

DYING STAR

BOOK TWO: EXODUS



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Prologue

As the fingers of white light spread their aging grasp across the ocean planet, it seems as if the great star Shu would shine forever, but as it rises slowly into the sky it is a shadow of its former glory and its power so weak it cannot keep the darkness from enveloping its children.

Throughout its near immortal lifespan the fading star and its planets have been joined in the never ending embrace of change. This unbreakable bond continues as Shu enters the final stage of its life - death.

The massive ice sheets spread further into the oceans with every rotation. The creatures of the sea flee before it like some devastating harbinger. Those above the ocean fair no better as the temperatures plummet, harvests fail, and the air becomes choked with snow.

As the eternal cycle unfolds there are those who can adapt. Those that, despite the harsh environment, find a way not only to survive but to prosper. Long ago the tribes of the deep south left their underwater tomb to forge a new life above on the pack ice. They alone now prosper as their icy domain stakes its claim on the rest of the world.

Those who struggle to embrace the coming storm still pray to the old Gods. Now, more than ever before, they turn to the deities who so often have forsaken them. They pray that they will awake and breathe new life into Shu and save them from the forever darkness.

In the black depths beneath the waves the icy tendrils reach out and wake another who has been sleeping for an eternity. The seabed rumbles on a tectonic scale as this bygone creature stirs the silt and slowly rises towards the light. The cold water stimulates its senses and revives its hunger. The leviathan crashes through the surface and bellows its defiance at the world. The Archaos is reborn and heralds the planets final step towards the end.

Chapter 1 - The New Emperor

The Lord Emperor Vas breathed deeply as the cold night air stung his throat. He was stood on a small parapet looking out across the Sea of Serenity towards the mountains. The black kullstone of the citadel rose up around him to form the imposing fortress city of Sagen-Ita. It was a considerable drop to the rocky shore below and the small area in which he stood seemed to float unnervingly above it. He gazed, lost in thought as the small white caps of the waves lapped the coast. He remembered the last time he had looked down at this spot. The broken body of Fi-Ota had laid mangled across the rocks his blood colouring the water. It all seemed like a lifetime ago when he had returned from the ocean planet and been declared Emperor. How could it have fallen apart so quickly? He breathed deeply again and cleared his mind of the melancholy thoughts. He could see the fires of the Virtue army burning all along the coast, he knew it wouldn't be long before the attack came.

He was jerked back to reality as the door to the private area was flung open. The Virtue of Water Tol-Aka smiled and walked across to join him. He placed his hands on the stone wall and looked over the edge.

"I'm not sure anyone would survive that drop" he said casually. The Emperor remained silent. After a comfortable silence the Virtue turned his head towards the Emperor. "I always knew that it would come to this".

"You didn't think to tell me this two revolutions ago?" questioned Lord Vas.

"Would you have done anything different?" questioned Tol-Aka. Lord Vas turned to stare out across the sea once more. "I thought not." continued Tol-Aka. "How long do you think we have?".

"This night, maybe the next" countered the Emperor.

"Your Principles and Dominators await your command my Lord." said Tol-Aka as he clasped the arm of the Emperor.

"I know, I will be there in a moment my friend." Satisfied with this answer the Virtue returned inside leaving the Emperor once again lost in his memories.

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Two revolutions earlier Vas had emerged from the shimmer portal accompanied by the remnants of his father's forces and that of the late

Virtue of Water. Runners were sent to all corners of the moon summoning all to the great temple of Ro-Mor.

The city of Sagen-Ita occupied one end of the Island of Hope and the temple the other. The massive shrine dwarfed the biggest buildings of the capital and stood as the symbol of power. It was here that all new Emperors were crowned. Two enormous statues of warriors supported the roof at the entrance and equally colossal pillars stood guard around the circumference of the temple. The sloping roof was decorated at regular intervals with carvings of gods, animals and heroes. Up close the light picked out the relief detail of the black structure and the workmanship that had gone into its creation was breathtaking. From a distance however, it was a thunderous black tomb, home of the God Emperor.

The coronation had been over in an unusually short time. The pomp and posturing of Emperor was a common and expected part of the ceremony. Vas had no time for the traditions, a point he made very clear to those trying to advise him otherwise. He had unveiled his vision for the future of Son-Gebshu, and there was clearly no place for anything that reminded him of his father whether good or bad.

