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WEDDING SILK
A TALE OF PAUL ATREIDES

HEROES OF DUNE
SHORT STORY 1

Part of our novel Paul of Dune details the early years of Paul Atreides and his training under Duncan Idaho and two other Swordmasters, Rivvy Dinari and Whitmore Bludd.

Even though Duke Leto loves his concubine Jessica, Paul's mother, he has to forge a marriage alliance with the daughter of Archduke Armand Ecaz in order to protect House Atreides from the complex political forces arrayed against them. To finalize the betrothal, Duke Leto brings Paul and Jessica, along with Duncan Idaho, to the Archduke's court on the jungled planet of Ecaz.

We originally wrote this story as part of Paul of Dune, but during the final edits of the manuscript we decided the events were not essential to the main plot, and so we edited it from the final published version of the novel.

"Wedding Silk" is presented here for the first time in print.

Paul watched his mother in the withdrawing room of the Ecaz palace, Jessica seemed stoic and unruffled, not at all troubled about being left alone, and showing no sign that the situation bothered her. She accepted the reason for which she, the Duke, and their son had come to this rich and verdant planet. She treated Duke Leto's upcoming wedding as if it were merely a commercial transaction, like shipping salted fish or investing in pharmaceutical commodities.

Jessica's ability to play a role was masterful, her demeanor perfect. To anyone else, her mask was a flawless disguise, but Paul noticed subtle indicators, hidden reactions, the tiniest flutter of an eyelid. His mother had taught him well—she didn't fool him for a moment.

The Lady Jessica was Duke Leto's concubine and companion, but not a wife. "I have always known and accepted this, Paul. I'm not a giddy schoolgirl who reads too many romantic poems." She wanted him to believe her aloof expression. "Marriage is a business alliance, a political weapon to be used for the advancement of House Atreides in the Landsraad. Love is... its own thing." Her reassuring smile would have convinced anyone else. "Our hearts may confuse the two, but our minds must not. And a *human* makes life choices with the mind, not based on the chemical tug-of-war of emotions."

Paul's sympathy went out to his mother, and he stayed with her in this lonely room, though he longed to explore the crowded, whispering jungles of Ecaz, which were so unlike even the tropical areas of Caladan. Through the palace's open windows the scent of pollens wafted in the air, along with the lush

humidity wafting from the riot of vegetation. He put aside the temptations of this exotic place.

As the Atreides heir, he would have to join the wedding party and participate in the ceremony. Knowing that his mother wanted him to understand, and determined to play his role as convincingly as she did, Paul said, “Lady Ilesa Ecaz seems an acceptable match for my father. Joining our families will benefit House Atreides greatly.”

Paul’s mother could see through him, as well, and she shooed him out of her chamber. “You are still the Duke’s firstborn son, Paul. Learn and experience everything you can—it will make you a more balanced leader. Speak with Duncan. He and the Archduke’s Swordmasters can show you Ecaz. This is an opportunity for you. Take advantage of it.”

Paul hesitated at the doorway. Outside, he heard a bird call, an eerie melodic keening, like an avian siren song; he wondered what it was. “You’ll be all right?”

Jessica busied herself with a sheaf of accounting records, which had seemed unimportant only moments before. “Go. I have plenty to keep me occupied.”

Duncan Idaho regarded the two Swordmasters: the foppish Whitmore Bludd and the enormously fat but agile Rivvy Dinari. “It is Duke Leto’s wish that Paul see more of this planet than the Archduke’s residence.”

Dressed in elegant clothes, Bludd raised his eyebrows at the suggestion. “If this is the boy’s first time on Ecaz, we must take him out to the fogtree forests. It’s an experience he’ll never forget.”

Though Paul stood with the three men, they discussed him as if he didn’t exist. He wanted to make them pay attention. “It is my wish as well. I’ve read about Ecazi fogtrees in filmbooks, and I found the images very interesting.”

