

Heirs of the Stars  
Chapter 1 Sample (9 Pages)  
Peter Dawson

When told to be prepared for anything, Michael Storm had immediately assumed zombies, nazis, giant rats, living blobs of slime or soldiers in power armour would be the most-likely threat. Bats, green-coloured robots, demon-possessed space marines, humanoid aliens, pirates, ninjas, wolves, imps and even dragons made of mist were all threats that had also floated through Mike's head as he'd entered the hydroelectric dam. For all the classic foes Mike had previously bested in his career however he'd forgotten a classic, one that appeared in the books he'd often lied to his friends about reading but never bothered with himself. Mike had been dyslexic and struggled with reading his entire life, thus grateful he'd grown up in an age where all the great books were being adapted into other, more accessible mediums. It was for the various movie and television adaptations that Mike knew just what to call the creatures standing before him within the dam.

“Orcs,” grumbled Mike as he flexed his fingers, “I was really expecting aliens, or maybe ninja aliens...” Hulking, six-foot tall creatures, green in skin and yellow in eye, flanked the young human as he stood in the doorway. The somewhat big-faced creatures were hairless, though Mike's keen eyes noted that their bodies showed signs of shaving. The orcs were also dressed in tight, black leather clothing, giving Mike a good idea of the muscular, hunchback anatomy of his foes. The leather combined with several of the orcs holding chains, tire irons and other improvised weapons reminded Mike of bikers, all the more cemented when one orc stepped forward with goggles on his forehead.

“You make a grave mistake coming here, human!” barked the orc; his voice deep and guttural but with just a hint of a pig-like squeak. The goggle-wearing orc, whom Mike mentally nicknamed Goggy, was hefting a large monkey wrench in both of his meaty hands.

“A grave is exactly where you're gonna be in a minute, pig boy!” laughed Mike, assuming a fighting stance. While in terms of height Mike was only slightly shorter than his opponents, his clothes and hair made him stand out. On Mike's body he wore blue karate uniform, or gi, and atop his head was spiky blonde hair.

“Pig... boy...?” sputtered Goggy; glancing at the dozen or so allies he had with him in the fairly bare cement room. “Break every bone he has!” An usual combination of squeals and roars echoed through the room at the order, and Mike braced himself.

“I got this!” insisted one orc; charging forward first and alone, swinging a lead pipe vertically to come down on Mike's head. The human pivoted on his left heel and spun to avoid the pipe, instead sweeping his leg to trip his opponent after he missed. As the orc fell forward Mike swung down his right arm, chopping the back of the orc's neck and hearing a satisfying crunch. The red, padded gauntlet Mike was wearing on his right hand absorbed any damage his own body might suffer from the strike. As the orc hit the floor Mike returned to his fighting stance.

“Next?” invited Mike, grinning ear to ear. A howl was the response he received as one orc struck with a baseball bat, another coming in moments later with a tire iron. Mike responded by delivering a powerful standing kick to the first orc's face before he could finish the swing with his bat, then flipping up with his free leg to strike the second orc with his heel. Each strike cracked bone and the orcs collapsed, one blow being all Mike needed to put his opponents out of the fight.

“Whoa!” Mike suddenly exclaimed as he heard a chain swinging towards him. Raising up his right arm Mike caught the edge of the chain, promptly starting to wrap it around his right arm. The orc who'd whipped the weapon at Mike struggled but after a few quick loops Mike was able to pull the orc towards him, promptly dealing a powerful uppercut to the creature that had foolishly not let go of his weapon. The chain free of the fallen orc, Mike quickly used it to whip another pair of his foes who'd tried to encroach from behind.

“You... you idiots!” exclaimed Goggy as he looked around the room at the six fallen orcs before focusing on the remaining four with him. Some of the orcs had been partially obscured by large steel piping that ran through the room, but on Goggy's orders they'd advanced so that it was now clear to Mike that he only had five opponents left. As Mike removed the looped chain from his right arm he noted the four remaining orcs were holding a ball-peen hammer, a shovel, a pool cue and a bowling ball respectively. The weapons were a bit surprising, as one would assume bringing something as exotic as a bowling ball into a fight it would have to be something the orc normally carried with him. The image of orcs wearing bowling league shirts at a local alley made Mike chuckle as he took the chain, now removed from his right arm, and began to wrap it around his left. While on his right arm Mike was wearing a red padded gauntlet his left only sported a padded bandage-like wrap, the kind boxers might wear under their gloves.

