

Dune: Nighttime Shadows on Open Sand

by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson

Nature commits no errors; right and wrong are human categories.

—Pardot Kynes, Arrakis Lectures

Monotonous days. The three-man Harkonnen patrol cruised over the golden swells of dunes along a thousand-kilometer flight path. In the unrelenting desert landscape, even a puff of dust caused excitement.

The troopers flew their armored ornithopter in a long circle, skirting mountains, then curving south over great pans and flatlands. Glossu Rabban, the Baron's nephew and temporary governor of Arrakis, had ordered them to fly regularly, to be seen—to show the squalid settlements that Harkonnens were watching. Always.

Kiel, the sidegunner, considered the assignment a license to hunt any Fremen found wandering near legitimate spice-harvesting operations. What made those dirty wanderers think they could trespass on Harkonnen lands without permission from the district office in Carthag? But few Fremen were ever caught abroad in daylight, and the task had grown dull.

Garan flew the 'thopter, rising up and dipping down to catch thermals, as if operating an amusement ride. He maintained a stoic expression, though occasionally a grin stole across his lips as the craft bucked and jostled in rough air. As they completed their fifth day on patrol, he continued to mark discrepancies on topographical maps, muttering in disgust each time he found another mistake. These were the worst charts he had ever used.

In the back passenger compartment sat Josten, recently transferred from Giedi Prime. Accustomed to industrial facilities, gray skies, and dirty buildings, Josten gazed out over the sandy wastelands, studying hypnotic dune patterns. He spotted the knot of dust off to the south, deep in the open Funeral Plain. "What's that? Spice-harvesting operation?"

"Not a chance," the sidegunner Kiel said. "Harvesters shoot a plume like a cone into the air, straight and thin."

"Too low for a dust devil. Too small." With a shrug, Garan jerked the 'thopter controls and soared toward the low, reddish-brown cloud. "Let's take a look." After so many tedious days, they would have gone out of their way to investigate a large rock sticking out of the sand....

When they reached the site, they found no tracks, no machinery, no sign of human presence—and yet acres of desert looked devastated. A mottled rust color stained the sands a darker ochre, as if blood from a wound had dried in the hot sun.

"Looks like somebody dropped a bomb here," Kiel said.

"Could be the aftermath of a spice blow," Garan suggested. "I'll set down for a closer look."

As the 'thopter settled onto the churned sands, Kiel popped open the hatch. The temperature-controlled atmosphere hissed out, replaced by a wave of heat. He coughed dust.

Garan leaned over from the cockpit and sniffed hard. "Smell it." The odor of burnt cinnamon struck his nostrils. "Spice blow for sure."

Josten squeezed past Kiel and dropped onto the soft ground. Amazed, he bent down, picked up a handful of ochre sand and touched it to his lips. "Can we scoop up some fresh spice and take it back? Must be worth a fortune."

Kiel had been thinking the same thing, but now he turned to the newcomer with scorn. "We don't have the processing equipment. You need to separate it from the sand, and you can't do that with your fingers."

Garan spoke in a quieter, but firmer voice. "If you went back to Carthag and tried to sell raw product to a street vendor you'd be hauled in front of Governor Rabban—or worse yet, have to explain to Count Fenring how some of the Emperor's spice ended up in a patrolman's pockets."

As the troopers tromped out to the ragged pit at the center of the dissipating dust cloud, Josten glanced around. "Is it safe for us to be here? Don't the big worms go to spice?"

"Afraid, kid?" Kiel asked.

"Let's throw him to a worm if we see one," Garan suggested. "It'll give us time to get away."

Kiel saw movement in the sandy excavation, shapes squirming, buried things that tunneled and burrowed, like maggots in rotten meat. Josten opened his mouth to say something, then clamped it shut again.

A whiplike creature emerged from the sand, two meters long with fleshy segmented skin. It was the size of a large snake, its mouth an open circle glittering with needle-sharp teeth that lined its throat.

"A sandworm!" Josten said.

"Only a runt," Kiel scoffed.

"Newborn—do you think?" Garan asked.

The worm waved its eyeless head from side to side. Other slithering creatures, a nest of them, squirmed about as if they'd been spawned in the explosion.

"Where in the hells did they come from?" Kiel asked.

