

The Essence of Mars

by

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Chapter 1

Elise Boyer woke early and touched the Oracle, which was sitting on her bedside table. Her living quarters on the Moon were very small and simple, but she didn't mind. She quickly showered, jumped into her overalls, picked up the Oracle and left the room.

A small woman with dark hair, Elise was thirty-three and Australian. She had a dynamic and wise personality.

It had been a couple of weeks since the Shadow Lord tried to reclaim the Earth. But thanks to Sean and the Keepers, this calamity was prevented.

Now, she was the Guardian.

What that meant she was not entirely certain, but Arden said she would receive knowledge from the Oracle as she required it. He also said there would be several tests she would receive in the "Essence" of the realm of innocence. The Essence was the underlying reality of the physical manifestation. It would be very challenging and very gruelling to bring her up to the standard of a Guardian. This was very important, as the Essence could be compromised by the Shadows to gain access to other realms.

She walked down the tunnel past the living area, through the amenities area and toward Moondome. She saw a long electric jack-truck coming from the dome's double doors, carrying a capsule. A capsule leaving Moondome?

She was almost at the door when a man in a hard hat motioned for her to move aside. Another jack-truck was following the last one.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"A lot of the plants are dying," he replied. "We're also removing some of the soil."

She was about to query him further when she noticed Sean poking his

head out of his office across the other side of the tunnel. She moon-walked her way toward him.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning,” replied the cheerful Moon Director.

“Why are they removing the plants?” asked Elise, looking toward the dome.

“Well, my dear,” said Sean, “it appears our Shadow friend made his mark on the only bit of nature on the Moon.”

“He’s infected it?” asked Elise. She immediately understood her wrong choice of words. “The negativity corrupted the dome?”

“That’s right,” said Sean. “That’s our piece of Mother Earth on the Moon, and the Shadow has done its job. Unfortunately, the portal closed before all the bad stuff was removed.”

“He was a bigger threat that we originally thought, wasn’t he?” said Elise.

“A potential Shadow Angel, perhaps? I thought the same thing. Come inside for a moment,” said Sean, closing the door. He suddenly pulled out a medallion suspended on a chain.

“That looks like a mini Oracle,” said Elise. “Where did you get it?”

“It’s a talisman. It’s used to protect potential Guardians and to help them progress a little more quickly if necessary,” said Sean. “Arden gave it to me before I acquired the Oracle, but now it’s yours.” He paused. “But before I pass it on to you, I’d like to borrow it for a while. It’s for a project I’m working on. I require it’s powerful vibrations.”

“What’s the project?” asked Elise, feeling that Sean was being a bit secretive.

“Let’s say I’d like to keep it as a surprise,” said Sean.

“Such a mysterious man you are, sir,” said Elise. “I see why Arden chose you as a Guardian.”

“Maybe I’m a mystery to a Shadow, but I’m sure you can now read me like an open book,” said Sean.

Elise pulled out the Oracle and put her attention on Sean’s secret.

“You require it to bring the dome back in line with Mother Earth.”

“See what I mean?” said Sean. “There are no secrets with the Oracle. It knows all. ”

“Hey! You’re also working on another dome or something similar. Something to do with a spaceship,” said Elise.

“Yes, there are tests being done on whether the concept of the dome can be put inside spaceships,” said Sean, not elaborating further. “This is the reason I need to keep the talisman for a while.”

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“The Moondome has gone beyond its original expectations, and the same concept has been proposed for further applications,” said Sean.

“The spaceship with a dome,” said Elise.

“Yes, it is expected that the same concept will be used as in the Moondome,” announced Sean. “Soon, a small stream will run through the centre. This, with the help of some special water filters, will enhance the neutralisation effect.”

He was standing in the Moonbase meeting room talking to Elise and Steven Withers about the future upgrade to the dome.

Steve was thirty-one. Born in Russia, he moved to Australia when he was a boy. He had a likeable, witty personality and was an experienced Lunar Cargo Lander (or LCL) pilot.

Sean extended his hand toward a huge touch-screen display, opening a web page from one of the icons at the bottom. He cut and expanded a photo on the touch-screen. It was an example of the dome with a stream running through the centre.

“It would look better with a bridge,” said Elise. “That would be a nice touch.”

“That could be arranged.”

Sean pressed his finger on the screen again, and another window appeared. It was a picture of a bridge. With his finger he cut that image, dragged it across the glass-panelled display and dropped it onto the image of the dome. He scaled and moved it, so as to align it over the stream.

“Impressive,” said Steve. Sean grinned.

“How about this?” Sean opened another window, and an image of a bride and groom appeared.

Elise gasped. Steve gently hugged her.

Sean dragged the bride and groom over to the image he was designing and placed them on the bridge.

“Even more impressive,” replied Elise, looking at Steve, and then back at Sean. “When can we do it?”

“Unless you want to marry this young man soon, it may take another year or so to get our dome upgraded.”

“Well,” said Elise excitedly, “by the look of this, it might be worth the wait.”

“That’s for sure,” said Steve.

“Indeed,” said Sean. “Also...”

“Something better than a wedding in the dome?” asked Elise.

“I mean, the dome isn’t just being upgraded for your wedding.”

“Oh, I thought it was,” said Elise with a mischievous grin. Sean grinned.

“As you’ve probably heard through social media, the dome will be tested to see how long it can sustain life.”

“You mean you’re getting people to live in there?” asked Elise.

“Yes, we need to know if seven astronauts can survive in there for three months.”

“You mean the Keepers and I will be locked up in there for three months?” asked Elise.

“That’s right,” said Sean. “Now the big secret is out. There is a new ship being built...”

“To go to Mars,” said Elise, looking at Sean with a funny look. “You know, the Oracle tells me everything.”

“You knew all along, didn’t you?” asked Sean. Elise grinned.

“And it will have a dome inside it?” asked Steve.

“The Tube,” said Sean, “because the ship will be cylindrical.”

“We’re expecting the Shadows to compromise the portal at Mars,” stated Elise.

“Arden said we may have transformed the Earth by ridding her of the Shadows, but this solar system also needs to be transformed,” said Sean.

“That’s the reason we need to prepare for the three-month journey,” said Steve. “OK, so that’s six Keepers and a Guardian journeying to Mars on this new ship that’s being built. We run across the Shadows. What about weapons?”

“The only weapons you need are the Oracle and the Keeper rings,” said Sean. “We’ve gone beyond guns and missiles – those silly ego-orientated extensions. In terms of protection, we must keep our faith in the Oracle. After all, it’s a reflection of the God and the Goddess.”

“So what do you think. Love it?” said Steve, standing on the little bridge inside the dome. The work for the dome’s upgrade had finally been completed.

“I do,” said Elise walking up the other side of the bridge.

“Is this a rehearsal?” asked Steve, holding Elise’s hand.

“Might as well. No one else here at the moment,” said Elise.

“Perhaps we should have waited until next week,” said Steve.

“Oh, yeah, we’ll be locked up in here for three months! We’ll have plenty of time to dream about a wedding then,” said Elise.

Steve looked down at the stream below. Goldfish were swimming around gracefully in the clear water.

“You know, If you told me before we came to the Moon we were going to fight Shadows for a living, I wouldn’t have believed it!” he said.

“I know. Once you get the Oracle or the ring, your whole life changes,” said Elise.

“Which ring are you referring to?” asked Steve.

Elise grinned. “I think that’s the case for both type of rings.”

“Oh, brother! What am I getting myself into?” murmured Steve.

Elise admired the nature around her: the grassy parkland, the wide variety of trees, shrubs, flowers, the new bridge and the stream. She savoured the air, which was abuzz with nature’s sounds. Butterflies, insects and small birds were flitting around. It was truly invigorating after coming in from the Moon’s sterile environment. But that was the whole point of the dome: to have somewhere for the Keepers to enjoy nature.

They had been sealed in there for three months. The test was to see how they could survive in the Tube on their maiden voyage to Mars.

She looked up through the transparent domed roof to the magnificent view of space. Apparently, the Tube didn't have that view, but had some new technology that would project the Sun and the sky in a very realistic way.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Steve, coming out of his tent and sneaking up behind her. Seven tents were dotted around the parkland for the future crew of the Martian Voyager.

"Actually, I wasn't thinking anything," said Elise. "It's so peaceful in here."

"You don't feel as locked-in as you first thought?" asked Steve.

"No, it's a very special place," said Elise.

"Almost like a Temple," said Steve.

"Yes. The Moon's the Temple of the left way, you could say," said Elise. "It's the left way which Arden and Sean used to bring down the Shadows on Earth. It dragged them away from the right way."

"But Garos was destroyed with the right way in the end," said Steve.

"Sean had to strengthen the Guardians' left way first to prepare for the powers of the right way," said Elise. "New Gurus were trained to use the same method."

"What about Mars? It's the power of innocence, isn't it?" asked Steve.

"Innocence is the most powerful quality, and if it's not properly established, it can be compromised by the Shadows," said Elise. "There's a realm on Mars that lies within the Temple that's called the Essence. The Essence is the powers of the left, central and right ways and can be used to either balance the universe or destroy it. It's the past, present and future all at the same time. It's much more subtle than our perception of time in this reality and can manifest a person's thoughts in a visually stunning way."

