

DYING STAR

BOOK ONE : PROPHECY



S A M S U N L O B E

Prologue

In the time of our ancient grandfathers, our planet Gebshu, basked in the light from our sacred star, Shu, and the peoples of our planet prospered. Our forebears lived on the land above the ocean surface in great cities of stone, breathing fresh air and feeling the heat of Shu on their skin.

Then the Emperor of the world and his magi discovered a 'new science' and unlocked the power within a mineral known as Lexan Stone. At first it was a great discovery and many wonders were worked. The greatest of all these feats was that of 'shimmer travel'. The resonating stone created a shimmering field through which objects were thrown, and then appeared miles from the original location. The technique was perfected so that people could travel through them over vast distances.

With this untold power at his disposal the Emperor declared himself a God. He outlawed the worship of the ancient deities, with the premise that if they truly existed they would make themselves known to him. He used the shimmer portals to take his armies to all parts of Gebshu where all tribes were forced to acknowledge him as the only true God. He destroyed or enslaved any that stood before him. The age of light had ended.

Before the Emperor's ascension there were believed to be many ancient gods controlling all aspects of the world - Povian the god of the ocean, Dalnu god of the land, Ventnor the god of death and above all these the King of the Gods, ShumenRa who dwelled in the centre of Shu itself. It was ShumenRa who finally answered the taunts of the Emperor. The great star Shu raged with fury and lances of light shot out into space; the colour of the great star changed from its dusky yellow to a bright white and with this change came fire and destruction.

The heat changed the weather on the surface of Gebshu and the land was engulfed by tornados and tsunamis. The land was torn apart and the mountains crumbled or spewed molten rock into the air. It was as if every god had awoken and declared war on the people of Gebshu. The storms and chaos lasted for many decades and millions died. The Emperor returned from his conquests and kept his loyal armies close. There was no longer a need for war, as survival had taken its place.

In the last months of the world the great ocean ice sheets melted and the world that had once breathed air was submerged beneath the roaring ocean. Legend tells that the Emperor and his loyal followers used the shimmer portals and escaped to the moon of Gebshu, Son-Gebshu. The peoples left behind were drowned in the Great Flood. The gods had

cleansed the world.

A handful of faithful servants to the true gods survived and found a life beneath the surface of the water. The founding fathers of the Ocean tribes had understood the anger of ShumenRa, and they understood he had allowed them to live but never again bask in the glory of his presence, forever to remain beneath the surface of the ocean. And so began the Age of Half-Light.

Chapter 1 – The Lord Emperor

Muyda knew that something was wrong. It was normal for the Lord Emperor to summon her at a moment's notice, but ordinarily she would be notified by a palace guard and make her way there unaccompanied. This time, however, she was being led by Ty-Sem. Ty-Sem was one of seven select warriors who formed the personal bodyguard of the Emperor. They would not normally be asked to perform such a menial task as this.

Muyda followed in silence, her head bowed, trying to keep up with the great strides of Ty-Sem. He was a giant of a man even among the other warrior castes. He wore his black imperial ceramic armour as a badge of his position, the white sun emblem of the emperor embossed on the chest plate and the white symbols on the pauldrons indicating his position as a Dominator. His white cloak billowed behind him. It was covered in ancient writing, all prayers of some form to the God Emperor. At his side, strapped to his thigh, was a nail gun and strapped to his back were two falcatas.

Muyda remembered the day she had seen Ty-Sem on the training ground practising his sword movements. The two black-bladed falcatas both had white symbols etched into the length of the blades, and he had spun them in a black and white blur as he had executed his sword pattern. She remembered also how impressed she had been with the power, finesse and control he possessed; he was no less impressive this morning as he strode with a rhythmic chink along the corridor.

He opened a door that led them out into the Great Square. Muyda shielded her eyes from the light, she blinked to adjust her vision and hurried to keep step. Ty-Sem's bio-shield eye implants automatically darkened as the light touched them, his eyes turning black. They passed through a series of high arches supported by massive

pillars, all intricately engraved with scenes of conquests and legendary heroes. They came out into a smaller courtyard. At the other end of the open space the Imperial Palace stood like a dark obelisk threatening the sky itself. All of the buildings on Son-GebShu were constructed of black kullstone. Muyda thought it ironic that these buildings were supposed to portray the greatness of the Lord Emperor, but it looked more like a monolithic tombstone. Perhaps that was more fitting after all.

