

--XII--

PROPHECY

"All saviors begin their great journeys as skeptics."

- Elias, first leader of the Ophuchi Clan
Journal of the Whills, 3:74

Fate had a way of changing people's lives in the blink of an eye. Whether it was the blessed birth of a child or a terrible accident that made a loved one leave before their time, the swiftness in which a life could change was immeasurable. It was hard to reconcile the person someone became when they were different only a day earlier.

It didn't take Javid long to figure that out. A day earlier, the twenty-three year old had been an apprentice carpenter, learning how to make all of the handcrafted necessities that an Ophuchi would need. Now he was in the presence of the collective of individuals who would help lead the galaxy out of the deepest darkness, a group that would help all beings find their salvation from the evil that lurked in the corners plotting the demise of civilization. The young man couldn't have asked for a greater honor.

After a short, twenty minute walk, the dimly lit catacombs, illuminated only by the torch that Javid carried, began to open up, and light finally broke through the darkness. The catacombs gave way to an ancient cave sanctuary, its entryway the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. To everyone but Javid, the caves were like nothing they had ever seen before, being completely unique to anything on their respective worlds. The only source of light in the wide open caves were the torches that were firmly attached to the walls, setting a welcoming, yet mysterious, atmosphere for those unaccustomed to it.

They all looked up, seeing the stalactites on the roof of the structure hanging down like glass chandeliers in a regal ballroom on some planet far, far away; but the most distinctive feature of the cave was the paintings all across its walls, depicting various events that none of them could wrap their heads around. Ancient designs, different symbols, and various pictographs littered the walls, as did an ancient alphabet. There were animals, different peoples, and so many other things.

While Javid led the others towards a large, smooth wall, surrounded by a number of stone seats in front of it, Dooku broke from the group and stepped up to the wall with the primeval alphabet. He ran his hands across the stone, hoping to get an idea of what the symbols were written with. Like Annikin, Dooku also had an interest in the cave, but not for any prophetic value. He never believed in prophecy, destiny, or the idea that one man could

hold information vital to the safety of the galaxy. No, he had a passion for archaeology, one that became apparent when he was a Padawan.

Dooku was sixteen when he traveled with Master Yoda on a research mission to Pho Ph'eah. The natives of the world had an immense array of artifacts and writings in their caves, at least in the ones that survived the bombing of Pho Ph'eah during the Great Territorial War. Still, they didn't hold a single candle to Ophuchi symbols. These were nothing like the Jedi Master had ever seen. The only recognizable symbols, even barely recognizable themselves, were those of animals, but he knew that there could have been a million different interpretations about what they all meant.

"Fascinating," Dooku whispered sincerely.

"You have an interest in ancient symbols?" Javid asked. Dooku turned around, surprised to see the young man standing there as he hadn't realized anyone was watching him.

"They are unique," Dooku told him. Javid contained a grin, not wanting to show any emotion whatsoever, but he was pleased to see a Jedi respecting his culture. The Ophuchi had a strong bias against the monastic peacekeeping order, so he never would've assumed that a Jedi would take an interest in the Ophuchi.

"He has something even better than this," Javid said coyly.

Dooku cocked an eyebrow, but as Sarus and Ray'kele entered the cave behind Javid, he knew what the young man meant. Returning to where the others had taken a seat in front of the symbol-laden walls, Dooku took a seat next to Obi-Wan. The Jedi Knight seemed genuinely pleased that his former master was appearing more open to the possibility of learning something from the Ophuchi. It was clear to the Jedi Knight that they were all there for a reason. Such was the nature of the non-coincidental Living Force.

Annikin looked around, looking at the sides of the caves, the markings, the symbols, the letters, letters whose meaning none of them knew, least of all Annikin. He could venture a guess, one that he dared not venture aloud at the risk of sounding ridiculous. Was galactic destiny written on these walls?

It seemed absurd, but an hour ago so did the idea of a civilization living in the far reaches of the Dune Sea, a supposedly inhospitable wasteland. If the answers that Sarus had for them were written on the walls of a cave, Annikin couldn't believe that he'd be able to take them on face value. There had to be other explanations. Destiny wasn't just transcribed in stone. It couldn't be. But as Annikin looked around, he had a terrifying feeling that it all, or at least some of it, had something to do with him.

He couldn't shake the thought that there was more to Sarus's story about him than defeating an evil army. Anyone with the proper military experience, expertise, and some ingenuity could help engineer a wartime victory, and this seemed like much more than that. Sarus seemed far too spiritual to be obsessing over a military commander. No, there had to be more, something much more profound, but what was it?

Did he even want to know?

As Dooku and Annikin both sat down, Sarus stepped up to a small stone ledge between the others and the stone wall. The aging hermit ran his coarse hands across its surface, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. Just the touch of the sacred wall was intoxicating. It always

overcame him with a deep sense of grace, a sense of destiny. He was always one of the more reverent Ophuchi of his time. It was no wonder he was chosen to be the herald of prophecy. No one else would've been able to undertake such a weighty responsibility. The group before him would probably dismiss what he had to say as a fairy tale, but he knew it was true. He believed that with all of his heart.

"Every since I was a young boy," Sarus began, sliding his hand off of the symbols as he looked back before the assemblage in front of him, "I've come here for spiritual guidance, as have all Ophuchi for generations. According to legend, our people were first led here around nine hundred years ago by the Shaman of the Whills. The clan had become disorganized and scattered across the Outer Rim, but he appeared to them and led them back here to show them the true path they needed to take to fulfill the destiny of all Ophuchi."

He was already losing everyone. Sarus couldn't blame them. It was all new information to them. The Jedi Order had lost all information about its past, but there were some elements of the galaxy that knew the truth. The Galactic Republic was the one that covered it up in the first place, and certain governmental sectors within it knew far more than they would let on. It was no surprise to him that they would do so. The information he had would, if made public, devastate the very foundations of its civilization.

