

The background of the cover features a large, reddish-brown planet, likely Mars, dominating the upper half of the frame. The sky is a deep blue with wispy white clouds. Below the planet, a vast, arid desert landscape stretches across the bottom half, characterized by rolling hills, valleys, and a hazy horizon under a warm, golden light.

# Tales of Jericho Reach

## Volume One

A collection of short fan fictions  
for Warcaster: Neo-Mechanika

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## Arrival

Tane's eyes opened with a start. He tumbled from bed and ran to the window, looking out from his fourth-story vantage over the rest of the city. He listened as the rumbling which had disturbed his sleep continued to grow in volume.

Was it an arc backup? Surely not. The fields were miles from town. Rather, it sounded like the noise the transports made when they came in too close, only deeper.

Much deeper.

Tane turned his eyes to the sky and saw a massive shape descending through the night-darkened clouds. Its shape was familiar to him. The color left his face, and he felt cold as even his blood retreated from the sight.

"No..." he said. "Not here..."

Lights exploded from the bottom of the ship. Tane flinched, but they were only floodlights. The bright white lights swept back and forth over the city. The people below were stumbling out of their doors or looking out of their windows like Tane. A handful of panicked screams could already be heard.

"CITIZENS OF JERICHO REACH!"

The processed voice bellowed from the great ship as it continued its descent.

"THIS SYSTEM IS NOW UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF THE IRON STAR ALLIANCE!"

If the statement had been intended to calm the citizenry, it had the opposite effect. People ran screaming through the streets. Tane heard a handful of sharp bangs as some took entirely ineffective shots at the warship with their field rifles.

"Daddy? What's going on?"

Tane's attention was drawn away from the window to the slim form of his daughter, still clad in her pajamas. The young girl climbed onto a nearby crate to get a better view of the tumult outside.

Tane grabbed her and set her down on the bed. He held up a warning finger.

"Amalla," he said in a stern voice, "We're leaving. Get your pack and put some food in it."

Amalla nodded and immediately hopped off the bed. Tane was glad that life in the Reach was rough enough that the girl had already learned to obey instantly in times of crisis.

The two of them flew around the cramped apartment for the next few minutes, packing food, necessities, and – in Tane's case – his field rifle and as much ammunition as he had on hand. Finally, Tane jammed a stuffed perisaur into the top of Amalla's small backpack and fastened it closed.

"There," he said with as much reassurance and as large a smile as he could muster. "Perry's coming with us."

Amalla looked up at him with large eyes. "Are we coming back, Daddy?"

Tane took a deep breath. "I hope so, sweetheart. Come on."

Rifle in hand, Tane led Amalla down the building's main staircase. The crush of other residents obliged him to carry her most of the way or risk being separated. When they got out to the street, Tane found a small alley that they could rest in and take stock of their surroundings.

Chaos reigned. People were dashing in all directions, few with any clear idea of where they were going. Many were carrying what valuables they could. Tane noticed more than a few were clearly carrying the valuables of others. He gave a cynical snort – it had taken less than fifteen minutes for the looting to start.

At one end of the street, a sudden burst of blue and white light coalesced into a ten-foot, floating orb. Men began stepping out from the orb of light and into the street. They wore sleek suits of polished white armor and carried advanced assault rifles.

Iron Star Alliance paladins.

Tane grabbed Amalla's arm and moved at a right angle to the soldiers, going across the stream of panicking citizens who were running directly away from the void gate. Several plowed into him, but he tightened his grip on Amalla's arm. Soon the two were safe on the other side of the street. Just then, another void gate opened up in front of the fleeing crowd and disgorged more paladins.

"Same old tactics," Tane muttered as he led Amalla away from the fray.

They wound their way through the back alleys of the city, avoiding one patrol and then another. Tane kept them out of the thoroughfares and away from any large groups that the paladins would be trying to corral. Eventually they came near a small house on the outskirts of the city.

"Stay here," Tane commanded. Amalla nodded quietly and sunk down. Tane approached the house alone. He pounded on the door.

A bedraggled old couple answered.

"Tane?" the woman asked. The elderly man behind her lowered his rifle.

"Are they here?" Tane demanded. Both the man and woman shook their heads.

"I need you to look after Amalla," Tane said. He turned and signaled the young girl. She came running to hide behind his legs.

"Of course," the woman responded. She gave Amalla a kind, grandmotherly smile.

"Where will you be?" the man asked. Tane shook his head.

"Can't tell you that. Safer for all of you."

"What should we tell them?"

"The truth. If they suspect you're hiding me, there's no telling what they might do."

Silence – broken only by the gowing noise of the invasion – reigned. Tane knelt to the ground to look his daughter in the eye. His eyes were already wet with tears, as were hers.

"Sweetheart, I need you to stay with your grandparents for a while."

Amalla shook her head, throwing tears in all directions, but she stayed quiet. She threw her arms around her father's neck and squeezed. He held her close.

The sound of a void gate opening forced him to push her away. Wordlessly, her grandmother reached down and pulled her up.

Tane picked up his rifle and ran. He dared not say goodbye.

He had been called 'Painbringer Tane' back on Bastion. Here he had just been 'Tane', or 'Daddy.'

But if the ISA was here, 'Painbringer' it would be again.

## Help

The wind was just beginning to pick up as Jonas arrived at the outpost. His old buggy objected loudly to the high speeds and bad road it had endured to reach it so quickly.

Jonas leapt out of the vehicle as soon as he was close. He ran to the door and banged on it with his fist. In the back of his mind he wondered why there were no guards already at the door.

A voice came from a nearby terminal. "Who's there?"

Jonas stepped to the side to into view of the terminal's camera. He saw a soldier's face looking back at him, wearing the green-and-brown colors of the local guard. The markings of a junior-grade officer – lieutenant, he thought – were visible on his shoulders.

"I'm Jonas Sarn, from Quinby! You've got to help. The geyser bugs have..."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," the lieutenant interrupted. He looked at something off camera, then turned back. "You got some ID?"

Jonas' face screwed into an incredulous expression. "What?"

"Ident card, bit of mail, anything?"

"No!" the young arc miner felt his face flush with anger. "I live just twenty miles from here! Nobody has..."

"Okay, okay. Hang on."

The door gave a heavy *clank* as it unlocked. Jonas immediately heaved it open and stepped into the outpost's airlock. He closed the outer door behind him and opened the inner door as quickly as he could.

Once inside the outpost, Jonas found himself surrounded by at least a dozen rangers. Several had weapons pointed toward him.

"Hold up," said a familiar voice. Jonas saw the officer he had been speaking to advance from a bank of consoles on the far side of the outpost. "He's clean."

"How do you know?" one of the other rangers asked, his battle rifle still aimed at Jonas' head.

"No ID. Iron Stars always have papers, even when they're undercover. It's how they think."

The other rangers seemed to accept this. They lowered their weapons and cleared away from Jonas.