“You know what might have been a good idea to bring?” commented Mike after putting the chain around his left hand. “Guns. Just a thought.” The orcs took that as their cue to strike and promptly charged, all four at once. Mike turned to meet the four, quickly breaking into a run. The room wasn't very big so within two seconds the fighters met, but Mike had jumped up and spun, delivering a flying, spinning kick to not one but two of the orcs. As Mike landed so too did the orcs, having each fallen with one blow like the others before them.

“Die!” snarled the orc with the bowling ball, suddenly lobbing the object with impressive speed. Mike quickly ducked and let the object smash into the wall behind him, and to his amusement and alarm realized the sound of the impact could only mean the bowling ball had embedded itself into the concrete. Concentrating, Mike began to spin on the balls of his feet, rapidly moving through what was effectively alternative sidesteps toward the other two orcs. The now-unarmed bowling orc received a chain-fitted punch to the sternum while the last one, the one with the shovel, was disarmed. Mike pulled the shovel free from the orc's grip and quickly smashed the head of the weapon into the head of his foe. The orc teetered backwards like a falling statue while the shovel, Mike noted, now had the imprint of an orc's face in its head.

“Ugh... Good help is so hard to find these days,” grumbled Goggy as Mike dropped the shovel. “Okay, enough monkeying around.”

“Puns, really?” groaned Mike as Goggy charged him, swinging the monkey wrench with inhuman speed. Fortunately Mike's body was honed like a fine machine, allowing him to quickly evade multiple swings so that all Goggy was hitting was empty air.

“Hold still you little-” cried Goggy, but that was when Mike found his window. As Goggy went for an ill-advised upward swing Mike sidestepped and caught his opponent's wrists. With Goggy lunged forward Mike had no trouble in raising his right leg and bringing it down upon his foe's exposed knee, breaking it instantly.

“Oh... snap!” taunted Mike, not usually one for such jokes, but he felt it was due after the earlier

'monkeying' remark. To his credit, Goggy didn't drop his wrench and instead limped backwards, showing Mike every one of his deformed, yellow-brown teeth with a massive sneer.

"I will break you until nothing is left but dust!" declared Goggy, but as the orc spoke Mike felt a sudden rush fill his body. Something inside Mike was stirring, he wasn't sure what, but it felt like every one of his muscles was suddenly being massaged. As Goggy started to lunge forward once more Mike watched in what seemed like slow-motion, more aware than ever of his own breathing and his heartbeat. The sensation that coursed through Mike's body felt like a surge of energy, and he suddenly realized that's what it was: energy. The surge, however, was not simply some typical form of power that flowed through the human body, but a rush of electricity.

"No," muttered Mike to himself as he raised his left hand, palm open, towards Goggy. "Not electricity... Lightning." Goggy had only been a few feet from Mike when there was a brilliant flash of light, a bolt of blue lightning lancing forth from Mike's open palm and straight into Goggy. As thunder cracked Goggy was thrown backwards, smashing into a large steel pipe and breaking it in two. Water began to spill forth from the smashed pipe as Goggy seemed to explode, his body disappearing with only a puff of ash remaining.

"Huh..." breathed Mike, now watching as the water from the pipe suddenly froze. The spilling liquid had seemed to instantly turn into ice, but there was no change in temperature. The orc bodies around the room faded away, the bowling ball stuck in the wall doing so as well. Finally the concrete room around Mike was engulfed in white light, and as he looked down at his hands those two faded from view. All Mike could see was white light, and in the distance he heard a faint hum.

*"... Got this email the other day..."*

*"... What kind of place is..."*

*"... EG... What does it mean...?"*

*"... to meet you, Colonel..."*

*"...cool, when can I..."*

"... done Mr. Shinada," came a voice, and after a few moments the blinding light faded. Mike was lying down, resting on a comfortable leather mattress of sorts. Around Mike was black glass, but that was now sliding away to reveal the brightly-lit grey room beyond. The capsule Mike was inside was rising up, his bare feet now resting on a less padded metal surface at the bottom of the unit. A sudden chill washed over Mike, as instead of wearing his gi he was dressed simply in a pair of blue shorts, tight ones that did at least reach his knees. Mike instinctively reached up to touch his hair, no longer spiked up and golden but instead short and, though Mike couldn't see it, assumed brown.

