

DYING STAR

BOOK THREE: DARKNESS



SAMSUNLOBE

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Prologue

All things end. Some things end in a heartbeat and other things take so long that they can appear immortal. However long the journey the inevitable darkness will always be there to claim its final embrace.

The last people of the ocean world Gebshu struggle to comprehend the death of their star and their planet. The minute decay over thousands of millennia has been so slow it has gone unnoticed. Now when life starts to fade with every rise and fall of the moon, they start to fear.

There are those that can see the approaching darkness and cling to the slightest hope, renewing vows to long forgotten Gods. There are those prepared to embrace the end, comfortable they have fulfilled the purpose of their existence, resigned to their fate. Then there are those who are blind to even the brightest signals of the apocalypse, unbelieving and unwavering in their stubbornness to survive.

All of these people, regardless of their origins and their view on the end of all consciousness, have the primal need for something greater than themselves. Perhaps this is a father, a creator, a watcher or simply a friend. In the end they are all the same eternal being. This singular need has the ability to overwhelm rational thought and logic. Can such a being, borne from emotion, truly have the power to change the future?

Can this God coax a dying star back to life? Can this God save his people from extinction? Can this God defy the inevitable? Can this God bring light to the darkness?

Whether he can or cannot it is the glimmer of hope that he provides that keeps him alive in the minds of men. It is hope that the people of Gebshu now nurture like their first born. But even hope has to end. All things end.

Chapter 01 - Betrayal

The dying star had already set yet the crisp white surface of snow still reflected enough light for Var to make out the familiar details of his home. The fortress city of Asturia was a welcome and comforting sight. The many moons spent travelling from the deep South had given him time to think and reflect. His melancholy mood quickly evaporated as he eyes followed the outline of the spire crowning the cathedral.

A few more of the living pods had appeared. Each linked to another via rope bridges and pulley systems, like arteries connecting vital organs. Apart from that everything looked as it had half a season ago, at least from the outside. Var slowed his pace as he reached the outer harbour wall. He flattened himself against the massive stonework, panting hard, the cold air stinging his lungs.

"You're out of shape" came the matter of fact comment from the gloom. The Emperor padded to a stop next to the breathless Helmsman. Var looked up into his shadowed features. Even in the low light he could see the lack of exertion on his face. A serene smile crept across his regal features.

"Well I made it here first" suggested Var.

"True enough" said the Emperor. "But we were following you, remember?" Var grunted regaining his composure as the last of the Emperor's Dominators loped in, all equally nonplussed by the vast distance they had just covered.

They had left the ice yachts some way from the island of Imercia. They had been cautious in their approach not knowing what waited for them at the tribesman's former home. The Magta and the remnants of the Emperor's army had stayed behind. Under Lothair's and Tol-Aka's supervision they were making their way to the ancient ruins of Labna. There they would prepare for the second part of the plan.

Var led the men around the edge of the outer harbour wall to where it met the earlier building phase. Two round towers marked the old entrance to the sea port, long since redundant as the ocean had retreated. All of the harbour now seemed pointless as it was held in the vice-like grip of the pack ice.

Var spotted the jutting stones he had been searching for and quickly started to climb the wall. The snow on the small handholds stung his fingers as he hauled his weight upwards. He peered over the top. There were footprints

in the snow all along the wall walk, but there was no sign of movement. One by one the group crested the wall. They made their way as silently as they could through the ramshackle buildings that occupied the majority of surface area atop the huge harbour walls. The occasional crunch of snow underfoot was drowned out by the noise coming from within the wooden shelters. The occasional child's cry mixed with cacophony of domestic chores.

As they approached the inner gate, Var raised his hand signalling 'Halt'. The group crouched and each individual did their best to blend into the environment.

"What do you see?" asked the Emperor.