"Iron Stars?" the miner asked as soon as his head stopped spinning. The lieutenant nodded in response.

"An ISA warship just knocked the *Sunrise* out of the sky. Jericho Reach is under attack."

Jonas' mouth went dry. He had heard of the Iron Star Alliance but had never actually encountered them. For them to be here, on such a lonely world as the Reach...

He shook his head. There were more important things.

"You've got to come to Quinby!" he said. "A nest of geyser bugs took over the west fields, and they've already killed two crews."

"Kid, we're buggin' out. Didn't you hear me? There's a war on."

The lieutenant swept his arm wide to indicate the rest of the outpost, and Jonas saw that he was correct. The other rangers were all busy packing up crates with everything that they could. Battle rifles, grenades, armor plates, and medical packs were all being loaded up. Some of the more portable computer systems were even being dismantled.

"But this is why you're here!" Jonas insisted. "You're supposed to protect us!"

One of the nearby rangers barked a harsh laugh. "Can't protect you if we're dead or in prison. Gotta get out of here before the Iron Stars come callin'."

“He’s right,” the lieutenant said with a sad shrug of his shoulders. “Besides, we’ve got our orders. General Atrapha’s put out the call. He’ll need all of us if we’re going to throw these bastards off the Reach.”

“I don’t give a damn about the Reach! I care about Quinby! I care about my friends!”

The words echoed around the confines of the outpost. The rangers, so busy before, all stopped and stood silent.

Jonas looked at each of them. He did his best to meet their eyes. Some of them just seemed sad, but others had to look away. At last he turned to face the lieutenant again.

“Please. We’re dying.”

The lieutenant gave a long sigh. He walked over to where one of the rangers was packing weapons into a crate and removed a handful. Into the emptied space he put grenades, armored vests, and other supplies.

When he was finished, the lieutenant closed up the heavy crate and pushed it toward Jonas.

“We can’t come with you,” he said. He held up a hand to forestall Jonas’ interjection as the young man opened his mouth. “But we won’t leave you defenseless. Take this. It’ll give you what you need.”

Jonas regarded the crate. “What if it’s not enough?”

“It’ll have to be.”

The lieutenant put a gloved hand on Jonas’ shoulder. “I’m sorry, kid. I know it’s not the way it’s supposed to be. That’s war, and war’s here – whether we like it or not. Odds are we’re all going to have to step up before this is all over.”

Jonas nodded silently. He picked up the crate, awkwardly balancing the heavy object as well as he could. The lieutenant opened the airlock door for him.

Outside, the wind was already filled with the hints of the coming sandstorm. Bits of dirt flew by at a growing speed. Jonas set the crate down and brought up the hood from his jacket.

“Looks like we’re in for it,” he said absently.

“You said it,” the lieutenant agreed as he closed the door behind him.

## Negotiations

“Hold up!”

Marek stopped the truck as soon as he heard the soldier’s command. The broken-down old hauler screeched and groaned as it ground to a stop. Marek popped a side window open on his cab and looked down over the treads to the armed man below.

“Yessir! What can I do for ya?”

“Papers!”

Marek nodded amiably and ducked back into the cab. He withdrew the required items from a thin storage compartment under his seat and gave them one last perusal. He willed himself to breathe easily. Old Elam’s work had not failed yet.

Yet. All the previous attempts had been with the Petrovich’s soldiers or with ranger detachments. These Iron Star paladins were new since the occupation.

Forcing a smile, Marek opened the cab’s door and climbed down over the hauler’s oversized treads. He handed the papers to the paladin, who took them without comment. Two more soldiers sauntered over from the guard post with their rifles loosely in hand.

“Got some diggin’ equipment for one of the outfits in the badlands,” Marek said as the soldier continued to leaf through the forms. He did not worry too much about his smile being obviously forced – after all, even legitimate drivers feared the arm of the law when it rested on their shoulders.

“So I see,” the paladin commented blandly. He stopped and examined a section more closely. When he looked up, Marek could feel the suspicion radiating from him like heat from a lit flamethrower.

“I don’t remember this mining crew from the approved list,” the paladin said, pointing to the listed recipient. “You sure they’re authorized? Regulations don’t take kindly to wildcatters.”

“Absolutely,” Marek nodded enthusiastically. “Ran the certificate myself before I loaded up. I think they’re new.”

The paladin said nothing but walked over to the guard post with the papers. Marek smiled at the other two soldiers and waited, listening to the wind whistling over the dusty landscape. Eventually the man returned and thrust the papers back at Marek.

“You’re good to go,” he said. Marek nodded his thanks and scampered quickly back into the hauler. It soon jolted to life and began rumbling once again towards the backwater mining town on the horizon.

\* \* \*

It was nearly evening by the time that Marek finally arrived. He pulled the hauler into a loading bay and locked it up. Nothing existed in the squalid little mining town that could be a distraction, so he headed straight for to the small cantina that served as a watering hold for the local residents. He pushed past the dust-covered laborers seeking refreshment at the bar, instead heading over to a small corner table where a seedy-looking woman sat nursing a tall glass.

Marek flopped into the seat opposite his contact. He held up a hand to a passing waiter, and soon had his own tall glass of...something brown.

“Any problems?” asked the contact.

Marek shook his head. “Smooth as silk.” He gave a little laugh. “Not that you’d find any silk out here, of course.”

His contact did not laugh. Instead, she reached into a pocket for a wrapped package. She placed it on the seat between herself and the smuggler, out of sight from the others in the bar.

“Your payment,” she said. Marek picked up the parcel just as clandestinely and tucked it into his jacket.

“Seems a little light.”

“It’s the same as ever.”

“That’s what I mean,” Marek said as he leaned a bit closer. “I’ve earned more.”

The contact’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve been given what we promised.”

“Yeah, but all the machines before were for exploratory mining. Little stuff. The machines you had me bring in today are for the big leagues.”

Marek lowered his voice. “You’ve found something – something the Petrovich Consortium would pay a lot to know about. Or maybe the new Iron Star boys with their fancy ship. I need a bit more to make sure I don’t let anything slip.” He leaned back and smiled broadly. “It’s only fair.”

“You’re walking a dangerous path,” the contact said. Marek saw her grip on the glass tightening.

“I’ve got protection.” The smuggler brought his other hand up from beneath the table and revealed a small, black box with a depressed lever on it.

“Deadman switch. The hauler’s rigged to blow if I let go. There’s your choices: kill me and try to find another runner willing to bring in your goodies, or just toss a few more credits my way and never worry about it again.”

The contact sat in silent contemplation for a moment.

“Do it.”

Marek raised an eyebrow. He was about to ask what that statement could possibly mean when a hand impossibly jutted forth from the wall behind him. It clasped around his mouth, preventing him from screaming and filling his nostrils with the stench of old leather and dirt.

