free

DUNE

WHIPPING MEK

A Tale of the Butlerian Jihad

An Original Short Story Leading up to *Dune: The Machine Crusade*

BRIAN HERBERT
AND KEVIN J. ANDERSON

DUNE

WHIPPING MEK

A TALE OF THE BUTLERIAN JIHAD

Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson

When the armored Jihad warship arrived, the population of Giedi Prime expected news of a great victory against the evil thinking machines. But with only a glance at the battle-scarred vessel, young Vergyl Tantor could tell that the defense of Peridot Colony had not gone at all as planned.

On the crowded fringe of Giedi City Spaceport, Vergyl rushed forward, pressing against the soldiers stuck there as ground troops, like himself: wide-eyed green recruits or veterans too old to be sent into battle against Omnius's combat robots. His heart hammered like an industrial piston in his chest.

He prayed that his adoptive brother, Xavier Harkonnen, was all right.

The damaged battleship heaved itself into the docking circle like a dying sea beast beached on a reef. The big engines hissed and groaned as they cooled from the hot descent through the atmosphere.

Vergyl stared at the blackened scars on the hull plates and tried to imagine the kinetic weapons and high-energy projectiles that combat robots had inflicted upon the brave jihadi defenders.

If only he had been out there himself, Vergyl could have helped in the fight. But Xavier—the commander of the battle group—always seemed to fight against his brother's eagerness with nearly as much persistence as he fought against the machine enemy.

When the landing systems finished locking down, dozens of egress hatches opened on the lower hull. Middle-ranking Jihad commanders emerged, bellowing for assistance. All medically qualified personnel were called in from the city; others were shuttled from across the continents of Giedi Prime to help the wounded soldiers and rescued colonists.

Triage and assessment stations were set up on the spaceport grounds. Official military personnel were tended first, since they had pledged their lives to fight in the great struggle ignited by Serena Butler. Their crimson-and-green uniforms were stained and badly patched; they'd obviously had no chance to repair them during the many weeks of transit from Peridot Colony. Mercenary soldiers received second-priority treatment, along with the refugees from the colony.

Vergyl rushed in with the other ground-based soldiers to help, his large brown eyes flicking back and forth in search of answers. He needed to find someone who could tell him what had happened to Segundo Harkonnen. Worry scratched at Vergyl's mind while he worked. Perhaps everything was all right . . . but what if his big brother had been killed in a heroic rally? Or what if he was injured, yet remained aboard the battered ship, refusing to accept help for himself until all of his personnel were tended to? Both of those scenarios would have fit Xavier's personality.

For hours, Vergyl refused to slow down, unable to fully grasp what these jihadi fighters had been through. Sweating and exhausted, he worked himself into a trancelike stupor, following orders, helping one after another of the wounded, burned, and despairing refugees.

He heard muttered conversations that told of the onslaught that had wiped out the small colony. When the thinking machines had attempted to absorb the settlement into the Synchronized Worlds, the Army of the Jihad had sent its defenders there.

Peridot Colony had been but a skirmish, however, like so many others in the dozen years since Serena Butler had originally rallied all humans to fight in her cause, after the thinking machines murdered her young son, Manion. *Xavier's son.*

The ebb and flow of the Jihad had caused a great deal of damage to both sides, but neither fighting force had gained a clear upper hand. And though the thinking machines continued to build fresh combat robots, lost human lives could never be replaced. Serena gave passionate speeches to recruit new soldiers for her holy war. So many fighters had died that the Jihad no longer publicly revealed the cost. The struggle was everything.

Following the Honru Massacre seven years earlier, Vergyl had insisted on joining the Army of the Jihad himself. He considered it his duty as a human being, even without his connection to Xavier and the martyred child, Manion. At their estate on Salusa Secundus, his parents had tried to make the young man wait, since he was barely seventeen, but Vergyl would hear none of it.

Returning to Salusa after a difficult skirmish, Xavier had surprised their parents by offering a waiver that would allow underage Vergyl to begin training in the army. The young man had leaped at the opportunity, not guessing that Xavier had his own plans. Overprotective, Segundo Harkonnen had seen to it that Vergyl received a safe, quiet assignment, stationed here on Giedi Prime where he could help with the rebuilding work—and where he would stay far from any pitched battles against the robotic enemy.