"A guard. I am not sure if it's one of my men." Var took out his small monocular and placed the cold metal bezel against his eye socket. The guard was dressed as they all were, head to toe in furs and skins. He watched as the man huffed into his mitts before clapping them together. He moved to one edge and briefly turned to look out to sea, before turning to disappear out of sight once more. In that instant Var had seen all that he needed. A red stripe running down the guard's face. Starting above his eye and finishing on his lower jaw. Var turned to the Emperor.

"We need the Nightsigh."

Without a word the Emperor turned to his men and clicked his fingers. The Dominator Mar-Sem had been entrusted with the unique Magta weapon. He shuffled forward as the Emperor pointed towards the tower.

"Do I wait until I can see him?" he whispered.

"You don't have to see your target" answered Var. "Just get the arrow through the opening. It will do the rest."

Mar-Sem nodded his understanding and respectfully removed the ornate long-bow from its cover. Placing the bow between his legs he bent the limbs as he had been shown in order to string it.

"Are you sure there is just one of them?" asked the Emperor.

"We'll soon find out" smiled Var.

Mar-Sem screwed the heavy arrow tip onto the shaft and notched it across the bow. He moved cautiously from his hiding place and into a small

clearing between the houses. He arched his back, battling to draw back the bow. He brought the string to his pursed lips. Despite his considerable strength he was struggling with the weapon that was designed for the giant Magta. Sure of his aim he loosed the arrow. The string sang a delicate tune as the projectile sped towards the tower. The arrow sailed through the small turret opening and disappeared.

Mar-Sem crouched back down next to the others, all of them waiting apprehensively, expecting any moment for the alarm to be raised.

"How does it work?" asked the Dominator.

"I'm not sure exactly" replied Var. "It's something to do with sound. The arrow head can home in on a heartbeat, or something like that."

They waited for several moments without the re-appearance of the guard or the alarm sounding, so decided it was safe to move. As they crept up the steps to the inner fortress they split up as planned and vanished inside the city buildings.

Even though Var knew every inch of the city, where every hidden alcove was, where the guards were likely to congregate, he felt uncomfortable in the presence of the Emperor and his Dominators. He watched them confidently stride off, no hint of fear or doubt. They had been born for this, trained all their lives for combat and martial prowess. He had no misgivings about their abilities; they would complete their missions. His worry was that he would fail them. He shook his head trying to dislodge his misgivings.

He headed into the labyrinth of corridors heading towards the kitchen. When he had lived here the long hallway outside of the kitchen was a common place for the guards to meet. The warmth and smell tempting them away from their duties. They had not been sure there would be any Merthurian guards in the city at all. As it was, it looked they had left just a handful. They obviously felt no threat from the people of Asturia. Var was sure Bronsur had a major part to play in that situation.

Var crept into the hallway, his target ahead of him. The guard was bent over fiddling with the buckles on his greaves. Var tried to move silently keeping the weight on his toes. This was proving difficult with his sprung artificial limb.

As he closed in on the warrior he inadvertently dragged his boot and the Merthurian guard span in surprise. Before the guard could draw his weapon Var thundered a sweeping kick towards his knee. The disadvantage of the

prosthetic limb was now lost as the metal and wood of Var's lower leg cracked against the guard's knee. The weight and momentum swept the soldier's leg away sending him flailing onto the floor.

Var pressed his advantage leaping onto the prone soldier, but as he did the guard lashed upwards. His fist missed but the following elbow slammed into Var's chin. His head felt heavy and his vision started to cloud. His opponent wasted no time and turned his body weight throwing Var onto the cold stone walkway. The Red Prime guard was no stranger to combat and recovering from the initial shock attack now rained down punch after punch trying to knock out his assailant. Var's natural instincts took over, bringing his arms up to shield himself from the onslaught. He reached up grabbing the guard's armour and dragged him close to his chest so that he couldn't get the leverage for further blows.

Holding the guard, Var tried to roll. He succeeded in moving onto his front, but the warrior stayed with him slipping his forearm under Var's chin and clasping his arm with his other hand. He started to squeeze. Var could feel his consciousness fleeing and desperately tried to pry the guard's fingers free.

