
GOD EMPEROR OF DUNE

fiction

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duncan idaho challenges the worm's deity, the vengeful siona bristles under his tyrannical rule—can leto rewrite his own destiny?

I am Duncan Idaho.

That was about all he wanted to know for sure. They had brought him down to the planet on a small Guild shuttle, arriving at the dusk line with a green glimmer of sun corona along the horizon as they dipped into the shadow. The spaceport had not looked at all like anything he remembered. It was larger and with a ring of strange buildings.

"Are you sure this is Dune?" he had asked.

"Arrakis," his escort had corrected him.

I am a ghola, he told himself.

That had been a shock, but he had to believe it. To find himself living when he knew he had died, that was proof enough. The Tleilaxu had taken cells from his dead flesh and they had grown a bud in one of their axolotl tanks. That bud had become this body in a process that had made him feel at first an alien in his own flesh.

He looked down at the body. It was clothed in dark-brown trousers and jacket of a coarse weave that irritated his skin. Sandals protected his feet.

"Women of the Imperial Guard will come for you," they had said. Then they

FIRST LOOK

at a new novel

had gone away, smiling slyly among themselves.

Women of the Imperial Guard?

I am Duncan Idaho, swordmaster of the Atreides.

He clung to this memory as he stood in the yellow room.

I died defending Paul Muad'dib and his mother in a Fremmen cave sietch beneath the sands of Dune. I have been returned to that planet, but Dune is no more. Now it is only Arrakis. More than 3500 years? Who could believe his flesh existed after such a time? He had to believe his own senses.

"There have been many of you," his instructors had said.

"How many?"

"The Lord Leto will provide that information."

The Lord Leto?

The Tleilaxu history said this Lord Leto was Leto II, grandson of the Leto whom Idaho had served with fanatical devotion. But this second Leto (so the history said) had become something . . . something so strange that Idaho despaired of understanding the transformation.

How could a human slowly turn into a sandworm? How could any thinking creature live more than 3000 years? Not even the wildest projections of the geriatric spice mélange allowed such a life span.

Leto II, the God Emperor?



Leto descended to the crypt in the late evening. He had found it best to begin the first interview with a new Duncan Idaho in a darkened room where the ghola could hear Leto describe himself before actually seeing the preworm body. There was a small side room carved in black stone off the central rotunda of the crypt that suited this requirement. The chamber was large enough to accommodate Leto on his cart, but the ceiling was low. Illumination came from hidden glow globes that he controlled. There was only the one door, but it was in two segments—one swinging wide to admit the Royal Cart, the other a small portal in human dimensions.

Leto rolled his Royal Cart into the chamber, sealed the large portal and opened the smaller one. He composed himself then for the ordeal.

Leto heard the voice of his majordomo Moneo outside the darkened room, then the hesitantly distinctive footsteps of the new ghola.

"Through that door," Moneo said.

Idaho was thrust into the room and the door was sealed behind him.

Leto knew what the ghola saw—only shadows among shadows and blackness where not even the source of a voice could be fixed. Leto brought the Paul-

Muad'dib voice into play.

"It pleases me to see you again, Duncan."

"I hear Paul's voice, but I can't see him," Idaho said. He didn't try to conceal the frustrations, let them all come out in his voice.

Leto recognized hysteria in the Duncan barely covered by the warrior bravado. This Duncan had arrived in a state of near shock, strongly suspecting he was insane. Leto knew that the most subtle powers of reassurance would be required now.

"There have been many changes, Duncan," Leto said. "One thing, though, does not change. I am still Atreides."

"They said your body was. . ."

"Yes, that has changed."

"What about your body?" Idaho demanded.

Muad'dib could be retired now; Leto resumed his usual voice. "I accepted the sand trout as my skin. They have been changing me ever since."

"How long have you been changing?"

"More than thirty-five hundred years."

"I remember my death," Idaho said. "Harkonnen blades, lots of them trying to get at Paul and Jessica."

Leto restored the Muad'dib voice for momentary play: "I was there, Duncan."

"I'm a replacement, is that right?" Idaho asked.

"That's right," Leto said.

"How did the other . . . gholas . . . I mean, how did they die?"

"All flesh wears out, Duncan. It's in the records."

"What do you really look like?" Idaho asked. "What's this sandworm body the Tleilaxu described?"

"It will make sandworms of sorts someday. It's already far down the road of metamorphosis."

"Can't we have some light? I'd like to see you."

Leto commanded the floodlights. Brilliant illumination filled the room.

Idaho swept his gaze along the faceted silvery gray body, noted the beginnings of a sandworm's ribbed sections, the sinuous flexings . . . the small protuberances that had once been feet and legs. He brought his attention back to the well-defined arms and hands and finally lifted his attention to the cowed face with its pink skin, a ridiculous extrusion on such a body.

"Well, Duncan," Leto said. "You were warned."

Idaho gestured mutely toward the preworm body.

Leto asked it for him: "Why?"

Idaho nodded.

"I'm still Atreides, Duncan, and I assure you with all the honor of that name, there were compelling reasons."

Over the centuries, Leto had found that this invocation of Idaho's profound

loyalties to all things Atreides dried up the immediate wellspring of personal questions. Once more, the formula worked.

"So I'm to serve the Atreides again," Idaho said. "That sounds familiar. Is it?"

"In many ways."

"They said I would command your elite Guard, a force chosen from among them. I don't understand that. An army of women?"

"I need a trusted companion who can command my Guard. You object?"

"Why women?"

"There are behavioral differences between the sexes that make women extremely valuable in this role."

"A female army," Idaho muttered.

"The ultimate male-enticing force," Leto said. "Sex always was a way of subduing the aggressive male."

"Is that what they do?"

"They prevent or ameliorate excesses that could lead to more painful violence."

"And you let them believe you're a god. I don't think I like this."

"The curse of holiness is as offensive to me as it is to you!"

Idaho frowned. It was not the response he had expected. He cleared his throat. "What's the worst thing you would ask of me?"

How like a Duncan! Leto thought. This one was a classic. Idaho would give his loyalty to an Atreides, to the guardian of his oath, but he sent a signal that he would not go beyond the personal limits of his own morality.

"You will be asked to guard me by whatever means necessary, and you will be asked to guard my secret."

"What secret?"

"That I am vulnerable."

"That you're not God?"

"Not in that ultimate sense."

"Your Guards talk about rebels."

"They exist."

"Why?"

"They are young and I have not convinced them that my way is better."

"So the Atreides still need a sharp knife?"

"We have jobs that only a Duncan Idaho can do."

"You say . . . we. . . ." Idaho swallowed, looked at the door, then at Leto's face. "All of the Atreides . . . in that one . . . body—" He broke off.

Leto remained silent. This was the decision moment.

Presently, Idaho permitted himself that devil-may-care grin for which he had been so well known. "Then I will speak to the first Leto and to Paul, the ones who know me best. Use me well, for I did love you."



The last runner in the line racing northward through moon shadows in the
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"Siona thought about Leto's journals. Something in them might open the way for her revenge."

Forbidden Forest ran less than 100 meters ahead of the pursuing D-wolves. The animals could be heard yelping and panting in their eagerness. The runner's name was Kwuteg, an old and honorable name on Arrakis, a name from the Dune times. An ancestor had served Sietch Tabr as Master of the Death Stills, but that was more than 3000 years lost in a past that many no longer believed.

Kwuteg ran with the long strides of a tall and slender body that seemed perfectly fitted to such exertion. He knew that Siona should be almost at the water. The fastest runner of them all, she carried the sealed packet and, in it, the things they had stolen from the fortress in the desert. Kwuteg focused his thoughts on that packet as he ran.

Save it, Siona! Use it to destroy him!

The eager whining of the D-wolves penetrated Kwuteg's consciousness. They were too close. He knew then that he would not escape.

But Siona must escape!

He risked a backward glance and saw one of the wolves move to flank him. As the wolf leaped, Kwuteg also leaped. Placing a tree between himself and the pack, he ducked beneath the flanking wolf, grasped one of its hind legs in both hands and, without stopping, whirled the captive wolf as a flail that scattered the others. But he could not guard every side. A lean male caught him in the back, hurling him against a tree, and he lost his bludgeon.

"Go!" he screamed.

The pack sounds took on a terrible commotion of frenzied yelps but nothing more from Kwuteg. Siona knew how Kwuteg was spending the last energies of his life.

Delaying them to help me escape.

Obedying Kwuteg's cry, she dashed to the river's edge and plunged headfirst into the water. The river was a freezing shock after the heat of the run. It stunned her for a moment and she floundered, struggling to swim and regain her breath. The precious kit floated and bumped against the back of her head.

