

THE STARGUARDS

Of Humans, Heroes, and Demigods

Raymond Burke

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THE STARGUARDS

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To my parents
for their continued belief
and patience.

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Any leftover errors are mine alone to claim.

I can spell; I just like to make words up!

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IN THE BEGINNING

A STORM OF STARS SHALL GATHER

Begin!

Energy filled the void, elementary forces coalesced and collapsed, particles formed and collided in universe-spanning filaments and strings until they were torn apart by the expanding cosmos.

In a blink of an eye the new universe had been spoken into being by the Great Father and Holy Mother.

They populated their new abode with twelve offspring: the Storm of Stars. There were six Prime Stars and six Shadow Stars, mirror-images, equal yet opposite in their argumentative and contrary natures. One day they gathered in the midst of the universe's hallowed swirls and boasted as to whom had achieved the most feats of power. Their tales would have gone on forever had not one of them said:

We need other beings; lesser beings; weaker beings; beings to worship us, fear us and to see our great deeds. Then would we all be great in their eyes.

The others agreed and so from the four universal elements they created four Peoples to worship them:

First they made the People of Energy
Next they made the People of Matter
Then were made the People of Psyche
And last they made the People of Time

The Storm of Stars were pleased with their creations, but the four Peoples did not like each other. They warred amongst themselves. They warred throughout the galaxies. They warred for a million years. The People of Energy became the most powerful and even dared to name themselves. They called themselves the Lore. They defeated the People of Matter, burning them from stone into metal, leaving them to drift for eternity throughout the cosmos. Next they defeated the People of Psyche by spreading imaginary poison, forcing them into exile. And lastly, they defeated the People of Time by trapping them within crystal and casting them beyond the Realms of Futurecome. The Lore were rampant and destructive, victorious, and destined to rule the universe, but their deeds did not go unnoticed. This aeons-long war, mere moments to the Storm of Stars, greatly displeased them, thus they met once again in the depths of Universe's darkest seas to discuss the development of their creations:

How shall we stop this bitter war that has raged for this short time?

We dare not interfere or we shall ruin the course of destiny.

Thus, we shall create a new People, one created from each of the other Peoples, one that shall decide the outcome of this war.

And thus, from the minds of the Storm of Stars sprang champions, bred for battle, and made from the elements of the first four Peoples:

Heroes made from Matter so that they had body and strength.
Heroes made from Energy so that they had souls and emotion.

Heroes made from Psyche so that they had intelligence.

Heroes made from Time so that they knew what had come to pass and what would come to be.

So were the Fifths endowed, finely structured and balanced in nature to counter and defeat the Lore. But fearing that the Fifths People would become too powerful and even turn against them, the Storm of Stars took action:

If these beings were to flourish and become too powerful they may take themselves to be beings such as ourselves. That must not be so. We shall therefore cast these Fifths far across the universe into an abyss so they could never return.

But others disagreed having compassion for their new creations:

No, let these Fifths contend for themselves in war. If they be vanquished, then we have nothing to fear. Be they victorious, then we shall teach them, lest they forget themselves.

In the end, it was decided that the Fifths' fate would be decided upon by the outcome of the war. And so had begun the Decillennial War between the Fifths and the Lore.

The Fifth Peoples had been a space-faring warrior race long before finding the path to peaceful civilisation. The Storm of Stars had made them solely for their pleasure and for the purpose of war, giving them great ships of power that harnessed the stars and weapons of potent destruction, but no guidance as to the nature of their being, nothing but the knowledge of war. But sometime during that misty period of the past that was the Decillennial War, one of the Fifths came to realise that the Fifth Peoples had a greater destiny to fulfil.

He was Celestius, a warrior of great conviction, courage and intelligence. Even in a universe where every Fifth was created equal by the Storm of Stars, Celestius stood out among them. Such was his character the Fifths named themselves the Celestians. And they settled on one world they named Celestia.

But the Storm of Stars had not been pleased and as was their way, contrived to cause misery for the Celestians. They split the People. The Decillennial War had covered every corner of the Universe and the Storm of Stars used this to scatter the warriors, so that they could not find their way home. These people had then settled on different worlds in distant parts of the universe, creating seven separate races of Celestians with differing cultures, languages, and beliefs.

They were the Galatians, the Elerae, the Amethystians, the Xarians, the Meccuns, the Trinari, and the Neb.

One thing that had remained a link between these different peoples had been the stories and legends of their past heroes. Only fragments of the Decillennial War chronicles survived and they were passed down through the ages in the Scrolls of History during the Stranger Aeons, that dark time which preceded the Golden Age.

It was a time when great heroes arose to teach, to battle the dreaded enemy whose name was never uttered, to explore, and to search for the other Antiqchronals, as the other three First Peoples were now called. The Celestians had almost been destroyed by the People of Energy and had vowed never to rebuild again until their enemy had been completely destroyed or ultimately purged from the light of the Universe.

This period had brought forth great questions about the nature of war as epitomised in the

Tomes of War, philosophical preachings and practices revered by a sect called the Knights Destina. These elders and warriors upheld the Storm of Stars as their Gods, revering them above the Great Father and Holy Mother, a heretical tradition. The Knights Destina awaited the Storm of Stars to embrace them in godliness, once the war was finished. But as the War wore on, the Knights Destina's power diminished and they gradually disappeared, becoming the Forgotten Ones. For all Celestians, belief in the Universal Father and Mother was paramount, and they prayed and waited through the darkness for salvation to appear.

And in the dark times of the Stranger Aeons, mysterious champions arose whose descendants would become the saviours despite the interventions of the Storm of Stars. With the will of the Universal Creators on their side, these champions overthrew the evil People of Energy, forever banishing them from the bounds of the universe. The Decillennial War was over.

And yet, that defeat had unbalanced the strange symmetricism shared by the Storm of Stars and the Universe, for shortly after, the Storm of Stars faded away, back into the universal fold from whence they had come. But the Storm of Stars had not left their existences without infusing upon the Celestial champions their legacies.

The Prime Stars granted:

*Champions; Fifth in nature, but superior in being.
They will flourish, be powerful, and victorious.
They will protect our creations and their destiny.*

But the Shadow Stars declared:

*But these champions will forget themselves in our absence.
They will seek to vanquish us and shoulder the universal glory.
Hence they will only survive for one thousand generations.*

This was mutually agreed. And thus began the birth, life, and death of those whom were called the Celestial knights.

PROPHECIES OF THE END OF TIME

I can see things. I can see more, a power to see things not visible in this world that ever since I was born and thereafter, I have seen things that no one else can ever see. I thought that I had seen everything, but then one night, I saw ever so much more, more than I ever wanted to see. And it scared me.

And so I had called the others: Galatian, Spheron, Statia, and The Others, even Gen Horol deigned to appear. And I told them what I saw:

“I saw four shadows, four distant darkened forms, reflections in black, but I saw their eyes, only their eyes, eyes that were windows into their souls.

“The First One, his eyes were blue. Ice blue. Ice cold. Worlds froze under his gaze. His eyes were like summer in winter, ice like fire. Scorching, burning, cold blue fire. Undeniable. Inextinguishable. His eyes burned. And all afire and unholy, he looked at me and I burned and burned and burned in his icy flare.

“The Second One, his eyes were black. And a voice said unto me: ‘Look into my eyes.’ I did. And I was lost, for they were deep. I saw a galaxy in each eye, one spiral arm in one corner, the far side in the other, the pupil a glowing core. He blinked and the galaxy exploded. And began again. He blinked and the galaxy exploded. And began again. Over and over and over again. They laughed at me, those black eyes.

