

THE UNDONE LIFE OF  
**JAK DREADTH**

BY SHAWN SPEAKMAN

**B**racing for impact, Jak Dreadth raged, sand rushing to meet Viridian. Nothing he did returned power to his controls, the mech dead, the pilot able to engage its glide emergency systems as a last bastion of hope. He didn't think it would matter. He had falling minutes to live. Memories flashed as his grandfather said they would, unbidden by death's approach. Laurellyn Angelus, the leader of Erth and pilot of the mighty Saph Fyre, giving a speech to raucous applause. At her command, mechs taking to the air as the Imperium entered the atmosphere. Pilots from all Royal Houses answering her call, their mechs spreading into the azure sky. Adrenaline rushing through his veins, Jak flying Viridian, his first major battle as a pilot and against the ever-encroaching spread of the Imperium through the stars.

As he tumbled from the sky, Jak caught glimpses of the other mechs battling Imperium warships the size of cities.

The sky a war zone of chaos.

It was the last thing he saw. Viridian plowed into the desert with such incredible force it whipped Jak in all directions within his stabilizing harness like a rag doll.

The world went dark.

Pain welcomed him back to the living.

Every part of his body hurt, like he'd fought his older brother and lost, made foggy and weak. He opened his eyes, shaking off the ringing in his ears. While the mech gear and goggles had retracted when his mech died, the harness he wore had kept him from hitting the sides of the cockpit. It had saved him.

He squinted out of the faceplate's thick glass.

Half the mech's head lay in desert, hot sand covering it.

He undid the straps. He fell to the cockpit's side. He grimaced, sucking air, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Dirk Dreadth. His brother.

His betrayer.

Laurellyn Angelus and her vaunted mech Saph Fyre had been the Dreadths's target. Take her out, replace her with someone stronger, and let the chaos of battle remove any clue to who had done it. They would take on the Imperium and win, a family and ultimately a planet united. Dirk, his older brother, conceived of the plan; their father, Bruss Dreadth, agreed.

These moments came along every so often, they said. Jak could not argue the logic.

Seizing one's destiny favored the willing.

The moment Viridian lost power, Jak knew he'd become targeted. Like Laurellyn Angelus. Dirk Dreadth had not only solidified his family's rank among the Royal Houses but also eliminated his only possible rival, Jak. The two had never liked one another as children—the twins as different as day and night—and that dislike had grown to adult animosity.

He hated to admit he never thought his brother would do something like this.

Anger fueling him, Jak crawled to the large faceplate's side panel and pulled the manual override lever within it.

The faceplate blew outward. Arid desert air rushed in. The faceplate pushed sand back just enough for Jak to squeeze through. He squeezed his way out into the world, blinded like a newborn, already sweating and trying to get his bearings.

Above, concussions tore the sky apart, shaking the Erth below. The battle raged. A crimson mech far above him exploded, hurling fiery titanium shrapnel in all directions, to fall to the desert below in hundreds of places.

He ignored it.

Instead, he turned his attention to Viridian. His mech's right arm had taken the brunt of the crash, everything from its shoulder down gone. Jak circled it, gauging his situation. The torso lay mostly buried but the legs lay exposed. He would have to get help, to remove the molecu-virus that hindered its operation. Help. A foreign word to him. He just didn't know where it would come from. And the desert surrounded him in all directions.

He gazed back to the war above, now gauging its events. The Imperium had gained the upper hand. The mech battalions floundered. Behind, a loud blast drew his attention. Above the high spires of Solomon Fyre in the far distance, another fleet of Imperium warships bombarded the city. Solomon Fyre, the jewel capital city,

lay defenseless. The war would be over before it even began. Jak realized the harsh reality the Dreadths would not be taking control of Erth as his brother and father had planned.

He reentered Viridian, moving from the cockpit into the mech's center, searching for items he would need. The mech was dead. But he would still fight. Only this time, it would not be in battle. It would be to survive.

The desert was a dangerous place. As a prince of a Royal House, he had never been in the desert alone. He knew several truths though, inconvenient but no less veritable.