Now Vergyl had been in Giedi City for years, rising minimally in rank to second decero in the Construction Brigade . . . never seeing any action. Meanwhile, Xavier Harkonnen's battleships went to planet after planet, protecting free humanity and destroying the mechanized legions of the computer evermind Omnius. . . .

Vergyl stopped counting all the bodies he'd moved. Perspiring in his dark green uniform, the young construction officer and a civilian man carried a

makeshift stretcher, hauling a wounded mother who had been rescued from her devastated prefab home on Peridot Colony. Women and children from Giedi City hurried among the workers and wounded, offering water and food.

Finally, in the warm afternoon, a ragged cheer penetrated Vergyl's dazed focus, as he set the stretcher down in the midst of a triage unit. Looking up, he drew in a quick breath. At the warship's main entrance ramp, a proud military commander stepped forward into the sunshine of Giedi Prime.

Xavier Harkonnen wore a clean segundo's uniform with immaculate golden insignia. By careful design, he cut a dashing military figure, one that would inspire confidence and faith among his own troops as well as the civilians of Giedi City. Fear was the worst enemy the machines could bring against them. Xavier never offered any observer reason for uncertainty: Yes, brave humanity would eventually win this war.

Grinning, Vergyl let out a sigh as all his doubts evaporated. Of course Xavier had survived. This great man had led the strike force that liberated Giedi Prime from the enslavement of cymeks and thinking machines. Xavier had commanded the human forces in the atomic purification of Earth, the first great battle of Serena Butler's Jihad.

And the heroic Segundo Xavier Harkonnen would never stop until the thinking machines were defeated.

But as Vergyl watched his brother walk down the ramp, he noticed that the brave commander's footsteps had a heavy, weary quality, and his familiar face looked shell-shocked. Not even a hint of a smile there, no gleam in his gray eyes. Just flat stoniness. How had the man gotten so old? Vergyl idolized him, needed to speak with him alone as a brother, so that he could learn the real story.

But in public, Segundo Harkonnen would never let anyone see his inner feelings. He was too good a leader for that.

Vergyl pushed his way through the throng, shouting and waving with the others, and finally Xavier recognized him in the sea of faces. His expression lit

with joy, then crashed, as if weighed down by the burden of war memories and realizations. Vergyl and his fellow relief workers hurried up the ramp to surround the lead officer and escorted him into the safety of Giedi City.

Along with his surviving sub-commanders, Xavier Harkonnen spent hours dispensing reports and debriefing League officials, but he insisted on breaking away from these painful duties to spend a few hours with his brother.

He arrived at Vergyl's small home unrested, eyes bloodshot and haunted. When the two of them hugged, Xavier remained stiff for a moment, before weakening and returning his dark-skinned brother's embrace. Despite the physical dissimilarities that marked their separate racial heritage, they knew that the bonds of love had nothing to do with bloodlines and everything to do with the loving family experiences they had shared in the household of Emil and Lucille Tantor. Leading him inside, Vergyl could sense the tremors Xavier was suppressing. He distracted Xavier by introducing him to his wife of two years, whom Xavier had never met.

Sheel was a young, dark-haired beauty not accustomed to receiving guests of such importance. She had not even traveled to Salusa Secundus to meet Vergyl's parents or to see the Tantor family estate. But she treated Xavier as her husband's welcome brother, instead of as a celebrity.

One of Aurelius Venport's merchant ships had arrived only a week before, carrying melange from Arrakis. Sheel had gone out this afternoon and spent a week's pay to get enough of the expensive spice to add to the fine, special dinner she prepared.

As they ate, their conversation remained subdued and casual, avoiding any mention of war news. Weary to the bone, Xavier seemed barely to notice the flavors of the meal, even the exotic melange. Sheel seemed disappointed, until Vergyl explained in a whisper that his brother had lost much of his sense of taste and smell during a cymek gas attack, which had also cost him his lungs.

Although Xavier now breathed through a set of replacement organs provided by a Tlulaxa flesh merchant, his ability to taste or smell remained dulled.

Finally, as they drank spice-laced coffee, Vergyl could no longer withhold his questions. "Xavier, please tell me what happened at Peridot Colony. Was it a victory, or did the—" his voice caught "—did the machines defeat us?"

