

Beyond the Great Juncture

by

Wayne Ellis

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Chapter 1 - The Voyage

“What do you think about this Temple on Mars?” asked Christophe Braun. “Do you think we can actually achieve hyperspace via the realms?”

“It’s worth a shot,” replied Lena Knopf. “It’s either twenty minutes or twenty years. I really think we’re not in this universe to live in space.”

They sat in a coffee shop called “Superb Brew” aboard the Starship Centauri. It was one of many shops that made up what looked like a small rural town, recreated inside most of the Starship’s main fuselage. And it came with some very earthly comforts: a gentle breeze blew outside; the sun was shining; and you could see in the distance many plants and trees. Even a small creek ran through the centre of town. First of its kind in the Interstellar ships, Centauri was quite a feat of engineering.

“I think you’re right, Lena,” said Braun. “I don’t want to become an old man out here.”

Christophe was thirty-two and always had to be the life of the party. He was the type of person who could suddenly turn a very serious situation into light-hearted humour. He had black hair and a short stocky build, due to his German descent. He wore the Earth Federation’s uniform, which was heavily influenced by the Indian kurta. The Earth Federation’s patch was proudly woven into the upper-left side of the jacket. The patch was a sixteen-pointed star made up of nine interlocking triangles, surrounded by two rows of eight and sixteen petals.

Zac looked up from an electronic magazine he was reading. “I read an article a few months ago that the late Sean Cummins wrote. He said that not only is it possible that we could hyperspace via the realms; we could go beyond the need for spacecraft altogether.”

Zac Reeve may strike you as a young man who did exceptionally well at university. You might even believe he was still at university! He looked a lot younger than his

twenty-three years of age, with his boyish looks and blond curly hair. He also wore a uniform similar to Braun's. He was New Zealand born.

"You mean, like StarGate or something?" asked Lena.

Lena was twenty-seven, with thin build and sandy-coloured hair. Born in France, she had her hair in a bob and wore the sari version of the uniform. Unlike commercial airline uniforms a century before, hers had a high collar and a long dress.

"Perhaps. Cummins said, and I quote, 'The realms would give us the capacity to become so united that the whole galaxy would be like one big Earth'."

"Woa," said Braun, "I'll have so many contacts, I won't have time to talk to everyone!"

"I don't think Mr. Cummins was talking about social networking," said Lena. "It's something much more subtle."

Reeve raised his eyebrows at Braun. "You should read his biography, 'From Seeker to the Keeper'."

"I read it," said Braun in mock surrender. "Hey, Zaco, you're taking this all way too seriously!"

Lena smiled, feeling a little elated. "The power of the Oracle and its realms is a broad subject."

"It certainly is," said Captain Daniel Withers, entering the coffee shop. Withers was a tall man in his late forties. His head was shaved really short and greying a little. As well as being tall, he was rather solid without being overweight.

"Your timing is impeccable, sir," said Braun.

Withers grinned as the three leaned towards him with interest.

“Don’t forget me,” said Yuri Gusev, the First Officer, entering soon after Withers.

“So is yours, sir,” said Braun.

Yuri Gusev was younger than Withers at thirty-four. He was also tall, but somewhat slimmer than the older man. He had short, sandy-coloured hair and also wore the Earth Federation’s uniform.

“No show without Number One,” said Gusev in his Russian accent.

“That’s right, Number One,” said Withers. “The Oracle and its realms is a broad subject.”

“Please continue,” said Gusev.

“Our elder brother, Arden from Caldon, described the Oracle as something infinite,” said Withers. “This may well be enough information for transformed beings who are still back on Earth, but because we have a special divine mission I should go into it further.

“Now, when I say ‘Oracle’, I mean,” he held up the small disk, “the Oracle of the Guardian and the Planetary Oracle, respectively.

“The mandala within the Oracle is formed by nine interlocking triangles that surround and radiate out from a central point. The four triangles here that point upwards represent God or the masculine aspect. Five of the triangles point downwards, representing the Goddess or the feminine aspect. These nine triangles are interlaced in such a way as to form forty-three smaller triangles in a web symbolic of the entire universe.”

“So, four of the Guardians channel the masculine power,” said Reeves, “and the other five, the feminine.”

“Yes,” replied Withers.

“And the forty-three triangles represent the Realm Keepers?” asked Lena.

“That’s also true,” replied Withers, “amongst other things. Like I said, forty-three of these triangles make up the galaxy. One of these triangles is called a ‘quadrant’. Within this quadrant, nine solar systems represent the Planetary Oracles, at the Realm of innocence.”

“Planets like Mars,” stated Reeve. “This quadrant is what we’ll be fighting to liberate, isn’t it?”

“You’re all well-informed,” said Withers. “We are about to liberate the last Planetary Oracle.”

“So the Realms make up the Planetary Oracles,” said Reeve, “and are activated only by all the forty-three Keepers, under the protection of the Guardians.”

“So what do the Shadows hope to achieve?” queried Lena. “I mean, we have such a unified force.”

“The Shadows are the universe’s unwillingness to evolve. They are negative left-overs from all the transformed worlds,” said Withers, “but a collective dark force in their own right. See this mandala?” he said, pointing at the Oracle of the Guardian. “See the fourteen points? These are the milestones of our evolution up till now and into the future. People of Earth who made it to the seventh point were transformed.”

“So that means the Shadows can only access the realms up to the sixth,” suggested Reeve.

“Yes, only the lower realms,” replied Withers. “A Shadow in the first realm can possess and control a person, or collectively possess a nation or even the whole world in this way.”

“Like Earth,” commented Reeve.

‘Or in the sixth realm, there are dark ghost-like, human or beastly physical forms that have dark influential powers.’

“Oh, brother,” said Lena. “I guess we’ll be up against more of the latter at...”

“Udicia,” said Withers, “and you could be right there. Brother Arden said they had a strong hold over this planet. I suspect the Shadows will throw everything they’ve got at this Last Bastion.”

Later they all walked out of the coffee shop, elated. At last, all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were coming together.

Withers looked at his senior officers and grinned. “It’s big, I know. Like the Gurus who were chosen to transform the Earth one hundred years ago, we’ve been chosen in these times to help transform the galaxy.”

“Well, I’m blown away!” exclaimed Braun.

“Anyone for a bit of fresh air? I think I’ll go for a walk,” said Lena, feeling a little dizzy.

“Sounds good,” said Braun.

“OK,” said Reeve.

“We’ll meet you back on the bridge,” said Withers, motioning Gusev to follow him.

They walked along the street not saying much. The artificial sun had risen high in the projected skyline.

Everything inside the ship within the emulated town was real. The only virtual parts of the whole scene were the sky and the vista. In the distance, the waterfall looked like it was coming down a mountain side.

Passing through the main centre of town was like passing through any typical country town on Earth. People either walked or rode electric scooters up and down the streets. Some were having conversations on the footpaths, while others came out of shops with new clothing or groceries in their hands.

“Hey, guys!” called a voice from the roof of one of the shops. “Nice day for it.”

It was Tristan Seymour, the town's leading technician. He was a Frenchman, of medium build with brown curly hair, and was twenty-eight years of age. He was wearing an overall-style uniform, with the mandala woven on his left breast pocket.

“What are you doing up there?” asked Lena.

“I was just checking the roof. Apparently, it leaks in the rain,” said Seymour, climbing down to where they were standing on the road.

“That’s funny,” said Braun, looking up at the simulated sky and chuckling. “You’re one step in front of me in humour, today.”

Reeve grinned.

“Feel like a walk?” asked Lena.

“Sure! Why not?” replied Seymour, “I’m between jobs, anyway.”

They all walked together to the edge of town. Coming into a parkland area, they could see many different species of birds, flying among the trees or pecking at seeds on the lawns.

The four crossed a stone bridge in the shape of a rainbow, staring at Centauri's version of the Oracle. Pillars surrounded the Oracle, with swastikas displayed on each one of them.

Further ahead, a modest-sized, domed temple proudly stood with an etching of the Primordial Fountain on the front of the building. A large group of people were sitting in front of it, meditating.

"Hey, Lena!" called a young woman from the group. She walked over to the where the four were standing. "Haven't seen you for a while."

"Dana, nice to see you again. How's the military going?" asked Lena with a funny look.

Dana was thirty, tall with sandy-blond hair. Born in Israel, she was the military adviser for the Centauri.

At that moment, Jere Bourne sneaked up on her from behind as a joke. Without looking behind, Dana grabbed Jere's arm and flipped him over her left shoulder. A stunned Bourne looked up at her from his horizontal position.

"It's going great!"

"I'm OK," croaked Bourne, climbing to his feet.

Jere Bourne was twenty-seven, of medium height with straight brown hair. He was born in the United States.

"Oh, Mr. Bourne, our Chief Engineer," said Braun.

"Well, someone's got to keep the cogs turning," said Bourne, shaking Braun's hand. He looked at Reeve, Seymour and Lena. "Hello."

They exchanged pleasantries, and everyone was silent for a while as if they all felt something at the same time.

“Did anyone else have an ‘in the moment’ experience?” asked Lena.

“Yeah,” said Seymour.

“Me too,” said Reeve.

“Same,” said Bourne.

“What happened?” asked Dana.

“We're all Keepers of the right way,” said Reeve.

“I'm not,” said Dana. “I'm in the Juncture.”

“What's the Juncture?” asked Bourne.

“Where the left and right ways meet,” replied Reeve. “Haven't you been spending some down time with your ring?”

“Well, no. Engineering takes a lot of my attention,” said Bourne. “Can you run me through the basics?”

“Sure,” replied Reeve, happy to be able to give a small lecture. “Basically, the first realm is the Realm of Innocence. Then there's the Realm of Knowledge, Realm of Contentment, Realm of Security, Realm of Collectivity, which is yours, and the Realm of Forgiveness.

“As you know, there's a left, central and right way to all these realms. The left and right ways meet at the Realm of Forgiveness, and it is at this point that it's called the Great Juncture.”

“But didn't the Gurus call this point the gate?” asked Bourne.

“Yes,” said Reeve, “it was called the gate, because it was the gate to enlightenment, the gate to our self-realisation. It still is, but in the universal scheme of things we enter the Realm of Innocence and move up through the other realms from there. That's why it's called the gate, in a galactic sense.” He paused. “However, the Great Juncture is still a gate, too, because it has to be opened at the other end, for a particular world to become enlightened. Like the Gurus, we'll work from the Realm of Innocence to the Great Juncture, clearing the ways and realms as we go. Confused?”

“I'm an engineer. I'm always confused,” responded Bourne.

Everyone laughed.

“Hey, our Temple is emanating a pleasant, calming power,” said Lena.

“Vibrations,” said Reeve, “the universal power.”

“I think we are close to Mars,” said Braun, tuning in to the vibrations. “Let's get back to the bridge.”

Captain Withers was sitting in his “ready” room. He waved his hand across a tiny projector embedded into the top of his desk. A holographic head-up display shot up, which he began interacting with.

The holographic projection simulated a trajectory over four and a half light years, predicting it would take over twenty years to reach Alpha Centauri-A under normal propulsion.

A holographic image of his First officer appeared on the screen.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir,” said Yuri Gusev, “but we’re approaching Mars.”

Withers raised his eyebrows.

“Bring us into orbit.”

Withers stood up and walked out through the automatic doors to the bridge. He briefly eyed the crew before looking towards his first officer.

“We’ve entered Martian orbit as requested, sir,” said Gusev.

Withers looked at the holographic image of Mars projected above the centrepiece console of the bridge. Projected data from the Cydonia region scrolled through at the side.

“Move to directly above the Temple,” ordered Withers.

“Aye,” said his helmsman, Braun, “onto it.” He danced his fingers through the hologram over his panel, manoeuvring the holographic versions of the ship and planet to align them. “Done.”

A huge mandala suddenly appeared in space. It was turning in a clockwise direction.

“Are we sure it leads to Alpha Centauri-A?” wondered Lena, the Communications Officer.

Withers wasn't sure, because intergalactic realm-jumping wasn't Earth's time. He figured he would have to fall back on a scientific approach. “Zac, fire a small probe into the centre of it, and monitor where it goes,” he ordered.

“Yes sir,” he said, his fingers dancing over the head-up screen in front of him. “It’s away.”