"The Shaman of the Whills?" Obi-Wan asked curiously.

"The Whills are an ancient species spoken of on these very walls," Sarus replied, pointing to the writings directly behind him. "These symbols speak of how they were organized by our ancestors and brought to a world far from here to record the history of the galaxy. For eons, they awaited the arrival of a shaman who would help guide them. He came to them a few thousand years ago."

Beside Obi-Wan, Binks listened attentively to the story, but he was completely skeptical of everything that was being said. It all seemed like Jedi lore to him, but the Jedi knew nothing of it. He doubted the Jedi would somehow miss so much history, so there was no way, at least to him, that it could be true, at least based on what he'd seen so far. Considering his own religious beliefs about the Gungan gods, he found it far more likely that what Sarus was saying was simply an Ophuchi myth.

"Who was he?" Jar asked. The Gungan was able to set aside his skepticism and humor the Ophuchi leader, if only to learn more about the hermit's cultural beliefs.

"His name is lost," Sarus replied regretfully, although he was skillfully lying as he did, indeed, know the identity of the shaman, "but we know that he studied both sides of the Force at one point in time before realizing the true nature of the Force of Others. The path led him to his death, upon which he became one with the great mystery and transcended reality to become the Shaman of the Whills. Now he dwells in a land known only as Ashlan Four, the land of the Whills."

Annikin leaned in closer to get a better view of the writings behind Sarus. Beneath the symbols was a painting, one that depicted a short, pudgy brown species leaning in close towards a winding blue stream. He had no idea what it meant, but, despite his confusion and fears that it all revolved around him, the lore was interesting to him. Tatooine was normally a hive of absolute boredom where the only stories were about far off wars with the Jedi and the Republic, so it was refreshing to hear a story that somehow gave Tatooine at least a degree of significance.

"What does the rest say?" Annikin asked.

"I was hoping you'd ask me that, Annikin," Sarus said, turning around towards the symbols. Annikin's face started to turn white. It seemed like such an innocent question, and yet Sarus was treating it as if it was the key to whatever they were there for.

With a puff of air from his mouth, the Ophuchi hermit cleared some of the dust that had gathered over the text on the walls. It had faded somewhat, making it a bit harder to read, but Sarus still knew exactly what it all said. He never memorized the exact words, but at fifty-seven years of age he had nearly six decades of experience in the caves and with the scriptures within them.

"These are the words of our prophet from his deathbed," Sarus continued. "He said to his twelve children that they and their descendants would travel far beyond the most distant stars and find the Whills. The Whills would accept their destiny and follow the prophet's children to dwell in the light of the Ashlan Nebula. On the fourth planet, they would record the story of the galaxy."

Sarus hesitated for a moment. His entire life was leading up to these next few words, but suddenly he found it difficult to continue. He knew he was about to change the lives of six individuals from six different backgrounds, yet sharing a collective destiny. How hard would it be for them to accept it? Even if they did accept the truth, not just his truth but the only truth, their lives would be altered forever and Sarus would be responsible for telling them that. It was a burden that he, for some reason, did not want to put on them, but he knew that it was for the right cause. It had to be done. He would do it no matter what.

"The Whills were tasked with telling the story of the Ophuchi ancestors," Sarus continued once more, "as well as the great republic, the Republic, that would last for over a thousand generations. The Whills would continue their task until told otherwise, and when the dark side of the Force attempted to overcome them, they would have no fear. As our prophet said, in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns."

...*what*? Thoughts flashed through Annikin's mind faster than he could process them. A savior? It couldn't be possible. He couldn't...was this why he was there? It was all so stupid. It was just a whole mess of hopelessly religious people thinking they had some prophecy. For whatever reason, Annikin just happened to be the perfect person for them to shove it all on. Annikin straightened up and crossed his arms, coming hazardously close to rudely scoffing what the Ophuchi leader had to say. It was just junk, a whole bunch of lies.

It had to be, for his sake. Even if he vocalized his objections, his boldness would've all been an act. Beneath his pretend composed exterior was his vehement thoughts, his desperate rationalizations, everything he ever knew thrown together as a front. Beneath it all was the trembling mind of a terrified little boy, one who was now standing up from the seats and stepping behind the rest of the group, trying to play it off like he just needed to stretch his legs a little bit.

'The Son of the Suns...' The magnitude of the last four words wasn't just heard by Annikin. They had a weight emphasis put upon them, something everyone picked up on, but most of them had no idea what they meant. A palpable silence followed Sarus's words. The group stirred, most of them uncomfortable with the stillness that Sarus had created. They shifted

uncomfortably in their seats, glancing back and forth between Sarus and each other as confusion spread rapidly among them.

Obi-Wan and Dooku were the only ones who could even begin to understand what Sarus was saying. As soon as he'd spoken of the coming of a savior, the two Jedi's necks snapped towards one another so fast that even a gust of gale force winds would be jealous of how fast they were. Words didn't need to describe what they were thinking; their complete and utter shock was written on their faces, their widened eyes and dropped jaws telling the story of what they may have known.

The two Jedi knew for a fact where the idea of the Son of the Suns came from. It was the sole remaining line of a prophecy about an individual who would bring balance to the Force by destroying the Sith once and for all. The prophecy was dismissed after the Sith were destroyed at the end of the New Sith Wars, as a team of Jedi had reportedly killed the final Dark Lord of the Sith. Dooku in particular always admired those Jedi who'd sacrificed their lives to destroy the Sith, so it came as a great surprise that there were people in the galaxy who still knew about and believed in the archaic scripture.

