



"I never had a family, people to lift me up when I've fallen or just pretend to understand my problems. Don't make that same mistake. You'll always regret it."

— From the journals of Elias

Lars moisture farm Outside the Judland Wastes

Motes of dust and sand swirled about the ground, the wind curling them into dozens of wispy spirals. Michael's speeder cut through them, racing towards a small structure sticking up from the ground, greeted with the sight of home, a sunken pit in the center of a vast moisture farm. Not that there was much moisture to be found. What little they brought to the surface from the wheezing pumps that littered the grounds was taken by the Hutt military to be distributed throughout the population. 'Fair' was how they described their rationing. What was so fair about the powerful having all the water they needed and the poor of Anchorhead desperately waiting for any drop they could get?

The hovering craft came to soft rest as the engine shut off, and Michael stepped off just above the pit. His muscles ached as he walked towards it. He could barely see straight at this point, between the fatigue from near-death and the swelling of his beaten face, but he still managed to see one of his favorite sights.

Sinking below the horizon was the final light of the setting suns, slowly giving way to the deep blackness of night. Light was snuffed out by darkness. It was the way of this world. Every day opened with a sunrise, a new beginning, a feeling that this day would be better. Then it turned to the final setting of the daytime suns like this, and there was nothing left but the cold and empty void of sand and mayhem.

But this farm was something more. It was the closest he had to anything that felt like real protection. Not the security of a tyrant's gate, but the warm comfort of those who would do anything to protect the ones they loved. It was surrounded by nothing; there were no trees, no grass, nothing outwardly suggesting there was anything else on this world but sand, but for Michael it had always meant something more.

From home, he could stare out into the distance, into the endless Dune Sea. It was there where the mysteries of this world lived, where barren wastes became all the more dangerous, and imaginations could run wild thinking of the excitement to be found. Even the Michael of today couldn't stop himself from getting lost in the possibilities of that great unknown. No matter his problems, sometimes a greater notion was all a person needed to feel inspired.

But this was a boy's dream. Sara was right. He was afraid, scared to take action; action against oppression, action against his fears, action to even have the slightest feeling of adventure. His imagination was the only place where his dreams lived. He could think about what was out beyond the horizon or see himself fighting against evil because none of it was real. It was safe, its comfort false. Only this farm, and the memories of the dreams he'd conjured as a child, could come close to something real, because this is where he always thought it would be real. It's why it was the only place things seemed clear to him, no matter how bleak that clarity was.

He headed for the entrance to the structure, one that looked to be fashioned from the desert itself, crudely sliced and sculpted out of the environment long before he was ever born. Its rounded oval structure was bombarded by the wind, scarred with streaks of sand that curled off its decrepit walls without incident.

Their home was the only sight from here to the horizon that resembled anything manmade, despite its crude and simple design. Although it had been built to reflect its surroundings, its beige rock had decayed over time, revealing the grey and terra-cotta stone beneath its exterior. At its very center, at what could be called its entrance, a rectangular hole was cut into the ground, connecting it to the rest of the structure, one that Michael began to step into. Slowly striding down the steps, he breathed a sigh of relief. He hoped to leave his troubles behind him in the desert, separating himself from them, shut away by old walls. He was home.

At least he thought he could leave it behind.

He rounded the corner towards the living area, resting his hand against the walls of the dark hallway before he hit the light of the pit, the smells of the nearby kitchen hit him like a freighter. The air he breathed in stung. The odors of ammonia and kitchen soap always there after a meal were things he'd always felt allergic too. He lurched forward, sneezing into his hands as he rounded the corner, stepping back into the light.

Their home was distinctly unremarkable. Garages and other work rooms littered the grounds of the circular enclosure. Bedrooms and other small living areas were on the upper levels, with only a small hole for a window. Room wasn't the right word to describe the places where they slept. A small, person-sized hole cut into the wall was far more apt. In the center of the pit, work tools were still strewn across the area. The pump

in the center, their main source of moisture, was still churning away. There was still work to do, even at night.

In the dining area was the reason why. There sat his father, sharing a drink of blue milk with Darklighter. The colonel seemed ashamed to even be there. His hands wrapped around the cup of milk and he sipped it, barely looking at Michael. Michael could tell he felt like a child, a tattler, but it was only because he knew Michael too well. He knew that above all else, above any other failure in life, disappointing his father, the man who had adopted him all those years ago, was the one thing he did not want to do. Hearing what happened today was a disappointment, but nowhere near the disappointment of Michael lying to Luke and not telling him.