“Pah!” Dinari chuckled. “Images are nothing. You must see the fogtrees with your own eyes. I’ll go requisition an ornithopter, so we can fly out immediately. There’s a whole planet to see, and we’d better get started.”

Duncan was somewhat cautious. “This is the Duke’s son. We will have to guarantee his safety.”

Bludd rolled his eyes in disbelief. “Are we not three Swordmasters from Ginaz?”

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The ornithopter fluttered away from the Archduke's ethereal palace, rising into the clouds and heading west over forested hills that rapidly gave way to steep mountains and sheltered valleys. Overarching trees formed a thick canopy that enclosed a shadowy and mysterious underworld. Paul leaned close to the 'thopter's curved windowplaz, drinking in the amazing sight, although he tried not to seem too overawed; he doubted he fooled the three Swordmasters.

Kite-sized butterflies drifted languidly along beside the aircraft. As the 'thopter dipped toward a broad artificial platform built into the upthrust crown of a tree, a clump of the supposed leaves took flight, revealing themselves to be green-camouflaged moths. Paul let out a laugh, while Bludd, at the piloting controls, merely complained and dodged around the dispersing insects.

The ornithopter settled down in a vacant spot on the landing platform. Several vehicles were parked there in the sunlight—exploration or harvesting crews working in the underforest—but Paul saw no one else around. He climbed out of the 'thopter and went to the edge of the platform, where thin metal cables extended from the platform's edge like the spokes of a wheel, plunging through the canopy to connect with lower platforms that were mounted to the trunks of other trees.

Next to Paul, Bludd peered down to where dense leaves swallowed the cables. He pointed. "Pharmaceutical prospectors have a cargo lifter at the base of this main tree, which they use to load their harvest and haul it up from the underbrush. But we'll take a faster route down to the forest floor."

The Swordmasters rummaged through a strongbox near the landed 'thopter and withdrew harnesses and hooks. Bludd took great care to demonstrate the techniques, showing both Duncan and Paul how to fit the harness properly about their bodies. Duncan approved Paul's equipment before he checked his own, satisfying himself that the young man had made no mistakes.

As he strapped on his equipment, Rivvy Dinari looked like whale wrestling with a fishing net. Finished, Dinari walked to the edge of the platform and clipped his harness to a trolley mechanism on the cable. "Watch me." Paul could hear the platform planks groan under the big man's weight as he leaned back into his sturdy harness. "These ziplines are fast, but perfectly safe."

"We had to specially reinforce that cable to carry Dinari's weight," Bludd quipped.

"My weight allows me to achieve greater velocity. It's an advantage."

“Only if the tree itself doesn’t break,” Bludd said.

With a snort, Dinari lifted his feet, swung out over the gulf, and released himself. He streaked down the zipline and plunged into the leafy depths of the canopy, swallowed up by a tunnel carved through the foliage.

“It’s quite simple, actually.” Bludd hooked his own gear onto the line and glanced over his shoulder at Duncan. “The hard part is stopping yourself in time. If you strike a tree trunk, you’ll most assuredly stop, but that’s not the recommended technique.” In a moment he whisked away down the zipline.

Without waiting for Duncan’s approval, Paul said, “I’m next.” He followed the lead of the other two and found himself soaring along the descending cable, his legs suspended. As he raced through the thick leaves, picking up speed, the wind whistled past; above his head, the trolley sang on the cable.

Ahead, the terminal platform came up fast, but two Swordmasters waited for him with outstretched arms. Dinari caught Paul like an enormous mattress, stopping him, and Bludd swung him onto the platform and disengaged the harness hook in a swift motion, moving him off of the cable. Paul laughed breathlessly with exhilaration. Duncan arrived a few moments later.

Using three successive ziplines, they worked their way downward to the lush and entirely foreign underworld on the forest floor.

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In the undergrowth at the base of the fogtrees, a constant rustle moved through the rotted soil and tangle of fallen branches. The dense brush was alive with hidden creatures, buzzing insects, spiky fungi, and golden ferns that unfurled and furled.

