

DUNE: HOUSE ATREIDES

BRIAN HERBERT



BALLANTINE BOOKS

DUNE

HOUSE ATREIDES

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*This book is for our mentor, Frank Herbert,
who was every bit as fascinating and complex as
the marvelous Dune universe he created.*

A requirement of creativity is that it contributes to change. Creativity keeps the creator alive.

—FRANK HERBERT, unpublished notes

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Transmission to the galactic merchandizing conglomerate "Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles" (CHOAM) from the Spacing Guild:

Our specific charge in this unofficial mission has been to search the uninhabited worlds to find another source of the precious spice melange, upon which so much of the Imperium depends. We have documented the journeys of many of our Navigators and Steersmen, searching hundreds of planets. To date, however, we have had no success. The only source of melange in the Known Universe remains the desert world of Arrakis. The Guild, CHOAM, and all other dependents must continue in thrall of the Harkonnen monopoly.

However, the value of exploring outlying territories for new planetary systems and new resources bears its own fruit. The detailed surveys and orbital maps on the attached sheets of ridulian crystal will no doubt be of commercial import for CHOAM.

Having completed our contract to the specifications upon which we previously agreed, we hereby request that CHOAM deposit the required payment in our official Guild Bank headquarters on Junction.

To His Royal Highness, the Padishah Emperor Elrood IX, Ruler of the Known Universe:

From His Faithful Subject the Siridar Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, Planetary Governor of Arrakis, titular head of House Harkonnen and Overlord of Giedi Prime, Lankiveil, and allied planets.

Sire, let me once again affirm my commitment to serving you faithfully on the desert planet Arrakis. For seven years after my father's death, I am ashamed to say that my incompetent half brother Abulurd has allowed spice production to falter. Equipment losses have been high, while exports fell to abysmal levels. Given the dependence of the Imperium on the spice melange, this bottleneck could have had dire consequences. Be assured that my family has taken action to rectify the unfortunate situation: Abulurd has been removed from his duties and relegated to the planet of Lankiveil. His noble title has been removed, though he may reclaim a district governorship one day.

Now that I am the direct overseer of Arrakis, allow me to give you my personal guarantee that I will use whatever means necessary—money, dedication, and an iron hand—to ensure that melange production meets or exceeds previous record levels.

As you so wisely have commanded, the spice must flow!

