

--IX--

DISCOVERY

Dinner was over and the others had already started helping Shmi clean the kitchen and the small dining room. Annikin stood outside, having decided that there just wasn't enough room to help out, listening to the outsiders laughing amongst themselves. It even sounded like his parents had joined in on it, their laughs overtaking the scrubbing sounds and the clamoring of dishes in the sinks. It was curious how Cliegg had warmed up to the outsiders after only a day, but that just spoke of his personality. He was a fairly open-minded person, especially in comparison to Owen. Annikin suspected that he would not find Owen laughing with the outsiders - laughing at them, maybe, but not with them.

Annikin lazily dragged his sluggish and tired self up to the surface, finally allowing himself to take a break. He rubbed his eyes, the fatigue showing itself in gray bags under his eyes. Working in the heat of the confined ship took a lot out of him, and he wasn't looking forward to the work yet to come, especially now that he had set himself back a few hours with his mistake at the end of the day. He wouldn't complain about it, of course. No one forced him to help: he volunteered. He certainly wasn't going to start a job he willingly offered to do only to cry about it and give up. That just wasn't his way, nor would it ever be.

Damn, Annikin said to himself. He missed one of his favorite times of day, the setting of the twin suns Tatoo I and Tatoo II. It was already dark, but the pinkish hue of the yellow and orange binary stars still lingered atop the horizon, an enchanting sight that had drawn many a traveler towards it before. Behind him was the rising of the moon Guermessa, the silver lining of the space body reflecting the light from the far off stars to provide just a minuscule amount of brightness to barely shine upon the surface of the planet. It wasn't enough to give anyone enough comfort to venture out into the nighttime deserts, but it was enough for Annikin to stand there with only the light from the homestead helping.

The sunset was always enjoyable to him, but it wasn't his absolute favorite time. It was the evening's cool breeze and the nighttime air, the air nudging softly against his face, wind blowing through his hair. It was cool and moist, sending a shiver down his spine. His skin tingled from the chill, a sensation that always calmed his nerves and made him feel better about whatever was bothering him. It was probably the same temperature as Utapau normally might be, but on Tatooine it was a rare commodity, something only felt at night when one would normally sleep.

He couldn't help but smile.

Annikin turned his head towards the east as the faint sound of bantha roars and the whines and howls of Tusken Raiders fell upon his ears. The Tusken were a primitive people, dwelling deep in the Dune Sea. No one cared for the savage race that made their home in the brutal wastes - all they did was attack and pillage settlements and homesteads. Reports of murder at the hands of the sand devils had become more and more common over the previous years, but no one was able to make any sort of arrest. How do you arrest a primitive species, especially when you don't know who actually carried out the attacks?

Some people had taken the answer to be hunting them down and killing them. Annikin may have despised them, yes, but killing them wasn't the answer. They were still sentient, even if barely so. No one even knew what they really looked like; the sand people all wore tan robes and spiked masks that made them all look the same, as if they were mindless clones that attacked only on a basic and primordial instinct.

Looking out into the distance, Annikin flinched at what he saw. His jaw locked and his face was visibly tense, his fists curling themselves into balls in a stance that said he was ready to fight anyone or anything that came towards him. He thought he saw a group of Tusken near the crashed ship, visible by moving lights, but as he looked deeper he let go of the fists and relaxed, realizing he may have been wrong by the way they walked.

Annikin grabbed his cheap nightview macrobinoculars off of his belt. He wanted to see a clearer picture of who was there, just in case. The built-in zoom made the figures look like they were standing right in front of him, though they appeared in a static green-like form because of the night vision. If only he could have afforded the electrobinoculars; he would have been able to see the image far clearer. Even so, he could still make out that the figures were the guards at the ship. He laughed as he put the device back onto his belt, his sarcastic and self-deprecating grin acknowledging his paranoia.

He couldn't be too careful when it came to Tusken, though, but it wasn't Tusken he saw. It was actual people, men: real, sane - no savage thoughts. Men who he had no desire to wrap his hands around and strangle. Those Tusken animals made even the best of people furious, but he still knew that they were people and deserved to live, even if they themselves took it upon themselves to decide who on Tatooine they thought should die.

Damn!

Annikin smacked himself upside the head, his eyes wincing when he realized that he didn't actually mean to do that. He meant to go into Anchorhead right after dinner. He didn't have the parts he needed to fix his mistake on the engine from earlier, but he knew that Ody's Garage had just what he needed. He'd been worried about the Tusken coming after his speeder if he drove into Anchorhead, so it wasn't until he just thought about the sand people did he remember what he needed.

Turning away from the horizon, Annikin ran back down through the stairwell at the top of the homestead. As he moved through the entryway to the kitchen, he nearly sneezed. The air he breathed into his nose stung, catching him off guard. The juicy and grilled smell of bantha meat, combined with the sweet whiff of Alderaanian brandy given to the family by Queen Arcadia, was replaced by ammonia and kitchen soap, smells that he always felt somewhat allergic to. His scrunched face while he was trying not to gag or sneeze again probably told everyone in the room that much. Shmi and Obi-Wan turned to each other and shared a faint laugh, while Dooku and Owen rolled their eyes in the corner and Panaka sat

at the table as stoic as ever. Annikin always found it ironic; he could race swoops at five hundred kilometers per hour, but the simple smell of cleaning solution send him running for the dunes.

Annikin tried his damndest to ignore it, all while putting in even more facial muscle effort to try to stop from throwing up. He normally distracted himself if he had to go into the kitchen right after supper, and this time was no different. He grabbed his jacket from the chair it was hanging on, throwing it around his back and quickly slipping his arms into it. He tugged on the gray denim coat, making sure it fit straight over his even lighter-gray undershirt. Annikin pat himself across the torso, making sure his wallet-full of small peggats was still in the inside pocket.

"Where are you going?" Shmi asked, her formerly laughing face replaced with a look of worry, the terrifying idea of Annikin being injured by sand people very clearly shown in her dark brown eyes.

