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SANDWORMS OF DUNE

Brian Herbert
and
Kevin J. Anderson

Based on an outline by Frank Herbert
TOR

A
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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

SANDWORMS OF DUNE

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Garimi, and Elyen, who had consumed the last available doses of the truthtrance drug. All of the women were armed and highly suspicious. Sheeana said, "Under various pretexts, we have isolated everyone aboard, using layers of observers. Most of them think we're searching for the missing explosive mines. So far, very few people know about Thufir Hawat. Other Face Dancers would not be aware that they are at risk of exposure."

"I would have thought the entire idea absurd - until recently. Now no suspicion seems too paranoid." Duncan locked gazes with the Bashar, and both nodded.

"My truthtrance is deeper than it has been before," Elyen said, sounding distant.

"Perhaps we didn't ask the correct questions previously." Garimi put her elbows on the table.

Teg said, "Ask away, then. The sooner you clear us of suspicion, the faster we can root out this cancer. We need a different kind of test."

Normally a trained Bene Gesserit should have been able to uncover deception with a mere question or two, but this extraordinary inquiry lasted an hour. Because they were building a cadre of trustworthy allies, Sheeana and her Sisters needed to be thorough. And they needed to do a better job than before. The three Reverend Mothers watched for even the slightest flicker of evasion. Neither Duncan nor Teg gave them any.

"We believe you," Garimi finally said. "Unless you give us cause to change our minds."

Sheeana nodded. "Provisionally, we accept that you two are exactly who you say you are."

Teg seemed bitterly amused. "And Duncan and I accept you three as well. Provisionally."

"Face Dancers are mimics. They can change their appearance, but they cannot change their DNA. Now that we have cell samples from the Hawat impostor, our Suk doctors should be able to develop an accurate test."

"So we believe," Teg said. With the loss of his protégé, the Bashar seemed fundamentally disturbed. He no longer took anything at face value.

With an iron-hard scowl, Garimi said, "The obvious answer is that Hawat was born a Face Dancer, then carefully planted and manipulated by our Tleilaxu Master. Who would know Face Dancers better than old Scytale? We know he had the cells in his nullentropy tube. If that scenario is true, the deception went on for almost eighteen years."

Sheeana continued, "A Face Dancer infant could have mimicked a generic human baby from the very beginning. As he grew, he took a shape based on archival records of the young Atrides warrior-Mentat. Since no one here - not even you, Duncan - remembers the original Hawat as an adolescent, the disguise would not need to be perfect."

Duncan knew she was right. In his original lifetime, when he'd escaped from the Harkonnens and gone to Caladan, Thufir Hawat had already been a weathered battle veteran. Duncan remembered his first real conversation with Hawat. He'd been a stable boy at Castle Caladan, working with the Salusan bulls that Old Duke Paulus loved to fight in grand spectacles. Someone had drugged the bulls into a frenzy, and young Duncan had tried to raise the alarm, but no one believed him. After Paulus was gored to death, Hawat himself had led the investigation, hauling young Duncan before a board of inquiry, since evidence indicated that he was a Harkonnen spy....

And now this Thufir was a Face Dancer! Duncan still had trouble wrapping his mind around the undeniable reality.

"Then all of the gholas babies could be Face Dancers," Duncan said. "I suggest you summon Scytale. He's now our prime suspect."

"Or," Teg said in a brittle voice, "he may be our best resource. As Garimi already stated, who would know the Face Dancers better?"

When the Tleilaxu Master was brought into the copper-walled chamber, Duncan and Teg took seats at the other side of the table, part of the growing inquisition to root out the Face Dancer infiltration. Scytale appeared frightened and unsettled. The Tleilaxu gholas was fifteen years old, but he did not look like a boy. His elfin features, sharp teeth, and gray skin made him seem alien and suspicious, but Duncan realized that was only a knee-jerk response based on primitive superstitions and previous experiences.

Similarly, she passed through a second grid, and then found herself at the last opening, from which she could observe the Face Dancer through the grille. His appearance flickered occasionally, sometimes reverting to the old man's shape, sometimes becoming a Futar, but primarily the Face Dancer wore a blank, skull-like visage. Even before she saw the torn body of Garimi on the deck, Alia knew not to underestimate this opponent.

With the tip of the glowing cutter, she sliced the tiny fasteners that held the last screen in place. Moving as silently as she could, she held the plate where it was and squirmed to free the needle gun from her shirt. She tensed, then drew a deep breath, waiting for the right moment.

I will have only a brief instant of surprise, so I must use it to full advantage.

The Face Dancer was working the controls, probably transmitting a signal to the mysterious Enemy, presumably more of his own kind. Every second she delayed would place the Ithaca in greater danger.

Suddenly the Face Dancer jerked his head up and snapped his gaze toward the grille. Somehow he had sensed her. Now, without hesitating, Alia shoved the loosened screen toward him like a projectile. He dodged out of the way, reacting just as she had expected. Still lying prone in the ventilation shaft, she extended the needle gun in front of her and fired seven times. Three of the deadly needles found their target: two in the Face Dancer's eyes, another in the artery on his neck.

He spasmed, thrashed, and fell lifeless. Wriggling out of the air shaft, Alia dropped to the floor, recovered her balance, and glanced to verify that Garimi was indeed dead, before casually walking to the door. With her nimble fingers she disarmed the internal security measures and unsealed the hatch from the inside.

Duncan and Teg stood there holding weapons, afraid of what might emerge. The little girl met them with a placid expression. "Our Face Dancer is no longer a problem."

Over Alia's shoulder they could see the inhuman form sprawled next to an overturned chair. Small trickles of blood leaked from the dart wounds in his eyes, and he wore a full crimson collar of blood around his neck. On the floorplates lay the mangled Garimi.

Sheeana narrowed her gaze. "I see that you are a born killer."

Alia was unruffled. "So I've been told. Didn't you bring the gholia children back for our abilities? This is what I do best."

Duncan hurried to the no-ship's controls to assess what the false Rabbi had done.

He extended his senses and was dismayed to see the deadly strands of the shimmering net suddenly appear and intensify all around them. Unbreakable. The trap was bright enough, powerful enough, that everyone could see it.

Teg rushed to a scanner station. "Duncan! Ships approaching - a lot of them! The Face Dancer has brought us right to the doorstep of the Enemy. We're tagged, and the net has locked onto us."

"After all these years, we are caught in the strands." Duncan swept his gaze across all of them. "At least, we're about to find out who our Enemy really is."

Our shared humanity should, fry definition, make us allies. In sad fact, however, our very similarities often appear to be vast differences and insurmountable obstacles.

- MOTHER COMMANDER MURBELLA, address to the New Sistethood

Given the critical shortage of time, the thousands of newly equipped Guildships could not undergo thorough shakedowns and test runs. The mass-produced Obliterators were loaded aboard the heavily armored vessels that had been built at Junction as well as seventeen satellite shipyards. Crews made preparations to go to the front lines.

Fresh from conscription across hundreds of at-risk planets, novice commanders received only minimal training, barely sufficient to stand against the Enemy at numerous vulnerable

shoved out of alignment, made inoperable. Two reaction chambers were breached. An explosion had nearly broken through the hull. He stood stunned, his arms shaking, thinking he couldn't possibly fix this. But he forced such thoughts away, went back to work. Teg's muscles trembled with exhaustion, and his lungs burned from gasping air so fast the oxygen molecules could barely move into position.

Fixing the hull should be easy enough. Teg ran to the maintenance sectors, where he located extra plates. Since he could never make the ship's heavy-lifting machinery operate fast enough for his time-sense, he decided that suspensors would have to do. He applied the null-gravity projectors to the heavy plates and hurried with them down corridors, dodging petrified people.

With each second, the Enemy battleships were getting closer. Some of his fellow passengers were only just now learning of the mines that had been detonated. He put on another burst of speed, and the suspensor carriers kept up with him.

In a few "hours," according to his metabolism, and only a few moments in reality, he fixed the hull damage that could have resulted in an engine breach. Sweat poured off of Teg's body, and he was near collapse. But in spite of that utter exhaustion, he could not let himself slow down. Never before had he allowed himself to fall so deeply into a pit of burning metabolism. Teg's body could not maintain this pace for long. But if he didn't, the ship would be captured, and they would all die. Fangs of hunger gnawed at his stomach. This would not do. He had to concentrate, had to fuel the engine of his body so that he could do what must be done. Ravenous, not slowing from his superspeed, he raided the ship's stores, where he found energy bars and dense food wafers. He ate concentrated nutrients until he was gorged. Then, burning calories as fast as he could swallow them, Teg ran again from one disaster area to the next.

He spent subjective days at these highly focused labors; to observers on the outside, caught in the glacial pace of normal time, only a minute or two passed.

When the task grew overwhelming, the Bashar struggled to reassess what the ship needed in order to function. What was the bare minimum of repairs that would let Duncan fly through the weakened loophole?

The exploding mines had led to a cascading series of damages. Teg nearly got lost in the details, but reminded himself of the immediate need and forced himself to skate the thin ice of possibilities.

Teg and his brave men had stolen this very vessel from Gammu more than three decades ago. Though it had performed admirably since then, the *Ithaca* had not undergone any of the usual necessary maintenance at Guild shipyards. Worn components had not been replaced; systems were breaking down from age and neglect, as well as the depredations of the saboteurs. Limited by the spare parts and materials he could find in the maintenance bays, he tried and discarded possible fixes.

Alarms continued to pulse slowly. He was moving too fast for sound waves to mean anything. In real time, there would be shrieking sirens, shouting people, conflicting orders. Teg fixed another of the Holtzman catalyst cradles, then took the time to look at a viewer. In the image displayed between scan lines, he saw that the Enemy ships had finally arrived, massive and heavily armed ... a full fleet of monstrous, angular things that bristled with weapons, sensor arrays, and other sharp protrusions.

Though he already felt used up, Teg knew with a sickening certainty that he needed to go even faster.

He raced to the ship's melange stores and broke the locks with a twist of his hand because he was moving so fast. He removed cakes of the dark brown compressed substance, stared at it with Mentat calculation. Considering his hypermetabolism and his body churning through its biochemical machinery faster than it ever had before, what was the proper dosage? How quickly would it affect him? Teg decided on three wafers - triple the maximum he had ever consumed - and gobbled them all.

As the melange rushed through his body and poured into his senses, he felt alive

again, recharged and capable of accomplishing the requisite impossibilities. His muscles and nerves were on fire, and his feet left marks on the deck as he ran. He repaired the next system in a few moments. But in that time, the Enemy battle fleet had closed in, and the no-ship still could not fly.

Teg looked down at his forearms and saw that his skin seemed to be shriveling up, as if he was consuming every drop of energy within his flesh.

Outside, the encroaching vessels launched a volley of destructive blasts. Balls of energy tumbled forward like storm clouds approaching with exquisite slowness. Those blasts would clearly render his repairs useless, maybe even destroy the ship.

In another burst of extreme speed, Teg dashed to the defensive controls. Thankfully, he had restored a few of their weapons. The Ithaca's defensive systems were sluggish, but the firing controls were swift enough. With a scattershot cannonade, like a burst of celebratory fireworks, Teg returned fire. He launched beams carefully targeted to intercept and dissipate the oncoming projectiles. Once he had fired the volley, though, Teg turned his back on the weapons systems and raced to the next damaged engine.

Bashar Teg felt like a candle that had been burnt entirely down to a lump of discolored wax. Despite his best efforts, the exhausted man still saw their doom closing in.

How do we repay a man who has done the impossible?

- BASHAR ALEF BURZMALI, A Dirge for the Soldier

On the navigation bridge, Duncan stared at the sensor projections for moments after Miles had disappeared. He knew what the Bashar must be doing.

After the internal explosions, the Ithaca hung dead in space, surrounded by Enemy ships that bristled with more weaponry than he had seen on an entire Harkonnen battle fleet. The mines had disabled the no-field generator, leaving the great ship visible and vulnerable in space.

After almost a quarter century of fleeing, they were caught. Maybe it was about damned time he faced the mysterious hunters. Who were his strange and invincible foes? He had only ever seen the ghostly shadows of the old man and old woman. And now ...

On the screens before him, the discontinuity in the gossamer net shifted, almost closed, and then strayed open again, as if taunting him.

Duncan spoke aloud, more to himself than anyone else. A prayer of sorts. "As long as we breathe, we have a chance. Our task is to identify any opportunity, however transitory or difficult it might be."

Teg had said he would fix their systems. Duncan was aware of the Bashar's closely held abilities. For years, Teg had concealed his talent from the Bene Gesserits, who feared such manifestations as the sign of a potential Kwisatz Haderach. Now those abilities might save them all. "Don't let us down, Miles."

The encroaching ships fired a series of blasts at the no-ship. Duncan barely had time to shout a curse and brace for impact - when a flurry of impossibly fast and deft defensive bursts intercepted the Enemy volley. Precisely targeted, instantly fired. All shots blocked. Duncan blinked. Who had launched the return salvo? He shook his head. The no-ship should have been incapable of even basic maneuvers or defense. A chill of delight coursed down his spine. Miles!

Suddenly, the control deck's systems began to glow; green indicator lights winked on by themselves. One after another, systems came back online. Sensing movement, Duncan snapped his head to the left.

The Bashar materialized in front of him, but it was a different Miles Teg - not the young ghola whom Duncan had raised and awakened, but a horribly drained man, as desiccated and ancient as an ambulatory mummy. Teg looked wrung out and ready to collapse. He had

exerted himself through time far beyond the point where a normal man would have already died.

"Boards ... active." His gasping voice cost him more energy than he had left. "Go!" Everything happened in an instant, as if Duncan, too, had fallen into an accelerated time frame. His first instinct was to grab his friend. Teg was dying, might already be dead. The aged Bashar could no longer hold himself upright.

"Go - damn it!" They were the last words Teg could force out of his mouth.

Thinking with Mentat clarity, Duncan whipped back to the control panels, vowing not to waste what the Bashar had done for them. Priorities.

He reached the piloting board, where his fingers skittered like a startled spider across the controls.

Teg crumpled to the deck, arms and legs akimbo, as dead as a dried leaf, older even than the first old Bashar had been in the last moments of Rakis. Miles!

All their years together, teaching, learning, relying on each other. Few people in all of Duncan's many lives had ever mattered so much.

He drove away his thoughts of shocked grief, but Mentat memory kept every experience clear and sharp. Miles! Teg was no more than an ancient husk on the floorplates. Duncan had no time for anger or tears.

The no-ship began to accelerate. He still saw how to slip out of the cruel net, but now he also had to contend with the entire fleet of Enemy ships. They had cut loose with a second volley. The blurred crackle ahead seemed to invite them. Duncan steered toward it, moving as fast as his human reflexes could go. The no-ship ripped the stubborn strands free.

"Come on!" Duncan said, willing it to happen.

More blasts glanced across the Ithaca's hull, grazing the ship as it yawed and rolled.

Duncan steered with all of his skill.

The Holtzman engines were hot and the diagnostic boards showed numerous errors and system failures, but none were immediately fatal faults. Duncan pushed the vessel closer and closer to the loophole. The Enemy ships couldn't head them off, couldn't move fast enough to stop them.

More of the net broke away. Duncan could see it happening.

He forced his attention back to the engines, applying acceleration far beyond what the systems normally allowed. In his frantic repairs, Teg had not bothered with the niceties of fail-safes and protective limitations. With increased velocity, they pulled free of the enclosing cordon.

"We're going to make it!" Duncan said to the fallen Bashar, as if his friend could still hear him.

A giant torpedo-shaped Enemy vessel leapt forward. No human could possibly pilot a ship so swiftly, changing directions with g-forces that would snap bones like a handful of straw in a clenched fist. Burning its engines, the attacker exhausted all of its fuel in one burst of forward motion - throwing the craft directly into their path.

With his maneuvering already hampered, Duncan could not dodge in time. The no-ship was too huge, with too much inertia. Impossibly, the suicidal Enemy vessel scraped the lower hull of the Ithaca, knocking it off course, damaging the engines yet again. The unexpected impact sent the no-ship spinning. The Enemy rammer tumbled and exploded, and the shock wave knocked them farther off course, out of control... back into the remaining strands of the net.

Duncan uttered a curse in dismay and rage.

Unable to fold space, the no-ship dropped back, its engines whining. The bridge control panels blazed red, then went dim. A small internal explosion further damaged the Holtzman engines. The Ithaca hung motionless in space. Again.

"I'm sorry, Bashar," Duncan said, heartbroken. With nothing else to do, he knelt beside the husk of his friend.

A message formed on the primary screen on the bridge, a powerful transmission from the

Paolo will remain here safe, but I will go aboard." He planted his hands on his hips. "In fact, I demand it."

Erasmus seemed amused. "In that case, we had better give you the Face Dancers. Go aboard, Baron, and be our ambassador. I'm sure you will employ all the diplomacy the situation requires."

We shall face the Enemy, and die if we must die. My strong preference, however, is to kill what we must kill.

- MOTHER COMMANDER MURBELLA, transmission to human defensive forces

Ten thousand Guildships against an infinite number of Enemy vessels.

For this confrontation, the Mother Commander had prepared all the warlords, political leaders and other self-proclaimed generals, as well as her ferocious Sisters - what remained of them. Spread out across the path of the oncoming thinking-machine forces, her human defenders dug themselves in.

Guildsmen had been rushed in at the last minute to help crew the numerous battleships, launching them to their designated rendezvous points in space. The untested military commanders were as ready as the Mother Commander could make them. Like ghost soldiers, red-eyed refugees from planets already ground under the machine boot heel volunteered in droves. Each craft was loaded with Obliterators produced by the tireless Ixian factories.

Unfortunately, Omnius had been preparing for centuries.

Like a force of nature, the thinking machines advanced, not dodging or changing course, without regard to the strength of planetary defenses arrayed against them. They simply rolled over anything in their path.

For Murbella's plan to work, the line of Enemy ships had to be stopped at every point, in every star system. No battleground was unimportant. She had divided her defenders into a hundred discrete groups of one hundred new Guild warships apiece. The battle groups were positioned at widely scattered but important points outside inhabited systems, ready to fend off the approaching Enemy.

As a last line of defense, Murbella's one hundred newly constructed vessels patrolled space in the vicinity of Chapterhouse, along with a number of smaller, older vessels to flesh out the military force. They knew Omnius considered this planet a primary target. Waiting for the clash, the Mother Commander thought her new ships looked magnificent, the line formidable. The fighters aboard were more confident than afraid.

By the New Sisterhood's best estimates, though, the thinking machines outnumbered them by more than a hundred to one.

To shore up their confidence, the fighters had all watched holos of the Ixian tests of the new Obliterators on dead Richese, admiring the massive destructive force contained in each of the powerful weapons. Bene Gesserit observers had monitored the Ixian production lines, and technicians had verified the complex weapons after they were installed in Murbella's fleet. She clung to the hope that this line of last stands could turn into a rout for the forces of Omnius.

More than she had for the past quarter century, the Mother Commander wished Duncan Idaho could be at her side again, facing this final conflict with her. Feeling the loneliness of command, tempted to bow to primitive human superstition and offer up a prayer to some invisible guardian angel, she hardened herself.

This has to work!

Her great ships prowled the edge of planetary orbit, not knowing from which direction the Enemy fleet would come. Down below, the refugees who had filled temporary camps on the plague-emptied continents were anxious to evacuate from Chapterhouse, but even if there

weren't even worth noticing!

Far behind them, just arriving at the distant edge of the solar system, came another wave of thinking machines, closing in on Chapterhouse. The same thing must be happening everywhere, at all of her carefully staged last stands across a hundred star systems.

"They knew! The damned machines knew our Obliterators wouldn't work!" As if Murbella's vessels were no more than a pebble on the path, the Omnium ships flowed around them on their way to the Sisterhood's now-unprotected homeworld.

Not one of her new Guild war vessels had a living Navigator aboard; most of the Navigators and their Heighliners had disappeared. Every ship in her battle groups used Ixian mathematical compilers for guidance. Mathematical compilers! Computers ... thinking machines.

The Ixians! Now her silent curse was directed at herself for overconfidence in the new Obliterators and her own ability to predict the Enemy's tactics.

"Follow me, Administrator. I want to see these Obliterators for myself." She grabbed Gorus's arm hard enough to leave bruises.

Guided by emergency illumination, they rushed to the weapons deck where the armaments had been installed. Inside, rack upon rack held the burnished silver eggs of the planet-melters that IX had manufactured. A distraught Guildsman intercepted them.

"We tested the weapons, Administrator, and they were installed correctly. The firing controls are operational. We just launched dozens of Obliterators, but none of them detonated."

"Why didn't they function?"

"Because ... because the Obliterators themselves ..."

Murbella marched over to where the man had opened one casing at random. Beneath a complicated labyrinth of circuitry and delicate components, the Obliterator charge was fused into the shell of the mechanism, making the whole thing inoperable. The weapon had been neutralized.

"It is useless, Mother Commander," said Gorus. "Sabotaged."

"But I saw the tests myself. How can this be?"

"A timing mechanism may have shut everything down at a prearranged time, or the Enemy fleet might have sent out a deactivating signal. Some devious trick that we could not have anticipated."

Murbella stood appalled, guilty of the same error she had been so certain the machines would fall victim to: She had failed to plan for the unexpected. Together, they opened another Obliterator to find it similarly fused and nonfunctional. A coldness froze her heart and spread into her bloodstream. These weapons had been built over the course of years by the Ixians, at a cost in melange that nearly bankrupted the Sisterhood.

She had been duped, and her fleet had been castrated by the Ixians before the battle could even begin.

"And what about our engines?"

"They can be made to function, if we operate them without the mathematical compilers."

"I don't give a damn about the compilers! Find a way to salvage some of the Obliterators. Are they all inactive? Every single one?"

"The only way to know, Mother Commander, is to open and inspect each of them."

"We could just launch them all and hope a few still function." Murbella nodded slowly.

It was indeed an option. At this point, it cost them nothing. She had to find some way to fight, and she hoped her other battle groups were faring better than this ... but she doubted it. Without functional Obliterators, every one of the planets on the front line was essentially unprotected in the face of certain destruction.

And it was all her responsibility.

Some say that survival itself can be the best revenge. For myself, I prefer something a bit

more extravagant.

- BARON VLADIMIR HARKONNEN, the ghola

On a whim, the Baron told the ten Face Dancers accompanying him to pose as Sardaukar from the old Imperium. He didn't know if anyone would even recognize the joke - fashions changed and history forgot such details - but it helped him present an air of command. During his original lifetime he had achieved a great victory over House Atreides with illicit Sardaukar at his side.

Leaving the restless Paolo with Erasmus, supposedly "for his own protection," the Baron dressed himself in a nobleman's uniform frosted with gold braids and ornate chains of office. A ceremonial poison-tipped dagger hung at his side, and a wide-beam stunner was concealed in his sleeve for easy access. Though the imitation Sardaukar were his guards and escort, he didn't particularly trust them, either. One could never be too careful. When the Baron's entourage marched to the imprisoned no-ship, however, they could not find a door on the kilometer-long hull - a frustrating and embarrassing moment, but Omnius was not to be hindered. Guided by the evermind, parts of nearby buildings transformed into gigantic tools that tore open the hull, peeling away plates and structural girders to leave a wide gash. Brute force was easier and more direct than locating an appropriate hatch and deciphering unfamiliar controls.

With the no-ship suitably opened, the Baron and his escort ducked under low-hanging debris and sparking circuitry. Prepared for an ambush, but moving with an outward show of confidence, they made their way through the winding corridors. Several of Omnius's floating watcheyes zoomed ahead of them down the passageways to scout out and map the interior of the vessel.

The captives would surely see that surrender was their only option. What other conclusion could they draw? Unfortunately, in his original lifetime the Baron had had considerable experience with fanatics, such as the mad Fremen bands on Arrakis. It was possible that these poor wretches intended to mount a desperate, hopeless resistance until they were all slaughtered, including the purported Kwisatz Haderach among them.

Paolo would then be the only contender, and that would be that.

Inside the no-ship, they first encountered Duncan Idaho and a defiant-looking Bene Gesserit woman who identified herself as Sheeana. The two waited for the boarding party in the middle of a wide corridor. The Baron only vaguely remembered the man from the records of House Atreides: a Swordmaster of Ginaz, one of Duke Leto's most trusted fighters, killed on Arrakis while protecting Paul and Jessica in their escape.

From the sneer on Idaho's face, he could tell that this ghola had his memories back, too.

"Oh ho, I see that you know me."

Idaho didn't budge. "I escaped from Giedi Prime as a boy, Baron. I beat Rabban on one of his hunts. I've lived many lifetimes since then. This time, I hope to watch you die with my own eyes."

"How boldly you speak, like one of those yipping dogs Emperor Shaddam used to keep at his side: full of annoying barks and growls, yet easily stepped on." Protected by the Face Dancer Sardaukar, he peered ahead down the hall. "How many people do you have aboard?" He snapped. "Bring them forward for our inspection."

"We have already assembled," Sheeana said. "We're ready for you."