As they approached the gates of the palace the two warriors guarding the entrance touched their forearms to their chests and bowed their heads slightly to acknowledge the visitors. Ty-Sem lifted his gauntleted hand to the huge doors, which seemed to dwarf even him. They opened with ease, as if they weighed nothing at all. Security wasn't really an issue; there was seldom any trouble from the Dumonii or the nameless, and the entire city of Sagen-Ita was an unpenetrable fortress built on top of an island that sat in the Sea of Serenity. Any trouble usually came from internal politics.

They walked on through the vast space of the nave. The roof was so high it was almost a blur. It made Muyda's head spin when she looked up at the massive scripted pillars that held the ceiling on flying buttresses way overhead. She had remembered the awe she had felt when she had first entered the temple. She had visited most of the temples on Son-Gebshu but all of them paled into insignificance against the majesty of the Holy Temple of the God Emperor. As they reached the end of the nave, she raised her head slightly to see who else had been summoned to the throne.

The throne was on the same scale as everything else in the temple; a huge black chair carved from a single piece of kullstone. It had religious markings engraved into its surface, and the relief detail had been picked out in brilliant white. The Lord Emperor Senn sat on the throne and despite its gigantic size he did not seem out of proportion. To the right of the Emperor stood Danus Venra. Muyda's heart sank and her stomach knotted. Whatever the reason for her summons it wasn't going to be good if Venra had anything to do with it.

Muyda and Venra had never seen eye to eye and Muyda knew of Venra's jealousy when she was pronounced Muyda Apos Senn; wife of the Emperor. Venra stood motionless, her head slightly bowed and the arm length hair spines that radiated around her skull made Muyda think of a desert lizard. She wore a white tunic decorated with

script and prayers and showing far too much flesh than Muyda thought was acceptable for a woman of her station. On the left of the Emperor stood Principal Dar-Ota flanked by two more of the Dominators, Cam-Sem and Zo-Sem. All were silent; a macabre tableaux waiting for events to unfold. As they neared the dais Ty-Sem stopped, dropped to one knee and fervently slapped his vambrace across his chest. Muyda followed suit, dropping to both knees and bowing to touch her forehead onto the cold stone floor of the temple.

“Muyda Apos Senn, my Lord” announced Ty-Sem, his gruff voice cutting the tension like a serrated razor. Lord Senn rose from the throne, his massive bulk overshadowing all present. The Emperor's armour was painted completely white, it reflected the light and gave him an ethereal almost angelic aura. His white fur cloak pinned to his armour by icons of Shu, spilled out behind him onto the dais. He was truly a formidable man. He approached Ty-Sem and nodded to him. The Dominator took one step back and bowed his head once more and stood motionless like one of the statues flanking the Sanctuary.

“Arise my Lady” commanded the Emperor, his voice calm but with ultimate authority. Muyda rose, but kept her head bowed. It was not appropriate for a woman to look directly at the Emperor unless explicitly directed to do so. “Do you know why I have summoned you here?” asked Lord Senn.

“I am sure you have good reason my Lord, but I confess I am at a loss as to why.” Muyda's voice was steady but she was struggling to control her nerves and the fear rising inside. She had always known in her heart that this day would come.

“I am sure that you are” he quizzically replied. He spun on his heel and faced the Principal. “Perhaps you could explain it to her my trusted friend and consul?” The Emperor's eyes pierced into Dar-Ota who until now had been just a bystander. Recognition of what was unfolding flashed across the face of the councillor. He knew to what the Emperor was eluding; he prayed he was wrong. He glanced at Muyda, who by now was also realising why she and Dar-Ota were there; her look of horror was not disguised. The Emperor continued “You of all people Dar-Ota, a Principal no less. Betrayal from a woman I could live with but a friend and advisor?”

“Please my Lord” yelled Muyda. “It was all my doing; I gave

Principal Dar-Ota no choice..."

"Silence witch" bellowed the Emperor abruptly ending Muyda's plea.

Dar-Ota knew exactly how this would unfold. He had been around long enough. He had been an accomplished warrior for thirty years before his promotion and he wouldn't go quietly. He rammed his elbow upwards into the jaw of Cam-Sem splintering his front teeth. He spun and with all his weight behind it he hammered his fist into the nose of Zo-Sem. Both Dominators fell back, stunned by the speed and ferocity of the attack. I might be a Principal now thought Dar-Ota but I will always be a warrior. The Principal turned to Muyda. Ty-Sem had her on her knees his huge hand firmly clamped onto her shoulder and his falcata already drawn with the blade biting slightly into her neck. The Principal backed away as the two Dominators picked themselves up off the floor, Cam-Sem spitting broken teeth and blood onto the floor. The Emperor had not moved and neither had Danus Venra, although a smug smile crept across her flawless visage.