"Mr. Shinada?" repeated the voice, and before Mike stood a man that he assumed slept and showered in his uniform. The man, forty-five, square jawed and only slightly more stout than was the ideal for a military officer, was Colonel William Hendrix. Despite it being indoors Hendrix, in addition to being clad in his green uniform and hat, was wearing black glasses, though he removed them after speaking.

"Yeah, I'm... I'm here," acknowledged Mike, who felt like he'd just run a marathon, and then

after that having had to wrestle a bear. In truth, Michael Storm wasn't his name, but Mitchell Shinada, an American convenience store clerk partially of Japanese descent. The thirty-year-old Mitch struggled for a moment to get his legs to move, but soon he was able to step out of the capsule he'd been inside.

"I was just telling you well done," explained Hendrix, putting a hand on Mitch's shoulder to both help him not stumble and also, perhaps, offer a sense of pride. "You do realize what you've managed just now?"

"Colonel, with all due respect, I, ah, needed a second to even remember who you were," admitted Mitch, rubbing his forehead. "God, it feels like my brain was just used for a round of table tennis. You got any medication for the second-worst headache ever?"

"Doctor Chopra assures me that your head should recover on its own within a few minutes, though you should absolutely have something to drink," responded Hendrix. A man in a green uniform but with no fancy jacket approached Mitch, offering him a red-coloured drink on a tray. After taking a moment to get his arm to raise itself Mitch took the glass and immediately sipped from it.

"Did... is this Gatorade?" questioned Mitch after a quick sip.

"Not far off, Chopra's team created it as an electrolyte solution specifically for those who participate in the EG Program," confirmed Hendrix, chuckling. "They've even made a bunch of different flavors for the candidates that stay on. Wouldn't shock me if they gave you that read one based on the preference for you we had on record."

"Well it is very-wait, you know what kind of sports drink flavor I like?" sputtered Mitch, nearly gagging over a second sip of the drink.

"Son, we pre-screened the candidates so well I'm sure someone, somewhere, can tell me your top ten favourite foods based on your purchasing history," stated Hendrix, offering a half-smirk. "I could have gone with a more graphic response but the General was telling me to keep my comments a bit less lewd when dealing with civilians."

Mitch's memories starting to come back to him, he nodded for a few seconds and said, "General... Taylor, right, that guy. Okay, either this stuff is working or my brain's healing itself. General Taylor is the head of the EG Program, this thing I signed up for after the Department of Defence lied and said it was just a beta test for a new video game."

"Mr. Shinada, we don't lie, we just never offer the full truth," insisted Hendrix; taking a few steps back from Mitch. "Try to walk a bit. We should go see Doctor Chopra as soon as you're able to take some steps and not fall all over yourself."

"Right... Legs, I have those," grunted Mitch, glancing down at his bare feet and then over at the uniformed man with the tray, who he remembered was named Perkins. "Hey Perkins, can you get me some slippers or something? Please?"

"I think so," nodded Perkins, whose rank Mitch couldn't remember, the young man promptly disappearing from sight. Mitch hadn't mentioned it to Hendrix but the light in the room was still bothering him, though now, finally, he could see clearly. The room had off-white tiles, a nice square pattern slightly reminiscent of a mall with no sense of artistic flair. Besides the capsule Mitch had just

stepped out from there were nine more in the room, each a metal tube with a black glass shell and a nice leather bed inside. Several monitors and computer terminals lined one side of the room, tables and medical equipment along the side opposite the ten capsules. The room had no windows, but Mitch then remembered that they were in the basement of the military installation. For a second Mitch couldn't remember where exactly he was, but he soon remembered it was a secretive base near Quantico, Virginia, that he only knew as "Project Oasis".