"Wasn't in my briefing," Garan said.

"Can we ... catch one?" Josten asked.

Kiel stopped himself from making a rude rejoinder, realizing that the young recruit did have a good idea. "Come on!" He charged forward into the churned sand.

The worm sensed the movement and reared back, uncertain whether to attack or flee. Then it arced like a sea serpent and plunged into the sand, wriggling and burrowing.

Josten sprinted ahead and dove face-first to grasp the segmented body three quarters of the way to its end. "It's so strong!" Following him, the sidegunner jumped down and grabbed the thrashing tail.

The worm tried to tug away, but Garan reached the front, where he dug into the sand and grabbed behind its head with a stranglehold. All three troopers wrestled and pulled. "Get it!" The small worm thrashed like an eel on an electric plate.

Other sandworms on the far side of the pit rose like a strange forest of periscopes sprouting from the sea of dunes, round mouths like black os turned toward the men. For an icy moment, Kiel feared they might attack like a swarm of marrow leeches, but the immature worms darted away and disappeared underground.

Garan and Kiel hauled their captive out of the sand and dragged it toward the ornithopter. As a Harkonnen patrol, they had all the equipment necessary to arrest criminals, including old-fashioned devices for trussing a captive like a herd animal. "Josten, go get the binding cords in our apprehension kit," the pilot said.

The new recruit came running back with the cords, fashioning a loop which he slipped over the worm's head and cinched tight. Garan released his hold on the rubbery skin and grabbed the rope, tugging while Josten slipped a second cord lower on the body.

"What are we going to do with it?" Josten asked.

Once, early in his assignment on Arrakis, Kiel had joined Rabban on an abortive worm hunt. They had taken a Fremen guide, well-armed troops, even a Planetologist. Using the Fremen guide as bait, they had

lured one of the enormous sandworms and killed it with explosives. But before Rabban could take his trophy, the beast had dissolved, sloughing into amoeba creatures that fell to the sand, leaving nothing but a cartilaginous skeleton and loose crystal teeth. Rabban had been furious.

Kiel's stomach knotted. The Baron's nephew might consider it an insult that three simple patrolmen could capture a worm, when he'd been unable to do so himself. "We'd better drown it."

"Drown it?" Josten said. "What for? And why would I want to waste my water ration to do that?"

Garan stopped as if struck by a thunderbolt. "I've heard the Fremen do it. If you drown a baby worm, they say it spits out some kind of drug or poison. It's very rare."

Kiel nodded. "Oh, yeah. The desert people use it in their religious rituals. It makes everybody go crazy, wild orgies and everything."

"But ... we've only got two literjons of water in the compartment," Josten said, still nervous.

"Then we only use one. I know where we can refill it, anyway." The pilot and his sidegunner exchanged glances. They had patrolled together long enough that they'd both thought of the same thing.

As if understanding its fate, the worm bucked and thrashed even more, but it was already growing weaker.

"Once we get the drug," Kiel said, "let's have some fun."

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At night, with the patrol 'thopter running in stealth mode, they flew over the razor-edged mountains, approaching from behind a ridge and landing on a rough mesa above the squalid village of Bilar Camp. The villagers lived in hollowed-out caves and aboveground structures that extended out to the flats. Windmills generated power; supply bins glittered with tiny lights that attracted a few moths and the bats that fed on them.

Unlike the nomadic Fremen, these villagers were slightly more civilized but also more downtrodden: men who worked as desert guides and joined spice-harvesting crews. They had forgotten how to survive on their world without becoming parasites upon the planetary governors.

On an earlier patrol, Kiel and Garan had discovered a camouflaged cistern on the mesa, a treasure trove of water. Kiel didn't know where the villagers had gotten so much moisture; most likely, they had committed fraud, inflating their census numbers so that Harkonnen generosity provided more than they deserved.

The people of Bilar Camp covered the cistern with rock so that it looked like a natural protrusion, but the villagers placed no guards around their illegal stockpile. For some reason desert culture forbade thievery even more than murder; they trusted the safety of their possessions from bandits or thieves of the night.

Of course, the Harkonnen troopers had no intention of stealing the water—that is, no more than enough to refill their own supply containers.