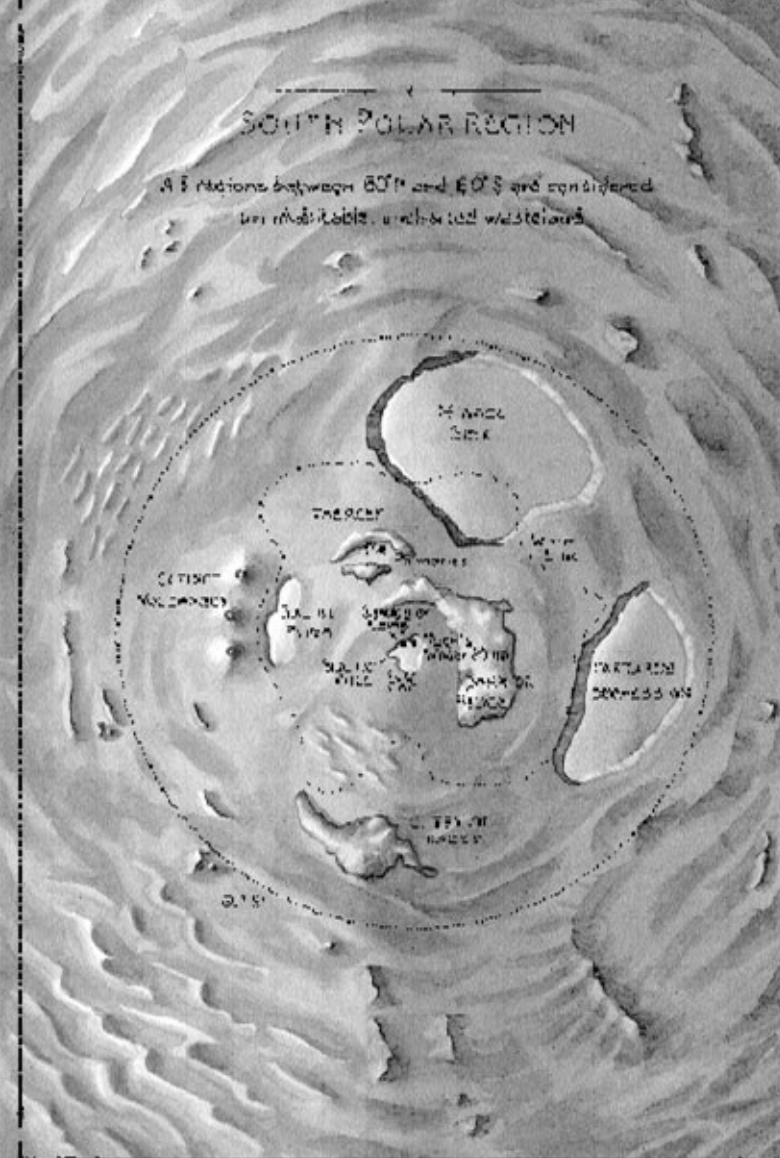
ARRAKIS

NORTH POLAR REGION



SOUTH POLAR REGION

A 3° latitudes between 80°W and 60°W and considered by most to be the most westerly



Melange is the financial crux of CHOAM activities. Without this spice, Bene Gesserit Reverend Mothers could not perform feats of observation and human control, Guild Navigators could not see safe pathways across space, and billions of Imperial citizens would die of addictive withdrawal. Any simpleton knows that such dependence upon a single commodity leads to abuse. We are all at risk.

—CHOAM Economic Analysis
of Materiel Flow Patterns

Lean and muscular, Baron Vladimir Harkonnen hunched forward next to the ornithopter pilot. He peered with spider-black eyes through the pitted windowplaz, smelling the ever-present grit and sand.

As the armored 'thopter flew high overhead, the white sun of Arrakis dazzled against unrelenting sands. The sweeping vista of dunes sizzling in the day's heat made his retinas burn. The landscape and sky were bleached of color. Nothing soothed the human eye.

Hellish place.

The Baron wished he could be back in the industrialized warmth and civilized complexity of Gien Prime, the central world of House Harkonnen. Even stuck here, he had better things to do back at the local family headquarters in the city of Carthag, other diversions to suit his demanding tastes.

But the spice harvesting must take precedence. *Always*. Especially a huge strike such as the one his spotters had reported.

In the cramped cockpit, the Baron lounged with well-postured confidence, ignoring the buffet and sway of air currents. The 'thopter's mechanical wings beat rhythmically like a wasp's. The dark leather of his chestpiece fit tightly over well-toned pectorals. In his mid-forties, he had rakish good looks; his reddish gold hair had been cut and styled to exacting specifications, enhancing his distinctive widow's peak. The Baron's skin was smooth, his cheekbones high and well sculpted. Sinewy muscles stood out along his neck and jaw, ready to contort his face into a scowl or a handsome smile, depending on circumstances.

"How much farther?" He looked sideways at the pilot, who had been showing signs of nervousness.

"The site is in the deep desert, m'Lord Baron. All indications are that this is one of the richest concentrations of spice ever excavated."

The flying craft shuddered on thermals as they passed over an outcropping of black lava rock. The pilot swallowed hard, focusing on the ornithopter's controls.

The Baron relaxed into his seat and quelled his impatience. He was glad the new hoard was far from prying eyes, away from Imperial or CHOAM corporate officials who might keep troublesome records. Doddering old Emperor Elrood IX didn't need to know every damned thing about Harkonnen spice production on Arrakis. Through carefully edited reports and doctored accounting journals, not to mention bribes, the Baron told the off-planet overseers only what he wanted them to know.

He swiped a strong hand across the sheen of sweat on his upper lip, then adjusted the 'thopter environment controls to make the cockpit cooler, the air more moist.

The pilot, uncomfortable at having such an important and volatile passenger in his care, nudged the engines to increase speed. He checked the console's map projection again, studied outlines of the desert terrain that spread as far as they could see.

