



*We are barometers of the human condition.*

—REVEREND MOTHER RAQUELLA BERTO-ANIRUL,  
remarks to third graduating class

Out of necessity, Reverend Mother Raquella Berto-Anirul took a long view of history. Because of the wealth of unique ancestral memories in her mind—history personified—the old woman had a perspective of the past that was not available to anyone else . . . not yet.

With so many generations to draw from in her thoughts, Raquella was well equipped to see the future of the human race. And the other Sisters in her school looked to their sole Reverend Mother to be their guide. She had to teach that perspective to others, expanding the knowledge and objectivity of her order, the physical and mental skills that set members of the Sisterhood apart from average women.

Raquella felt a drizzle of rain on her face as she stood with other Sisters on a cliff balcony of the Rossak School, the formal training facility of the Sisterhood. Dressed in a black robe with a high collar, she gazed solemnly down from the edge of the cliff at the purplish jungle below. Though the air was warm and humid for the somber ceremony, the weather was hardly ever uncomfortable at this time of year, because of breezes that blew regularly along the cliff faces. The air had a faint sour smell, a brimstone aftertaste from distant volcanoes mixed with the stew of environmental chemicals.

Today they were enduring another funeral for a dead Sister, one more tragic death from poison . . . another failure to create the second Reverend Mother.

More than eight decades ago, the dying and bitter Sorceress Ticia Cenva had given Raquella a lethal dose of the most potent poison available. Raquella should have died, but deep in her mind, in her cells, she had manipulated her biochem-

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istry, shifting the molecular structure of the poison itself. Miraculously she survived, but the ordeal had changed something fundamental inside her, initiating a crisis-induced transformation at the farthest boundaries of her mortality. She had emerged whole but different, with a library of past lives in her mind and a new ability to see herself on a genetic level, possessing an intimate understanding of every interconnected fiber of her own body.

Crisis. Survival. Advancement.

But in all the years afterward, despite many attempts, no one else had achieved the same result, and Raquella didn't know how many more lives she could justify losing in order to reach the elusive goal. She knew only one way to push a Sister over the brink: driving her to the edge of death where—possibly—she could find the strength to evolve. . . .

Optimistic and determined, her best trainees continued to believe in her. And they died.

Raquella looked on sadly as a black-robed Sister and three green-robed acolytes took positions on top of the canopy of trees and lowered the corpse down into the humid depths of the silvery-purple jungle. The body would be left there for predators as part of the eternal circle of life and death, recycling human remains back into the soil.

The valiant young woman's name had been Sister Tiana, but now her body was wrapped in pale fabric, anonymous. The jungle creatures stirred deep below, as the thick canopy swallowed up the platform.

Raquella herself had lived for more than 130 years. She had witnessed the end of Serena Butler's Jihad, the Battle of Corrin two decades later, and the years of turmoil afterward. Despite her age, the old woman was spry and mentally alert, controlling the worst effects of aging through moderate use of melange imported from Arrakis and by manipulating her own biochemistry.

Her ever-growing school was comprised of outside candidates recruited from the best young women in the Imperium, including the special last descendants of the Sorceresses who had dominated this planet in the years before and during the Jihad; only a scant eighty-one of them remained. In total, eleven hundred Sisters trained here, two-thirds of them students; some were children from the nurseries, daughters from Raquella's missionaries who became pregnant by acceptable fathers. Recruiters sent hopeful new candidates here, and the training continued. . . .

For years the voices in her memory had urged her to test and enhance more Reverend Mothers like herself. She and her fellow proctors devoted their lives to showing other women how to master their thoughts, their bodies, their own future. Now that the thinking machines were gone, human destiny demanded that people become more than they had ever been before. Raquella would show them

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the way. She *knew* that a skilled woman could transform herself into a superior person, under the proper conditions.

Crisis. Survival. Advancement.

Many of Raquella's Sisterhood graduates had already proved their worth, going offworld to serve as advisers to noble planetary rulers and even at the Imperial Court; some attended the Mentat School on Lampadas, or became talented Suk doctors. She could feel their quiet influence spreading across the Imperium. Six of the women were now fully trained Mentats. One of them, Dorotea, served as a trusted adviser to Emperor Salvador Corrino back on Salusa Secundus.

But she desperately wanted more of her followers to have the same understanding, the same universal view of the Sisterhood and its future, and the same mental and physical powers as she did.

Somehow, though, her candidates could not make the leap. And another promising young woman had died. . . .

Now, while the women continued the oddly businesslike disposal of the dead Sister's remains, Raquella worried about the future. Despite her long life span, she harbored no illusions of personal immortality, and if she died before anyone else learned to survive the transformation, her skills could be forever lost. . . .

