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THE FACES OF A MARTYR

LEGENDS OF DUNE
SHORT STORY 3

“I’m sorry,” Rekur Van said to his fellow Tlulaxa researcher as he slipped the knife deftly through the victim’s spine, then added an extra twist. “I need this ship more than you do.”

Blood seeped around the slender steel blade, then spilled in a final dying gush as Van yanked the knife back out. His comrade jittered and twitched as nerve endings attempted to fire. Van tumbled him out the hatch of the small vessel, discarding him onto the pavement of the spaceport.

Explosions, shouts, and weapons fire rang through the streets of the main Tlulaxa city. The fatally wounded genetic scientist sprawled on the ground, still shuddering, his close-set eyes dimming as they blinked accusations at Rekur Van. Discarded, like so many other vital things...

He wiped the blood on his garments, but his hands remained sticky. He would have time to launder the clothes and clean his skin, once he escaped. Blood... it was the currency of his trade, a genetic resource filled with useful DNA. He hated to waste so much of it.

But now the League of Nobles wanted blood. *His* blood.

Though he was one of the most brilliant Tlulaxa scientists and well connected with powerful religious leaders, Van had to flee his homeworld to escape the lynch mobs. Outraged members of the League blockaded the planet and swept in to exact their justice. If they caught him, he could not begin to imagine the retribution they would inflict upon him. “Fanatics—all of you!” he shouted uselessly toward the city, then sealed the hatch.

With no time to retrieve his priceless research documents and forced to leave his personal wealth behind, Van used his bloodstained hands to operate the stolen ship’s controls. Without a plan, wanting only to get off the planet before the vengeful League soldiers could seize him, he launched his vessel into the sky.

“Damn you, Iblis Ginjo!” he said to himself. It gave him very little consolation to know that the Grand Patriarch was already dead.

Ginjo had always treated him as a lower form of life. Van and the Grand Patriarch had been business associates who depended on each other but shared no feelings of trust. In the end, the League had discovered the horrific secret of the Tlulaxa organ farms: missing soldiers and Zensunni slaves were cut up to provide replacement parts for other wounded fighters. Now the tables had turned. All of the Tlulaxa were in turmoil, scrambling for their lives to escape the League’s indignant vengeance. Flesh merchants had to go into hiding, and

legitimate traders were run off of civilized worlds. Disgraced and ruined, Van was now a hunted man.

But even without his laboratory records, his mind still carried vital knowledge to be shared with the highest bidder. And sealed in a pocket he took with him a small vial of special genetic material that would allow him to start over again. If he could only get away...

Reaching orbit in his stolen ship, Van saw powerful javelin battleships manned by angry jihadis. Numerous Tlulaxa vessels—most of them flown by inexperienced and panicked pilots such as himself—streaked away in a pellmell fashion, and the League warships targeted all Tlulaxa craft that came within range.

“Why not just assume we’re *all* guilty?” he snarled at the images, knowing no one could hear him.

Van increased acceleration, not knowing how fast the unfamiliar ship could go. With the end of his sleeve, he wiped away a blot of drying blood on the control panel so he could read the instruments better. The League javelins took potshots at him, and an angry voice came over the commline.

“Tlulaxa craft! Stand down—surrender or be destroyed.”

“Why not use your weapons against the thinking machines?” Van retorted. “The Army of the Jihad is wasting time and resources here. Or have you forgotten the real enemies of humanity?” Surely any supposed Tlulaxa crimes were minimal compared to decades of devastation by the computer evermind Omnius.

Apparently, the javelin commander did not appreciate his sarcasm. Exploding projectiles streaked silently past him, and Van reacted with a sudden lurch of deceleration; the artillery detonated some distance from its intended target, but the shockwave still put his stolen ship into a spin. Flashing lights and alarm signals lit the control panels in the cockpit, but Van did not send out a distress signal. Noiselessly, he tumbled out of control, playing dead—and the League ships soon left him to hunt other hapless Tlulaxa escapees. They had plenty of victims to choose from.

When the League battleships were finally gone, Van felt he was safe enough to engage stabilizers. After several exaggerated attempts, he compensated for the out-of-control rolling and got his ship back on course. With no destination in mind, intent only on escaping, he flew out of the system as far and as fast as he could go. He did not regret what he was leaving behind.

