

Why ask a man who is already lost to lead you? Why then are you surprised if he leads you nowhere?

-- Duncan Idaho, A Thousand Lives

They were adrift. They were safe. They were lost.

An unidentifiable ship in an unidentifiable universe.

Alone on the navigation bridge, as he often was, Duncan Idaho knew that powerful enemies were still after them. Threats within threats within threats. The no-ship wandered the frigid void, far from any recorded human exploration. A different universe entirely. He couldn't decide whether they were hiding or trapped. He didn't know how to get back to a familiar star system, even if he wanted to.

According to the bridge's independent chronometers, they had been in this strange, distorted otherwhere for years . . . though who could say how time flowed in another universe? The laws of physics and the landscape of the galaxy might be completely altered here.

Abruptly, as if his concerns had been laced with prescience, he noticed the main instrument panel blinking erratically, while the stabilizing engines surged up and down. Though he couldn't see anything more unusual than the now-familiar twistings of gases and distorted energy ripples, the no-ship had encountered what he'd come to think of as a "rough patch." How could they encounter turbulence when nothing was there?

The ship shook in a whiplash of strange gravity, jarred by a spray of high-energy particles. When Duncan switched off the automatic piloting systems and altered course, the situation worsened. Barely perceptible flashes of orange light appeared in front of the vessel, like a faint, flickering fire. He felt the deck shudder, as if he had rammed into some obstacle, but he could see nothing. Nothing at all! It should have been empty vacuum, giving them no sensation of movement or turbulence. Strange universe.

Duncan corrected course until the instruments and engines smoothed out, and the flashes disappeared. If the danger grew worse, he might be forced to attempt yet another risky foldspace jump. Upon leaving Chapterhouse, he had flown the no-ship without guidance, having purged all navigation systems and coordinate files, using nothing but his intuition and rudimentary prescience. Each time he activated the Holtzman engines, Duncan gambled with the whole ship, and the lives of the one hundred fifty refugees aboard. He wouldn't do it unless he had to.

Three years ago, he'd had no choice. Duncan had lifted the great craft from

its landing field -- not escaping per se, but stealing the entire prison where the Sisterhood had put him. Simply flying away wasn't sufficient. In his attuned mind, he had seen the trap closing around them. The Outside Enemy observers, in their bizarrely innocuous guises of an old man and an old woman, had a net they could cast across vast distances to entangle the no-ship. He'd seen the sparkling multicolored mesh begin to contract, the strange old couple smiling with victory. They had thought he and the no-ship were in their grasp.

His fingers a blur, his concentration sharp as a diamond chip, Duncan had made the Holtzman engines do things that not even a Guild Navigator would ask of them. As the Enemy's invisible web ensnared the no-ship, Duncan had flung them away, flying the enormous vessel so deeply into the folds of space that he tore the fabric of the universe itself and slid beyond. His ancient Swordmaster training had come to his aid. Like a slow blade slipping through an otherwise impenetrable body shield.

And the no-ship had found itself somewhere else entirely. But he had remained vigilant, not allowing himself to breathe a sigh of relief. In this incomprehensible universe, what might be next?

Now he studied external images transmitted from sensors extended beyond the no-field. The view outside had not changed: twisted veils of nebula gas, inside-out streamers that would never condense into stars. Was this a young universe, not yet finished coalescing, or a universe so unspeakably ancient that all suns had burned out and been reduced to molecular ash?

The group of misfit refugees desperately wanted to get back to normal . . . or at the very least to somewhere else. Over such a long time, their fear and anxiety had faded first to confusion, then to restlessness and malaise. They wanted more than simply being lost and unharmed. Either they looked to Duncan Idaho with hope, or they blamed him for their plight.

The ship contained a hodge-podge of humanity's factions (or did Sheeana and her Bene Gesserit Sisters view them all as mere "specimens?"). The assortment included a sprinkling of orthodox Bene Gesserits -- acolytes, proctors, Reverend Mothers, even male workers -- along with Duncan himself and the young Miles Teg ghola. Also aboard were a Rabbi and his group of Jews who had been rescued from an attempted Honored Matre pogrom on Gammu; one surviving Tleilaxu Master; and four animalistic Futars -- monstrous human-feline hybrids created out in the Scattering and enslaved by the whores. In addition, the great hold was home to seven small sandworms.

Truly, we are a strange mixture. A ship of fools.

A year after escaping from Chapterhouse and becoming mired in this distorted and incomprehensible universe, Sheeana and her Bene Gesserits had joined Duncan in a christening ceremony. In light of the no-ship's endless wanderings, the name Ithaca seemed appropriate.

Ithaca, a small island in ancient Greece, had been the home of Odysseus, who had spent ten years wandering after the end of the Trojan War, trying to find his way back home. Similarly, Duncan and his companions needed a place

to call home, a safe haven. These people were on their own great odyssey, and without so much as a map or a star chart, Duncan was as lost as age-old Odysseus.