“The Third One, his eyes were gold. Devastating. Fascinating. Lightning-bringing. Crackling starbursts. Fierce and noble. Flaring points of omnipotence. Conflict raged within those eyes. Light hailed. Darkness assailed. Then pain rained down, chaos screamed, and the gold bled, dead. In a rage of light he turned to me. He had terrible eyes. And I was afraid of him.

“The Last One, I knew his eyes. I had seen them before. My father’s eyes. His eyes were death. There were tears in his eyes. Tears of death. He cried death, one drop after another, dealing death. Death to all, until no one was left. And it was then that I knew I had seen the end of the universe. I had seen the end of future’s end.”

And so I had called the others: Galatian, Spheron, Statia and The Others, even Gen Horol deigned to appear and I told them what I saw. And they believed me, even inscrutable Gen Horol. And they prepared, and hoped we were in time.

EVIL persists.

It snakes and writhes its menacing form, eclipsing the
cosmic light of life with its shadowy wings of death.

But there is an evil which transcends all others.

An evil incarnate, slipping between the universal bonds;
a perpetual object of living darkness existing even beyond
the grasp of death, in bodies enshrouded in unholy energy.

No where, no when, is safe from them.

They are the Lore.

And they are coming.

PART ONE

MAGNA AURA

Of New Beginnings and Neverendings

Prologue: Futurepast

The Magna Aura Star System exploded, the Lore having destroyed the children of the infestations that called themselves Celestians.

But not all Lore were enraptured with their victory.

“This should not have been,” the magenta one said to itself. “Time and time again, I have failed. I cannot change what has come before and what will come again—alone.”

And so help had been sought.

CHAPTER ONE

“Thank you, Spheron.”

Novan, son of Alphatronius and Elysium, firstborn among the sons and daughters of the Celestian Knights, gently closed the book that he had been reading, rubbing his fingers over the worn leather bindings. The book, ‘A History’, had been given to him by Spheron to safeguard, before the young Novan had escaped in the last ship just prior to the final Lore attack.

Novan read the hand-written inscription inside the front cover again, a personal message from the wizened sage, who hoped he would find solace and inspiration from his combined tales of myth and history. Novan gazed out at the dark, blue sky and as he had done every day gave thanks to the Universe for another day in which all Celestians could dream of better days to come. “I will not forget the sacrifices you all made to save us,” he promised as much to himself as to his mentor.

From where he sat upon a high escarpment overlooking a new island settlement being built, the land between him and the calm, blue sea sliced the vast, open waters in a crescent-shaped arc. It was times like these that he wished the Celestian Knights could be here to witness the rebirth of their civilisation. It had been thirty years since the escape from the Lore and there had not been any sign of surviving Celestian Knights. Novan, still young, with centuries to look forward to, hoped one day to find out the fate of his parents and the others. But for now he was the inspirational architect and leader of a new breed of heroes protecting the rise of the new civilisation. That the children of the Celestian Knights had been named the Starguards by the people was a testament to their heroics.

The history of the Starguards was only just beginning, a beginning that had started after passing through the dimensional gateway. After searching for many years, they had come across a suitable star system with a large, bright, yellow star, which they had named Magna Aura.

Most Celestians had inhabited Halcyon and Placia; the twin worlds widely circling each other like two courting Starbirds, not touching yet always near. They were nestled in between Nexa, a small rocky sphere closest to the sun, and the gas giant Magna Prime. Halcyon, was an impossibly-blue orb, an oceanic world dotted with hundreds of small islands. The Trinari ships had been reconfigured to become the first of the majestic sky cities and a few sea-based ones, while settlements sprung up on the myriad of islands, like the one Novan had just inspected. The capital, Halcyon City, was the largest air-based structure in the system and not far away was Sky Command, the home of the Sky Warriors. Halcyon was mainly populated by Galatians and Trinari.

Placia was slightly smaller than Halcyon, with three massive landmasses which boasted the beautiful Xalia Canyons leading to the wide plain of five rivers that held the capital, Atronia. The Elerae, Xarians, and Neb settled on Placia, the Neb inhabiting a whole continent themselves to remain as isolated as before. Both worlds were blessed with burgeoning indigenous and imported Celestian sea life and copious amounts of small fauna, some of which became docile pets. Magna Prime, the ringed, gas giant with a dozen moons, had been colonized by the Meccuns for their own purposes and because each reminded them somewhat of their home world. The last world and furthest out was uninhabited Aurana, another gas sphere with two unremarkable moons that could be mined for ship-building materials and resources.

Novan lived in the small sky city of Elysian on Halcyon. And it was about time he returned, though he had business on Millennium City-State first.

Turning his gaze up into the thick-blue plushness where the first stars had started to pin-prick their way through, Novan could just make out the admirable, glinting form of the other orbit-free

City-State, Alpatron, which hung majestic-like in the skies and constituted many a Celestians' home. Novan had no doubt that his brother Decion was looking down upon him from his militaristic roost.

For all their hard work and fortune, Novan knew there were voices of dissent among the Starguards. But it was up to him to integrate the Starguards more into society if they were going to earn the complete respect, trust, and loyalty of the Celestians and survive for long as a new civilisation.

He sighed as he made ready to leave. There was still a lot of work to be done.

“Look, there’s Novan watching over us,” gasped Classia, pointing with her chin up toward Novan’s perch on the ridge. “He’s a God, Deb, a true God.” Her hushed voice was tinged with awe, her brown eyes wide in fascination.

“If you say so, Classie, but we’d better finish the training sessions, or old Gal Agar will find our names on report, again.” She nudged Classia and the two, blue-uniformed Sky Warriors began their tedious work supervising other teams of Sky Warriors in various training exercises around the building site. Luckily the day was coming to an end.

When the sky cities were first built, there had been a need to establish order and a protection force that could oversee law both in the air and on the sparse land that existed. Then Cirrius had stepped in and proposed the establishment of the Sky Warriors, a force of flying enforcers, dedicated to his father, Hyphon the Sky Warrior and his ideals. But it would take the ambition and the ingenuity of all of the Starguards to see it come to pass, for it envisioned a force capable of natural flight, rather than depending on external mechanisms. The technology to alter themselves had always been there, but never used, for it had not been needed with the Celestial Knights around, but now things were different and extra precaution was called for. Within a few years, the first aeromorphically-engineered Sky Warriors had appeared, their two-toned, blue-armoured uniforms (or manoeuvre suits as they were called) a familiar sight in the skies above Halcyon. Now there were over fifty-thousand warriors of the sky, emanating from Sky Command, their vast aerial fortress.

Classia and Deb were two young Sky Leaders whose rise up through the ranks could not have been more different. Classia had a privileged upbringing. Her Galatian parents had retained much of their wealth after The End and had promised that their first-born would be dedicated to the service of their new world. She had undergone rigorous and various tests and procedures and had become a Sky Warrior soon after, rising up the ranks very quickly, sometimes in questionable ways. Quite haughty, living up to at least the ‘superior’ part of the Sky Warriors’ creed, it was a wonder that she and Deb had become good friends.

After The End there had been much confusion and chaos. Some ships and records had been lost and in the process vast numbers of children became orphans. Deb had been one of them. Nothing was known about her early life, except that her name was Deneb, given to her by the orphan keepers. She had an exceptionally keen mind and later, her soaring intelligence, along with her dark beauty and aloofness—more out of shyness than arrogance—would bring about resentment toward her.

