



*“Here on this world, the weak run strong and
the strong stay weak—because they allow it.”*

—From the journals of Elias

Yarga Cantina **An hour later**

Michael was still sitting in the cantina, but had finally put the idol away once he realized he was attracting attention by staring so intently at it for too long. Now he sipped his water, hydration coming back to him, at least as well as it could in this city. He squirmed in his seat as he did, feeling something in his pocket that was bothering his leg. It was a tiny book, one he’d had since childhood, and he pulled it out, smiling like he would for an old friend he hadn’t seen in years. He had been cleaning out his room earlier in the day, and he must’ve have put it in his pocket, almost instinctively as he used to do.

He brushed the grains of sand off its cover as he held it tightly in his hands. It was one of his most valuable possessions, at least in the materialistic sense. It always gave him a sense of vision, a sense that the future would be better, even if so much of that hope had already been lost. The cover was faded, but etched across it, in a boy’s handwriting, were the words *Beyond the Rim*, emblazoned there by the boy who wrote it, emphasized for the mysteries that lied beyond the Great Rift that divided the Outer Rim from the Republic.

His father, Luke Lars, his adoptive father at least, had written it there when he was a boy. Luke’s grandfather had given it to him, only for the since-jaded Luke Lars to tuck it away, until Michael found it years ago. Michael was never able to stop thinking about what was out there, beyond the Outer Rim. Adventures waiting to be had, terrors waiting to be slain, challenges to be overcome; even now, Michael had a hard time keeping himself from getting lost in the unknown. The idea of a Republic that stood for people and justice was one of the only things that gave him at least some small measure of hope for tomorrow.

Suddenly, the book was snatched from his hands. Michael whipped his neck around, seeing who had taken it. It was Joshua Banai, out of his uniform and dressed in posh, privileged clothing, though he certainly didn't look, or smell, like the upper class, the odor of bad alcohol on his breath and clothes. He and his family were well connected to the Hutts thanks to his friends, the brothers Dirk and Lorn whose father was a high ranking military officer, who flanked him. He had all the amenities he would need, and yet his tan skin was still covered in dirt. Apathy had bred laziness in him even outside of the wall.

"You pining over the Republic again? Hah!" Joshua slurred. "Good one, Sleemo." *hic* "The Republic don't give two damns about us."

Michael stood up from his stool, looking down at Joshua. It was a strange sight; Michael dwarfed most other people, yet it was they who somehow looked down on him. This wasn't Michael's best day, though, not after the sand people, and he wanted his book back.

"Give it back," Michael demanded. "And don't call me Sleemo."

"Look out, Joshy," Dirk slurred, grinning like an idiot. "Sleemo here's gonna" *hic* "hit you!"

"Go on, Sleemo," Lorn said. "Give him your best shot." *hic* "I'll make sure our guys do what those raiders couldn't."

Michael sniffed the air, smelling the alcohol wafting through the breeze coming through the open doorway. He grimaced at the thought of what would happen if anyone found out, but it didn't take him long to remember that the authorities were probably the ones to give them alcohol in the first place. Just because the Hutts made it illegal didn't mean the soldiers weren't going to indulge themselves with it.

"Are you guys drunk?" Michael asked, even though he clearly didn't need to.

"No," Joshua said, stumbling where he stood as he did. "Okay, yeah. What's it to you?"

"How'd you even get it?" Michael wondered aloud.

"Hah!" Dirk shouted, practically scoffing. "Not everybody's daddy is some piece of crap rebel farmer like yours."

A seething anger shot through Michael's core, striking a nerve stronger than anyone else had ever done before. The Rim Wars were a sore subject; loyalties and allegiances were split in the desert, but people kept it to themselves. Drunk or not, no one had ever said

anything like that to him before, not until Dirk.

“Shut up,” Michael spat, clenching his fists.

“Or what?” Lorn mockingly asked.

“Just give me my book, Joshua,” Michael asked, pleading, not wanting to be around them anymore. “Give me the book and I’ll leave.”

“Why don’t you go cry to your mommy, Sleemo?” Joshua said. “Oh right, she’s dead.”