There would be no ceremony, no words and no quarter given. The world in which they lived was completely based on the principles of right and wrong, and what would seem like brutality to an outsider was simply practicality. Cam-Sem turned to the Emperor, he gave a simple nod and he turned back to face Dar-Ota. He reached behind his back with both hands and un-clicked two shiva. The shiva was an ancient weapon and consisted of a crescent shaped blade attached to a handle and a tubular brace. Cam-Sem slid his hands through the braces and curled his armoured fingers around the grips. He smiled at the Principal, his smile a mockery of broken teeth and blood.

Dar-Ota circled the Dominator. He would have relished the adrenaline of combat with one of the Emperor's Dominators, perhaps a little more if he had been armed or even armoured. As it was he was garbed only in his sleeveless white Principal's tunic, with a black stole draped around his neck, it bore the symbols of his office. He removed the stole and tied it around his waist, as the two warriors continued to circle each other. 'Speed' thought Dar-Ota, it is my only advantage. Even as the thought occurred Cam-Sem leapt forward slashing the shiva towards his throat, Dar-Ota's reactions took over and he dropped to the floor like a stone. As he did he swung his right leg out in an arc and brought it into Cam-Sem's knee with a thunderous crack.

The Principal knew how strong the ceramic armour was, but he also knew every weak point. The Dominator toppled back like a felled tree landing with a resounding crack as his armoured back thudded into the floor, and his breath escaped him. Dar-Ota bounded over the prone form slipping his small ceremonial blade from his calf scabbard. He landed with one knee on the breastplate and one knee on the left bicep of Cam-Sem pinning it in place. He plunged the blade repeatedly into the right armpit of the pinned warrior. The knife skewered the mass of nerves and paralysed the Dominator's right side.

Dar-Ota reached down and slid the shiva off the lifeless limb and slid it over his own right hand. Cam-Sem had not given up his struggle and was frantically trying to free his left arm so he could bring it to bear on his attacker. Dar-Ota arched his back and brought the shiva down onto the elbow joint. The blade sliced through the weaker armour straps and severed the Dominator's left arm, making a final chink as it bit into the temple floor. He raised the shiva again and punched it down on the side of the neck guard. The protector popped and the piece of metal sprung clear revealing his next target. In a swift sideways movement Dar-Ota severed the jugular. Cam-Sem brought his handleless limb towards his throat in a futile attempt to stem the blood. He coughed and blood erupted from the gash in his neck. Dar-Ota retrieved the severed limb and took the other shiva, he turned to face his next opponent.

Muyda watched the unfolding scene, tears in her eyes, awaiting the inevitable. Dar-Ota was a proud man and he would not go to the depths quietly, but go he would, and she would follow shortly behind him, of that she was sure.

Zo-Sem wasn't going to make the same mistake as his friend, he would not underestimate his opponent, coupled with the fact he was now armed. Zo-Sem's armour was the same as the other Dominators except that his vambraces had been modified. As he stepped forward to face Dar-Ota he clenched his fists tightly and blades as long as his forearms sprang out over his fists, turning each arm into a deadly sword. Each blade was serrated on the inner edge and the outer edge was interrupted by a hooked incision. The armour casing that held the blades now doubled as extra armour and could be used to block as well as attack.

The pair eyed each other carefully, mentally baiting the other to make the first move. Dar-Ota caved first jumping and spinning three

hundred and sixty degrees lashing out his arm as he spun. Zo-Sem raised his arm to block the strike and the shiva sparked off the armour, but left no other impact. Zo-Sem retaliated in a rapid flurry of moves, slicing and jabbing. The onslaught was so quick and powerful it took every bit of skill from the Principal to block the attacks. The temple rang out with the sound of metal on metal. Zo-Sem pressed his advantage which eventually paid off as his arm blade passed the guard of Dar-Ota and penetrated his left shoulder. Zo-Sem withdrew the arm blade and stepped back from his victim.

The pain was like fire inside his shoulder, his grip deserted him and the shiva clanked to the floor. Zo-Sem renewed his attack swiping at the head of his opponent. The Principal moved back and as he did he dropped to one knee, the arm blade passed harmlessly over his head. He simultaneously rammed the remaining shiva up under Zo-Sem's kilt into his groin severing the femoral artery. Zo-Sem's arms went limp his strength draining like the blood pouring from his wound, he tried to lift his arms but Dar-Ota easily swatted them away. Mustering his strength Dar-Ota punched the shiva toward the face of his enemy. The power of the blow sliced completely through Zo-Sem's mouth almost decapitating him. His eyes rolled and his dead body crashed to the flagstones, blood from his wounds pooling on the floor.