For most of his life, Van had worked to develop vital new biological techniques, as had generations of his people before him. During the Jihad, the Tlulaxa had made themselves fabulously wealthy, and presumably indispensable. Now, though, Serena's fanatics would raze the original organ farms, destroying the transplant tanks, and "mercifully" putting the donors out of their misery. Short-sighted fools! How the League would complain in coming years when eyeless or limbless veterans wailed about their injuries and had nowhere else to go.

The myopic League idealists didn't consider practical matters, didn't plan well at all. As with so many things in Serena Butler's Jihad, they chased unrealistic dreams, were driven by foolish emotions. Van hated those people.

He grasped the ship's control bar as if to strangle it, pretending it was Iblis Ginjo's thick neck. Despite a full résumé of despicable acts, the Grand Patriarch had succeeded in keeping his own name clean while shifting blame onto an old, hard-bitten war hero, Xavier Harkonnen, and the whole Tlulaxa race. Ginjo's ever-scheming widow falsely portrayed her fallen husband as a martyr.

The League could steal the "honor" of the Tlulaxa people. Mobs could take their wealth and force his people to live as outlaws. But the betrayers could never take away Rekur Van's special knowledge and skills. This scapegoat was still able to fight back.

Finally, Van made up his mind where he should go, where he should take his secret and innovative cloning technology, as well as viable cells from Serena Butler herself.

He headed out past the boundaries of League space to find the machine worlds, where he intended to present himself to the evermind Omnium.

* * *

On Salusa Secundus, capital of the League of Nobles, a screaming, unruly crowd set fire to the figure of a man.

Stony silent, Vorian Atreides stood in the shadows of an ornate arch, watching the crowd. His throat was clenched so tightly that he could not shout his dismay. Though he was a champion of the Jihad, this wild throng would not listen to him.

The effigy was a poor likeness of Xavier Harkonnen, but the mob's hatred for him was unmistakable. The mannequin dangled from a makeshift gibbet above a pile of dry sticks. A young man tossed in a small igniter, and within

seconds outstretched flames began to consume the effigy's symbolic Army of the Jihad uniform—like the one Xavier had been so proud to wear.

Vorian's friend had devoted most of his life to the war against the thinking machines. Now an irrational throng had found a uniform and used it to mock him, stripping it of all medals and insignia, in much the same way Xavier had been stripped of his rightful place in history. Now they were burning him.

As the fire caught, the figure danced and smoldered on the end of its tether. Raucous cheering rattled the windows of nearby buildings, celebrating the death of a traitor. The people considered this an act of vengeance. Vor considered it an abomination.

After Vor learned how brave Xavier had exposed the Tlulaxa organ farms and brought down the treacherous Grand Patriarch Ginjo, he had rushed to Salusa. He'd never expected to witness such an appalling and well-orchestrated backlash against his friend. For days Vor had continued to speak out, trying to stop the hysterical anger from striking the wrong target. Despite his high rank, few came to his support. The smear campaign against Xavier had begun, and history was being rewritten even while it was still news. Vor felt like a man standing on the beach in a Caladan hurricane, holding up his hands to ward off a tidal wave.

Even Xavier's own daughters bowed to pressure and changed their names from Harkonnen to their mother's surname of Butler. Their mother Octa, always quiet and shy, had withdrawn in misery to the City of Introspection, refusing to see outsiders...

Wearing street clothes to conceal his identity, Vor stood among the crowd, unnoticed. Like Xavier, he was proud of his service in the Army of the Jihad, but in the mounting emotional fervor this was no time to appear in uniform.

Over the course of the long Jihad, Primero Vorian Atreides had engaged in many battles against the thinking machines. He had fought at Xavier's side and achieved tremendous, but costly, victories. Xavier was the bravest man Vor had ever known, and now billions of people despised him.

Unable to tolerate the spectacle any longer, Vor turned away from the throng. Such mass ignorance and stupidity! The ill informed and easily manipulated multitude would believe whatever they chose to. Vorian Atreides alone would remember the brave truth about the Harkonnen name.

