi. Now that the clones have their future deployment orders for the Republic, I am sure we will be seeing you soon."

The two shared a bow before the Kaminoan left the room, but the two clones stayed behind. Stepping up onto his starfighter, Mace sensed that they were asked to stay to make sure he left, but he didn't know why the Kaminoans would be afraid he was staying. It didn't exactly help change his view that the cloners were trying to hide something from him.

"Did you get deployment orders?" the first helmeted clone quietly asked, his voice emanating from his helmet's built-in comlink. The distinctive white plastoid armor had a number of features, including the comlink.

"No one has, as far as I know," the second clone replied, just as hushed and secretive, or so he thought, as his fellow soldier.

Mace resisted the urge to stop dead in his tracks. He knew that if he stopped climbing into his vessel then the clones would realize he overheard them, and that would probably have had dire consequences for him. It was all just too suspicious, and there was more deception than he previously thought. At first he just sensed that something was amiss, but now he knew that the Supreme Leader had lied to him. What else during the tour was a lie? Was the army actually for the Republic, or was he being misled in order to think that there was no threat from them? Clearly there was a threat, and only one person now could help him get to the bottom of it.

Jango Fett.

-----

Pain. Suffering. Death. Such omens of the future were becoming far too common for the diminutive Jedi Grandmaster's comfort. Even more troubling was the signal he had just received in his quarters aboard Chu'unthor, where he and Ki-Adi Mundi, whom Yoda had briefed on the situation for additional Jedi Council support in this unauthorized investigation, were currently staying. The transmission was coming in over scramble code five, care of the "old folk's home." Only the most urgent of signals were sent by such means. It meant Master Windy had found what he was looking for.

The dark-skinned Jedi Master's face appeared before them, his bald head taking up a sizeable amount of the room's small space. He wore a grim determination combined with a somber worry, indicative of what he had discovered. Based on the image of a seat behind

him, it appeared that Mace had already left the Kaminoan city and was en route to his next destination, whether that was the flagship or another planet.

"Master Windy," Yoda began, with an uncharacteristically worried eagerness in his scratchy voice, "what have you found?"

"I'm not sure," the hologram's voice replied. "I sense a lot of deception in these people. Their leader told me the clones have deployment orders to fight for the Republic, not against it like the Senate said."

Yoda and Mundi breathed a collective sigh of relief. Yoda never smiled, but Mundi could almost make out what seemed to be a faint grin on his small, green master's face. The Grandmaster would never admit it, of course, preferring to remain stoic in front of all Jedi in order to appear as wise as he possibly could, but it was there. How could it not be? They just found out that there was no threat against the Republic after all.

"Then we have nothing to worry about," Mundi told them. "The Force is with us."

"I don't agree," Mace retorted, sending their spirits plummeting once again. "Their leader told me that the clones received deployment orders, but I overheard two of the clones say that none of them have received any orders."

"Lying their leader could be," Yoda acknowledged.

"What was the status of the army?" Mundi asked.

"Five hundred thousand units are fully ready," Mace said, still in a sense of disbelief of his own that would rival those of Yoda and Mundi. "Two and a half million more will be ready in the next two months."

"Three million?" Mundi gasped.

"They also claim that the order for the clones was placed by Jedi Master Sido-Dyas," Mace said, diving further into the mystery that he had discovered.

"Master who?" Mundi asked. He knew his fair share of Jedi, but he wasn't familiar with that particular one.

Mundi may not have known why he couldn't think of who Sido-Dyas was, but Yoda regrettably did. At eight hundred and seventy years of age, Yoda had known tens of thousands of Jedi during his lifetime. Even those he did not know he was familiar with. He knew the names of every single Jedi that had come through the Jedi Temple on Coruscant for the past hundred years, considering he trained most of them as younglings, and not once was there ever a Sido-Dyas.

"That's what I said," Mace's holographic visage affirmed. "There's no Jedi by that name, but that's not the worst of it. The genetic host is a man named Jango Fett. That's a Mandalorian clan name."

"You must find him, Master Windy," Yoda ordered, his determined and resolute tone being the closest the small, wise leader could come to barking orders. "If involved the Mandalorians are, grave danger the Republic is in."

"Understood," Mace replied. "I'll report back when I have him."

Mace's holographic form faded away, and Yoda, rubbing his three-fingered hand across his temple, closed his eyes, pondering where Mace's investigations would take him next. The Grandmaster's eyes closed tightly as he tried to reach out through the Force to find some sort of answer as to what was happening with the clones, and if it was connected to the situation on Utapau. The timing of the Senate's report on the clones, the discovery of a potential Mandalorian involvement, and the Federation's actions at Utapau were far too close together to be coincidental. Only the Force, for now, could provide answers.

What Yoda found in the Force greatly disturbed him: nothing. For whatever reason, the Force had no answers to give him. He was completely blind, as if he were a bat flying through the night without sonar to guide its way. It seemed like a dark hand was reaching across the galaxy, blocking out the light of all the stars, leaving a vast and empty expanse of absolute darkness and complete and total nothingness.

"Blind we are if the creation of this clone army we could not see," Yoda admitted.

Mundi nodded his head in agreement. He wished that it wasn't true, but if the strongest and wisest of all the Jedi Masters were left scratching their heads, it meant something was amiss. When Jedi of Yoda and Mace's stature could not find clairvoyance enough to see through the Force and uncovering what was happening, then it was more than likely the dark side was growing stronger. It was something he had never considered before he learned of the clone army. Now that he did, he knew it was something the Jedi Order would have to deal with for a long time to come.

It was troubling, but Mundi couldn't help but wonder if the only way to move forward with this handicap was to let the galaxy know that the Force was no longer there to properly guide them. It was obviously possible that such an action could prove to be suicidal to the Jedi Council, but there was no much else they would be able to do to deal with the crisis. It was a risk that they would have to consider taking, so long as Yoda approved of such an action. Knowing Yoda, though, Mundi would have a hard time convincing him to do so. Despite that, he couldn't let that hold back his opinion.

"Should we inform the Senate that our ability to use the Force has diminished?" the Jedi Knight asked, knowing full well that his suggestion would likely be shot down.

"Only those behind this plot may know of our weakness," Yoda reminded him. "If informed the Senate is, multiply our adversaries will."

Yoda could never approve of an action like that. Considering the timing of the Senate Armed Services Committee's report on the clones, it was entirely possible that whoever was behind the clone mystery was in league with someone in the Galactic Senate. Yoda's mind raced to its two co-chairman, Wilhuff Tarkin of Eriadu and Bail Prestor Organa of Alderaan, but he couldn't see either of them risking the security of the Republic like that. Either way, someone had to be a conspirator. It was the only way that the Republic Ministry of Intelligence could have missed the existence of the army for nearly ten years.

If such a person was to be informed of the Jedi handicap, they would be able to exploit the situation to their advantage. Neither Yoda nor the Jedi Council would have been able to afford taking such a bold and risky course of action during such unsure times. This was even truer considering the situation on Utapau, which had the ability to spiral into an all-out war if handled improperly. As far as Yoda knew, no one on the Jedi Council would stand for that.

# --XI--

## THE OPHUCHI

*"And it is written, the Ophuchi shall inherit the desert."*

- Journal of the Whills, 1:11

The Dune Sea, a deserted and forsaken region of the desert wastes. It was a barren tract of inhospitable mayhem, home of the wild banthas and intolerable Tusken Raiders, but still incapable of supporting a population that chose comfort over the essential living requirements. It was one vast sand plain destitute of moisture and vegetation, and for that reason no one, save for the most hardened hunters and explorers, entered into it.

Once an immeasurable inland sea, extreme shifts in temperature caused the water to run dry and transform the entire region into a desolate wasteland. A Human could easily dehydrate in less than half an hour under the scorching suns, a fact that Sarus was all too aware of. His people had lost far too many brethren, ones who believed that they were stronger than the rest. Over the years, thankfully, that mindset diminished to a point of near-non-existence.

The strange old hermit looked up at the twinkling heavens, taking in the soft, cool breeze that the nighttime deserts provided. Ever since he was a boy, he loved venturing into the desert at night. Despite how dangerous it was, there was something magical about it. People had become so concerned with cities and machinery that they had forgotten the simple majesty of the mystical deserts. Humanity, and in fact all sentient peoples, had evolved in such lost beauties. There was no greater sin than forgetting one's roots.

For once, Sarus had the chance to remind others of their planetary heritage. Their ancestry may not have come from Tatooine, but if one could learn to appreciate a small wonder like the Dune Sea then perhaps they would be able to reconnect where they came from. Perhaps they would remember not to take their lush terrestrial worlds and high-rise metal buildings any longer. Others, like Annikin, might even stop taking the desert for granted, for it was Tatooine, amongst the sands of time, where true courage and true warriors were born.

Sarus and the six others who followed him had been walking nonstop for nearly six hours, and were only minutes from their destination. The gentle fragrance of the sands wafting through the breeze provided a constant source of refreshment whenever they, or at least Sarus, tired during their journey. The hermit had traveled to the far corners of Tatooine and back, and he was always able to find out something new about himself by searching within, which was the true test of the arid desert. Some preferred flourishing worlds of greens and blues, but Sarus couldn't see himself living anywhere else.

It was Sarus's lineage that taught him to respect the great dunes of his world. He, like all of his people, descended from one of the greatest orders the galaxy had ever seen. The great order spread its influence across the galaxy, from the deepest reaches of the galactic core to the farthest expanses on the galactic edges. His ancestors came to Tatooine after a schism broke their order into two, and their descendants remained in the Dune Sea ever since. It was where they were belonged. It was where destiny called for them to be. They inherited the desert, watching over and protecting it from those who may have wanted to cause it harm.

Even though Sarus felt at home in the Dune Sea, the others weren't as open to the extreme environment. Dooku could barely keep up with the rest of them considering his age, and it took every ounce of his physical and mental strength to keep him going. Not only that, but if he faltered then Obi-Wan would win the argument they had before leaving. He wasn't about to let Obi-Wan score a blow to his pride by collapsing before reaching their destination. No one had ever challenged his ability to do something without being proven wrong. He held firm to that notion throughout the entire trek.

Obi-Wan also didn't care for the desert, but he was fully capable of traversing it without falling behind as his former master was. Still, he had to give Dooku his due credit. There were very few people the Jedi Master's age who could still survive the harsh desert climate, even at night. Dooku was managing to do it for hours on end. Whatever their ill feelings towards one another, the Jedi Knight was still happy to see that his former master had the strength to perform the unpleasant duties of a Jedi.

By and large, Dooku was not the one who was having the worst time. Binks held that distinction. His arms were numb and limp, waving back and forth as he walked. Sweat poured down his entire head, from his eyestalks to his chin, like a torrential downpour during hurricane season on Utapau. It took every fiber in his being not to let his tongue fall and hang out from the side of his mouth. The others may have known by his heavy breathing and panting, combined with the fact that he was nearly four meters behind them, that he was having a difficult time, but he wasn't about to look like an idiot.

Though the temperature had dropped dozens of degrees since they left Anchorhead, the air was still so dry that he could barely handle it. He had made sure while he was working to stay outside and work only for short periods of time before resting in the cool interior of the Lars homestead, but he didn't have that luxury in the middle of nowhere. He hadn't thought of the strain it would put on him when he agreed to go. What it did do was make him wish he was back in the swamps on Utapau. Never before had his exile seemed like the good old days. He would never again take anything on his homeworld for granted.

Arcadia, on the other hand, with her faithful protector and athletically strong protector by her side, was able to adapt to the harsher environments of Tatooine, as was Amator. Despite Veruna Arcadia's obvious political faults, he knew exactly what needed to be done to prepare his daughter for any given situation, and she considered him a great father because of it. When she was eighteen, the king sent her to survival training in the Vaj Desert on Ingo, a backwater world in the Mid Rim and only a few sectors from Utapau, just as he'd been by his father. Because the planet also had two frozen continents, she went through survival training in both the hottest and coldest regions.

The training took the young princess away from her homeworld for an entire year as she trained for dozens of situations in numerous different environments. Wandering through the desert was just but one of them. She had a hard time in her training at first, but she was

able to become accustomed to it after a few weeks. Above all, she learned exactly what needed to be done to stay hydrated and retain as much energy as possible.

The climate was the last thing on young Logan Amator's mind. He didn't approve of the queen venturing off into the desert with some strange hermit, with or without Amator protecting her. For all he knew, they were walking into some sort of Federation trap, or even worse a trap set by the Hutts. Hot or cold, flat or steep, Amator would follow Arcadia wherever she went, even if it was to the death. His whole life revolved around her, especially her safety. He wasn't about to fail.

As the others all reflected on their own experiences in the desert and prayed that the pilgrimage would soon be over, Annikin watched from behind. Unlike Sarus, living on Tatooine for nearly twenty years made him care very little for the environment. It was tolerable and generally comfortable to him, but in the end he would've preferred living on a less arid world. Over the last few days, he heard stories of Utapau, particularly its beauty, comfort, and all the luxuries anyone could ever ask for.

The waterfalls were something he dreamed of seeing. Water was such a scarce commodity on Tatooine. He couldn't imagine it in raging mountains of falling liquid that would be able to hydrate everyone on Tatooine for an entire year. It was amazing to him how his planet had so little but Utapau had so much. He'd possibly made a friend in Queen Arcadia, so he hoped to have the chance to visit Utapau one day. In fact, he planned on it. Before he died, he would see the waterfalls. Even now, he could almost hear their titanic rumblings, roaring faintly in his ears.

Suddenly remembering where he was, Annikin noticed he lost track of the time. The group was already making it through a tunnel that led them beneath one of the larger sand dunes. It was completely random. No one lived on top of the Dune Sea let alone below it. There was nothing there but more sand and dirt. There was no way that they were going the right direction. It just didn't seem possible.

And yet it was. Standing before them was a heavily armed guard, draped in knives and a long, keen silver blade that made even Annikin, who had practiced with a katana for nearly ten years, nervous. Sarus placed his hand over his heart and pumped his fingers into a fist, a gesture that the guard repeated. It was a sign of respect that all of Sarus's people showed one another. Truth be told, Annikin was surprised to see another living soul so far from civilization. How many people did Sarus have following him?

He was about to find out. The guard pushed a bulky gray stone away, nearly straining himself as he moved the boulder. Behind it was a sand-covered door, an entrance to wherever they were going. Annikin suddenly felt cold, but not in any ominous way. Could it of been what he thought it was? Could moisture really exist this far out into the desert, in an area that no one believed capable of housing life? If so, then their destination may very well have been the only oasis on the entire planet.

Descending further, darker, into the tunnel towards the unknown, Annikin started to hold his breath. It had been in the back of his mind, but he was starting to worry about how neither he nor the rest of the group really thought things through when they agreed to venture out into the middle of a deserted wasteland. He acted on impulse and paranoia, some of the others on a desire to make sure he was safe, and others on pride. What if all of those emotions were meant to trick them into walking into a trap? The outsiders told him what was happening on Utapau. Could this have been the Federation's way of trying to lure the queen into being captured? It would have been wise to ask those questions

beforehand, not now when it may very well have been too late.

Annikin couldn't have been more wrong. Out of the blue, the dark tunnel gave way to the hidden oasis he had always dreamed of finding. It was an entirely self-sufficient underground colony, surviving in the barren depths of the dunes of Tatooine despite every odd being against its very existence. Dozens upon dozens of people were moving about before him. How could they have lived there without ever being noticed?

A shiver went down the young moisture farmer's spine. At first he thought it was anxiety, perhaps a foreboding sense of dread in the back of his mind telling him that it was all too good to be true, but that wasn't it at all. He felt cold, cold on a planet that was exactly the opposite. The walls dripped with moisture, more than Annikin had ever seen in his entire life. He stepped away from the group for a moment, rubbing his hand against the wet wall of rock. His face scrunched up and he was blinking rapidly. It was as if he had won the lottery. Had he not been around the others, it may have been occasion to weep a few tears of joy. He had no problem admitting that. No one on the planet would have.

The secret sanctuary was more than simple caves and caverns carved out of the sand and stone. For such a simple people, all dressed in cloths, rags, and other passé and traditional attires, it was an architectural masterpiece. The walls sparkled with quartz like the fireworks of Life Day on Kashyyyk, twinkling in their eyes as if the minerals could light up the entire torch-lit area. Rooms adorned with elegant fixtures lined the walls on all levels of the compound. It was quite literally a working civilization with dozens of people making their way through it, all carrying food, water, and laundry as they went about their nightly chores and routines.

From what they all could see, the sanctuary had three levels, all being held up by half a dozen or so stone spires that were chiseled out of the rock. Each level was lit by dozens of torches, all spread throughout the entire residential area they were standing in, an area that also doubled as a common area for the settlement. The color was somewhat dry, as the rock walls weren't painted in any way. They were a sparkling tan and brown, a design that went well with the rest of Tatooine. The main area the new guests stood in seemed to be guarded over by a large statue of a man none of them recognized, but someone they could only assume was important to Sarus's people.

Even more remarkable were the people themselves. To anyone who had seen outside society, it was strange to think that such a seemingly primitive society could even exist, let alone function in such an age. The food was being baked right on the stones, and the bread was rolled by hand. Men lurched back and forth as they pumped water straight from the ground, carrying it in colossal buckets, larger than any source of water on Tatooine would have normally afforded, to a water purification to make sure it wasn't harmful. Even the clothing was washed by hand in silver wash tubs with soap that came directly out of a bottle. There wasn't a single piece of machinery anywhere in sight. To the outsiders, even to Annikin, it was as if they had gone back in time. That was exactly the effect that Sarus had hoped for.

Annikin may not have been able to understand how he or anyone else had never heard of these people before, but his mind wandered back to when he was a small boy. He and his friends heard myths about wizards living out in the far reaches of the Dune Sea, but he never believed them. He always brushed them off as urban legends, considering the region was supposedly incapable of supporting life. He didn't know how, but the hermits had obviously stumbled onto the last habitable area in the former aquatic body. It was most impressive, especially considering Jawas and sand people were always on the hunt for

treasure and prey, respectively.

More so than Annikin, the other guests couldn't believe their eyes. Obi-Wan expected that there was more to Sarus than met the eye. No meeting like that happened by coincidence. Dooku, on the other hand, was completely shocked by what they found. He assumed Sarus was a simple, primitive hermit not worth the effort it took for him to trudge out to the sanctuary, but he was clearly wrong, or so it seemed. Whether that was a good thing, he had no idea. Either way, he would have something very interesting indeed to report back to the Jedi High Council.

Sarus laughed as a number of his followers gathered around him. He deliberately refrained from telling the outsiders where they were headed, simply so he could see their reactions to his underground paradise, one that he had led for many years. It was such a joy to see people so impressed by something so simple. His wide smile beamed and his eyes lit up, especially considering the reactions of the Jedi. He had worried they wouldn't be impressed, what with his people's stereotypes about how the Jedi were too arrogant to see past their own ancient order. He was happy to admit that he was wrong.

Before Sarus could speak, the small group of his people, the most loyal of his followers, began what the two Jedi assumed was some sort of worship ritual. Some put their flat hands together in front of them, bringing their finger tips to their upper lips. Others clasped their hands and did the same, while one woman seemed to almost kiss her hands in front of her. They mumbled, but it was a barely audible prayer. It was no matter. The outsiders would find out all about their customs and traditions soon enough. Every member of the group of guests had an important role to play. They simply didn't know it yet.

"Welcome, my friends!" Sarus finally shouted, much to the relief of the outsiders who were starting to become a bit uncomfortable, fidgeting while not knowing where they were or what was happening.