One of Vas's first appointments was that of Tol-ith. He appointed the Servitor as the new Virtue of Water. He had quickly become a trusted friend and confidant since his father's betrayal. As the other stony faced Virtues took their seats around the ancient tree in the centre of the Sanctuary, Vas was confident that Tol was the only one here that he could count as a friend.

The five men all sat, each trying to instantly gauge the strengths and weaknesses of the others. The Emperor stood.

"Welcome my friends. I am glad you could make this meeting at such short notice. I realise things have moved quickly since my return and I know you must have questions. Let us speak plainly." Despite only a few rotations in his new guise, Vas was every bit the part. He was much taller than his peers and his muscular build set him apart from the principles and servitors. It was his manner that added the finesse. He was supremely confident, bordering on arrogant. He exuded this to all around him and it made those now seated in the Sanctuary extremely nervous.

The three older Virtues cast quick glances at each other, trying to silently re-confirm who should speak and when. Gallu-Aka the Virtue of Fire was the first to respond. He was older than all the other men. He had a leathery complexion from years of exposure to the elements. He had three strips of

hair one on each side of his head and one on top, all tied back in a pony tail at the back of his head. The rest of his head was clean shaven. The hair he did have was dyed bright red. There was no mistaking the Virtue of Fire. His manner and temper also followed his title. Vas could clearly see emotions burning in the Virtue's eyes. "This will be interesting" he thought.

"My Lord" began Gallu-Aka. "My brothers and I are happy you have called this meeting. There is much to discuss and many questions to answer." There was a clear hint of aggression in his tone.

"Say what you must" countered the Emperor. Gallu-Aka looked across at the Virtue of Air who gave him a look of caution.

"We do not understand your decision to deny access to the resources of planet below us. How do you intend to feed the people without out it?"

"The ocean planet has been a distraction" started the Emperor. "Over time we have become lazy and reliant on slaves to provide for us. As was proved recently this is a delicate situation, if we were to lose that resource then life for us would become very difficult. I am not saying we should not utilise the planets resources, I am saying that it should only be as a secondary measure. Our first priority should be that of self sufficiency, here on our own world. Our fore fathers left that place behind for a reason. This is now our opportunity to re-kindle our once great civilisation."

"That is a stirring speech my Lord" countered Gallu-Aka sarcastically. "But exactly how do you intend to do it?" The Lord Emperor noted the Virtue's tone but chose temporarily to ignore it.

"The old food ziggurats will be repaired and we will build new ones all along the Sea of Serenity. They will provide ample food for the populous." Gallu-Aka once again glanced at his companions looking for guidance.

"With respect My Lord, they have not been used for years, do we even know how to repair them or how they operated. Who will carry out the work? Who will man the ziggurats if you do get them working?" The Emperor un-phased by the questions replied calmly.

"We still have those who retain the knowledge of our predecessors. I have met replicators and medicators who have much to offer our civilisation if only we would listen. As for who will do the work. We all will. The people of Son-Gebshu will find a new purpose in providing our food."

"And the people will just do as they are told I assume?" countered the Virtue of Fire.

"They will" replied the Emperor.

The newly appointed Virtue of Water, Tol-Aka, stood and nodded to the Emperor. Vas extended an open hand towards his friend.

"We have already scouted the old ziggurats. There are four that can be repaired easily and another six which will take some while longer. We have already identified those with the knowledge of how they operated. Within a quarter of a revolution we would have them fully working and producing food."

"Sounds like you have it all sorted" barked Gallu-Aka "My Lord, you asked us to speak plainly so I will. This upstart has poisoned your mind. He was but a Servitor, how can he sit here as an equal to me and my brother Virtues spouting this treachery." The Virtues of Air and Earth both frowned as Gallu-Aka looked at them for reassurance. Vas remained calm.

"I am struggling to understand your issue my friend, is it my appointment of Tol as a Virtue? Or my ascension as Emperor?" Gallu-Aka clenched his fists. The wiry figure of Alu-Aka the Virtue of Air stood and quickly moved towards his comrade before he boiled over. The Virtue of Air was taller than most men. He had a lean toned physique, long wispy white hair and an angular face. He had a pale complexion which was offset by his striking crimson eyes.

