

# --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.

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The assault came out of nowhere. No sooner had Sarus watched Obi-Wan become trapped beneath the cave in as 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.

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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.

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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.