Having examined the cartographic projections himself, the Baron had been displeased by their lack of detail. How could anyone expect to find his way across this desert scab of a world? How could a planet so vital to the economic stability of the Imperium remain basically uncharted? Yet another failing of his weak younger demibrother, Abulurd.

But Abulurd was gone, and the Baron was in charge. *Now that Arrakis is mine, I'll put everything in order.* Upon returning to Carthag, he would set people to work drawing up new surveys and maps, and the damned Fremens didn't kill the explorers again or ruin the cartography points.

For forty years, this desert world had been the quasi-fief of House Harkonnen, a political appointment granted by the Emperor, with the blessing of the commercial powerhouse CHOAM—the Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles. Though grim and unpleasant, Arrakis was one of the most important jewels in the Imperial crown because of the precious substance it provided.

However, upon the death of the Baron's father, Dmitri Harkonnen, the old Emperor had, through some mental deficiency, granted the seat of power to the softhearted Abulurd, who had managed to decimate spice production in a mere seven years. Profits plunged, and he lost control to smugglers and saboteurs. In disgrace, the fool had been yanked from his position and sent off without official title to Lankiveil, where even he could do little damage to the self-sustaining whale-fur activities there.

Immediately upon being granted the governorship, Baron Vladimir Harkonnen had set out to turn Arrakis around. He would make his own mark, erase the legacy of mistakes and bad judgment.

In all the Imperium, Arrakis—a hellhole that some might consider a punishment rather than a reward—was the only known source of the spice melange, a substance worth far more than any precious metal. Here on this parched world, it was worth even more than its weight in water.

Without spice, efficient space travel would be impossible . . . and without space travel, the Imperium itself would fall. Spice prolonged life, protected health, and added a vigor to existence. The Baron, a moderate user himself, greatly appreciated the way it made him feel. Of course, the spice melange was also ferociously addictive, which kept the price high. . . .

The armored 'thopter flew over a seared mountain range that looked like a broken jawbone filled with rotted teeth. Up ahead the Baron could see a dust cloud extending like an anvil into the sky.

“Those are the harvesting operations, m'Lord Baron.”

Hawklike attack 'thopters grew from black dots in the monochrome sky and swooped toward them. The communicator pinged, and the pilot sent back an identification signal. The paid defenders—mercenaries with orders to keep out unwelcome observers—circled away and took up protective

positions in the sky.

So long as House Harkonnen maintained the illusion of progress and profits, the Spacing Guild didn't need to know about every particular spice find. Nor did the Emperor, nor CHOAM. The Baron would keep the melange for himself and add it to his huge stockpiles.

After Abulurd's years of bumbling, if the Baron accomplished even *half* of what he was capable of, CHOAM and the Imperium would see a vast improvement. If he kept them happy, they wouldn't notice his substantial skim, would never suspect his secret spice stashes. A dangerous stratagem discovered . . . but the Baron had ways of dealing with prying eyes.

As they approached the plume of dust, he took out a pair of binoculars and focused the oil lenses. The magnification permitted him to see the spice factory at work. With its giant treads and enormous cargo capacity, the mechanical monstrosity was incredibly expensive—and worth every solar expended to maintain it. Its excavators kicked up cinnamon-red dust, gray sand, and flint chips as they dug down, scooping up the surface of the desert, sifting for aromatic spice.

Mobile ground units ranged across the open sand in the vicinity of the factory, dipping probes beneath the surface, scraping samples, mapping the extent of the buried spice vein. Overhead, heavy machinery borne by jumbo ornithopters circled, waiting. Peripherally, spotter craft cruised up and down the sands with alert watchers searching for the telltale ripples of wormsign. One of the great sandworms of Arrakis could swallow their entire operation whole.

"M'Lord Baron," the pilot said and handed the communicator wand over to him, "the captain of the work crew wishes to speak with you."

"This is your Baron." He touched his ear to listen to the pickup. "Give me an update. How much have you found?"

Below on the sands, the crew captain answered, his voice gruff, his manner annoyingly unimpressed with the importance of the man to whom he was speaking. "Ten years working spice crews, and the deposit's beyond anything I've ever seen. Trouble is, it's buried deep. Normally, you know, we find the spice exposed by the elements. This time it's densely concentrated, but . . ."