"Anchorhead," Annikin said as he turned back towards the kitchen counter, attached to the far side of the narrow room upon the tan concrete wall. "I need to get a few things for tomorrow before the shops close. I don't want to waste any time in the morning."

"Would you like some company?" Obi-Wan asked, leaning forward from his place against the wall in anticipation of Annikin saying yes.

"No, that's alright," Annikin replied, catching Obi-Wan off guard and prompting the Jedi Knight-in-hiding to slowly lean back against the wall, his eyes darting from side-to-side as he embarrassingly tried to play it off as if he hadn't made the presumption. "I won't be that long anyway, and you probably need more rest than I do on this planet."

For a second, it sounded like Dooku let out a faint chuckle from the corner of the table, and Annikin looked over to the displeased Obi-Wan to see that he had heard right. Still, Annikin wasn't about to pay any attention to Dooku, whom he had told himself was an arrogant jerk anyway. Not exactly the pride of the Jedi Order, or at least that's what Annikin assumed of him. How the man was a Jedi to begin with went far beyond Annikin's understanding, and he didn't even want to try to figure that Order out. Once the outsiders were gone, Annikin knew that he'd probably have no further contact with any Jedi ever.

It was times like this, going out during the night on Tatooine even a few kilometers from home, when Annikin wished he had a Jedi's lightsaber to defend him, but he had to make do with what he had. He grabbed a key from his belt and unlocked one of the white and orange cabinets above the sink, inside of which was his own personal blaster pistol. He pulled it out and opened it, checking the ammunition cartridge before cocking it and placing it on his belt. He noted the stares from the others, their unhinged jaws telling him that they certainly didn't expect him to pull out the gun or, for that matter, even know how to operate a firearm to begin with.

"Oh Ani, you know how I hate those things," Shmi said as she approached. She put her hand on his arm, trying to get him to stop from going and put the gun away, but Annikin pulled back and started towards the door, shaking his head as he felt that his mother was being paranoid and overprotected.

"Well the sand people hate getting shot by them," Annikin reminded her as he walked. "That's why I carry it when I go out at night."

"I can send one of my men with you," Panaka offered, darting up from the table and leaning forward on his fists as if he was about to make his way into combat. That characteristically stoic look still hadn't left his face, though.

"Really, everyone, I'm fine," Annikin said as he threw up his hands in an "I surrender" meets "back off" gesture all the while trying to laugh off their behavior. "It'll only take me a few minutes to get there anyway. I'll be back in an hour or so, so don't wait up."

Annikin wasn't going to let anyone get another word in. He turned suddenly and darted up the steps, avoiding any further remarks from those in the kitchen. Owen shook his head and laughed disappointedly, even though he should have seen Annikin's behavior coming. Dooku noticed Owen's reaction, pulling back and arching his gray eyebrows. Did Owen support Annikin in this instance or was he disappointed in his step-brother? Dooku couldn't tell.

"Is he always this confident?" Dooku asked, curious to see Owen's reaction to his own comments to determine how the man felt about Annikin.

"That's not confidence, that's arrogance," Owen told him in a near-squint, prompting Shmi's worried smile to turn into an displeased frown at Owen's continued derogatory comments.

"You would have taken the guards with you?" Dooku asked, although he suspected he knew the answer to that question. He had gotten a pretty good read on Owen's personality earlier in the day. In fact, Owen was the only one of the family members that Dooku actually liked, and he suspected that he himself was the only one of the outsiders that Owen liked. He had no idea why it worked out that way, though.

"No, but I wouldn't have been as cavalier as him either," Owen replied. "I don't know if he's trying to impress you people or what, but someone needs to knock some sense into him. Gods only know I try."

"I cannot abide arrogance," Dooku said in detest as he shook his head, prompting Obi-Wan to arch his own eyebrow in joyful surprise and curiosity. "It makes my skin crawl."

Obi-Wan spit out his mouthful of blue milk, and the ultramarine liquid began to roll down the front of his beige tunic. He felt a sharp pain in his right side. For a minute he was worried, but then he realized that the pain was coming from the intensity of his own laughter, the irony of Dooku's statement overcoming him.

Annikin coughed, his mouth contorting as he tried to spit out the insistent sand. The sandstorm two days earlier had trashed the settlement, leaving wood and concrete lying on the dusty street. The normally tan buildings were now temporarily painted with brown dirt that the storm's fury had picked up. Even now, at night, shopkeepers and townspeople were still picking up after the damage left in the storm's wake. Their ragged clothing and frail features let him know that they were already not well off.

Frequent sandstorms, but even more so these bigger ones, didn't exactly make life easier for them, or anyone on the planet for that matter. It's just that these people already were living through economic and social hell. That wasn't the sandstorms, though, but rather the only thing worse: Jabba the Hutt. Thankfully, Annikin was in one of the few parts of the town where he couldn't see Jabba's fortress. It helped him keep his mind off of what the flat blob of skin was doing to the people.

Ready to leave, Annikin picked up the supplies he left on the table near the open door. He'd already paid the Er'Kit store owner, whom he had raced with some years back before they both gave up the sport, for the supplies he needed for the repairs the next day, so he was good to go. It had taken him a bit longer than he'd hoped, so he was sure to hear about it from his always-worried mother.

"Thanks Ody," Annikin shouted into the back of the store. The short, blue-skinned creature turned its thin neck towards him, its gangly stick-like arms waving towards him. Annikin smiled and laughed, always amused by the joyfulness of the shop owner. He and Ody had been rivals when they raced, but once they both stopped racing they were able to become friends, which was certainly for the better. The once-perpetually grouchy Er'Kit, normally stressed by his races, was also able to lighten up, which was probably why they were able to get along after so many years of intense competition.

