

The strongest and most altruistic leader, even if his office is dependent on the support of the masses, must look first to the dictates of his heart, never allowing his decisions to be swayed by popular opinion. It is only through courage and strength of character that a true and memorable legacy is ever attained.

--from "Collected Sayings of Muad'Dib" by the Princess Irulan

Like a dragon empress surveying her subjects, Murbella sat on a high throne in the large receiving hall of the Bene Gesserit Keep. Bright, early morning sunlight poured through the tall stained-glass windows, splashing colors around the chamber.

Chapterhouse was the center of a most peculiar civil war. Reverend Mothers and Honored Matres came together with all the finesse of two colliding spacecraft. Murbella -- following Odrade's grand plan -- allowed them no other option. Chapterhouse was home to both groups now.

Each faction hated Murbella for the changes she had imposed, and neither had the strength to defy her. Through their union, the conflicting philosophies and societies of the Honored Matres and the Bene Gesserits merged like horrific

Siamese Twins. The very concept was appalling to many of them. The potential for reigniting bloodshed was always there, and the forced alliance teetered on the edge of failure.

That was a gamble some in the Sisterhood had not been willing to accept. “Survival at the cost of destroying ourselves is no survival at all,” Sheeana had said just before she and Duncan took the no-ship and flew away. “Voting with their feet,” as the old saying went. Oh, Duncan! Was it possible that Mother Superior Odrade had not guessed what Sheeana planned to do?

Of course I knew, said the voice of Odrade from Other Memory. Sheeana hid it from me for a long time, but in the end I knew.

“And you chose not to warn me of it?” Murbella often sparred aloud with the voice of her predecessor, one of the many ancestral inner voices she could access since becoming a Reverend Mother.

I chose to warn no one. Sheeana made her decisions for her own reasons.

“And now we must both live with the consequences.”

From her throne, Murbella watched the guards lead in a female prisoner. Another disciplinary matter for her to handle. Another example she must make. Though such demonstrations appalled the Bene Gesserits, the Honored Matres appreciated their value.

This situation was more important than others, so Murbella would handle it personally. She smoothed her shimmering black-and-gold robe across her lap.

Unlike the Bene Gesserits, who understood their places and required no

ostentatious symbols of rank, Honored Matres demanded gaudy signs of status, like extravagant thrones or chairdogs, ornate capes in vivid colors. Thus, the self-proclaimed Mother Commander was forced to sit on an imposing throne encrusted with soostones and firegems.

Enough to purchase a major planet, she thought, if there were any I wanted to buy.

Murbella had come to hate the trappings of office, but she knew the necessity. Women in the different costumes of the two orders attended her constantly, alert for any sign of weakness in her. Though they underwent training in the ways of the Sisterhood, Honored Matres clung to their traditional garments, serpent-scribed capes and scarves, and form-fitting leotard bodysuits. By contrast, the Bene Gesserits shunned bright colors and covered themselves with dark, loose robes. The disparity was as clear as that between gaudy peacocks and camouflaged bush wrens.

The prisoner, an Honored Matre named Annine, had short blond hair and wore a canary yellow leotard with a flamboyant cape of sapphire plazsilk moire. Electronic restraints kept her arms folded across her midsection, as if she wore an invisible straightjacket; a nerve-deadening gag muzzled her mouth. Annine struggled ineffectively against the restraints, and her attempts to speak came out as unintelligible grunts.

Guards positioned the rebellious woman at the foot of the steps below the throne. Murbella focused on the wild eyes that screamed defiance at her. "I no

longer wish to hear what you have to say, Annine. You have already said too much.”

This woman had criticized the Mother Commander’s leadership once too often, holding her own meetings and railing against the merging of Honored Matres and Bene Gesserits. Some of Annine’s followers had even disappeared from the main city and established their own base in the uninhabited northern territories. Murbella could not allow such provocation to pass unchallenged.