Something jabbed him in the back. It was blunt at first, but then Marek heard the horrible sound of a fusion saw revving up. His innards muffled the noise as the saw eviscerated him from behind. All Marek could do was twitch and try ineffectually to scream.

His hand reached up. He wanted to let go of the box – to deny them the prize. Another pair of hands sprouted from the wall, along with a face masked in metal and red cloth. The second attacker seized his hand and swiftly brought their own fusion saw down on his wrist. The deadman switch was snatched away along with the bloody appendage.

Through it all, Marek’s contact said nothing. She simply drained her glass to its dregs, her expression one of extreme satisfaction. When it was all over and Marek’s blood-soaked corpse was allowed to slump into the thin cushions of the bench, she leaned over and retrieved the payment from Marek’s jacket.

“The Red Disciples thank you for your contribution,” she said as she stood up. “Negotiations are over.”



# Scrap

“Twenty credits. That’s it.”

Ronner crossed his arms and sat back in his chair. On the other side of the counter, the weather-beaten countenance of the scavenger glared back at him. The counter itself held a long, metallic tube that had been tightly coiled up and bound with some bits of rope. It was a silvery blue color except for one end, which tapered into a bone-colored talon.

The scrap dealer kept his face dispassionate as the man across from him fumed. The scavenger picked up the tube as if a better angle would change the price.

“It’s a good part,” he said in a pleading tone. “It works. I scanned it!”

“Good for what?” Ronner asked. He kept his tone even as he leaned forward. “That ain’t for any jack I’ve ever seen. Odds are I’ll have to melt it down.” He allowed his eyes to narrow. “Might be more trouble than it’s worth, even at twenty credits.”

The scavenger dropped the tube in disgust and muttered a coarse epithet, but he stuck out an open hand to accept payment. Ronner maintained his placid expression as he counted out the credits and waited for the man to leave.

The door had barely closed before Ronner snatched up the tube. He stepped from his storefront into a small room overflowing with dusty chunks of salvage he had yet to clean or sort. The scrap dealer picked his way through the mess to reach a large blue bin in the corner.

Ronner tossed the coiled tube into the bin, where it fell among a number of similar pieces. Some were tubes of various lengths; others were large shards of the same bone-colored material that made up the ‘talon’ end of virtually all of the tubes. None of them looked particularly impressive – or expensive.

Yet, Ronner’s expression was one of smug satisfaction as he left the storage room. He tapped a comm terminal on the wall and keyed in a long passcode. He sighed in annoyance as the signal trilled and trilled again, waiting for the party on the other end to connect.

A staticky image appeared on the terminal and a processed, mechanical voice spoke.

“Ronner.”

“Ezekiah. I’ve got another part for you. When are you coming to collect?”

“Soon.”

The scrap dealer folded his arms and adopted the same impassive face he had brought to bear against the scavenger.

“That’s what you said last time. This stuff’s starting to pile up. I run a salvage yard, not a storage business.”

“Pile up?” Ezekiah asked, a note of fear creeping into his voice. “You aren’t keeping the pieces together, are you? I warned you about...”

Ronner waved his hand dismissively, careful to keep his face stony.

“Don’t worry about that. Worry about me selling these to some other collector if you don’t show up soon with my credits.”

The terminal was silent for a moment although the static-filled screen remained. At last, Ezekiah replied “I will be there in a week. Keep the pieces apart.”

Ronner tapped the terminal again, ending the call. He nodded approvingly to himself.

\* \* \*

That night, Ronner awoke to the sound of silence. It took him a moment to even realize that he was awake – much less what had awakened him. Then it hit him: the lights were out. He looked around his room, trying to make out shapes in the dark. Outside he could hear the voices of his neighbors yelling.

“Damned generators,” he muttered as he crawled out of bed and fumbled for the manual release on his window’s covering. The old metal creaked as Ronner forced it open. Just as he had suspected, the entire town was dark. A few people were already in the streets, shouting and pointing towards the generator shed. He just sighed and turned back towards his bed. The engineers would fix things soon enough.

He stopped. He could feel something in his feet: a low, barely audible *thrummm thrummm* from the shop below.

Ronner grabbed a cobbled-together laser pistol and a flashlight. “Damned thieves,” he muttered as he descended the stairs to his shop. “Takin’ advantage of a bad generator to steal my...”

He halted in mid-sentence, the staircase door hanging ajar. No thieves were present, nor any machine that might explain the growing *thrummm thrummm*. Yet as he looked around, Ronner saw a pale light shining under the door to his storage room.

He approached cautiously, the flashlight held out and a trembling finger already on the pistol’s trigger. The light moved about but no sound came from the room besides the everpresent hum.

Gingerly, Ronner opened the door. He gasped. Floating above the blue bin in the corner was a sinister alien shape. Its top was a sleek ovoid sphere below which writhed a series of undulating metal tubes.

Ronner’s eyes bulged as he recognized those tubes. With growing terror he slowly accounted for every piece he had absently tossed into the bin. Another of the tubes – the very one he had added earlier that day – floated from the bin and nestled with the rest.

The hum grew louder. Ronner moved to cover his ears, but in doing so he brought the light of the flashlight up and onto the machine’s form. It moved to look at him with a single, great eye. The scrap dealer’s blood ran cold as it began to float towards him.

He fired the laser pistol, hitting the machine just to the left of its eye. It stopped, and for a second Ronner thought he might have actually damaged it.

Then the mass of tentacle-like tubes lashed out, shoving Ronner across the hall and into the wall. He wheezed, trying to get his breath back. He looked up to see the great eye staring down at him.

A blast of void energy filled the hall.

## In a Flash

Arc storms, Rana thought, were the worst part of life in the Reach. A buildup of particles from arc geysers merged with one or another of the sandstorms that routinely crossed the dry stretches of the southern continent, supercharging what was already a problematic bit of weather. Sand and stone blew at unbelievable speeds while electric bursts cracked nonstop until the storm decided it was done.

Rana did her best not to look out the windows as she cleaned her rifle for the third time that day. She already knew there was nothing to see but flying dirt and the occasional bolt of lightning. The windows were salvaged from old starships; they were made to withstand far more than even an arc storm. Yet it never failed to make Rana jittery to actually see one. Having one all around the bunker was even worse. There was no escape out any of the viewpoints.

Another bolt of arc-fueled lighting flashed outside, and all of the lights inside went dark. Rana looked up from her work and moaned.

“Generator’s had it,” somebody said as a few suit-mounted lights were clicked on.

“What about the emergency generator?” Rana asked. Already the darkness was oppressive.

“Wind blew that over an hour ago,” came the reply from Captain Bryk. “Blew it back, too, but the cord’s popped. We’ll have to do without until the storm’s over.”

“What in the Dark Halls?!”

All of the rangers turned to regard the one who had given the shout. He stood by one of the windows with a horrified expression.