The Baron sighed. "And no doubt you've scattered commandos or snipers throughout the decks? Your personnel records will have been doctored. A childish resistance that may cause us a few headaches, but will gain you nothing. We have enough troops to mow all of you down."

"It would be foolish for us to resist," Sheeana said, "at least in such obvious ways."

The Baron scowled, and he heard the little girl's voice inside his head. She is playing with your mind, Grandfather!

"So are you!" he hissed to himself, startling the others.

His optic threads gleamed like a galaxy of stars. "If it is the same, exactly the same, then both are works of genius. If my copy is perfect down to every single brushstroke, does it not become a second original?"

"Van Gogh was a man of creativity and inspiration. You merely mimicked his work. You might as well call a Face Dancer a work of art."

Erasmus smiled. "Some of them are."

Abruptly, with powerful hands, the robot ripped the painting and its frame into tiny pieces. As if putting a punctuation mark on the grotesque display, Erasmus whirled and stomped on the broken pieces, saying, "Call this artistic temperament." Moving to depart, he added, "Omnium will summon your Kwisatz Haderach soon. We have waited a long time for this."

What is the difference between data and memory? I intend to find out.

- ERASMUS, Laboratory Notebooks

The independent robot's memories of Serena were as fresh as if the events had occurred only days ago. Serena Butler ... such a fascinating woman. And just as Erasmus had survived through the millennia as a package of data nearly destroyed and then recovered, so Serena's memories and personality lived on, somehow, in the Other Memories of the Bene Gesserit.

This posed an intriguing question: No Bene Gesserits could be Serena Butler's direct descendants, for Erasmus had killed her only child. Then again, he couldn't be sure what had happened to all of his experimental clones over the years. He had tried many times to bring Serena back, with no success.

Aboard this no-ship, however, the humans had grown gholas from their past, just as his own plan had brought back Baron Harkonnen and a version of Paul Atreides. Erasmus knew that a nullentropy tube hidden in a Tleilaxu Master had contained a wealth of ancient and carefully gathered cells.

He was confident that a real Tleilaxu Master could succeed in bringing Serena back, where his own primitive experiments had failed.

Erasmus and Omnium had both absorbed enough Face Dancers to have instinctive reverence for the abilities of a Master. The independent robot knew exactly where he had to go before leaving the no-ship.

Erasmus found the medical center and the axlotl chambers where the whole library of historical cells had been catalogued and stored. If Serena Butler was among them ...

He was surprised to find a Tleilaxu already there, harried and frantic. The diminutive man had disconnected the life-support systems of the axlotl tanks. With his olfactory sensors, Erasmus noted the smells of chemicals, melange precursors, and human flesh. He grinned. "You must be Scytale, the Tleilaxu Master! It's been a long time."

Scytale whirled, looking fearful at the sight of the robot.

Erasmus took a step closer, and studied the Tleilaxu's face. "A child? What are you doing?"

The Tleilaxu drew himself up. "I am destroying the tanks and the melange they produce.

I had to surrender that knowledge as a bargaining chip. I won't let thinking machines and traitorous Face Dancers simply take it from me - from us."

Erasmus showed no concern for the sabotaged axlotl tanks. "But you appear to be very young."

"I am a gholah. I have my memories back. I am everything that any of my previous incarnations were."

"Of course you are. Such a marvelous process, perpetuating yourself through serial gholah lives. We machines understand such things, although we have much more efficient methods of performing data transfers and backups." He looked intensely at the genetic library that held the potential gholah cells ... Serena Butler ...

have his memories back. All other passengers and crew were apparently extraneous baggage. Had he been the subject of the hunt from the beginning?

How could that be? Had the thinking machines somehow known he would be aboard? Paul gripped Chani's hand and said to her, "It will be over soon, in whatever manner fate decides. All along, our destinies have hurtled us toward this point, like levitating trains out of control."

"We will face it together, my love," Chani said. He only wished that he could recall all his years with her ... and that she could do the same.

"What about Duncan?" he asked. "And Sheeana?"

"We must depart now," the robots said in unison. "Omnius waits."

"Duncan and Sheeana will know soon enough," Jessica said.

Before they left, Paul made a point of taking the crysknife Chani had made for him.

Like a Fremen warrior, he wore it proudly at his waist. Although the worm-tooth blade would do nothing against the thinking machines, it made him feel more like the legendary Muad'Dib - the man who defeated powerful empires. But in his mind he again saw the horrible recurring vision, the flicker of memory or prescience in which he lay on the floor in a strange place, mortally wounded - looking up at a younger version of himself who laughed in triumph.

He blinked and sought to focus on reality, not possibilities or destiny. Following the insectile robots down the corridors, he tried to tell himself he was prepared to face whatever lay in store for him.

Before the gholas could emerge from the ship through the ragged hole the machines had made, Wellington Yueh tried to push his way past the ranks of escort robots.

"Wait! I want... I need to go with you." He fumbled for excuses. "If someone gets hurt, I'm the best Suk doctor available. I can help." He lowered his voice and pleaded,

"The Baron will be there, and he'll want to see me."

Still wrestling with her reinjured feelings toward him, Jessica sounded harsh and bitter.

"Help? Did you help Alia?" Hearing this, Yueh looked as if she had slapped him.

"Let him come, Mother." Paul felt resigned. "Dr. Yueh was a staunch childhood supporter and mentor to the original Paul. I won't turn down any ally or witness to whatever is about to occur."

Following the robots, they emerged onto flowing roadways that carried them along like floating plates. Batlike fliers streaked high overhead, and mirrored watcheyes flitted about in the air, observing the group's progress from all angles. Behind them, the huge no-ship had been incorporated into the machine metropolis. Sentient metal buildings of freeform architecture had grown around the Ithaca's hull like coral swallowing up an old shipwreck beneath the seas of Caladan. The buildings seemed to alter whenever the evermind had a fleeting thought.

"This whole city is alive and thinking," Paul said. "It's all one changeable, adapting machine."

Under her breath, his mother quoted, "'Thou shalt not create a machine in the likeness of the human mind.'"

Speakers appeared in the solid silver walls of the looming buildings, and a simulated voice mockingly repeated Jessica's words. "'Thou shalt not create a machine in the likeness of the human mind.' What a quaint superstition!" The laughter sounded as if it had been recorded from somewhere else, distorted freakishly, and then played back. "I look forward to our encounter."

The escort robots brought them into an enormous structure with shimmering walls, curved arches, and enclosed parklike spaces. A spectacular lava fountain spouted plumes of hot, scarlet liquid into a tempered basin.

In the middle of the great cathedral hall, an elderly man and woman awaited them, dressed in loose, comfortable garments. Dwarfed by the enclosure, they certainly did not look menacing.

Paul decided not to wait for their captors to play control games. "Why have you brought me

hundreds of giant ships. Not human defender vessels.

At first Murbella thought that the Enemy machines had sent yet another devastating fleet, but she quickly identified the cartouche on the curved hulls. Guild Heighliners!

They spilled out of foldspace from every direction, surrounding the first massive wave of thinking-machine vessels.

"Administrator, why did you hold out on us?" Murbella's voice was brittle. "There must be a thousand ships here!"

Gorus seemed just as astonished as she was.

A female voice thrummed across the commlines that linked Murbella's defenders. "I am the Oracle of Time, and I bring reinforcements. Mathematical compilers corrupted many Guild vessels, but my Navigators control these Heighliners."

"Navigators?" The white-haired Administrator gasped in consternation. "We thought they were all dead, starved for spice."

The Oracle spoke in a powerful, lilting tone. "And my ships - unlike those made by the traitorous fabricators of Ix - command full armaments. Our Obliterators work as designed. We took them from old Honored Matre ships and hid them away for our own defenses. We intend to use them now."

Murbella's face flushed. She had suspected the rebel Honored Matres had possessed many more Obliterators than were found. So, the Navigators had been hiding them all along!

The Omnium invasion fleet shifted position in response to the Navigator reinforcements, but the machines could not comprehend the magnitude of the astonishing opponent they now faced. They did not react in time as the Oracle's Heighliners spewed out dazzling sunbursts in a flurry of explosions like miniature supernovas. Each incinerating burst of light vaporized entire clusters of the overly complacent Enemy vessels.

Although the machine forces scrambled to defend themselves, their response was ineffective, as if their control functions had been disconnected. The evermind had modeled his plan repeatedly, setting up contingency options for likely turns of events. But Omnium had not foreseen this.

"Thinking machines have long been my sworn enemies," the Oracle said in her ethereal voice.

While Murbella looked on with great satisfaction, precisely targeted Obliterators wiped out countless Enemy ships. If only the Honored Matres had simply turned their stolen weapons against the thinking machines when they'd had the chance, long ago!

But those women had never stood together against a common foe. Instead, they hoarded their stolen weapons and used the destructive power against each other, against rival planets. What a waste!

The overlapping detonations, each strong enough to scorch a planet, struck the front line of machine ships. A dozen Heighliners raced deeper into the Chapterhouse system to chase Enemy vessels that had already reached planetary orbit.

"We will do what we can at your other front-line planets," the Oracle said. "Today we hurt the Enemy."

Almost before she could absorb what was happening around her, Murbella saw that the initial wave of thinking-machine forces had been reduced to nothing more than scattered debris. As far as she could tell, the Enemy battleships never got the chance to launch a single shot against the defenders of humanity.

Some of the Heighliners winked out, folding space to go to the other crippled last-stand defenders. There, they would deliver their Obliterators and speed off to further encounters with the Enemy. All across the front lines, at every flashpoint where Murbella had placed her groups of fighters, the Oracle's Navigators struck, and vanished again....

Murbella snapped to Administrator Gorus. "Get me a comchannel! How do we talk to your Oracle of Time?"

Gorus was stunned by the events around him. "One does not request an audience with the Oracle. No living person has ever initiated contact with her."

"She just saved our lives! Let me talk with her."

With a skeptical expression, the Administrator made a gesture toward another Guildsman.

"We can try, but I promise nothing."

The gray-robed man fiddled with the commline until Murbella shouldered him aside.

"Oracle of Time - whoever you are! Let us join forces to eradicate the thinking machines."

A long silence was Murbella's only response, not even static, and her heart sank.

Gorus gave her a superior look, as if he had known to expect this all along. Murbella saw a second wave of thinking-machine ships race in, now that the initial attack had been

thwarted. And these would not tauntingly hold their fire. "More machines are coming - "

"For now, I must move on." As the Oracle spoke, Heighliners began to disappear like soap bubbles popping. "My main battle is on Synchrony."

"Wait!" Murbella cried. "We need you!"

"We are needed elsewhere. Kralizec will not be consummated here. At long last, I have found the no-ship that carries Duncan Idaho, and the secret location of Omnium.

I must now go there to end this by destroying the evermind. Forever."

Murbella reeled as the unexpected information hit her. The no-ship found? Duncan was alive!

Within moments the last of the Heighliners vanished into fold-space, leaving the Mother Commander and her ships alone to face the next wave. The thinking machines kept coming.

We have our own goals and ambitions, for good or ill. But our true destiny is decided by forces over which we have no control.

- "The Atreides Manifesto," first draft (section deleted by Bene Gesserit committee)

A door in the machines' grand cathedral flowed open like a water-fall of metal, parting to reveal two figures that stepped forward in tandem.

It had been hours since Baron Vladimir Harkonnen had murdered Alia, yet his wide lips still struggled to contain his satisfaction. His spider-black eyes glinted.

Dr. Yueh glared at the Baron, his personal bête noire.

Paul did not need ghola memories to recognize the Baron's companion - a lean young man, barely more than a boy, but whipcord strong with muscles tuned from constant training.

The eyes were harder, the features sharper, but Paul knew the face that stared back at him from the mirror.

Beside him Chani gave a strangled cry, but the sound changed to a growl in her throat.

She recognized the younger Paul, and also saw the terrible difference.

A cold sense of inexorability froze Paul's blood as everything became clear. His prescient vision in the flesh! So, the thinking machines had grown another ghola of Paul Atreides to be their pawn, a second potential Kwisatz Haderach for their private use. Now he understood the recurring dreams of his own face laughing triumphantly, consuming spice, the peculiar image of himself stabbed and dying, bleeding out his life's blood on a strange floor. Just like the one on which he stood now, in this vaulted chamber. It will be one of us....

"It seems we have an abundance of Atreides." The Baron ushered his protégé forward, his hand clamped on the young man's shoulder. Almost apologetically, as if the wary audience cared, he said, "We call this one Paolo."

Paolo pulled away from him. "Before long you will call me Emperor, or Kwisatz Haderach - whichever term grants me the highest respect." Looking on, the old man and Erasmus seemed to find the whole tableau amusing.

Paul wondered how many times he had been trapped by fate, by terrible purpose. How often and in how many circumstances had he seen himself dead from a knife thrust?

Now he cursed the fact that he would face this crisis as a shell of his former self, not armed with the memories and skills of his past.

package. He was gaunt, with bland features.

"Khrono, there you are! We have been waiting."

"I am here, Lord Omnius." The man glanced at the assemblage and then, either in surrender or a flash of independence, his unremarkable human features faded away to reveal him as a pale and sunken-eyed Face Dancer. Setting the box aside, he carefully unwrapped the translucent fabric of the small package to reveal a brownish-blue paste flecked with gold spangles.

"This is a concentrated and unusually potent form of spice." The Face Dancer rubbed his fingertips and lifted them to his inhuman nose, as if the smell pleased him.

"Harvested from a modified worm that grows in the oceans of Buzzell. It will not be long before the witches understand and begin their own operations there to capture the worms and extract the spice. At the moment, though, I hold the only sample of this ultraspice. Its sheer power should be sufficient to plunge the Kwisatz Haderach - one of you - into a perfect prescient trance. You will achieve powers that only prophecy could predict. You will see everything, know everything, and become the key to the culmination of Kralizec."

Erasmus spoke, sounding almost cheery. "After observing how the human race has ruined things without us around to maintain order, the universe definitely needs changing." The robot picked up the blood-wood box and raised the finely etched lid. Inside lay an ornate, gold-hiked dagger, which he picked up with something like reverence. A smear of old blood remained on the blade.

Behind Paul, his mother gasped. "I know that dagger! It's as clear and fresh in my mind as if I just saw it. Emperor Shaddam himself presented it to Duke Leto as a gift, and years later at Shaddam's trial Leto gave it back to him."

"Oh, there is more than that." The Baron's eyes glittered. "I believe the Emperor gave that same dagger to my beloved nephew Feyd-Rautha for his duel with your son.

Unfortunately, Feyd didn't quite succeed in that battle."

"I love convoluted stories," Erasmus added. "Later still, Hasimir Fenring stabbed Emperor Muad'Dib with it and nearly killed him. So you see, this dagger has a long and checkered past." He lifted it, letting the light of the cathedral chamber gleam off the blade.

"The perfect weapon to help us make our choice, don't you think?"

Paul drew the crysknife Chani had made for him from its sheath at his side. The hilt felt warm in his grip, the curved milky blade perfectly balanced. "I have my own weapon."

Paolo danced back warily, looking at the Baron, Omnius, and Erasmus, as if expecting them to leap to his aid. He snatched the gold-hiked dagger from the robot's hand and pointed the sharp tip at Paul.

"And what are they to do with these weapons?" Jessica asked, though the answer was obvious to everyone.

The robot looked at her in surprise. "It is only appropriate that we solve this problem in a particularly human way: a duel to the death, of course! Is that not perfect?"

The worm is outside for all to see, and the worm is within me, part of me. Beware, for I am the worm. Beware!

- Leto II, Dar-es-Balat recordings, in his voice

After Paul and his companions were taken from the no-ship, Sheeana found young Leto II in his quarters. Huddling all alone in the dark, the youth was feverish and trembling. At first she thought he was terrified at having been left behind, but she soon realized he was genuinely sick.

Seeing her, the boy forced himself to his feet. He swayed, and perspiration glistened on his brow. He looked pleadingly at her. "Reverend Mother Sheeana! You're the only one - the only one who knows the worms." His large, dark eyes flicked from side to side. "Can you

hear them? I can."

She frowned. "Hear them? I don't - "

"The sandworms! The worms in the hold. They're calling me, tunneling through my mind, tearing me up inside."

Raising her hand for silence, she paused, deep in thought. All her life, Shaitan had understood her, but she had never received any actual messages from the creatures, even when she'd tried to become part of them.

But now, by extending her senses she did feel a tumultuous thrumming in her head and through the walls of the damaged no-ship. Since the *Ithaca's* capture, Sheeana had ascribed such feelings to the crushing weight of failure after their long flight. But now she began to understand. Something had been scraping through her subconscious, like dull fingernails raking across the slate of her fear. Subsonic pulses of invitation.

The sandworms.

"We have to go to the hold," Leto announced. "They are calling. They ... I know what to do."

Sheeana gripped the boy's shoulders. "What is it? What do we have to do?"

He pointed to himself. "Something of me is inside the worms. Shai-Hulud is calling."

With the no-ship safely trapped in living-metal constructions, the thinking machines paid little attention to the vessel. Apparently, they had wanted to own and control the *Kwisatz Haderach* ... a goal that was not as simple as it sounded, as the Sisterhood had learned long ago. Now that he had Paul Atreides in his machine cathedral, Omnius seemed to think he possessed everything he needed. The remaining passengers were irrelevant prisoners of war.

The Bene Gesserits had planned the creation of their superman over hundreds of generations, subtly guiding bloodlines and breeding maps to produce the long-anticipated messiah.

But after Paul Muad'Dib turned against them and created havoc in their carefully ordered timeline, the Sisters had vowed never to unleash another *Kwisatz Haderach*.

But in the long-ago aftermath, Muad'Dib's twin children had been born before the damage could be fully understood. One of those twins, Leto II, had been a *Kwisatz Haderach*, like his father.

A key turned in Sheeana's mind, unlocking other thoughts. Perhaps in the solemn twelve-year-old

Leto, the thinking machines had a blind spot! Could he be the final *Kwisatz Haderach* they sought? Had Omnius even considered the possibility that the machines might have the wrong one? Her pulse quickened. Prophecies were notorious for misdirection. Maybe Erasmus had missed the obvious! She could hear the inner voice of Serena Butler laughing at the possibility, and she allowed herself to cling to a tiny kernel of hope.

"Let's go to the cargo hold, then." Sheeana took the boy's hand, and they hurried down the corridors and dropchutes to the lower levels.

As they approached the great doors, Sheeana heard explosive thunder from the other side. The frenzied worms charged from one end of the kilometer-long space to the other, smashing into the walls.

By the time they arrived at the access door, young Leto seemed ready to collapse.

"We have to go in," he said, his face flushed. "The worms ... I need to talk with them, calm them."

Sheeana, who had never been afraid of the sandworms before, now hesitated, worried that in their wild state they might not grant safety to her or Leto. But the boy worked the controls, and the sealed door slid aside. Hot, dry air blew onto their faces. Leto waded out and up to his knees in the soft dunes, and Sheeana hurried after him.

When Leto raised his arms and shouted, all seven worms charged toward him like snorting predators, with the largest one - *Monarch* - at the fore. Sheeana could feel the hot wave of their anger, their need for destruction ... but something told her that rage was not directed at either of them. The creatures rose up from the sand and towered over the two humans.

"The thinking machines are outside the ship," Sheeana said to Leto. "Will the worms ... will they fight for us?"

The boy looked forlorn. "They will follow my path if I lay it out for them, but I can't see it yet myself!"

Looking at him, she wondered again if this boy could be the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach, the link in the chain that Omnius had overlooked. What if Paul Atreides was no more than a feint in the final duel between man and machine?

Leto shook himself, visibly bolstering his determination. "But the prior me, the God Emperor, had tremendous prescience. Maybe he foresaw this as well and prepared the beasts. I... trust them."

At this, the worms dipped in unison, as if bowing. Leto swayed, and they swayed with him. For a moment the walls of the hold seemed to recede, and the sand dunes flowed out to eternity. The ceiling disappeared in a vertiginous haze of dust. Suddenly, everything snapped back into focus.

Leto caught his breath and called out, "The Golden Path is coming to meet me! It is time to release the worms - here, and now."

Sheeana sensed the Tightness of this and knew what to do. All systems were still programmed to obey her instructions. "The machines deactivated the weapons and engines, but I can still open the great cargo doors."

She and Leto hurried to the controls in the hall, where she input the commands. Machinery hummed and strained. Then, with a loud clank and a bang, a gap appeared in the long-sealed walls. From the corridor, Sheeana and the boy watched the immense lower doors slide open, like clenched teeth being pried apart.

Tons of sand spilled out in a rushing stream and propelled the sand-worms, like living battering rams, into the streets of the machine capital.

Prescience reveals no absolutes, only possibilities. The surest way to know exactly what the future holds is to experience it in real time.

- from "Conversations with Muad'Dib" by the PRINCESS IRULAN

"A duel makes no sense." The Baron frowned as he looked around the cathedral chamber. "It is wasteful. Naturally, I am convinced my dear Paolo will defeat this upstart, but why not keep both Kwisatz Haderachs for yourself, Omnius?"

"I desire only the best one," the evermind said.

"And we could not be certain of controlling two of them as they struggled for preeminence with their new powers," Erasmus said.

"Whichever of you wins the duel will receive the ultraspice," Omnius announced. "When the winner consumes it, I will have my true and final Kwisatz Haderach. I can then conclude this wasteful nonsense and begin my real work of remaking the universe."

Chani kept one hand on Paul's arm. "How do you know either of them is your Kwisatz Haderach?"

"You could be delusional," Yueh said, and the boy Paolo shot him a glare.

"And why should I cooperate if I win?" Paul said, but the sickening echoes of recurring visions strangled his protest. He thought he knew what was going to happen, or some piece of it.

"Because we have faith." The Baron, a paragon of unholiness, laughed at his own joke, but no one else did.

Paolo drew designs in the air with the tip of his gold-hiked knife. "I have the Emperor's dagger! You were stabbed with it once."

"That won't happen again. This is my day of triumph." But Paul heard the brittleness in his measured words, the vulnerability behind the bravado. He could see no way to avoid the

duel, and wasn't sure he wanted to. In his mind, he drove back the troubling flashes of vision. This perverse version of himself needed to be cut out like a cancer.

The time had come. Paul gathered all of his concentration for the fight. Hardly seeing Chani, he kissed her. The wormtooth dagger she had made felt perfectly balanced in his hand. He had practiced with the crysknife on the no-ship, and he knew how to fight.

I must not fear. Fear is the mind killer.

Young Paolo pressed his lips together in a tight smile. "I can tell you've had the visions, too! See, we are alike in yet another aspect."

"I've had many visions." I will face my fear.

"Not like these." His opponent's knowing smile was maddening, unnerving.... Paul stiffened his resolve. He would not give Paolo the satisfaction of showing dread or uncertainty.

Quicksilver robots appeared and removed the human observers to the sidelines of the expansive hall. The Baron stepped back beside Khrono, his gaze flicking back and forth between young Paolo and the tempting dose of ultraspace. He licked his thick lips hungrily, as if wishing he could try some for himself.

On the smooth combat floor of the chamber, Paul stood poised a couple of meters from Paolo. His younger foe tossed the gold-hilted dagger from hand to hand and smiled at him, showing white teeth.

Calming himself, Paul summoned all the important lessons he had learned: Bene Gesserit attitudes and prana-bindu instruction, the precise muscular training and rigorous attack exercises that Duncan and the Bashar had drilled into all of the ghola children.

He spoke to his fear: I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

It would all culminate here. Paul felt confident that if he rose to the challenge and won, his Kwisatz Haderach powers would surface, and he would be able to go on to defeat the thinking machines. But if Paolo won ... He didn't want to consider that possibility.

"Usul, remember your time among the Fremeni," Chani called from the side of the hall.

"Remember how they taught you to fight!"

"He remembers none of it, bitch!" Paolo slashed the Emperor's knife across the air, as if slitting an invisible throat. "But I am fully trained, a tempered fighting machine."

The Baron applauded, but only a little. "No one likes a braggart, Paolo ... unless, of course, you succeed and prove to everyone that you were merely stating facts."

Paul refused to be controlled by his visions. If I am the Kwisatz Haderach, I'll change the visions. I shall fight. I shall be everywhere at once.

Young Paolo must have been thinking the same thing, for he lunged like a viper. Startled by the abrupt beginning of the duel, Erasmus swept his plush robes aside and stepped quickly out of the way. Apparently he had intended to delineate the rules of the challenge, but Paolo wanted to make it a brawl.

Paul bent backward like a reed and let the Emperor's blade whistle past, within a centimeter of his neck. Young Paolo snickered. "That was just practice!" He held up the dagger, showing the rust-red stains. "I am one step ahead of you, for this knife is already blooded!" "It's more your blood than mine," Paul said under his breath. He drove forward with the crysknife, weaving, making the blade dance.

The younger ghola responded by mirroring Paul's movements, as if the pair had an unconscious telepathic connection. He stabbed to the side, and Paul flowed in the other direction. Was this a form of prescience, Paul wondered, subconsciously foreseeing each blow, or did the two of them know and reproduce each other's fighting styles exactly? They had entirely different training, entirely different upbringings. But still...