A silence befell the entire area for a moment, but as he finished speaking the whole residency broke into cheer. Widespread grins were across all faces. Some women and children couldn't help but cry, and even a number of the men looked as if they were straining themselves to hold back tears of joy. There was something about their new group of friends that caused great joy to the hermit people.

Sarus threw his cloak off to the side, showing a much more elegant and regal look than the rest of his people. He wore a light green tunic with a low-cut neck, with a gentle yet radiant gold chain connecting the two sides of the shirt. A distinctive tattoo on his forehead, one that curved from the middle of his brow to the center of his eyebrows like a snake on the arboreal planets of the galaxy, was visible now that they were in the light. As one of his men took his robe away, Obi-Wan stepped forward, taking charge of the situation.

"Who are you?" the eager Jedi Knight asked on behalf of the others.

"We are the Ophuchi," Sarus replied with a slight nod of the head. "Our clan has existed here for centuries, but I'll explain more about that later. For now, come with me. We've prepared a feast in your honor."

Obi-Wan smiled as he saw Dooku's eyes light up at the very mentioning of food. If Dooku had his full energy, the Jedi Knight knew that his former master would've had some sort of snide comment regarding the hospitality, but everyone was caught in moments of weakness and vulnerability every once and awhile. Truth be told, Obi-Wan could hardly blame him. He



was also very tired and hungry from their long journey on foot through the desert, so he knew that whatever hospitality the Ophuchi had to offer would prove to be useful once it was time to make the long journey back to the moisture farm.

Anytime his thoughts wandered back to the farm, Obi-Wan worried about Cliegg and Shmi's reaction when Annikin and the others failed to return home. With such perilous dangers in the nighttime desert, they would assume the worst. He promised them he would make sure Annikin was safe, so he felt responsible for the young boy, like a Jedi Master felt responsible for his Padawan. It was Obi-Wan's duty to make sure that nothing happened to him.

As Sarus made his way through the gathered crowd, each one clamoring to get a look at the strangely dressed and very foreign outsiders, the group followed close behind him. Their path led them through the rest of the common area, and eventually underneath the large marble statue that they had seen on the way in, a statue whose face seemed to watch over and protect all of the Ophuchi in the sanctuary.

Finally close enough to get a good look, they could tell that the statue was a carving of a fairly young man, no older than thirty standard years. He was dressed in simple warrior's attire, and the vibrant colors of the carved green tunic and dark brown pants were a stark contrast to the rest of the dull surroundings. The figure, with long brown hair and a light beard, had its tunic covered in moderately-sized gray armor, adorned with a symbol none of them had ever seen, one that resembled something of a serpent mixed with a dove. The man had a case of arrows slung over his shoulders, though they were just barely visible with the cloak that covered his shoulders and back. In his hand was a tightly gripped blade with two large jewels on the hilt, one ruby and one sapphire, the duality of light and dark.

Annikin looked up at the bust as he passed underneath it, drawn to its design. It was completely foreign to Tatooine, clearly reminiscent of another time and another place. All of a sudden, he realized that he had seen the dove on the figure's armor before. It was the same symbol on the japor snippet that his father had given him. Annikin resisted pulling it out, not wanting to answer any questions about the mystical object, but he didn't need to anyway. There was no doubting the connection. Perhaps Sarus was actually on to something about Annikin's destiny.

No, that couldn't be. Sarus was obviously wrong. The connection was just a coincidence. Yes, a coincidence. There wasn't any other explanation. Annikin spent the last six hours convincing himself that he was on a fool's errand, one where he wouldn't find anything of actual value about himself. It would all be either lies or misinterpretations. His only destiny was to be a moisture farmer. He knew it, he felt it. He refused to accept the fact, even the possibility that he was anything more than that. It was his lot in life. He wouldn't allow himself to admit otherwise.

Annikin was the last member of the group to pass beneath the statue, although he was flanked by two other Ophuchi, adorned with knives likely meaning that they were guards who would make sure none of the outsiders posed any sort of threat. Annikin followed the others down an old stone stairwell, gently running his hand against the walls to feel the moisture that again trickled down the stone. Never before had he felt a naturally cool environment, and never again did he want to feel anything else. The moisture only continued as they made their way further down the stairwell and into a large rotunda of rooms that made up the edges of the residential complex. The people lived quite comfortably, if not primitively by the rest of the group's standards.

The walls were carved into moderately sized family huts. Each one was two levels high, the

bottom serving as a family gathering spot while the upper levels, accessible only by two wooden ladders, were the sleeping quarters. Two small children, a boy no older than six years old with his younger sister, watched from above as the outsiders passed by. Queen Arcadia looked up and waved, and she smiled as they waved back. She idolized the innocence of a child, if only because her innocent naivety was lost the moment the first Federation battleship arrived around her homeworld.

Struggling to restrain a smile and instead keep his serious, stoically professional features on display, Amator watched the queen's brief interaction with the children. Whatever Arcadia may have felt about herself after the invasion began, Amator didn't see her any differently. Seeing her wave to and smile at the children only served to reinforce his deep respect and admiration for her kind and gentle, a far cry from her hardened father's iron fist. She may have felt like she lost herself, but Amator couldn't have disagreed more.

Finally away from the main public area of the sanctuary, or at least the parts they had seen of it, Sarus led them all into a large stone chamber, one lit by dozens of candles lining the walls. At its center was a massive stone table with what seemed like thousands of different choices of food for all of them. Annikin looked in disbelief at what had to have been a month's worth of his normal diet. How could these people get so much food considering they were so far away from civilization? There was no way it could grow so far out into the desert, and there were certainly no shipments being sent so far. The others couldn't seem to care less.

Dooku was nearly licking his lips in anticipation of the feast. Schlepping through the desert at his age took a lot out of him, especially without any food and barely enough water to keep him from collapsing. Had he not been a Jedi Master, using the Force and all of his willpower to keep him going, he likely would've fallen flat on his face hours ago. Even still, he couldn't help but wonder whether this feast was merely an elaborate rouse before something more sinister took effect. He wasn't going to ignore the food, in fact he couldn't considering his weakened state, but he would be on alert. He wasn't just about to assume that these strange hermits had nothing but peaceful intentions.

Sarus smirked as the group seemed to thoroughly enjoy the bounty that he had ensured would be before them once they arrived. It wasn't often that he made sure his people acquired goods of such quality to create a feast of that magnitude. The effort that went into smuggling the right amount of materials in small portions from the spaceports required a great deal of work from his people. He couldn't have been prouder of their hard work.

More so than the others, Annikin still couldn't believe everything that was before them. Was this really all about him? He couldn't remember the last time, if ever, he had seen so much food at once. Sarus must've been trying to get on his good side, especially considering what Sarus had to say was supposedly about the fate of the galaxy. The Ophuchi leader certainly did know how to cater to them and help get on their good sides. The numerous different cuts of meat and even more choices of fruits and vegetables, some Annikin had never even seen before, was proof of that. Red wine and the traditional blue milk of Tatooine were placed next to each plate, which had already been filled with a rather generous selection of all the different meals. It didn't seem even remotely possible that they would be able to finish it all, but they would, of course, put in a good effort so they wouldn't seem rude in front of their seemingly gracious host.

"Please," Sarus said, stretching his arms out wide towards the table, "sit down. I'm sure we could all use a meal after our long journey."

The others could hardly disagree. They all may their way to seats around the table, though Dooku was still somewhat hesitant. Amator was even more hesitant than the Jedi Master, ready to try each type of food before the queen did. He wasn't about to let her be poisoned, drugged, or anything else that could be done to food. He had a nagging sense that they were being dragged into a false sense of security, and, while he wouldn't vocalize his fear, he had to stay alert to make sure nothing happened to the monarch.

Sarus took his seat at the head of the table, and he invited Annikin and the two Jedi to sit beside him. The Ophuchi leader knew that Annikin and the Jedi knew very little about one another, as the Jedi had only arrived a few days earlier, but he hoped to change that with the information he would reveal to them at the end of their meal once he took them further and deeper into the hidden sanctuary.

"Please join me in the blessing of this food," Sarus requested, raising his hands in anticipation of the others joining theirs together. Everyone looked at one another, their faces a source of confusion and puzzlement. It was a custom that none of them were used to, but they were, after a few moments, able to figure it out. As they bowed their heads and took the hand of the two people next to them, Sarus continued. "For the bounty laid before us, may the Force make us thankful and ever mindful of the needs of others. Amen."

The others raised their heads when the prayer was over, still unsure about what they had witnessed. Obi-Wan had seen similar customs in the past, but they were usually far more elaborate. Some religious cultures would say prayers, but they would also be preceded or followed by long, yet interesting, ceremonies and other such customs. Sarus's prayer was simple, yet effective. The Ophuchi were clearly a very spiritual people, and what piqued Obi-Wan's interest the most was that they believed in and recognized the Force, seemingly above all else. It was rare to see such groups in the galaxy, so it was refreshing to finally find one in person.

Sarus placed a cloth napkin on his lap and picked up his utensils to begin eating, so the others took it as a sign that they too could do the same. None of them, particularly Amator who was already trying pieces of each food, wasted any time in beginning their meals, nor did Sarus who was just as hungry as the rest of them. He had learned from the deserts how to mask the discomforts of hunger and dehydration, but that didn't mean such discomforts didn't exist. He was only a mere mortal, after all.

Slowly chewing each piece of meat to savor the very juicy flavor, Annikin was surprised by the taste of the food he'd been given. Most food on Tatooine was reprocessed more than once in order to preserve it in the heat, but what they were eating tasted fresh. It was yet another layer of intrigue in the mystery of the Ophuchi people, a people that Annikin was starting to take an interest in. After hearing the prayer, and yet while he was still wary of what was happening, he was beginning to get the idea that he didn't have to worry about his safety or the safety of anyone else. The Ophuchi seemed far too peaceful for that.

Everyone ate their meals in silence for a few moments, each of them gorging on the great variety of food before them. Annikin watched in amazement at how quickly the outsiders ate. He came to realize just how accustomed they were, even the Jedi, to eating larger meals at set times of day. As a moisture farmer, Annikin grew up in an environment that taught him to prolong the amount of time it took to feel hungry, although that wasn't to say he didn't need as much nourishment as the others after such a long trek on foot. He too was greatly appreciative of the meal and ate as much of it as he could, but he was uncomfortable with such a long silence in a larger group of people. The others may have wanted to eat in quiet, but he figured it was up to him to break the awkward silence.

"That was an impressive statue we walked under back there," Annikin finally said as he wiped his mouth of the food crumbs around his lips. "Who was it?"

"That man was our beloved prophet," Sarus told him, placing his utensils on the table as he clasped his hands together and leaned forward to speak. "The holy man lived a hundred thousand years ago and wrote the ideals that we live our lives by, but we're not worthy enough to speak his name or even tell his story aloud. What I can say is that he was the first to discover the true potential of what you call the Force."

"You don't call it the Force?" Dooku asked. Despite his reservations, he still considered himself a student of history and archaeology, so the Ophuchi and their sanctuary greatly intrigued him. His opinions of their lifestyle aside, he did want to learn more about their customs, traditions, and overall way of life.

"Yes, and no," Sarus replied, his near-Coruscanti accent drawing the attention of everyone in the room, although some, such as Dooku, far more than others, such as Amator. "It is written that it be called the Force of Others, as the power of it is generated by the life force of all living beings. We've become somewhat accustomed to calling it the Force for short considering we do, occasionally, interact with non-Ophuchi, but we still hold on to our ancient customs and traditions."

Sarus recalled the stories his father told him when he was just a boy. The schism that forced the great ancestral order in two was always something of interest to him, as it was a story of political corruption and betrayal, and it was particularly relevant here considering that was the last time the galaxy-at-large knew of the great mystery as the Force of Others. There were very few points throughout history where such a defining event occurred, and he felt fortune to be one of the descendents of an event that truly reshaped the galaxy, even though it was covered up by the Galactic Republic. The true history of the galaxy seemed to be lost to the ages.

"Our ancestors were part of a small splinter faction that had been part of what you now call the Jedi Order," Sarus continued, not wanting to give too much information on his people away, as it would be the task of others to do that in the future. "After a rift was created between some Jedi, our people left and found themselves here in the Dune Sea."

"And you've been here ever since?" Amator asked, his interest piquing as the story continued, even though there was the possibility that the entire thing was a sham.

"Quite comfortably, actually," Sarus said, "as much as that may surprise you."

"It does, to be honest," Binks jumped in, feeling that it was an appropriate point to do so considering his species and natural habitat. "I'm barely breathing here as it is, considering my native environment."

It felt strange being away from home. Binks had never travelled off world before, let alone to a world that had an environment that was the complete opposite of everything he knew and was accustomed to. He may not have lived in Otoh Gunga for two years, but the swamps of Utapau were still a damp and moist region perfectly suitable for an amphibious creature like him. He was trained to survive in difficult situations while he was in the Gungan military, but he was finding it harder than he ever imagined in the desert. At least he was able to feel more relaxed in the moist underground of the Ophuchi compound.

"There were some Ophuchi who felt the same way, my friend," Sarus said recounted, his tone one of remorse and regret, as if such lines of thought were unbecoming of a member of his society. "Only a year ago, a group of our young people chose to give up their heritage and made the mistake of trying to become part of normal society. They tried living in Mos Eisley, but they had no idea they were walking into such a merciless hive of scum and villainy. They were far too incautious for their own good."

The queen may have lived on the idyllic Utapau her entire life, but even she wasn't able to escape hearing the horror stories of the Mos Eisley spaceport. There were constant riots that started from fights, there were murders left and right, and every type of mercenary, smuggler, bounty hunter, and other undesirable no one would ever want to run into could be found there. She couldn't imagine ever going to such a place, and she would do her damndest to make sure she never had to. Even without knowing she was a queen, she could only imagine how unwelcome a pretty young woman would feel surrounded by scoundrels like that city's inhabitants.

"I take it by your past tense things didn't go very well," the queen said, her radiant eyes expressing the concern she felt for the safety of people she didn't even know.

"Unfortunately, you're right," Sarus remorsefully explained. "The locals branded them crazy wizards, and the worst of the traders were able to exploit the local fear of strange visitors from outside their sense of normalcy."

"How?" Dooku asked, although his expression proved to be less-than-concerned at this point. He was only interested in hearing the rest of the story, not sympathizing.

"Taken as slaves," Sarus said, lowering his head for a moment in respect, but as he brought it back up his deep blue eyes reflected what could only be seen as his rage, "by the Federation, no doubt. We thought we had seen the last of those barbarians when Iaco Stark began plundering their ships, but he was no better. A two-timing backstabber was what he was. I rarely wish anyone ill will, but I can assure you I shed no tears when I learned that he was killed at the war's end."

The very mention of Stark drew raised eyebrows from Dooku and Obi-Wan, considering he had been the instigator of the war that they wished they weren't veterans of. Stark had been a smuggler in the Outer Rim who raised and stole from Federation ships. He sold them back to the people of the Outer Rim at prices high enough to make a profit, but still lower than the Federation's prices. He was a hero to the Outer Rim, as well as the Republic. He was the first person to truly make a stand against the slave-holding trade conglomerate. It was unfortunate that he used his influence to create the Stark Commercial Combine and start the war.

The rest, as the expression went, was history. The two Jedi tried for years to forget about that pointless conflict, but they came to terms with the fact that the memories would be with them forever. The war helped shape who they were, and their real concern ended up being for the people of the Outer Rim. The war was one of the many reasons that the Republic finally pushed the anti-slavery laws through the Senate, and one of the many reasons that Utapau was now under direct Federation authority.

But for Arcadia, the Stark Hyperspace War was the last thing to go through her mind. She simply couldn't stop thinking about how her own people were suffering in what was another pointless conflict in a long line of pointless conflicts. Worst of all, she felt like she abandoned her people. She may have enjoyed popularity, but her family as a whole was not viewed

favorably. Her father saw to that, even if inadvertently. She didn't even want to begin thinking about how people would perceive her when she first ascended to the throne. She could only hope they knew she was doing everything she possible could to end the violence.

"I still can't believe how low the Federation will sink," Arcadia said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the group, "but it's hard to believe they would have done this a year ago. That's when the new anti-slavery laws for the outlying systems were - "

"The Republic doesn't exist out here," Sarus snapped, his voice cold and rough for the first time, as Arcadia had clearly struck a nerve. "We have to make due on our own."

"But the Senate said the Federation is complying with the laws," Arcadia told him, showing the partial naivety of her youth, and prompting Amator to sit taller in his chair in the event he needed to defend the queen. "It's why they invaded my home. That's the whole reason we're even here."

"Don't be so nai - "

"I'd be careful about finishing that sentence if I were you," Amator said, dropping his utensils down onto the stone table now that it was his turn to snap. "I'd like to remind you that you're speaking with Her Royal Highness Sabé Arcadia, Queen of Utapau."

Not a single sound could be heard. Not a whisper, not a faint breath, not anything. The young security officer's outburst took everyone by surprise, but it was Arcadia who ended up blushing, yet in an affectionate and grateful way. She turned her head slightly and smiled, seeing that he was embarrassed by what he'd done. She didn't want him to feel uncomfortable by any means, especially since he was just doing his job.

"Of course," Sarus said, taking a deep breath as he realized he had gotten far too caught up in his emotions for his own good. "I truly am sorry about your world, Your Highness, but do you really believe that a few new laws will stop Nute Gunray from making his profit?"

"No," Arcadia admitted, allowing herself to express her words in a defeated tone, knowing full well that Sarus was right. "I suppose not."

Even the normally abrasive Dooku was surprised at how defensive and relatively rude Sarus had become. It may have made the Jedi Master a hypocrite, but he still felt that it shouldn't have been said with so much of an edge, especially in the presence of a young woman who was clearly superior to the Ophuchi leader. It was at that moment that Dooku remembered Sarus had brought them all down there to speak with something that was of grave urgency. He could only assume that a conversation about Nute Gunray was not what was intended.

"If I recall correctly," Dooku chimed in, "we were brought down here because you needed to speak with us about something concerning the safety of the galaxy."

"Oh yes," Sarus said, wiping his mouth of the wine he had just drunk. Standing up, he looked genuinely happy, as it was finally time to put into action what he had been working on for so many years. Sarus clapped his hands, and the two men who had followed them down to the dining area entered from outside. "If you're all finished with your meals, I would like you to follow Javid here into one of our lower and most sacred sanctuaries. I will be right behind you, and we can talk about why I brought you here once we all arrive."

"Is it far?" Annikin asked, speaking up after not saying much of anything throughout the

entire dinner conversation. He wasn't looking forward to the prospect of walking a great distance again so soon.

"It's only a few minutes away," Javid replied stoically, not letting on to any emotion, unlike Sarus who turned and winked at Annikin. It was clear that it was meant to infer something, and Annikin gulped as he tried to contemplate what it may have been. "Please follow me, and watch your step as we enter the catacombs."

The assembled group stood up from the table and threw down their washcloths, quietly following Javid back out of the dining area and into a nearby, lower-ceilinged catacomb entrance that would lead them to the cave sanctuary that Sarus spoke of. None of them knew what to expect, but even Dooku and Arcadia, both somewhat annoyed at Sarus because of his outburst, couldn't help but be curious. Amator, as always, was nearly clinging to the queen's side. The prospect of moving further into the compound made him ill at ease. The further he was from the surface, the harder it would be to ensure the queen's safety.

Annikin, however, was far more reluctant. Sarus seemed to hold him in high esteem, something that the young man cared very little for. While he didn't feel like he was in any danger, he still knew next to nothing about Sarus or the Ophuchi, so he had no idea why he was being looked at like a hero. He was starting to wonder if the people in the common area who cheered when they first arrived were welcoming them all or hailing him. Still, in the end, if the sanctuary was half as interesting as the Ophuchi themselves, Annikin at least knew he would be in for an interesting night of illumination.