“Someone’s trying to get in!”

The entire population of the bunker scrambled to see. Rana herself could only barely manage to make out several figures clustered around the main airlock door. Their cloaks and armor plates, though covered in dust, were clearly those of her own battalion.

“Poor bastards,” Bryk said. “There’s no way we can open those doors without power.”

The words pierced Rana. She stared at the handful of soldiers trying to cover themselves as they faithfully waited for the doors to open. She watched as they pounded again and again on the unfeeling, unyielding metal.

Before she fully knew what she was doing, Rana was halfway to the back of the bunker. She wrapped her cloak around her face and pulled down her goggles.

“Rana! Where are you going!”

She dared not answer as she threw open the inner door to the back airlock. Bryk’s boots thundered across the bunker after her.

“They’ll be dead before you even get to the cord! Don’t throw...”

The last of Bryk’s statement was cut off as Rana slammed the door behind her and locked it. She took a deep breath.

A bolt of lightning struck directly outside the door, sending shockwaves into the airlock. Rana fought the urge to run back into the bunker. Whatever she avoided, she told herself, those other rangers would have to endure.

Rana grabbed the manual release on the outer door and cranked it as hard as she could. It stuck, the force of the wind outside pressing the door hard into its setting. It was only with massive effort that she was able to wrest it open.

The wind instantly blew in and threw Rana to the ground. She closed her eyes instinctively despite the protective goggles. Slowly, she got back to her feet. The sand was unable to work past her layers of protection, but the brute force of the wind felt like a gigantic hand pushing her back.

Rana ducked her head down and pushed forward. She could barely see more than a few feet in front of her. She kept one hand firmly against the side of the bunker as she worked her way towards where the wires had to be. She did not even bother trying to get the airlock door closed again.

Another bolt of lightning struck the ground ten feet from where she was. Rana threw herself against the bunker wall, her breath coming fast.

“Damn!” she shouted, and the word vanished into the wind.

Step by step, Rana made her way to the side of the bunker. Sometimes the wind blew against her; sometimes it threatened to blow her forward or to slam her into the wall.

Finally in the chaotic swirl she thought that she glimpsed the thick, black cord.

The wind began to roar even more fiercely. Rana felt like she might be carried off at any moment. Yet she could swear that she could hear voices on the wind. The patrol was crying out, caught in the open as the storm pelted them even harder.

With a scream of pure willpower, Rana threw herself forward and grabbed the cord with one hand. She fumbled in the increasingly powerful storm to find the other cord.

There!

Her fingers curled around a long, flexible tube that could only be the matching cord. Rana jammed her hands together and willed the two cords to connect. She felt a click, then a bright flash of blue-white light filled her vision.

\* \* \*

The gates powered on, and the rangers scurried into the main airlock as quickly as they could. They coughed and wheezed as the airlock swiftly exchanged the sand-filled air for the clean air of the bunker.

Out in the yard, by the emergency generator, nothing remained of Rana but a scorch mark on the ground and a pair of broken goggles soon carried away by the storm.

## Alternative Uses

“Prepare yourselves, vassals.”

The Immortal passed her hand over the assembled congregation. Dozens of men and women wearing the blood-colored cloaks of the Red Disciples waited eagerly for her admonition.

“In a moment a select few will ascend to the battlefield. Your objective is this.”

She brought forth the orb in her right hand. The image of a tripod tower, tall and gleaming, flickered into being above the orb. A control panel could be glimpsed at its base. The panel’s small size gave a hint as to how large the tower itself must be.

“A comm relay?”

The congregation gave a fearful hush, and several backed away from the vassal who had dared to speak – especially in such disbelieving tones. Cayn looked only at the Immortal as she received his question.

“Correct.” The Immortal hovered a bit higher so that she could see Cayn clearly among the masses. “The Heirotheos’ project requires more energy to be finished. We shall be using this relay and others to shunt power to it. It is not efficient, but it is usable in our hour of need.”

The Immortal looked directly at Cayn. Although he could not see her eyes behind her psychokinetic hood, he felt her gaze.

“Remember that the Continuum always seeks alternative uses for our resources. Those who learn this will be rewarded.”

Two void gates opened next to the Immortal. Flashes of gunfire could already be seen on the other side.

“Timolt. Vexin. Annara.”

The three named vassals plunged into the first of the void gates, collapsing it. The Immortal passed her hand over the congregation again.

“Edden. Cayn. Sare.”

Cayn bolted through the void gate just ahead of the other two. He gripped his pistol and fusion saw tightly. A rush of cold and a brief feeling of floating through nothing, and then he was on the battlefield.

Weapons fire came from every side. The battle was already well underway as other members of the Red Disciples fought against a deployment of blue-and-white paladins from the *Lawgiver*.

The trio quickly sought cover. Cayn could see the outline of the objective appear on his mask’s viewscreen. It was behind a protective wall of some sort, with the door on the far side.

“There!” He called to the others, gesturing with his nailer.

“We’ll never make it!” Sare yelled over the rage of battle. She snapped a few shots off at a paladin who had gotten too close. He fell, a bloody hole in his armor.

A flood of energy washed over the vassal reavers. Their mimetic cloaks responded to the sudden infusion of arc from the Continuum warcaster. Each one’s form shifted and blurred. They were not invisible, but they would be much harder to hit.

“For glory!” shouted Edden, pushing past both of his ostensible squadmates as he charged toward the objective. Cayn and Sare scrambled after him. The trio blasted away with their nailers at an unlucky squad of paladins taking cover near the protective wall, shredding their bodies and then crouching among the corpses for cover.

Cayn took stock of their situation. None of the other paladins were near enough to get a reliable shot off at the cloaked reavers. At the edge of the field, a pair of Firebrand warjacks equipped with harbinger cannons were busy terrorizing the other vassals as they swarmed from more void gates. He looked over at the wall. It was thick, and tall enough to be practically unscalable. The door on the other side could

probably be hotwired or at least taken apart with their fusion saws, but a handful of automated defenses were already in place over there.

He glanced down at the control box for his mimetic cloak. Overloading it would let them phase through the wall, but that would expend their arc. Their stealth would be gone, and either of the two Firebrands would make short work of them if they did not make it to the wall in time.

An evil smile appeared underneath Cayn's mask. Without a word to his fellows he hopped over the barricade and sprinted toward the wall. Over his shoulder he could hear Sare yelling something at him.

He hit the controls. The shimmer of his cloak evaporated as the circuits overheated. He heard the thundering fire of the harbinger cannon and the screams of Sare and Edden as they soaked up its fury.

Cayn threw himself at the wall. It was the reverse of going through the void gate. That had given him a feeling of weightlessness; this made him feel sluggish and grounded.

He landed heavily on the other side. A single technician stood by a control panel, surprise evident on his face. Cayn's fusion saw made short work of him.

