

STAR
ALTERNATIVE SAGA
WARS

EPISODE I: THE CHOSEN ONE

BRANDON RHEA

BASED UPON
'STAR WARS' BY
GEORGE LUCAS

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Dedication

To the members of The *Star Wars* RP (<http://www.thestarwarsrp.com>). There are countless elements of this story that are deeply rooted in the lore of the website, without which *The Chosen One* would not be what it is now—if it even existed. Without that website, I never would have grown as a writer, and this would just be a cheap knockoff of *The Phantom Menace*. Thank you for all of the fun as we continue to build that new chapter in the ever-growing lore of *Star Wars*.

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And who can forget George Lucas? Not only did he create this epic saga that I am now gleefully re-imagining in my vain attempt to see if I can even so much as approach the level of awesome that was the original *Star Wars* trilogy, but he allows people like me to freely play in the sandbox of his galaxy and make it our own.

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 Kironak 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.”



“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.



"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 to. 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 tattle tale, 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.

~IV~

"I met someone recently whose life was tainted by the darkness of desires born of no self-control. Such desires are fruits that always become bitter over time."

—From the journals of Elias

Lars moisture farm A few hours later

It was the middle of the night now, when the lights of the farm had been shut off and the desert was nearly silent but for the distant chants of sand people and the wailing of the night beasts. Michael was sleeping in the hole he called his quarters, although he was anything but sound. He thrashed back and forth, shaking at times, overcome by a nightmare. He was sweating profusely, mumbling in his sleep.

Michael slowly found himself somewhere else, drifting somewhere beyond his quarters, beyond his home, and it was then that he realized he was flying. He soared high above the ground in a craft he had piloted as a younger man, his eyes marveling at the open air of the desert skies. As he looked about him, taking in his surroundings, he turned to find himself accompanied by another craft, flanking him as his altitude increased.

They were flying higher, further away from Anchorhead than they had ever flown before. Dozens if not hundreds of kilometers were between them and the city as they recklessly abandoned the safety of civilization for the risks of the unknown.

The ships began to seize. Sparks flew. The roars of their engines stopped. The ships convulsed in the throes of death and smoke poured out of their engines, fire and metal bursting outward in all directions. Michael looked over to the second craft. Fire enveloped it, devouring it whole. His own senses were growing weak, dizziness overcoming him. His ship was spinning out of control. He tried to cry out to the other pilot, but the words couldn't leave his lips. No engines. No control. No hope. The desert floor was growing closer. Time slowed and fate was clear.

Michael shot out of bed, his body covered in sweat, shaking and breathing uncontrollably. He just sat there, panting, his mind racing back and forth from that day so long ago, the day his father brought back to the forefront when he chastised him earlier. It was a day he'd always tried to forget, but one he never could.

He got up, still wearing the sweaty and bloodied clothes from the day before, and stumbled out of the structure and into the open hole in the ground that was his home. The memories of that day,

and of the days after, kept replaying in his head. He found a source of comfort after it. He found Sara, but fruit often turned sour when left out in the suns, such as it was with Michael and Sara.

No matter how hard he tried, though, he just couldn't get her out of his head. It was maddening. She was maddening. He sought the intoxication that she once provided him. He had an itch that only she could scratch, a longing that burned inside of him. She tempted him. She seduced the dreams of the boy named Michael Lars and turned it into a nightmare for the man he was now. He knew that only by giving in, just this once, could he get her out of his head.

Michael ran into the garage and grabbed a blaster, a necessary companion for the fool who would enter the desert at night, but he wasn't just going to use it for defense. He dropped to a knee and rummaged through the bottom drawers of a work bench, pulling out a small safe. He aimed the blaster at it and the bolt of energy surged outward, the blaster smoking hot as it did, and it blew open the lock of the safe.

It was his father's hidden cache of alcohol. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Michael knew what he was doing was wrong. Not just wrong, but stupid. And yet, he didn't care. He grabbed the bottle and made his way up the nearest stairwell and onto the desert floor. He was surrounded by nothing but the pitch blackness of the desert night. The howls of the creatures of the distant dunes beckoned him. They desert called out a name, but it wasn't his.