Dar-Ota stood defiant, he looked at Muyda, and he could see the pride and love in her eyes. He was glad he had the courage to face the depths as a warrior.

Lord Senn stood up from his throne and thumped the two catches that retained his cloak. As he strode forward the white fur cloak fell to the floor behind him. He reached behind his back and brought out two metal bars. His thumbs eased a catch on top of each and the weapons sprang to life with a well oiled click. They telescopically extended to the length of an arm and then a hammer head rotated to form a right angle. At the other end of the hammer head was a long spike. These war hammers were the Emperor's weapons of choice and had served him well in many campaigns. As the Emperor approached him Dar-Ota dropped his remaining shiva. The Emperor would have to kill an unarmed man. The Emperor never even broke his stride; he unleashed a blur of hammer blows with terrifying force, each blow breaking and shattering bone.

The broken body of Principal Dar-Ota sagged to its knees as the Emperor reversed the hammer in his hand and he struck the final blow. The spike of the hammer head buried into Dar-Ota's skull up to

the haft. Lord Senn released his grip on the hammer as the dead Principal fell forward, gravity pulling his face into the floor. The Emperor put his armoured foot on the head of the corpse and tugged his hammer free. He reached down and clinically wiped the cranial fluid from the spike. He stood and clicked the catches, the hammers folded and retracted and in one graceful movement were again attached to the back of his armour.

“Just get it over with you coward” snarled Muyda through gritted teeth. Her Dominator guard fiercely slapped his gauntleted hand across her face producing a large red welt across her cheek. The Emperor held up his hand and once again Ty-Sem stepped back.

“That would be too easy my dear wife” explained Senn. “I couldn't possibly have you killed for adultery. People simply wouldn't believe you could have chosen another man over me! No it's much simpler than that. I am disowning you. You will be cast down to GebShu and join the ranks of the nameless Murai. If you survive the rapists and murderers, you will continue to serve me in the granaries of Imercia.”

“No, please my Lord” Muyda begged. Senn continued as if deaf to Myuda's plea.

“I shall inform the people that I grew tired of you, that you no longer satisfied the Emperor's needs.” He turned away from Muyda. “And perhaps I shall take Danus Venra as my new wife.” Muyda looked across at Venra; she was grinning and gave a coy wink. Muyda raised herself up, anger boiling inside which she could no longer contain.

“You can do what you like with me” she spat. “But my son will return and fulfil the prophecy. I only wish I could be here to see him cleave your head from your shoulders.” The Emperor paused and turned. For the first time his calm exterior faded.

“If you truly believe one of my sons would turn on me then know that I would mutilate their bodies and send the unrecognizable crippled chunks of flesh to join you on Gebshu. Take her away” he commanded. Ty-Sem grabbed Muyda's arms as the Emperor gave his final order. “Ty-Sem, inform the clerics there are two openings in my personal bodyguard. Trials to be held on the morrow. Oh, and we have an opening for a Principal also.” And with that he walked to Venra who placed her hand on his arm and they strolled away into

the Sanctuary. Muyda felt hopeless as she was led away, but hope flared as she thought of the one thing that would keep her going. Her secret. Her son. The prophecy.

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The two brothers Vas-Te and Bok-Te walked across the training ground courtyard. Vas-Te was a clear forearm's height taller and wider than his younger brother, but his size in no way hampered the bigger man. His muscled frame rippled beneath his black tunic.

"What do you reckon he wants with us?" said the smaller of the two men.

"The challenge" stated Vas-Te.

"What challenge?" Asked a surprised and intrigued Bok-Te.

"Two of the Emperor's Dominators were killed. There is an arena challenge event. I am guessing he wants us to enter."

"That's excellent news" exclaimed the young brother. "I have been waiting ages for a chance like this."

"You and me both brother" said the big man. Bok-Te thought for a second and asked.

"What if we get drawn against each other?"

"Then I'd have to kill you" said the big man completely serious.

"You'd have to catch me first you fat lump" and with that Bok-Te thumped his brother in the arm and ran across the courtyard to the arena. The arena was a circular amphitheatre, the central pit covered in sand and a stone pillar twice the height of a man stood in the centre. Outside the pit fifty rows of seats disappeared up into the distance. The whole arena was covered by a suspended roof with an opening in the centre, letting the light flood down in a vertical column illuminating the killing ground. In the past there had been a special area for the Emperor and his retinue, but that had long been removed and the arena was now completely symmetrical. When the Emperor attended the arena he sat with the rest of the Dumonii. It was supposed to signify his empathy and connection with the masses.

