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TREASURE IN THE SAND

DUNE CHRONICLES
SHORT STORY 3

When the last worm dies and the last melange is harvested upon our sands, these deep treasures will spring up throughout our universe. As the power of the spice monopoly fades and the hidden stockpiles make their mark, new powers will appear throughout our realm.

— **Leto Atreides II,
the God Emperor of Dune**

Pressing his fingers against the windowport of the Spacing Guild landing shuttle, Lokar stared at the blasted world beneath them. Rakis, once called Dune—home of the holy sandworms, the only natural source of the spice melange, the place where the God Emperor Leto II had gone into the sand.

Now everything was dead, incinerated by the obliterating weapons of the Honored Matres...

Lokar, one of the last Priests of the Divided God, closed his eyes before tears could come. *Giving water to the dead. To a whole dead world.* He murmured a prayer, which was drowned out by the sound of dry air currents that buffeted the descending ship.

“The planet looks like one giant scab. How can there be anything left down there?” asked Dak Pellenquin. Lokar didn’t like him; he was the expedition member who had talked loudest and bragged most frequently during the Heighliner journey to Rakis. “One giant scab. Is this expedition going to be worth our while? Worth *anyone’s* while?”

“We’ll find whatever there is to find.” Guriff, the expedition leader, cut him off. “Our priest will show us where to dig.” Guriff had close-cropped dark hair, narrow-set eyes, and a persistent bristly stubble on his chin, no matter how often he attended to his facial hygiene. “Anything left down there—that whole planet is ours for the taking.”

“Only because no one else wants it,” said a stocky man. He had a jovial expression, but icy cold eyes behind his forced smile. This one called himself Ivex, though rumor held that this was not his true name. He propped his feet up on the empty seat in front of him.

Lokar didn’t answer any of them, just clung to his prayer like a lifeline, eyes shut. Joining these treasure hunters on the departure planet of Cherodo had been a risk, but the devout priest had considered his options. Rakis was the most sacred of all worlds, home of the great sandworms that comprised the Divided God. Away from Rakis on a mission during the cataclysm, Lokar had survived

by the purest luck—or divine destiny. He must recover what he could, if only to atone.

Since scanning had proved imprecise on the planet still in flux after the bombardment, Lokar had offered to use his own instincts and first-hand knowledge to guide their searches. Among many poor choices, this one made the most sense, the only way he could afford to travel back to what was left of his beloved Rakis. A last, desperate pilgrimage.

He had agreed to accompany their “archaeological expedition”—what a euphemism!—under very specific terms. CHOAM, the ancient and powerful trading organization, financed the expedition for its own reasons, hoping for a financial boon. They had agreed to the priest’s demands, drawn up a contract, and specified the terms. Provided the Priest of the Divided God could indeed show the scavengers the way, Guriff’s men were authorized to grab whatever physical treasures they managed to dig out of the blasted sands, but any sacred relics would be turned over to Lokar (though the distinction between “sacred relics” and “treasure” remained uncomfortably nebulous).

A slender woman stepped out of the cockpit and looked at the hodgepodge members of the expedition. Representing CHOAM, Alaenor Ven had reddish-gold hair that hung to her shoulders, the strands so precisely neat and straight that they seemed held in place with a nullentropy field. Her eyes were crystalline blue, her facial features flawlessly (and probably artificially) sculpted to the absolute perfection one might find on the visage of a mannequin. In an odd way, her very lack of flaws made her seem cold and unattractive.

“CHOAM has provided all the equipment you will need. You have two survey ’thopters, two groundcars, prefabricated shelters, excavation machines, and supplies for two months. Even with all of the sand plankton killed, sample probes show the air is thin but breathable. The oxygen content remains tolerable, though diminished.”

Ivex gave a scornful laugh. “How can that be? If sand plankton create the oxygen, and they were all burned away—”

“I merely report the readings. I do not explain them. You will have to find your own answers.”

Listening without participating, Lokar nodded quietly to himself at the obvious explanation: It was a miracle. There had always been mysteries about the planet Dune. This was just one more.

“Though the environment is not as inhospitable as one might expect, do not allow yourselves to be overconfident. Rakis is still a harsh place.” She

looked at them again. “We land in forty minutes. Our schedule permits you only three standard hours to unload and make your preparations.”