“Sit down,” Luke demanded.

He was an unkempt man, a farming man dressed in little more than rags, someone who spent his days toiling away in the merciless heat of the suns. His skin cracked and his light brown hair was already beginning to turn gray, yet he still had his strength. He still carried the demeanor and physicality of even Michael, but his eyes told Michael everything. With just a look, the angry yet sad eyes of the man that glared at him now, Michael could feel like he'd had an entire conversation with him.

“What do you know?” Michael tepidly asked.

Luke slammed his hands onto the table. “The sand people. The cantina. All of it.”

“I tried to tell Deak before,” Michael said, as he sat at the center of the table, between Luke and Darklighter, “I can explain about the sand people.”

“Then go ahead,” Luke said.

Michael let out a sigh, of both frustration and relief. “I was at a dig site, and on my way back I took a longer way around another one.”

Deak's eyebrow cocked, and now he was curious. “Why? You had a pre-approved path.”

“A battle was fought there,” Michael told him, his tone carrying the weight of its importance to him, “a long time ago, during the Dune Sea War. I didn't want to ruin the site.”

“Poetic,” Deak quipped. “And?”

This was where Michael knew he would lose them. “And I ran into a group of sand

people in the east, so I—”

“The east?” Luke shouted. He flew out of his seat, pacing across the floor in front of them and rubbing his hands across his eyes. “You went into the Eastern Dune Sea? Are you out of your mind? That’s the most reckless thing you’ve done since...”

His voice trailed off and he looked away, the shame of what he had just said written across his face, after the line he had just crossed. Michael felt it too, as his eyes closed, trying to avoid what his mind wanted to show him. Spiraling out of control. Smoke. Fire. So much fire.

Michael’s voice was subdued now. “I was trying to—”

“Get yourself killed?” Luke asked, his voice also growing softer.

“I’m sorry,” Michael whispered.

“I should hope so,” Luke said as he sat back down, offering a weak smile of consolation. “None of tonight’s chores got done because of all this. I suggest you get started.”

As Michael walked away, Luke’s eyes were heavy with the remorse of a man who had once been the same person his son was. He remembered it all too well, the pain, the sadness that came from losing everything he believed in because of a stupid mistake and the pains he put himself through in the years that followed. Life just didn’t make sense sometimes.

“You were rough on him,” Darklighter said, critical in his words, studying Luke in an overly obvious way to get a sense of what he was feeling. Luke knew that Deak was never one to understand his past, even if he wanted to.

“I know,” Luke told him. “I also know he didn’t mean any harm.”

Luke could see that his friend was visibly frustrated, gripping his glass tightly and furrowing his brow. “Maybe not,” Darklighter said, “but I have to explain all this to my superiors, and they won’t be happy.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re treated fairly,” the scorned farmer said, “so I’m sure we’ll be hearing from them soon.”

“Bullshit,” Darklighter spat. “No, things aren’t fair here. No one knows you used to be my brother in law, no one can, but that doesn’t mean I don’t pull a string or two when I’m able. You know it too, so don’t act like you don’t get special treatment,” his voice was growing louder as he said that, and Luke was wincing, knowing he’d stepped into

the lion's den. "You're a year behind on moisture quotas. I've had to pull Michael's ass out of the line of fire more than once. Any other family would've been rounded up and shot by now, but not yours. Because you're my family."

The colonel leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest, across the medals and the stars and stripes that adorned his black uniform, his entire demeanor clearly defiant. "You're welcome."

Luke didn't want to admit it, but he knew Darklighter was right. Luke had always wanted to believe he was self-sufficient, that he didn't need help from anyone, least of all a government based on criminality, yet he did need it. He would've been dead or in a prison cell without Deak.

"But I can't do that forever," Darklighter said, his voice becoming hushed to the point where Luke could barely hear it, as if the eyes and ears of the all-seeing Hutts were there with them. "You know why I'm still in the military. You know what I'm doing, what I have to do."

"I know what you're trying to do," Luke jabbed. "I know what's going to kill you."

He shook his head at the thought while Darklighter stood up. The colonel knew the risks, saying, "Maybe so. Maybe it will kill me, but I won't jeopardize my chance."