While Javid led the others out, the second guard remained with Sarus. Ray'kele was looked upon as the next leader of the Ophuchi once Sarus ultimately passed away, so he was frequently by his leader's side. The two were very similar in appearance. Ray'kele, far less intense with his views than Sarus, wore short, unkempt hair. His brown eyes reflected the natural colors of the planet, as did his light, tan tunic. Unlike Sarus, however, Ray'kele had yet to receive the forehead tattoo that traditionally signified Ophuchi leadership, as he was still considered Sarus's leadership apprentice.

"Was that him?" Ray'kele finally asked. Sarus had spoken of Annikin Skywalker for many years, but Ray'kele had never been permitted to see the young man, unlike Sarus who frequently kept an eye on him.

"That's him," Sarus replied. He could sense that his disciple was somewhat skeptical, as was natural. He had not received the guidance that Sarus had, so he could only take things on faith whereas Sarus knew things as fact.

"Do you really think he can fulfill the prophecy?" the younger Ophuchi cautiously asked his teacher, treading carefully so as to not insult Sarus's wisdom. "He's not even Ophuchi."

"It's not his cultural heritage that matters," Sarus told him. "It's his lineage. Every possible interpretation I've found points to this."

"I hope you're right," Ray'kele sighed in reply, but his teacher wasn't concerned. Were Sarus taking things on faith then he would be, but the benefit of knowing things for a fact was that he had no need to doubt himself. The prophecy would be fulfilled, no matter what.

# --XII--

## PROPHECY

*"All saviors begin their great journeys as skeptics."*

- Elias, first leader of the Ophuchi Clan  
Journal of the Whills, 3:74

Fate had a way of changing people's lives in the blink of an eye. Whether it was the blessed birth of a child or a terrible accident that made a loved one leave before their time, the swiftness in which a life could change was immeasurable. It was hard to reconcile the person someone became when they were different only a day earlier.

It didn't take Javid long to figure that out. A day earlier, the twenty-three year old had been an apprentice carpenter, learning how to make all of the handcrafted necessities that an Ophuchi would need. Now he was in the presence of the collective of individuals who would help lead the galaxy out of the deepest darkness, a group that would help all beings find their salvation from the evil that lurked in the corners plotting the demise of civilization. The young man couldn't have asked for a greater honor.

After a short, twenty minute walk, the dimly lit catacombs, illuminated only by the torch that Javid carried, began to open up, and light finally broke through the darkness. The catacombs gave way to an ancient cave sanctuary, its entryway the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. To everyone but Javid, the caves were like nothing they had ever seen before, being completely unique to anything on their respective worlds. The only source of light in the wide open caves were the torches that were firmly attached to the walls, setting a welcoming, yet mysterious, atmosphere for those unaccustomed to it.

They all looked up, seeing the stalactites on the roof of the structure hanging down like glass chandeliers in a regal ballroom on some planet far, far away; but the most distinctive feature of the cave was the paintings all across its walls, depicting various events that none of them could wrap their heads around. Ancient designs, different symbols, and various pictographs littered the walls, as did an ancient alphabet. There were animals, different peoples, and so many other things.

While Javid led the others towards a large, smooth wall, surrounded by a number of stone seats in front of it, Dooku broke from the group and stepped up to the wall with the primeval alphabet. He ran his hands across the stone, hoping to get an idea of what the symbols were written with. Like Annikin, Dooku also had an interest in the cave, but not for any prophetic value. He never believed in prophecy, destiny, or the idea that one man could



hold information vital to the safety of the galaxy. No, he had a passion for archaeology, one that became apparent when he was a Padawan.

Dooku was sixteen when he traveled with Master Yoda on a research mission to Pho Ph'eah. The natives of the world had an immense array of artifacts and writings in their caves, at least in the ones that survived the bombing of Pho Ph'eah during the Great Territorial War. Still, they didn't hold a single candle to Ophuchi symbols. These were nothing like the Jedi Master had ever seen. The only recognizable symbols, even barely recognizable themselves, were those of animals, but he knew that there could have been a million different interpretations about what they all meant.

"Fascinating," Dooku whispered sincerely.

"You have an interest in ancient symbols?" Javid asked. Dooku turned around, surprised to see the young man standing there as he hadn't realized anyone was watching him.

"They are unique," Dooku told him. Javid contained a grin, not wanting to show any emotion whatsoever, but he was pleased to see a Jedi respecting his culture. The Ophuchi had a strong bias against the monastic peacekeeping order, so he never would've assumed that a Jedi would take an interest in the Ophuchi.

"He has something even better than this," Javid said coyly.

Dooku cocked an eyebrow, but as Sarus and Ray'kele entered the cave behind Javid, he knew what the young man meant. Returning to where the others had taken a seat in front of the symbol-laden walls, Dooku took a seat next to Obi-Wan. The Jedi Knight seemed genuinely pleased that his former master was appearing more open to the possibility of learning something from the Ophuchi. It was clear to the Jedi Knight that they were all there for a reason. Such was the nature of the non-coincidental Living Force.

Annikin looked around, looking at the sides of the caves, the markings, the symbols, the letters, letters whose meaning none of them knew, least of all Annikin. He could venture a guess, one that he dared not venture aloud at the risk of sounding ridiculous. Was galactic destiny written on these walls?

It seemed absurd, but an hour ago so did the idea of a civilization living in the far reaches of the Dune Sea, a supposedly inhospitable wasteland. If the answers that Sarus had for them were written on the walls of a cave, Annikin couldn't believe that he'd be able to take them on face value. There had to be other explanations. Destiny wasn't just transcribed in stone. It couldn't be. But as Annikin looked around, he had a terrifying feeling that it all, or at least some of it, had something to do with him.

He couldn't shake the thought that there was more to Sarus's story about him than defeating an evil army. Anyone with the proper military experience, expertise, and some ingenuity could help engineer a wartime victory, and this seemed like much more than that. Sarus seemed far too spiritual to be obsessing over a military commander. No, there had to be more, something much more profound, but what was it?

Did he even want to know?

As Dooku and Annikin both sat down, Sarus stepped up to a small stone ledge between the others and the stone wall. The aging hermit ran his coarse hands across its surface, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. Just the touch of the sacred wall was intoxicating. It always

overcame him with a deep sense of grace, a sense of destiny. He was always one of the more reverent Ophuchi of his time. It was no wonder he was chosen to be the herald of prophecy. No one else would've been able to undertake such a weighty responsibility. The group before him would probably dismiss what he had to say as a fairy tale, but he knew it was true. He believed that with all of his heart.

"Every since I was a young boy," Sarus began, sliding his hand off of the symbols as he looked back before the assemblage in front of him, "I've come here for spiritual guidance, as have all Ophuchi for generations. According to legend, our people were first led here by the Shaman of the Whills. The clan had become disorganized and scattered across the Outer Rim, but he appeared to them and led them back here to show them the true path they needed to take to fulfill the destiny of all Ophuchi."

He was already losing everyone. Sarus couldn't blame them. It was all new information to them. The Jedi Order had lost all information about its past, but there were some elements of the galaxy that knew the truth. The Galactic Republic was the one that covered it up in the first place, and certain governmental sectors within it knew far more than they would let on. It was no surprise to him that they would do so. The information he had would, if public, devastate the very foundations of its civilization.

"The Shaman of the Whills?" Obi-Wan asked curiously.

"The Whills are an ancient species spoken of on these very walls," Sarus replied, pointing to the writings directly behind him. "These symbols speak of how they were organized by our ancestors and brought to a world far from here to record the history of the galaxy. For eons, they awaited the arrival of a shaman who would help guide them. He came to them a few thousand years ago."

Beside Obi-Wan, Binks listened attentively to the story, but he was completely skeptical of everything that was being said. It all seemed like Jedi lore to him, but the Jedi knew nothing of it. He doubted the Jedi would somehow miss so much history, so there was no way, at least to him, that it could be true, at least based on what he'd seen so far. Considering his own religious beliefs about the Gungan gods, he found it far more likely that what Sarus was saying was simply an Ophuchi myth.

"Who was he?" Jar asked. The Gungan was able to set aside his skepticism and humor the Ophuchi leader, if only to learn more about the hermit's cultural beliefs.

"His name is lost," Sarus replied regretfully, although he was skillfully lying as he did, indeed, know the identity of the shaman, "but we know that he studied both sides of the Force at one point in time before realizing the true nature of the Force of Others. The path led him to his death, upon which he became one with the great mystery and transcended reality to become the Shaman of the Whills. Now he dwells in a land known only as Ashlan Four, the land of the Whills."

Annikin leaned in closer to get a better view of the writings behind Sarus. Beneath the symbols was a painting, one that depicted a short, pudgy brown species leaning in close towards a winding blue stream. He had no idea what it meant, but, despite his confusion and fears that it all revolved around him, the lore was interesting to him. Tatooine was normally a hive of absolute boredom where the only stories were about far off wars with the Jedi and the Republic, so it was refreshing to hear a story that somehow gave Tatooine at least a degree of significance.

"What does the rest say?" Annikin asked.

"I was hoping you'd ask me that, Annikin," Sarus said, turning around towards the symbols. Annikin's face started to turn white. It seemed like such an innocent question, and yet Sarus was treating it as if it was the key to whatever they were there for.

With a puff of air from his mouth, the Ophuchi hermit cleared some of the dust that had gathered over the text on the walls. It had faded somewhat, making it a bit harder to read, but Sarus still knew exactly what it all said. He never memorized the exact words, but at fifty-seven years of age he had nearly six decades of experience in the caves and with the scriptures within them.

"These are the words of our prophet from his deathbed," Sarus continued. "He said to his twelve children that they and their descendants would travel far beyond the most distant stars and find the Whills. The Whills would accept their destiny and follow the prophet's children to dwell in the light of the Ashlan Nebula. On the fourth planet, they would record the story of the galaxy."

Sarus hesitated for a moment. His entire life was leading up to these next few words, but suddenly he found it difficult to continue. He knew he was about to change the lives of six individuals from six different backgrounds, yet sharing a collective destiny. How hard would it be for them to accept it? Even if they did accept the truth, not just his truth but the only truth, their lives would be altered forever and Sarus would be responsible for telling them that. It was a burden that he, for some reason, did not want to put on them, but he knew that it was for the right cause. It had to be done. He would do it no matter what.

"The Whills were tasked with telling the story of the Ophuchi ancestors," Sarus continued once more, "as well as the great republic, the Republic, that would last for over a thousand generations. The Whills would continue their task until told otherwise, and when the dark side of the Force attempted to overcome them, they would have no fear. As our prophet said, in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns."

...what? Thoughts flashed through Annikin's mind faster than he could process them. A savior? It couldn't be possible. He couldn't...was this why he was there? It was all so stupid. It was just a whole mess of hopelessly religious people thinking they had some prophecy. For whatever reason, Annikin just happened to be the perfect person for them to shove it all on. Annikin straightened up and crossed his arms, coming hazardously close to rudely scoffing what the Ophuchi leader had to say. It was just junk, a whole bunch of lies.

It had to be, for his sake. Even if he vocalized his objections, his boldness would've all been an act. Beneath his pretend composed exterior was his vehement thoughts, his desperate rationalizations, everything he ever knew thrown together as a front. Beneath it all was the trembling mind of a terrified little boy, one who was now standing up from the seats and stepping behind the rest of the group, trying to play it off like he just needed to stretch his legs a little bit.

'The Son of the Suns...' The magnitude of the last four words wasn't just heard by Annikin. They had a weight emphasis put upon them, something everyone picked up on, but most of them had no idea what they meant. A palpable silence followed Sarus's words. The group stirred, most of them uncomfortable with the stillness that Sarus had created. They shifted uncomfortably in their seats, glancing back and forth between Sarus and each other as confusion spread rapidly among them.

Obi-Wan and Dooku were the only ones who could even begin to understand what Sarus was saying. As soon as he'd spoken of the coming of a savior, the two Jedi's necks snapped towards one another so fast that even a gust of gale force winds would be jealous of how fast they were. Words didn't need to describe what they were thinking; their complete and utter shock was written on their faces, their widened eyes and dropped jaws telling the story of what they may have known.

The two Jedi knew for a fact where the idea of the Son of the Suns came from. It was the sole remaining line of a prophecy about an individual who would bring balance to the Force by destroying the Sith once and for all. The prophecy was dismissed after the Sith were destroyed at the end of the New Sith Wars, as a team of Jedi had reportedly killed the final Dark Lord of the Sith. Dooku in particular always admired those Jedi who'd sacrificed their lives to destroy the Sith, so it came as a great surprise that there were people in the galaxy who still knew about and believed in the archaic scripture.

"How do you know about the prophecy?" Dooku grittily asked.

The Jedi Master was irritated, rightfully so in his mind. The old Jedi prophecy wasn't exactly common knowledge in the galaxy. It was sealed in the most secure files of the Jedi Archives. The High Council wasn't about to let the youngest members believe in the possibility of the Sith still existing. There had to have been a leak somehow. There was no other explanation for how the Ophuchi could have known about it. Any idea of the Ophuchi having known about it before the annihilation of the Sith never even crossed his mind. There had to have been some sort of wrongdoing.

"Our ancestors wrote it," Sarus kindly replied. He wasn't prepared to alienate one of the Jedi like he'd done with Arcadia during the feast. "That's not all. We have the entire text of the prophecy."

"Recite it," Dooku demanded as he shot out of his seat, "now!"

Sarus could understand Dooku's frustration. Dooku was displeased that Sarus knew, or at the very least thought he knew, something about the Jedi Order that the Jedi Master did not. The Jedi thought they knew everything, but they couldn't have hoped to understand the secrets of galactic salvation when their own past was being kept hidden under lock and key in a top secret government facility that, of course, may or may not have existed.

"Very well," Sarus said as he moved over to another passage written in the ancient Ophuchi language, brushing off the dust just as he did to the previous one. "It says, 'In the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns, a vessel of pure divine energy. Born to purity, he shall bring balance to the life-force of all other beings, destroying the greatest threats the galaxy has ever known.'"

This time, Dooku didn't resist scoffing like Annikin had. The very idea that the Sith, undeniably the greatest threat the galaxy had ever known, still existed was offensive, not just to him but to all of the Jedi Order. Dooku could tell by the look on Obi-Wan's face that the younger Jedi Knight was giving Sarus the benefit of the doubt, at least for the duration of their time in the cave, but the elderly Jedi was not in the mindset to do that. Alsius Hoth and Valenthynne Farfalla sacrificed too much to destroy the Sith a thousand years earlier. That was why they were some of the greatest heroes the Jedi Order had ever known.

"May I continue?" Sarus asked. He hid his annoyance at Dooku for interrupting him, mainly because it was mixed with confusion. Dooku, who nodded as cordially as he possibly could have to say he could keep going, wasn't the most agreeable of men, but he did ask to hear it.

*Oh no. Please no, please. There can't be more of this.* Annikin thought the first part was bad enough. How could the rest possibly top the revelation of a galactic savior? Nothing Sarus would say could possibly make anything worse for Annikin, at least that's what he kept telling himself. Whether or not he believed it was something even he couldn't figure out.

"Continuing," Sarus said, "'Some will wish him dead; others will wish to exploit him, but he will not travel alone. Those who follow the chosen one in his time of awakening must do so for all his days, lest all of civilization collapse before them.'"

Annikin's heart nearly stopped as Sarus finished. It almost became hard to breathe, as if the weight of the entire universe had been thrown on his shoulders. It couldn't be about him. The prophecy wasn't about him. Annikin backed up further into the shadows, finding it hard to breathe, a sick feeling in his stomach. Even if the prophecy wasn't about him, if Sarus believed it was, Annikin knew the Ophuchi leader would do anything in his power, manipulate what he could, to make his ideas come to pass, whether they were meant to or not. It was as if this whole civilization was bent on ruining his life.

Annikin wasn't a hero. He didn't even want to be a hero. Who would want to shoulder the responsibility of saving an entire galaxy? A crazy person, which Annikin wasn't. He was just Annikin Skywalker, a moisture farmer, a glorified mechanic who possessed barely any skills outside of mechanics that he knew of. He may have hoped to get off the planet one day, he couldn't do it like this. He couldn't do it as a son of prophecy. The very idea just made him feel sick, as if the darkness and the shadows were closing in on him.

Not everyone was having the same reaction as Annikin, though. *Maybe this wasn't as interesting as I thought it'd be,* the young Queen Arcadia quietly whispered to herself. The only reason she went with Sarus was to satisfy her own curiosity about how he could know information of galactic importance, and so far an ancient prophecy didn't seem overly relevant to her.

"For a time," Sarus continued once more, "darkness will find strength, but none should be dismayed. Out of the darkest night comes the brightest dawns. On this long awaited day of judgment, the sons of the Ophuchi shall announce the return.'"

Obi-Wan found himself instinctively drawn to the words of the prophecy. He had been taught from a young age that the Sith were dead and gone. He still wanted to believe that, but it was far too unlikely that all of this was a mere coincidence, despite what Dooku would likely try to say. The Living Force guided everything, and nothing happened by accident. The idea that he would be sent to Utapau and find the queen just in time to get onto her starship that just so happened to be damaged enough to land on Tatooine was one thing. Crash landing and being rescued by the young man who a hermit was obsessing over and then being brought to these caves to hear a prophecy saying that the Sith still existed was a completely different matter entirely.

The hermit knew that there would be mixed and confused reactions. He could see it written on all of their faces. Annikin was terrified, Dooku was insulted, and Obi-Wan and Arcadia were intrigued yet confused. Amator and Binks were beyond lost, having said nothing since leaving the fast. Sarus watched them in amusement as he stepped over to another ledge a

few meters away. The group didn't follow him, but they did watch to see what he had to say next. He stood before a wall with an elaborate painting of a group of animals in a large brawl. What it meant was beyond all of them, but, knowing Sarus, they were about to find out all about it.

"This painting reflects the beliefs of our people regarding the savior," Sarus said, "whom we refer to as the Chosen One. The mural is mostly symbolic, but symbolism can represent a degree of fact. It shows an enslaved dove that will rise up and vanquish a serpent who will slowly try to corrupt and destroy him in order to catch him as his prey. When the serpent is destroyed, the desert rain will fall again."

"Wait, hold on a minute," Annikin said, almost breathless, failing to understand the implication that an ancient drawing had something to do with Tatooine's woes, "are you trying to tell us that this drought is somehow connected to the prophecy?"

"Yes," Sarus simply replied, sensing that Annikin was beginning to catch on. "The rain stopped falling the day the Chosen One was born, and it will not fall again until he fulfills his great destiny. Thankfully for his sake, he will not have to face it alone. There are a number of individuals who will help him, but the most important is the Argus. The Argus helps to free him from his shackles before vanquishing the serpent."

"You know what," Annikin barked, his turbulent emotions getting the best of him as he got closer to Sarus, stepping up onto the ledge to look Sarus directly in the eye, "enough with the prophecies and the paintings. I know what you want to say. Just say it."

"Annikin, what is this all about?" Obi-Wan asked, speaking as calmly and friendly as he possibly could. Obi-Wan let out a faint smile, trying to help a clearly and surprisingly test Annikin keep his calm as well. For whatever reason, the young man had an air of paranoia about him, something he hadn't sensed in him before.

"Isn't it obvious?" Annikin replied. "A day ago, Sarus tells me that I have a destiny to destroy an evil army. Now he's reciting a prophecy about a galactic savior rescuing the galaxy from some great threat. He thinks it's me."