Annikin stuffed the half-dozen tools into the many pockets of his jackets, not able to hold them all himself. Upon finishing, he rubbed his temples as he let out a long yawn. The day was beginning to really take its toll on his body. As he walked down the street, he rubbed his eyes, shutting out everything else around him to focus on just getting home so he could sufficiently crash. In the darkness, having nothing else to think about and even less to look at in the dim moonlight, he began to ponder about how much longer the repairs would take, what things to watch out for, how to order it so as to be as time-efficient as possible...but then he heard it.

An engine roar. A feeling of confusion. His head snapped towards the sound, eyes wide open. The blinding white light of headlights. A feeling of absolute panic. He couldn't move, he was frozen in place with terror, his mind utterly blank with fear.

Just then, his body kicked into high gear as he finally processed what was happening. It hit him all hard and fast - he only had a few seconds to live. He fought a scream as, with nothing to lose, Annikin just pushed himself off the ground in desperation, diving off to the side and, he hoped, out of the way. Then...time stopped.

The speeder - he could tell it was a speeder now - was still, the people around him were motionless, the roar in his ears grew vague. The only thing that seemed to be moving was him, a whirlwind of energy swirling around him and through him.

He was dead.

That was the only explanation for what was going on. The speeder had already hit him, sending his body flying limply, killing him. Unless the speeder bike's forward-mounted steering vanes had jabbed into him. All this was just some afterlife-shock or his brain dying on him. He expected not to see anything but an infinite blackness, or just nothing. That probably wasn't too long in coming now.

Then it was over. He blinked sand out of his eyes, the sand that had flown up when he had landed on it. His breathing was fast, and he could feel his heart beating in his ears and fingers as he looked at the world sideways from the ground.

He could hear the speeder bike's engine stop abruptly, its pilot obviously realizing that he had nearly killed someone. Annikin's eyes darted around, teeth clicking and clattering together, sweat pouring down him as the terror of what had just happened overcame him. He didn't even notice the silhouette of the driver approach and hover over him.

"I'm so sorry," the driver said, sounding just as panicked and perplexed as Annikin felt. "But...you...how did you get out of the way so quickly? You must have some reflexes, young man. That's normally a Jedi trait."

"Jedi? I...what?" Annikin asked. His voice was hushed, and he barely had any concept of where he was or what just happened. It all took place so fast that his brain was having trouble digesting it all. "I don't know what just happened. Who...who are you?"

The man, now clearly middle-aged, dropped down onto his knees so Annikin could see his face. His balding head reflected the light behind and above them, and his rough features stood in unison with the damaged and tortured state of the town itself. As Annikin saw his dark blue eyes, darker and deeper than he had ever seen anyone's eyes look like before, he had a sense of déjà-vu. He looked away, trying to find something in his mind that told him who the man was, but he couldn't remember, assuming he even knew who he was to begin with.

"My name is Sarus," the man said as he reached out his hand, which Annikin took to stand up. Annikin was a bit woozy and wobbly when he got back onto his feet, but he'd survive. "Pleased to meet you, Annikin. Are you all right?"

Annikin nodded his head in thanks. Once he remembered what he was doing, and his nerves finally began to calm, he checked his pockets to make sure all his supplies were still there. It was hard feeling for them, considering his hands still wouldn't stop shaking, but that wasn't his only priority. It took him a minute, but Annikin's eyes finally darted back towards Sarus when something occurred to him.

"I don't remember telling you my name."

"Perhaps we should go indoors where it's a bit warmer," Sarus suggested. "It gets awfully cold out here at night."

The Anchorhead Cantina was a much different place at night than it was during the day. In the daytime, most patrons were humans who were passing through when they were picking up supplies or going to the market. The nighttime crowd was very different - none of the patrons were Human. From the rare four-eyed Ualaq Aqualish at the bar, to the powerful, long, gray-necked Ithorian standing beside Annikin at the bar, rocking back and forth for some reason as many Ithorians seemed to do, the cantina was a place brimming with the most unusual of people.

A three-member band of Biths, each equipped with strange instruments whose intricacies Annikin couldn't even begin to understand, stood just beyond the bar on a stage built up higher than the heads of most of the patrons. The large-headed and black-eyed musicians swaggered back and forth, swaying from side to side as they played their music with vigor. Somewhere in the cantina, coming from a hidden surround-sound system, more music bellowed out, playing along with the Bith band. The overbearing bass emanated outward and filled the cantina with its noticeable vibrations. The sharp clashing of steel on steel drums over the music system hid the lighter, eerier tones that the music had to offer.

Annikin lost himself in the music. The soft tones mixed with the clashing of steel in an industrial tone was not the best music he had heard, but it was still a far cry from the

painfully annoying songs of the latest trendy band, Evar Orbus and His Galactic Wailers. To Annikin, wailing couldn't even begin to describe how awful the bands so-called hits were. If he had his way, Annikin would've made the group's newest single called "Lapti Nek", Huttese for "Work It Out," work its way out of existence.

Suddenly snapping Annikin out of his trance, Greedo slammed two waters down onto the table in front of him. With so much water in the small glasses, the force of the slam splashed water through the air, hitting Annikin on the arm. He turned to see Greedo standing there, grinning like an idiot after likely splashing it on purpose. Annikin threw ten credits down onto the table, just enough to pay for the drinks, one for him and one for the mysterious Sarus, as he picked them up off the table.

"U wamma wonka jujumon," Greedo said in a snide tone unbecoming of a person whose job was meant to be customer service.

"Piss off," Annikin spat as he turned away. After nearly being hit by a speeder driven by the strangest person he had ever met, when all Annikin wanted to do was buy a few parts for the next day, he was in no mood to deal with Greedo.

Greedo started to mumble something, but he kept it mostly to himself when Annikin continued walking away and ignoring him. Annikin set the drinks down on the table where Sarus was already sitting, doing so gently to avoid sloshing the water around even further. He wasn't about to throw away money by wasting something as valuable as water.

"So..." Annikin said, "you still haven't answered my question," He remarked as he sat down at the booth across from Sarus, folding his hands together to make it seem as if he was patiently waiting for a response. In actuality, he wanted to rip the answer right out of him.