Concentrating on the duel, Paul's hearing became a fuzz of static. At first he heard encouragement, gasps, shouts of concern from his mother and Chani, but he blocked everything out. Did he have the potential to become the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach that Omnium was searching for? Did he want to be? He had read the histories, knew the bloodshed and suffering that Paul Muad'Dib and Leto II had both caused as Kwisatz Haderachs. What would the machines try to accomplish by possessing an even stronger

Kwisatz Haderach? Some locked -away part of Paul already had the ability to look where no one else could - into both feminine and masculine pasts.

What other powers lie untapped within me? Do I dare find out? If I win this duel, what will the thinking machines demand of me afterward?

He felt like a gladiator on ancient Terra having to prove himself in an arena. And he had a fatal weakness: Omnius held Chani, Jessica, Duncan, and so many others as hostages. If Paul got his gholia memories back, his feelings for them would be even stronger.

Obviously, that was how Omnius intended to force Paul to cooperate, if he won this duel. His love for his companions would only intensify, and they would suffer because of him. Since the computer evermind had far more patience than any human, the machines could torture and kill these hostages with impunity, take cell scrapings and grow new gholias. Over and over! Perhaps Erasmus would bring back his sister Alia, his father the Duke, or Gurney, or Thufir. Kill them, resurrect them, and kill them again.

Unless Paul Atreides, the Kwisatz Haderach, bowed to their demands, the thinking machines would make his life an unending hell. Or so they intended.

Now he understood the dilemma of his destiny. And again he saw himself dying in a pool of blood. Perhaps some things could not be changed. But if he was a true Kwisatz Haderach, he should be able to defeat such petty tactics.

He fought on with wild passion, driving himself into a sweaty frenzy. Paolo kicked at him with his feet and slashed with the Emperor's dagger. Paul dove, rolled, and the younger gholia pounced on him. The Emperor's blade drove down hard in what would have been a killing thrust, but Paul slipped to the side, barely in time.

The blade slashed his sleeve, cut a thin line of blood on his left shoulder, then clanged against the stone floor. Paolo, his wrist jolted by the sharp impact, barely maintained a grip on the hilt.

On the polished floor, Paul swept his feet sideways, getting them under his rival and kicking upward. He did have the advantage of being physically stronger than a twelve-year-old. Paul grabbed his counterpart's wrist and pulled himself to his feet, but Paolo locked his fingers around Paul's knife arm, preventing the crysknife from stabbing down. Paul pushed, using his leverage to maneuver them both back toward the shimmering lava fountain.

"Not very ... innovative!" The younger gholia's breath rasped as he struggled, and Paul continued to drive him back. The heat from the fountain gushed in all directions.

If he knocked Paolo into the incandescent metal, would he be killing himself - or saving himself?

Paul saw his opponent clearly and could not hate the other gholia. At the core, both of them were Paul Atreides.

Paolo was not innately evil, but had been corrupted by terrible things that had been done to him, things he had been taught, not things done of his own volition. Paul did not let his sympathy for his rival weaken him. If he did, Paolo would not hesitate to kill him and claim victory. But Paul - because he was Paul - would fight with every ounce of his being to save the future of humanity.

Omnius and Erasmus observed without cheering for either fighter. They would accept whichever one proved victorious. Khrone's shadowed, olive-pit eyes held no emotion at all. The Baron was scowling. Paul didn't want to look toward Chani or his mother.

The roaring lava fountain dumped heat into the air. Paul's already sweaty body became slicker. Wiry Paolo used that to his advantage, squirmed, and Paul's grip began to slip.

Suddenly, at the very verge of the fountain, the younger man allowed his knees to buckle.

Paul overcompensated, which threw him off balance. He kneed his opponent in the stomach, but young Paolo had untapped reserves. When Paul raised the crysknife in his sweat-slickened grip, Paolo brought his own hand up backward, using the jeweled hilt of his dagger to smash the base of Paul's knife hand. Tendons twitched in reflexive reaction. The crysknife dropped free, clattered on the edge of the fountain, and tumbled into the molten pool.

Gone.

With the force of dominating vision, stronger than just the knowledge of his own death, Paul realized what he should have known from the beginning: I am not the Kutsatz Haderach that Omnium wants. It isn't me!

Time seemed to slow down and freeze. Was this what Bashar Teg had experienced when he accelerated himself? But Paul Atreides could move no faster than the events around him. They held him captive and squeezed in on him like the steely embrace of Death.

Wearing a venomous grin, young Paolo swung the gold-hiked dagger around in a perfect arc and, with exquisite slowness, drove the point into Paul's side. He slipped the dagger between his opponent's ribs and kept pushing, shoving the deadly point through Paul's lung and up into his heart.

Then Paolo yanked the murderous weapon free, and time resumed its normal speed. From far away, Paul heard Chani screaming.

Blood gushed from his wound, and Paul stumbled against the base of the hot fountain.

It was a mortal wound; there could be no denying it. The prescient voice in his head hammered at him to no purpose. It seemed to be mocking him.

I am not the final Kwisatz Haderach!

He slithered to the floor like a broken doll, barely saw Chani and Jessica running toward him. Jessica had Yueh by the collar and was dragging the Suk doctor over to her bleeding son.

Paul had never known that one body could contain so much blood. With fading vision, he looked up and saw Paolo prancing victoriously, holding the dripping red dagger.

"You knew I would kill you! You might as well have driven in the knife with your own hands!"

It was a perfect reproduction of his visions. He lay on the floor, dying as swiftly as his body would allow.

In the background he heard the Baron Harkonnen's boisterous laughter. The sound was intolerable, but Paul could do nothing to stop it.

When they pour in at once, my memories will be like a sandstorm - and just as destructive. Who can control the wind? If I am truly the God Emperor, then I can control it.

- GHOLA OF LETO II, last preparatory assignment delivered to Bashar Miles Teg

Sandworms poured out of the entrapped no-ship's hold into the carefully ordered machine metropolis. The writhing creatures plowed into the open streets like maddened Salusan bulls bursting from their pens. Beside Leto, watching the hold empty in a deafening rush, Sheeana opened her mouth, and her eyes went wide with surprise.

Through his strange connection to the worms, Leto II's mind surged outward with them into the sparkling city. Standing high above at the doorway to the immense cargo bay, he felt a wave of relief and freedom. Without a word to Sheeana, he dove into the sliding, flowing sand, following the worms in their wild exodus. He let the grit carry him, like a swimmer caught in an undertow being rapidly whisked out to sea.

"Leto! What are you doing? Stop!"

He could not have stopped to answer even if he had wanted to. The current of flowing powder sucked him downward - exactly where he wanted to be. Leto plunged under the sand, and his lungs somehow adapted to the dust, as did all of his senses. Like a sandworm he saw without eyes, and perceived the creatures ahead of him, as if he were looking at them through clear water. This was what he had been born to do, what he had died to do, ever so long ago.

Memories reverberated in him like echoes of the past - not a visceral recollection, but greater than the knowledge he had acquired by reading the Ithaca's archives. Those entries had been about another young man, another Leto II, but still himself. A thought surfaced: My

skin is not my own.

In those days, his body had been covered with interlinked sandtrout, their membranous bodies meshing with his soft flesh and nerves. They had imparted strength to him, enabling him to run like the wind.

Though still in human form, Leto II recalled some of the fantastic power, not from gholia memories but from the pearl of awareness that the original God Emperor had left within each worm descendant.

They remembered, and Leto remembered with them.

Histories had been written by so many people who loathed him, who misunderstood what he had been forced to do. They decried the Tyrant's purported cruelty and inhumanity, his willingness to sacrifice everything for the extraordinary Golden Path. But none of the histories - not even his own testamentary journals - had recorded the joy and exuberance of a young man experiencing such unexpected and wondrous power. Leto remembered it all now.

He swam through the flow of sand to where the seven giant worms writhed, and then burst upward to break through the surface. Knowing instinctively what he had to do, Leto staggered toward the largest worm, Monarch. He caught the small part of the thrashing tail, leapt onto the hard rings, and scrambled up like a bare-footed Caladanian primitive scaling a rough-barked palm tree.

As soon as Leto touched the greatest of the seven worms, his fingers and feet seemed to acquire an unnatural adhesion. He could climb and hold on, as if he were part of the creature. And in a way, that was true. Fundamentally, he and the sandworms were one. Sensing that Leto had joined them, all of the worms paused like enormous soldiers coming to attention. Reaching a perch atop Monarch's curved head, Leto surveyed the sprawling complex of living metal structures, and smelled the strong odor of cinnamon.

From his high vantage point, he watched the city of Synchrony as it shifted buildings into formidable barricades, trying to impede the long-confined sandworms. This was Leto's army, his living battering rams - and he would turn them loose against humanity's Enemy. Dizzy and euphoric in the redolence of spice, Leto held onto the worm's ridges, which parted to expose the soft pink flesh underneath. He found it enticing, and his body longed for the full sensation, direct contact. Leto slid his bare hands between the ring segments, into the soft tissue membrane. There, he felt as if he was touching the nerve center of the beast itself, plunging his fingers into the neural circuitry that joined these primal creatures together. The sensation hit him like a jolt of electricity. This was where he had belonged for eternity. At his behest, the sandworms reared higher, like angry cobras no longer interested in the soothing music of a snake charmer. Leto controlled them now. All seven of the worms went on a rampage through the machine streets, and Omnius could do nothing to stop them. When Leto's mind merged with the largest sandworm, he felt a flood of intense sensations and recalled a similar thing that another Leto II had done thousands of years before.

Again he experienced the raspy feel of fast-flowing sand beneath a long and sinuous body. He relished the exquisite dryness of old Arrakis, and knew what it had meant to be the God Emperor, the synthesis of man and sandworm. That had been the zenith of his experience. But did something even greater lie in store for him?

As a gholia child raised aboard the no-ship, Leto II was never entirely sure how the Tleilaxu had obtained his original cells. Had they been taken when he and Ghanima underwent routine medical inspections as children? If so, an awakened Leto gholia would have only the memories of a normal child, the son of Muad'Dib. What if, however, the cells in Scytale's nullentropy capsule had been stolen from the actual God Emperor in his prime? Some unlikely scraping of his enormous vermiform corpse? Or a tissue sampling by one of the devout followers who had taken the Tyrant's withered, drowned body from the bank of the Idaho River?

As Leto's mind fused with Monarch, and all of the surrounding worms, he realized that it didn't matter. This incredible joining now unlocked everything that was within his gholia body

and within each nugget of awareness buried deep in the sandworms. Leto II finally became his true self again, as well as the conflicted gholah boy he had been - a loner child and an absolute emperor with the blood of trillions on his conscience. He understood in exquisite detail all his centuries of decisions, his terrible grief, and his determination.

They call me Tyrant without comprehending my kindness, the great purpose behind my actions! They don't know that I foresaw the final conflict all along.

In those last years, God Emperor Leto had strayed so far from humanity that he had forgotten innumerable marvels, especially the softening influence of love. But, as he rode Monarch now, young Leto remembered how much he had adored his twin sister Ghanima, the good times they had shared in their father's incredible palace, and how they had been slated to rule the vast empire of Muad'Dib.

Now Leto was everything he had ever been and more, enhanced by the firsthand memories of his own experiences. With his new vision, as fresh precursors of spice from the worm's body pumped through his blood, he beheld the Golden Path extending gloriously before him. But even with this remarkable revelation, he could not quite see around all the corners ahead. There were blind spots.

High atop his worm, young Leto smiled in determination, and with a single thought he sent the serpentine army forward. The leviathans charged between the great buildings, throwing themselves against reinforced barricades and breaking through. Nothing could stop them. Hands still buried deep between the ring segments, Leto II rode with a shout of joy on his lips. He gazed forward through eyes that had suddenly become blue-within-blue, eyes that saw what others could not.

Now that I have ridden one of the sandworms and touched the immensity of its existence, I understand the awe the ancient Fremen experienced, why they considered the worms to be their god, Shai-Hulud.

- TLEILAXU MASTER WAFF, letter to the Council of Masters in Bandalong, dispatched immediately before the destruction of Rakis

The last pair of Waff's sandworm specimens died inside the arid terrarium.

When freeing the first test worms out in the desert, he had kept two with him at the modular laboratory for research, hoping that what he learned would improve their chances of survival. It did not go well.

Waff prayed vigorously each day, meditated on the holy texts he had brought with him, and sought guidance from God on how best to nurture the reborn Prophet. The first eight specimens were now loose, tunneling through the brittle, crusted sand like explorers on a dead world. The Tleilaxu Master hoped they had survived in the blast-zone environment.

In their final days, the last two little worms in his laboratory aquarium became sluggish, unable to process the nutrients he gave them, though the food was chemically balanced to provide the sandworms with what they needed. He wondered if the small creatures could experience despair. When they lifted their round heads above the sandy surface of the holding tank, it seemed as if they had lost their will to live.

And within a week they both perished.

Though he revered these creatures and what they represented, Waff was desperate for vital scientific information with which to better the other worms' chances of survival. Once the specimens were dead, he had little compunction against picking apart their carcasses, spreading their rings, and cutting into the internal organs. God would understand. If he himself lived long enough, Waff would begin the next phase, as soon as Edrik came back for him.

If the Navigator ever came back, with his Heighliner and the sophisticated laboratory facilities aboard.

His own Guild assistants offered their help - persistently - but Waff preferred to work alone.

Now that these men had set up their standalone camp, the Tleilaxu Master had no further use for them. As far as he was concerned, the Guildsmen were free to join Guriff and his treasure hunters in seeking lost spice hoards out in the wasteland.

When one of the bland Guildsmen appeared before him, demanding his attention, Waff easily lost the delicate balance of his thoughts. "What? What is it?"

"The Heighliner should have returned by now. Something is wrong. Guild Navigators are never late."

"He did not promise to come back. When is Guriff's next CHOAM ship due to arrive? You are welcome to depart on it." In fact, I encourage that.

"The Navigator may not be concerned with you, Tleilaxu, but he made promises to us."

Waff didn't care about the insult. "Then he will return, eventually. If nothing else, he will want to know how my new sandworms are doing."

The Guild assistant frowned at the flayed creature spread out on the analytical table.

"Your pets do not appear to be thriving."

"Today I will go out and monitor the specimens I released earlier. I expect to find them healthy, and stronger than ever."

When the flustered Guildsman left, Waff changed into external protective clothing and hopped into the camp's groundcar. The locator signals showed him that the released worms had not ranged far from the ruins of Sietch Tabr. Attempting to be optimistic, he assumed they had found a habitable subterranean band and were establishing their new domain. As more and more worms grew on Rakis, they would become tillers of the soil, restoring the desert to its former glory. Sandworms, sandtrout, sandplankton, mélange. The great ecological cycle would be reestablished.

Reciting ritual prayers, Waff drove across the eerie black-glass desert. His muscles trembled and his bones ached. Like the assembly lines in a war-damaged factory, his degenerating organs labored to keep him alive. Waff's flawed body could fall apart any day now, but he was not afraid. He had died already - many times, in fact.

Always before, he'd had the faith and confidence that a new gholia was being grown for him.

This time, though convinced he would not return to life, Waff was content with what he had accomplished. His legacy. The evil Honored Matres had tried to exterminate God's Messenger on Rakis, and Waff would bring Him back. What greater accomplishment could a man hope to attain in this life? In any number of lives?

Following the tracker signals, he drove away from the weathered mountains, to the dunes. Ah, the new sandworms must have fled out into open terrain, looking for fresh sand in which to bury themselves and begin their lives anew!

Instead, what he saw horrified him.

He easily located the eight fledgling worms. Much too easily. Waff stopped the groundcar and scrambled out. The hot, thin air made him gasp, and his lungs and throat burned.

He could barely see through stinging tears as he hurried forward.

His precious sandworms lay on the hard ground, barely moving. They had cracked the melted crust of the dunes and churned through the soft grainy dirt beneath, only to emerge again. And now they lay dying.

Waff knelt beside one of the weak, failing creatures. It was flaccid, grayish, barely twitching. Another had heaved itself high enough to sprawl across a broken rock, and there it lay deflated and unable to move. Waff touched it, pressed down on the hard rings. The worm hissed and flinched.

"You cannot die! You are the Prophet, and this is Rakis, your home, your holy sanctuary. You must live!" His body was wracked by a spasm of pain, as if his own life was tied to those of the sandworms. "You can't perish, not again!"

But it seemed that the crippling damage to this world was simply too much for the worms. If even the great Prophet Himself could not endure, then these must assuredly be the End Times.

He had heard of it in ancient prophecies: Kralizec, the great battle at the end of the universe.

The crux point that would change every-thing. Without God's Messenger, surely humanity would be lost. The final days were at hand.

Waff pressed his forehead against the dusty, dying creature's yielding surface. He had done everything he could. Maybe Rakis would never again support the behemoth worms. Maybe this was indeed the end.

From what he saw with his own eyes, he could not deny that the Prophet had truly fallen.

People strive to achieve perfection - ostensibly an honorable goal - but complete perfection is dangerous. To be imperfect, but human, is far preferable.

- MOTHER SUPERIOR DARWI ODRADE, defense before Bene Gesserit Council

When the older and inferior Paul Atreides gholia lay dying on the floor, Paolo turned away, pleased with his victory but far more interested in his other priority. He had proved himself to Omnius and Erasmus. The special ultraspice that would unlock all of his prescient abilities was his now. It would elevate him to the next level, to his exalted destiny - as the Baron had taught him for so long. During that time, Paolo had convinced himself that this was what he wanted, brushing aside any nagging qualms or reservations.

Around the cathedral hall, quicksilver robots stood at attention, ready to attack the remaining humans should Omnius give the order. Maybe Paolo himself would decide to issue such a command, once he was in control. He could hear the pleased laughter of the Baron, the sobs of Chani and Lady Jessica. Paolo wasn't sure which sounds he enjoyed more. His greatest thrill was the clear proof of what he had always known: I am the one!

He was the one who would change the course of the universe and control the end of Kralizec, guiding the next age of humanity and machines. Did even the evermind know what he was about to face?

Paolo allowed himself a secretive, amused smile; he would never be a mere puppet for thinking machines. Omnius would soon learn what the Bene Gesserit had long ago discovered: A Kwisatz Haderach is not to be manipulated!

Paolo slipped the bloody dagger into his waistband, strode over to the Face Dancer, and held out a hand to collect the spoils of combat. "That spice is mine."

Khrone smiled faintly. "As you wish." He extended the cinnamony paste. Not interested in savoring it, Paolo quickly consumed a whole messy mouthful, far more than he should have. He wanted what it would unlock within him, and he wanted it right away. The taste was bitter, potent, and powerful. Before the Face Dancer could withdraw the offering, Paolo grabbed more and swallowed another mouthful.

"Not so much, boy!" the Baron said. "Don't be a glutton."

"Who are you to talk about gluttony?" Paolo's retort drew a rumbling chuckle in response.

On the floor where he lay dying, Paul Atreides moaned. Chani looked up in despair from beside her beloved, her fingers dripping with his blood. Her face a grief-stricken mask, Jessica held her son's clenching hand. Paolo trembled. Why was it taking Paul so long just to die? He should have killed his rival more cleanly.

Kneeling over him, Dr. Yueh worked feverishly to save Paul, trying to stanch the flow of blood, but the Suk doctor's deeply troubled face told the terrible story.

Even his advanced medical training was insufficient. Paolo's knife strike had done all the damage it had needed to.

Those people were all irrelevant now. Mere seconds had passed when Paolo felt the potent melange burst into his bloodstream like a lasgun blast. His thoughts came faster, sharper. It was working! His mind was suffused with a certainty that outsiders might have considered hubris or megalomania. But Paolo knew it only as Truth.

He drew himself taller, as if he were growing physically and maturing in all ways, so that he loomed above everyone else in the chamber. His mind expanded into the cosmos. Even

Omnibus and Erasmus now seemed like insects to him, muddling through their grandiose, but ultimately minuscule, dreams.

As if from a great height, Paolo looked down at the Baron, the self-absorbed snake who had spent so many years dominating him, bossing him around, "teaching" him. Suddenly the once-powerful leader of House Harkonnen seemed laughably insignificant.

The Face Dancer Khrone studied the scene, and then - with seeming uncertainty - turned toward the evermind's manifestation as an old man. Paolo saw through all of them with incredible ease.

"Let me tell you what I will do next." In his own ears, Paolo's booming voice sounded like a god's. Even the great Omnibus must tremble before him. Words flowed with the force of a cosmic Coriolis storm, rushing along on a current of ultraspace.

"I will implement my new mandate. The prophecy is true: I will change the universe. As the ultimate and final Kwisatz Haderach, I know my destiny - as do all of you, for your actions led to this prophecy." He smiled. "Even yours, Omnibus!"

The false old man responded with an annoyed frown. Beside him the robot Erasmus grinned indulgently, waiting to see what the just-hatched superman would do. All of Paolo's visions of domination, conquest, and perfect control were based on prescience. He harbored no doubts in his mind. Every detail unfolded before him. The young man continued to spew pronouncements.

"Now that I have come into my true powers, there is no need for the thinking-machine fleet to obliterate the human-inhabited planets. I can control them all." He waved a hand. "Oh, we may have to annihilate a minor world or two to demonstrate our strength - or maybe just because we can - but we will keep alive the vast majority of people, as fodder."

Paolo gasped as even more ideas flooded into his head, building momentum and power.

"Once we have swallowed up Chapterhouse, we will open the Sisterhood's breeding records.

From there, we will implement my master plan of making brilliant, perfect humans, combining whatever traits I choose. Workers and thinkers, drones, engineers, and - occasionally - leaders." He spun toward the old man. "And you, Omnibus, will construct a vast infrastructure for me. If we give our perfect humans too much freedom they'll mess everything up. We must eliminate the wild, troublesome genetic lines." He snickered to himself.

"In fact, the Atreides bloodline is the most unmanageable of all, so I shall be the last Atreides. Now that I have arrived, history needs no more of us." He glanced around, but did not see the man who came to mind. "And all those Duncan Idahos. How tedious they've become!"

Paolo was speaking faster and faster, swept along by intoxicating spice visions.

The look of confusion on even the Baron's face made the young man wonder if anyone here could comprehend him any longer. They seemed so primitive to him now. What if his own thoughts were so grand that they were beyond the understanding of the most sophisticated thinking machines? That would really be something!

He began to pace around the chamber, ignoring glares and gestures from the Baron.

Gradually Paolo's motions became jerky, manic. "Yes! The first step is to sweep away the old, mow down and dispense with the outdated and unnecessary. We must clear a path for the new and the perfect. That's a concept all thinking machines can embrace."

Erasmus stared at him and mockingly reshaped his flowmetal face into a perfect likeness of the old man that represented Omnibus. His expression reflected disbelief, as if he considered Paolo's pronouncements a joke, the rantings of a deluded child. A flare of anger rose within Paolo. This robot wasn't taking him seriously!

Paolo saw the whole canvas of the future unrolling before him, broad strokes revealed by the incredible magnifying power of ultra-spice. Some of the upcoming events became razor sharp, and he discerned more specifics, intricate details. The super-potent melange was even stronger than he had imagined, and the future became intensely focused in his mind, fractal minutiae unfolding before him in an infinite, yet completely expected, pattern.

In the midst of this mindstorm, something else was unleashed from within his cells: All the memories buried there from his original life. With a roar that briefly drowned out even the other clamoring knowledge, he suddenly remembered everything about Paul Atreides. Though the Baron had raised Paolo and the machines had corrupted him into what they imagined would be their puppet, he was still himself at the core.

He scanned the chamber, viewing everyone from a new perspective: Jessica, dear Chani, and himself lying in a pool of blood, still twitching, gasping a last few breaths. Had he done that - a bizarre form of suicide? No, Omnius had forced him. But how could anyone really force a Kwisatz Haderach to do anything? Details of the fight with Paul clashed in his mind, and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to drive back the disturbing images. He didn't want to serve Omnius. He hated the Baron Harkonnen. He could not let himself be the cause of such destruction.

He had the power to change everything. Wasn't he the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach? Thanks to the ultraspace and his own Atreides genes, Paolo now possessed a greater prescience than had ever before been possible. Not even the smallest event could slip past him.

In a glorious tableau, he knew he could see everything about the tapestry of the future. Every tiny detail, if he wanted! No unexplored terrain, no wrinkles or nuances in the topography of events to come.

Paolo paused in his restless pacing and gazed ahead, seeing beyond the walls of the grand machine cathedral, feeling overwhelmed by thoughts that no other human could begin to understand. His eyes changed to more than an intense blue-within-blue, to black and glassy, rippled and impenetrable like a landscape of seared dunes.

In the background, he heard the Baron's voice. "What's the matter with you, boy? Snap out of it."

But the visions continued to shoot at Paolo like projectiles from a repeater gun.

He couldn't dodge them, could only receive them, like an invincible man standing up against ferocious firepower.

Outside in the grand machine city, he heard a tremendous commotion. Alarms rang, and quicksilver robots rushed out of the cathedral chamber to respond. Paolo knew exactly what was happening, could see it from every angle. And he knew how each action would turn out, regardless of how Omnius, the humans, or the Face Dancers tried to change it.

