

--XI--

THE OPHUCHI

"And it is written, the Ophuchi shall inherit the desert."
- Journal of the Whills, 1:11

The Dune Sea, a deserted and forsaken region of the desert wastes. It was a barren tract of inhospitable mayhem, home of the wild banthas and intolerable Tusken Raiders, but still incapable of supporting a population that chose comfort over the essential living requirements. It was one vast sand plain destitute of moisture and vegetation, and for that reason no one, save for the most hardened hunters and explorers, entered into it.

Once an immeasurable inland sea, extreme shifts in temperature caused the water to run dry and transform the entire region into a desolate wasteland. A Human could easily dehydrate in less than half an hour under the scorching suns, a fact that Sarus was all too aware of. His people had lost far too many brethren, ones who believed that they were stronger than the rest. Over the years, thankfully, that mindset diminished to a point of near-non-existence.

The strange old hermit looked up at the twinkling heavens, taking in the soft, cool breeze that the nighttime deserts provided. Ever since he was a boy, he loved venturing into the desert at night. Despite how dangerous it was, there was something magical about it. People had become so concerned with cities and machinery that they had forgotten the simple majesty of the mystical deserts. Humanity, and in fact all sentient peoples, had evolved in such lost beauties. There was no greater sin than forgetting one's roots.

For once, Sarus had the chance to remind others of their planetary heritage. Their ancestry may not have come from Tatooine, but if one could learn to appreciate a small wonder like the Dune Sea then perhaps they would be able to reconnect where they came from. Perhaps they would remember not to take their lush terrestrial worlds and high-rise metal buildings any longer. Others, like Annikin, might even stop taking the desert for granted, for it was Tatooine, amongst the sands of time, where true courage and true warriors were born.

Sarus and the six others who followed him had been walking nonstop for nearly six hours, and were only minutes from their destination. The gentle fragrance of the sands wafting through the breeze provided a constant source of refreshment whenever they, or at least Sarus, tired during their journey. The hermit had traveled to the far corners of Tatooine and back, and he was always able to find out something new about himself by searching within, which was the true test of the arid desert. Some preferred flourishing worlds of greens and blues, but Sarus couldn't see himself living anywhere else.

It was Sarus's lineage that taught him to respect the great dunes of his world. He, like all of his people, descended from one of the greatest orders the galaxy had ever seen. The great order spread its influence across the galaxy, from the deepest reaches of the galactic core to the farthest expanses on the galactic edges. His ancestors came to Tatooine after a schism broke their order into two, and their descendants remained in the Dune Sea ever since. It was where they were belonged. It was where destiny called for them to be. They inherited the desert, watching over and protecting it from those who may have wanted to cause it harm.

Even though Sarus felt at home in the Dune Sea, the others weren't as open to the extreme environment. Dooku could barely keep up with the rest of them considering his age, and it took every ounce of his physical and mental strength to keep him going. Not only that, but if he faltered then Obi-Wan would win the argument they had before leaving. He wasn't about to let Obi-Wan score a blow to his pride by collapsing before reaching their destination. No one had ever challenged his ability to do something without being proven wrong. He held firm to that notion throughout the entire trek.

Obi-Wan also didn't care for the desert, but he was fully capable of traversing it without falling behind as his former master was. Still, he had to give Dooku his due credit. There were very few people the Jedi Master's age who could still survive the harsh desert climate, even at night. Dooku was managing to do it for hours on end. Whatever their ill feelings towards one another, the Jedi Knight was still happy to see that his former master had the strength to perform the unpleasant duties of a Jedi.

By and large, Dooku was not the one who was having the worst time. Binks held that distinction. His arms were numb and limp, waving back and forth as he walked. Sweat poured down his entire head, from his eyestalks to his chin, like a torrential downpour during hurricane season on Utapau. It took every fiber in his being not to let his tongue fall and hang out from the side of his mouth. The others may have known by his heavy breathing and panting, combined with the fact that he was nearly four meters behind them, that he was having a difficult time, but he wasn't about to look like an idiot.

Though the temperature had dropped dozens of degrees since they left Anchorhead, the air was still so dry that he could barely handle it. He had made sure while he was working to stay outside and work only for short periods of time before resting in the cool interior of the Lars homestead, but he didn't have that luxury in the middle of nowhere. He hadn't thought of the strain it would put on him when he agreed to go. What it did do was make him wish he was back in the swamps on Utapau. Never before had his exile seemed like the good old days. He would never again take anything on his homeworld for granted.

