

T h e M a g n a A u r a G e n e s i s

BOOK ONE OF

T H E S T A R G U A R D S
Of Humans, Heroes, and Demigods

A S A M P L E R

R a y m o n d B u r k e

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THE STARGUARDS

Raymond Burke is a British-born author - The Starguards series being his first foray into novels. His background includes an early life in Canada and the US, employment in the British Army as an aircraft technician, an MSc degree in Archaeology from University College London, and short-article writing. He is also a member of The Mars Society. He cunningly lives without a fridge, satellite TV, iPods, and he also can't drive. He's a self-confessed 21st century caveman . . . and loves it! Through all, he has been a keen and aspiring writer. He currently lives in London.

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.

BOOK ONE

THE MAGNA AURA GENESIS
Of New Beginnings and Neverendings

P r o l o g u e : F u t u r e p a s t

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

The sky burned. It twisted, warped into a lurid vortex suspended like a huge, angry fist wrenching the very fabric of reality. Under the glare of the red-purple bruise puncturing the universe another battle unfurled.

“Mother, I beg of you, let me stay and fight!” Novan pleaded, arms outstretched, leaning forward and shouting to be heard above the howling hot dry wind in the intervening twenty meters between them. The dust stung his nostrils. Bitter red air swirled under the dazzling maw of the vortex hanging above the very last world, Galatia, drawing in the gleaming swordships by the dozen—their escape route.

Novan ignored the last of the armoured crew and panicked civilian refugees clutching small possessions and younglings running past him up the ramp. Dozens of other sleek cruisers dusted off in pairs to dock with the awaiting long white swordships, which majestically rose quietly upon great shafts of heavenly light toward the dark-purple cavity. But Novan’s world was in front of him denying him his destiny.

“I am strong enough to stand by your side!” Unbidden tears welled up—the dust, he told himself; his balled-up fists shook in defiance, his mind’s energy surged around his head like a nimbus. *>Mother!<* his psyed voice broke as he saw the look of resolve in her eyes.

She stood serenely, arms down in front of her, seemingly unaffected by the charging wind.

Somewhere in the distance, a towering silver skyhab collapsed almost in slow motion in a heap creating a billowing red and yellow dust cloud, another link to the past gone. Novan felt it symbolised his crumbling life. He turned disconsolately back to his mother.

The Goddess Elysium tilted her head, eyes glistening, admiring her son’s determination—her first born, her beloved Novan, born of the mind like her. But he could not stay. He was not part of the prophecy.

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A wisp of a woman, Elysus' glowing ethereal features belied an inner strength, and an even greater power of the mind. Her gold-tanned skin, feathery-white hair, and keen golden eyes imbued her with an exotic nature which intoxicated everyone. All that was going to end soon, but the children would be saved.

>Novan, you must go< she psyed to him, an urgency in her voice. >You will lead the new Celestian civilisation. Do this for me!< Though they were not in physical contact, Novan felt her caress his face.

Standing forlornly on the metal ramp leading to the airlock of the last cruiser, Novan knew she was right. Her psyed message was mixed with feelings and memories mere words could not convey. Novan had felt that she out of anyone would have understood his desire to stay. His father, Alpatronius, was somewhat busy keeping the vortex open and would not have countenanced such emotion and intransigence from his son, especially from Novan, who was much less his father's son in image and power than his mother's.

Another spired edifice toppled, convincing Novan even more they were representing his own personal failures.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a flying figure fast approaching them. The green-clad Celestian Knight landed by his mother.

“Spheron!” Novan called out in hope, his vocal greeting whipped by the howling winds. His mentor would surely be on his side.

The dark-skinned Celestian Knight gave Elysus a supportive squeeze of her shoulder, said a few private words, to which she nodded. Spheron advanced toward the cruiser, his great green cape flapping in the capricious winds. He was cradling an object; a book, Novan realised.

Without preamble, he said, “Your mother is correct, my young lord.” Nearing him, he clasped his shoulder. “This world is no longer your fate.”

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Spheron, master of forcefields, was a handsome man even nearing seven hundred years old, with dark eyes and a neatly trimmed black beard and mustache wrapping his lower wrinkled face. His body was still as honed as a two-hundred year old's.

“Your destiny awaits on the other side of the vortex.” They both stared up into the wild sky, which churned as it nonchalantly swallowed more swordships to safety.

Novan squared up to Spheron gazing past him to his mother. He would not go like this.

“I make my own fate!” he shouted, hoping he sounded threatening enough. He shifted to force his way past Spheron, but an energy trapped him in place.

Not Spheron's forcefield, Novan realised in shock, but his mother's energy enveloping him, a psychic wreath of harsh yellow light. She was shaking her head, sorrowful emotions accompanying her effort. He tried to push back, free himself, but it was no use. He grudgingly relented. Shoulders slumped and downcast he swung around to enter the cruiser, the ship's commander had been waiting in the inner airlock for almost an hour anxious to leave the dying world.

More skyhabs, spires, and a pyratedral crashed in the distant city, dust and explosions blurring the skyline of Celestia, the capital of their world. Novan watched, detached, accepting the inevitability of The End.

“Novan.”

He halted and turned at Spheron's soft voice. Spheron had his hand outstretched with the book.

“A gift,” he smiled. “Read it, learn from it, and remember us, always.” He embraced Novan in a parting hug.

Novan hugged him back. “Always!” he replied, feeling hot tears on his cheek.

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He wiped them away. >*Goodbye, mother*< he psyed, feeling the need to reinforce their shared connection.

>*Farewell, my son. I will always be there for you, in your mind, in your heart*< she caressed his face from afar again. >*Always, listen for me!*< She implored, smiling sadly.

It was the saddest smile Novan had ever seen and experienced. Yet it also infused him with the warmth, love, and outpouring of hope only a mother could give. It was the last thing he ever saw of his world as Novan entered the cruiser and the airlocks closed behind him.

The commander spoke quickly into his small comm unit on his forearm. The small warship immediately hovered off the ground briefly, then shot up toward its mother swordship, an elegant ten-kilometer-long shard of white light. Novan sullenly followed the commander through the endless well-lit corridors, cabins, and open spaces full of people, many of the hundreds of Celestian evacuees on board, numerous of them greeting their young lord, blessing the universe he was with them.

Novan smiled and shook hands where he could. He had to be strong for them, but inside he was rotting away with guilt. He barely noticed the rest of the journey. Up four decks he was led forward where in a large cabin aft of the bridge he joined the other Celestian Knight progeny.

The grey octagonal room was as non-ostentatious as it was portless, with a double row of shockseats situated in a tight circle on a slightly lower circular level. It was the crash room, with emergency escape pods embedded in the walls around them. The commander strapped Novan into a seat within the inner circle, full with the other Celestian Knight families.

By the time Novan was strapped in, they had docked with the swordship *Commandarian*.

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“We will depart shortly,” the commander announced. He looked at them all. “Your parents are the bravest Celestians I know. But I also know you will follow their example.”

“Thank you, Commander Horp,” Novan managed, his throat tight.

The commander bowed slightly, exiting the room, the door sliding shut. They were left alone as the crew busied themselves with the departure.

The other children could see the disappointment in Novan’s eyes. He had failed to stay. He was one of them after all. He could see their reactions in their eyes: a glint of smug satisfaction in his brother Decion’s eyes, sadness in Urana’s, understanding in Aeri’s. His younger twin siblings, Alpha Rion and Astara, were silent as usual sitting quietly together, while his youngest brother, Solandus, actually slept beside an oblivious Cirrius who was busily studying a crystalator’s readout of the sword’s telemetry. And Altair brooded opposite him, trying to ignore them all. They also did not want to leave, but they had to. The Celestian civilisation had to survive.

The last swordship to leave Galatia rocketed up gracefully to the vortex. There were minutes of serene silence. Then the ship jolted violently. Rocked left then right, Novan sat glumly, strapped in to his seat. The vortex threshold bounced the swordship on a tremendous wave on energy then rolled it to one side, suddenly porpoising in the eddies of torsional currents. And then without warning, glaring lights penetrated the hull and sheared open their reality, churning them inside out, tearing at their existence. Corporeality became a memory, a painful sin punished by transit through a soul-destroying spiral. The burning sense of prevailing nothingness amid crushing omnipresence was shattering.

Novan cried out in pain, his distorted voice mingled with thousands of suffering others on the swordship. Their dying universe was extracting the last bit of energy from them, crying for its loss,

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birthing its former inhabitants into a new dimension; leaving the Celestian Knights to their fate.

>Listen!< Elysius cried out to him. >Listen for me! Listen for my voice< was the last thing he heard.

Novan fell unconscious.

That had been thirty years ago.

“Thank you, Spheron.”

Novan, son of Alpatronius and Elysius, firstborn among the sons and daughters of the Celestian Knights, opened his eyes from his hallowed memories. He gently closed the old bound book he had been reading, rubbing his fingers over the worn leather bindings. The book, ‘A History’, given to him by Spheron had been his constant companion as he had traversed Alpatronius’ dimensional gateway and beyond.

He 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.

“Universe preserve us!” he 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. The emotions were still raw like it was yesterday to him. It was even more so on the anniversary of The End.

Another new island settlement was being built on the crescent-shaped arc which sliced the calm blue seas. The warmth of the sun embraced Novan as his eyes caught several flocks of cackling tarlips swooning in the fresh salty air. From where he sat upon a high rocky escarpment it was times like these that he wished the Celestian Knights could be here to witness the rebirth of their civilisation.

There had not been any sign of surviving Celestian Knights, and 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

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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.

After being expelled from the vortex and rendezvousing with the fleet, they had searched for five years, before discovering a suitable star system. This had five worlds pledged to a large, luminous, yellow star. They had named it Magna Aura.

Only fifteen million of twenty-one billion Celestians had survived The End.

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.

Celestians had never seen so much ocean before. Halcyon, was an impossibly-blue orb, an oceanic world dotted with hundreds of thousands of small island chains volcanic in origin, most islands only ten thousand square kilometers in size. Many of the hundreds of 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, being one of the three city-ships which had escaped. And not far away was Sky Command, the home of the Sky Warriors. Halcyon was mainly populated by Galatians and Trinari.

The small sky city of Elysian on Halcyon was Novan's home. And it was about time he returned, though he had business on Millennius City-State first.

Another bout with Altair, he sighed.

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

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out the glinting form of the other orbit-free City-State, Alpatron, which hung majestic-like in the skies and constituted many a Xarians' home. Novan had no doubt Decion was looking down upon him from his militaristic roost.

He found himself frowning just thinking about it. For all their hard work and fortune, Novan struggled with leadership. Or rather, others made his leadership more difficult. 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 deeply 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.” *Novan and flying*, sighed Deb inwardly, *the two constant subjects in Classia’s mind! And in that order!*

She nudged Classia back to reality 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. Lower-rank Sky-marks were helping establish several terrafarms and an aquature, the main fishery, until the protein generators were running. Luckily the long day was coming to an end.

When the sparsely spaced island-based and sky cities were first built, there had been a need to establish order and a protection force which could oversee law both in the air and on the sparse land that existed. Not that there was any rampant crime, but there were those

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who desired more than their fair share at the expense of others. And occasionally there were disturbances over the lack of individuals or communities not trading fairly or committing to the volunteer time-work scheme, mostly in the new settlements. And of course there would be the pressing need for a defense contingent should an external enemy emerge.

Into this arena had stepped Cirrius, proposing 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 physically had been present for centuries, but never used, for it had not been required with the Celestial Knights around, but now things were different and extra precaution was called for.