And that was it. Michael kicked his bar stool out from in front of him, slamming it into Joshua, who stumbled backward onto the ground. Dirk ran at Michael, but Michael thrust his arm outward, tripping him backward onto his brother, and they both fell to the ground. It wasn’t their fight anyway. It never was.

Joshua jumped back up, barely standing straight, but that never stopped him from getting in a fight, and it certainly wouldn’t stop him now. He had waited a long time to take a shot at Michael, but he wasn’t fully prepared for what he was getting into. Like a long dormant volcano ready to erupt, all of the pent up rage and frustration inside of Michael’s veins rose to the surface. Joshua swung and Michael blocked, slamming his free fist into Joshua’s face. Bloodied, he stumbled backward again, with Michael right behind him.

Michael pulled back his fist, ready to swing, but it was grabbed by Dirk, who had gotten up off the ground where his brother still laid. It took Michael by surprise, enough that he lost his focus, letting Joshua jump forward and slam Michael against the bar, where the other patrons scattered and the bartender hid. That’s when Joshua let loose, slamming his fist into Michael’s face over and over.

All of Joshua’s pent up anger, all of his rage, over what Michael had done to him years earlier, came pouring out of him. His hands were bloodied, his own blood mixing with Michael’s, soaking his hand. It stung, not only his fingers but the memories of that day as they ran through his mind.

The beating stopped suddenly, with Dirk being thrown across a table, crashing down against the wall of the bar. Lorn tried to react, but a chair swung across his face, cracking as it hit his cheek bones and he fell to the ground, screaming and writhing in pain.

Through blurred eyes, Michael watched the one who attacked them stand over them. It was Sara Jade, Joshua’s girlfriend, the one person who had the thug on a leash. Her long, blonde hair flowed over her shoulders, and her form-fitting white shirt caught Michael’s attention from the moist sweat that made it almost see-through. Even the sweat dripping

from her forehead looked good on her. Michael would know, given that he dated her for nearly a year, until just a few months earlier.

“What the hell?” she asked, ignoring Michael and keeping her eyes fixed on Joshua.

“He was—”

Sara wasn’t going to give him a chance, though. “He was probably sitting here minding his own business when you came in and had to make an ass out of yourself.”

“Just wait,” Dirk said, helping his blithering brother up the ground and hiccuping again. “Just wait until my father hears about this.”

“I don’t think so,” Sara said. “Not unless you want me to tell Colonel Darklighter about how your father gave us all that alcohol.”

“Screw you, bitch!” Lorn’s trembling voice shouted.

“Hey!” Joshua barked back. “That’s my girlfriend you’re talking to.”

“All of you get out of here,” Sara finally demanded. “Now.”

The three of them stood their ground for a minute, but Joshua could see the killer look in her eye, knowing he’d be in for hell if he didn’t do what she said. He motioned for Dirk and Lorn, who begrudgingly followed him through the door, all while Sara made her way to the bruised and bloodied Michael, whose face was swelling up from Joshua’s attack. She brushed the hair out of a gash on his forehead, lightly brushing across the cut but hard enough for Michael to wince.

“Oh, Michael,” she said, her voice heavy with disappointment. “What happened to you?”

An hour later, Michael was still feeling the pain of the fight, even after most of the swelling had gone down. They didn’t have ice, but the water in a glass that the bartender gave him was cold for long enough to help. He sat in a back corner booth now, as did Sara, and she just stared at him from the other side as he tried to hide his shame over what had happened. Still, he couldn’t help but keep glancing over at her. He had a hard time taking his eyes off her at any time, really. He always did.

She brushed her golden hair off of her face, and her green eyes looked into his as they fully caught one another’s gaze. There was something about her eyes that he could

always get lost in, something that captivated his thoughts. It was everything he didn't know about her. Her mystery, like how she'd been able to sneak up on him just now, among so much more, was part of what attracted him to her...but she was so very beautiful on top of that.

"I wanted to apologize—"

"Don't," Michael angrily cut her off. "Not for him."