The soldier grunted and Var breathed in relief as his attacker's grip faded. Var felt the sudden dead weight of the man and the warm trickle of blood on the back of his neck. He rolled, throwing the limp body to one side, kicking to free his legs.

Standing in the hallway, blood dripping from his knife, was the Emperor.

"I had it covered" suggested Var.

"Of course" came the reply.

Var puffed out his chest trying to conjure up his lost pride. The torch light bounced off the Emperor's features and he saw no sign of malice or contempt. If it had been Gero he wouldn't have heard the last of it. The Emperor's outlook was simply matter of fact. The task at hand was complete and that was enough.

The two men continued through the hallway and silently crept up a small spiral staircase leading to the main keep. The small archway at the top of the stairwell opened onto a main walkway. From here numerous doors led off into private chambers and the main staircase fanned upwards towards the great hall.

Noise erupted from their right and they ducked back down into the darkness in unison. A young woman carrying empty pots and pans rounded the corner. She turned into the archway and attempted to make her way down the stairs to the kitchen. As she saw the two figures crouching in the shadows she dropped the pans and was about to scream. Var clamped his hand firmly over her mouth and looked into her eyes.

"It's me, the Doyen, please do not scream" he whispered.

Recognition and then understanding flashed across her eyes and Var gently released his grip. He had managed to stop her screaming but the clatter of pots and pans on the stonework would surely bring unwanted attention.

"You're back!" exclaimed the woman. "I must..."

"Please keep your voice down" interrupted Var. "No-one must know we are here."

They heard a latch lift and drop and the creak of door hinges out in the corridor. Var put his finger over his lips and moved back down into the stairwell. The young woman acting startled turned to see one of the Red Prime guards smiling jovially and walking towards her.

"Are you alright? I am sorry I didn't mean to alarm you" said the guard.

"Yes of course" replied the woman organising her thoughts. "I'm so clumsy, I tripped and dropped everything."

"Here let me give you a hand" offered the guard.

"No, No it's quite alright. Thank you for your offer of help." She quickly picked up the utensils and made her way down the stairs. The guard lazily took one last look around and headed back towards the open door. As the shaking woman passed Var he mouthed the words 'Thank You'. She smiled back, but the smile quickly faded as she locked eyes with the Emperor. The huge frame of Lord Vas nudged Var to one side and sped down the hallway his knife drawn. He grabbed the guard by the hair ripping his head back and plunging his knife into the man's throat. He tore it out to the side severing the jugular and windpipe. He withdrew the blade and then rammed it into the back of the dead man's skull.

As he did a second guard rounded the corner behind him. Before he could shout, Var jumped from the stairwell and lunged forward with his sword.

The razor sharp Magta blade passed straight through the surprised guards stomach plate, through his abdomen and severed his spinal cord. He span withdrawing his sword at the same time, looking back towards the Emperor. The tall warrior strode up the hallway and past Var without so much as a look of recognition.

"You're welcome" said Var with as much sarcasm as he could muster. He watched as the Emperor placed his armoured boot on the chest of the fallen soldier and curled his fingers around the hilt of his knife. The blade was firmly lodged in the eye socket of the Red Prime soldier. He tore it free and the ruined eyeball came with it. He wiped the popped eye sack on the dead man's jerkin. He gestured to Var pointing down the hallway.

"Shall we continue?" he suggested.

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On the far side of the city was the postern gate. When Var had last been here this was used as the main point of access to the sea pods. These were the living accommodation of all of the sea tribes that had migrated to Asturia when the oceans started to freeze. Since the Red Prime's peaceful occupation it had been used as the main gateway to the encamped forces of the Merthurian army. It was the nearest entrance to the huge force, and had recently been in constant use.

The three Dominators that had been assigned to secure the gate crept silently along the battlements of the curtain wall. As they reached the end, they tried the small wooden door to the tower. It was locked. Below them under the portcullis were five guards that they could see. The noise from the lower barracks told them that there were more inside.