They were now looking at the front of the ship projected in front of them. If you weren't accustomed to it, it looked very much like something had sheared the front section of the ship clean off. If you walked over there, you might get sucked into space. Of course, no one flinched; this type of ultra-high-definition video had been around for a very long time.

They watched as the probe shot out of the side of the ship and headed towards the mandala with incredible speed. The console in the centre of the bridge started displaying a bird's-eye video of the probe.

"That's beautiful," said Lena, referring to the colours that glittered around the mandala.

Suddenly, the probe's-eye view changed from the view of the stars on the other side to nothing! They had lost the video signal.

"Sir, the probe's entered a different region of space," offered Reeve.

"Well?" said Withers.

"Yes," said Reeve, surprised, "I've received the telemetry." He diverted the view to the centre bridge console. Again the computer simulated the Centauri's trajectory in relation to the Earth and Alpha Centauri, and it also added where the probe had ended up.

"That probe has jumped four point five light years!" said exclaimed, awe-struck. "It made it to Alpha Centauri! That's good enough for me."

He turned towards Braun. "Take us in. Use the same trajectory the probe used."

"Gotcha. Hold on to your hats, ladies and gentlemen. We may be in for a bumpy ride!" Braun's fingers danced over his head-up display, and the ship started to speed towards the opening. "Yee hoo!"

Withers gave Braun a funny look, conveying similar but more formal sentiments over the intercom ship-wide.

Like the probe, they approached the mandala. At once, their whole view of the universe changed.

Chapter 2 - The Realm of Innocence

The Centauri materialised within the orbit of a planet similar to Mars. In the distance they could see a huge armada of dark, crude-looking ships stationed in orbit.

Suddenly, a wide beam of energy shot out from one of the dark ships, hitting a different class of ship in a lower orbit. It exploded in a huge fireball, before being quickly extinguished.

“My God!” exclaimed Withers, stunned. He guessed it was a Guardian ship.
“Christophe, hold our position.”

“You got it,” said Braun, looking out the front-view screen with concern.

“Where are we, Zac?” asked Withers.

“We’re orbiting the fourth planet from Alpha Centauri-A,” said Reeve a little nervously. “Like Mars, it’s very cold on the surface and harbours no life.”

“Can you see the Temple?” asked Withers.

“Yes, it’s directly below us.”

“Give me a close-up view of the area in front of the dome,” ordered Withers.

The view of the front-view screen zoomed on the assembly area of the Oracle. They could see figures moving around. Explosions rocked the area.

“Sir, there’s a battle going on down there!”

“Oh dear...” started Gusev.

“Centauri, Centauri!” called a mysterious voice over the Centauri’s comm-link. “This is the Guardian of Caldon, Yarmel.”

“Reeve, open a channel to Yarmel!” commanded Withers.

“Open, sir.”

“Yarmel, sir, this is the Captain of the Centauri and the Guardian of Earth. Standing by for your orders.”

“I insist I call you ‘sir’,” replied Yarmel, “as I’ve been given strict instructions by our honourable Arden to take orders from you.”

Wither’s mind whirled: He was the lead Guardian! He was still alive, fifty years after his mother saw him on Cydonia, Mars! He wasn’t sure which concept he was having more trouble with.

He knew this wasn’t the right time to ponder these things. He turned his attention back to the holographic comm-panel.

“Er, OK, what is your situation down there?”

“We’re holding off the best we can, but the shields around the Temple are losing integrity,” replied Yarmel.

“Sorry, sir, but three of those huge space-craft have broken away and are heading towards us,” interrupted Reeve.

Wither could feel a surge of vibrational power coming from the Oracle of the Guardian, which was in his uniform pocket. He pulled it out and attached it to his left breast pocket.

“Continue to hold our position, Christophe, and as before, stand by for Oracle sync.” He turned his attention to the comm panel. “Yarmel, stand by. We’re transferring the Keepers.”

“Thank the Goddess for that!” said Yarmel. “Energy weapons from the Shadows have just penetrated the shields. The Temple dome was just destroyed!”

“We only just got to know her,” murmured Withers, referring to the Centauri. He touched a holo-button on his comm-panel. “This is your Captain speaking. All hands please head to the Temple immediately.” He looked at the bridge crew. “That includes you.”

“Sir, are you going to take the Shadows on by yourself?” asked Gusev sternly. “I must insist that the Captain is putting himself at an incredible risk.”

“You’re too important, Yuri. You must make it to the planet. It’s an order.” Withers lightened his sternness a little and smiled. “Good luck, Keeper of the Realm of Forgiveness.”

After overhearing their conversation, Lena walked off the bridge, annoyed, and met up with Braun back inside the village.

“He’s going to kill himself,” snapped Lena. “He’s important, too!”

Braun gave Lena a solemn look. “He’s not the Captain anymore. His Guardianship has been activated. He’s now doing his new job and protecting us.”

All the crew of the Centauri assembled on the Temple – forty-three of them, arranged according to their positions on the Oracle.

At once, the entire Temple was enveloped in a brilliant, subtle light, and all the Realm Keepers were transferred.

“We have the Keepers! The Shadows have now entered the Temple area,” yelled Yarmel between panting breaths.

Withers said nothing but looked at the enormous Shadow ships that loomed over the Centauri on the front-view screen. The view suddenly changed to a black figure in a black uniform, with red piercing eyes.

“You are doomed, Guardian,” said the menacing voice through the comm panel.

Withers touched the Oracle, and extra vibrations began emitting from it.

“Not exactly a fair fight, is it?” Withers asked. “But I’ll take my chances.”

The Shadow Lord laughed an evil laugh. “Prepare to die!”

“Well, take your best shot!” snapped Withers, powering up the Centauri and heading his ship towards the three Shadow ships.

“What are you doing?” roared the Shadow Lord, surprised. An energy beam shot out from the closest Shadow ship and hit the Oracle-generated force-field in front of the Centauri.

Withers slid the holographic controls to full power. “That’ll teach them for parking so close to me.” He ran off the bridge and into the parklands towards the Temple. As he went over the bridge, the Centauri hit the closest Shadow ship. Withers fell hard to the ground and started crawling towards the Oracle as debris rained all around him.

Standing on the Centauri’s Oracle he put his right hand on the Oracle of the Guardian at his left heart. A pillar fell down in front of him. Something came to his consciousness then, as if the words came out of nowhere.

“Great Goddess, please make me a fearless, pure spirit.”

He felt a downward movement, like he’d entered a very fast elevator.

When he looked up, an angry Shadow Lord grabbed him and pinned him to the ground.

He was now on the Planetary Oracle, at the planet below. This was Marcia, this planet having the same qualities as Mars in the Realm of Innocence. This realm, like Mars, was not only the base of all its evolutionary realms; it also acted as a gate to other realms.

He fought, knocking a huge blade from the Shadow's grip. He was aware of all the other Guardians around him, fighting other Shadow Lords, desperately keeping them away from the Keepers.

He also noticed that the sides of the arched tunnel looked the same as when they had hyper-jumped between the realms in the ship.

Withers was soon engaged in the battle, the Oracle transforming into a mighty sword. Sparring with an angry Shadow Lord, who also wielded a large blade, he was reminded that this was what he had trained for.

There was no pause in the fighting, even though the scene around them had changed. They had arrived on Udicia in the Realm of Innocence. In this case, this realm only represented the country and not the planet, as on Marcia.

This gave the Guardians the upper hand, as the power of Innocence strengthened them, particularly the Guardian Ralnof, who guarded this particular realm. His sword struck with quick and deadly blows, and several Shadow Lords immediately fell by his hand.

Withers had also swung with precision to dispatch his foe. The other Guardians followed suit, and before long, all the Shadow Lords had been slain.

Withers was about to thank Yarmel for his input, when three huge mandalas appeared before them, spinning in a clockwise direction. These were the entry points to the left, central and right ways.

The Guardians and the realm Keepers gathered in front of the mandalas, in formations specific to their own ways.

Withers was the Guardian of the right way. His Keepers were mostly made up from his senior staff on the Centauri.

With no time to lose, the nine Guardians and forty-three Realm Keepers stepped through the entry-points. The Keepers were immediately sent straight to their realms. Six Guardians went to the main centre realms, while the remaining three Guardians were free to traverse the ways. Their number one priority was to protect their Keepers, and the second was to clear any blockages that might impede the vibrational flow through the ways.

Withers materialised in the Realm of Innocence within the right way. He looked around a huge forest canopy, momentarily disoriented, taking in the smell and the sounds of nature.

Becoming thoughtless, he placed his hand on the Oracle at his left breast pocket. Now in the right way, he would have to prepare the way and its related realms for transformation.

His eye caught what he was wearing. The Oracle had changed his clothing!

“What’s this?” Withers grinned. “A robe?”

He was wearing a long dark-brown robe with a frilly light-brown shirt, bell-shaped cuffs and brown trousers with cowboy boots.

“Captain!” called a voice in the distance.

He grabbed the Oracle and held it.

He took off, not responding to the greeting. It could be a Shadow trick, even though the voice sounded like Reeve's. The forest was dense, with the undergrowth potentially noisy, but Withers managed to move through like a gentle breeze.

Arriving at a clearing, he spotted Reeve walking around, a little stunned. Withers casually walked into the clearing, surprising the younger man.

"Captain!" said Reeve, holding a big stick in his hand. Reeve wore a dark cloak and tight pants, with elfish-looking boots.

"Keep your voice down," ordered Withers. He eyed the stick and grinned. "I'll give you a better weapon shortly. Nice boots by the way."

"Oh, thanks," said Reeve. "Where are we?"

"In your country, the Realm of Innocence, on the right side," replied Withers.

"Oh, I see. Udicia, in this case, is the temple," murmured Reeve. "That's very interesting."

There was silence. Only the cicadas chirped in the background.

"We'll set up camp," said Withers. "It's getting dark."

Withers woke very early in the morning, his keen senses picking up unnatural noises in the forest. He knew immediately that two life-forms were stealthily bearing down on their position. Reeves was still sleeping. Withers decided to leave him like that, as he would make too much noise if awakened.

He stood in the shadow of a tree, waiting very still. A casual observer may have thought that he, too, was a tree.

A branch cracked loudly close by. He grabbed the Oracle, and tremendous vibrations started surging from it.

A black, four-legged beast broke out of a bush right next to Reeves. Huge claws flashed through the air.

Suddenly, Reeve awoke and held up his right hand. Tremendous vibrations shot out of the palm of his hand, and the black Shadow dog disappeared in mid-flight.

Withers was ready for the other man charging at him from the bushes. The man raised his sword, but suddenly realised that Withers was not the enemy that he was pursuing. At the same time, Withers received cooler vibrations from the Oracle.

“Hello,” said Reeve. “I think I killed that beast you were pursuing.”

“Beast? It was a man, but a beast nonetheless. Our town will be grateful that he’s dead!”

Of course, thought Reeve, the Oracle manifests absolute truth. Those on Udicia can’t see the Shadows for what they really are.

“What’s your name?” asked Reeve.

“Ulef,” he replied. “Where are you from?”

“I’m Daniel and this is Zac,” said Withers, shaking his hand. “We’re special agents from Sylonia.”

“Who was that?” asked Reeve, also shaking Ulef’s hand.

“Liro, the most brutal tyrant that Lemar has ever known. He and his henchmen have poured fear into the hearts of Lemarians for many years.” Ulef paused, deep in

thought. "By the way, it is unusual that he has come after his enemies on his own. Normally, he would send his men."

"Well," replied Withers, "these are unusual times. And talking about that, we need your help."

"Oh," said Ulef.

"I'm gathering some fighting men," said Withers, "and preparing them for battle."

"I don't understand," said Ulef. "There are only a few of Liro's men left here."

"Reeve will help you to remove them, but your country is needed to liberate the whole of Udicia."

"OK, I saw how easily you killed Liro," said Ulef. "We owe you a debt for that."

"You don't owe us anything," said Withers. "You owe it to yourself. You owe it to your families, to your community, to your freedom. This darkness must end."

Later, Withers pulled Reeve aside to discuss Reeve's role in this realm.

"Very spontaneous," said Withers. "That Shadow Lord didn't stand a chance against the power of Innocence."

Reeve held up his right hand. On his wrist he wore a gold bangle, with a small disk covering his lower palm. It had an etching of a four-petaled flower on it.