Dutifully, Josten trotted along with their sloshing container, which held the thick, noxious substance exuded by the drowned worm after it had stopped thrashing and bucking inside the container. Awed and nervous about what they'd done, they dumped the flaccid carcass near the perimeter of the spice blow and then taken off with the drug.

Garan operated the Bilar cistern's cleverly concealed spigot and refilled one of their empty containers. No sense in letting all the water go to waste just for a practical joke on the villagers.

"Do you know what this drug will do to them?" Josten asked.

Garan shook his head. "I've heard plenty of crazy stories."

"Maybe we should make the kid try it first," the sidegunner said.

Josten backed away, raising his hands.

Kiel took the container of worm bile and upended it into the cistern. The villagers would certainly have a surprise next time they all drank from their illegal water hoard. "Serves them right."

Garan looked at the contaminated cistern again. "I bet they tear off their clothes and dance naked in the streets, squawking like dinfowl."

"Let's stay here and watch the fun for ourselves," Kiel said.

Garan frowned. "Do you want to be the one to explain to Rabban why we're late returning from patrol?"

"Let's go," Kiel answered quickly.

As the worm-poison infused the cistern, the Harkonnen troopers hurried back to their ornithopter, reluctantly content to let the villagers discover the prank for themselves.

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It is said that the Fremen has no conscience, having lost it in a burning desire for revenge. This is foolish. Only the rawest primitive and the sociopath have no conscience. The Fremen possesses a highly evolved

world view centered on the welfare of his people. His sense of belonging to the community is almost stronger than his sense of self. It is only to outsiders that these desert-dwellers seem brutish ... just as outsiders appear to them.

—Pardot Kynes, *The People of Arrakis*

"Luxury is for the noble-born, Liet," Pardot Kynes, Imperial Planetologist to Arrakis, said to his son as the groundcar trundled across the uneven ground. "On this planet you must instantly become aware of your own surroundings, and remain alert at all times. If you fail to learn this lesson, you won't live long."

As Kynes operated the simple controls, he gestured toward the buttery morning light that melted across the stark dunes. "There are rewards here, too." Kynes exhaled a long breath between his hard chapped lips.

Young Liet stared out the scratched windowplaz. Unlike his father, who reeled off whatever random thoughts occurred to him, making pronouncements that the Fremen heeded as if they were weighty spiritual matters, Liet preferred silence. He narrowed his eyes to study the landscape, searching for any small thing out of its place. Always alert.

On such a harsh planet, one had to develop stored perceptions, each of them linked to every moment of survival. Though his father was much older, Liet wasn't certain the Planetologist understood as much as he himself did. The mind of Pardot Kynes contained powerful concepts, but the older man experienced them only as esoteric data. He didn't understand the desert in his heart or in his soul...

For years, Kynes had lived among the Fremen. It was said that Emperor Shaddam IV had little interest in his activities, and since Kynes asked for no funding and few supplies, the Emperor and the Harkonnens left him alone. With each passing year he slipped farther from attention. Shaddam and his advisors had stopped expecting any grand revelations from the Planetologist's periodic reports.

This suited Pardot Kynes, and his son as well.

In his wanderings, Kynes often made trips to outlying villages where the people of the pan and graben scratched out squalid lives. True Fremen rarely mixed with the townspeople, and viewed them with veiled contempt for being too soft, too civilized. Liet would never have lived in those pathetic settlements for all the solaris in the Imperium. But still, Pardot visited them.

Eschewing roads and commonly traveled paths, they rode in the groundcar, checking meteorological stations and collecting data, though Pardot's troops of devoted Fremen would gladly have done this menial work for their "Umma," or prophet.

Liet-Kynes's features echoed many of his father's, though with a leaner face and the close-set eyes of his Fremen mother. He had pale hair, and his chin was still smooth, though later he would likely grow a beard similar to the great Planetologist's. Liet's eyes had the deep blue of spice addiction, since every meal and breath of air was laced with melange.

Liet heard a sharp intake of breath from his father as they passed the jagged elbow of a canyon where camouflaged catchtraps directed moisture to plantings of rabbitbush and poverty grasses. "See? It's taking on a life of its own. We'll 'cycle' the planet through prairie phase into forest over several generations. The sand has a high salt content, indicating old oceans, and the spice itself is alkaline." He chuckled. "People in the Imperium would be horrified that we'd use spice byproducts for something as menial as fertilizer." He smiled at his son. "But we know the value of such things, eh? If we break down the spice, we can set up protein digestion. Even now, if we flew high enough, we could spot patches of green where matted plant growth holds the dune faces in place."