"How do you know about the prophecy?" Dooku grittily asked.

The Jedi Master was irritated, rightfully so in his mind. The old Jedi prophecy wasn't exactly common knowledge in the galaxy. It was sealed in the most secure files of the Jedi Archives. The High Council wasn't about to let the youngest members believe in the possibility of the Sith still existing. There had to have been a leak somehow. There was no other explanation for how the Ophuchi could have known about it. Any idea of the Ophuchi having known about it before the annihilation of the Sith never even crossed his mind. There had to have been some sort of wrongdoing.

"Our ancestors wrote it," Sarus kindly replied. He wasn't prepared to alienate one of the Jedi like he'd done with Arcadia during the feast. "That's not all. We have the entire text of the prophecy."

"Recite it," Dooku demanded as he shot out of his seat, "now!"

Sarus could understand Dooku's frustration. Dooku was displeased that Sarus knew, or at the very least thought he knew, something about the Jedi Order that the Jedi Master did not. The Jedi thought they knew everything, but they couldn't have hoped to understand the secrets of galactic salvation when their own past was being kept hidden under lock and key in a top secret government facility that, of course, may or may not have existed.

"Very well," Sarus said as he moved over to another passage written in the ancient Ophuchi language, brushing off the dust just as he did to the previous one. "It says, 'In the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns, a vessel of pure divine energy. Born to purity, he shall bring balance to the life-force of all other beings, destroying the greatest threats the galaxy has ever known.'"

This time, Dooku didn't resist scoffing like Annikin had. The very idea that the Sith, undeniably the greatest threat the galaxy had ever known, still existed was offensive, not just to him but to all of the Jedi Order. Dooku could tell by the look on Obi-Wan's face that the younger Jedi Knight was giving Sarus the benefit of the doubt, at least for the duration of their time in the cave, but the elderly Jedi was not in the mindset to do that. Alsius Hoth and Valenthayne Farfalla sacrificed too much to destroy the Sith a thousand years earlier. That was why they were some of the greatest heroes the Jedi Order had ever known.

"May I continue?" Sarus asked. He hid his annoyance at Dooku for interrupting him, mainly because it was mixed with confusion. Dooku, who nodded as cordially as he possibly could have to say he could keep going, wasn't the most agreeable of men, but he did ask to hear it.

Oh no. Please no, please. There can't be more of this. Annikin thought the first part was bad enough. How could the rest possibly top the revelation of a galactic savior? Nothing Sarus would say could possibly make anything worse for Annikin, at least that's what he kept telling himself. Whether or not he believed it was something even he couldn't figure out.

"Continuing," Sarus said, "'Some will wish him dead; others will wish to exploit him, but he will not travel alone. Those who follow the chosen one in his time of awakening must do so for all his days, lest all of civilization collapse before them.'"

Annikin's heart nearly stopped as Sarus finished. It almost became hard to breathe, as if the weight of the entire universe had been thrown on his shoulders. It couldn't be about him. The prophecy wasn't about him. Annikin backed up further into the shadows, finding it hard to breathe, a sick feeling in his stomach. Even if the prophecy wasn't about him, if Sarus believed it was, Annikin knew the Ophuchi leader would do anything in his power, manipulate what he could, to make his ideas come to pass, whether they were meant to or not. It was as if this whole civilization was bent on ruining his life.

Annikin wasn't a hero. He didn't even want to be a hero. Who would want to shoulder the responsibility of saving an entire galaxy? A crazy person, which Annikin wasn't. He was just Annikin Skywalker, a moisture farmer, a glorified mechanic who possessed barely any skills outside of mechanics that he knew of. He may have hoped to get off the planet one day, he couldn't do it like this. He couldn't do it as a son of prophecy. The very idea just made him feel sick, as if the darkness and the shadows were closing in on him.

Not everyone was having the same reaction as Annikin, though. *Maybe this wasn't as interesting as I thought it'd be,* the young Queen Arcadia quietly whispered to herself. The only reason she went with Sarus was to satisfy her own curiosity about how he could know information of galactic importance, and so far an ancient prophecy didn't seem overly relevant to her.

"For a time," Sarus continued once more, "darkness will find strength, but none should be dismayed. Out of the darkest night comes the brightest dawns. On this long awaited day of judgment, the sons of the Ophuchi shall announce the return.'"

Obi-Wan found himself instinctively drawn to the words of the prophecy. He had been taught from a young age that the Sith were dead and gone. He still wanted to believe that, but it was far too unlikely that all of this was a mere coincidence, despite what Dooku would likely try to say. The Living Force guided everything, and nothing happened by accident. The idea that he would be sent to Utapau and find the queen just in time to get onto her starship that just so happened to be damaged enough to land on Tatooine was one thing. Crash landing and being rescued by the young man who a hermit was obsessing over and then being brought to these caves to hear a prophecy saying that the Sith still existed was a completely different matter entirely.

The hermit knew that there would be mixed and confused reactions. He could see it written on all of their faces. Annikin was terrified, Dooku was insulted, and Obi-Wan and Arcadia were intrigued yet confused. Amator and Binks were beyond lost, having said nothing since

leaving the fast. Sarus watched them in amusement as he stepped over to another ledge a few meters away. The group didn't follow him, but they did watch to see what he had to say next. He stood before a wall with an elaborate painting of a group of animals in a large brawl. What it meant was beyond all of them, but, knowing Sarus, they were about to find out all about it.

"This painting reflects the beliefs of our people regarding the savior," Sarus said, "whom we refer to as the Chosen One. The mural is mostly symbolic, but symbolism can represent a degree of fact. It shows an enslaved dove that will rise up and vanquish a serpent who will slowly try to corrupt and destroy him in order to catch him as his prey. When the serpent is destroyed, the desert rain will fall again."