The Baron waited for only a moment. "Yes, what is it?"

"Something strange going on here, sir. Chemically, I mean. We've got carbon dioxide leaking from below, some sort of a bubble beneath us. The harvester's digging through outer layers of sand to get the spice, but there's also water vapor."

"Water vapor!" Such a thing was unheard-of on Arrakis, where the moisture content of the air was nearly unmeasurable, even on the best of days.

"Could have stumbled on an ancient aquifer, sir. Maybe buried under a cap of rock."

The Baron had never imagined finding running water beneath the surface of Arrakis. Quickly he considered the possibilities of exploiting a free-flowing water resource by selling it to the populace.

That was sure to upset the existing water merchants, who had grown too swollen with self-importance anyway.

His basso voice rumbled. “Do you think it’s contaminating the spice somehow?”

“Not able to say, sir,” said the crew captain. “Spice is strange stuff, but I’ve never seen a pocket like this before. It doesn’t seem . . . right somehow.”

The Baron looked over at the ’thopter pilot. “Contact the spotters. See if they’ve picked up any wormsign yet.”

“No wormsign, m’Lord,” the pilot said, scanning the reply. The Baron noticed sparkles of sweat on the man’s forehead.

“How long has the harvester been down there?”

“Nearly two standard hours, sir.”

Now the Baron scowled. One of the worms should definitely have come before now.

Inadvertently, the pilot had left the comsystem open, and the crew captain gruffly acknowledged over the speaker. “Never had this much time either, sir. The worms always come. Always. But something’s going on down here. Gases are increasing. You can smell it in the air.”

Taking a deep breath of the recycled cabin air, the Baron detected the musky cinnamon smell of raw melange scooped from the desert. The ornithopter flew in a holding pattern now, several hundred meters from the main harvester.

“We’re also detecting vibrations underground, some kind of a resonance. I don’t like it, sir.”

“You’re not paid to like it,” the Baron replied. “Is it a deep worm?”

“I don’t think so, sir.”

He scanned the estimates being transmitted from the spice harvester. The numbers boggled his mind. “We’re getting as much from this one excavation as a month’s production on my other sites. He drummed his fingers on his right thigh in a rhythmic pattern.

“Nevertheless, sir, I suggest that we prepare to pack up and abandon the site. We could lose—”

“Absolutely not, Captain,” the Baron said. “There’s no wormsign, and you’ve already got nearly full factory load. We can bring down a carryall and give you an empty harvester if you need it. I’m not leaving behind a fortune in spice just because you’re getting nervous . . . just because you have an uneasy *feeling*. Ridiculous!”

When the work leader tried to push his point, the Baron interrupted, “Captain, if you’re a nervous coward, you’re in the wrong profession and in the employ of the wrong House. Carry on.” He switched off the communicator and made a mental note to remove that man from his position as soon . . .

possible.

Carryalls hovered above, ready to retrieve the spice harvester and its crew as soon as a worm appeared. But why was it taking so long for one to come? Worms always protected the spice.

Spice. He tasted the word in his thoughts and on his lips.

Veiled in superstition, the substance was an unknown quantity, a modern unicorn's-horn. An Arrakis was inhospitable enough that no one had yet deciphered the origin of melange. In the vast canvas of the Imperium, no explorer or prospector had found melange on any other planet, nor had anyone succeeded in synthesizing a substitute, despite centuries of attempts. Since House Harkonnen held the planetary governorship of Arrakis, and therefore controlled all spice production, the Baron had no wish to see a substitute developed, or any other source found.

Expert desert crews located the spice, and the Imperium used it—but beyond that, the details didn't concern him. There was always risk to spice workers, always the danger that a worm would attack too soon, that a carryall would malfunction, that a spice factory would not be lifted away in time. Unexpected sandstorms could come up with startling speed. The casualty rate and the equipment losses to House Harkonnen were appalling . . . but melange paid off nearly any cost in blood or money.

As the ornithopter circled in a steady, thrumming rhythm, the Baron studied the industrial spectacle below. Baking sun glinted off the spice factory's dusty hull. Spotters continued to prowl the air, while groundcars cruised beneath them, taking samples.