The wolf pack stood ranged along the bank, all except one that had come down to the river's edge. It leaned forward with its forefeet almost into the flow. She heard it whine. Then it leaped back up to its companions. At some silent signal, they turned and loped back into the forest.

drifted with the current until her feet met the first shelving of a narrow beach. Slowly, her body dragged down by fatigue, she climbed from the water and paused to check that the sealed contents of her kit had remained dry. The seal was unbroken. She lifted her gaze to the forest wall across the river.

I have broken through your defenses, Leto!

Siona thought then about the volumes in the packet. Leto's journals. She felt certain that something in them would open the way for her revenge.

I will destroy you, Leto!

She turned and strode toward the orchards beyond the river's mowed border. As she walked, she repeated her oath, "Siona Ibn Fuad Al Seyefa Atreides it is who curses you, Leto. You will pay in full!"

It was a sound like no other, the sound of a waiting mob, and it came down the long tunnel to where Idaho marched ahead of the Royal Cart—nervous whispers magnified into an ultimate whisper, the shuffling of one gigantic foot, the stirring of an enormous garment. And the smell—sweet perspiration mixed with the milky breath of sexual excitement. It was the ritual of Siaynoq.

"What is the Feast of Siaynoq? What is it really?" Idaho had asked.

"I have told you. It is the Great Sharing."

Now, as he marched ahead of Leto in the tunnel, Idaho felt that he had heard the words correctly but learned nothing from them. He could discern a gradual widening in the tunnel; the ceiling sloped higher. There were glow globes, tuned now into the deep orange. He could see the high arch of an opening about 300 meters away, rich red light there in which he could make out glistening faces that swayed gently left and right. Their bodies below the faces presented a dark wall of clothing.

As he neared the waiting women, Idaho saw a passage through them and a ramp slanting up to a low ledge on his right. A great arched ceiling curved away above the women, a gigantic space illuminated by glow globes tuned high into the red.

"Go up the ramp on your right," Leto said. "Stop just beyond the center of the ledge and turn to face the women."

Idaho lifted his right hand in acknowledgment. He was emerging into the open

space now and the dimensions of this enclosed place awed him. He set his trained eyes the task of estimating the dimensions as he mounted to the ledge and guessed the hall to be at least 1100 meters on a side—a square with rounded corners. It was packed with women, and Idaho reminded himself that these were only the chosen representatives of the far scattered Guard regiments—three women from each planet. They stood now, their bodies pressed so closely together that Idaho doubted one of them could fall. They had left only a space about 50 meters wide along the ledge where Idaho now stopped and surveyed the scene. The faces looked up at him—faces, faces.

Leto stopped his cart just behind Idaho and lifted one of his silver-skinned arms.

Immediately, a cry of "Siaynoq! Siaynoq!" filled the great hall.

Idaho was deafened by it.

"My brides," Leto said. "I welcome you to Siaynoq."

Idaho glanced up at Leto, saw the dark eyes glistening, the radiant expression. Leto had said: "This cursed holiness!" But he basked in it.

The Royal Cart creaked slightly as Leto arched his front segments upward, lifting his head.

"You are the keepers of the faith!" Leto said.

They replied as one voice: "Lord, we obey!"

"In me you live without end!" Leto said.

"We are the infinite!" they shouted.

"I love you as I love no others!" Leto said.

"Love!" they screamed.

Idaho shuddered.

"I give you my beloved Duncan!" Leto said.

"Love!" they screamed.

Idaho felt his whole body trembling. He felt that he might collapse from the weight of this adulation. He wanted to run away and he wanted to stay and accept this. There was power in this room. Power!

Idaho glanced left and right. The awe and submission was something absolute. If Leto ordered it, they would do anything!

Leto lowered his front segments onto the cart, a gentle rippling motion. He peered down benignly and his voice came as a soft caress. "Share with me now," he said, "the silent prayer for my intercession in all things that humankind may never end."

As one, every head in the hall bowed. Idaho felt the silent unity, a force that sought to enter him and take him over.

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"As Idaho marched stoically ahead, women reached from all sides to touch him, to touch Leto."

His mind searched frantically for something to which he could cling, something to shield him.

These women were an army whose force and union Idaho had not suspected. He knew he did not understand this force. He could only observe it, recognize that it existed.

This was what Leto had created.

What part of that power would he pass into my hands?

The temptation was monstrous! Idaho found himself trembling with it. With chilling abruptness, he realized that this must be Leto's intention—to tempt me!

"Duncan Idaho stands beside me today," Leto said. "Duncan is here to declare his loyalty that all may hear it. Duncan?"

Idaho felt a physical chill. Leto gave him a simple choice: *Declare your loyalty to the God Emperor or die!*

If I sneer, vacillate or object in any way, the women will kill me with their own hands.

A deep anger suffused Idaho. He swallowed, cleared his throat, then: "Let no

one question my loyalty. I am loyal to the Atréides."

"We share!" the women screamed. "We share! We share!"

Idaho looked across the mass of faces, telling himself that this was only a small core of that enormous female force that spread its feminine web across the Empire. He could believe Leto's words:

"The power does not weaken. It grows stronger every decade."

To what end? Idaho asked himself.

He glanced at Leto, who was lifting his hands in benediction.

"Duncan, you will precede me," Leto said.

As Idaho marched stoically ahead, women reached from all sides to touch him, to touch Leto, or merely to touch the Royal Cart. Idaho felt the restrained passion in their touch and knew the deepest fear in his experience.

Moneo will soon be 118 years old, Leto thought.

The man could live many times that long if he would take the spice mé-

lange, but he refused. Moneo had entered that peculiar human state where he longed for death. He lingered now only to see his daughter, Siona, installed in the Royal service, the next director of the Imperial Guard.

And Moneo knew it was Leto's intention to breed Siona with a Duncan. It was time.

Moneo stopped two paces from the cart and looked up at Leto. Something in his eyes reminded Leto of the look on the face of a pagan priest, a crafty supplication at the familiar shrine.

"Lord, you have spent many hours observing the new Duncan," Moneo said. "Have his cells or his psyche been tampered with?"

"He is untainted."

A deep sigh shook Moneo. There was no pleasure in it.

"You object to his use as a stud?" Leto asked.

"I find it peculiar to think of him as both an ancestor and the father of my descendants."

"But he gives me access to a first-generation cross between an older human form and the current products of my breeding program. Siona is twenty-one generations from such a cross."

"I fail to see the purpose. The Duncans are slower and less alert than anyone in your Guard."

Leto said: "It is clear to me that you do not yet understand what I hope to achieve in my breeding program."

"Lord, have you an improvement of the human stock in mind?"

Leto glared down at him, thinking: *If I use the key word now will he understand? Perhaps. . . .*

"I am a predator, Moneo."

"How can this be, Lord? You do not hate us."

"I kill, but I do not hate. Prey assuages hunger. Prey is good."

"For what do you hunger, Lord?" Moneo ventured.

"For a humankind that can make truly long-term decisions. Do you know the key to that ability, Moneo?"

"You have said it many times, Lord. It is the ability to change your mind."

"Change, yes. And do you know what I mean by long-term?"

"For you, it must be measured in millennia, Lord."