* * *

The independent robot stepped back to admire the new sign mounted on his laboratory wall. *Understanding Human Nature Is the Most Difficult of All Mental Exercises.*

While considering the implications of the statement, Erasmus shifted the expression on his flowmetal face. For centuries his quest had been to decipher these biological creatures: They had so many flaws, but somehow, in a spark of genius, they had created thinking machines. The puzzle intrigued him.

He had mounted various slogans around his laboratory to initiate trains of thought at unexpected times. Philosophy was far more than a game to him; it was a means by which he improved his machine mind.

It Is Possible to Achieve Whatever You Envision, Whether You Are Man or Machine.

To facilitate his better understanding of the biological enemy, Erasmus performed constant experiments. Strapped onto tables, confined within transparent tanks, or sealed within airtight cells, the robot's current round of subjects moaned and writhed. Some prayed to invisible gods. Others screamed and begged for mercy from their captor, which showed just how delusional they were. A number bled, urinated, and leaked all manner of fluids, discourteously messing his laboratory. Fortunately, he had subservient robots as well as human slaves to restore the facility to an antiseptic and orderly state.

Flesh Is Just Soft Metal.

The robot had dissected thousands of human brains and bodies, in addition to conducting psychological experiments. He tested people with sensory deprivation, causing extreme pain and unrelenting fear. He studied the behavior of individuals as well as crowd activities. Yet through it all, despite his meticulous attention to detail, Erasmus knew he continued to miss something important. He could not find a way to assess and collate all the data so that it fit within a comprehensible framework, a "grand unified theory" of human nature. The behavioral extremes were too far separated.

Is It More Human to Be Good? Or Evil?

That sign, next to the new one, had posed a conundrum for some time. Many of the humans he had studied in detail, such as Serena Butler and his own ward Gilbertus Albans, demonstrated an innate human goodness filled with compassion and caring for other creatures. But Erasmus had studied history and

knew about traitors and sociopaths who caused incredible damage and suffering in order to gain advantages for themselves. No set of conclusions made sense.

After thirty-six years of Serena Butler's Jihad, the machines were far from victory, despite computer projections that said they should have crushed the feral humans long ago. Fanaticism kept the League of Nobles strong, and they continued to fight when any reasoned consideration should have led them to surrender. Their inspirational leader had been martyred... by her own choice. An inexplicable act.

Now, he finally had a fresh opportunity, an unexpected new subject that might shed light on hitherto unexplored aspects of humanity. Perhaps when he arrived, the Tlulaxa captive would provide some answers. After all, the foolish man had fallen into their laps...

Rekur Van had brashly flown into Synchronized space controlled by the thinking machines, and transmitted his demand to see Omnius. The Tlulaxa's bold arrival was either part of a complicated trick... or he genuinely believed he had a worthwhile bargaining chip. Erasmus was curious as to which it was. Omnius wanted to destroy the Tlulaxa ship outright; most humans trespassing in Synchronized space were either killed or captured, but Erasmus intervened, eager to hear what the well-known genetics researcher had to say.

After surrounding the small vessel, robotic warships escorted it to Corrin, center of the Synchronized Worlds. Without delay, armored sentinel robots marched the captive directly into Erasmus's laboratory.

Rekur Van's angular gray-skinned face was pinched into a scowl that flickered between haughtiness and fear. His dark, close-set eyes blinked rapidly. He wore a braid down to his shoulder and tried to look confident and nonplused, but failed completely.

Facing him, the autonomous robot preened in his plush, regal robe, which he wore to make himself impressive in the eyes of his human slaves and test subjects. He fashioned a non-threatening smile on his flowmetal face, then glo-wered, trying out another expression. "When you were captured, you demanded to see Omnius. It is strange for the great computer evermind to receive commands from such a diminutive human—a man both small in stature and in importance."

Van lifted his chin and sniffed haughtily. "You underestimate me." Reaching into the folds of his stained and rumpled tunic, the Tlulaxa withdrew a small vial. "I have brought you something precious. These are samples of vital cells, the raw materials of my genetic research."

“I have done a great deal of my own research,” Erasmus said. “And I have many samples to draw from. Why should yours interest me?”

“Because these are original cells from *Serena Butler* herself. And you have no technology or techniques to grow an accelerated clone of her, as I do. I can create a perfect duplicate of the leader of the Jihad against thinking machines—I’m sure you can think of a use for that.”