The fate of the Sisterhood, and their extensive works, was much more important than her own mortal fate. Humanity's long-term future depended on careful advancement, improvement. The Sisterhood could no longer afford to wait. She had to groom her successors.

As the funeral ended with the disposal of the body, the rest of the women turned back to the cliff school, where they would continue their classroom exercises. Raquella had chosen a fresh new candidate, a young woman from a disgraced family with little future, but someone who deserved this opportunity.

Sister Valya Harkonnen.

Raquella watched Valya leave the other Sisters and proceed toward her along the cliffside path. Sister Valya was a whiplike young woman with an oval face and hazel eyes. The Reverend Mother observed her fluid movements, the confident tilt of her head, the carriage of her body—small but significant details adding up to the whole of the individual. Raquella did not doubt her choice; few other Sisters were as dedicated.

Sister Valya had joined the Sisterhood at the age of sixteen, leaving her backwater planet of Lankiveil to go in search of a better life. Her great-grandfather, Abulurd Harkonnen, had been banished for cowardice after the Battle of Corrin. During her five years on Rossak, Valya had excelled in her training and proved to be one of Raquella's most faithful and talented Sisters; she worked closely with Sister Karee Marques, one of the last Sorceresses, studying new drugs and poisons to be used in the testing process.

When Valya presented herself to the old woman, she did not seem overly upset by the funeral. “You asked to see me, Reverend Mother?”

“Follow me, please.”

Valya was clearly curious, but she kept her questions to herself. The two walked past the administration caves and domicile warrens. In its heyday in past centuries, this cliff city had supported thousands of men and women, Sorceresses, pharmaceutical merchants, explorers of the deep jungles. But so many had died during the plagues that the city was mostly empty, housing only members of the Sisterhood.

One entire section of caves had been used for the treatment of the Misborn, children who suffered birth defects as a result of toxins in the Rossak environment. Thanks to careful study of the breeding records, such children were born only rarely, and those who survived were cared for in one of the cities to the north, beyond the volcanoes. Raquella did not permit any men to live in her school community, although they occasionally came here to deliver supplies or perform repairs or other services.

Raquella led Valya past barricaded cliff-side entrances that had once led to large sections of the hivelike cave city, but were now abandoned and blocked off. They were ominous places, devoid of all life, the bodies having been removed years ago and laid to rest in the jungle. She pointed to the treacherous path that led steeply along the cliff face to the top of the plateau. “That is where we’re going.”

The young woman hesitated for a flicker of an instant, then followed the Reverend Mother past a barricade and signs that restricted access. Valya was both excited and nervous. “The breeding records are up there.”

“Yes, they are.”

During the years of horrific plagues spread by Omnius, while entire populations were dying, the Sorceresses of Rossak—who had always kept genetic records to determine the best breeding matches—began a far more ambitious program to keep a library of human bloodlines, a far-reaching genetic catalog. Now, tending that wealth of information fell to Raquella and her chosen Sisters.

The path rose in sharp switchbacks along the rock face, a solid cliff wall on one side of them, a sheer drop-off to the dense jungle on the other. The drizzle had stopped, but the rocks remained slick underfoot.

The two women reached a lookout point where wisps of fog encircled them. Raquella looked out at the jungle and smoldering volcanoes in the distance—little had changed in that landscape since she’d first arrived decades ago, a nurse accompanying Dr. Mohandas Suk to treat victims of the Omnius plague.

“Only a few of us ever go up here anymore—but you and I are going farther.” Raquella was not one for small talk, and kept her emotions tightly controlled, but she did feel an excitement and optimism to be introducing another person to

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the Sisterhood's greatest secret. A new ally. It was the only way the Sisterhood could survive.

They stopped at a cave opening set amid blocky boulders near the top of the plateau, high above the fertile, teeming jungles. A pair of Sorceresses stood guard at the entrance. They nodded to the Reverend Mother, allowed them to pass.

"The compilation of the breeding records is perhaps the Sisterhood's greatest work," Raquella said. "With such an enormous database of human genetics, we can map and extrapolate the future of our race . . . perhaps even guide it."

Valya nodded solemnly. "I've heard other Sisters say it's one of the largest data archives ever compiled, but I never understood how we could possibly manage so much information. How do we digest it all and make projections?"

Raquella decided to be cryptic, for now. "We are the Sisterhood."

Inside the high caves, they entered two large chambers filled with wooden tables and writing desks; women bustled about, organizing reams of permanent paper, compiling and stacking immense DNA maps, then filing documents that were reduced and stored in dense near-microscopic text.

"Four of our Sisters have completed Mentat training under Gilbertus Albans," Raquella said. "But even with their advanced mental abilities, the project is overwhelming."