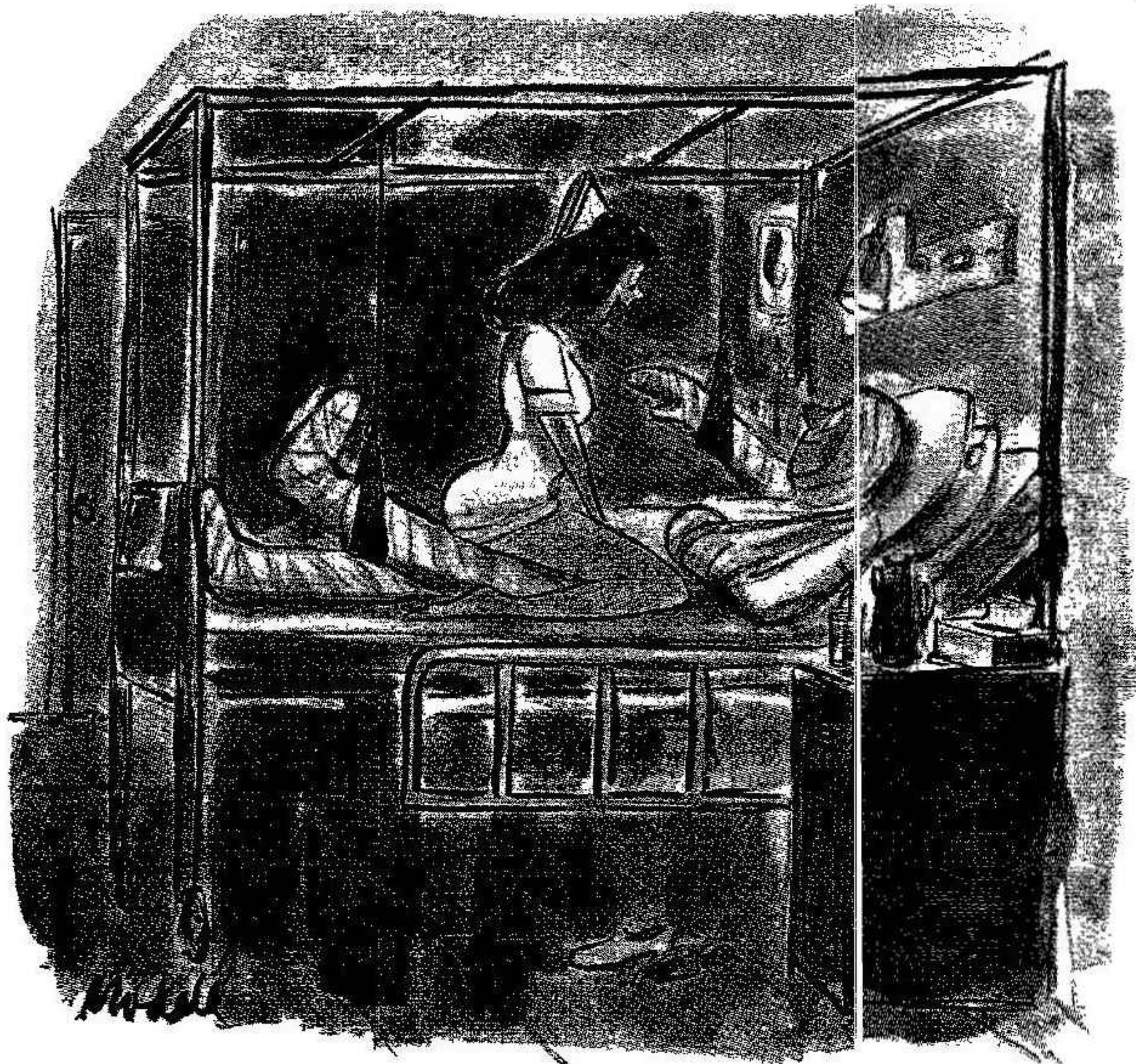
"You know *intellectually* that even I will suffer a kind of death someday," Leto said. "But you do not believe it."

"How can I believe what I will never see?"

Moneo had never felt more lonely and fearful. What was the God Emperor doing? *I came down here to discuss his intentions toward Siona. Does he toy with me?*

"Let us talk about Siona," Leto said. *Mind reading again!*

"When will you test her, Lord?" The



"There! What did I tell you? We didn't break every bone in your body, after all."

question had been waiting in the front of his awareness all this time, but now that he had spoken it, Moneo feared it.

"Soon."

"Forgive me, Lord, but surely you know how much I fear for the well-being of my only child."

"You fear her rebellious nature," Leto said.

"I have seen the report on Siona," Moneo said.

Leto's smile widened. "Have I not created her, Moneo?" Leto asked. "Have I not controlled the conditions of her ancestry and her upbringing? Surely you do not ask me to delegate authority to a weak administrator."

Moneo recoiled one step. "No, Lord. Of course not."

"Then trust Siona's strength."

Moneo squared his shoulders. "I will do what I must."

"Siona must be awakened to her duties as an Atreides. Is that not our commitment, Moneo?"

"I do not deny it, Lord. When will you introduce her to the new Duncan?"

"The test comes first."

Once more, Moneo lifted his gaze to Leto's face. "I hope she will like the Duncan's company, Lord."

"No doubt you have noted that his genotype is remarkably attractive to females."

"That has been my observation, Lord."

Leto reflected. Was there need for Moneo to know the peculiar thing about his daughter? Siona could fade from Leto's prescient view at times. The Golden Path remained, but Siona faded from it. Yet . . . she herself was not prescient. She was a unique phenomenon. And if she survived. . . . Leto decided he would not cloud Moneo's efficiency with unnecessary information.

What a gift Moneo has given me in this daughter, Leto thought. Siona is fresh and precious. She is the new, while I am a collection of the obsolete, a relic of the damned, of the lost and strayed.

Only the Golden Path is important. Humankind must scatter. Our descendants must be able to hide . . . even from the prescient vision, they must hide. They must scatter that no single death may find them all. Siona . . . preserve the Golden Path.

Nayla moved at a steady, plodding pace as she climbed the circular stairs to the God Emperor's audience chamber atop the Citadel's south tower. Leto followed the Guard's progress up the long circular stairs by way of a device that projected her approaching image quarter size onto a region of three-dimensional focus directly in front of his eyes.

Leto's thoughts locked on her. *In many ways, she is the most useful assist-*

ant I have ever had. I am her God. She worships me quite unquestioningly. Even when I attack her faith, she takes this merely as a testing. She knows herself superior to any test.

When he had sent her to the rebellion and had told her to obey Siona in all things, she did not question.

Leto recalled that first conversation with Nayla, the woman trembling in her eagerness to please.

"Even if Siona sends you to kill me, you must obey. She must never learn that you serve me."

"No one can kill you, Lord."

"But you must obey Siona."

"Of course, Lord. That is your command."

"You must obey her in all things."

"I will do it, Lord."

Nayla does not question me. Her Lord commands? Nayla obeys I must not let anything change that relationship.

Nayla entered the tower sanctuary and stood three paces from Leto's cart, her gaze lowered in proper subservience.

Leto said: "Look at me, woman, and tell me about Siona."

"Siona continues actions that predict violent attack on Your Holy Person. She remains unswerving in her avowed purpose to discover your weakness and kill you."

"Siona does not suspect you?" Leto asked.

"I am not clumsy."

"I want your assessment of Siona. I want to see it on your face and hear it in your voice," Leto said. "Will she survive the test, Nayla?"

"As my Lord describes the test. . . ." Nayla lifted her gaze to Leto's face, shrugged. "I do not know, Lord. Certainly, she is strong. She survived the wolves. But she is ruled by hate."

"Quite naturally."

"What are those books she stole from you, Lord?"

"They are my words for my people. I want them to be read."

Siona is my ardent enemy, he thought. I do not need Nayla's words to confirm this. Siona is a woman of action. She lives on the surface of enormous energies that fill me with fantasies of delight. I cannot contemplate those living energies without a feeling of ecstasy. They are my reason for being, the justification for everything I have ever done. . . .

"You will return to Siona and guard her life with your own," Leto said. "That is the task I set for you and that you accepted. It is why you were chosen."

Nayla turned and fled the Holy Presence.

But Nayla had told him what he needed to know. She had revealed with accuracy the thing that Leto could not find in Siona's fading image. Nayla's instincts were to be trusted.

ment that I require.

Leto prepared for his first private meeting with Siona since her childhood. He told Moneo that he would see her at the Little Citadel, a vantage tower he had built in the Central Desert.

There could be no more delays. She had to be tested. Moneo knew this as well as Leto did.

This preliminary day contained a multiple purpose. Leto had to be sure that he knew Siona's every strength and every weakness. And he would have to create special susceptibilities in her wherever possible. She had to be prepared for the test, her psychic muscles blunted by well-planted barbs.

Shortly after noon, on the appointed day, Leto went to the tower. Throughout the rest of the day, he lay in the aerie, thinking, plotting.

The fluttering wings of an ornithopter whispered on the air just at nightfall to signal Siona's arrival.

Leto caused a landing lip to extrude from his aerie. The 'thopter glided in, its wings cupped. It settled gently onto the lip. Siona emerged and walked in toward him. She stopped just inside the tower and turned her attention to Leto's bulk waiting on the cart almost at the center of the aerie. The 'thopter lifted away and jetted off into the darkness.

"Why am I here?"

Directly to the point! She would not deviate. Most of the Atreides had been that way, he thought. It was a characteristic that he hoped to maintain in the breeding program. It spoke of a strong inner sense of identity.

"I need to find out what time has done to you," he said.

"Why do you need that?"

A little fear in her voice there, he thought. She thinks I will probe after her puny rebellion.

"You are curious about me," he said. "It is the same with me. I am curious about you."

"What makes you think I'm curious?"

"You used to watch me very carefully when you were a child. I see that same look in your eyes tonight."

"Yes, I have wondered what it's like to be you."

He studied her for a moment. The moonlight drew shadows under her eyes, concealing them.

"Do you eat human food?" Siona asked.