"You mean like some kind of virtual time travel or something?" asked Steve.

"I've been taken via the Essence through the Oracle to help fight in past wars as well as wars in the future. It's really mind-blowing!" said Elise. "I don't

physically go there, just in spirit. Mostly, it's all about learning how to strategise and fight, but sometimes you might talk to some wise Gurus."

"Wow!" said Steve. "Do you think we'll all be taken into the Essence on Mars?"

"I think so," said Elise. "If we can collectively master the powers of the Essence, we can transform the Temple."

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"Commander Mason," said Steve, looking up from the electronic newspaper he was reading. "Long time no see."

"It's been a while," said Bryan Mason, sitting down in the chair across from Steve. "I've been down to Earth, helping with the new space venture that Sean has been pushing these last couple of years, and I'm glad to announce that it's completed."

Bryan was fifty-two. Although he sometimes spoke in a very strong, authoritative voice, the American still tended to soothe others with his subtle diplomacy.

"The ship's completed!" exclaimed Steve.

"Come out to the Spaceport and take a look," said Bryan. "The Tube has worked out really well. Bring Elise with you."

Steve raised his left wrist toward his face, and a holographic arm-band computer came to life. He motioned his right hand to select a comm's program and selected Elise's avatar. Directly, a holographic image of her face appeared on top of his arm.

"Elise, meet you out at the Spaceport. Bryan Mason wants to show us something."

“Whoa!” said Steve. “This is big.”

Steve compared the LCL that flew him here and this new spacecraft that stood beside it.

“It’s taking up half the spaceport,” noted Elise, beating Steve to the observation. “It’s similar in shape to the old ship, but much larger. It’s cylindrical, with an aircraft-shaped nose, but the landing legs are a lot shorter in comparison.”

“That’s only a perception,” said Bryan. “Actually, they’re larger. The legs on the Voyager have a lot more suspension and they retract at different lengths, depending on how uneven the surface is.”

Sean made his way over to the three, shaking Bryan’s hand.

“Hello, my old friend. What a fine machine you’ve landed here today.”

“Yes, she is,” said Bryan. “The Martian Voyager, the most advanced spacecraft ever made by human hands.”

“Well, I don’t know about everyone else, but I’d like to see what’s inside,” said Steve.

Steve stared at the flight deck, astounded.

“I love this ship!”

The flight deck comprised a large wrap-around console and two high-back command chairs. Huge touch-screens filled the console, which was alight with navigation controls and ship-system functions.

“Boys with their new toys,” said Elise watching her fiance talking to Bryan. She looked at Sean. “I bet you’re happy this is finally completed.”

“I am. This has been many years in the planning and making,” said Sean. “Finally, we’re in a position to protect Mars.”

“The Temple there,” said Elise.

“Or Planetary Oracle, as they’re called universally,” said Sean.

“So Mars is the Planetary Oracle, the base realm in all of the nine realms in this solar system, which are represented in the rest of the planets,” said Elise.

“Like the realm of innocence in our own subtle system, if it’s compromised, it will bring down all the rest,” said Sean.

“So why don’t the Shadows just go out there and claim it before we get there?” asked Elise.

“That’s because they can’t. Not while the Goddess has her powers over the Earth,” said Sean. “We have to activate it first.”

“Through the Essence,” said Elise.

“Yes.”

“So, once Earth is transformed the Shadows won’t be able to come into our realms anymore,” said Elise.

“Yes. At that point we will begin travelling to other worlds, joining the rest of our family in the fight against the Shadows.”

“So, this is the Tube,” said Steve as they all walked through from the back of the flight deck.

The Tube was similar to the Dome, as they each had a small stream that ran through the middle. However, the Tube was shaped so that it would fit inside the Voyager, whereas the Dome was circular.

As she walked in, Elise admired the beauty of the nature around her. It looked really unbelievable; even the rays of the sun were projected, and there were clouds in the sky!

“Oh, it’s similar to the Dome in that it feels like we’re going camping,” said Elise. “At least now we can sleep in nice cabins and not tents – not that I have had any problem sleeping on an air mattress for three months.”

Elise walked into the closest cabin and jumped on the bed.

“The bed’s comfortable,” she called from inside.

Steve followed, smiled at Elise on the bed and then checked the kitchenette.

“Fancy a capsule coffee?”

“Oh, that would be lovely,” she said.

“Anyone else for coffee?” called Steve to Sean and Bryan. They were sitting on director chairs on the front verandah.

“Yes, please,” they both said.

“Perhaps we can have our honeymoon in here,” said Steve.

Elise laughed. “Wedding in the Dome, our honeymoon. That would be nice.”

“But the Oracle is recommending Uluru for our honeymoon,” said Steve.

“The Oracle requires me to go to Uluru to connect to all the realms on a much higher level,” replied Elise. “In the same way that Uluru stands for the centre of the realm of innocence on Earth, the Cydonia region on Mars also has a rock that stands for the realm of innocence.”

“You mean the rock with the face?” asked Steve.

Sean who’d just walked in and overheard their conversation said, “Are you talking about the Face on Mars?”

“Yes, what do you know about it?” asked Elise.

“Let me show you something on this terminal here,” said Sean.

“Remember this photo that NASA took on Mars in 1976 during the Viking missions?” asked Sean. “This one.” He pointed to the large LCD on the side of the cabin wall in the living area. It showed a blurred image of a face that looked a lot like an Egyptian Pharaoh. “I checked with the Oracle and found out that this face represents the face of the Incarnation of the realm of

innocence. That was his warrior face when he first began his offensive on the Shadows. It was the time when he formed the Guardians.”

“You mean that’s Ardesh! And the first Guardians came from Caldon. He still sits there today as if guarding the Temple,” said Elise. She paused in thought. “So, this rock is the one connected to our Uluru, but Uluru doesn’t look like an ancient Pharaoh from space.”

“No, it looks more like an elephant,” said Sean. “Ardesh took many forms, and the elephant-head God was his original form.”

“What about NASA’s photos after the Viking mission?” asked Bryan. “The Global Surveyor probe twenty years later showed a different image.”

“You see, in the early seventies the Goddess had only just started her work, but so had the Shadow Master. He did all he could to distort the truths, innocence being the main one. Unfortunately, Ardesh was one of the Incarnations who had to endure a lot of negativity, and when I mean a lot – it’s beyond our comprehension. Luckily for them, he is also the Incarnation of the realm of forgiveness.”

“So what about now?” asked Steve. “What does the face look like now?”

“Here’s an image of the Mars Seeker probe taken about five years ago,” said Sean. “Her mission was to give us new data to prepare for our landing in Cydonia.”

Everyone stared at the new image.

“It’s half-shadowed,” said Steve.

“It looks like a Shadow on one half, and the other half is probably Ardesh,” said Elise.

“That might be you and your Shadow nemesis,” said Steve.

“No, I’m not that significant,” said Elise. “The Shadow half is probably the Shadow Master’s face.”

Sean magnified the image and stared at it.

“The Shadow side is female. Look! You can see long hair.”

“Look at the top of the Ardesh’s head. It looks like he’s still wearing his

Pharaoh head gear,” said Elise.

“So Ardesh is still there,” said Sean.

“Magnify the ear of the Shadow,” said Bryan, “to check whether the Shadow is a female. She may be wearing ear-rings or something.”

Sean zoomed in on the ear of the Shadow. There weren’t any ear-rings, but the shape of the face was more defined.

“I know what this means,” said Elise. “Half of the face on Mars is still Ardesh, and the other half is over-shadowed by the Shadow Queen. Whoever ends up ruling this solar system will depend on what happens at Mars. If we don’t transform the Temple, the face on Mars will fall under darkness – and so will Earth.”

Chapter 2

Nelth, the Shadow Master of Udicia, journeyed to the Thal mountains along with a small group of foot soldiers. Overhead, three winged-creatures kept a vigil for any potential enemies.

He wore a long dark cloak over the top of a dark, tight-fitting uniform. His face was smugly confident and calm, but he had the personality of a snake and was known to turn brutal in a second.

After a few hours' journey, he stood on his chariot in apprehension, waiting for the Queen's arrival. He didn't understand why she had to come here. She knew his every move, his every thought, even if she was on the other side of the galaxy. It had been seven years since he had spoken directly to the Queen, and suddenly she had insisted on his presence.

The three winged-beasts landed on the ground behind him with a thud.

"This area is secure, sire," said the leading beast.

The winged beasts transformed into human form, their wings disappearing.

Suddenly, a crude dark portal opened out between the Thal mountains, spinning in an anti-clockwise motion, before a dark female form emerged.

"Nelth, let's talk," she said.

The Queen stayed in her shadowed form, with large red eyes leering at Nelth. She was wearing a high-collared dress with long dark hair flowing down to her midriff, but her image was distorted.

"Now, let's..." she paused, and her leering stare turned toward one of Nelth's Centurions. "Who's this charming young soldier?"

Nelth was furious, but forced himself not to show it. It was commonly

known that the Queen had her way with many of her minions.

“That’s Gylith. He’s very new – and very young.” He wanted to get this over with. He hated that she was flirting with one of his men. He wished he’d left that insubordinate brat behind, but he had promoted Gylith to one of his Centurions because of his ruthless nature.