"I didn't really do anything," said Reeve, still feeling a little rattled.

"That's how it works," said Withers. "The Oracle does all the work."

Withers placed the Oracle against Reeve's smaller disk.

"The power in this talisman will send any Shadow to the foot of the Great Juncture," said Withers. "Here they will be judged."

"I could send you the Lemarian army."

"You've just demonstrated how in-tune a Keeper is to the Oracle. When the time comes, send me a fighting force, as well as the remaining Shadows."

"To the Realm of Forgiveness, to the foot of the Great Juncture," murmured Reeve. "Yes, that would solve the problems of this realm and others. Then it would be up to you and the other Guardians to defeat them there."

"Just keep that child-like innocence about you," said Withers. "That is your greatest power."

"I'm ready," said Reeve, watching the first sign of the sun rising on this alien world.

A couple of hours later, Withers, Reeve and Ulef broke out of the thick forest into a clearing. The countryside was a little elevated, and they could see down into a picturesque valley.

"Nice," commented Reeve.

"Thanks," said Ulef.

"I can see your town down there," said Withers, pointing.

Reeves turned to Withers and held up his hand. "Good luck sir."

“And you. Call if you need me. I can be here in seconds,” said Withers. “Take care. And you, Ulef, thanks for your help.”

“It’s an honour.”

The three men parted. Withers was watching them walking away in the distance, when suddenly a huge mandala appeared before him. He stepped through and materialised in a similar scene, in another part of Udicia. It took a moment to get his bearings, and then he started taking in this new country in the Realm of Creativity.

He decided to follow a road down into the valley, receiving the coolness from the Oracle. Lena would be somewhere in this direction, he thought. He noticed a river running along that road, a little further along, and decided to head that way.

Chapter 3 - The Realm of Creativity

Withers made it to the river's edge a few hours later. He spotted Lena a little further down. She was meditating beneath a large tree. She was holding up her hands, palms up, but she was paying particular attention to her right thumb. There she wore a gold ring, with an etching of a six-petalled flower.

Withers gently sat down beside her, as Lena looked up, a little startled.

"I knew someone with good vibrations was coming," said Lena. "Otherwise, if I'd felt heat coming from my ring, I'd be up this tree!"

"Good to see you're looking beyond your normal senses," said Withers. "Been here long?"

"I've just arrived. So I thought I might get some direction," she said, looking towards the river. "The river should lead me to a town and I can go from there."

"Nice dress, by the way."

"Thanks." Lena's dress was long, with frills around the bottom of the long skirt. Even larger frills adorned her breast, which drew one's attention – not in a salacious way, but because of the work that had gone into the material. She was wearing a long, light-coloured shawl around her shoulders. It was a fashion that was left behind in Earth's past, but here it was in modern Udicia.

Withers pulled the Oracle from his robe and held it against Lena's ring. The ring began to vibrate in the same way.

"Wow!"

“Daniel.”

Withers stopped in his tracks. They were following a dirt road alongside the river and they could see a village in the distance. The voice was in his head.

“Daniel.”

“Yes,” said Withers. Lena looked at him curiously, saying nothing.

“It is Arden.”

Withers look around as if to see Arden standing in the bush. He looked up, trying to find a space-ship. Nothing.

“Where are you?”

“Never mind at the moment,” said Arden. “I am with you in the present.”

Withers remained solemn, saying nothing.

“I will be here with you until transformation.” Arden paused. “Remember to use the Oracle of the Guardian, but not just as an invaluable tool. You must become that tool. You must become those subtle powers within. That’s the whole point – to go beyond identifying with the Oracle and become the Oracle. Once all those on Udicia know that, then the Shadows will cease to exist.”

Soon they arrived at a small village. It was mostly deserted as they walked the street, and some curtains parted as they passed. It made Withers feel like he was in one of those old Western movies.

Perhaps this was a space Western?

Up ahead there was a huge crowd congregating in front of what looked like a church. The church was apparently the most important building in town.

Lena looked up at the steeple on top of the building and immediately felt pain in his lower abdomen. It looked like an "X" that had been rotated slightly in an anti-clockwise direction.

"Can't they feel the negativity coming from that building?" asked Lena, shocked. "And that man!"

"May this congregation be blessed and blessed by the Great One," intoned the cloaked, hooded man standing in front, as he finished his sermon. He paused, glaring at Withers and Lena.

"No, they can't," said Withers, speaking a little more quietly as they approached.

"Oh," said the hooded man, "new disciples. That will be all for today. I'm passing the hat around. So please be very generous. May the Great One bring joy into your hearts."

Everyone held up their own X pendants in a prayer pose.

"That's horrible," murmured Lena.

Wither nodded, watching everyone go. At last, only they and the hooded figure remained. Withers walked towards the man, his right hand covering the Oracle, which he had placed over his left heart.

There was a temporary stand-off as the hooded figure realised they weren't his disciples after all.

Two glowing red eyes suddenly glared at them from under the hood.

"Maybe he's not that thrilled to see us after all," said Withers, detaching the Oracle.

The hooded figure detached a large metal X from his cloak. Withers guessed the Shadow Lord probably used it for sermons and punishments. Now it was to become a weapon.

“Blasphemers!” roared the hooded Shadow Lord, raising his X. “Be gone!” He threw the X like a boomerang. While it was approaching at great speed, Lena directed vibrations towards it from her ring, and it diverted its course, going back to the Shadow Lord.

Startled, the hooded Shadow Lord suddenly took off down the road towards the river. He wasn’t running; he had levitated and was sailing across the ground at the speed of a car!

“Where did he pull that trick from?” asked Lena, baffled. She was about to run after him but was picked up by Withers who was also floating above the ground. He was standing on a larger Oracle.

“His comes from science, mine from the powers of the universe,” said Withers, gaining speed.

“Well, put the pedal to the metal,” urged Lena. “The Grim Reaper is getting away!”

Withers grinned as they headed towards the river.

They landed near the river after they lost sight of the hooded Shadow Lord.

“He got away,” said Lena.

“He’s around here,” said Withers, checking the Oracle. “I can feel his heat.”

“The water looks refreshing. Don’t mind if I do,” said Lena. She walked over to the river, looking upstream and downstream. “A little more natural than the water we’ve been drinking from Centauri’s spring.”

Many birds were chirping in the trees all around them, and the occasional fish made contact with the water’s surface.

Suddenly, the hooded Shadow Lord came out of the water. He hurled the X, which came towards Lena at a frightening speed! In a split-second, she remembered her ring and held up her hand. An invisible power surged from the palm of her hand, knocking the X down. She shot another surge of invisible power towards the Shadow Lord, who appeared to melt back into the river.

“You all right, Lena?”

“Yes, thanks,” said Lena. “Just a little shaken.”

“Yes. You’ve sent him to the Great Juncture for judgement,” said Withers. “Excellent response, by the way. Just what I needed to know.”

“Thanks, sir,” replied Lena. “You know, I think I’m beginning to appreciate what you’ve been through, sir.”

Withers gave Lena a solemn look, momentarily reflecting on the time when his mother passed him the Oracle.

“Daniel, one day you will have to face a darkness, way beyond anything that you have ever experienced before.” His mother had passed him the Oracle then. “This is the ‘Oracle of the Guardian’ and it will begin to guide you from this day forward.”

“I know, Lena,” responded Withers.

The Oracle had certainly tested him, from survival in the Australian Outback, to fighting monsters in an Oracle simulated world! The tests were gruelling and had almost pushed him to breaking point.

It was time to put it all to the test.

Withers and Lena went a little further down the river, when they noticed cool vibrations coming from their respective divine tools. They followed the coolness into the bush, which became cooler and cooler the further they went in. After pushing their way through a thick part of the scrub, they finally found a small group of people painting and sketching the scene around them. It was next to a creek that probably flowed into the river.

Lena was thrilled that they were finally going to meet some friendly people – and creative ones, at that. She carefully approached them, noting how secluded this little spot was.

“Hello, there,” she said warmly.

All heads turned her way. A few of them were surprised, others frightened.

Withers put his hand on the Oracle, sending some heart-strengthening vibrations towards them.

“How did you find us?” asked one of the men. There were four women and two men in the group.

“We’re not the authorities,” said Withers, soothingly. “We’re friends.”

“I’m Lena. We’re from Sylvania,” Lena said, rehearsing the lines that Withers had given her. “We’re making contact with Gurus like you and looking for potential recruits.”

"I'm Sef. This is Myal, Zenita, Fern, Xandra and Lal. Others have come through our town before," explained Sef, "but ended up falling under Kenar's illusions. Now, it's against the law to be creative."

"That tyrant, Kenar!" snapped Xandra. "He destroyed my florist, my sewing shop!"

"Who was Kenar?" asked Lena.

"The Minister of The Freedom of the People," responded Xandra. "He runs this town on fear, but we're sick of..."

"He's dead," said Withers, politely interrupting.

Everyone was happy but they didn't want to cheer yet. They wanted to verify this later.

"If he is," said Xandra, "then I don't need this terrible pendant anymore!" She threw an X-shaped pendant to the ground.

Withers picked it up. "I've seen ones like this before." He discreetly vibrated it against the Oracle and passed it back to Xandra.

"Try it now."

Xandra took it reluctantly and put it back around her neck. Instead of sitting on the side with the design, it fell on her chest with the back of it sticking out. It appeared to be turning the other way round.

"It feels cool!" exclaimed Xandra. "How did you do that?"

"My hands are starting to feel cool," said Myal.

Sef checked his hands and found they were cool, too.

Lena was amazed. She knew from Earth history that, a century ago, people's hands could feel vibrations, but it was amazing to see people experiencing it now.

"Lena will teach you everything you need to know about this new awareness," said Withers. "You can exchange vibrations between your Xs."

Lena gave Withers a funny look, but smiled.

Withers grinned back. "You have to think like a Guru now as well as a Keeper. You studied our history?"

"Yes, I did," said Lena, "and I will."

"Very good," said Withers. He paused in thought. "I must talk to Sef before I leave."

Withers said goodbye to Lena and approached Sef, leading him towards the creek.

"Sef, I want you to put a group of men together," said Withers, getting straight to the point, "a group of men who will not only unite for this land, Alvernia, but also for the liberation of all Udicia."

"Where's the battle?"

"Lena's the key," responded Withers.

"What do you mean?"

Withers suddenly walked towards the creek. A huge mandala appeared and he walked through; it disappeared behind him.

Sef raced back to the group.

“Lal, come with me, quickly! The real transition has come, not Kenar’s mad vision. We must rally the troops!”

Chapter 4 - The Realm of Contentment

Withers arrived in the Realm of Contentment at the end of a quiet street. As he walked, he observed the ramshackle houses around him, without getting involved in the misery of the scene. In the distance, he noticed larger buildings, and so he guessed this was part of the suburban sprawl.

The further he went into the town, the more the poverty and lawlessness were evident.

He rounded a corner to see a group of children playing with toy guns. One young boy was suddenly hit in the side of the face with a projectile. The rest of the boys ran as they thought they were going to get into trouble.

“You all right, mate?” Withers helped the boy to his feet. The boy was about to run, but realised that there was something non-threatening about this man.

“Yeah,” he said shyly. “Sorry, mister. I know we should be at school.”

“What’s your name?” asked Withers.

“Nel,” said the boy. “Hey, do you work with my Dad?”

“What does he do?”

“He fights the bad guys,” said Nel.

Withers grinned. “I’m on his side. What’s his name?”

“Zepth,” said Nel, “I haven’t seen him for a week.”

Withers put his hand on his head. “Don’t worry, son. That day is coming very soon.”

Closer to the main town, Withers was stopped by two law officials, riding what he would describe as a floating chariot. It was open at the top and levitated by anti-gravity.

“What are you doing in this sector?” demanded a black-robed official. He wore a black helmet, covered by a reflective visor.

“I’m a tourist from Sylonia,” said Withers. “I strayed a little from the tour this morning.”

The other official laughed, as if it was the best joke he had heard in a long time. “You’re very funny. Tourism finished in Rylose years ago. A spy, more like it!” He pulled out his gun and motioned Withers to get in the back of the chariot.

Withers checked the Oracle. These men were possessed by Shadow drones in the universal sense. He climbed in the back. At least they would lead him to the real obstacle in this realm.