The Lord Emperor was in the central pit strolling around the arena, tracing gauges in the masonry with his fingers as if he had purposely carved them himself. Bok-Te saw the Emperor and raced towards him dropping to one knee and giving the customary forearm salute across his chest. Bok-Te, although enthusiastic, knew his place and the etiquette he should use when in the presence of the Emperor, his father.

“Good morning my Lord” greeted Bok-Te.

“No need for formalities my son. Stand and let me look at you.” Bok-Te quickly rose to his feet always wanting to please. The Emperor grabbed him by the arms. Even in his most tactile moments Bok-Te could feel the power in his father's arms.

“Where is that hulk brother of yours?” asked Lord Senn.

“I am here father” shouted Vas-Te as he entered the arena. The Emperor turned to see the huge frame of his eldest son squeeze through the doorway. Vas-Te strode across the arena and imitated his brother's actions by falling to one knee and saluting.

“You know why I have brought you here” stated the Emperor.

“Yes father, the challenge” answered Vas-Te standing.

“It is time for you to take your place at my side” he said looking directly at Vas-Te.

“And me also father?” asked Bok-Te puzzled at why his father's statement had been directed at his brother.

“No my son, it is not your time. I wanted to tell you in person. Your time will come, but it is not this day.” Bok-Te could feel the anger and frustration well within him; he wanted to blurt out questions, statements, and proof that he was ready. He knew better and attempted to quell the burning passion inside.

“As you wish father. I am honoured you have told me in person.” His face made a poor attempt of hiding his disappointment.

“Wait outside my young son; I will speak with your brother alone.” Bok-Te stood straight, bowed and saluted.

"At the Emperor's command" said Bok-Te quietly. He turned and left the arena.

"He'll get over it" said Vas-Te confidently.

"It matters not" stated the Emperor. "It is you that must tread these sands. Have you prepared?"

"There is no man amongst the Reavers or the Missionrai who can stand against me" said Vas-Te assuredly.

"Your complacency will be your undoing my son. Never underestimate your opponent. The reason we have this challenge in the first place is because an unarmed Principal bested two of my Dominators." His voice betrayed the respect he had for the recently murdered Principal Dar-Ota.

"It is as you say my Lord. I have confidence in my abilities and I will destroy whoever stands before me in this arena." Vas-Te spoke quietly with an unintentional edge to his voice but with absolute certainty of his words.

"Anything else would simply not do" smiled the Emperor as he clasped the forearms of his eldest son. Vas-Te saluted and turned to leave. As he bent over to exit the arena, he turned to his father.

"What was the real reason you didn't want Bok to fight my Lord?" The Emperor laughed as he answered.

"I wouldn't want you to kill him." Satisfied with that fact, Vas-Te left the arena to prepare.

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Muyda had spent the night in a holding cell. She was going over and over yesterday's events in her head. She felt a terrible guilt. Had she said too much? She had wanted to hurt the Emperor, her husband, and had lashed out with her words. She was sure she hadn't given anything away. Her secret was safe, the child she had with Dar-Ota many revolutions ago was safe, she was sure. If the Emperor had expected anything she would have been interrogated. She thought about Vas-Te and Bok-Te. They only clamoured for their father's attention; they hadn't spoken to her for years. She knew the Emperor would look at them differently after her outburst about the Prophecy, but she felt no guilt at what might happen if the Emperor became too paranoid.

She was woken from her thoughts by the clanking of metal as the key entered the lock to her cell and the door was thrown open. There stood two Reavers. She didn't recognize either soldier. Muyda studied them. They were both in their late forties, probably had served in the shock troops in their early years and now had opted for the easy life of prisoner transport. The taller of the two men had a jagged scar across his cheek that continued down under his chin and across his neck. He had seen action of some sort she thought. The scarred man looked at Muyda like a man about to devour his prey. Muyda sensed the lust and stepped back against the wall.

"Don't worry my Lady" said the scarred man. "We are under strict orders that you remain..." he paused, "intact" he added. "Tis just formalities" he looked at his partner and smiled. "If you could just remove your clothes for us and put this brocard on." He tossed the brocard at Muyda's feet. Muyda stared at the brocard. It was a short sleeveless dress made from a coarse material. It was stained and it stank.

"It's what all the fashionable unnamed are wearing these days" chuckled the guard. "Now put it on witch." Muyda raised herself up and rallied her courage. She stared at the men and then spat onto their boots. The scarred man stepped forward and grabbed her by the hair yanking her head back; with his other hand he punched her hard in the stomach. Muyda doubled over and as she did a fist came down on the side of her head knocking her to the ground. Her head swam. She tried to roll over onto her front, but the guard had her pinned. He started tearing at her clothes like a wild animal; she could feel his coarse nails scraping against her flesh. Sweat dripped from his head onto her naked chest and she smelt the foul odour of his breath and body consume her.