No longer able to move, Paolo stood staring at moments that were yet to come, everything he could influence and all that he could not. Each second sliced into a billion nanoseconds, then expanded and spread out across a billion star systems. The scope of it threatened to overwhelm him.

What is happening? he asked himself.

Only what we brought upon ourselves, whispered the voice of Paul-within.

With new eyes Paolo saw moment by unfolding moment, expanding outward from the machine city, beyond the planet, the whole scope of the Old Empire, the farthest reaches of the Scattering, and the vast thinking-machine empire.

Another nanosecond passed.

The ultraspace had given him absolutely uncontaminated revelation. He saw time folding forward and backward from the focal point of his consciousness.

Perfect prescience.

Caught in the tidal wave of his own power, Paolo began to see much more than he had ever wanted to see. He witnessed every heartbeat a thousand times over, every action of every single person - every being - in the entire universe. He knew how each instant would play out from now until the end of history, and in reverse, to the beginning of time.

The knowledge flooded into him, and he drowned in it.

He watched Paul Atreides in his death throes and saw his counterpart go motionless, haloed by the crimson puddle on the floor, eyes staring into blessed oblivion.

Paolo, who had wanted to be the final Kwisatz Haderach so badly he had killed for it, now became petrified by the utter tedium of his own existence. He knew every breath and

of thinking-machine buildings and detonate them.

The Tleilaxu Master Scytale pushed his way through the crowded corridor, trying to reach Sheeana, looking as if he had something important to say. "Remember, we have more enemies out there than just robots. Omnius has an army of Face Dancers to stand against us."

Duncan handed a flechette rifle to Reverend Mother Calissa, who appeared as bloodthirsty as any Honored Matre. "This will cut down plenty of Face Dancers."

The little man announced with a thin smile, "I have another way to help. Even before we were captured, I began to produce the specific toxin that would target Face Dancers.

I made sixty canisters of it, in case we had to saturate all the air aboard the ship.

Unleash it against the Face Dancers in the city. It may make humans a little nauseated but it is lethal to any Face Dancer."

"Our weapons could do the rest - or our bare hands," Sheeana said, then turned to the other workers. "Get the canisters! There's a battle outside!"

A fierce army of humans streamed out through the gaping hole torn in the Ithaca's hull.

Sheeana led her Bene Gesserits. Reverend Mothers Calissa and Elyen guided groups through the shifting streets in search of vulnerable targets. Reverend Mothers, acolytes, male Bene Gesserits, proctors, and workers rushed out carrying weapons, many of which had never been fired before.

With a loud battle cry, a well-armed Duncan charged forward into the bizarre metropolis.

In his original lifetime, he had not survived long enough to join Paul Muad'Dib and his Fremen Fedaykin in bloody raids against the Harkonnens. The stakes were more desperate now, and he intended to make a difference.

The streets of Synchrony were in turmoil, the buildings themselves pumping and writhing.

Leto's sandworms had already tunneled beneath the foundations of the structures, breaking through the pliable, living metal and knocking down tall towers. Across the galaxy, Omnius's thinking-machine fleet was engaged in numerous climactic battles.

Duncan thought of Murbella out there somewhere - if she was still alive - facing them, fighting them.

Combat robots swarmed the streets. They emerged from between buildings, fashioning and firing projectile weapons from their own bodies. The Bene Gesserits scrambled out of the way, finding shelter. Las-beams cut smoking holes through the fighting machines; explosive projectiles smashed them backward into debris.

Running headlong into the fray, Duncan used his long-dormant Swordmaster skills to attack the nearest robots. He wielded a small projectile launcher as well as a vibrating sonic club that transmitted a deadly blow each time it struck a fighting machine.

From all directions, Face Dancers rallied against the humans, while combat robots turned their attention to the destructive sandworms. The first ranks of shape-shifters advanced with blank and unreadable faces, armed with machine-designed weaponry.

When the first canisters of Scytale's curling, gray-green gas landed among them, the frenzied Face Dancers did not understand what was happening. Soon they began to fall, writhing, their faces melting off their bones. Sensing the danger too late, they scrambled to retreat as Sheeana's fighters launched more poison gas into their midst.

The Bene Gesserits continued to push forward. Their demolition crews planted mines against looming buildings that could not uproot themselves in time. Powerful explosions brought down the shuddering metal towers. Sheeana rushed her teams to shelter until the thunderous collapses were over. Then they surged forward again.

Duncan decided to hang back. In the center of the city, the huge, bright cathedral drew him like a beacon, as if all the intensity of the evermind's thoughts were being channeled through it. He knew Paul Atreides was in that structure, perhaps fighting for his life, perhaps dying.

Jessica was inside, as well. Compelling instincts born of memories from his first life told Duncan where he had to go. He needed to be at Paul's side in the den of the Enemy.

"Keep the machines occupied, Sheeana. Even the evermind can't fight on an infinite number

Now a firmer voice yanked his attention, as if strings were attached to his mind.
"Paul, you must listen to me. Remember what I taught you." His mother's voice. Jessica

...

"Remember what the real Lady Jessica taught the real Paul Muad'Dib. I know what you are. You have the power within you. That is why you aren't dead yet."

He found words within his throat, and they bubbled up through the blood. He was amazed at the sound of his own voice. "Not possible ... I'm not... the Kwisatz Haderach - the ultimate ..."
He was not the superbeing that would change the universe.

Paul's eyes flickered open, and he saw himself lying in the great machine cathedral. That part of the prescient dream had been true. He had seen Paolo laughing with victory and consuming the spice - but now Paolo himself rested on the floor like a fallen statue, frozen and mindless, gazing into infinity. The Baron lay dead, murdered with a look of disbelief and annoyance on his pasty face. So the vision was true, but all the details had not been available to him.

Some kind of commotion came from beside Omnium and Erasmus, and Paul looked there, his gaze bleary. Watcheyes flitted in, displaying images. The old man stood with an impatient expression on his face. The Face Dancer Khrone seemed unsettled. Paul could hear voices shouting. The whole cacophony wove itself in oddly incomprehensible strands through the buzzing tapestry in his head.

"Sandworms attacking like demons ... destroying buildings."

"... a rampage ... armies emerging from the no-ship. A poisonous gas that kills -"

The old man said drily, "I have dispatched combat robots and Face Dancers to fight them, but it may not be sufficient. The sandworms and the humans are causing considerable damage."

Erasmus picked up the conversation. "Rally more Face Dancers, Khrone. You didn't send all of them out."

"That is a waste of my people. If we fight the humans, their poison kills us. If we go out to battle sandworms, we will be crushed."

"Then you will be poisoned, or crushed," Erasmus said lightly. "No need to fret. We can always create more of you."

The Face Dancer's features shifted and blurred, a storm crossing his putty face.

He turned and marched out of the vaulted chamber.

Meanwhile Yueh raised Paul's head, ministering to him with Suk medical techniques.

But Paul folded his eyes shut again and dropped backward into the pain. Again he danced along the edge of the chasm that opened wider and wider before him.

"Paul." Jessica's voice was insistent. "Remember what I told you of the Sisterhood."

Maybe you aren't the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach that the thinking machines want, but you are still a Kwisatz Haderach. You know that, and your body knows it as well. Some of your powers are the same as those of a Reverend Mother. A Reverend Mother, Paul!"

But he found it too difficult to concentrate on her words, or to remember ... As he spiraled deeper and deeper into unconsciousness, her voice faded, and he could not hear or feel his heartbeat anymore. What did his mother mean?

If Jessica now remembered her past life, she also remembered the Spice Agony. Any Reverend Mother had the innate ability to shift her biochemistry, to manipulate and alter molecules within her bloodstream. It was how they selected their pregnancies, how they transmuted the poisonous Water of Life. That was why the Honored Matres had searched so furiously to find Chapterhouse - because only Reverend Mothers had the physical ability to fight off the terrible machine plagues.

Why did his mother want him to remember that?

Trapped inside the darkness, Paul felt the emptiness of his body. Completely bled out.
Silent.

On Arrakis so long ago, he had undergone his own version of the Agony, the first male ever to do so successfully.

For weeks he had lain in a coma, declared dead by the Fremen, while Jessica insisted on keeping him alive. He had seen that stygian place where women could not go, and he had drawn strength from it.

Yes, Paul had that ability within him now. He was a male Bene Gesserit. He could still control his body, every cell, every muscle fiber. At last, he knew what his mother had been trying to tell him.

The pain of dying and the crisis of survival gave him the lever he needed. He stood upon his pain as a fulcrum and used it to pry open his life, his first existence - the memories of Paul Atreides, of Muad'Dib, of himself as Emperor and later as the Preacher. He followed that flood backward to his childhood and his early training with Duncan Idaho on Caladan, including how he had almost been killed as a pawn in the War of Assassins that had ensnared his father.

He remembered his family's arrival on Arrakis, a place Duke Leto knew to be a Harkonnen trap. The memories rushed past Paul: the destruction of Arrakeen, his flight into the desert with his mother, the death of the first Duncan Idaho ... meeting the Fremen, his knife fight with Jamis, the first man he had ever killed ... his first worm ride, creating the Fedaykin force, attacking the Harkonnens.

His past accelerated as it flowed through his mind - overthrowing Shaddam and his empire, launching his own jihad, fighting to keep the human race stable without traveling down that dark path. But he had not been able to escape political struggles, assassination attempts, the exiled Emperor Shaddam's bid for power and the pretender daughter of Feyd-Rautha and Lady Fenring ... then Count Fenring himself had tried to kill Paul

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His body no longer felt empty, but full of experiences and great knowledge, full of abilities. He remembered his love for Chani and his sham marriage to Princess Irulan, as well as the first Duncan gholia named Hayt, and Chani dying while giving birth to the twins, Leto II and Ghanima.

Even now, the pain of losing Chani seemed far greater than the pain he presently suffered. If he died now, in her arms, he would inflict that same anguish upon her.

He remembered wandering off into the desert, blinded from prescience ... and surviving. Becoming the Preacher. Dying in a dusty street surrounded by a mob.

He was now everything he had once been: Paul Atreides and all the different guises he had worn, every mask of legend, every power and weakness. Most important of all, he now had the abilities of a Reverend Mother, the infinitesimal physical control.

Like a beacon in the darkness, his mother had enabled him to see.

Between his last heartbeats, he searched within himself in the deep and drowning place. He found the knife wound inside his heart, saw the mortal damage, and discovered that his body's defenses were incapable of repairing the grievous injuries on their own. He needed to direct the healing process.

Although in the preceding moments he had seemed to be fading, he now sharpened himself and became part of his own heart, which was no longer beating. He saw where Paolo's blade had slashed open his right ventricle, letting blood spill out of the chamber.

His aorta had been nicked, but there was no more blood for it to carry.

Paul brought the cells together and sealed them. Then, droplet by droplet, he began to draw his own blood back from the cavities of his body where it had spilled, and reabsorbed it into his tissues. He literally pulled life back into himself.

* * *

Paul didn't know how long his trance lasted. It seemed as infinite as the death coma caused by touching just a drop of the poisonous Water of Life to his tongue. He became suddenly aware of Chani's grip again. Her hand was warm, and he felt his own flesh, no longer cold and shuddering.

"Usul!" He could hear Chani's faint whisper and detected the disbelief in her tone.

"Jessica, something's changed!"

"He is doing what he needs to do."

When he finally summoned the strength to flutter his eyelids, Paul Muad'Dib Atreides rejoined the living, bringing with him both his old life and his new. In addition to those memories and abilities, he returned with a fantastic, even greater revelation....

Just then, a flushed and bloodied Duncan Idaho burst into the great cathedral hall, knocking sentinel robots aside. Erasmus casually gestured to allow the man to enter. Duncan's eyes went wide when he saw the bleeding Paul propped up by his mother and Chani. Dr. Yueh looked astonished at the miracle before him. Duncan ran toward them.

Trying to pull together his thoughts, Paul placed the tableau around him in the context of his internal knowledge. He had learned much by dying the first time, coming back as a ghola, and nearly dying again. He had always had a phenomenal gift for prescience.

Now he knew even more.

In spite of his miraculous survival and rebirth, he still was not the perfect Kwisatz Haderach, and clearly Paolo was not, either. As Paul's vision cleared, he focused on a realization that none of them had seen - not Omnium, Erasmus, Sheeana, nor any of the gholas.

"Duncan," he said in a hoarse voice. "Duncan, it's you!"

After hesitating for a moment, his old friend came closer, this loyal Atreides fighter who had been through the ghola process more times than any other individual in history.

"You're the one they've been looking for, Duncan. It's you."

Even prescience has its limits. No one will ever know all the things that might have been.

- REVEREND MOTHER DARWI ODRADE

With her arm around his shoulders, Chani rocked Paul, as she shuddered with joy and relief. Fremen prohibitions were so much a part of her that even after seeing his mortal wound and watching him come within a heartbeat of dying in her arms, she still had not shed a tear.

In the machine cathedral, Duncan wrestled with the revelation that the pale and bloodied Paul had given him. "I... am the Kwisatz Haderach?"

Paul nodded weakly. "The final one. The perfect one. The one they were looking for."

The old-man manifestation of Omnium gave the robed form of the independent robot an accusing look. "If this claim is correct, you were in error, Erasmus. You did not allow for the humans to twist fate yet again. You said your predictive calculations were accurate."

The robot remained aloof, even smug. "Only your interpretation of my calculations was flawed. The final Kwisatz Haderach was indeed aboard the no-ship, as I said all along. You drew the obvious conclusion that the one we sought must be Paul Atreides. When the Face Dancer found the bloody knife carrying the cells of Muad'Dib, you falsely reinforced your own conclusion."

Duncan's mind wanted to reject what he was hearing. Even if he truly was the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach, what was he to do with the knowledge?

The old man sneered down at the frozen, useless boy Paolo and the dead Baron. "All that work on our own clone gave us no advantage. Extremely wasteful."

Erasmus shaped his flowmetal face into a sympathetic expression and addressed the recent arrival. "I knew I was drawn to you for a reason, Duncan Idaho. If you really are the Kwisatz Haderach, you stand in a position to alter the course of the universe.

You are a living watershed, the harbinger of change. You can choose to stop this conflict that has made enemies of humans and thinking machines for thousands of years."

Duncan realized that Yueh, Jessica, Chani, and Paul had all played their parts, and now the focus had shifted to him.

Erasmus stepped closer to them. "Kralizec means the end of many things, but that end need

not be destructive. Just a fundamental change. Henceforth, nothing will be the same."

"Not destructive?" Jessica raised her voice. "You said your thinking-machine ships are attacking worlds in the Old Empire. You've already sterilized and conquered hundreds of planets!"

The robot seemed unperturbed. "I did not say our approach was the only way, or even the best one." The old man glowered at Erasmus as if he had been insulted.

Suddenly the sky above the great machine city was torn by multiple booms of displaced air as a thousand Guild Heighliners appeared like storm clouds. Emerging from foldspace, the fleet of huge vessels easily carried enough weaponry to level the continent.

Omnius's old man guise flickered as his concentration was wrenched by the dramatic shift. Across the city of Synchrony, robots buzzed about, fighting the sandworms that continued to rampage. Now they had to shore up defenses against the new enemy overhead.

Inside the vaulted building, Erasmus altered his form again to the kindly old woman, as if he believed this presentation more convincing and compassionate. "I've run probabilities beyond the limits of my original calculations. I believe you have the power, Duncan Idaho - stop these Guildships from destroying us."

"Oh, please stop prattling," Omnius said.

Duncan looked around, crossed his arms over his chest. "I am not afraid of the Guild and their Navigators. If I have to die to end this, I'm willing to do so." Yueh added bravely, "Everyone here has died before."

"It doesn't matter. Let them destroy Synchrony." The old man did not seem overly disturbed. "I am dispersed across many locations. Annihilating this entire planet, this node, will never eradicate me. I am the evermind, and I am everywhere."

A crack sounded at the center of the wide cathedral hall. Then, with a blur and a bang of folded space, an image appeared above the bloodstained floor. The shimmering transmission appeared to be solid one moment and a staticky ghost the next. In moments, the shape clarified to a beautiful and statuesque human woman with classically perfect features. Then she shifted to become stunted and dwarfish, with a blunt, unattractive face, short arms and legs, and an overly large head. After another flicker, the image was nothing more than a disembodied face that wavered in the air. It was as if she could not remember exactly what she was supposed to look like.

Duncan immediately knew who - or what - this was. "The Oracle of Time!"

The face swiveled to scan the people and robots in the great hall, before the image hovered closer to him. "Duncan Idaho, I have found you. I searched for years, but your no-ship and your own ... strangeness protected you."

Duncan no longer questioned the bizarre storm of occurrences around him. "Why did you come now?"

"You emerged from your no-ship only once before on the planet Qelso, but I did not follow you swiftly enough. I sensed you again when your no-ship was damaged and captured. Now, with the thinking machines attacking, I was able to trace the lines of the evermind's tachyon web and follow Omnius to you. I brought my Navigators with me."

"What is this apparition?" the evermind demanded. "I am Omnius. Begone from my world!"

"Once I was called Norma Cenva. Now I am exponentially more than that - far beyond anything a computer network can comprehend. I am the Oracle of Time, and I go where I please."

In the old crone guise, Erasmus reached out like a curious child and touched, but the wrinkled hand passed through her image. "So many of the most interesting humans are women," he mused. The robot experimentally waved fingers through her ghostly likeness, stirring without altering it. She ignored him.

"Duncan Idaho, you have finally come to your realization. Kwisatz Haderach, I tried to protect you. Before you, Paul Muad'Dib and his son Leto the God Emperor were imperfect prophets. Even they realized their flaws. Now through a confluence in the cosmos, the nexus of all nexuses, you have become the singularity in a bold new universe, the vital point from

"We are in the midst of it now. Kralizec is not merely a war, but a point of change."

Her image flickered. "And you are the culmination of it."

"But what about the rest of humanity?" Murbella. "They need to know. How will they understand what has happened?"

"My Navigators will inform them, perhaps even bring their leaders here. First, however, I need to eliminate a threat that should have been gone millennia ago. An enemy I fought ten thousand years before you were first born."

The Oracle slid through the air toward the indignant-looking old man, Omnium. Facing him, she made her voice boom more loudly than the evermind's speakers ever had. "I must ensure that the thinking machines can no longer harm anyone. That was my mission ages ago, when I was merely a woman, when I invented the concept of the fold-space engine, when I discovered the mind-expanding powers of *mélange*. I shall remove you, Omnium."

The evermind laughed, a remote old man's chuckle. The slightly stooped manifestation suddenly grew larger, looming like a giant over her image. "You cannot remove me, for I am not a corporeal being. I am information, so my existence has spread anywhere the tachyon net stretches. I am everywhere."

The female image formed a smile. "And I am more than that. I am the Oracle of Time. Now hear my laughter." In an eerie voice Norma Cenva chuckled long and hard, causing even the oversized Omnium to take a step backward. "I am heard across star systems and eons, across time and space, far beyond the range of your net."

Omnium took another step backward.

"First I crippled your fleet. Now I will rip you out like the weed that you are, and discard you."

"Impossible - " The old man began to dissolve as he retreated into his own network.

"I will extract you - every shred of information from every node." Her misty image became amorphous and seeped around Omnium. He nearly staggered into Erasmus, but the independent robot easily slid out of the way, his old-woman face expressing curiosity and bemusement.

"I will take you to a place where such information is no longer comprehensible, where physical laws do not apply."

Duncan heard the evermind's voice cry out in rage, but it was muffled. In the vaulted hall, the insectile sentinel robots who tried to move forward in the service of Omnium seemed strangely disoriented and sluggish.

"There are many universes, Omnium. Duncan Idaho has visited more than one, and he knows the place of which I speak. I rescued him and his no-ship from it long ago. You, however, will never find your way back."

Duncan considered the incomprehensible struggle before him. Indeed, when he had first stolen the no-ship from Chapterhouse, he had lurched through the fabric of space in a desperate attempt to avoid capture and had taken them to a bizarrely skewed universe. He shuddered to think of it.

"Nothing shall rescue you, Omnium."

"Impossible!" the old man bellowed, losing his physical form and becoming no more than a spangled outline.

"Yes, impossible. Wonderfully so."

The air in the chamber crackled with clouds of electricity that spread thinner and thinner, as the Oracle wrapped herself like a net around the iconic thinking machine.

For an instant, Duncan saw Norma's face superimposed over that of the old man. The two countenances merged into one: Hers. The beautiful woman smiled, and the air filled with sparkling, hair-fine strands of electricity that she drew around her like an elegant cloak.

Then she uprooted herself from reality and vanished into the incomprehensible void, taking with her all traces of Omnium.

Forever.

You see enemies everywhere, but I see only obstacles - and I know what to do with obstacles. Either move them or crush them, so that we can be on our way.

- MOTHER COMMANDER MURBELLA, address to the combined Sisterhood

Even after the Navigators destroyed the bulk of the Enemy fleet in a flurry of unexpected Obliterators, a second wave of machine ships advanced toward Chapterhouse.

The Oracle, upon locating Duncan Idaho and the lost no-ship, had promptly taken most of her Heighliners to Synchrony, only assigning a small percentage to aid in the defenses of other human-inhabited planets. With the outcome of those missions unknown, some or all of the other planets could still be vulnerable. One thing was certain:

At Chapterhouse, Murbella and her defenders faced the remaining machine ships alone.

Through it all, the Mother Commander didn't have much time to process her shock at discovering that Duncan was still alive.

Administrator Gorus groaned. "Will they never stop?"

"No." Murbella scowled at him for forcing her to state the obvious. "They are thinking machines."

High over the Bene Gesserit world, her hundred last-stand vessels hung surrounded by the debris from thousands of destroyed machine battleships. This fight had inflicted a substantial toll on the Enemy, but unfortunately it was not enough.

The new wave of Omnius vessels would not thumb their noses at the human defenders, as the first had. Murbella expected no mercy this time and didn't have much hope for the last-stand ships at other strategic points, either. The machines intended to annihilate Chapterhouse and every other world that stood in their way.

She cursed the clumsy, uncooperative Guild vessels that the Junction shipyards had produced and the worthless weapons the Ixians had supplied. She had to think of something on her own. "I won't just let our ships sit here with their throats bared, like lambs waiting for slaughter!"

"The mathematical compilers controlled our foldspace guidance and standard - "

She shouted at Gorus. "Rip out those damned navigation devices - we'll maneuver our vessels by hand!"

"But we will not know where we are going. We could crash!"

"Then we must crash into the Enemy, instead of each other." She wondered if the machines would feel a need for vengeance when they saw the wreckage of the first wave. Honored Matres certainly would.

The Enemy kept coming. Murbella studied the complex tactical projections. Surely they did not need such a vast number of vessels to conquer the minimally inhabited Chapterhouse. It seemed obvious that the evermind had learned the value of intimidation and showmanship, as well as the wisdom of redundancy.

In the Heighliner control center, two Guildsmen argued with Gorus. One claimed that disconnecting the mathematical compiler was impossible, while the other warned that it was unwise. Murbella ended the debate with the compelling power of Bene Gesserit Voice. The Guildsmen shuddered and, unable to resist her, did as she commanded.

Although the machine forces outgunned them by a substantial margin, Murbella did not flinch from what had to be done. Instead, she allowed herself to reawaken her old Honored Matre anger. This was not a time to calculate odds. It was a time to unleash every bit of destruction her people could muster. Their chances were better now than they had been when this last stand began. If they all embraced viciousness and fought like frenzied Honored Matres, they could inflict significant damage. They might still go down in flames, but if they bought sufficient time for the Oracle and her Navigators to defeat Omnius, Murbella would count it a victory. She just wished she could have seen Duncan one more time.

Murbella turned toward the broad projection plate that magnified the oncoming vessels.

"Arm all weaponry and stand ready to ram. The moment we deplete conventional

armaments, our own ships will become the final weapons. A hundred of us will take out at least as many of their ships."

Up to this point, Gorus had called her battle strategy suicidal. Now, he looked as if he might try something foolish to stop her. "Why not negotiate with them? Would it not be preferable to surrender? We cannot stop them from destroying their targets!"

Murbella fixed her gaze on the Administrator as if he were weak prey. Even the Sisters who had started out as pure Bene Gesserits now reacted with a feral Honored Matre strength. They would never back down.

"And you base this suggestion on the success of your emissaries to the thinking machines? All those emissaries who disappeared?" Murbella's voice sizzled like hot acid.

"Administrator, if you'd like to seek another solution, I would be happy to eject you from an airlock and let you fly across the empty vacuum. As the last breath explodes out of your lungs, maybe you can gasp out your personal surrender terms. Be my guest, if you believe the thinking machines will listen to you."

The desperate-looking Guildsman cringed. Around him, the Sisters moved to take control, ready for a final plunge.

Before Murbella could give the command, though, Janess broke in over their tight-linked channel, "Mother Commander! Something's changed with the machine battleships. Look at them!"

Murbella examined the images on the viewing plate. The Enemy vessels no longer moved in a tight, efficient formation. They slowed and began to spread apart, as if they had no goal, like unmanned sailing ships becalmed on a vast cosmic sea.