“What were you doing in Sector C?” demanded the police sergeant. Withers, the police sergeant and the two officials were standing in an interrogation room at the Rylose police station.

Withers remained cool, calm and collected. The sergeant wasn’t a Shadow Lord, either, he decided. He needed a way to get to the thick of the action.

“I’ve got some information from the rebels, that you may be interested in, but I was hoping to pass it on to someone a little higher in authority,” responded Withers calmly.

“I’m high enough in authority for you!” snapped the sergeant, pointing his gun at Withers.

Withers glared at him and the other man lowered the gun.

“It’s important that I see your superior!” snapped Withers, feigning impatience. “Now!”

“How dare you speak to the Sergeant like that!” said one of the officials. He tried to fire at Withers.

Using the Oracle, Withers jammed the electronics in the energy-bolt gun. The others fired but their guns, too, were jammed.

Most guns in Udicia had single energy-bolt firing capabilities, and it took nearly a minute of re-energising before the next energy-bolt could be fired.

The Sergeant charged at Withers, intending to pistol-whip him, but Withers grabbed his arm like a vice. The other two came at Withers again but he kicked an office chair in front of them.

Withers quickly went out the door, pushing aside another officer who got in his way. The officer was bewildered that his weapon didn’t fire.

Outside, Withers jumped in the chariot and studied the controls. The Oracle instantly gave him the knowledge to operate it, and he took off down the road.

“He’s set up the city centre like a fortress,” said Tristan Seymour. “It should be a place for everyone to share and enjoy.”

Seymour wore the simple clothing of rebels, with a very plain light-blue shirt with tattered ends, and trousers that only went half-way down his lower legs. His shoes were slip-ons which hardly covered his ankles.

“Where are you from?” asked Viler. “Fairylend? It’s been like this for many years.” Viler was the rebel commander. When he had first seen Seymour he had almost shot him, but something alerted him to the fact that this was a good man.

Seymour had been in Rylose since the day before and had immediately come into contact with the local freedom fighters. At that moment, they were on a raid to rescue an important comrade who had been captured by the local authorities.

“Why don’t you just kill the Mayor?” queried Seymour. “He and a few others are probably the only ones who are really corrupted.”

“He’s too well-guarded,” replied Viler. “We’ve lost a lot of good men to that Fat Fuhrer.”

Using the Oracle like a global positioning system, Withers had the notion that the Shadow Lord was in the city centre. When he parked the chariot a couple of blocks away, several armed men surrounded him. They pointed their weapons at him and motioned for him to get out of the vehicle.

One of them spoke on a chunky hand-held device. After a short while a few soldiers and Seymour came around the corner.

Seymour ran to Withers and grabbed his hand.

“It’s all right. He’s a friend of mine,” said Seymour.

Viler looked at Withers suspiciously. “Where did you come from? I know, I know. You’re on a special mission from Sylvania.”

“Well, you can do with all the help you can get,” said Withers. He grabbed something from the chariot. All the soldiers’ guns were raised again, pointing at Withers. “Very alert. That’s impressive.” He put a black cloak and helmet on, over the top of his own clothes.

“What are you doing?” asked Viler, surprised. “You’ll be killed!”

“Then I’ll die fighting for the freedom of Udicia, won’t I?” said Withers, patting Viler’s arm. He grinned. “Get ready to back me up.”

Withers drove the chariot straight to the fortress of the town Mayor. At the gate, he bluffed the guard using the Oracle as a false ID.

Withers made his way up the stairs to the entrance of the building. Two guards were posted at the door. One of them gave him a funny look as if he noticed something was odd, but wasn’t sure what it was.

Withers marched along a corridor, past a number of offices, keeping his attention on any heat that came from the Oracle.

“Hey, soldier, what happened to your pants?”

A senior-looking officer was staring down at Withers’ clothing. His tan-coloured pants were out of place beneath the black cloak.

“Sorry, sir, I had to chase some rebels through the mud,” replied Withers apologetically. “By the way, I’ve got this message.” He grabbed the Oracle and held it towards the man. Suddenly, a surge of vibrations shot out of the Oracle, stunning the officer.

He quickly put the unconscious body in a corner and moved on. He rounded a corner to find another two sentries, guarding a main entrance to what appeared to be an important room. He walked straight towards them, but before they could grab their weapons, Withers quickly dispatched them with a surge from the Oracle.

Barging into the room, he immediately saw the fat Shadow Lord lounging on a couch, being hand-fed fruit by two scantily-clad young women.

Fat wasn't the word for this greedy Dark Lord. He was repulsively overweight! He must be the size of a baby elephant, Withers thought.

"Well, if it isn't the saviour of Udicia," said the Fat Fuhrer. Two more guards raced through the door and positioned themselves between the Fuhrer and Withers.

Wither looked around the room, appalled at the amount of wealth in this large room. It looked like the tomb of an ancient Pharaoh of Egypt.

"Saviour?" said Withers, disgusted. He picked up a large gold dinner plate and studied the design on it. "There's enough wealth here to give everyone in this land a very comfortable life!"

The Fat Fuhrer laughed.

Withers was not impressed and threw the gold plate out through the front window like a frisbee. Glass exploded outward from the front window, and the golden discus flew out into the street. That was the signal for Viler's men to start their attack on the compound. There was sudden gunfire outside and then a loud explosion.

"Get him!" snapped the Fat Fuhrer. The two young women screamed and ran from the room, as several guards appeared and prepared to engage Withers.

Seeing that he was largely out-numbered, Withers held the Oracle in front of him with one hand and waited for its response. At that moment, a huge sonic force expelled from the Oracle and directed its destructive energy towards the guards, just as they were about to open fire.

The invisible energy was like a silent explosion, and the guards were picked up and thrown through the air, crashing into the booty that was spread all over the room.

The Fat Fuhrer was furious. He immediately engaged a levitation device from his belt and began to float in the air. His body began to transform. The Fat Fuhrer went from a very overweight human male, that was unbelievably floating in the air, to a grotesque, giant black slug with piercing red eyes. Its huge mouth opened wide, like a great shark about to attack.

“My God,” muttered Withers, raising the Oracle.

He intended to throw it into that very mouth, but a long black tongue shot out and knocked the Oracle aside, making a clang amongst the hoard of treasures.

Withers summoned its return, but as there was so much clutter, the Oracle only made it halfway back before becoming stuck.

The giant slug laughed an inhuman laugh.

The long tongue shot out of the slug’s mouth again, wrapping itself around Wither’s right leg. He tripped backward and began to be dragged towards that gaping mouth.

Withers tried grabbing hold of some of the treasures, but nothing in his reach was heavy enough or anchored strongly enough for him to pull against this tug-of-war to the death.

Just as he thought his was going to end up inside the monster, an invisible beam severed the tongue.

Withers turned to see Seymour and a group of soldiers, including Viler.

Withers dived out of the way as a barrage of energy-bolts pummelled the slug. The beams had little effect, other than making the Shadow Lord very angry. Hundreds of little spikes began to appear all over its skin.

Seymour immediately raised his hand and fired an even bigger burst of invisible energy at the Shadow Lord. Just as the slug was puffing up to fire all his deadly spikes, the energy from Seymour’s ring entered its gaping mouth.

Instead of exploding, the slug imploded. A huge pile of black goo landed on the floor, like a giant bowl of black jelly being spilt.

Withers looked at Seymour. “I’m impressed.”

“So am I,” said Viler. “I’ve never seen such a compact sonic weapon before.” He stared at the ring on the middle finger of Seymour’s right hand. He noticed it had a symbolic flower on it, with ten petals.

“Well, you’re not short of wealth now,” said Withers, quickly changing the subject. “At least you now have plenty of money to re-build your country.”

“The Fat Fuhrer took everything!” said the freed soldier in shocked surprise. “I never realised he had amassed so much wealth.”

“We got our good man back,” said Viler, hugging a man who had just been freed. He turned and also hugged Seymour. “This is Zepth, my top lieutenant.” They exchanged handshakes. “Let’s celebrate with our new friends with a feast tonight!”

“We’ll accept your hospitality,” said Withers, grinning, and turned to Zepth. “Bring your son. He’s been waiting for you.”

“Oh,” said Zepth, “how do you know him?”

“He gets around.”

“This is a lovely banquet,” said Seymour, chewing on a drumstick that he assumed belonged to some sort of fowl. “What type of bird is this?”

“Nema,” said Zepth. “It’s a flightless, domesticated bird which also produces delicious eggs.”

“But you would have heard of them from Sylvania,” commented Viler. He looked at Withers, raising his eyebrows.

“OK,” said Withers, picking up on Viler’s suspicions. “I’ll let you know more about us, but I need your help first.”

“You need to finish off more bad guys!” said Zepth’s young son, Nel.

“You’re sharp, son,” said Withers, “and you’re right. If all goes well, when you grow up there won’t be such a thing as bad guys. You’ll be able to use that same witness state your father used to destroy the Shadows, to lead your world into a new, loving and compassionate society.”

“Mister, what are Shadows?” asked Nel.

“Vampires, I thought,” suggested Viler.

“They are the people who are not touched by the light, the source of truth,” said Withers, “and the further they’re away from that light, the darker they become.”

“For a moment, I could have sworn I saw a monster floating there and not a fat man,” said Viler, “or was I imagining it?”

Well, the Goddess would have made sure the unenlightened never saw a Shadow’s true form, thought Seymour. “Nah, you must have been imagining it.”

Chapter 5 - The Realm of Security

“We live a very simple life here,” said Finn grimly. “That’s the way it has to be for us to survive in Bersia.”

“Otherwise, we may be taken away by the secret police,” said his wife, Katis, in almost a whisper. “It’s happening now more than ever! I went to the market the other day, and so many townsfolk are missing, it’s terrible!” She almost started crying.

Finn reassured his wife, “Now, now, dear. It will be OK. Look, the Goddess has sent us a Guru from Sylvania to help us.”

Braun looked at a picture of a woman on the mantelpiece. She was dressed in traditional clothing, but it must have been from some other realm in Udicia.

He was wearing what looked like a variation on a Japanese Kimono, with similar beautiful fabric. Instead of sandals, he wore slippers, and the belt around his waist was quite wide and stood out in contrast to the gown.

“You have nothing to fear, then. You’re still under Her protection. How many Gurus are there in this province?”

“Few,” said Finn. “Collectivity is getting harder and harder, but stronger, in a way.”

“You must all get together somewhere immediately,” said Braun, “regardless of the risk. It is almost time for Udicia’s judgement.”

“This way,” Finn advised. “We’ll go via the forest. Police patrol most of the main streets.”

Braun, Finn and Katis headed to the forest on the edge of the suburb. As they approached the forest, Braun noticed how eerily quiet it was.

“There’s something missing in this forest,” said Braun, sensing an impending darkness. “Where are the birds and crickets?”

“Well, we can’t go through the streets,” said Finn.

“Let’s keep moving,” suggested Braun, touching the two Gurus on the back at their heart centres. “Any fear that runs through these woods will be offset by our courage.”

They were not long in the forest when they heard an object shoot into the forest canopy and land with a tremendous crash. It sounded like a meteor!

“What was that?” cried Katis, alarmed.

A dark figure approached them at great speed, crashing its way through the forest. Braun saw red eyes, horns on a crude head, and bat-wings. It was a Shadow Angel.

Suddenly, a mandala appeared about the group and they were transported to another location.

Withers had swapped his position with Braun’s and held up the Oracle. He collided with the Angel and was thrown back several metres through the forest, landing at the edge of a large clearing.

Shaken, Withers stood up, summoning his Oracle, which had fallen from his grasp. It came flying back through the forest, and he caught it skilfully.

There was a lot of dark power coming from this creature. The Oracle indicated that it was one of the Shadow Master’s elite Centurions. This Shadow Angel made up one of the three opposing powers of the Guardians of the ways – the opposing power of the left, central and right ways.

At that moment, the Shadow Angel descended from the sky. Its form was eerily superimposed over two of the three moons of Udicia. It crashed into the grassy field, issuing a terrible roar.

Withers charged at it, the Oracle transforming into a sword. He struck the Angel with his sword. The Angel suddenly countered the blow with a long tail that had a barbed end.

"You die tonight, Guardian," it said in a deep, evil voice.