Bludd tagged the coordinates of the massive tree that supported the landing platform high above, and kept a small locator device at his hip. Duncan scouted the green shadows, narrowing his eyes. “Turn on your body shield for protection, Paul.”

The boy did as he was told, and Duncan followed suit. The other two Swordmasters nodded at the precaution. Dinari reached around his belt and activated the humming field that extended across his girth. “Things can get unpredictable down here.”

“At least it’ll hinder these incessant insects.” Bludd swatted at the air for good measure, though he didn’t seem to be targeting any particular bug. “If we

encounter any danger, three of us can hide in a protective little cranny and use Rivvy, here, as a blockade.”

The fat Swordmaster, taking no offense at the constant ribbing, responded in kind. “I am honored to serve in any capacity, even if it’s only to prevent your fine garments from getting soiled—unless, of course, you happen to soil yourself. In that event, I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

Bludd took the lead, and they trotted along, exploring interesting foliage. Cocking his head to hear a crunching rustle, Dinari lifted fallen sheets of bark to show Paul a nest of scuttling emerald beetles that were the size of his hand. Puffball mushrooms exploded nearby, and Bludd quickly knocked his companions in the other direction. “Don’t inhale! Those are hallucinogenic spores.”

Paul held his breath until they were at a safe distance.

Ahead of them, he heard a buzzing rustle of sound that swelled like a roaring fire, and Duncan glanced around warily. “What is that?”

“That is exactly what we wanted to hear,” Bludd said. “Since your Duke announced his upcoming wedding to Lady Ilesa, I thought you and the young lad would like to obtain a betrothal present unlike anything else the Duke is bound to receive.”

“Bludd has a fine eye for gifts,” Dinari said. “I think he would prefer shopping to fighting.”

Leading their guests, the two Swordmasters parted the fronds of two-meter-high ferns to reveal a clearing. The swell of sound—like an armful of crackling paper—grew louder, and Paul saw that it came from a tangled mass of branches, leaves, and *silvery webs*. The silky webs enclosed twigs and thick boughs in a mummy-wrapped cocoon that filled the glade.

“Ever see anything like that on Caladan, boy?” Dinari asked.

Duncan put an arm out to stop Paul when he tried to press forward for a better view. “No, sir,” Paul answered in a quiet voice.

“Don’t worry—they’re still enclosed,” Bludd announced. “We should be safe. The caterpillars won’t range about until the food inside the tent is all gone—another few weeks yet.”

They all stepped forward in wonder. Thick ropes of silk hung, glued to fallen trees and rocks, stretching out as awnings to hold the translucent gossamer sheets.

“We’ve been watching this nest for some time, and it’s about as ready as it could be,” the foppish Swordmaster continued. “The silk is truly remarkable.”

“*You’ve* been watching it.” Dinari laughed. “I couldn’t give a fig for silk.”

“Because you have no taste in clothing.” Bludd turned to Paul and Duncan, ignoring the fat Swordmaster. “This webbing has the perfect sheen and a soft, comfortable hand. Lady Ilesa could want nothing better for wedding silk.”

Hearing this, Paul wished instead that he could give it to his mother, but she would turn it down. Jessica played her role, and the Bene Gesserit had taught her to control every aspect of her heart and mind. And Paul had his role to play as well. “Yes, it would make a fine gift for my father’s new wife. Thank you for thinking of it for me.”

Bludd drew his dagger and motioned for Duncan and Paul to follow him, while Dinari trudged into the clearing under the tent-like structure. Within the folds of spun fabric, Paul could see shadowy cylindrical forms. The shadows of the ominous vermiform creatures shifted behind the gauze, raising a chill in him. They loomed up, then faded from view, seen and unseen.

Paul had dreamed of huge worms several times, creatures much larger than these—behemoths that lived beneath a shifting surface... majestic and also mysterious. He remembered being terrified, yet awestruck, waking without understanding. He had described the dreams to his mother, but she had no explanation for what the images might mean. The metaphors delivered by his subconscious could be interpreted many ways; the serpentine leviathans in his dreams might be a symbol of strength, or a shapeless threat.