The way Annine had handled the matter -- embarrassing Murbella and diminishing her authority and prestige from behind a cloak of cowardly anonymity -- had been unforgivable. The Mother Commander knew Annine’s type well enough. No negotiation, no compromise, no appeal for understanding would ever change her mind. The woman defined herself through her opposition.

A waste of human raw material. Murbella flashed an expression of disgust. If Annine had only turned her anger against a real enemy . . .

Women of both factions observed from either side of the great hall. Even in the chamber, the two groups were reluctant to mix, instead separating into “whores” on one side and “witches” on the other. Like oil and water.

In the years since commanding this unification, Murbella had come through numerous situations in which she might have been killed, but she eluded every trap, sliding, adapting, administering harsh punishments.

Her authority over these women was wholly legitimate: She was both

Reverend Mother Superior, selected by Odrade, as well as Great Honored Matre by virtue of assassinating her predecessor. She had chosen the title of Mother Commander for herself to symbolize the integration of the two important ranks. With time, the women around her had learned, and even become rather protective of her. Murbella's lessons were having the desired effect, albeit slowly.

Following the seesaw battle on Junction, the only way for the embattled Sisterhood to survive the violence of the Honored Matres had been to let them believe they were victorious. In a philosophical turnabout, the captors actually became captives before they realized it; Bene Gesserit knowledge, training, and wiles subsumed their competitors' rigid beliefs. In most cases.

At a hand signal, the Mother Commander caused her guards to tighten Annine's restraints. The woman's face contorted in pain.

Murbella descended the polished steps, never taking her eyes off the captive. Reaching the floor, Murbella glared down at the shorter woman. It pleased her to see the eyes change, filling with fear instead of defiance as realization swept over her.

Honored Matres rarely bothered to hold back their emotions, choosing instead to exploit them. They found that a provocative feral expression, a clear indication of anger and danger, could make their victims prone to submission. In sharp contrast, Reverend Mothers considered emotions a weakness and controlled them rigidly.

“Over the years, I have met many challengers and killed them all,” Murbella said. “I dueled with Honored Matres who did not acknowledge my rule. I stood up to Bene Gesserits who refused to accept what I am doing. How much more blood and time must I waste on this nonsense when we have a real Enemy hunting us?”

Without releasing Annine’s restraints or loosening her gag, Murbella brought forth a gleaming dagger from her sash and thrust it into Annine’s throat. Without ceremony, without dignity . . . without wasting any more time.

The guards held the dying prisoner up as she twitched and thrashed and gurgled half words, then slumped over, her eyes glassy and dead. Annine hadn’t even made a mess on the floor.

“Remove her.” Murbella wiped the knife on the victim’s plazsilk cape, then resumed her seat on the throne. “I have more important business to take care of.”

Out in the galaxy, ruthless and untamed Honored Matres -- still greatly outnumbering the Bene Gesserits -- operated in independent cells, discrete groups. Many of those women refused to accept the Mother Commander’s authority and continued their original plan of slash-and-burn, destroy and run. Before they could face the real Enemy, Murbella would have to bring them into line. All of them.

Sensing that Odrade was once again available, Murbella said to her dead mentor in the silence of her mind, “I wish this sort of thing were not necessary.”

Your way is more brutal than I'd prefer, but your challenges are great, and different from mine. I entrusted you with the task of the Sisterhood's survival. Now the work falls to you.

"You are dead and relegated to the role of observer."

Odrade-within chuckled. I find that role to be far less stressful.

Throughout the internal exchange, Murbella kept her face a placid mask, since so many in the receiving hall were watching her.

To the left of her ornate throne, the aged and enormously fat Bellonda leaned over. "The Guildship has arrived. We are escorting their six-member delegation here with all due speed." Bell had been Odrade's foil and companion. The two had disagreed a great deal, especially about the Duncan Idaho project.

"I have decided to make them wait. No need to let them think we are anxious to see them." She knew what the Guild wanted. Spice. Always spice.

Bellonda's chins folded together as she nodded. "Certainly. We can find endless formalities to observe, if you wish. Give the Guild a taste of their own bureaucracy."