Ton-Sem signalled upwards to his brothers as they had all heard a guard in the lookout tower above cough loudly. Ton-Sem put his back to the door and linked his fingers together forming a foothold. Go-Sem placed his boot on the makeshift step and hauled himself upwards. He carefully searched the stonework for handholds before he climbed again so that he was standing on Ton-Sem's shoulders. As careful as he was his metal breastplate clacked against the stone. Go-Sem looked up. A red faced guard peered over the edge of the tower. Without hesitation Go-Sem flexed his legs and launched himself up into the air, reaching out for the stunned guard. His mailed fists clamped tightly to the guards fur jacket and as he fell back to the walkway he dragged the helpless soldier with him.

As he landed he used his own momentum to aid gravity by pulling the screaming soldier head first into the stone slabs. Ton-Sem winced at the

sound of bone crunching and the unnatural angle of the dead look-out's neck.

"So much for stealth" muttered Cal-Sem unsheathing his bolt gun. Rubbing his calf muscles, Go-Sem turned to scowl at his brother in arms.

"That thing won't work here" he grunted. He pointed towards Cal-Sem's unholstered gun. "They didn't work properly back home on the moon, you'll have no chance here. The mechanism freezes solid."

Undeterred Cal-Sem smashed the weapon against the parapet, urging it to work, if for nothing else but to prove his comrade wrong. As predicted, nothing happened. He looked over the side of the wall at the Red Prime guards scurrying around trying to work out from where the noise had emanated. He threw the useless bolt gun at the nearest guard and swiftly followed behind it.

The gun bounced harmlessly off the guard's shoulder, but the follow up thrust from Cal-Sem's blade shattered his teeth as the Dominator rammed his sword through the shocked soldier's mouth. The dead weight of the warrior turned the hilt in Cal-Sem's hand as he fell. He quickly realised that in his eagerness for the kill the sword point was stuck firmly in the dead man's skull.

Four more Red Prime ran from the guardhouse to join forces, whilst another sprinted down the steep slope away from the gate.

"Ton! One of them is trying to raise the alarm" shouted Cal-Sem.

"Already on it" replied the Dominator.

As Cal-Sem drew two curved knives, Go-Sem dropped down beside him.

"Lost your sword already" he laughed.

"Thought I would give them a chance" he shrugged.

Go-Sem unpinned two shiva that were strapped to his back. They were a traditional weapon of the Dumonii. They consisted of a crescent blade under which a grab handle was fixed. The weapon was used to punch and swipe and was a favourite weapon of the Dominators. It was particularly effective in close combat.

Their adversaries advanced quickly trying to use their weight in numbers to

overcome the two Dominators.

Cal-Sem side stepped the attack thundering a low kick at the oncoming guard. It was blocked but gave him enough time to shoulder charge another of the soldiers. The force bloodied the man's mouth and sent him skidding into the snow. He raised both knives to block an overhead sword swing. Before he could step back the point of a Red Prime's sword dug into his midriff. Grabbing the blade Cal-Sem stepped back dragging the warrior forward. As he stumbled towards the Dominator, Cal-Sem lurched forward stabbing the blade up under the soldier's chest plate piercing his heart. He flipped the newly acquired sword over catching it by the hilt, just in time to parry the next thrust.

Go-Sem was more cautious. He moved with purpose, eyeing his enemies, looking for an opening. One of the Red Prime swung his mace wildly trying to force the encounter. The warrior to his left followed in behind the swing lunging for the Dominator's thigh with his sword. Go-Sem stepped back, calmly parried the blow with his left shiva and then hammered his right blade into the exposed side of the attacker's head. The crescent blade bit deeply into the brain pan. Screaming with pain the man fell to his knees, holding his head.