"I know, it's just..." she trailed off. She didn't know what to say. It used to be so easy for them to talk to each other, but now things were more complicated. It was awkward. "You didn't deserve that."

Michael dropped his blurred gaze, feeling her hand on top of his, a gentle gesture telling him that everything was going to be fine. He couldn't help but smile. No matter what she'd said when she left him, she always had a way of making him feel better after a rough day. And now, after everything that had happened, he thought that maybe, just maybe, they could still be friends.

"I should go," she said as she pulled her hand away, her touch leaving him like the sting of an open wound.

He nodded, but then suddenly, almost unconsciously, blurted out, "Why him?"

Sara stopped herself from leaving the booth and turned her eyes to meet his. One eyebrow rose, going so far up it almost touched the golden hair over her forehead. She rolled her eyes ever so slightly and gently tilted her head, showing an indignation that only served to mask her surprise.

It wasn't a question she'd have expected him to ask. It was too impulsive for the Michael she knew, a rash leap into a lion's den that he would never normally take. He was always too quiet, too unwilling to actually speak his mind to the source of his frustrations, much unlike Joshua. It was a refreshing change, actually, just one that came too little, too late.

And it was because of that she found herself not knowing what to say. She just kept looking at him, staring blankly at the normally gentle face now etched with anger and confusion. There wasn't a good answer that immediately came to mind, and she was someone almost always quick on her feet.

Instead she sighed in frustration, her shoulders slumping, "Is this really the time for that?"

Not really, he thought deep down, but he couldn't help himself. "He's arrogant. He's weak. He's a slave who willingly gives in to his masters."

"You don't get it," Sara said as she shook her head. "You never have. Playing their game isn't giving into them. It's accepting the life you have and trying to make it just a little bit better for yourself. If anyone gives into them, it's you."

Michael burst out into a mock laughter, but quickly stopped from the physical discomfort strong facial expressions brought. *What a ridiculous thing to say!*, he thought. Anyone who had ever talked to him about the Hutts knew just how he felt about them. No one who believed the same things he did could ever be accused of giving into the Hutts. *Nor should they be.*

"And how's that?" he asked, leaning back with folded arms, almost joyously awaiting her answer.

"Because you're afraid," she snapped, her pitch growing higher as her words went by, and as Michael dropped his crossed arms and wiped the smile from his face. "You always talk about how someone should do something to stop them, but that's all you ever do is talk. All the while, your family falls farther into the hole that you'll just willingly let yourself die in. And that's just the way you want it, because it's easier. You're exactly the type of self-defeating coward they want, because your tough talk can't keep them from walking all over you."

Sara did just as Michael had and crossed her arms as she leaned back up against her side of the booth, smirking as her persistence became more and more pointed. "But hey, at least you've got a clear conscience, right?"

Michael's jaw hung open, his face aghast. *How dare she! How dare she say that to me!* She didn't just take a shot at him. No, he knew she aimed that right at his father too. Michael didn't control what his family did and she knew it.

"You think you have me figured out, but—"

"I do," she interrupted. "I have for a long time. You used to tell me stories about how your dad fought in the Rim Wars, how he actually took a stand against the Hutts."

He paused for a second or two, not knowing what to say to that. "A lot of good that did him," he finally shot back, taking a slow, almost painful sip of water.

"Maybe so," she conceded, "but you used to tell everyone else how you wanted to be like them, only better. How you wanted to do it the right way. What happened to that Michael Lars?"

I wish I knew, he thought.

“What am I supposed to do?” he asked. “Steal and kill? Be like they are? No thanks.”

“Part of you wants to,” she told him, knowing it probably wasn’t something he was even consciously aware of. “Don’t lie to yourself about it. I know you too well.”

“That’s insane,” he chuckled. “I’d never have that in me.”

“That’s rich,” she said, leaning towards him as she pointed back out the door. “You think Dirk and Lorn are smarter and better than you are? They’re idiots. If they can do it...”

Sara slipped out of the booth and over to the other side, slowly sliding onto his seat as he moved against the wall away from her. It was a more intimate conversation than she expected to have, especially in light of his battered face, but it served to get her point across.