Left suddenly leaderless.

To her amazement, the thinking-machine fleet floated listlessly in space.

Even when caught up in his awn myth, Muad'Dib pointed out that greatness is only a transitory experience. For a true Kwisatz Haderach, there are no warnings against hubris, no rules or requirements to follow. He takes from all things and gives to all things, as he wishes. How could we have deluded ourselves into believing we could control such a one?
- Bene Gesserit analysis

After the Oracle vanished, Erasmus stared at the empty space in the center of the vaulted chamber, his head slightly cocked to one side. "Omnius is gone." His voice sounded hollow to Duncan Idaho's ears. "No vestige of the evermind remains in the network of thinking machines."

Duncan felt his own mind racing, expanding, absorbing new information. The terrible Enemy he had sensed for so long - the threat that the Honored Matres had provoked - was no more. By removing the evermind, uprooting it from this universe and taking it elsewhere, the Oracle had disabled the vast thinking-machine fleet, leaving it without its controlling force.

And we still remain.

Duncan didn't know exactly what had changed inside him. Was it simply the knowledge of his *raison d'être*? Had he always had access to this potential without realizing it? Assuming Paul was correct, something had lain dormant inside Duncan for all those years, through all of the lives - original and gholas - a latent power that had grown with each iteration of his existence. Now, like a massive genetic program, he had to figure out how to activate it. Paul and his son Leto II had the blessing and curse of prescience. With their memories restored, each could claim to be a Kwisatz Haderach. Miles Teg had possessed his phenomenal capacity to move at a speed beyond comprehension and might conceivably have become a Kwisatz Haderach himself. The Navigators in the clustered Heighliners overhead could use their minds to see through folds of space and find safe paths for the

great ships to travel. The Bene Gesserits could control their bodies, down to their very cells. All had expanded on traditional human abilities, expressing humankind's potential to exceed expectations.

As the ultimate and final Kwisatz Haderach, Duncan believed he might have the capability to do all of those things and much more, reaching the highest pinnacle of humanity.

Thinking machines had never understood human potential, even though their "mathematical projection" credited the Kwisatz Haderach with the power to end Kralizec and change the universe.

Confidence infused him, and he thought he might discover a way to make grand, epic changes ... but not under the control of the thinking machines. Instead, Duncan would find his own way. He would be a real Kwisatz Haderach, independent as well as all-powerful.

Dispassionately, he gazed upon the old woman in her frumpy floral-print dress and gardening apron, complete with scuffs of dirt. Her face appeared careworn, as if from nurturing people her entire life. "Something of Omnius has vanished from me, but not all." Finally forsaking the old-woman disguise, Erasmus resumed the liquid-metal form of the independent robot attired in an elegant crimson and gold robe. "I can learn much from you, Duncan Idaho. As the new god-messiah of humankind, you are the optimal specimen for me to study."

"I am not another specimen for your laboratory analysis." Too many others had treated him that way, in too many of his past lives.

"A mere slip of my tongue." The robot smiled cheerily, as if attempting to veil his looming violence. "I have long desired a perfect understanding of what it means to be human. Now it seems you have all the answers I so assiduously sought."

"I recognize the myth in which I live." Duncan recalled Paul Atreides making similar pronouncements. Paul had felt trapped by his own mythos, which had become a force beyond his control. Duncan, however, had no fear of the forces that would emerge, either for or against him.

With penetrating vision he saw through, and around, Erasmus and his minions. Across the hall he watched Paul Atreides standing unsteadily, aided by Chani and Jessica after his terrible ordeal. Paul drank from a water flagon, which he had taken from a table near the Baron's body.

Outside, the crashing of sandworms against robotic defenders had begun to subside. Though the huge creatures had not destroyed the machine cathedral, they had caused extensive damage to the city of Synchrony.

At the perimeter of the great chamber, quicksilver robots stood attentively, the charges in their integral weapons glowing in a display of readiness. Even without the evermind, Erasmus could direct these machines to fire a deadly barrage against the humans in the vaulted room. The independent robot could attempt to kill every mortal here in a show of petulant revenge. And perhaps he would make the effort....

"Neither you nor your robots can make any difference here," Duncan warned. "All of you are far too slow."

"Either you are overconfident, or you are fully aware of what you can do." The flowmetal smile tightened, just a little, and the bright optic threads glistened a bit more.

"Perhaps it is the latter, and perhaps not." Somehow, Duncan knew with absolute certainty that Erasmus meant to unleash all the destructive power under his control, wreaking whatever havoc he could.

Before the robot made half a turn, Duncan was upon him with all the speed Miles Teg had shown, knocking him backward. Erasmus crashed to the floor, his weapons disabled.

Was it just a test? Another experiment?

Duncan's heart pounded and his body radiated heat as he stood over the robot, but he felt exhilarated, not exhausted. He could keep fighting like this against any machines Erasmus chose to send against him. At that thought, he left the independent robot where he had fallen, dashed at hyperspeed around the circle, and battered the silvery sentinel robots with

quick kicks and punches until they shattered into debris. It was so easy for him now. Before the metal pieces had finished falling to the floor, he was back, looming over Erasmus.

"I sensed your doubts as well as your intentions," Duncan said. "Admit it. Even as a thinking machine, you wanted more proof, didn't you?"

Lying on his back and looking upward through the hole in the dome at the thousands of huge Guild Heighliners in the sky, Erasmus said, "Assuming you are the long-awaited superman, why don't you simply destroy me? With Omnium gone, removing me would assure the victory of humanity."

"If the solution were that simple, a Kwisatz Haderach would not be needed to implement it." Duncan surprised Erasmus, and himself, by reaching down and helping the robot to his feet.

"To end Kralizec and truly change the future requires more than just the annihilation of one side or the other."

Erasmus examined his body core and his robes to ensure his appearance, then looked up with a broad smile. "I think we just might have a meeting of the minds - something I never really achieved with Omnium."

When the time comes for our Great Unmasking, our foes will be surprised by what has been disguised in front of them since the very beginning.

- KHRONE, communiqué to Face Dancers

Now that the Oracle was gone, several of the Navigators' giant Heighliners overhead folded space and disappeared from Synchrony without explanations or farewells.

Throughout the city, sandworms continued to destroy the living metal buildings. Because Omnium had never allowed them autonomy, the robotic defenders were unable to function effectively without connecting to the evermind. The vaulted hall filled with resounding silence. Then with a loud crash, the high doors swung open. Dressed in black and followed by a throng of Face Dancers, Khrone marched in from the bright machine streets.

Identical, blank-faced drones swarmed into the room. Scytale's poison gas had killed some of the shape-shifters, but many had avoided the battle entirely.

Out in the sprawling machine city, countless Face Dancers had pretended to stand against the rampaging sandworms, but secretly melted away from the barricades the robotic soldiers had set up. Khrone had taken pleasure in watching the worms destroy the great flowmetal buildings, smashing thousands of thinking machines.

Clearing the way. Making our job easier.

Khrone offered a skeletal smile as he swept forward. "I never cease to be entertained by the erroneous deductions of those who think they control us." In his mind, a Face Dancer victory was now assured.

"Explain yourself, Khrone." Erasmus seemed only mildly curious.

Ignoring the humans and their dead, Khrone faced the independent robot, who stood by Duncan Idaho. "This war has been in process for five thousand years. It was never Omnium's idea, anyway."

"Oh, our war has been building for far longer than that," Erasmus pointed out. "We escaped after the Battle of Corrin fifteen thousand years ago."

"I'm referring to a completely different war, Erasmus - one you never realized was taking place. From the moment the first advanced Face Dancers were dispatched by our creator, Hidar Fen Ajidica, we began our manipulations. When we encountered your thinking-machine empire, we allowed you to create more and more of us. Yet the moment Omnium let us in, the Face Dancers became his true masters! We shared with you all the lives we had gathered, letting you believe you were becoming increasingly superior to us and to humans. But we Face Dancers were in control all along."

"There is a diagnosis for your mental condition," Dr. Yueh said boldly. "You have delusions

of grandeur."

Khrone's lips peeled back from blunt, perfect teeth. "My statements, based as they are on accurate information, can hardly be called delusions."

The amused expression on Erasmus's face did not change. Khrone found it maddening, so he raised his voice, "You thinking machines helped us implement our Face Dancer plans, all the while believing that we served you. But it was exactly the opposite. You were, in fact, our tools."

"All machines began as tools," Duncan pointed out, looking from Erasmus to the Face Dancer leader.

Khrone was not impressed. So this was the man who had revealed himself as the final Kwisatz Haderach? Nor could he understand why the independent robot was not more upset, since he prided himself on employing his artificial emotions.

Khrone continued. "Under your guidance, Erasmus, biological facilities run by thinking machines manufactured millions of enhanced Face Dancers.

At first, we ventured into human society as scouts, swiftly infiltrating the fringes of the Scattering, and then the Old Empire. We easily duped the Lost Tleilaxu into believing we were their allies. Wherever humans remained, Face Dancers quietly intruded.

We lived long, and accomplished much."

"Exactly as we instructed you to do," Erasmus said, sounding bored with the lecture.

"Exactly as we wished to do!" Khrone snapped back. "Face Dancers are everywhere, a hive mind more advanced than any extrasensory human linkages, more powerful than the network of Omnius. So swiftly and easily we accomplished our aims."

"And our aims, as well," Erasmus said.

Galled by the robot's stubborn refusal to recognize defeat, Khrone felt rage building within him. "Over the centuries, we prepared for the day when we would implement our plan and eliminate Omnius. We never guessed that the Oracle of Time would do it for us." He chuckled softly. "Your empire has fallen. We have superceded all thinking machines. And now that Omnius's fleet and plagues have brought humanity to its knees, we can activate our hidden Face Dancer cells - everywhere, simultaneously. We will take control." He planted his fists on his hips. "It is already over for machines, and for humans."

Behind him, all the identical Face Dancers wore blank expressions. Khrone's featureless face had been duplicated many times over.

"An interesting and insidious plan," Erasmus said. "Under other circumstances, I might applaud you for your ingenuity and duplicity."

"Even if you could rally your robots to kill those of us on Synchrony, it would be of no use. I am reproduced everywhere." The Face Dancer scoffed. "Omnibus thought he was seeding the universe for his own conquest, but the true seeds of his downfall were right under his mechanical nose."

Erasmus began to laugh. It started as a chuckle that he imitated from an ages-old dataset, and he added components sifted from other recordings. The resultant sounds were quite enjoyable to himself, and he was sure they were convincing to the others.

Over his long, long lifetime, the unusual robot had expended a great deal of effort in studying humans and their emotions. Laughter particularly intrigued him. An early step, which had required centuries of deep thought, had been to understand the concept of humor, to learn what circumstances might elicit this strange, noisy response from a human. In the process, he had compiled a library of his favorite laughter samples.

A delightful repertoire.

He played them all now through his mouth speakers, much to the bewilderment of the Face Dancer Khrone. But Erasmus realized that not even these favorite chuckles, snickers, and guffaws were adequate to express the true hilarity that he currently felt.

"What is so funny?" Khrone demanded. "Why are you laughing?"

"I am laughing because even you don't understand the trick that was played on you."

Erasmus chuckled again, and this time he created a unique sound that contained flavors

and undertones of his best borrowed recordings. This was truly his individual sense of humor, something genuinely original. After such long and difficult study, Erasmus was pleased with the new comprehension he had achieved. Surely this was worth all the tribulations of Kralizec!

The independent robot turned to Duncan Idaho, who - after listening to the betrayals upon betrayals - had the faraway look of a man trying to join mismatched puzzle pieces.

Erasmus knew that Duncan hadn't the faintest idea of how to achieve his full potential. Just like so many other humans! The robot would have to guide this one.

Ignoring Khrone, he spoke to Duncan. "I am laughing because the inherent differences between humans and Face Dancers are painfully hilarious. I hold great fondness for your species - as more than specimens, more than pets. You have never ceased to astonish me. In defiance of my most careful predictions, you still manage to do the unexpected! Even when those actions work to the detriment of thinking machines, I can appreciate them for their uniqueness."

Khrone and his contingent of Face Dancers closed in, as if expecting to mop up these few robots and humans easily. "Your words and laughter are meaningless."

Jessica supported a still-weak Paul, while Chani picked up the bloodied dagger that Paolo and Dr. Yueh had both used. Now that she had her past memories, Chani held the weapon in the manner of a true Fremen woman, ready to defend her man.

Erasmus smiled to himself. His own confrontation with Duncan had shown only the tip of the iceberg of the Kwisatz Haderach's powers. The robot had found it terribly exciting for a few moments, placing himself at the brink of death, or at least its equivalent for a machine.

The Face Dancers would be in for quite a surprise if they thought Duncan Idaho and these other humans would be an easy conquest. But Erasmus had an even greater surprise to spring.

"What I mean, my dear Khrone, is that while humans can astonish me, Face Dancers are woefully predictable. It's a shame. I had hoped for something more original in your case."

When Khrone scowled, every one of the Face Dancers in the chamber mimicked his expression, like reflections in a hall of mirrors. "We've already won, Erasmus. Face Dancers control every foothold, and you have no place to hide from us. We will rise up across the human planets and on all machine worlds. We will look back upon the path of destruction, and only we will remain."

"Not if I choose to stop it." Erasmus's flowmetal face shifted into a placid, disappointed expression. "Omnius might have been convinced that you all were our meek puppets, but I never believed as much. Who can ever trust a Face Dancer? Among humans, that saying has become a cliché. You and your counterparts did exactly what I predicted you would do. How could you not? You are what you are. It was practically programmed into you." The robot gave a sad shake of his head.

"While you Face Dancers were laying down your schemes, sending out spies, and establishing your presence, I watched patiently. Though you thought you were hidden from Omnius, you weren't clever enough. I saw everything you did and allowed it to happen because I found your petty power plays amusing."

Khrone adopted a fighting stance, as if ready to attack the robot with bare hands.

"You know nothing of our activities!"

"Now who is drawing conclusions from insufficient data? Ever since the end of the Butlerian Jihad, when Omnius and I were sent out here on our long exile to start the machine empire all over again, I was the one in control. I allowed Omnius to continue believing he ruled everything and made all the decisions, but even in his first incarnation he was a self-aggrandizing annoyance, overconfident and unconscionably stubborn. More so than most humans!" The robot swirled his plush robes. "The evermind never learned to adapt and never bothered to face his mistakes, so I refused to let him ruin our chances again. Thus, I took control of the Face Dancer program from the moment the first of you arrived on our fringe planets."

Khrone remained defiant, though his voice carried a slightly uncertain undertone.

"Yes, you manufactured us - and made us stronger than ever."

"I manufactured you, and I wisely planted a fail-safe routine in each and every Face Dancer. You are biological machines, evolved and manipulated over thousands of years, according to my own exacting specifications." Erasmus moved closer. "A tool should never confuse itself with the hand that wields it."

The gathered Face Dancers seemed to hold the balance of power, and Khrone did not back down. His features shifted into a monstrous, demonic mask of fury. "Your lies cannot control us any longer. There is no fail-safe."

Erasmus emitted a poignant sigh. "Wrong again. This is my proof." With a precise nod of his burnished head, he triggered the implanted shutdown virus that was genetically buried within each of the customized, "enhanced" Face Dancers.

Like a toy discarded by a petulant child, the Face Dancer standing immediately behind Khrone crumpled lifeless to the floor, arms and legs akimbo, an expression of momentary shock animating his face before it reverted to its blank state.

Khrone stared, unable to comprehend. "What are - "

"And this." Erasmus nodded again. With a swift sighing thump, the throng of Face Dancers in the cathedral chamber also dropped, an army scattered in death as if mowed down by projectile fire, leaving Khrone alive to accept his utter defeat.

Then, after stretching out the moment for effect, the independent robot said, "And this. Your services are no longer required."

With his face twisted in rage and desperation, Khrone threw himself toward Erasmus - only to fall to the stone floor, as dead as the rest of his brethren.

Erasmus turned to Duncan Idaho. "So, Kwisatz Haderach - as you see, I control fundamental parts of our intriguing game. I would not suggest my powers are as great as your own, but in this particular case, they are quite useful."

Duncan did not show any awe. "How far will your shutdown virus spread?"

"As far as I wish. Even though the Oracle of Time extracted Omnius from the tachyon net, the strands of that vast interconnected mesh still exist in the fabric of the universe." Erasmus twitched his head again and sent out a signal. "There, I just dispatched my trigger to every modified Face Dancer throughout human civilization.

They are dead now. All of them. They numbered in the tens of millions, you know."

"So many!" Jessica exclaimed.

Letting out a whistle, Paul said "Like a silent jihad."

"You would never have known most of them. With memory imprints, some even believed they were human. All across what remains of your former empire, a great many people are probably quite surprised as comrades, leaders, friends, and spouses drop dead where they stand and transform into Face Dancers." Erasmus laughed again. "With a single thought I've eliminated our enemies. Our common enemy. You see, Duncan Idaho, we need not be at odds."

Duncan shook his head, feeling oddly sickened. "Once again, the thinking machine sees total genocide as a simple solution to a problem."

Now Erasmus was surprised. "Don't underestimate the Face Dancers. They were ... evil. Yes, that is the correct word. And since each one was fundamentally part of a hive mind, they were all evil. They would have destroyed you, and they would have destroyed us."

"We've heard that kind of propaganda before," Jessica said. "In fact, I've heard it cited as the primary reason why all machines need to be destroyed."

Duncan looked at all the dead Face Dancers, realizing how much damage the shape-shifters had done for centuries, whether they were guided by the evermind or by their own schemes. Face Dancers had killed Garimi, sabotaged the no-ship, and caused the death of Miles Teg ...

Looking at the robot, Duncan narrowed his eyes. "I can't say I'm terribly sorry, but there was no honor in what you - or the Face Dancers - did here. I cannot agree with it. Don't think we

are indebted to you."

"On the contrary, it is I who owe so much to you!" Erasmus could barely contain his pleasure.

"That is exactly the way I'd hoped you would react. After thousands of years of study, I believe I finally understand honor and loyalty - especially in you, Duncan Idaho, the very embodiment of the concept. Even after an event that obviously helps your race, you still object to my tactics on a moral basis. Oh, how wonderful."

He looked down at all the Face Dancers, the astonished and confused expression on Khrone's face. "These creatures are the exact opposite. And my fellow machines are not loyal or honorable, either. They merely follow instructions because they are programmed to. You have shown me what I needed to know, Kwisatz Haderach. I am very much in your debt."

Duncan stepped closer, searching for some way to access the new abilities he knew lay dormant inside him. Just knowing he was the much-anticipated Kwisatz Haderach was not enough. "Good. Because now I want something from you."

A single decision, a single moment, can make the difference between victory and defeat.

-

BASHAR MILES TEG, Memoirs of an Old Commander

"It's a trap - it must be." Murbella stared at the vast yet motionless enemy fleet.

The human ships were still outnumbered hundreds to one, but the thinking machines made no move. The Mother Commander froze, holding her breath. She had expected to be annihilated.

But the Enemy did nothing. "This is deeply unnerving," she whispered.

"All backup systems ready, as you ordered, Mother Commander," one of the pale young Sisters announced. "It may be our only chance to cause some damage."

"We should open fire!" Administrator Gorus cried. "Destroy them while they are helpless."

"No," said another Sister. "The machines are trying to lure us from our defensive positions. It's a trick."

Everyone on the navigation bridge stared at their dark and quiet foe, afraid to breathe.

The robot vessels just drifted out there in the cold void.

"They have no need to trick or trap us," Murbella finally said. "Look at them! They could destroy us any time they like. It was foolish, impulsive Honored Matre violence that triggered this very war in the first place."

The Mother Commander narrowed her gaze, studying the overwhelming force of warships. Utter stillness. "This time, I will take a moment to understand before we just open fire."

Murbella's eyes blazed as she struggled to comprehend. She remembered when her eyes had been a hypnotic green - an alluring feature that had helped her ensnare Duncan.

Strange, the thoughts that haunt you when death waits at your door ...

At the time of Duncan's escape from Chapterhouse, no one had known the identity of the outside Enemy. Now, the Oracle had said Duncan was on Synchrony at the heart of the thinking-machine empire. Had he managed to get away? If Duncan was still alive, she could forgive him anything. How she longed to see him again, and hold him!

The painful silence stretched out. Another excruciating minute, followed by another. Murbella had seen the thinking-machine forces on the move from planet to planet, and the aftermath of their strikes. She had seen the plagues they disseminated and had buried her own daughter Gianne with so many others in an unmarked grave out in the Chapterhouse desert.

"No matter what the reason," she said, "the machines have never been so vulnerable."

From her nearby ship, Janess gruffly acknowledged. "If we are going to die in battle, why not take out as many of the Enemy as we can?"

Murbella had already prepared for this moment. She issued her orders, each word carrying

a sharp edge. "All right, I don't know why, but we've got an unexpected reprieve. We may be few, but we'll be like D-wolves with sharp fangs. We'll rely on our own eyes and skills."

One of the Guildsmen who had rushed aboard the ship at the last minute reacted with alarm. He was a bald and pasty-faced man with tattoos on his scalp. "Aiming our weapons will require precision maneuvering, Mother Commander! We can't do it without assistance." Murbella shot him a wilting glare. "I'd rather rely on my eyes than on Ixian systems. I've already been deceived once today. Target the largest ships. Destroy their weapons, disable their engines, and move on to others."

Janess transmitted to the clustered defenders, "The wreckage of all those Enemy ships can provide cover if the machines fire back at us."

The bald Guildsman objected again. "Every piece of debris is a navigational hazard. No human can react fast enough. We need the Ixian devices back online, at least in a limited fashion."

Even Gorus looked at him strangely. Suddenly, the bald Guildsman shouted, turned from his technical station, and collapsed. Near him, without a sound, another of the new crewmen dropped dead in his tracks. A third slumped over on the upper navigation deck.

Suspecting that their ships were under some kind of invisible attack from a silent, deadly weapon, the Sisters reacted quickly, trying to determine what was happening.

Murbella hurried to the tattooed Guildsman, rolled him over, and watched his puttylike face shift to the blank visage of a Face Dancer.

Gorus looked around as if he finally realized how he had been betrayed. The other two fallen bodies also shifted. All Face Dancers! Murbella glared at the Administrator.

"You guaranteed me that everyone had been tested!"

"I spoke the truth! But in the rush to launch your whole fleet, someone might have been missed. And what if one or more of the testers happened to be a Face Dancer?"

She turned from him in disgust. A flurry of transmissions arrived from the other defender vessels, all reporting dead Face Dancers onboard. Amidst the jumble of comm activity, Janess's voice came in sharp and clear. "Five Face Dancers were on my vessel, Mother Commander. All are now dead."

Meanwhile, the listless Enemy ships continued to drift apart, though they could easily have pressed their attack on Chapterhouse and achieved victory. Murbella's thoughts spun, wrestling with yet another mystery.

Face Dancers among us, working for Omnium. But why did they drop dead?

Not long ago, the Oracle of Time had whisked her numerous Heighliners away from this battlefield to Synchrony ... to Duncan. Had the Oracle and her Navigators struck a blow that sent ripples through the entire Enemy fleet? Had Duncan! Something seemed to have shut down the thinking-machine battle fleet and all their shape-shifter spies.

Murbella indicated the dead Face Dancers sprawled near her. "Get those monstrosities out of here." Not bothering to hide their revulsion, several Sisters dragged the scarecrowish bodies away.

Murbella focused on the screen with such intensity that her eyes burned. The Honored Matre part of her wanted to strike and kill in a frenzy, but all of her Bene Gesserit training screamed for her to understand first. Something essential had changed here. Even the voices of Other

Memory couldn't counsel her. Thus far, they had been mute.

Representatives of the remaining populations on Chapterhouse transmitted urgent messages, demanding reports from the front, wondering how long they might expect to survive.

With no answers for them, Murbella didn't respond.

Janess transmitted a brash suggestion. "Mother Commander ... should we board one of the Enemy ships? It could be our best chance to discover what's happened."

Before she could answer, space distorted again around them. Four huge Heighliners

reappeared, emerging in the debris-strewn battle zone so close to the human defenders that Murbella shouted for evasive action. The Guild pilot on one of the nearby ships reacted with an exaggerated maneuver, pulling his heavy cruiser out of the way and nearly colliding with Janess's vessel. Another careened into a debris field of destroyed first-wave machine ships.

A third defender acted impulsively and opened fire on the silent thinking-machine fleet, launching a volley of explosive projectiles into the conical nose of the nearest machine battleship. Fiery eruptions burst out in a repeating pattern along the Enemy vessel's hull. Alarms rang out, and Murbella demanded reports, wondering if the machines would respond with a massive display of force. No more caution. "Prepare to fire! All ships, prepare to fire! Hold nothing back!"

But even thus provoked, the darkened Omnius fleet remained motionless. The Enemy vessel damaged in the impulsive barrage careened in a slow drift, still burning. Very slowly it crashed into an adjacent machine ship and caromed off, sending them both spinning. The Enemy ships did not fire a single return shot. Murbella couldn't believe it. In the midst of the surprise and mayhem, a Navigator's voice sounded calm and otherworldly. "The Oracle of Time has sent us here to locate the commander of the human forces."