Annikin's head sunk as the words finally left his mouth, not because of what he said but because of what Sarus didn't say. Annikin held out hope that he just paranoid over Sarus's confusing prophetic rant, but the hermit didn't say a word to deny it. He didn't even want to be near the Ophuchi leader anymore, or anywhere in the same galactic region as him for that matter. Annikin jumped back down off the ledge, slowly backing away from the nonsense that Sarus kept spewing at him.

"That's preposterous," Dooku laughed. He couldn't possibly fathom the idea that Annikin was a prophetic savior. There was nothing special about an insignificant farm boy. The very idea of it made a mockery out of the ancient Jedi prophets, even more so considering Annikin very clearly wanted nothing to do with it. How could a savior, a vessel for the Force, be such a weak-minded peasant?

"Is it, Master Dooku?" Sarus asked, also stepping down from the ledge to confront the aging Jedi. He had enough of the Jedi Master's sanctimonious, self-righteous, arrogant Jedi blithering. "Is the view so clear from your ivory tower on that steel mess you call a planet that you know this for a fact."

"I don't need an ivory tower to tell me that you're insane," Dooku growled. He clenched his fists and wrapped them around Sarus's shoulders, slamming the hermit into the wall behind him. Dust softly floated down from the impact as rocks from above crawled down the side of the wall. "Alsius Hoth and Valenthynne Farfalla sacrificed their lives to ensure the Sith were destroyed. How dare you slander their names."

"Jard," Obi-Wan tried to interject, "why don't - "

"Don't 'Jard' me," the Jedi Master demanded. "Not this time, Obi-Wan. They destroyed the Sith. You know that."

"The Sith are not extinct, Master Jedi," Sarus assured him, only to be forced tighter up against the wall. "For that, you have my word."

"You're a hermit who lives in an Outer Rim desert," Dooku reminded him. "Your word means absolutely nothing to me."

Dooku forced Sarus off to the side, finally letting go of his grip. Sarus wanted to shake his head in disgust, but that would've been no different to shaking his head at an infant who wasn't able to swim despite telling it to swim. Dooku had grown up in a rigid order that brought its people up to believe that their way was the best way. One man wouldn't be able to break through that arrogant armor.

"If they were extinct," Sarus said, brushing the dust off of his tunic, "then the man I fought eighteen years ago at this very sanctuary was nothing more than a figment of my imagination and I truly am insane."

"I wouldn't put that past you," Dooku said as he grit his teeth, seething in frustration.

For nearly twenty years, Obi-Wan knew that Dooku could be somewhat arrogant, particularly when it came to his own opinions about how the Jedi had lost their core ideals of being defenders of peace as opposed to defenders of a corrupt government. This outburst, though, was something completely new. The Jedi Knight had never seen his old master in such a dark and terrifying light, if the man before him now even was the same person who he butted heads with so many years ago.

Obi-Wan always had his suspicions that Dooku felt a bit more superior than a Jedi should, but he always brushed it under the rug. He never suspected that the Jedi Master could be so closed-minded and, truthfully, bigoted towards other people and their beliefs. A good Jedi was supposed to look past that. Qui-Gon Jinn always told him self-pride and a true superiority complex was a path to the dark side. Jedi were meant to lead by example, not dictate how others should be led.

"You said more people would help the Chosen One," Obi-Wan said, trying to change the subject from the Sith and cut Dooku out of the conversation, even though he knew that would be hard considering what he was about to ask. "Do you mean us?"

"With all due respect, Master Kenobi," Amator interjected after having said nothing since the feast, "that's ridiculous assumption. Maybe it's different for a Jedi, but there's no way any of us could be involved in this Sith apocalypse of yours."

"Are you sure?" Sarus suggestively posed. The way he saw it, it was the young Utapau guard that was jumping to ridiculous assumptions.

"Hold on a minute," Amator said, but before he could say anything else the Ophuchi hermit cut him off.

"The galaxy is on the verge of annihilation," Sarus continued. "Civilization as we know it will collapse unless you all work together. You must unite or all will be lost."

A completely stunned silence befell them all this time. No awkward shifting, no uncomfortable glances, just stillness and complete and utter silence. The ramifications of such a seemingly outlandish idea were of an incomprehensible magnitude. It meant everyone on the entire cave was prophesized to fulfill some sort of destiny that none of them wanted. Like Amator said, the Jedi were one thing, but how could a security guard, a monarch, and an exiled prince fit into the plans for stopping universal Armageddon?

"Why us?" Binks finally spoke up. "There's nothing any of us could do."

"As the prophecy says," Sarus began, "'Those who follow the Chosen One in his time of awakening must do so for all his days, lest all of civilization collapse.' He is now in his time of awakening."

"You dragged us out here for this?" Amator shouted. "That's not destiny. That's you trying to force us into something that fits what you think the future is."

"I did not 'drag' you out here, young Logan," the Ophuchi reminded him. "As I recall, I asked Annikin and the Jedi if they would be willing to come, and they were. I never asked you, your queen, or the Gungan to come. You took it upon yourself to follow us out here. You now have to accept the responsibility that comes with that decision."

It was an outrage, a sheer, unabashed outrage. Amator threw up his arms in disgust. Sarus manipulated them from the beginning, and Amator could see right through it. He knew that the queen would want to hear about matters of galactic importance, he knew that Amator would follow her no matter what her orders were, and he knew that Binks would follow along as well. There was no mistaking the fact that they were all there because Sarus wanted them there. The hermit could deny it all he wanted, but that wouldn't change anything. The decision for them to go into the desert was already made for them before Sarus even uttered a single word to any of them.

"You know what, Skywalker," Amator said, turning around behind him where he knew Annikin was standing, "you don't have to..."

He looked around for the boy, but he was nowhere to be found. The boy had ran, and like his father hours earlier there was nothing any of them were able to do about it. None of them even knew he was gone. None of them even knew what he could've been feeling. Not just what he was feeling about the prophecy, but about what was happening around him.

The boy's world was crashing down around him. Every semblance of his reality was shattered in only a few short hours, with just a few utterances of ancient scripture and old symbols. When they should have been looking to see if he was all right, or if he was even halfway composed, they turned on one another and argued amongst themselves. They were selfish, and they all knew it. Even Arcadia, having kept to herself almost the entire time, felt guilty. She was so focused on what everyone else was arguing about that what Annikin was feeling didn't even cross her mind. She couldn't even begin to imagine it.



"Great," Amator quipped as he turned back to Sarus. "You lost the kid."

"Logan," Arcadia whispered. Her scolding frown and the disappointed glare in her eye expressed her disapproval. She wasn't about to tell him to change his personality on account of Sarus, but she did expect him to at least behave himself.

"I'll find him," Obi-Wan said.

"No, let me," Sarus appealed.

Obi-Wan nodded, albeit with a nervous hesitation that he earnestly tried to mask. Sarus was the root of the entire problem here, like a doctor who not only broke the news of a terrible disease but actually gave Annikin the terrible disease himself. He had no faith that Sarus would be able to cheer Annikin up, considering everything that had to be going through the young man's mind, but he knew that there was no way he could stop Sarus from speaking with Annikin, save for physically restraining him. The man was determined, a fact that Obi-Wan noticed with an alarming obviousness. Hopefully Sarus could at least get Annikin to come back. The Jedi Knight didn't want Annikin off by himself, not when the young moisture farmer was his responsibility.

While the others may not have known where Annikin went, Sarus had a good idea. There were only two passages out of the caves, and Javid and Ray'kele were standing on the other side of one of them with strict orders not to let anyone else unless accompanied by Sarus himself. That left only one option, a winding yet short catacomb that led to a ledge at the opening of a carved balcony-like structure at the edge of a sand dune. Sarus had ordered many years earlier that it be carved out, as it was a peaceful place to meditate. Luckily for him and his meditations, the entire Ophuchi compound was within a sand dune, although more like a cliff, or else there would have been no high-up opening to carve.

Leaving the rest of the group, Sarus entered the tunnel that would take him to the ledge, a fairly steep climb but one he had many dozens of times. As he walked, he couldn't help but feel bad for Annikin. In fact, on some level, the hermit felt pity, but it wasn't just for Annikin. The Chosen One wasn't the only one who would suffer so much for others, but it was also all those who would be sacrificed along the way.

On one hand, some would choose to be martyrs; others would simply be sucked into the journey without consent, like Logan Amator for example. Some would be both, and yet it was necessary for the Chosen One's ultimate fate. All great men needed trusted allies who would help guide them along the path of destiny, but those who walked with such men rarely lived to tell grandchildren about happy endings.

All would be worth it. Victory would be had over the beasts of the dark side, and over those who so foolishly and despicably did its bidding. Those who lived a proper life, a just life, would stand on a sea of glass and sing the triumphant songs to the sweet music played by the everlasting Force of Others. Sarus was sure of it. There was no doubt salvation was just beyond the horizon.

Sarus stepped out into the light on the edge of the cliff overlooking the Dune Sea. It was sunrise, something people had marveled at for millions upon millions of years. It was a daily rebirth, a reminder that things could start anew, but no one was ever able to fully grasp the magnitude of how an entire universe could change in the twelve hours between dawn and dusk. Sarus had an idea, though, and it was an idea of an eternal daybreak. There was never a night so dark that could defeat the rising suns.

Annikin sat somberly at the edge of the cliff watching the suns rise. It was tranquil and relaxing, the complete antithesis of what was raging about in his thoughts. Sarus could understand why Annikin was unable to immediately accept his destiny. He too had been given a heavy burden at a young age, but his father was able to help him accept the responsibility he needed to take. Sarus knew he could help Annikin do it too. As he sat down beside him, Sarus assumed that he would have the first word, but Annikin turned to him before the hermit could even utter a syllable.

His thoughts were on his father, not Cliegg but rather the man he never met, the man he was told died when Annikin was a baby. Deak Skywalker was supposed to be a navigator on a spice freighter in the Outer Rim, and he was supposed to have been killed when pirate raiders assaulted his vessel, but now Annikin wasn't so sure. He always dreamed about what his father was like, creating an image of him in his mind, but the prophecy seemed to change all that. It was almost as if his father never existed. It was one of a thousand questions swirling around in his overwhelmed mind, but he didn't have any real desire to know the answer to any of them. How could there be an answer that wouldn't help shatter his frail spirits?

"My father, my real father," Annikin began, a deep sigh and the sound of his words resonating how deeply troubled this weighty burden made him, "he wasn't real, was he?"

"What makes you think that?" Sarus asked. He already knew the answer, of course, but he had to humor him. After putting so much on Annikin's shoulders, it was best that the young man started coming to his own conclusions.

"If everything you said is true, then so is the part about the Chosen One being born to purity," Annikin gloomily surmised. "You don't have to sugarcoat it. I know what it's trying to say."

"This question is better left for your mother," Sarus admitted. He didn't want to get involved in something like this, because any discussion about Annikin's real father would implicate Shmi as a liar. "The question for you is whether or not you believe what I said."

That was a question Annikin couldn't answer. Part of him, deep down inside his soul, wanted to say that he knew it was true, that he felt everything was happening for a reason. That part of him couldn't understand why Sarus and the Ophuchi would go through so much trouble and put so much focus on him if it wasn't true. On the other hand, he was just a farmer, a glorified mechanic. He knew he wasn't a savior. He was just Annikin Skywalker.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Annikin emotionlessly conveyed. He didn't know if he should've expressed fear, anger, or any other emotion for that matter. "This is all too big for me."

The old hermit let out a defeated sigh. He was hoping that wouldn't be Annikin's answer. Remembering how his own father helped him, Sarus slowly placed his hand on Annikin's shoulder, sitting down beside him to comfort him. It was all too reminiscent of when he too felt a great burden upon him. It wasn't something he wanted, nor was it something he wanted to accept, but his father helped him do so. Had it not been for his father, Sarus wouldn't have been able to do it. The least he could do for Annikin was return the favor.

"Do you see that small outcropping over there?" Sarus asked him. He pointed out towards one of the farthest sand dunes he could see, where a small, barely visible speck could be

seen at the base of it. "Those are the ruins of Arrakeen, a very old Ophuchi settlement. Within those ruins is another cave with even more cryptic messages and symbols."

Annikin's shoulders tensed up and he clenched his fists, a nervous habit when he felt something bad was about to happen. He could barely keep himself together after having heard the prophecies in the cave below, and now there were more? How much more could someone like him possibly take? He was already near his breaking point.

"Don't worry," Sarus laughed, pulling his hand back. "They have nothing to do with you. In fact, it was about me."

"You?" Annikin asked. Sarus grinned when Annikin almost sounded excited, but it was more like relief that something didn't have to do with him for a change.

"Yes," Sarus replied. "When I was about your age, I went there with my father. The Ophuchi leader, my predecessor, Darius, told me that I was carrying a spirit inside of me that had lived for a hundred millennia and would live for many more to come. I didn't believe it, but I learned to accept that it could be true."

"What are you trying to say?" Annikin asked him. The boy shook his head in confusion. He couldn't make sense out of the idea that there was a hundred thousand year old spirit inside the man sitting in front him.

"That you don't have to believe you're a savior," Sarus reassuringly told him, "at least not yet. You just have to accept the fact that you might have a destiny greater than you realize. As long as you can accept it might be true, then when the time comes you'll make the right choice. I know it's a lot to ask. Between you and me, I wish I didn't have to ask it."

"Then find someone else," Annikin demanded. Sarus's comforting words didn't do enough to reassure him. Whatever the Ophuchi leader's intent in saying them may have been, the point was still that Annikin would one day have to save the galaxy, even if he didn't want to accept it right that minute.

"There is no one else, son" Sarus said in remorse, trying to comfortably get Annikin to accept it. "You are Chosen."

He certainly didn't want to be. Annikin could understand why Sarus was so adamant about all this. In the hermit's mind, civilization depended on it. He'd been brought up with a particular religious belief, and the hesitancy of the man he believed to be a savior wasn't going to change anything. There was a certain fanaticism involved. Annikin could see that clearly. He wished he could've believed in something so strongly, but at the end of the day, while he may not have admitted it, he didn't believe in himself enough to subscribe to this idea of prophecy and predestination.

Annikin stood up from the cold, hard ground and turned away from the sunrise, trying to collect his thoughts. They were still a jumbled mesh of barely intelligible questions, fears, and regrets. How did he get in this mess? Why did he agree to go with Sarus? That stupid impulsiveness the night before ended up ruining any sense of truth and reality that he had.

He knew he should've just stayed with his father, but the japor snippet that now rested in Annikin's pocket, adorned with the same symbols as the statue and the caves, wouldn't let him. He was so afraid of what it meant that he ran off halfcocked, only to find his fear

increasing exponentially with each passing minute. He just wanted to be himself, and right now he just wanted to be alone.

Sarus's optimism about convincing Annikin turned to a frowning disappointment in himself for not being able to do so. He could understand Annikin's hesitancy and desire for solitude, though. He too had wanted to be alone when he first found out about his own destiny. It was a feeling that he needed to shut out everything and everyone just to make it so it wouldn't be real.

Giving Annikin his privacy, Sarus nodded in understanding and headed back down the catacombs, keeping his hand against the rock walls the entire time for balance. As he made his way down, he could already hear the agitated voice of Master Dooku bellowing his self-righteous Jedi arrogance, probably for all to hear. Sarus certainly didn't want to hear it. The sooner he could rid himself of Jar Jar Dooku the better. The Jedi Master certainly wasn't doing the Jedi Order any favors, considering he was the epitome of how the Ophuchi view all members of the ancient order.

It was true that Dooku was agitated. Down below, in the far side of the cave, Dooku fiercely waved his egotistical pointer finger at his former apprentice, angered by whatever they were discussing. Sarus could only hear small bits as he made the final descent down the remainder of the catacombs, but from he could make out it had to do with Obi-Wan's own opinions on what had transpired in the cave.

"I put up with your naïve insistence to believe everything someone told you when you were my Padawan," Dooku bawled in disgust, "but not anymore. You are a Jedi Knight, and yet you show the inexperience of a youngling."

"How dare you lecture me on what it means to be a Jedi," Obi-Wan scolded in an equal amount of disgust, considering his newfound revelations about his old master's attitude. "Considering the way you treated the Ophuchi beliefs tonight, your hypocrisy now is astounding. I never imagined you could fall this far from the Jedi ideals."

"Bah!" the Jedi Master shouted. "Your ideals. The ideals of an Order that lost its way centuries ago. The Jedi Order is the one that's fallen from the right ideals, not me. But as always, I'm the only one with any sense around here."

"If you disagree with the Jedi way so strongly," Obi-Wan began, quickly realizing that he was saying something he knew he'd regret, "then why are you even here? No one's making you stay with the Jedi."

Dooku gasped in astonishment. He found it incredible that Obi-Wan would call him arrogant and yet be so bold as to suggest he leave the Jedi Order. The Jedi Knight clearly didn't know his former master at all. Dooku was trying to save the Jedi Order from itself, not leave it. He would show the galaxy and the Jedi themselves what it meant to be a true keeper of the peace. The complacency that the Jedi Order showed now would be its downfall, but not if Dooku had anything to say about it.

The Jedi Master left Obi-Wan where he was, moving to the opposite end of the cave to distract himself by trying to analyze the Ophuchi symbols. Obi-Wan beat himself up in his thoughts, knowing how absurdly stupid his statement was. Perhaps Dooku did have a point, at least in some regards. The comment was rather immature, but beyond that it was reckless. He couldn't argue Jedi ideals while at the same time telling a Jedi to leave the

Order. His recklessness was always an issue, but this was the first time it manifested itself so strongly in many years.

He never would be able to understand Jard Dooku, though. One minute the old man was vocally berating the leader of an entire civilization for 'insane' beliefs, and the next his archeological interests were kicking into gear and he was analyzing the cave wall he thought was the source of the insanity. It was a peculiar mystery, and that would never change.

Sarus laughed off what he'd just watched, but it was no longer of any particular interest to him. He suddenly noticed a moderately-sized fire in the center of the cave, one started with a few pieces of desert wood and the brush used for the torches, all of the material having been set off to the side in case more fuel was needed. Amator sat next to the flames, tending to them as Queen Arcadia shivered behind him.

Amator was certainly a dedicated young man, but Sarus sensed there was more to him than that. The security officer passionately defended his queen during the feast, something that, from what Sarus had seen in his lifetime, most guards didn't do for their superior. There seemed to be an underlying motive for all of it, a particular passion that extended beyond his work. Sarus had a good idea as to what it was, but it wasn't his place to say anything about it or even think anything more of it. That was between Amator and Arcadia.

"That should do the trick," Amator said as he sat back down next to the freezing Arcadia. "You should've told me you were cold earlier, my lady. I could've had this fire going as soon as we got here."

"Everyone was so caught up in the moment that I didn't want to interrupt," the queen confessed. "To be honest, I wasn't paying attention most of the time."

"I don't blame you," Amator told her. "I can't stop thinking about home. I just keep seeing myself wrapping my hands around Neimoidian's fat neck and..."

"I know the feeling," Arcadia reminded him, considering how testy she had gotten during her earlier exchange with Sarus, but also to cut him off from finishing the sentence that he clearly didn't want to finish.

The young queen stared into the flames in front of her. She may have wanted to squeeze the life out of that Neimoidian coward, but she wasn't anywhere near her planet. That was the problem. She was sitting on a ball of sand doing absolutely nothing. She kept telling herself there was nothing she could do, but, for starters, she could've stayed on Utapau. There may have been a threat against her life, but her people were probably thinking she ran like a scared little girl, ran away from her responsibilities and betrayed them just like her father did. She didn't even know if she'd ever be able to return and set that record straight. If the Galactic Senate wasn't able to help if and when she reached Coruscant, then there was just no way she could go home.