"Which question would that be, Annikin?" Sarus asked almost jokingly after taking a sip of water, but he realized that Annikin wasn't in the mood for jokes.

"You know which question," Annikin informed him. His tone was harsh, almost cold; Annikin had no desire to sit around and chat. He only wanted answers to his questions, and he wasn't going to tolerate any games.

Sarus's thin lips curled upwards into a smirk, yet another sign of his sarcasm. He almost seemed to be enjoying what he was doing, even though Annikin was clearly getting more and more agitated by the moment. This was only a test, of course, to see how Annikin would respond to him. Sarus had seen Annikin before, noticing how impatient he was. The young man would look towards the future, wanting it to be the here and now while sometimes ignoring the present. This was not constant in Annikin's life, to be sure, but it was a trait he exhibited every once and awhile.

"I've been watching you for quite a few years, my young friend," Sarus admitted, knowing that Annikin probably would be somewhat put-off by the revelation.

"You've..." Annikin started to say before losing his train of thought considering the absurdity of being watched and followed. "Are you some kind of a stalker?"

"I'm sure there are those who might think that," Sarus admitted, understanding full well why someone would think that, "but I can assure you that I'm not. I was tasked with watching you by...well, shall we say, a higher authority."

"What higher authority?" Annikin shouted, not realizing how he was attracting stares from the rest of the cantina. "Why are you watching me? Who the *hell* are you?"

Annikin stopped short of asking another question once he realized that the music was no longer playing. Instead, he heard the deafening silence that accompanied the stares of the band and the patrons, making him realize just how loud he had been talking. He slumped down in his chair, as if that would hide him as his face turned bright red. Sarus chose not to make a remark about the embarrassingly awkward situation, which surprised Annikin, considering the comments that Sarus had been making throughout the evening. At least Sarus was able to show some little bit of restraint.

"Well, you're just full of questions, aren't you?" Sarus asked once the band started to play again and when Annikin sat back up in his seat.

"And I'd like to be full of answers, if you don't mind," Annikin requested, still impatient but minding his tone in order to avoid another abashed moment.

"Not at all," Sarus said. The strange man leaned forward, turning his head ever-so-slightly to the side to make sure no one was watching. He started to speak in a hushed tone, not as quiet as a whisper but quiet enough so no one around them could listen in on the conversation. "Annikin, think back a few minutes to when we first met. Was it really the first time we met? How did you manage to avoid being hit by a speeder that probably should've killed you?"

"I thought I was asking the questions here."

"Annikin, please," Sarus insisted, his words conveying an importance and power that took Annikin by surprise. "Your answers are of vital importance."

"And yours aren't?" Annikin rudely asked of him. "Stop toying with me. I don't have time for this."

"You answer my questions and I'll answer yours," Sarus shrugged

"I don't see why I should bother," Annikin said, though he wanted answers too much, especially about why he couldn't figure out where the sense of *déjà vu* was coming from, "but whatever. You did seem familiar, but I can't remember ever meeting you. I don't know how I didn't get hit either. I just sorta saw the speeder and felt like I was spinning out of control, then I was on the ground looking at you. I can't explain what happened."

"I can," Sarus vowed. "The great powers of the Force were embedded in you when you were born, not far from here I might add. You might have noticed it in your reflexes or heightened intuition."

Something about what Sarus was saying caused Annikin to stare at him disbelievingly. Annikin had of course noticed his quick reflexes before, as had he noticed his ability to retrieve lost objects that no one else could find or complete other people's sentences, things of that sort. That didn't mean he was sensitive to the Force, though. Some people just had more heightened senses than others, or so he thought. It seemed normal to him, at least normal enough to where the Force, something Annikin knew next to nothing about, wouldn't have to be added into the equation.

"I couldn't tell you," Annikin lied. "I don't really know much about the Force."

"The Force is a metaphysical and binding power that connects all living things," Sarus said with a nod of apology, forgetting that not everyone was as familiar with the concepts of the Force as he was. "It surrounds us and penetrates us while holding the universe together."

"Are you a Jedi?" Annikin asked, curious as to whether or not he was like Obi-Wan, or if he and Obi-Wan knew one another. Annikin found it odd that this man would approach him around the same time he met Obi-Wan, so there had to be some sort of connection.

"No," Sarus told him regrettably. "Unfortunately, I was never blessed with the same unique abilities as you. I am merely a vessel of knowledge and experience tasked with helping you fulfill your destiny."

"Wait, what?" Annikin asked, the conversation suddenly taking an unexpected turn. "What are you talking about? What destiny?"

"To vanquish the armies of evil," Sarus admitted, believing it was better to get the truth out quickly than try to play around with more indirect answers.

Annikin stared at him with disbelief. The music struck the same dramatic chords as Sarus's words, as if the whole thing had been planned and the band was specifically playing along with Sarus's game. It was a game that Annikin wasn't willing to play any longer. The entire discussion had just taken a turn for the ridiculous, and he wasn't going to sit around any longer and listen to the ramblings of a crazy old hermit.

"That's it," Annikin said furiously, insulted that he'd wasted his time, "I'm leaving."

"You cannot forsake your destiny, Annikin!" the hermit shouted as Annikin walked towards the door, not caring who heard what he had to say anymore.

"Goodbye," Annikin's voice echoed. He didn't even stop or turn around as he spoke. There was no reason to now that he was at the door.

"Ask your parents about the day you were born," Sarus shouted again, prompting Annikin to stop dead in his tracks. "You may find some answers that you're looking for. When you do, I'll be waiting for you just outside."

Now things were starting to get weird. At first, Annikin assumed that Sarus was just making everything up, maybe for money or maybe just because he was bored and had nothing better to do than trick people into having drinks with him and listening to absurd stories. Then he mentioned his parents. Were Annikin the one telling the lie, he wouldn't tell someone where they could go and have the lie disproven. It was as if Sarus actually was telling the truth, and Cliegg and Shmi could shed light on the situation. Was it possible?