All orphans had become Sky Warriors or Star Warriors, their space-faring counterparts, but Deb had shown a natural potential and with those skills and an intangible quality that set her above the rest, she had become the youngest Sky Leader, and a favourite of the Sky Commander, Gal Agar, the first Sky Warrior. He had found and taken care of Deb in his younger days, before she had been

placed in the orphanage, but he had always looked out for her. That had been hard to accept by other leading Sky Warriors, the resentment ever more present, especially when she and Classia were always leading each other into trouble, much to the chagrin of the Sky Commander, as if the life of a Sky Warrior was not adventurous enough.

“You know sometimes, Deb, I don’t get you.”

Deb looked over at her friend. They had been promoted the same day two years ago, not that Classia acted any more responsibly. Classia frowned from beneath her curly brown locks. Her brown eyes and pouting lips could be potent weapons, but this time there seemed to be genuine concern in them.

“What’s the problem now, Class?” But she knew. Deb sighed, not wanting to turn toward Classia. She let her attention wander extra-long over a distant Sky Warrior practice patrol, but Classia was still intently scrutinising her.

“I don’t know, Deb. I’ve known you for ages and yet you’re still . . . unknowable, you know? You’re distant at times and I don’t get it. I don’t know if you mean to be like that, but it’s been happening a lot recently. Is there something wrong?” Her eyes implored, as Deb’s eyes searched the ground for grubmites, “Has something happened?” Classia’s eyes widen in glee, “Have you and Tol Valar been . . .”

“No, we have not!” flushed Deb indignantly, yet also almost laughing at her friend. She had resisted all of his advances.

“Then what’s going on? Tell me, Deb, please!” She looked so earnest this time. But just as Deb was about to tell her, Classia suddenly looked up and inhaled sharply, “Oh, look, Deb. He’s going,” She pointed skyward to where Novan was a fast receding figure in the darkening sky.

Deb slumped, not believing her friend. “You’re such the universe, Classia, all cold and starry-eyed.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Anyway, we’re just about done now. I’m heading back to Command.” Before Classia could reply, Deb flew off to visit various points on the island, advising her subordinates to wrap up for the day. Then before Classia could catch up, Deb took to the air executing a tight arc to spiral upward onto her back and then with an aeromorphic thrust of speed propelled herself over the island, a classic and perfect manoeuvre, which Deb could only hope the training Sky Warriors were watching and learning from. She was so involved in her own thoughts, that she had not felt Classia coast in from behind and below.

She started at the sound of Classia’s voice, “Sorry, Deb.” Deb couldn’t help but smile. She knew that Classia meant it, even as Classia continued. “You know how I feel about Novan. Even the Celestian Knights married non-noble Celestians, so why can’t I dream of Novan. One day he’ll notice me and that will be that, we’ll live happily ever after.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes, just like that. I believe it, Deb. I love him.”

“I don’t doubt that, Class.”

They slowed and stopped, hovering high over the small, smiling speck of the island. A fair breeze blew jet-black hair across Deb’s eyes and she felt a chill course through her body, despite her manoeuvre suit’s internal environmental protection. And Classia’s concerned eyes were upon her again.

“Oh, there you go again, Deb. Something happens and you get this look in you. Really now, what is it?”

Taking a deep breath Deb shrugged, trying to tie words to her feelings, but could only manage, “I don’t know, Class, I get these . . . feelings that something’s wrong, really wrong, and that

something's going to happen." A nervous laugh escaped her as she dismissed those aired thoughts with a wave of her hand. "Forget it, sounds silly doesn't it?"

"Well . . . we all have those thoughts," Classia mused, treading warily. Then as if a new thought had struck her, her face lightened and she lifted up Deb's chin with a finger and purred seductively, "Maybe you and Tol Valar *should* be doing something. Could take your mind off things." Sporting a wide-mouthed grin, she sped off into the sky toward their home, looking back, taunting 'catch-me-if-you-can'.

Flustered and open-mouthed, Deb took after her, the scene depicted by Classia embarrassingly forming in her mind. They laughed and chased their way through the now dark sky and through Sky Command's automated security fields, before entering the massive centre for the planet's defence. It had been a long day and they were both exhausted and Deb had been grateful for her friend's concern, but as she walked along the landing deck, ominous thoughts began to creep through her again.

Out in the cosmos there are gaps. Some are billionths the size of atoms, while others could swallow whole worlds. They had been made in the new-born void, where matter and energy did not quite coalesce to form ordinary matter and energy, and so had developed into areas of nothingness. But far from being benign pools of star-lit placidity, they were raging cauldrons of whirling energy, for plugging these gaps were other universes, spilling their own diverse energies into others. And after billions of years of seeping energy, something else came through one of those gaps. Something screaming.

Two hours after leaving Halcyon, Novan coasted silently and easily through the arena that was the void. His eyes searched the cosmic horizon for a moving star that was no star, but the independent City-State of Millennius. Novan enjoyed the serenity of flying openly in space. All the Starguards possessed the indefinable energy that allowed them to live centuries or more; to fly and to survive the open expanses of space unharmed. To them, it was just a part of life, but increasingly now, Meccun sci-techs were infringing on their territory by trying to artificially create such elements within the Magna Auran society and even asking to study members of the Starguards. This would never have happened with the Celestial Knights, but new times seemed to be bringing new attitudes and customs, some of which Novan did not mind, but he knew that some of the other Starguards, like Decion and Altair seemed hostile to these changes and Cirrius seemed to outright avoid the public for just such a reason. Maybe Solandus, Novan's youngest brother, had seen this and done the right thing early, Novan reflected, smiling at the thought of his youngest brother who had forsaken his duties, having opted to roam the new universe in search of adventure, his parents, and his destiny, somewhere out there.

But Novan was quite different from his younger siblings, so much so that at birth, Alpatronius had been disappointed in him. While his younger siblings all possessed the black hair and dark eyes of Xarians and wore the red and black armour, Novan possessed feathery white hair, fair eyes and duskier complexion, and wore white armour. His powers, though energy-oriented like his father's, came from the mind, like his mother. As the eldest, he had campaigned to stay and fight by his mother's side, but Elysus had forbidden him and placed him on the last spacecraft herself, promising that she would return; he had only to listen for her voice calling for him to come to her. Sometimes he could hear it, but only in his dreams.

Coming out of his revelry, Novan spotted the tell-tale signs of the wandering City-State, just as

he rounded green-hued Magna Prime. Constantly travelling around the system, the city sometimes orbited one of the worlds, its unmistakable sword-like form, bristling with spires and domes, the regal domains of its denizens. Novan had come to see its most eminent resident, his second-in-command, and closest friend, Aeri - The Sceptre.

Gliding through the outer-laying myriad of spires toward an entry port, Novan felt a slight tremble twist his body.

“*What the . . . ?*” He shrugged it off, but then it returned and it stabbed his soul. He doubled over, in absolute pain, his vision blurred and a piercing scream ripped through his mind. Eyes squeezed shut in agony, his hands grabbed his head and he went tumbling out of control.

He did not notice how many spires he crashed through, or how many people narrowly escaped death rushing from the damaged spires, sending the city reeling toward the lurking planet below. He did not notice the frantic efforts to save the city or the hands, which eventually caught him, before he was lost in the deep blackness. All he knew was the scream inside his head. All he knew was in that scream, the scream Novan had waited for all his life: His mother was calling him.

The invaded gap began to rip, overflowing with constituents from outside the universe, until it suddenly came to an end in a burst of spectral explosions, which for the first time ever, sealed the gap. There was no going back. The war had gone on for a very long time and they had almost lost. Almost. But now it was time to feed. And they were very hungry.

“Send Sky Leader Deneb in,” Sky Commander Gal Agar said.

“Yes, sir,” his aide, Sky-Mark Aphene, responded sharp and crisp in manner as she opened the door to admit Deb, closing the door on her way out to leave the two alone.