The young man sighed. His father was a great man with magnificent dreams for Dune—and yet Kynes was so focused on one thing that he failed to see the universe around him. Liet knew that if any Harkonnen patrols found the plantings, they would destroy them and punish the Fremen.

Though only twelve, Liet regularly went out on guerrilla raids with his Fremen brothers and had already killed Harkonnens. For more than a year, he and his friends—led by the brash Stilgar—had struck targets that others refused to consider. Only a week before, Liet's companions had blown up a dozen patrol 'thopters at a supply post. Unfortunately, the stupid Harkonnen troops had taken their revenge against poor villagers, seeing no difference between settled folk and the will-o'-the-sand Fremen.

He hadn't told his father about his guerrilla activities, since the elder Kynes wouldn't understand the necessity. Premeditated violence, for whatever reason, was a foreign concept to the Planetologist. But Liet would do what needed to be done.

Now, the groundcar approached a village tucked into the rocky foothills; it was called Bilar Camp on their terrain maps. Pardot continued to talk about melange and its peculiar properties. "They found spice too soon on Arrakis. It deflected scientific inquiry. It was so useful right from the outset that no one bothered to probe its mysteries."

Liet turned to look at him. "I thought that was why you were assigned here in the first place—to understand the spice."

"Yes ... but we have more important work to do. I still report back to the Imperium often enough to convince them I'm working at my job ... though not very successfully." Talking about the first time he'd been to this region, he drove toward a cluster of dirty buildings the color of sand and dust.

The groundcar jounced over a rough rock, but Liet ignored it and stared ahead at the village, squinting his eyes in the harsh light of the desert morning. The morning air held the fragility of fine crystal. "Something's wrong," he said, interrupting his father.

Kynes continued talking for a few seconds and then brought the vehicle to a stop. "What's that?"

"Something is wrong." Liet pointed ahead at the village.

Kynes shaded his eyes against the glare. "I don't see anything."

"Still ... let us proceed with caution."

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In the center of the village, they encountered a festival of horrors.

The noise was appalling, as was the smell. Bodies lay sprawled on the ground like squashed insects, arms and legs stiffened at odd angles, while tortured survivors wandered about as if insane, shrieking and snarling like animals. They had ripped hair out of their heads in bloody clumps. Some used long

fangnails to claw the eyes out of their faces, then held the scooped eyeballs in their palms; blind, they staggered against the tan walls of dwellings, leaving wet crimson smears.

Even the dead ones did not look at peace.

"By Shai-Hulud!" Liet whispered under his breath, while his father let out a louder curse in common Imperial Galach.

One man with torn eye sockets like bloody extra mouths above his cheekbones collided with a crawling woman; both victims flew into a rage and ripped at each other's skin with bare hands, biting and spitting and screaming. There were muddy spots on the street, overturned containers of water.

Some buildings were locked and shuttered, barricaded against the crazed wretches outside who pounded on the walls, wailing wordlessly to get in. On an upper floor Liet saw a woman's terrified face at the dust-streaked windowplaz. Others hid, somehow unaffected by the murderous insanity.

"We must help these people, Father." Liet leaped out of the sealed groundcar before his father had brought it to a complete stop. "Bring your weapons. We may need to defend ourselves."

They carried old maula pistols as well as knives. His father, though a scientist at heart, was also a good fighter—a skill he reserved for defending his vision for Arrakis. The legend was told of how he had slain several Harkonnen bravos who'd been attempting to kill three young Fremmen. Those rescued Fremmen were now his most loyal lieutenants, Stilgar, Turok, and Ommun. But Pardot Kynes had never fought against anything like this. . . .

The maddened villagers noticed them and moaned. They began to move forward.

"Don't kill them unless you must," Kynes said, amazed at how quickly his son had armed himself with a crysknife and maula pistol. "Watch yourself."

Liet ventured into the street. What struck him first was the terrible stink, as if the foul breath of a dying leper had been captured in a bottle and slowly released.

