



“Everyone always thinks that the sky falling means it’s the end of the world. Not me, though. The end of one chapter is usually the start of an even better one.”

—From the journals of Elias

Smuggler’s Ridge

Two luminous suns slowly rose from the far horizon, above the distant mountains of the Dune Sea, carrying with them the radiant light of a new day. They brought with them a display of many vivid colors; vibrant yellow, intense orange, majestic purple, and a variety of blue hues, all of them melting together as they sought to illuminate the darkness with the promise of a scarlet dawn. They would soon loom above the vast desert landscape, but they had not risen fully yet.

Night still owned this world, and what a barren and dead world it was. There was a time, however, when it had not been such a dry and decrepit place. There was a time when it was host to all walks of life, life that called the skies, the seas, and the land home, places that defied description. Lush emerald forests and thick humid jungles had rested along the banks of countless rivers, when a cool breeze would have carried with it the scent of a million different flowers, all of them more colorful and unique than the last. Creatures of all kinds would have flown through this cool and gentle air, some roaming the skies above the vast seas that had been home to all kinds of life. Some creatures, some as large as a whale, had made their homes in the snowy mountains of the north, living in harmony with creatures no larger than a man’s eye.

That was before the darkness. That was before it reached out with cold, dead hands and choked this world, draining it of all its moisture, of all nature and beauty. At the last, it left a world as beautiful and full of life as this a sprawling, shriveled wasteland of sand and harsh, dry rock. The death of a world.

Another shadow darted across the desert landscape, cutting through the scorching sands and across the dunes, determined to reach its destination no matter the rising heat, no matter the time. As the night slowly faded, a sight was revealed along the highest edges of the Tusken Valley, emanating from deep within it. Enormous clouds of black smoke emerged from the ancient riverbed, where a great pool of water had once carved through the landscape, delving a great, deep gorge of unparalleled beauty. This, what was now a

dead canyon, was where the shadow was headed. There was a brisk intensity to its movement, yet, as it got closer, its pace slowed as it stopped to observe what was within the chasm.

Stepping out of the shadow and into the first rays of the morning light, Michael was torn between the shock that threatened to stop him from breathing and the awe that caused him to squint his eyes in sheer disbelief. His heart beat rapidly within his chest, now drenched in sticky perspiration. Wet dirt and sand mixed with the sweat across his body. He looked like a wild man of the desert. His eyes became that of a madman's, scanning the scene over and over again, stopping only when he needed to wipe off the sweat that constantly dripped from his brow. He was exhausted, drained of almost all energy after his spontaneous run towards the cloud of smoke, whose fumes were not at all helping his condition.

He wanted to run away. This was all too familiar, all too real for him. What he saw, the smoke rising from contorted steel and the moans, screams of agony echoing and bouncing through the canyon walls, were things he had seen and heard before. The distant sight of bodies, the cries for help, the smell of death; Michael saw them every night when he closed his eyes, and every morning when he opened them again. He had to run away from this. He couldn't handle this again. He didn't even handle it the first time.

Yet, in spite of it all, Michael couldn't look away. He couldn't run away. Every fear that gripped at him begged him to go home, but there was something that wouldn't let him walk away. There was something that dragged him towards it, that made him begin his descent deeper into the valley, wheezing as he did so. His footing was unforgiving, just like the screams, the crying for help that seemed to call out only to him. The jagged rocks jabbed at his ankles, cutting them, blood dripping onto his boots, but he didn't care. There was something cathartic about it. For a fleeting moment, the physical pain overwhelmed the emotional torrent, and he actually felt better.

He kept descending, shielding his eyes with one hand as the suns moved directly into his line of sight, his other hand helping him keep his footing as it touched the rocky wall. Stones began falling from greater heights as he climbed downward, and sand was relentlessly blowing into his face. Finally, he reached a depth at which he could push away from the wall, landing safely on his feet with only a light thud onto the dirty floor of the dried riverbed. He had to squint to make out the vague shapes he could see through the smoke, made all the more difficult by the fact that the smoke had now managed to block the light of the suns. The valley still belonged to darkness. Michael's stomach churned, twisting into knots as bile threatened to bubble towards his throat. He was taking in too much of the fumes and he knew it, yet he pressed on as hesitation and awe gave way to determination and, perhaps, foolishness.

There was a ringing in his ears as his fingers began to clench into fists, his palms sweating, his eyes stinging, and his teeth clenching to the point where it caused him pain. It was only then that the stench finally found its way past all other overwhelmed senses, hitting him like a sandstorm. It brought him to his knees, one hand clutching his chest, the other over his nose and mouth. Coughing and spluttering, his stomach completely gave way, vomit and bile oozing violently from his quivering lips.