Erasmus was indeed impressed. “Serena Butler? You can recreate her?”

“Down to her exact DNA, and I can accelerate her maturity to whatever point you wish. But I have planted certain... inhibitors... in these cells. Little locks that only I can open.” He continued to hold the vial tantalizingly in the laboratory’s light, where Erasmus could see it. “Just imagine how valuable such a pawn could be in your war against humans.”

“And why would you offer us such a treasure?”

“Because I hate the League of Nobles. They turned against my people, are hunting us down at every turn. If the thinking machines grant me sanctuary, I will reward you with a brand new *Serena Butler*, to do with as you wish.”

Possibilities flooded Erasmus’s mental core. *Serena* had been his most fascinating human subject ever, but his experiments and tests on her had come to a grinding halt once he’d killed her unruly baby. After that, she was no longer cooperative. For decades, the robot had wished for a second opportunity with her—and now he could have it.

He imagined the dialogues they might have, the exchanges of ideas, the *answers* to all his pressing questions. He studied another slogan on the wall.

If I Can Think of the Ultimate Question, Will It Have an Answer?

Fascinated, Erasmus clasped Van’s shoulder, causing the *Tlulaxa* to grimace in pain. “I agree to your terms.”

* * *

The Grand Patriarch’s widow sent him a formal invitation, and *Vorian Atreides* knew it was not an idle request.

The message was delivered by a captain of the Jihad Police, which in itself carried an implied threat. But *Vor* chose not to be intimidated. He donned many of the medals, ribbons, and decorations he’d been awarded over the course of his long and illustrious career. Although he’d grown up among thinking machines as a trustee, *Vor* had later become a Hero of the Jihad. He didn’t want *Iblis Ginjo*’s pretentious wife to forget for one second who she was dealing with.

Camie Boro-Ginjo had married Ginjo for the prestige his name offered, but it had been a loveless union between loveless people. Camie had every intention of turning her husband's spectacular death to her own political gain. Now, inside the same offices where the Grand Patriarch had formulated so many of his nefarious schemes, she sat beside the bald, olive-skinned Jipol commandant, Yorek Thurr. Vor steeled himself for whatever this dangerous pair might be planning.

Smiling prettily, Camie directed Vor's attention to a model on a display platform, a small-scale rendition of a grandiose monument. "This will be our shrine to the Three Martyrs. Anyone who glimpses it cannot help but be filled with fervor for the Jihad."

Vor eyed the arches, the huge braziers to carry eternal flames, and the three colossal figures inside, stylized representations of a man, woman, and child.

"Three Martyrs?"

"Serena Butler and her child, murdered by the thinking machines, and my husband Iblis Ginjo, slain by the treachery of humans."

Vor could barely suppress his anger. He turned to leave. "I will have no part in this."

"Primero, please hear us out." Camie raised her hands in a placating gesture. "We must address the extreme turmoil in the League, the horrible murder of Serena Butler by the thinking machines, and the tragic death of my husband due to the plot hatched by Xavier Harkonnen and his Tlulaxa cohorts."

"There are no facts to prove Xavier's culpability," Vor said, his voice brittle. Camie had been primarily responsible for the blame-shifting and mudslinging. He was not afraid of her, or of her henchman. "Your assumptions are false, and you have stopped looking for the truth."

"It has been proven to my satisfaction."

Thurr rose to his feet. Though shorter in stature than Camie, he had the coiled strength of a cobra. "More to the point, Primero, it has been proven to the satisfaction of the League citizens. They need their heroes and martyrs."

"Apparently they need their villains as well. And, if you cannot find the correct culprit, you create one—as you did with Xavier."

Thurr meshed his fingers together. "We don't wish to engage in an acrimonious debate, Primero. You are a great military strategist, and we owe many of our victories to you."

"And to Xavier," Vor said.

The Jipol commandant continued without responding to the comment.

“We three important leaders must work together to accomplish important goals. None of us can be mired down by bruised feelings and traditional grieving. We must keep the populace focused on winning our Holy Jihad, and cannot afford arguments that divert us from the real enemy. You persist in raising questions about what happened between Xavier Harkonnen and the Grand Patriarch, but you do not realize the damage you’re doing.”