He placed his long fingered hand gently on Gallu-Aka's arm. The Virtue of Fire seemed to quell immediately as if his anger had been extinguished.

"What my brother is trying to say my Lord is that there has been much change in a very short time. It has been the privilege of the Virtues to counsel the Emperor on possible successions and matters of state. I assume that is why you have called us here this day?"

The Lord Emperor moved towards the two men. He seemed to ignore the Virtue of Air and his question and instead walked to face Gallu-Aka.

"Tell me Gallu, if you are brave enough that is, what you truly think? Do you think me worthy of my position as Emperor?" He leaned closer to the seething Virtue. "Well?" Gallu-Aka shot out his arm trying to grab Vas by the throat. The Emperor was ready for the move and blocked the grab with his left arm. The block turned the Virtue to one side and Vas Countered

with a punch to the kidneys. The Virtue groaned at the blow. He quickly regained his wits and vaulted away trying to put distance between himself and his attacker. As he spun he looked up to gauge his position. Before he had lifted his head completely the Emperor's foot smashed into his chin, jerking his head back violently and flipping him onto his back. His vision started to cloud, but he could make out the Lord Emperor stalking towards him. He rolled onto all fours trying to regain his footing. The predictable kick caught him in the rib cage, cracking the bones. He winced at the pain but managed to stagger to his feet. He felt the iron taste of blood in his mouth and spat it onto the floor. Without a pause Vas hammered a roundhouse kick to the Virtue's left knee. The force of the blow dislocated the knee cap and Gallu-Aka buckled onto the stone slabs. The Emperor moved in close wrapping his arms around the helpless mans neck. He then jerked the Virtue's body upward with incredible force. The movement snapped the Virtue's neck. Vas released the lifeless corpse and the broken Virtue slumped over in an impossible pose.

The Emperor hadn't even broken a sweat. Calm but purposeful he strode back to the centre of the Sanctuary.

"That is the reason why I asked you here" he said quietly. The Virtue of Earth who until now had been a bystander looked unimpressed by the Emperor's actions.

"To kill us all?" asked Frey-Aka. The Emperor laughed.

"No. Simply to understand where your loyalties lie. I will rule this moon, and I will do it how I see fit. This is not a democracy, my word is the law. I wanted to be sure that those who have my counsel stand alongside me and not against me. It is a simple question. You may of course challenge me, that is your right, as it was your fellow Virtue." He pointed towards the crumpled body of Gallu-Aka.

The Virtue of Air stood and looked back at Frey-Aka.

"I think I speak for both of us when I say.." He turned towards the Emperor his hair flicking in front of his face. "Go to the Depths."

Both Men stood and backed away from the Emperor. The Virtue of Water looked towards Vas for instruction.

"Let them go" he instructed.

"But my Lord..." complained Tol-Aka. The Emperor looked at the

retreating Virtues.

"It is now up to you how this will end" said Vas.

"This will end with your blood on these stones" spat the Virtue of Earth.

"That is for time to tell." replied the Lord Emperor.

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Tol-Aka watched the long line of soldiers wind their way into the distance. He had pleaded with the Emperor to allow him to join the expedition. Lord Vas had been quite clear that Tol was the only person he trusted to oversee the construction of the food ziggurats. Food production was the key to the Emperor's plans. Success on this front would comfort the population, reassuring any that were in doubt about his ability to rule and deliver on his promises. Plus they would need a huge amount of supplies to feed the troops now on the march.

The soldiers of Emperor's Kingdom remained loyal to him as did the forces of the new Virtue of Water. It was this massive army that now headed towards the town of Angel-Por. The Emperor's strategy was simple, with the Virtue of Fire dead he would quickly march into their territory, rally the people to his cause before they had a chance to side with the renegade Virtues.

The main force consisted of foot soldiers accompanied by most of the remaining grounders that could be coaxed into life. The Emperor had quickly realised that the forgotten skills of the Replicators were going to be crucial to success. He had called them to a personal audience and given a rousing speech bestowing much overdue praise on the people behind the limited technology. The Replicators had lapped it up and sprung into action restoring the rusting grounder vehicles and some of the more mysterious relics. Some of these vehicles now rumbled alongside or were towed by the grounders. At the same time Lord Vas had sent the majority of his sea blades out from the island. They would approach the town from the sea and then support his force from the River of Angels as they moved inland. Tol-Aka knew the importance of his remit, but he still wished he was at the Emperor's side. He stood and watched the departing army until the last units disappeared into the man made dust cloud. He placed a hand on the shoulder of Bar-I, the small Replicator that had been patiently waiting by the Virtue for instruction.