With the assistance of the enthusiastic technophile Meccuns' genetic engineering technology, the first aeromorphically-engineered Sky Warriors had appeared, their two-toned, blue-armoured uniforms (or manoeuvre suits as they were called) fabricated from the soft-armour vortexite, 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's Galatian parents had retained much of their noble-status after The End, based on their meritorious past rather than material wealth. They had promised that their first- and only-born would be dedicated to the service of their new world. She had undergone the rigorous and various physical and psychological tests and then the final genetic procedures. She graduated as a Sky Warrior soon after, rising up the ranks very quickly, sometimes in questionable ways. Quite haughty,

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living up to at least the ‘superior’ part of the Sky Warriors’ ‘air superior’ creed, it was a wonder she and Deb had become best friends.

In the ensuing confusion and chaos after The End some swordships and records had been lost. 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 soaring intelligence, along with her dark beauty and aloofness—more out of shyness than arrogance—which would later bring about resentment toward her.

All orphans had become Sky Warriors or Star Warriors, their space-faring counterparts. 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. It was he who had found and rescued Deb as a youngling and taken care of her in his pre-flight days, before she had been placed in the orphanment. But he had always looked out for her. The undercurrent of resentment toward her upon becoming a Sky Warrior had hardened, as her early relationship with Gal Agar had become known, as if that had conferred upon her an unfair advantage—a non-meritorious benefit. And 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 smiled, peering 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, her eyebrows knitting together, not wanting to turn toward Classia. She let

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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 have 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 wearily in disbelief. Everything to Classia was superseded by Novan. “Anyway, we’re just about done now. I’m heading back to Command.”

Before a flustered Classia could reply, Deb launched herself into the air, flying off to visit various points on the island, advising her subordinates to wrap up for the day. Then before Classia could catch up, Deb propelled herself higher and faster executing a tight arc to spiral upward onto her back and then with an aeromorphic thrust of speed shot 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 slightly at the sound of Classia’s voice, “Sorry, Deb.” Deb couldn’t help but smile. She knew 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

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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 terrible is going to happen." A nervous laugh escaped her as she dismissed those hazily aired thoughts with a wave of her hand. "Forget it, sounds silly I know!"

"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 off after her, the scene depicted by Classia embarrassingly forming in her mind. They laughed and chased their way through the darkening sky. And soon, a familiar form grew on the expansive horizon.

Deb admired the almost-translucent blue outline of Sky Command, resembling a *fragel's* tough shell, though unlike the venomous deep-sea serpent, her home was five kilometers long, three wide,

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encompassing twenty decks. Its pointed hemispherical outer carapaces with its distinctive saddle-shaped central bridge on top, could close upon each other in attack, the interdecks and structures collapsing within each other and the bridge receding into the skimmer bay below. Comm struts, aerials, and tertiary command habs and domes dotted the outer structures, launch and landing pads for Sky Warriors and crewed and auto-skimmers lined the upper deck with further dorsal exit points away from the four great gravity engines. Weapon ports and airlocks were dispersed around the whole fortress.

Deb tuned into her crystalator comms relaying it from her forearm unit to her ear ‘conversing’ with Sky Command, accepting her codes as she floated through the automated security shields. She and Classia landed on an external pad jutting out from a skimmer deck and entered the massive centre for the planet’s defence via a transtube.

Once inside, Deb mentally dialled down the comms chatter, preferring the quiet walk to her quarters. She was ready for a rest. It had been a long day. They were both exhausted and Deb was grateful for her friend’s concern, but as she and Classia walked along the corridors caught up in the traffic of many returning Sky Warrior patrols, 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. Created during the exploding new-born void, where matter and energy did not quite coalesce to form ordinary matter and energy, they had developed into areas of relative nothingness. But far from being benign pools of starlit placidity, they were raging cauldrons of whirling energy, for plugging these gaps were other universes, innocently spilling their own diverse energies into others. And after billions of years of exclusively seeping energy, something else emerged. Something screaming.

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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.

New universe, new times, was Novan's attitude, 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 has done the right thing, Novan reflected, smiling at the thought of his youngest brother who had forsaken his duties. He had 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 and fair blue eyes enhancing his duskiest complexion. His armour was chiefly white with red and black strikes and edgings. His powers, though energy-oriented like his father's, came from the mind, like his mother. And he still remembered her last words to him 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.

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Coming out of his revelry, Novan spotted the telltale signs of the wandering gleaming City-State, just as he rounded green-hued Magna Prime. Constantly traversing the system, the city sometimes orbited one of the worlds, its unmistakable sword-like form, bristling with silver spires and transparent domes, the regal domains of its denizens. Novan had travelled to see its most eminent resident, his second-in-command, and closest friend, Aeryl - 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 savagely stabbing 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 spun violently tumbling out of control.

He did not notice how many spires he crashed through, or how many Celestians narrowly escaped death madly 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, the Goddess Elysium, was calling him.

The invaded gap began to rip, overflowing with resurgent constituents from an alien universe, until the cosmic effluence suddenly came to an abrupt 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.

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

“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, controversially to some, 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 Celestians 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 received commed orders to report to 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, just 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.

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“You know, Deneb, 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 affect the performance of other Sky Warriors and if it impacts on them, it concerns me. It could endanger lives and we cannot have that now.” He resisted the urge to tap the desk, awaiting her reply.

Head hung in thought, Deb responded hesitantly at first, knowing she could talk to Gal Agar about anything, 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, searching for a word. “. . . 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 enveloping 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

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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. If anyone had been born for the skies it was her. But something was wrong. He suddenly jumped in his seat, startled. 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

Urana's Mountain, it was called.

The live volcano sat haunched almost six thousand meters above the surrounding plains of thick grass spread over tumulus rock. The Protectress of State had carved out her fortress from the hard yellow-brown mass herself; her base of operations and home, tapping the heat, lava, and magma chamber for energy which could be transferred to surrounding communities.

Placia had been a wild untamed rocky world wracked with torrents of volcanic magma and accompanying earthquakes, but all that ferocious physical and kinetic energy had been controlled and harnessed, powering cities around the world, without a huge techno-industrial infrastructure.

Like her younger brother, Cirrius, Urana was more at home on land rather than in space. However, while Cirrius liked his island privacy on Halcyon, the northern side of the volcano's crater held a crystalline dome. Various balconies and smaller domes dotted the sloping sides, ridges, and sheer cliffs accommodating scenic views and acting as a redoubtable defensive measure.

"I believe the chronimonum will suffice," Urana stated, tucking stray strands of long blue hair behind her ears. "Four hundred thousand techtons for my sci division and another three for the medtechs." She looked engagingly across the small low table assessing how her offer was received.

The conference room was small, but was Urana's favourite for negotiations. No windows to distract visitors and warm surrounding walls to foster engagement and comfort.

High Principal Eemom Brou inhaled deeply in thought, resting backward into the high backed plastiform chair. Keen brown eyes met Urana's bright blue eyes as he mulled over her offer. He could surely

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spare the chronimonum, the Herdician Province was rich with the ore. It supplied the Trinari swordships, the Star Warrior fortress, and was traded as far as Aurana. Supply was no problem. But he wondered why Urana wanted it.

Where would she even use seven hundred thousand techtons of chronimonum? She is the Protectress of State protected by a mountain already reinforced with stelledneum! The question kept forming in his mind, but he dismissed it. Who was he to question a Starguard, let alone his world's guardian. And the daughter of the great Celestian Knights Hyphon and Ultra Ari.

Placia is blessed indeed, he thought.

Placia was slightly smaller than Halcyon, comprised of three massive landmasses encompassing several inland seas and one shallow ocean. The main occupied continent was the largest and boasted the beautiful hundred-kilometer-long Xalia Canyons, clawed out of the bedrock millennia ago, by five fast-flowing rivers which then spread through the wide plain that held the capital, Atronia. Mostly Elerae and Xarians populations had settled on the fertile plains bounded by large blue-leaved forests, while the Neb had inhabited a small southern continent to themselves.

It had surprised many that the Elerae and Xarians would choose to live together given their past histories; the Elerae having decimated the Amethystians, the one-time purple-haired inhabitants of the seventh World; and the Xarians, who were the only beings who could boast the only defeat inflicted upon the Elerae since Antiquity. But even with that violent history between them, the Elerae and Xarians had later become staunch allies.

The Xarians, besides being of a muscular ideal, were well known from their long black hair and black or dark blue eyes, a trait held by many Celestian Knights of the Alpharion clan. Some Xarian females wore ceremonial beards, known as *dreba*, while training to be

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warriors, while some of the older women grew real beards after attaining warriorship or to mourn certain ancestors or husbands who had died in battle. Female-bearded battle units, or the *Drebori*, were often seen in the Star Warrior ranks.

Burgeoning indigenous and imported Celestian sea life and copious amounts of small fauna and livestock, some of which became docile pets, earned Placia the distinction as the cornucopia of the system; exports its chief industry.

Urana's Mountain lay at the far end of the Xalia Canyons. She was far enough away for privacy, yet close enough to hold periodic mission briefings, though she preferred heading to Atronia if only to keep the ever-pressing Celestian folk away from her private life.

Brou had been politely summoned by Urana. And he felt he was being ambushed for the chronimonum. Even in the high-backed chair he seemed lanky within it and shifted uncomfortably, his long braided blond hair falling over his shoulders. His relative youth and openness had won him the election only two years ago and he had been thrust into the position of having to deal with weekly meetings with Urana. This had been an extra meeting with another agenda away from the rest of the council. They wouldn't have liked that. But he wouldn't have dared turn down a Starguard.

"What would you agree for compensation?" she asked, trying not to sound desperate.

Brou pretended to think about it, but the answer had always been at the ready. "My transport fleet needs servicing." He peered down at his crystalator padd, which churned out figures. "Fifteen hours per ship should suffice." He stared hard at Urana. "At the Systar docks!"

Urana hid her mild outrage. *Systar!* It was an outrageous bargain. Systar was meant for Swordships, battle ships, and well, anything more than a mere trade transport, even for a High Principal. It would take a lot of service to make up for that. But she knew the metal ore

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was important. She maintained a tense, but pleasant smile.

The Celestians has retained their trade and time-resource economic system. There was no shortage of resources for fifteen million people spread over four worlds and two space cities. From the raw products, whether mined or grown they could either be mass- or self-manufactured and traded. Everyone could claim their fair share. While central authorities played their administrative role, the system was run by the citizens balancing their time and resources with each other. Service, volunteering, and a meritorious character were the valued currencies. A certain amount of time and resource credits could be built up over time and by volunteering personal time with or without a trade, products and services could be paid for. This led to a less-materialist society where personal time was more valuable than amassing wealth, hence the maintenance of the meritorious system.

Urana ticked off a quick calculation in her mind. Brou's twenty ships, fifteen hours each overhaul. It could be done, but she would then have to offer the Trinari Syster eng-techs an extra service.

Teeth ground together, Urana nodded compliance to Brou, who imperceptibly breathed a sigh of relief. Just as they were about to exchange signatures on their respective padds, a side niche door slid open almost unobtrusively.

"Protectress," whispered aide Camtrin as she slipped into the room. She was quiet, slim and short, in a white and gold robe topped with a wavy bob of silvery hair framing a round face. Urana's favourite aide of the Mountain, as she called Camtrin, the discreet Trinari aide; the only one, given the history between the Elerae and Trinari. She was one of twenty-two aides in the mountain, they kept the mountain running for their Protectress, supervising the league of understaff. And they were allowed to interrupt any meeting with pertinent news.

Urana beckoned the aide over. She gave a short respectful bow to

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High Principal Brou and whispered in Urana's ear.

A wave of shock rolled across the Protectress' face before she controlled it. Urana tapped the comms on her forearm crystalator, listening to the communications on and off world: Novan.

