

A long time ago in a galaxy far,
far away...

It is a desperate time for the galaxy. Poverty and suffering have infested the far frontiers of the cosmos, and their governments are ill-equipped to respond to the endless harrowing cries of a hopeless population.

In the great Republic, home to some of the greatest thinkers and visionaries history has ever known, political and economic corruption runs rampant, with whole worlds falling victim to oligarchs and sycophants.

But just beyond the rim that divides the Republic from the tyranny of the Hutt Lords, where forgotten wars have left scars that will last for time immemorial, one tiny planet will give rise to the one who can change it all....



PART ONE

The Boy of the Desert

3 years before
the fall



“At first glance, this world is little more than a useless ball of sand and dirt. Only by looking deeper into the desert can the mind’s eye see the treasure it holds.”
— From the journals of Elias

The stars hung over the desert like spectators of the madness of twilight, when the savages roamed and the foolish, seeking adventure and excitement in all the wrong places, would remain out when day began its descent into night. The desert was a treacherous and seemingly endless land, infested with all manner of wretched and unfathomable creatures. Even now their roars and screeches could be heard from kilometers away. This was an hour when the sane returned to their settlements and homes.

Across the still-boiling sands darted a shadow, still visible in the light of the setting suns, suspended in the darkening amber sky like the eyes of a distant god. They revealed the figure of a man, sprinting across the desert dunes in a mad dash towards an unknown destination. The fading light gradually began to reveal his appearance, that of a tall man, lost in the comfort of youth, full of life and promise, yet still somehow tired and worn like a man thrice his age. Further observation would reveal that he was exasperated to the point of exhaustion. He’d been running for nearly an hour, though it seemed a lifetime. His forest green eyes were fixed towards the setting suns, as the stars began to appear, guiding the way towards home.

The dunes stretched as far as his emerald eyes could see, one leading into the next. The scant signs of life, the wicked heat bearing down even now; they all served to mock anyone who ventured beyond the confines of their settlements. It was for that reason that few ever did. For most of the planet, that meant the only signs of life were the wisps of finer particles dancing and swirling about in the hot winds.

As he ran, the wind flowing through his auburn hair, he felt panic, weariness, and all the other pangs that came from running for one’s life. Yet at the same time there was a certain exhilaration there, amidst his panting and sweating, a feeling of being more alive than ever before. He imagined this was how adventurers felt, or soldiers facing the threat of death. Not that he would admit it to himself, the thrill of the chase. He was

much too concerned with the fear of not surviving.

He came to a stop as he crested one of the higher dunes, thinking he was in the clear. He looked towards the horizon for refuge, seeing his settlement ahead of him as the light began to fade beyond the horizon. He knew the perfect place to run to, away from death, away from fear and despair where he could hide forever, but this wasn't it. That place was a dream, a fool's errand far away from his current heading, beyond the rim that separated this part of the known galaxy from the next. Where he was going now was the best source of asylum he had. Knowing what kind of home this place really was, that he would have to find comfort in the security of tyrants, made him sick to his stomach. It taunted him too, the light of the suns illuminating it from behind, as if to say it was the best he could ever hope for. Maybe it was.

Looking back again, he saw the shadows he had been fleeing from. He quickly turned and lunged forward in a desperate, last ditch effort to survive. Behind him came the savages who had been hunting him, the sand people who called the desert home. A menace to settlers across the planet. Rapists and pillagers, they were the barely sentient pirates of the endless sands. The primitive, animalistic shrieks of rage they uttered as they chased him were words that only they could understand. To the settlers, their true language was brutality and mayhem. Whatever culture they may have had before had faded long ago.

The young man they chased was unarmed, yet the hunters were outfitted heavily with their dangerous and primitive tools. He couldn't get a good look at them—no one who laid their eyes on the sand people returned to speak of what they saw—but he knew of their weapons. Their *gaderffii* sticks resembled spears, with a mace on one end and a serrated axe on the other. If the degenerates caught him, they would surely skin him alive. Only then, when he had been stripped raw, would they decide if he should die or if they should prolong his suffering for as long as possible. Just to satisfy their lust.