Xavier lifted his head, looking far away. "Grand Patriarch Iblis Ginjo says that there are no defeats. Only victories and . . . moral victories. This one fell into the latter category."

Sheel squeezed her husband's arm sharply, a wordless request that he withdraw the question. But Vergyl didn't interrupt, and Xavier continued, "Peridot Colony had been under attack for a week before our nearest battle group received the emergency distress call. Settlers were being obliterated. The thinking machines meant to crush the colony and establish a Synchronized World there, to lay down their infrastructure and install a new copy of the Omnius evermind."

Xavier sipped spice coffee, while Vergyl put his elbows on the table, leaning close to listen with rapt attention.

"The Army of the Jihad had little presence in this area aside from my warship and a handful of troops. We had no choice but to respond, not wishing to lose another planet. I had a full shipload of mercenaries anyway."

"Any from Ginaz? Our best fighters?"

"Some. We arrived faster than the thinking machines expected, struck them swiftly and mercilessly, using everything we had. My mercenaries attacked like madmen, and many of them fell. But a lot more thinking machines were destroyed. Unfortunately, most of the colony towns had already been trampled by the time we got there, the inhabitants murdered. Even so, our Army of the Jihad drove in—and by a holy miracle we pushed back the enemy forces." He drew a deep, convulsing breath, as if his replacement lungs were malfunctioning.

"Instead of simply cutting their losses and flying away, as combat robots usually do, this time they were programmed to follow a scorched-earth policy. They devastated everything in their wake. Where they had gone, not a crop, structure, or human survivor was left behind."

Sheel swallowed hard. "How terrible."

"Terrible?" Xavier mused, rolling the sound of the word on his tongue. "I cannot begin to describe what I saw. Not much was left of the colony we went to rescue. Over a quarter of my jihadi fighters lost their lives, and half of the mercenaries."

Shaking his head sadly, he continued. "We scraped together the pathetic remnants of settlers who had fled far enough from the primary machine forces. I do not know—nor do I want to know—the actual number of survivors we rescued. Peridot Colony did not fall to the machines, but that world is no longer of any use to humans, either." He heaved a deep breath. "It seems to be the way of this Jihad."

"That is why we need to keep fighting." Vergyl lifted his chin. His bravery sounded tinny in his own ears. "Let me fight at your side against Omnius! The Army of the Jihad is in constant need of soldiers. It's time for me to get into the real battles in this war!"

Now Xavier Harkonnen seemed to awaken. Dismay flashed across his face. "You don't want that, Vergyl. Not *ever*."

Vergyl secured an assignment working aboard the Jihad warship as it underwent repairs for the better part of two weeks. If he couldn't fly off and fight on alien battlefields, at least he could be here recharging weapons, replacing damaged Holtzman shield systems, and strengthening armor plating.

While Vergyl diligently performed every task the team supervisors assigned to him, his eyes drank in details about how the ship's systems functioned. Someday, if Xavier ever relented and allowed him to participate in the Holy

Jihad, Vergyl wanted to command one of these vessels. He was an adult—twenty-three years old—but his influential brother had the power to interfere with anything he tried to do . . . and had already done so.

That afternoon, as he checked off the progress of repairs on his display pad, Vergyl came upon one of the battleship's training chambers. The dull metal door stood half open, and he heard a clattering and clanging of metal, and the grunting sounds of someone straining with great effort.

Rushing into the chamber, Vergyl stopped and stared in astonishment. A long-haired, battle-scarred man—a mercenary, judging from his wild, disheveled appearance—threw himself in violent combat against a fighting robot. The machine had three sets of articulated arms, each one holding a deadly-looking weapon. Moving in a graceful blur, the mechanical unit struck blow after blow against the man, who defended himself perfectly each time.

Vergyl's heart leaped. How had one of the enemy machines gotten on board Xavier's battleship? Had Omnius sent it as a spy or saboteur? Were there others spread out around the ship? The beleaguered mercenary landed a blow with his vibrating pulse sword, causing one of the mek's six arms to drop limply to its side.

Letting out a war cry, knowing he had to help, Vergyl snatched the only weapon he could find—a training staff from a rack by the wall—and charged forward recklessly.

The mercenary reacted quickly upon hearing Vergyl's approach. He raised a hand. "Hold, Chirox!"