"High Principal, I am sorry, but our negotiations will have to be cut short. Please have the techtons delivered here by the end of the week. You will be compensated as per our agreement." She signed her padd. At his confused look, she added. "Please attune to Mountain comms and you will hear the news I just have. I am placing the Mountain on alert for precaution." Without waiting for Brou's response, Urana turned and marched briskly from the conference room, the doors automatically sliding up open and closing behind her, silently.

Brou's mouth opened and closed in continued confusion, his hand raised in an unasked query. As the nominal head of Placia's Planetary Council, he had expected a bit more courtesy. Camtrin waited patiently while he gathered his wits, gave her a half-embarrassed look, and collected his crystalator padd. He straightened his mauve trousers and tunic as he stood up. Composure regained, he glanced sideways at Camtrin who tilted her head in a conciliatory bow.

"This way, High Principal." Camtrin led Brou out the sliding door. Four Urana-hewn corridors away awaited the transtube chambers. Brou was surprised to see other non-staff already by the transtubes, accompanied by their respective aides.

One of the visitors recognised him before he could enter one. "High Principal, have you heard the news?" an Elerae woman asked, rushing over with concern.

Brou could only nod, automatically. His thoughts on other things.

"Such news!" said another visitor. Everyone shook their heads in sorrow.

"Were you with Urana when the news came in?" asked the first woman. A crowd was gathering around Brou now, their Magna Auran

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leader more accessible than their Starguard Protectress.

Brou composed himself. There were a dozen people around him. And though he felt he had been manipulated by Urana, he still had to be seen to support her. He held up his hands for quiet.

“Yes, I was with Urana when the news came in. We were in agreement on a course of action, which I cannot discuss,” he smiled disarmingly as he elaborated. “But I will do everything I can to help in this crisis,” he stated. *Even deliver seven hundred thousand techtons of chronimonum*, he sighed to himself.

The small group clapped in appreciation. Brou gave Camtrin a sly glance, but her face remained impassive.

A transtube arrived and the party were politely ushered in to the transparent-walled carriage, by the aides. The carriage descended to a mid-mountain platform where the visitors were escorted onto the small personal flitters and flown back to their respective cities.

Camtrin sighed in relief. She loved her job, but some visitors were more troublesome, especially the political kind. She would have to inform Urana of Brou’s impromptu support of her. But that could wait, she knew Urana was busy and she prayed to the Universe for Novan’s recovery.

Urana rushed directly to her private quarters, located close to the heart of the mountain, via private transtube. She had many quarters around the mountain she could have utilised, most on the periphery of the mass, but now she demanded the absolute privacy in this case.

She breezed into the cool room, the natural dark yellow rock covered in places by light red wood and cut grey stone in the corners. The furniture was functional, but soft, however Urana was not here to relax. She was there to talk.

Her armour was of the same close-fitting style as the other Starguard’s armour. Yellow sun-like rays spiked in a diagonal arc across her body painting half her armour golden and the other in white,

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with a narrow red sash running across the opposite way.

“Armour soft,” she spoke aloud. And the armour shifted into a more casual gold one-piece outfit. She wanted to be relaxed for this meeting.

Her room’s crystalator unit was located in a side alcove. A hand-sized hexagonal crystal sat within a semi-circular arrangement of six slender thirty-centimeter high rods, fifty centimeters apart from first to last.

The crystals, which powered the crystalators came in varying sizes, shapes, and colors and powered the Celestian civilisation. So perfect and complete were the crystals in their calculating abilities and energy output upon their discovery millennia ago that many Meccun sci-techs could not decide whether the crystals were natural, engineered, or even alive. Urana was just glad her unit obeyed her instructions. There was a flashing green dot icon on the base of the control rod’s pedestal. A message. Urana ignored it, knowing better than to keep the sender waiting.

“Activate,” Urana commanded the unit. The crystal glowed and a virtual screen lit up between the outermost rods.

“Did you get the chronimonum?” the question immediately sparked impatiently from the screen.

Urana exhaled humourlessly as she regarded the angular handsome face on the screen.

“And hallo to you too, brother,” she replied curtly to Cirrius, a bit on edge and exasperated after the day’s events with Novan and Brou, respectively. “Yes, I obtained all seven hundred thousand techtons,” she snapped.

“What was his price?” he asked, ignoring her gruffness.

Urana felt he already knew the answer.

“Overhauling his transports on Systar!” She shook her head, still fuming at the negotiation price. “Ridiculous, really!” She let out a loud

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noise of frustration.

“Of course he did,” Cirrius smiled knowingly. “It was an obvious move, but it is worth it,” he said, enigmatically.

Urana huffed. “Obvious, of course!” was her sarcastic reply. “What do you want them for? You have not told me!” She slapped her arms on her thighs frustrated, trying not to get up and pace in front of the screen. She liked to walk and talk, but knew her brother was a stationary and methodical thinker at best, hidden away on his island.

“Research,” Cirrius answered simply. His short spiky blue hair caught the light off his screen, Urana not recognising the elaborate surroundings behind him, some sort of machinery. Cirrius, noting her curiosity, casually moved closer to the screen to block out the background. “I heard about Novan. I am sure he will be fine,” he said with dry emotion. He changed the subject. “How are the cousins doing?” His smile sympathetic, but Urana knew it was a mocking one.

She also smiled to herself, knowing exactly what Cirrius meant. Aerl and Altair were cousins to herself and Cirrius, but also half-brothers and cousins to themselves. Brothers when the mood struck them, usually based upon Altair’s whims, but more often than not, they were cousins. And Altair’s contrary disposition was now darker than normal, seeing as Novan had just destroyed parts of his home.

Urana was rather fond of Altair. They had often played and trained together as younglings; their respective mothers remaining close as sisters. Her father, Hyphon, had encouraged an early match, but was resisted by Altair’s parents. And while both Altair and Aerl were trained for command, Altair’s more rebellious nature always put him in the shadow of the slightly younger, but more serious Aerl.

Urana’s lips curled into a smile. “The cousins are fine, I am sure. I have not had time to comm them nor they me. You?”

Cirrius’ mouth turned down in nonchalance. “I have been busy... “
“Researching,” she finished.

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“Researching.”

“And you are not going to tell me what I have just negotiated for you?”

Cirrius shook his head. “Sister, I need to research. I have much work to accomplish.” He sounded weary, but sincere.

Urana gave him a hard look. “Are you sure nothing is going on?” She tried one last time.

“Nothing!” Cirrius assured her. “Now, how soon can you have the chronimonum delivered?”

Resigned to losing this battle, Urana played out the mental calculations. “Well, once Brou gets over the shock, I can have my personal courier, Gammor, deliver in three days, maybe two at a push.”

Cirrius winced, making a sound in his throat. “Three days,” he grimaced, looking hurriedly at something off screen. “It will have to do, I suppose.” He returned his gaze to his sister.

“I suppose,” Urana half mocked him again with a smile. “Look for Gammor in three days then.” Urana regarded her brother closely, as he again monitored something else off screen. “Are you well, brother, really?” She was not sure why she had asked, but his uncharacteristically distracted manner and actions seemed different, agitated.

Cirrius conjured another weary smile. “I am fine, sister. Just been busy licking moon beams.” He used the old-fashion expression from Galatia, seeing as neither Halcyon nor Placia had a moon, natural ones at least.

They stared awkwardly at each other on the screen for a while neither believing his explanation.

“Fine,” Urana broke the silence, hiding her frustration. Cirrius could be quite secretive at times and she never pried, much. She always felt protective of him, sheltered as he was on his island. But there was something different this time. “Let me know if anything

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changes.”

“I will,” Cirrius said cagily. “I expect the chronimonum in three days.” He smiled briefly, waved his hand across a crystal, and his screen went blank. Urana was left staring as her screen shut down.

She shook her head. *What was Cirrius hiding?*

Cirrius frowned at the blank screen. He sat back in his seat steeping his hands. “Three days!” He loved his sister, but sometimes she did not grasp the importance of things, his things.

It could be the difference between life and death.

Though he was not on active everyday duty, Cirrius still wore his Supreme Commander uniform. It was a stylised Sky Warrior manoeuvre suit, light blue and dark blue in varying proportion with a black belt, an allowance of individuality accorded to Sky Leader rank and above. He was ready for battle at all times.

He exhaled heavily through his nose, more in deep thought than anything else. He stared through the screen, his dark blue eyes visualising the mental permutations, sharpening his thoughts, recalculating schedules, rethinking strategies, manoeuvring pieces in his mind.

It was not good enough, he shook his head in frustration. Next time he would have to negotiate directly with Brou. It would risk exposing his plans, but in the end, it really was a matter of life and death.

Happy with his decision, his thoughts were cut short by a soft chiming on another crystalator array behind him. He spun in his seat, half annoyed at the disturbance, and looked at the holo-screen readout.

This is interesting! His eyebrows curved up in surprise.

“Transfer and display,” he said, intrigued. A large holographic display opened in front of him; a medtech scan of a Sky Warrior. Cirrius knew this day would come. “Hmm, so Sky Leader Deneb is active.” He studied the display.

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Raising his hands, he reached out and touched various holographic test results and notes, slightly manipulating here, deleting there. Being the Supreme Commander of the Sky Warriors and designer of the Sky Warrior crystalator systems had its advantages. He made sure he left no trace of his presence. Satisfied, he closed the system down.

“Monitor status,” he told his crystalator, which silently went to work.

First Novan, now Sky Leader Deneb. What next? a pensive Cirrus thought.

“Are you trying my patience?” The gruff voice of an irritated Decion boomed out in the cavernous training deck on Alphatron City-State.

The second son of Alphatronius and Elysus looked more like his father every day. He was so named because his father knew he would be worth ten times more than anyone who stood before him (mostly his first born, Novan). His aggressive flair in command had made him Supreme Commander of the space-borne Star Warriors and an honorary commander in the Xarian warrior clan, many of whom lived on Alphatron.

And one of his many duties was the training of his younger siblings. While he had many students who came to him for training, he saw them as a chore, but he reveled in training with the twins. But the twins were having their own fun again; being individuals in his training sessions, making their own decisions.

Youth! Decion decried to himself.

The secondary dock training area was eleven levels high, thirty meters wide with various platforms, rooms, alcoves, whole and fragmented floors open to the central hollow of the dock, all ready to hone the skills of warriors. Airlocks led to external platforms for null gravity work. The decks should have been full of Star Warrior

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opponents, but they were either late or otherwise unavoidably summoned to other duties. Decion agreeably found himself stuck with the twins, whom now it seemed had tactical ideas of their own.

“You are under my command in this scenario!” he growled down at Alpha Rion who was eight platform levels below and to the left of him and to Astar, who was crouching on the higher most level but one, to the right.

Below, the great round dock doors were cycled closed. The air was cold and crisp, but the recyclers still wafted the mechanical scents of stowed skimmers and large support equipment around. And it was quiet. Expectantly so. The stillness demanded action.

Decion’s jaw clenched as he reassessed their positions, the unexpected absences, examining the possibilities. He smiled grimly.

Ah, now I see! They are trying to purchase wane over me! His mood turned. And he saw the twins look at each other with expectant exhilaration as they realised they had almost accomplished their goal. Decion felt a surge of pride pulse through him. He was honoured. The twins saw him as a more worthy opponent than the hundreds of live and holo Star Warrior squads he had lined up for them. And he was. Then the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. Of course the Star Warriors were not coming. It was all part of their plans. The twins were learning.

Decion stared down at Alpha Rion. He was a cunning one, a skilled warrior, but he relied too much on his intelligence. Alpha Rion was the brains of this plan, he knew. Looking up, he knew Astar was the more able of the twins, more intuitive, instinctive and wilder when provoked. She was more like himself.