Luke had seen firsthand what Deak wanted to do. He had been there before. He once had hope, like Deak did now, but it was crushed under the weight of the Hutt military that the colonel now called himself a leader in. It would devour them all whole and spit them out without a second's thoughts, and the memories of a time long since passed would not be enough to save them.

"Fair enough," Luke said, yet it was anything but.

Lars moisture farm, garage

"Do the chores he says," Michael grumbled, muttering about to himself. "They're not done because of me he says. It's not like I almost died..."

The garage was a dank place, built deep into the side of the desert wall for more room, and so less light entered it than the dining area. Michael sat in the far back corner, laboring away at the shifter of a broken down landspeeder, trying to get it operational again. Most of the garage was one big mess of things that needed fixing. Broken speeder

parts and gears for moisture vaporators were left carelessly throughout the garage. Some of it was there when he got there. More of it was of his own doing.

Every move he made, from looking for a part to fixing one, was exaggerated in his frustration. He couldn't just search through a pile of junk, he had to toss every part behind him, letting it fall wherever it would. Turning a wrench on a shifter bolt was too simple for him tonight. Instead cranking it as hard as he could, his arms moving about as he did and his exasperation growing.

Sparks began to fly and he jumped backward, afraid there might be a fire. Did he do that? He didn't think he'd been that haphazard about how he was working. Just then, a tiny vermin ran out from under the speeder, scurrying away across the floor and back out into the pit. Michael's frustration grew. Now he was pacing back and forth at what the sniveling sand-rat had done, or what Michael himself had done. He wasn't quite sure. More uncertainty. That's what frustrated him more than the broken wires that now hung from the bottom of the shifter's parts.

"Damn it!"

His wrench flew out of his hand, thrown across to the far wall of the garage where it slammed against it, clattering down to the floor behind a table. Michael didn't even remember throwing it. There was no thought. It just happened, without control, without consideration for what he was doing. He slammed his fists against the workbench, the tools and parts jumping into the air as he did. *What's happening to me?* he asked himself.

"Don't worry about Deak," came a voice from behind him, a voice not much older than him, an uplifting one at times and a massive annoyance at others. It was a brother's voice. "He's a damn fool on an idealistic crusade. You don't want any part in that."

Michael whirled around to see his adoptive brother standing there, clad in the same ragged clothing that their father was. Owen Lars was older than Michael, four years older, though not nearly as tall. He was a smaller man, his brown hair brushed modestly and not as unkempt as their father, but one built enough to hold his own. Everyone had to be in this environment. Owen placed a hand over his mouth, trying to suppress a brother's laugh at the bruises on Michael's face, and he moved his hand across the stubble of his own face to try and play it off.

As Owen kept laughing beneath his hand, Michael didn't even care. Michael said, "What if I do? After what happened to Kitster, I ran scared." He laughed at that, not at what had happened but at the absurdity of what it made him. "I used to dream about finishing what Dad and the other rebels started, but now... You should've seen me, Owen. I can barely stand up to Dirk and Lorn, the two biggest idiots in the history of idiots."

Owen didn't say a word. He didn't need to. The two of them both knew that nothing he said could comfort Michael right now. What Michael needed, and what Owen had always given him, was an outlet. Owen always looked out for him. He didn't need to make anything better. He just needed to be there, and that's where he was now. He approached Michael, standing in front of him, letting the pause hang over them so Michael could keep breathing and calm himself, and then Owen hugged him. He wrapped his arms around his much larger brother, slapping him on the back both for strength of comfort and for a kick in the backside.

"You're a real pain in the ass, you know that?" Owen said as he stepped away, with Michael nearly taking offense until he saw the grin etched across his face, "but you're my pain in the ass."

Owen turned away, walking back towards the center of the pit, as he said. "Buck up and get some sleep. You look like a bantha stepped on your face."

Michael burst out laughing, not expecting that tonight. "Shut up."

But the laughter didn't last, fading away as the frustration with himself and the day returned. Without ever saying it, Owen answered the question about what was happening to Michael. In the few brief words they shared, Owen had told him to get over himself and managed to make him laugh at the same time. Unlike Sara, unlike the hell that she managed to stuff into his head. He could almost feel her there, taunting him as Owen left. It was her, the memory of her from earlier at least, that made the laughter fade away. Sara was all he could think about now, and she just wouldn't get out of his head.