

# ~VI~

*“Better to do the right thing and suffer scorn  
than to do the wrong thing and escape it.”*

— From the journals of Elias

Michael slowly stirred on the cave floor. He sniffed the air, his eyes fluttering, a light breeze of smoke surrounding him as his eyes lazily opened. He coughed as the smoke hit his nose, smoke that was different, lighter even, than what he had stumbled through in the wreckage of the downed starship. His arm stung like he was still being stabbed, and he winced at the pain, squeezing his palm into a fist to manage it. It came in spurts, but the moments in between were fleeting.

Slowly pushing himself up off the dusty ground, Michael realized he was lying deeper into the cavern than he had been when he first collapsed, in a larger expanse of carved rock that could fit at least a dozen people inside it. A soft cloth sat rolled up into a ball where his head had been, giving him comfort for however long he had been out. Whoever the woman was who came to his rescue, it seemed like she had done more than save him.

Joshua was lying beside him, still unconscious and showing no signs of waking up. However, what Michael noticed immediately was his former friend's legs; when Michael rescued him, Joshua's legs had been twisted, bloodied, and broken from the force of the drone fighter crashing into the ground only meters from him. Now, his legs were perfectly straight, and the only outward sign that there was ever an injury were his ripped, bloodstained pants.

Michael brought his own hand to where his own wound had been, looking into the rip on his shirt. All he could see was a faint scar and the dried blood that still remained on his grimy skin. He brought his hands to his face, gently stroking his forehead and all the way down his cheek. After he left the bar the night before, it was swollen, covered in bruises and cuts from his fight with Joshua, but now there was nothing, nothing other than the dirt and sweat that had accumulated over the hours since the crash. Except for the lingering sting in his arm, he seemed completely healed.

The relief he felt at having been saved allowed the pain to abate, replaced only with a sense of warmth from the breeze that was making its way through the cave entrance, still a few meters from where he was standing. Part of him wanted to look out beyond the cavern walls to see what was happening, but the rustling of footsteps he could hear upon the desert floor convinced him otherwise.

He didn't even know if he could make it there without stumbling over himself, still feeling groggy from whatever residual effects there were from the crash and the sand people's attack. As he turned his gaze behind him, his eyes began to water, more smoke coming through the entrance from the valley. Half blinded for a moment, he put his hand on the cave wall for balance and staggered further into the rocky structure, barely able to see anything through the haze.

As he squinted, he could finally begin to make out a shape through the smoke, as he looked further down the cave tunnel. Through the water welling in his eyes, and through the smoke that was fading away, he could see it was the shape of a person. Perhaps the woman—no, it was bulkier than the woman he saw earlier. This was a man, and not one of the sand people. It was someone new, draped in a cloak from head to toe, his face obscured within the shadows of the cave, the light barely reaching him. Michael slowly leaned down and grabbed a rock from the cave floor, just in case he needed to defend himself, but something told him he wouldn't need it. Something about this figure made Michael sense that there was no threat.

For a moment, the man didn't look up, seemingly oblivious to Michael's existence. His demeanor was calm, the light of the suns just barely illuminating the lower hemisphere of his face. Michael began to tilt his head to look, but thought better of it. The hooded figure was silent, keeping to himself as if lost in his own thoughts, and taking no notice of the curious young man gawking at him.

Finally the figure glanced up, his visage still cast in shadow. There was silence, and, for a moment, Michael felt like he could feel the man's gaze, like the figure could see past his eyes and directly into him. It felt like the man could see into Michael's thoughts, into every corner of his mind. It was unnerving.

The man finally raised his hands, grasping the edges of his hood. As the cloth slowly slid back, revealing the face of the stranger, Michael was hit with an odd sense of unrecognizable familiarity, a sort of kinship he couldn't explain, as if he knew the man, and yet did not. Michael had no idea how to explain it. The man's weary blue eyes betrayed wisdom, yet also fatigue; he was both a gentle presence and a worn one, his persona mysterious yet clearly powerful all at once. It was an odd aura that encompassed the man, one that Michael saw not just in his appearance, but that he could feel as well.

“Hello there.”