Still no sign of a worm, and every moment allowed the crew to retrieve more spice. The workers would receive bonuses—except for that captain—and House Harkonnen would become richer. The records could be doctored later.

The Baron turned to the pilot. "Call our nearest base. Summon another carryall and another spice factory. This vein seems inexhaustible." His voice trailed off. "If a worm hasn't shown up by now, there just might be time. . . ."

The ground crew captain called back, broadcasting on a general frequency since the Baron had shut down his own receiver. "Sir, our probes indicate that the temperature is rising deep below—a dramatic spike! Something's going on down there, a chemical reaction. And one of our ground-roving teams just broke into a swarming nest of sandtrout."

The Baron growled, furious with the man for communicating on an unencrypted channel. What CHOAM spies were listening? Besides, no one cared about sandtrout. The jellylike creatures deep beneath the sand were as irrelevant to him as flies swarming around a long-abandoned corpse.

He made a mental note to do more to this weakling captain than just remove him from the work crews and deny him a bonus. *That gutless bastard was probably handpicked by Abulurd.*

The Baron saw tiny figures of scouts tracking through the sands, running about like ants maddened with acid vapor. They rushed back to the main spice factory. One man leaped off his dirt-encrusted rover and scrambled toward the open door of the massive machine.

“What are those men doing? Are they abandoning their posts? Bring us down closer so I can see.”

The pilot tilted the ornithopter and descended like an ominous beetle toward the sand. Below, the men leaned over, coughing and retching as they tried to drag filters over their faces. Two stumbled on the shifting sand. Others were rapidly battening down the spice factory.

“Bring the carryall! Bring the carryall!” someone cried.

The spotters all reported in. “I see no worms sign.”

“Still nothing.”

“All clear from here,” said a third.

“Why are they evacuating?” the Baron demanded, as if the pilot would know.

“Something’s happening,” the crew captain yelled. “Where’s that carryall? We need it now!”

The ground bucked. Four workers stumbled and pitched facefirst onto the sand before they could reach the ramp to the spice factory.

“Look, m’Lord!” The pilot pointed downward, his voice filled with awe. As the Baron stopped focusing on the cowardly men, he saw the sand trembling all around the excavation site, vibrating like a struck drumhead.

The spice harvester canted, slipped to one side. A crack opened in the sands, and the whole site began to swell from beneath the ground, rising in the air like a gas bubble in a boiling Salus mudpot.

“Get us out of here!” the Baron shouted. The pilot stared for a fraction of a second, and the Baron swept his left hand with the speed of a cracked whip, striking the man hard on the cheek. “Move!”

The pilot grabbed the ’thopter controls and wrenched them into a steep ascent. The articulated wings flapped furiously.

On the terrain below, the swollen underground bubble reached its apex—then burst, hurling the spice harvester, the mobile crews, and everything else up off the surface. A gigantic explosion of sand sprayed upward, carrying broken rock and volatile orange spice. The mammoth factory was crushed and blasted to pieces, scattered like lost rags in a Coriolis storm.

“What the devil happened?” The Baron’s dark eyes went wide in disbelief at the sheer magnitude of the disaster. All that precious spice gone, swallowed in an instant. All the equipment destroyed. The loss in lives hardly occurred to him, except for the wasted costs of crew training.

“Hang on, m’Lord,” the pilot cried. His knuckles turned white on the controls.

A hammer-blast of wind struck them. The armored ornithopter turned end over end in the air, wings flailing. The engines whined and groaned, trying to maintain stability. Pellets of high-velocity sand

struck the plaz windowports. Dust-clogged, the 'thopter's motors made sick, coughing sounds. The craft lost altitude, dropping toward the seething maw of the desert.

The pilot shouted unintelligible words. The Baron clutched his crash restraints, saw the ground coming toward them like an inverted bootheel to squash an insect.

As head of House Harkonnen, he had always thought he would die by a treacherous assassin's hand . . . but to fall prey to an unpredictable natural disaster instead—the Baron found it almost humorous.