"Bring it in" she heard him say. He continued to rip at her clothes and she was now lying completely naked with the guard sat astride her. The second Reaver appeared with a small brazier and took out the iron rod that protruded from it and handed it to his scarred accomplice. The brand sizzled, and she could see the glowing red numbers. The second guard knelt down with his knees either side of her head. She struggled with everything she had but the scarred man forced the brand down onto her forehead. She smelt her burning flesh and for an instant felt no pain, then it came like a flood searing through her skin. She screamed and lost consciousness. Muyda's whole body and mind were an inferno. She opened her eyes to see the two guards staring down at her. The scarred man adjusted

his belt and tunic. She heard them laughing as she felt the urine splashing onto her face and re-igniting the brand on her forehead.

"This is my special blend of antiseptic." The laughter rang in her ears and her mind retreated from her physical body.

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The din of the arena was intense. There hadn't been a challenge match for a while let alone two at once. Nearly all seats were taken and only a few in the high reaches remained empty. The Emperor flanked by Venra, the four Virtues and the remainder of his Dominators, sat close to the edge of the pit wall and were deep in conversation.

A bellowing horn sounded and the noise of the arena stopped in an instant, replaced by eager anticipation. There was very little in the way of ceremony. The civilization had prospered on efficiency and needless words or oratory got in the way of the action and purpose of the challenge. The horn sounded twice and the single door to the arena pit opened.

Two men entered, both Missonrai. They were clad only in small kilts. Each fighter was covered in tattoos from head to toe, mostly in scripted prayers, but one of the men, Shun-Te, had the Emperor's sun motif on his back. Both men were ripped with muscle and strode into the arena like they owned it. The crowd erupted with rapturous applause and cheers. The combatants took their places at either side of the central pillar, neither fighter able to see the other. The fighters were completely unarmed but at the top of the pillar hung a vicious selection of blades and other exotic weapons.

The challenge usually went one of two ways. The fighters would battle hand to hand, or both would climb the pillar using the small holds on the pillar, grab a weapon and then fight. Both men braced themselves. The horn sounded once more to signal the start of the bout. Both men leapt forward and assailed the pillar. Shun-Te, the man with the tattooed sun on his back, dropped to the ground first clutching an enormous double headed axe in his hands. He rounded the pillar to face his opponent. To his surprise he wasn't there. He quickly looked up to see the other fighter stood aloft the pillar with a mace in one hand and kuriken in the other. The kuriken was a three bladed throwing weapon, each blade the length of a hand. The fighter launched the kuriken towards Shun-Te and as he did so he somersaulted off the pillar. Shun-Te blocked the missile by knocking it to the floor. He managed to lift the heavy axe in time to block a fierce strike from the flanged mace. Both backed away. The fight was on.

The smaller of the two men, Urun-Te, attacked first and leapt in the air swinging his mace with both hands. Shun-Te blocked the mace but as he landed the nimble Urun-Te thrust out his foot catching Shun-Te in the stomach and launching him across the pit. He landed heavily but rose quickly, sand sticking to his back like glue. Shun-Te gritted his teeth and charged. He swung the axe with one hand in a decapitating arc, but Urun-Te ducked beneath the blow and then back flipped away from the returning strike. The crowd roared, eager for first blood.

Both fighters again faced off, the bigger man now breathing heavily and sweating profusely. Again Urun-Te leapt at the big man attempting a strike to the side of his head. His attack blocked, he tried to sweep the front leg but his move was read and Shun-Te lifted his front foot to avoid the leg sweep. Urun-Te stepped back slightly off balance only to feel the foot of his opponent smash into his ribcage and send him sprawling across the pit. Shun-Te pressed his advantage and with a thunderous strike brought the axe over his head and down towards his foe. The smaller fighter blocked the blow taking the force in his arms, but the axe blade bit deep into the haft of the mace. Another strike and the mace would fold. He needed another weapon. He waited for the next strike, which was another overhead strike. He dived to the side, avoiding death by a finger. Shun-Te's axe thunked into the sand of the arena floor. Urun-Te dropped his mace and leapt for the pillar in a gamble to get a new weapon. He climbed swiftly but looked back to see the axe swinging towards his leg. He jumped for a war maul to his right and avoided the blow, but although his fingers clutched at the maul's handle he could not keep his grip. His hand slid off and he landed in the pit weapon-less.