He grinned appreciably from under his beard. “You should have kept the Star Warriors. You would have required the reinforcements,” he goaded in jest. He stood imperiously on his five-meter long platform jutting out into the central open docking area, his red and

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black armour, topped with his huge red helm, ringed from his wide shoulders by his bifurcated cape which swept around him. He was only missing one thing.

From within, he summoned this energy. His hand reached into the air in front of him where a small flashing portal had opened. He drew his arm back and with it his lancesword; two and a half meters of lethal black metal crowned with a fist-sized crystal resting in the vee of the pommel. Beside him lay his four-armed shield. He hoisted this up and stood ready.

The twins, likewise Decion and their father Alpatronius, were able to summon their weapons from a fortress hidden in another dimension. They each possessed a sword forged and handed down through each of the ancestral Alpharion clan generations, each sword as individual as the bearer.

Alpha Rion's black armour bore a torso-dominated red, broken-cross motif, which led down to a belt, adorned with the cross of Alpharion, an emblem to denote universal energy. Each hand of Alpha Rion drew an energised short meta-sword, the golden blades flaring in anticipation.

Perched above, Astara's black nexus sword was already unsheathed and held aloft. Upon her mane of long, curling black hair she wore a simple thin red crown which extended down at the sides of her head almost encircling her elfin features. A short red cape hung behind her and her short black-belted, red and black tunic covered her black armour, while long black boots ended above her knees.

Suddenly, Astara launched herself at Decion, sword first, almost taking him by surprise, just as she and Alpha Rion had practiced for weeks. Her ferocious scream, as she descended, augmented by her comms, made Decion wince. In full free-fall mode, Astara drew her arms back for maximum power. Then she wrenched her arms forward her nexus sword striking Decion's lofted four-armed shield dead centre.

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Decion was knocked to one knee for an instant. His shield bore the brunt of the impact, the force of the strike rebounded upon Astara who backward rolled out of the danger area, expecting Decion's next move.

Before Astara could draw back and strike again, Decion dipped his shield forward driving her back with its sharp edges. Then he abruptly brought his right arm up and around, his lancesword dropping flat-sided like a boom upon Astara's crowned head, felling her.

Astara couldn't but help cry out in pain. Followed by a curse.

Ha, Decion laughed to himself, *that will make her think twice!* He hefted the lancesword for another strike.

Trying to ignore the pain or feel for any cuts, Astara screamed; more in anger than pain, and from her prone position rolled back and out of danger rising into a crouched position. She wasn't finished yet.

Out of the corner of his eye, over the edge of the platform, Decion kept tabs on Alpha Rion below. He had not yet moved and Decion wondered what their ploy was. Astara could fight all day, but together they would be stronger.

What is their ploy? the thought dogged him.

There was a flash to the side of him as Astara charged, ran up a supporting strut, spun, and kicked Decion through the opening in his shield. Her boot caught Decion across his eye guard and he was blinded for a second, just as Astara hit the ground, pirouetted low with an outstretched right leg, and swept the legs from under Decion.

Decion went down flat on his back in a heap, shield falling from his grip, but no sooner had he hit the ground then he had kicked up followed by his torso and he was back on his feet. And almost immediately he was defending himself from Astara's Nexus sword to the head, parried; slashing down his arm, protected; jabbing, probing, swerving, Astara fighting almost on Decion's toes, too close for his lancesword to do anything, but block and parry with a virtually vertical blade and hilt, his shield still grounded on the other side of the arena.

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And that's when Decion realised his back was turned to Alpha Rion, below.

Gods!

The big man turned sharply, shield-less gauntleted arm raised defiantly, lancesword pointed rearward to fend off Astara. His breath was ragged, his sweat was absorbed by his helm, but his heart was steady. So was his hand. And his little brother was not going to get the upper hand...

He turned and there was darkness. A weird circle of black appeared from nowhere and hurled Decion back five meters hard against the platform wall and to the metal decking. The lancesword flew out of his hand across the platform teetering on the edge.

From below, Alpha Rion stared up, a smile of astonishment on his visored face. Examining his hands, from whence the energy had come, he dissipated the portal. A little smirk on his face replaced his initial open-mouthed shock.

Astara stood frozen looking down in shock at him, motionless with caution as her instinct told her what would happen next.

Decion looked up with a grimace, tapped his helm firmly back into place and held out his hand. The lancesword flew into it.

A rumbling grew in the room, a low roar emanating from the throat of Decion; louder as he opened his mouth, baring his teeth.

"Aaaaaaargh!" the risen Decion screamed as he stormed to the edge of the platform and jumped, lancesword outstretched behind him ready for a devastating strike.

Alpha Rion stood still, transfixed in confusion and shock.

Astara shot a horrified look at her twin, willing him to do the only thing he could do. Scared to death that he would not do it! Astara jumped down.

Decion's arm brought the lancesword up and over, down upon his brother who looked up in some trepidation.

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And at the last second...

“I yield!” Alpha Rion yelled, falling instantly to one knee, his twin gold swords extinguished to their otherworldly sheaths.

...just as Decion’s lancesword skirted the top of his head landing in the thick metal deck beside him, point first, half a meter deep.

The reverberation sent a shiver through Alpha Rion’s spine. He looked straight ahead, showing no fear; not looking Decion in the eye. Astaralanded and fell in beside her twin, eyes down, her nexus sword sheathed.

“What was that?” growled Decion in as menacing a voice the twins had ever heard. He leaned on the lancesword overlooking them, flexing the decking even more.

Alpha Rion exhaled sharply. “I... I tried to open my sword portals to... be wide enough to go through it myself and exit behind you or bring you to me!” He looked up at Decion. “Obviously, it did not work. The portal repelled you.”

“Repelled?” Astarascoffed, her smile evaporating quickly as Decion scowled down at her.

A face of scorn painted Decion’s lower face, his lips like stone beneath his black shield of a beard. “What? You tried what?” He put a gloved hand to his beard, rubbing thoughtfully. “Why did you think you can do that?” he asked in an exasperated manner, anger slowly relenting. “It is not what the portals are designed for. They lead to our weapon sheathes in the fortress! They are not for travelling!” he roared.

“I know.” The disappointment in Alpha Rion’s voice could be heard. “But I wanted to see if it could be done. A surprise element in battle.” He was about to say more but closed his mouth tightly.

But Decion knew what he was going to say. “You want to go to the fortress, like father.”

A flicker in Alpha Rion’s eyes told Decion the truth of it.

He shook his head, guffawing. “Father had the power to open

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dimensional portals. He could go to the fortress where our weapons are stored, at will. *We* cannot,” he pointed at them. “We can draw weapons from their sheaths, but we cannot travel upon the weapon portals.”

Alpha Rion shrugged. “Do you not want to see the fortress?”

Decion’s shoulders slumped as much as he allowed his caped shoulders to. “I have seen it, as well you know. Father took me there when you were but week-old whelps. He used his powers from the map chamber to return!” He did not say the visit was to cheer him up after the twins had been born as he felt he had fallen down the pecking order of his parents’ love.

Alpha Rion glared at him. “The only one. Not even Novan went.”

Decion snorted in derision. “Novan? He is not like us. He is no warrior, has no weapon, and no place in the fortress. Why would father take him there?” His lips twisted in displeasure.

Alpha Rion bit his tongue at what was Decion’s clear rhetorical question.

Decion’s glare had softened, but his voice was still hard. “Training is finished for the day.” With a grim smile, he extracted the lancesword effortlessly from the deck and sheathed it in a flash of portal energy. He turned and marched off, his boots striking the deck hard. The twins rose to their feet offering their brother a cursory bow. A few paces later, he stopped. Without turning he said, “You fought well today, Astarā.” He walked on.

Astarā smiled, but then again, she always fought well. The words had been for Alpha Rion’s sake.

Alpha Rion shrugged. He knew he would receive no praise today, but it did not bother him. He had his own plans. His lips curled upward slightly at the thought. Astarā could see the set of his mouth. It always gave away his thoughts.

“You have already tried to enter the fortress.” Astarā did not have to make it a question.

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Alpha Rion winked at her.

Before Decion had left the deck, there was a chime on all three of their forearm comms.

“Decion, here.” He turned to the twins, a questioning tone in his posture.

“Decion, Star Commander Vander.” There was a long pause on comms, the three Starguards thinking the line had been closed from the orbiting Star Warrior station of Vista Mare. Then: “There has been an incident. Novan has crashed into Millennius City-State...”

“Crashed?” Decion’s retort was sceptical. “Was he attacked?” His warrior mind at work.

“We do not know. He is in their medbay, Aerl and Altair are standing by. Orders?”

Decion sighed. *So Novan had crashed. He could take care of himself. And the brother-cousins were watching over him.* But he had to be seen to be doing something. “Raise alert status and increase patrols. I will comm Aerl for more data.”

He cut the link. Turning back to the twins, he noted their genuine concern for Novan, and knew they knew he was not as concerned.

“He should have looked where he was going!” he remarked sarcastically.

He whirled toward the door, his large red cape billowing behind him. The doors to the level opened and slid closed behind him, making the dock area seem bigger.

The twins watched him go.

“Do you think we should go to Millennius?” Astará asked.

“No.” Alpha Rion shook his head. “If there was a problem Aerl would let us know and if it was really bad Altair would be throwing a festival,” he joked. Astará made a face at him.

“Do not even joke about that!” she chided. While she cared about their eldest brother, she, Alpha Rion and Decion were a family within

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a family. “He is not as robust as us.”

A knowing laugh was the reply. “Yes he is. He’s just different to us, but no less a leader,” Alpha Rion said. He gave her a wry smile. “Let us clean up, renourish, then we have the tour of Systar Docks. The engineers are expecting us.”

Astara groaned dramatically. The Trinari were always experimenting on new swordship designs, weapons and systems, and sought the opinions of the Starguards even though they were not engineers themselves.

“Why us? This is Cirrius’s territory.”

Alpha Rion gave her a look that said what she was thinking. *Because he is always on his island.*

But he said, “Probably because they want to see you,” he teased.

Astara giggled. She had heard stories about the Trinari eng-techs engaging in nefarious behaviour aboard their ships with disreputable females, some known to dress up in the likeness of her or Urana. She shuddered at the thought.

Astara sucked her teeth, dismissing him with a flick of her hand. They both knew the real reason. Cirrius (and Urana) were of Elerae ancestry. And despite their respect for the Starguards, the Trinari still distrusted Elerae, due to the Amethystian genocide millennia ago. Direct relations were kept to a minimum even now. But the Trinari would deal with everyone else, even the Xarians, close allies to the Elerae.

Some of the pale, stocky, silvery-haired Trinari still retained an ancestral extra opposable thumb by their little finger. This extra dexterity had enabled them to excel in the art of spacecraft building, thereby mastering the leadership in space exploration, trading, and now crewing Swordships from the large asteroid station of Systar, orbiting Halcyon. They also allowed all others to crew their ships and access their space facilities, except the Elerae.

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Astara would make sure she attended with Decion. He was enough to make any Trinari quiver in fear and thus avoid unwanted admirers annoying her.

Mind made up, she changed the subject. “So, after that spectacular failure tell me more about this portal travelling plan of yours?” she asked.

Alpha Rion looked at her cautiously. “Another time.”

“No, now!” She bumped his shoulder playfully. Then she saw the guarded look he was trying to hide from her. “Universe, you’ve already done it haven’t you?” She pulled him back by the arm to confirm her suspicions.

Alpha Rion smiled enigmatically. “We’ll be late for the tour.” He left the dock with a swing in his step.

“Brothers,” Astara lamented, following with a head full of puzzles.

As Decion left the deck returning to his quarters, he scrutinised his and the twins performance. He was not happy.

