

Why Can't I Win with the Harkonnen?

By Laurence Bernstein

At first glance you would think the Harkonnen faction is one of the most powerful in Dune. In a game of treachery it seems the faction with so many treacherous abilities would have a distinct advantage, but it rarely works out that way. What's the problem?

The Harkonnen get the following advantages:

1. **Four traitors** (the Harkonnen get to keep all four traitors that they draw).
2. **Increased hand size** (the Harkonnen may hold 8 treachery cards instead of 4).
3. **Sneaky, hidden cards** (the Harkonnen may draw an extra treachery card that the Atreides don't get to see, for every one they win)
4. **Carthag** (the Harkonnen start with a Stronghold, Ornithopters and Harvesters).
5. **Good token revival** (the Harkonnen may revive 2 tokens for free each turn).
6. **Starting spice** (the Harkonnen start the game with 10 spice).
7. **Stealing leaders** (the Harkonnen may steal an opponent's leader when victorious in battle).

This seems overwhelming when compared to Fremen or Emperor, but those factions win much more often. One is likely to look at the stats and say: "Wait a second! The Harkonnen have 18% of the total victory points. Just behind the Fremen and Emperor". But you need to look more closely. If you do you will see Jeff (the most winning player in our group) has played the Harkonnen more than any other faction and has garnered the least victory points per play of any faction except the Bene Gesserit (we won't talk about BG issues here). Two of his victories were allied, and three of the six total victories were as an ally. So the Harkonnen make potent allies, but why don't they win more solo?

There are many more problems for the Harkonnen player than first meet the eye.

FEAR FACTOR

The first problem the Harkonnen face is the tendency of other players to see the Harkonnen as a dangerous opponent that must be "taken care of". The sooner the better. No one wants to face a Harkonnen player with a handful of cards so by attacking them early they feel they can eliminate them before they get too strong. Their starting position in Carthag and the lure of ornithopters make them a likely early target for players with a good hand and a willingness to fight, throw in a Karama card to negate hostage taking, and the upside seems much greater than the downside. Furthermore, an initial attack may leave the Harkonnen standing but then make them easy prey to a second attack by an opportunistic player. An early loss of 10 tokens, treachery cards and access to ornithopters can put the Harkonnen in a sorry state. In addition, recent analysis shows that the Harkonnen are likely to encounter a traitor in either Feyd or Beast. This may be from the perceived necessity to counter the Harkonnen traitors and the concern about double leader loss due to hostage taking.

SCARY SPICE

Spice is the currency of Dune, and the Harkonnen are in the **worst** position when it comes to spice. They lack the income of the Emperor or Guild, the free "shipping" of the

Fremen, the ability to use worthless cards like the BG, and the fore-knowledge of which treachery cards to bid on like the Atriedes. With all that against them the Harkonnen are the most spice-hungry of all factions. Odds are they are going to purchase or draw a lot of worthless or undesirable cards which creates the need for card “churning”. The only way to “churn” cards is to fight. To fight you have to ship tokens (which costs spice). When you fight you take losses. Token losses and treachery cards need to be replaced.. and this costs more spice. You get two free revivals which helps slightly but you may want/need to get another (which costs 2 spice). Then you have to get back to the planet again. You get the picture. As the Harkonnen you are going to need a **lot** of spice. How do you get that spice? Ornithopters. You can ship in, but that usually is too costly. It is two spice to ship to the desert and you can only pick up three spice per token. If you encounter any losses, due to storm or fighting, you just gave up any profit. So you **must** hold the ornithopters. Lose ornithopters and the rest of the game is an uphill battle. No spice to ship, slow movement, and no way to replenish cards is going to make for a lot of sitting around watching the game go by.