"I don't know if it means anything," a nervous Amator told her, stepping into a more personal realm than most guards would have with the monarch they were protecting, "but for what it's worth I can't think of anyone better to deal with this situation. I think you can do anything if you put your mind to it."

"It doesn't, but thanks," she said, brushing off the compliment but smiling nonetheless. It really didn't mean that much to her. She was dead set on blaming herself.

Amator sighed in discontent. He was hoping to shake her out of her depression, but it wasn't working. He just wanted to do whatever it took within reason to help her find her way back to some semblance of happiness, but he just wasn't ready to say what he thought might be able to do that. He just didn't know how she would take how he really felt. He'd worked so hard to get to a place where he could just be in the same room as the queen he cared so much about, and he wasn't about to blow it. For now he would have to try other options that he had up his sleeve.

"There is a way you can beat Nute Gunray, you know," Amator said. The queen immediately perked up, a very welcoming and pleasant sight for his sore eyes. "When I was a law student, I was an apprentice legislature in a corporate case against the Federation. They were accused of murdering a woman's husband for supposedly stealing trade secrets. Gunray was so sure of himself that he didn't even bother covering it up. He was so ignorant to the fact that people were onto him that he didn't even see the lawsuit coming. That's his weakness. He's an ignorant fool. If you can figure out a way to exploit that, then the odds are in your favor."

"How'd the case turn out?" Arcadia asked. For the first time in days she seemed almost happy, her joyful expression after finally making some sort of headway in how to deal with the subjugation of her home taking a weight off her shoulders.

"There was no happy ending," he dejectedly replied, his head sinking as he knew that it wasn't what the queen wanted to hear. "Evidence only goes so far. The Federation has more influence and power than I'd like to give them credit for."

The queen knew that all too well. It was something she'd been thinking about for days. However passionate she may be when she would go before the numerous galactic senators, the Federation Senator Lott Dodd would still be there with the voting bloc the Federation was able to pay off for years. She could provide all the evidence she wanted to get the Senate to vote her way, but evidence wasn't as powerful as financial influence. All the Federation had to do was throw some money at the right people and the Republic would once again demonstrate just how ineffective it was.

She was going to say more, but the entire cave fell silent as Annikin came back down from the catacombs. He didn't make eye contact with any of them. The last thing he wanted to do was be counseled by anyone, and they seemed to know that. No one said a word, which he was thankful for. There was nothing anyone could really say to make him feel better. How could anyone take away such inner pain? How could anyone erase all of the hard feelings he had? It wasn't possible. No one could rationalize the nonsense that was being spewed at him left and right.

Annikin was overwrought with tension. His throat slammed shut and he could barely breathe. His hands were dripping with sweat like they had been when he first decided to go and see Sarus again the night before. The moisture coming off of his hands as they shook was like a torrential downpour of rain, but they could've easily been the tears that he so desperately wanted to shed.

He wished his mother was with him. She was the only one who was ever able to truly comfort him. Anytime he had an argument with Cliegg or something bad happened, her shoulder was there to lean upon. She was there to say a few words that would make everything alright, but now she wasn't. He had to deal with this one on his own. He had to make the decision to either run away or find out more about what Sarus claimed to know

about him. It wasn't a decision he was even remotely ready to make, but it was one that he didn't have much choice over.

"I don't believe you at all," Annikin said. "In fact, I think you're completely insane, but I need to know more. I have to know what you think you know about me."

*At last he's finally ready*, Sarus said to himself, something he wanted to say aloud, but he knew such thoughts were better kept to himself. Yes, he was stringing Annikin along to a certain degree, but he couldn't let that be known. A ventriloquist was only as good as the amount of strings he had to pull. He didn't think of himself as a master manipulator by any stretch, though. He was simply doing what he was told to do. It was his destiny, and an Ophuchi never backed away from his destiny.

"Then follow me."

-----

Deeper in the desert, kilometers away from the sanctuary, the twin suns were just beginning to rise, but the majesty of the powerful fireballs rising above the horizon was perverted by the sight of a prototype infiltrator stealth ship landing atop a nearby ridge. The *Scimitar* gently landed in the sands, pushing away the dust and the rocks that had settled over top of the ground.

From beneath the cockpit, a hatch opened up and out came four hooded figures, three men and one woman. Each snapped to attention in formation, two by two on each side of the ramp. They were waiting for someone, someone far more powerful than them, someone who had promised to lead them to the glory their people had desired for thousands of years.

It was Maul, having finally caught the trail of the queen's vessel just like he told the Neimoidian slugs he would do. It wasn't his first time on such a pathetic waste of a planet. He had been there nearly twenty years earlier for a mission, one that had become far too complicated for his liking. The challenge of it, though, was exactly what he needed considering his youth and inexperience.

Before coming to Tatooine, he was a blind follower of the light, the so-called righteous path. It was disgusting now. How anyone could follow such a dogmatic view was something he'd never be able to understand. He sought to give aid to all of the sad, sorry beings in the galaxy who suffered, but then he realized his true potential. He wasn't born to save, he was born to conquer. He was born to enslave. There was only one true path to righting the wrongs in the galaxy. It was to rid it of the light and all those who followed it.

The idea that he was once a Jedi didn't sit well with his followers. They were afraid he would betray them and go back to the narrow-minded Jedi Order. That would never happen. He felt the call of the dark side. It was in his blood. It was soaked into him with the red and black ink that he tattooed himself with to prove his loyalty to the cause. For every good deed he once did, he swore to bring about equal destruction and torment to all beings in the galaxy. If his followers didn't know that by now, they didn't know him at all.

Not all of them were hesitant about it, though. The woman who stood beside him, his most trusted lieutenant, was completely loyal to him. Lilith was a powerful ally, one who would stop at nothing to watch as the fires of their destinies burned civilization as they knew it to the ground. It was a delicate alliance when beings were united by their own passionate hatred for one another, but Lilith was trained exactly how Maul wanted her to be trained. He

didn't teach her himself, but he knew the way of her people. They were sworn to serve him and couldn't possibly fathom the idea of doing anything to betray that service. It wasn't in their nature. The teachings of their people made sure of it.

"Orders, my lord?" Lilith asked. She removed her hood, brushing back her silky blonde hair as she spoke. She had a certain beauty about her, but her true distinctiveness was in her eyes. There was a fire there, a fire that never seemed to be put out. That was the quality that Maul cherished the most in her. It was why she was the most powerful of his dark and loyal servants.

"Kill the Ophuchi," Maul ordered. That was only the beginning, though. Their true task was to finish the job he was unable to finish the last time he was on the planet. "Bring me the queen and the boy unharmed."

Dealing with the boy was the task he failed at, the task he wasn't allowed to finish. His original goal was kill the boy he sought so strongly, but there was a change of plans. He couldn't kill him when the boy was an infant, but instead he had to wait for the opportune moment to turn him to his side. He wouldn't fail again. Swearing to finish what he started, he vowed that there could be no loose ends this time.

Annikin Skywalker had seen his last desert sunrise.



# --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 proceeded 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."

# --XIV--

## SHADOW HUNTER

*"Hell can cast shadows on even the holiest of eyes."*

- Irpene, Corellian holy woman, c. 47,000 BBY  
Journal of the Whills, 1:07

"So let me get this straight," Annikin said in frustration as he, Obi-Wan, and Sarus made their way back through the desert towards the Ophuchi compound, where Annikin would hopefully find transport back home so he could escape this sheer ridiculous madness. "There wasn't any water at Arrakeen at all? It was all a figment of our imaginations, even outside of the ruins?"

"That would be correct, unfortunately," Sarus admitted. "The Force nexus located deep within the ruins provided you both, but more specifically you, Annikin, with a life-like image of what you wanted to see here: water."

Annikin threw his arms up in disgust, but he kept walking instead of stopping to confront the hermit leader. The whole situation was completely unthinkable. Annikin had to admit, what happened in the temple, however sadistic it may have been, did provide him with a rare insight to his own psyche, but making a Tatooinian believe that there was an oasis filled with pools of running water was a disgraceful travesty. It was like telling a homeless and starving person that there was a home with warm food waiting for him around the corner, only to show him nothing but a rundown building without a roof and crumbs taken from a trash bin. Sadism didn't even begin to describe what Sarus had done.

"I take no pleasure in this, Annikin," Sarus said, hoping to convince Annikin that what he'd done was justified. "I simply have to prepare you for a greater destiny so -"

"I mean no offense, my friend," Obi-Wan told Sarus pointedly, "but we're both very tired and I think I can also speak for Annikin when I say that neither of us wants to keep playing these games today."

"Or ever," Annikin quipped, drawing yet another pointed look from the Jedi Knight who was doing nothing more than trying to prevent another headache-inducing argument. "Sorry."

Even with the apology, Obi-Wan knew that Annikin wasn't sorry. He could hardly blame him. Obi-Wan himself felt as if he was going through a rough ordeal simply being in Sarus's presence. He was keeping an open mind and had yet to openly cast doubt on anything that Sarus had said, but he was growing tired of watching Sarus pull their strings and drag them



along in situations that fit the Ophuchi religious beliefs. Not only that, but he couldn't help but, in his own mind, question the validity of the idea that he and the others were part of some sort of fellowship of the Chosen One, destined to somehow help Annikin or whoever the supposed savior was fulfill his destiny. If all that was weighing Obi-Wan down and wearing thin on him, Obi-Wan didn't even want to begin to imagine what it was like walking in Annikin's shoes.

The last thing on Annikin's mind now, though, was whether or not the prophecy was true. After the stunt Sarus pulled in Arrakeen, Annikin just wanted to go home. He could question whether he was a savior once he got there, but standing around and feeling sorry for himself now wasn't going to get him back to the farm any faster. He was completely and utterly through with Sarus, and all Annikin could think of was how good it would feel to never have to see the Ophuchi leader again.

"How much further?" Annikin asked, having no idea where they were in relation to the Ophuchi sanctuary, especially now that the suns were nearly setting. They all needed proper rest after the events of the temple, so they waited a few hours before venturing back out. The sand out in these parts of Tatooine looked the same no matter where he was, and the mountains never seemed to leave the distance.

"Just over this next rise," Sarus said, sensing how strongly Annikin wanted to leave. He'd have to put up with Sarus for a little while longer, however. The Ophuchi leader wasn't quite finished with him, not until he ensured Annikin was going to leave the planet and become a trained member of the Jedi Order. It was the only feasible way for Annikin to be prepared enough to fulfill his destiny.

Annikin, even Obi-Wan, could only hope that the speeder that had brought the rest of the group back to the farm hours earlier had returned. He had no intention of sticking around any longer than he had to. He had nothing against the Ophuchi people, that much he knew for certain. It was just that he couldn't stand being around anymore of this prophecy nonsense for much longer.

As they made their way over the last dune before the sanctuary, Obi-Wan paused, prompting Annikin and Sarus to stop walking as well. Something didn't feel right to the Jedi Knight, as if there was some sort of disturbance in the Force. He sensed danger, he sensed fear, chaos, and...something, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on, but it was the same elusive feeling that he'd felt when he and Dooku first boarded the Federation command vessel orbiting Utapau. He had no idea where it was coming from or why, but he was increasingly on alert. It just didn't sit right with him that it was happening again.

"Do you see that?" Annikin asked, pointing towards a lump of something just before the entryway to the sanctuary.

"It's a body," Sarus exclaimed in a panic, "and it's no illusion this time."

With Sarus in the lead, the three ran towards the body, hoping and praying that someone was only injured and not anything worse. Sarus turned it over once they arrived, realizing that it was Jacob, the guard that first let them into the sanctuary the night before. His throat was slashed; blood was dripping down the deep gash onto his clothing and the sand, forming a stain in the sand so hot that the actual liquid had evaporated almost instantly. It was obvious, based both on the gash and the look of shock and terror in his eyes, that Jacob died almost immediately. Annikin was aghast; an illusionary murder was bad enough, but to see one like this in real life was unimaginable.

"Who could've done this?" Annikin asked rhetorically, knowing that no one actually knew the answer, though he was somewhat mistaken about that.

"I'm not sure," Sarus lied, knowing that whoever did this was likely after Annikin, as that seemed to be the only explanation, "but they certainly didn't murder him and move on. Whoever it was is in the sanctuary."

Annikin assumed that was code for "then we should stay out here instead of finding the killers," but he realized he was wrong once Sarus bolted up and ran through the entryway into the tunnels. Despite his feelings towards him, Obi-Wan wasn't going to let Sarus run inside alone, but at the same time he wasn't going to let Annikin remain outside by himself. The only choice either them had was to follow Sarus into the sanctuary, where they would confront whatever was down there waiting for them.

They descended further and deeper into the tunnel towards the common area entryway, not having the slightest clue what they would find. They had an idea of what it would be, considering they'd already seen one murdered corpse, but none of them wanted to think those thoughts. It was almost ironic running through the tunnel towards the sanctuary. The first time he went through he wondered if he was headed towards his death, and now he was running towards a murderer. It was a cruel irony, but irony nonetheless.

Everything in the common residential area was a mess, the area strewn with injured Ophuchi, and even some who were far more unlikely than they. Blood was everywhere, from men, women, and even one child. Sarus nearly collapsed upon seeing the area; so many of his people were dead, innocent victims who didn't deserve to die. The Ophuchi numbers were small, barely even one hundred, so even just a handful of deaths was a major loss to the community. The dead were fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors; each was a valuable member of the clan, and now they were gone, lost to the ages, but Sarus would make sure that their death, their sacrifice, was not in vain.

Obi-Wan knew from experience that whoever killed these people were after something specific. He'd seen enough real-life horror stories as a Jedi to know that if the killer's goal was to murder everyone in sight, there'd be dozens of bodies lying in the area, not just around one dozen. There were knives on the floor as well, indicating that the Ophuchi had fought back. If this was some sort of mass murderer whose only goal was to create carnage here, the Ophuchi wouldn't have been able to put up such a fight. Instead, Obi-Wan assumed that the priority of the killer was to find something, or someone.

The Jedi Knight could only assume that it was Sarus, but Sarus thought differently. He'd seen this exact type of attack before, nearly twenty years earlier. It was when the Sith Lord he'd fought first discovered the sanctuary when looking for the then-pregnant Shmi Skywalker, as that Sith Lord wanted her unborn child dead. The Sith Lord knew exactly who Annikin would become, and it seemed he was back to finish the job.

"Whoever did this is still close by," Obi-Wan told them, able to sense the attackers through the Force.

Obi-Wan took the hilt of his lightsaber off of his belt, igniting its blue blade as a precautionary measure. Normally he wouldn't make such an offensive gesture that could provoke a fight, but it was clear that the killers had already done that. He knew exactly what this was; the ominous feeling he sensed before finding Jacob's body was the same feeling as when he first walked aboard the Federation vessel, which proved to be nothing

more than a trap. If he was right, they'd been lured into one again and the Federation had been able to track them to Tatooine after all.

"Stay close to me," Obi-Wan demanded, ready to protect both Sarus and Annikin if it was absolutely necessary. Sarus had mentioned earlier that the cave they went to the night before was inaccessible unless one knew the exact route, so the Jedi Knight figured that would be the safest place for them to hide. It could've turned into hunting season anywhere else in the compound.

Annikin wasn't about to argue with that demand. He may have had a knife with him, but that was nothing compared to the comforting hue of a Jedi's lightsaber. It was the first time he'd ever seen one activated; the blue blade's light reflected against the wall, casting a blue glow as they walked through the hallway beneath the statue of the Ophuchi prophet. It made him feel safe and protected, at least until he saw yet another corpse, this one much more familiar to him.

"Javid!" Sarus shouted in agony when he realized it was the body of the carpenter that they'd seen. The hermit leader slammed his fist into the wall, knocking pebbles onto the ground and dust into the air.

Sarus never saw any of this coming. He thought his eyes were wide open to the future, but he couldn't have been any more blind to this. He had no warning, no precognition. Nothing. He'd been so sure of everything that would happen in the coming days and the coming years, but this just hit him like a ton of bricks. He knew he couldn't make the pain go away; all he could do was endure. All he could do was make sure Annikin fulfilled his destiny. This abhorrent atrocity would not go unpunished, and all the souls who died in the sanctuary would be saved when balance was brought to the Force.

Just as Obi-Wan was moving towards Sarus to try to get him to keep walking, it suddenly happened. They all heard a pop, almost like a small, muffled blast, and within seconds what seemed like a ton of rock and dirt fell from the ceiling. Annikin jumped back, not realizing that he was leaving the others behind. He turned his head just in time to see Sarus on the other side, safe and sound, but Obi-Wan being pinned under the entire cave in, buried and out of sight under what had to be hundreds of pounds of rock.

"Obi-Wan!" Annikin shouted, yelling as loud as he could in case it was hard to hear him under all of the rocks. "Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan, talk to me!"

He heard nothing, not so much as even a groan of pain coming from beneath the rubble. Annikin frantically began pulling rocks away, but it didn't make a difference. Most of the rocks were far too heavy, and he had no way of being able to move them himself. That didn't stop him from trying, though. He pushed and pushed as hard as he could, exerting every last ounce of strength he had, but the largest rock in his way wouldn't even so much as budge. He could only pray that Obi-Wan wasn't caught below it, and he even held out hope, for whatever reason, that Sarus was able to escape the cave in. He had no real respect for the man, but he had no desire to see him die either, no matter what the Ophuchi leader did to him.

Annikin ran back into the common area, hoping someone in the residential areas around it would hear his cries for help and summon courage enough to leave their safe homes to try and help him. He shouted as loud as he could, but not a single soul dared answer his cries. They couldn't see who he was, so they had no idea of who they were hearing was friend or foe. For all they knew, one step out of their homes would've meant death, and they weren't

prepared for that no matter what.

His shoulders sank in disappointment and frustration. He had no idea if he'd ever be able to get Obi-Wan out, assuming the Jedi Knight was still even alive. It was just then, though, that he heard the faint sound of a young woman's voice. He could barely hear her, and it sounded like she was injured, but he had the distinct impression that she was reaching out to him, that she needed his help. He ran through an archway on the far side of the common area where he found her, a small blonde girl only a few years older than he, lying in the corner, wearing the typical clothing of an Ophuchi, dirt across her face, and blood on her forehead. It was obvious she'd been attacked, and she seemed to be in a lot of pain.

"Hold still," Annikin said as he ran towards her, putting her arm around his shoulder to help her. "Let me help you up."

She seemed to struggle as she stood, wobbling with light-headedness. She appeared to be having trouble remembering what happened, though that was only natural. An attack like this took a lot out of someone, especially someone who'd been directly victimized from it. Annikin helped her out of the room, bringing her back out into the light of the common area so he could see fully the extent of any injuries she had.

"What's your name?" Annikin concernedly asked.

"Lilith," she said with a cough, but she looked up at him with her wide brown eyes, her full lips arching into a smile that seemed grateful, but was actually far more sinister. She'd finally found exactly who her master wanted.

"I'm Annikin," he told her. "You're going to be fine, Lilith. Can you tell me what happened?"

"It..." she paused, and Annikin could only assume how difficult it was for her to speak about this, though in reality she was, of course, just putting on an act. "It just all happened so fast. Four people, four horrible people, they killed the guard at the door and...they just started killing everyone!"

Lilith broke down in mock tears, yet she was surprising even herself at how convincing she was at tricking Annikin into believing that she was nothing but sincere. Annikin held her tight, trying to bring comfort to her seemingly shattered world, but he was actually eating right into her hands. She had a number of cards she still needed to play, but everything was working perfectly. Her master would be most pleased.

"Everything's going to be fine," Annikin assured her, even though he wasn't sure if it was the truth or just a lie. "I promise."

"No, no you don't understand," Lilith gasped, feigning terror-induced panic as she pulled away from him. "He's still here. He's some kind of demon. I saw...the horrible black and red face. He'll kill us all."