"For a long time after I put on the sand-trout skin, I felt stomach hunger," he said. "Occasionally, I would attempt food. My stomach mostly rejected it. The cilia of the sand trout spread almost everywhere in my human flesh. Eating became a bothersome thing. These days, I only ingest dry substances that contain

a bit of the spice."
 "You . . . eat mélange?"
 "Sometimes."
 "But you no longer have human hun-
 gers?"
 "I didn't say that."
 "I don't see how anyone could make
 such a choice," she muttered. Then loud-
 er: "Never to know love. . . ."
 "You're playing the fool!" he said.
 "You don't mean love, you mean sex."
 She shrugged.
 "You think the most terrible thing I
 gave up was sex? No, the greatest loss
 was something far different."
 "What?" She asked it reluctantly.
 "I cannot walk among my fellows
 without their special notice. I am no
 longer one of you. I am alone. Love?
 Many people love me, but my shape
 keeps us apart. We are separated, Siona,
 by a gulf that no other human dares to
 bridge."
 "We?"
 "You are an Atrideses."
 "You mean that I . . . could?" She
 touched her breast with a finger.
 "If there were enough sand trout
 around. Unfortunately, all of them en-
 close my flesh. However, if I were to
 die. . . ."
 She shook her head in dumb horror at
 the thought.
 "There's no secret about it," he said.
 "The first moments of the transforma-
 tion are the critical ones. Your aware-
 ness must drive inward and outward
 simultaneously, one with infinity. I
 could provide you with enough mélange
 to accomplish this. Given enough spice,
 you can live through those first awful
 moments . . . and all the other mo-
 ments."
 She shuddered uncontrollably, her
 gaze fixed on his eyes.
 "You know I'm telling you the truth,
 don't you?"
 She nodded, inhaled a deep trembling
 breath, then: "Why did you do it?"
 "There has never before been a gov-
 ernment exactly like mine. Not in all
 of our history. I am responsible only
 to myself, exacting payment in full for
 what I have sacrificed."

"Sacrificed!" she sneered, but he heard
 the doubts. "Every despot says some-
 thing like that. You're responsible only
 to yourself!"
 "Which makes every living thing my
 responsibility. I watch over you through
 these times."
 "You haven't convinced me of any-
 thing," she said.
 "That was not the purpose of this
 meeting."
 "What was the purpose?"
 "To see if you are ready to be tested."
 "Test. . . ." She tipped her head a
 bit to the right and stared at him.
 "Don't play the innocent with me,"
 he said. "Moneo has told you. And I
 tell you that you are ready!"
 She tried to swallow, then: "What
 are. . . ."
 "When we begin tomorrow," he said,
 "we will really learn what you are
 made of."

The sun came up, sending its harsh
 glare across the dunes. Leto felt the
 sand beneath him as a soft caress. Only
 his human ears, hearing the abrasive
 rasp of his heavy body, reported other-
 wise. It was a sensory conflict that he
 had learned to accept.

Slowly, gently, he began to move,
 swimming on the sand surface, gliding
 down off the dune.

Siona followed him with an unchar-
 acteristic docility. Doubt had done its
 work. She had read Leto's journals,
 stolen and earned on the tragic run
 from the D-wolves. She had listened to
 the admonitions of her father. Now she
 did not know what to think.

Moneo had prepared his daughter,
 dressing her in an authentic Fremmen
 stillsuit with a dark robe over it, fitting
 the boot-pumps correctly. He had ex-
 plained the stillsuit, how it recycled her
 body's own waters. He made her pull the
 tube from a catch pocket and suck on it,
 then reseal the tube.

"You will be alone with him on the
 desert," Moneo had said.

"What if I refuse to go?" she had
 asked:

"You will go . . . but you may not
 return."
 Leto's swimming progress took him
 down the dune's slip face and onto an
 exposed section of the rocky basement
 complex, then up another sandy face
 at a shallow angle, creating a path for
 Siona to follow. Fremmen had called such
 compression tracks "God's gift to the
 weary." He moved slowly, giving Siona
 time in which to recognize that this was
 his domain, his natural habitat.

He came out atop another dune and
 turned to watch her progress. She
 held to the track he had provided and
 stopped only when she reached the top.
 Her glance went once to his face, then
 she turned a full circle to examine the
 horizon. He heard the sharp intake of
 her breath.

"This is how it was," he said.
 Leto spoke from where he had stopped
 just below the dune's crest. "This is the
 real desert. You only know it when
 you're down here afoot. This is all that's
 left of the *bahr bela ma*."

"The ocean without water," she whis-
 pered.
 Again, she turned and examined the
 entire horizon.

There was no wind and, Leto knew,
 without wind, the silence ate at the
 human soul. Siona was feeling the loss
 of all familiar reference points. She was
 abandoned in dangerous space.

Betraying no surface sign of the fears
 he knew she felt, Siona turned and
 stared down at him.

"I need to know why you brought
 me here."

"To give you a taste of your past.
 Come down here and climb onto my
 back."

She hesitated at first, then seeing the
 futility of defiance, slid down the dune
 and clambered onto his back.

Leto waited until she was kneeling
 atop him. It was not the same as the
 old times he knew. She had no maker
 hooks and could not stand on his back.
 He lifted his front segments slightly
 off the surface.

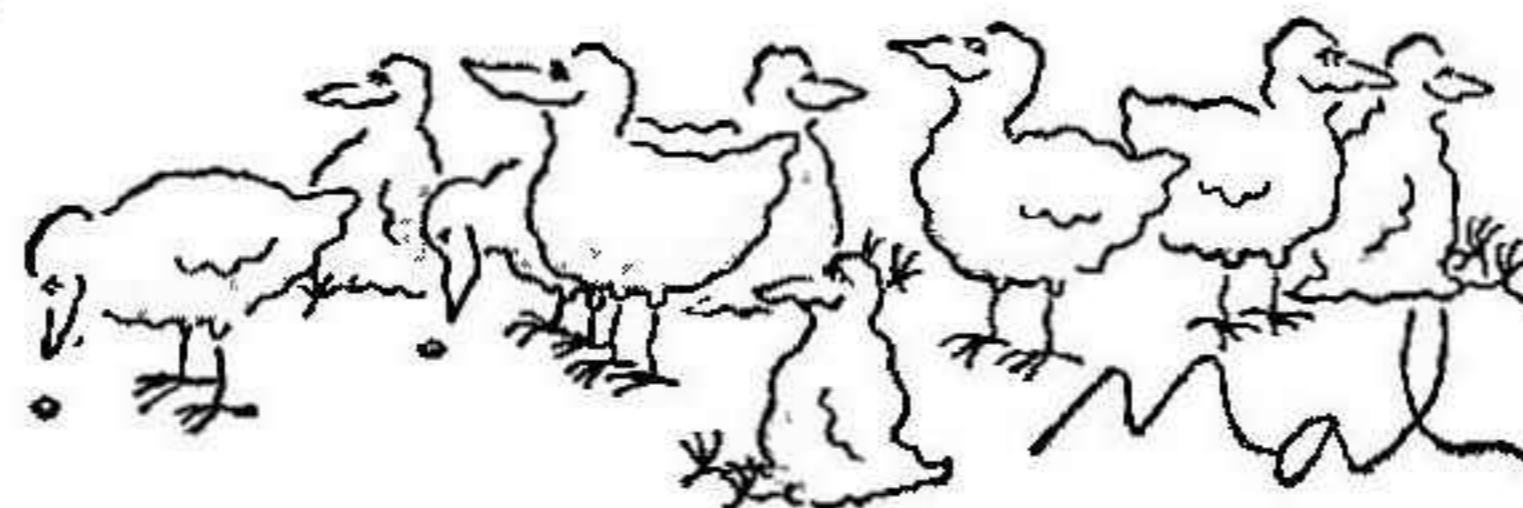
"I want you to taste the way our
 people once moved proudly across this
 land, high atop the back of a giant sand-
 worm."

He began to glide along the dune just
 below the crest. Siona had seen holos.
 She knew this experience intellectually,
 but the pulse of reality was different and
 he knew she would resonate to it.

Ahhh, Siona, he thought, you do not
 even begin to suspect how I will test you.

Leto steeled himself. I must have no
 pity. If she dies, she dies.

He sensed when Siona began to enjoy
 the sensation of riding on his back. He
 felt a faint shift in her weight as she
 eased back onto her legs to lift her head.
 The desert demanded recognition. She
 rode silently on his back, but he knew



her eyes were full. And the old-old memories were beginning to churn in her.

He came within three hours to a region of cylindrical whaleback dunes, some of them more than 150 kilometers long, at an angle to the prevailing wind. Beyond them lay a rocky corridor between dunes and into a region of star dunes almost 400 meters high. Finally, they entered the braided dunes of the central *erg*, where the general high pressure and electrically charged air gave his spirits a lift. He knew the same magic would be working on Siona.

Leto slowed his pace and began to speak to Siona, telling her about their Fremen past. He sensed her quickening interest. She asked questions, but he could also feel her fears building. She could recognize nothing man-made.

"Why won't you tell me why you brought me here?" she asked. Fear was obvious in her voice.

"How far have we come, Siona?"

She thought about this. "Thirty kilometers? Twenty?"