No one realized how much he himself longed to go back to Chapterhouse. Heartstrings linked him to Murbella, his love, his slave, his master. Breaking free of her had been the single most difficult and painful endeavor he could remember in his multiple lifetimes. He doubted he would ever entirely recover from her. Murbella . . .

Yet Duncan Idaho had always placed duty above personal feelings. Regardless of the heartache, he assumed responsibility for keeping the no-ship and its passengers safe, even in a skewed universe.

At odd times, stray combinations of odors reminded him of Murbella's distinctive scent. Organic esters that drifted through the no-ship's processed air would strike his olfactory receptors, triggering memories from their eleven years together. Murbella's perspiration, her dark amber hair, the particular taste of her lips and the seawater scent of their "sexual collisions." Their passionate, codependent encounters had been both intimate and violent for years, with neither of them strong enough to break free.

I must not confuse mutual addiction with love. The pain was at least as sharp and unendurable as the debilitating agony of drug withdrawal. Hour by hour as the no-ship flew through the void, Duncan drew farther from her.

He leaned back and opened his unique senses, reaching out, always wary

that someone might find the no-ship. The danger in letting himself do this passive sentry duty was that he occasionally descended into muddled woolgathering about Murbella. To get around this problem, Duncan compartmentalized his Mentat mind. If a portion of it drifted, another portion was always wary, always on the lookout for danger.

In their years together, he and Murbella had produced four daughters. The oldest two -- twins -- would be nearly grown now. But from the moment the Agony had transformed his Murbella into a true Bene Gesserit, she had been lost to him. Because an Honored Matre had never before completed training -- retraining -- to become a Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother, the Sisterhood had been exceptionally pleased with her. Duncan's shattered heart had been, and still was, merely collateral damage.

In his mind's eye, Murbella's lovely countenance haunted him. His Mentat abilities -- both a skill and a curse -- allowed him to call up every detail of her features: her oval face and wide brow, the hard green eyes that reminded him of jade, the willowy body that could fight and make love with equal prowess. Then he remembered that her jade eyes had attained a deeper blue after the spice Agony. Not the same person . . .

His thoughts wandered, and Murbella's features shifted in his mind. Like an afterimage burned onto his retinas, another woman began to take shape. The new woman's visage was blurred, as if she herself had forgotten what she looked like. He was startled. This was an outside presence, a mind immeasurably

superior to his own, searching for him, wrapping gentle strands around the Ithaca.

Duncan Idaho, a voice called, soothing and feminine.

He felt a rush of emotions, as well as an awareness of danger. Why hadn't his Mentat sentry system seen this coming? His compartmentalized mind snapped into full survival mode. He jumped toward the Holtzman controls, intending once again to fling the no-ship far away, without guidance.

The voice tried to intercede. Duncan Idaho, do not flee. I am not your enemy.

The old man and woman had made similar assurances. Though he had no idea who they were, Duncan did comprehend that they were the real danger. But this new muliebral presence, this vast intellect, had touched him from outside of the strange, unidentified universe the no-ship currently inhabited. He struggled to get away.

I am the Oracle of Time.

In several of his lives, Duncan had heard of the Oracle -- the guiding force of the Spacing Guild. Benevolent and all-seeing, the Oracle of Time was said to be a shepherding presence that had watched over the Guild since its formation fifteen thousand years ago. Duncan had always considered it an odd manifestation of religion among the hyper-acute Navigators.

"The Oracle is a myth." His fingers hovered over the touchpads of the command console.

I am many things. He was surprised when the voice did not contradict his accusation. Many seek you. You will be found here.

“I trust in my own abilities.” Duncan powered up the foldspace engines. From her external point of view, he hoped the Oracle wouldn’t notice what he was doing. He would take the no-ship somewhere else, flee again. How many different powers were hunting them?

The future demands your presence. You have a role to play in Kralizec.

Kralizec . . . typhoon struggle . . . the long-foretold battle at the end of the universe that would forever change the shape of the future.

“Another myth,” Duncan said, even as he activated the foldspace jump without warning the other passengers. He couldn’t risk staying here. How many different forces were hunting them? The no-ship lurched, then plunged once more into the unknown.

He heard the voice fading as the ship escaped the Oracle’s clutches, but she did not seem dismayed. Here, the distant voice said, I will guide you. The intruding voice ripped away like shreds of cotton.

The Ithaca careened through foldspace and, after an interminably brief instant, tumbled out again.

Stars shone all around the ship. Real stars. Duncan studied the sensors, checked the navigation grid, and saw the sparkle of suns and nebulae. Normal space. Without further verification he knew that they had fallen back into their own universe. He couldn’t decide whether to rejoice or cry out in despair.



Duncan no longer sensed the Oracle of Time, nor could he detect any of the likely searchers -- the mysterious Enemy and the unified Sisterhood -- though they must still be out there. They would not have given up, not even after three years.

The no-ship continued to run.