Eleven members of the team shifted in their seats, fully attentive; two pretended to sleep, as if ignoring the challenges they would face; the remaining three peered through the windowports with varying levels of interest and trepidation.

Pellenquin cried, “Three hours? Can’t you wait a day or two to make sure we’re not stranded there.”

Guriff scowled at his own crewman. “The Spacing Guild has schedules and customers. If you don’t trust your own survival abilities, Dak, you have no business on my team. Tear up your contract now and go back with Alaenor Ven if you like.”

“I would if she’d have me,” Ivex said with a snort. A few others chuckled in their seats. The icily beautiful CHOAM woman’s expression did not change at all.

High overhead, the huge Heighliner that had carried them here orbited the seared desert planet as the landing shuttle set down on the unmarked ground. Devastating weapons had entirely reshaped the terrain—cities leveled, mountains turned to glass, oceans of sand vitrified. A few sketchy landmarks remained, and despite the planet’s unpredictable magnetics, the transport’s deep-scan probes had found enough of a street grid to identify the buried city of Keen. The team would set up camp there.

When the cargo doors opened onto the glassy, baked plain, Guriff’s team wore oxygen intensifiers with supplemental tanks on their shoulders. Lokar was the first to remove his breather and inhale deeply. The air was thin and dry, with what others found to be an unpleasant burnt smell; even so, when he filled his lungs, the taste was sweet. He was returning home. He fell to his knees on the hard, scorched sand, thanking the Divided God for bringing him back safely, for helping him to continue holy work.

Guriff went over to the kneeling priest and nudged him roughly.

“Work now, pray later. You’ll have plenty of time to commune with your desert once we set up the camp.”

Under a tight schedule, the crew threw themselves into the task at hand. Guriff shouted orders to them, and the scavengers moved about unloading the groundcars and ’thopters, removing the shelter structures, prefabricated huts, crates of food supplies, and large barrels of water. To protect the exploratory ’thopters and groundcars, they erected a hangar dome.

For his own shelter, Lokar had specified a simple desert tent. To really understand this planet, to touch its pulse, the Holy Books of the Divided God said it was better to live on the surface and in natural rock formations, facing the heat, sandstorms, and behemoth worms. But this was not the old Rakis, not a great planetary expanse of windblown sand. Much of the loose sand had turned to glass, and surely the great worms had all perished in the conflagration.

The scavengers spoke excitedly of the great treasure the God Emperor was said to have concealed on Rakis. Though no one had found the hoards in thousands of years, during prime conditions on Rakis, the scavengers hoped the very devastation had churned something up from the depths.

In less than three standard hours, they had unloaded the equipment and supplies. All the while, the CHOAM representative stood staring at the wasteland, frequently consulting her wrist-embedded chronometer. She stepped back into the transport precisely when her schedule told her to do so. "A ship will return to gather whatever you have found in thirty standard days. Complete your survey and assess any value this planet retains." Her voice became harder. "But do not disappoint us."

With a hum of suspensor engines and a roar of displaced air, the large landing shuttle climbed back into the atmosphere, leaving Lokar with Guriff's crew, alone on an entire planet.

* * *

Like frenzied worker bees, the treasure hunters laid out their equipment and gear, ready to begin their work. Guriff and his men fanned out with handheld probes, using several models of Ixian ground-penetrating scanners in a useless attempt to peer through the sandy surface. Lokar watched them with patient skepticism. The Divided God would never make their work so simple. They would have to labor, sweat, and suffer for any gains they achieved.

These men would learn, he knew.

It was late afternoon, with the sun low in the restless atmosphere, but the men were anxious to get underway, frustrated by the long wait of the journey. They made a lot of noise, unlike the old days when such vibrations would have brought the monster worms. Not anymore. Lokar felt a wave of sadness.

Off by himself, he moved to a low spot, a glassy featureless depression that he thought might be the center of the lost city. He placed himself in relation to the low rocky escarpments that distinguished the site from the rest of the

bleak surroundings. The sensation felt right, as if his entire life and all its experiences, large and small, had pointed him in this direction.