It was hers.

Douz outpost

Just outside of Anchorhead, still in view of its lights and the sprawling fortress, sat the Douz outpost, an even more decaying settlement than the far reaches of Anchorhead. Michael sped onto the dusty streets, kicking up sand and dirt behind him, before stopping in front of Sara's home. It was a small hovel of a home with only two tiny rooms inside. The outside was crumbling, and the bleached domes of the neighboring homes were even beginning to cave in. It was not a place where people lived willingly, though Michael knew Sara made the best of it.

She didn't have much money. Her wage as a mechanic in the outskirts of Anchorhead forced her to live on modest means, it always had, but her relationship with Joshua afforded her some newfound advantages. Sara's home was tended to, even if it was in an impoverished area. Joshua took care of her. Michael didn't know how well, but he knew he did. *Bastard*, he thought to himself.

He knocked on the door, more of a pounding really, but loud enough to wake her up. To his surprise, though, she wasn't asleep. She opened the door almost immediately. When he saw her standing there, he was taken in by her sensuality, as the light robe she wore wrapped around her curves and left little to be desired, but it didn't take him long to notice that something wasn't right. Her eyes were wet. Not with the sweat of a desert heat, but with tears. He felt so much sadness from her, so much heartache, and he slipped the small bottle of whiskey in his hand into his back pocket, keeping it to himself for now.

Sara wiped the tears from her eyes as she said, "Michael...what are y-... Sorry, I didn't think I'd be seeing anyone tonight. Come in, please."

“What is it?” he asked as he stepped through the door, closing it behind him. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” she said, turning away from him. “Really.”

He rested his hand on her shoulder, comforting her, just as he used to. “Hey, you can’t lie to me. Remember what you told me last night? I also know you too well.”

Sara was fidgeting, obviously not wanting to tell him what was wrong. He could understand that. Their relationship fell apart not only because his ambition and drive died, but because he became distant. Sometimes cold, even. He treated her like an afterthought, with his mind consumed by his own past mistakes. The only difference now was that he had stopped pulling away.

“After what happened at the bar,” she finally said, “Joshua told me I’d humiliated him and that he wasn’t going to put up with someone who ‘didn’t know their place.’ He left me.”

“I’m...,” he started to say, trying to suppress his amusement and the smirk that was etching itself across his face, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

New tears started to slowly crawl down her face, a reaction to his stupidity, the same kind of cold demeanor he once had. He winced at the thought of what he’d just done. This was worse than when he was distant. That was the lowest thing he had ever done to her, and for once he didn’t mean it to happen. It just happened.

As she sat down on her bed, bringing her hands up to cover her face and wipe away the tears, Michael knew just how stupid he had been. He knew he had gone to her house for all the wrong reasons. He went there for fun. He went there to comfort himself. He went there for his needs. Never once did he think about her comforts or her needs in his drive to find his own.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sitting down next to her, this time not for Joshua’s words, but for his own.

“No,” she said, sniffing, wiping the tears away. “No, you have a right to laugh at me. I was horrible to you last night.”

“No I don’t,” he told her. “I don’t have a right to this. I don’t have a right to hurt you.”

His words didn’t seem to mean anything as she threw her arms into the air, scoffing. Not at him. Not at anyone in particular. Just this entire situation. Michael knew what it was like, when everyone he thought cared about him turned away and left him with nothing. He knew the emptiness that lingered inside, an emptiness that boiled beneath the surface until it couldn’t be contained anymore. Until one stole their father’s alcohol in a desperate attempt to show off.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Sara told him, trembling. “I can’t afford this place anymore. Joshua’s the one who was helping me keep it. I’m going to lose everything.”

“It’s not much,” Michael said, pulling his father’s flask of whiskey out of his pocket, “but I’ve got something that might help a little.”

Sara snatched it from his hand, marveling at it. Not at the flask itself, but just the mere thought of

it, the thought that it was in Michael's hand. What she said in the cantina was obviously more effective than she thought. She assumed it would have taken more time for Michael to finally act.