He knew it too, which was why that so-called city, Anchorhead, would have to do for now.

Gates of Anchorhead Station

Anchorhead Station was the capital of this world and one of the last vestiges of civilization on the dying planet; not that the name was still apt in this day and age. What was once a tiny spaceport community, home to small corporate outposts here and there from those naive enough to think there was treasure to be mined beneath the sand, had been transformed into a sprawling desert metropolis. Dozens of ships dotted the air above the city, looking like tiny silver specks even from a nearby distance when

compared to the vast size of the settlement.

The city itself was surrounded by a massive wall, and, as those versed in the histories of the world ought to know, it was built to keep out the sand people. Minor towns and wayward settlers were what they had once attacked, but they had grown bolder throughout the centuries. Soon they gathered in greater numbers and began to hit the larger settlements, even Anchorhead as it was being built up. That became the ultimate cause of the Dune Sea War over a century ago, where thousands of sand people were slaughtered by the Hutt military.

Foolishly, the Hutts thought that would cause the sand people to stop, yet it did anything but. If anything it strengthened their resolve, even with their dwindling numbers.

Evening patrols were wandering the walls now, at least some of them. Soldiers equipped with the latest in blaster technology available to such a backwater world sat up against the wall, barely paying attention. The sand people hadn't been around in months and the soldiers were growing complacent. Many of them were becoming lazy, sitting there with a deck of cards, putting their own entertainment before their work.

"Fold," one of the soldiers, a tall, muscular young man named Joshua Banai said. He seemed to be enjoying himself, even in the light of the dimming suns, as the burns across his tan skin were showing. "Wait, hold on."

He grabbed his fellow card player by the wrist, shaking it until two cards fell out of the older soldier's sleeve. He had been cheating, just as Banai had come to suspect.

"I could kill you right now," Banai shouted.

That was life for soldiers on guard duty, little to no action, just mindless threats over cheating in a card game. Suddenly a horde of sand people were incoming, and though they were ignorant of the oncoming threat, they would surely pay the price for their lack of vigilance. If this had been a world in the core of Hutt Space, perhaps they would be concerned about being executed for their ineptitude, but not here. Almost no one cared about anything on this planet.

Almost.

Doors to the lift from ground level swished open, and the stoic Colonel Deacon Darklighter stepped out, combing back his sand-infested dark brown hair with his hand as he prepared for a surprise inspection. He was not a particularly tall or imposing man. Whatever strength most people thought he had came through an image of military leadership carefully cultivated by the Hutt Lords throughout the centuries. His mid-

sized frame clashed with his battered face, wary and scarred from life in the desert, but his eyes told the true story of the man his friends called Deak. No one really noticed it, but even now, looking upon his men, he was not one of them.

His men snapped to attention, giving him a moment's pause. He knew what they were doing, or more precisely what they were not doing. He knew what protocol demanded that he do, given that he was the commander of all Hutt military forces on the planet, but he couldn't bring himself to blame them, even in spite of the albeit limited discipline he would hand out. He cared, but in a different way than a hardened Hutt stooge would. He cared about people and second chances.

Before he could say anything, one of his soldiers cried out, "Raiders, incoming!"

The soldiers bolted into weapons ready positions, aiming their weapons outward towards the incoming horde of sand people while others manned the cannons that lined the walls. Darklighter looked over the wall and out at what was coming, squinting his eyes at the figure in front of the pack. It was a man, a normal human man, not one of the sand people. The colonel grabbed his microbinoculars and looked through it, gasping at the sight.

"Hold your fire! Wait for a cleaner shot," Darklighter shouted. "I know him."