Michael still didn't have any words as the man spoke to him. The figure's voice was reassuring, surprisingly cheerful and forthright for someone on Tatooine. Michael was hesitant, watching as the man ran a hand through his short hair, brown with a hint of gray here and there. Yet, Michael set the rock down, trusting that the man meant no harm. For a moment, however brief, Michael could've sworn he saw a smirk pass over the stranger's lips, as if the prospect of being attacked with a mere stone was amusing.

“Who are you?” Michael demanded to know, his voice low and suspicious. “What do you want?”

The man smiled, stepping closer as he said, “Don't worry, you're safe.”

“That doesn't answer my questions,” Michael shot back.

The stranger stood up, looking curiously at Michael as he sensed his persistence. The man wore light black tunic and heavy, dark pants, both stained with sweat and blood. A thick, dark robe lied on the ground, obviously taken off due to the heat. Why anyone would wear such bulky garb in the desert wastes was beyond Michael, but what he could tell is that the man's attire was both humble and regal, despite their simplicity. Michael noticed the contradiction immediately; for someone emanating some sort of power, some sort of otherworldly quality that couldn't be defined in such simple terms, the man was, by all accounts, as normal as Michael himself.

“My name is Ben,” the stranger told him, though his voice was hushed, as if saying even a three-letter name was revealing too much. “I found you and your friend here and wasn't about to leave you on your own, not when you both clearly suffered an ordeal.”

Michael couldn't control the words that blurted from his own lips. “He's not my friend!”

He sighed, hearing the way he must have sounded. Ben took a step backwards, as if taken aback by Michael's outburst, and Michael knew he'd taken Ben's words too personally. Part of him still wondered if he should have left Joshua in the sand to die. It was a nagging feeling, one that gnawed at him from the depths of his psyche, but that didn't mean Ben deserved to have it taken out on him. This was a man who saved his life, a life that surely would've ended had the sand people returned.

Michael glanced back down at where he'd slept, seeing the crumpled cloth, now knowing that it had come from Ben. Michael's cheeks grew bright red, his shoulder slumping. This was a man who kept him safe, who spent hours in a cave with someone he didn't even know, and Michael was all but ready to pummel him with a rock.

"I'm Michael," he said, brushing away the outburst. "I guess I owe you my life."

"Your gratitude is appreciated, but unnecessary," Ben said as he offered a cordial nod. "I only did what anyone else would have."

*Did you take a hit to the head?* Michael wondered to himself. Ben's words were ones that Michael had never heard spoken before, at least not with any sincerity. Not even from his father, someone who spent years of his youth risking his life to help people he'd never even met. Generosity and goodwill towards others were hard to come by in a harsh desert civilization. The war had snuffed them out.

"You're not from around here, are you?" Michael asked, flashing a sheepish grin as he didn't bother to hide his amusement at Ben's ignorance.

Ben chuckled right along with him. "Is it that obvious?"

"You don't hide it very well," Michael told him. "Which settlement are you from?"

"Oh...," Ben muttered, drawing out the word, as if he was stalling for time, something Michael noted instantly, "...north of here."

"Really?" Michael asked, his suspicions piqued. "Anything I might've heard of?"

Ben grabbed a cloth from his pocket, dabbing it on the sweat upon his forehead as he began to say, "I doubt it. It's a very small settlement about a hundred kilometers north."

Michael jumped back, startled, nearly tripping over the scrambling of his own feet upon the dusty floor as he questioned whether the feeling that Ben wasn't a threat was misplaced. He quickly knelt back down, grabbing the rock that he'd dropped, and held it out in front of him. It wasn't like he thought it would help, but it was making an impression.

"A hundred kilometers north puts you into No Man's Land," Michael said, seeing through Ben's façade. "No one lives there, not even the sand people. Where did you come from?"

Ben cautiously stepped back, raising his hands in the air in a gesture of surrender. There was genuine concern in the man's eyes now that he was found out, but he wasn't looking at the rock. Ben's eyes were fixed on Michael's, watching him and judging what he was going to do before he would even do it. There was a depth of perception there, a sense of intuition that told Michael that even if he did try to attack Ben, the man would be too quick to let any harm befall him.

"There's really no need for concern," Ben assured him, his voice growing more passive and disarming. "I mean you no harm."