Arcadia, on the other hand, with her faithful protector and athletically strong protector by her side, was able to adapt to the harsher environments of Tatooine, as was Amator. Despite Veruna Arcadia's obvious political faults, he knew exactly what needed to be done to prepare his daughter for any given situation, and she considered him a great father because of it. When she was eighteen, the king sent her to survival training in the Vaj Desert on Ingo, a backwater world in the Mid Rim and only a few sectors from Utapau, just as he'd been by his father. Because the planet also had two frozen continents, she went through survival training in both the hottest and coldest regions.

The training took the young princess away from her homeworld for an entire year as she trained for dozens of situations in numerous different environments. Wandering through the desert was just but one of them. She had a hard time in her training at first, but she was

able to become accustomed to it after a few weeks. Above all, she learned exactly what needed to be done to stay hydrated and retain as much energy as possible.

The climate was the last thing on young Logan Amator's mind. He didn't approve of the queen venturing off into the desert with some strange hermit, with or without Amator protecting her. For all he knew, they were walking into some sort of Federation trap, or even worse a trap set by the Hutts. Hot or cold, flat or steep, Amator would follow Arcadia wherever she went, even if it was to the death. His whole life revolved around her, especially her safety. He wasn't about to fail.

As the others all reflected on their own experiences in the desert and prayed that the pilgrimage would soon be over, Annikin watched from behind. Unlike Sarus, living on Tatooine for nearly twenty years made him care very little for the environment. It was tolerable and generally comfortable to him, but in the end he would've preferred living on a less arid world. Over the last few days, he heard stories of Utapau, particularly its beauty, comfort, and all the luxuries anyone could ever ask for.

The waterfalls were something he dreamed of seeing. Water was such a scarce commodity on Tatooine. He couldn't imagine it in raging mountains of falling liquid that would be able to hydrate everyone on Tatooine for an entire year. It was amazing to him how his planet had so little but Utapau had so much. He'd possibly made a friend in Queen Arcadia, so he hoped to have the chance to visit Utapau one day. In fact, he planned on it. Before he died, he would see the waterfalls. Even now, he could almost hear their titanic rumblings, roaring faintly in his ears.

Suddenly remembering where he was, Annikin noticed he lost track of the time. The group was already making it through a tunnel that led them beneath one of the larger sand dunes. It was completely random. No one lived on top of the Dune Sea let alone below it. There was nothing there but more sand and dirt. There was no way that they were going the right direction. It just didn't seem possible.

And yet it was. Standing before them was a heavily armed guard, draped in knives and a long, keen silver blade that made even Annikin, who had practiced with a katana for nearly ten years, nervous. Sarus placed his hand over his heart and pumped his fingers into a fist, a gesture that the guard repeated. It was a sign of respect that all of Sarus's people showed one another. Truth be told, Annikin was surprised to see another living soul so far from civilization. How many people did Sarus have following him?

He was about to find out. The guard pushed a bulky gray stone away, nearly straining himself as he moved the boulder. Behind it was a sand-covered door, an entrance to wherever they were going. Annikin suddenly felt cold, but not in any ominous way. Could it of been what he thought it was? Could moisture really exist this far out into the desert, in an area that no one believed capable of housing life? If so, then their destination may very well have been the only oasis on the entire planet.

Descending further, darker, into the tunnel towards the unknown, Annikin started to hold his breath. It had been in the back of his mind, but he was starting to worry about how neither he nor the rest of the group really thought things through when they agreed to venture out into the middle of a deserted wasteland. He acted on impulse and paranoia, some of the others on a desire to make sure he was safe, and others on pride. What if all of those emotions were meant to trick them into walking into a trap? The outsiders told him what was happening on Utapau. Could this have been the Federation's way of trying the lure the queen into being captured? It would have been wise to ask those questions

beforehand, not now when it may very well have been too late.

Annikin couldn't have been more wrong. Out of the blue, the dark tunnel gave way to the hidden oasis he had always dreamed of finding. It was an entirely self-sufficient underground colony, surviving in the barren depths of the dunes of Tatooine despite every odd being against its very existence. Dozens upon dozens of people were moving about before him. How could they have lived there without ever being noticed?