The Priests of the Divided God had placed many of the God Emperor's treasures in safekeeping at their temple in the city of Keen. Though he held only a middle rank, Lokar had once seen the protected subterranean vaults. Perhaps those chambers were far enough beneath the surface to have survived the bombardment.

The air, while dry and thin, was disturbingly cool, as if the planet's great furnace had flickered out. But he could not shake the belief that his Divided God still lived here, somehow. As he stared, hypnotically drawn to the shimmering and melted surface, Lokar began to see with a different set of eyes.

He walked around the blasted city with an increasing sensation. Each step of the way he knew exactly where he was. When he narrowed his eyes, ancient structures began to appear around him like mirages, dancing on the sand in ghostly, flickering color, as if his mind had its own scanner.

Am I going mad? Or am I receiving divine guidance?

A few hundred meters away, the others gathered around the expedition leader, shaking their heads at their equipment in anger, hurling it to the ground and cursing it. Pellenquin shouted, "Just like they said. Our damned scanners don't work here!"

Although Guriff brought out a tough, thin map printed on spice paper, he and his companions could not get their bearings. Annoyed, he stuffed it back in his pocket.

"Maybe our priest will have a revelation," Ivex said with a forced chuckle.

Guriff led them over to Lokar.

"Priest, you had better earn your keep."

Still seeing spectral images of the lost city, he nodded distractedly. "The Divided God is speaking to you through this planet. All of your technology didn't destroy it. Rakis still has a pulse."

"We didn't destroy it," Pellenquin protested. "Don't blame us for this."

"Mankind is a single organism. We are all responsible for what occurred here."

"He's talking strangely," Ivex said. "Again."

"If you insist on thinking that way, you will never understand." Lokar narrowed his eyes, and the illusory splendor of the great city danced beyond and around the men. "Tomorrow, I will show you the way."

* * *

As he slept alone in his flimsy tent, listening to the rustle of silence outside, Lokar lived through a peculiar dream. He saw the Temple at Keen restored in all of its glory, with dark-robed priests going about their business as if the Divided God would last forever.

Lokar had not been one of the Priesthood's elite, though he'd undergone rituals and tests that could one day grant him entry into the most secret sanctums. In his dream he gazed through the slit-window of a tower that overlooked the sands, the realm of the holy worms. A procession of hooded priests entered the tower room and gathered around him. They pulled down their hoods to reveal their faces: Guriff, Pellenquin, Ivex, and the others.

The shock awoke him, and he sat up in the darkness of his tent. Poking his head out through the flap seals, Lokar smelled moisture in the darkness, an oddly heavy night-scent unlike any of the Rakian odors he remembered. What had the bombardment done to the cycles of water on this planet? In bygone days there had been subterranean caches of water, but the devastating weapons must have damaged them, broken them loose. He drew another deep breath, savoring the smell. Moist air on Rakis!

Above the disconcertingly bumpy eastern horizon, the sky glowed softly red, then brightened with sunrise to profile the nubby, melted escarpments. The treasure hunters emerged from their stiff-walled shelters and milled around.

Lokar walked out onto the sandy surface. The men formed a circle outside, opened food and beverage packages provided by CHOAM, and made faces as they chewed and swallowed. He picked up a breakfast pack and joined them, lifting a self-heating coffee cup from an extruded holder on his plate. The dark blend should have had melange in it, especially on Rakis. It had been so long since he'd had good spice coffee.

Eager to get started, stocky Ivex tested his handheld scanner again. In disgust he tossed it into a half-buried storage bin.

At sunset the night before, their two survey 'thopters had already taken off for a first look at the surrounding area. When they returned, the men had streamed out of them like enraged bees. Lokar didn't have to hear their complaints and expectations. Their faces told it all. Rakis had not met their expectations, and now they were stuck here for at least a month.

Guriff said, "We're relying on you, Priest. Where is the buried temple?" He pointed over his left shoulder. "That way?"

“No. Government offices were in that direction, and the Bene Gesserit keep.”

The expedition leader brought out the rumpled spice-paper map.

“So the temple was more to the west?”

“Your map is flawed. Important streets and structures are missing. The scale is off.”

“Reliable documents about Rakis are hard to come by, especially now. No one thought maps of Keen would ever be useful again.”