Though he seemed sincere, and though his words brought a sense of comfort, Michael still didn't know whether he could trust him. He knew nothing about Ben, after all, and he had already been lied to. That's when Michael remembered something his father taught him, a way of judging someone that Luke had learned during the war. Michael's eyes scanned Ben up and down, looking for any sort of tell and watching his almost shaken demeanor. Ben's clothes, though familiar, were not anything Michael had seen before. Everything about Ben screamed otherworldly, as did the clearly alien ship that lied as nothing more than twisted hulks of metal just meters away.

Yet beyond that, Michael was drawn to the blood and sweat on Ben's robes. Ben's breathing was growing heavier, and it was starting to become panting. Sweat dripped like buckets of rain down upon the sand. Ben wasn't used to the heat. The crimson blood that stained the regal robes betrayed no outward sign of injury on the stranger, save for a few scrapes on his face, but no rips in his robes that could have belied a greater wound. What Michael could see was the blood of others.

"You were in that ship, weren't you?" Michael asked, his eyes growing wide and glowing. "The big one that crashed."

"I'm a very simple man," Ben said, his voice shaking. "I don't know of any—"

Michael dropped the rock on the ground, not letting Ben get another word in. "You are! Where'd you come from? Are you alright? What happened? Was there a battle? Who were you fighting? Did..."

Before Ben could say anything, Michael's vision blurred again, like it did after the sand people wounded him. He could feel himself wobbling, his body falling out of balance as it leaned to the left towards the cave wall. He began to stumble, his own feet barely able to keep him up, forcing Ben towards him. The stranger put his hands on Michael's back, keeping him upright before slowly helping him slide his back down the wall to sit.

"You're full of questions for someone who was just injured. Here," Ben said, stepping back over to his robes and pulling out a canteen. He handed it to Michael and said, "Drink some water. You need it more than I do."

"I doubt it, the way you're sweating," Michael said as he pushed the canteen away, his vision still fading in and out. "I don't have any money on me anyway. I can't pay you."

"Pay me?" Ben mused, his sweaty forehead scrunching as he cocked an eyebrow. "It's just water."

*Just water?* Michael wondered to himself. That's when he knew for sure that he had Ben pegged. Nothing was different in the north, or anywhere else on this planet. If Ben was from this world, he would have known that no one gave away the world's most valuable commodity for free. In a drought that lasted for decades, it was liquid gold.

Then again, maybe Ben did know that. Could this be a trick? He seemed overly insistent that Michael drink it. Perhaps this ignorance was a ruse, and what was in the cantina was more than water. He had no way of knowing what Ben's intentions were, or who his allegiances were with. Michael may not have wanted to admit it, but there were no truly decent people on this planet. Not even himself, not even his family. They all had their demons and almost none had better angels.

As if on cue, Ben spun the top of the canteen open and took a sip. "See? It's nothing but water. Now drink up."

The canteen was tossed through the air and landed in an incredulous Michael's lap. Either he was being overtly obvious about his mistrust, or Ben's perception was greater than Michael had sensed. It was almost inhuman how quickly Ben picked up on it, but, right now, Michael couldn't let himself care. He leaned his head back and let the cold metal of the canteen rest on his lips, letting only a few drips of water onto it first, as if to test whether there was actually water or if this was just a cruel joke. A shiver lingered on his spine; he drank water on a daily basis, but not like this. The water given to the common people was dirty, just short of diseased, but what he tasted now... The sensation of his parched throat was indescribable, and it was suddenly quenched by the refreshing elixir of water sliding down his throat, making him awash with an involuntary feeling of relaxation and relief. This must have been what the rich and powerful felt like every time water touched their lips.

Ben watched all of this with a confused amusement. Michael smiled, knowing how alien it must have seemed to him. It almost made Michael forget that, if he was right about Ben, he wasn't the only one looking at a foreigner. Ben was too, and anything Michael did could seem out of the ordinary. It was all the more reason not to hog all of the water. Michael took a few more conservative sips, not wanting to waste it, and tossed it back to Ben's lap, as Michael knew that someone so unaccustomed to the hellish climate would need to drink as much water as they could.

"I take it you're not accustomed to the help of strangers," Ben remarked.