A shiver went down the young moisture farmer's spine. At first he thought it was anxiety, perhaps a foreboding sense of dread in the back of his mind telling him that it was all too good to be true, but that wasn't it at all. He felt cold, cold on a planet that was exactly the opposite. The walls dripped with moisture, more than Annikin had ever seen in his entire life. He stepped away from the group for a moment, rubbing his hand against the wet wall of rock. His face scrunched up and he was blinking rapidly. It was as if he had won the lottery. Had he not been around the others, it may have been occasion to weep a few tears of joy. He had no problem admitting that. No one on the planet would have.

The secret sanctuary was more than simple caves and caverns carved out of the sand and stone. For such a simple people, all dressed in cloths, rags, and other passé and traditional attires, it was an architectural masterpiece. The walls sparkled with quartz like the fireworks of Life Day on Kashyyyk, twinkling in their eyes as if the minerals could light up the entire torch-lit area. Rooms adorned with elegant fixtures lined the walls on all levels of the compound. It was quite literally a working civilization with dozens of people making their way through it, all carrying food, water, and laundry as they went about their nightly chores and routines.

From what they all could see, the sanctuary had three levels, all being held up by half a dozen or so stone spires that were chiseled out of the rock. Each level was lit by dozens of torches, all spread throughout the entire residential area they were standing in, an area that also doubled as a common area for the settlement. The color was somewhat dry, as the rock walls weren't painted in any way. They were a sparkling tan and brown, a design that went well with the rest of Tatooine. The main area the new guests stood in seemed to be guarded over by a large statue of a man none of them recognized, but someone they could only assume was important to Sarus's people.

Even more remarkable were the people themselves. To anyone who had seen outside society, it was strange to think that such a seemingly primitive society could even exist, let alone function in such an age. The food was being baked right on the stones, and the bread was rolled by hand. Men lurched back and forth as they pumped water straight from the ground, carrying it in colossal buckets, larger than any source of water on Tatooine would have normally afforded, to a water purification to make sure it wasn't harmful. Even the clothing was washed by hand in silver wash tubs with soap that came directly out of a bottle. There wasn't a single piece of machinery anywhere in sight. To the outsiders, even to Annikin, it was as if they had gone back in time. That was exactly the effect that Sarus had hoped for.

Annikin may not have been able to understand how he or anyone else had never heard of these people before, but his mind wandered back to when he was a small boy. He and his friends heard myths about wizards living out in the far reaches of the Dune Sea, but he never believed them. He always brushed them off as urban legends, considering the region was supposedly incapable of supporting life. He didn't know how, but the hermits had obviously stumbled onto the last habitable area in the former aquatic body. It was most impressive, especially considering Jawas and sand people were always on the hunt for

treasure and prey, respectively.

More so than Annikin, the other guests couldn't believe their eyes. Obi-Wan expected that there was more to Sarus than met the eye. No meeting like that happened by coincidence. Dooku, on the other hand, was completely shocked by what they found. He assumed Sarus was a simple, primitive hermit not worth the effort it took for him to trudge out to the sanctuary, but he was clearly wrong, or so it seemed. Whether that was a good thing, he had no idea. Either way, he would have something very interesting indeed to report back to the Jedi High Council.

Sarus laughed as a number of his followers gathered around him. He deliberately refrained from telling the outsiders where they were headed, simply so he could see their reactions to his underground paradise, one that he had led for many years. It was such a joy to see people so impressed by something so simple. His wide smile beamed and his eyes lit up, especially considering the reactions of the Jedi. He had worried they wouldn't be impressed, what with his people's stereotypes about how the Jedi were too arrogant to see past their own ancient order. He was happy to admit that he was wrong.

Before Sarus could speak, the small group of his people, the most loyal of his followers, began what the two Jedi assumed was some sort of worship ritual. Some put their flat hands together in front of them, bringing their finger tips to their upper lips. Others clasped their hands and did the same, while one woman seemed to almost kiss her hands in front of her. They mumbled, but it was a barely audible prayer. It was no matter. The outsiders would find out all about their customs and traditions soon enough. Every member of the group of guests had an important role to play. They simply didn't know it yet.

"Welcome, my friends!" Sarus finally shouted, much to the relief of the outsiders who were starting to become a bit uncomfortable, fidgeting while not knowing where they were or what was happening.