"Farther," he said. "I can move very fast in my own land. Didn't you feel the wind on your face?"

"Yes." Sullen. "So why ask me how far?"

"Come down and I'll explain," he said.

She slid off his back and came around to where she could look into his face.

"Moneo put dried food in the pouch of your robe," he said. "Eat a little and I will tell you."

She found a dried cube of protomor in the pouch and chewed on it while she watched him. It was the authentic old Fremen food, even to the slight addition of *mélange*.

"You have felt your past," he said. "Now you must be sensitized to your future, to the Golden Path."

She swallowed. "I don't believe in your future Golden Path."

"If you are to live, you will believe in it."

"Is that your test? Have faith in the Great God Leto or die?"

"You need no faith in me whatsoever. I want you to have faith in yourself."

"Then why is it important how far we've come?"

"So you'll understand how far you still have to go."

She glanced left and right at the unbroken desert.

"We are going to go out of my desert together," he said.

She found the catch-pocket tube at her shoulder, sucked at it and restored it. He noted the care with which she sealed the end, but she did not pull the face flap across her mouth, though Leto had heard her father warning her about this. She wanted her mouth free for talking!

She turned a full circle, examining the wasteland.

"There is a saying about the open land," he said, "that one direction is as good as another. In some ways, that's still true, but I would not depend on it."

She pointed to the steep side of the dune on which they had stopped. "But I could just go down there and. . ."

"On the dune's steep side, unless you follow the natural curves, the sand may slide down upon you and bury you."

She looked down the slope, absorbing this.

"You learn to value leisure out here. There's no hurry."

"But we have no water except the. . ."

"Used wisely, that stillsuit will keep you alive."

"But how long will it take us to. . ."

"Your impatience alarms me."

"But we have only this dried food in my pouch. What will we eat when. . ."

"Siona! Have you noticed that you are expressing our situation as mutual? What will *we* eat? *We* have no water. Should *we* be going? How long will it take *us*?"

He sensed the dryness of her mouth as she tried to swallow.

"Could it be that we're interdependent?" he asked.

She spoke reluctantly. "I don't know how to survive out here."

"But I do?"

She nodded.

"Why should I share such precious knowledge with you?" he asked.

She shrugged, a pitiful gesture that touched him. How quickly the desert cut away previous attitudes.

"I will share my knowledge with you," he said. "And you must find something valuable that you can share with me."

He turned away from her and set off in a sinusoidal track down the dune. He heard her slipping and stumbling as she followed. Leto stopped well into the dune shadow.

"We'll wait out the day here," he said. "It uses less water to travel by night."

They talked sporadically. He told her about the Fremen graces that once had dominated this landscape. She probed for secret knowledge of him.

Once, he said: "You may find it odd, but out here is where I can be most human."

His words failed to make her fully conscious of her human vulnerability and the fact that she might die out here. Even when she was not talking, she did not restore the face flap of her stillsuit.

"What lives here now?" she asked.

"The vultures, a few night creatures, an occasional remnant of plant life out of the old days, burrowing things."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Why do they live here?"

"Because this is where they were born

and I permit them to know nothing better."

It was almost dark with that sudden glowing light his desert acquired in these moments. He studied her in that luminous moment, recognizing that she had not yet understood his other message. He knew that message would sit there, though, and fester in her.

Where the dune dipped to cross another, she waited for him. He saw that the face flap of her stillsuit remained open, hanging loose.

She glanced up at the stars and he saw her identify the Pointers, those Fremen Arrows that had led her ancestors across this land. She stared all around the moon-frosted horizon. "Why didn't we bring a signal device?"

"I wanted you to learn about possessions."

She turned toward him. He sensed her breath close to his face. She was losing too much moisture into the dry air. Still she did not remember Moneo's admonition. It would be a bitter lesson, no doubt of that.

"I don't understand you at all," she said.

"In the old days, everything you took into the desert was a necessity and that was all you took. Your life is no longer free of possessions, Siona, or you would not have asked about a signal device."

She came hurrying up to walk beside his cowed face. "What happens if I don't learn your damned lesson?"

"You'll probably die," he said.

For two full turns of days and nights, Siona failed to seal her face mask, losing precious water with every breath. Leto had spoken to her finally on the cold third morning of their traverse when they stopped within a rock shadow on the wind-swept flat of the *erg*.

"Guard every breath, for it carries the warmth and moisture of your life," he said.

Now Siona took down the mouth flap of her stillsuit only to speak clearly. And she spoke through black, bleeding lips.

She has the thirst of desperation, he thought. *She will reach the moments of crisis soon.*

Siona peeled her face mask aside but held it in her hand for quick restoration.

"How much longer until we find water?" she asked.

"Three nights."

She had come to appreciate the Fremen economy with important information. She sipped greedily at a few drops in her catch pocket.

Leto recognized the message of her movements—familiar gestures for Fremen *in extremis*. Siona was now fully aware of a common experience among her ancestors—*patiyeh*, the thirst at the edge of death.

The few drops in her catch pocket 30

were gone. He heard her sucking air.

She restored the mask and spoke in a muffled voice. "I won't make it, will I?"

Leto looked into her eyes, seeing there the clarity of thought brought on by the nearness of death. Yes, she was well into the *tedah ri-agrimi*, the agony that opens the mind.

"Nothing is certain," he said.

She sighed.

Her mask-muffled voice probed at him once more. "You had some special intention for me in your breeding program."

It was not a question.

"All people have intentions," he told her.

"But you wanted my full agreement."

"That is true."

"How could you expect agreement when you know I hate everything about you? Be honest with me!"

"The three legs of the agreement tripod are desire, data and doubt. Honesty has little to do with it."

"What do you mean—desire, data and doubt?"

"Desire brings the participants together. Data sets the limits of their dialog. Doubt frames the questions."

She moved closer to stare directly into his face from less than a meter away.

"Could you save me?"

"There is a way."

Siona sank to a sitting position on the cold rock and remained silent. Leto thought he could hear the soft scream waiting in her throat. Now her doubts were at work. She looked up at him with that terrible clarity he had identified in her.

"The Golden Path still stands open," he said.

"I don't trust you!"

"Because we are not equals?"

"Yes!"

"But we're interdependent."

"What need have you for me?"

"You are the Golden Path," he said.

"Me?" It was barely a whisper.

She shook her head slowly from side to side, but her gaze remained fixed on his face. "What will make you save me?"

"Nothing will make me do it. That is not the way of interdependence."

She focused on his eyes and glared at him as though seeking to move completely into his thoughts. New strength entered her muffled voice.

"You will give me . . . water if I ask?"

"It is not just water."

She nodded. "And I am Atrides."

She knew the special susceptibility in the Atrides genes. She knew where the *mélange* spice originated and what it might do to her.

"These little curled flaps beside my face," he said. "Tease one of them gently with a finger and it will give up drops of moisture heavily laced with spice essence."

"But I am Atrides," she said. "I could die of it."

"That's the test."

She pulled away her mask and moved her face to within a handbreadth of his. A finger came up and touched one of the curled flaps of his cowl.

"Stroke it gently," he said.

Her hand obeyed not his voice but something from within her. The finger movements were precise, eliciting his own memories. He turned his face to its limit and looked sideways at her face so close to his. Pale-blue drops began to form at the flap's edge. Rich cinnamon smells enveloped them. She leaned toward the drops. He saw the way her tongue moved as she drank.

Presently, she retreated.

"How long before it begins to work?" she asked.

"It is already working."

She sealed her face mask.

He saw the milky distances enter her eyes. Without asking permission, she tapped his front segment, demanding to climb into the *hammock* of his front segment. He obeyed. She fitted herself into a gentle curve. By peering sharply downward, he could see her. Siona's eyes remained open, but they no longer saw this place. She jerked abruptly and began to tremble like a small creature dying.

He felt her life ebbing. *Fight the darkness, Siona!* That was one thing the Atrides did. They fought for life. And now she was fighting for lives other than her own. He felt the dimming . . . the terrible outflow of vitality. She went deeper and deeper into the darkness. He began to rock her gently. That or the thin hot thread of determination, perhaps both together, prevailed. By early afternoon, her flesh had trembled its way into something approaching real sleep. Only an occasional gasp betrayed the vision's echoes. He rocked her gently, rolling from side to side.

She awakened in the late afternoon, a stillness coming over her abruptly, the breathing rhythm changed. Her eyes snapped open. She peered up at him, then rolled out of the *hammock* to stand with her back to him for almost an hour of silent thinking.

"You are beginning to have some concept of how far my family extends," he said.

She turned but did not meet his gaze. He could see her accepting it, though, the realization of that singular multitude that made all of humankind his family.

"The Golden Path," she whispered. "I can feel it." Then, glaring at him: "It's so cruel!"

"Survival has always been cruel. But now you have seen the vision that drove me to assume the sandworm body and to rule as a god."