These occasional vivid dreams confused Paul. Were they premonitions or merely nightmares? Either way, he did not understand them.

“Falcon-moths are responsible for the nests, boy,” Dinari explained. “Isn’t your Atreides house crest a falcon?”

“No, it’s a hawk.” Paul said it with enough conviction to imply a vast metaphorical distinction between the two raptors, though he would have been hard-pressed to explain it.

The fat Swordmaster didn’t seem to care about the subtleties. “When the caterpillars hatch, they eat their egg casings and devour all the nearby foliage as they spin a larger and larger tent complex. Then they eat the branches and the heartwood, and when the supporting trees are dead, the caterpillars eat one another. Only the strongest ones tear their way out of the tent-cocoon. By then, they are near starving, and they go on a rampage through the underbrush. You can find large dead areas and clearings where the worms have hatched.”

“That’s why you have to be careful.” Bludd slashed one of the anchor strands with the tip of his dagger. “Don’t break through the main containment wall when harvesting the silk.”

“We won’t,” Duncan said pointedly.

With great care, Bludd peeled away the flat filmy sheet of tent-silk and wrapped it like a large bolt of cloth on his arm. Paul was reminded of a vendor in the Caladan market who spun sweet sugar into clouds of candy on a stick.

With his body shield still on, Paul took up his dagger and found another anchor point, imitating Bludd’s technique. The raw tent-silk had a slick, airy feel. From the nest came the sounds of squirming, twitching. He guessed there must be more than a thousand large caterpillars crowded together, all famished by now.

Bludd finished wrapping up a large roll of the silk, set it aside, and began to extract more. Dinari, with a put-upon air, also began to cut some of the silk free. While Paul worked with the other two men to gather his unique wedding gift, Duncan kept watch for danger in the thriving underbrush.

Duncan suddenly ducked, craned his neck as a shadow flitted through the leaves overhead. “Careful!” He held up his sword.

With a fluttering buzz, two large shapes streaked just above them, circled the matted silky mess, then darted back up above the canopy. Paul jerked his head upward, following them.

“Those were falcon-moths,” Dinari said. “Sometimes they guard their nests.”

“We are being very careful,” Bludd said in a whisper, apparently talking to himself. “Gentle... gentle...”

With a twang, he severed another anchor-cord, but this one snapped and recoiled from the tension. As Bludd scrambled out of the way, numerous layers of interlinked fabric started to unravel and split apart. “*That* wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Duncan!” Paul yelled. “Trouble!”

And then, as the sheet of fabric tore open, widening the rift, caterpillars roiled out of the nest like armloads of giant maggots. The segmented creatures were a sickly, pale green, their bodies adorned with yellow spots. The shortest worms were as long as his arm; others were as thick as his thigh and nearly a meter-and-a-half in length.

The caterpillar heads were like smooth eyeless helmets sporting a set of clacking mandibles made for chewing wood. From each thorax sprouted six pointed legs that opened and closed, reaching for something to grasp. Paul saw that many tentworms were scarred and scratched from doing combat in the confines of the tent; some worms oozed gelatinous green ichor from tears in their

skin. Now freed, the caterpillars lunged toward anything that moved—including Paul and the three Swordmasters.

Bludd sheathed his cutting knife and instead whipped out his thin rapier. With a flourish, he lunged forward, skewering a caterpillar and flinging it aside so he could stab the next.

“Stay out of this, Paul,” Duncan yelled. He sliced open the side of a worm with the tip of the Old Duke’s sword. “Get out of the clearing—I don’t want you hurt.”

“You trained me yourself.” Paul brandished his knife. “There are plenty of worms for all of us to kill.”

“Lad, you’ve got that right!” Dinari began slashing and chopping, butchering a dozen of the squirming bugs in only a few seconds as they tumbled toward the four intruders.