"Wait, hold on a minute," Annikin said, almost breathless, failing to understand the implication that an ancient drawing had something to do with Tatooine's woes, "are you trying to tell us that this drought is somehow connected to the prophecy?"

"Yes," Sarus simply replied, sensing that Annikin was beginning to catch on. "The rain stopped falling the day the Chosen One was born, and it will not fall again until he fulfills his great destiny. Thankfully for his sake, he will not have to face it alone. There are a number of individuals who will help him, but the most important is the Argus. The Argus helps to free him from his shackles before vanquishing the serpent."

"You know what," Annikin barked, his turbulent emotions getting the best of him as he got closer to Sarus, stepping up onto the ledge to look Sarus directly in the eye, "enough with the prophecies and the paintings. I know what you want to say. Just say it."

"Annikin, what is this all about?" Obi-Wan asked, speaking as calmly and friendly as he possibly could. Obi-Wan let out a faint smile, trying to help a clearly and surprisingly test Annikin keep his calm as well. For whatever reason, the young man had an air of paranoia about him, something he hadn't sensed in him before.

"Isn't it obvious?" Annikin replied. "A day ago, Sarus tells me that I have a destiny to destroy an evil army. Now he's reciting a prophecy about a galactic savior rescuing the galaxy from some great threat. He thinks it's me."

Annikin's head sunk as the words finally left his mouth, not because of what he said but because of what Sarus didn't say. Annikin held out hope that he just paranoid over Sarus's confusing prophetic rant, but the hermit didn't say a word to deny it. He didn't even want to be near the Ophuchi leader anymore, or anywhere in the same galactic region as him for that matter. Annikin jumped back down off the ledge, slowly backing away from the nonsense that Sarus kept spewing at him.

"That's preposterous," Dooku laughed. He couldn't possibly fathom the idea that Annikin was a prophetic savior. There was nothing special about an insignificant farm boy. The very idea of it made a mockery out of the ancient Jedi prophets, even more so considering Annikin very clearly wanted nothing to do with it. How could a savior, a vessel for the Force, be such a weak-minded peasant?

"Is it, Master Dooku?" Sarus asked, also stepping down from the ledge to confront the aging Jedi. He had enough of the Jedi Master's sanctimonious, self-righteous, arrogant Jedi blithering. "Is the view so clear from your ivory tower on that steel mess you call a planet that you know this for a fact."

"I don't need an ivory tower to tell me that you're insane," Dooku growled. He clenched his fists and wrapped them around Sarus's shoulders, slamming the hermit into the wall behind him. Dust softly floated down from the impact as rocks from above crawled down the side of the wall. "Alsius Hoth and Valenthynne Farfalla sacrificed their lives to ensure the Sith were destroyed. How dare you slander their names."

"Jard," Obi-Wan tried to interject, "why don't - "

"Don't 'Jard' me," the Jedi Master demanded. "Not this time, Obi-Wan. They destroyed the Sith. You know that."

"The Sith are not extinct, Master Jedi," Sarus assured him, only to be forced tighter up against the wall. "For that, you have my word."

"You're a hermit who lives in an Outer Rim desert," Dooku reminded him. "Your word means absolutely nothing to me."

Dooku forced Sarus off to the side, finally letting go of his grip. Sarus wanted to shake his head in disgust, but that would've been no different to shaking his head at an infant who wasn't able to swim despite telling it to swim. Dooku had grown up in a rigid order that brought its people up to believe that their way was the best way. One man wouldn't be able to break through that arrogant armor.

"If they were extinct," Sarus said, brushing the dust off of his tunic, "then the man I fought eighteen years ago at this very sanctuary was nothing more than a figment of my imagination and I truly am insane."

"I wouldn't put that past you," Dooku said as he grit his teeth, seething in frustration.

For nearly twenty years, Obi-Wan knew that Dooku could be somewhat arrogant, particularly when it came to his own opinions about how the Jedi had lost their core ideals of being defenders of peace as opposed to defenders of a corrupt government. This outburst, though, was something completely new. The Jedi Knight had never seen his old master in such a dark and terrifying light, if the man before him now even was the same person who he butted heads with so many years ago.

Obi-Wan always had his suspicions that Dooku felt a bit more superior than a Jedi should, but he always brushed it under the rug. He never suspected that the Jedi Master could be so closed-minded and, truthfully, bigoted towards other people and their beliefs. A good Jedi was supposed to look past that. Qui-Gon Jinn always told him self-pride and a true superiority complex was a path to the dark side. Jedi were meant to lead by example, not dictate how others should be led.

"You said more people would help the Chosen One," Obi-Wan said, trying to change the subject from the Sith and cut Dooku out of the conversation, even though he knew that would be hard considering what he was about to ask. "Do you mean us?"

"With all due respect, Master Kenobi," Amator interjected after having said nothing since the feast, "that's ridiculous assumption. Maybe it's different for a Jedi, but there's no way any of us could be involved in this Sith apocalypse of yours."

"Are you sure?" Sarus suggestively posed. The way he saw it, it was the young Utapau guard that was jumping to ridiculous assumptions.

"Hold on a minute," Amator said, but before he could say anything else the Ophuchi hermit cut him off.

"The galaxy is on the verge of annihilation," Sarus continued. "Civilization as we know it will collapse unless you all work together. You must unite or all will be lost."

A completely stunned silence befell them all this time. No awkward shifting, no uncomfortable glances, just stillness and complete and utter silence. The ramifications of such a seemingly outlandish idea were of an incomprehensible magnitude. It meant everyone on the entire cave was prophesized to fulfill some sort of destiny that none of them wanted. Like Amator said, the Jedi were one thing, but how could a security guard, a monarch, and an exiled prince fit into the plans for stopping universal Armageddon?