"A single death for all of humankind," she whispered.

"Our descendants must scatter," he

said. "Not even the prescient must find them."

"And you want me to . . ."

"You have not yet survived the desert," he said.

Slowly, her trembling subsided. The Fremmen instincts he had set to work in her did their usual tempering.

"I will survive," she said. She met his gaze and spoke with venomous elation: "But I saw another thing! You can't know my future!"

"Which is why you must breed and preserve this."

Even as he spoke, it began to rain. The sudden cloud darkness and the downpour came upon them simultaneously.

Siona pulled back her face flap and lifted her face greedily to the falling water, not even noticing the effect on Leto.

As the first drenching swept in from behind the sand-trout overlappings, he stiffened and curled into a ball of agony. Separate drives of sand trout and sandworm produced a new meaning for the word *pain*. He felt that he was being ripped apart. Sand trout wanted to rush to the water and encapsulate it. Sandworm felt the drenching wash of death. Curls of blue smoke spurted from every place the rain touched him. Blue smoke lifted around him from where he lay in puddles of water. He writhed and groaned.

The clouds passed and it was a few moments before Siona sensed his disturbance.

"What's wrong with you?"

He was unable to answer. The rain was gone, but water remained on the rocks and in puddles all around and beneath him. There was no escape.

Siona saw the blue smoke rising from every place the water touched him.

"It's the water!"

There was a slightly higher bulge of land off to the right where the water did not stay. Painfully, he made his way toward it, groaning at each new puddle. The bulge was almost dry when he reached it. The agony subsided slowly and he grew aware that Siona stood directly in front of him. She probed at him with words of false concern.

"Why does water hurt you?"

Hurt? What an inadequate word! There was no evading her question, though. She knew enough now to go searching for the answer. That answer could be found. Haltingly, he explained the relationship of sand trout and sandworm to water. She heard him out in silence.

"But the moisture you gave me . . ."

"Is buffered and masked by the spice."

He saw the flame of rebellion return to her eyes. He was not a human, not like her at all. And she possessed the secret of his undoing! Ring him with

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"He wants babies in my belly, new lives to warp and twist. I'll see him dead before I'll give him that!"

water, destroy his desert, immobilize him within a moat of agony! She did not have to feel guilty or dependent. She no longer could avoid belief in his Golden Path, but what difference did that make? His cruelties could not be forgiven!

"The Lord has commanded me to tell you that your daughter lives."

Without looking up at Nayla's stocky figure standing at proper attention in front of him, Moneo asked: "Both of them have returned to the Citadel?"

"Yes."

Moneo looked out the window to his left, not really seeing the flinty border line of darkness hanging on the Sareer's horizon nor the greedy wind collecting sand grains from every dunetop.

She has survived as I did. Siona now had an inner sense that told her that the Golden Path remained unbroken. *As I have.* He found no sense of sharing in this, nothing to make him feel closer to his daughter. It was a burden and it would inevitably curb her rebellious nature. No Atrides could go against the Golden Path. Leto had seen to that!

Siona has been caged. As I was caged. As poor Leto was caged.

Idaho entered the workroom as Nayla left. Moneo watched him enter. A trick of the light gave Idaho a face like a grimacing mask with pitted eyes. Without invitation, he sat down across from Moneo and the trickery was gone. *Just another Duncan.* He had changed into a plain black uniform without insignia.

"There's a human Leto I don't know," Idaho said.

"Have I not told you this?"

"And there's a God Leto you don't know," Idaho said.

"Be careful, Duncan," Moneo said.

Something moved in the doorway to Moneo's workroom. They looked up to see Siona enter.

Moneo studied her, looking for signs of the change. She had bathed and put on a fresh Guard's uniform, but her face and hands betrayed the evidence of her desert ordeal. She had lost weight and her cheekbones stood out. Unguent did little to conceal cracks in her lips. Veins stood out on her hands. Her eyes looked ancient and her expression was that of someone who had tasted bitter dregs.

Moneo forced his voice to be cold and professional. "Sit down."

"I prefer to stand." She looked down at Idaho's upturned face. "Ahhh, Duncan Idaho, my intended mate. Don't you find this interesting, Duncan? They ex-

pect us to fall into each other's arms and breed more like my father. Your descendant, my father!"

Moneo's face went pale. "You are both fools! But I will try to save you. In spite of yourselves, I will try to save you."

Idaho saw the intensity of the man's stare and felt oddly moved by this. "I'm not his stud, but I'll listen to you."

"There is a small village of Museum Fremmen at the edge of the Sareer," Moneo said. "It is called Tuono. It's in the shadow of the Wall with the river just beyond the Wall. There is a well and the food is good."

"And the nights are long and there's no entertainment," Siona said.

Idaho shot a sharp glance at her. She returned it. "He wants us breeding and the Worm satisfied," she said. "He wants babies in my belly, new lives to warp and twist. I'll see him dead before I'll give him that!"

Idaho looked back at Moneo with a bemused expression. "And if we refuse to go?"

"I think you'll go," Moneo said.

"We either accept or the troopers will bind us and carry us out there in a most uncomfortable fashion," Siona said. "You can see it in his face."

Still Idaho stared at Moneo. "Your real intentions, Moneo? Won't you satisfy my curiosity?"

"My daughter remains a rebel and I would preserve her by removing her from the presence of the God Leto. You, Duncan . . . you will remain loyal to the Atrides, but I observe how you begin to doubt the godhead of Leto."

"You still haven't satisfied my curiosity," Idaho said.

"Curiosity has kept many people alive when all else failed," Moneo said. "I am trying to keep you alive, Duncan. I have never done that before."

Idaho stood aghast at his first close glimpse of Tuono Village, located in a depression surrounded by dunes, and all of it deep in the shadows of the towering man-made Wall that ringed Leto's Last Desert. This village . . . *this* was the home of Fremmen? The proud desert lords of Dune?

The Guards had taken them from the Citadel at daybreak, Idaho and Siona and Nayla bundled into a large ornithopter accompanied by two smaller Guard ships.

For a time during the march across the morning-lighted dunes, Idaho had tried to imagine that he was back in the old

days. Sand was visible in the plantings and, in the valleys between dunes, there was parched ground, yellow grass, the sticklike shrubs.

His imagination was not equal to the task of defocusing the differences between the past and this time. The issue stillsuits these Museum Fremmen wore were more for show than for efficient collection of the body's water. No true Fremmen would have trusted his life to one of them, not even here where the air smelled of nearby water.

Siona trudged beside him, withdrawn. Nayla strode along a few paces ahead of the troop.

What was between those two women? Idaho wondered. Nayla appeared devoted to Siona, hanging on Siona's every word, obeying every whim Siona uttered . . . except that Nayla would not deviate from the orders that brought them to Tuono Village. Still, Nayla deferred to Siona and called her Commander. There was something between those two, something that aroused fear in Nayla.

They came at last to a slope that dropped down to the village and the Wall behind it. From the air, Tuono had been a cluster of glittering rectangles just outside the shadow of the Wall. From this close vantage, though, it had been reduced to a cluster of decaying huts made even more pitiful by attempts to decorate the place. A tattered green banner fluttered from a metal pole atop the largest structure. A fitful breeze brought the smell of garbage and uncovered cesspools to Idaho's nostrils. The central street of the village extended across the sparsely planted sand toward the troop, ending in a ragged edge of broken paving.

A robed delegation waited near the building of the green flag, standing there expectantly. As they neared the delegation, a man with a green headband stepped forward and bowed. He moved slowly, but Idaho saw that he was not old, barely into his middle years, the cheeks smooth and unwrinkled, a stubby nose with no scars from breath-filter tubes.

"I am Garun," the man said as Nayla stopped in front of him. "I am Naib of this place. I give you a Fremmen welcome to Tuono."

Nayla gestured over her shoulder at Siona and Idaho, who had stopped just behind her. "Are quarters prepared for your guests?"

"We Fremmen are noted for our hospitality," Garun said. "All is ready."

Garun addressed himself to Siona, correctly identifying the gold piping of Guard Command on her uniform.

"Will you wish a performance of our Fremmen rituals?" he asked. "The music, perhaps? The dance?"

An urchin extended flowers toward

Siona, lifting a wide-eyed stare. She accepted the flowers without looking at the child.

Garun spoke to Idaho. "If you give them a few coins, they will not bother you."

Idaho shuddered. Was this training for Fremen children? He felt deeply offended by the surface decorations on the buildings, none of it disguising the evidence of decay. He could hear the whine of supplication in Garun's voice. These were not Fremen! These poor creatures lived on the margins, trying to retain parts of an ancient wholeness. And all the while, that lost reality slipped farther and farther from their grasp. What had Leto created here? These *Museum* Fremen were lost to everything except a bare existence and the rote mouthing of old words that they did not understand and that they did not even pronounce correctly!