Shun-Te withdrew his axe from the pillar; a large chunk of kullstone fell to the floor dislodged by the strike. He moved towards the crouching figure, knowing he would have to attempt to retrieve his mace. Shun-Te feigned a left thrust with his axe, at which point Urun-Te charged to the right and towards his weapon. Shun-Te reversed his body movement as planned and brought his left leg around in an arc, his heel connecting with Urun-Te's jaw. It made a hollow thud as the jaw broke. Urun-Te took one shaky step back and saw the axe lift and the blade glint in the light. He lifted his arm in a pathetic attempt to block the attack. The axe passed straight through the arm and buried itself deep into his chest cleaving the heart. For a split second there was silence, then the masses went berserk, shouting and screaming. Shun-Te walked towards the Emperor and saluted. The horn sounded

once again to end the duel.

Vas-Te stared through the barred window on the pit door. A trap door opened and several men emerged to drag the dead body beneath the sands and fresh weapons were reset atop the pillar. Shun-Te approached the door and stepped inside. He was caked in sweat, sand and blood. The warriors exchanged glances but no words. The man Vas-Te was about to fight was a Reaver. He hadn't yet made squad leader, but seemed accomplished enough. He had thought he would feel at least some remorse or pity for his opponent when they met. Vas-Te felt nothing for the man; he was just another obstacle in his way. His thoughts drifted and he wondered if his father had fixed it so that he had a weaker opponent; he hoped not. The horn sounded twice and the two warriors stepped from the door out into the light. Vas-Te arched and stretched and walked towards his starting block. The crowd started chanting.

“Vas-Te, Vas-Te, Vas-Te.”

He looked every bit the perfect warrior, massive in height and muscle. Unlike the majority of soldiers who wore their hair tight cropped, Vas-Te had two streaks of longer hair either side of his head which formed small pony tails on the back of his scalp. The rest of his head was shaved short and into this were razored patterns matching the patchwork of tattoos that covered his entire body. His opponent Yan-Su had been a Reaver for many years and had been passed over for promotion to Missionrai on more than one occasion. He wasn't sure why, maybe his temper. Whatever it was he knew this was his one chance to get the promotion he deserved and make a name for himself. He was a seasoned fighter and knew his strengths and weaknesses. He was glad when he had been drawn against Vas-Te. Taking down this popular man would increase his standing no end. As he walked to his starting block he looked across the pit at the big man. 'He won't know what hit him' he thought.

The Horn blurted, the bout was on. Yan-Su's strategy was a simple tried and tested one. Get to the pillar, grab a weapon, and then use it on his opponent before he had a chance to retrieve a weapon of his own. It had worked before.

The instant the horn had sounded, Vas-Te had sprinted forward and around the pillar, for a man of his size he moved at an incredible speed. Yan-Su had reached the column and had started to climb. As Vas-Te rounded the pillar he launched himself like a battering ram,

leading with his knee into the startled body of the climber. The speed of the blow alone would have done serious damage. That coupled with the weight behind the attack cracked the ribs of Yan-Su and sent him skittering onto the floor. Landing on one foot and then launching himself again, Vas-Te plummeted towards his prone victim, this time with his other knee. It was like a comet hitting the surface of a planet, completely inescapable.

The bulk of the big Missionrai smashed the ribcage. The ribs shattered and splintered piercing the internal organs. The stricken soldier coughed blood and winced at the pain in his chest. Vas-Te rose and turned; he steadily climbed the pillar and then jumped back down to the pit holding a two handed war maul. The weapon was so heavy it could only be wielded by a man of Vas-Te's physique. He walked calmly back to where his victim was trying to sit up. Without hesitation he raised the maul over his head and brought it down in a thunderous crack. The force of the blow obliterated the skull and anything remaining of the ribcage. Even the most bloodthirsty of spectators winced at the strike. There was total silence. The bout was over in less than twenty seconds.

Vas-Te turned and held the hammer aloft with one hand and punched it into the air. The crowd erupting in applause and shouts, his name echoing around the arena. The Emperor looked on smiling, his mind planning and scheming. Venra turned to the Emperor.

"He's very impressive" she enquired. 'Maybe too much so' thought the Emperor, 'maybe that witch was right about him after all'.

*

Muyda was curled up in the foetal position hugging the corner of her cell. The physical pain was receding but the mental pain still lingered. She had traced the brand on her forehead with her fingers revealing it to be the number seventy-four. This was now how she would be known.

She heard keys rattling outside her door and she attempted to make herself smaller. The door opened and a Reaver stepped into the cell. She could tell by the wave symbol on his shoulder guard he was based on the planet Geb-Shu. She looked up into his eyes, and like all the rest she had encountered, saw no emotion.