“The truth is the truth.”

“The truth is relative, and must be taken in the context of our larger struggle. Even Serena and Xavier would agree that unpleasant sacrifices are warranted if they help to achieve the goals of the Jihad. You must stop this personal crusade, Primero. Stop casting doubts. You only harm our cause if you don’t keep your feelings to yourself.”

Though Thurr’s words were spoken calmly, Vor read the implied threat in them and suppressed a fleeting urge to strike the man; this Jipol commandant had no comprehension of honor or truth. No doubt, Thurr had the power to see that the Primero was quietly assassinated... and Vor knew he would do it if he considered it necessary.

Still, the Jipol commandant had struck a solid blow, reminding him of his friends’ intentional sacrifices. If Vor destroyed the public confidence in the Jihad Council and the League government as a whole, the political repercussions and social turmoil could be considerable. Scandals, resignations, and the general uproar would severely weaken the solidarity the human race needed in order to face the thinking machines.

Omnius was the only enemy that mattered.

Vor crossed his arms over his heavily medaled and ribboned chest. “For now, I will keep my opinions to myself,” he said. “But I don’t do it for you and your power plays. I’m doing it for Serena’s Jihad, and for Xavier.”

“Just so long as you do it,” Camie said.

Vor turned to leave, but paused at the door. “I don’t want to be anywhere around when you unveil your Three Martyrs farce, so I’m heading for the front lines.” Shaking his head, he hurried away. “Battles I can understand.”

* * *

On the main machine world of Corrin, years passed, and a female child grew rapidly into adulthood, her cloned life accelerated by Rekur Van. Erasmus

regularly visited his laboratories full of moaning experimental subjects, where his new Serena Butler was taking shape nicely.

Among the tormented human subjects, the Tlulaxa researcher seemed quite at home. Van was himself an interesting person, with opinions and attitudes dramatically different from those Erasmus had observed in the original Serena or in Gilbertus Albans. Even so, the intense scientist had an unusual perspective: entirely self-centered, twisted by irrational hatred and spite toward the feral humans. In addition, he was intelligent and well trained. A good mental sparring partner for Erasmus... but the robot pinned his hopes on the return of Serena.

During her prolonged development, Van used advanced machine instructional technology to fill her head with misinformation, false memories mixed with details of the real Serena's life. Some of the data took hold; some of it needed to be implanted again and again.

When he had the opportunity, the robot engaged his new Serena in tentative conversation, anxious for the forthcoming days when he could debate with her, provoking her ire and her fascinating responses—just as it had once been. But though she looked like an adult, Rekur Van insisted that the clone's preparation was not complete.

And after all this time, Erasmus was growing impatient.

At first, he had assumed the discrepancies from the Serena he had known were inconsequential, the difference between a juvenile and the woman she would ultimately become. But as the clone approached the equivalent age at which he had known Serena, Erasmus became increasingly disturbed. This wasn't at all what he had expected.

Sensing that he could no longer justify further delays, the Tlulaxa researcher rushed his final preparations. Dressed again in his regal robe, Erasmus arrived to observe as the Serena clone completed several days of immersion in an experimental cellular deceleration chamber, to slow the aging process. Her development had been stretched and pushed, and her weak biological body had endured incredible rigors.

The Tlulaxa had been anxious to prove his claims, but Erasmus reconsidered now. Thinking machines could wait for centuries, if necessary. Perhaps, if he decided to make another clone, he would allow that one to grow normally, since this experimental acceleration might have introduced flaws. The independent robot had extremely high expectations for his renewed interactions with Serena Butler. He did not want anything to get in the way.

As the gummy fluids drained and the female clone stood naked and dripping before him, Erasmus scrutinized her through several spectral regimes, using his full complement of optic threads. A long time ago, though his many surveillance systems, the robot had seen the original Serena naked many times; he had been present when she'd given birth to her frustrating infant, and he had personally performed the sterilization surgery on her so that the pregnancy problem could never occur again.

Now Rekur Van came forward, leering unpleasantly, to give her a physical examination, but Erasmus lifted the little Tlulaxa out of the way. He did not want Van to interfere with what should have been a special moment.