Idaho bent to study the cut of Garun's brown robe, seeing a tightness in it dictated by a need to conserve fabric. A stillsuit could be seen underneath, exposed to sunlight that no real Fremen would ever have let touch his stillsuit that way.

Disgust propelling him, Idaho strode forward abruptly and parted Garun's robe to look at the stillsuit. Just as he had suspected! The suit was another sham—no arms on it, no boot-pumps!

Garun pulled back, putting a hand to the knife hilt Idaho had exposed at the man's belt. "Here! What're you doing?" Garun demanded, his voice querulous. "You don't touch a Fremen thus!"

"You, a Fremen?" Idaho demanded. "I lived with Fremen! I fought by their sides. I died with Fremen! You? You're a sham!"

Garun's knuckles went white on the knife haft. He addressed himself to Siona. "Who is this man?"

Nayla spoke up: "This is Duncan Idaho."

"The gholas?" Garun turned to look at Idaho's face. "We have never seen your like here before."

Idaho felt himself almost overcome by a sudden desire to cleanse this place even if it cost him his life, this diminished life that could be repeated endlessly by people who had no real concern for him.

"Draw that knife or take your hand off it," Idaho said.

Garun jerked his hand away from the knife. "It is not a real knife," he said. "Only for decoration."

Idaho could not help himself. He threw his head back in laughter.

The laughter had an odd effect on Garun. He lowered his head and clasped his hands tightly together, but not before Idaho saw them trembling.

Garun cleared his throat, then: "Perhaps Duncan Idaho will witness our ways and our rituals and judge them?"

Idaho felt shamed by the plaintive request. He spoke without thinking: "I will teach you anything Fremen that I know."

"We've no need to play old cultish games," Siona said. "Take us to our quarters."

Nayla spoke without looking at Siona. "Commander, you and the . . . Duncan Idaho are to be quartered together."

"My father's orders?"

"Lady Commander, they are said to be the orders of the God Emperor himself."

In the hut, Idaho stretched out on his cot with his eyes half open. Siona, he saw, had picked up one of the books she carried around with her in a green-fabric pack.

The door opened without a knock and Garun entered, closed the door and stood there looking at them.

Siona's voice came from behind Idaho. "Well, what is it?"

Idaho noticed then that Garun seemed strangely excited, vibrating with it.

"The God Emperor. . . ." Garun cleared his throat and began again. "The God Emperor will come to Tuono! He will visit his Fremen and their guests!" Garun bobbed his head briefly, turned and let himself out.

Siona glanced at Idaho. "Let me read you something, Duncan," she said. Idaho was still concentrating on Garun's words. She took his attention as agreement. "'Some believe,'" she read, "'that you must compromise integrity with a certain amount of dirty work before you can put genius to work. They say the compromise begins when you come out of the Sanctus intending to realize your ideals.'"

She looked at Idaho. "The God Emperor—his own words."

"What is that book?" he asked.

Briefly, she told him how she and her companions had stolen Leto's journals.

He saw the tears latent in her eyes. "Nine of you killed by the wolves?"

She nodded.

"You're a lousy commander!" he said. "How did Leto test you?"

"He showed me a . . . he showed me his Golden Path."

"That's convenient. . . ."

"It's real enough, Duncan." She looked at him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "But if it was ever a reason for our God Emperor, it is not reason for what he has become!"

Idaho inhaled deeply, then: "The Atreides come to this!"

"The Worm must go!" Siona said.

"I wonder when he's arriving," Idaho said.

"We have no weapons," Siona said.

"Nayla has a lasgun," he said. "We have knives . . . rope."

"Against the Worm?" she asked. "Even if we could get Nayla's lasgun, you know it won't touch him."

"How will the Worm come to Tuono?" Idaho asked. "He's too big and heavy for an ordinary 'thopter."

"Garun will tell us," she said. "But I think he will come on peregrination with his entire crew. He will come along the Royal Road and drop down to here on suspensors." She looked at Idaho. "Why?"

"I have a plan," Idaho said.

Idaho found he could manage the climb without thinking about it. His original youth might be lost in the eons, but his muscles were young. He did not think about the Wall's height. He thought only about where he would next put a hand or a foot and about the coil of light rope around his shoulders. That rope was the *tallness* of this Wall. He had measured it out on the ground, triangulating across the sand.

Feeling for handholds that he could not see, Idaho groped his way up the sheer face . . . well, not quite sheer. Wind and sand and even some rain, the forces of cold and heat, had been at their erosive work here for more than 2000 years.

He crept upward. A bit of rock broke away from his hand; dust and shards fell across his right cheek, but he did not even feel it. Every bit of his awareness concentrated on the groping hand, the balance of his feet on the tiniest of protrusions.

Idaho felt the ghosts of all his other selves, the gholas who had died in Leto's service. Leto had become something . . . no longer Atreides, not even human. He had become not so much a living creature as a brute fact of nature, opaque and impenetrable, all of his experiences sealed off within him. And Siona opposed him. The real Atreides turned away from him.

As I do.

Idaho's right hand groped upward and found a sharp ledge. He could feel nothing above the ledge, but he would not dare to allow himself to believe that he had reached the top . . . not yet. The sharp edge cut into his fingers as he put his weight on it. He brought his left hand up to that level, found a purchase and pulled himself slowly upward. His eyes reached the level of his hands. He stared across a flat space that reached outward . . . outward into the blue sky. The surface where his hands clutched showed ancient weather cracks. He crawled his fingers across that surface, one hand at a time, seeking out the cracks, dragging his chest up . . . his waist . . . his hips. He rolled then, twisting and crawling until the Wall was far behind him. Only then did he stand and tell himself what his senses reported.

The top.

He let elation still the trembling of his muscles, soothe the aching of his shoulders, as he strode to the center of the roadway.

The Royal Road interested him. About

three kilometers away, it narrowed and crossed a river gorge on a bridge whose faery trusses appeared insubstantial and toylike at this distance. Idaho fixed his attention on the bridge, letting his military training examine it. He nodded once to himself before turning back the way he had come, lifting the light rope from his shoulders as he walked.

Nayla was the first to glimpse the approaching cortege. Perspiring heavily in the midday heat, she stood near the edge of the Royal Road. A sudden flash of distant reflection caught her attention. She peered in that direction, squinting, realizing with a thrill of awareness that she saw sun-dazzle on the cover of the God Emperor's cart.

"They come!" she called.

Nayla touched one finger to the butt of the lasgun holstered at her hip. The bridge lay no more than 20 meters ahead of her, arching across the chasm like an alien fantasy joining one barren surface to another.

This is madness, she thought.

But the God Emperor had reinforced his command. He required his Nayla to obey Siona in all things.

Siona's orders were explicit, leaving no way for evasions. And Nayla had no way here to query her God Emperor. Siona had said: "When his cart is in the middle of the bridge—then!"

It was another test, she decided. The God Emperor had said that Nayla must obey Siona. It was a test. What else could it be?

Everyone on the bridge would die.

Unless He performs a miracle.

That had to be it. Siona had set the

stage for a holy miracle. What else could Siona intend now that she had been tested, now that she wore the uniform of Leto's Guards? Siona had given her oath to the God Emperor.

A distant shout caught Nayla's attention. She turned and looked across the bridge. The cortege had been in the familiar trot of a royal peregrination. Now they were slowing to a sedate walk only a few minutes away from the bridge. Nayla recognized Moneo marching in the van, his uniform brilliant white, the even, undeviating stride with his gaze straight ahead.

The mystery of it all filled Nayla.

A miracle was about to happen!

Nayla glanced to the right at Siona. Siona returned her gaze and nodded once. Nayla drew the lasgun from its holster and rested it against the rock pillar as she sighted along it. The cable on the left first, then the cable on the right, then the trellis of plasteel on the left. The lasgun felt cold and alien against Nayla's hand. She took a trembling breath to restore calm.

Moneo had seen the people on the bridge and at the far end. His first thought was to wonder who had ordered these greeters.

He was well onto the bridge before he recognized Siona and Idaho standing well back from the far end. Doubts began squirming through Moneo's mind, but he could not change the pattern. He ventured a glance down at the river—a platinum world there caught in the noonday light. Leto's cart was loud behind him. The flow of the river, the flow of the cortege, the sweeping importance of these things in which he

played a role—all of it caught up his mind in a dizzying sensation of the inevitable.

This thought was still in his mind when he heard the first awful humming of the lasgun and felt the bridge lurch beneath him.

He heard the Royal Cart scrape sideways across the roadbed. Snap. A bedlam of screams and cries arose from behind him, but he could not turn. The bridge's roadbed had tipped steeply to Moneo's right, spilling him onto his face while he went sliding toward the abyss.