"Stand up Murai" he barked. "Time to find you a new home." As she walked past the soldier, he took her hands and jerked them

around her back clamping on a restraining cuff which held her arms firmly behind her back. Outside of her cell were three other women all in restraints, and all looking like they had undergone a similar treatment. She filed into line and then the sorry group proceeded out through the holding cells.

“Wait there” commanded a second Reaver bringing up the rear of the group. They had stopped outside a cell door which the first guard was opening. He stepped inside.

“Get up fish boy” the guard shouted. Muyda turned to look at the woman behind her. She shrugged her shoulders, so Muyda turned back to see what was happening. Out from the cell ducked an incredibly tall but very skinny man. He was unlike anything she had seen before. He stood a great deal taller than the guard who was clacking wrist restraints on him. He wore a male brocard, which was effectively a long skirt, although on this man it only came down to his knees. His skin was darker than normal and it was covered in a striking pattern. The pattern consisted of green and blue stripes over his arms, shoulders, legs and face resembling a form of camouflage. Muyda wasn't sure if they were painted on or actually his natural skin. His hair was long and matted hanging all the way down his back, and tied within it were various shells and beads. He turned to look at the line of women, his unusual appearance punctuated by cloudy white eyes. He too filed into line and they continued out of the cells. Muyda had known their destination as she had been there before, but not like this. They headed toward the 'Gate'.

The 'Gate' was the portal that the Dumonii used to travel from their satellite of Son-GebShu to the ocean planet below. She had no idea of how it worked, only that depending on which side you entered it decided where you came out. She had been thankful in the past for Gate travel as ninety percent of the food and resources used by the Dumonii came through the portal, plundered from the planet below. According to Dar-Ota there had once been hundreds of them. This was the only one she was aware of still in use. They entered the Gate chamber. The room was triangular which reflected the lines of the 3 stone pillars arranged in an equilateral triangle in the centre of the chamber. The roof above was open to the sky. The three circular pillars were almost identical, only the carved symbols distinguishing them apart. The pillars consisted of black kullstone cylinders stacked one on top of the other, spaced apart by a smaller diameter cylinder. Through the centre of all of the stones was a cylinder of pure crystal. This was Lexan stone. By each pillar stood a hunched, hooded

servillisor.

“Open the gate” commanded the lead Reaver. Each servillisor began to hum, each one at a different pitch. As they continued their bizarre song the Lexan stone began to vibrate. The whole chamber then started to vibrate. Electrical sparks started to dance around the pillars. The servillisors continued their audio prayers and the electric tendrils grew until they reached out for each other. As they touched a loud 'whump' filled the chamber. Muyda could feel the gravitation pull towards the now shimmering centre of the three pillars. Holding onto the tall prisoner the Reaver stepped into the void. Muyda had always been terrified by this bit but knew it was harmless; she followed her eyes tight shut. She kept walking and then thudded into the back of a body in front of her. It was the tall prisoner. They had passed through the gate and she had felt nothing.

There were a lot more Reavers here than she had expected. Several approached the line with black cloth in their hands. A Reaver reached up and tied the cloth tightly around her eyes. They were led away and as they walked she heard the crackle and fizz of the Gate closing. Muyda had known of the Nameless peoples, the Murai. She knew they lived here on the island of Imercia. She also knew they farmed the food for the people of Son GebShu. What she didn't know was how they lived and she wasn't prepared for what she saw before her. The rain was falling hard which added to the miserable scene. A long main track ran down the hill to a jetty that reached out into the ocean. The water stretched out disappearing into the gloom. The track was deep in mud and sewage. On either side of the track, spreading out across the land like a sore were hundreds of shacks.

There wasn't a straight line anywhere. Some shacks seemed to be built on top of others; some seemed barely big enough to accommodate a person. They looked fragile and she was convinced a fierce storm would wipe them all away. They were built from driftwood and anything else that had been discarded. Dim lights flickered from makeshift windows and doorways and smoke filtered up through the rain. The sally port of the fortress closed behind them. Muyda rubbed her wrists and looked at the others. Already cold and shivering they had started to wander into the junk town. The tall prisoner was missing.

“Where did the tall man go?” Muyda asked after the other women. One turned.

“They don't let his sort roam free outside, they keep them in

the fortress" she replied.

"His sort?" questioned Muyda. The woman kept walking without answering. "Please!" she shouted a touch of desperation in her voice. "What do we do now?" The woman ahead stopped again and without turning she said,

"Find a place to live before it gets too dark."