Bludd scowled at a splurt of ichor across his chest. “Bloody Hell, Rivvy! You’re a Swordmaster of Ginaz—use a bit of finesse! People will think you grew up in a slaughterhouse.”

Two caterpillars turned their spinnerets toward the wiry Swordmaster and sprayed fresh webbing on his tunic and trousers. While Bludd clawed the sticky strands away, Dinari gave him a wry look. “You’re right, Bludd—the silk does look good on you.”

When one of the tentworms reared up in front of Paul, he stabbed the smooth head with his dagger, but the knife glanced off the chitin. Turning the dagger, he thrust again, this time jamming the point between the worm’s mandibles, then twisting. He kicked the heavy carcass aside.

The other men did not pause in their mayhem. Bludd taunted from the side, “That’s fifteen for me so far, Rivvy. What’s your count?”

“Pah. I don’t have time to count!

A squirt of slime splashed onto Bludd’s face and across his ruffled tunic. Scowling, he skewered the offending worm twice for good measure. Worms still spilled from the tent, but many more carcasses lay inside, their flaccid empty bodies gnawed by their stronger brothers.

Soon dead caterpillars lay everywhere. Their squirming and squeaking sounds filled the glade, along with the slash-and-squish of hard fighting. Paul killed three more. Fighting at Duncan’s side, he waited for a group of four to lunge at them, then together they slashed and cut.

“I was hoping for the chance to train you under practical conditions, Master Paul,” Duncan said.

Paul grinned. “And how am I doing so far?”

From the corner of his eye, a flash of motion alerted him. He spun and ducked simultaneously, but not fast enough. A falcon-moth came at him like a dive-bomber, its long narrow wings like an ornithopter’s, its head torpedo-shaped. The moth slammed into Paul, moving too fast to pass through the shimmering body shield. The impact sent the moth reeling, and a dusty cloud of dislodged scales from its wings blew everywhere.

The falcon-moth’s antennae waved like feathers, each as wide as Paul’s outstretched hand. Its wings drummed against the shield as it tried to orient itself and dive in again, but Duncan slashed its abdomen. Yellowish guts spilled out.

As the dying moth wheeled away, then came back, Paul’s dagger caught the antennae. The creature flew away drunkenly and one wing caught in the loose fabric of the cocoon tent. After struggling like a fly in a spiderweb, the gutted moth crashed to the ground amid the dead caterpillars.

“Oho, a trophy for Duncan Idaho and his young companion!” Dinari belted. “Even I’ve never managed to kill a falcon-moth on the wing.”

“Dirty things,” Bludd spat.

Catching their breath, the Swordmasters strode about like scavengers in the aftermath on a battlefield, stabbing the few remaining worms and then wiping the slime from their blades.

“You did well, Paul,” Duncan said, wiping ichor from his face.

“Now there’s a battle to remember,” Dinari added.

Bludd said in a sing-song voice, “Young Paul Atreides, Conqueror of Caterpillars and Slayer of Squirmers! You have earned this wedding silk for your father’s bride.”

The boy walked over to the still-twitching, somehow sad form of the huge falcon-moth. “It was only trying to protect its nest. The silk didn’t mean that much to me.”

A shadowy, uneasy feeling came over him. A falcon and a hawk... how much difference was there? At the thought of what this moth had done, he felt a shudder of realization: Duke Leto would have done a similar thing, throwing himself into certain destruction if it was his only chance to save his family.

His family, Jessica and Paul... and now Ilesa Ecaz. And whatever children they might have. And how many others?

“On the bright side, we don’t have to be careful any longer,” Bludd said cheerfully. “We can retrieve all the tent-silk for ourselves. I’ve never had such an extravagant haul.”

“It’s going to be a very large wedding for Duke Leto.” Duncan smiled at Paul, sure his young ward must be excited about the upcoming celebration.

But Paul could only see all the strands of silk, the tangled webs, and the dead falcon-moth that lay among its slaughtered young.