The darkness in its voice send a shiver down Withers' spine. But his heart was flooded with strength, nonetheless. "Catch me if you can."

With that, Wither literally ran. He ran in a clockwise direction around the Shadow Angel, the long grass rooster-tailing behind him. The angel tried to flick him with his tail several times but missed.

"Keep still," roared the angel, frustrated. He began to shoot flames from his mouth, and the grass around them was set instantly ablaze.

After a while the fire started to turn into a fiery tornado. The Shadow angel flew from the vortex, singeing its tail on the way out.

Withers walked through the wall of flame and stood inside the fire. He checked his skin and clothing, but he was unaffected by the searing heat.

The Angel descended again and landed outside the fire tornado. It opened its jaws and began to blow a gale-force wind, in an attempt to destroy Withers in the fire.

The Shadow Angel's breath began to slow the tornado's spin, moving it in the other direction.

Withers reached out with the Oracle, which was instantly set alight. He directed it at the Angel, and the Oracle started raining fire balls on top of it. It roared, flying into the air. It flew above the vortex, as Withers redirected his fire.

The Shadow Angel suddenly came down, being singed on the way down and landing right next to Withers with a crash. It started wrapping its tail around Withers and lifted him up into the air.

“Well, isn’t this cosy?” said Withers.

The Shadow Angel laughed a sinister laugh and began crushing him.

Withers ignored the pain and took control of the fire. Using his attention, he began to narrow the vortex.

“I feel your life draining away, Guardian.”

Withers, close to losing consciousness, watched as the Angel’s wings caught fire.

The Shadow Angel roared in pain and dropped Withers to the ground. Using his will, Withers allowed the fire to cover them. The fire burned the Angel, while Withers was protected.

The Shadow Angel shot into the air, as the fire storm was suddenly extinguished.

Braun, Katis and Finn had been deposited right in front of their planned destination.

“My Goddess, those secret police are falling out of the sky,” said Finn, a little shaken.

“They must have jumped from one of those special chariots, but I’ve never seen them go up that high,” said Katis. “And the way he raced through the forest towards us!”

“How did we get here, anyway?” asked Finn, bewildered.

“I, um,” started Braun. People from the house were standing in the doorway watching them. “I think we’re being welcomed.”

Braun noticed the houses in Bersia were designed similar to houses in Japan. Even the gardens had a Zen look.

“Hello. Please come in,” said a man from the doorway.

“This is Christophe,” said Finn to the man. “Christophe, this is Larn.”

“This is my wife, Rosari,” said Larn, “and my two daughters, Penni and Sari.”

“Hello,” said Braun, walking into a wide-open living area. A large group of people who looked like they were having a get-together turned to smile at him.

Penni, who would have been in her early teens, noted Braun’s clothing.

“Sylonia?” she queried. “Your skin is too white for that country.”

Braun grinned. He couldn’t lie, because these people could read the vibrations through their central nervous systems. He knew that, because many Gurus on Earth could in their transformation time.

“Well, I must be an alien,” replied Braun.

“This must be true,” said Penni.

“Well, Penni, it’s good to see the future of Udicia,” replied Braun, looking at all the enlightened people around him again, “in amongst so much darkness.”

“What’s that ring on your right finger?” she asked, grabbing his hand.

“You don’t miss much, do you?”

“It’s the twelve-petalled centre of the heart,” she said. “The Great Goddess sometimes wore rings like this on her fingers and toes in our ceremonies, but normally Gurus don’t.” She touched the ring and enjoyed the cool breeze around her. “There are tremendous vibrations coming from it!”

“Well, it’s something that She must have touched,” said Braun, speaking as if it wasn’t anything special.

“Well, Penni,” said Larn, “I think you’ve interrogated your uncle enough.”

“No, she’s fine,” said Braun, beginning to realise who Penni might be, “but I will go and meet the others. Perhaps we can talk a little later, Penni.”

“Ice!” said Penni. “Ice” was the teenage equivalent of “cool” or “awesome” on Bersia.

Braun spent some time walking around meeting other people.

Soon, everyone had gathered in front of an altar and started singing beautiful songs. The altar was adorned with colourful fabrics, burning candles and fragrant flowers. The Goddess’s photograph was prominently placed in the centre of the altar.

Later, everyone sat around a large table eating a delicious banquet.

Braun noticed movement outside and jumped a little when he saw Withers cross-legged on the lawn out the front. He excused himself.

“Captain, good to see you,” said Braun, shaking Wither’s hand. “Thanks for getting us out of the way of that monster.”

“That’s my job,” said Withers, “and I’ve noticed you’re doing your job very well.”

“Thanks,” said Braun, “but you know we’re just the instruments of the Goddess.”

“I’m learning that fact more and more,” replied Withers.

“What are you learning, Uncle?” said a young female voice.

“Penni!” Braun exclaimed.

“Hello, young lady,” said Withers, noticing the vibrations from the Oracle on her arrival. “Sit down.”

Braun gave Withers a funny look when he lay the Oracle in Penni’s hand.

“Wow!” she said. “I can see everything with this.”

After a while, Withers took the Oracle back. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” she said, looking at the Oracle wistfully.

“Your time will come soon,” said Withers, “but at the moment, you must use your powers to keep everyone safe and together. You’re the most dynamic Guru, not only in this country but in the whole of Udicia!”

Withers reached into one of his pockets and handed a small pendant to Penni.

“It looks like yours,” she said excitedly.

“If something happens to me or my Oracle, this will help you find it,” said Withers.

Penni stared long and hard at the pendant. “I understand, Uncle.”

Chapter 6 - The Realm of Collectivity

Withers entered the Realm of Collectivity in amongst a large crowd of people. A man was giving a speech in the fashion of an American Presidential oration.

Hot vibrations emitted from the Oracle when he looked at the “President”. He was a Shadow Lord. Centurions, the “Vice-President” and the “Secretary” stood behind him. Unlike the suit-and-tie custom of Earth, Udicians wore high collars with neck bands in their chosen colours.

“Varlia is a proud unified nation, seen as world leaders because of our ideals, which have become the ideals of many other nations. With our current financial downturn, we have taken a more hands-on approach to world issues. If there’s trouble abroad, we are there to pull them out.”

Withers realised that this Shadow Lord was speaking in a way that could have fooled him if he didn’t have the Oracle.

“You know about the Sylonian threat. Recently, the Sylonians have made coordinated attacks on every nation in Udicia. They’ve killed many world leaders in attempts to destabilise the global economy.”

The crowd was shocked. The President remained silent while they absorbed the news.

“Should we stand by and watch while these aggressors take away our way of life?”

He was silent again. Withers saw that the crowd was being swayed by this misconception.

“No, we will not! We won’t! I, Nep Zelv, the leader of this great nation, cannot stand by and do nothing. Neither can the Tyronian Empire, for that matter.

That’s why this government and our allies, on this day, have decided...”

Suddenly, for a spit second a large mandala appeared behind the President. Then he vanished.

“What do you mean, you didn’t see anyone take the President?” snapped Meln over a chunky hand-held radio. “You were right behind him! I don’t believe this!”

Meln, aged thirty-nine Udician years, which were a little shorter than Earth’s, was originally from Sylonia, before he was assigned to Varlia. He wore a dark cloak, bell-shaped cuffs and long boots over his trousers. A holstered energy-bolt pistol protruded from his right hip.

“I’m telling you, he just vanished, sir,” said Remm.

Remm, thirty-three, wore a tan shirt with a brown vest and long dark-brown boots halfway to his knees and carried an energy-bolt pistol inside his vest.

“Sir, sir!” crackled a voice over the comm-link. “We’ve spotted the President in bushland near the Delf precinct.”

The voice belonged to Cal. Twenty-nine years of age, he wore a white shirt with a few frills, black trousers with long boots to his knees and carried a large energy-bolt rifle over his shoulder.

“How’s that possible?” Meln asked. “You’re three kilometres away. He only went missing a couple of minutes ago.”

“Well, he’s here standing on a chariot alongside the suspect.”

“You won’t get away with this!” raged the President. “I’ll see you rot in prison, along with all the other terrorists we’ve brought to justice!”

Withers could see this Shadow Lord was blinded to his own being. He was just a puppet of the Shadow Master.

“Sit down,” ordered Withers, watching the approaching chariots.

“They’ll kill you on sight!” said the President. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Withers ignored him. A sniper attempted to fire at Withers, but Withers neutralised the weapon with his attention. Other officers also tried, but with the same result.

Frustrated, the President roared, "Kill him!"

At that moment a large mandala appeared. So Withers slipped the chariot, along with the stunned President, through the mandala.

Meln stared at the place where Withers and the President had disappeared. So it was true: the President did vanish before Agent Remm's eyes.

"I told you, sir," said Remm, as if he'd read his mind.

"Quick! Follow them through," ordered Meln. "This portal, or whatever it is, may still be active."

Remm signalled for the other agents to follow the commander's chariot. They all went through, and the countryside transformed before their eyes.

"Commander," said Cal over the radio, "I recognise this place from a mission a few years ago. This is Tyrone."

Jere Bourne was at the speech, too, and for a moment he recognised the man who had taken the Varlian President. It was Captain Withers.

Bourne was wearing the Western style clothing of the Varlians, with long leather boots over his trousers, a frilly light-green shirt with bell-shaped cuffs, and a vest.

He knew the Keepers were to make contact with the local Gurus and give them strength during these difficult times. He also knew from the knowledge of his sixteen-petalled ring that he had the powers to displace a Shadow Lord – or his Centurion, for that matter.

Bourne wasn't one to miss out on an opportunity. He couldn't be. He was the chief engineer from the Centauri, and it had been a very gruelling task to keep that baby flying through space.

So, when he saw a shrewd Vice-President taking advantage of the disappearance of his leader, by reassuringly shaking the hands of the people, Bourne made sure he was in the position to receive it. The second the Vice President touched Bourne's right hand, the Vice-President completely vanished!

"So what now?" the President asked. "Do you plan to deliver my dead body to the Tyronian dictator, Gylith?"

They were approaching the Tyronian Imperial Palace. Withers had stopped the chariot and was looking at it with a poker face.

"I thought of that," said Withers, "but I've decided to let you go."

"Let me go?" said the President baffled. He immediately jumped from the chariot and ran towards the palace gates. "Guards! Guards! Shoot this terrorist!"

Withers shook his head. The President's voice was the only real threat to this transformation; he was a coward.

Withers opened a mandala and stepped through. It was time he spoke to the Sylonians.

Chapter 7 - The Realm of Forgiveness

Nestled in a picturesque valley, the Sylonian city of Lincier was like no other place in Udicia. With an abundance of greenery, rolling hills and a vast diversity of wildlife, it was evident that no Shadow cast his rule here. Even the people of these lands seemed to be in tune with the beautiful nature around. It was as if the transformation had already well and truly begun.

There was only one other realm that shared this. That was Delcia, in the centre of the Realm of Innocence.

Yuri Gusev thought he was the luckiest Realm Keeper in this transformation. He had been there for almost a day and had not met one Shadow Lord. He was aware of the powers of the ring and the way it exposed any Shadow within his realm, but as yet he hadn't found any pockets of negativity.

Gusev was wearing a long grey robe fastened at the neck, light-brown trousers, a white shirt and short stocky boots.

Presently, he sat at a table on a boardwalk, sipping a brew that closely resembled coffee. The boardwalk ran along the edge of a river that flowed through the centre of the city. He watched as boat-shaped chariots made their way along the river, the people on board pleasantly chatting and enjoying the scene around them.

Suddenly a mandala appeared at the opposite end of his table. Withers looked at him with a grin.

“Captain,” exclaimed Gusev, dropping his mug on the table. “What a surprise!”

“Number One,” said Withers, “in the number one realm.”

“Well,” said Gusev, “someone has to sit back and smell the flowers.”

“Very good,” said Withers. “It's good to see there's actually a little piece of Earth here.”

“Oh,” said Gusev, “the rest of the place isn't so friendly.”

“But I still found some good people,” replied Withers, sniffing the inviting aroma. “Is that coffee?”

“It's similar. The ring tells me it has been ground from a bean,” replied Gusev.

“There are so many interesting things in this city.”

“I take it you haven't found any Shadow Lords here,” said Withers. “We do have a way of flushing them out, remember.”