The robe tore away from his shoulders. He turned in the solid wind of the canyon—one last glimpse of the Royal Cart tipping . . . tipping from the shattered roadbed. The God Emperor slid out.

Something solid smashed into Moneo's back—his last sensation.

Leto felt himself sliding from the cart. As he slipped, he saw the scimitar arc of the river, a sliver-edged thing that shimmered in its mottled shadows, a vicious blade of a river honed through eternity and ready now to receive him into agony. His great ridged body flexed as it fell, twisting him about until his amplified vision revealed Siona standing at the broken brink of the bridge.

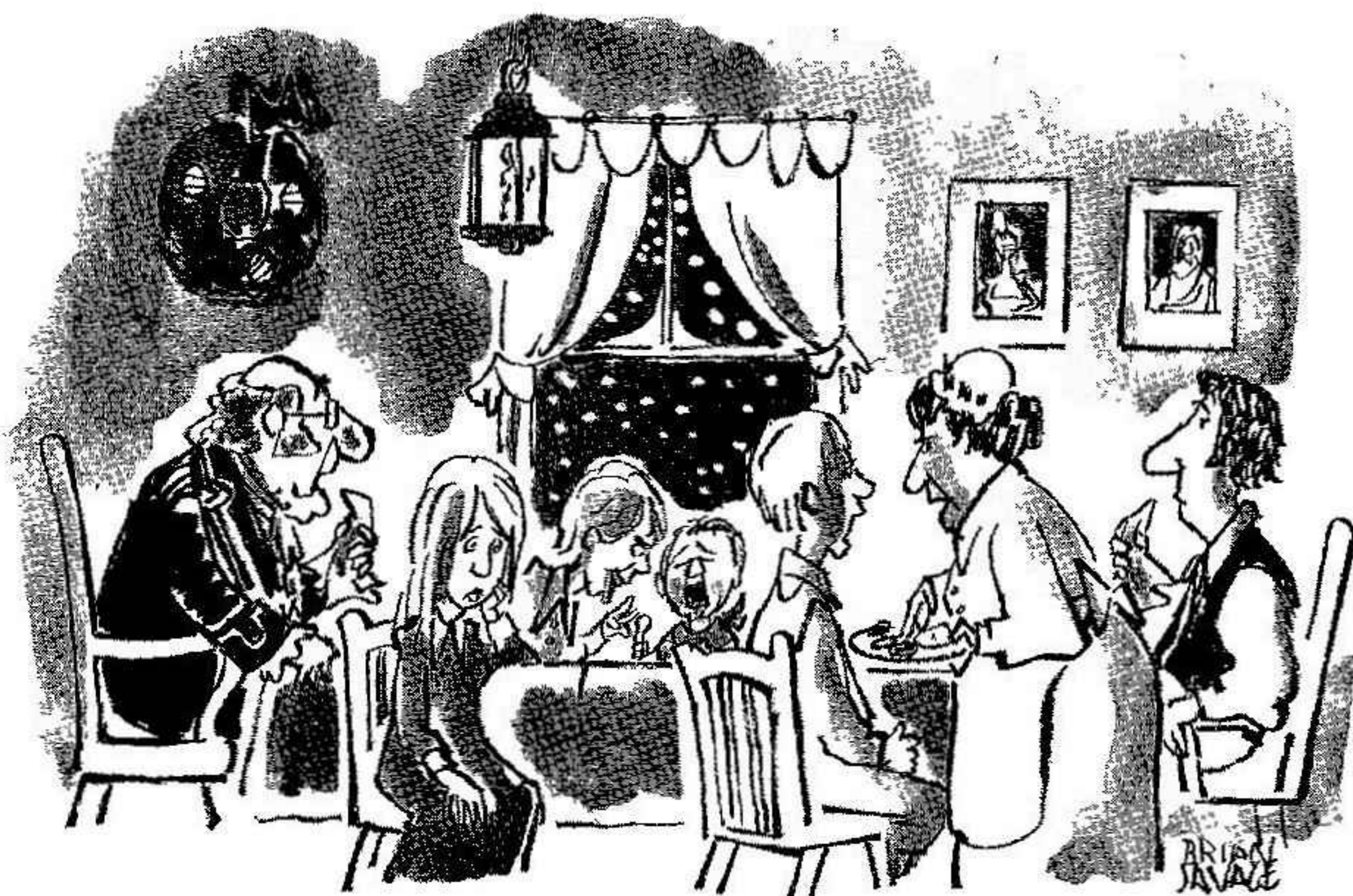
Now you will learn! he thought.

A bursting flash of bubbles enclosed him in agony. Water, vicious currents of it, buffeted him all around. He felt the gnashing of rocks as he struggled upward, his body flexing in a paroxysm of involuntary, writhing splashes. Shattered spangles of what had been his skin exploded away from him, a rain of silver all around him darting away into the river, a ring of dazzling movement, brittle sequins—the scale-glitter of sand trout leaving him to begin their own colony lives.

The agony continued. Leto marveled that he could remain conscious, that he had a body to feel.

Instinct drove him. He clutched at a rock around which the torrent spilled him, felt a clutching finger torn from his hand before he could release his grip. The sensation of it was only a minor accent in the symphony of pain.

The river's course swept to the left around a chasm buttress and, as though saying it had enough of him, it sent him rolling onto the sloping edge of a sand bar. He lay there a moment, the blue dye of spice essence drifting away from him in the current. The agony moved him, the worm body moving of itself, retreating from the water. All the covering sand trout were gone and he felt every touch more immediate, a lost sense restored when all it could bring him was pain. He could not see his body, but he felt the thing that would have been a worm as it made its writhing, crawling progress out of the water. He peered upward through eyes that saw everything



"I appreciate the dinner, Cratchit. You have rekindled my belief in the spirit of bachelorhood."

in sheets of flame from which shapes coalesced of their own accord.

Exuding blue fumes, his agonized body writhed its way noisily along a shingle of beach, dragged its blue-dyed way across broken boulders and into a damp hole. It was only a shallow cave now, blocked at its inner end by a rockfall.

Sounds intruded on his agony. He turned in the confinement of the cave and saw a rope dangling at the entrance. A figure slid down the rope. Siona. Another figure. Idaho.

Leto could not even imagine what they saw. The sand-trout skin was gone, he knew. There would be some kind of surface pocked with cilia holes from the departed skin.

Siona scrambled closer and reached toward him, then drew back.

"I am reality, Siona. Look upon me. I exist. You can touch me if you dare. Reach out your hand. Do it!"

Slowly, she reached toward what had been his front segment.

"You have touched me and felt my body," he said. "Is that not strange beyond any other thing in this universe?"

She started to turn away.

"No! Don't turn away from me! Look at what you have wrought, Siona."

She whirled away from him.

*Remember what I did! Remember me!
I will be innocent again!*

The flame of his vision parted to re-

veal Idaho standing where Siona had stood.

"Are you still alive?" Idaho asked.

"Be kind to Siona, Duncan," Leto whispered. "She is more than Atreides and she carries the seed of your survival. Nobody will find the descendants of Siona. The oracle cannot see her."

"What?" They spoke in unison, leaning close to hear his fading voice.

"I give you a new kind of time without parallels," he said. "I give you the Golden Path."

Flames covered his vision. The agony was fading, but he could still sense odors and hear sounds with a terrible acuity. Both Idaho and Siona were breathing in quick, shallow gasps. Odd kinesthetic sensations began to weave their way through Leto—echoes of bones and joints that he knew he no longer possessed.

"Look!" Siona said.

"He's disintegrating." That was Idaho.

"No." Siona. "The outside is falling away. Look! The Worm!"

Idaho and Siona heard a gasping hiss.

Presently, Siona said: "I think he's dead."

Siona turned and took Idaho's cold hand in hers. Carefully, she led him out of the cave into the light where the rope dangled from the barrier wall's top, where the frightened Museum Fremmen waited.

Poor material with which to shape a new universe, she thought, but they would have to serve. Idaho would require gentle seduction, a care within which love might appear.

When she looked down the river to where the flow emerged from its man-made chasm to spread across the green lands, she saw a wind from the south driving dark clouds toward her.

Idaho withdrew his hand from hers, but he appeared calmer.

"What did he mean about your descendants . . . not finding them?" Idaho asked.

"He created a new kind of nemesis," she said, "a new biological imitation. He knew he had succeeded. He could not see me in his futures."

"What are you?" Idaho demanded.

"I'm the new Atreides."

"Atreides!" It was a curse in Idaho's voice.

Siona said: "I am different, but still I am what he was. I am the Golden Path."

Idaho spoke in a hushed whisper: "The ancestors, all of. . ."

"The multitude is there, but I walk silently among them and no one sees me. The old images are gone and only the essence remains to light his Golden Path. It's from an old story. You'll find it all in my journals."