"Okay, so we're at Project Oasis, you're Colonel Hendrix, and Doctor Chopra's the guy in charge of the science here while you're General Taylor's effective guy in charge of this whole thing," recapped Mitch as he took a couple of steps, getting his legs to work after only slightly more effort than normal. "And I'm not Michael Storm, karate master, but Mitchell Shinada. I think my brain's back on track. Please tell me I didn't forget my own name..."

"Michael Storm, huh?" chuckled Hendrix as Perkins returned, having barely been gone more than a few seconds, a pair of simple black slippers now on his tray. "Yes, you're correct. Glad to see there's no lasting damage."

"Yeah... wait, has there been?" demanded Mitch, nearly dropping the slippers as he took them from Perkins.

"No, but I'd have hated for that to start now," Hendrix assured Mitch, who had awkwardly dropped the slippers on the floor and tried to get his feet inside them. "Michael Storm... So you actually adopted a new moniker for yourself inside the simulation?"

"Inside the game, yes, I did," corrected Mitch, managing to get one slipper on. "Don't call it a simulation: simulations don't make you so strong you can drop green-skinned pigmen with one blow each. That's a freaking video game... Which I guess does make the beta test claim you lured me here with accurate on that count at least."

"Like I said, not lies, just never whole truths," insisted Hendrix, Mitch managing to get his other slipper on. "Doctor Chopra will of course give you all the finer details, but from my observations? I don't think I've seen another candidate do as well at the simulation-"

"Video game."

"-at the game, as you," finished Hendrix, correcting himself but also frowning at Mitch's interruption. "Now, if you'll follow me..." Hendrix started to walk away from Mitch, headed past the monitors where a couple of people in polo shirts were inspecting a plethora of information that was being displayed. Mitch had been disappointed when he'd first arrived that there weren't more people wearing lab coats, the people working around the project space looking more like employees at a computer store than scientists.

"Thanks Perkins," offered Mitch, placing the drained glass of electrolyte juice back on Perkins's tray before moving to follow Hendrix. Mitch's legs were resistant to moving more than a couple of steps but he forced them forward, aches be damned. As he walked however Mitch thought back to the night he'd been contacted, the email that had seen him dragged from his home in Seattle all the way to just outside of Washington D.C.

*Mitchell L Shinada,*

*Congratulations! You have been selected to join the private closed Beta for what we at Aquifer Studios are calling simply... EG. What does it mean? You'll have to come and find out! BUT... If you like the idea of battling the evil hordes of a Star Empire, using nothing but your martial arts prowess, we're sure you'll love EG!*

*We were looking for the best gamers to beta this project, as you need to be both of sound mind and body to withstand what you're about to experience. Why sound of body? With EG, we promise a next generation virtual reality experience unlike any you've seen before! To that end, we'll need you to come join us out in Washington (DC, not the State). But wait, you can't just leave your lives just to play a video game! Well, maybe not... but this beta test would also be a PAID, yes, PAID, test, and that includes your flight and accommodation!*

*If you're interested in this LIFE-CHANGING opportunity, please, reply!*

That had been it. Two paragraphs, plus another sentence and his name, that read to Mitch like the writer had listened to too many monster truck commercials had all it had taken for him to join a secret government project. Mitch however didn't have much going on at home however, as while he had his friends and his family he had been in a bit of a rut, working at a convenience store for the past two years while quietly putting away some money for a big purchase, be it an engagement ring or a house. Life could have been worse, but Mitch hadn't taken a vacation in over a year and hadn't dated anyone since a mutual breakup over two years ago. Playing a top secret video game he didn't fully understand yet felt to Mitch like the kick in the backside he needed.

“Any chance I could get a robe or something, maybe a nice jumpsuit?” requested Mitch as he managed to catch up to Hendrix, indicating the shorts he was wearing. “I mean, I know I'm a civilian but this is a military base, right? Gotta have some standards.”

“Way ahead of you, Mr. Shinada,” came Perkins's voice, the trusty aide appearing behind Mitch with a black T-shirt as the trio exited the lab where the capsules were and entered a long hallway.

“Thanks, Perkins,” offered Mitch, managing to pull on the shirt while he walked, though he nearly flailed his arms into Hendrix. “You take pride in helping out like this?”

“I've always liked getting things for people,” confessed Perkins, shrugging, “You know, so long as they appreciate it. Military's a great place for that, though. People here are grateful for anything they're given.”