Michael spat the last of it away after a few moments, averting his eyes from it. He wiped his mouth with grime-covered hands as tears gathered in his emerald eyes, now bloodshot and morose. He looked up once more, taking in the image of a wall of black smoke, stretching from one side of the valley to the other.

What am I doing here? he asked himself. That determination nearly gave way to hesitation and fear again. He told himself he shouldn't be there, that this wasn't his problem. He told himself that he was just going to hurt someone again, like he hurt Kitster. He was going to hurt so many more people, somehow, someday, he was going to fail them. He didn't cause this, but he'd find a way to make it worse. That's all he ever did.

No, he said to himself. *No, I can do this.* He had to do this. He had to make it through this one, he had to not be afraid anymore. Maybe he could show Sara that he wasn't afraid, that he could take action; that he could help other people, just like he used to say he wanted to. It wasn't a rebellion, it wasn't the Rim Wars of his father, but it was a start.

He tore off a piece of his ragged shirt and covered his mouth with the material. It wasn't nearly enough, but it would have to do. Now he slowly struggled to rise from the ground, his legs shaking as he pushed himself upward and towards the wall of smoke. Michael took a sharp breath and, in a brief moment, almost seemed to whimper, before finally stepping into the darkness.

The heat bombarded him, unrelenting and unforgiving as he stepped forward, one hand outstretched and the other clutching the cloth around his face. Sand swirled all around him; as each grain hit his skin, he couldn't help but notice the heat of each and every one of them. He began feeling it in his legs and feet. The ground was scorched worse than it had ever felt before, as if the suns themselves had descended into the valley. That thought left his mind almost as soon as it had occurred to him, though, because the next sight was worse, almost too much for him to bear.

The fire enveloped everything, its tendrils licking the very top of the valley walls as it rolled over ancient rocks and contorted metal debris, melting and breaking almost everything in sight. Confusion and desperation gave way to all-encompassing fear as Michael fell instantly to his knees, hopelessness and doubt seeping into his mind as he chastised himself for being foolish enough to come here, stupid enough to think he could do something. Despite all the destruction and heat, the stench still sliced through the raging fire, attacking his senses once more and motivating him to stand yet again. The doubts remained, but the will overcame it, because he knew that stench all too well, more than any man should have to.

The wreckage of this ship was of another world, beyond any culture he had ever known, but the stench of death was decidedly familiar. It was the same stench he remembered from that day, when he crawled out of the twisted remains of his Skyhopper, dragging himself through a pool of his own blood only to find death waiting for him.

Before he could do anything else, before he could see the full scope of the graveyard around the ship, the mangled corpses strewn about it from when the vessel was snapped in half on impact, he was blown off his feet. A shockwave, one that seemed to come from every

direction in an endless wave of piercing screams and violent intensity, knocked him backwards, deeper into the valley, onto his backside, landing him in the fiery sand. He scrambled to his feet, burning his own hands as they touched the scorched earth, and his gaze made its way towards the farthest visible edges of the valley.

The desert roared all around him. Dust and dirt were kicked up off the ground even from a distance, flying right at him—into his eyes, all over his face and his hair. Everywhere. The winds were picking up as sand was thrown at him from what seemed like kilometers away, the dull roar becoming deafening. The sound was coming from all directions, like a monster that approached from all sides. Like the beasts that inhabited the desert.

Yet, Michael knew it wasn't the wind. It was all too directional, all too pure and simple to be a sand storm or anything that could have been caused by the crash of the ship. Wind from kilometers away would often pick up the desert floor and throw it, but not in a straight line.

Behind him, he could hear the muffled sounds of voices crying out in panic, of men screaming for him to run, to get out of the way of whatever was coming—of what they knew was coming. In the few brief moments when the smoke and sand wasn't in his way, he turned to see them, waving him towards them, to see that they were soldiers, the team sent by the Hutts to respond to the crash. These men, wearing the tan and red uniform of the Hutt Cartel, were no older than him, but he never went to them. They didn't care in the end. They started to run, fleeing, leaving Michael to fend for himself. They weren't standing in confusion, weren't fixed on the unknown like he was. They still knew something he didn't.

Michael looked back towards the cloud of sand that was approaching, watching as lightning began to blink from inside of it—at least, it seemed like lightning. It couldn't have been, though. Sandstorms didn't bring lightning, not in this part of the planet. Then, as what had seemed like the crackling of electricity became the muffled sounds of laser fire, Michael knew what was coming.