Staring in disbelief, Pardot stepped farther from the groundcar. He saw no lasgun burn marks in the village, no chip scars from projectile weapons, nothing that would have indicated an overt Harkonnen attack. Was it a disease? If so, it might be contagious. If a plague or some kind of communicable insanity was at work here, he could not let the Fremen take these bodies for the deathstills.

Liet moved forward. "Fremen would attribute this to demons."

Two of the bloody-faced victims let out demonic shrieks and rushed toward them, their fingers outstretched like eagle claws, their mouths open like bottomless pits. Liet pointed the maula pistol, closed his eyes to utter a quick prayer, then fired twice. The perfect shots hit each of the attackers in the chest, and they fell dead.

Liet bowed. "Forgive me, Shai-Hulud."

Pardot watched him. I have tried to teach my son many things, but at least he has learned compassion. All other information can be learned from filmbooks . . . but not compassion. This was born into him.

The young man bent over the two bodies, studied them closely, pushing back his superstitious fear. "I do not think it's a disease." He looked back at Pardot. "I've assisted the healers, as you know, and . . ." His voice trailed off.

"What, then?"

"I believe they've been poisoned."

One by one, the tortured villagers wandering the dusty streets fell onto their backs in screaming convulsions, until only three remained alive. Liet moved quickly with the crysknife and dispatched the last victims painlessly and efficiently. No tribe or village would ever accept them again, no matter how much they recovered, for fear that they had been corrupted by demons; even their water would be considered tainted.

Liet found it odd how easily he had taken command in front of his father. He gestured toward two of the sealed buildings. "Convince the people inside those barred dwellings that we mean them no harm. We must discover what happened here." His voice became low and icy. "And we must learn who is to blame."

Pardot Kynes moved to the dusty building. Fingernail scratches and bloody handprints marked the mud-brick walls and pitted metal doors where crazed victims had tried to pound their way in. He swallowed hard and prepared to make his case, to convince the terrified survivors that their ordeal was over. He turned back to his son. "Where will you be, Liet?"

The young man looked at an overturned water container. He knew of only one way the poison could affect so many people at once. "Checking the water supply."

His face etched with concern, Pardot nodded.

Liet studied the terrain around the village, saw a faint trail leading up the side of the overhanging mesa. Yes, they had hidden a qanat there, their own emergency water supply.

Moving with the speed of a sun-warmed lizard, he scurried up the mountain path and reached the cistern. The evidence of its location had been cleverly disguised, though the villagers had made many errors. Even a clumsy Harkonnen patrol could have discovered the illegal reservoir. He studied the area quickly, noting patterns in the sand.

Smelling a harsh alkaloid bitterness near the upper opening of the cistern, he tried to place the odor. He'd experienced it rarely, and only during great celebrations in the sietch, the Fremen hidden communities. The Water of Life! The Fremen people consumed such a substance only after a Sayyadina had converted the exhalation of a drowned worm, using her own body chemistry as a catalyst to create a tolerable drug that sent the sietch community into an ecstatic frenzy. Unconverted, the substance was a ferocious toxin.

The villagers in Bilar Camp had drunk pure Water of Life, before it was transformed. Someone had done this intentionally ... poisoning them.

Then he saw the marks of ornithopter pads in the soft soil atop the plateau. It had to be a Harkonnen 'thopter. One of the regular patrols ... a practical joke?

Frowning grimly, Liet descended to the devastated village, where his father had succeeded in bringing out the survivors who had barricaded themselves within their dwellings. Through luck, these people had not drunk the poisoned water. Now they fell to their knees in the streets, surrounded by the awful carnage. Their keening cries of grief drifted like the thin wails of ghosts along a sheer cliffside.

Harkonnens did this.

Pardot Kynes moved about doing what he could to comfort them, but from the quizzical expressions on the villagers' faces, Liet knew his father was probably saying the wrong things, expressing his sympathy in abstract concepts that they had no ability to understand.

Liet moved down the slope, and already plans were forming in his mind. As soon as they returned to the sietch, he would meet with Stilgar and his commando squad.

And they would plan their retaliation against the Harkonnens....

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The desert is a surgeon cutting away the skin to expose what is underneath.