"I won't let that happen," Annikin said, holding her by the shoulders to try to calm her down, "Do you hear me? I'm not going to let that happen. You'll be safe now."

She nodded her head, still letting the fake tears flow down her cheeks. The look on her face was one of a frightened insincerity, as if she didn't believe what Annikin was saying, but she let him believe she did, of course. She needed to bring him deeper into the sanctuary where her master was. She would've loved nothing more than to skin Annikin alive right here, but

her Lord Maul had his plans for the boy, plans that had been in place for nearly two decades. She wasn't about to interfere with that.

"Lilith, maybe you can help me with something," Annikin said, figuring it was a shot in the dark but he wasn't about to pass up the opportunity for help from the only person who'd speak with him in the compound. "A friend of mine, he may be trapped underneath some rubble, but I can't move it. Is there another way to the chamber on the other side of the prophet statue?"

"What?" she asked, feigning momentary confusion. "Oh, yes, yes there is. It's through that hall over there. I can show you."

"No, no that's alright," he said, nearly having to catch her as she swayed from side to side once she stood, still seemingly having trouble standing in one spot. "If you can just tell me how to get there, I'll find it."

"I insist," she said. She stopped swaying, starting to feel as if she was overplaying the injured card, and began to maintain her composure. "You probably saved my life in there, so the least I can do is show you down a hallway."

Annikin smiled in gratitude. He was concerned for her safety and had no idea if she would actually be able to make it anywhere, but he was ready to give her a chance. He had to if he was going to save Obi-Wan. Besides, after everything that just happened, he had no reason not to trust Lilith.

-----

The assault came out of nowhere. No sooner had Sarus watched Obi-Wan become trapped beneath the cave in was the Ophuchi leader attacked from behind, someone knocking him out with one blow to the head. He woke up only a few minutes later, but it was too late to do anything at that point. His mouth was bound with a cloth and some sort of sack had been placed over his head. Whoever attacked him didn't want him to know who he or she was, or where they were going.

Considering everything that had happened in the sanctuary, it was becoming increasingly obvious that someone had set a trap for them. They'd walked right into it, but only after having been away when the raid happened, unable to help any of the fallen Ophuchi survive. Now he was being dragged across the cold, rocky ground of the deeper chambers of the sanctuary. It felt like two individuals dragging him, one pulling on one arm and the other pulling on the second, but he couldn't be certain.

Finally the sack was pulled off his head. At first he couldn't see a thing, blinded by the white light that typically would've seemed normal to him. He turned his head around just in time to see the chamber door shut behind him, but not quick enough to see who had pulled him inside. His instincts told him to be cautious, to try and piece together what was happening, but he wasn't in much of a position to actually do anything. He managed to adjust the cloth to fall out of his mouth, but now he could see that his hands were chained together in front of him, and he'd been placed into the corner of the chamber.

His senses were sporadic. He couldn't tell exactly what was lurking around the next corner for him. This attack could prove to be the death of him, or perhaps it was simply a ploy for something else, namely Annikin. Either way, he knew that he'd soon find out. Something told him that he wasn't alone, though he couldn't see anyone, neither in the bright half of

the chamber or the further, darker end meters away.

"What is this?" Sarus shouted, hoping that whoever was behind this was in the room. It may have been dangerous to confront the culprit, but he needed answer, no matter the cost.

"Hell," a voice called out for the shadows, its tone calm, collected, almost soothing in a sadistic sort of way. "Pure, unadulterated hell."

"Who are you?" Sarus asked. He looked around from corner to corner, but he couldn't see anyone. Was he hearing a voice through the Force? Was this person somehow able to conceal their presence? Neither seemed very likely.

"You won't find me," the voice called out again. "No matter how many planets you've searched, no matter how many officials, explorers, and soldiers you've tried to bribe, you've never been able to find me. I hunt from the shadows, as no one can know my name or my face..."

The voice trailed out for a moment. Suddenly a figure began emerging from the deepest shadows of the corner of the chamber, having skillfully and, most importantly, artfully concealed his presence in an expert fashion. Sarus's eyes widened and his heart began thumping faster, harder, than it had in nearly twenty years. The figure's face may have been different, having been tattooed red and black, and his eyes now ablaze with a red and yellow fury, but Sarus could never forget the man so fittingly referred to as Maul.

"...but you already knew that."

"You," Sarus managed to say, the only thing he could say.

Sarus was afraid of very few things in the galaxy, but no words could describe the absolute terror he felt in the presence of the man who nearly killed him, Shmi, and the unborn Annikin two decades ago. It was true, he had sought out Maul a number of times in the past, but he abandoned the search nearly ten years earlier. He believed with every fiber in his being that Maul was the Dark Lord of the Sith, the leader of the only two Sith who still lived, and the Dark Lord that Annikin would have to kill in order to fulfill his destiny.

"I'm truly touched," Maul said with only a hint of sarcasm, maintaining his calm and almost eerily serene composure, a stark contrast to the rage-filled machine of death and destruction that Sarus had fought once before. "You actually missed me."

"Hardly," the Ophuchi scoffed.

"I thought we enjoyed ourselves last time," Maul told him, recalling the day when he nearly killed Sarus but was only able to kill a dozen of his men or so when he attacked the Ophuchi compound the first time. "I know I did."

"I have a hard time calling nearly being killed by a Sith Lord enjoyable," Sarus spat back.

"A Sith Lord?" Maul posed, repressing an amused grin. "Fascinating. I had always been told that the Sith were extinct."

"Don't play games with me!" Sarus roared almost uncontrollably, finally standing up from where he'd been tossed earlier. "I know what you are."

It was so amusing in a pathetically sad sort of way for Maul to watch Sarus so adamantly believe in something and be so close to an answer, only to have it dangled just high enough to where he couldn't reach it as if he were a dog with a master cruel enough to taunt him. The galaxy knew Maul only as a Dark Jedi Master, albeit a self-proclaimed one. Whether he was the Dark Lord of the Sith was only something he would no. Sarus would have to go on playing his guessing games, which didn't seem to be a problem. The hermit always did strike him as one who enjoyed games.

"Yes of course," Maul said. "I forgot that you were always the game master. As I recall, you were so obsessed with that prophecy that you were willing to give your life for that whore the last time we met."

"How dare you!" Sarus said, lunging towards, but stopping just short.

Sarus fell to his knees, but it felt more like being forced to his knees. He had no motor control, no ability to move his own legs off the ground. He struggled to force his head up, watching as Maul held his hand out above him. The Force was holding Sarus down, a consequence of his abrasive and reckless decision to try and attack out of impulsiveness. He couldn't have been insulted. After all, he'd had no contact for Shmi, the so-called whore, for years, but his strong loyalty to the Chosen One clouded his better judgment.

"Where is the boy?" Maul asked, refusing to release his Force hold over Sarus's body until he had the answers he wanted.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Sarus lied. He knew that Maul wouldn't believe him, regardless of his outburst a moment earlier, but he wasn't going to reveal anything about Annikin's whereabouts.

"How unfortunate," Maul told him, releasing his grip over the Force. "For you, at least."

Sarus stood up, but before he could even regain his own composure Maul swung his leg outward, knocking it into the back of Sarus's legs. The hermit fell to the ground, and Maul swooped down to his knees. He ripped the chains on Sarus's wrists apart, preferring not to torture a man who had no ability to defend himself. He had no trouble with senseless slaughter if the moment called for it, but he preferred a more delicate and sophisticated touch when it came to torturing certain prisoners.

"I will only ask you once more," Maul warned, his composure still intact, at least for the next few moments. "Where is the boy?"

"And I will tell you once more," Sarus replied, refusing to budge, even in the face of agonizing torture. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Wrong answer," Maul replied, finally letting his grin surface as he removed his gloves from his hands. He felt a certain pleasure when torturing others, but this one was special. Sarus, as far as victims went, was Maul's proverbial one who got away. Not this time.

-----

It'd only taken a few minutes for Annikin and Lilith to get around to what Annikin was led to believe was the other side of the cave-in. Lilith, of course, wasn't leading him anywhere near there. Her goal was to lead him into a false sense of security so he could drop his

guard, allowing her to finally make her move and gain even more favor with her master. One day, hopefully seen, she would take her rightful place as his apprentice, once the only person standing in her way was removed from the equation.

They stepped into an antechamber deep in the sanctuary, one that was somewhat dark yet torch lit like most other areas of the compound. Annikin looked around, trying to find where they would be able to get Obi-Wan out from under the pile of rubble, but the room was a dead end. There didn't seem to be anything that would lead them to Obi-Wan. Lilith must've been delirious from her injuries, unless he was missing something.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Annikin confusedly asked, scratching his head while trying to figure out where he was. Lilith stepped out in front of him, grinning in satisfaction.

"Oh I'm sure," she cackled.

Just then, two of Maul's other followers approached Annikin from behind, each grabbing one of his arms to hold him in place. The young man squirmed and struggled, trying to break free while panicking about what had just happened to him at the same time. He tried to break free, trying to run forward with all his might, but the two men were far stronger than he was. There was no way he could break free from them, at least not while they were on their guard like this.

"Who are you?" Annikin demanded, finally realizing what had happened and kicking himself for letting himself be misled.

"I already told you," she replied with a coy innocence, enjoying taunting him as she knew that such acts and games would drive him over the edge eventually.

"You know what I mean!" Annikin shouted.

Lilith laughed, almost a childlike giggle. Annikin grunted in frustration, hating the fact that she was toying with him after already trapping him without him realizing it. She was an intelligent huntress, one with a beauty that belied a dark nature. It was that beauty, the youthful innocence that she radiated, that made him trust her earlier. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

"I'm the one who's going to help you fulfill your destiny," Lilith admitted. She'd continue to toy with him in the future, but the amusement only lasted for so long at one time.

"So you're doing this because of some prophecy?" Annikin asked with a laugh, almost like it was his turn to start toying with her. "You people need new hobbies."

"Don't be ridiculous," she spat. "That prophecy has no more credibility than a mad man and you know it."

He couldn't argue with that. Other than the Force, virtually every religious belief in the galaxy had been proven wrong over the hundreds of thousands of years of recorded history. Annikin knew this prophecy wasn't any different, especially since the person who told him about it was, in fact, a mad man. Destiny was a word he was beginning to despise as well every time he heard it, especially now that he saw a senseless murdering trying to force feed it down his throat like Sarus had. Destiny was just another word for not having a choice, and he fully intended to choose his own path in life, not the path that someone else told him that he should take.



"Then what are you talking about?" Annikin asked.

"You weren't sent to save the galaxy," Lilith told him, which almost took the weight off of his shoulders, but it all quickly piled back on when she began speaking again. "You were born to destroy it."

Annikin's shoulders sank, an even greater weight falling upon his shoulders. Every instinct in his body had told him that the idea that was a savior was the most preposterous thing he'd ever heard, but Lilith topped that. He could never be a destroyer, it simply wasn't his nature. Even if he didn't believe in it, the traits needed to be a savior were things he always believed he had; kindness, compassion, a moral compass pointed in the right direction were traits that all saviors had in common, and Annikin always tried to live ideals like that. Bringing pain and unthinkable horrors to the galaxy was nothing something he believed he could ever do, no matter who else believed it.

It felt like Annikin had a rope tied to each of his arms with Sarus on one side and Lilith on the other, each side pulling as hard as they could in a never ending game of cosmic tug-of-war. One side wanted him to be the galaxy's greatest hero, while the other, even more delusional than the first, fully intended to make him its destroyer. They were all insane, and what none of them realized was that by perpetuating their ridiculous ideas over and over they were pushing Annikin further away, though he was already as far away from Lilith's point of view as humanly possible.

"So all this, you being injured, was just you trying to trap me into your deluded fantasies?" Annikin asked, pushing the only button he knew to push: doubt, the same one that had the ability to send Sarus into an offended rage.

"I knew you'd finally catch on," Lilith said, restraining herself from lashing out at his taunts, "I'd expect a Jedi to be suckered into a ruse like this, but I'd hoped you'd be smarter. Oh well. We'll give you all the skills you need to - "

"I don't want *anything* from you," Annikin interrupted, letting her know exactly how he felt about this, though she certainly already knew. She also knew that, in time, he would give into his more primal emotions and fulfill his dark destiny.

"You have only one choice," Lilith said. "You will do this, whether you like it now or not. One day, you will make that choice."

"You're wrong," Annikin said, choking up, overwrought with emotions of pain, confusion, but more so fear, fear of a future predetermined where he had no choice but to comply with someone else's master plan.

Lilith began to speak, but she paused, noticing something behind the guards, someone who wasn't there a moment ago. It gave her cause for concern, as she knew what it was. She thought that loose end had been taken care of by the two guards, but clearly they'd failed her, but more importantly failed their master. Annikin watched as Lilith's eyes began to widen in fear, becoming nervous himself about what was happening.

*When you hear my voice, drop,* Annikin heard in his mind, realizing exactly what was about to happen and exactly who it was behind him: Obi-Wan, alive and well. Just as the voice echoed in Annikin's mind, the two guards turned to find what Lilith was looking at.

"Hello there," Obi-Wan sarcastically announced.

Annikin immediately let his knees relax and he dropped to the ground, pulling the guards down with him. The guards fell towards one another and their heads impacted against one another, knocking them out. Their vice grips let go of Annikin's arms, and he quickly rolled off to the side as Obi-Wan brandished his shimmering blue blade once more.

Bewilderingly, Lilith too drew the hilt of a lightsaber. Obi-Wan took a step back, taken aback by his sudden realization of what she was capable of. Hilt in hand, Lilith lunged forward, ready to draw the blade and fight even if it was to the death, but she stepped as she saw Obi-Wan and Annikin cover their eyes and look away. They turned from a blinding white light forming all around her, with only her shadow visible in the center of it, and when the light dissipated she and the guards were gone, nowhere to be found, taken away somewhere far, far away so she couldn't hurt anyone, at least not for now.

Annikin looked up at Obi-Wan thinking the Jedi Knight would have answers as to what happened, but Obi-Wan stood awestruck, just as mystified as Annikin. For Annikin, when Obi-Wan didn't have the answers to a display of power like that, it was a cause for concern.

-----

Blood spit right out of Sarus's mouth, not by choice but by the sheer force of impact from Maul's ungloved fist into the hermit's chest. The Ophuchi leader fell to his knees, having endured the agonizing pain of Maul's methodical torturing for nearly ten minutes, though that felt more like a lifetime considering the power behind Maul's rage. Sarus struggled to get to his feet and Maul let him, but the self-proclaimed Dark Jedi Master grabbed Sarus by the throat, forcing him against the wall behind him.

"I forgot how strong you were," Maul told a gagging, blue-faced Sarus as the pressure against his head from the rock wall intensified by the second, "but no matter. I will break you, and you will tell me where the boy is."

Though barely able to breathe, Sarus managed to gag up enough blood to fill his mouth. He hacked it out, spitting it right into Maul's eye. The dark warrior winced, the blood stinging his eye, though he ignored it and kept up his assault. He squeezed harder, applying just enough force to move Sarus towards the very edge of unconsciousness without actually letting him fall over the edge.

Sarus closed his eyes, hoping for it to be over as quickly as possible. Even with his eyes closed, the light penetrating his eye lids suddenly intensified. It was as if his eyes weren't even closed at all; while he couldn't actually see anything, it felt like the light of day. Suddenly he dropped to the ground, Maul letting go of his chokehold.

The hermit opened his eyes, expecting to see Maul, but instead he saw nothing. He rubbed his hands against his eyes, wondering if he was delusional, but when he opened his eyes once more he saw something that he never would've expected, at least not right now. It was the one who saved his people, the shaman who'd guided him to save Shmi all those years ago, and the one who instructed him to tell Annikin about his destiny.

It was Ussej Padric Bac, the Shaman of the Whills. Ussej wore the robes of the Ophuchi, brown and tan tunics and robes, just as he had on any occasion when he spoke with Sarus. It was to blend in should any Ophuchi other than Sarus have seen him, but it also brought Sarus a sense of familiarity, one that was important when Sarus was speaking with a man

whom he considered to be a legend.

Ussej extended a helping hand, which Sarus took as he painfully stood up on his feet. The hermit grabbed his side, wincing as his own mere touch made it hurt even more. He'd hoped to be able to go back to the Lars farm with Annikin, to keep helping him as they found a way for the boy to leave Tatooine, but now he wasn't sure if he'd be able to. Walking, for sure, was out of the question now.

"The pain will pass," Ussej told him, his voice a comforting serenity in Sarus's time of agony, just as it had been after the first attack by Maul, "but you need to be more careful."

"I'm not exactly in a position to argue," Sarus chuckled, though speaking only elevated the pain on his face. "Is he dead?"

"No," Ussej said. "I used an ancient Bendu ritual to send him away, but he'll be back. You and the Jedi need to get the Chosen One off this planet now."

"That won't be easy," Sarus remorsefully informed him, fearful that the shaman would hold him responsible for Annikin's reluctance. "He does not want to accept who he is."

"Of course he doesn't," Ussej exclaimed, surprised that Sarus would think that convincing someone of an impending destiny would actually be a simple task. "No one with a destiny like that wants to accept it."

"Not even you?" Sarus asked, referencing when Ussej had become the Shaman of the Whills many thousands of years before that.

"Least of all me," Ussej admitted, though it was never something he ever tried to, or was even able to, hide from anyone. "I'd just gotten out of the war and was still trying to sort out my own issues when Shamus Malachor told me who I was. The last thing I wanted to do was fulfill a destiny that I didn't feel I was worth having. It took me years to come to terms with it, and by then it was time to fulfill it."

"What should I do?" Sarus asked, his tone one of near-begging as he was desperate to find out how he can get Annikin to move forward instead of trying to hold himself back.

"Let him chart his own course," Ussej advised, remembering how he was able to fulfill his own destiny. "His destination will be the same no matter the journey."

It was an intriguing possibility, one that Sarus had never considered. He'd always been taught by the Ophuchi before him that destiny was a one lane road, that there was only one way someone could take to get to their final destination. He hated to be one to disagree with Ussej's interpretation, but he simply couldn't subscribe to the shaman's reasoning. He couldn't wrap his head around the idea that all roads led to the same place. It just seemed illogical, no matter who it was that was telling him. He knew that he had to keep doing what he was doing, which was to do whatever it took to get Annikin to become the man that he was supposed to be.

"Now get him out of here before Maul and the others come back," Ussej urgently stressed. Maul was still in the region of the planet; the ritual wasn't powerful enough to send someone any further than twenty kilometers or so, no matter who was performing it.

"Who were the others?" Sarus asked, having never seen or heard of anyone such as them,

save for Sith or Dark Jedi, before.

"The Guardians of Lettow," Ussej uncomfortably told him, the very name poison to his lips.

The Guardians of Lettow were organized many years earlier, on the orders of Carden Mannux, by a man called Damien Starkiller, technically Ussej's great-grandson, but in reality a genetic abomination created by Mannux using the DNA of Ussej Padric Bac III and Isabella Dashin. The early Lettow hid on the lost world of Lehon, setting up a home and an organizational structure in the Temple of the Ancients. They began working for the Sith nearly five hundred years before Annikin was even born, forming their subservient alliance with the Dark Lord during the Hol Insurrection that nearly destroyed the Sith from within.

"Are they stoppable?" Sarus asked, knowing that if they were as dangerous as they appeared then he would need some way to defend against them in the future.

"Easily," Ussej told him, taking Sarus aback considering how casually Ussej said it. "Lettow are trained to be mindless and expendable drones, a necessity when there are only two Lords of the Sith. They're not trained the way Jedi or Sith are, but they're still dangerous. That's why you need to leave now."