"I'm not accustomed to the help of anyone," Michael told him. "You wouldn't be either if you'd grown up here."

Ben's brow furrowed again and his demeanor tensed up, far from the cheerful vibe he had given off when they first met. Michael could see it all written on his face; Ben wanted to answer, but he hesitated. He struggled with what to say, seemingly wincing at the idea of telling a lie, but with a feeling that he had very little choice. Michael wanted to tell him that there was no reason for distrust, but Michael couldn't blame Ben if he didn't want to say anything. The dangers here were not to be taken lightly.

"What makes you think I didn't?" Ben finally asked.

"Because you tense up every time I mention it," Michael reminded him, "but whatever. I'm just glad your friend found me when the sand people attacked. Where is she anyway? I'd like to thank her."

"Who?" Ben wondered.

"The woman who was here," Michael said. "The one who healed me?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you there," Ben admitted, his fingers stroking the thick beard on his face as he pondered who the woman could have been. "Whoever she was, she wasn't with me."

Ben looked down at the pool of blood Michael was lying in when he'd first found him unconscious, and he had checked the wound itself. The healing was crude, yet magnificently done, a work of art clearly made only with the hands that tended to it. Nothing more, nothing less; a steady hand was all that was needed if one came equipped with the right training. He kept his hand on his chin, unable to help himself from wondering who, and what, this mystery woman was.

"In any event," Ben said, "I'm glad to see you're awake and safe."

Michael was grateful for that, and he didn't want to push the issue of the ship, but something was stirring inside him. A feeling welled up from deep down, resonating both with Sara's challenge and the feelings that washed over him when he met Ben, a feeling that was rekindling his imagination. He felt like a wide-eyed boy again, and he didn't want it to stop.

"What happened?" Michael asked, knowing he had nothing to lose. "In the ship."

"Michael, please."

But Michael waved him off from saying anything more. "You think kindness is normal. You're confused about why I'd want to pay for water. Your clothes are covered in blood,

and you look like you're about to have a heat stroke. Whatever you're afraid I am, I'm not an idiot."

"Worry about your own recovery right now, Michael," Ben snapped, much more aggressive than he had been before. "Where I'm from shouldn't matter. A simple thank you would suffice."

"Fine then," Michael said, slowly getting back on his feet as he held the wall for support. "I'm out of here."

"Wait."

Ben turned away, bringing the cloth back up to his head. He wiped the sweat off his brow once more, and pools of water were brushed off his skin, flying onto the cave wall beside him and evaporating once they hit the hot the rock. Michael couldn't see his face, but he knew that this cave wasn't enough for Ben. If he didn't get somewhere cooler, he would most likely pass out. Still, as Ben flung his cloth into the sand below him, Michael could tell that he wasn't concerned about himself. Right now, Ben was mainly concerned with what he had just said.

"I apologize for my rudeness," Ben told him, his words sincere.

"Yeah, I've never heard that one before," Michael said, but Ben seemed aghast at it, as if Michael was being sarcastic when he wasn't. He could tell he had beaten Ben down, like all Ben wanted was to just give Michael water and not be a nuisance, but Michael had pushed too hard. He was too eager.

There were so many more questions Michael wanted to ask, so many ideas about what might have happened, but he knew now that Ben's reluctance to talk wasn't just a lack of trust. It was a sadness; deep, heavy, unending. Ben's worn eyes and his broken spirit, after only a few minutes, was enough for Michael to know that. Michael didn't need any great perception to see that what happened wasn't an adventure. It wasn't an epic battle between good and evil, or a fight between smugglers, mercenaries, or pirates. It was a tragedy, and it was deeply affecting Ben, who was now leaning up against the cave wall, lost in his own thoughts.

Whether by some connection between them or just intuition, Michael could feel it, too.

Those thoughts were broken, though, when they both turned towards the cave entrance, away from the uncomfortable silence that had beset them, upon hearing a heavy panting. Another man ran through the cave entrance, his blonde hair stained red with blood, and stopped as he reached them, leaning down with his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. Michael looked at him with a renewed curiosity, wondering



why anyone would run through the heat of this terrain no matter what time of day it was, especially in the heavy leather uniform the man was wearing. As Michael stared at him, a look the man returned.