The combat mek froze. The mercenary, panting, dropped his fighting stance. Vergyl skidded to a halt, looking in confusion from the enemy robot to the well-muscled fighter.

"Don't alarm yourself," the mercenary said. "I was simply practicing."

"With a *machine?*"

The long-haired man smiled. A spiderweb of pale scars covered his cheeks, neck, bare shoulders, and chest. "Thinking machines are our enemies in this Jihad, young officer. If we must develop our skills against them, who better to fight?"

Awkwardly, Vergyl set his hastily grabbed staff on the deck. His face flushed hot with embarassment. "That makes sense."

"Chirox is just a surrogate enemy, a target to fight. He represents all thinking machines in my mind."

"Like a whipping boy."

"A whipping mek." The mercenary smiled. "We can set it to various fighting levels for training purposes." He stepped closer to the ominous-looking combat robot. "Stand down."

The robot lowered its weapons-studded limbs, then retracted them into its core, even the impaired arm, and stood waiting for further commands. With a sneer, the man slammed the hilt of his pulse sword against the mek's chest, knocking the mek backward a step. The optic-sensor eyes flickered orange. The rest of the machine's face, with its crudely shaped mouth and nose, did not move.

Confidently, the man tapped the metallic torso. "This limited robot—I dislike the term *thinking machine*—is totally under our control. It has served the mercenaries of Ginaz for nearly three generations now." He deactivated his pulse sword, which was designed to scramble the sophisticated gelcircuitry of a thinking machine. "I am Zon Noret, one of the fighters assigned to this ship."

Intrigued, Vergyl ventured closer. "Where did you find this machine?"

"A century ago, a Ginaz salvage scout found a damaged thinking machine ship, from which he retrieved this broken combat robot. Since then, we've wiped its memories and reinstalled combat programming. It allows us to test ourselves against machine capabilities."

Noret patted the robot on one of its ribbed metal shoulders. "Many robots in the Synchronized Worlds have been destroyed because of what we learned from this unit. Chirox is an invaluable teacher. On the archipelago of Ginaz, students pit their skills against him. He has proved to be such an advantage and a repository of information to utilize against our enemy that we mercenaries no longer refer to him as a thinking machine, but as an ally."

"A robot as an ally? Serena Butler wouldn't like to hear that," Vergyl said guardedly.

Zon Noret tossed his thick hair behind his head like the mane of a comet. "Many things are done in this Jihad without Serena Butler knowing. I wouldn't be surprised to learn of other meks like this one under our control." He made a dismissive gesture. "But since we all have the same goal, the details become insignificant."

To Vergyl, some of Noret's wounds looked only freshly healed. "Shouldn't you be recuperating from the battle, instead of fighting even more?"

"A true mercenary never stops fighting." His eyes narrowed. "I see you're an officer yourself."

Vergyl let out a frustrated sigh. "In the Construction Brigade. It's not what I wanted. I wanted to fight, but . . . it's a long story."

Noret wiped sweat from his brow. "Your name?"

"Second Decero Tantor."

With no flicker of recognition at the name, Noret looked at the combat mek and then at the young officer. "Perhaps we can arrange a little taste of battle for you anyway."

"You would let me . . . ?" Vergyl felt his pulse quicken.

Zon Noret nodded. "If a man wants to fight, he should be allowed to do so."

Vergyl lifted his chin. "I couldn't agree more."

"I warn you, this may be a training mek, but it is lethal. I often disconnect its safety protocol during my rigorous practices. That is why Ginaz mercenaries are so good."

"There must be fail-safes, otherwise it wouldn't be much good as an instructor."

"Training that entails no risk is not realistic. It makes the student soft, knowing he is in no danger. Chirox is not like that, by design. It could kill you."

Vergyl felt a rush of bravado, hoped he wasn't being foolish. "I can handle myself. I've gone through Jihad training of my own." But he wanted a chance to prove himself, and this combat robot might be as close to the fight as he ever got. Vergyl focused his hatred on Chirox, thought of all the horrors the fighting machines had inflicted upon humanity, and wanted to smash the mek into scrap metal. "Let me fight it, just as you were doing."

The mercenary raised his eyebrows, as if amused and interested. "Your choice of weapons, young warrior?"