The next night, Annikin drifted quietly out of the garage after yet another dinner. Once more, the sounds of cleaning came from within, followed by the laughter of his family and their guests. The two were becoming accustomed to one another, something Annikin never expected. The night before it was a refreshing sound, but now it was one that filled Annikin with confusion and conflict. Had he not rushed aboard the outsider's vessels, he would've had no reason to go into Anchorhead the night before, and Sarus would have been unable

to tell him the destiny nonsense. Annikin would've had no reason to feel so confused, so broken, so upset.

He wandered out to the nearest moisture vaporator, gently leaning his arm against it as he watched out into the evening desert. The sounds of the desert wastes filled the soft night air; the screeches of the womp rat packs running through the area, nibbling at anything the vicious creatures could find, and the hissing of snakes and scorpions that were too close for comfort stung his ears. Cliegg once told him that the area around their homestead had been a near-oasis before the drought, where the sweet scent of moist grass and vegetation filled one's nose with an aroma that those who knew it would've given anything to have back. It was a far cry from the dusty, dirty aroma that now prevailed.

The night was ethereal, the sky filled with countless dots of white flickering lights from all distant corners of the galaxy. When he was a boy, working as the closest thing to a slave in the Toydarian's junk shop, Annikin often dreamed of what it would be like to see those stars. He would fly deep into space, not in a ship but rather he himself would literally float through the heavens, and be the first to see them all. His duty would be to bring order to the chaos, making sure everyone was able to live freely and happily. He would never let anyone suffer, go hungry, or go to sleep worrying about how to support themselves or their loved ones. Annikin believed with every fiber in his being that he would be the one to help all the people of the galaxy.

But it was only a dream, or so he thought.

Sarus's words stirred up those old memories but also confused him beyond belief. He wanted to help people, but not as a prophetic savior. How could he take any sort of pride in what he was doing if he knew that he was only doing it because someone decided he would thousands of years before he was born? How could he possibly deal with the stresses of actually carrying it out when he had to simultaneously juggle the implications of failing in that destiny? It wasn't fair to force him into doing it. He should've been able to do something like that on his own accord, on his own time, and in his own way.

Annikin sighed, unable to find a way to comfort himself. As he tried to get it out of his mind, he could hear Threepio's mechanical joints aching their way towards him, and the droid was clearly worried about him. There was a certain urgency to such a walk, a certain worry, one that Annikin picked up on long ago. Annikin turned, coming face to face with his protocol droid who was so close that it caused the young farmer to flinch. The droid was incapable of facial expression, but Annikin could still tell when he was worried.

"Oh Master Annikin, I must ask you to come indoors," Threepio begged, his butler-esque Coruscanti accent accentuating his fears. "It's too dangerous to remain outside after nightfall. Those dreadful Sand People are everywhere."

"I'll be fine, Threepio," Annikin tried to assure him.

"But Master Annikin," Threepio continued, not taking 'no' for an answer, "might I remind you that the odds of successfully surviving an encounter with a tribe of Sand People is approximately one hundred forty-seven to one!"

"If I promise to be inside in five minutes," Annikin asked, mostly out of annoyance than out of any real concern for Threepio's misplaced fears, "will that make you feel better?"

"Oh please hurry, sir," Threepio implored him. "I have a bad feeling in my circuits about this evening, a very bad feeling indeed."

As Threepio turned around, his metal skeleton clinking across the sandy floor of the surface, Cliegg in turn approached. The handsome yet rugged middle-aged farmer had a distinct look of worry on his face, and his brow was replete with sweat. He had a terrifying idea about what was bothering his stepson, but he couldn't imagine how Annikin could've found out what Cliegg was so worried about him knowing.

"Oh Master Cliegg," Threepio said, stopping in his tracks as the farmer approached, "please make sure that Master Annikin makes it indoors safely. I wouldn't know what to do without my maker! I just..."

The droid rattled on and on just as he always did, but Cliegg let him be. There was no sense trying to shut Threepio up. He could turn the droid off, but the blasted thing would just keep yammering away as soon as he was powered back up. Cliegg was content to let Threepio's artificial mind go wherever it wanted to go, especially if it was off the farm and away from him. He didn't dislike the droid, but he never really saw any need for it on a moisture farm.

Rather than listening to Threepio's incessant rambling, Cliegg stood behind Annikin, hoping to get him rambling instead. Cliegg gulped, the sweat coming down his forehead faster and more intense. He saw in Annikin's eyes the night before a look of dread, and even now he could sense that the giant hand of the galaxy was forcing its weight onto Annikin's shoulders. That could've meant any number of things, but considering Annikin's past... Cliegg feared that there were very few options to choose from about what the boy's worries might be.

"Alright son," Cliegg finally said, not wanting to wait for Annikin to speak up any longer. "Something's obviously bothering you, so let's have it."

"It's nothing," Annikin replied in a barely audible mumble.

"You can't fool me, Annikin," Cliegg said as he put his palm onto Annikin's right shoulder, hoping to comfort the truth out of the boy. "I'm your father."

"Stepfather," Annikin stingingly reminded him, and Annikin could tell very quickly that it had upset the man.

"I thought we'd moved past that," Cliegg said, his voice filled with remorse as he retracted his hand and slumped his own shoulders.

"We have," Annikin assured him, turning around to look his stepfather in the eye. "You're the only father I've ever known. I'm sorry."

"What's wrong, son?" Cliegg asked. He wasn't overly insulted by the comment. He knew Annikin well enough to be able to sense when the boy would say things he didn't mean, although he also had to admit to himself that there must have been a degree of truth in the comment. Annikin wouldn't have said it if otherwise.

"Everything," Annikin said his mind abuzz and his voice slurring in confusion; he could barely look Cliegg in the eye, "or maybe it really is nothing. It's just...there was this weird hermit-looking guy in town last night saying these crazy things about me. I guess I can't get them outta my head."