“I've communicated a lot by means of the ring,” said Gusev, motioning to his right-hand ring finger, which had a symbolic picture of a “third eye”. “There's a potential Shadow Lord here, and he's in the army. He's a General.”

“I wonder how he's been overlooked by the red eyes of the Shadow Master,” mused said Withers.

“As he's not as yet a Shadow, we can't really move him along the way,” advised Gusev. “We can only keep him in our attention.”

“But that won’t stop me from paying him a visit,” said Withers, “I’ll get him to work before Gylith does.”

Withers entered a Sylonian army compound and was immediately surrounded by a group of soldiers. In the split-second of sensing danger, he threw the Oracle-discus as one of the soldiers was about to fire upon him. The Oracle sailed in a wide arc, knocking the crossbows from the hands of all the soldiers. When it returned, Withers held it up ready.

A figure of authority approached Withers.

“So you must be one of the vigilantes who have been getting around the world causing havoc,” said Major Knove. He face was a poker face, but Withers could tell he had a few cards up his sleeve.

“I’m happy that my status has been upgraded from terrorist,” said Withers, also not betraying any emotion.

From a long range, a sniper using a high-powered stun-rifle tried to fire at Withers. Withers neutralised the weapon at the moment the trigger was being depressed.

Suddenly, three chariots appeared, hovering above Withers and the Major. The soldiers standing on them lifted their weapons and were about to fire, when Withers put his attention on them, causing them to collide with each other. The soldiers fell back into the chariots, crossbows clattering to the ground. One soldier fell over the side of a chariot. So Withers used the vibrations from the Oracle to soften his fall.

The Major suddenly looked a little uneasy. Soldiers on the ground were holding up their weapons, but weren't sure whether they worked anymore or whether Withers was a friend or a foe.

“We are wasting time!” snapped Withers, feigning anger. “The Tyronians are about to invade!”

A more senior officer walked out of the Command Centre and looked at the awkward scene. "OK. You have our attention," said General Nas. "Step into my office."

From the Oracle, Withers knew that this was the future Shadow Lord.

Nas stood behind his desk, glaring at Withers. "I've been in the military for a very long time and seen some unexplained things, but never anyone who could single-handedly hold off a platoon of professional soldiers."

"We could sit here all day and talk about me, but that's not important," said Withers. "Let's discuss the Tyronian invasion."

"Invasion, eh?" said Nas. "We have no intelligence about any such invasion. Why the hell would the Tyronians want to invade Sylonia?"

"Well, I'm giving you intelligence, General. Gylith has amassed a large army. He could be here within hours!" snapped Withers.

"Hours?" mocked Nas. "It would take weeks, possibly months, for Tyrone to stage this ludicrous proposal."

"What sort of proof do I need to convince you?" started Withers.

"Listen here, mister!" snapped the General. "If you were the Chancellor of Sylonia, I would be listening, but who the hell are you?"

Withers' eyes lit up. "I will show you how he'll get here in hours." He opened a huge mandala on the floor of the office and looked down at it. "Through one of these."

Nas's eyes fell on the scene below. "Where's this?" He was shocked by the scene in front of him.

"Tyrone. That's the invasion force."

"What sort of trick is this?" asked Nas, leaning over the mandala to get a better look. Withers came around behind the General and knocked him in. Withers followed.

Withers and the shaken General landed in Tyrone. They watched as thousands and thousands of angry Tyronians massed on chariots around the palace.

"Do you want to go over there and see if they're real?" Withers asked. He, too, had been here many years ago as a special forces soldier.

"Our intelligence was watching Varlia. We thought Tyrone was too busy border-fighting with the Jentinians."

"The Jentinians were assimilated. They're part of Gylith's empire now. You're their only real threat."

"I don't understand," said the General.

"Yes, I understand your confusion. There's a bigger picture." Withers pulled the General back into Sylonia.

The General stood behind his desk and was quiet for a long time. "All right, I'll send an invasion force to counter theirs. We may have several hundred, but nowhere near the army that dictator has amassed."

"Leave that to me," said Withers. "Just get your men ready."

A mandala appeared and Withers stepped through.

Chapter 8 - The Great Juncture

“So, you’re in Tyrone. You were supposed to send an army to Sylonia!” snapped the Tyronian Overlord angrily.

His name was Gylith, and he was the Master of all the Shadows in Udicia. His hair was long and black, his face cruel and sinister, and he wore a long black robe that almost touched the ground. Under the robe he wore the black, tight-fitting uniform of the Shadows from the Galactic Empire. He also held a staff that sported a dark glowing orb.

The President composed himself, wondering who the hell this man thought he was, getting angry at him. “How dare you talk to me like that!” He tried to sound angry, after all that happened with that Sylonian agent. “That is my damn country and my people! I’ll sort out my affairs! The only thing we’ve got to discuss is getting me back home!”

Enraged, Gylith lifted his staff. A dark energy flowed out. It was turning in an anti-clockwise direction, bringing the President to his knees. “Bow to me! Bow to your Master!”

“What the...” started the President, shocked. He stared at his hands. They were transforming. He was turning black.

‘You see,’ sneered Gylith, “it’s not all that it seems. I am your Master, and you are another one of my pathetic Lords that failed to hold their posts!”

The President stared into a mirror on an adjacent wall and saw his black form and piercing red eyes.

“Now I no longer have any use for you,” said Gylith holding up his staff. Suddenly, a dark power radiated from his staff again, and the President’s Shadow form was being sucked towards it.

“No, don’t! No!” screamed the President. His black shadowy body was being sucked into the staff like a big vacuum cleaner. After a short moment he was gone.

“Now that’s better,” said Gylith rubbing his body. “Now I can keep an eye on you.”

Agents Meln and Remm, who had made it into the court-yard of Gylith’s palace, had seen the whole thing.

“My God!” said Remm. “What the hell are they?”

“I don’t know,” said Meln, looking around for his men who were hiding in the courtyard, “but there’s been a change of plan. Everyone, pull out! I repeat, pull out! The President has been,” he paused looking at Remm, still in disbelief at what they had seen, “terminated!”

Just as they were about escape the way they had come, a man stood in their path.

“This way,” urged Withers, and suddenly they were out in the forest a few kilometres away.

Meln held his energy-bolt weapon up at Withers. “Who are you?”

Although the other agents had their weapons trained on him, they were a little edgy as they knew what Withers was capable of.

“Daniel Withers,” replied Withers, eyeing all the energy weapons, “and you can put those down.”

Meln motioned for everyone to put their weapons away, although he still held his. “All right, but start talking.”

“I will answer all your questions, when you put that away!” snapped Withers.

Meln flinched, remembering that Withers had the ability to neutralise their weapons anyway. Reluctantly, he holstered his gun.

“You’re not from Sylvania, are you?” demanded Meln.

“No, I’m from Earth,” Withers replied.

“Earth? Where the hell is that?” asked Remm.

“On the contrary, Agent Remm, I think Udicia is in hell at this point,” said Withers. “I’m here to help change that. Where I’m from is not important at the moment. What is important is where you presently are.”

“All right,” said Meln. “So you’re a good alien from Earth, here to seek out and destroy these dark aliens that have...”

“They’re not aliens,” corrected Withers. “These Shadows, as we call them, were born into your world, just as you were.”

“We saw something in there,” said Remm.

“Oh,” said Withers, “that’s just a glimpse of the next part of your evolution – a time when the Shadows will not be Shadows to you. The only reason you saw them, is because you have tuned in to my vibrations.”

“Vibrations?” queried Meln, puzzled.

“It’s just a higher level of awareness, which normally manifests as heat, if things aren’t correct.”

“OK,” said Meln, “let’s say we believe you about our former President – vibrations or not. What now?”

“I need your help to defeat the Tyronians,” said Withers. “Tyron is the Great Juncture – the gate, if you like – to a new peaceful life for Udicia. If we win.” He paused, giving the Varlian agents a serious look. “If we lose, more darkness will reign over this world, and ultimately the Shadows will be able to re-conquer planets they have lost, including Earth.”

“You’re a Sylonian spy!” said General Veldore accusingly, glaring at Dana Kandor. “So don’t pretend you’re some local peasant. I’m not a fool.”

She knew this realm. Tyron was in a bad state of affairs. It was completely under the control of the Shadows, very much like the Middle East one hundred years ago on Earth.

The few Gurus she had found were only here from neighbouring countries, trying to make as little impact on the situation as they could. It took a long time for the Tyronian spies to find her.

Veldore was impatient. He could have easily killed her.

Kandor wore a thin tiara around her hair. It was held up in a bun and sat right in the middle of her forehead. There was a symbolic picture on the talisman of a “third eye”, which had started vibrating earlier this morning and was cleverly distinguishing itself, too! Her clothing was typical Tyronian dress for women: high-heeled black boots, tight-fitting dark pants and a cloak.

If she kept his cool and played along a bit, perhaps she could stay alive long enough to be rescued by the Captain.

“Well?” Veldore would have killed anyone in his army who didn’t respond immediately.

“You’re correct,” replied Kandor. “I’m a spy.” Kandor had a feeling this man wasn’t going to take very long to find the real reason she was here.

“Oh, so it talks!” snapped Veldore. He could have easily have threatened to cut her throat open, but that had already been tried by a few of his soldiers. Kandor sported a large bruise around her right eye, but appeared indifferent to the threats. Veldore paced around Kandor, holding the handle of his sword. “Tell me about this terrorist plot of yours. Your agents have been reported to have killed many of our operatives.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Kandor.

“You lie!” snapped Veldore. “He had pulled his sword and held it at Kandor’s neck.

Kandor remained calm and took herself to a peaceful place. There was a surge of vibrations from the talisman, and she could feel a cool power around her forehead.

Veldore seemed to notice something in Kandor’s nature that he was unaccustomed to – fearlessness.

“Speak to me!” roared Veldore furiously. He raised his sword.

At that moment, the Tyronian Overlord, Gylith, came into the room. Veldore stiffened in apprehension. Kandor felt a tremendous surge of heat coming from her forehead, signifying that this person radiated much more negativity than all the Lords she had encountered so far.

“Well, well, well,” murmured Gylith, “you’re not a Sylonian spy, are you?”

“She said she was, Sire,” said the General.

“You fool!” snapped Gylith. “She’s a much more dangerous enemy than that.” The Overlord raised his staff and directed it towards Kandor. The top of the staff encased

a dark, crude-looking orb, which emanated a powerful dark energy. Kandor knew she could be turned into a Shadow with this power. Gylith's intention was to kill Kandor immediately, but then he had another thought. Unknown to Gylith, Arden was working behind the scenes to save Kandor. "Throw this Keeper into the arena. My pet is very hungry. This will give the army a bit of entertainment before they leave for Sylvania!"

Kandor stood in the middle of a huge arena, watching the crowd of angry Tyronians from behind a high wire fence. They shouted profanities, threw food and cheered in anticipation of the coming event.

She noticed a few meagre objects that were left around the arena for a person to climb on or hide behind, but not much else. Looking further afield, she could see some bones scattered here and there. Apparently, this creature ate almost everything.

A huge gate started opening on the far side of the arena, and the crowd roared in excitement. Kandor couldn't see anything at first, as it was quite dark beyond the gate.

Suddenly, a huge dark, four-legged beast shot out of the gate and headed straight towards her. It was a dog the size of an elephant, but its head looked like a lion's.

The crowd's excitement went up a higher octave, as Kandor ducked behind a large boulder. The beast overshot and skidded to a halt.

It turned and roared savagely at Kandor, drool dripping from the sides of its muzzle.

She felt powerful vibrations coming from the talisman. Her whole forehead was very cool and she directed her attention towards the beast. A surge of invisible power shot out of her face and struck the beast. It was thrown off its feet, becoming airborne, before landing on its back.

Kandor walked towards the beast as the crowd went completely wild. Someone fired an energy-bolt weapon that hit quite close to her. She ignored it and walked gently towards the beast, listening to its loud breathing.

Subtle knowledge through the talisman told her that this beast was not naturally aggressive. In fact, now that she had blasted it with vibrations, it was no more a threat than the family dog.

A huge tongue shot out of the giant dog's mouth and licked her arm.

"Hey, boy. You wanna get out of this place?"

The Lion-dog lifted its whole head in excitement as another white bolt of energy fire hit the ground close by. The Lion-dog growled in the direction of the blast.