Murbella pushed her way to a commline station. "I am Mother Commander Murbella of the New Sisterhood ... of all humanity."

"I have orders to escort you to Synchrony. I will now take command of your foldspace engines."

Before her Guildsmen could scramble to their stations, the Holtzman engines hummed at a higher pitch. Murbella felt a familiar shifting sensation.

It is too simplistic to state that humans are the enemies of all thinking machines. I strive to understand these creatures, but they remain incomprehensible to me. Even so, I greatly admire them.

- ERASMUS, private files, secure database

"You want something from me?" Erasmus seemed to find Duncan's demand amusing. "And how will you force me to obey?"

The man's lips quirked in a faint smile. "If you truly understand honor, robot, I won't need to. You will do what's right and pay your debt."

Erasmus was genuinely delighted. "What else do you wish from me? Isn't it enough that I eliminated all Face Dancers?"

"You and Omnius were responsible for far more mischief than those shape-shifters."

"Mischief? It was rather more than mischief, wasn't it?"

"And to atone for it, there's something you need to do." Duncan's attention was entirely focused on the robot, not on the dead Face Dancers, not on the destructive sounds of sandworms outside in the city. Paul, Chani, Jessica, and Yueh all remained quiet in the chamber, watching him.

"I am the final Kwisatz Haderach," Duncan said, feeling the nascent abilities embedded within him all the way down to his DNA, "yet I need to comprehend so much more. I already understand humans - maybe better than anyone else - but not thinking machines.

Give me a good reason why I shouldn't just eliminate you all, now that the thinking machines are weakened. It's what the evermind would have done to us."

"Yes, it is. And you are the final Kwisatz Haderach. The decision is yours." Erasmus seemed to be waiting for something, his optic threads gleaming like a cluster of stars.

"And is there a way that doesn't require the annihilation of one or the other? A fundamental change in the universe - Kralizec." Duncan stroked his chin, thinking.

"Omnius's fleet contains millions of thinking machines. They're not destroyed, but simply without guidance, correct? And I believe your empire contains hundreds of planets, many of which would never be habitable to humans."

With his robes flowing around him, the platinum robot began to stroll through the great vaulted hall, stepping over Face Dancer corpses that lay strewn everywhere like marionettes with their strings cut. "That is an accurate assessment. Do you want to find them all, destroy them all, hoping you never miss one? Now that they are without the evermind, it's even possible that some of the more sophisticated machines could develop independent personalities during a time of long deprivation, as I did. How confident are you in your abilities?"

Duncan followed him closely. Several times, Erasmus glanced back at him, and made an odd series of expressions, from inquisitive scowls to tentative smiles. Did he see a bit of fear there, or was it feigned? "You're asking me if I want victory ... or peace." It was not a question.

"You are the superhuman. I say it again - decide for yourself."

"Through more lifetimes than I can count, I've learned patience." Duncan took a long, deep breath, using an old Swordmaster technique to center his thoughts. "I'm in a unique position to draw both sides together. Humans and machines are both battered and weakened. Do I choose extermination for one side as the solution?"

"Or recovery for both?" Erasmus stopped, and with a blank expression faced the man.

"Tell me, what precisely is that dilemma? Omnius has been ripped from the universe, and the rest of the thinking machines have no leadership. In one swift blow I have expunged the entire Face Dancer threat. I fail to see anything left to solve. Hasn't the prophecy come true?"

Duncan smiled. "As is the case with so many prophecies, the details are vague enough to convince any gullible mind that everything was 'foretold.' The Bene Gesserit and their Missionaria Protectiva were masters at that." He looked closely at the robot.

"And so, I think, are you."

Erasmus seemed both surprised and impressed. "What are you suggesting?"

"Since you were in charge of the 'mathematical projections' and the 'prophecies' based on them, you were in a position to write predictions however you wished. Omnius believed everything."

"Are you saying I made up the prophecies?" Erasmus asked. "Perhaps as a way to guide an evermind stubbornly intent on a narrow-minded course of action? Perhaps to bring us precisely to this juncture? A very interesting hypothesis. One worthy of a true Kwisatz Haderach."

The grin on his face seemed more genuine than ever.

Smiling coolly, Duncan said, "As the Kwisatz Haderach, I know there are - and always will be, even as I evolve - limitations on my knowledge and my abilities." He tapped the robot in the center of his chest. "Answer me. Did you manipulate the prophecies?"

"Humans created countless projections and legends long before I existed. I simply adapted the ones I liked best, generated the complex calculations that would produce the desired projections, and fed them to the evermind. Omnius, with his usual myopia, saw only what he wanted to see. He convinced himself that in the 'end' a 'great change in the universe' required a 'victory' for him. And for that he needed the Kwisatz Haderach. Omnius learned many things, but he learned arrogance too well." Erasmus swirled his robes. "No matter what the evermind or the Face Dancers thought - I have always been in control."

Raising his hands, the robot gestured to the sentient metal cathedral around them, indicating the whole city of Synchrony and the rest of the thinking-machine empire.

"Our forces are not entirely leaderless. With the evermind gone, I now control the thinking machines. I have all the codes, the intricate, interlinked programming."

Duncan had an idea that was part prescience, part intuition, and part gamble. "Or the final Kwisatz Haderach can take control."

"That seems a much neater solution." An odd expression moved across the robot's flowmetal face. "You interest me, Duncan Idaho."

"Give me the codes and the access I need."

"I can give you more than that - and, yes, it will require much more. A whole machine empire, millions of components. I would have to share an ... entirety with you, just as my Face Dancers shared all those marvelous lives. But for a Kwisatz Haderach, that would be just the thing."

Before the robot could laugh again, Duncan reached forward and grabbed the platinum hand that extended from the plush sleeve. "Then do it, Erasmus." He pressed closer, reached out his other hand and pressed it against the robot's face in a curiously intimate gesture. Prescience seemed to be guiding him.

"Duncan, this is dangerous," Paul said. "You know it."

"I'm the one who's dangerous, Paul. Not the one in danger." Duncan pulled himself to within inches of Erasmus, feeling all the possibilities roil within him. Though there were troublesome blind spots in the future, pitfalls and traps he might not be able to foresee, he felt confident.

The robot paused, as if calculating, then gripped Duncan's hand and - in a like gesture - reached out with the other to touch his face. Duncan's dark brows knitted as he experienced strange sensations. The cool metal felt alarmingly soft, and he almost had the sensation of falling into it. He extended himself, stretching his mind toward the uncharted territory of the independent robot's thoughts, just as Erasmus did the same to him. The robot's fingers elongated, spreading out over Duncan's hand like a glove. As flowmetal covered Duncan's wrist and ran up his forearm, it felt biting cold as Erasmus began to talk. "I sense a growing trust between us, Duncan Idaho."

As moments passed, Duncan couldn't tell if he was taking from the robot, or if Erasmus was surrendering what the nascent Kwisatz Haderach needed, everything he needed. And, though the two of them were fused, Duncan had to go further. A viscous, metallic substance covered his arm like the sandtrout that had engulfed young Leto II's body, so long ago.

I hear the clarion call of Eternity beckoning me.

- LETO ATREIDES II, records from Dar-es-Balat

With the machine city heavily damaged and the evermind Omnium gone, the major components of Synchrony stopped moving. The buildings no longer pumped and shifted like interlocking puzzle pieces, no longer morphed into strange shapes. Like an immense broken engine, the city had ground to a complete halt, leaving many streets blocked, structures half buried or partially formed, and tramcars suspended in the air, dangling on invisible electronic wires. Grotesque Face Dancer bodies and smashed combat robots littered the streets. Columns of fire and smoke rose into the sky.

Exhausted even in victory, Sheeana stared around the city, her face filled with awe and pleasure. As she walked alone down a devastated street, she saw a young boy standing there by himself between the towering, exotic buildings. Looking wrung out but far more powerful than she had ever seen him, was the transformed boy Leto II. He had left the sandworms, having directed them off into the city, but even though he stood here in front of her, he was still part of them.

As Leto craned his neck to look up at one of the dangling tramcars, Sheeana noticed an oddness about him, a looming presence that hadn't been there before. She understood.

"You have your memories back."

"In perfect detail. I've been reviewing them." Leto's eyes were full of centuries, now completely blue-within-blue due to incredible spice saturation from the bodies of the sandworms he had controlled. "I am the Tyrant. I am the God Emperor." His voice sounded

louder, yet carried a deep and abiding weariness.

"You are also Leto Atrides, brother to Ghanima, son of Muad'Dib and Chani."

In response, he smiled as if she had lifted some of his burden. "Yes, that too. I'm everything my predecessor was - and everything the worms are. The pearl of dreaming inside them has been broken open. He sleeps no more."

Sheeana recalled the quiet boy aboard the no-ship. His past had been worse than anyone else's, and now that innocent boy was truly gone.

"I remember every death I caused. Every one. I remember all of my Duncans, and the reasons each died." He looked up, then grasped her arm and pulled her back toward a twisted building that was stuck halfway out of the ground.

Seconds later, the invisible suspensor line high above snapped, and the tramcar hurtled down to smash on the street exactly where the two had been standing. Dead Face Dancers lay sprawled in the wreckage.

"I knew it would fall," Leto said.

She smiled gently. "We each have our special talents."

The two of them climbed the high rubble of a collapsed building to get a better view of the city's wreckage. Confused and disoriented robots milled around the smoldering piles of wreckage and broken structures, as if waiting for instructions.

"I am a Kwisatz Haderach," Leto II said, his voice distant. "And so was my father.

But it is much different now. Did I plan for all this long ago, as part of my Golden Path?"

As if he had summoned them, four sandworms rose noisily from the churned and smashed ground and loomed over the wreckage. She heard loud grinding noises, and the remaining three worms came from other directions, knocking buildings aside, tunneling through the wreckage. Slightly larger than before, they circled Leto and Sheeana.

The largest worm, the one she had named Monarch, turned its head toward the two of them. Unafraid, Leto climbed down the remains of the building to approach the creature.

"My memories are back," Leto said to Sheeana, stepping forward, "but not the dreaming existence I had as the God Emperor, back when man and worm were one." Monarch laid its head on the base of the rubble pile, as did the companion worms, like supplicants before a king. The cinnamon odor of melange filled the air from the exhalations of the beasts.

Reaching out, Leto stroked the rounded edge of Monarch's mouth. "Shall we dream together again? Or should I let you go back to a peaceful sleep?"

Without fear, Sheeana also touched the worm, feeling the hard skin of the rings.

With a sigh, the boy added, "I miss the people I used to know, especially Ghanima.

Your gholia program didn't bring her back with me."

"We didn't consider personal costs or consequences," Sheeana said. "I'm sorry."

Tears welled in Leto's dark blue eyes. "There are so many painful memories from before I took the sand trout as part of me. My father refused to make the choice I did - refused to pay the price in blood for the Golden Path, but I thought I knew better.

Ah, how arrogant we can be in our youth!"

In front of Leto, the largest worm lifted. Its open mouth looked like a cave full of rich spice.

"Fortunately I know how to go back into the dreaming essence of the Tyrant, the God Emperor. To the real son of Muad'Dib." With a glance at her, he said, "I take my last few sips of humanity." Then he entered the towering mouth and climbed over the maw-fence of crystalline teeth.

Sheeana understood what he was doing. She had tried the same thing herself, though ineffectively. The worm engulfed Leto II, closed its mouth, and reared back. The boy was gone.

Sheeana struggled to keep her knees from buckling. She knew she would never see Leto again, though he would be with the worms eternally, merged into Monarch's flesh from the inside, becoming a pearl of awareness once more. "Goodbye, my friend."

But the spectacle was not finished. The other worms rose beside Monarch, and all towered over her. Sheeana stood motionless, at once horrified and fascinated. Would they devour

her, too? She steeled herself for her own fate, but had no fear of it.

As a young girl, after a worm had destroyed her village on Rakis, Sheeana had run wildly out into the desert and screamed at the huge creature, calling it names, insisting that it eat her.

"Well, Shaitan - do you have an appetite for me, now?"

But they did not want her. Instead, the seven worms gathered together, tumbling one upon the other, writhing like a mass of snakes. With Leto inside them now, the worms were transforming. Six worms wound themselves around the largest beast that had swallowed the boy. They twisted and twined, wrapping their sinuous bodies like vines around a tree, and then moved together.

Sheeana scrambled back up the rubble pile to keep herself safe from falling debris.

The fleshy rings of the separate sandworms began to merge and metamorphose into a much larger form. The differentiation among the creatures became less distinct; the rings united, joining into one incredible sandworm: a behemoth greater even than the largest monsters from legendary Dune.

Sheeana stumbled, falling backward on the rubble but unable to tear her gaze away from the immense sandworm that towered in front of her, rippling and twining, its body stretching back hundreds of meters.

"Shai-Hulud," she murmured, intentionally refusing to use the term Shaitan, just as she had always done. Truly, this was the godlike Old Man of the Desert. The dizzying odor of melange was stronger than ever.

At first she thought the leviathan would consume her after all, but the giant worm turned away and smashed down into the ground with a great thunder of noise, tunneling downward beneath the machine city.

Its new home.

A shudder of supreme pleasure ran through her. She knew the great worm would divide beneath the surface. This union between Leto II and the creatures would have a greater resistance to moisture, enabling them to survive until they could remake parts of this former machine planet into a domain of their own. One day, new sandworms would grow and thrive on this world, always lurking beneath the surface, always watching.

To defeat the humans, one option is to become like them, granting no quarter, chasing and destroying them to the last man, woman, and child, just as they tried to do to us.

- ERASMUS, databank on human violence

"With my curiosity, ages of existence, and understanding of both humans and machines," Erasmus mused as he and Duncan remained joined, fused together mentally and physically, "am I not the machine equivalent of a Kwisatz Haderach? The Shortening of the Way for thinking machines? I can be in many places at once and see a myriad of things that even Omnium never imagined."

"You are not a Kwisatz Haderach," Duncan said. He became aware of his comrades rushing toward him. But the liquid metal now flowed across Duncan's shoulders and face, and he felt no desire to tear himself away.

Duncan let the physical reaction between him and the robot continue. He didn't want to escape. As the new standard bearer of humankind, he needed to advance. So he opened his mind and let the data rush in.

A voice rang out in his head, louder than all the whirlwind memories and streams of data. I can impress all of the key codes you seek, Kwisatz Haderach. Your neurons, your very DNA, form the structure of a new networked database.

Duncan knew this was the point of no return. Do it.

The mental floodgates opened, filling his mind to bursting with the robot's experiences and coldly factual, regimented information. And he began to see things from that entirely alien

viewpoint.

In thousands upon thousands of years of experimentation, Erasmus had struggled to understand humans. How could they remain so mysterious? The robot's incredible range of experiences made even Duncan's numerous lives seem insignificant. Visions and memories roared around the Kwisatz Haderach, and he knew it would take him much more than another lifetime just to sift through it all.

He saw Serena Butler in the flesh, along with her baby, and the startling reaction of the multitudes to what Erasmus had thought was a simple, meaningless death ... howling humans rising up in a fight they had no chance to win. They were irrational, desperate, and in the end, victorious. Incomprehensible. Illogical. And yet, they had achieved the impossible.

For fifteen thousand years, Erasmus had longed to understand, but had lacked the fundamental revelation. Duncan could feel the robot digging around inside him, looking for the secret, not out of any need for domination and conquest, but simply to know.

Duncan had difficulty focusing amidst so much information. Presently he withdrew, and felt the flowmetal move the other direction, away from him - though not completely, for his internal cellular structure was forever changed.

In an epiphany, he realized that he was a new evermind, but of an entirely different sort from the original. Erasmus had not deceived him. With eyes that extended to centillions of sensors, Duncan could see all of the Enemy ships, the fighting drones and worker robots, every cog in the awe-inspiring reborn empire.

And he could stop everything in its tracks. If he wanted to.

When Duncan returned to himself, in his relatively human body again, he looked through his own eyes around the great chamber. Erasmus stood before him, separate now and smiling with what seemed to be genuine satisfaction.

"What happened, Duncan?" Paul asked.

Duncan let out a long breath of stale air. "Nothing I didn't initiate, Paul, but I'm here, I'm back."

Yueh rushed up. "Are you hurt? We thought you might be trapped in a coma like ... like him." He gestured toward the still-frozen Paolo.

"I'm unharmed ... but not unchanged." Duncan looked around the vaulted chamber, and gazed out into the vast city with a new sense of wonder. "Erasmus shared everything with me ... even the best parts of himself."

"An adequate summation," the robot said, undeniably pleased. "When you merged into me and kept going deeper and deeper, you made yourself vulnerable. Had I wished to win the game, I could have tried to take over your mind and program you to do exactly what benefits me and thinking machines. Just as I did with the Face Dancers."

"But I knew you wouldn't," Duncan said.

"From prescience, or faith?" A crafty smile crept across the robot's face. "You now have control of the thinking machines. They are yours, Kwisatz Haderach - all, including me. Now you have everything you need. With the power in your hands, you will change the universe. It is Kralizec. See? We have made the prophecy come true after all."

Seemingly alone in the remnants of a vast empire, Erasmus walked casually around the chamber again. "You can shut them all down permanently, if that is your preference, and eliminate thinking machines forever. Or, if you have the courage, you can do something more useful with them."

Jessica said, "Shut them down, Duncan. Finish it now! Think of all the trillions they've killed, all the planets they've destroyed."

Duncan looked at his hands in wonder. "And is that the honorable thing to do?"

Erasmus kept his voice carefully neutral, not pleading. "For millennia I studied humans and tried to understand them ... I even emulated them. But when was the last time humans bothered to consider what thinking machines could do? You only despise us. Your Great Convention with its terrible stricture, 'Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a

human mind.' Is that really what you want, Duncan? To win this ultimate war by exterminating every vestige of us ... the way Omnium wanted to win the war by eliminating you? Didn't you hate the evermind for that fixed attitude?

Do you have the same attitude yourself?"

"You have an abundance of questions," Duncan observed.

"And it is up to you to choose the single answer. I gave you what you need." Erasmus stood back and waited.

Duncan felt a new sense of urgency, perhaps imparted to him by Erasmus. Possibilities roiled through his head, accompanied by a riptide of consequences. With his growing awareness he saw that in order to end Kralizec, he needed to stop the eons-old schism that separated man and machine. Thinking machines had originally been created by man, but though intertwined, each side had tried repeatedly to destroy the other. He had to find a common ground between them, rather than let one dominate the other.

Duncan saw the great historical arc, a social evolution of epic proportions. Thousands of years ago, Leto II had joined himself with a great sandworm, thereby acquiring vastly greater powers for himself. Centuries later, under the guidance of Murbella, two opposing groups of women had joined forces, fusing their individual cultures into a stronger synthesized unit. Even Erasmus and Omnium had been two aspects of the same identity, creativity and logic, curiosity and rigid facts.

Duncan saw that balance was required. Human heart and machine mind. What he had received from Erasmus could become a weapon, or a tool. He had to use it properly.

I must serve as a synthesis of man and machine.

He locked gazes with Erasmus, and this time he and the robot connected without making physical contact. Somehow the Kwisatz Haderach retained a ghost image of Erasmus within himself, just as Reverend Mothers carried Other Memories inside.

Drawing a deep breath, Duncan faced the overwhelming question. "When you and Omnium manifested yourselves as an old couple, you demonstrated the differences between you.

Erasmus, while maintaining your own independence, you acquired the evermind's vast storehouse of data, the intellect, while Omnium in turn learned about heart from you, what it means to have human feelings - curiosity, inspiration, mystery.

But even you never fully achieved all the aspects of humanity you sought."

"But now I can. With your consent, of course."

Duncan turned to face Paul and the others. "After the Butlerian Jihad, human civilization went too far by completely banning artificial intelligence. But in forbidding any sort of computers, we humans denied ourselves valuable tools. That overreaction created an unstable situation. History has shown that such absolute, draconian prohibitions cannot be sustained."

Jessica said skeptically, "Yet eradicating computers for so many generations forced us to grow stronger and become independent. For thousands of years, humanity advanced without artificial constructions to think and decide for us."

"As the Fremen learned to live on Arrakis," Chani said with clear pride. "It is a good thing."

"Yes, but that backlash also tied our hands and prevented us from reaching other potentials. Just because a man's legs will grow stronger by walking, should we deny him a vehicle? Our memory improves through steady practice; should we therefore deny ourselves the means to write or record our thoughts?"

"No need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, to use one of your ancient clichés,"

Erasmus said. "I threw a baby off a balcony once. The consequences were extreme."

"We didn't do without machines," Duncan said, crystallizing his thoughts. "We just redefined them. Mentats are humans whose minds are trained to function like those of machines.

Tleilaxu Masters used female bodies as axlotl tanks - flesh machines that manufactured gholas or spice."

When Paul looked back at him, Duncan thought that the young man's face seemed deeply old. Recovering from his past life had drained him even more than his mortal wound had. As

a Kwisatz Haderach himself, as Muad'Dib, Emperor, and blind Preacher, Paul understood Duncan's dilemma better than any human present. He nodded slightly. "No one can choose for you, Duncan."

Duncan let his eyes take on a far-off glaze. "We can do much, much more. I see it now. Humans and machines cooperating fully, with neither side enslaving the other. I shall stand between them, as a bridge."

The robot responded with genuine excitement. "Now you see, Kwisatz Haderach! You have helped me to achieve understanding along with you. You have shortened my way, too."

Erasmus's flowmetal body shifted like a mechanical version of a Face Dancer, becoming again the wrinkled body of the kindly old woman. "My long quest is complete. At last, after thousands of years, I understand so much." He smiled. "In fact, there is very little that interests me anymore."

The old woman walked over to where the still-transfixed Paolo lay, staring blankly upward. "This failed, ruined Kwisatz Haderach is an object lesson for me. The boy paid the price of too much knowledge." Paolo's unblinking eyes seemed to be drying out. He would probably wither away and starve to death, lost in the infinite maze of absolute prescience. "I don't want to be bored. So I ask you, Kwisatz Haderach, help me understand something I could never truly experience, the last fascinating aspect of humanity."

"A demand?" Duncan asked. "Or a favor?"

"A debt of honor." The old woman patted his sleeve with a gnarled hand. "You now epitomize the finest qualities of man and machine. Allow me to do what only living beings can do. Guide me to my own death."

Duncan had not foreseen this. "You want to die? How can I help you do that?"

The old woman shrugged her bony shoulders. "All your lives and deaths have made you an expert on the matter. Look inside yourself, and you'll know."

Over the millennia since the Butlerian Jihad, Erasmus had considered distributing backup copies of himself as Omnius had done, but he had decided not to. That would have made his existence far less stimulating, and less meaningful. After all, he was an independent robot, and needed to be unique.

Duncan saw that along with all the codes and commands that controlled the host of thinking machines, he had received the life-function commands that regulated Erasmus. He could shut down the independent robot as easily as Erasmus had shut down all of the Face Dancers.

"I am curious to see what lies on the other side of the great divide between life and death."

The robot looked at Khrono and the identical shape-shifter bodies strewn on the floor of the cathedral chamber.

But it wasn't as simple as flipping a switch or sending a code. Duncan had lived and died over and over, and learned more about life and death than anyone. Did Erasmus want him to understand whether or not a robot could have a soul, now that the two of them had been inside each other's mind?

"You want me to serve as a guide," Duncan said, "not just an executioner."

"A fine way to put it, my friend. I think you understand." The old woman looked at him, and now her smile held a hint of nervousness. "After all, Duncan Idaho, you have done this over and over again. But this is my first time."

Duncan touched her forehead. The skin was warm and dry. "Whenever you're ready."

The old woman sat on the stone steps. Folding her hands in her lap, she closed her eyes.

"Do you suppose I will ever see Serena again?"

"I can't answer that." With a mental command, Duncan activated one of the new codes he possessed. From inside his own mind, reaching down to touch his own numerous death experiences, he showed Erasmus what he knew, even if he didn't entirely comprehend it himself. He wasn't certain the ancient independent robot could follow. Erasmus would have to make his own way. He and Duncan parted, both of them traveling on utterly separate journeys.

The aged body slumped quietly on the steps, and a long sigh flowed from the old woman's lips. Her expression became utterly serene ... and then went completely motionless, with the eyes staring straight ahead.

In death, the robot's human shape held.

Where there is life, there is hope ... or so the old sayings tell us. But for the truly faithful there is always hope, and it is not determined by either death or life.

- TLEILAXU MASTER SCYTALE, My

Personal Interpretations of the Shariat

Out under the burned sky of Rakis, Waff's despair took him to a place as bleak and dry as the devastated landscape around him. On a vitrified dune nearby, only one of his precious armored sand-worms stirred with the last flickerings of life, while the others were already dead. He had failed his Prophet.