"Why us?" Binks finally spoke up. "There's nothing any of us could do."

"As the prophecy says," Sarus began, "'Those who follow the Chosen One in his time of awakening must do so for all his days, lest all of civilization collapse.' He is now in his time of awakening."

"You dragged us out here for this?" Amator shouted. "That's not destiny. That's you trying to force us into something that fits what you think the future is."

"I did not 'drag' you out here, young Logan," the Ophuchi reminded him. "As I recall, I asked Annikin and the Jedi if they would be willing to come, and they were. I never asked you, your queen, or the Gungan to come. You took it upon yourself to follow us out here. You now have to accept the responsibility that comes with that decision."

It was an outrage, a sheer, unabashed outrage. Amator threw up his arms in disgust. Sarus manipulated them from the beginning, and Amator could see right through it. He knew that the queen would want to hear about matters of galactic importance, he knew that Amator would follow her no matter what her orders were, and he knew that Binks would follow along as well. There was no mistaking the fact that they were all there because Sarus wanted them there. The hermit could deny it all he wanted, but that wouldn't change anything. The decision for them to go into the desert was already made for them before Sarus even uttered a single word to any of them.

"You know what, Skywalker," Amator said, turning around behind him where he knew Annikin was standing, "you don't have to..."

He looked around for the boy, but he was nowhere to be found. The boy had ran, and like his father hours earlier there was nothing any of them were able to do about it. None of them even knew he was gone. None of them even knew what he could've been feeling. Not just what he was feeling about the prophecy, but about what was happening around him.

The boy's world was crashing down around him. Every semblance of his reality was shattered in only a few short hours, with just a few utterances of ancient scripture and old symbols. When they should have been looking to see if he was all right, or if he was even halfway composed, they turned on one another and argued amongst themselves. They were selfish, and they all knew it. Even Arcadia, having kept to herself almost the entire time, felt guilty. She was so focused on what everyone else was arguing about that what Annikin was feeling didn't even cross her mind. She couldn't even begin to imagine it.

"Great," Amator quipped as he turned back to Sarus. "You lost the kid."

"Logan," Arcadia whispered. Her scolding frown and the disappointed glare in her eye expressed her disapproval. She wasn't about to tell him to change his personality on account of Sarus, but she did expect him to at least behave himself.

"I'll find him," Obi-Wan said.

"No, let me," Sarus appealed.

Obi-Wan nodded, albeit with a nervous hesitation that he earnestly tried to mask. Sarus was the root of the entire problem here, like a doctor who not only broke the news of a terrible disease but actually gave Annikin the terrible disease himself. He had no faith that Sarus would be able to cheer Annikin up, considering everything that had to be going through the young man's mind, but he knew that there was no way he could stop Sarus from speaking with Annikin, save for physically restraining him. The man was determined, a fact that Obi-Wan noticed with an alarming obviousness. Hopefully Sarus could at least get Annikin to come back. The Jedi Knight didn't want Annikin off by himself, not when the young moisture farmer was his responsibility.

While the others may not have known where Annikin went, Sarus had a good idea. There were only two passages out of the caves, and Javid and Ray'kele were standing on the other side of one of them with strict orders not to let anyone else unless accompanied by Sarus himself. That left only one option, a winding yet short catacomb that led to a ledge at the opening of a carved balcony-like structure at the edge of a sand dune. Sarus had ordered many years earlier that it be carved out, as it was a peaceful place to meditate. Luckily for him and his meditations, the entire Ophuchi compound was within a sand dune, although more like a cliff, or else there would have been no high-up opening to carve.

Leaving the rest of the group, Sarus entered the tunnel that would take him to the ledge, a fairly steep climb but one he had many dozens of times. As he walked, he couldn't help but feel bad for Annikin. In fact, on some level, the hermit felt pity, but it wasn't just for Annikin. The Chosen One wasn't the only one who would suffer so much for others, but it was also all those who would be sacrificed along the way.

On one hand, some would choose to be martyrs; others would simply be sucked into the journey without consent, like Logan Amator for example. Some would be both, and yet it was necessary for the Chosen One's ultimate fate. All great men needed trusted allies who would help guide them along the path of destiny, but those who walked with such men rarely lived to tell grandchildren about happy endings.

All would be worth it. Victory would be had over the beasts of the dark side, and over those who so foolishly and despicably did its bidding. Those who lived a proper life, a just life, would stand on a sea of glass and sing the triumphant songs to the sweet music played by the everlasting Force of Others. Sarus was sure of it. There was no doubt salvation was just beyond the horizon.

Sarus stepped out into the light on the edge of the cliff overlooking the Dune Sea. It was sunrise, something people had marveled at for millions upon millions of years. It was a daily rebirth, a reminder that things could start anew, but no one was ever able to fully grasp the magnitude of how an entire universe could change in the twelve hours between dawn and dusk. Sarus had an idea, though, and it was an idea of an eternal daybreak. There was never a night so dark that could defeat the rising suns.

Annikin sat somberly at the edge of the cliff watching the sun rise. It was tranquil and relaxing, the complete antithesis of what was raging about in his thoughts. Sarus could understand why Annikin was unable to immediately accept his destiny. He too had been given a heavy burden at a young age, but his father was able to help him accept the responsibility he needed to take. Sarus knew he could help Annikin do it too. As he sat down beside him, Sarus assumed that he would have the first word, but Annikin turned to him before the hermit could even utter a syllable.