“I’m your only reliable map now.” He could easily have led them off track, but he was anxious to explore the religious site himself—and they had the appropriate tools. “Remember, according to my CHOAM agreement, I am to be the caretaker of the most important religious artifacts. And I am to decide which artifacts are the most significant.”

“Yes, yes.” Guriff’s eyes flashed angrily. “But first you have to find something for us to discuss.”

Lokar pointed to the northwest. “The great Temple of Keen is that way. Follow me.”

As if his comment had fired the starting gun in a race, the scavengers ran for digging machines kept in the ’thopters and began assembling the components. He had seen the powerful wheeled machines demonstrated back on Cherodo, during preparation for the expedition.

As the priest led the treasure hunters across the desolate sand, he hoped he was doing the right thing. *If God didn’t want me to do this, he would tell me so.* With each step, a more intense trancelike state came over him, as if the Divided God were still transmitting across the cosmos, telling the priest exactly what to do, despite the grievous injury that had been committed against Him.

Through narrowed eyes, Lokar absorbed the images of the lost buildings, and the grandeur of Keen danced around him. These unbelievers noticed nothing more than dead rolling sand around them. He led the men along a thoroughfare that only he could see, a wide boulevard that once had been lined with devout followers. Behind him, the men chattered anxiously over the soft rumble of their rolling, self-propelled digging machines.

At the main entrance of the Temple, where a statue-lined bridge had once crossed a deep, dry arroyo, Lokar pointed a wavering finger downward.

“Dig there. Carefully.”

Two men donned protective suits and climbed onto a pair of digging machines. Side by side, they began to bore downward at an angle into the fused

sandy surface, blasting a reinforced shell into the soft, sloping walls. Behind them, the exhaust funnels spewed dirt back out with great force, shooting material high into the air.

Guriff handed an imager headset to the priest. “Here, watch the progress of the drilling. Tell us if you see anything wrong.”

When Lokar put the device on, the illusory images of the city faded in his mind, leaving only ugly reality. He watched as the tunnelers reached a glassy-black surface several meters beneath the surface—the remains of a melted structure that had been covered over by blowing sand. The headlamps of the digging machines revealed a partially uncovered door and an ancient symbol.

He transmitted an urgent signal to the tunnelers, halting their machines.

“They’ve reached the entrance to one of the meeting chambers!” He and Guriff climbed down the fused slope into the deep hole, pressing past the tunnelers. “Remove the door carefully.”

One of the men activated a small, spinning drill on his machine, while the other tunneler produced a mechanical hand that held several small, black cartridges. While Lokar and Guriff looked on, the men drilled holes in the door and inserted cartridges. Before the priest could express his alarm, tiny explosions went off, and the ancient, heavy door shuddered and tilted, and a narrow opening showed on the hinge side. The men used a hook to pull the door open, then shone a bright light inside the chamber.

A partially collapsed ceiling hung like a thunderhead over a room filled with debris. Lokar squeezed through the opening and entered the room, demanding the right of first inspection. He hunched beneath a section of partially collapsed ceiling, scuttled across the rough floor.

“The whole thing could cave in on you,” Guriff warned. Lokar knew, though, that the Divided God would not allow that, not after all he’d been through.

His heart beating wildly, he spotted a glittering object in the pile of debris and shoved rubble aside to clear a large platinum-colored goblet capped with an engraved lid so that the symbolic blood of God would not evaporate into the dry desert air.

Digging deeper into the pile, he found something more interesting, a small golden statue of a sandworm rising out of the desert and turning its proud, eyeless face upward to the heavens. Excited, the priest set it next to the goblet.

Then, like a miracle, he noticed moisture seeping down a wall behind the debris pile. Could it be? What was the source? Hearing a rumble, he looked up-

ward and saw the ceiling start to give way over his head. Water trickled and then poured on him—*water* on Rakis! Grabbing the goblet and the statuette, he ran for the doorway. Just as he squirmed out next to Guriff, the whole room collapsed behind him in a roar.

“What do you have there?” the expedition leader asked, looking at the goblet as if nothing remarkable had happened.

“This goblet should have some value to you. I believe it is made of rare metal.” Lokar handed it to Guriff, while slipping the sandworm sculpture into the pocket of his wet robe. “This is something more sacred. Not for outside eyes.”

