

Some like to live in complacency, hoping for stability without upset. I much prefer to turn over rocks and see what scurries out.

-- Mother Superior Odrade, Observations on Honored Matre Motivations

Even after so many years, the Ithaca divulged its secrets like old bones rising to the surface of a battlefield after a drenching rain.

The old Bashar had stolen this great vessel from Gammu long ago; Duncan was held prisoner aboard it for over a decade on the Chapterhouse landing field, and they had been flying for three years now. But the Ithaca's sheer size, and the small number of people aboard, made it impossible to explore all its mysteries, much less keep a diligent watch everywhere.

The vessel, a compact city over a kilometer in diameter, was more than a hundred decks high, with uncounted passageways and rooms. Although the main decks and compartments were equipped with surveillance imagers, it was beyond the Sisters' capacity to monitor the entire no-ship -- especially since the vessel had mysterious electronic dead zones where the imagers did not function.

Perhaps the Honored Matres or the original builders of the vessel had installed blocking devices to preserve certain secrets. Numerous code-locked doors had remained unopened since the ship left Gammu. There were, literally, thousands of chambers that no one had entered or inventoried.

Nevertheless, Duncan did not expect to discover a long-sealed death chamber on one of the rarely visited decks.

The lift tube paused at one of the deep central levels. Although he had not requested this floor, the doors opened as the tube took itself out of service for a series of self-maintenance steps, which the old ship performed automatically.

Duncan studied the deck in front of him, noted that it was cold and barren, dimly lit, unoccupied. The metal walls had been painted with no more than a white primer layer that didn't completely cover the rough-surfaced metal underneath. He'd known about these unfinished levels but had never felt a need to investigate them, because he assumed they were abandoned or never used.

However, the Honored Matres had owned this ship for years before Teg stole it from under their noses. Duncan should not have assumed anything.

He stepped out of the lift tube and wandered alone down a long corridor that continued for a surprising distance. Exploring unknown decks and chambers was like making a blind foldspace jump: He didn't know where he would end up. As he walked, he randomly opened chambers. Doors slid aside to reveal dim, empty rooms. From the dust and lack of furnishings, he guessed that no one had ever occupied them.

At the center of the deck level, a short corridor circled an enclosed section that had two doors, each marked MACHINERY ROOM. The doors did not open at his touch. Curious, Duncan studied the locking mechanism; his own bioprint had been keyed into the ship's systems, supposedly granting him complete access. He overrode the door controls and forced open the seals.

When he stepped inside, he instantly detected a different quality to the darkness, an unpleasant long-faded odor in the air. The chamber was unlike any other he had seen aboard the ship, its walls a bright discordant red. The splash of violent color was jarring. Driving back his uneasiness, he spotted what looked like a patch of exposed metal on one wall. Duncan passed a hand over it, and abruptly the entire center section of the chamber began to slide and turn over with a groan.

As he stepped out of the way, ominous-looking devices came up from the floor, machines manufactured for the sole purpose of inflicting pain.

Honored Matre torture devices.

The lights in the dim chamber came up, as if in eager anticipation. To his right he saw an austere table and hard, flat chairs. Dirty dishes strewn on the table held what looked like the crusted, unfinished remains of a meal. The whores must have been interrupted while eating.

One machine in the array still held a skeleton bound together with dry sinews, thorny wires, and the rags of a black robe. The bones hung from the side of a large stylized vise; the victim's entire arm was still caught in the

compression mechanism.

Touching long-dormant controls, Duncan opened the vise. With great care and respect, he removed the crumbling body from the harsh metal embrace and lowered her to the deck. Mostly mummified, she weighed little.

It was clearly a Bene Gesserit captive, perhaps a Reverend Mother from one of the Sisterhood planets the whores had destroyed. Duncan could tell that the unfortunate victim had not died quickly or easily. Looking at the withered iron-hard lips, he could almost hear the curses the woman must have whispered as the Honored Matres killed her.

Under the increased illumination from the glowpanels, Duncan continued to explore the large room and its labyrinth of odd machines. Near the door through which he had entered, he found a clearplaz bin, its grisly contents visible: four more human skeletons, all piled in disarray, as if thrown unceremoniously inside. Killed and discarded. All of them wore black robes.

No matter how much pain they had inflicted, the Honored Matres would not have gotten the information they demanded: the location of Chapterhouse and the key to Bene Gesserit bodily control. Frustrated and infuriated, the whores would have killed their Bene Gesserit prisoners one by one.

Duncan pondered his discovery in silence. Words did not seem adequate. Best to tell Sheeana about this terrible room. As a Reverend Mother, she would know what to do.