Now the Dominator attacked. He jumped forward launching an upper cut that cleanly sheared through the jaw of the nearest Red Prime soldier. He then pirouetted in the air slicing down across another guard. The helmet took the brunt of the attack with the blade just nicking the guard's cheek. The guard had no time to dwell on his luck, as Go-Sem who seemed continually in motion spiralled around again bringing his second shiva to bear. This time the blade sliced through the chinstrap, through his lower ear and across his throat. Dark blood bubbled up from the wound and from his mouth. As he dropped, Go-Sem's knee struck hard into the downed man's face sending him flying back, blood spraying skyward.

"Four down, Four to go" smiled Cal-Sem.

"Are you sure you can keep up" replied Go-Sem. "You seem to have misplaced some of your blood." He gestured towards the red stain on Cal-Sem's side. The Dominator touched the wound and smiled.

"I have too much blood as it is. It was just slowing me down."

With four of their number either dead or incapacitated most soldiers would have turned and ran. These weren't most soldiers. They were Red Prime. They were handpicked from the hordes of the Merthurian army. Singled

out for their skill and devotion in battle. The two vertical red streaks across their faces was a sign of their elite rank.

They focussed on the pair in front of them and without words all knew the plan of action. Separate, them, then focus on the injured one. Three of them were armed with traditional sabres and shields whilst the other held a long halberd. The pole-arm was normally used when mounted. It had a curved blade with a reverse hook on the back and a spear point at the other end. He lowered the weapon and advanced.

The injured man suddenly leapt towards them, his stolen sword clattering against a raised shield boss. The shield had blocked the strike but did not stop the knife blade which followed. The slender blade drove upwards piercing the guard's bicep. Gritting his teeth against the pain the Red Prime soldier swung his shield smashing it into the face of his attacker. He followed with a sword jab which was deflected before he swung his shield again, this time catching him square in the face and knocking him to the ground.

The three men surrounded the downed Dominator, whilst the other was desperately trying to keep his friend from coming to his aid.

"You hit like a woman" spat Cal-Sem standing slowly. The sword in his left arm felt heavy in his grip. Heavier than it should. He knew he was losing too much blood. He ran and jumped. The injured Red Prime soldier lifted his shield as expected and rather than striking the Dominator used the shield to catapult himself over the warrior and land behind him. He swung his sword in a wide arc before turning on the soldier he had just vaulted. This time Cal-Sem jabbed his knife into the man's ear killing him instantly. He didn't have time to turn and felt the warm numb pain from repeated sword strikes in his back. He smiled peacefully as the white blanket of ground came towards him.

Go-Sem looked on despairingly. The guard was doing a good job keeping him at weapon's length. Without engaging him it was a stalemate. He saw Cal-Sem fall and his rising anger gave him an involuntary snarl .

He feigned a surge forward. The soldier took the bait and lurched out with the long weapon. Go-Sem batted the blade down and then stamped hard on the wooden haft. The shaft splintered. Moving forward the Dominator deflected a feeble strike with broken pole-arm before punching down with his shiva. The blade severed the guard's hand at the wrist. With a disdainful swing he severed the screaming man's throat before dropping to one knee and punching up beneath the plate mail skirt.

"Which one of you two wants a gender change first" sneered Go-Sem. The nearest guard attacked, swinging first low and then high in a flurry of attacks. The Dominator expertly blocked the strikes, but equally none of his returns were getting through either, each skimming harmlessly off the shield.

Go-Sem stamped forward pinning the soldier's foot. He blocked a sword swipe before dropping to the ground and punching where his foot had been. The sharp blade of the shiva severed the guards toes and sliced into the frozen ground.

Go-Sem expected the pain of the wound to slow the man down. Instead the soldier pushed forward on his ruined foot stabbing downwards with his sword. The curved blade parted the straps on his shoulder plate and the blade sank deep into his flesh. Ignoring the white hot pain he punched up half chopping through the arm that had him pinned. He punched up again sinking his other blade deep into the guard's upper thigh.

Thinking of the remaining soldier he stood to witness the long chain of Ton-Sem's kuri wrap around the guard's throat. Safe in the knowledge their mission was successful he stood straddling the prone guard. He pulled the blade out of his shoulder and threw it to one side. The Red Prime was fearfully trying to back away from the stalking Dominator. Blood was pouring from his arm and his ruptured femoral artery. Go-Sem kicked the shield away and dropped down onto his knees pinning the guard's torso.