With a shrug, Guriff said, “It’s a start.” He swung up the goblet’s metal lid to investigate whether the large vessel contained any other treasure. He cried out as a tiny creature jumped out and scampered partway up the inclined tunnel, then stopped and looked back at the intruders with tiny, dark eyes.

“Damn thing bit me!” Guriff rubbed a red spot on his thumb. “How the hell did it survive?”

“It’s just a mouse,” one of the men said. “Something’s alive here after all.”

“A desert mouse. The ancient Fremmen called it *muad’dib*,” Lokar murmured in awe. “The mouse that jumps.”

The two tunnelers left their machines and ran up the fused incline, boisterously chasing after the creature.

“Terrible catastrophe will befall anyone who harms a *muad’dib*,” Lokar cried. The rodent easily scurried away from its pursuers and disappeared into a tiny opening in the doorway.

Guriff rolled his eyes. “Now you consider a *mouse* a sacred object?”

* * *

Two weeks later, the sunset looked like a layer of spilled blood over a hot flame. Dust smeared the horizon in an ominous approaching line. The air around the settlement, which normally held a silence so deep as to be a hole of sound, was alive with an angry background hum like buried thunder.

Lokar knew what the signs meant. Because of his human failings, he felt the thrill of fear; because of his religious faith, he felt awe. Rakis was wounded, perhaps mortally, but not entirely dead. The planet was restless in its sleep.

“What I wouldn’t give for a set of weathersats.” Guriff propped his hands on his hips and sniffed the air. “That looks dangerous.” He had already called back the exploration ’thopters and groundcars, though a team continued to dig in the tunnels of buried Keen, excavating a large labyrinth underground.

“You know what it is,” Lokar said. “You can see. It’s a storm, maybe the mother of them all.”

“I thought that with the bombardment, with the fusing of so much sand, the usual Coriolis effect—”

“This will not be usual, Guriff. Not in any way.” The priest continued to stare. He had not moved. “The whole environment has been thrown into turmoil. Some weather patterns might have been suppressed, and others inflamed.” Lokar nodded toward the blood-red horizon. “We will be lucky if we survive this night.”

Taking the warning seriously, Guriff shouted for his men, picked up a commlink and summoned his teams for an immediate emergency meeting.

“Tell me then, Priest, what shall we do? You’ve lived through storms here before. What is our best option for shelter? In the tunnels under Keen, or sealed inside our shelters? What about the hangar dome? Will the vehicles be safe?”

Lokar responded with a vacant smile and a shrug. “I shall remain in my tent, but you do whatever you see fit. Only God can save us. No shelter in the universe can protect you if He deems that tonight is the night you will die.”

Guriff cursed under his breath, then trudged off to meet with his crew...

That night the wind howled like an awakening beast, and abrasive sand scratched against the fabric of the priest’s small tent. The storm whispered and muttered maddening temptations like the hoarse voice of Shaitan.

Lokar huddled with his bony knees drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped around them, his eyes closed. He recited his prayers over and over, raising his voice until he was practically shouting against the roar outside. The true God could hear even the tiniest whisper, no matter what the background din might be, but Lokar comforted himself by hearing his own words.

The reinforced tent fabric stretched taut, as if demons were breathing against it. Lokar knew he could survive this storm. A storm had unquestionable power—yet faith was more powerful still.

Lokar held on, rocking himself throughout the night. He heard a clatter and a groan as one of the camp’s larger, heavily armored structures was torn apart in the gale, but if he ran outside, the blowing sand grains would flay the flesh from his bones.

The men of Guriff's team had made their choices and placed their bets. Some had dug themselves underground in Keen; others believed in the security of their own structures. Their fates had been written by a hand of fire in the Book of Heaven from the moment they were born. In the morning after the storm had passed, Lokar would see what had been decided.

Hours passed, and he didn't actually sleep so much as go into a deep trance. Sand and dust sprinkled his face, caking his eyes and his nose.

Finally, he blinked and looked around him to see washed-out daylight. Miraculously, his tent still stood erect, but the fabric had been scoured down to fine gauzy remnants. Breezes, now gentle in the exhausted aftermath of the terrific winds, spilled through tiny gaps in the tent, stirring against him. The priest stood up and parted the spiderweb-thin fibers of the wall of his tent, like a man emerging from a womb.