Vergyl fumbled, looked at the clumsy training staff he had grabbed. "I didn't bring anything but this."

Noret held his pulse sword up for the younger man to examine. "Do you know how to operate one of these?"

"That looks like one we used in basic training, but a newer model."

"Correct." Noret activated the weapon and handed it to the young man.

Vergyl hefted the sword to check its balance. Shimmering arcs of disruptive energy ran along the surface of its blade.

He took a deep breath and studied the combat mek, who stared back at him dispassionately, its eyelike optic sensors glowing orange . . . waiting. The sensors shifted direction, watched Noret approach and prepared for another opponent.

When the mercenary activated the mek, only two of the six mechanical arms emerged from the torso. One metal hand clasped a dagger, while the other was empty.

"It's fighting me at a low difficulty setting," Vergyl complained.

"Perhaps Chirox is just testing you. In actual combat, your adversary will never provide a resumé of his skills beforehand."

Vergyl moved carefully toward the mek, then shifted to his left and circled, holding the pulse sword. He felt moisture on his palm, loosened his grip a bit. The mek kept turning to face him. Its dagger hand twitched, and Vergyl jabbed at the robot's weapon with the electronic sword, hitting it with a purple pulse that caused the robot to shudder.

"Looks like a dumb machine to me." He had imagined combat like this. Vergyl darted toward his opponent and struck the torso with the pulse sword, leaving a purple discoloration on the metal body. He tapped a blue button on the weapon's handle until it reached the highest pulse setting.

"Go for the head," Noret counseled. "Scramble the robot's circuits to slow him. If you strike Chirox just right, he will need a minute or two to reconfigure."

Again Vergyl struck, but missed the head, sliding down to the armored shoulder. Multicolored sparks covered the mek's outer surface, and the dagger dropped from its mechanical grip to clatter on the floor of the training chamber. A wisp of smoke rose from the robot's hand.

Vergyl moved in for the kill. He didn't care if anyone needed this fighting unit for training. He wanted to destroy it, to burn it into molten remains. He thought of Serena, of little Manion, of all the humans slaughtered . . . and of his own inability to fight for the Jihad. This scapegoat mek would have to do for now.

But as he stepped forward, suddenly the flowmetal of the robot's free hand shifted, reshaping itself, to extrude a short sword with barbs on the blade. The other hand stopped sparking, and a matching weapon also formed there.

"Careful, young warrior. We wouldn't want the Army of the Jihad to lose your construction skills."

Feeling a surge of anger at the remark, Vergyl snapped, "I'm not afraid of this machine."

"Fear is not always unwise."

"Even against a stupid opponent? Chirox doesn't even know I'm ridiculing him, does he?"

"I am just a machine," the mek recited, his synthesized voice coming from a speaker patch. Vergyl was taken aback, thinking he had caught just a hint of sarcasm in the robot's voice. Like a theatrical mask, his face did not change its expression.

"Chirox doesn't usually say much," Noret said, smiling. "Go ahead, pound him some more. But even I don't know all the surprises he might have in store."

Vergyl moved back to reassess his opponent. He studied the robot's optic sensors, which glowed a steady orange, focused on the pulse weapon.

Abruptly, Chirox lunged with the barbed short sword, exhibiting unexpected speed and agility. Vergyl tried to dodge the blow, but not quickly enough, and a shallow gash opened on one of his arms. He went into a floor roll to escape, then glanced at the wound as he leaped back to his feet.

"Not a bad move," Noret said, his tone casual, as if he didn't care whether the robot killed Vergyl. Killing was both sport and profession to him. Maybe it took a harsh mindset to be a mercenary for Ginaz, but Vergyl—endowed with no such harshness—worried that he had gotten into this situation on impulse and might be facing a challenge more difficult than he was ready for. The combat mek kept advancing with jerking, unpredictable speeds, sometimes lunging, sometimes with an astonishing fluidity of motion.

Vergyl darted from side to side, striking blows with the pulse sword. He executed proficient rolls and considered attempting a showy backflip, but didn't know if he could pull it off. Failure to properly execute a move could prove fatal.

One of his pulse blows struck the panel box on Chirox's side, making it glow red. The robot paused. A thin, agile arm emerged from the robot's torso and adjusted something inside.

"It can repair itself?"