I concentrated too much on Astara’s play; underestimated Alpha Rion. And they almost had me... almost.

But darker thoughts clouded his mind. Alpha Rion had to be dissuaded from entering the portal to the fortress. For his, and their family’s own sake.

Cirrius poured over the last results from the chronimonum projections. If all went to plan, he could proceed with the engineering programmes. His crystalators had already created prototypes and his manufacturing lab under the adjacent island was just waiting to get started.

Now all I need is...

A loud blaring alarm from his main crystalator console froze him. He stared at it incomprehensibly. That sound was impossible. It was

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set to alert him in the event of..

“Universe! Not now!” He darted to the console, hands frantically working controls, voice commands minimal. “Confirm!” He analysed the screen, trying to collate the signals and scrolling figures. “Re-confirm. Time frame display!” His voice was raised.

He stared at the readouts. There was no question of its authenticity.

Cirrius closed his eyes, the briefest of respites in contemplation. He had much to do.

“They are coming!”

CHAPTER THREE

“So, what’s wrong with him then?” snarled Altair for the umpteenth time.

While Aerl had flown out into the void and 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 from his task, 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.

Being in close proximity to Magna Prime, the Meccuns had combed for medtech specialists, ferrying them in skimmers to Millennium City-State. Their shaved heads marked them out for their healing service, though generally most Meccuns’ heads, both male and female, were adorned by long twisted locks or afros of golden, black or brown hair. Their capacity in learned skills and advances matched the Galatians and allegedly some Meccuns possessed psychic abilities.

“You should try and probe Novan’s mind for any signs of intelligence!” Altair had unsympathetically quipped, when told of Novan’s condition.

Now standing in a muted-blue anteroom, Sceptre tried to calm Altair down. Sometimes that was easier said than done. The Meccun medtechs had cloistered themselves in the medlabs, assessing and working on a treatment for Novan ever since, to no avail.

“They still do not know what’s wrong with him,” Aerl calmly stated. “The senior techs report Novan seems to have been attacked, but the city’s defence forces out hunting for any intruders haven’t found any signs of an attack.” Aerl 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.”

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“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 double doors to the medlabs. “I’ll really show him,” he growled.

Aerl, 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. Aerl’s calm confidence was honed into him by his father, Millennius’ protégé, hence Aerl’s honorary title of The Sceptre, the all-powerful weapon and symbol of Millennius, which Aerl’s powers resembled.

Blond-haired Altair brooded like his father, Auron. He, like Decion, disagreed with some of Novan’s policies and argued that they should be more in command. Despite Altair being almost two years older than Aerl, it was Aerl 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. Millennius City-State was full of magnificent spires and was home mostly to Galatians who wished a life among the stars. It was also home to and jointly commanded by Aerl and Altair.

Regarding his half-brother, Aerl sighed. He was weary of Altair’s resentment toward Novan. And this latest incident did not help. 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, Aerl knew, someone would come along and put Altair in his place. And Aerl was afraid it would have to be him.

Inside the medlab, the medtechs tried once again to awaken Novan, this time stimulating his brain with neurowave-impulses designed to interrupt whatever it was interfering with his own brainwave signals,

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but his state remained unchanged.

Senior Medtech Ede reviewed Novan's progress with her staff. "There is no pain, no serious injuries, but his mind is systematically engaged. It is as if his mind is being held captive, his brain activity has increased remarkably. And look at his eyes," she pointed to the movement under closed eyelids. "It is as if he is receiving an incredible amount of sensory input!" She shook her head, mystified. "We just do not know enough about his psionic nature to help him. He may have to let his own mind resolve this!" She shook her head again.

The eight medtechs stood around, baffled at what could be afflicting Novan.

But Novan was dreaming.

And memories came flooding back

Long ago.

"We stand on a World on the threshold of total destruction . . ." Millennius paused at the uncomfortable words, glowing across the crystalator screen of his padd, a reluctant admission of defeat. He adjusted the padd settings for no reason other than to procrastinate, before continuing.

"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 by our dark enemy, 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.

But Spheron shook his head. It was not for him to address the Celestians.

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On a kilometer-high sheer plateau over looking the majestic and overcrowded Celestia Qor, in the Halls of Celestial Order, the young Novan sat half-slouched in a chamber seat, one of twelve ornate high-backed metal seats, circling the large U-shaped table. Millennius' raised seat stood at the head of the open end with its own raised dais. Holograms of world regions played out in the hollow of the table, Novan watching for any telltale signs of invasion. Half his mind was also engaged with listening to Millennius practice his speech he would be delivering to the world that night.

The Celestian Knights had been on varying missions around Galatia, dispersed to maintain peace, investigate enemy incursions, and show the Celestian populace a united Celestian Knight presence. Tonight they were returning, an exciting event for Novan. And for all Celestians, a chance to hear Millennius speak to them.

But Millennius' mind seemed to be distracted on something else. Someone else.

“Has she arrived, yet?” The leader's soft voice asked.

Spheron shook his head again. Phasia was still absent. His leader's lover and blind spot. His greatest strength and liability.

Just then, the five-meter-high carved metal doors to the Celestian Council chamber opened. Millennius' heart skipped a beat just for a second in hopes of the arrival being Phasia, but instead, a frown clouded his face as Destina came gliding in. Her long brown hair was tied up in a conical shape upon her head, wrapped in gold thread. Her green cape overlapped a silver and green loose-fitting gown. She had never been one for the tight restrictions of armour.

Millennius knew better than mention Phasia's name now, knowing his sister's dislike for her. She was always watching, distrustfully.

“Brother,” she addressed him curtly, her winsome features managing a brusque smile. “When can we expect this speech. We have to prepare and finalise the youngling's training!” she added impatiently.

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Novan's ears pricked up. He knew he was included in the 'younglings' even though he was almost twenty. But he was determined to stay. He would convince them. His mother would listen to him.

Destina, Mistress of Fate, daughter of Celestra, drew close to her step-brother and kissed each cheek in a perfunctory manner. Her mother had joined with Millennius' father after both their non-Celestian Knight parents had passed. With the power of the Sight, Destina was able to see the unfolding paths of the future. She guided and advised Millennius who turned her prophesies into his commanding policy. Though she could be manipulative, her visions were true and uncompromisable, for if she were to debase her prospicience, havoc would reign.

However, even Novan knew something had happened to her powers. Even as Destina had seen 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. 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.

Millennius accepted her greeting. "The speech will be ready soon and we will have enough time for the younglings, sister," replied Millennius. "Take your seat." He held out his hand.

With a withering look, Destina glanced at the table. She stalked slowly around the heavy wood table as if looking for the optimal position, the seats not allocated to a specific Celestian Knight, a tradition so each Knight had no chance of claiming the favouritism to whomever led the Celestian Knights. Destina gave Novan a courteous smile, which Novan happily returned, as she sat a few chairs from him.

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Novan had heard his parents speak of Destina, how she involved herself with the intrigues of the court, scheming various fates for others whom she judged deserved her personal attention, which included almost everyone. But she had always been kind to the younglings.

Away from them, Spheron regarded his leader:

Millennius, son of Millenniar, had the magnificent bearing and stature that could have seen him live a thousand years, but that honour was lost, being the last leader of those born in the one thousandth generation. The very light that shone out through the cosmos was at his command. He was the light, encaptured in his golden armour, and his symbol and weapon—a sceptre of light. Spheron had seen him 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, hidden passions, and to the flaws which lay within himself. And that is what Spheron had to mollify.

Spheron sighed, and as usual, opened the large bound book *The Scrolls of History* carefully emplaced on a lectern by Millennius' seat, seeking the words his leader needed. His action was an affected habit as the book could have easily been read from a padd if required. Being Millennius' First General, confidant, 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.

Only Millennius, Destina, and Spheron had stayed within the environs of Celestia Qor, almost thirty million inhabitants, mostly refugees trying to survive. It needed all of their attention.

Outside the chamber, fast-paced footsteps, greetings, and complaints could be heard. Novan sat up, expecting to be both warmly acknowledged by one parent and cajoled or ignored by the other.

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But stepping proudly in first with a wide smile on his rough face was Hyphon the Sky Warrior, son of Jerichon. The Elerae blood within him was apparent by his 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, his armour dark blue with red vertical stripes on his arms, torso and legs. And the only things that could capture and tame the storm that was Hyphon the Sky Warrior were his wife, Ultra Ari, and their younglings, Urana and Cirrius.

“Millennius, my Lord,” he bowed graciously. “It is well met to see you again.” They clasped forearms in greeting. Hyphon had just returned from patrolling Anchrus, the western continent, inspecting the shield defences across the Tannic Sea. He frowned. “It is a shame to see the Qor in such a state, but we will save as many as we can. It was a great plan you conjured, Spheron.” He strode forth and also clasped the Master of Forcefield’s arm.

Spheron smiled with satisfaction. “Magnanimous of you, but while I was but the architect, the engineer is behind you!” Hyphon turned knowing who he would meet.

As if on cue, the next Celestian Knight arrived ahead of a couple of others. Novan stiffened in his chair at the new arrival—his father: Alpatronius, son of Novan, warrior-sorcerer supreme. Back from reinforcing the outposts in the High Torolocos in the east, he seemed as insouciant as ever.

Alpatronius practically stalked into the chamber, his long black hair threatening to hide his face, yet never taking his eyes off Millennius, his long-term rival. Of Xarian descent, his dark features

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were accentuated by his heavy worn armour, coloured the red of blood and the black of death.

“Millennius,” Alpatronius began, “A pleasure.” He grinned, stopping short of Millennius to clasp his forearm. “I look forward to your speech as always.” His words dripped sarcasm as he walked off, red cape flowing behind him. Then his eyes caught and lingered over Destina, who coyly diverted her eyes after a few seconds, leaving Alpatronius with a lecherous smile. His path took him past his son.

“Father,” Novan greeted him coolly, not surprised Alpatronius barely flinched at his voice or acknowledged him with a glance. Father swept by son in silence. Novan knew Alpatronius would rather have Decion by his side, but his second-eldest and preferred son was watching over the other younglings, several chambers below them.

The warrior’s powers granted him command over other dimensions and space with which he could warp around himself, expand, and create dimensional shields. It had been Alpatronius who had saved the Trinari population 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, a feat his fellow Celestian Knights never heard the end of. He often had them spellbound with tales of other galaxies. His weapons, a myriad of swords, were sheathed in an other-dimensional fortress and commanded by thought to his hand alone.

His friction with Millennius stemmed from the fact Alpatronius was desperately in love with Destina. But she spurned his love in a toying fashion to spite him, much to the amusement of his estranged wife, Elysius. The love between him and Elysius had grown to hatred; his ego, jealousy, and cavorting combining to drive them apart. No longer a present father to his own five children, Alpatronius became mentor to Auron, whom he honed into his own image.

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Dismissed by his father, Novan's spirits were raised when his mother entered the room.

Elysius, the Divine Goddess, daughter of Meccus was a treasure, a jewel of beauty. The mind was her domain, with mastery over telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation. Elysius had long ago given up using her charms on her wayward husband, knowing too well of his indiscretions and his feelings toward Destina. Their five children were in her care and, in her eyes, better off without their father.

A wide smile rewarded Millennius, Elysius always brightening any room she graced. She kissed him on each cheek and caressed his face in friendship. She had served with Neb and Meccun priests and sci-techs across the sprawling scorched Haxhaxx deserts.

"We are with you," she said in her soft accented voice. She clasped his forearm then Spheron's. Her eyes met with Alpatronius and there was a sparse muted greeting across the table.

Novan squirmed in his chair even as his mother approached with a warm smile.

>Never mind. This is normal< she psyed reassuringly, standing close to him.

Novan sighed, his eyebrows raised in agreement.