Outside the gates

He was running faster now, but the savages were matching his pace, determined to get to him before they were in the line of fire. Questioning their actions, when it came to anything having to do with the sand people, was an exercise that most people on this world didn't have any desire to grapple with. They probably just wanted to make an example out of him, or they simply wanted to satisfy their bloodlust, no matter the cost.

Their tribal wails grew louder as they got closer and closer, his breathing quickly becoming heavier. Sweat was beading down his forehead, stinging his eyes mercilessly. He'd been on the verge of death before, feeling like it was the end for him, and it was not a feeling he had ever wanted to repeat, least of all like this. At least last time it was in the cockpit of a small ship high in the sky, not down on the ground, in the dirt and at the whim of murderous savages.

He heard the muffled sounds of a soldier shouting to open fire and immediately dropped to the ground, throwing his face into the sand and covering his head with his hands. Dozens of laser bolts flew through the air above him, pummeling the sand people. One by one, they screamed and fell, before the last few remaining raiders turned

and fled. Not all of them made it out alive, only two or three had survived, but they would not soon forget what had happened. If they were smart, they would never return. Although with the sand people, nothing was certain.

Moments passed by that seemed like days. The blaster fire had stopped, but, with his face pressed against the sand and his eyes shut, he couldn't see what was happening. Slowly, carefully, he peered around behind him and began to sit up, watching the remaining sand people flee towards the deep desert. The sounds of gunfire were soon replaced by that of an approaching speeder, its engine quietly roaring towards him from the city gates.

His heart skipped a beat and a chill went down his spine. If there was one thing he feared more than the creatures of the night, it was the enforcers who tried to keep them at bay. He was in awe of their strength, but worried every day about how they intended to use it. He lamented over the constant threats of slavery he and others were subjected to—particularly his family, bound to the slavery of a never-ending contract as farmers. Not everyone who worked for the Hutts was a bad person. He knew some of them. He knew Darklighter. Yet far too many more were the worst kinds of people one could ever be unfortunate enough to meet, and he had no idea who was coming to confront him now.

This was a microcosm of his life, one defined by fear.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the speeder arrived and Darklighter stepped out. He knew he had dodged a bullet with the arrival of a friend. At least he hoped so. This wasn't the first time he'd been in the line of fire, only to have Darklighter, a man meant to do the bidding of criminals, stick his neck out on his behalf.

That's why he couldn't shake the feeling that the colonel was disappointed in him now. He could see it in Darklighter's eyes. That weak, crooked smile struggling to form, so forced and so insincere. Darklighter's head tilted, shaking ever so slightly. It was his tell, yet Darklighter thought he was such a convincing actor.

"Michael Lars, I expect better from you," Darklighter said, his tone clear in its annoyance, but not yet to the words that would truly sting. That's when he said, "Your father expects better from you."

Michael dropped his head, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "If I could just explain myself, I—"

"No," Darklighter snapped. He didn't want to. Michael was family, his nephew, though their relation was known to no one outside of the family. He hated having to do this, but he had no choice. He tried to temper his annoyance now, telling him, "I'm glad you're

safe, but I don't want to hear it. You want to explain, and I want the ammunition we used to save your ass. Neither of us are going to get what we want."

"I know, and I'm sorry," Michael said. "Really, I'm sorry. I know I stayed at my dig site too late."

Darklighter folded his arms across his chest. "Was it worth it?"

"That depends," Michael said, sensing the worst of this confrontation was over as he pulled a small wooden idol from his pocket, bearing the outline of a man and a woman with their hands clasped together. "How much would you pay for this?"

He tossed it to the colonel, who took a look at it, only half-sincerely. He knew what Michael's job was. It wasn't his primary job, what with the contract and all, but it helped make ends meet, no matter how demoralizing it was for him. Darklighter was tempted to lie, but he valued honesty. He was one of the few on this planet who did, and that's what made him so important.

"I wouldn't," Darklighter said, tossing it back.

"Then it was worth absolutely nothing," Michael said, his voice defeated as he shoved the idol back into his pocket.