A long dark tentacle came out of the dark distortion and started stroking Gylith on the face. Just as Nelth was about to explode with anger, the Queen retracted her tentacle and turned her attention back to him.

“It’s come to my attention that the Guardians are preparing to seal the portal at Earth’s realm,” said the Queen.

Forcing himself to regain his composure, Nelth said, “If that was to happen it would mean we would be the only part of the Empire left in this sector.”

“That’s why I can’t let it happen,” said the Queen firmly. She paused, glaring at Gylith for a while, before skimming over the other two Centurions and looking at Nelth again. “Send the old one there.”

Nelth looked at his older Centurion. “Resh is the most powerful of the three. I need him here!”

The Queen glared at Nelth as if she was about to fry him on the spot.

“You will do as I say,” she seethed. “I have all the powers, not you. I’m the one who can see across the entire galaxy. Your senses are limited to this pathetic realm!”

Nelth lowered his head as if in respect, but said nothing initially so as to not show any weakness in front of his men.

“Very well. Have it your way, your highness,” he suddenly snapped. “Is that all?” He was feeling very impatient and angry.

“There’s a new Earth Guardian,” said the Queen. “It’s a female.”

Nelth was about to say this would give them a tactical advantage, but bit his lip.

“Very well,” he murmured.

“Show a bit more respect next time!” she roared. As she was about to

leave, a tentacle shot out and grabbed Gylith. The portal shrank, and the Queen and Gylith vanished.

“You! You!” roared Nelth. Not only had she taken Gylith for her own pleasures; she had probably taken him to prepare him. She had a thing about old men as leaders, meaning she could be considering replacing him as the Master of Udicia.

Back at the Palace, Nelth pondered the future rule of Udicia as he summoned Resh to his chambers.

Resh marched in the room. He wore a dark, tight-fitting uniform, with a large hand-gun, holstered against his right upper leg. He had a cruel face and an arrogant militant posture.

“As you’ve heard, the Guardians are preparing to seal off the portal at the Earth’s realm, potentially leaving us as the only part of the Empire in this sector,” said Nelth. He glared at Resh. “This makes your mission critical. You must kill the Guardian!”

“Sire, I will crush Earth’s Guardian with my bare hands!” roared Resh.

“Now that Earth has a female Guardian, it will give you a tactical advantage,” said Nelth. “Females are weak. She will have minions. They must be destroyed also. Take one of the most dedicated and ruthless Lords with you – and as many soldiers as you require.”

“Jul is the strongest and most disciplined,” said Resh. “He is the perfect killer.”

Nelth smiled. I desperately need to impress the Queen, and Resh will be the man to deliver the goods, he thought.

“Relax, Resh,” said Nelth finally. “Tonight, you savour the future. Tomorrow, you fly out of here a hero. We’re taking the war back to the Guardians!”

“To the Empire!” shouted Resh.

Nelth grinned and passed Resh a glass. Both Shadows raised their glasses.

As Udicia wasn't as yet technologically advanced, Resh had to wait several weeks for a Shadow Ship to arrive from deep within the dark realms. To use the time proficiently, he ordered Jul to rally the troops and get them ready for battle.

"Jul, what's the status of my army?" queried Resh, glaring at the big Shadow Lord. Jul was huge in size, which made his Shadow form look all the more daunting. Like Resh, he wore a dark, tight-fitting uniform with a holstered hand-gun on his right leg.

Jul demonstrated his control by directing non-corporeal drones toward some of the closer soldiers, who snapped straight to attention.

"They're directly under my command," growled Jul. "And yours, sir, of course."

Resh walked down between the formation of drones with his hands clasped behind his back.

"How many?"

The drones, in dark, tight fitting uniforms of the Shadow Empire, stood to military attention, their faces expressionless. Completely controlled by their Lord, they were holding their weapons as if ready for battle.

"One hundred and fifty, as per your request. As many as can fit into a flyer," said Jul proudly. Resh glared at up at Jul. Jul may have been a huge giant, but he was a little wary of his superior nonetheless.

"Don't pat yourself on the back yet. When I see them crushing Keepers under their feet I might be impressed."

Jul stiffened to attention.

"Yes, sir."

As Reth turned away he grinned and murmured, “I can’t wait to get see that arrogant female Guardian turned to dust.”

Three weeks later, a large Shadow ship came into Udician orbit. A small flyer craft was immediately dispatched to the surface, where Resh, Jul and their drone army were waiting.

Without saying a word, Jul unleashed his powers to conjure a mass of non-corporeal drones to move the army into the flyer in a military fashion.

Resh watched the Shadow Lord’s play in amusement as he was given some final details from Nelth.

“It’s fine day for the empire,” said Nelth. “Show no mercy, Resh.”

“I won’t,” said Resh as he followed the last of his army boarding the flyer. He turned briefly, looking back to see that Gylith had returned from his business with the Queen. The young winged beast landed next to Nelth with a thud, reshaping back to human form. He noticed Nelth paid little attention to Gylith, as he knew his attention was on Resh.

“Showing no mercy is my nature,” murmured Resh proudly, as he walked up the ramp. “When I return, I will also clip little lover boy’s wings.”

Chapter 3

“That was a beautiful wedding,” said Sean, gazing at how well the scene at the dome had been transformed from a ceremony to a reception. “And this is one grand reception.”

Sean was looking quite the part in his tailored suit. Normally unshaven and with a poor sense of fashion, tonight he looked like a new man.

“I’m in awe at how well it all went,” replied Elise. “If you didn’t think too hard about it, you would think we were in some exotic place on Earth.”

“Absolutely,” said Sean. “Not only is it the nature of our union as transformed human beings, but we are also in the moment of something very special, something sacred.”

“Yes, I felt that,” said Steve.

“Hey, something happened with the Oracle after we said, ‘I do’,” said Elise. “Powerful vibrations came out of it, and it sort of clicked or something.”

“Marriages are certainly very significant,” said Sean, “and your Oracle has responded to that. We need marriages to protect our chastity and our innocence. As Guardians, it is even more important.”

“That’s kind of like the bond between a couple, right?” asked Steve, squeezing Elise’s hand.

“It’s more than that,” said Sean. “It’s the essence of the union, the purity, the significance of it for humanity.”

“Yeah, you see very few divorces in this day and age,’ said Elise. “It certainly stabilises society.”

“Hello, everyone,” said Jenny Davis. She was one of the bridesmaids and a good friend of Elise. “Everyone looks so serious! Hope I haven’t interrupted anything important.”

“As usual with Mr. Cummins,” replied Elise, “he’s telling us something

important.” Everyone laughed.

Jenny hugged Elise and nodded at Steve. “So you are married now! When’s the baby due?”

“Sex is an expression of love within a marriage, within a secure relationship,” said Sean. “It’s best only after marriage, and then it happens spontaneously!”

“Do you have to be so spontaneous on that point?” said Elise firmly, but not seriously.

Everyone laughed again. Jenny laughed so much that she tripped and fell over; the joy went out of her face momentarily.

“You all right, Jen?” asked Elise.

“Yeah,” said Jenny, climbing to her feet. “I just remembered how that Shadow killed all the plants and trees in here. It was certainly a surprise.”

“I know. The Moon’s portal was just doing her job, but didn’t quite have time to finish,” said Elise.

“One hell of a lot of negativity,” put in Steve, remembering that Shadow Wolf.

“Mother Earth in Moondome is contained in a very small area, much like a giant pot-plant,” said Sean.

“Same as the Tube of the Martian Voyager,” said Elise. She looked at Sean inquisitively. “When are we going to Mars, anyway?”

“Soon,” said Sean hesitantly. “Preparations are being made as we speak.”

“So there will be a mission to Mars?” probed Elise.

“Yes, eventually,” replied Sean.

“So when are they actually setting sail in the ship?” asked Elise. “I mean, flying it to Mars...”

“You are so persistent.” replied Sean. “You, young lady, have a honeymoon to attend to. Space should be the furthestmost from your mind!”

“Maybe I should dress up like a Martian,” murmured Steve.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” said Elise, grabbing Steve around the waist and

pulling him closer. "You're absolutely right."

"Hey, Elise," said Jenny, "let's go and catch up with a few of the other ladies and let the men have some men's time."

"Excellent idea," said Steve. "We've got so many men things to talk about, you'd better leave us for a while."

Elise gave Steve a mockingly serious look as she walked away.

"If I were you, son," said Sean, "I would start practising putting that toilet seat down now!" Both men laughed. "Actually, I'd asked Jenny earlier if she could arrange to separate you two for a while."

"Oh?" said Steve.

"Yes, I nearly let the cat out of the bag there," continued Sean. "It was my plan not to tell Elise anything about when we were going to Mars, so that it wouldn't spoil your honeymoon plans."

"Thank you, sir," said Steve.

"In September, Elise and the primary Keepers will be going," said Sean.

"Excellent!" said Steve.

"As you know, there's a much larger agenda for humanity than what the Earth Space Agency envisages," said Sean.

"The Shadows."