As they plunged, he saw the sand open like a festering sore. The dust and raw melange were being sucked down, turned over by convection currents and chemical reactions. The rich spice vein of only moments before had turned into a leprous mouth ready to swallow them.

But the pilot, who had seemed weak and distractible during their flight, became rigid with concentration and determination. His fingers flew over sky rudder and engine throttle controls, working to ride the currents, switching flow from one motor to another to discharge dust strangulation in the air intakes.

Finally the ornithopter leveled off, steadied itself again, and cruised low over the dune plain. The pilot emitted an audible sigh of relief.

Where the great opening had been ripped into the layered sand, the Baron now saw glittering translucent shapes like maggots on a carcass: sandtrout, rushing toward the explosion. Soon giant worms would come, too. The monsters couldn't possibly resist this.

Try as he might, the Baron couldn't understand spice. Not at all.

The 'thopter gained altitude, taking them toward the spotters and the carryalls that had been caught unawares. They hadn't been able to retrieve the spice factory and its precious cargo before the explosion, and he could blame no one for it—no one but himself. The Baron had given them explicit orders to remain out of reach.

“You just saved my life, pilot. What is your name?”

“Kryubi, sir.”

“All right, then, Kryubi—have you ever seen such a thing? What happened down there? What caused that explosion?”

The pilot took a deep breath. “I've heard the Fremen talking about something they call a . . . *spice blow*.” He seemed like a statue now, as if the terror had transformed him into something much stronger. “It happens in the deep desert, where few people can see.”

“Who cares what the Fremen say?” He curled his lip at the thought of the dirty, nomadic indigenes of the great desert. “We've all heard of spice blows, but nobody's ever actually seen one. Crazy superstitions.”

“Yes, but superstition usually has some kind of basis. They see many things out in the desert.” No longer the Baron admired the man for his willingness to speak out, though Kryubi must know of his temper and vindictiveness. Perhaps it would be wise to promote him. . . .

“They say a spice blow is a chemical explosion,” Kryubi continued, “probably the result of a pure spice mass beneath the sands.”

The Baron considered this; he couldn’t deny the evidence of his own eyes. One day maybe someone would understand the true nature of melange and be able to prevent disasters like this. So far, because the spice was seemingly inexhaustible to those willing to make the effort, no one had bothered with detailed analysis. Why waste time on tests, when fortunes waited to be made? The Baron had a monopoly on Arrakis—but it was also a monopoly based on ignorance.

He gritted his teeth and knew that once they returned to Carthag he would be forced to blow off some steam, to release his pent-up tensions on “amusements,” perhaps a bit more vigorously than he had earlier intended. He would have to find a special candidate this time—not one of his regular lovers, but someone he would never have use for again. That would free him of restraint.

Looking down, he thought, *No longer any need to hide this site from the Emperor.* They would record it, log it as a find, and document the destruction of the crew and equipment. No need to manipulate the records now. Old Elrood would not be pleased, and House Harkonnen would have to absorb this financial setback.

As the pilot circled around, the surviving spice crew assessed their damages on the ground, and over the comlink reported losses of men, equipment, and spice load. The Baron felt rage boiling within him.

Damn Arrakis! he thought. *Damn the spice, and damn our dependence on it!*

We are generalists. You can't draw neat lines around planetwide problems. Planetology is a cut-and-fit science.

—PARDOT KYNES, *Treatise on the Environmental Recovery of Post-Holocaust Salusa Secundus*

On the Imperial planet Kaitain, immense buildings kissed the sky. Magnificent sculptures and opulent tiered fountains lined the crystal-paved boulevards like a dream. A person could stare for hours.

Pardot Kynes managed to catch only a glimpse of the urban spectacle as the royal guards marched him at a rapid clip into the Palace. They had no patience for a simple Planetologist's curiosity, nor any apparent interest in the city's wonders. Their job was to escort him to the tremendous vaulted throne room, without delay. The Emperor of the Known Universe could not be kept waiting for mere sightseeing.

The members of Kynes's escort wore gray-and-black uniforms, impeccably clean and adorned with braids and medals, every button and bauble polished, every ribbon straightened and pressed. Fifteen of the Emperor's handpicked staff, the Sardaukar, surrounded him like an army.