"Sir Bac," Sarus said, using the honorary title of a Bendu Knight, which Ussej once was, as the shaman turned away in preparation of helping Sarus and the others return to the Lars homestead as quickly as possible, "thank you. It's comforting to know that you're watching over me, even after all these years."

Ussej nodded, his own silent way of telling Sarus "you're welcome." It was easier than saying the words; Ussej shied away from emotions for years after his near-mental breakdown during the Great Territorial War, feeling that it would be easier than actually dealing with them. It'd been a hindrance to a number of friendships and relationships, especially with the love of his life, the love everything he was doing now was meant to protect so he could one day feel it again.

Once he was ready, Ussej stood still, closing his eyes in order to speed up the travel time of the three individuals returning to the Lars farm. The white light, one that Sarus had seen even when his eyes were tightly shut, formed again, and in an instant he disappeared, taken kilometers away within a fraction of a second.

"Good luck," Ussej whispered under his breath. Sarus and the others would need it now more than ever.

# --XV--

## CHOICES

*"Choice, not fate, determines your destiny."*

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

Half a second earlier, Annikin and Obi-Wan were staring at the walls of the Ophuchi sanctuary. Now, suddenly, they were kilometers away, looking at nothing but open nighttime desert. They looked at one another incredulously; neither of them could even begin to explain what had just happened. They turned away from each other, away from the blackness of the deep desert, only to find the main hut of the Lars homestead a few meters away from where they were standing.

It just didn't make any sense, and Annikin wasn't sure if he was even seeing right. Was this another one of Sarus's tricks? Did he somehow...was he dead? He preferred the former, which seemed like the only logical explanation, at least at first. When they first went into the Dune Sea the night before, it took them six hours on foot. Getting home didn't even take six seconds.

"Weren't we just...," Annikin started to mutter, trailing off in his confusion.

"This isn't possible," Obi-Wan said dumbfounded, even knowing that it somehow had to be possible. They were there, after all.

"Not quite," Sarus called out from behind, limping towards the two confused men, still holding his side in pain. "There are aspects of the Force even the Jedi have yet to understand."

"Considering the circumstances," Obi-Wan admitted, even if every last ounce of integrity within him didn't want him to, "I'm inclined to take your word for it."

Annikin scoffed. "Sarus's word" was an oxymoron, a sign of trust that went out the proverbial window the second he first laid eyes upon Annikin. The events of the last few hours, between the temple at Arrakeen and what Lilith had told him only a few minutes earlier, only solidified that.

"Speaking of," Annikin grumbled, forcefully grabbing Sarus by the shirt, pulling him closer so the injured man could see the rage building in his eyes, "you knew about this, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid I've no idea what you're referring to," Sarus said, his pitch rising, his eyes momentarily panic-stricken as he winced in pain. He had no idea what Annikin was going to do, though he was beginning to realize what he was capable of.

"Annikin, what are you talking about?" Obi-Wan asked, worried about what Annikin was not only going through, but what he was actually about to do. The Jedi Knight rested a comforting hand on Annikin's shoulder, trying to calm him down.

"That bitch who attacked me," Annikin screamed, not caring who or what heard him at this point. He simply couldn't take this nonsense anymore. "She said I was destined to destroy the galaxy. You knew those psychopaths thought that."

"Annikin," Sarus pleaded, his eyes widening, his body in so much pain; for the first time he was actually afraid of Annikin, though that was likely the pain and fatigue clouding his senses, "before today I had no idea who they even were. I give you my word, I - "

"Your word means nothing to me," Annikin said.

Sarus's shoulders sunk. He knew Annikin wasn't fond of him, but this was a bombshell Sarus wasn't quite ready to deal with. He never meant to push Annikin away completely, especially when there was more that he had to do in order to prepare Annikin to fulfill his coming destiny.

Annikin let him go, the liar not even worth his time anymore. He knew he wouldn't get anywhere with Sarus. The hermit had his own hidden agenda, and if what Annikin wanted to know didn't fit with it then there was no chance Sarus was simply going to reveal anything. As Sarus grabbed his side, he was hardly in a position to argue. He made a conscious choice not to say anything about Maul, not believing Annikin was ready to know that the man whom Sarus believed was the prophetic Dark Lord was on Tatooine.

Before Sarus could say anything, if he was even able to muster up any words in a situation where there were so few, the Lars family emerged from the homestead's hut, followed soon after by Dooku, Arcadia, Logan, and Binks. The Lars' were relieved to see their son safe and sound, not knowing where exactly he was or whether or not he was in danger for nearly twenty-four hours. Sarus stepped behind Obi-Wan, not wanting to Shmi to see him, at least not yet. He didn't want to take away from the moment where his mother was able to embrace him, allowing her fears about his safety to all fly away.

"Are you alright?" Shmi asked as she approached her son, who looked just as happy to see her as she did him.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm fine," he said, breathing a sigh of relief, though it was more for his physical condition. His mental state of being was far from fine.

"Good," Shmi said, slapping Annikin across the face, her fingers leaving a bright red mark on Annikin's cheek, but the strike was immediately followed by her warm embrace. "Oh Annikin, I was so worried."

"What happened?" Logan asked, noticing the cuts and scrapes on Obi-Wan's face, a result of the cave-in that nearly trapped him in the sanctuary.

"We were attacked by some rather dark characters," Obi-Wan said, injecting a look of terror

into Shmi's eyes, forcing her to wonder whether they would come back. "Not to worry, though. They seem to have quite literally disappeared."

"Who were they?" Binks curiously asked, thankful that he'd left the sanctuary with the others before any of that happened.

"We're not quite sure," Obi-Wan admitted, "but I intend to find out."

"It must have been the extinct Sith again..." Dooku muttered, his condescension drawing a pointed glare from his former apprentice. Obi-Wan had hoped that Dooku would at least allow a modicum of concern for the Jedi Knight's well being, but that seemed to be beyond the capabilities of the Jedi Master anymore.

"Well we're glad you made it back safe," Arcadia interjected, stepping between Obi-Wan and Dooku to prevent yet another argument between them. She'd had enough of that at the Ophuchi cave. "We were starting to get concerned."

As the queen spoke, Sarus gathered the courage he could to step out from behind Obi-Wan, not wanting to traumatize Shmi with his presence while at the same time also not wanting to cower away from her. She'd been very clear the last time they'd met, telling him that she wanted nothing to do with him ever again. Though he'd kept an eye on Annikin over the years, he respected her choice, never once speaking with her and even making his presence known to her. She'd been through a harrowing ordeal throughout her pregnancy, culminating in the nearly-disastrous day when she finally gave birth to her son. He didn't blame her for not wanting anything more to do with him, despite the pleasant relationship they'd had before Annikin was born.

Sarus's hands trembled. Sweat poured down his back. He'd never been so nervous in his life. He didn't even know why he was feeling this way. Perhaps it was because he was afraid for how Shmi would feel, but maybe it also had to do with his own fear of being cast aside again by yet another Skywalker. It was strange for him. He'd faced down a man he knew in his heart was the Dark Lord of the Sith twice now, and yet this woman seemed to have some sort of alarming power over him.

Little did he know, his fears were routed in feelings of remorse, something he claimed he had none of when it came to the Chosen One. Of course, he truly had no remorse over how he was dealing with Annikin. He didn't have a doubt in his mind that everything he was doing was necessary. With Shmi, though, her role in galactic salvation was to give birth to and shape the savior into the man that Annikin had already become. She was a vessel of love and compassion, which Annikin would always have to remember and cherish. She was never meant to go through what she went through those many years ago, which, as he stepped out from behind Obi-Wan, was exactly why he knew she wouldn't react in any way that would be favorable to Sarus.

"Hello Shmi," Sarus timidly spoke, limping out from behind the hidden comfort of obscurity behind the Jedi Knight.

Shmi had so many questions about what Annikin saw, what he went through, and what Sarus was going to do with Annikin after all these years, having found out that her son was at the Ophuchi sanctuary when she overheard the outsiders speaking about it, but she never expected that Sarus would actually break his promise and show himself. Her heart nearly skipped a beat; his was a face that she never expected nor wanted to see again, because she knew that if Sarus was here then it meant Annikin was going to be taken away

from her.

For the first time since he came back, Shmi noticed Annikin's reserved demeanor, one of worry and fatigue that he tried to play off with an overconfident stature. There was only one reason why that could be. Annikin knew. He knew everything that she'd tried to shield him from for the last nineteen years. She did everything she could to protect him from the secrets that lied buried in that desert, but she failed. Sarus had won, and now all she could do was pray that Annikin didn't believe a word of it and run off.

Shmi couldn't bear to look at the man. It was a painful reminder of the trauma his beliefs inflicted upon her, and an omen of the pain that was likely yet to come. She turned away, the only thing she could do, and went back into her modest home, leaving everyone else behind. The others stood in silence, an awkward tension befalling upon them. It was clearly obvious that Sarus and Shmi had a history, one powerful enough to have made her leave without a word. None of them wanted to even begin to speak of that, especially when all Shmi wanted to do was be alone with her reflections of the past. She'd hoped this day would never come, but it had and now she had to deal with it.

"Perhaps we should all go indoors," Sarus said, breaking that silence. "The nighttime desert isn't to be taken lightly."

He was right; the sand people were especially violent lately, having been upset by Jabba the Hutt's forces who'd began hunting them down after raids on the outskirts of Anchorhead. Annikin and Sarus walked at the back of the group. Sarus limped towards the doorway and Annikin matched the hermit's slow speed. When the others began making their way down the steps, Annikin put his arm out in front of Sarus', stopping him and catching the attention of Cliegg, who stood in the stairwell waiting for his stepson.

"I think it's time for you to leave," Annikin demanded. Annikin knew that no matter what was troubling his mother at the moment, Sarus was the root of the problem. It was no coincidence that she'd become upset the moment she saw the hermit.

"Considering what just happened to us," Sarus reminded him, "I think it'd be best if I stayed, for both our sakes."

"Get out," Annikin said.

He wasn't about to let himself hear anything Sarus had to say. Not anymore, not after Arrakeen and the attack on the sanctuary. He was through him and all the Ophuchi; their beliefs, their prophecies, their ridiculous ideas about him, he wasn't going to listen to any of it anymore. He approached his stepfather, making his way down the steps, hoping he'd never have to see or hear from Sarus ever again.

"I'm injured, Annikin," Sarus cried out, concerned for his own safety as he had nowhere to go, at least not at this time of night by himself. "Where do you suppose I go?"

"I don't care," Annikin called back from the bottom of the stairwell, his words accentuated by the slamming of a door once Cliegg and Annikin were finally out of view.

Sarus was left to fend for himself, in the middle of the night and the middle of the desert. His only options were to sneak into the Lars homestead for shelter or find shelter in Anchorhead, as walking six hours back to the sanctuary by himself at night while injured was out of the question. As much as he wanted to, he knew that finding shelter somewhere



on the farm would only make matters worse if he was discovered.

With only one choice, Sarus turned away from the hut, turning away from everything that his life had prepared him for, and he walked away from the most important person that had ever been in his life. But this wasn't the end. He wouldn't let it be the end. He was one hundred percent devoted to the fulfillment of the prophecy, so he wasn't about to walk away for good. There had to be a way to show Annikin had absolutely committed he was, a way to atone for whatever sins the boy thought he'd committed. The only thing Sarus was missing was a means to do that.

-----

Hours later, everyone in the homestead was asleep, everyone except Annikin. He spent hours lying in bed trying to get some rest, but there was no rest for the weary. There was too much on his mind, too heavy a burden, too strong the feelings of solitude and despair. Sleep would be too bittersweet; in the morning he'd have the luxury of waking up and believing that this was all but a dream, only to have that hope crushed when reality set back in.

Now he stood in the kitchen, mixing the strongest drink he could with what little his family had. The normally vibrant overhead light was off, with only the light of machines littered throughout the kitchen allowing him to see. It was for the best; the light normally coming from the entryway could be seen from the garage, and he didn't want to wake up the outsiders. He'd had enough nonsense from Dooku to last a lifetime. How Obi-Wan was able to put up with that man for years was a mystery, but if the Jedi gave out bravery awards then Obi-Wan definitely deserved one.

Annikin sprinkled a few more ingredients into the drink processor, the machine's soft wailing a constant nuisance for him. Cliegg stepped into the kitchen as Annikin kept mixing, though the boy tried not to notice. He'd wanted to be alone, even in the midst of the worst feeling of loneliness he'd ever felt, but it was comforting to know that his stepfather was still looking out for him.

"What is that, blue milk?" the farmer asked, a slight grin on his face showing his sarcasm.

"Sure," Annikin softly replied; he knew Cliegg realized what he was making, but neither of them particularly cared.

Cliegg's face scrunched in his a frustrated sadness. He couldn't even begin to imagine what Annikin was feeling, what all he was going through. The man always felt he knew what to say with Annikin, but now he was drawing a blank. He'd known about Sarus for a long time, ever since Shmi told him about it all years ago, and these moments were ones he never hoped would come, mostly because there was nothing he could say to make it better.

"You know your mother's pretty shaken up," Cliegg told him. "You should talk to her."

"I'm going to tomorrow," Annikin stoically replied. "I'll let her know everything's alright."

Annikin's evasiveness and his lack of any show of feeling were making it harder for Cliegg to help him. If Cliegg was going to say anything, he had to get some sort of idea of what Annikin was feeling and what he was going through. A cold shoulder wasn't going to help with that, especially in a situation like this. The silence between them only made things worse, though it was hard for Annikin to talk to Cliegg knowing that he knew about Sarus

for nearly a decade and didn't tell him. Still, he didn't want to create a rift, so all Annikin could do was try to put it behind them, no matter how hard that would be.

"I hear the queen's ship got fixed," Annikin said, looking towards the now-seated Cliegg as the drink mixed in the processor on the counter behind him. "How'd they manage that?"

"Honestly? I have no idea," Cliegg said, just as confounded as everyone else on the farm. "Captain Panaka lost contact with his guards last night. He was going to send out a team but I convinced him to wait until the morning, just in case. By the time the team got there, all the parts were installed and the guards were unconscious."

"Sounds like Ophuchi handiwork," Annikin grumbled. "Not that I care. I didn't have the heart to tell the queen this, but it only took me about five minutes the other day to realize I had no idea what I was doing."

The two shared a laugh, a genuine moment like so many others they'd had in the years before. Perhaps burying the hatchet that was Cliegg's secret wouldn't be as hard as either of them thought it would be. They did mean a lot to one another, particularly Cliegg to Annikin. He couldn't imagine not having a father figure anymore, especially one as supportive and mentoring as Cliegg always was.

"Speaking of the two ton bantha in the room," Cliegg started to say, referencing Sarus.

"Look, Dad, don't worry," Annikin said as he threw up his hands, pretending that everything was alright when that couldn't have been further from the truth. "Sarus is just insane."

"That's what the outsiders made it seem like," Cliegg said, remembering what they'd said when he overheard them speaking when they first returned to the farm. "Was it true what they said about the caves?"

Annikin sighed, taking a seat across the table from Cliegg. Annikin folded his hands together, bringing them up to his chin in contemplative thought. He barely understood any of what Sarus said and he was actually there when he said it, so he couldn't expect Cliegg to grasp it any better. He searched for any word he could to try and make Cliegg understood, even though they both knew the odds of that were nil.

"Destroying an evil army didn't even begin to scratch the crazy surface," Annikin finally said. "Sarus said that according to legend, an ancient prophecy foretells me destroying a Dark Lord of the Sith and being the savior of the galaxy."

"I...I, um," Cliegg mumbled, trying to say something, anything, but he found himself too dumbfounded to even get out a completed sentence.

"I had the same reaction," Annikin laughed, trying to brush off the confusion.

Cliegg still couldn't say a word. He thought what Shmi had told him years earlier was ridiculous, but this was a whole new level of insanity. But was it? The destroying the extinct Sith certainly seemed that way, as did actually being a prophetic savior, but the hero part of that story...that gave him pause to think. He'd always known that Annikin was meant for better things than just being a farmer. As crazy as it all was, he could understand why someone would think that of Annikin. The boy was selfless, compassionate, and a believer in most other people, all qualities of a noble person and qualities that all heroes shared.

"What do you think about all that?" Cliegg wondered aloud, curious to see what Annikin's reaction would actually be.

"That he's insane, obviously," Annikin said with a raised eyebrow, hoping he was wrong about where Cliegg was headed with this. "Why? You can't honestly believe him."

"Son, I think you can do anything if you put your mind to it," Cliegg admitted, hoping that it would at least give Annikin the confidence to believe in who he was again. "Whether that means you're going to be a hero or the best damn moisture farmer on Tatooine is up to you. Don't let anyone else tell you who you're destined to be."

That's when it hit him. Annikin had spent the last two days scared to death about what was going to happen to him, what was destined to happen to him, but Cliegg was right. No one could dictate destiny, could they? No, Annikin wouldn't allow it. It was his life, not Sarus's and not anyone else's. If Annikin wanted to be a hero, he would make that choice, and that wasn't a choice he planned on making.

It was strange. Just making the choice to make a choice seemed to take weight off of his shoulders, though not completely. He could never escape the burden of what Sarus and the Ophuchi believed, just as he knew he'd probably never escape Sarus forever. There would always be doubt, there would always be confusion, but at least he could live with the fact that Sarus was just misguided. At least, that's what he wanted to do.

"Sleep in tomorrow," Cliegg said, patting Annikin on the back as he left, leaving Annikin behind at the table. "You could use the rest."

Once Cliegg was gone, Annikin shut off the processor on the counter. With his mind made up, with his decision to ignore what Sarus had said, he didn't feel he needed the alcohol anymore. He could get a good night's sleep, hopefully the first of many.

-----

A warm, dry breeze hit Annikin's face late the next morning. He rolled in bed, not wanting to wake up. A creature of habit, he assumed it was very early in the morning, which is when he'd woken up almost every day his entire life, but that wasn't the morning breeze. He opened his eyes and rolled back over. The clock read 11:37 standard hours, later than he could ever remember sleeping. He wasn't panicked, though. If Cliegg had been concerned about him sleeping later than his definition of "sleeping in," then Annikin would've been dragged out of bed hours ago.

He wiped muck of morning off his face, trying to brush away the residual fatigue. After the trek through the Dune Sea, both to get to the sanctuary and to Arrakeen and back, it was going to take him away to feel fully rested. Still, he was up, and he needed to find something to do. It was just then that he heard rustling from the adjacent room, his parents' room. He had no idea what she'd say, but he couldn't hold off talking to his mother, especially after how she'd react to Sarus the night before.

When he opened the door to room, he found Shmi sitting in a somber silence on her bed, rustling through an old box of trinkets she'd collected throughout the years. One of them he noticed instantly: the snippet of japor Cliegg had shown him. Considering Shmi now had it, Cliegg probably told Shmi that he admitted the truth to Annikin. Not that it mattered, considering Sarus had let that secret slip before Annikin even spoke to Cliegg about it.

"Are you all right, Mom?" Annikin asked, putting his hand onto her shoulder, worried about her well being after everything had happened. He never wanted to burden her, but after what happened he didn't seem to have a choice.

Annikin stepped back when Shmi stood up, not saying a word in response. He was taken aback as she placed the japor snippet into his hand, softly placing it into his palms with a great reverence. It clearly meant more to her than it did to him. Perhaps she knew what it truly was, beyond that of a carving with the symbol of the Chosen One on it.

"Cliegg told me he showed this to you," Shmi said as she closed Annikin's hand over the object, giving it to him for good. "I should've given this to you years ago."

"Why didn't you?" Annikin asked, though he could barely look at it. He could barely even hold it for that matter. He wanted to put the Ophuchi behind him, but it was hard to do with an Ophuchi object like that in his possession.