Gal Agar had been the first Sky Warrior, genetically altered in his prime to fly and defend the skies. He was a hero to his people, the Celestians, or to the new generation who preferred to call themselves Magna Aurans. An imposing figure, he was quite tall, young looking with well-weathered features, but going grey at the temples—the rewards of state he called it. Now he was entering his seventh decade and looking forward to the next half of his life, but some people seemed destined to make it harder for him. Enter Sky Leader Deneb.

Before being allowed to head to her quarters, after a filling meal, Deb had been called in to see the Sky Commander. Now she stepped into the familiar office of her commanding officer, noting the usual array of personal mementos, awards and other paraphernalia, like his ceremonial battle-staff, modelled on Hyphon’s famous Meta-staff. Despite his rank, the office was not too airy or in fact too compact, room enough for himself. Deb felt as if she was in a containment cell, an arm’s length away from her captor.

“Take a seat please, Sky Leader.” Gal Agar held out his arm indicating the chair across his desk. Gal Agar gave her his solemn stare which usually melted the wills of other Sky Leaders, but Deneb, as always, sat unperturbed and it was the Commander who let his gaze fall away first. *She does that every time*, he thought, suppressing a smile. Regaining his composure, he searched for the words with which to address her. Any other person and he could give them the usual speech, but with Deneb, she always required something different. *She’ll have my job one day*, Gal Agar mused. *And I wouldn’t envy those under her command*. That thought formed the basis of his talk.

“You know, Deneb, that I’ve known you almost all of your life. You’re one of my foremost leaders and someday, and I don’t doubt it, you’ll be in this seat. Even with your somewhat unfortunate record of minor insubordinations and association with the, shall we say, incorrigible

Classia, your skills and intelligence should be enough to have you promoted to Deputy Sky Commander, but to take that last step; you have to start working hard now on your temperament and attention to attitude. Recently, it seems to have been getting worse, not better. I need to get inside your head. Find out what's wrong. It's beginning to worry people and if it worries them, it worries me, and if it's affecting your duties, then it's endangering lives and we can't have that now can we?" He resisted the urge to tap the desk, awaiting her reply.

Head hung in thought, Deb responded hesitantly at first, before finding the words. "I . . . I don't know, sir. Recently, I've been having dreams, bad ones, but they feel more than just dreams. I feel like something's going to happen. I get this overwhelming sense of . . ." She shrugged. ". . . of doom, something beyond us all. And I'm afraid. I don't know how I know, but I do. And that's about it, sir." She sat, looking like a small child, peering out the large window at the night sky with her wide blue eyes.

"Have . . . have you ever experienced anything like this before?" Gal Agar was genuinely concerned.

"No," came a quiet voice, "Never."

"Um, well maybe we'd better get you down to the med facilities. Let them take a look at you. They might be able to help," Gal Agar said unconvinced. Then trying to reassure her, he added. "I need you. This world needs you. More than any other Sky Warrior, I feel you have the makings of a great leader. But . . . these . . . episodes are greatly undermining your chances. Go down to the medtechs and get your mind together. You'll be alright, Deb, I have every confidence in you." Gal Agar realised that his last sentence had been a thought expressed aloud. Normally, he would not have allowed himself to become so personal with anyone, but sometimes he likened Deneb to the daughter he would never have. He would never admit that to anyone, for he would never allow relationships to soil his duty. And he was not about to start now.

Deb looked at him, or straight through him, Gal Agar couldn't tell. Studying her he had always noted that her blue eyes truly matched the colour and the wildness of the sky and if anyone had been born for the skies it was her. But something was wrong and if he hadn't have seen it for himself, he would not have believed it. For a second Deb's eyes seemed to pulse a vivid blue.

And then she fainted.

CHAPTER TWO

“So, what’s wrong with him then?” snarled Altair for the umpteenth time. While Aeryl had retrieved Novan after his crash, Altair had resealed and steadied the city from its drop into Magna Prime, much to the relief of the Meccuns. On returning, Altair had wanted to tear apart Novan, who ever since his admittance to the medlabs hours ago, had remained unconscious. Altair had to be content with pacing up and down.

Now standing in an anteroom, Sceptre tried to calm Altair down. Sometimes that was easier said than done. The Meccun medtechs had been working over Novan for the last few hours to no avail.

“They still do not know what’s wrong with him. They say he seems to have been attacked, but the city’s defence forces out hunting for any intruders haven’t found any signs of them, either.” Aeryl rubbed his face then combed his fingers through his short brown hair. “To tell you the truth, I don’t think it was an attack. Something else happened to him. And if you want to help, you can by keeping calm.”

“Oh, I’ll show Novan calm when he wakes up. He’ll be so calm when I’m finished with him, he’ll never wake up again.” Altair frowned, his blue eyes settling upon the hurrying medtechs. “I’ll really show him,” he growled.

Aeryl, the Sceptre, son of Sola Venga and Iria, and Altair, son of Auron and Iria, half-brothers and cousins, were complete opposites of each other. Aeryl’s calm confidence was honed into him by his father, Millennium’s protégé, hence Aeryl’s honorary title of The Sceptre, the all-powerful weapon and symbol of Millennium, which Aeryl’s powers resembled. Blond-haired Altair brooded like his father, Auron. He, like Decion, disagreed with some of Novan’s policies and thought that they should be more in command. Despite Altair being slightly older than Aeryl, it was Aeryl who was Novan’s second-in-command. And while most Celestians had decided upon settling on the sparkling new worlds, others wanted the freedom of space, and in time they converted ships into two vast space-faring City-States, roaming the system at will. Millennium City-State was full of magnificent spires and was home to anyone who wished a life among the stars. It was also home to and jointly commanded by Aeryl and Altair.

Looking over toward his half-brother, Aeryl sighed. Altair, for some reason, resented Novan and it had nothing to do with this latest incident. Novan bore no hostility to anyone, not even toward his own arrogant brother Decion, but Altair just couldn’t, or wouldn’t, get along with him or anybody else. He had to go looking for a fight. Someday, Aeryl knew, someone would come along and put Altair in his place. And Aeryl was afraid it would have to be him.

Inside the medlab, the physicians tried once again to awaken Novan, but his state remained unchanged. Medtech Ede reviewed his progress: No pain, no injuries, but his mind was systematically engaged. It was as if it was being held captive, his brain activity had increased remarkably and his eyes moved under closed eyelids as if receiving an incredible amount of sensory input. Novan was dreaming.

And memories came flooding back

Long ago

“We stand on a World on the threshold of total destruction . . .” Millennium paused at the uncomfortable words, a reluctant admission of defeat.

“This, Galatia, was the first and foremost of all the Worlds, now we are the last remaining

bastion of life in the universe. Outside our realm, enveloping death and ultimate destruction is held at bay by us, the last guardians: the Celestian Knights.”

Millennius’ voice tried to stay strong, but Spheron, Keeper of the Scrolls of History, heard the deep sorrow within it. He halted his rehearsal, Millennius, for all his towering leadership, had never been one for speeches and he gave Spheron a look of resignation: You can do this, Spheron.

Spheron sighed, and as usual, opened the Scrolls of History and sought the words his leader needed. He remembered how they had got here in the first place. And how he had come to chronicle the end of the Celestian Knights.

The Decillennial War had seen the Celestians battle against an enemy so incomprehensibly evil that their name had been forbidden in the Scrolls of History. But it had never been forgotten. Dead to history, but alive in memory, the name had resided in the minds of those who would have dared to think it and lingered on the lips of those who would have dared to whisper it. After the war, the enemy had been defeated and imprisoned beyond their universe.