The reaver tapped a few controls on the panel, giving the Red Disciples control. He looked up to see arc already pulsing through its relays.

Cayn smiled. He had accomplished the goal and found an alternative use for his squadmates. He would be richly rewarded today.

## Shore Leave

“That’s the dumbest idea I’ve heard tonight,” Kren drawled, a playful light coming into his eyes. “And there’s some stiff competition there.”

Dorn shrugged. “What’s the point of shore leave if you don’t have fun?” he rejoined.

The other enforcers at the table laughed.

“Fun don’t mean needin’ to see the medic when we get back to the *Lawgivier*,” Lana answered.

“Speak for yourself,” muttered Gil, touching one of the larger scars that crisscrossed his face.

Lana slapped him with the back of her hand. “You know what I mean.” She nodded to the bar’s door, where a slim-waisted woman stood making eyes at Dorn through the smoke and haze. “That woman’s trouble. I know.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Lana slapped Gil again, eliciting a laugh from both Dorn and Kern. The latter paused a moment and then addressed Dorn in a quiet voice.

“Look, I’m not going to pull rank on you tonight,” Kern said, “But this is a bad idea. This city’s full of people who hate us.”

“Backwater thugs don’t scare me.”

“Just be careful out there. Your armor and force generator are a long way from here.”

Dorn stood up, rifling through his jacket pockets until he came up with a handful of credits.

“Next round’s on me,” he said as he dropped the money on the table.

“Have fun,” Lana smirked.

“Find out if she’s got a friend,” Gil muttered. Dorn turned away before the inevitable backlash from Lana. He maneuvered through the crowd of other off-duty paladins infesting the local bar, making his way as straight as possible for the girl.

“Hi,” he said. She gave him a sultry smile.

“Hi yourself. I’m Nora.”

“Dorn.”

She flicked her gaze to the nearby door. “You wanna get out of here, Dorn?”

He nodded, and the pair quickly made their way out of the bar and into the relatively cleaner night air of the city.

They walked together for a few minutes, exchanging light conversation under the streetlights, until Nora turned down a small side street.

“This is me,” she said. Dorn followed.

It took him a few more steps to realize that this particular side street had no exit. In fact, it was not a street at all but rather a dead-end alley.

A shadow moved between the alley and the streetlight. Dorn looked back to see a large man standing in the entryway. He turned to say something to Nora and saw that a handful of men had come out of hiding to stand near her.

They were all looking at him.

“Sorry, baby,” Nora said, though her voice held no sorrow at all. “Guess I forgot to mention my friends. They love meeting Iron Star bastards.”

The thugs began to slowly advance on Dorn. They took their time, giving him a moment to scan the environment.

Escape was not an option; the alley only had one exit and that was covered. Dorn took a position in the narrowest area he could find, allowing only room for a couple of the thugs to get at him.

The off-duty paladin swung his left arm up to deflect the first blow. His right thrust out to hit his attacker squarely in the stomach. As the thug puffed out all the air in his lungs, Dorn brought his left back around and followed up with a hard punch to the chest. The winded thug went down.

The man's demise did not seem to concern his friends, as two of them moved in. The smaller one rushed Dorn from the side, knocking the paladin off-balance. The larger one followed with a brutal slam that sent him hurtling into the wall.

Dorn's right shoulder took the brunt of the impact and exploded in pain. He instinctively cried out as the joint was forced from its socket. His vision blurred with tears, reducing his view of the alley and its inhabitants to a hopeless muddy mess. He could not react in time as another of the thugs delivered a vicious kick to one leg, sending him to the ground.

"Ya think you're tough?" the largest one sneered, his lip twisting grotesquely. "We rolled one a'your precious pally commanders the other week. Left 'im sobbin' like a baby."

Dorn looked up with a grim, yet satisfied expression.

"So," he said, "You're the ones that sent Commander Krenth to the medbay."

A high-pitched beeping sound filled the alleyway. Dorn's left hand emerged from a pocket in his jacket, holding a small rod that pulsed with a soft white light. At first the thugs all backed away in anticipation of the item exploding, but their leader corrected them.

"It's a transmitter!" Nora shoved the nearest thug towards Dorn. "Wreck it!"

The thug grabbed Dorn's hand without hesitation. Dorn struggled, but his injuries left him unable to contribute both hands to the contest. The thug gave him a body blow that knocked the air from him and wrested the transmitter away. He dropped it to the ground and crushed it with a heavy stomp.

The beeping died away. Nora's face went from panicked to predatory.

"Just us again," she said. "That wasn't active nearly long enough for your ship to get a lock."

"That's okay," came a voice from the end of the alleyway. "We weren't all that far away as it was."

The thugs looked to see Kern, Lana, and Gil arrayed at the street entrance. Gil was unceremoniously throwing the limp body of the lookout to one side while the other two held batons at the ready.

Kern inclined his head to the wounded Dorn. "Paladin, what's your status?"

Dorn straightened up as best he could. "I'm all right, Sarge. Guilt confirmed. They're the ones we're after." He smiled wryly, "Good news, Gil. She did have a friend for you. Plenty for all of us, in fact."

Gil returned the smile, while Kern's eyes lit up. The paladin sergeant pointed his baton down the alley. "Squad Two! Forward!"



## Analysis

A klaxon wailed in the hangar, and accompanying red-and-purple lights strobed across the vast room. Saber guardian 2X-553 stood motionless in formation with its brethren as the warnings sounded all around. A few servitor units floated from one place to another, fixing this thing or that. Despite the many hours – no, years – of preparation there was still much to be done.

The guardian knew its role and remained still until the time came. Perhaps ‘knew’ was not the entirely proper term. After all, the mechanical being had no mind or personality of its own; no soul to speak of. It was just a body of steel and circuits built to be directed by an Aeon in the service of the Emyreans and their Great Constellation. A puppet.

And yet...

No architect had ever intended for the guardians, the vanguards, the fulcrums, or the thousands of other servitors they had created to be absolutely controlled by the Aeons. After all each Aeon was responsible for a vast host upon the battlefield. It would be impossible for a single entity, no matter how advanced, to regulate every step, every shot, and every little movement of every servitor.

Thus, the architects among the Emyreans had given each of their mechanical servants some degree of autonomy. While the power to make large-scale decisions was still absent, a saber guardian could easily translate a general order to destroy a target into the cascade of smaller decisions needed to make that order happen. This limited awareness and capacity for self-motivation had given birth to a strange sort of intellect within the robotic ‘minds’ of the servitors. In these minds there was no philosophy. There was no driving desire or over-arching goal. There was not even the consideration of one moment to the next. All that existed was an analysis engine that took in orders and calculated the best way to carry them out.

As the klaxons continued, the analysis engine of saber guardian 2X-553 whirred along. Its sensors were taking in the presence of its kin: the hundreds of fellow guardians waiting in the hangar. It calculated the force that they were capable of bringing to bear against their foes.

