

# --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.

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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.

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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.

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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."