"Absolutely. All the mission objectives, like testing the new fusion drive, landing systems, space travel effects on the crew and living in the Tube, are insignificant compared with the testing of our fearlessness, our wisdom, our purity and our innocence against the Shadows." He gave Steve a serious look. "That's why it's also important that you and Elise focus on having such a beautiful time up until then."

"I completely understand, sir," replied Steve.

"You're a good man," said Sean, "and you two deserve to be where you are." Sean paused in deep thought. "Don't under-estimate your position as a Guardian's 'soul-mate'. She needs you. Your bond with her is more powerful than any force the Shadows can hold against you."

Sean nodded. "I appreciate your wisdom, sir, and I will endeavour to keep that sentiment right here," he said, placing his hand over his heart.

Elise, Jenny and a few other women came toward them.

"That's the most serious face I've seen on you since we were married," said Elise. "Anything you'd like to discuss with me?"

Steve grinned. "Sean was just telling me what a beautiful couple we are and how we deserve each other."

"Did he?" said Elise, eyeing Sean sceptically. "Anything else?"

"No," said Steve. "The rest was just men stuff."

"There it is, honey," said Steve, staring out at the scene before him. "Two places you wanted to be: on your honeymoon, and at Uluru."

Elise smiled and said nothing, immersing herself in the landscape. She could feel the same vibrational power that emanated from the Oracle, but on a much grander scale.

"Let's take a walk," said Steve, grabbing Elise's hand. He locked the doors of his electric-powered Honda.

"I am not sure why I didn't come here earlier," murmured Elise, still staring at the rock. "After all, I lived in Queensland. I could have flown here anytime."

Steve pointed at the Moon. "Probably too busy bouncing around up there. As Mr. Cummins always said, you must come down to Earth some time."

"Hey, you!" said Elise. "Well, I have been down here, mostly."

"Mostly, but your mind's still up there," said Steve.

As she reflected on those times, she felt the Oracle in her khaki shorts.

"Well, it's hard not to think about anything else when you've been told you are now the Guardian of Earth," she quickly added. "That is, aside from you, my dear."

Steve grinned. "Nicely caught."

“Thanks, dear,” replied Elise. She diverted her view back to the rock, which was becoming larger as they advanced along the track.

“Hey, that’s weird! There’s a strange mist rolling in.”

Suddenly, they were in the mist, and for a moment they had no idea where they were. Then, as quickly as it appeared, the mist vanished and they were walking toward a vision of the Moonbase in the past.

“What happened?” asked Steve.

“The Oracle has taken us back to Moonbase seven years ago,” said Elise, watching Arden pull the Oracle from his overalls pocket and pass it to her dream-self.

“Elise, this is yours,” said Arden.

She remembered feeling a tremendous calming feeling and going completely thoughtless, enjoying the moment.

She had studied the disk before. Initially, she could only see a sixteen-pointed star made up of interlocking triangles, surrounded by eight and sixteen petals. However, the further she had gone into a meditative state she could also see a three and a half coiled spiral and flashes of a swastika – not the Nazi swastika, but the one that is found in Eastern religions.

“What is it?” asked Elise's dream avatar. “It’s amazing.”

“It's called the 'Oracle of the Guardian’,” said Arden.

“What's it for?”

Arden smiled. “It can be anything you want it to be, because the power of the Oracle is infinite.”

“Why are you giving it to me?” asked Elise.

“Because you have replaced Sean’s role here,” replied Arden. “You are now the 'Guardian' on Earth.”

There was a long silence.

“You speak of Earth as if you’re from somewhere else.”

“Yes, I'm from a planet called Caldon. It’s several light years away from Earth.”

“This is big,” Elise whispered to herself.

“You don't need to worry. The Oracle will reveal its secrets to you as you require them,” said Arden.

At that moment, the scene changed. They were suddenly in what looked like a coffee shop, although the five people were wearing kurta-style uniforms.

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

Elise stared at the man. She felt like she'd known him all her life.

“The mandala within the Oracle is formed by nine interlocking triangles that radiate out from a central point,” the man continued. “The four triangles here that point upwards, represent God or the masculine. Five of these triangles point downwards, representing the Goddess or the feminine.”

“So the Oracle represents the union of the masculine and feminine Divine?” asked someone.

“That's correct,” said the man. “Together, these nine triangles are interlaced in such a way as to form forty-three smaller triangles in a web symbolic of the entire galaxy.”

There was another scene change, and for a moment it looked like they had been taken back to Uluru. Elise could still see a rock similar to Uluru in the distance, but the landscape around it had been dramatically transformed. It was like they were looking down from a mountain.

“Where are we now?” asked Steve, bewildered.

“Not sure yet,” said Elise, smiling at Steve's bewildered expression.

They climbed up over a ridge to find a large circular, tessellated, stone-covered area. Immediately in front of them was a shallow pond, with a stone bridge crossing it in the shape of a rainbow. Tall pillars surrounded the area, with swastikas displayed on each of them.

Beyond the stone-covered area stood a large domed temple. On the dome was an etching of the Primordial Fountain. Elise studied the circular area.

“It's a huge Planetary Oracle,” she said, remembering the words of the

gentleman. Unlike the Oracle of the Guardians, which was a little smaller than a DVD, this large Oracle on Mars was the size of a basketball court.

“I’ve never seen these energy centres displayed on your Oracle before,” said Steve.

Elise looked at the symbol at the bottom of the Martian Oracle.

“That large one at the bottom is Mars, the realm of innocence. The next circle is Mercury, the realm of knowledge.”

“The next one is Jupiter, the realm of contentment,” said Steve.

“The next is Venus,” said Elise, “The realm of security.”

“And up here at the realm of collectivity, we have Saturn,” said Steve.

“The Sun up here at this cross-road between the left and right ways,” said Elise, “is the realm of forgiveness.”

“That’s it. This where we are!” said Steve, excitedly. “Mars! That’s where we are go...”

“What?”

“Sorry. I guess I let the cat out of the bag there,” said Steve. “It was meant to be a secret until we finished our honeymoon. Mr. Cummins announced a Mars mission. You and I are going in September!”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” cried Elise excitedly.

“Honey, look out there!” gulped Steve. “Shadows.”

She looked down toward the rock that looked like a dark Uluru on Mars to see a huge swarm of Shadows climbing up toward them.

A large platoon started amassing from behind them. They began standing on specific points of the Martian Oracle. They all wore rings on different fingers and on different hands. They were the Realm Keepers.

Elise and Steve walked toward the group, now conscious of the fact that they themselves were merely ghosts in this whole scene.

As well as the group of Keepers, ten more authoritative individuals made their way over and stood in the middle of the Martian Oracle, positioning themselves in the shape of a large circle. They each wore an Oracle over

their chests and studied the mass of incoming Shadows without any fear on their faces. They were the Guardians. Interestingly, one of these Guardians wore battle dress similar to the distinguished individuals around them, but the others looked like they came from other tribes or races.

The first Shadows to come over the ridge were the Shadow Master and his Centurions. It was apparent that the Master held an authority over the army behind him. Three Centurions stood at his side and nine Shadow Lords a little further away.

A huge army of more Guardians was coming down from the mountain and forming a military-style line in front of the temple. They held up their swords, while the archer-men held up their bows. Elise noticed the tips of their weapons were vibrating like the Oracle.

A god-like figure suddenly appeared from within the Dome structure and made his way toward the Martian Oracle.

Elise felt tremendous vibrations coming out of the Oracle of the Guardian. She knew this person was someone of great significance. As their attention was drawn to him, Elise and Steve were taken right up close.

“Who’s that?” asked Steve quietly, afraid he might be heard.

Elise didn’t answer, transfixed and in a thoughtless state.

The Keepers and Guardians bowed respectfully to the Incarnation, who walked between the Keepers and Guardians, assessing the scene before him. He stared at the Shadow Master and his minions, who all took a step back. He walked back and stood amongst the Guardians.

“My Lord,” said the Guardian wearing the same dress as the warriors, “we await your orders.”

Elise noticed the Guardian’s Oracle was attached to the middle of the man’s chest and was emanating tremendous vibrations. The Incarnation’s face showed no sign of contemplation.

“The Shadows have amassed a huge army.”

He studied the eyes of the young Guardians in the platoon surrounding the

temple and noticed the unsteadiness there. He knew immediately that many of them had already been compromised.

“Yes, we will fight, but it won’t be a fight we will win on this night.” A few of the Guardians stirred in protest, but soon became solemn with the news. “It will be a fight that will last many lifetimes.”

The Shadow army was beginning to march into the open area of the temple, and the Shadow Lords were transforming into various dark forms.

Steve looked at Elise nervously. Elise was transfixed by the words of the Incarnation. The two of them could feel tremendous heat coming from the direction of the Shadows, but were cooled by the pleasant vibrations coming from the Incarnation and the Guardians.

Suddenly, the sun blackened for a moment, before a trail of black cloud started making its way across the sky and toward the two armies. It seemed to circle around a few times over the tops of their heads, before coming down in a mass of black smoky cloud between the opposing sides.

The dark smoke began to shape itself into a very large dark form, much larger than even the Shadow Master or his Lords. Its large, red, piercing eyes glared down at them, and a wide, black, open mouth roared a dreadful roar.

