

# ~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. The desert called out a name, but it wasn't his.

It was hers.

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### **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."

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### **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, their legs hanging 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.