“We could’ve been great together,” she said, leaning closer to his face, her voice alluringly seductive. “Just think what we could’ve been if you weren’t so afraid.”

He leaned forward towards her now, serving to get his own point across, moving only inches from her, “I’m not afraid.”

Sara curiously tilted her head again. She leaned to her left side, closer towards him, and reached her hand into her pants pocket. She pulled out a small flask of whisky, not even bothering to hide it from anyone else, and handed it out to him.

“Then prove it,” she challenged. “Drink up.”

“You know you’re not supposed to have that,” Michael said, his voice hushed and his eyes shifting as the conversation took a turn to the uncomfortable.

“Who cares?” she asked, her voice awash with disappointment. “Prohibition is a symbol of imperialism. If you’re really not afraid of doing something about that, then drink it. Rebel, just a little.”

He wanted to. Every fiber of his being told him to grab the flask and drink it all, and then demand more. He had no idea who could’ve been watching them, so he looked around, scanning the room. That almost made it fun to think about, exhilarating even, all while knowing there were enough people in the cantina where any of them could’ve been working for the Hutts, or at least been willing to rat someone out for a small reward.

The whole idea of prohibition was ridiculous. The Hutts were the lords of sin and vice, nothing more than criminals masquerading as a government, so they only forbid it on this and a small handful of other worlds for no other reason than to make life worse for people. It and more was revenge for the Rim Wars, nothing else.

But he couldn't do it, and the disappointment written all over Sara's face told him that she knew it too. She took the flask away, putting it back into her pocket, and stood up, ready to leave.

"You're pathetic," she said, defeated, and without another word began to walk away.

Michael wasn't ready to just let her walk off like that, shouting, "So...so I have the temerity to live, and *I'm* the pathetic one?"

"Temerity?" she yelled, whipping herself back around and slamming her hands onto the table, which attracted the attention of those around them. With a quieter voice, she said, "That right there is half your problem. You do this all the time, acting like if you look smart and calm and use words you read in a book then people will be like you and they'll be better off."

"You know what?" Michael said, lifting himself up between the seat and the table to lean in towards her. "They would be."

"The Rim isn't a place for good people, Michael," she said. "People aren't looking for leadership. They don't want inspiration. They want money and pleasure."

They stood there for a few long, never-ending seconds, looking at one another, both thinking about all the months they'd spent together in times so much better than this. The music kept playing in the background, growing softer and more sensual as it played on. They both took deep breaths, once again comfortable in front of one another, perhaps too much so.

That was the thing, though. Michael never wanted her to leave him, but now she wanted to remind him what he'd lost—and all that he never had. So she pushed him back into the booth, hitting his back against the wall as she clung to his shirt and slid into the seat.

Sara wrapped her legs around him. For a moment, Michael forgot how to breath, surrendering himself to her, ignoring whatever pain, physical and emotional, that this brought to him. He vaguely caught a glimpse of her piercing emerald eyes before he felt his lips meet with her own.

She knew exactly how to push his button, knew just what drove him crazy. Her fingers curled into his hair as she kissed him, moistening his dry lips, devouring his will as he

lost himself in a passion he'd forgotten. It was a measure of sensual control that affected her as much as it did him. Michael, on the other hand, allowed it to happen, letting himself be lost in the taste of her lips and the hint of whiskey that flavored her breath. He pulled her closer, tilting his head to delve deeper in.

And then, just as suddenly as she had pushed him back, she was back on her feet. Michael exhaled, so deep it was like the first breaths out of the womb, and glanced up at Sara. He was an animal caught in the headlights, frozen in place.

"When you're ready to be a man," she said, with a sigh of pleasure, feeling overwhelmed herself, "there's so much more where that came from."

She left without another word spoken between them, walking out the door and out of his life again. Nothing she said made sense, and yet everything she said made sense. It was a paradox, a struggle within his own mind, a conflict about what he should and shouldn't do. He may have rejected her words flat out, but he couldn't help but wonder if she was right.