Streets of Anchorhead

The suns were almost completely set by the time Michael was safely inside the city gates, heading slightly deeper into the settlement once Darklighter returned to his post after dropping him off. Ahead of Michael was Darklighter's destination, a towering fortress of military supremacy. Not that there was much to rule over in the desert, but the Hutt Lords weren't ones a person could attribute any level of subtlety. Their egos thrived on showing off to others, especially those less fortunate.

The fortress sat dead center, while the rest of the settlement was broken up into four quarters around it. Small dwellings lined the far corners, although they became progressively bigger the closer one got to the capitol. Its towers and fortified defenses were a sign to anyone, not just in the city but outside of it. Even with the city walls, the structure could be seen from all directions—a castle only a Hutt could've designed.

Those closest to the center, where most of the military protection was, were the more affluent and influential people who lived on the planet or were just visiting. Truth be told, most of that area of the city was abandoned, yet still kept in the most perfect of

shape on the off chance that someone the government cared about actually stayed there.

That, of course, was not where Michael was now. He didn't even live in the city, rather on its outskirts, but he had no reason to venture into the more privileged area. He had no desire to, really, nor did they desire him or anyone else of his lower class and stature to be there. He stayed in one of the most outlying areas, where the jewel of the desert made way to a shanty town. Expecting more for the underclass was the epitome of naivety. Metal was dried and split. Paint faded in a matter of days. Stones cracked. An untrained eye wouldn't be able to tell if the apparent neglect was by choice or a testament to the harsh environment, but the inhabitants knew better. They knew it was both.

Yet despite all their hardships, a handful of people still tried to call it home. Members of countless species darted from one building to the next, seeking shelter from the heat that still bore down upon them in the early evening. The shadows of the buildings cast by the lights of the city afforded them a cool embrace in the heat. Perhaps there was no greater analogy for the decaying state of this world and all the others like it.

As Michael rounded a corner, he stepped into a larger building. An eyesore on the outside, with scorch marks from a long-dead idealistic rebellion many years ago, but within was a comfort for many of the city's less privileged. It was called the Yarga Cantina, derived from the *Huttese* word for "thirsty," and it was the most popular hangout in this quarter of the city, as well as its main source of entertainment. Naturally, though, the rowdy nighttime crowd had yet to trickle in, letting the last few daytime patrons avoid all manner of shady types that would crawl out of the cracks and corners of the city soon enough.

Still, even now, different types of people sat in booths on the outer walls, or at the bar that circled around the center of the cantina. There was a fat, nearly naked Kitonak from Kirdo III, and a blue, stickily-thin Er'kit from the world of the same name on one end of the bar. On the other was a tusked Aqualish and a long, gray-necked Ithorian, rocking back and forth as Ithorians always seemed to do. Between them, the cantina was a place brimming with the most unusual of lifeforms, at least by Human standards.

Michael sat down at the far corner of the bar, out of earshot from the conversations going on throughout the building. He preferred to be as alone as possible, withdrawing from the judgmental eyes of those around him, as he knew what almost everyone, save for a select few, thought about him and his family. Events of the last few years only painted his family in a worse light, so this was his way of hiding in plain sight from the scorn that seemed to follow him everywhere.

Letting out a sigh, and with it as much frustration and relief as he could, he looked out across the bar and watched as an alien band, each member equipped with strange

instruments whose intricacies he wasn't even going to try to understand, stood just beyond it. The large-headed, black-eyed Bith musicians swaggered back and forth, swaying from side to side with the rhythm of their song.

He lost himself in the music. The soft beats, mixed with the clashing of steel in a neo-industrial tone, wasn't the best he had ever heard, but it was relaxing, tranquil. The overbearing bass emanated outward and filled the cantina with its vibrations. The sharp clashing of steel on steel drums hid its lighter, eerier tones, but an attuned ear could still pick them up.