While Alpatronius and Hyphon spoke in quiet tones at the far bend of the table, the estranged wife of the former was joined by the wife of Hyphon.

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. Her 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. The beloved wife of Hyphon had rejoined them from Anchrus' neighbouring forest continent of Anturia. She and Hyphon were two of a kind, headstrong and passionate, but

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together managed to tame each others primal forces enough to start a family.

She waltzed into the room, embraced Millennius with a hearty hug. She stared into his eyes. “I am ready!” she announced, just as her younger sister drew up beside her.

Iria, the Imp, was full of the energy of life. The wife of 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 around Meccus, the spectrum had burst out from within her and splashed upon the unholy enemy, thereby giving each one a distinctive colour that remained ever since.

Shyer than her sister, she bowed formally to Millennius, greeting both him and Spheron. She was not as tall, nor as robustly built like Ultra Ari, but her speed was unmatched. Her only regret, she had confided once to Ultra Ari, was not marrying Sola Venga sooner and begetting him more sons. Though she had produced a son with Auron, their union had not been a joyous one. And her young, but perceptive sons fed off those misgivings.

Millennius did not have to guess what was on her mind. “I will protect your sons. I promise,” he said sincerely.

This seemed to lift Iria, whose body shimmered a harmonious yellow. She patted Novan on his shoulder as she passed to join the conversation with her sister and Elysium. Her mission had ranged west across the Jenjekjo and Tannic seas surrounding Anchrus and Anturia.

Novan loved the procession of the Celestian Knights. They hardly ever entered the halls in concert as each wanted their own private entrance and an audience to speak briefly with Millennius. And none more so that the next Knight. Novan watched keenly for any signs of dissent.

Another figure in smooth blue armour marched in—Acirrius, the younger brother of Hyphon. In from the northern six-domed Opellion

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Qors, full of Elerae refugees, he had trained them in maintaining the forcefields over the Xaman Ice Sea.

Living under the shadow of his more famous sibling was beginning to reflect in Acirrius' 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 had a great affinity with cold seas and winds able to 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.

Even from where he sat, Novan could feel a coldness develop in the chamber. Millennius seemed to ignore it smiling cordially at Acirrius, who stared stony-faced at his leader. Well-muscled and more handsome than Hyphon, his blue hair plaited in long rows, Acirrius' sole purpose in life was to serve, so much so that he had never started a family. That had never bothered him and he had been proud that his brother had named his son, Cirrius, after him. But he would not allow anyone to distract him from his own duties.

He solemnly held Millennius' forearm and spoke quietly into Millennius' ear, "We may not see eye to eye, but I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to make sure our people survive." Without a smile he left Millennius and took a seat straight away, leaving the other Celestian Knights still standing in their private conversations. That is until the next Knight entered. And all pretense of silent conversation fell away.

If Phasia felt all eyes upon her or all thoughts directed toward her, she did not reveal it. She even ignored the cold glare of Destina. She only had eyes for Millennius. Tall, with long brown tumbling hair, green eyes, and high cheekbones, which defined her wide smile directed at Millennius,

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she practically danced into his arms. Millennius instantly felt the weight of the world lift off his shoulders. The daughter of the great Zater Jen and sister to Synther, 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 her brother had.

Though Millennius could not see his own flaws and the resentment that was building toward him, notably from Destina, Alphatronius and Acirrius—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.

She and Millennius clasped hands and briefly joined lips, in a rare open acknowledgment of their relationship. Even the young Novan realised the significance of that. This was really the end.

And instead of joining the others around the table, Phasia took her place beside Millennius, on his right, Spheron stepping back to accommodate her.

Destina looked away disgusted, while the others tried to continue their hushed conversations.

Even Novan knew the reasons for the discreet discussions. There were rumours that Phasia's only mission to the remote southern Lostratane Mountains had been to bear Millennius' child. Her long periods incommunicado with all but Millennius and Spheron were not proof, neither was the inability to discover the child, apparently hidden for its own safety. But the suspicions still remained.

And in strode the twin sons of Attanian; youthful, brash, idealistic, but different to each other as the poles of Galatia. Both had been deployed around the Darmanon Coastal islands, southeast and southwest, ironically surrounding and overlapping Phasia's area. They had not reported being in contact with her.

The brothers could harness and wield the energies created by the universe, but not as masterfully as Millennius who had often taken the

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twins under his wing to hone their powers as younglings. They were the youngest of the Celestian Knights, but made up for it with sheer courage and determination.

Auron's oft-obstinate nature coupled with a propensity for violence, the cause of the loss of his young wife, Iria and their child, Altair, to his own brother, found him more akin to Alpatronius who eventually took charge as his mentor. The twins had always been rivals and jealousies had arisen almost every time. While Auron tried to find no fault with his twin and loved him dearly, he considered Iria to be deceitful. But the apparent theft of his wife was too far for any heartfelt reconciliation.

By contrast, Sola Venga was as loyal to Millennius in a way that no one else could be, though the twins both undertook training from Millennius and Alpatronius. 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. His nightmares only 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, and their son, Aerl.

Almost worshipful, Sola Venga knelt on one knee before Millennius, "I pledge I will defend Galatia to the end," he earnestly announced.

Alpatronius rolled his eyes. "Be careful what you wish for, young lord!" he laughed. There were a few quiet titters. Even Auron showed his amusement.

Sola Venga hid his emotions, but retorted. "Mock me, Alpatronius, I do not care. I will die with honour!"

Alpatronius tilted his head in appreciation. He turned his gaze to Auron in greeting who returned it with a slight bow, a small and

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frowned-upon discourtesy to Millennius to greet another without first paying him respect.

“You forget yourself, brother,” Sola Venga whispered to him.

A brief hesitation from Auron made the watching Novan think he would not make amends, but stroking his thin-bearded chin, he faced Millennius.

“I meant no sleight, Millennius. There is no excuse.” He looked down, suitably chastised, dutifully grasping Millennius’ forearm.

“No offense taken,” replied Millennius, accustomed to Alphatronius’ ploys, pointedly looking at him. Alphatronius’ sly grin remained.

Auron turned away slowly crossing over to Alphatronius and Hyphon, as Sola Venga sat by Novan. They clutched arms in greeting.

Spheron gestured and the holographic images above the table died down and the great doors closed automatically.

They had all arrived.

All but one.

Spheron inclined his head at Millennius, who motioned for everyone to sit, which they did, opponents opposite each other.

“Let the ceremony begin!” Millennius said.

Novan listened, raptly. The Recital was his favourite part of the annual Celestian Knight gathering.

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 sequent generation of Celestian Knights, all the successive Spherons, who copied word for word the inscriptions over time.

And even though crystalators had superseded the ancient parchments, the Recitation was traditionally read from the large bound book accompanied by copious amounts of scrolls laid out in front of Spheron upon the lectern at the head of the table.

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Prior to Millennius' speech to the rest of Galatia, Spheron, as all the ancestral Spherons had before him, performed the annual recital from the Scrolls of History chronicling their beginnings, an affirmation to their Great Father and Holy Mother, their Makers, and to their offspring the Storm of Stars, and the rise of the Celestian Knights.

There was a reverent hush as Spheron began with the first words that sang the Universe into being:

“Begin!”

Such a simple word, Novan thought, but it was a profound thought and concept in which to create a whole new universe and life to follow.

Novan also loved the way Spheron's voice changed to inhabit different characters and aspects of the story.

“In a blink of an eye,” Spheron continued in hushed tones, “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 after an argument 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 they decided to create lesser beings to worship them and to witness their great deeds. 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

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“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, but being so incomprehensibly evil *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.

“*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. *They* 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. And it was agreed to create a new People.

“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.

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“So were the Fifths endowed, finely structured and balanced in nature to counter and defeat the People of Energy. And so had begun the Decillennial War. 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 leader among equals, a warrior of great conviction, courage, and intelligence. Such was his character that the Fifths named themselves the Celestians. And they settled on one world they named Celestia.

“And millennia later, in the dark mythical times of the Stranger Aeons, mysterious champions arose, the progeny of the heroes and champions of the wars aeons past. 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. Before they faded away, back into the universal fold from whence they had come, they infused upon the Celestian champions their legacies. But so that they would not forget themselves or aspire to universal glory, the Storm of Stars mutually agreed and saw fit that these champions would only survive for one thousand generations.

“And thus began the birth, life, and death of those whom were called the Celestian knights!”

Spheron bowed his head in supplication. Each of the Celestian Knights placed a palm over their heart then raised the same hand placing their fingertips to their foreheads in sacred remembrance.

Spheron continued his recitation, the mythical past turning into recorded history.

“The first Celestian Knights: Galatian, Spheron, Statia, Ozmec, The Others, and Gen Horol were harbingers of strange and wonderful powers, mysterious, all-powerful, and worshipped throughout the universe which

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they safe-guarded, gifts bequeathed to successive generations. A Golden Age had followed; a time of peace lasting millennia.

“Celestia, our ancestral home world, was lost to time after the Celestians had been scattered by the Storm of Stars, diverging into differing societies. We became a peaceful union of Seven Worlds: Galatia – the world of artist-builders, Elera of the noble blue-haired warriors, Meccus the technocrats, Trinar the mighty ship builders and explorers, Neb the tribal priests, and Xarias with its weapon makers. The seventh world, Amethystia and her peoples, were long since destroyed.

“With their attendant colonies, Outer Worlds and territories, they had stood for countless millennia as an example of supreme excellence. And they would have existed for millennia upon millennia had not the horror from the past returned.”

Spheron’s voice turned harsh.

“*They*, the People of Energy, 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. *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

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was becoming inevitable. And then one by one the Worlds had fallen, leaving the survivors to flee each time, until only Galatia remained!”

Spheron’s voice was husky with grief.

“Now, the universe lays 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 us 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 fiery tragedy and death the Celestian 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 Celestian 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 Celestian 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 us Celestian Knights, our days in the Golden Age had come to an end on a dark day of treachery!”

Someone huffed in anger, Novan not seeing who.

Spheron proceeded unperturbed: “In all of the one thousand generations of Celestian Knights, since the end of the Decillennial War, our origins and history had been shrouded in secrecy and mysticism!” Spheron quoted from the Scrolls of History.

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

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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 Celestian Knights were actually the descendants of the Decillennial War heroes from the Stranger Aeons.

On Spheron spoke: “But the one thousandth generation would always be 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.”

They all knew The End was near. Galatia was alone, protected by dint of the Celestian Knights having 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.

Then Spheron made an admission. “We had believed we had lost one of our own heroically fighting *Them*! But that is false!”

The Celestian Knights stirred in their seats, Millennius looking hard at his exegate. A din of confusion began to rise in the chamber.

Undaunted, Spheron’s voice rose above theirs. “We Celestian Knights had not foreseen one of their own turning against the others, forsaking his proud heritage...”

Phasia shot from her seat. “Spheron, speak plainly. Did not my brother die at the hands of the beasts?” She shivered in anger.

Spheron stared grimly at them all. “No!”

There was a moment of incredulous silence.

“Synther lives, Spheron?” Millennius spat through gritted teeth.

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His face was of dark resolve. “How? You reported he was dead!” he snarled angrily.

Spheron sighed, somewhat over-dramatically. “I thought he was dead. He could not have survived. I wanted to preserve his name, his integrity.”

“No!” shouted Alpatronius, pointing at Millennium. “You wanted to protect Millennium and Synther’s treacherous sister!” he accused Spheron.

Arguments broke out around the table.

“Stop!” ordered Millennium. Silence instantly followed. He shook his head in disbelief. “Then Synther is evil, Spheron. Why else would he turn against us, delving into the forbidden arts of evil and destruction... joining the enemy?”