“Back in the day I forced a whole platoon to stand outside in the rain until I was sure they appreciated the gear we gave them,” recalled Hendrix as Mitch couldn't help but glance at a cute-looking woman in a blue uniform that walked by. “I am glad I don't deal with the grunts so much anymore though. Nowadays everything's 'too mean'. I mean I never encouraged beating people with soap-filled socks or anything, but these days it's like we can't even yell...”

“Society tends to over-correct when it comes to solving problems,” mused Mitch, turning his head to glance at the uniformed woman again, though now he was focused on her blue uniform. “Is she Air Force?”

“DOD facility, we've got marines and even a few navy boys here too,” confirmed Hendrix,

smiling. "I forgot how much you still don't know about this place. Still, I get the feeling Chopra's going to want to fill you in completely now, assuming you've enjoyed yourself..."

"Dunno if enjoyed is the right word, but it was definitely something else," allowed Mitch, the trio now exiting the fairly nondescript hallway in favour of another room full of monitors. A few people in this lab were wearing white coats, which made Mitch happy, and there were only computers and big monitors present. Over a dozen people dotted the room, seated at various terminals, while a man Mitch figured to be nearly fifty approached, beaming a smile. Doctor Arun Chopra, Mitch remembered the man was named. While Mitch had no idea what degree had gotten Arun his doctorate he was the one in charge of the EG Program, at least when it came to actually running it's systems. General Taylor was the guy overseeing the project but Mitch had never met him personally, just Hendrix.

"Here he is, our star candidate!" exclaimed Chopra, offering Mitch a handshake. Chopra reminded Mitch of a lot of scientists he'd seen in movies, as he had a big pair of horn-rimmed glasses, a distinguished shock of grey in his black hair and a well-groomed beard. However while Mitch had been expecting Chopra to wear a bow tie or a plaid shirt he was instead wearing the same kind of black T-shirt Mitch was wearing, though it was at least under a lab coat that had his identification pinned to it. The scientist did have the whiff of a smoker about him and Mitch secretly hoped Chopra smoked a pipe.

"Star candidate, really?" questioned Mitch while shaking Chopra's hand. "I mean, I kicked the crap out of those orcs, but that felt really easy..."

"That's because it was the tutorial level!" laughed Chopra, patting Mitch on the back before letting go of his hand. "I should explain though. Now, this game, it does operate quite a bit like games I'm sure you're used to. While you were fighting we were able to measure your, ah, forgive me Colonel, Sergeant, 'hit points', and you didn't lose any the whole fight!"

"I have hit points?" gasped Mitch, a bit surprised, Hendrix meanwhile letting out a small sigh and Perkins just shaking his head. "So it is a video game! I mean, hit points, tutorial levels... Was Goggy a boss battle, then?"

"Goggy?" repeated Chopra, not seeming to clue into Mitch's pet name for the one orc he'd faced.

"The last orc I took down, the one with the wrench, the goggles and the puns," clarified Mitch.

"Ah, yes, he was meant to be the tutorial's final exam, as it were," nodded Chopra, then gesturing. "Come, let's get a little closer to our big screen and we'll have a look at everything."

Mitch, Hendrix and Perkins took a few steps further into the room, coming up next to the first computer row as Chopra spoke to a woman sitting at one of the computers. A few keystrokes and mouse-clicks later and a picture of Mitch, or rather his video game alias Michael Storm, was up on the monitor. "Why did you only have the glove on the one hand?" questioned Hendrix, glancing at Mitch's avatar. "Seems impractical, like only having one shoulder pad."

"Colonel, I keep telling you that their avatars are created by scanning their brains, it's completely automatic!" exclaimed Chopra, shaking his head. "Mitch, I'm sure you've seen characters dress like this before?"

“Oh for sure,” confirmed Mitch, touching his chin for a moment. “Karate robes, I mean, I did study karate as a kid. Spiky gold hair, I can name probably a half-dozen video games and cartoons that feature that, never mind anime. The one gauntlet, one bandage arm thing, that's also pretty common in anime. Surprised my robes weren't sleeveless though, and that I had somewhat practical boots on.”

“Well, your appearance was one thing, and the name, Michael Storm, did you make it up?” continued Chopra, touching his beard, apparently in a mirroring of Mitch touching his own face.