Still dripping from the tank, Serena didn't seem to care about her nudity, though the original would no doubt have been offended; just one of many personality variations that the robot noticed.

"Do I please you now?" Serena asked, blinking her lavender eyes. She stood seductively, as if trying to lure a potential mate. "I want you to like me." An artificial scowl formed on Erasmus's flowmetal face, and his optic threads gleamed dangerously.

Serena Butler had been haughty, independent, intelligent. Hating her captivity among the thinking machines, she had debated with Erasmus, searching for any chance to hurt him. She had *never* tried to please him.

"What did you do to her?" Erasmus turned to the Tlulaxa. "Why did she say that?"

Van smiled uncertainly. "Because of the acceleration, I had to guide her personality. I shaped it with standard female attitudes."

"Standard female attitudes?" Erasmus wondered if this unpleasant, isolated Tlulaxa man understood human women even less than *he* did. "There was nothing 'standard' about Serena Butler."

Van appeared increasingly uneasy, and he fell silent, deciding not to attempt further excuses. Erasmus remained more interested in the clone. This woman looked like Serena, in her soft, classically beautiful face and form, in her amber-brown hair, and in her unusual eyes.

But she wasn't the same. Only close enough to tickle his own memories of her, of the times they had spent together.

"Tell me your beliefs about politics, philosophy, and religion," the robot demanded. "Express your most impassioned feelings and opinions. Why do you think that even captive humans deserve to be treated with respect? Explain why

you believe it is impossible for a thinking machine to achieve the equivalent of a human soul.”

“Why do you wish to discuss such subjects?” She sounded almost petulant. “Tell me how you would like me to answer, so that I can please you.”

As soon as the clone spoke, she shattered his fond remembrance of the real Serena. Though she looked exactly like Serena Butler, this simulacrum was very different in her internal makeup, the way she thought, the way she behaved. The cloned version had no social conscience, no spark, no glimmer of the personality that had become so familiar to him, and which had caused him so much interesting trouble. The real Serena’s rebellious attitude had triggered an entire Jihad, while this poor substitute lacked any such potential.

Erasmus noted the difference in the glint of her eyes, in the turn of her mouth, in the way she threw her wet hair over her shoulder. He missed the fascinating woman he had known.

“Put your clothes on,” Erasmus said. Looking on from one side, Rekur Van appeared alarmed, obviously sensing the robot’s disappointment.

She slipped into the garments he had provided, accentuating her feminine curves. “Do you find me pleasing now?”

“No. Unfortunately, you are unacceptable.”

With a blur of his flowmetal arm, Erasmus struck a swift, precise blow. He didn’t want her to suffer, yet he did not want to look at this flawed clone ever again. With all his robotic strength, he drove the sharp edge of his shaped metal hand into the base of her neck, and decapitated her as easily as he might cut a flower in his greenhouse gardens. She made no sound as her head tumbled away and her body fell, spraying blood on his clean laboratory floor.

Such a disappointment.

On his left Rekur Van made a choking sound, as if he had forgotten how to breathe. The Tlulaxa man stumbled backward, but sentinel robots stood all around the laboratory chambers. The numerous tortured experimental subjects moaned and chattered in their cages, tanks, and tables.

Erasmus took a step toward the genetics researcher. Van held up his hands and his expression telegraphed what would occur next. As usual, he would try to worm his way out of any responsibility. “I did everything possible! Her DNA matches perfectly, and she is the same in every physical characteristic.”

“She is not the same. You did not know the real Serena Butler.”

“Yes! I met her. I took the tissue samples myself when she visited Banda-long!”

Erasmus made his flowmetal face a bland expressionless mirror. “You did not *know* her.” This Tlulaxa’s ability to perfectly recreate Serena Butler had been overstated, at best. As in the robot’s own attempts to imitate the paintings of Van Gogh to the finest detail, the copy never approached the original’s perfection.

“I have many more cells. This was just our first attempt, and we can try again. Next time, I’m sure we’ll take care of the problems. That clone was different only because she never shared the real Serena’s life experiences, never faced the same challenges. We can modify the virtual reality teaching loops, make her spend more time immersed in sensory deprivation.”

Erasmus shook his head. “She will never be what I want.”