Thereafter ensued the so-called Stranger Aeons: the almost mythical time of the end of the Storm of Stars and from whence had arisen the all-noble Celestian Knights, the progeny of the heroes and champions of the wars aeons past. They were harbingers of strange and wonderful powers, mysterious, all-powerful, and worshipped throughout the universe that they safe-guarded. A Golden Age had followed: a time of peace lasting a million years.

So it had been.

The universe had been a peaceful union of six worlds: Galatia, Elera, Meccus, Trinar, Neb, and Xarias. There had once been a seventh, Amethystia, but it was long since destroyed.

Celestia had been the ancestral home world. But over time, after the Celestians had been scattered by the Storm of Stars, diverging into differing societies, Celestia had been lost in the annals of time and presumed destroyed during the Decillennial War. The surviving Celestians had then existed separately until the first Celestian Knights had united them millennia later.

The Galatians, bless their glory, were the perfect specimens of physique and beauty. Their combined wealth was beyond calculation, which was evident in their dress, art and culture. Their cities, from the tallest spire to the deepest walks, were designed by artists and built to perfection by architects whose blueprints looked like sheets of divine music, the finished product a shining chorus in an orchestra of stars. Truly were they works of marvel and wonder. Galatia, the only world in its star system, was also the seat of the ruling government, a fair and just society—the Guiding Light of the Six Worlds. Many a Celestian Knight claimed heritage from Galatia, the golden jewel in all civilisation.

The Elerae were no less noble, but were highly feared and fiercely loyal to one another. Their uniqueness was shared in an extraordinary trait in that to the last one, they all possessed long, flowing blue hair. Their world was one of arduous domains from towering mountains down to the deepest of the magenta seas, which had given birth to the Elerae warrior states. And all beneath the glare of a fierce, blue star, which Elera shared with three gaseous spheres. Now, the reason why the Elerae were so feared and mistrusted stemmed from their treatment of the Amethystians, the one-time inhabitants of the seventh World. Long ago, so it was written, an Elerae had been unjustly killed on Amethystia. The killer was never found or given up. The grievously loyal Elerae had found fault with this, and as one, had travelled the vast scape of space to Amethystia and annihilated the whole world in revenge. Total decimation. Amethystia still hangs around its sun, but as a disjointed ring of loose rubble and dust.

The Elerae had never been forgiven, nor had they ever apologised, and nor had they been punished; the other Worlds fearing the consequences of another war. But from then on the Elerae had always been treated with caution. And the Elerae would be judged. The universe was the Great Judge of all things and the day would come when Elera would be judged. It was the way of the universe.

The Xarians, another warrior-class society, were the beings who could boast the only defeat inflicted upon the Elerae since Antiquity. An industrious and once peaceful people, the Xarians were the most superb weapon forgers, making weapons for others, their skills unsurpassed, but they began to feel that their skills were going unappreciated and so started making weapons for themselves. There had been an uproar from the other worlds as their supply of weapons had been cut off and the Xarians had armed themselves. The Elerae had then taken it upon themselves to restore order, but had been humiliated in battle and repelled by the upstart warriors. Fearing further battles, the remaining worlds had negotiated a settlement between Elera and Xarias, restoring calm. Even with that violent history between them, the Elerae and Xarians later became two of the closest allied among the Worlds.

The Trinari excelled in the art of spacecraft building, thereby being the leaders in the explorations to and of the Outer Worlds. They also controlled the space trade, allowing all others to crew their ships and to access their space facilities, except the Elerae. Out of all the worlds, the Trinari had more reason to hate the Elerae, for the Trinari had been close kin to the Amethystians, the two worlds being close to each other's star system. No direct relations existed between Trinar and Elera.

Meccus, the smallest world, was a world of intellectual wonder. Their capacity in learned skills and advances matched the Galatians and allegedly some Meccuns possessed psychic abilities. Meccus, like Galatia, had been named after a hero from antiquity and was also a single-world system. Meccus was also the most inhospitable of the worlds and was adorned with thousands of vast inhabited domes and underground cities, linked by thinking machines and crystal tunnels, which the Meccuns were deeply proud of. It was a triumph of what could be accomplished by mind and science. But underneath all this visage of wonderment lurked a tangible air of sadness, for the universe held secrets that even they could not fathom.

Neb was a world of boundless nature with endless forests and rivers, a world alive with the vibrancy of life. The few large, inland seas and mountains that existed were sites of majestic monuments and pyramids, for the Neb were a very ritualistic and religious race. They were wary of outsiders, and hardly a one of them had ever left their world, though they had the technology and capability to do so. Their Book of the Ages had prophesied total destruction if they were ever to leave their world. It was their most sacred law.

These then were the Six Worlds. For countless millennia, they and their Outer Worlds and colonies had stood as an example of supreme excellence and they would have existed for millennia upon millennia. But then had come the horror from the past.

They had escaped from their other-dimensional prison. Word from the Outer Worlds had told:

“. . . of great creatures of black light and evil emerging from the depths of space, casting an unholy and gory glow among the stars as *They* devoured the very life from out of them . . .”

The Outer Worlds had been slowly devoured first, as *They* had made their way across the universe toward the Six Worlds, the very heart and soul of every beings' life.

Their evil resurgence had been swift and relentless. Whereas it had taken ten millennia to defeat them before, a mindless brood intent on survival, there was now an intangible intelligence behind their actions and *They* were spanning star-years in rapid succession:

“. . . skies filled with the blood of stars, suns scarred and screaming for their lives, an everlasting twilight descending bringing death . . .”

They were insatiable and unstoppable:

Neb had been the first World to fall. *They* had never reached the Six Worlds' frontier before, but now within a fraction of the Decillennial War's time, *They* had reached them and the final outcome was becoming inevitable. And then one by one the other Worlds had fallen, leaving the survivors to flee each time, until only Galatia remained.

The universe lay dead around Galatia, burning in unnatural fires created by *Their* feeding, or dying in a cold waste; so cold that no sun's fire could ever warm it again. It pained the Celestians: those who had lived for so long, achieved, advanced and sacrificed so much only to see *Them* return to destroy it all. There was no fathomable conscience to *Them*, just an incomprehensible desire to exist to destroy.

And throughout all of this the Celestial Knights had battled in vain, every manoeuvre countered by *Them*, every step undermined and turned against them. They fought with fervour and righteousness, but the unnameable monstrosity continued on unabated and strengthened by Celestial Knights' failures. With Galatia the only world left, it seemed now that the greatest civilisation ever known was coming to an end.

There had been no crisis of this like for generations, not since the Period of the Hero Siege when the Celestial Knights Priorion, Astari, Ulix, Zen Devastar, Spheron, Teo Venga, Azurzura and Thronen Kor had fought against a mysterious enemy and then just as mysteriously disappeared without a trace, a whole generation gone.

But unknown to any of the Celestial Knights, their days in the Golden Age had come to an end on a dark day of treachery.

In all of the one thousand generations of Celestial Knights, since the end of the Decillennial War, their origins and history had been shrouded in secrecy and mysticism:

“. . . And so it was that the Gods brought unto us the Celestial Knights, the Great Saviours.”

Everyone knew that passage from the Scrolls of History. But only Spheron, the scribe and keeper, had known exact lineages. The general consensus was that the Celestial Knights were actually the descendants of the Decillennial War heroes from the Stranger Aeons, but that was to change irrevocably.

There was turmoil amongst the ranks for the first time, generating distrust and discord. The cause was a traitor who had turned against the rest of the Celestial Knights, and for the ever-venerable Celestial Knights and the surviving populations on Galatia, it was heart-rending. The

tension threatened to tear them apart from within. By this time they had concentrated and combined their powers to create a blazing field of protective energy around Galatia, which the heartless monsters could not penetrate. This supernatural aura of protectiveness was all that kept *Them* at bay, and if it were to disintegrate as a cohesive body, then all would be lost.