"If it isn't my favorite archaeologist!" a voice called out.

Michael looked up to see a familiar face walking towards him, a coarse, stubbled face he had seen so often while scavenging for relics. He was a tall man, rivaling Michael in height, and his middle-aged frame fared well compared to most people on the planet. He abruptly shook his head near the doorway, sand and dirt falling from his unkempt light brown hair after a long day in the desert. Sweat covered his thin tan shirt and he reeked of the smells that the heat of midday would bring. Michael could tolerate it, though. This man was one of the few who ever left this world and actually came back, someone who actually thought of this place as home. Such a person deserved respect.

"Hate to break it to you, Ray'kele," Michael said, "but you're the only archaeologist here. I'm just a scavenger."

Ray'kele chuckled at the thought. "Ah, but a scavenger is someone who just collects a bunch of junk for profit and doesn't care what else they trample on."

"I know," Michael said. He was dispirited by the notion. He thought very little of what he did beyond what Ray'kele had just described. "That's not too far from what I am."

"Really?" Ray'kele asked. There was a knowing wisdom in his voice, as if he was not asking a serious question but just trying to goad an answer out of Michael. "I heard you were chased by a band of sand people today. Why was that?"

Michael sighed. He wasn't in the mood for this now, but he knew Ray'kele was right. "I accidentally wandered too close to them so I wouldn't have to walk through a historical site."

"Told you," Ray'kele said, grinning like a child. "Archaeologist."

"Whatever," Michael said dejectedly.

Ray'kele motioned for the bartender to bring them two waters, one of the only drinks

available on the planet. Michael looked down at it when it came, his mind still replaying being chased by the sand people, though ignoring his drink wasn't the best of ideas. Water was a treasure here, so much more expensive than almost any other world, and it was needed to survive here more than anywhere else when so little of it was buried beneath the sands. If the people were lucky, the Hutts would have it shipped in from other worlds. If they were lucky.

"Find anything good?" Ray'kele asked, breaking Michael's silence.

Michael pulled the idol from his pocket again, flinging it over haphazardly now that he knew that not even Darklighter, his own uncle, would want to buy it, yet Ray'kele seemed more interested, staring at it with an air of nostalgia, an appreciation of something that Michael couldn't understand.

"Should I know what that means?" Michael asked.

Ray'kele leaned in closer, keeping the idol in his hand, "Well, should is a strong word, but it never hurts to know things," he quipped, pointing at the relic as he did. "They were star-crossed lovers. It's from an ancient legend about a shaman, this guy," he said, pointing to the man in the depiction, "and he taught that interpretation was the key to understanding ourselves. He believed that our lives were shaped by the way we look at the world around us."

"Who was he?" Michael asked, taking the idol back, the awe of something possibly meaningful returning to his eyes.

"A curse. A messiah. Depends on who you ask," Ray'kele told him, still look at it wondrously, affectionately. "It doesn't really matter, though. Sometimes the legend of a man is more important than the man himself."

Ray'kele stood up from his stool, pushing it out behind him and stepping away from the bar. He leaned in again, though, but only just for a moment. Michael may have felt slightly better, but Ray'kele could tell that this wasn't the best time for a conversation. After all the times they had talked, about the lives they lived and the lives they perhaps wished they were living instead, he had come to know Michael well enough to know when to back off.

"I wish I could stay longer, but I have other matters to attend to," Ray'kele told him.

Michael held the idol up towards him, asking, "You want this? Seems to be worth more to you."

"No, you hold on to that," Ray'kele said. "You're not going to fetch anything for it, not

here, but value isn't always in money. You may find it's worth a lot more than you think."

Michael kept his eyes fixed on it as Ray'kele walked away. Maybe there was something valuable in the desert after all. Not like profit, as Ray'kele said, but something that he could at least attach some value to. He had very few things that he could do that to, and adding one more gave him a good feeling that he didn't often have.

He whispered as Ray'kele walked away, "Thank you."