—Fremen saying

As the first moon rose copper-red over the desert horizon, Liet-Kynes and seven Fremen departed the rocks and made their way out to the soft curving dunes where they could be easily seen.

"Prepare yourselves," Stilgar said, his narrow face like a desert hawk's in the moonlight. His pupils had

dilated, making his solid blue eyes look black. He wrapped his desert camouflage around him, as did the other, older guerrillas. "It is said that when one waits for vengeance, time passes slowly but sweetly."

Liet-Kynes nodded. He was dressed to look like a weak, water-fat village boy, but his eyes were as hard as Velan steel. Beside him, his sietch-mate and blood-brother Warrick, a slightly taller lad, nodded as well. This night, the two would pretend to be helpless children caught out in the open ... irresistible targets for the anticipated Harkonnen patrol.

"We do what must be done, Stil." Liet clapped a hand on Warrick's padded shoulder. These twelve-year-olds had already blooded more than a hundred Harkonnens apiece, and would have stopped keeping count, except for their friendly rivalry with each other. "I trust my brother with my life."

Warrick covered Liet's hand with his own. "Liet would be afraid to die without me at his side."

"With or without you, Warrick, I don't plan to die this night," Liet said, which elicited a deep laugh from his companion. "I plan to exact revenge."

After the orgy of poisoned death had fallen upon Bilar Camp, Fremen rage had spread from sietch to sietch like water soaking into sand. From the 'thopter markings found near the hidden cistern, they knew who was responsible. All Harkonnens must pay.

Around Carthag and Arsunt, word had been passed to timid-looking workers and dusty servants placed inside Harkonnen strongholds. Some of the infiltrators scrubbed the floors of troop barracks using dry rags and abrasives. Others posed as water sellers supplying the occupation force.

As the tale of the poisoned village passed from one Harkonnen soldier to another in progressively exaggerated anecdotes, the Fremen informants noted who derived the greatest pleasure from the news. They studied the crew assignments and route logs of Harkonnen patrols. Before long, they had learned exactly which Harkonnen troopers were responsible. And where they could be found...

With a high-pitched squeak and a dancing blur of gossamer wings, a tiny distract bat swooped from an observation outcropping in the mountains behind them. When Stilgar held up a hand, the bat landed on his forearm, primly folding its wings and waiting for a reward.

Stilgar drew a tiny drop of water from the sipping tube at his throat and let the moisture fall into the open mouth of the bat. Then he brought forth a thin cylinder and placed it to his ear, listening as the bat emitted complex, wavering squeaks. Stilgar tapped the bat on its head, then flung it into the night air again, like a falconer releasing his bird.

He turned back to his expectant troop, a predatory smile on his moonshadowed face. "Their ornithopter has been seen over the ridge. The Harkonnens fly a predictable path as they scan the desert. But they have been on patrol for so long, they are complacent. They do not see their own patterns."

"Tonight, they fly into a web of death," Warrick said from the dune top, lifting his fist into the air in a very un-boy-like gesture.

The Fremen checked their weapons, loosed crysknives in sheaths at their sides, tested the strength of garroting cords, preparing. With swishing robes, they erased all marks of their passage. Leaving the two young men alone.

Stilgar looked up at the night sky, and a muscle on his jaw flickered. "This I learned from Umma Kynes. When we were cataloguing lichens, we saw a rock lizard that seemed to vanish before our eyes. Kynes said, 'I give you the chameleon, whose ability to match itself with its background tells you all you need to know about the roots of ecology and the foundations of personal identity.'" Stilgar looked gravely at his men, and his expression faltered. "I don't know exactly what he meant ... but now we must all become chameleons of the desert."

Wearing light-colored clothes, Liet stepped up the slipface of the dune, leaving deliberate, painfully apparent footprints. Warrick followed just as clumsily, while the other Fremen spread out on the flat sand. After pulling out breathing tubes and covering their faces with loose hoods, they flailed their arms in a blur of motion. Powdery sand engulfed them, and then they lay still.

Liet and Warrick ran about, smoothing wrinkles on the surface and leaving nothing but their own footprints. They finished just as the patrol 'thopter whirred over the line of rocks, flashing red lights.