His thoughts were on his father, not Cliegg but rather the man he never met, the man he was told died when Annikin was a baby. Deak Skywalker was supposed to be a navigator on a spice freighter in the Outer Rim, and he was supposed to have been killed when pirate raiders assaulted his vessel, but now Annikin wasn't so sure. He always dreamed about what his father was like, creating an image of him in his mind, but the prophecy seemed to change all that. It was almost as if his father never existed. It was one of a thousand questions swirling around in his overwhelmed mind, but he didn't have any real desire to know the answer to any of them. How could there be an answer that wouldn't help shatter his frail spirits?

"My father, my real father," Annikin began, a deep sigh and the sound of his words resonating how deeply troubled this weighty burden made him, "he wasn't real, was he?"

"What makes you think that?" Sarus asked. He already knew the answer, of course, but he had to humor him. After putting so much on Annikin's shoulders, it was best that the young man started coming to his own conclusions.

"If everything you said is true, then so is the part about the Chosen One being born to purity," Annikin gloomily surmised. "You don't have to sugarcoat it. I know what it's trying to say."

"This question is better left for your mother," Sarus admitted. He didn't want to get involved in something like this, because any discussion about Annikin's real father would implicate Shmi as a liar. "The question for you is whether or not you believe what I said."

That was a question Annikin couldn't answer. Part of him, deep down inside his soul, wanted to say that he knew it was true, that he felt everything was happening for a reason. That part of him couldn't understand why Sarus and the Ophuchi would go through so much trouble and put so much focus on him if it wasn't true. On the other hand, he was just a farmer, a glorified mechanic. He knew he wasn't a savior. He was just Annikin Skywalker.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Annikin emotionlessly conveyed. He didn't know if he should've expressed fear, anger, or any other emotion for that matter. "This is all too big for me."

The old hermit let out a defeated sigh. He was hoping that wouldn't be Annikin's answer. Remembering how his own father helped him, Sarus slowly placed his hand on Annikin's shoulder, sitting down beside him to comfort him. It was all too reminiscent of when he too felt a great burden upon him. It wasn't something he wanted, nor was it something he wanted to accept, but his father helped him do so. Had it not been for his father, Sarus wouldn't have been able to do it. The least he could do for Annikin was return the favor.

"Do you see that small outcropping over there?" Sarus asked him. He pointed out towards one of the farthest sand dunes he could see, where a small, barely visible speck could be

seen at the base of it. "Those are the ruins of Arrakeen, a very old Ophuchi settlement. Within those ruins is another cave with even more cryptic messages and symbols."

Annikin's shoulders tensed up and he clenched his fists, a nervous habit when he felt something bad was about to happen. He could barely keep himself together after having heard the prophecies in the cave below, and now there were more? How much more could someone like him possibly take? He was already near his breaking point.

"Don't worry," Sarus laughed, pulling his hand back. "They have nothing to do with you. In fact, it was about me."

"You?" Annikin asked. Sarus grinned when Annikin almost sounded excited, but it was more like relief that something didn't have to do with him for a change.

"Yes," Sarus replied. "When I was about your age, I went there with my father. The Ophuchi leader, my predecessor, Darius, told me that I was carrying a spirit inside of me that had lived for a hundred millennia and would live for many more to come. I didn't believe it, but I learned to accept that it could be true."

"What are you trying to say?" Annikin asked him. The boy shook his head in confusion. He couldn't make sense out of the idea that there was a hundred thousand year old spirit inside the man sitting in front him.

"That you don't have to believe you're a savior," Sarus reassuringly told him, "at least not yet. You just have to accept the fact that you might have a destiny greater than you realize. As long as you can accept it might be true, then when the time comes you'll make the right choice. I know it's a lot to ask. Between you and me, I wish I didn't have to ask it."

"Then find someone else," Annikin demanded. Sarus's comforting words didn't do enough to reassure him. Whatever the Ophuchi leader's intent in saying them may have been, the point was still that Annikin would one day have to save the galaxy, even if he didn't want to accept it right that minute.

"There is no one else, son" Sarus said in remorse, trying to comfortably get Annikin to accept it. "You are Chosen."

He certainly didn't want to be. Annikin could understand why Sarus was so adamant about all this. In the hermit's mind, civilization depended on it. He'd been brought up with a particular religious belief, and the hesitancy of the man he believed to be a savior wasn't going to change anything. There was a certain fanaticism involved. Annikin could see that clearly. He wished he could've believed in something so strongly, but at the end of the day, while he may not have admitted it, he didn't believe in himself enough to subscribe to this idea of prophecy and predestination.

Annikin stood up from the cold, hard ground and turned away from the sunrise, trying to collect his thoughts. They were still a jumbled mesh of barely intelligible questions, fears, and regrets. How did he get in this mess? Why did he agree to go with Sarus? That stupid impulsiveness the night before ended up ruining any sense of truth and reality that he had.

He knew he should've just stayed with his father, but the japor snippet that now rested in Annikin's pocket, adorned with the same symbols as the statue and the caves, wouldn't let him. He was so afraid of what it meant that he ran off halfcocked, only to find his fear

increasing exponentially with each passing minute. He just wanted to be himself, and right now he just wanted to be alone.

Sarus's optimism about convincing Annikin turned to a frowning disappointment in himself for not being able to do so. He could understand Annikin's hesitancy and desire for solitude, though. He too had wanted to be alone when he first found out about his own destiny. It was a feeling that he needed to shut out everything and everyone just to make it so it wouldn't be real.

Giving Annikin his privacy, Sarus nodded in understanding and headed back down the catacombs, keeping his hand against the rock walls the entire time for balance. As he made his way down, he could already hear the agitated voice of Master Dooku bellowing his self-righteous Jedi arrogance, probably for all to hear. Sarus certainly didn't want to hear it. The sooner he could rid himself of Jar Jar Dooku the better. The Jedi Master certainly wasn't doing the Jedi Order any favors, considering he was the epitome of how the Ophuchi view all members of the ancient order.