"Who are you?" the man asked, wheezing as he did so.

"Who are *you*?" Michael asked back, his eyes shifting between the man and Ben, not knowing if they were companions or if this was the new random meet up place. The man scoffed, his tone indignant. "I asked you first."

"Gentleman! Please," Ben said, moving in between them to stop whatever argument was about to ensue. They'd both been through traumatic ordeals, and this wasn't the time to get into petty bickering. "Logan, this is Michael, the young man I told you about. Michael, this is Logan, a friend."

"I still don't know if you're a friend," Michael reminded him.

"Yeah, look, I'd shake your hand and everything, but we've really got to go," Logan said as he stood back up straight, his breathing now indicative of concern more than exhaustion.

"What's going on?" Ben asked, determination returning to his voice as he stood back upright, as if ready for anything that might be coming.

"Patrol ships are buzzing overhead," Logan gulped. "They've got us."

Michael jumped in before Ben could say anything? "You *are* from the starship."

"This *really* isn't the time," Ben snapped again, but this time he meant it.

"Damn right," Michael shot back. "I'm getting out of here. If the Hutts find us—"

"Hold on a second," Logan frantically said, not taking his eyes off of Ben. "Hutts? As in the Lords of the Outer Rim? What planet is this?"

"Tatooine."

Logan stared at him blankly, the name not even registering. He let out a deep sigh as he defeatedly dropped his head into his hands, saying, "Is that even a word? I don't even know what that means."

Michael didn't need to say anything more. He could tell that what planet they were on meant nothing. Everything Logan and Ben needed to know came from the word Hutt, a

word that apparently evoked fear and desperation from people in all corners of the galaxy.

He turned his gaze towards Ben, but Ben's was no longer with him and Logan. Michael noticed he was facing the entrance of the cave, and then realized what Ben saw. Joshua, his uniform having adorned the emblem of the Hutt Lords—an emblem that Ben only now recognized in hindsight—was gone, having slipped away as they conversed. All that remained was the dusty outline of his body and boot tracks in the sand headed back out into the valley. As the slow, agonizing moments went by, the marching of footsteps could be heard right outside their door.

A shadow moved towards the entrance, only to take the shape of a group of men, stepping into the cave, armed to the teeth with blaster pistols on their belts and rifles in their hands. Ben and Logan knew immediately that these men were soldiers for the Hutt Lords, their uniforms emblazoned with the same emblem as Joshua, but all Michael could see was Joshua himself, standing at the head of the pack, not armed but clearly leading them back here. Michael could see hatred in Joshua's eyes as the soldiers stepped forward, hatred that told Michael that Joshua was here not for Ben and Logan, but for him. All other concerns were secondary. This was Joshua's moment.

"There!" Joshua shouted. "Lars. He's the one who tried to kill me, him and his friends."

"What?" Michael shouted. "I saved your life, you son of—"

Before he could get another word in, Joshua lashed out, hitting him again for the second—or more like tenth—time in less than a day. None of the other soldiers even so much as flinched. They were grunts, enlisted blunt instruments, and Joshua was their superior officer here. They weren't about to lift a finger to help Michael, and both he and Joshua knew it. Still, Joshua couldn't go too hard on him, not just yet, and not the least of which because of who Michael's uncle was.

"In the name of his High Exalted Excellency, Jabba the Hutt, Great Lord of the Outer Rim," Joshua said, his words of exaltation shallow and unconvincing yet his hatred for Michael pure and true, "you're under arrest."

"On what charge?" Ben barked out.

Michael spit out his own blood, muttering, "Man, you really aren't from around here," much to Ben's chagrin.

"Call ahead to Anchorhead," Joshua ordered the soldier beside him, ignoring Ben's question. "Tell base we have three prisoners and we're on our way back. Then take a team and search the wreckage."

To Michael, that last order didn't mean anything. So far as he knew, Ben and Logan were the only two survivors who crawled their way out of the wreckage, and their lack of surprise at the mention of no other prisoners told him that they knew that. Yet, they seemed to know something else. Their fingers clenched into fists, and Logan's lower chin was quivering, but neither out of a readiness to attack. No, that would be suicide.

They were hiding something.