"For my brother" he snorted.

It was not until he felt Ton-Sem's hand on his shoulder that the big Dominator stopped punching. The bloodlust withdrew and his vision returned. Warm blood dripped off his chin and he felt the sticky liquid squelch in both his hands. There was nothing left of the soldier's upper body except chunks of flesh, bone and ruptured organs.

"Come brother" said Ton-Sem. "We must inform the Emperor."

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Var and the Emperor made their way to the top of the keep without any further encounters. As they approached Bronsur's room they heard laughter from within. Var's heart was pounding in his chest. He was desperate to see his wife after his long absence, but he felt a niggling pang of doubt. The deep rumble of male laughter was only adding to it. He grabbed the handle about to walk in, but then hesitated. He stepped back and knocked on the door.

The door opened slowly and Bronsur still in conversation with her guest turned her head. She stopped as if frozen in the ice along with her city. A beaming smile suddenly melted across her face and with tears welling in her eyes she threw her arms around Var's neck. He stood unmoving, lost in the moment, not wanting to speak or move, less it would end the warm feeling that now caressed his soul.

Movement elsewhere in the room shattered his peace and he looked over Bronsur's shoulder to see a tall Red Prime guard get up from his old wooden rocking chair. The man smiled and moved towards him.

"I do not believe we have...." The guard's cordial introduction was cut short. Before Var could even get a word out the Emperor had moved past him his war hammer extending in his hand. He drove the still unfolding metal head into the guard's temple. The blow fractured the skull killing him instantly. His dead body bounced comically from the end of the bed before collapsing onto the wooden floor. Both Bronsur and Var stood wide mouthed.

"What is going on? What have you done? Var?" the flurry of questions from Bronsur as she knelt at the dead man's side. "Who in the name of the Gods is this monster?" She pointed an accusing finger at the Emperor.

"I'll rendezvous with the rest of my men. Come and find me when you have sorted this situation" said the Emperor. Without any further ceremony he turned and strode from the room.

"It's a long story" Var started. "Those men, you have no idea what they are like."

"Really?" interrupted Bronsur. "This man was my friend. His name was Jerard. He and his men have been staying at the castle as our guests. How dare you and that idiot just burst in here." Emotion welled up inside her and she placed her hand gently on the dead guard's forehead.

"Just how friendly were you?" asked Var. Bronsur glared up at him and in that moment he knew the answer, and knew also he should have not asked the question. "I'm sorry" he pleaded.

"I think it's time you explained it all to me" suggested Bronsur. Var sighed deeply and moved to hold Bronsur's hand. She drew away sharply.

"Whoever you think this man is, and whether or not he has been a

peaceful guest here, you do not know what they are capable of. They are called the Red Prime, but they are part of a much bigger army known as the Merthurian."

"Do you think me stupid?" demanded Bronsur. Var shrugged his shoulders, unsure of why she was asking the question. "I know exactly who this man is. Yes he is, was, a sergeant in the Red Prime. He and his Captain, Petr, have been visiting the castle since they arrived over twenty moons ago. I know they are professional soldiers, that is why I accepted their offer to patrol the city. I also know there is a large force camped out on the ice less than an arrow's distance from our walls. They have been courteous and helpful. What did you expect me to do? The ocean tribes have no interest in conflict, especially one in which we would lose. " She stood and looked down at the prone figure.

"And now this. They will not stand by once they find out."

"They have no intention of standing by" snapped Var. "I have seen the destruction they bring. They have all but wiped the Magta from this world. They have no intention of stopping until all of the people of this planet are either dead or subjugated. We came here to fetch our people and move before they have a chance to stop us."

"The Magta? Gero and Hanelore's race? What happened?" asked Bronsur.