The two white-clad Fremen froze out in the open, their bright clothes unmistakable against the pale, moonlit sand. No true Fremen would ever be caught in such a show of clumsiness ... but the Harkonnens didn't know that. They would not suspect.

As soon as the 'thopter came into view, Liet made an exaggerated gesture of alarm. "Come on, Warrick. Let's make a good show of it." The two ran away pell-mell, as if in a panic.

Predictably, the 'thopter circled to intercept them. A powerful spotlight flooded down, then a laughing sidegunner leaned out of the 'thopter. He fired his lasgun twice, sketching a line of melted glass upon the surface of the sand.

Liet and Warrick tumbled down the steep side of a dune. The gunner fired three more blasts, missing them each time.

The 'thopter landed on the broad surface of a nearby dune ... close to where Stilgar and his men had buried themselves. Liet and Warrick flashed each other a smile, and prepared for the second part of the game.

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Sidegunner Kiel shouldered his still-hot lasgun rifle and popped open the door. "Let's go hunt some Fremmen." He jumped onto the sand as soon as Garan had landed the patrol craft.

Behind them, the fresh-faced recruit Josten fumbled for his own weapon. "It would be easier just to shoot them from above."

"What kind of sport would that be?" Garan asked in his gruff voice.

"Or is it just that you don't want blood on your new uniform, kid?" Kiel called over his shoulder. They stood beside the armored craft looking across the moonlit dunes, where the two scrawny nomads stumbled away (as if they had any hope of escape once a Harkonnen trooper decided to target them).

Garan grabbed his weapon, and the three of them strode across the sands. The two Fremen youths scuttled like beetles, but the threat of the troops might cause them to turn around and surrender ... or better yet, fight like cornered rats.

"I've heard stories about these Fremen." Josten panted as he kept up with the two older men. "Their children are said to be killers, and their women will torture you in ways that even Piter de Vries couldn't imagine."

Kiel gave a rude snort of laughter. "We've got lasguns, Josten. What are they going to do—throw rocks at us?"

"Some of them carry maula pistols."

Garan looked back at the young recruit, then gave a shrug. "Why don't you go back to the 'thopter and get our stunner, then? We can use a wide field if things get bad."

"Yeah," Kiel said, "that way we can make this last longer." The two white-clad Fremen continued to flounder across the sand, and the Harkonnen troopers closed the distance with purposeful strides.

Glad for the opportunity to be away from the fight, Josten sprinted over the dune toward the waiting 'thopter. From the dune top, he looked back at his companions, then rushed to the darkened craft. As he ducked inside, he encountered a man clad in desert tans, hands flicking across the controls with the speed of a snake on a hot plate.

"Hey, what are you—" Josten cried.

In the cabin light he saw that the figure had a narrow leathery face. The eyes captivated him: blue-within-blue, with the sharp intensity of a man accustomed to killing. Before Josten could react, his arm was grabbed with a grip as strong as an eagle's talon, and he was dragged deeper into the cockpit. The Fremen's other hand flashed, and he saw a curved, milky-blue knife strike up. A bright icicle of pain slashed into his throat, all the way back to his spine—then the knife was gone before even a droplet of blood could cling to its surface.

Like a scorpion that had just unleashed its sting, the Fremen backed up. Josten fell forward, already feeling red death spreading from his throat. He tried to say something, to ask a question that seemed all-important to him, but his words only came out as a gurgle. The Fremen snatched something from his stillsuit and pressed it against the young man's throat, an absorbent cloth that drank his blood as it spilled.

Was the desert man saving him? A bandage? A flash of hope rose in Josten's mind. Had it all been a mistake? Was this gaunt native trying to make amends?

But Josten's blood pumped out too quickly and forcefully for any medical help. As his life faded, he realized that the absorbent pack had never been meant as a wound dressing, but simply to capture every droplet of blood for its moisture....

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When Kiel came to within firing distance of the two Fremen youths, Garan looked back into the moonlight. "I thought I heard something from the 'thopter."

"Probably Josten tripping on his own feet," the sidegunner said, not lowering his weapon.

The trapped Fremen staggered to a halt across a shallow pan of soft sand. They crouched and pulled out small, clumsy-looking knives.

Kiel laughed out loud. "What do you mean to do with those? Pick your teeth?"