But this generation had always been special, for as foretold by Ozmec:

“ . . . In the one thousandth generation shall arise the most powerful generation, born and blessed with all the insight, knowledge, and power ever bestowed upon a generation. They shall be the most powerful and prolific; the most celebrated and revered. And they shall also be the last. For it is foreseen that in this same generation shall arise The Crisis of The End, a conflict beyond all others, between ultimate good and ultimate evil which shall bring about the destruction of all.”

These Celestian Knights, thus became the most celebrated since the Decillennial War and were named in the Scrolls of History as:

Millennius, Destina, Hyphon, Alphonius, Elysium, Spheron, Ultra Ari, Acirrius, Iria, Synther, Auron, Phasia, and Sola Venga.

Millennius, son of Millenniar, was a leader of magnificent bearing and stature. With a Celestian Knight life sometimes lasting a thousand years, he was the last leader of those born in the one thousandth generation. The very light that shone out through the cosmos was at his command to use at his pleasure or displeasure. He was the light, encaptured in his golden armour, and his symbol and weapon—a sceptre of light. Many a time was there when he would cast his golden gaze across the lands, raise his sceptre of light and reform the land into a form that best pleased him. But as the rays of a sun blind one when glanced upon, so Millennius was blinded by his own inner pains and passions and to the flaws and that lay within himself.

Destina, Mistress of Fate, daughter of Celestra, was Millennius' half-sister and was one of the most beguiling of the Celestian Knights for she could see into the unfolding paths of the future. The way ahead was open to her alone as she guided and advised her half-brother, who turned her prophecies into his commanding policy. She was not one for manipulating her visions, for if she were to, havoc would reign. But even as she saw the dark future forming, fate had intervened and left her blinded to the sight. Some had said it was to ensure the prophesied fate of the Celestian Knights; others that Destina had deliberately chosen to relinquish her powers in order to not see their End. Either way, fate, it seemed, would have its way. Destina was also very influential and involved herself with the intrigues of the court, scheming various fates for others whom she judged deserved her personal attention, which included almost everyone. Without a doubt, Destina was a woman all her own, her lonesome existence was all-encompassing and could drive one insane in their pursuit of her. It already had.

Hyphon the Sky Warrior, son of Jerichon, had Elerae blood in him for his hair was a flaming mane as wild and as blue as the fiery, blue-giant star that Elera sailed around. His raptorial nature and haughty loftiness was a grim reminder of his heritage, enhanced by his skysharp swooping and soaring with a grace unmatched as if he were the transformed bird itself. His strength was enhanced by the meta-staff, a gift from Millennius, capable of unleashing energies that could raze mountains or calm the seas. He was the power of the wind. And the only things that could capture and tame the storm that was Hyphon the Sky Warrior were his wife, Ultra Ari, and their baby daughter.

Alphatronius, son of Novan, was a warrior-sorcerer supreme, his powers granting him command over other dimensions and space with which he could warp around himself, expand, and create dimensional shields. It had been Alphatronius who had saved the Trinari by surrounding their world in a shield of dimensional energies, thus allowing the inhabitants to escape to Galatia, while the creatures of darkness had become caught in a maze of energy. His armour was coloured the red of blood and the black of death and he was regarded as a brave and loyal warrior. His weapons, a myriad of swords, were sheathed in an other-dimensional fortress and commanded by thought to his hand alone. He was also a dreamer, who often had his fellow Celestian Knights spellbound with tales of other galaxies. But Alphatronius was also known to be jealous of Millennius, whom he saw as a rival, and also desperately in love with Destina, who spurned his love in a toying fashion to spite him, much to the amusement of his estranged wife, Elysius. The love between them had grown to hatred; his ego, jealousy, and cavorting combining to drive them apart. No longer father to his own fine, five children, Alphatronius became mentor to Auron, whom he honed into his own image.

Elysius, the Divine Goddess, daughter of Meccus, and one-time wife of Alphatronius was a treasure, a jewel of beauty. The mind was her domain, with mastery over telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation. Although a wisp of a woman, Elysius' glowing ethereal features belied an inner strength. Her gold-tanned skin, feathery-white hair, and keen golden eyes imbued her with an exotic nature that intoxicated everyone. Elysius had long ago given up using her charms on her wayward husband, Alphatronius, knowing too well of his indiscretions and his feelings toward Destina. Their five children were in her care and were better off without their father.

Ultra Ari, daughter of Solatia, was no less a Goddess herself, but whereas Elysius had the beauty and the spirit, Ultra Ari also possessed physical strength beyond all others. The beloved wife of Hyphon and sister to Iria, Ultra Ari's powers relied on the rays of the cosmos to radiate upon her golden mane of hair increasing her strength up to a thousand-fold, but with that power came a rage that also threatened to consume her. She and Hyphon were two of a kind, headstrong and passionate, but together managed to tame each other's primal forces enough to start a family.

Spheron, son of Spheron and a thousand Spherons before him, Master of Forcefields and all things technical and scientific, was Millennius' First General and closest friend, even ahead of Hyphon. All military strategy and tactics were relayed through him and it had been Spheron who had advised Alphatronius on the tactics behind the Trinar Deception, the Ring of Fire that now protected Galatia, and many more feats of majesty. Being Millennius' First General, confidant to many others, and interpreter of the Scrolls of History, Spheron held many secrets, many of which could destroy them all and any hope of salvation, if revealed. But Spheron, would never reveal a secret, even on threat of death; for there were some things even worse than death.

Iria, the Imp, was full of the energy of life. She was the sister of Ultra Ari and intended wife to Sola Venga. Iria was blessed with the gracefulness of a starbird and could produce the most vivid spectral effects, each colour of light having a different purpose. She was the spark of life. It was said of her that during a fierce battle, the spectrum had burst out from within her and splashed upon the unholy enemy, thereby giving each one a distinctive colour that remains until this day.

Acirrius was the younger brother of Hyphon. Living under the shadow of his more famous sibling was beginning to reflect in his manner. He tried with great care to hide that fact, but a rift had developed which could have caused them to tear each other apart. The cause of this simmering conflict was Millennius, or rather the gift he made to Hyphon—the meta-staff. Acirrius could control great masses of air, energising them to his will, whereas Hyphon used his meta-staff for that same purpose. Acirrius resented the use of the staff, which infringed upon his domain and vowed to

have it lost. Destina had foreseen that his wish would come to pass, but long after he was dead.

Phasia, daughter of the great Zater Jen, was sister to Synther, always having to defend her unfortunate kinship to him and disassociate herself from him, though she still loved him. Like him, she could transform herself from matter into an energy state resembling a magenta storm of energy in a woman's form, though she could not wield it as handily as he could. She was also Millennius' lover, much to the chagrin of Destina and Synther who had conspired to keep them apart. Others considered them the perfect couple. Though Millennius could not see his own flaws and the resentment that was building toward him—mostly because Elysium and Spheron buffered him from such annoyances—Phasia was able to smooth out his temperament, presenting him as a leader worthy of his title.

Auron, like his twin brother, Sola Venga, could harness and wield the energies created by the universe, but not as masterfully as Millennius who had often taken the twins under his wing to hone their powers as young children. The sons of Attanian, Auron and Sola Venga were the youngest of the Celestian Knights, but made up for it with sheer courage and determination. But while Sola Venga worshipped Millennius, Auron's brooding nature, for he had lost his young wife, Iria and their child, to his own brother, found him more akin to Alpatronius who took charge as his mentor. Auron found no fault with his twin and loved him dearly, but considered Iria to be deceitful.