"Time for us to complete our mission" said Tol-Aka.

"Yes!" smiled the ever enthusiastic Replicator.

The two men headed a team of thirty plus workers who had all been hand chosen for their knowledge or experience of the ancient food factories. After only a short while they approached the first food ziggurat. The stepped pyramid was colossal. Built when the first Emperor had settled the moon they had fallen out of use many revolutions ago. Now the once productive steps were so overgrown that the foliage hid the true outline of the structure.

The building consisted of stepped tiers rising way up into the sky. Each layer overhung the last doubling the footprint area for cultivation. At the front was a channel which ran the height of the pyramid. At either side were the hundreds of steps that allowed the workers access to the many levels. Sunk into the channel was a huge metal cylinder. This cylinder had a central core with metal blades spiralling around its length. At its base it was submerged into a deep trough which was fed directly from the fresh water of the Sea of Serenity. At the top were huge cogs that connected to a windmill. The wooden tower of the mill was still standing but the sails had long since fallen and rotted. In its prime the windmill slowly turned the long screw, which in turn raised water from the base to its summit. The water filled a huge stone tank and then through multiple outlets the water would cascade down over the cultivation terraces. The whole system was incredibly efficient, continually producing crops throughout an entire revolution. As soon as the crops ripened, they were harvested and then they were stored in the vast chambers inside the ziggurat. The chambers remained at a constant cool temperature preserving the food. The huge bio-system could easily keep a small town supplied. The regiment of pyramids that had once stood all along the shoreline and its river deltas had once supplied the entire moon. This was the re-kindled vision of the new Emperor. Waiting at the base of the ziggurat were twenty or more soldiers and several hundred civilians. Tol-Aka wasted no time in organising the workforce. Each of the Replicators was assigned their own group and a specific task on the rebuild.

As the day progressed, the Virtue of Water couldn't help but being impressed by the drive of the workforce. Like an army of termites they crawled over every inch of the colossal structure cutting, clearing and mending, slowly but surely bringing the sleeping giant back to life. As the afternoon progressed, four newly assembled sails made their way up the steps of the pyramid. Under the watchful eye of Bar-I they were fixed atop the windmill. Bar-I raced around checking and double checking the interlocking cogs, satisfied that the work met his high standards he ran towards Tol-Aka.

"My Lord, I believe we are ready to test the first part of the system"

he said trying to control his excitement.

"The first part?" queried the Virtue.

"I am still waiting on an essential part to complete the structure, it should be with us shortly, but for now I would like to test the mill."

"Of course Bar, please proceed." The replicator moved to a series of long levers. Each had a smaller lever at the handle. Bar-I squeezed the top mechanism with his hand and then pulled his weight backwards, shifting the larger lever into place. It grated and complained as the ancient metal gears shifted for the first time in an aeon. The strong winds filled the sails and they started to rotate. They moved at a graceful pace, but the gearing beneath span rapidly. The aching groan of metal on metal gave way to an oiled hum as the system found its old mesh. Bar-I grabbed the next lever and eagerly yanked it back. The huge metal cylinder then began to turn. The internal spiral slowly lifted the water from its base upward inside the tube. It was several moments before the assembled workforce could hear the water splashing inside as it rose ever closer. Tol-Aka climbed up a few steps and peered into the empty water tank. At first only a small trickle of water came from the outlet, but this was soon followed by a gush, and then with a constant rhythm the water flooded into the holding tank.

A cheer went up from the crowd, and Tol-Aka slapped the exuberant replicator on the back. Bar-I explained to the Virtue how the water would flow along the channels and into the cultivation terraces. As Tol-Aka peered under one of the tiers he noticed a rusty chain running around the core of the building.

"What's that?"

Bar-I smiled.

"This old thing has more surprises up its sleeve. I think that is what is left of an automated planting system. Each level has one, but they are all rusted beyond repair. It may have also harvested the crops." explained the Replicator.