A preparatory subroutine automatically called up images of those foes. Humans, they were called. The images displayed them in all manner of armor and bearing all kinds of weapons. They were quite the variable group, given the sheer space that they took up in the saber guardian’s databanks.

Not that their variability could save them. 2X-553’s databanks contained the specifications of every weapon and defense that the Emyreans had ever witnessed in the hands of a human. They also contained the specifications for its own weapons and those of its fellow servitors: weapons designed for the sole purpose of ending humans.

Why the humans needed to be ended was not a question that 2X-553 entertained. To be fair, it did not entertain any questions at all.

An order pulsed through the minds of all the guardians. Immediately they shifted their stances and faced the far wall. New information came pouring in to 2X-553’s databanks.

The targets were opening a massive void gate; one of the originals left behind when the Emyreans had abandoned the planet. The gate was being channeled to this location, possibly to others as well. Why the targets would open a gate and invite their own destruction, 2X-553 did not know. It did not care. It was not capable of caring.

The void gate opened. The yawning chasm filled the whole of the hangar wall and the sound of its roar drowned out even the wail of the klaxon. Saber guardian 2X-553’s optical sensors registered nothing but darkness at first.

Stone became visible first. Then stalactites. 2X-553's analysis engine determined that it was looking at the ceiling of a large cave of some sort.

That information led to a direct conclusion: the gate must be oriented horizontally instead of vertically. 2X-553's processor found a trigger for that information in its databanks and sent out the requisite signals. Its internal gyroscopes powered up, and small thrusters prepared to reorient it once it passed through the gate. 2X-553 noted that the rest of the guardians in its formation were performing the same preparations.

A series of departure orders washed through the horde of servitors. Those closest to the void gate stepped through, and the rest followed as quickly as they could. 2X-553 soon found itself the next in line.

Its optical sensors registered heavy weapons fire on the other side, both Empyrean and human. Blasts of arc and flame could be seen on all sides.

Saber guardian 2X-553 readied its systems and stepped through the gate.

If it could, it would have grinned.

## Cave In

The first tremor shook the entire complex. Dust fell from the cave ceiling, scattering across the workbenches arrayed throughout the room.

The grafter looked up from his work. “What is Raxis doing?” he muttered.

More tremors came, each doing more damage than the last. The caves where the Continuum mechanic had set up his equipment began to collapse.

“Find cover!” he yelled to his assistants as the ceiling caved in. The grafter jammed his own bulky, augmented frame beneath his workbench. Rocks banged against the reinforced surface. The grafter smiled, pleased to see that the workbench held up under the strain.

Eventually the tremors stopped, and the cavern complex ceased its collapse. The grafter placed three of his metal hands against the largest stone blocking his exit and pushed. It moved with surprisingly little force, indicating that there was air above. Emboldened by this discovery, the grafter shoved the rock aside. Only a spatter of gravel fell into the space under the workbench.

The grafter swiftly dug the rest of his way out and switched on the work lamp fused to his armor.

It was not as bad as it might have been. The collapse had been primarily in the tunnels, with the reinforced ceilings in the main room preventing too much earth from falling. Half of the equipment was buried, and much of the rest was damaged, but it was not a total loss.

A groan reached the grafter’s ear – or rather, his auditory receiver. He turned to see one of his assistants crawling out from under a table that had been partially crushed. The man’s arms were torn and the side of his face was bloody. The grafter initiated a quick scan and saw that one of the man’s legs had been broken. Apart from that, his assistant had survived the collapse intact.

“Excellent,” the grafter nodded. He noted that the table which the assistant had used for cover had broken under the weight of several large stones. He turned back to examine his own workbench, which had emerged relatively unscathed. Four arms swept the debris away from the top and revealed little cosmetic damage.

The grafter smiled underneath his rebreather. He would have to note the techniques he had used in constructing this workbench.

The next topic to attract the augmented mechanic’s attention was that of escape. He strode carefully across the uneven floor to the nearest collapsed tunnel. He studied the area for a moment, then grimaced. The moans of the wounded assistant were becoming distracting. He tapped a button on the side of his head and instantly all sound ceased.

There. That was better.

Now free of the nuisance, the grafter carefully examined the collapse. He poked and scraped at several portions of earth. Eventually he felt confident enough that he brought out his bone saw and began chewing away at a particular section. A few minutes of work produced a cylindrical hole about two feet wide and three feet long that pointed toward the surface at a steep angle.

Next, he began digging around some of the half-buried storage boxes. From the corner of his eye he could see that the assistant had finally managed to fully disinter himself and was now resting on a large, flat rock. He considered ordering the man to help him dig but rejected the idea. The wounds would need to be patched up first, and there was work to do before that.

One of the boxes finally yielded what the grafter had been searching for: a damaged holophage cannon taken from a scrapped warjack.

“Still serviceable,” the grafter smiled as he brought the long-shafted weapon to the tunnel. He gently placed the barrel into the divot that he had dug, and then firmly planted its butt into the ground.

A few touched wires later, the cannon began spewing great blasts of corrosive energy. The grafter waited until the device started to send up thin wisps of white smoke before disconnecting it. The barrel was melted when he brought it out of the divot.

Bending low, the grafter examined the work. All had been as he had hoped. The barrage had created a long, stable tunnel of the same width as the original divot all the way to the surface. He could see the fading light of day several hundred feet away.

Still, there were more problems to be solved. The aperture of the tunnel was only about two feet wide – nowhere near enough to accommodate his bulky frame. He would need to send a message. But how to ensure it was delivered to the correct people?

The grafter looked around the ruins of his workshop for inspiration. His gaze settled on a marvelous piece of equipment that had already been field-tested in adverse conditions. He smiled.

“That will do.”

It took the better part of an hour to complete construction. The assistant had to be sedated until the housing for the rocket that would propel him to the surface was complete. Space was still an issue, but the removal of the assistant’s arms enabled him to fit snugly within the capsule. The grafter made certain to remedy the broken leg. After all, who knew how long the man would need to walk before finding a reliable member of their sect?

The grafter was thankful that he had neglected to turn his auditory receiver back on. The sedation had worn off about halfway through, and while the assistant’s thrashing had been problematic, the screaming had not been.

At last, the makeshift rocket and its human occupant were placed in the same position that the holophage cannon had been. The grafter opened a side panel in order to access the assistant’s face.

“Tell the others where I am. I will stay here and see what I can dig out.”

The man’s tear-stained face nodded, and the grafter closed the panel. He hit a button and sent the rocket screaming up to the surface.

## Necessary Measures

Colonel Phlax stood before the main table of his briefing room onboard the *Lawgiver*. A display of the capital city and the surrounding terrain took up most of the table's space, projected as a three-dimensional frame. Phlax could see everything from the mountainous regions to the north and west all the way to the river winding through the southern fields. The representation even displayed the mighty shape of the *Lawgiver* itself as it hovered just far enough away from the city that it did not entirely block the sun.