Chapter 4

“This Tube gives you a false sense of location, doesn’t it?” said Elise, relaxing on a deck-chair. “I mean, this feels like I’m on a camping trip in a national park somewhere – not on a space-ship.”

“It does,” replied Sean. “The hard work we’ve all put into the dome over the years has paid off.”

“Shame about the gravity, though. I think there’s less here than on the Moon,” said Elise.

“About the same, I thought,” commented Matsu Hiroyama, who was lying on the grass a bit further away from them, “but then, I haven’t spent as much time there as you two have.”

Matsu was thirty-six and from Japan. He, like everyone else, wore the Martian Voyager overalls with mission patches on both arms. His compassionate nature meant he was very sensitive regarding people’s family and social lives.

“With a larger crew we could improve the gravity, though,” said Elise, smiling at Matsu. She walked over to the small stream that ran through the middle of the tube. Cupping her hands she took a sip of the crystal-clear water. “Lovely.”

She looked further down the stream and could see another two crew members, standing in the water with their hands out, meditating.

“That’s an idea.”

She walked down toward them, admiring the beauty of the nature around her.

“Ah,” said Sean, admiring the scene. He pulled a tablet computer from his overalls pocket and started running his finger over it. “Now, I must study a little bit more about Mars.”

“Good idea,” replied Matsu. He pointed at a display that appeared to wrap around his left wrist. Holographic images suddenly appeared from it.

“Oh, don’t mind my antiquated technology,” murmured Sean indifferently.

“Hello, guys,” said Elise, walking into the stream. “Mind if I join you?”

“Be my guest,” said Bernard Granger in his strong French accent. “The more the merrier.”

Bernard was thirty-seven. He had a very inspiring and creative personality. A little further upstream, his uncompleted painting had captured the uniqueness of this man-made wonder.

Marie Emile was so immersed in meditation that she hadn’t noticed Elise’s arrival. She was also French, twenty-seven years old and the youngest on the Mission. Marie, apart from her meditative mood, was attentive and alert. If there was some pressing issue on the radar, she would be there to try and solve it.

They all immersed themselves in the silence for a while. It seemed nothing could have disturbed the moment, until the announcement came on the PA.

“Elise, would you report to the flight deck, please?”

“Oh,” said Elise, as if she heard a voice from another dimension, “the Commander has summoned me.”

Elise entered the flight deck and admired the expanse of space through the front-view screen. She saw the Commander leaning over her husband’s shoulder, having a word with him, before turning to greet her.

“Elise,” said Commander Mason, “welcome to my office – finally.”

“That’s all right, Commander. You’ve been busy,” said Elise. She looked at

Steve, who smiled.

“Sean and I have had long conversations about the events that took place on the Moon seven years ago,” said Bryan.

“About the Shadows,” said Elise.

“Yes,” said Bryan. “You yourself haven’t orchestrated a collective battle against the Shadows as yet.”

“If you are wondering whether I can handle a situation if it happens on Mars,” said Elise, “the Oracle has put me through many simulated battles in the Essence.”

“It’s just my old military background,” said Bryan, studying Elise without giving any emotion away. “I always make sure my soldiers are up to the task.”

Elise spied the ring on Bryan’s right pointer finger. Studying it closely, she could see it had a picture of the planet Saturn etched into it. Bryan noticed what she was looking at.

“The ring,” said Bryan. “Now, that’s a story. Did Sean tell you?”

“No.”

“Sean, a gentleman called Neil, and I were in our first battle against three Shadows on the Moon. We were testing the first LCL, actually. They fired at us in the Moon’s orbit, but Sean used the Oracle to shield us from their deadly energy weapons.”

“Wow! Lucky you had the Oracle,” said Elise.

“Yeah, we were eventually hit on the rear rockets and I had to take the LCL down really fast. We managed to transfer to the Lunar Remote Vehicle, or LRV, an electric vehicle that was housed in the cargo bay of the ship. At first we travelled at night in the shadows of some craters, but then we had to go across an open sea.” He paused. “Sean used the Oracle to fire at the Shadows, but eventually we were knocked over, rolling into a crater. Neil was killed.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Elise.

“We eventually made it to the dome, as Sean knocked out those Shadows

coming at us in a hover-vehicle,” said Bryan, “but they made it up to the dome with these huge space guns. That’s when I thought we might be in big trouble.”

“Garos,” said Elise.

“Yes. The three fired, and Sean was able to knock them back down the cliff. The power of that Oracle is amazing!” said Bryan. “Anyway, Garos came back with a vengeance, somehow managing to get the hover-vehicle going again and sending an army of flying wolf-drones at us. That was when I was able to extract the ring from the dome.”

“You were able to use the ring as a weapon?” asked Elise, curious. “When Garos came back to attack the Moon, the Keepers were only able to collectively empower the Oracle.”

“I must have been able to get more power as there was only one of me at the time,” said Bryan. “I think I was given a bit of help by the Goddess to get us out of a tight spot. Normally, I’d say we should work collectively. It’s the best way.” He paused in thought. “That’s how I figured how to energise the Oracle, when everyone else wasn’t sure at the time.”

“Thanks for telling me this. You’ll be a strong part of our collective force,” said Elise.

Bryan smiled. “From that moment, my life hasn’t been the same.”

“Why?” asked Elise.

“Well, it’s almost like everything I’ve done since then is leading me toward something extremely significant, something big.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Elise.

Several thousand metres above the Face of Mars, Elise took several photos of the rock as they descended.

“You see the faces?” said Elise, pointing down at the rock through a portal

window. The huge rock was becoming larger by the minute. “I can’t quite make out the two faces from here.”

Sean studied the rock. “No, not from here.”

She wanted to study the digital screen, but wasn’t about to miss out on the rest of the scene.

“Prepare for landing,” said Steve. Rockets at the base of the fuselage suddenly fired with extra thrust.

“I will land at the edge of that ridge,” reported Steve. “It’s perfectly flat.”

Elise checked a small LCD screen at the back of the seat in front of her, displaying geographical information from Google.

Red dust billowed up from the surface in a thick cloud. There was a jolt and a shudder as the Voyager hit the Martian surface.

“Folks, we have successfully landed on Mars,” reported Bryan. “Thanks to our excellent pilot, Steven.”

Everyone cheered and took turns in shaking his hand. Elise gave him a warm hug.

“OK, everyone,” said Bryan, “let’s suit up and get out on the surface.” He turned toward Steve. “Let Mission Control know we’ve landed.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Lord, the humans have left a satellite in orbit,” said Sirek.

“Destroy it,” snapped Resh.

A wide, dark beam shot out of the Shadow ship and hit the satellite. But instead of the satellite being vaporised, it continued its orbit around the planet.

“Ah, our weapons have had no effect on it, Lord,” reported Sirek. “They’re using a force-field.”

“Earthers don’t have force-fields,” spat Resh, impatiently. “The Guardian is using the Oracle somehow. Fire again!”

Another beam struck the satellite, with the same result. Resh smashed a fist against the closest panel.

“Arrr!” He waved his fist in the air in frustration. “OK. Ram it. Full power to the forward shields.”

“Yes, Lord,” replied Sirek, running his fingers through the holographic panel. The ship powered toward the satellite and impacted it with a thud. Instead of the satellite exploding, it bounced off their ship and continued on its merry way.

Resh belted the panel again, but this time, pieces flew everywhere.

Chapter 5

Elise stared at the hill called the Face of Mars in the distance. It emanated the same vibrational power that Uluru had done. Sure enough, when she touched the Oracle it responded with coolness. She took in the ruggedness, the redness of the Martian landscape and the subtle, pink sky.

The Cydonia region on Mars contained several hills, some of which resembled pyramids. Other features included an area of flat-topped mesa-like features, a region of small hills and a complex of intersecting valleys.

“It’s a unique majestic beauty,” said Sean through the space-suit comm. “No words can describe it.” She turned to look at him through his helmet visor. “Yes, there’s definitely something very powerful here, yet gentle.”

“It’s gentle now,” said Sean, “although Mars is renowned for giant dust storms that engulf the entire planet.”

“Hopefully, the next one’s after we leave,” shivered Elise, looking higher up the ridge. Huge, pyramid structures loomed in the background. She lifted her arm and a screen came to life at her wrist. A holographic schematic of that area popped up, revealing the position of an open area and the pyramids around it. She could also feel the Oracle responding to her intuition with coolness. “I think we should go up there.”

“Well, my dear, I can’t argue with you,” said Sean. “This is your show.”

Elise smiled. “But, not my mission. Commander, are you there?”

“Yes, Elise,” said Bryan over the comm-link.

She could see a few suits working around the ship. One was probably her husband. Two other suits were standing a little further down the ridge.

The latest space-suits were a very light-weight design, making them much easier to walk around in than the suits they used on the Moon. The helmets were now soft, durable bubbles.

“I’d like to venture up beyond this structure here,” Elise said, pointing. “I’m

getting messages from the Oracle that it's important."

"Very well," said Bryan, thinking a former Guardian had said something very similar years ago. "We'll finish up our checks on the MV and take a look."

"Sirek," said Resh, "is the Earther party at the portal?"

Sirek also wore the dark, tight-fitting Shadow uniform, although his face wasn't in Shadow form. He was a young, dark-skinned human male and was one of the crew that came with the ship.