Spheron spoke another startling confession: “But that is not why he turned against the Celestian Knights!”

More arguments threatened to erupt, but it was Phasia, not able to abide by what she was hearing, who spoke up the loudest.

Clearly upset, she said, “I, like my brother, had been affected adversely by our father’s mysterious disappearance. But while I had Millennium to console me, my brother had no one. He had been more outspoken against Millennium than even Alpatronius!” She looked darkly over to Alpatronius who didn’t hold her gaze. “His inner motives and thoughts were his own. He was a law unto himself, the darkness inside us all, but, Spheron, if this was not enough to change him? Then what was?” At least a few sympathetic noises were made.

A deep breath vibrated through Spheron. “He discovered something; a simple truth. In searching for his father through the Scrolls of History, he discovered the Celestian Knights’ secret, one that had affected him beyond all reason. As it has long been believed, the Celestian Knights had been sent by the Storm of Stars as saviours, our origins shrouded in mysticism. But it had been the first generations of

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the Celestian Knights who had expounded this myth. It had grown and become part of the legend of the Celestian Knights, but it is entirely false. And Synther, without my knowledge, deciphered an obscure inscription from the Scrolls of History, written by one of my ancestors.”

Spheron glanced up from shuffling his scrolls, trepidation on his face. He was scared, Novan saw. Spheron’s lips moved, but no words came out at first. Then louder, he read out:

“Know now that we Celestian Knights art 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?”

Sharp silence spiked with incredulity descended upon the hall.

Alphatronius scoffed. “Spare us the jesting mythic testaments, Spheron...” He stopped short as he realised no one else was laughing.

Everyone turned to Millennius.

“Is this true, Spheron?” he asked his trusted friend.

With a bitter smile, Spheron nodded.

“It is part of the forbidden scrolls,” Spheron confirmed with a pained voice. “Dark truths and black arts reside in these scrolls.”

“What do you mean forbidden?” Hyphon exploded from his seat. “How can any knowledge be forbidden to us? How could you and your ancestors be so arrogant and so cowardly to hide such knowledge from us, for millennia!” He screamed. His wrath turned to Millennius. “How could you not know!” he jabbed his finger angrily in Millennius’ direction. “This is our history! Our lives!”

Ultra Ari stroked his arm to calm him, which he unkindly shrugged off, awaiting an answer.

Spheron grimaced in an effort to explain. “The esoterics of the material demanded their removal from the public scrolls,” he said.

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“Even I was fascinated and afraid when I first read them, but in control. I can only imagine what those words must have stirred within Synther. To be alone, different, and to discover our ancient connections to monstrous kin! What would you have done?” He let the words hang.

This time there was uproar as the Celestian Knights quarrelled amongst themselves. But Destina had kept her eyes fastened on Phasia, who now sat frozen and hadn't uttered a word since.

“And what do you think, Phasia? You and your brother's powers are closer to the... Lore,” she said the forbidden name out loud before she realised, “than we are!” she added with a sneer.

The chamber went quiet. Everyone looked at Phasia.

Novan held his breath. He could barely understand what he was hearing. How was this all possible? What was he supposed to tell the other children? He caught the eyes of his mother, her psi-aura, a diffuse pink colour, urging reassurance and calm across the hall.

Millennius stood up to defend Phasia, but his consort held up her hand forestalling his intervention.

“All through his life my... brother,” the word reluctantly fell from her mouth, “felt apart, different, lonely. He felt that exhilaration of being pure energy, but I was still inexperienced in total transformation, still tied to the mortal world of corporeal beings. As pure energy, even I could feel the lure of immortality. But if he had fallen under their spell...” Her voice drifted off, not having to say anymore.

But more damning was another revelation from Spheron. He pulled out a tightly folded scroll from the many rolls he carried in a bundle and unwrapped it. In it was a small opaque oblong crystal.

“What trickery now, wizard?” Alpatronius contemptuously waved his hands at Spheron.

Spheron faced every Celestian Knight, his voice low and remorseful.

“This is Synther's confession!” He held it out for Millennius.

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At first, the Celestian Knight leader refused to touch it, as if the contamination of Synther would tarnish him. But he knew they all had to know. He grabbed it from Spheron's outstretched hand, activated the crystal with his touch, placing it on the stone floor before him and in an instant a holographic image appeared.

Synther, son of great Zater Jen, was a chameleon, a master of transformation, able to change his body into a fluid energy state. In this way he had been the closest to the ancient enemy, whose energy forms were as sinuous.

Now Synther's handsome features, sporting short blond hair, and dark eyes stared back at them. He smiled. A sad smile indicating an acknowledgement of his actions. His quiet voice spoke:

“My fellow Celestian Knights, by now you realise I am not dead at the hands of the Lore and know what I have done! I found the forbidden scrolls. I do not apologise for my actions. They are true and noble. Though I was quite adept at deciphering the codes, the further the Scrolls of History went back, the more arcane the script became and I could not understand them. However, I sought, found, and took an ancient map from the records; an encrypted one, and that was a start.

“After a long search, I found the focal point in the region of space through which the first Celestian Knights had exiled and imprisoned the Lore outside of their dimensional plane. The breach between dimensions had been sealed by a bond of inter-dimensional energy, like a cauterized wound, strong enough to repulse the Lore's energy. But I deconstructed and opened the portal, allowing the Lore, our ancient kin, to be released.

“My first thoughts had been to unite the Celestian Knights with the Lore: a flawed ambition, I now know. The universe

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would have known the joys and delights of immortality, but I knew that it would not be accepted by you, especially you, Millennius. You do not have the ambition or leadership for this. So in secret, I embarked upon my path alone to tame the savage beasts to my will.

“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 demands this. We demand conquest. That is our destiny. And above all else, we demand our destiny.”

And with that, Synther burst into a bright blue fiery energy being. “The Lore have returned!” the holographic image shouted. “And destiny will be ours!”

Message over, the holograph shut down.

The Starguards stared at the crystal, as if it was the embodiment of Synther, the blazing image etched into their minds.

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.

Millennius stood up and angrily crushed the crystal beneath his boot.

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“Conquest! That is what Synther wants!” he snarled. “That is all!” His smile was grim, defiant. “He was bound by the laws given by the Scrolls of History, yet he still betrayed us,” he lamented. With ire he turned to his four closest fellow Knights who could have foreseen such treachery and in a fit of pique suddenly found themselves on trial.

“Spheron, Destina, Elysius and Phasia, you are charged with the failure to detect Synther’s treachery, for alone or together, you could have prevented such catastrophe!” accused Millennius. “Tell me how you could not have foreseen this?” he ordered with a demeanour which brooked no defiance. He stalked off, pacing the rear of the hall while the four worked on their defenses.

“This is crazy!” Novan overheard Sola Venga whisper to Iria.

“It is his right,” rasped Alphatronius across the table.

The four accused were by themselves, preparing their statements. When the allotted time was up Millennius returned to his seat for each to address him. They each approached his seat singly.

Destina argued first; angry, forthright: “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, came Spheron; calm, logical, reasonable: “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.”

Then came enlightened Elysius, peaceful in aura and manner: “My Lord, I am the seer into minds, but the mind of one such as Synther’s

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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; plaintive, yet strong, determined: “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 had no contact with him. I have no brother!”

Millennius listened to all their testimonies as spoken. He stared at the stone floor, nodding to himself at each statement, deliberating on their words. After an interminably long time brooding by himself, he announced he was ready with his verdict.

Novan held his breath awaiting the verdict.

Millennius solemnly nodded to them. “Very well,” he acknowledged. “After contemplation, I accept and exonerate you.” This to the general relief of the Celestian Knights. But he was not finished.

“Spheron, these further words will be recorded into the Scrolls of History. Spheron readied his padd. “As leader of the Celestian Knights, I Millennius, in my infinite wisdom, state that for his treacherous actions, Synther, shall be forever cast out of the ranks of the Celestian Knights Order and condemned; forever to be known as the Traitor Synther.”

There were gasps around the chamber. Never had a Celestian Knight been cast out. But no one spoke out. No one defended the Traitor Synther. There was no coming back from this.

With those words, the Traitor Synther had been tried in absentia; there was only one punishment that awaited him, the Celestian Knights knew.

“Synther will be brought to justice. He will die for his actions!” Millennius held the gaze of every Celestian Knight. “To that end, I,

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Millennius, declare war against the Traitor Synther and the Lore!”

The announcement sent a chill down the spine of young Novan’s back. This was the first time war had been declared by anyone since the Decillennial War and against the same foe.

The proclamation had been transmitted beyond the bounds of their unbreachable wall of energy. The Celestian Knights knew the Traitor Synther would retaliate after repudiating his offer to join him. But they had both nothing and everything to lose trapped as they were behind their forcefield. They felt like 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.

Novan, while not officially a Celestian Knight, having not been ordained into the Order or carried out a mission, was nominally in charge of liaising between the Celestian peoples and the Knights, freeing up Spheron from the role and also overseeing the other children, much to Decion’s annoyance.

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

Destina, within her private chambers, 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

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magnificent presence, but no sooner had he appeared, then he had vanished in a burst of celestial light.

Rushing into the Halls of Celestial Order and summoning the Celestian Knights, Destina had recounted Galatian's 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.

In a bid to decipher the words, Millennius had convened a late-night war council. Not everyone was best pleased.

“Millennius, what is the meaning of this?” Alpatronius barged his way into the chamber past Spheron and Hyphon. Even with a few meters between them, they could all smell the strong *vikinci* nectar emanating from him.

Elysius glowered at him, experience telling her that her former husband had been interrupted during one of his nocturnal dalliances. She cast a look of somewhat embarrassment toward Novan, who up until now had never seen his father inebriated.

>*Now I know, mother*< he psyed. She closed her eyes in acceptance of the situation.

“Alpatronius, show respect to our leader,” a smiling Hyphon ambled forward trying to defuse the situation. “We are all tired and battle weary, but we need to...”

“Silence, Hyphon!” Alpatronius whirled on him. “I am tired.” He

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admitted, turning back to Millennius. “Tired of your leadership. You rely on whispers from Spheron, spying from your sister, and cavorting with a traitor’s sister!” he spat at Phasia.

“Speak wisely,” Spheron warned, “You insult us all!”

Alphatronius grinned widely. “No, not all, just him!” He pointed at Millennius, who stood impassively, with fists clenched, jaw set. “Our generation has been one debacle after another. We are trapped in a prison of our own making, letting traitors grow in our midst, and playing at puzzles from the past!” His voice rose at every accusation. “You do not deserve to lead us, Millennius, last generation or not. We need to fight, not cower behind forcefields,” he raised his fists to emphasise his point. “Am I wrong?” he asked the assembled Knights.

Everyone looked at each other. Drunk or not, Alphatronius had some valid points. But was it their right to choose a new ruler? Was Alphatronius the right choice to replace him?

Alphatronius didn’t wait for their answer.

“Step down, Millennius. Step down now!” he demanded, a growl in his voice. “Let someone more capable of leading take the battle to the Traitor and his Lore, instead of being self-made prisoners!” He swayed, arms on hips.

The chamber was as silent as a tomb.

Millennius stepped forward off his seat, resolute, arms by his side, eyes burning with repressed rage. Stopping inches away from Alphatronius’ face, Millennius scowled at him.

“How dare you enter the Halls in your state, brandishing hate and questioning my leadership. I will not be relinquishing my leadership to anyone, least of all you!” Millennius kept his voice low to avoid embarrassing Alphatronius further, but the surrounding deafening silence served to amplify his words. “You are a disgrace to yourself and your fami...”

“No!” Alphatronius screamed in rage. He suddenly bared two

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gleaming short swords from their hidden dimensional sheaths.