Rakis seemed pristine and virginal. He blinked into the dawn radiance, rubbed the dust from his face, and stared at the freshly scoured landscape. The early morning sunlight sparkled across fresh sand that had been freed from the glassy crust that covered so many dunes.

Debris from the entire encampment had scattered, probably over an expanse of kilometers. Nearby, one of the prefabricated structures had been destroyed, and everyone inside was surely dead. Although the hangar dome was also breached, the vehicles and 'thopters were still intact, though damaged.

Lokar heard shouts and voices, other members of the scavenging team crawling out of where they had huddled during the night, assessing the losses, counting the casualties, and cursing. Guriff's voice was unmistakable as he shouted profanities, finding one set of wreckage after another.

Lokar couldn't believe he had survived in his tiny shelter, where he should have been wiped out. There was no logical explanation, but a Priest of the Divided God did not look for logic. He found himself wrapped up in his own revelation, his own ecstasy. He bent down to the fresh sand at his feet, scooped up a handful and looked at it in his palm. He pinched a single grain between thumb and forefinger and lifted it to the sunlight, studying the sparkle. He saw in even this tiny fleck of silica a symbol of miraculous, divine power. He smiled.

Without warning, Guriff slapped his hand, and cuffed Lokar in the side of the head. The priest blinked and turned to the expedition leader, whose face was red with anger and disgust. Guriff had lost so much during the night that he needed to take out his outrage on someone.

Lokar refused to be rattled. "Be thankful, Guriff. You survived."

Disheartened, the man stalked away. A few moments later, Lokar went to join him, offering his assistance. God had saved them for a reason.

* * *

The robed priest stood on a high lump of rock, gazing across the mottled, lifeless wasteland. The lens of dust in the air made the rising orange sun appear larger than normal.

Like immense birds riding the air currents, the two repaired ornithopters approached from the night, flying low over the desert, flapping their wings rhythmically. In the week following the storm, disgusted with the lack of success at Keen, Guriff had sent his scouts to search the south polar regions for treasure sites. Optimistically and unrealistically, the scavengers hoped they might find signs of ancient hidden vaults exposed by the upheaval. Lokar knew they would find nothing. The Divided God would reveal his treasure only to the faithful—like himself.

Lokar climbed down from the rock and made his way across the makeshift field as the aircraft landed. Guriff came forward to meet the 'thopter crews and receive his report.

The rough-and-tumble scout leader knocked dust from his clothes. “Nothing down south at all. We landed more than twenty times and poked around, took core samples, tested the deep scanners.” He shook his head. “Looks like Keen is all we have.”

In the background, the priest heard engines whirring to life, the drone of tunneling machines as they awoke for the day. Excavation crews had so far discovered a handful of artifacts, a sealed chest of clothes, flatware, broken pieces of furniture, portions of tapestries, a few relatively undamaged statues.

“Even junk collectors wouldn’t pay more than ten solaris for these scraps,” Pellenquin had said in disgust.

The priest did not share the general feeling of disappointment. Something valuable would turn up, if they persisted in their efforts. But God had his own tricks, and perhaps Guriff and his crew would not see the treasure in front of their eyes.

As the returning scouts from the second 'thopter plodded toward the settlement to curl up and sleep in the heat of the day, the tunnel-riddled ground trembled. On the other side of the camp, a cloud of dust spurted upward, accom-

panied by a loud thud and shouts. Guriff and the men ran toward the excavations. “Cave-in!”

Within the hour, all working together, they pulled two bodies out of the dirt. Lokar recognized a pair of young men who had been eager to contribute, anxious to earn their fortunes. Guriff bitterly watched the bodies being wrapped for chemical cremation. The team was still reeling from the damage the unexpected storm had inflicted.

“There is treasure on Rakis,” Lokar said, trying to reassure him. “We just have to look in the right place.”

“You’re as blind as your precious worms, Priest!”

“The worms of Rakis were never blind. They simply saw in a different manner.”

“They didn’t see the obliteration of their planet coming,” Guriff said, and Lokar had no response.