A silence befell the entire area for a moment, but as he finished speaking the whole residency broke into cheer. Widespread grins were across all faces. Some women and children couldn't help but cry, and even a number of the men looked as if they were straining themselves to hold back tears of joy. There was something about their new group of friends that caused great joy to the hermit people.

Sarus threw his cloak off to the side, showing a much more elegant and regal look than the rest of his people. He wore a light green tunic with a low-cut neck, with a gentle yet radiant gold chain connecting the two sides of the shirt. A distinctive tattoo on his forehead, one that curved from the middle of his brow to the center of his eyebrows like a snake on the arboreal planets of the galaxy, was visible now that they were in the light. As one of his men took his robe away, Obi-Wan stepped forward, taking charge of the situation.

"Who are you?" the eager Jedi Knight asked on behalf of the others.

"We are the Ophuchi," Sarus replied with a slight nod of the head. "Our clan has existed here for centuries, but I'll explain more about that later. For now, come with me. We've prepared a feast in your honor."

Obi-Wan smiled as he saw Dooku's eyes light up at the very mentioning of food. If Dooku had his full energy, the Jedi Knight knew that his former master would've had some sort of snide comment regarding the hospitality, but everyone was caught in moments of weakness and vulnerability every once and awhile. Truth be told, Obi-Wan could hardly blame him. He

was also very tired and hungry from their long journey on foot through the desert, so he knew that whatever hospitality the Ophuchi had to offer would prove to be useful once it was time to make the long journey back to the moisture farm.

Anytime his thoughts wandered back to the farm, Obi-Wan worried about Cliegg and Shmi's reaction when Annikin and the others failed to return home. With such perilous dangers in the nighttime desert, they would assume the worst. He promised them he would make sure Annikin was safe, so he felt responsible for the young boy, like a Jedi Master felt responsible for his Padawan. It was Obi-Wan's duty to make sure that nothing happened to him.

As Sarus made his way through the gathered crowd, each one clamoring to get a look at the strangely dressed and very foreign outsiders, the group followed close behind him. Their path led them through the rest of the common area, and eventually underneath the large marble statue that they had seen on the way in, a statue whose face seemed to watch over and protect all of the Ophuchi in the sanctuary.

Finally close enough to get a good look, they could tell that the statue was a carving of a fairly young man, no older than thirty standard years. He was dressed in simple warrior's attire, and the vibrant colors of the carved green tunic and dark brown pants were a stark contrast to the rest of the dull surroundings. The figure, with long brown hair and a light beard, had its tunic covered in moderately-sized gray armor, adorned with a symbol none of them had ever seen, one that resembled something of a serpent mixed with a dove. The man had a case of arrows slung over his shoulders, though they were just barely visible with the cloak that covered his shoulders and back. In his hand was a tightly gripped blade with two large jewels on the hilt, one ruby and one sapphire, the duality of light and dark.

Annikin looked up at the bust as he passed underneath it, drawn to its design. It was completely foreign to Tatooine, clearly reminiscent of another time and another place. All of a sudden, he realized that he had seen the dove on the figure's armor before. It was the same symbol on the japor snippet that his father had given him. Annikin resisted pulling it out, not wanting to answer any questions about the mystical object, but he didn't need to anyway. There was no doubting the connection. Perhaps Sarus was actually on to something about Annikin's destiny.

No, that couldn't be. Sarus was obviously wrong. The connection was just a coincidence. Yes, a coincidence. There wasn't any other explanation. Annikin spent the last six hours convincing himself that he was on a fool's errand, one where he wouldn't find anything of actual value about himself. It would all be either lies or misinterpretations. His only destiny was to be a moisture farmer. He knew it, he felt it. He refused to accept the fact, even the possibility that he was anything more than that. It was his lot in life. He wouldn't allow himself to admit otherwise.

Annikin was the last member of the group to pass beneath the statue, although he was flanked by two other Ophuchi, adorned with knives likely meaning that they were guards who would make sure none of the outsiders posed any sort of threat. Annikin followed the others down an old stone stairwell, gently running his hand against the walls to feel the moisture that again trickled down the stone. Never before had he felt a naturally cool environment, and never again did he want to feel anything else. The moisture only continued as they made their way further down the stairwell and into a large rotunda of rooms that made up the edges of the residential complex. The people lived quite comfortably, if not primitively by the rest of the group's standards.