Sola Venga was as impetuous and loyal to Millennius in a way that no one else could be. With his brother, Auron, they undertook training from both Millennius and Alpatronius, for their shared powers were such that the raging torrent of quantum forces that they controlled were unstable and unpredictable. Sola Venga always worried that his powers would overwhelm him and turn him against the others. He feared his powers and his nightmares increased his fears as he saw himself turning into one of *Them* and destroying the others. This vision tormented him and the more he used his powers, the more he was tormented, his only source of comfort being Iria, his betrothed.

Synther, son of the great Zater Jen, was a chameleon, a master of deception, able to change his body into a fluid energy state, becoming like a blue fire. In this way he had been the closest to the ancient enemy, whose energy forms were as sinuous. But that is not why he had turned against the Celestian Knights. He had been affected adversely by his father's mysterious disappearance and had also always been more outspoken against Millennius than even Alpatronius had been, and his inner motives and thoughts had been his own. He had been a law unto himself, the darkness inside us all, but yet this had not been enough to change him. In searching for his father through the Scrolls of History, Synther had discovered the Celestian Knights' secret, one that had affected him beyond all reason, and the truth of it would shatter and destroy the Celestian Knights and their universe forever.

According to the Scrolls of History and in all Spheron's readings, the Celestian Knights had not foreseen one of their own turning against the others, forsaking his proud heritage, and delving into the forbidden arts of evil and destruction. However, the very reason that they had strove to create their ultimate vision of Celestian Knights was to erase a secret that had been threatening to break free and destroy all previous generations of Celestian Knights. And the one thousandth generation had been their last hope; yet they had always known that they would be doomed to fail. As it had long been believed, the Celestian Knights had been sent by the Storm of Stars as saviours, their origins shrouded in mysticism. It had been the first generations of the Celestian Knights who had expounded this myth. It had grown and become part of the legend of the Celestian Knights, but it was entirely false and now in the one-thousandth generation, one Celestian Knight, Synther, had finally discovered the truth. He had, without Spheron's knowledge, deciphered an obscure inscription from the Scrolls of History, written by a previous Celestian Knight. It read:

“Know now that we Celestian Knights are no sons of Gods, but the spawn of the bane that we sought to abolish from our universe. Know now that we are kin to the Destroyers of Worlds, half-breeds to living devils, the children of death. Are *They* not responsible for us? Are we not responsible to *Them*? Are *They* not us? Are we not Lore?”

Those last words must have stirred within Synther; to read the name of the enemy for the first time. Spheron had been fascinated and afraid when he had first read them, but in control. Not so, poor Synther. All through his long life he had felt apart, different, lonely. He alone had felt that exhilaration of being pure energy, his sister Phasia was still inexperienced in total transformation and was still tied to the mortal world of corporeal beings. However, as pure energy, Synther could feel the lure of immortality.

As he had later confessed in a written scroll, Synther’s first thoughts had been to unite the Celestian Knights with those dark-souled creatures: a flawed ambition. The universe would have then, in his words: “known the joys and delights of immortality.” But he had known that it would not be accepted by the rest and that he would have to do it alone. But he had first to find the savage beasts, release them and tame them. And so, in secret, Synther had embarked upon his dark and treacherous path.

The Scrolls of History were old. Long before the Decillennial War, the knowledge contained within them had been astronomical, but it had been encrypted and entrusted to the Scroll Keeper of each successive generation of Celestian Knights, all the successive Spherons. Though Synther was quite adept at deciphering the codes, the further the Scrolls of History went back, the more arcane the script became and Synther could not understand them. However, he had sought, found, and taken an ancient map from the records; an encrypted one, and that was a start.

After a long search, Synther had found the focal point in the region of space through which the first Celestian Knights had exiled and imprisoned the Defeated Ones outside of their dimensional plane. The breach between dimensions had been sealed by a bond of inter-dimensional energy, like a cauterized wound, but it was enough to keep *Them* imprisoned, the bonding energy repulsing their evil energy. But it could be deconstructed and opened, allowing *Them* to be released.

As the victor writes history, so Synther later impressed upon the Celestian Knights his version of events:

“At once after opening the gate, thus freeing the Lore from their unjust incarceration, I, Synther, as I had been known, had died. The Lore had invaded my body, prepared to engulf me, but in that moment, the Lore, once the mightiest of the First Peoples, and I, the innocent Synther, had found ourselves fusing into something more. We were neither just Synther; nor just Lore. I had been chosen; chosen by the Lore to lead millions upon millions of now sentient Lore, such gifts did our fusion wrought. We absorbed all of our experiences, saw our worlds of birth, shared views of the universes. I saw them in hunger, in their drive to survive and grow. We need to survive. We need to grow. We cannot co-exist with you. Our survival *demand*s this. We demand conquest. That is our destiny. And above all else, we demand our destiny.”

Conquest Synther wanted, but the Celestian Knights were in his way. Now, after a thousand generations of Celestian Knights, the Great Enemy, whose name had once been a whisper on the winds of fear, became a fierce cry borne in the raging storm that would follow.

The Lore had returned.

It had still been a surprise to the Celestian Knights that Synther had betrayed them in such a way; after all, he had been a Celestian Knight, bound by the laws given by the Scrolls of History. It had at first been assumed that Synther had vanished into isolationism. But soon, the nature of his disappearance and the untimely re-emergence of the Lore, had taken on more sinister aspects once Synther's treachery had been revealed.

Spheron, Destina, Elysium and Phasia found themselves charged with the failure to detect Synther's treachery, for those four, alone or together, could have prevented such catastrophe according to Millennius. They addressed Millennius in the Halls of Celestial Order:

Destina had said:

"My Lord, the paths of the future are such that I can read their content, but their meaning is much more difficult. And furthermore, due to some contrivance, the paths of the future have been made unclear to me. I fear that the premonitions in the Scrolls of History were to come to pass, no matter what I saw, Sire."

Next, had come Spheron:

"My Lord, I am the Keeper of the Scrolls of History, whose runes date to the beginnings of time. Mine is the duty to read, interpret, and scribe these runes, but at no time can I prevent others from learning the inscriptions and indeed from acting upon them. The fault lies not within the Scrolls, Sire, but within the heart of whosoever reads them."

And, so came Elysium:

"My Lord, I am the seer into minds, but the mind of one such as Synther's was as impenetrable as the darkness that was coiled around his heart. His mind was as cold and unreachable as the creatures he now commands and I could no more read his thoughts, than he could mine, Sire."

Last was Phasia:

"My Lord, I have never been my brother's keeper and I am not now. I will not be held responsible for his actions. I have no feeling for him. I have no contact with him. I have no brother!"

And with their testimonies accepted and the defendants exonerated, in Millennius' infinite wisdom, these further words had been recorded into the Scrolls of History:

"For your actions, Synther, you shall be forever cast out of the ranks of the Celestian Order and condemned; forever to be known as the Traitor Synther."

And with those words, the Traitor Synther had been tried in absentia, found guilty and the only punishment that awaited him was death. To that end, war had been declared for the first time since the Decillennial War against the same foe.

The war had raged for years on end. The Celestian Knights and the peoples on Galatia had withstood the Lore onslaught, trapped as they were behind the unbreachable wall of energy. They were now prisoners as the Lore had once been and time was running out. An eternity could have come to pass before Galatia had given in, but it was well known that this was to be the last Celestian Knight generation.

In that time, Sola Venga and Iria had wed and Iria given birth to a baby son, a young mirror of his father. He grew up with Auron and Iria's son. Hyphon and Ultra Ari also had a son, while it had also been rumoured that Millennius and Phasia had a child, but it had been hidden from the rest, for fear of its life. There were now nine children in all, but they were not Celestian Knights, and would never be.