Out of the clouds raced a tiny ship, a small brown, cylindrical craft, so small that it had to have been unmanned. It swooped down towards the valley, like a vulture that had suddenly become the prey, away from the Hutt fighter that emerged from the clouds in pursuit. Michael didn't recognize the drone; it wasn't something he'd ever seen at the spaceport. Its design was too sleek, too polished to have been from this part of the Outer Rim. *So where is it from*, he wondered.

Not that it mattered. The drone didn't have much time left. The Hutt fighter was firing relentlessly, bombarding it, and hitting the unthinking machine with every shot. The tiny ship's engine erupted into flames, fire and metal bursting outward in all directions before landing on the ground and burning it with a heat so intense that the sand seemed to crystalize into glass. The ship spiraled in chaos as the flames enveloped it, devouring the entire vessel as it lurched downward, destined to become a heap of contorted steel on the valley floor.

It looked like it was headed right for him, like a straight line had been drawn from the unmanned ship right to Michael. It had no control, and he had no hope. Time slowed and

fate was clear. Michael watched as it approached, knowing that, in seconds, he would be dead, and those who knew him would remember the fool who went into the valley for nothing. So he closed his eyes, waiting for darkness to overtake him forever. Whether his death ultimately meant anything wasn't for him to decide, but, in that moment, no matter the horror that he'd seen, he didn't regret coming to this place. He would die knowing that even in his trance, his delirium that brought him here, the memories of his own crash having drawn him towards it, he tried. He tried to help.

But the darkness never came.

It didn't take him long to realize that he should have been dead, that he should have been crushed under the weight of that falling ship, but there was no impact. Not for him, at least. He slowly opened his eyes, wondering if he'd find a choir of angels waiting for him, but there was nothing. The sky in front of him was clear again, and the sand and dirt that the ships had picked up were dissipating. Only one thing was different now. The heat on his back had grown more intense, and he knew that the soldiers he had seen weren't so lucky.

Slowly, he turned his neck to look behind him, but the fire and the smoke where the soldiers had been told him enough. He winced, gagging, the realization of everything that was hitting him becoming all too real. It was one thing to see a body. It was another to have seen that body before it was dead, to know that, in a split-second decision, he could have run towards them and met the same fate.

"H... he...lp," a voice groaned from behind him, agonizing in pain.

Michael jumped, not having expected to hear anyone. He didn't have to think about this one, to wonder whether he should act. He just acted, running towards the sound, around the smoky debris of the newly crashed drone, its android brain exposed, shooting sparks everywhere, and into another dried stream in the valley floor. Dozens of bodies were mangled, mutilated, charred; he nearly vomited again at the sight of a body burned beyond recognition, but the further he moved away from the ship, the less mutated they were.

Finally, he reached the edge of the pile of soldiers, and could still hear the groaning of one, the man who must have called out to him. The man was laying on his stomach, his legs twisted and broken as blood flowed from a gash on his arm. Even with all the sweat and dirt on what he could see of the man's face, Michael could tell that he was becoming pale, the red-stained sand showing how much blood he had lost.

Michael leaned over, bending down on one knee, as he took the cloth that he had been using for the smell and put it over the gash on the man's arm. Michael ripped off his belt, twisting it around the arm and cloth. He pulled on it, making it tight around the man's arm, virtually constricting the flow of blood. The man howled in pain, and the spasm that it caused forced him to roll over, and land on his back. It took Michael a moment to realize what he was looking at, to see through the dirt and sand that covered the man's face, to see past the bloodstains in his hair.

When Michael finally realized what was happening, though, what he saw was, for a brief

moment, worse than any mangled body.

“Son of a...,” Michael muttered. “Joshua?”

There was no response. Whether Joshua could even understand him wasn't something Michael knew, but that didn't really matter. Michael just stood there, unsure of himself, of what to do. Joshua was just laying there, defenseless, in need of help—help Michael could give him. He could help the man who, only minutes beforehand, Sara had abandoned him for. He could help the man who hated him, who blamed him for all of the horrible things that had happened to him over the last few years.

Or...

No. *Did I really just think that?* Michael couldn't help but ask that question, just as he couldn't help but entertain the thought of leaving Joshua behind. He couldn't do it. Part of him wanted to, part of him knew that if he left Joshua there to die, maybe with Joshua out of the picture, he could be with Sara again. He could be happy again, with his tormentor gone. But that wasn't who Michael Lars was, even if the far corners of his mind tempted him to be.

So, he grabbed hold of Joshua's uniform, gripping the cloth at the shoulders, and began dragging him up off the ground. Joshua struggled, squirming around and trying to get out of Michael's grip, but Joshua wasn't aware. He was delirious and was only acting on instinct to try to get away from the pain of any physical movement. Michael managed to get Joshua's arm around his shoulder, though, and he slowly began a walk towards a small cave on the far side of this part of the riverbed.