The walls were carved into moderately sized family huts. Each one was two levels high, the

bottom serving as a family gathering spot while the upper levels, accessible only by two wooden ladders, were the sleeping quarters. Two small children, a boy no older than six years old with his younger sister, watched from above as the outsiders passed by. Queen Arcadia looked up and waved, and she smiled as they waved back. She idolized the innocence of a child, if only because her innocent naivety was lost the moment the first Federation battleship arrived around her homeworld.

Struggling to restrain a smile and instead keep his serious, stoically professional features on display, Amator watched the queen's brief interaction with the children. Whatever Arcadia may have felt about herself after the invasion began, Amator didn't see her any differently. Seeing her wave to and smile at the children only served to reinforce his deep respect and admiration for her kind and gentle, a far cry from her hardened father's iron fist. She may have felt like she lost herself, but Amator couldn't have disagreed more.

Finally away from the main public area of the sanctuary, or at least the parts they had seen of it, Sarus led them all into a large stone chamber, one lit by dozens of candles lining the walls. At its center was a massive stone table with what seemed like thousands of different choices of food for all of them. Annikin looked in disbelief at what had to have been a month's worth of his normal diet. How could these people get so much food considering they were so far away from civilization? There was no way it could grow so far out into the desert, and there were certainly no shipments being sent so far. The others couldn't seem to care less.

Dooku was nearly licking his lips in anticipation of the feast. Schlepping through the desert at his age took a lot out of him, especially without any food and barely enough water to keep him from collapsing. Had he not been a Jedi Master, using the Force and all of his willpower to keep him going, he likely would've fallen flat on his face hours ago. Even still, he couldn't help but wonder whether this feast was merely an elaborate rouse before something more sinister took effect. He wasn't going to ignore the food, in fact he couldn't considering his weakened state, but he would be on alert. He wasn't just about to assume that these strange hermits had nothing but peaceful intentions.

Sarus smirked as the group seemed to thoroughly enjoy the bounty that he had ensured would be before them once they arrived. It wasn't often that he made sure his people acquired goods of such quality to create a feast of that magnitude. The effort that went into smuggling the right amount of materials in small portions from the spaceports required a great deal of work from his people. He couldn't have been prouder of their hard work.

More so than the others, Annikin still couldn't believe everything that was before them. Was this really all about him? He couldn't remember the last time, if ever, he had seen so much food at once. Sarus must've been trying to get on his good side, especially considering what Sarus had to say was supposedly about the fate of the galaxy. The Ophuchi leader certainly did know how to cater to them and help get on their good sides. The numerous different cuts of meat and even more choices of fruits and vegetables, some Annikin had never even seen before, was proof of that. Red wine and the traditional blue milk of Tatooine were placed next to each plate, which had already been filled with a rather generous selection of all the different meals. It didn't seem even remotely possible that they would be able to finish it all, but they would, of course, put in a good effort so they wouldn't seem rude in front of their seemingly gracious host.

"Please," Sarus said, stretching his arms out wide towards the table, "sit down. I'm sure we could all use a meal after our long journey."

The others could hardly disagree. They all may their way to seats around the table, though Dooku was still somewhat hesitant. Amator was even more hesitant than the Jedi Master, ready to try each type of food before the queen did. He wasn't about to let her be poisoned, drugged, or anything else that could be done to food. He had a nagging sense that they were being dragged into a false sense of security, and, while he wouldn't vocalize his fear, he had to stay alert to make sure nothing happened to the monarch.

Sarus took his seat at the head of the table, and he invited Annikin and the two Jedi to sit beside him. The Ophuchi leader knew that Annikin and the Jedi knew very little about one another, as the Jedi had only arrived a few days earlier, but he hoped to change that with the information he would reveal to them at the end of their meal once he took them further and deeper into the hidden sanctuary.

"Please join me in the blessing of this food," Sarus requested, raising his hands in anticipation of the others joining theirs together. Everyone looked at one another, their faces a source of confusion and puzzlement. It was a custom that none of them were used to, but they were, after a few moments, able to figure it out. As they bowed their heads and took the hand of the two people next to them, Sarus continued. "For the bounty laid before us, may the Force make us thankful and ever mindful of the needs of others. Amen."

The others raised their heads when the prayer was over, still unsure about what they had witnessed. Obi-Wan had seen similar customs in the past, but they were usually far more elaborate. Some religious cultures would say prayers, but they would also be preceded or followed by long, yet interesting, ceremonies and other such customs. Sarus's prayer was simple, yet effective. The Ophuchi were clearly a very spiritual people, and what piqued Obi-Wan's interest the most was that they believed in and recognized the Force, seemingly above all else. It was rare to see such groups in the galaxy, so it was refreshing to finally find one in person.