"Ingenious" commented Tol-Aka.

"We also think the top stone that sits above the water tank held some sort of crane arm, and inside there seems to have been a railed cart to transport the stores."

"This truly is an amazing piece of technology, to think we almost lost them forever." The Virtue grabbed the stone lip to pull himself up and as he did he spotted a flat crystal embedded into the stone. "And this... I suppose this has some function also?"

Bar-I beamed with satisfaction.

"It does. There are thousands of them all over the structure all linked by holes through the stones. This is its crowning glory. Bar-I looked down the steps of the pyramid and his excitement grew still further.

"What is it?" asked the Virtue.

"This is what we have been really waiting for" exclaimed Bar-I.

Struggling up the steps was a large man carrying something very heavy wrapped in cloth. He was holding it and treating it like a delicate infant. As he approached the replicator he carefully peeled back a corner of the cloth. The light caught the hidden crystal and white light exploded from it. Bar-I covered his eyes.

"Cover it up man!" he yelled. The Virtue watched puzzled as the two men climbed to the very summit of the ziggurat. They carefully lowered the giant crystal into a purpose made fissure in the stone all the while keeping the cloth covering the gem.

"Are you ready?" shouted Bar-I.

"What is it?" replied Tol-Aka. Without replying he whipped the cover away. The light from Shu poured into the faceted crystal. The tapered shape concentrating the light as it is shot out down through the pyramid reflecting off the thousands of inset crystals and mirrors. The myriad of inter-connecting tubes allowed the light to illuminate each layer. The whole pyramid glowed with stunning white light like the gods themselves had given it life.

Tol-Aka just stared, dumbstruck.

"It's amazing" he said finally.

"My grandfather referred to them as the food beacons. I thought there must have been a good reason for it! Apparently the light and heat speeds up the whole growing process."

"It's amazing" said Tol-Aka.

As evening approached the army of workers toiled as the radiant pyramid slowly lost its lustrous glow. The Emperor's strategy for the future of Son Geb-Shu was unfolding as planned.

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The long line of soldiers reached the estuary town of Angel-Por just before dusk. They had expected the renegade Virtues to put up some form of resistance, but as the scouts rolled through the outskirts, what awaited them was worse than anything they could have imagined.

The Emperor and the main force waited just outside the town. He stood on top of the grounder his hands shielding his eyes scouring the buildings for a sign of his scouts. The town of Angel-Por was a strategic location, positioned as it was on the River of Angel's estuary. It controlled access into the heart of the lands governed by the Virtues of Fire and Earth. Although part of the Emperor's own domain he had expected a battle to secure it. The eerie quiet worried him, but admitting to himself that the strategy of the traitorous Virtues eluded him, troubled him more.

He squinted into the distance, as he caught sight of movement. The scout vehicle, a smaller and quicker version of the grounder, sped between the buildings and out towards the waiting force. The Emperor vaulted from the vehicle and raced out to meet the returning soldiers. His heavily armoured retinue of Dominators followed closely at his side.

The Reaver Scout climbed out from the cab and slammed his forearm against his chest in salute to the Emperor. He was pale and shaking.

"What is it?" demanded Lord Vas.

"My Lord" The soldier gulped. "The town is entirely empty. There are no signs of the population and no signs of a struggle all except..." his voice trailed off.

"Except what?" enquired the Emperor.

"I think you should see for yourself." replied the Reaver.

"Tir-Sem, Oma-Sem with me, the rest of you remain here, follow in if we are not back before nightfall" ordered the Emperor.

The Emperor and his two Dominators jumped on the back of the scout vehicle and travelled back towards the ghost town. Vas scanned the streets and houses as they passed for any signs of life, but there was nothing. As they entered the central town square the Emperor could see the reason for the scout's demeanour. He called a halt, and climbed down off the vehicle. He walked out towards the centre of the square.

There were three tall wooden stakes. Bodies hung impaled on both the outer staves whilst the central pole held a severed head. At the base were what looked like the rest of the body torn into two separate pieces. The Lord Emperor moved towards the central stake. He looked down as the bloody sand stuck to his armoured feet. He then glanced up slowly at the decapitated head. The pale tortured grimace betrayed the victims last moments.