The cellular modifications he had made were insufficient, and he had neither sandtrout specimens, nor the proper facilities to create additional test worms. He felt the last grains of sand slipping through the hourglass of his life. His body wouldn't last long enough for him to try again with a new line of the hybrid worms, even if he'd had the chance. Only the hope of restoring these sandworms to Rakis had kept him from surrendering to the damage in his accelerated gholia body, but now he was falling apart.

Raising his fist to the sky and shouting into the dry, caustic air, he demanded answers from God, though no mortal had the right to do so. He hammered his hands on the hard, cracked ground and wept. His clothes were dirty, his face smeared with sooty residue.

Sprawled atop what had once been magnificent dunes lay the dead worm specimens. Truly, they symbolized the end of all hope.

Rakis was forever cursed, if even the Prophet no longer wished to live there.

Then, as he huddled on the ground, Waff felt a shudder from deep beneath the surface.

The resonant vibration grew stronger, and he looked up in wonder, blinking his stinging eyes. The last dying worm twitched, as if it, too, could sense something important happening.

With a thunderous crack in the thin, whistling air, a fissure raced across the glassy ground.

Waff stumbled to his feet and stared at the zigzag progress of the widening split, hardly able to comprehend what he was seeing.

Widening, jagged lines appeared like fine fractures in reinforced plaz struck by a hard blow.

The dunes bucked and heaved as something emerged from below.

Waff staggered backward. At his feet the last slumped sandworm stirred, as if to warn the Tleilaxu Master that it was about to end its days - and that the man, too, was about to die.

A sequence of explosions erupted like sand geysers from deep beneath the dunes. The crevices gaped wider, revealing forms stirring underground. As if in a waking dream, he saw enormous ridges crusted with stones and dust, huge behemoths rising in a cascade of sand.

Sandworms. Real sandworms - monsters of the size that used to roam the desert in the days when this world was known as Dune. A leg' end and a mystery reborn!

Waff stood transfixed, unable to believe, yet filled with awe and hope rather than fear. Were these survivors of the original worms? How could they still be alive after the holocaust?

"Prophet, you have returned!" At first he saw five of the gigantic sandworms, then a dozen emerging at once. All around him the broken ground spawned more and more.

Hundreds of them! The whole dead world was like an immense egg, cracking open and giving birth.

Breaking free of their underground nest, the sandworms rampaged toward the distant encampment in the rubble of Keen. Waff supposed they would swallow up Guriff and his

prospectors, devouring all of the Guildsmen.

The sandworms would make Rakis their own again.

He reeled forward in ecstasy, his hands raised in joyous worship. "My glorious Prophet, I am here!" God's Messenger was so great that Waff felt like a minuscule speck, hardly worth noticing.

His faith swelled again, and he saw that his insignificant efforts on Rakis had never mattered. Regardless of how hard he had worked with the sandtrout, trying to seed these dead dunes with enhanced worms, God had His own plans - always His own plans.

He showed the way by producing a flood of life, like the wordless revelation of s'tori.

And Waff realized what he should have known all along, something every Tleilaxu should have understood: If each of the sandworms spawned from God Emperor Leto II's great body actually contained a pearl of the Prophet inside them - how could the worms themselves not have been prescient? How could they not have foreseen the coming of the Honored Matres and the impending destruction of Rakis?

He clapped his hands in glee. Of course! The great worms must have envisioned the terrible Obliterator weapons. Forewarned that the surface of Rakis would become a charred ball, some sandworms had been guided by Leto II's prescience to tunnel deep and encyst themselves protectively far beneath the sands, perhaps kilometers down.

Away from the worst destruction.

This world can take care of itself, Waff thought.

Arrogant humans had always caused trouble here. When it was a pristine desert planet, Rakis was what it should have been before human pride and ambition terraformed it.

The efforts of outsiders to "improve" Dune had resulted in the apparent extinction of the great worms, until the death of Leto II brought them back. After which humans - the Honored Matres - had wiped out the ecosystem again.

Rakis had been beaten, stepped on, raped ... but in the end, the magnificent world had saved itself. The Prophet had remained there all along and contributed mightily to the survival of Dune. Now all was as it should be, and Waff was immensely pleased.

Two giant sandworms churned toward the Tleilaxu man, who stood transfixed. Plowing through the crusted ground, the worms scooped up the flaccid carcasses of the weak test worms, devouring them as if they were mere crumbs.

Overcome by joy, Waff fell to his knees and prayed. At the last moment, he looked up into the giant mouth, with its deep, simmering flames and crystalline teeth. He smelled the spicy exhalations.

Smiling beatifically, the Tleilaxu Master lifted his face to heaven and exclaimed,

"God, my God, I am yours at last!" With the speed and fury of a crashing Guild Heighliner, the worm descended. Waff inhaled a deep, satisfying breath of spice and closed his eyes in rapture as the monster's cavernous mouth engulfed him.

Waff became one with his Prophet.

Life is about determining what to do next, from moment to moment. I've never been afraid of making decisions.

- DUNCAN IDAHO, A

Thousand Lives

Through the broken cathedral's high dome, a preoccupied Duncan saw the sky flicker like a pattern changing in a kaleidoscope. A wealth of vessels appeared side by side, pulled along by the returning Navigator-controlled Heighliners.

Even before the signal came to him, Duncan sensed that someone very special was aboard one of the newly arrived ships. His expanded mind showed him her face, very little changed after all these years.

Murbella!

Some past part of him was terrified at the prospect of being near her again, but he was so much more than that now. He was eager to see her.

A thousand Navigator-faction Heighliners hovered over Synchrony, uncertain of their role, now that the Oracle was gone. Using his newly acquired abilities, Duncan communed with them all in a common-denominator language. The Navigators would understand him in their own way, as would the thinking machines and the humans. Duncan barely touched on his enhanced knowledge to do so.

Important changes. Necessary changes.

The human ships sent lighters down. Looking up through the dome's skylights Duncan saw the glints trailing through the sky and knew that Murbella would be with them. She would come down first, and he would see her again. Almost twenty-five years... a mere tick on the eternal clock, yet it had seemed an eternity all its own. He waited for her.

But the woman who entered the vaulted hall was Sheeana, worn and weary from her fighting out in the machine city. Her eyes were full of questions as she took in the blood on the floor, the smashed sentinel robots, the supine bodies of the Baron and glassy-eyed Paolo. Just by looking at the four young gholas Sheeana could tell that Paul and Chani had their memories back.

She noticed the motionless body of the old woman slumped on the stairs and recognized her. Speaking through Sheeana's mouth, the inner voice of Serena Butler lashed out.

"Erasmus killed my innocent - the innocent baby. He was the one responsible for - "

Duncan cut her off. "I didn't hate him in the end. I think I pitied him more. It reminded me of when the God Emperor died. Erasmus was flawed, arrogant, and yet oddly innocent, guided only by insatiable curiosity ... but he didn't know how to process what he already understood."

Sheeana stared down, as if expecting the old woman's eyes to snap open and a clawlike hand to grab her. "Erasmus is really dead, then?"

"Completely."

"And Omnium?"

"Gone forever. And the thinking machines are no longer our enemies."

"Do you control them, then? Have they been defeated?" Wonder shone on her face.

"They are allies ... tools... independent partners more than slaves, and so different.

We have a whole new paradigm to grapple with, and a lot of new definitions to make."

* * *

When Murbella and a party of Guildsmen and Sisters were ushered into the chamber by courier drones, Duncan set all questions aside and just stared at her.

She stopped in mid-step. "Duncan... you've hardly changed in more than two decades."

He laughed at that. "I've changed more than any instrument could measure." All the machines in the hall, in the whole city, turned toward Duncan at the comment.

He and Murbella embraced automatically, uncertain of whether this contact would rekindle their past feelings. But each sensed the difference in the other. The river of time had carved a deep canyon between them.

As he touched Murbella, Duncan felt a bittersweet sadness to know how much damage her addictive love had done to him. Things could never be the same between them again, especially now that he was the Kwisatz Haderach. He also guided the thinking machines, but he was not their new evermind, not their new puppet master. He didn't even know how they could exist without a controlling force. They had to adapt or die, something humans had done well for millennia.

From across the room, Duncan recognized the spark in Sheeana's eyes - of genuine concern rather than jealousy; no Bene Gesserit would allow herself the weakness of jealousy. In fact, Sheeana was such a staunch Bene Gesserit that she had stolen the no-ship

from Chapterhouse and fled with her refugees, rather than abide by the changes Murbella had forced on the Sisterhood.

He spoke to both women. "We have freed ourselves from the traps we set for each other. I need you, Murbella - and you, Sheeana. And the future needs all of us more than I can express." An infinite number of machine thoughts coursed through his mind, giving him the sudden awareness that countless human planets needed help that only he could provide. With a thought, he dispatched the guardian robots out of the hall, marching them away as if in a military exercise. Then he stretched his mind through the empty pathways of the tachyon net, and across the universe. With his instantaneous connection to all of the human defender ships once controlled by corrupted Ixian machines, as well as the machine battleships linked to Omnius's command -

Duncan's command, now - he summoned the vessels to the former machine planet, dragging them all simultaneously through foldspace. They would all come here, to Synchrony.

"You, Murbella, were born free, trained as an Honored Matre, and finally made into a Bene Gesserit so that you could gather the loose ends. As you were a synthesis between Honored Matre and Bene Gesserit, so I am now a fusion between free mankind and thinking machines. I stand in both domains, understanding both, creating a future where both can thrive."

"And ... what are you, Duncan?" Sheeana asked.

"I am both the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach and a new form of the evermind - and I am neither. I am something else."

Alarmed, Murbella glanced at Sheeana, then back at him. "Duncan! Thinking machines have been our mortal enemies since before the Butlerian Jihad - more than fifteen thousand years."

"I plan to untie that Gordian knot of misunderstandings."

"Misunderstandings! Thinking machines slaughtered trillions of human beings. The plague on Chapterhouse alone wiped out - "

"Such is the cost of inflexibility and closed-minded fanaticism. Casualties are so often unnecessary. Honored Matres and Bene Gesserits, humans and thinking machines, heart and mind. Don't our differences strengthen us rather than destroy us?" The reality-expanding wealth of information Erasmus had given him was tempered by the wisdom he had earned through numerous lifetimes. "Our struggle has reached an end and a watershed." He flexed his hand, and he could feel innumerable thinking machines out there listening, waiting. "We have the power to do so much now."

Utilizing perfect prescient and calculational knowledge, Duncan knew how to bring about an everlasting peace. With humanity and thinking machines balanced in the palm of his hand, he could control them all and seize their powers, preventing them from making further war. He could force cooperation among the Navigator-faction Heighliners, the Ixian-modified ships, and the thinking-machine fleet.

With his developing prescience, he foresaw the joint future of humankind and thinking machines - and how to implement it every step of the way. Such breathtaking power, greater than the God Emperor or Omnius combined. But power had eventually corrupted Leto II. How, then, could Duncan handle this even greater burden?

Even if Duncan Idaho acted for the most altruistic of reasons, there were bound to be dissenters. Would he eventually be corrupted, regardless of his good intentions?

Would history remember him as an even worse despot than the God Emperor?

Facing an avalanche of questions and responsibilities, Duncan vowed to use the lessons of his numerous lifetimes for the benefit and survival of the human race and thinking machines. Kralizec. Yes, the universe had indeed changed.

How terrible for a mother to bury her own daughter. There is no greater pain, not even the Bene Gesserit Agony. Now I have had to bury my daughter twice.
- LADY JESSICA, Lament for Alia

Just one casualty among uncounted trillions.

Later, as Jessica gazed sadly at the cold form of her daughter, she knew that one little girl did matter as much as all the others. Each life had value, whether a ghola child or a natural-born person. The titanic struggle that changed the future of the universe, the defeat of the thinking machines, and the survival of the human race seemed as nothing to her. She was completely preoccupied with preparing Alia's body for burial.

As she touched the small pale face, stroking the forehead and wispy dark hair, she remembered her daughter. An Abomination, Alia had been called: a child born with the full intelligence and genetic memories of a Reverend Mother. It had come full circle now. In her original lifetime, the little girl had killed Baron Harkonnen with the poison gom jabbar; later, as an adult and haunted by the evil presence of the Baron, Alia had taken her own life, throwing herself through a temple window high above the streets of Arrakeen. Now the reborn Baron had killed the reborn Alia, before she'd ever had the opportunity to reach the potential she deserved. It was as if the two of them were forever locked in mortal combat, on a mythical scale.

A tear rolled down Jessica's cheek with the grace of a falling raindrop. She closed her eyes and realized that she had been frozen in the same position for a long moment, caught up in memories. She hadn't even heard the visitor approach her quarters.

"Is there any way I might help you, my Lady?"

"Leave me. I want to be alone." But when she saw that it was the somber Dr. Yueh, her demeanor softened. "I'm sorry, Wellington. Yes, come in. You can help me."

"I don't wish to intrude."

With a wan smile she said, "You've earned the right to be here."

For long moments the unlikely pair stood together without speaking. Grateful just to have him there, Jessica finally said, "Long ago when you were with us at Castle Caladan, I cared for you. You always kept your life private, and when you betrayed us, I hated you more than I thought possible."

He hung his head. "I would throw myself upon a knife ten thousand times if I could take back the deeds I've done and erase the pain I've caused, my Lady."

"History can only move forward, Wellington, not backward."

"Oh? We've been dredged out of the dustbins of history, haven't we?"

On old Arrakis, the Fremen had made a solemn ritual of recovering a body's water in a deathstill and sharing it among the tribe. On Caladan, the tradition had been a funeral pyre or an ocean burial. While the Ithaca wandered through space, their dead had been ceremoniously ejected into the void.

Using stain-free fabric from the no-ship's sheets, they wrapped Alia's small, frail body. Here in the post-Omnium machine city, however, Jessica wasn't sure how best to honor her daughter. "We don't really have a funeral tradition anymore, so I don't know what to do."

"We'll do what we must. The symbols don't matter, but the thought does."

* * *

Long after the last echoes of the battle on Synchrony had died away and survivors from the no-ship ventured out to discover the new face of the universe, Jessica and Yueh joined Paul, Chani, and Duncan in their own private funeral procession. Paul and Jessica carried the tiny wrapped body out into the streets where the sandworms had caused so much damage, where explosions in the battle against the Face Dancers had destroyed countless structures.

"Such a tiny body ... and so much lost potential," Paul said. "I miss my sister terribly, even

though I didn't get to know her this time as well as I would have liked."

Duncan led the group, shunting aside his other responsibilities for the time being.

"I don't remember the original little girl, but I remember the woman. She hurt me and loved me, and I loved her passionately."

They didn't have far to walk. Jessica had selected a particular broken tower, a slumped, thin pyramid that would serve as an appropriate grave marker. Jessica and Paul said their goodbyes during the procession, so that when they reached the collapsed structure they carried the girl inside through a lopsided trapezoidal opening, pushed debris aside to clear a space for her, and laid Alia Atreides on the smooth metal floor.

Then Jessica stood over the wrapped child, saying another quiet farewell. Paul grasped his mother's hand, and she squeezed back.

After a lingering, painful silence, she turned and spoke to Duncan. "We've done all we need to do."

"I'll take care of the rest," Duncan said. When they had withdrawn from the fallen pyramid, Duncan raised his hands, fingers splayed, and his face took on a distant expression. The metalform buildings around them began to tremble and sway, growing and curving. The remnants of the pyramid folded around Alia's body and reinforced the walls, drawing polished alloys from other structures. Like a magnificent crystal and quicksilver monument, the ruined spire then rose heavenward. The rapidly growing tower crackled and clanged like mechanical thunder as flowmetal streamed upward. Its curves and angles were streamlined, its polished surfaces perfectly reflective.

Duncan guided the semisentient structures with greater care and focus than the evermind ever had. When he was finished, he had created a tomb, a memorial, a work of art that would amaze anyone who looked upon it.

It left a mark on Synchrony that could never compare with the mark her daughter's loss left on Jessica's heart.

Some problems are best solved with an optimistic approach. Optimism shines a light on alternatives that are otherwise not visible.

- SHEEANA, Reflections on the New Order

In the aftermath, the humans in Synchrony gradually began to believe that their race would survive.

When Sheeana looked at Duncan, he seemed strangely distant, though that was to be expected. Often his gaze flicked from side to side as if he were in a thousand places at once.

While Mother Commander Murbella called down lighters from her newly arrived battleships, and the Guild provided shuttles full of workers and administrators to help consolidate the strange city, Sheeana watched self-guided robots clean up remnants of the bloody duels in the cathedral chamber.

The Ithaca's refugees had taken shelter inside the torn-open ship. The vessel would never fly in space again, even if Duncan forced the living-metal docking cradle to release the no-ship. Courier drones and buzzing watcheyes, now personally directed by Duncan, led crowds of people through the broken streets, summoning them to a meeting where they would discuss the changed universe. Sheeana's renegade Bene Gesserits from the no-ship were uneasy about facing the former Honored Matre Murbella.

But the Mother Commander had grown much wiser in the intervening quarter century since the schism. Years ago, had she known of Sheeana's plan to steal the no-ship, Murbella would have killed her rival outright. Sheeana wondered what the former Honored Matre would think of all those years Duncan had pined for her. Did Murbella still love him? For that matter, had she ever?

Reverend Mothers Elyen and Calissa led a weary and uneasy crowd into the enormous cathedral hall. Guild crewmen from the ships above also entered the chamber, Administrator Gorus among them. He appeared drained, no longer in control of anything, and remained silent, following rather than leading his fellow Guildsmen.

When they had settled into a low hum of conversation approaching silence, Duncan took his place in the center of the chamber where Omnium and Erasmus had once presided over their thinking machines. He used no amplification system, yet his words resounded through the hall.

"This fate, this grand culmination of Kralizec, is what we sought for so many years."

He swept his gaze over Sheeana and the refugee Bene Gesserits. "Your long journey is at an end, for this is the new heartland you dreamed of finding. The planet is yours now. Use the remnants of Synchrony to form an entirely new Bene Gesserit order, your base far from Chapterhouse."

The gathered Sisters were confused and astounded. Even Sheeana had not known Duncan would propose this. "But this is the heart of the thinking-machine empire!" cried Calissa.

"The homeworld of Omnium."

"It's your homeworld now. Stake your claim and build your future."

Sheeana understood. "Duncan is exactly right. Challenges strengthen the Sisterhood.

The universe has changed, and we belong here, regardless of the difficulties we may face. Even the sandworms have come to Synchrony, burrowing deep underground." She smiled.

"They may reemerge when we least expect them. Someone has to keep an eye on the restored Tyrant."

Beneath the hall, Sheeana thought she felt the ground trembling, as from a great behemoth moving under the foundations. Many robots had been destroyed or damaged during the sandworm attack, but thousands more of the machines remained perfectly functional.

Sheeana knew that the Bene Gesserits here would have all the labor pool they could possibly desire, if the machines would work with them.

Murbella spoke up. "I shall return to Chapterhouse. It will take some effort to spread news of the new reality." She gazed at Sheeana. "Don't worry. My combined Sisterhood doesn't need to be at odds with your orthodox Bene Gesserit base here. There have always been many schools, many trains of thought. In proper balance, rivalry promotes strength and innovation - so long as we can avoid the acrimony of conflict and mutual destruction."

Sheeana knew that Duncan would go back to Chapterhouse with Murbella, at least for a time. With his guidance, Murbella would shepherd the reintroduction and integration of superior technology into a thriving society. If handled properly, Sheeana saw no reason for humans to fear cooperation with thinking machines any more than they needed to fear religion itself, or competition among Bene Gesserit elements. Any group could be dangerous if managed improperly.

Sheeana, though, would remain here. She saw no point in going back. Addressing Murbella, she said, "Even before Honored Matres destroyed Rakis, the Bene Gesserit order made me the centerpiece of a manufactured religion. For decades I had to hide while the Missionaria spread myths about me. I let the legend continue without me. What would I achieve if I stopped it now? So I say, leave it, if the thought comforts people.

My place is on this planet."

She saw that Scytale was also in the audience. The last of the Tleilaxu Masters had, in the end, proved greatly helpful, fighting for instead of against them. "Scytale, will you remain with us? Will you join my new order here? We can use your knowledge and genetic expertise.

We are, after all, founding a colony, and we have only a few hundred people."

"I expect others from the outside will eventually join you," Murbella said.

The little Tleilaxu was surprised by the invitation. "Of course I will stay. Thank you. My people have no other place now, not even sacred Bandalong." He smiled at

Sheeana. "Perhaps at your side I can accomplish something worthwhile."

Duncan walked among the Bene Gesserit refugees. "You are gardeners laying down

flagstones on our path of destiny. Many of us will return to worlds we once called home, but you will remain here."

With a warm feeling toward him, Sheeana touched Duncan's arm. Though still flesh and bone, and human, she knew he was far more than that. And his words rang true.

"Thanks to you Duncan, my Sisters and I are finally home."

The worst part of going back is that the past is never exactly the way you remember it.

- PAUL ATREIDES, Notebooks of a Ghola

Back in the Old Empire, the last Chapterhouse defenders waited, tense and alert, but nothing changed for days. The machine warships had not moved, and Bashar Janess Idaho had received no further word from the Navigator ships that had whisked the Mother Commander away. Fast scouts flitted back and forth from the hundred last-stand groupings, and the situation was the same along the entire front.

Waiting. No one knew what was happening.

Janess reacted with alarm and dismay when a large swarm of ships burst out of foldspace in all sizes and configurations. Shouting into the commline, the bashar rallied all of her functional defensive craft that remained in orbit. At first she did not recognize the configurations, but then she saw that the newly arrived cluster included smaller human and thinking-machine vessels that had been towed along by the Holtzman engines of great Guildships.

"Identify yourselves!" Janess said to the unexpected armada.

On the bridge of her large battleship, returning home, Murbella smiled at Duncan.

"That is your - our daughter."

He raised his eyebrows and performed quick mental calculations. "One of the twins?"

"Janess." Murbella frowned slightly. "The other one, Rinya, didn't survive the Agony.

I forgot you didn't know. Tanidia, the middle one, is alive and well, assigned with the Missionaria among the refugees. But we lost Gianne, our youngest - born just before I became a Reverend Mother. She died during the Chapterhouse plague."

Duncan steadied himself. How odd to feel a blow of genuine grief to learn of the death of two children he had never met. He hadn't even known their names until now.

He tried to imagine what the young women might have been like. As Kwisatz Haderach and evermind, he could do many things ... almost anything. But he couldn't bring back his daughters. Duncan studied Janess's features on the screen: dark hair and round face from his own genes, a petite figure, intense eyes, and a hard expression showing she would never run from a challenge. A synthesis of himself and Murbella. He activated the commline himself. "Bashar Janess Idaho, this is Duncan Idaho, your father. I am with the Mother Commander."

Murbella leaned into the field of view. "Stand down, Janess. The war is over. You have nothing to fear from us."

Janess seemed suspicious. "There are thinking-machine ships with you."

"They are my ships now," Duncan said.

The female bashar did not flinch. "How do I know you're not Face Dancers?"

Murbella answered, "Janess, when we stood against the thinking machines and discovered that Ixians and Face Dancers had deceived us, you and I were ready to throw away our lives in a final burst of glory. Don't be so eager to die now that we finally have hope."

The image of Janess stared at them from the viewing plate. Duncan was proud of his daughter's caution. He said, "We will all meet in the great hall of the Keep. A good place for us to discuss the future." He smiled wistfully. "I never actually saw the inside of the Keep when I was here.... I had to remain aboard the no-ship at alltimes."

Janess hesitated just a moment longer, then nodded curtly. "We will have guards."

Duncan already missed his no-ship comrades, but they had their own places to go now, important niches to fill. Paul and Chani would return to Arrakis, where they had always known they belonged. Jessica had chosen Caladan, and she surprised many by asking Yueh to go with her. And on Synchrony, Scytale's nullentropy capsule still contained a wealth of cells, a treasure chest of prizes.

Duncan had already decided on the first request he would make of the Tleilaxu Master. The turmoil and changes, the repercussions and adaptations would last for decades, even centuries. He would value the assistance and advice of a great man. He needed Miles Teg at his side again....

As the ship descended toward the main city on Chapterhouse, Duncan knew he could never think of this world as home, despite the time he'd spent there. In his genetic incarnations he had experienced many places and known innumerable people. Duncan's developing prescience, and his mental connection to decillions of eyes spread across the cosmos and linked through the evermind's tachyon net, made the entire universe his home now.

Now you begin to understand the fascinating obligation I helped you to assume, said a familiar-sounding voice in his mind. Erasmus!

I could have made it much harder on you, Kwisatz Haderach. Instead, I cooperated. This is only an echo of me, an observer. You can access me as you like. Use my knowledge like a databank. A tool.

I am curious to see what you will do.

"Are you haunting me now, like a demon?"

Consider me an advisor, but my research continues. I will always be here to guide you, and I am confident you will not let me down.

"Like the witches' Other Memory, but far bigger, and more easily accessible."

You are here to serve both humans and thinking machines and the future. It is all under your command.

Duncan laughed softly to himself at the friendly bantering between the two of them.

Though Erasmus was in a subservient position, he still had a bit of humanlike pride, even if he was only an echo, and an advisor.