It was true that Dooku was agitated. Down below, in the far side of the cave, Dooku fiercely waved his egotistical pointer finger at his former apprentice, angered by whatever they were discussing. Sarus could only hear small bits as he made the final descent down the remainder of the catacombs, but from he could make out it had to do with Obi-Wan's own opinions on what had transpired in the cave.

"I put up with your naïve insistence to believe everything someone told you when you were my Padawan," Dooku bawled in disgust, "but not anymore. You are a Jedi Knight, and yet you show the inexperience of a youngling."

"How dare you lecture me on what it means to be a Jedi," Obi-Wan scolded in an equal amount of disgust, considering his newfound revelations about his old master's attitude. "Considering the way you treated the Ophuchi beliefs tonight, your hypocrisy now is astounding. I never imagined you could fall this far from the Jedi ideals."

"Bah!" the Jedi Master shouted. "Your ideals. The ideals of an Order that lost its way centuries ago. The Jedi Order is the one that's fallen from the right ideals, not me. But as always, I'm the only one with any sense around here."

"If you disagree with the Jedi way so strongly," Obi-Wan began, quickly realizing that he was saying something he knew he'd regret, "then why are you even here? No one's making you stay with the Jedi."

Dooku gasped in astonishment. He found it incredible that Obi-Wan would call him arrogant and yet be so bold as to suggest he leave the Jedi Order. The Jedi Knight clearly didn't know his former master at all. Dooku was trying to save the Jedi Order from itself, not leave it. He would show the galaxy and the Jedi themselves what it meant to be a true keeper of the peace. The complacency that the Jedi Order showed now would be its downfall, but not if Dooku had anything to say about it.

The Jedi Master left Obi-Wan where he was, moving to the opposite end of the cave to distract himself by trying to analyze the Ophuchi symbols. Obi-Wan beat himself up in his thoughts, knowing how absurdly stupid his statement was. Perhaps Dooku did have a point, at least in some regards. The comment was rather immature, but beyond that it was reckless. He couldn't argue Jedi ideals while at the same time telling a Jedi to leave the

Order. His recklessness was always an issue, but this was the first time it manifested itself so strongly in many years.

He never would be able to understand Jard Dooku, though. One minute the old man was vocally berating the leader of an entire civilization for 'insane' beliefs, and the next his archeological interests were kicking into gear and he was analyzing the cave wall he thought was the source of the insanity. It was a peculiar mystery, and that would never change.

Sarus laughed off what he'd just watched, but it was no longer of any particular interest to him. He suddenly noticed a moderately-sized fire in the center of the cave, one started with a few pieces of desert wood and the brush used for the torches, all of the material having been set off to the side in case more fuel was needed. Amator sat next to the flames, tending to them as Queen Arcadia shivered behind him.

Amator was certainly a dedicated young man, but Sarus sensed there was more to him than that. The security officer passionately defended his queen during the feast, something that, from what Sarus had seen in his lifetime, most guards didn't do for their superior. There seemed to be an underlying motive for all of it, a particular passion that extended beyond his work. Sarus had a good idea as to what it was, but it wasn't his place to say anything about it or even think anything more of it. That was between Amator and Arcadia.

"That should do the trick," Amator said as he sat back down next to the freezing Arcadia. "You should've told me you were cold earlier, my lady. I could've had this fire going as soon as we got here."

"Everyone was so caught up in the moment that I didn't want to interrupt," the queen confessed. "To be honest, I wasn't paying attention most of the time."

"I don't blame you," Amator told her. "I can't stop thinking about home. I just keep seeing myself wrapping my hands around Neimoidian's fat neck and..."

"I know the feeling," Arcadia reminded him, considering how testy she had gotten during her earlier exchange with Sarus, but also to cut him off from finishing the sentence that he clearly didn't want to finish.

The young queen stared into the flames in front of her. She may have wanted to squeeze the life out of that Neimoidian coward, but she wasn't anywhere near her planet. That was the problem. She was sitting on a ball of sand doing absolutely nothing. She kept telling herself there was nothing she could do, but, for starters, she could've stayed on Utapau. There may have been a threat against her life, but her people were probably thinking she ran like a scared little girl, ran away from her responsibilities and betrayed them just like her father did. She didn't even know if she'd ever be able to return and set that record straight. If the Galactic Senate wasn't able to help if and when she reached Coruscant, then there was just no way she could go home.

"I don't know if it means anything," a nervous Amator told her, stepping into a more personal realm than most guards would have with the monarch they were protecting, "but for what it's worth I can't think of anyone better to deal with this situation. I think you can do anything if you put your mind to it."

"It doesn't, but thanks," she said, brushing off the compliment but smiling nonetheless. It really didn't mean that much to her. She was dead set on blaming herself.

Amator sighed in discontent. He was hoping to shake her out of her depression, but it wasn't working. He just wanted to do whatever it took within reason to help her find her way back to some semblance of happiness, but he just wasn't ready to say what he thought might be able to do that. He just didn't know how she would take how he really felt. He'd worked so hard to get to a place where he could just be in the same room as the queen he cared so much about, and he wasn't about to blow it. For now he would have to try other options that he had up his sleeve.

"There is a way you can beat Nute Gunray, you know," Amator said. The queen immediately perked up, a very welcoming and pleasant sight for his sore eyes. "When I was a law student, I was an apprentice prosecutor in a corporate case against the Federation. They were accused of murdering a man for supposedly stealing trade secrets, so his wife sued them for wrongful death. Gunray was so sure of himself that he didn't even bother covering it up. He was so ignorant to the fact that people were onto him that he didn't even see the lawsuit coming. That's his weakness. He's an ignorant fool. If you can figure out a way to exploit that, then the odds are in your favor."