"Yes, my Lord," said Sirek standing over a holographic panel behind his command chair, "but our scanners are having difficulty giving us specific information."

"Arrr! They've barely left their little pathetic abode they call a planet! How is it they can be so difficult? After all, we are the superior beings," said Resh smugly.

"The Oracle is giving them an advantage."

Resh had drawn a very large knife out of his belt and pointed it at Sirek's neck. Sirek froze.

"I want results, not your opinions. The Oracle is just a cheap piece of metal," he spat angrily.

"Yes, my Lord," said Sirek, frantically going back to work on his panel.

"The Earthers must be stopped. From here, they could end up joining the rest of their kind in the war against us."

That woman walks around with her nose in the air, thought Marie as she climbed up the incline. I thought the Commander was in charge?

Bernard, walking beside her, was so absorbed in looking at the landscape,

that he suddenly slipped on a jutting rock, but luckily Marie was quick to catch him.

“Thank you, Marie. I was just so captivated. I wish I could sit down and paint.”

When she really thought about it, however, maybe it wasn't really arrogance she was seeing in Elise. Maybe it was righteousness.

“My bangle is giving off vibrations,” said Sean. He was now the Keeper of the realm of innocence, after the Guardianship had been handed to Elise. Basically, they had swapped roles. He had a bangle on his right wrist, which had the symbol of Mars, although it was covered by his space-suit.

Marie noticed the ring on her right thumb, inside her space-suit glove, was giving off vibrations also. The ring had the symbol of Mercury on it.

“My ring is vibrating, too,” she said.

“Hey!” said Bernard. “So is mine.” Bernard had a Keeper ring on his right middle finger. The symbol on his ring represented Jupiter.

“Me, too,” said Matsu. His ring was on his right pinky, and it had the symbol of the planet Venus.

“Same here,” said Bryan. His ring was on his right index finger and had the symbol of the planet Saturn.

“I feel it too,” said Steve. His ring sat on his right ring finger, and had a symbol of the Sun.

It all made sense now.

Although Elise couldn't see all their faces it felt like they were all looking toward her for answers. She had this feeling it wasn't necessary to explain.

“I'm not sure yet,” she said, “but I'm certain we'll get our answers up there in the heart of Cydonia.”

“I've found something, Lord,” said Sirek. “The satellite they deployed in orbit

just received telemetry. I've extrapolated the signal back to their location on the ground."

A holographic globe of Mars projected from his panel. A flashing light pinpointed their general position on the image.

"Excellent, Sirek," said Resh. "Perhaps you're useful after all." Resh glared at the hologram. "Head to the Flyer immediately and power it up."

"Yes, my Lord," said Sirek, marching off the bridge.

Resh touched the part of the panel in front of him.

"Jul, prepare the army and report to the Flyer immediately!"

The Flyer ascended through the atmosphere of Mars. The ruggedness of the Martian landscape loomed below them.

Resh glared at Jul on the helm's control of the Flyer.

"Take us down in a steep descent," ordered Resh. "This isn't a pleasure cruise!"

"Arrr," growled the giant Shadow, putting the ship into a dive.

"Interesting, isn't it?" commented Sean, looking down at the huge odd-shaped hill that was renowned as the Face on Mars. They'd climbed up quite high and were admiring a spectacular view. "This rock is the embodiment of Ardesh, the protector of our innocence..."

"I can't make out the Face from here," said Elise. "Perhaps it's only visible from up there at the Temple."

"I think you're right," said Sean. "The natural structures up there align so as to focus our attention."

"Do the deities of the realms reside in those pyramid-like structures up

there?” asked Marie, pointing up the incline.

“They do,” said Elise. “It’s how they’re placed and aligned which makes it all work for the rest of the solar sys...” She stopped suddenly as she noticed a huge, dark, crude-looking spacecraft descending rapidly from the sky. “We’re not the only ones here for a purpose. Look.”

The vibrations from the Oracle were tremendous – so much so, that Elise was instantly absorbed in its power. She could feel the rings of the Keepers were responding in much the same way, and she could feel their strengths combining.

Resh glared down at the seven space-suited figures that were magnified on their front-view screen.

“Kill them!” he roared. “Kill them all!”

Sirek pressed a touch-sensitive icon on his panel, and a blinding ray of white light shot out of the nose of the Flyer. There was an explosion of red dust and rock as the ray-beam hit the ground and a huge dust cloud enveloped the area.

“Yes, yes,” Resh murmured. “We’re victorious!”

“My Lord,” said Sirek, frantically studying the data on his panel. “Our fire has been deflected by some sort of shield.”

Resh’s euphoria turned to irritation. “What?”

Before Sirek could respond, their white ray-beam shot out of the cloud below and hit the Flyer in the exact same spot it came from.

The nose of the Flyer exploded and the space-craft started spinning out of control toward the ground.

“Is everyone all right?” asked Bryan. He looked up into the dusty sky, vaguely seeing the Shadow ship through the smog.

Everyone responded with an affirmative.

“Wow, what a beautiful connection of power!” said Bernard.

“Yes, our collective might is beyond anything I’d expected,” said Elise.

“Our unity is no coincidence,” said Sean. “We’re standing next to one of the greatest powers in the universe.”

“So, our little league of super heroes have formed. The baddies are here,” said Steve. “What next?”

There were a few chuckles through the comm-link.

“We fight,” said Marie, a little bitterly. “Who do they think they are?”

“Good spirit,” said Elise, “but let’s keep our negative emotions in check. Otherwise we’ll play right into their hands.”

There was a loud crashing noise, a little way down the range.

“They're dead,” said Matsu.

“Don’t bet on it,” said Sean.

Resh picked himself up off the floor of the crashed spacecraft. He went to a tall compartment at the back of the bridge and pulled out a large rifle. Rifle wasn’t really the right word for this weapon; it looked more like a cannon. He flicked a switch on the side of the stock and it made a powering-up noise.

“Wake up!” he snarled to the other two. He kicked Sirek, who was lying on the floor.

Like a giant zombie, Jul got up from the pilot seat and headed to the back of the bridge. He, too, picked up a large rifle, which looked like a child’s pop-gun in his huge hands. He released the rear compartment door and checked his army. He projected drones from the supra-conscious to bring them to attention. They were already masked and ready to go into the Martian

atmosphere.

“Get ready,” growled Jul to his army.

Sirek selected a smaller weapon, and all the Shadows headed toward to the exit hatch. In the airlock, their soft, clear, translucent face shields unfurled over their heads.

The army of drones diligently worked their way out of the airlock after them.

“Shouldn’t we head back to the ship?” asked Matsu.

“Negative,” said Bryan flatly. “We’d be more vulnerable there. If there’s a mother ship in orbit, we’d be sitting ducks.”

Elise could see the Shadows making their way toward them in the distance.

“I think we’re vulnerable both ways, but still under enormous protection nonetheless. The Oracle is emitting cooler vibrations the closer we come to those pyramids up there.”

Most of the others nodded except Marie. She was staring down at the Shadows.

“You all right, Marie?” She turned toward Elise.

“I’m fine,” she said flatly.

“Shoot and ask questions later,” snapped Resh, moving as fast as he could over the Martian landscape. Jul saw some of his army were falling behind.

“Hurry up!”

“What are the Earthers doing here anyway, my Lord?” asked Sirek, struggling to keep up with his leader.

Resh turned on Sirek, grabbing the front of his suit.

“Questions, questions! You’re wasting my time! How about do, do do!” He shoved him roughly away. “Come on! Keep that rifle up!”

Sirek look at Jul through his translucent helmet and shrugged.

“I’m not a soldier. I’m a tech.”

“Rrrrr!” growled Jul.

Chapter 6

The Mission had increased their pace to keep in front of the Shadows. Soon, they'd made it up over a ridge where they were rewarded with a spectacular view. In the distance they could see the Face of Mars.

"Look! You can see the two faces on the Face of Mars from here," said Elise.

Everyone stared down, some of the Keepers trying to determine whether it was caused by a shadow being cast by the adjacent mountain. Finding no evidence of that, they turned around to see a circular, tessellated arena covering most of the area and, much further on, a dome structure which had collapsed. Running parallel to this loomed the unusual pyramid structures. Elise immediately recognised this place from the vision the Oracle had given them earlier in the year.

"This is the Temple," she said. "There was a war here a long time ago – long before human history – between the Guardians and the Shadows."

"How do you know?" asked Bernard, who was transfixed by the view.

"The Oracle took Steve and me there," said Elise.

Steve nodded, although no one would have seen this beyond his helmet. "Yes, it was a mixture of something really pleasant and something really evil."

"Hey, do you want to know something, everyone?" said Matsu, studying his arm-band computer. "There's a breathable atmosphere here."

Everyone checked their own computers.

"Yes," said Bryan, studying the data, "we're in a huge invisible dome just like our Moon but much larger." Bryan immediately began to remove his helmet. He grinned at the others, other than Sean, who hesitated. "It's a weird smell, but pleasant." Everyone removed their helmets.

“The Guardians did the same here as what Arden did on the Moon with the Oracle,” said Sean, putting his helmet on the ground. Elise looked at the Temple, saying nothing.