“Huh... You know, I don't remember now how I came up with that,” realized Mitch after thinking for a moment.

“Yes, the name was also generated subconsciously, like your outfit and general appearance,” explained Chopra, clapping his hands together. “The EG Program's ability to read minds, it's hard to fathom just how effective it really is. But... beyond that, this is where you are, as I said, a star candidate... Quickly, can you tell me what a tutorial level typically requires?”

“Um, well, they vary, but in a game like this, you usually learn the basic controls, how to do some combos if those are a thing, learn how health works...” Mitch trailed off as he suddenly realized that his last remark hadn't technically happened with him since, according to Chopra, he hadn't lost any hit points. “Do people normally take a few hits?”

“Bulls-eye!” laughed Chopra, clapping again. “You made it through a scenario designed to have the candidate hit at least once without actually getting hit. You adapted so perfectly that the program couldn't properly handle you, get you used to how it works. Though I am burying the more important lead here... The lightning blast.”

“Well isn't that just like a super move?” asked Mitch, shrugging. “A limit break, a buster, a musou, something like that? Or was I not supposed to use that during the tutorial level?”

“You weren't supposed to use it at all!” revealed Chopra, which did surprise Mitch a bit.

“Sounds like I broke your beta then,” snorted Mitch, flexing his fingers. “Whatever, it's what I do. Last beta I played? I ended up discovering some very specific walls you could walk through. Made me really good at ambushes... though everyone just called me a camping bitch, despite it being a legitimate strategy.”

“Mr. Shinada, no one, not one candidate, has managed to hurl lightning,” reported Hendrix, crossing his arms. “Are you starting to understand why we're so amazed now?”

“Wait... Wait...” demanded Mitch, holding up his hands. “So you're telling me that this program you designed is doing stuff you didn't know was possible? I suppose I should be happy this isn't a theme park full of dinosaurs right now...”

“Mitchell, ah, may I call you Mitchell?” asked Chopra, waiting for a nod of approval before continuing. “Mitchell, only a dozen other candidates have managed to do what you did, at least in terms of not being injured. Of those dozen, only five of them were able to do something even resembling that lightning bolt you conjured. It's for this reason we want to continue working with you, but, right now, we're giving you one last chance to walk away.”



Mitch looked at Chopra, then over at Hendrix, and finally at Perkins just so he wouldn't be left out. He couldn't understand being given a chance to walk away, especially after the dozens of forms he'd signed in the previous days regarding confidentiality. Upon first entering the capsule Mitch had figured the DOD was simply looking for new ways to train soldiers using virtual reality, the next-generation stuff agencies like the National Security Agency were no doubt keeping secret from the regular population. Now however Mitch was wondering if there was more to the story that he wasn't understanding, and to that end he couldn't help but be curious what was going to come next.

"I'm still in it," confirmed Mitch, giving a thumbs up. "In it to win it, really, since it's a game... Or is this were you pull a twist on me and it's not actually a game?"

"Oh no, it's a game... we think," answered Hendrix, glancing at Chopra before he'd said the last two words. Mitch just stared at Hendrix in confusion.

"Huh?" Mitch managed after a few seconds. "You put me in it. I fought Biker Orcs from Mars. It's clearly a game. How are you not sure?"

"Mitchell, there's absolutely no easy way to say this, and since we've done so five other times already, you know I'm speaking the truth about that," breathed Chopra, walking up to the clerk and putting both hands on his shoulders. "Deep breath now..."

Chopra just stared at Mitch for a moment. "Oh, okay..." Mitch agreed after realizing the doctor was waiting for him to clearly take a deep breath.

"The EG Program wasn't made by us," confessed Chopra. "It wasn't even made by anyone we know of... We believe that the machine we run it all from, the Aquifer? We believe that to be alien in origin."

Silence hung in the room after Chopra finished speaking. As Mitch tried to process what had just been told to him he was aware that, around the room, the various technicians had stopped typing and were all looking at him. Hendrix and Perkins had also both braced themselves.

"Aliens... from another planet?" questioned Mitch after a good ten seconds of silence.

"We believe so, yes," nodded Chopra.

"Bullshit."