"I'll pick the teeth from your dead body," one of the boys shouted. "Got any old-fashioned gold molars we can sell in Arrakeen?"

Garan chortled and looked at his companion. "This is going to be fun." Moving in lockstep, the troopers marched into the flat sandy area.

As they closed to within five meters, the sand around them erupted. Human forms popped out of the dust, covered with grit—tan human silhouettes, like animated corpses boiling up from a graveyard.

Garan let out a useless warning cry, and Kiel fired once with his lasgun, burning down one of the men. Then the dusty forms surged forward. Clustering around the pilot, they pressed in so close that he couldn't bring his lasgun to bear. They attacked him like blood-lice on an open wound.

As they drove Garan to his knees, he cried out in the manner of an old woman. The Fremen restrained him so that he could do little more than breathe and blink his eyes. And scream.

One of the white-clad "victims" hurried forward. The young man held out the small knife that Garan and Kiel had snickered at just moments ago. The youth darted downward, jabbing with the tip of the blade—but with precise control, as gentle as a kiss—to gouge out both of Garan's eyes, transforming his sockets into red Oedipal stains.

Stilgar barked out a command, "Bind him and keep him. We shall bring this one back to our sietch alive, and let the women take care of him in their own way."

Garan screamed again....

When the Fremen rushed forward to attack Kiel, the sidegunner responded by swinging his weapon like a club. As clawing hands grabbed for it, he surprised them by releasing the lasrifle. The Fremen who clutched the gun fell backward, caught off balance by the unexpected action.

Then Kiel began to run. Fighting would do him no good here. They had already taken Garan, and he assumed Josten was dead back at the 'thopter. So he left the Fremen, running as he had never run before. He sprinted across the night sands away from the rocks, away from the 'thopter ... and out into the open desert. The Fremen might be able to catch him, but he would give them a run for it.

Panting, leaving his companions behind, Kiel raced across the dunes with no plan and no thought other than to flee farther and farther away....

.....

"We've captured the 'thopter intact, Stil," Warrick said, flushed with adrenaline and quite proud of himself. The commando leader nodded grimly. Umma Kynes would be exceedingly pleased at the news. He could always use a 'thopter for his agricultural inspections, and he didn't need to know where it came from.

Liet looked down at the blinded captive, whose gouged eye sockets had been covered by a cloth. "I saw what the Harkonnens did to Bilar Camp with my own eyes ... the poisoned cistern, the tainted water." The other body had already been packed in the rear of the patrol 'thopter to be taken to the deathstills. "This doesn't pay back a tenth part of the suffering."

Going to his blood brother's side, Warrick made a face of disgust. "Such is my scorn that I don't even want to take their water for our tribe."

Stilgar glowered at him as if he had spoken sacrilege. "You would prefer to let them mummify in the sands, to let their water go wasted into the air? It would be an insult to Shai-Hulud."

Warrick bowed his head. "It was only my anger speaking, Stil. I did not mean it."

Stilgar looked up at the ruddy rising moon. The entire ambush had lasted less than an hour. "We shall perform the ritual of tal hai so that their souls will never rest. They will be damned to walk the desert for all eternity." Then his voice became harsh and fearful. "But we must take extra care to cover our tracks, so that we do not lead their ghosts back to our sietch."

The Fremen muttered as superstitious fear dampened their vengeful pleasure. Stilgar intoned the ancient chant, while others drew designs in the sand, labyrinthine power-shapes that would bind the spirits of the cursed men to the dunes forever.

Out across the moonlit sands they could still see the clumsily running figure of the remaining trooper. "That one is our offering to Shai-Hulud," Stilgar said, finishing his chant. The tal hai curse was complete. "The world will be at balance, and the desert will be pleased."

"He's chugging like a broken crawler." Liet stood next to Stilgar, drawing himself up, though he was still small compared to the commando leader. "It won't be long now."

They gathered their supplies. As many as possible piled into the patrol 'thopter, while the remaining Fremen slipped back across the sands. They used a well-practiced random gait so that their footsteps made no sound that was not natural to the desert.

The Harkonnen sidegunner continued to flee in a blind panic. By now, he might be entertaining a hope of escape, though the direction of his flight across the ocean of dunes would take him nowhere.

Within minutes, a worm came for him.

The End