"Where did you get this?" she asked him.

Michael dropped his gaze, sheepish; he was embarrassed to even say it. "I stole it from my father. You really got to me last night. Consider this me proving you wrong."

"I've never been happier to be proven wrong," Sara said, finally smiling again.

Yet her happiness was short-lived. No sooner had her face become bright again did her emotions get the better of her once more, with her eyes watering up again, and the thought of Michael's impulsiveness not enough to help her. Michael thought back to when they were together, before he pulled away, how they would help one another get through rough times. They used to go to their favorite places, few and far between, and just talk. Sometimes about nothing. Sometimes about everything. Whatever it was, they always came out better for it.

"I've got an idea," Michael said, standing back up again. "Come with me."

Smuggler's Ridge Overlooking the Tusken Valley

The gentle breezes of the cool morning's wind brushed across their faces as Michael's speeder, carrying the two of them on its back, sped towards the ridge overlooking the Tusken Valley, a dozen kilometers away from Anchorhead. Michael's eyes were fixed ahead to their destination, yet his thoughts remained on Sara, who was gently hugging him from behind.

It felt like old times again, better times, when they were still together, before their relationship became poisoned from the bitterness of life. It felt right having her there. He could feel that she needed him, by how tightly she held onto him and how warm of an embrace hers was, just as he felt that he needed her right now.

Michael brought the speeder to a stop at the edge of the ridge, overlooking the wide valley. The canyons appeared to stretch on forever, twisting and turning through the sand and dirt. Local legends said it was once a river, some thousands of years ago, before the planet was scorched into a barren wasteland, devoid of everything but sand and hardship. Michael couldn't even imagine such a wondrous place, let alone believe that this rock used to be one.

The crisp air of the near-dawn winds breathed new life into him as he stepped off the speeder. He reached out his hand and Sara took it, stepping off as well, and they walked over to the edge. Beyond was the valley that stretched off into the horizon, towards the distant mountains on the edge of the Dune Sea, beyond which no sane person would venture. Yet from afar, it was something incredible. Just for a moment, Michael felt like that wild-eyed child again.

"I used to come here in the mornings to watch the suns rise above those mountains," Michael told her as they sat on the edge of the cliff, letting their legs hang over the side. "I would try to remember that every day has new possibilities, that it can all get better by the time the suns set."

“What made you stop?” Sara asked him, her voice still faint and subdued.

He chuckled at the question, a self-aware laugh at the absurdities his mind put him through. “Life.”

She didn’t need to hear anything more than that, and Michael knew it. After the last few years, and after last night, there was very little left unsaid between them that one simple word couldn’t make clear. She was there at every step, at every turn, and knew too well his fall from that idealistic young boy of the desert to the jaded man he had become.

“Why did you come to my house?” she asked.

“Well, I...,” he stumbled in trying to find the words, sheepishly trying to avoid eye contact, “...I had an itch.”

Sara smirked, raising her eyebrow as she did. “And you thought I’d scratch it, is that right?”

“I wasn’t in the right mind,” Michael admitted.

“Yeah, I know,” she told him. “I’m sorry for how I treated you yesterday. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Yes I did,” he replied with force in his tone, pushing back against her words. “You weren’t wrong, and I needed to hear it.”

His words hung there for a moment, with neither of them saying anything. Nothing else really needed to be said, not after last night, and not after this. Instead, Sara moved in closer, and she rested her head on his broad shoulders, shifting on the ground to make herself more comfortable.

Michael wanted to pull away at first. He didn’t know what was happening, or what to make of it, even though he thought it was everything he wanted. Yet there was something peaceful about this moment, and about her. It was a return to a serenity he hadn’t felt in months, coupled with the cool breeze gently dancing across his face.

“You used to tell me your father’s stories,” she whispered, keeping her head on his shoulder, “the ones from the Rim Wars. I miss those... I miss the old you, the real you.”