"Most combat meks can. You wanted a fair shot at a real machine opponent, didn't you? I warned you, this robot does not fight below its abilities."

Suddenly Chirox came at Vergyl harder and faster than before. Two more arms extruded from the body core. One held a long dagger with a jagged tip for snagging and ripping flesh. The other held a shimmering branding iron.

Zon Noret said something in an anxious tone, but the words blurred. The entire universe that Vergyl had known up to this point faded, along with all unnecessary sensory perception. He focused on only survival.

"I am a jihadi," Vergyl whispered. He resigned himself to fate and at the same time decided to inflict as much damage as he could. He recalled a pledge that even the Construction Brigade had to memorize: "If I die in battle against the machines, I will join those who have gone to Paradise before me, and those who follow." He felt a near-trancelike state consume him and remove all fear of death.

He plunged into battle, flailing away, striking the pulse sword against the mek, discharging the weapon repeatedly. In the background, someone shouted something, words he couldn't make out. Then Vergyl heard a loud click, saw a flash of color, and bright yellow light immersed him. It felt like a blast from a polar wind and froze him in place.

Immobilized, helpless, Vergyl shuddered, then toppled. He fell for what seemed like a great distance. His teeth chattered, and he shivered. He didn't seem to land anywhere.

Finally he found himself looking up into the robot's gleaming optic sensors. Totally vulnerable. "I can kill you now." The machine pressed the jagged tip of the long dagger against Vergyl's neck.

The combat mek could thrust the blade through his throat in a microsecond. Vergyl heard shouts, but could not squirm away. He stared up into the implacable optical sensors of the robot, the face of the hated machine enemy. The thinking machine was going to kill him—and this wasn't even a real battle. What a fool he had been.

Somewhere in the distance, familiar voices—two of them?—called out to him. "Vergyl! Vergyl! Shut the damn thing off, Noret!"

He tried to lift his head and look around, but could not move. Chirox continued to press the sharp point against his jugular vein. His muscles were paralyzed, as if frozen inside a block of ice.

"Get me a disruptor gun!" He recognized the voice at last. Xavier. Somehow, incongruously, Vergyl worried more about his brother's disapproval than dying.

But then the mek straightened and removed the dagger blade from his throat.

He heard more voices, the thumping of boots, and the clattering of weaponry. Peripherally, Vergyl saw movement, and the crimson-and-green of jihadi uniforms. Xavier shouted commands to his men, but Chirox retracted the jagged dagger, its other weapons, and all four arms into its torso. The fiercely glowing optic sensors dulled to a soft glimmer.

Zon Noret placed himself in front of the robot. "Don't shoot, Segundo. Chirox could have killed him, but didn't. His programming is to take advantage of a weakness and deliver a mortal blow, yet he made a conscious decision against it."

"I did not wish to kill him." The combat robot reset itself to a stationary position. "It was not necessary."

Vergyl finally cleared his head enough to push himself into a stiff sitting position. "That mek actually showed . . . compassion." He still felt dazed from the mysterious stun blast. "Imagine that, a machine with feelings."

"It wasn't compassion at all," Xavier said, with a contentious scowl. He reached down to help his brother to his feet.

"It was the strangest thing," Vergyl insisted. "Did you see his eyes?"

Zon Noret, intent on his training mek, looked into the machine's panel box, studied instrument readings and made adjustments. "Chirox simply assessed the situation and went into survival mode. But there must have been something buried in his original programming."

"Machines don't care about survival," Xavier snapped. "You saw them at Peridot Colony. They hurl themselves into battle without concern for personal safety." He shook his head. "There's something wrong with your mek's programming, a glitch."

Vergyl stared over at Chirox, caught the gaze of the glowing optic sensors. In the depths of the twin lights, the young construction officer thought he detected a flicker of something animate, which intrigued and frightened him at the same time.

"Humans can learn compassion, too," Chirox said, unexpectedly.

"I'll run it through a complete overhaul," Noret said, but his voice was uncertain.

Xavier stood in front of Vergyl, checking his brother for serious injuries. He spoke in a shaky voice as he led his brother out of the training chamber. "That was quite a scare you gave me."

"I just wanted to fight . . . a real enemy for once."

Xavier looked deeply saddened. "Vergyl, I fear that you will have your chance, eventually. This Jihad will not be over anytime soon."