He had limited food. Limited water.

And limited chances to live.

Time was against him.

He would have to cross the desert. A perilous place few lived—and fewer survived.

"A star falls from the heavens, the desert drinks its portents."

Jak spun, heart racing. An *arabi* stood above the tallest nearby dune, black robes billowing in the day's light wind, veil covering her face—all but the old woman's black eyes and surrounding brow wrinkles. She leaned on a long white staff, watching him. She had appeared out of nowhere, a wraith given substantive life.

"It is an honor to meet a warrior from the stars," she added, nodding lightly.

"I wouldn't say I'm from the stars," Jak said, wary. He looked about. No one else appeared, although he would have bet that very same thing a moment before the *arabi* appeared. "Solomon Fyre, to the west and south."

"A city man then."

Jak nodded, taking a closer look. Like all *arabi*, she wore the black robes of their religion, the silks used to hide the feminine figure. He did not know the source of the staff's wood, but it had grains running its length like ironwood, mildly gnarled at its top. Jak had a hard time taking his eyes from it.

The *arabi*'s eyes sparkled, bright with his interest.

It left Jak feeling anxious.

"How did you find me?" he asked. "I just walked around my mech and did not see you."

"Invisibility only exists between grains of sand," the *arabi* woman said. Her eyes laughed at him. "One does not need eyes to hide."

Jak frowned. "I see."

"Do you?" the woman asked, cackling.

He didn't. But he knew he wasn't meant to. He had met few *arabi* in Solomon Fyre—the people sprinkled across the desert and concentrated in their capital city

of Bayt al-Hikma rarely visiting his city—but he knew the Will Masters among them tended to riddle, the words quoted from their ancient book of faith.

"You sound like a Will Master," he said, hoping to pry information from her.

"I doubt you would know what a Will Master sounds like, city-born," the woman said, still grinning. "I can hear the worry in your voice though. You are safe, I warrant that," the woman assured. "I am Agnez al-Kol, a Walker of the Splinter."

"And what does that 'Walker' mean?"

"I tend goats."

The Dreadth looked about. He saw no goats. For a moment, he wanted to ask if the animals were invisible—or if the *arabi* had merely lost her wits.

"Oh, they are nearby, making their way through the desert," Agnez said, as if reading his mind. "They enjoy the grasses here in the Splinter's open. Sweeter than the rock grasses growing at the edge of the desert." She paused, looking back over her shoulder as if she could see them. "They do not need to be tended every moment, in case that was your next question."

Wondering if this odd woman finding him was luck or ill news, Jak gathered his food, water, and other light supplies into a pack. He moved his pilot's laz-pistol for easy access if the need should arise.

"You will not need the weapon," Agnez said simply. She gestured with her chin at the pack in his hand. "Where do you think you are going with all of that, city-born?"

"You can stop calling me that. My name is Jak."

"Jak," the *arabi* tried it on her tongue. "Short name. Means you are destined to do great things. Great things, yes."

Jak had no idea what the woman meant. "What is the closest town, village, whatever where I can find transport back to Solomon Fyre."

"Need a guide," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Point me in the general direction."

"City-born Jak, I doubt you will survive traveling these lands," Agnez said, straightening and holding her staff out before her. She looked like a prophet-specter with all the world's power at her command. "The war of the heavens above is not the only threat to you. There are dangers lurking in the Splinter that would leave your bones bleached and buried by the forever sands."

"Regardless, I have to try," Jak said, pack in place on his back.

"The All Father sees what is to come and time grows short," she said, looking off into the distance. "'The end happens when the middle tires.'"

Jak looked where she stared. There was nothing there.

"Will you help me?" Jak asked finally.

## THE SPLINTER SANDS OF JAK DREADTH

Agnez returned her gaze—so penetrating Jak had a hard time maintaining her stare—before she leaned on her staff again, ancient age slumping the woman once more. “I will. And I welcome to you to the Splinter.”

Then she cackled.

Jak wondered what he had gotten himself into.