Phlax reached out with his hand and traced a few lines through the mountain region. His hand interfered with the projection, but it resumed its precise gridline formation immediately after the interruption had passed. He walked over to a nearby side table and picked up one of a handful of scattered reports. His frown only grew more severe as he read.

A ping at the door caught the ISA Colonel's attention. He walked over to the door and activated a terminal on one side. The terminal's screen showed two ISA paladins standing abreast of a flabby, irritated little man wearing the ostentatious robes of a colony administrator.

"You summoned me?" the man said with a barely-suppressed sneer.

Phlax closed the screen and unlocked the door. He motioned for the two guards to wait as the Administrator was brought in.

"Mister Barro..." he began.

"Administrator."

"Administrator Barro," Phlax corrected himself. He walked to the side table and perused the gathered papers. "I wonder if you have heard the reports of Continuum forces gathering in the mountains outside of town."

"The Disciples have never been a major concern for the capital," Barro answered as he advanced to look over the projection of his city in the middle of the room. He offered the image of the *Lawgiver* a passing glare. "At least they weren't before you lot showed up."

"I'm sure. The presence of light discomforts all creatures of darkness. Aha! Speaking of which..."

Phlax turned around, holding up the papers that he had been searching for. He brought them over to where Barro was standing and handed them to him.

"What're these?" the administrator asked as he took the reports. Although his tone was easy and insolent, his face grew a shade paler as he looked over what was written.

Phlax clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace.

"Those are the last batch of incident reports. I'm afraid that your citizens have been pushing back quite a bit of late."

"We aren't used to people telling us what to do," Barro noted. "We're a free people. At least, we were."

"Indeed. And your appetite for personal liberty is quite costly."

Phlax nodded toward the papers. "If you will note the tab on the far right, it marks how many paladins were necessary to restore order in each circumstance."

Barro shook his head as he scanned the papers again. "Right next to everybody's name, address, and shoe size. You Iron Stars love your figures," he muttered.

"Of course. Our attention to detail is what has allowed us to create such masterpieces as this warship, and to extend our reach even...well, even to the Reach." He shrugged amiably at the unintentional pun.

"In fact, my analysts have told me – now where is that other one? Here!" Phlax picked up a rather thick bundle of papers filled with graphs and calculations and brought it over to Barro. "They tell me that

based on those numbers and our previous experience with such uncooperative citizenry that a single squad of paladins can reliably pacify a group of up to 7.3 civilians, and four times that amount if they are allowed to use lethal force.”

“I’d hate to see that point three fellow,” Barro quipped.

“I would hate to see the lethal force.”

Phlax had stopped pacing, and now fixed Barro with a severe look. His last words hung in the air. Barro gulped.

“The Red Disciples of the Aeternus Continuum are a problem that I cannot ignore, and they will take many of the paladins at the *Lawgiver*’s disposal to eradicate. In a few hours I will be sending Commander Cinere to deal with the problem along with whatever resources she needs. This will leave the *Lawgiver* and your town with a minimum of patrols to keep the peace.”

Slowly, Phlax advanced toward the city administrator. The thump of his heavy boots underscored his words.

“I will not have my current liberty of reinforcing my paladins. They will need to cover more ground, and to cover it quickly. If they encounter trouble within the city, they will not have the luxury of expending all their options before taking necessary measures.”

Phlax was very close to Barro. The edges of the papers the latter was holding bent as they encountered the armored chest of the former.

“Do I make myself clear?”

Administrator Barro nodded, his large eyes never breaking from Phlax’s gaze.

“Excellent. You may go.”

Barro hustled towards the door. Halfway there, the Colonel called to him.

“One other thing, Administrator. Should some outside force take advantage of the strained nature of our patrols to wrest control of the city from me, this will render the entire location a lawless zone. Lawless zones are not permitted within range of the *Lawgiver*’s cannons.”

He gestured to the papers that Barro was still holding.

“You may keep those,” Phlax said. “The names and addresses may be of use to you in making certain everyone is on their best behavior.”

“Yes, Colonel,” Barro acknowledged. His voice was hollow, and his eyes were distant. By the time he left the room it was clear that he was already mentally down on the planet’s surface.

Phlax sighed wearily. He passed his hand over the projection of the city, caressing its edges in an effort not to disturb the image.

“Rest quietly tonight, fair citizens,” he murmured, “Else you may not live to see the sunrise.”

# Tactics

Heran felt as if he were floating in an endless sea.

No, not a sea. If he was in a sea, then he would have felt the presence of water all around him. He would have felt the push and pull of the current. Mindless, perhaps, but it would at least have been something besides himself. Floating with nothing but himself for company was worse.

The Aeon turned his attention outwards – that was his role for the moment, after all. He was to gather information and report back. It would not be to the comfort and togetherness of the Great Constellation, but it would be contact with another. That was something.

Heran sent his will out to touch his machine-servants. Sabers and oculi, sentinels and fulcrums all responded to the touch of his mind. He saw through their eyes; felt through their metal limbs. For an instant it felt like being back among the Great Constellation.

It was a false feeling and it faded quickly. The other presences were just extensions of himself. It was like being surrounded by mirrors.

Heran could see himself through the eyes of his servants – or rather, he saw the body of steel and wire that he temporarily occupied. It was a majestic form. A form built for war and to inspire awe in a subservient populace.

A pity that the humans had never been subservient.

He directed his attention to the scouts. They had already ranged far, and through their eyes he saw many vantage points. It astonished him how much this planet had changed from its ancient days. Once it had been a grand marshalling point for the Emphyreans' armies. Now it was a dust-ridden and wild land. A field left to fallow.

Most of the scouts reported the same sad landscape and nothing else. Two, however, demanded closer scrutiny. Though one scout Heran glimpsed groups of humans in armor, pointing their primitive weapons at each other. There were perhaps fifty scattered about the remains of a crude mining operation. Light flashed between them at random as they fired.

The other scout showed Heran a view of a town. A hundred humans of various sizes and colors moved about the simple dwellings on a hundred different tasks. They spoke to each other, gave and took things, and in general swarmed about.

Heran studied the two views. When he felt that he had seen enough he removed his will from the mechanical puppets, keeping only a subconscious connection in case of trouble.

The Aeon left his mechanical housing. His spirit, unlimited by the concerns of space and time, floated in the void to contact the one who was waiting for him. The latter Aeon beckoned to Heran as he approached.

“What have you found?” Ratal asked.

“I have found two places where we may attack,” Heran answered. “One is a field of arc geysers. The humans have armed men there – I believe they are attacking each other to determine control.”

“And the other?”

“A place of residences. Nothing but dwelling places where the humans sleep and eat before going to geyser fields.”

“Your recommendation?”

Heran adopted a superior air. “We fall upon the geyser fields. The dwellings are nothing. They do not even house soldiers. We need the arcanessence.”