Oh no... The two simple words were the only things that Cliegg could muster, even within himself. The choice word of "hermit" sent his heart racing.

"What kind of things?" Cliegg asked, praying he didn't know the answer to the question.

Annikin couldn't help but laugh. He wanted to let the words out for all to hear, but they were just so absurdly stupid. Destinies? Sensitivity to the Force? Evil armies? It was all so ridiculously made up. How could Cliegg possibly believe a word of what he had to say? It was so ridiculous that Annikin at first thought he was still living a dream, a never-ending torturous dream from Hell.

"Well apparently," Annikin said, hesitating before letting out the next words, "I have a destiny to destroy an evil army. But what really threw me was that he told me to ask you and mom about what happened on the day I was born. I don't have a clue what that's supposed to even mean."

Cliegg's face turned as white as a ghost. Every bone in his body became tense; he was immovable. The day he had dreaded since he first learned the truth about Annikin was here. Shmi had warned him never to bring it up, knowing full well what the consequences of Annikin knowing the truth would be, but he couldn't hide it from him. Annikin knew, or at least he thought he knew, and he deserved to hear the truth from the only man he ever considered to be a father to him. He deserved to know the truth period. Shmi could hate Cliegg for it, but he felt an obligation to tell Annikin the truth.

"It's time son," Cliegg finally told him, the color in his face returning to a normal complexion after a near-anxiety attack.

"Time for what?" Annikin asked. His face began to turn white, as if the anxiety was literally taken from Cliegg and dropped into him.

"The truth."

Or as I like to call it, Cliegg quipped to himself, trying to make light of the situation, motive in your mother's trial for my brutal murder.

The tool room down the hall from the garage was pitch black. Annikin went for a light panel, but Cliegg grabbed his hand before he could. No one could know they were there, least of all Shmi. Cliegg was already going to have a hard enough time explaining what he had to say to Annikin. There was no way he could explain it to anyone else. He could barely even rationalize any of it to himself. It just seemed so ludicrous.

From a small pouch hidden behind a shelf, Cliegg pulled out a tiny trinket hanging by a thin brown chain. The item was made from japor ivory wood, a rare commodity considering the limited supply of it left on Tatooine, but it wasn't particularly impressive, at least not at first. The snippet of japor was carved as a traditional Tatooine sand symbol, one used by settlers for thousands of years, possibly since the planet was first colonized. It wasn't until Annikin saw what was in the center of it that he realized it was something more. In the center was the symbol of a small dove, one shackled to the ground. He had no idea what it meant, but it captured his attention. What could it have meant, and what did it have to do with him?

"What's that?" Annikin asked, but he hesitated in actually taking a look at it. He was too scared about what might happen if he placed it in his hand.

"I don't know," Cliegg sighed, slumping his shoulders; he was strangely disappointed that he didn't have all the answers, "but I think it might have the answers to who you are and where you came from."

"Where I came from?" Annikin asked. His eyes grew wider; he was suddenly a lot more worried about what Cliegg was going to say.

"The circumstances of your birth weren't exactly...normal," Cliegg admitted. It was if a huge weight had been lifted off of his shoulders, and he could finally breathe easy again now that he wasn't living with a lie. Still, now that he was finally explaining what he knew to Annikin, that would likely lead to a whole mess of new problems.

"Meaning...?" Annikin asked. *Can't he give a straight answer?*, Annikin asked. He just wished someone would answer him directly for once.

"Meaning that it was the will of the Force that you were born to save the galaxy," Cliegg blurted out, much more forceful than he originally planned.

Annikin's jaw dropped. Was Sarus right? Was Annikin really born to save the galaxy? Maybe Cliegg was just tricked too. That had to be it. It was just a trick by Sarus! He couldn't have been right. Sarus was clearly crazy, but what if he wasn't? *No, that's crazy talk...*, Annikin muttered in his flustered mind before finally looking his stepfather square in the eye. He stepped forward, confrontationally leaning in towards the farmer. Annikin's eyes bugged out. If he wasn't careful, he too would've gone crazy.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Annikin demanded to know. He felt nauseous, nearly ready to keel over and throw everything he'd ever eaten up onto the floor, but he couldn't bring himself to care enough about that. He couldn't get over the fact that he was lied to by Shmi for nineteen years, and Cliegg for nine. It was unthinkable that they would do something like that to him.

"We wanted to protect you," Cliegg said confidently. He may have no longer had the burden of the secret on his shoulders, but he still would've kept it all to himself again if he had to relive everything that had happened.

"Protect me from *what*?" Annikin asked, accentuating the last word. He couldn't understand what he would've had to be protected from.

"The rest of the story!" Cliegg shouted; he wasn't about to have his decision be questioned, least of all by the person who he was trying to protect. "The day you were born, a Dark Jedi tried to kill you and your mother, but the leader of those hermits, Sarus, fought him off. Your mother knew that if she told you this earlier or gave you this japor snippet that there would be people who would either want to exploit your power or kill you. We couldn't live with ourselves if we let either of those things happen, even if it was the will of that Force."

Annikin's whole body grew tense. He felt his throat close and the air stop short; he was too overwhelmed to breathe. His moist hands shook, dripping with the sweat that might as well have been the tears of his shattered universe. There were no words to describe what was happening. He stared blankly at the man that had never lied to him, or so he thought. Everything he knew was a lie. Everything he ever believed was gone. Reality was a myth

that he now had to sift through in order to find some semblance of order in his chaotic being.

The boy ran, and his father said nothing.

There was nothing the aging farmer could muster to say that would even remotely help his confused stepson. There was nothing anyone could say. How could anyone rationalize the incongruous absurdity of being destined to destroy an evil army? How could anyone legitimize the idea of destiny period? Cliegg knew this and so did Annikin, but part of the boy still wanted his father to run after him, give him a big bear hug, and tell him everything would be alright. Still, the part of Annikin that had some sense left knew that nothing could ever change what he was feeling. Nothing could ever take those words back and make him feel normal again.