Sarus placed a cloth napkin on his lap and picked up his utensils to begin eating, so the others took it as a sign that they too could do the same. None of them, particularly Amator who was already trying pieces of each food, wasted any time in beginning their meals, nor did Sarus who was just as hungry as the rest of them. He had learned from the deserts how to mask the discomforts of hunger and dehydration, but that didn't mean such discomforts didn't exist. He was only a mere mortal, after all.

Slowly chewing each piece of meat to savor the very juicy flavor, Annikin was surprised by the taste of the food he'd been given. Most food on Tatooine was reprocessed more than once in order to preserve it in the heat, but what they were eating tasted fresh. It was yet another layer of intrigue in the mystery of the Ophuchi people, a people that Annikin was starting to take an interest in. After hearing the prayer, and yet while he was still wary of what was happening, he was beginning to get the idea that he didn't have to worry about his safety or the safety of anyone else. The Ophuchi seemed far too peaceful for that.

Everyone ate their meals in silence for a few moments, each of them gorging on the great variety of food before them. Annikin watched in amazement at how quickly the outsiders ate. He came to realize just how accustomed they were, even the Jedi, to eating larger meals at set times of day. As a moisture farmer, Annikin grew up in an environment that taught him to prolong the amount of time it took to feel hungry, although that wasn't to say he didn't need as much nourishment as the others after such a long trek on foot. He too was greatly appreciative of the meal and ate as much of it as he could, but he was uncomfortable with such a long silence in a larger group of people. The others may have wanted to eat in quiet, but he figured it was up to him to break the awkward silence.

"That was an impressive statue we walked under back there," Annikin finally said as he wiped his mouth of the food crumbs around his lips. "Who was it?"

"That man was our beloved prophet," Sarus told him, placing his utensils on the table as he clasped his hands together and leaned forward to speak. "The holy man lived a hundred thousand years ago and wrote the ideals that we live our lives by, but we're not worthy enough to speak his name or even tell his story aloud. What I can say is that he was the first to discover the true potential of what you call the Force."

"You don't call it the Force?" Dooku asked. Despite his reservations, he still considered himself a student of history and archaeology, so the Ophuchi and their sanctuary greatly intrigued him. His opinions of their lifestyle aside, he did want to learn more about their customs, traditions, and overall way of life.

"Yes, and no," Sarus replied, his near-Coruscanti accent drawing the attention of everyone in the room, although some, such as Dooku, far more than others, such as Amator. "It is written that it be called the Force of Others, as the power of it is generated by the life force of all living beings. We've become somewhat accustomed to calling it the Force for short considering we do, occasionally, interact with non-Ophuchi, but we still hold on to our ancient customs and traditions."

Sarus recalled the stories his father told him when he was just a boy. The schism that forced the great ancestral order in two was always something of interest to him, as it was a story of political corruption and betrayal, and it was particularly relevant here considering that was the last time the galaxy-at-large knew of the great mystery as the Force of Others. There were very few points throughout history where such a defining event occurred, and he felt fortune to be one of the descendents of an event that truly reshaped the galaxy, even though it was covered up by the Galactic Republic. The true history of the galaxy seemed to be lost to the ages.

"Our ancestors were part of a small splinter faction that had been part of what you now call the Jedi Order," Sarus continued, not wanting to give too much information on his people away, as it would be the task of others to do that in the future. "After a rift was created between some Jedi, our people left and found themselves here in the Dune Sea."

"And you've been here ever since?" Amator asked, his interest piquing as the story continued, even though there was the possibility that the entire thing was a sham.

"Quite comfortably, actually," Sarus said, "as much as that may surprise you."

"It does, to be honest," Binks jumped in, feeling that it was an appropriate point to do so considering his species and natural habitat. "I'm barely breathing here as it is, considering my native environment."

It felt strange being away from home. Binks had never travelled off world before, let alone to a world that had an environment that was the complete opposite of everything he knew and was accustomed to. He may not have lived in Otoh Gunga for two years, but the swamps of Utapau were still a damp and moist region perfectly suitable for an amphibious creature like him. He was trained to survive in difficult situations while he was in the Gungan military, but he was finding it harder than he ever imagined in the desert. At least he was able to feel more relaxed in the moist underground of the Ophuchi compound.