"How'd the case turn out?" Arcadia asked. For the first time in days she seemed almost happy, her joyful expression after finally making some sort of headway in how to deal with the subjugation of her home taking a weight off her shoulders.

"There was no happy ending," he dejectedly replied, his head sinking as he knew that it wasn't what the queen wanted to hear. "Evidence only goes so far. The Federation has more influence and power than I'd like to give them credit for."

The queen knew that all too well. It was something she'd been thinking about for days. However passionate she may be when she would go before the numerous galactic senators, the Federation Senator Lott Dodd would still be there with the voting bloc the Federation was able to pay off for years. She could provide all the evidence she wanted to get the Senate to vote her way, but evidence wasn't as powerful as financial influence. All the Federation had to do was throw some money at the right people and the Republic would once again demonstrate just how ineffective it was.

She was going to say more, but the entire cave fell silent as Annikin came back down from the catacombs. He didn't make eye contact with any of them. The last thing he wanted to do was be counseled by anyone, and they seemed to know that. No one said a word, which he was thankful for. There was nothing anyone could really say to make him feel better. How could anyone take away such inner pain? How could anyone erase all of the hard feelings he had? It wasn't possible. No one could rationalize the nonsense that was being spewed at him left and right.

Annikin was overwrought with tension. His throat slammed shut and he could barely breathe. His hands were dripping with sweat like they had been when he first decided to go and see Sarus again the night before. The moisture coming off of his hands as they shook was like a torrential downpour of rain, but they could've easily been the tears that he so desperately wanted to shed.

He wished his mother was with him. She was the only one who was ever able to truly comfort him. Anytime he had an argument with Cliegg or something bad happened, her shoulder was there to lean upon. She was there to say a few words that would make everything alright, but now she wasn't. He had to deal with this one on his own. He had to make the decision to either run away or find out more about what Sarus claimed to know

about him. It wasn't a decision he was even remotely ready to make, but it was one that he didn't have much choice over.

"I don't believe you at all," Annikin said. "In fact, I think you're completely insane, but I need to know more. I have to know what you think you know about me."

At last he's finally ready, Sarus said to himself, something he wanted to say aloud, but he knew such thoughts were better kept to himself. Yes, he was stringing Annikin along to a certain degree, but he couldn't let that be known. A ventriloquist was only as good as the amount of strings he had to pull. He didn't think of himself as a master manipulator by any stretch, though. He was simply doing what he was told to do. It was his destiny, and an Ophuchi never backed away from his destiny.

"Then follow me."

Deeper in the desert, kilometers away from the sanctuary, the twin suns were just beginning to rise, but the majesty of the powerful fireballs rising above the horizon was perverted by the sight of a prototype infiltrator stealth ship landing atop a nearby ridge. The *Scimitar* gently landed in the sands, pushing away the dust and the rocks that had settled over top of the ground.

From beneath the cockpit, a hatch opened up and out came four hooded figures, three men and one woman. Each snapped to attention in formation, two by two on each side of the ramp. They were waiting for someone, someone far more powerful than them, someone who had promised to lead them to the glory their people had desired for thousands of years.

It was Maul, having finally caught the trail of the queen's vessel just like he told the Neimoidian slugs he would do. It wasn't his first time on such a pathetic waste of a planet. He had been there nearly twenty years earlier for a mission, one that had become far too complicated for his liking. The challenge of it, though, was exactly what he needed considering his youth and inexperience.

Before coming to Tatooine, he was a blind follower of the light, the so-called righteous path. It was disgusting now. How anyone could follow such a dogmatic view was something he'd never be able to understand. He sought to give aid to all of the sad, sorry beings in the galaxy who suffered, but then he realized his true potential. He wasn't born to save, he was born to conquer. He was born to enslave. There was only one true path to righting the wrongs in the galaxy. It was to rid it of the light and all those who followed it.

The idea that he was once a Jedi didn't sit well with his followers. They were afraid he would betray them and go back to the narrow-minded Jedi Order. That would never happen. He felt the call of the dark side. It was in his blood. It was soaked into him with the red and black ink that he tattooed himself with to prove his loyalty to the cause. For every good deed he once did, he swore to bring about equal destruction and torment to all beings in the galaxy. If his followers didn't know that by now, they didn't know him at all.

Not all of them were hesitant about it, though. The woman who stood beside him, his most trusted lieutenant, was completely loyal to him. Lilith was a powerful ally, one who would stop at nothing to watch as the fires of their destinies burned civilization as they knew it to the ground. It was a delicate alliance when beings were united by their own passionate hatred for one another, but Lilith was trained exactly how Maul wanted her to be trained. He

didn't teach her himself, but he knew the way of her people. They were sworn to serve him and couldn't possibly fathom the idea of doing anything to betray that service. It wasn't in their nature. The teachings of their people made sure of it.

"Orders, my lord?" Lilith asked. She removed her hood, brushing back her silky blonde hair as she spoke. She had a certain beauty about her, but her true distinctiveness was in her eyes. There was a fire there, a fire that never seemed to be put out. That was the quality that Maul cherished the most in her. It was why she was the most powerful of his dark and loyal servants.

"Kill the Ophuchi," Maul ordered. That was only the beginning, though. Their true task was to finish the job he was unable to finish the last time he was on the planet. "Bring me the queen and the boy unharmed."

Dealing with the boy was the task he failed at, the task he wasn't allowed to finish. His original goal was kill the boy he sought so strongly, but there was a change of plans. He couldn't kill him when the boy was an infant, but instead he had to wait for the opportune moment to turn him to his side. He wouldn't fail again. Swearing to finish what he started, he vowed that there could be no loose ends this time.

Annikin Skywalker had seen his last desert sunrise.