Still, the splendor of the capital world overwhelmed Kynes. Turning to the guard closest to him, he said, "I'm usually out in the dirt, or tromping through swamps on a planet where nobody else wants to be." He had never seen, or even imagined, anything like this in all of the rugged and out-of-the-world landscapes he had studied.

The guard made no response to this tall, lean off-worlder. Sardaukar were trained to be fighting machines, not conversationalists.

"Here I've been scrubbed clean down to the third layer of my skin and dressed like a noble." Kynes tugged at the thick corded fabric of his dark blue jacket, smelled the soap and scent of his own skin. He had a high forehead, with sparse, sandy hair combed straight back.

The escort hurried up a seemingly endless waterfall of polished stone steps, ornately highlighted with gold filigree and creamy, sparkling soostones.

Kynes turned to the guard on his left. "This is my first trip to Kaitain. I'd wager you don't even notice the sights anymore, if you work here all the time?" His words hung on a wistful smile, but again fell on deaf ears.

Kynes was an expert and well-respected ecologist, geologist, and meteorologist, with additional specialties in botany and microbiology. Driven, he enjoyed absorbing the mysteries of entire worlds. But the people themselves often remained a complete mystery to him—like these guards.

"Kaitain is a lot more . . . comfortable than Salusa Secundus—I grew up there, you know," he continued. "I've been to Bela Tegeuse, too, and that's almost as bad, dim and bleak with two dwarf suns."

Finally Kynes faced forward, consenting to mutter to himself. “The Padishah Emperor called me from halfway across the galaxy. I wish I knew why.” None of these men ventured to offer any explanations.

The entourage passed under a pitted archway of crimson lava rock that bore the ponderous oppression of extreme age. Kynes looked up, and with his geological expertise recognized the massive rare stone: an ancient archway from the devastated world of Salusa Secundus.

It puzzled him that anyone would keep such a relic from the austere planet where Kynes had spent so many years, an isolated prison world with a ruined ecosystem. But then he recalled, feeling like a fool for having forgotten it, that Salusa had once been the Imperial capital, millennia ago . . . before the disaster changed everything. No doubt House Corrino had brought this archway here intact as a reminder of their past, or as some sort of trophy to show how the Imperial family had overcome planet-destroying adversity.

As the Sardaukar escort stepped through the lava arch and into the echoing splendor of the Palace itself, fanfare rang out from brassy instruments Kynes could not name. He’d never been much of a student in music or the arts, not even as a child. Why bother, when there was so much natural science to absorb?

Just before passing beneath the jewel-sparkling roof of the immense royal structure, Kynes craned his neck upward to gaze once more at the clear sky of perfect blue.

On the trip here, inside a cordoned-off section of the Guild Heighliner, Kynes had taken the time to learn about the capital world, though he had never before applied his planet-understanding skills to such a civilized place. Kaitain was exquisitely planned and produced, with tree-lined boulevards, splendid architecture, well-watered gardens, flower barricades . . . and so much more.

Official Imperial reports claimed it was always warm, the climate forever temperate. Storms were unknown. No clouds marred the skies. At first, he thought the entries might have been mere tourist propaganda, but when the ornate Guild escort craft descended, he had noted the flotilla of weather satellites, climate-bending technology that—through brute force—kept Kaitain a peaceful and serene place.

Climate engineers could certainly strong-arm the weather to what someone had foolishly decided was optimal—though they did it at their own peril, creating an environment that led, ultimately, to a malaise of the mind, body, and spirit. The Imperial family would never understand that. They continued to relax under their sunny skies and stroll through their well-watered arboretums, oblivious to an environmental catastrophe just waiting to unfold before their covered eyes. It would be a challenge to stay on this planet and study the effects—but somehow Kynes doubted that was what Emperor Elrood IX had summoned him here. . . .

The escort troops led him deeper into the echoing Palace, passing statuary and classic paintings. The sprawling audience chamber could well have been an arena for ancient gladiatorial events. The floor stretched onward like a polished, multicolored plain of stone squares—each one from a different planet in the Imperium. Alcoves and wings were being added as the Empire grew.

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