Nothing.

Then again, he could've been wrong. As he ran off, jumping into a speeder headed for Anchorhead where he would confront Sarus yet again, Obi-Wan watched. Flanked by Dooku, Arcadia, and a number of others from the ship, Obi-Wan had overheard the tail end of the conversation. Shmi, who had not heard, also approached, and she was even more confused than the others when she saw her son rush off in a fit of despair. She turned to her husband, tilting her head and cocking an eyebrow in confusion and worry.

"What happened?" Shmi asked desperately, worrying only as a mother could. "Where's he going this late?"

Cliegg looked down at his wife, a woman now distraught in panic. One arm clutched her stomach while the other, shaking, gently covered her mouth. Shmi had never seen her son run off like that, and it honestly terrified her. She had sensed all day that something was bothering him, but she could never get a fix on it. It was something completely new, something she had never hoped to see in her boy, which worried her even more. Cliegg thought about telling her the truth because of that, but he knew it wouldn't help to assuage her fears. It might only tear apart a family.

"I haven't the slightest idea," the farmer lied, deciding it would be best to keep his wife in the dark, at least for now. For all he knew, the whole thing would blow over in a couple of hours, the Force willing.

"Don't worry," Obi-Wan assured them; the Jedi Knight had also noticed something wrong in Annikin throughout the day, so he too was worried about the boy. "We'll find him."

"We will?" Dooku asked. *Why is it always our responsibility?*, the old Jedi thought quietly to himself. Part of him wanted nothing to do with Obi-Wan's pet project, but it seemed he had little choice. It was either go with Obi-Wan on some wild bantha chase, or stay at the farm and avoid making small-talk with the Lars family. The choice was simple. "Oh, right. We will, most certainly."

"I'm going too," Arcadia told them unexpectedly, prompting a number of heads to turn. "If whatever's wrong has anything to do with us, I want to take responsibility for it in person."

"Then I'm going with you," came the handsome voice of Logan Amator from behind her; Panaka wasn't in the area, so he would have to step up and make sure the queen wasn't going off by herself. "Someone tell Captain Panaka that the situation is under control."

"Well it won't be me," Jar spoke up, stepping towards the group that was already jumping into the nearest family speeder. "If you're all leaving, so am I."

Dooku rolled his eyes, but this time he restrained himself from making it too over-the-top and obvious to make sure no one else saw him. The old man rubbed his eyes with his palms, regretting the fact that he almost had a moment away from virtually every member of the crew, but of course the whole bunch just had to go with them. Had he cared enough, he would've likely reminded himself that the ridiculous truly didn't ever end for him.

Annikin maneuvered his speeder through the outskirts of Anchorhead, pushing the engine faster and harder than he ever had before. He considered dropping down to a normal cruising speed so as to not attract attention, but his quiet determination was evident. He was going to get to Sarus as soon as possible. He didn't know how, but he knew that the strange old hermit would be there waiting for him. When Annikin rounded a corner at the edge of the city, his theory was confirmed: there was Sarus, leaning against a building smoking a long pipe, the smoke from it rising into the dark nighttime sky. When Annikin approached, the hermit dropped the smokable substance onto the ground and put the pipe into a satchel that he wore around himself.

"You know," Annikin said, jumping out of his speeder as he spoke, "at first I thought you were making all that stuff up last night. Now I know you told my mother the same thing."

"So you believe?" Sarus asked, determined to convince Annikin that he was saying was the absolute truth, nothing more and nothing less.

"Absolutely not," Annikin snapped in a half-lie, still not sure what to make of any of it, "but you freaked my mother out enough to make her lie to me my whole life. There must be something that made her even remotely believe what you're telling me. What was it?"

Sarus chuckled. As he smiled, he wiped a drop of sweat off of his upper lip, not used to the heat on this part of Tatooine. Annikin would know about Sarus's climate soon enough, but first he had to wait for a few friends. The time was not yet right to bring Annikin where he needed to be brought, but he could at least get the introductions out of the way.

"The answers you seek won't be found in Anchorhead, Annikin," Sarus told him. "You'll have to travel farther than that."

"Then where?" Annikin asked. He wanted to smack Sarus; all Annikin wanted was a straight answer, and no one was giving one to him. Was it so hard to ask?

Sarus looked out past the city line, gazing far into the distance, far beyond the horizon to a point that no one could see from the city. All known parts of the Dune Sea were a barren tract of death, but beyond there, beyond the most distant dunes, lied the closest thing the planet had to an oasis. It was Sarus's home, the only one he ever knew, and the only one he could ever think of knowing. It was his paradise, his heaven. Annikin would know it too soon enough.

"The Dune Sea," Sarus said with an affectionate infatuation that no one could have understood save for his own people. No one saw Tatooine the way his people did, and it was a damn shame.

"There's nothing in the Dune Sea other than sand and barbarians," Annikin ignorantly bellowed. "What could I possibly find there?"

"There are hidden places on this planet that will help teach you the truth about yourself," Sarus admitted, adding to the confusion that Annikin was feeling. "You can never hope to know the threats you face until you reach them. You need to follow me there."

Now things were starting to sound even more ridiculous, yet at the same time even more intriguing. As the second speeder carrying the Jedi and the others pulled up, which Annikin didn't even notice, Annikin still didn't believe the hermit. Still, if there was anything out there in the desert hell that could clear the air about what was happening, he needed to find it. He knew Sarus wouldn't tell him anything further unless he went with him into the Dune Sea, so curiosity got the better of Annikin. He had to know more, even if deciding to go with Sarus was likely the dumbest decision he had ever made.

"Alright," Annikin agreed, just not very enthusiastically, "but I want answers."

"So do we," Obi-Wan interrupted while he approached with the others. "Where were you running off to?"

"Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for all of you to come out here?" Annikin asked, his eyes darting from right to left over and over again as he tried to come up with some sort of way to change the subject away from where he was going. "You're either targets for Sand People or the criminals."