There was an irony that gnawed at Michael. A half hour earlier, he had thought that he would be holding Sara in his arms that night. He thought that they would go back to her home, and that they would be together again. Instead, he was holding in his arms the man who Sara sped off to be with. Michael had to wonder if this was one of those times that he would look back on in a few years and laugh at.

As the path ended at the mouth of the cave, the heat from the nearby wreckage grew less intense, and the smoke was clearing out of his lungs. He slowly leaned down, careful not to drop Joshua, and grabbed a rock. Michael tossed it into the cave to ward off any creature that might have been lurking there. When he heard nothing, he stepped into it, and gently laid Joshua back down in the cool, soft, unscorched dirt.

Snap!

Michael froze in place, paralyzed in panic. Someone, or something, was behind him, and he didn't know what it was. As if he was expecting a person, he dropped the rock and put his hands in the air, ready to surrender to whomever might have been behind him. Instead, as he turned to face it, he found nothing, just an empty canyon and the softening sounds of twisting metals.

Then a shadow rounded the corner, followed by a slow moving sand person. The mask that

adorned its head kept its face from being seen, as all sand people did, but its eyes immediately fixed on Michael. They both saw one another in the light that was emerging over the valley wall, and they both stood there, neither one expecting to encounter another soul.

For a moment, Michael also thought that the raider was afraid, but that didn't make any sense. The sand people were easily startled, but not when they had an advantage. That's when another one of the sand people jumped from a ledge above the mouth of the cave, landing in front of Michael. The first scout ran off, and Michael was left only with the warrior. The towering creature lunged its *gaderffii* stick high into the air, thrusting it above its head over and over in a display of dominance.

The creature grunted and howled in pleasure and rage, a deadly combination for almost anyone who heard it. Its thick leg kicked outward, knocking Michael to the ground as it brought its double-edged axe down towards Michael's head. Michael rolled out of the way, trying to keep himself away from the helpless Joshua. He kept moving deeper into the cave, kicking and throwing sand and dirt to try to distract the warrior.

Michael scrambled backward and thrust his leg outward, knocking the warrior back far enough for Michael to stand up again and move back towards the cave entrance. The warrior was anything but deterred. He slowly stalked back towards Michael, a deep, animalistic and sickening laugh coming out from the rags around its head.

He lunged at Michael, striking him in the arm with the axe, ripping open flesh and muscle as blood started to gush out of Michael's arm. Grabbing the wound, Michael cried out in pain, looking away from the blood dripping down onto the ground below. His muscles relaxed and his mind slowed, his vision blurring. As the darkness of the unconscious world began to overtake him he watched as the warrior stood above him, raising his weapon again, ready to kill Michael for no other reason than to watch him die.

For a moment, though, the desert itself seemed to suddenly cry out, carrying its voice through the winds. It was a piercing howl, a booming screech that bounced off the valley walls and burst like an explosion into the ears of the warrior. The warrior was frozen in place, panic-stricken. He didn't want to give up the kill, but something told the barely-conscious Michael that the predator knew he would soon be the prey.

A second howl came, and the warrior visibly shivered as the sound grew nearer. It looked out into the cave and saw a massive shadow approaching, a dragon of the desert, one of the few things that the sand people respected and feared. Leaving Michael to his own fate, the warrior fled, leaving nothing but dust and footprints behind.

Michael could still see, though his vision was fading in and out, and he watched as the shadow approached—but it wasn't a beast like the warrior thought it was. Squinting, he wondered, was it a mirage? It had to be, because a woman, around the same age as he was, covered in a hood with her face only somewhat visible, slipped into the cave, immediately noticing Michael on the ground.

Running to him, she knelt down, and stretched out her hands, placing them on his arm. Michael felt a surge of energy throughout every fiber of his body. It was a feeling of warmth, one that washed over him, taking him into a gentle hold. He felt pain at first, like a pinch, but then the warmth came over him, seeping into the wound, binding with his nerves, and flowing into him. It expanded out like a river, pouring into the rest of his very being.

Part of him wanted to pull away, but he couldn't. His arm was tingling with jolts of stimulation, as if it had been asleep for years. The arm felt alien to him for a moment, but the pain began to subside. The warmth that overtook him calmed his mind, and his breathing began to slow and relax. For reasons he couldn't explain, the woman emitted an aura of confidence, of purity. Even as unconsciousness took over, he felt like he had nothing to fear.

Everything would be alright.