“We need the arcanessence,” agreed Ratal. Something lurked in his voice, however. The elder Aeon continued.

“If we attack the fields, we will lose many servitors.”

“This is war,” Heran rejoined. “They are tools of war.”

“They are finite.” Ratal’s tone was a thunderclap loosely wrapped in low, soft tones. Heran felt the sting of the words – of the implied rebuke for disregarding the millennia of work that it had taken to create these ‘disposable’ soldiers.

Silence fell between the two beings. Heran shuddered at this artificial aloneness.

“I shall attack the fields,” Ratal continued, his voice no longer a rebuke but still firm. “But first, you shall attack the dwellings.”

Heran could not help himself. “Why?” he asked.

“Your attack shall draw the forces from the field. They will be stretched. When they find me attacking the fields, they will have to choose which to defend. Perhaps they will split. Perhaps they will return. Perhaps they will go on. Whatever they choose, they will not face us entire and in their fortifications.”

“We could wait for them to kill each other in conflict...”

“We have waited long enough.”

It was not opinion, it was fact – and Heran knew it. The galaxy could not afford delay.

“The people of the dwellings are not soldiers,” he protested.

“The only difference between a civilian and a soldier is a gun,” retorted Ratal. “Every one of them we leave alive today will need to be killed tomorrow, and they will be buoyed by hatred and bolstered with arms. We will end them now.”

He came closer, his being nearly touching that of Heran.

“You will end them now.”

“Yes,” Heran bowed.

Ratal withdrew. “Go. I will gather my forces and attack the fields soon. Do not spare a single one of them.”

Heran left the presence of his fellow Aeon and began to stretch himself out once again to his army, and to his own temporary body of steel and wires.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.



## The Third Path

General Atrapha flopped down on a flat, heavy rock. He breathed as steadily as he could, focusing on one inhalation and exhalation at a time. The high mountain air was thin; each breath felt like it was barely drawing in anything despite his chest heaving visibly. The grey-maned military man tightened his hands into fists and forced his lungs to calm. Already he was beginning to see tiny black dots at the edges of his vision.

Atrapha ground his teeth together. He could not risk hyperventilating. He glanced at the readout on his bracer's display, hoping that some of his suit's oxygen supplies still remained.

Nothing. The readout displayed the same dismal '0' that it had the last dozen times he had checked. He was going to have to make it on his own declining constitution.

The general turned to look up the sloping mountainside. Just how far up could the old woman live, anyway?

"General Atrapha Petrovich. Welcome."

Atrapha leapt to his feet and spun around in one smooth motion. His military reflexes snapped up his right hand, weapon primed and pointed at the source of the sound.

He blinked in an attempt to dispel the black dots and ensure he was seeing correctly. Across the rocky terrain floated an old woman wrapped in sun-bleached robes.

No, it was not her that floated. She stood upon a stone, and it was the stone that levitated. A dozen other floating rocks followed in her train.

Atrapha felt the ground shudder. He looked down and saw the very stone he had just been sitting on lift slowly into the air. It hovered only a few feet up, swaying from side to side as if happy to be free of its confinement on the ground. Others soon joined it and the mountainside was filled with dancing stones of all sizes.

The general lowered his weapon as the woman approached. Dignity and vanity joined with his military discipline. The three were enough to finally conquer his body's instincts and allow him to breathe easier.

"You are the Seer of Stones," he stated. It was an obvious enough statement compared to her knowledge of his name, but it made him feel a bit more of a peer. "Dire enemies have come to the Reach. I must know my path to victory."

The Seer stopped a few feet from Atrapha and regarded at him impassively. Only the mountain wind gently blowing her many-layered robes showed that she was not a statue.

"I will show you what paths you may take," she answered. "You come at an excellent time. The stones have much life in them today."

Atrapha raised an eyebrow. He indicated the stones slowly dancing all around him.

"You mean that you're not doing that?"

The wyrd simply smiled.

"I merely direct them. It is the world you defend that gives them life."

She reached behind her head to pull a long hood almost completely over her face. Only her mouth and chin showed beneath its fold.

"Keep your eyes on the stones, General. It is for you to know the reading – not to know the reader."

The Seer waved a hand and the stones floated forth to assume a new, more rigid pattern. Four lines of them went out from Atrapha's position, forming the boundaries of two paths: one to the right, and the other to the left.

“The protection you had in anonymity is gone; the Iron Star Alliance has come. The protection you had in power is gone; the skyship of your masters has been brought down.”

Her voice was deeper now. Slower. Atrapha thought that he could glimpse hints of bluish-white light escaping from under her hood. He obeyed her warning, however, and kept his attention on the stones.

“There are but two paths open to you now.”

“I see them.”

She held out her left arm, pointing in the direction that one path led.

“This is the Way of Sacrifice. To walk it, you must give up all that you have fought for. You must give up your freedom. You must give up your hatred. In the end, you must give up your own life. Yet it will lead to the salvation of this world.”

“How?”

“Give comfort to your enemy. Be a balm to those you have sworn to destroy – those whom you have a right to destroy.”

Atrapha bristled. “The Iron Stars,” he growled.

The Seer merely smiled and held out her right arm to indicate the other path.

“This is the Way of Doom. To walk this path requires neither victory nor defeat, but only the will to fight. Upon it you shall discard nothing until the end. Even then it shall not be you that perishes but the Reach itself.”

The old woman lowered her arms.

“The choice is before you, General.”


Atrapha glowered at the four lines of floating stones. Their two rigid paths seemed to taunt him, each teasing him with the destruction that they promised. How could he choose? The death of his beloved world, or the death of all that made it worth loving?

He turned to regard the Seer. The light no longer shone from under her hood. She seemed to sway a bit unsteadily on her feet. Doubtless the reading had sapped her strength. It reminded Atrapha that despite her powers, she was still only human.

“I shall make my own path,” he said firmly. He bowed his head respectfully and began the long trek down the mountain, stepping willfully in the space between the two outlined paths that had been presented to him.

The Seer stood mute as her visitor left. She watched as he picked his way down the mountainside, carefully walking his chosen center path. From her high vantage point, however, she could see something that the General was incapable of noticing:

His path angled ever so slightly to the right.

The background of the entire page is a futuristic, reddish-orange landscape, likely Mars, with rolling hills and a hazy horizon. In the upper portion of the image, a large, blue-tinted planet with visible surface details occupies the right side, and a thin, crescent moon is visible in the upper left against a dark blue sky.

Tales of Jericho Reach, Volume One is a collection of twelve short stories – each under 1,000 words long. From the arrival of the *Lawgiver* to Raxis' opening of the void gate and the subsequent invasion of the Empyreans, each story allows a glimpse into the Reach through the eyes of a different person.

Look for future releases as the story of Warcaster: Neo-Mechanika continues.

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