"There were some Ophuchi who felt the same way, my friend," Sarus said recounted, his tone one of remorse and regret, as if such lines of thought were unbecoming of a member of his society. "Only a year ago, a group of our young people chose to give up their heritage and made the mistake of trying to become part of normal society. They tried living in Mos Eisley, but they had no idea they were walking into such a merciless hive of scum and villainy. They were far too incautious for their own good."

The queen may have lived on the idyllic Utapau her entire life, but even she wasn't able to escape hearing the horror stories of the Mos Eisley spaceport. There were constant riots that started from fights, there were murders left and right, and every type of mercenary, smuggler, bounty hunter, and other undesirable no one would ever want to run into could be found there. She couldn't imagine ever going to such a place, and she would do her damndest to make sure she never had to. Even without knowing she was a queen, she could only imagine how unwelcome a pretty young woman would feel surrounded by scoundrels like that city's inhabitants.

"I take it by your past tense things didn't go very well," the queen said, her radiant eyes expressing the concern she felt for the safety of people she didn't even know.

"Unfortunately, you're right," Sarus remorsefully explained. "The locals branded them crazy wizards, and the worst of the traders were able to exploit the local fear of strange visitors from outside their sense of normalcy."

"How?" Dooku asked, although his expression proved to be less-than-concerned at this point. He was only interested in hearing the rest of the story, not sympathizing.

"Taken as slaves," Sarus said, lowering his head for a moment in respect, but as he brought it back up his deep blue eyes reflected what could only be seen as his rage, "by the Federation, no doubt. We thought we had seen the last of those barbarians when Iaco Stark began plundering their ships, but he was no better. A two-timing backstabber was what he was. I rarely wish anyone ill will, but I can assure you I shed no tears when I learned that he was killed at the war's end."

The very mention of Stark drew raised eyebrows from Dooku and Obi-Wan, considering he had been the instigator of the war that they wished they weren't veterans of. Stark had been a smuggler in the Outer Rim who raised and stole from Federation ships. He sold them back to the people of the Outer Rim at prices high enough to make a profit, but still lower than the Federation's prices. He was a hero to the Outer Rim, as well as the Republic. He was the first person to truly make a stand against the slave-holding trade conglomerate. It was unfortunate that he used his influence to create the Stark Commercial Combine and start the war.

The rest, as the expression went, was history. The two Jedi tried for years to forget about that pointless conflict, but they came to terms with the fact that the memories would be with them forever. The war helped shape who they were, and their real concern ended up being for the people of the Outer Rim. The war was one of the many reasons that the Republic finally pushed the anti-slavery laws through the Senate, and one of the many reasons that Utapau was now under direct Federation authority.

But for Arcadia, the Stark Hyperspace War was the last thing to go through her mind. She simply couldn't stop thinking about how her own people were suffering in what was another pointless conflict in a long line of pointless conflicts. Worst of all, she felt like she abandoned her people. She may have enjoyed popularity, but her family as a whole was not viewed

favorably. Her father saw to that, even if inadvertently. She didn't even want to begin thinking about how people would perceive her when she first ascended to the throne. She could only hope they knew she was doing everything she possible could to end the violence.

"I still can't believe how low the Federation will sink," Arcadia said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the group, "but it's hard to believe they would have done this a year ago. That's when the new anti-slavery laws for the outlying systems were - "

"The Republic doesn't exist out here," Sarus snapped, his voice cold and rough for the first time, as Arcadia had clearly struck a nerve. "We have to make due on our own."

"But the Senate said the Federation is complying with the laws," Arcadia told him, showing the partial naivety of her youth, and prompting Amator to sit taller in his chair in the event he needed to defend the queen. "It's why they invaded my home. That's the whole reason we're even here."

"Don't be so nai - "

"I'd be careful about finishing that sentence if I were you," Amator said, dropping his utensils down onto the stone table now that it was his turn to snap. "I'd like to remind you that you're speaking with Her Royal Highness Sabé Arcadia, Queen of Utapau."

Not a single sound could be heard. Not a whisper, not a faint breath, not anything. The young security officer's outburst took everyone by surprise, but it was Arcadia who ended up blushing, yet in an affectionate and grateful way. She turned her head slightly and smiled, seeing that he was embarrassed by what he'd done. She didn't want him to feel uncomfortable by any means, especially since he was just doing his job.