Entering the Keep, Duncan and Murbella marched into the echoing great hall, side by side. Watcheyes followed them, along with a pair of sentinel robots. The robots greatly disturbed the people who waited there, but in the future humans must learn to set aside their fears and preconceptions.

Without Omnium, the thinking-machine empire continued to function but without a unified mind or mission. Duncan would direct them, but he refused to simply continue the endless cycle of enslavement. They had potential to be more than tools or puppets, more than just a destructive force. Some of the machines were merely that, but more sophisticated robots and advisory mechanisms could grow and develop into something far superior. Erasmus himself had become independent, developing a unique personality when he was isolated from the homogenizing influence of the evermind. With so many thinking machines spread across so many planets, other prominent figures would arise if given the opportunity. If guided. If Duncan allowed them.

He had to achieve a balance.

The Mother Commander's imposing chair stood high and empty in front of a segmented window that looked out on the arid, dying landscape. Janess stood to one side, welcoming Murbella to the empty seat, with nearly a hundred of the New Sisterhood's guards standing at high alert in the chamber. Though all of the insidious Face Dancers had been exposed and killed, Janess was not letting down her guard, and Duncan felt proud of his daughter. She bowed formally. "Mother Commander, we are glad to have you back. Please, take your place."

"It is no longer only my place. Duncan, your daughter has been raised in the Bene Gesserit ways, but she also made a point of learning about you. She trained herself to become the equivalent of a Ginaz Swordmaster."

Thinking bittersweet thoughts about all he had missed, Duncan formally shook his daughter's hand and found her grip pleasingly strong. Until this moment they had been strangers who shared a bond of blood and patriotic allegiance. Their real relationship was just beginning.

Murbella had fought a long and bloody battle to combine the opposing forces of the Honored Matres and the Bene Gesserits, after which she had wrestled with the disparate groups of humanity to forge them into one whole.

On an even larger scale, Duncan, through his newfound abilities, was shaping an even greater, farther reaching union.

Everything was woven together in a tighter tapestry than history had ever known, and at last Duncan grasped the extent of his newfound strength. He was not the first human in history to possess great power, and he vowed not to forget what he had learned as a pawn of the God Emperor, Leto II.

The human race would never forget the thousands of years under that terrible reign, and Duncan's comprehensive racial memory held a roadmap that showed him where the pitfalls were, thus enabling him to avoid them. The great Tyrant had suffered from a flaw he hadn't recognized. Weighed down by his sense of terrible purpose, Leto II had isolated himself from his humanity.

In contrast, Duncan clung to the knowledge that Murbella would be with him, and Sheeana, too. He could talk with his daughter Janess as well, and perhaps even his other surviving daughter, Tanidia. In addition, he had all the memories of great and loyal friends, of dozens of loves, and a succession of comrades, wives, families, joys, and beliefs.

Though he was the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach with immeasurable power, Duncan had known the best parts of being human. Life after life. He didn't need to feel alienated and worried, when he could be filled with love instead.

But his would not be a conventional kind of love. His love needed to extend much farther, to every living person, and to thinking machines. One form of sentient life was not superior to the other. And Duncan Idaho was greater than the flesh that encompassed his body.

In a war, be watchful for unexpected enemies and unlikely allies.
- BASHAR MILES TEG, final log entries

More than a year had passed on Qelso. The unnatural desert continued to spread as sandtrout reproduced and commandeered more and more of the planet's water. Though their fight seemed hopeless, Var's commandos stood against the forces that were killing their environment.

Stilgar and Liet-Kynes did their best to assist in the struggle. Both desert-bred gholas felt that their more important work was to show the natives how they could live in cooperation with the encroaching desert, rather than fight it.

During the many months since the pair had departed from the no-ship, the dry sands had extended much farther into the continental forests and plains. Var's camp had moved time after time, retreating from the oncoming dunes, and the desert kept following them. Though they had killed dozens of sandworms using water cannons and moisture bombs, Shai-Hulud was not so easily thwarted. The worms grew larger, despite all the efforts of the Qelso commandos.

With the first faint light of dawn, Liet stepped out of his rock-walled sleeping chambers and stretched. Although he and Stilgar were still teenagers, they remembered being adults once and having wives. Among the commando women on Qelso, many would accept either of them as a husband, but Liet had not yet decided when he could justify getting married and fathering children. Maybe he would have another daughter, and name her Chani....

No matter how much Liet-Kynes worked to remake Qelso, it would never be Dune. The

fertile landscape was giving way to dry waves of sand, but it would not be the same. Eons ago, had Arrakis been fertile? Had some forgotten superior civilization transplanted sandtrout and sandworms there, much as Mother Superior Odrade had when she sent her Bene Gesserit to Qelso? Perhaps it had been the Muadru, who left mysterious symbols on rocks and cliffs, and in caves across the galaxy. Liet didn't know. His father might have been intrigued by the mystery, but Liet considered himself more practical.

Preparing for the day's work, he looked over at Stilgar, whose eyes had begun to turn blue-within-blue. For years the people here had stubbornly denied themselves the use of *mélange*, but Stilgar called it a sacred reward from the desert, a gift from Shai-Hulud. He had small groups harvesting spice for their own uses, and Liet knew that spice was like a velvet chain - pleasant enough, until one tried to break free of it.

Two chattering and flirtatious teenage girls brought the men breakfast on a tray, knowing what Stilgar and Liet preferred for their morning meal. The girls were lovely, but so young. Liet knew they saw only his youthful body, not knowing how many years he carried in his mind. At times like these, he truly missed his wife Faroula, Chani's mother.

But that had been so long ago....

Stilgar, however, remained the same. After they finished their coffee and sweet cakes, Liet stood and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Today we will go out into the deep dunes and plant weather devices. We need better resolution to track the desiccation patterns."

"Why do you obsess over details? The desert is the desert. It will always be hot and dry, and here on Qelso it will keep growing." The former naib did not see anything particularly tragic or wrong with the dying ecosystem. To Stilgar, it was the natural order of things. "Shai-Hulud continues to build his domain no matter what you do."

"The scientist pursues knowledge," Liet said, and his companion had no answer for that.

Taking one of the small flyers the *Ithaca* had left behind, he had gone to the northern and as yet undamaged latitudes where the forests stood tall, the rivers flowed, and snowcaps crowned the mountains. Cities and towns still flourished in the valleys and on the hillsides, though the people knew they would all be gone before long. Var's commandos were poignantly reminded every day of how much they were missing, how much they had lost. Stilgar did not see it.

The two friends, along with a group of rugged volunteers, donned newly manufactured stillsuits and adjusted the fittings. When the commandos marched into the open desert, they walked in single file on the dunes. Liet had them practice the random stutter-step that would not attract a worm. The yellow sun grew swiftly hotter, reflecting off the granular sands, but they plodded onward, practicing their lives here. Far in the distance Liet saw the rusty-brown smear of powdery smoke that indicated a spice blow, and he thought he saw the rippling tracks of a worm moving out there.

Stilgar shouted and pointed up at the sky. The desert men instinctively clustered together in a defensive formation.

Hundreds of huge metallic ships suddenly descended, made of angular plates bristling with weapons and powered by enormous engines. The vessels looked like nothing Liet had ever seen before. Enemy ships?

For a moment he hoped the *Ithaca* had returned with them, but these were unlike the no-ship and unusual in their formation, moving in a coordinated fashion. They dropped indiscriminately onto the open desert, scattering sand and flattening dunes. Their pilots seemed oblivious to the fact that the dull vibrations would attract sandworms. As Liet stood gaping at the ships' sheer size, he had no doubt that their weapons could brush aside a worm attack as if it were no more than a nuisance.

The dusty commandos looked to the two gholas for answers. Liet had none, though, and despite the impossible odds, Stilgar appeared ready to attack, if need be.

With an ominous humming and clanking, the ships extended support struts and raised themselves on thick, powerful anchors. Then numerous doors began to open, turning loose an army of metal-skinned machines: heavy lifters, ground crushers, and excavators. Moving

on treads, the lumbering self-guided behemoths crawled across the dunes. Behind them marched ranks of heavysset metal robots that smashed forward like deadly warriors ... or were they workers?

Helpers?

The commandos had only small weapons. Some of the eager ones drew their projectile launchers, dropped to their knees on the soft sand, and took aim. "Wait!" Liet cried.

A hatch at the top of the largest landed ship opened and a pale form emerged, stepping out onto an observation platform. A human form. When the man called down to them, his voice echoed in an eerie chorus transmitted from thousands of speakerpatches on the lines of machine forces. "Stilgar and Liet-Kynes! Don't be so quick to declare yourselves our enemies."

"Who are you?" Stilgar shouted defiantly. "Come down here so that we may speak to you face to face."

"I thought you would recognize me."

Liet did. "It's Duncan - Duncan Idaho!"

Flanked by an honor guard of robots and accompanied by a troop of human workers wearing outfits that Liet did not recognize, Duncan came down to stand with them on the dunes.

"Liet and Stilgar, we left you here to face the onslaught of the desert. You said this was your calling."

"It is," Stilgar said.

"And the Jews? Are they here with you?"

"They formed a sietch of their own. They are thriving and happy."

Duncan's honor guard stepped forward, women in black singlesuits and similarly garbed men who walked beside the females as equals. One of the women wore insignia and carried an air of command. He introduced her as his daughter Janess. "I confronted the Enemy, the thinking machines, and ended the war." He extended his hands, and all of the robot workers turned to face him. The awesome ships themselves seemed to be alive and aware of every move Duncan made. "I have found a way to bring us all together."

"You surrendered to thinking machines," Stilgar said, his tone acidic.

"Not at all. I decided to show my humanity by not annihilating them. In many solar systems, they are building great things, achieving impressive works on planets inhospitable to humans. We work for the same purpose now, and I have brought them here to assist you."

"Assist us?" one of the commandos said. "How can they help? They're just machines."

"They are allies. You face an insurmountable task. With as many robot crews as you require, I can help you accomplish what you need." Duncan's dark eyes glittered, as he watched from a million eyes all at once. "We can build a barrier against the desert, stop the sandtrout from spreading, and keep the water on a portion of the continent. Shai-Hulud will have his domain, while the rest of Qelso remains relatively unscathed. Humans can have their lives and slowly learn to adapt to the desert, but only if they choose to."

"Impossible," Liet said. "How can a force of worker robots stand against the tide of the desert?"

Duncan flashed a confident smile. "Don't underestimate them - or me. I fill the roles of both Kwisatz Haderach and Omnium. I guide all the factions of humanity and control the entire Synchronized Empire." He shrugged, and smiled. "Saving one planet is well within the scope of my capabilities."

Liet couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You can stop the desert and turn back the worms?"

"Qelso will be both desert and forest, as I am both human and machine." At a gesture and a thought from Duncan, the massive excavating equipment rumbled out into the sand, heading toward the boundary where the dunes met the still-living landscape.

Liet and Stilgar followed Duncan, who walked ahead of the heavy convoy. As a planetologist, a ghola, and a human being, Liet had innumerable questions. But for now,

watching the machines begin their work, he decided to wait and see what the future held.

When Leto II envisioned his Golden Path, he foresaw the direction that humankind should take, but he had blind spots. He failed to see that he was not the ultimate Kwisatz Haderach.
- Bene Gesserit fact-finding commission

In the eleven years Jessica had been back home, she had realized more and more that some things did not add up. This planet might indeed be Caladan, or Dan, but this was not the same home she and her Duke had loved so long ago.

On a stormy evening, as she walked through the restored castle, the incongruous details finally became more than she could bear. Pausing in an upper hallway, she opened a finely carved elaccawood cabinet, an antique that some decorator had placed there.

This time, she stood staring at the ornate interior, and on impulse pressed a wooden extrusion in one corner. To her surprise, a panel opened, and inside she found a small blue statuette of a griffin. Perhaps placed there by the Baron ghola, the griffin was the ancient symbol of House Harkonnen. He must have hidden it there as a clever reminder of the falseness of the castle.

As she stared at the statuette, feeling the wrongness of the object, she considered all of her hard work since returning to Caladan. She had directed crews of local laborers to dismantle the Baron's torture devices and the Face Dancer Khrone's offensive laboratories from the underground chambers. Through it all she had worked side by side with the cleaning teams, sweating and angry as she scrubbed away every stain, every odor, every hint of the unwanted presence. But Castle Caladan still reeked with reminders.

How could she make a fresh start when so much of the past - at least this awkward, out-of-focus echo of the past - hung all around her?

Behind her, moving silently, Dr. Yueh said, "Are you all right, my Lady?"

She looked at the Suk doctor. He wore an expression of deep concern on his buttery face; his dark lips turned downward as he waited for an answer.

"Everywhere I turn, I am reminded of the Baron." She frowned at the griffin figurine in her hand. "Some of the articles in this castle are authentic, such as that dropleaf desk with the hawk crest, but most are bad copies."

Making up her mind, Jessica stepped to a segmented window at the end of the hall and swung it open to let in the stormy night air. In a dramatic gesture, she hurled the griffin figurine out to the crashing sea. The waves would soon erode it and break it into unrecognizable pieces. A suitable fate for the Harkonnen icon.

A cold, wet wind whispered into the hall, bringing spatters of rain. Outside, scudding clouds parted to reveal a crescent moon on the horizon, casting cold yellow light on the water.

Moments later she tore down a wall tapestry that she had never liked, and was about to throw that out the window, too, but - not wanting to spoil this beautiful planet - she instead tossed the tapestry on the floor, promising herself to cast it on the trash heap the following morning. "Maybe I should just tear this whole place down, Wellington. Can we ever remove the taint?"

Yueh was shocked at the suggestion. "My Lady, this is the ancestral home of House Atreides. What would Duke Leto - "

"This is a mere reconstruction, fraught with errors." A gusting breeze blew her bronze hair away from her face.

"Maybe we waste too much time trying to recreate what we see in our old memories, my Lady. Why not build and decorate your home as you choose?"

She blinked as cold rain blew into her face, drenching her jade green dress and wetting the rug. "I thought this place would help my Leto, give him comfort, but maybe it was more for me than for him."

A ten-year-old boy with coal-black hair came running down the hall, his smoke gray eyes widening with excitement and alarm when he saw the open window. He was even more surprised when neither Jessica nor Yueh reacted to the blowing rain that drenched the rugs and tapestries. "What's happening?"

"I was considering moving somewhere else, Leto. Would you like me to find us a normal home in the village? Maybe we'd be happier down there, away from this pampered life."

"But I like this castle! It's a Duke's castle." Jessica could not think of her Leto as a child. He wore fishing dungarees and a striped shirt, just like the ones he had worn when Jessica had first come to Caladan as a concubine purchased from the Bene Gesserit. The young nobleman had put a knife to her throat that day, a bluff...

Yueh smiled. "A Duke ... Such titles no longer mean anything with the Imperium long gone. Do the people of Caladan even need a Duke anymore?"

Jessica's reaction was automatic, making her realize she had not thought through her notion. "The people still need leaders, no matter what title we use. And we can be good leaders, as House Atreides has always been in the past. My Leto will be a good Duke." The boy's eyes glittered as he listened with rapt attention. Beyond his youthful features, Jessica could see the seeds of the man she loved. This young Atreides was among the first of a new generation of gholas produced by Scytale. The baby had been shipped to Caladan and christened there - just as the original Paul had been.

Since leaving Synchrony, Jessica and Yueh had struggled to recover here, endeavoring in the process to bring back a degree of glory to the quiet water world. The tangled threads of their initial and ghola lives made them ironic allies, two people with shared tragedies and shared pasts. Finally, though he could never have his beloved Wanna back, Yueh had found some measure of peace.

Jessica, though, knew that her true Duke waited for her. Eventually he would grow to manhood. When he got his memories back, his physical age would not matter.

Jessica's partnership with Leto would be unusual, but no stranger than the relationships of all the mismatched gholas that had grown up on the no-ship. As a Bene Gesserit, she could slow her own aging process, and with melange melange melange melange melange readily available from the operations on Chapterhouse, Buzzell, and Qelso, they could both enjoy extended lives.

She would prepare Leto, and when the time was right, she would help trigger his true awakening. Miraculously, he would once again be the man she loved, with all his thoughts and memories.

She only had to wait a decade or two. As a Bene Gesserit, she could be patient.

Jessica grasped his small hand. This time there would be no political reason to prevent them from getting married, if that was what he wanted, and she wanted. It only mattered to her that they would be together again.

"Everything will be the same when you finally remember, Leto. And everything will be different."

The future is around all of us, and it looks very much like the past.

- MOTHER SUPERIOR SHEEANA, at the founding of the Orthodox School on Synchrony

The mangled and permanently grounded Ithaca had become the new headquarters building for Sheeana's splinter group. Innovative human architects in conjunction with construction robots had remodeled the large vessel into a unique and imposing headquarters. The navigation bridge, the highest deck on the no-ship, had been opened up and converted into an observation tower.

Mother Superior Sheeana stared across the breathtaking, rebuilt city of Synchrony.

Dipping into her deep reservoir of memories, she drew parallels to one of the original Bene

Gesserit schools on Wallach IX, which had also been founded in an urban setting. Here many of the machine spires remained, and some even moved as they had before, processing materials in automated industries.

Years ago, Duncan and the willing machines had helped her reconstruct the unusual metropolis, though he balanced his "miraculous" work with the necessity of letting the humans achieve their own successes. He and Sheeana knew the dangers of letting people grow too soft, and he had no intention of allowing them to rely on him for things they could do for themselves. Humankind needed to solve its own problems as much as possible.

At the same time, clusters of thinking machines had begun to grow apart, given manageable goals, inhabiting niches unbearable to humans: blasted planets, frozen asteroids, empty moons. The galaxy was a vast place, and so little of it was suitable for biological life. There would be more lebensraum than any empire could possibly need.

Some of the robots had started showing traits of personalities, unique characters of their own. Duncan suggested that, in time, these could eventually become some of the greatest thinkers and philosophers history had ever known. Sheeana remained unconvinced of this, and vowed that her special trainees here would prove him wrong with their own superior achievements.

Every month fresh candidates came to join the orthodox Bene Gesserit center on Synchrony, while others joined Murbella's New Sisterhood on Chapterhouse. Surmounting early difficulties, the two orders now worked in harmony with one another. Sheeana and her stricter ways attracted a different sort of acolyte, which she knew would have pleased Garimi. Sheeana tested the applicants harshly and rejected all but the most acceptable. Far away, Murbella's order had its own attractions. In this new universe, there was plenty of room for both views.

Sheeana's conventional Bene Gesserit breeding program was in full swing now, and it warmed her heart to see so many pregnant women each day. She counted seven of them outside among the people leaving and entering the headquarters. The sight gave her confidence that her order would expand and continue into humanity's future.

Later that day, the Tleilaxu Master Scytale contacted Sheeana on the navigation bridge that had become her center of operations. Transmitting from one of his Synchrony laboratories, he actually sounded cheerful now instead of harried. "I finished cataloguing the remaining cells and sifted out all traces of Face Dancer contamination. We must introduce some of those traits into the Bene Gesserit again."

"After Duncan, we will breed no further Kwisatz Haderachs. It's not even a matter for discussion." As far as she was concerned, many things did not need to occur again....

"I merely mean to preserve our knowledge. It's like finding the seeds of long-forgotten but beautiful plants. We shouldn't just discard them."

"Perhaps not, but we must set up strict fail-safe mechanisms."

Scytale did not seem bothered by the restrictions Sheeana was placing on him. "I honestly feel that the Tleilaxu race will recover their lost knowledge." Quickly he added, "With changes for the better, of course."

"For the advancement of humankind," Sheeana said.

She had never known him to work so hard. Scytale had used the cells in his nullentropy capsule to regrow gholas of the last Tleilaxu Council, and now the little ones followed him everywhere, reminding her of a mother duck trailed by ducklings.

Scytale raised the group in a manner different than was traditional for Tleilaxu males. In separate quarters, he was also raising Tleilaxu females - from newly discovered cells - though they would never be relegated to the horrific, degrading conditions their predecessors had endured. Never again would Tleilaxu females be forced to become axlotl tanks, so there would be no chance of creating another set of ferocious, vengeful enemies like the Honored Matres. In particular, Sheeana and her Sisters would monitor the council members closely, keeping watch to ensure that they did not corrupt the Tleilaxu people as they had before.

There were still axlotl tanks, of course - some women volunteered for personal reasons, while others left instructions for their bodies to be converted in the event of serious accidents. As always, the Bene Gesserits met their own needs.

After she ended the conference with Scytale, the Mother Superior gazed through the broad windows of the navigation bridge. Far away on the horizon, beyond the redefined boundaries of the gleaming city, the ground was churned and torn up, and many of the geometric structures built by Omnium lay toppled and crushed into rubble.

She adjusted one of the windows, increasing its magnification. From this vantage point she could see the new desert and one of the sandworms rising up from the debris, its eyeless head questing about. Then the creature smashed down hard, breaking part of a wall. Like huge, determined earthworms churning the soil, they had begun the process of converting the abandoned buildings into the desert they preferred.

Soon, Sheeana thought, she would go and speak to them again.

She looked down at the little girl at her side and grasped her small hand. Perhaps one day she would even take her protégée with her, the young ghola of Serena Butler.

It was never too early to start preparing Serena for her role.

The desert has a beauty I could not forget in a thousand lifetimes.

- PAUL MUAD'DIB ATREIDES

Bathed in the golden rays of sunset, two figures made their way along the crest of a dune, their steps irregular so that they did not attract the huge sandworms. The pair walked side by side, inseparable.

It was warm on Dune, but not like old times. Because of the severe damage to the environment, the weather had cooled and the atmosphere had thinned. But with the return of the worms, along with sand-plankton and sandtrout bursting through the cracked shell of glassy dunes, the old planet had begun to come back. As Chani's father Liet-Kynes used to say, everything on Dune was tied together, an entire ecosystem that included the land, the available water, and the air.

And, thanks to Duncan Idaho, an extensive work force of hardened machines continued the excavation process in latitudes where the sandworms had not yet returned. Methodically, the mechanical army prepared the old sand section by section, opening the way for worms to expand their territory. Massive planting and fertilization work performed by powerful thinking-machine tractors and excavators had stabilized the seared ground, establishing a new biomatrix, while Paul's hardy settlers monitored the growth and did their own work alongside. Through his wide-reaching thoughts, Duncan made sure the thinking machines understood what Dune had once been, before outsiders meddled with its ecosystem. Misused technology had devastated the desert planet, and now technology would help bring it back.

Paul stopped a hundred meters from the nearest rock formation, where a work crew had found the ruins of an abandoned sietch. With a small group of determined settlers, he and Chani had been salvaging the Fremen habitat with their own hands. Reclaiming the old ways.

In bygone days, he had been the legendary Muad'Dib, leading a Fremen army. Now he was content to be a modern-day Fremen, a leader of 753 people who had established austere homes in the rocks, which were on the way to becoming thriving sietches.

Paul and Chani flew out regularly with survey crews. Instilled with fresh optimism, he saw the magnificent potential for Dune. Near the excavated sietch, he had discovered an underground grotto that he and his followers planned to irrigate and artificially illuminate, to support a planting project for grasses, tubers, flowers, and shrubs.

Enough to support a small population of new Fremen, but not enough to shift the desert

ecosystem that the new worms were recreating, year after year.

One day, he might even ride the great worms again.

Paul turned to see the pale yellow sunrise appearing over the ocean of sand. "Dune is reawakening. Just as we are."

Chani smiled, seeing both her beloved Usul of memory and the gholia she had grown up with. She loved each Paul for himself. Her abdomen protruded just a little, where their growing baby was beginning to show its presence. In five months, it would be the first child born on the recently resettled planet. In her second lifetime Chani did not need to worry about Imperial schemes, hidden contraceptives, or poisoned food. Her pregnancy would be normal, and the child - or children, if they were again blessed with twins - would have great potential, without the curse of terrible purpose.

Chani, even more in touch with the weather than he was, turned her face into a cool breeze. The sunrise began to show a new richness of coppery colors from dust stirred into the air.

"We'd better get back to the sietch, Usul. A storm is brewing."

He watched her glide forward gracefully, her red hair blowing behind her. Chani sang the walking song of lovers on the sand, her words lilting beautifully and in a stutter rhythm, like the cadence of her feet:

"Tell me of thine eyes
And I will tell thee of thy heart.
Tell me of thy feet
And I will tell thee of thy hands.
Tell me of thy sleeping
And I will tell thee of thy waking.
Tell me of thy desires
And I will tell thee of thy need."

When they were halfway back to the rocks, the wind picked up. Blowing sand stung their faces. Paul held onto Chani, doing his best to shelter her with his own body against the abrasive wind.

"Yes, a fine storm is brewing," she said, as they finally reached the sietch entrance and hurried inside. "A cleansing one." In the low light of a glowglobe, exhilaration flushed her features.

Catching her by the arm, Paul spun her around and wiped sand from around her eyes and mouth. Then he drew her close and kissed her. Chani seemed to melt into his arms, laughing. "So you have finally learned how to treat your wife!"

"My Sihaya," he said as he held her, "I have loved you for five thousand years."

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