"The Red Prime are just a small part of this army. They are led by a Helmsman called Toll-Son-Ray. He besieged the Magta's home, and apart from the scarce few that escaped with me they were all slaughtered. Women and children Bron, they don't care."

"They have not mentioned any Helmsman. I thought Petr to be in charge."

"I wonder why that could be?" said Var sarcastically. He could see his words were gradually taking hold in her mind.

"But the Magta. You met with them seasons ago, asking for help. They refused, and that was to help one of their own."

"That's true" conceded Var. "Gero has a special talent for annoying those close to him. It's a complicated story, but the leader of the Magta - Lothair, is Gero's brother. As well as that, Hanelore is their father. I believe it had something to do with a woman."

Bronsur raised her eyebrows. Strangely the thought of the Magta involved in romantic trysts had not crossed her mind before.

"Where are they now?" asked Bronsur.

"We could not risk the Merthurian seeing them at the city. They are at the ruins of Labna waiting for us."

"And who was that brute that did this?" she questioned.

"He is the Emperor or rather was the Emperor of the Dumonii." Var waited for the explosion of rage.

"And you two are friends?"

"Sort of" replied Var. "We have had our differences, but you know the old saying, the enemy of my enemy and all that. Besides without him, we wouldn't have made it back here - The Merthurian would have overrun us for sure."

Bronsur shook her head, trying to put the disjointed facts she was hearing into some sort of order.

"So what's the plan? Are we leaving Asturia to settle elsewhere, or is this simply to defeat the Red Prime?"

"The Red Prime, although our immediate concern, are simply delaying us. The Kekken have also come back into play. I think they may well also be hostile towards us."

"So basically everyone or everything is out to kill us, and you want to leave this fortress and make a run for it?"

"When you put it like that" Var smiled. "It makes no difference whether we run or stay and fight. There is another purpose. I have the key. It is the key to the gateway to the Gods. That is where we must go. Whether we die at the hands of the Merthurian or the Kekken, remaining here on this world one thing is certain. We will die. The only hope for us, and our people is to reach the Gods, and pray they will listen. I have always known I had a purpose, and this is it"

Bronsur crossed the room and placed her arms once again around his neck.

"You know I don't believe in the Gods and neither do most of our

people."

Var was about to defend his destiny, when she placed her delicate finger across his lips.

"I believe in you Var, and so do the people. That is enough." She leaned in and kissed him gently. "I have missed you my love."

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"I don't like it" stated the Emperor.

"I trust her" replied Var.

"It's not your wife that concerns me" said the Emperor.

After emotional reunions with the rest of his family, Var had introduced them to the Emperor and filled them in on the events of the past season, including the demise of the Magta. He patiently explained the plan of the alliance and was surprised at how easily they accepted his explanation. Bronsur had told them that Petr, the captain of the Red Prime was due to visit that evening. They had carefully constructed a water-tight trap which no warrior, no matter how great, would be able to escape. With Petr and his entourage dead they would begin the evacuation of the city.

Bronsur had urged Var to let her take a welcoming party down to meet the Red Prime captain. Insisting anything less would arouse suspicion. It was this party of Bronsur, Var's mother and father and his twin brothers that Var and the Emperor now watched, as they wound their way down the steep path and out onto the ice.

They could make out a flurry of snow that was being kicked up by the advancing soldiers. As they closed the distance Var's gut knotted as the hulking Shektars came into focus.

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Mort blew the snow off from his fur collar into the face of his brother.

"Hey!" complained Mido.

"Cut it out you two" demanded Gednu. "Remember nothing should seem out of place. Concentrate for once."

Ignoring his father Mido flicked snow back at his brother.

"I give up" complained Gednu. His wife hugged his arm trying to placate her husband. Bronsur turned to the group.

"Just let me handle things" she admonished.

They stood in renewed silence as they watched the gigantic beasts of the Red Prime lope ever closer. As they neared, Petr's four flanking riders started to dismount, and the Captain pulled down the shemagh from his face.

"It's fresh this evening" said Petr amicably.

"That it is" answered Bronsur.