Gazing out at the barren, blasted planet, Lokar turned and strode out onto the wasteland. Though he took no water or supplies, he walked for hours as the day warmed and the air began to shimmer. He ventured farther from camp than he had ever gone before.

Out on the sand, instinctively Lokar walked with an irregular shuffling step in the manner of the Fremmen who used to live here, as if any worms still existed deep underground that might be able to detect him. He felt something driving him forward, galvanizing his energies, enticing him.

Far from view of the camp, with only a trail of footprints snaking behind him to show him the way back, Lokar climbed up a wide, gnarled rock formation under the harsh afternoon sunlight. He reached the top and gazed across the expanse. Something dark and rounded caught his eye, an obstruction large enough to form a stark lip of shadow. It seemed to call to him.

Lokar made his way down the other side of the rock and plodded across the desert. The sinuous mound was larger than it looked, as if most of it was still covered by the sand. Its exterior was mottled and weathered with splotches of black, like a giant buried tree trunk. He touched it and pulled back as sand and dust sloughed down from a rough, pebbly surface. Lokar fell to his knees in the dust.

A sandworm had risen to the surface and perished in the last shocks of the bombardment of Rakis, roasted alive. These weathered cartilaginous remnants had been burned, fused with a layer of glassy sand, exposed by the shifting storms.

In the loose sand that had gathered in the lee of the obstruction, he discovered a fist-sized ball of clear glass, perfectly spherical. Filled with wonder, Lokar dug it out, then found another melted sphere buried beside it. These nodules of flash-melted sand were not an unusual consequence of the ferocious heat of the attack. But placed where they were, beneath the head of the fallen worm, Lokar interpreted them as something entirely different. *The tears of God.*

Out on the blasted landscape, staring in wonder at the hulk of the long-dead worm, Lokar felt a new kind of light suffusing him from all directions. Just as he had seen ghostly visions of the lost city of Keen, he now also saw the entire planet as it once had been, in all of its perilous glory. No matter what the Honored Matres had done, all the splendor of Rakis was not gone. The treasure was everywhere, for all of the faithful. The priest knew exactly what the Divided God wanted him to do.

Lokar smiled beatifically.

“We just weren’t looking for it with the proper eyes.”

* * *

The CHOAM ship returned in a month, exactly on schedule. Exploring at random in the ruins of Keen and the collapsed Temple, Guriff ordered his prospectors to continue their scavenging and excavation work up to the last minute, hoping to find some lost treasure to justify the expedition.

The expedition leader had managed to consolidate what remained of his crew, but two days ago the useless priest had gone missing. Guriff had sent an ornithopter out to search for the frustrating man, but gave up the effort after a few hours. Lokar was mad; they should never have wasted time or supplies on him in the first place. But the trading company had hired him, sent him along.

As soon as the large CHOAM transport ship landed, workers emerged from the transport, scurrying about like ants on the sand. They opened the cargo doors and removed equipment.

Guriff was surprised to see the priest disembark onto the blasted sands with the coldly beautiful Alaenor Ven. How had they gotten together? The cargo shuttle must have found him wandering like a lunatic on the sands. Guriff didn’t know why they would have bothered to rescue the man.

As he watched Lokar and the woman talking, not even looking in his direction, the expedition leader balled his fists. He was tempted to stride over and knock down the babbling priest for being so reckless, not acting as part of this

crew. But he realized that his outburst would be childish, and he doubted the cool, businesslike representative would have the time or patience for power plays like that. Instead, Guriff decided it would be better for him to ignore the situation entirely, retreat to his headquarters hut, and put together documents and records. *She* could come to *him*. He sealed the door against oxygen and moisture loss and made himself a cup of potent spice coffee using the last scraps of melange from their supplies.

As he sat in his sealed chamber, Guriff listened to the hum of excavating machines outside, the groan of equipment. New diggers? He didn't know what the company was doing out there, nor could he understand why Alaenor Ven continued to ignore him. Did she not want her report?

At last she unsealed the door and strode into his headquarters hut without signaling or asking permission. She probably thought she owned the entire camp because CHOAM had supplied it.