“You want to hear a story right now?” Michael asked with another faint laugh. He wasn’t expecting this from her now.

She shrugged. “Why not?”

“Alright,” he said, trying to think of something appropriate.

That’s when he remembered a story, one that meant more to Michael than perhaps any other story he had ever heard. It meant more to him than the stories of idealism of the rebellion in the early days of the war, and more than nearly everything in *Beyond the Rim*. This spoke to the very core of who Michael once was and who he had wanted to be. It spoke to why he would come to this ridge in those early mornings so long ago, where he believed that life could be better.

So he said, "Alright, I've got one. He told me about a battle once, on Picon. He was captured and held by this idiot soldier who thought taking one rebel would get him a promotion, but the idiot had a group of followers so he was well armed. My dad had to be rescued by some other rebels, plus a man he'd met earlier in the battle. The man was..." Michael paused, trying to find the words, "Well, my dad never really knew how to describe him. He said he had this aura around him, this presence that felt so full of life and warmth. No matter how down my dad felt that day, this person had the power of lifting him back up."

"Who was he?" Sara wondered.

"I don't know," Michael said. "If my dad knew his name, he's never told me."

She wasn't satisfied, and she lifted her head off his shoulder. "Well, who do you think he was?"

Michael reached into his pocket and slid *Beyond the Rim* out, quickly flipping through the pages. He stopped on a page, well-worn from his constant reading of it as a child. On it was a drawing, one he had seared into his brain. It was a depiction of a man, draped in regal gray robes and wrapped in a thick brown cloak. His appearance and poise suggested both humility and prestige at once, that said this was a man who understood the common person yet lived above them in stature, that he had a demeanor that spoke of wisdom but piercing eyes that showed the experience, both good and bad, that he had amassed in his life.

The man's hand held the most important part of the image. A gray cylinder rested in his hands, his fingers wrapped tightly around it, and from that piece of metal shown a sword of shimmering blue light, a controlled laser beam used as a weapon. Never had Michael seen anything like that in person, nor had he heard of anyone who had. There was only one kind of person who would use such a device.

He said, with all the confidence Sara had dared him to have, "I think he was a Jedi Knight."

That confidence instantly evaporated when Sara burst out laughing. She lurched forward, overlooking the valley below, and held her stomach as she did. She couldn't stop cracking up, crowing so hard she was nearly convulsing, falling up against his arms.

"Oh come on," she said, finally catching her breath. "There's no such thing."

"Maybe," he said dejectedly, "but a guy can dream."

"You know," Sara said, shifting closer to him, and resting her hand onto his thigh as she looked into his eyes, "it took guts stealing from your dad and coming to my house like that. I'm impressed."

He shivered, a tingle moving up his leg from her hand, all the way around to his back. This was what he wanted when he went to her house. This was what he longed for, the true intoxication, what the whiskey only represented, yet he didn't know how to do this anymore. The idea of romance, even giving in to lust, was lost on him, lost on the desert floor with the innocence that was taken from him in that moment from his nightmare.

"I, uh...", he said, his voice wandering, trembling, "I just wish I could live up to the person you think I can be."

"Forget dreams tonight," she said, her voice strong, yet soft, as she whispered into his ears. "I can make one of them come true."

He was holding his breath, waiting for the words to come, trying to find something to say. But it wasn't just his breath that he was holding back. Everything that he wanted to say, everything that he wanted to feel—the arousal of feelings he had tried to forget, the touch of her breath against his ear, the familiarity of her body—was held in for each passing second.

"Close your eyes," she told him.

Michael was overwhelmed by what was happening as he closed his eyes, awaiting what would come next, listening to the seductive tone of her voice as it beckoned him towards her. He could feel her approaching, still feel her breathing there against his face, as she moved her lips towards his to meet in a soft, gentle kiss. She was slow to move, but it was the anticipation more than anything else that was most alluring to him. She lingered there, letting the moment Michael had been waiting for last as long as it could.