“This is weird standing out here with no helmet,” said Steve. “You guys should take a closer look at the Temple.”

“Well, I might do just that,” said Bernard. “Marie, are you coming?”

Suddenly, they saw a mass of Shadows coming up toward the ridge. Marie stared down the ridge at the army.

“I think I’ll keep guard.”

“How many are there?” muttered Bernard.

Elise briefly eyed the Shadow army before taking in the flat open area of the Temple. Several things were missing. The shallow pond and the bridge were completely gone – the pond filled up over the aeons, the bridge probably destroyed in the war. The pillars that had surrounded the round tessellated area were gone, but rocky remnants remained here and there.

The main dome structure and its pillars largely remained, except for the fact that it had collapsed. Even the Ardesh symbols were still on the fallen pillars, and an etching of the Primordial Fountain was proudly displayed on the dome.

“This area and the dome have similarities to the Temple of the Goddess in India,” said Marie.

“Interesting how this can be built thousands and thousands of years ago, by another race,” said Sean, “and be very similar to the very Temple that many people make a pilgrimage to every year on Earth.”

Elise was nodding but couldn’t say anything as she had gone thoughtless. She could feel a sudden surge in the Oracle. She knew it was about to reveal something.

The ground below them started to rumble, but the movement was confined to the circular tessellated area. Rock and dust were being shifted, but not in a way that a logical mind could perceive. It was being cleared, much like metal pellets rolling on a glass sheet. The rumbling suddenly stopped.

“It is a large Oracle,” said Sean, rubbing his stubbly chin, “and it’s displaying the subtle system.”

“A ‘Planetary Oracle’ representing our solar system,” said Elise.

“Not only that,” said Bryan. “I can see how it links our countries as well. Find your symbols and stand on them.”

Elise looked at Sean. “You already know more about the subtle system than most of us in our generation. You lived in a time that will never be seen again.”

Sean looked at Elise and the Oracle she had velcroed to the opposite side of her armband computer.

“Yes. You know, you may be the only person in your generation, who wasn’t in those times, who knows that.”

“I know,” said Elise. “It comes with the job.”

“Indeed,” said Sean.

“We’re all standing on the energy centres of the right channel,” Matsu reminded them.

“Yes, we are the dynamic right side,” said Sean. “Remember, we are the Sun.”

“Then what about the left and central ways?” asked Elise.

“You mean, who stands on them?” asked Sean.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps we don’t need the remaining thirty-six keepers to stand on them,” muttered Sean.

Bernard was puzzled at all the empty realms.

“We don’t have Starships. So we can’t bring that many people, anyway.”

“We don’t need them physically,” said Elise. She looked at her arm-band

computer.

“You mean, if you open a direct line of communication to all the people who represent the remaining centres...” suggested Sean.

“Realms,” corrected Elise. She held up her left arm and pressed the touch screen display. A holographic icon of Skype appeared to float above the screen. This was replaced by a list of floating icons that represented different contacts. She selected a group called Keepers. Suddenly, full holographic images of that group materialised on their corresponding realms.

“Hello, everyone,” said Elise. “Thanks for making yourselves available on short notice.”

“That’s OK,” said the closest hologram at the beginning of the left way. She was a young African girl. “We know how important this is.”

Elise was just thinking that the holograms looked like they were suffering from poor bandwidth, when their clarity dramatically improved.

The Shadows approached the temple and stopped with rifles raised, looking at Marie.

“Hey, guys,” said Marie, “I may need your attention. The Shadows are here.”

Resh noticed that the Earthers were already trying to open the realms! Jul suddenly growled and charged toward Marie.

Elise could feel a surge of vibrations from the Oracle. She turned around and saw Marie charging toward a giant Shadow.

“Marie!” called Elise, stunned.

Jul fired at Marie, but the shot went wild, causing an explosion of rock and dust to fly everywhere.

Marie performed some type of martial arts manoeuvre, which landed Jul flat on his back. In a rage, Jul pressed a button and removed his translucent

helmet, revealing a dark, shadowy head. He lashed out with his leg, knocking Marie on her back.

Jul's body suddenly started transforming. It was increasing in size like some evil-looking Incredible Hulk. His uniform stretched to accommodate his new, massive size. His face had changed to look more like a monster than previously.

"Rrrrrr!" roared Jul. He pulled out his hand-gun, but Marie kicked it aside. Marie could feel tremendous negativity coming from the giant Shadow and she pushed back the urge to vomit.

The moment may have looked a little comical if it were a different situation; Jul was huge, but Marie was quite small in comparison.

Jul charged, but his movements were a little unsteady. Marie charged toward him and karate-kicked him back toward the ridge. Suddenly, Jul froze as if something had struck him. He reached for his face, which started to melt. Black slime was running down his suit. Then, what was left of his body fell to the ground.

"Marie!" called Elise sharply. "Don't move. You're right on the edge of the perimeter!"

Marie cursed herself; she could have walked right into the Martian atmosphere, which would have resulted in instant death, just like Jul.

"OK, turn carefully," said Elise. She stopped as Resh appeared directly beside Marie with his translucent helmet lowered.

Resh had transformed his Shadowy face into a young human male in his mid-twenties.

"Hello, there," said Resh. "I loved your performance." Resh had also transformed his dark, brutal nature into that of a kind, polite gentleman.

"Keep away from me," said Marie.

“Beautiful, in fact,” Resh was saying, “just like you.”

“Marie!” called Elise. “Get away from him!”

Marie felt like talking to him, but another part of her was saying, “Don’t do it!”

With Jul dead, the Shadow army had stopped in formation on the edge of the cliff.

Elise and the Keepers had gathered together as Sirek entered the Martian dome.

“We must all put our attention on Marie,” said Elise.

Sirek was walking toward them pointing a hand-gun at them.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Elise held up the Oracle as Sirek fired, and the Oracle absorbed the white beam. Elise threw the Oracle like a Frisbee, hitting the gun out of Sirek’s hand. The Oracle returned like a boomerang to Elise’s hand.

“Why didn’t I get one of those?” muttered Steve.

“Now, let’s use that similar power by focusing our attention on Marie,” said Elise. “We need her.”

“What about the soldiers?” asked Matsu.

“Well, they’re not attacking us yet,” said Elise. “First things first.”

Everyone held up their rings, directing their collective energy toward the Oracle. This amplified the Oracle’s power so that everyone’s desires could be manifested.

“You and I,” continued Resh, “could rule this galaxy together.”

Marie was starting to become captivated by Resh. He was young,

adventurous and romantic, but she suddenly released how artificial this all seemed. Something was pulling her back to reality and pulling her back fast.

“No,” said Marie. “I can’t.”

Resh reached for her as Marie had a sudden realisation of which way to run without going through the perimeter. She felt a surge of dynamic energy and ran toward the others. There was normal Earth gravity in the Temple, but it could still have been Martian gravity as far as she knew. She had moved very quickly!

“Sorry to interrupt you love birds,” said Steve to Marie, “but we still have a Planetary Oracle to activate.”

Elise hugged her. “Glad to get you back.”

“I’m sorry, guys,” said Marie. “I won’t try to take them on single-handed anymore.”

“It’s all right, my dear,” said Sean, smiling. “We know.”

“And what we now know about this Centurion is invaluable,” said Elise.

Chapter 7

“Who am I going to kill first?” roared a dark, angry voice. It was Resh, who had resumed his own appearance. He was closely followed by Sirek, firing his weapon wildly. Resh had apparently started controlling the army as they moved in behind him.

Elise suddenly felt angry about the hundred-odd guns that Resh, Sirek and the drone army were carrying. However, instead of displaying that anger she vented it inwards and toward the weapons that Resh and Sirek were carrying. Guns were such an evil and unnecessary instrument. They had become extinct on Earth.

She imagined Resh and Sirek’s guns becoming extinct. The Oracle became cool, and there was a roar of surprise and anger. The weapons had become very hot and melted into a pool of metal on the ground.

Resh was so enraged about the loss of the rifles that he pulled out a hand gun from his suit and started firing aggressively at Elise.

“Die, you bitch!”

Elise held the Oracle, which absorbed the death rays. She threw it at Resh, which sent the weapon flying, the Oracle returning to Elise’s hand. In a rage, Resh charged at Elise.

Elise stood her ground without fear and imagined she was standing inside a protective aura which could not be penetrated. Her allegiances had concerned looks on their faces this time, but said nothing as they could feel that Elise was now standing in the fortress of truth!

“Arrrr!” roared Resh. He raised his hands ready for his attack, but was suddenly thrown back after touching a positive energy force, which was indeed surrounding Elise. The Planetary Oracle’s powers were starting to activate.

Shaken, Resh turned to the awaiting drone army and began enforcing his power over them. Unlike Shadow Lords, Centurions had more direct control over the minds of drones and in close proximity didn't need non-corporeal drones to send the dark orders. Like the Master, he could also take them into his being as a way to increase his evil collective power.

Now that his powers had increased, he could easily penetrate the positive force around the Oracle. Resh, Sirek and the drones began marching in.

"OK," said Elise. "Let's get our collective act together."

"We've got company," warned Marie, looking toward the army of Shadow drones.