"Of course," Sarus said, taking a deep breath as he realized he had gotten far too caught up in his emotions for his own good. "I truly am sorry about your world, Your Highness, but do you really believe that a few new laws will stop Nute Gunray from making his profit?"

"No," Arcadia admitted, allowing herself to express her words in a defeated tone, knowing full well that Sarus was right. "I suppose not."

Even the normally abrasive Dooku was surprised at how defensive and relatively rude Sarus had become. It may have made the Jedi Master a hypocrite, but he still felt that it shouldn't have been said with so much of an edge, especially in the presence of a young woman who was clearly superior to the Ophuchi leader. It was at that moment that Dooku remembered Sarus had brought them all down there to speak with something that was of grave urgency. He could only assume that a conversation about Nute Gunray was not what was intended.

"If I recall correctly," Dooku chimed in, "we were brought down here because you needed to speak with us about something concerning the safety of the galaxy."

"Oh yes," Sarus said, wiping his mouth of the wine he had just drunk. Standing up, he looked genuinely happy, as it was finally time to put into action what he had been working on for so many years. Sarus clapped his hands, and the two men who had followed them down to the dining area entered from outside. "If you're all finished with your meals, I would like you to follow Javid here into one of our lower and most sacred sanctuaries. I will be right behind you, and we can talk about why I brought you here once we all arrive."

"Is it far?" Annikin asked, speaking up after not saying much of anything throughout the

entire dinner conversation. He wasn't looking forward to the prospect of walking a great distance again so soon.

"It's only a few minutes away," Javid replied stoically, not letting on to any emotion, unlike Sarus who turned and winked at Annikin. It was clear that it was meant to infer something, and Annikin gulped as he tried to contemplate what it may have been. "Please follow me, and watch your step as we enter the catacombs."

The assembled group stood up from the table and threw down their washcloths, quietly following Javid back out of the dining area and into a nearby, lower-ceilinged catacomb entrance that would lead them to the cave sanctuary that Sarus spoke of. None of them knew what to expect, but even Dooku and Arcadia, both somewhat annoyed at Sarus because of his outburst, couldn't help but be curious. Amator, as always, was nearly clinging to the queen's side. The prospect of moving further into the compound made him ill at ease. The further he was from the surface, the harder it would be to ensure the queen's safety.

Annikin, however, was far more reluctant. Sarus seemed to hold him in high esteem, something that the young man cared very little for. While he didn't feel like he was in any danger, he still knew next to nothing about Sarus or the Ophuchi, so he had no idea why he was being looked at like a hero. He was starting to wonder if the people in the common area who cheered when they first arrived were welcoming them all or hailing him. Still, in the end, if the sanctuary was half as interesting as the Ophuchi themselves, Annikin at least knew he would be in for an interesting night of illumination.

While Javid led the others out, the second guard remained with Sarus. Ray'kele was looked upon as the next leader of the Ophuchi once Sarus ultimately passed away, so he was frequently by his leader's side. The two were very similar in appearance. Ray'kele, far less intense with his views than Sarus, wore short, unkempt hair. His brown eyes reflected the natural colors of the planet, as did his light, tan tunic. Unlike Sarus, however, Ray'kele had yet to receive the forehead tattoo that traditionally signified Ophuchi leadership, as he was still considered Sarus's leadership apprentice.

"Was that him?" Ray'kele finally asked. Sarus had spoken of Annikin Skywalker for many years, but Ray'kele had never been permitted to see the young man, unlike Sarus who frequently kept an eye on him.

"That's him," Sarus replied. He could sense that his disciple was somewhat skeptical, as was natural. He had not received the guidance that Sarus had, so he could only take things on faith whereas Sarus knew things as fact.

"Do you really think he can fulfill the prophecy?" the younger Ophuchi cautiously asked his teacher, treading carefully so as to not insult Sarus's wisdom. "He's not even Ophuchi."

"It's not his cultural heritage that matters," Sarus told him. "It's his lineage. Every possible interpretation I've found points to this."

"I hope you're right," Ray'kele sighed in reply, but his teacher wasn't concerned. Were Sarus taking things on faith then he would be, but the benefit of knowing things for a fact was that he had no need to doubt himself. The prophecy would be fulfilled, no matter what.