Not letting her take control of the conversation, Guriff faced her clear blue eyes. "My team and I would like to stay for another month. We have not found the wealth you expected, but I'm convinced that the legends of the God Emperor's treasure hoards are true." He had no direct evidence to support what he said, but he would not give up. Not yet.

She responded with a thin smile. "Oh, the treasure is here all right—more wealth than we can imagine, perhaps more than CHOAM could sell."

"Then I'll find it," Guriff said. "We'll keep digging, keep hunting."

"Perhaps you will find something else of interest, but my transport already has a hold full of treasure, something you overlooked. Quite foolishly, I must say. We found the priest Lokar out in the desert, and he convinced me that he had found something of great value. Priests are very good salesmen, you know."

Guriff felt his skin grow hot.

"What has the crazy priest found? He reported nothing to me." He pushed past the woman, and she slowly turned to watch him as he unsealed the door hatch and marched toward the landed transport.

Lokar stood there on the ramp, looking saintly. The last large pieces of equipment had been rolled back aboard. A great deal of digging had been done in the sand around the landing area.

Guriff grabbed him by the collar of his robes. He felt betrayed, after all his effort, all the disasters his misbegotten crew had faced.

"What have you been hiding from me?"

"I have hidden nothing. It was right in front of you all the time."

“Explain yourself.”

“I am a messenger of God, chosen to continue His great work. Even though the priesthood is mostly dead, even though our temples have been leveled here on Rakis, our belief remains widespread across the galaxy. Many new cults and spinoff sects have sprung up. The faithful continue to believe and worship. They need more. They need their Divided God.”

“What does that have to do with treasure?”

Lokar slumped down onto the ship’s ramp, sitting there as if meditating. Guriff wanted to strangle him.

“You simply don’t understand, Guriff.” The CHOAM woman walked calmly up to him. “Treasure and wealth are a matter of definitions. You defined your search too narrowly.”

He walked up the ramp, ignoring her, demanding to see exactly what they had loaded into their hold. Guild and CHOAM workers had returned to their seats, preparing to take off again. Crates of new camp supplies had been left behind on the ground to be sorted and restacked by the scavenger crew. It was certainly enough to last them for another month. He would demand that the woman take Lokar with her when she departed.

Guriff pushed his way down the aisle with Alaenor Ven following him. He reached the back, where a hatch led into the cargo bay.

“You forgot to recognize the importance and power of religion,” she said, continuing as if she had never paused. “Even if the fanatics are not wealthy, they will sacrifice everything to pay for something they believe is important. They truly revere their Divided God.”

Guriff worked the hold’s controls, but missed the proper button. He slapped his palm on the wall and rekeyed the pad. Finally, the hatch slid open.

The transport’s cargo hold was full of sand.

Ordinary sand.

The CHOAM woman continued to smile. “The faithful seek any sort of artifact from Rakis. Sacred relics. Even in the best of times, only the richest and most dedicated could afford to make a pilgrimage to their sacred Dune. Now that the planet is dead and almost all travel cut off, every scrap—every holy artifact—is worth even more.”

“You’re planning to sell *sand*?”

“Yes. Beautiful in its simplicity, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never heard of anything so absurd.”

“CHOAM will file for the necessary mining rights and patents to prevent claim jumpers. When word gets out, of course, there will be smugglers and purveyors of fraudulent goods, but those are all problems we can deal with.”

Lokar came up beside them and beamed as he stared into the dusty, sand-filled hold. Stepping forward, he bent down and thrust his hands into the soft grains, pulling up handfuls. “Isn’t it wonderful? Offworld, throughout the Old Empire, even a tiny vial of this sand will sell for many solaris. People will line up for a single grain, to touch the dust to their lips.”

“The sand must flow,” the CHOAM woman said.

“You’re all idiots.” In disgust, Guriff exited the transport and went to meet what was left of his crew. They were pleased at the stacks of fresh supplies. When they asked him about the departing priest and what the CHOAM representative had said, he refused to answer, gruffly telling them to get back to work. They all had risked everything to come here, and they needed to find something worthwhile on Rakis. Something other than sand.

As the heavily laden transport ship lifted off, kicking up a blast of sand around it—*worthless sand*, in his view—Guriff looked at the barren landscape and imagined the real treasure out there, treasure that he would find.