"It is the local administrator" said the Emperor. "I met him once a few revolutions ago."

The Dominator Oma-Sem stood alongside the Emperor.

"What do you think they are trying to achieve by this my Lord? And where are all the people?"

"Perhaps this is a message, perhaps they are trying to instil fear, or perhaps they have lost their minds, whatever it is they will soon lose their heads. Get these men down and burn the remains. Tir, organise a thorough search of the town, I want those people found."

It was deep into the night before the search teams reported back to the Emperor. There were no further bodies alive or dead. Lord Vas had instructed his main force to move around the town and head up the river valley towards the city of Watco-Tun. He had no intention of slowing his advance and, as the events of Angel-Por had happened recently, he wanted to catch them unaware. For the second time in a rotation he would be one step behind.

The armoured convoy rumbled slowly into the outskirts of the City. It was difficult to make anything out in the gloom, but ahead in the street there was definitely something. The edge of the buildings appeared to undulate, gradually moving as if alive. A Dominator swiftly passed the viewers to the Emperor. He held them up to his eyes and carefully adjusted the range finder.

"I think we have found the missing population" sighed the Emperor.

"What is it?" asked Oma-Sem.

"They have chained the civilians from Angel-Por together; they are forming a human shield around the city. They look to be four to five deep on the main approaches."

"What are your orders my Lord?" questioned the Dominator, seemingly unaffected by the situation.

The Emperor knew that the fleeing Virtues would test his resolve at every turn. This was a simple test. Would he be ruthless enough to bombard the city, killing the innocent civilians before he sent his troops in or would he try and save their lives at the risk of further casualties to his own men? He shook his head and laughed to himself.

"You fool" muttered the Emperor.

"My Lord?" asked Oma-Sem.

"Deploy a small contingent here and at far side of the city. Ensure they are far enough away to avoid any sniper fire or skirmishes. They are not to engage the enemy unless they break from the city and try to escape."

"Yes my Lord" replied the young Dominator looking puzzled.

"This is simply a delaying tactic, the traitorous Virtues are close, the more time we spend here the more time they will have to prepare their defences. It could take several rotations to clear that rat hole, time we don't have. The main force will take a wide berth of the city. We will march on the temple at Tetra-Mor at first light. We can revisit this situation once we have completed our main objective. Once they have been cut off from their main force they will be an easy target."

The Dominator smiled with understanding. Perhaps this was the Emperor that would rekindle the fire of the Dumonii. The Dominator strode away with fierce pride burning in his chest as he barked orders to his men.

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From one of the outlying buildings in the city Principal Sho-Ota edged his way towards the opening. He moved silently as he carefully peered out through the glassless window. He held a scope to his eye, the cold metal initially stinging his skin. Even in the gloom of the night he could see the dust cloud billowing out behind the moving column. He watched in total

silence, unmoving from his position until he was confident of his intelligence.

Sho-Ota collapsed the scope and slid it into his pocket. He carefully crawled along the dusty floor and through the inner doorway. There were two soldiers crouching behind the door jambs. He nodded to them as he quickly scuttled away into the city.

The principal was a cautious man and even far from the sight of the Emperor's forces he kept his route to the shadows. He approached a large building near the centre of the borough. A quick dash across the street and he stood in the entranceway to the town's civic centre. The hallway was full of soldiers. They parted as the principal approached and one stepped forward to open the door to the inner chamber.

"Ah, Sho. We were beginning to wonder where you had got go" said an abnormally wide man sat at the end of a long stone table.

"I had to be sure my Lord" countered the Principal.

"Of course my friend, your unquestionable dedication for the facts is why I sent you. So what has the self appointed Emperor decided to do about this little dilemma?" asked the seated man.

"He is moving his forces around the city, I would surmise that he intends to by-pass us and press on towards the Temple of Tetra-Mor." The Principal held the man's gaze. "As you predicted" he added. The Virtue of Earth shifted his massive bulk back from the table and stood up.

"He may be a formidable warrior my friends but he is no commander." The Virtue laughed as he slapped his belly in a self congratulating manner. "Get word to the troops throughout the city, no movement and no noise. We will tear into their hind ranks like the tide upon the shore" he gloated.

"It will be a slaughter" said Sho-Ota.

"It will be annihilation" grinned Frey-Aka.