The crowd was frantic now.

The Lion-dog got to its feet, and Kandor started climbing up its fur to position herself on its neck.

Suddenly, from above Withers sailed down to the ground, landing rather roughly on his feet.

"You OK?"

"Can't you see I have everything under control, sir?" asked Kandor.

"Well, next time I'll just wait outside," said Withers with a grin. He eyed the Lion-dog. "Nice pet you got there."

A barrage of energy bolts was being fired at them now, but they were falling short. His attention in overload, Withers jammed all the energy weapons that he could. Some shots were still getting through, and these he deflected with his Oracle-formed shield.

“That way,” said Withers, looking towards the gate. He jumped up on the back of Kandor’s steed, jamming and deflecting any fire still coming their way.

The Lion-dog raced towards the gate, and the pair had to really hold on. It was fast! They flew out of the gate, just as it was beginning to close.

By this time, Withers sword had re-formed from the Oracle. He was taking care of the soldiers who came too close, while Kandor fired some vibrations, which had started coming out of her hands.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Withers, frantically jamming and deflecting more fire. He imagined a huge bubble of energy around them.

Now, the firing was being absorbed before the beams came anywhere near them.

“That thing amazes me more every time,” commented Kandor.

“You would be surprised how much power you yourself are capable of,” replied Withers.

A huge blast of dark energy hit them, knocking them off the dog’s back.

Gylith and two of his Elite Centurions were approaching them. Withers, Kandor and the Lion-dog lay stunned on the ground.

Gylith held up his staff and pointed it at Kandor. Suddenly, a big wave of dark energy shot out of the end of the staff, spiralling in an anti-clockwise direction. It struck Kandor directly on the forehead, and she moaned and fell still.

Withers groped for the Oracle.

“I should have killed you before!” snarled Gylith at Kandor. He switched his stare to Withers. “Once I’ve finished off your Realm Keeper, your mission here will be over,

Guardian.”

He was about to fire another burst, but the Oracle shot out of Withers hand and struck the side of the staff, causing the energy burst to miss.

Gylith turned on Withers, enraged, and fired at him. Withers held the Oracle up in defence, as it increased in size. The dark energy struck the Oracle-shield, and Withers struggled to stay on his feet.

“Perhaps I'll destroy you first,” roared Gylith, directing even more negativity towards Withers.

Withers soon realised that Gylith possessed powers beyond any Shadow Lord or Angel that he'd encountered so far. He could feel a terrible darkness bearing down on him; if he didn't get out of it soon, he would be consumed.

“This will be easier than I thought,” jeered Gylith, watching Withers crumble before him.

Suddenly, the Lion-dog dived in Gylith's direction, forcing him to take his attention away from Withers. He fired at the dog, which landed dead at his feet.

In the meantime, Withers had positioned himself in front of Kandor, thinking he would sacrifice his life for the Keeper's. This time, instead of focusing on any form of exchange, his attention went inwards.

“You must become those subtle powers within,” Arden whispered to him.

That's it! he thought. Tyrone was the Realm of the Great Juncture. All he needed to do was manifest the correct powers for it. He held the Oracle up in front of his forehead.

“Time to die, Guardian,” said Gylith, pointing his staff at Withers.

Gylith fired at Withers again, and he crumbled to the ground. A darkness went over him, and he could feel his life leaving his body.

At that moment, the nearest gate exploded open, and five figures in chariots came charging towards Gylith and his Centurions.

There were fierce exchanges in fire between the Agents and the rest of Gylith's soldiers.

Meln saw Withers' body just as it disappeared with a flash of a mandala. He directed his chariot in Kandor's direction.

While Gylith and the others were distracted, Meln pulled the groggy Kandor to her feet and started loading her onto the chariot.

Meln was about to fire at Gylith and his Centurions, but the vision of him killing the President returned. He was a Dark man. He would leave him to Withers when he came back.

Without warning, Meln lifted his energy-bolt weapon and fired a bolt at a watch-tower that was positioned close to the perimeter fence. It started to fall slowly and then crashed to the ground, creating a huge plume of dust.

When all the dust had settled the Agents, the Keeper and the Guardian were gone, and the Tyronian army were standing there stunned.

Gylith turned to one of his closest Centurions.

"Prepare to invade Sylvania!"

"We need to get somewhere safe," said Meln. "This woman's health is deteriorating." Gylith's dark powers had really taken hold.

They had been riding the chariots across open country-side all day. It was lush and green, with many trees and similar wildlife to Earth. Presently, they went up a sharp incline, which gave them all a grand view.

“Nice!” said Remm. “Look.” He was pointing to a mountain range with a valley in between.

Meln studied the mountains. “That must be the Great Juncture.”

“Yes, that’s the gate to a new life on Udicia,” said Remm. “Beyond there is Utopia.”

Suddenly a mandala enveloped Kandor and she vanished!

Chapter 9 - Beyond the Great Juncture

Withers slowly saw the world coming back into focus. He strained to see the person who was looking down at him expectantly. Then, he finally took in the details of the scene around him.

“Daniel,” said Arden, “good to see you’re back in the world of the living.”

“Arden?” asked Withers. He noticed the man was no older than his mother had described him to be, fifty years ago.

“Yes,” replied Arden.

“What happened?” asked Withers.

“Gylith almost killed you,” said Arden, but we got you out of there in time. “We’ve got Dana here, too.”

Withers looked at Kandor, sleeping in the bed beside him, feeling truly blessed that they had such a divine force watching over them.

“At this time, at this juncture you're all too important for us to lose.”

Withers stared at Arden, realising the truth. Arden wasn’t a Caldon agent. He wasn’t a Guardian Coordinator. It was all just a guise. Arden had been an incarnation all along!

Arden opened his hands, palms up. Seven golden stars shot out and penetrated Withers’ body where the seven centres resided.

Withers could suddenly see everything. He could see all the galaxies swirling around Arden's body, as if he was one great universe. He could also see what was going on in space, as well as the plans Gylith had on the ground.

Withers suddenly vomited, overwhelmed by the capacity of these new powers.

“For the first time in the history of the Guardians, you will be the first human to be given temporary power and knowledge of an incarnation,” said Arden. “You are now equipped to challenge the Shadow Master.”

Withers walked over to the bridge of the Caldon cruiser. He stared out at the huge armada of Shadow ships, poised for a potential breach in the realms.

“I’m ready,” said Withers, as the Shadow ships started firing on the Caldon cruisers.

He raised the Oracle and bowed at Arden in respect.

As Withers glanced briefly at the sleeping Kandor, a huge mandala appeared around him and he was gone.

Gylith’s army assembled at the foot of valley between the Thal mountain range, at the Great Juncture. This would be the staging point to his invasion of the realms. Completely unaware of what Gylith was about to do, his army prepared for potential weeks of journey to the border of Sylonia.

Gylith signalled for his army to come to a halt. He held up his staff and started rotating it in an anti-clockwise direction towards the Great Juncture. Immediately, a wide black vortex started forming, appearing to draw the army towards it.

Gylith waved his invasion force forward. They had not moved very far when the vortex slowly stopped spinning. Angry, he motioned the army to halt. The vortex changed colour this time. Blackness turned to whiteness, a huge mandala appeared and the rotation started in a clockwise direction.

Suddenly, a lone soldier on a chariot came through. Gylith recognised him as General Nas. He raised his staff as a signal to destroy him, but hesitated as the rest of Nas's army started emerging through the white spinning vortex. Gylith and the General met in the middle of the opposing forces.

"My dear General, I think you're greatly out-numbered. Maybe you'd like to consider a surrender," offered Gylith, motioning to his massive army. Gylith had over five thousand soldiers, while Nas had only five hundred.

"You may have a larger army," replied General Nas fearlessly, "but every Sylonian soldier is a professional – not some brainwashed zombie."

The General was true to his word. Two hundred of his soldiers were trained marksmen and sported Stinger bows, sophisticated cross-bows that fired multiple energy bolts. A good marksman could kill up to six enemy at a time, with one volley of bolts.

Outraged at this remark, Gylith raised his staff.

"What are you going to do?" snapped Nas. Beat me with that stick?" Nas pulled a large energy pistol from his uniform. This weapon was a Sylonian proto-type, the first semi-automatic energy weapon made in Udicia. Nas was oblivious to the fact of how deadly his opponent was.

A dark, spinning energy shot out of Gylith's staff and hit the General, who was consumed. He cried out as his body was transformed into a Shadow.

Withers opened a mandala several metres from the ground as he descended from space. With his robe flailing out behind him, he flew through the air like Superman. He landed on the ground in the middle of Gylith's soldiers. The force of the landing caused a huge explosion that threw hundreds of Tyronian soldiers into the air.

When the dust cleared, Withers stood in a large crater, his sword held high. Three other Guardians suddenly appeared behind him via separate mandalas, their swords also held high ready for Gylith's wrath.

In a horse-shoe shape behind the Sylonian army, five huge mandalas appeared, one after the other: the Lemarians, Alvernians, Rylosians, Bersians and Varlians.

Withers eyed the armies of his six realms, knowing there were about two thousand soldiers. He wasn't concerned about the shortfall; the quality of the people was more important.

He could see Ulef, Sef, Viler, Remm, Cal and Meln preparing their battalions for battle.

Gylith glared at the scene. Not only had he planned to crush the Sylonian army in their realm; he also wanted to cause as much collateral damage there as possible. Then he and his army would storm through the remaining pathetic realms, re-establishing his hold on his dominions. His plan was to ally himself with Varlia, too. That would have doubled his force!

Instead, the Guardians had played their tricks, and he had lost the potential alliance with Varlia. Now, his army had to face not only Varlia, but all the rebels of Udicia. This, without the pleasure of killing the innocents!

He thought of all the rebels being here at the same time. Yes, they're all here. Let's finish them all off once and for all! He motioned for his Generals to commence the attack.

When the Tyronians led the charge, the Sylonian marksmen didn't waste any time from the vantage points of their sleek-styled chariots. A wide volley of energy bolts immediately rained down on the first wave of the army.

Once again, Agent Meln witnessed the transformation of a normal human being into a Shadow – General Nas. Nas had assumed his position even more arrogantly than his original human form, ready to turn on the very soldiers he helped to inspire. The Shadow Lord was now barking orders at some of Gylith's officers.

“Remm,” called Meln, over his chunky hand-held radio, “prepare to take out the big man with the red eyes and the General's hat.” Meln thought he looked a little comical, like someone out of a funny Gothic movie, but he knew very well how deadly this Shadow was. Gylith was very good at selecting ruthless Lords.

“Red eyes, hat. Oh, got ya!” replied Remm. “Was that Nas?”

“Yes,” said Meln, “you lure him out. I'll engage...”

“Will back you guys up,” crackled Cal over the radio.

“Thanks, Cal,” replied Remm, “I'm going in.”

Gylith was standing on a rise with three of his Elite Centurions. He lifted his staff and started turning it in an anti-clockwise direction. A crude dark portal formed in front of him and began turning like an angry storm. Six Shadow dogs shot out of the centre and made their way aggressively towards the Guardians.

The Guardians stood their ground as the Shadow-dogs pounced. Each Guardian's swing of his sword was a perfect horseshoe shape, which sliced through each Shadow dog.

Gylith was so enraged that his form started changing from his usual human appearance into a huge dragon, with large red piercing eyes.

Two huge wings formed, which split into three on each side. On the tip of each winglet, crude heads protruded with their own Shadow identities.

His three Elite Centurions transformed into Shadow Angels, flew into the air and landed with a crash, roaring at their Guardian adversaries.

With Cal covering him from potential attacks, Remm attracted the General's attention by firing a volley of shots at and around his chariot. A few of his newly adopted officers made their way over to Remm's position on several chariots.

From even further afield, Cal, using a high-powered sniper rifle, took out two of Nas's officers before coming under fire himself.

Remm took another one out much the same way, as Meln flew in front of Nas on his chariot with an energy pistol.

“Agent Meln,” said Nas, firing his deadly proto-type pistol. Meln tilted his chariot wildly to avoid being hit, as Nas's pistol blew a large hole in the side of his chariot. This sent it spinning, as the shot destroyed one of the levitation devices. Meln fell to the ground, the chariot spinning along its edge and collecting a group of Tyronian soldiers.