But the moment never came. He could no longer feel her sitting near him, could no longer feel the warm touch of her breath. Michael opened his eyes again, and she was gone, or so it seemed. He whipped around, throwing his legs back over the ledge and onto land again, when he saw her. Sara was sitting on his speeder, engaging the engine as she readied herself to leave.

"Wh.. what are you doing?" his still-trembling voice asked.

"I'm sorry, Michael, but I can't," she said, defeated. "I just can't."

"Why?" he demanded.

Sara sighed, leaning over the handles of the speeder, her face betraying agony. "You know why."

Michael's hands scrambled across the sand and rock to push himself up off the ground, and he shot to his legs. He was exasperated. He couldn't understand. He didn't want to understand. After everything they had just went through, after all the pain she was in, after everything he said and she said, he knew, he thought, that there was nothing left to say between them. He had thought that this was the moment that would maybe, just maybe, make things right. Until now.

The words spat out of his mouth, "Are you kidding me? After all this, you're choosing that son of a bitch over me?"

"Goodbye Michael."

And just like that, she was gone, leaving him standing in a cloud of sand kicked up by the roaring engine of his speeder. "Yeah, you can have my speeder," he barked. "It's cool."

Michael grumbled and muttered words better left unsaid under his breath as the dust cloud dissipated, and Sara was only a speck in the darkness headed towards the distant lights of the city.

He brought his hands to his head, pulling on his hair in frustration. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have let any of this happen?

It wasn't just about Sara leaving. He wanted to be angry now, he wanted to be furious, to feel betrayal to his very core, but he couldn't. No matter how hard he tried or how much he desperately wanted to cling to the idea that this was her fault, he couldn't do it. She may have made a choice he didn't want, but maybe the one he wanted just wasn't supposed to come to pass.

It's not as if he could hold his head up high as the arbiter of the moral high ground, and he knew it too. He stole, from his own father for that matter, all in the desperate attempt to win over a woman who was already taken. He hadn't exactly gone to her house with the noblest intentions. He knew, on some level, that he was taking advantage of the pain he found her in, a pain that suited him, even if it was, as he thought, just a little bit. He let frustration and desperation overcome him. He let himself be consumed with anger, even fear.

Michael let out a heavy sigh, something he'd been doing a lot lately—it never used to be that way—as he turned back towards the horizon. The suns were beginning to rise again, with the first flickers of light creeping above the distant mountains. Predators howled and sand people chanted in the far corners of the canyons, crying out the melody of the morning, carried by the wind throughout the area.

He wanted to stay and watch the suns rise above those mountains again, and feel like the new day could offer new possibilities before the suns set again hours from now, but he couldn't. Instead he looked away, turning his back on the promise of tomorrow, just as he had done for months and months on end. Somehow, he had to find a way to make this right. Even if he couldn't be with Sara, he couldn't let things end like this. He knew he had to find her and make amends.

As he turned away from the ancient valley below, he cursed abruptly to himself, anticipating the long walk ahead of him—without his blaster no less, given that it was still on his speeder—but suddenly a distant echo grabbed hold of his senses, turning his attention from the trek home to something else entirely. Something had changed, a shift in the air. It sent shivers through his spine.

He found the wind was steadily increasing in its intensity, swirling countless motes of dust and sand into his squinted eyes as he slaved to determine what was happening, frantically looking in all directions for any sign of a sandstorm, or anything to explain the sudden change in the wind.

The distant echo grew louder and louder, a dull, deep baritone that cast itself throughout the landscape until it seemed like the entire desert was shaking under the weight of the ominous sound. The intense vibrations triggered by the bass of the noise were deafening, growing louder in their resonance as he searched for the sound's origin, until his efforts were narrowed by the sound of an enormous explosion.

His line of sight was immediately drawn to the skies, as a brief blinding light shot through the heavens, casting aside the advancing rays of the rising suns. As his eyes met the cascading light, he thought it might be a falling star or perhaps an enormous meteorite plummeting into the desert. But as the light drew closer, he realized how truly wrong he was. His skin grew pale, his stomach churned, and his body was instantly drained of confusion, replaced by all-encompassing fear.

It was something much worse.