"That man, the one who was here last night, he told me I had to give it to you on your thirteenth birthday," Shmi recalled, cupping her hands over the face as she tried to hide the tears that began rolling down her cheeks. "He said that there would be consequences, but he was wrong. I didn't want him to take you away from me."

"How do you know him?" Annikin asked, even though he knew he wouldn't like the answer.

Shmi slumped back down onto the bed as she heard the question, her thoughts wandering back to when she first met Sarus. Her pregnancy and Annikin's birth weren't things she enjoyed thinking about. There were too many unanswered questions and too many painful memories. None of it made any sense, but she lived through the events. She knew they were real, even if they seemed to defy all measures of reality.

She was only twenty-two when she found out she was pregnant. She'd fainted in the marketplace of Mos Espa, which she'd lived on the outskirts of with her father and older sisters, and in her delirium she saw a man, a shaman, who told her that she would give birth to a child who would be one of the galaxy's greatest heroes. She assumed it was her mind playing tricks on her, having never known a man's touch, but the settlement's doctor confirmed it. Somehow, somehow, she'd become pregnant. Her growing body confirmed it further in the months that followed.

For months on end, she tried to piece together what happened, and she finally began to believe that she'd somehow conceived a child without a father. She made the mistake of letting that piece of information slip, and that was the day Sarus came into her life. He immediately believed her, and he told her about the prophecy but she dismissed it and demanded that he never speak to her again. He agreed, but he kept a close eye on her.

Shmi was thankful for his hidden protection. When she was nine months pregnant, she was attacked by a lightsaber-wielding assassin, a Zabrak who said he was there to end the threat to his existence. Sarus stepped in and whisked her to the Ophuchi sanctuary, where the assailant was able to track them down. Sarus and his men fought off the attacker, and while they were gone Shmi went into labor. Sarus arrived just in time to help her, having forced the Zabrak assailant to escape after having mauled Sarus's fellow Ophuchi to death. After Sarus arrived, she gave birth to her son, and he even suggested the name Annikin.

In the hours that followed, Sarus brought her to the nearest medical center he could find. Before saying goodbye, he gave her the snippet of japor and told her what she needed to do

with it, but she panicked at the thought that someday her baby would be taken away. She told Sarus to leave her and her son alone, and while she took the object she promised herself she'd never give it to him. It only took her nineteen years to break that promise.

"Does this have to do with my father?" Annikin asked, his questioning becoming more insistent, remembering what Sarus said about the Chosen One being born to purity.

"You...", Shmi began, shaking her head, shutting her eyes as she at last told him, "You have no father. There...there was no father."

Shmi lowered her head in guilt in guilt over having not told him the truth sooner. Her shaken, confused son stumbled backwards, the news knocking the wind right out of him. He reached his hand out, putting it up against the wall for balance. Everything he knew was a lie. Even though he knew and understood that it was to protect him, he still couldn't help but resent it. He'd always heard stories about his father, but now he knew that the man he knew as Deak Skywalker didn't exist and never had.

He had no reason to doubt his mother's story, that she believed there'd be some sort of immaculate conception, but that didn't mean it was true. Perhaps she'd been raped and didn't remember any of it, but wouldn't she have had herself tested for that? Of course she would've, any rational person would've. Then where did he come from? How did he exist if there was some sort of divine conception and his mother had never known a man's touch before his birth?

Even though he'd told himself the night before that only he could make the choice to be who he wanted to be, that seemed to be wishful thinking. If all of this was true, if he really didn't have a father, then the burden of destiny was back onto his shoulders and the simple idea that he had control over his life was gone. He wanted this all to be a coincidence.

He wanted his mother to be wrong, but he could feel in her words, he could feel in his own heart, that she was somehow right, that somehow the simple reality that you needed a man and a woman to have a child had been thrown out the window just for him. But why was he so damn special? He couldn't be a savior, he simply couldn't. It wasn't right and it wasn't fair. There were much better people in the galaxy for something like this. Important people like that never came from a backwater rock like Tatooine.

"Annikin," Cliegg interrupted from behind, not even causing Shmi to flinch as she kept to her own thoughts, "Sarus is outside. He says he needs to talk to you."

"Tell him to go screw himself!" Annikin barked. He'd had it with Sarus. He was done.

"He says it's important," Cliegg said; on one hand, Cliegg didn't want Annikin anywhere near Sarus, but on the other hand he could see how urgent Sarus's request was and how desperate the man seemed to be. "He says it's about your freedom."

*My freedom?* Annikin wondered. That didn't make any sense. He wasn't technically a captive or a slave, save for his family's sharecropping contract with the Hutt Cartel that prevented him from leaving the planet. That realization was a cause for worry. Annikin left his mother and made his way up to the surface, hoping, praying, that Sarus hadn't done anything that would jeopardize his or his family's wellbeing. Knowing the hermit, though, Annikin wouldn't put that past him.

"I told you to leave," Annikin shouted as he saw the nearby Sarus, resting on a cane from

his injuries at Maul's hands.

"I know, Annikin, but - "

"Shut up!" Annikin yelled. He was closer to Sarus now, though his voice wasn't any quieter. He was furious that Sarus hadn't listened to him. "You're trespassing here." He took a step closer. "Now get out."

"Annikin, I'm sorry for coming back, but please listen," he said, speaking quickly, almost desperately, so Annikin couldn't cut in. "I've just come from a meeting with Bib Fortuna, one of Jabba's aides, and I was able to arrange for your release from your family's sharecropping contract."

Sarus's words confirmed what Annikin had suspected. He wanted to believe that it was done out of plain and simple generosity, but he knew better. It was a double-edged sword with strings attached to it. That much was painfully obvious, even if he didn't want it to be. He didn't necessarily want to believe in Sarus or any good intentions the man may have had, but he wanted to believe that there were no strings attached because the release from the sharecropping contract was something he'd always wanted.

Ever since he was a boy, Annikin was always under the contract of someone else, but never actually a slave. Whether it was the Toydarian shop owner in Mos Espa when he was a child or Jabba the Hutt after his mother married Cliegg, there was always someone else controlling where he was able to go, or in this case unable to go.

He'd always wanted to leave Tatooine, not forever but at least so he could see what else was out there. He was tired of just hearing stories of faraway places that would take his breath away. He wanted to see them, to know what it was like to be somewhere other than a desert wasteland. Whether it was the spiraling metropolis of Coruscant and Corellia or the waterfalls of Alderaan and Utapau, he didn't care. If Sarus's intentions were genuine then Annikin would finally be able to make that a reality, though he wasn't holding his breath for Sarus to actually come through.

"Go on," Annikin said, humoring Sarus without any faith in what he was about to say.

"Tomorrow, you're to race your arch rival Sebulba," Sarus said, nearly giddy, believing that Annikin was actually beginning to open up to his destiny. "If you win, you're released from the contract and you can go with Master Kenobi to Coruscant and become a Jedi."

There it was, the string that'd been so obviously hanging from the offer. Annikin couldn't believe he'd actually hoped Sarus would actually do something just to help Annikin without shoving the prophecy down his throat more. The man was truly a lost cause, even if Annikin didn't want to believe anyone was beyond being brought back down to rationality. Even after everything that had happened, after everything that Annikin had told Sarus about how he couldn't string him along like that, nothing had changed. Nothing would ever change.

Still, Annikin had a choice to make, because he saw two options in front of him. He certainly wasn't going to run off and become a Jedi, but he could still use Sarus's offer to his own advantage. Would he humor Sarus, win release from the contract, and then use that newfound opportunity to see the galaxy without becoming a Jedi? On the other hand, he could stick to his principles and recognize that anything Sarus touched crumbled apart, thereby ignoring the offer. He was tempted to use the offer to his advantage, but he couldn't. The potential consequences outweighed the benefits.

"No," Annikin firmly and absolutely decided; there was no way of changing his mind.

"I beg your pardon," a near-speechless Sarus said, taken aback by the rejection of the offer he was so sure would succeed.

"I'm completely and utterly through with you," Annikin declared, emphasizing the fact that it was Sarus specifically, and not anyone else or any other belief, that he was through with. Everyone else could do what they wanted, but he was done dealing with Sarus. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll never be who you want me to be."

"I'm sure your nervous, Annikin," Sarus said, hoping to find some way to convince Annikin that he had no say in the matter, "but this isn't a choice."

"Oh yes it is," Annikin shot back, amazed that Sarus could be so blind to the fact that he couldn't control Annikin's life. "I'm deciding my future, not you. I'm staying here, and I'm not racing Sebulba just because you want me to be a Jedi. Now go away, leave me alone, and never come back."

Annikin turned away, not just physically but in every metaphorical sense as well. Annikin turned his back on him, and while Annikin knew that he was doing the right thing by disassociating himself from Sarus, the hermit himself felt otherwise. Rather than recognizing the anger that he'd caused and the pain and confusion he was feeling because of it, Sarus saw it as nervousness, the fear of change that the Arrakeen temple had shown Annikin the day before. It was quite understandable.

It was increasingly obvious that Annikin wasn't going to take the initiative to do what he needed to do in order to progress to where he had to be. Annikin was taking destiny far too lightly, believing that there was actually a choice. To Sarus, such an idea was insane, even though he knew no one else shared that opinion.

If Annikin wasn't going to take it upon himself to be free, Sarus would have to ensure that it still happened. That left Sarus only one choice. It wasn't a choice he particularly wanted to make, preferring that a destined savior make that decision on his own, but it was one he had to make nonetheless. The future of the galaxy depended on it.

"That's something I cannot do," Sarus whispered. Though it was a reply to Annikin's demand, he never intended for Annikin to actually hear it. Instead, the hermit turned away, partially complying as he left the farm for Anchorhead, but his role in Annikin's life wasn't over quite just yet.

A few meters away, Annikin slowly walked down the steps into main pit of the farm. The outsiders had all returned to their ship, preparing to leave in only a few short hours, which gave Annikin very little time to say goodbye. Instead, the only person he found in the pit was Owen, who, by the look on his face, clearly overheard the conversation.

"I think you made the right call," Owen said, showing just a faint flicker of brotherly concern, something awkwardly new for him, "You don't need to be going off on some damn fool's idealistic crusade. I don't know if that's any consolation."

"It's not," Annikin snapped, brushing Owen off to the side and, for the first time in a strange reversal of roles, brushing Owen's opinion and genuine concern off to the side.

Even though Owen was never able to get along with Annikin, part of him was always concerned about his well-being. You could care about someone without actually liking them, especially if they were family. After Owen's mother died, he didn't want to lose any other family members, no matter who they were. Perhaps his sudden worry for Annikin was his recognizing that Annikin had an extraordinary amount of pressure put on him because of Sarus, who Owen had no love for after hearing what he'd done. Part of Owen just wished he could somehow help.

-----

Ray'kele paced back and forth in front of the old hunting lodge, the building that had been converted into an office for the Hutt Cartel once Czerka relinquished control over the planet and the Hutts gained it. Jabba used it now, and it was where Sarus and Ray'kele had negotiated Annikin's freedom from the contract with Bib Fortuna. They'd hoped to speak with Jabba personally at his fortress, but the Hutt was off world on Nal Hutta, Jabba's homeworld and the capital of the Hutt Cartel.

It was an insane plan. Too much rested on chance. If Annikin was to lose the swoop race or Fortuna was to go back on his word, then it all would've been for nothing. Ray'kele understood that Annikin was a skilled swoop racer; Sarus had seen the boy race a number of times, albeit in secret. Still, even with that skill, part of winning depended on luck. Considering what had happened to the sanctuary, a raid that saw the murders of seventeen Ophuchi, it didn't seem like they had much luck lately.

The clan leader-in-training assumed that Sarus had an ace in the hole if necessary. The man was a zealot, fanatically devoted to ensuring the fulfillment of the prophecy. All Ophuchi knew it, save for the few other Ophuchi leaders who also viewed things the way Sarus did. Things would change once Ray'kele became the leader, but all he could do now was bite his tongue. He did what Sarus told him to do, just as he'd always done. He owed him that.

When Maul attacked the sanctuary two decades earlier, Ray'kele was gravely injured in the assault. He was only ten years old at the time and was caught in the crossfire of the defense, and it didn't seem like he was going to survive. A severely wounded Sarus, though, pulled him from the rubble and began to patch him up, even though Sarus himself was in an excruciating amount of pain. It took Ray'kele weeks to recover, but if Sarus hadn't pulled him out of the rubble then he'd likely be dead. He owed Sarus everything, and he wasn't about to speak out against him, even if Sarus was too much of an extremist for his tastes.

Ray'kele looked up, hearing the settlement's clock tower chime. It was 13:00 standard hours, and he'd been waiting for nearly two hours for Sarus to make his way to the Lars homestead and back. It shouldn't have been taking him that long, but then Ray'kele saw him approach, remembering that the man was walking with a cane after his injuries half a day earlier. He breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that his superior was just taking his time as opposed to something bad having happened. The look on Sarus's face, on the other hand, told Ray'kele that while nothing physically bad had happened to Sarus, things didn't go the way either of them had hoped.

"I take it he said no?" Ray'kele asked, hoping he was wrong.

"Unfortunately," Sarus replied, confirming the fear.

Ray'kele threw his hands in the air. It was incredibly frustrating, considering he'd wasted his morning. He was the one to bring the outsiders back to the Lars farm so he wasn't able to



help his people when the Guardians of Lettow attacked. He'd wanted to go back and help once he met Sarus in Anchorhead and found out what happened, but Sarus insisted that he stay. Not only did Sarus need Ray'kele's medical assistance, but he'd also wanted his support when proposing Annikin's freedom to Fortuna. All of that was a waste of time, and his people were suffering without him.

"So now what?" Ray'kele asked, still hoping that Sarus had a backup plan. "Do you have a plan B or is that the end of it?"

Sarus's lips formed into a disturbing, uncomfortable smile. Something was happening in that head of his, something that gave Ray'kele pause for concern. He was ill at ease with what his leader could be considering, knowing that the Ophuchi people could be put in danger again if any drastic action was taken. Too many of them had already been lost in the last twenty-four hours. They couldn't afford to put anyone else in danger.

"There's always another choice," Sarus grimly stated, not liking his option but knowing that it was the only way to move forward. "If the Chosen One isn't going to free himself, then we're going to do it for him."

# --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 cowering 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 skrunnee 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 skrunnee 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.

## COVER ART

Cover art for *Star Wars: Episode I – The Chosen One* was provided by Victor Dorantes, author of the fan fiction novel *Acceptance* about the former Jedi Narod Antrell making a new life for himself during the days of the evil Galactic Empire. It features, from left to right, the characters Obi-Wan Kenobi, Annikin Skywalker and Padmé Naberrie.

Credit for all of the images is as follows: *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* for Ewan McGregor as Obi-Wan Kenobi, Hayden Christensen as Anakin Skywalker (head), and Natalie Portman as Padmé Amidala; *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* for Anakin Skywalker's body, Coruscant, and Tatooine; all text, effects, and any other part of the front and back covers not previously specified by Victor Dorantes.

This work is neither endorsed by nor affiliated with the aforementioned sources, nor does it claim to be endorsed by or affiliated with them. The individual images are copyrighted to Lucasfilm Ltd. The cover art is licensed under the Creative Commons license of attribution and ShareAlike 3.0. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)

## COPYRIGHTS, DISCLAIMERS, AND PUBLISHING

Some rights for this novel are reserved under the Creative Commons license of attribution, noncommercial, and no derivative works 3.0 unported. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)

The aforementioned license states that you may freely share this work, under the condition that you must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work) (attribution); you must not use this work for commercial purposes (noncommercial); and that you may not alter, transform, or build upon this work (no derivative works).

This novel is a product of the Alternative *Star Wars* Saga, a series of fan fiction written and maintained by Brandon Rhea, Wayne Lipman III, Solus, Edward Oliver and Brent Krajewski, as well as others that may be added in the future. The work was originally distributed by upload on *Star Wars* Fanon, the *Star Wars* wiki of fan invention, of Wikia, Inc. by the author. This work is not endorsed by or affiliated with Wikia, Inc., nor does it claim to be.

All *Star Wars* trademarks and licenses are property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This work is not endorsed by or affiliated with Lucasfilm, nor does it claim to be, and will adhere to any legal restrictions placed upon should any restrictions or complaints arise and be directed to the author. The work does not seek to gain any commercial profit whatsoever and any individual attempting to do so is not affiliated with the author or the licensor of this work. It is illegal to profit or attempt to profit from this work. The author is committed to following all guidelines placed by Lucasfilm on the privilege of legally writing fan fiction.

Any resemblance to any persons (living or dead), locations, or events is purely coincidental.

## ABOUT THE CONTENT

This work contains science fiction violence, profanity, sexuality, and themes that may not be suitable for children. Were this a film, the author stresses that it would likely be rated PG-13. Reader discretion is advised.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of Solus and Edward Oliver as beta readers for this novel. The quality of this novel has increased tremendously due to their assistance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandon Rhea is a *Star Wars* fan fiction author and, along with Wayne Lipman III and Victor Dorantes, a co-founder of the Alternative *Star Wars* Saga series. Although Dorantes is no longer a part of the project, Rhea and Lipman continue to work together and with others in producing the content of the series, which includes *Star Wars: Episode I – The Chosen One* and Lipman's novel *Star Wars: The Alderaan Affair*.

Rhea has been part of the online *Star Wars* community since 2004, when he registered on TheForce.Net's Jedi Council Boards and began participating in discussions, particularly in the Classic Trilogy board and the Fan Sites board. He was the manager of the Fan Sites board from 2008 to 2009, the co-manager of the Classic Trilogy board from 2008 to 2010, and the co-manager of the Fan Design board from 2009 to 2010. He is currently a Manager Emeritus.



In 2005, Rhea was invited to register at The *Star Wars* RP, a role-playing board then-powered by ProBoards, and become the moderator of the board about SuperShadow, a notorious *Star Wars* fan who claims to be good friends with George Lucas, the creator of the *Star Wars* Saga. As of the present day, Rhea is the Head Administrator of The *Star Wars* RP, which is now powered by vBulletin software at <http://www.thestarwarsrp.com/forum>.

Along with TheForce.Net and The *Star Wars* RP, Rhea is an administrator on *Star Wars* Fanon, the Wikia, Inc. *Star Wars* wiki of fan invention. He currently hosts his fan fiction on this wiki and uses it as an encyclopedia to document information about his work. He also serves on the Council of Seers, the good article and featured article review board. All of the Alternative *Star Wars* Saga work by Rhea, Lipman, and others can be found on the *Star Wars* Fanon Wiki for public viewing and download.

In his personal life, Rhea is an active member of the Boy Scouts of America and its national honor society, the Order of the Arrow. He currently serves as the Immediate Past Chief of the Order of the Arrow Section NE-7A. Rhea served on the 2009 National Order of the Arrow Conference Training Committee, as well as the Northeast Region Cub Scout Task Force. He is an Eagle Scout and a member of the National Eagle Scout Association, and a Vigil Honor member of the Order of the Arrow. Both honors are the highest anyone can achieve in the Boy Scouts of America and the Order of the Arrow, respectively.

Rhea lives in New Jersey with his family and is in his junior year of college, where he is studying to earn a degree in political science. He plans to attend law school following his graduation from college, and has a desire to attain elected office in the future.



AND IN THE TIME OF GREATEST DESPAIR,  
THERE SHALL COME A SAVIOR, AND HE  
SHALL BE KNOWN AS THE SON OF THE SUNS...  
- JOURNAL OF THE WHILLS, 3:127



[swfanon.wikia.com](http://swfanon.wikia.com)

Created in the USA

CC  
SOME RIGHTS RESERVED

