

--VII--

ANNIKIN

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 pirate 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 pedal 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 they 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.