GO EARLY AND GO HOME

So when you combine the the likelihood of attack in Carthag with the need for spice to fuel the war machine and the Harkonnen have to be **very** careful in the early rounds. A lot can depend on storm position (i.e. – turn position) and location of spice blows. If the spice is close and the Harkonnen go late in the round they can venture out from Carthag and grab it, particularly if no one else is there or they face a weak opponent, but the odds are they will face the Atriedes or Fremen. On the other hand, if the Harkonnen go early in the round, any weakening of Carthag by moving troops out to grab spice leads to potentially two fights: one in Carthag and one at the spice and that is likely to be an expensive proposition. Meanwhile, buying cards or reinforcing Carthag depletes your starting spice reserves.

WHAT’S A GIRL TO DO?

First, the Harkonnen **must** protect Carthag and the ornithopters. Ornithopters are their best way to insure continued spice harvesting. It is unlikely that other players will take on the Harkonnen in Carthag if the Harkonnen keep a substantial force there. In Jeff’s solid article on basic Harkonnen strategy he says “Don’t weaken Carthag (much)”. I will go further and say don’t weaken Carthag at all and you may even want to reinforce it a small amount. You **might** be able to move a couple tokens out to grab some spice if the turn order is in your favor, but if **any** player moves after you (and this includes the guild of course) you have to carefully consider the likelihood of an attack from that faction on Carthag. Keep in the mind the Emperor and Guild gain spice tremendously quickly and can afford to throw tons of troops down on Arakis. If you are perceived as weak, particularly compared to the Atriedes in Arakeen either the Guild or Emperor is likely to take a run at you. Even a failed assault can cost you precious spice, so it is much better to avoid a fight all together by presenting a strong force and using intimidation if necessary.

Second, the Harkonnen **must** get a couple of cards into their hand. They really only need to buy one which, counting the two starting ones, results in what would be a full hand for anyone else. This is true even if the cards are all worthless. After all, no one knows this but the player themselves. If the cards are worthless, don’t be tempted to splurge and try to get better ones. Ten spice may seem like a lot, but until you get more you have to stretch it as far as it will go. The first card purchase is likely to cost about four spice,

which will leave you with six. After shipping a few tokens down to reinforce Carthag and potentially grab spice you won't be left with much. If the spice blow isn't near Carthag, if you encounter resistance and lose tokens, can't collect enough spice, or anything else unforeseen happens, you might need that little extra spice for turn two.

If all goes well in round one then your next move depends on how much spice you have. If you gathered a load of spice on turn one, you can start to get a little aggressive if you have the cards and turn position for it. Buy another treachery card, but don't overdo it. You won't pick up every spice blow so you need to save for the turns that you don't. If you didn't get spice on turn one, you have to be even more careful on turn two. Your spice reserves are dwindling. The temptation to get more cards may be strong, but no amount of cards will help you if you get wiped off the planet, lose ornithopters and don't have the spice to get back on. You will essentially be neutered in turn two. You are almost forced to hold up in Carthag and defend until you can safely get more spice. The opportunity to attack a weakling near Carthag may present itself and that could yield spice **if** you can kill their leader, but one must always keep in mind the potential for a loss, from traitor or otherwise, or the use of a cheap hero, which could result in a net loss of spice which you just can't afford. Nothing is certain in Dune, but the taking of risks **must** be carefully calculated and the first few turns are critical to the Harkonnen. The Harkonnen **must** be conservative in these early turns or risk being out of the game before it starts.

So why can't you win with the Harkonnen? It's most likely due to over-extending in the early turns. It can often seem like you "got unlucky" but like most things in Dune, it is more likely a confluence of events some of which were under your control. Jeff's article says "First priority is buying cards" but I think that is a mistake. You do need cards, but you don't have to fill your hand immediately. Every card you buy is really two, so you gain cards faster than anyone else anyway. Cards can be expensive. He also recommends "Be aggressive early". This is sound advice, but must be tempered with an eye to the turn position and opponent strengths. Even wins may more costly than anticipated. So my revised summary:

- 1) Keep Carthag strong.
- 2) Remember to save some spice.
- 3) Make spice acquisition your focus.
- 4) Attack with an eye to minimizing losses
- 5) Buy cards slowly but steadily

Once your position is solidified in the early turns, you will be a force to be reckoned in the mid-game and this is where most Harkonnen victories occur.