“Killing me would be a mistake, Erasmus! You can still learn much.” Staring at the Tlulaxa, the inquisitive robot noted how objectively unpleasant he was; apparently, all of his condemned breed were similar. Van had none of the noble attributes of character that could be found in so many people of other races. The little man might have some value after all, providing a new window on the dark side of human nature.

He was reminded of one of his thought-provoking signs.

Is it more human to be Good? Or Evil?

The robot’s flowmetal face formed into a broad smile.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” Van asked, nervously.

At a silent, transmitted signal from Erasmus, the sentinel robots came closer to surround the Tlulaxa man. Van had no place to run.

“Yes, I can learn from you, Rekur Van.” He turned, his plush robe swirling, and signaled for the sentinel robots to seize the man. “In fact, I already have several very interesting experiments in mind...”

The Tlulaxa screamed.

* * *

Fixing his gaze forward, Vorian Atreides sat stiffly on the bridge of the flagship. Over the past week, his assault force had been cruising across space. Soldiers and mercenaries continued their specialized drills. To the last man, they counted the days until reaching their next destination.

As the fleet entered Synchronized space, Vor mentally tallied all the weapons and firepower, all the soldiers and Ginaz mercenaries he would bring to bear against the thinking machines in the next great battle. He had not heard of

the target planet before, but nevertheless Vor intended to conquer it and destroy the machine scourge.

Politics be damned. Out here is exactly where I belong.

For years after the death and defamation of Xavier, Vor had thrown himself into the struggle against Omnius. He fought one accursed machine enemy after another, striking in the sacred name of humanity.

Vor felt instilled with the holy determination of Serena, and of Xavier as well. Their strength allowed him to carry the Jihad forward. Always forward. He vowed anew to crush every thinking machine in his path. He would leave the next planet a blackened blister if there was no other way, despite the loss of unfortunate human slaves who served Omnius. By now, the Primero had learned to accept almost any cost in blood, just as long as it counted as a victory against the machines.

His two dearest friends had become martyrs in their own fashion. They had known what they were doing and had been willing to make great sacrifices, not only of their lives, but of their memories as well, allowing myths to replace truth, for the sake of the Jihad.

In a private message, Serena Butler had begged Vor and Xavier to understand the personal sacrifice she was making. Later, Xavier made his own sacrifice in order to stop the Grand Patriarch's predatory organ farm scheme with the Tlulaxa, saving thousands of lives in the process. Xavier's decision to leave Ib-lis's name untarnished was unselfish and heroic; he knew full well how much harm would befall the Jihad if its Grand Patriarch was proven to be a fraud and a war profiteer.

Both Xavier and Serena had paid terrible, ultimate costs, with full knowledge of what they were doing. *I cannot dispute the decisions of my friends*, Vor thought, feeling a universe of sadness on his shoulders.

And he realized that his own burden must be to *let them do what they intended*. He had to resist the impulse to change what Xavier and Serena had done, and to let the untruths stand in order to achieve a long-term result. In accepting their fates and accomplishing what they had hoped, Serena and Xavier had left Vor to carry on in their behalf, and to bear an unseen banner of honor for all three of them.

Not an easy task, but that was my sacrifice.

"We are approaching the target planet, Primero," called his navigator.

On the flagship's screens, he saw the unremarkable planet—wispy clouds, blue oceans, brown and green land masses. And a bristling force of weirdly

beautiful machine warships converging to form a defensive line. Even from a distance, the angular robotic battle vessels flickered with bursts of fire as they launched machine-guided projectiles in a hailstorm toward the League fleet.

“Engage our Holtzman shields.” Vor rose from his chair and smiled confidently to the officers on the bridge with him. “Summon the Ginaz mercenaries into ground teams, ready to shuttle down as soon as we break the orbital defenses.” He spoke automatically, confidently.

Decades ago, Serena had started this Jihad to avenge the murder of her baby. Xavier had fought beside Vor, crushing many machine foes. Now Vor, without his friends, intended to see this impossible war through to its end. It was the only way he could be sure the martyrs had made worthwhile sacrifices.

“Forward!” Vor raised his voice as the first robotic shells impacted against the Holtzman shields. “We have enemies to destroy!”