"Well we're here now," Obi-Wan said, "so perhaps you could tell us what's going on with you. Your parents are scared to death right now."

"I'm going with Sarus to the Dune Sea," Annikin admitted, seeing no reason to hide anything after all. They might as well know, considering there was no way they were going to change his mind. "Alone."

"Not alone, actually," Sarus interjected, much to everyone's surprise. "I need you all to come with me on this pilgrimage. There, and only there, can we speak about what needs to be spoken."

"Us?" Dooku asked, not taking kindly to the idea that he needed to embark on a hermitage out into the desert with a hermit he didn't even know anything about. "What could you possibly want with us?"

"I have information that you and the boy needed," Sarus explained, his voice reflecting the perilous urgency that he felt was in the air. "The future of the galaxy depends on it."

Annikin's head slumped down, almost as if someone had loosened the joints in his neck and just let his head fall. Twenty-four hours earlier, had someone said something about the fate of the galaxy he would've laughed them off. Now, after hearing that he was supposed to destroy the armies of darkness, the idea didn't seem as far-fetched to him. Obi-Wan and Dooku, however, shared a strong confusion, looking at him and Sarus with disbelief and uncertainty. Save for Dooku, though, everyone silently yet begrudgingly decided that they would go with Sarus. They knew it was likely that Sarus was wrong, but if he wasn't then it was information that was vital to the galaxy's future.

"I know what you're thinking," Obi-Wan quietly told his former master after pulling the old Jedi aside to convince him to go, "but this isn't another pet project. If this man means what he says then he has information we need."

"Oh please," Dooku blurted, not concerning himself with keeping his voice down in what he felt was a preposterous situation. "He's a hermit in a desert. What value could he possibly be to any of us?"

"Looks can be deceiving," Obi-Wan reminded the old man, "and you're not going to get the answer to that question unless you go with us."

"I'm not walking through an entire desert just to be swindled by a hermit," Dooku told him. The Jedi Master was steadfast in his decision, crossing his arms and standing resolute. He stopped just short of stomping his feet like a child.

Obi-Wan shook his head, trying to think of some way to convince his arrogant old mentor to go with him. It only took a few minutes to do so, as the proverbial light bulb lit up above his head. Years ago, before the Stark Hyperspace War, the two had been sent on a mission to Manaan, the memories of which were suddenly flooding back to him. They were sent there to investigate the claims of the Selkath, the planet's indigenous species, that the Trade Federation was illegally mining and stealing kolto, a healing product that had become relatively useless since the invention of the superior bacta substance. Dooku fiercely refused to dive to the bottom of the ocean to investigate while wearing only an environmental suit, but Obi-Wan was able to challenge his pride and convince the Jedi to make the dive with him, even though they were unable to find any conclusive evidence that the Federation was up to no good. Still, the challenging of pride was an obvious tactic for one to use against someone so full of themselves.

"I guess if you don't think you can do it," Obi-Wan wryly said with a hint of sarcasm, "then there's nothing I can do to make you go."

"It has nothing to do with my capability," Dooku exclaimed, uncrossing his arms as he was clearly becoming annoyed. The injured tone of his voice told everyone that well enough.

"Then prove it," Obi-Wan demanded. "Go with us and show me that you can make it through the desert. Show me that you're not afraid of a little harsh terrain at night."

If Dooku was anyone other than a Jedi, someone who lacked control over his emotions, odds were he would've hit Obi-Wan. However, he knew better than that, and he knew that Obi-Wan had issued him a direct challenge. It was just like it had been on Manaan, and Dooku realized that he had no choice but to venture out on some worthless mission to listen to whatever it was the hermit had to say. If he refused, he would've looked weak, and Obi-Wan would've won. He would not let that happen.

Annikin nearly laughed aloud when he saw the reluctant look of agreement on Dooku's face, because even though it was an agreement it was a look of clear annoyance and near disgust at what was about to happen. Annikin could only surmise that Dooku was not someone who cared for the desert sands, or having his pride and his capabilities challenged for that matter. The humor value was something that Annikin desperately needed at the moment.

"Looks like we're all going then," Arcadia said at random, speaking up when no one else seemed to want to after the confrontation between the Jedi, before turning to Amator, who also had not yet said a word but rather was trying to make heads or tails out of what was

happening. "Sergeant, go back to the farm and inform Captain Panaka where we're headed and that I won't require a guard."

"I won't let you go out there alone, my queen," Amator said, disagreeing with Arcadia's cavalier attitude. He knew nothing of the hermit, so that combined with Panaka's standing order that no one was to ever, under any circumstance, let the queen go off on her own told him that he had to go with her.

"I'll have two Jedi, a more than capable farm boy, and a warrior prince with me," Arcadia said with a reassuringly warm smile, innocently batting her eyes as if to try and convince him to leave with her kindness. "I think that's more than enough protection, don't you?"

"No," Amator firmly told her, shooting down her hopes at getting him to leave so she wouldn't have to feel like a prisoner anymore. "I'm going with you."

Arcadia stood her ground, but finally rolled her eyes and threw up her arms in annoyed agreement. She was sick of guards following her all the time, but more than that she was tired of the guards listening to Panaka's order to never let her go anywhere unarmed. She understood where the captain was coming from, considering the incident that happened after her father's assassination, but she still wished it were otherwise.

Once it was settled who all was going, Sarus looked over to Annikin, who was becoming increasingly nervous but nonetheless ready to leave. The rest of the group nodded, telling him that they too were prepared to go. With that, the entire group followed Sarus towards the city's gate, ready to make their way into the Dune Sea without having any idea or expectation as to what awaited them once they go there. Still, Sarus knew it would be a time they would never forget, as he had been assured by his superior. Somewhere, the man who instructed him was smiling, knowing that the ball had been set in motion for the coming of destiny. Annikin may have only been on the threshold of destiny, but Sarus was finally about to fulfill his.

Force willing, of course.