But then had appeared the most momentous occasion in the history of the Worlds.

Destina had a miraculous vision, an omen of such overwhelming vividness and eminence, that the Scrolls of History described it as:

“A visitation of significance, so unparalleled in the annals of history, its import could not be justifiably rendered by mere words.”

Destina's vision had indeed been a visitation, by one of the first and most powerful Celestian Knights ever to have existed: Galatian.

Using his own and his generation's formidable powers, he had been able to project himself far into the future, through a thousand generations, to deliver salvation. Destina had been awed by his magnificent presence, but no sooner had he appeared, then he had vanished in a burst of celestial light.

Destina had recounted his prophetic tidings:

“Behold the Voyager-Warrior come on wings of time long gone.

Our fathers are nigh, defeated not in what they have done.

When time at last shall die upon you, embrace brave blood and death.

Enter not the Gate of Spawn. Stand to, bold Knights, and hold forth The Light.”

Long did the Celestian Knights ponder over these weird and twisted words, some of which were known, but others unfathomable in their sense and reason. It was not until their breaking point, that Spheron realised the true meaning of the Great Galatian's words.

Alphatronius' patience and jealousy had finally overcome him. He had demanded of Millennius to step aside and let someone more capable of leading, like himself, and take the battle to the Lore, instead of being self-made prisoners. Millennius had refused, naturally, and in full view of the others in the Halls of Celestian Order, Alphatronius had attacked Millennius.

And that is when the prophecy's meaning had become clear to Spheron.

He had stood as transfixed as the others, mesmerised by the conflict in progress. They had all expected this to happen and would all now stand by and accept their fate, which lay in the outcome of this battle. It was the way of the universe.

As the two grappled, their energies sparking and glancing off each other, their armour glaring under the energy-barrage of the other's attacks, it was then Spheron realised what each of these two stood for: Alphatronius was the 'Blood and Death' of war, while Millennius was 'The Light' of the everlasting universe. In the prophecy, both had been mentioned cryptically as being instrumental in the survival of our civilisation, at least until time ended and the Gate of Spawn opened. And like lightning, that part had become clear to Spheron, too. It was all so clear. And yet he had little time. He could feel the precious moments slipping away.

Acting quickly before anyone could stop him, Spheron sealed and enveloped the Celestian

Knights within individual forcefields, for Spheron was the Master of Forcefields, and such things were within his rights and realm of powers as First General.

Ignoring the protests of the others, Spheron arranged them around himself, in order for them to hear his grand announcement and their way to victory:

“Celestian Knights, please forgive my brash and sudden manner in which I have intruded and trussed you up. But a great revelation has just now hit upon me, during this most worthy debate, which to my knowledge could end our woes. Long and in vain had we pondered the words laid out before us by our great forebearer, Galatian, but I have now discovered its awesome meaning.”

He paused, gazing among them to see if he had caught their undivided attention. He had.

“The Traitor Synther had been right!” There were raucous denials. Spheron raised his arms to cease their worried plight. “The Storm of Stars did indeed take the spark of our progenitors, the dreaded Lore, to create us, but that is now neither here nor there, nor is this the time for discussion, for they are surely nigh and upon us, and time is running out. And you, Alpatronius . . .” He said, pointing to him, still seething in anger, “Are our only hope!”

At his confused look, Spheron retorted, “Well, are you not the ‘brave Blood and Death?’ What have you to offer us, then? I’ll tell you what: the ability to dabble with other dimensions. But have you ever tried to enter and cross those dimensions? No? Then I tell you, Alpatronius that you can and must. Our salvation lies within you! Let me tell you how. You all know the Story of Adantus and the Antiquichronals Quest. Our children will lead our peoples in their wake.”

A general chorus of amazement pervaded.

“But . . .” Spheron hesitated, “we are warned ‘enter not the Gate of Spawn’ for we are not destined to escape, I’m afraid. Only the young, able and fortunate will be able to escape, for there are not enough starcraft for all. And who will defend those misfortunate remaining at the end? We will, ‘Bold Knights,’ led by ‘The Light,’ our own dear Lord Millennium. So you see, my fellow Knights, there will be no contest here today, for we will all be needed, even at the end.”

A palpable, ringing silence descended within the Hall, as the truth and understanding of Spheron words sunk in, until Millennium, as resplendent as ever, had spoken for all of them:

“Then let us end this thing, forever!”

At first there had been general disbelief, outright anger and rampant panic when the Celestian Knights had informed the populace about their discoveries and the solution, but as the hard reality of the situation had taken grip, the multitudes of people had drawn together, united in a cause to save the cream of their once glorious civilisation. The Six Worlds would live on, but in some distant land across the cosmic barrier of dimensions.

It had been hard for Alpatronius, too, at first. He had never generated such an immense cross-dimensional channel before, but working with him, Spheron was able to use his powers to help stabilise Alpatronius’ efforts. It had been difficult, but it would work and with all of the available Trinari ships and other vessels, the Celestian Knights would be able to evacuate two hundred million people, just one hundredth of the survivors of their once glorious civilisation.

But by using their powers this way, the Celestian Knights were destabilising the protective field around Galatia and scores of Lore were penetrating through. They had been destroyed quickly; they had to be, because every Lore that got through was an eye of the Traitor Synther. He could not find out their plans or there would be no hope; he would hunt down and destroy every single living being. And they had not come so far for him to win. No matter what, the Celestian Knights had pledged, the Traitor Synther would never win.

Alpatronius had kept the gateway open for long periods of time, enough so that a number of

ships could pass through untroubled. It had been tested by Meccun technology and was safe, stable and fixed onto an area in another universe which seemed suitable and unquestionably Lore-free. Already, the ships had been loaded and it had been hard enough for even the Celestian Knights to let go of their children, but they would be taken care of, by trusted companions, and grow up certain in the knowledge that they were loved.

It would take three days for all of the ships to voyage through the gateway. Three days, then The End would come.

Those three days were the longest of the Celestian Knights' lives, fending off the Lore, while sending the ships through. Their future would be safe, but the Celestian Knights were coming to an end. The Lore were penetrating more frequently, the Celestian Knights' powers weakening from maintaining the forcefield—their prison—constantly, and they could not stop all of them. Havoc reigned.

Millennius, Spheron, Destina, Phasia, Sola Venga and Elysium had formed one group, while Alphontrionius, Hyphon, Auron, Iria, Ultra Ari and Acirrius formed the other, protecting the populace, hidden underground, though thousands of brave souls had ventured out, in determined defiance, to help fight for their World.

“We *will* be the survivors!” had been their fervent cry.

Spheron's chronicle was the last thing to enter the gateway, given to Novan, son of Alphontrionius, in the hopes of future generations understanding all that had come to pass, and to safeguard them in the future.

The End had come.

I am Spheron, son of Spheron and a thousand Spherons before him, Master of Forcefields, First General, friend to Millennius, Chronicler, Interpreter, Exegete of the Scrolls of History. Above all—Celestian Knight.

Millennius never did give the speech he rehearsed, but his last recorded words were:

“Our end has come, my Celestians; fight well and long may we live!”

In a boundless, energy-specked void, Novan floated. It was the happiest and saddest time of his life and he didn't want it to end, but he felt the rest of the data-flow coming to an end. He let his feelings flow out of him, a blue-green stream of sorrow, that was met with a rush of yellow aura of sympathy and hope that no words could match in love and sincerity, and then a red aura of euphoria caught hold of him and thrust him up toward a bright light.

And then Novan awoke.