"There was no need to come out to meet me. I know my way now" smiled the Captain.

"Yes I know" replied Bronsur. Her tone was losing its friendly lilt, a subtlety only picked up by Petr.

"Is there a problem?" he asked. Bronsur cast a nervous glance around to her father in law.

"There is I'm afraid" she replied.

"Bron! What are you doing?" yelled Gednu.

"It's OK Gednu, this is for the best, for all of us" soothed Bronsur. She moved towards Petr. His Shektar flinched and snorted. She could smell it's hot breath as she neared the rider. "I must speak to you plainly" she explained.

Petr twisted in his saddle and lent over towards her.

"We have always spoken that way" said Petr. "What is on your mind?"

"I know why you are here, you and your men. I was hoping to talk to you, to reason with you in order to save further bloodshed" said Bronsur.

"Further bloodshed?" questioned the Captain as he looked up towards the city walls searching for an answer.

"I know you are a honourable man Petr. From the short time we have known each other I know that to be true. I would like to consider us

friends. As a friend I would ask a favour of you. Return to your camp and leave us in peace. Death awaits you and your men inside the gates." she explained. Petr looked up at the great city and then keenly eyed Var's family.

"So, you would save my life in exchange for your people?" asked the Captain. "What of the lives of my men inside your fortress. Do they still live? Or do you intend to exchange your lives for theirs" he snarled.

In that briefest of moments she saw deep into the rider's soul and re-coiled with fear at what she had glimpsed.

"What has happened could not be stopped. My husband has returned, he only looks to protect his people. I would gladly give my life to put a stop to this madness" she stammered.

"That is not your choice!" he bellowed. He spurred his mount and the giant beast lurched up into the air. It's massive paw batted Bronsur to the ice before the Shektar returned to the ground pinning her beneath its massive paw. Mort and Mido leapt into action, but before they could get close to Bronsur the Red Prime guards were upon them. The pommel of a sword crashed into the back of Mido's head and he plummeted face first unconscious into the snow. Mort received a heavy kick in the stomach and as he doubled over the soldier grabbed his arm forcing it upwards and then forcing him down onto the floor. Gleefully a guard stepped in and launched a thunderous kick at the boy's head. His head jerked backwards and his eyes rolled as he succumbed to the darkness. Gednu stepped forward drawing his sword. He shook off his wife's desperate grip.

"You coward!" growled Gednu.

Petr vaulted from his mount in one swift move. The Shektar remaining in place still pinning Bronsur to the frozen ground. He drew his own blade .

"Tell me old man. Bronsur's husband. He is your son?" asked Petr.

"He will rip the eyes from your skull, and cast you into the depths" swore Gednu.

"Well make sure you tell him I will do much worse to his woman, and when I finally tire of her attentions I will feed her broken body to my beast." In one swift move Petr's arm flashed forward his sword slicing into Gednu's stomach. The Red Prime Captain stood over Var's father as he thudded to his knees. His screaming wife coming between the two men.

Petr ignored her cries and looked to the distance at the group of people running out from the city gates towards them.

"We are taking the woman and the boys with us" commanded Petr. "This fight will keep for another day." He chuckled to himself and he climbed back onto his mount. With one final glance over his shoulder they rode back towards the Merthurian camp.

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Var's lungs burned and his muscles strained as he tried to chase the fleeing riders. He finally stopped, bending double trying to regain his breath. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"We will get them back" said the Emperor simply.

Var looked back at the rest of the Dominators who stood around his mother and father. With his remaining reserves of energy he sprinted back to the group. Skidding to a halt he crouched grasping his father's hand. The hand was limp. His mother sobbed uncontrollably. Var looked down at the serene features of his father. He gently closed his unseeing eyes, and burrowed his head into the dead man's chest. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I told Bronsur that it didn't matter whether we ran or whether we stayed and fought. That we had a greater purpose in this world. That changes now. I promise you this father, I will not stop until every last Merthurian embraces the darkness. That is the only purpose left to me now."