Valya struggled to control her awe. "Such an immensity of data here . . ." Her bright eyes drank in the new information with fascination. She felt great honor and pride to be allowed into the Reverend Mother's inner circle. "I know more women of our order are training on Lampadas, but this project would require an army of Sister Mentats. The DNA records from millions and millions of people on thousands of planets."

As they passed deeper into the restricted tunnels, an elderly Sister emerged from a file room wearing the white robe of a Sorceress. She greeted the two visitors. "Reverend Mother, is this the new recruit you have decided to bring to me?"

Raquella nodded. "Sister Valya has excelled in her studies and has proved her dedication in aiding Karee Marques in her pharmaceutical research." She nudged the young woman forward. "Valya, Sister Sabra Hublein was one of the original architects of the expanded breeding database during the plagues, long before I ever came to Rossak."

"The breeding records must be maintained," the other old woman said. "And watched."

"But . . . I'm not a Mentat," Valya said.

Sabra led them into an empty tunnel and looked over her shoulder, making certain they were not seen. "There are other ways to help us, Sister Valya."

They stopped near a curve in the passageway, and Raquella faced a blank

stone wall. She glanced at the younger woman. "Are you afraid of the unknown?"

Valya managed a small smile. "People always fear the unknown, if they are truthful about it. But I can face my fears."

"Good. Now come with me and tread on territory that is largely unexplored."

Valya looked uneasy. "Do you want me to be the next volunteer to try a new transformative drug? Reverend Mother, I don't think I'm ready for—"

"No, this is something else entirely, though no less important. I am old, child. It makes me more cynical, but I have learned to trust my instincts. I've watched you carefully, seen your work with Karee Marques—I want to bring you into this plan."

Valya did not look fearful, and she kept her questions to herself. *Good*, Raquella thought.

"Take a deep breath and calm yourself, girl. You are about to learn the Sisterhood's most closely guarded secret. Very few in the order have ever seen this."

Taking the young woman's hand, Raquella pulled her toward the seemingly solid wall. Sabra stepped forward beside Valya, and they passed entirely through the rock—a hologram—and entered a new chamber.

The three of them stood in a small anteroom. Blinking in the bright light, Valya struggled to hide her surprise, using her training to maintain her composure.

"This way." The Reverend Mother led them into a large, brightly lit grotto, and Valya's eyes widened as they encompassed the sight.

The chamber was filled with humming and clicking machines, constellations of electronic lights—banks and banks of forbidden *computers* on levels that rose high along the curving stone walls. Spiral stairways and wooden ramps connected them all. A small number of white-robed Sorceresses bustled back and forth, and machine noises throbbed in the air.

Valya stammered, "Is this . . . Is this . . . ?" She couldn't seem to phrase the question, then exclaimed, "Thinking machines!"

"As you suggested yourself," Raquella explained, "no human, not even a trained Mentat, can store all the data the women of Rossak have compiled over the generations. The Sorceresses used these machines secretly for many generations, and some of our most trusted women are trained to maintain and service them."

"But . . . why?"

"The only way we can keep such vast amounts of data, and make the necessary genetic projections over successive descendants, is with the aid of computers—which are strictly forbidden. Now you see why we need to keep these machines secret."

Raquella studied Valya carefully, noted the calculating expression as her gaze

moved around the chamber. She seemed overwhelmed, but intrigued, not horrified.

“There is much for you to learn,” Sabra said. “For years we have studied the breeding records, and we fear that the true Sorceresses are going to die out. Few enough of us remain, so there is little time left. This may be the only way we can understand what’s happening.”

“And find alternatives,” Raquella said. “Such as the creation of new Reverend Mothers.” She was careful not to let her desperation, or her hope, creep into her voice.

One of the Sorceress workers spoke briefly to Sister Sabra about a breeding matter, then returned to her work after giving Valya a brief curious glance. “Sister Esther-Cano is our youngest pureblood Sorceress,” Raquella said, “barely thirty years of age. The next youngest, however, is more than ten years older. The telepathic characteristic of Sorceresses occurs only rarely in native daughters now.”

Sabra continued, “The school’s breeding records include information from people on thousands of planets. Our database is vast, and the goal—as you already know—is to optimize humankind through personal improvement and selective breeding. With the computers, we can model DNA interactions and project breeding possibilities from a near-infinite number of bloodline pairings.”

Valya’s brief, automatic terror had been replaced by a more intense interest. She looked around the chamber and said in a practical tone, “If the Butlerians ever find out about this, they will raze the school and kill every last Sister.”

“Yes, they will,” Raquella said. “And now you understand the amount of trust we have placed in you.”