In full view of the others in the Halls of Celestian Order, Alpatronius attacked Millennius.

Millennius in turn grasped his sceptre, his eyes also ablaze.

Novan 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.

But as the two grappled, their energies sparking and glancing off each others' weapons and armour under the barrage of the other's attacks, that is when the Great Galatian's prophesy meaning had become clear to Spheron.

In the prophecy, both had been mentioned cryptically as being instrumental in the survival of their 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, especially a cursing Alpatronius, 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 of physical debates, 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

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undivided attention. He had.

“The Traitor Synther had been right!” There were raucous shouts of 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’ of war? 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 apart from the fortress?”

Alpatronius looked confused, then slowly shook his head.

“No?” Spheron confirmed. “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!” Spheron referred to a mythical quest to find the First peoples. “Our children, our spawn, 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 am 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,’ of the universe; 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!”

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Alphatronius stared back at him and then at Spheron. “Agreed!” His voice signalled regret. But he sheathed his swords back to the fortress.

Spheron released the Starguards from their incarceration, the atmosphere still tense, but now filled with purpose. The beginning of The End was upon them.

“It is time our fellow Celestians knew what lies ahead,” Millennius calmly stated, laying down his sceptre. He activated the holo-screens above the table to address the world.

At first there had been general disbelief, outright anger, and rampant panic when Millennius had informed the populace about the Traitor Synther, the vision and the solution, but as the hard reality of the situation had taken grip, the multitudes 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.

Grudgingly working with Spheron, Alphatronius had been able to generate a large dimensional portal under the protective shielding, which Spheron shored up with his forcefields, maintained by Meccun techs and explored by Trinari probes and craft. The escape route was ready. And Celestial populations were readied for the transfer.

But disaster had struck.

Cryptic messages had been transmitted to the Hall, the Celestial Knights returning to the chambers at the urgent behest of Spheron. Taking their seats, the great holo-screens around the hall blurred, shifted and transformed into the features of a once proud Celestial Knight.

“Traitor!” accused Millennius in a great shout at first sight. “Show yourself to me, in combat, and I will end your suffering!”

Alphatronius, Hyphon, and Ultra Ari all rose from their seats ready for action.

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Phasia stared in disbelief at her brother. Gone were his handsome blond features. Phasia could see no resemblance to her brother in his current form, a blue mass of energy, a caricature of a Celestian.

Synther sneered, his voice almost a hiss of energy. “Millenniussss, I am but on the other side of your great forcefield. Come, sssee me, in all my glory!”

Before he had even finished, Millennius had sprinted from the Halls, flown off the plateau and shot into the air, closely followed by the others. Novan struggled to keep up, his psi-powered flight not as strong as the energy wielders.

And what they flew toward staggered them. Not only was the dark blue spark of malice that was the Traitor Synther present through the miles of forcefields, but so was a massive force of Lore, lining the world like a stellar blanket.

The first few minutes were of silence; outright rage from the Celestian Knights, defiance from the Traitor Synther.

“Why have you returned, Traitor?” Millennius demanded.

There was a delay as the message was relayed to the Traitor Synther’s comms he still wore around his forearm. His voice was as ragged as a solar flare burst:

“Join me!” his voice shattered the air. “You are trapped in your own prison. We, are free!” he indicated the millions of Lore around him. “You each have the capability to be free, like me, as the spark of the Lore runs through all of you. We were designed by the Ssstorm of Ssstars to be the sum of all the Antiqchronals, but it was the essence of the Lore which gave the Celestian Knights their powers. You know thissss!” he pointed a wavering finger of light at them.

Millennius clenched his fists, as the Goddess Elysium held back Alphontrionus, and the twins Sola Venga and Auron battled against their natures with so many Lore present.

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Hyphon looked at Millennius ready for any action he would take with Ultra Ari and Iria by his side. Only Phasia and Destina held back, the former out of fear of her brother, the latter out of distrust for Phasia wondering which side she would choose. Spheron braced the forcefield wary of any breaches.

“All we will speak of is your doom!” an angry Millennius retorted. “End this now! Give up!” he shouted. “Discharge the Lore and return to Galatia our prisoner. We may even forgive you in time,” he lied, feeling the eyes of all the others on his back.

A noise like boiling blood issued from Synther’s mouth. “No, you lie! I know you, Millennius! But one day I may forgive you,” he hissed. And even from this distance, they knew he was smiling. “And I know all your secrets. Let me show you!”

While the Starguards glanced bewildered and a little nervously at each other, Synther beckoned forth a lone red Lore. He gripped the creature tightly with his hands, sculpting its energy, the Lore flickering, changing form from a Celestian-shape into a sinuous five-meter-long energy bolt.

Before they comprehended what he was doing, the Traitor Synther hurled the Lore-bolt with all his might. And to the utter shock of the Starguards, the rude charge penetrated the forcefield, sparking its jagged way toward them; toward Millennius who hovered motionless in the Lore-lightning’s path.

Time slowed as each Starguard realised what had and would occur. Millennius would try to prove his power by intercepting and neutralising Synther’s threat. But they each knew the Lore was also as likely to kill Millennius.

The alien projectile had astonishingly and successfully navigated the forcefield at increasing velocity, its fury rising, as the living spark expanded and reached a frenzied pitch. The Lore-bolt screamed, splitting the air as it escaped the shield, the immediate sky turning dark

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red, an unwavering path to Millennius awaiting. A menacing arcing mouth of red spikes reached out from the lightning-form ready to strike.

Hands charged with energy, Millennius raised his arms to counter, eyes blazing golden light. He roared in preparedness to kill or die, the lore diving to engulf him in its nebulous gaping maw.

Movement flashed from Millennius' left just as the lore lightning struck. There was a soul-churning cry, choked off suddenly as a body absorbed the entire blast, burned, crumpled, and fell from the charred-smelling skies.

“Acirrius!” Hyphon’s sudden anguished shout rang out as he dived furiously to catch his brother’s body, which even as it dropped disintegrated until the wind had dispersed it into nothingness.

Hyphon watched in disbelief as his hands were washed through by dust of his brother. The wind had reclaimed its champion. Hyphon stared up in torment to Millennius whose harrowed expression mirrored the rest of the Starguards.

Acirrius had knowingly thrown himself in the path of the Lore to save Millennius.

Millennius thundered, turning his violent essence toward the Traitor Synther, his whole body incandescent with rage and light. All he had to do was to convert completely and fight the treacherous coward Lore to Lore. As soon as he realised how close he was to capitulating his corporeal Celestianity, Millennius let his anger subside.

“You will not win this way, Traitor!” he sneered through gritted teeth and ragged breath. His soul burned for vengeance.

The Traitor Synther grinned, sparks flickering around his mouth, neither joyous or disappointed Millennius still lived. “Will they all sacrifice themselves for you, Millennius?” He searched out the faces of the rest of the Starguards, lingering over his sister’s horrified

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features. He re-focused on Millennius. "I think not! Your shield energies are Lore energies. I told you we are more alike than not!" He started to back away from the forceshield. "I will return," he announced, arms outstretched. He turned to leave, but a thought seemed to fall upon him. "No matter what you do, I will know. No matter where you go, I will find you. And then I will obliterate you!" With a hissed sneer breaking the stunned silence, the Traitor Synther and the Lore disappeared into the void.

His words had chilled Millennius. *What did he mean, no matter where we go? Did he know? Did the Traitor know their plans?* Millennius' eyes were alight with energy, his grim stare threatening to bore a hole through the forcefield.

His thoughts were aired aloud by a grieving Hyphon. "He knows?" He turned to the others. "How?"

A hard shove pushed Phasia through the air. She whirled around at the culprit.

"How else?" Destina jeered at Phasia. "Like sister, like brother!" She folded her arms, case obviously closed. "She killed Acirrius!"

The words hung starkly in the air. No Starguard had ever been murdered. And no Starguard had ever murdered another. Destina's accusation was as dark a charge as could be rendered.

Still glaring through the shield, Millennius' voice was a hard strike of light: "Destina, do not make me forget you are my sister!" He aimed a glower at her. "This is all the Traitor Synther's doing! And now I do not care if he knows. Or how he knows. This is our destiny! We do this for our dear sacrificed fellow Knight, Acirrius, for our younglings' sake, and the continued existence of our civilisation. We do this right! Do you understand?" He directed at Destina.

Bravado crushed, Destina nodded in meekness. "Yes, brother."

"Does everyone understand?"

"Yes, Millennius!" had come the shouted replies.

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He and Hyphon exchanged glances. “Acirrius gave his life for this. We will not forget his sacrifice,” Millennius stated. “We will grieve in this world and honour him in the next.

Hyphon flew up to him. They clasped forearms. “He will be honoured,” Hyphon repeated. He was the first, as the other Starguards flew to both Millennius and the Sky Warrior, clasping arms and remembering Acirrius.

Novan had joined in. He had hadn’t understood why Acirrius had sacrificed himself for Millennius, whom he had no great love for. But at that very thought, he realised that was the duty of a Celestian Knight. Every life was sacred. And where death threatened he would be there to defend life. It had stuck with him ever since.

Once the ceremony was over, Millennius sought out Alpatronius, “The nexus to the new universe has to be maintained for longer periods. Can you do this?”

“Yes, Millennius!” was the instant reply, positive, assured. “With Spheron’s help to stabilise the vortex at such a size, it can be done.” Having never generated such an immense cross-dimensional channel before, even Alpatronius had to stifle any doubts. It had to be done.

“Good,” Millennius replied. “The rest of us will help with loading the swordships and protecting the forcefield perimeter.”

With a last baleful look toward the forcefield, Millennius led the Starguards down to the Halls of Celestial Order. The Celestian populations would have to be told the bleak news of Acirrius and the chances of their survival. The Lore would return.

Out of the surviving two point four billion Celestians from a total of twenty-two billion Celestians before the Lore invasion, only fifteen million would be able to be evacuated. Every swordship, including three city-ships, and everything that could fly, from personal skimmers and vessels, warrior cruisers, and commercial transports, were used for passengers, food, and resource supplies. The sleek ten-

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kilometer swordships would go first, while the spherical personal transports would cluster together to form vast clusterships and life support vessels.

However, by creating the dimensional vortex, the Celestian Knights were destabilising the protective field around Galatia. And scores of Lore were penetrating through. They had been destroyed instantly; they had to be, because every Lore infiltrator was an eye of the Traitor Synther. He could not discover 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, using every spark of his energy he could muster, sustained an open transdimensional portal for long periods of time, enough so that a number of scout 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 was deemed 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 penetrating Lore in brutal fight after brutal fight, while sending the ships through. Their future would be safe, but the Celestian Knights were coming to an end. The Lore were piercing the shield more frequently, the Celestian Knights' powers weakening from maintaining the forcefield—their prison—constantly, and they could not stop all of them. Havoc reigned.

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Then the Traitor Synther had broken through.

Millennius, Spheron, Destina, Phasia, Alpatronius and Elysus had formed one defensive group, while Hyphon, Sola Venga, Auron, Iria, and Ultra Ari formed the other, protecting the remaining 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, as he had reluctantly boarded the last swordship, in the hopes of future generations understanding all that had come to pass, and to safeguard them in the future.

The End had come.

The dedication at the beginning of the Scrolls of History read: I am Spheron, son of Spheron and a thousand Sphérons before him, Master of Forcefields, First General, Creator of the Trinar Deception, the Ring of Fire protecting Galatia, and many more feats of majesty, friend to Millennius, Chronicler, Interpreter, Exegete of the Scrolls of History. Above all—Celestian Knight. I dedicate this book to Novan, son of Alpatronius, the new lord of our progeny.

Novan would never forget the sacrifices they had all made for them to survive.

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

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rush of golden 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.