Withers spotted a quick way up to where Gylith was transforming. He flew into the air and landed on the closest enemy chariot, knocking the soldiers to the ground. He quickly started jumping from one chariot to the next, swiping any soldier that got in his way. He disengaged any fire that was directed his way.

Nas loomed above Meln on his chariot, pointing his gun.

“I remember you,” snarled Nas, “the double-agent.”

“You got that right,” snapped Meln, “you traitor!”

Meln's job had been to send intelligence back to Sylvania about a potential alliance between the Tyronian and Varlian governments. He eventually got hooked up with the Varlian secret service to get close to the President. He didn't know about Shadow Lords then. He wished he had known; he would have popped off the President himself, instead of protecting him.

Nas raised his proto-type pistol and began squeezing the trigger. “Thanks for all that useful information. It's been forwarded to the Master.”

At that moment, Nas's hat flew off, and a large piece from the side of his face went missing. Instead of blood, black goo splattered around his chariot. Cal's shot had reached its mark.

Meln watched in fascinated horror as the side of Nas's face reformed itself. Nas laughed an evil laugh.

The Rylosian Commander, Viler, came out of the battle and rammed Nas's chariot. Nas fell to the ground, his gun flying.

Meln grabbed Nas's gun and fired the fancy weapon as the General got back on his feet. A large hole appeared at the top of his chest, but immediately started closing over again.

Nas swiped at the gun in Meln's hand and it sailed away. “I'll crush you with my bare hands.” He grabbed Meln by the throat and lifted him up in the air.

Suddenly, Meln heard a loud swooshing sound. A Shadow Angel collided with Nas and both Shadows flew off into the distance.

A Guardian landed with a thud next to him. It was Yarmel, who protected the Realm of Collectivity.

Meln gave Yarmel bewildered look, too stunned to say anything.

When Withers finally made it to the rise, the Gylith-Dragon roared at him. All six of the dragon's winglets speared their way towards him, like angry snakes. Shadow heads roared at him from the ends of winglets, and each head started snapping at different parts of Withers' body. One managed to rip at his pants, but couldn't get its teeth into him.

Withers raised his sword and started swinging it in a very precise and deadly fashion. The heads flew through the air and a few rolled down the hill. The winglets retracted headless, but immediately began re-spawning.

The heads at the ends of the winglets represented Gylith's rule over the six realms, as his three Shadow Angels represented his rule over the three ways.

Withers realised it would take more than chopping off those six heads to bring Gylith down.

They came at him again. This time the winglets transformed into tentacles and bound him up. His sword fell to the ground as each head roared at him at face level. He noticed that each one carried the faces of all the lords who were displaced by the Keepers in the right way.

He put his attention on the Oracle, which transformed itself into a cutting disk. It flew in front of his face, slicing off all the heads. The tentacles released him, and he ran between the Gylith-Dragon's legs. The Gylith-Dragon tried to snap at him, but Withers managed get underneath the monster.

He directed the Oracle at the belly of the beast. There was a tremendous surge of energy, which threw the Gylith-Dragon into the air.

There was an explosion as the Shadow monster hit the earth. This killed many Tyronian soldiers who were overwhelming Ulef's, Sef's and Viler's companies.

Withers super-jumped down, aiming his sword at Gylith's black heart. But, as he was about to make his deadly plunge, tentacles bound him and threw him into the air. He landed at the entrance of the valley – the Great Juncture.

The fight between the Guardians and Shadow Angels still raged. The Guardians were finding their adversaries particularly hard to destroy, but they had devised a clever work-around. Each time they had the advantage, they began throwing the Angels like mortars into any new waves of Tyronian advancements.

Withers crawled out of the crater he'd made with his landing, just as the Gylith-Dragon came bounding over the other side of the rise towards him. He felt shell-shocked from the fall and at this moment, wasn't interpreting all of the extra vibrational power that had been bestowed upon him.

He groped for the Oracle, but it wasn't anywhere on him or around him. He put his attention on it and waited for its return, but still nothing came.

The Gylith-Dragon approached like a wolf that had cornered its prey.

“Looking for this?” snarled the Gylith-Dragon, holding up the Oracle with one of his winglets.

Withers noticed the head that was holding the Oracle was the Shadow Lord from the Realm of Innocence, and it was burning in pain trying to hold it. But Gylith was controlling him. He had little choice.

The Gylith-Dragon roared in the direction of the Great Juncture, and a large dark portal formed. It started spinning in an anti-clockwise direction, and Withers could immediately feel an overwhelming negativity coming from it. The Gylith-Dragon threw the Oracle into the vortex. It was gone!

Withers felt a stab of pain about the loss of the Oracle, but he didn't feel a loss of vibrational power.

Suddenly, the Gylith-Dragon roared and the six spear-shaped winglets shot at Withers, impaling his body with each one.

The Gylith-Dragon lifted Withers up in the air and howled in victory!

Withers' head lolled to one side as the vortex began to slow down. Gylith glared at the vortex as it began rotating clockwise. Gylith was about to throw the dead Guardian down when he realised he no longer had any power over his wings.

Gylith thought he successfully impaled the Guardian with six spears, but in fact Withers had drawn them into his body. The spear points pierced the six centres, where they resided within the human body.

On the battlefield the allies were getting the upper hand. The Tyronian army had lost many of its numbers, thanks to the help of the Guardians, and was now being pushed back towards the valley. In fact, many had deserted, and Sef's company were rounding up prisoners.

The battle between the Guardians and the Shadow Angels ended the moment Withers sacrificed himself to the power of the Great Juncture. Each Guardian sword was making its mark on those foul black hearts.

Withers lowered himself to the ground, standing directly in front of the spinning vortex. The Great Juncture started sucking negativity from the realm.

Gylith had made the mistake of throwing the Oracle away, giving Withers the upper hand. Instead of channelling the power through the Oracle, Withers in fact had

become the Oracle. He opened his eyes, returning from death. He looked down at his chest and noticed that each one of the spears was now receding.

The black snake-like spears were being turned from black to white and started making their way across to Gylith, who by now had reverted back to his human self. Using the tentacles like ropes, Withers swung Gylith around towards the vortex, holding him over the opening.

“I banish you from the six realms,” said Withers.

“No, you can't!” snarled the Gylith, desperately trying to detach himself.

The tentacles suddenly released their grip on Withers, and Gylith was sucked into the vortex. The intensity of the suction increased after this, and hundreds of Gylith's soldiers came flying over the hill, down into the valley and through the Great Juncture.

Very few of his army remained. They were those who had only been partially infected by the Shadow Master.

Feeling drained, Withers walked over the rise and noticed Sef keeping at bay what was left of the Tyronian regime. He and his contingent were poking energy weapons at them to keep them in line.

“Thanks, Sef,” said Withers wearily, “but that won't be necessary.” He noticed Ulef's and Viler's contingents were doing much the same thing. “Drop your weapons. These people are free to go.”

Sef hesitated, but soon realised his error. “They've passed judgment.”

“Yes, they are our friends,” said Withers. He turned to the group. “Are there any officers here?”

A young Sergeant came forward and started walking beside Withers. Withers knew the man had been treated harshly by the Tyronian regime.

“What's your name?”

“Benn, sir.”

“Now walk beside me, Benn,” said Withers. “The Tyronian empire is in dire need of new leaders. Do you think you’re up to it?”

“Yes sir,” said Benn in a military style.

“‘Sir’ is fine, but there's no need to feel subservient,” said Withers. “I'm nothing like that tyrant you were working for previously.”

Later, Withers stood before the allies in the main chamber of the Tyronian Palace.

“I know this may feel a little weird, convening in what was once the chamber of a ruthless dictator, but at this time, at this juncture, it's very important that we put all those emotions about the empire behind us.”

Withers stared at his audience intently.

“It’s the only way for this transformation to work. The only way. If you continue to dwell in what Udicia once was, it will become that once again.

“I'm sorry I had to say that, but it's important. It will take several years for the transformation to properly establish itself. In this time it's possible for the Shadows to compromise the situation again.

“They were up there in space ready for you to lose this war, ready to increase their empire here and to re-claim worlds that were once theirs. They’re relentless!

“I’m happy to say that because of your ability to detect oppression and embrace collectivity, you were able to defeat them. For Udicia, it’s a new era, and new methods of fighting the Shadows must be adopted.”

Withers made a signal to the other eight Guardians. He and the Guardians arranged for all the forty-three Realm Keepers from the Centauri to form the three ways.

Withers moved along the right way and reunited with Zac, Lena, Tristan, Christophe, Jere, Yuri and Dana, the seven he had had main contact with.

“Thanks, crew. You’ve done a grand job holding up the realms,” announced Withers, “but I’m sorry to say your time as the Keepers of the Realms has ended.” He looked at Dana. “Feeling better?”

“Much better, thanks to Arden,” replied Dana.

He gazed at the Udician crowd that surrounded the old crew of the Centauri. “I would like to announce the new Keepers.”

After the ceremony, where the old Keepers passed the rings over to the new Keepers, a white-robed, hooded figure appeared at the main entrance. The figure gracefully walked through the assembly of Keepers and stood right at the top of the Great Juncture. The robed figure dropped his hood and raised his arms.

“I am the Great Juncture.”

All the Centauri crew immediately bowed to him, as did the Udician Gurus. Others hesitated, but when they saw Withers bowing to him, they immediately followed suit.

“The Great Juncture has now opened.” Arden turned around and a new realm materialised. The seventh realm appeared as a colourful lotus. On that lotus a

beautifully dressed woman stood, adorned with a jewelled headpiece. “Behold the Goddess!”

Then, everyone bowed, including Arden. The hologram disappeared. For a while there was meditative silence.

Arden turned, admiring the new Udicia. He greeted all the Keepers, thanking the old ones and greeting the new. He paid his respect to the other eight Guardians before making his way to Withers.

Withers took one last look at Arden as he approached, taking in all the universe that made up every pore of his powerful being.

“I know. I can't hold this power,” started Withers.

Arden smiled. “We'll just drop it back a little.” He placed his arm on Wither's shoulder. “Now that you've passed the training, you're the right man for the position of the Tenth Guardian.”

Withers accepted the position gracefully without any ego and bowed. “I accept, my Lord.”

Arden looked at Withers with admiration and put his hands in a praying position, “Hail to the Great Goddess!” He then replaced his hood and walked quickly through the hall and out the door.

Withers felt a pang of loss as if hadn't spent enough time with Arden. However, he knew this was an absurd, selfish human emotion and quickly dismissed it. He knew Arden was always there for him at every moment.

Suddenly a large mandala appeared, and Penni materialised. She appeared disoriented, looking around, confused, before seeing Withers.

“Whoa, Ice!”

Teenagers! They don't take long to figure things out, thought Withers. "Glad you could make it."

"Uncle, I found your disk," said Penni, holding up the Oracle.

Withers stared at the Oracle, flawless in design. Although it looked much like any other Oracle owned by a Guardian, he knew this one was previously his.

"It's been bestowed upon you now," said Withers. "Your time has come."

Penni looked like she was going burst with joy, but suddenly the importance of his words hit her, and she whispered, "Already?"

"When it comes to divine plans, things are always immediate," said Withers. "Don't be concerned about fighting the Shadows at this point; there's a long path of learning before then. You'll still need to focus on your schooling first. The Oracle will be just like another subject along the way."

"Should I meet up with the Keepers?" asked Penni.

"The Keepers won't see you as a leader yet," replied Withers. "The best thing would be to never talk to them about it."

"Never?"

"They'll figure it out themselves when the right time comes," replied Withers. "Anyway, the Oracle will teach you everything you need to know, when you need to know it."

Penni nodded reluctantly. "OK, Uncle. I can do it."

"Of course you can, and that's why you've been chosen. I will be there for you when you need me." Withers looked at the forty-three Keepers and back at Penni.

“Udicia now stands at the beginning of a new era. Peace has finally come to your lands, but for many other worlds out there, the Shadows still reign in terror. Your world has a responsibility to bring that same peace to other worlds.”

“Will they ever be defeated?”

“They've now been pushed back into the furthest reaches of the galaxy. Yes, it's possible that we can eventually defeat them. But, at the end of the day, it's up to us. Human beings must seek the greater good and eventually recognise the Goddess.”