"Take up your positions on the Planetary Oracle," said Elise. "It will increase the powers of your rings and protect you from their weapons."

Just as she uttered the words, the drones began firing at the Keepers, who held up their rings, thus forming a protective shield in front of them.

Suddenly, for everyone present, the whole scene changed, as if they were in a virtual reality. Elise knew this was the Essence. Instead of looking like a large group of people standing at specific points on top of a large stone disk, they were now immersed in a dream-like state, as if they were inside the Oracle itself. They had entered the realm of innocence at the beginning of the right way in a bright clockwise spiralling energy, while the Shadows entered in an anti-clockwise dark, spiralling energy. Now, Elise, Sean, Resh and his drone army were all within the same realm. Elise looked around and noticed they were somewhere in the countryside of New Zealand.

While everyone was momentarily distracted by this occurrence, Elise fired a large spiralling bundle of energy at Resh, which lifted him up and pushed him toward where Sean was standing. Resh's arm shot up from where he lay and grabbed Sean on the right arm.

Sean experienced flash-backs of Resh's past atrocities, with visions of countless wars, scandals, crimes, tortures and sexual perversion. Stated simply, Resh was a monster.

Sean blocked the visions right there. If Resh could affect Sean with his darkness, then Sean could use his enlightened power to turn this around!

With his will, Sean brought back all his memories of when he first received his transformation and how that had turned him into a peaceful, loving person. He thought of all the people he'd passed this knowledge on to and how it made them feel. He remembered, through the transformation, how so few had become so many, in such a short time.

Shadow after Shadow was vanquished.

Resh pulled away and stumbled to his feet.

"You can't use that mind control rubbish on us!" snapped Elise, staring at the rattled Shadow Lord. "Our collective faith is far more powerful."

Resh glared at Elise. "We'll see about that!" He suddenly directed his attention to collectively exhume powers from his closest drone army. As a few of the drones started falling to the ground around him, he also grabbed hold of Sirek at the top of the head and pushed him onto his knees. Sirek started shaking uncontrollably and also fell to the ground. Then, Resh's body started to transform.

As Resh's body began re-shaping, the drone army started to attack with their energy weapons. Elise fired large spirals of energy, knocking over large numbers of drones, while Sean used his ring to hit the ones getting too close and use it as a shield to deflect fire.

"Oh, dear," said Sean, looking at Resh's new form. "As if he wasn't already a big enough monster."

Elise turned to look at the tall, winged beast that was once Resh. This beast was also in the Oracle vision. It had horns on its head, eyes that were blood-red and wings like a dragon. Resh was a Shadow Angel, one of the Centurions of the Shadow Master.

The Resh-beast glared at Elise and Sean as the drone army waited. Its newly transformed senses slowly searched for any sign of an opening or weakness in the realm. He was looking for a way to move up the realms.

He suddenly flew off into the air and toward the edge of the realm. An anti-clockwise spiral of darkness enveloped Resh, and he disappeared. The portal stayed open for a while as the rest of the drones made a dive for the opening. Elise and Sean began to knock down as many as they could, but many of them got through.

Elise ran in the same direction and formed the Guardian version of a gateway between the realms. A beautiful clockwise, spiralling mandala suddenly appeared. She smiled back at Sean and walked through.

“The Martian Oracle has been breached,” said the Guardian of Caldon. “The Centurion has entered the realm of pure knowledge.”

“Very well,” replied the Tenth Guardian. “The Centurion will soon make it to the Juncture. Brother Darmas, prepare to land.”

The huge saucer-shaped spacecraft descended rapidly toward the Temple.

Resh entered the realm of pure knowledge through an anti-clockwise spiral of darkness, closely followed by his remaining drone army.

When Bernard felt the heat of the Shadow’s approaching negativity, he seemed a little annoyed, as he was creating one of his finest masterpieces ever. The Oracle had put him in the beautiful countryside of France, just as

he'd imagined. His painting was unusually large, too, blocking Resh's path through the right way, although it was being manifested as a village lane.

"Get out of my way!" snarled Resh. The painting, which captured the beauty of the Martian landscape, darkened dramatically.

A pang of anger hit Bernard's stomach, but he ignored that and instead focused on the painting. There was an exciting power about him, and he realised he could fix this without his paint brush. He meditated and thought about his painting before Resh tainted it.

Sure enough, when he opened his eyes the painting had been restored. Not only did it have its original lustre, but there was much more; it was almost like it was real. It was radiating the essence of the power that was within the scene he had painted.

Resh sensed something threatening about it. It was literally pulling him into the painting!

Behind them, Elise materialised in the French scene via a bright, rotating mandala. She summoned a burst of energy from the Oracle, which began knocking down more of the drones, as the drones responded with their energy guns.

"Arrr!" he roared, frustrated by the painting and Elise's arrival. As he was being quickly drawn to it, he frantically darkened it, and the pulling sensation stopped suddenly. In a rage, he destroyed the painting with his sharp nails.

Bernard waved his hand, and a maze appeared in front of them. Instead of hedges, the walls were made from paintings!

"Good luck making your way through that," said Bernard, running toward the maze.

Elise raced toward Bernard, grabbing his arm. She fired a blast of energy back at the Shadows.

"We'll ambush them in the maze."

Resh studied the entrance of the maze and decided the best way to make it to the end was to send the drone army in smaller groups, with each going in a different direction. With his connection to the drones, he would immediately know which group had been successful.

With Elise's mastery over the Essence and with Bernard's rapid improvement, the two found that they were able to alter the whole puzzle by rotating individual works of art in different places. In that way, they were able to use the element of surprise to quickly dispatch the drones without getting caught in cross-fire.

Once Resh found out what the Guardian and Keeper were doing, he was so furious he tried to crash through a particular painting posing as the wall, ending up inside that particular scene.

Resh howled inside the static scene of Paris with the Eiffel Tower in the background. He quickly recalculated his entrance point, falling back inside the maze.

"Split up into smaller groups!" ordered Resh. "I want that Guardian dead." He sent the same message to the other groups, which were substantially smaller in number than when they entered the maze.

"I think we're close," said Elise. "Look."

Bernard saw that the paintings around them were of archways and gates. The Shadows suddenly appeared around the corner. Elise and Bernard fired on them with a rotating blast of white energy and quickly spun a few paintings around to get away from the returned fire.

But the drones were waiting there, too. They quickly did the same again. And again the drones were there firing at them. They shielded themselves with the Oracle and ring.

“They’ve worked out a counter plan and are surrounding us,” said Bernard.

“Quick, I’ve got an idea. Follow me,” said Elise.

They flipped the paintings in front of them one after the other, doing a wider clockwise rotation around the cluster of drones that had converged on them.

They kept doing this, getting faster and faster, creating a kaleidoscope of rotating artwork around the drone army. Eventually, the artwork exploded everywhere, with a lot of the drones being vaporised in the process.

As the confetti showered down, Resh and the remainder of his drone army made their way into the next realm through the only gateway artwork that remained.

Chapter 8

As Resh and the drone army materialised in the realm of contentment, Resh found himself in Paris! He looked up to see the Eiffel Tower in the background. For a minute, he thought he'd been tricked after all, but soon he realised this was the projection of this particular realm.

They were in a large mall area where people were engaged in business. Resh scowled at how the Earthlings traded in such a pathetic and honest fashion.

He and the drones moved through the crowd, with no interest in the useless items they were passing. However, he could see something shining in the distance. When he finally arrived at the end of the mall, he saw a large array of things that got his attention. There in various stalls were riches such as bags full of diamonds, bars of gold, jewellery and piles of cash.

Elise and Marie hid behind one of the stalls, hoping that they could trap Resh and the drones long enough to vanquish them once and for all. Elise looked back and saw the market scene had disappeared, as she and Marie were left in this treasure trove with the greedy Centurion. She watched as Resh picked up an amulet from amongst the pile of jewellery. Elise looked closely as the amulet became dark and cloudy from Resh's touch.

As the drones gathered around Resh, Elise and Marie started sending spirals of destructive energy toward the drones, many of them crashing back into the loot, others firing back.

Resh held up the amulet, and a spiralling dark energy shot out, as small static explosions crashed into some of the stalls. Then a barrage of energy was fired toward the women's location.

"Did you see the amulet that Resh picked up?" asked Marie.

"I saw it. He knows conventional weapons won't destroy us," said Elise.

“But I don’t think he knows totally how to harness the dark powers yet.”

“Well, he is kind of an apprentice Master,” said Marie.

“All the more reason why he needs to be vanquished,” said Elise.

Elise suddenly stood up as the Oracle formed into a large shield. From the centre of the shield she began firing a volley of spiralling energy balls toward the shadow army. Many drones were knocked over, while some were vaporised. In his urge to retaliate, Resh tried to activate the amulet again, but he was also hit and thrown back, crashing into the stalls. Elise ducked back down again as more energy weapon fire exploded around them.

“That was amazing,” said Marie. “That thing is full of surprises!”

Elise nodded as she threw the Oracle suddenly toward the drones. Many guns were knocked from their hands, as the disk did a wide arc and returned to her hand.

“Come on! Let’s get out of here.” Elise and Marie fired at the remaining drones, but a large group of them manage to escape.

“Resh must have escaped into the next realm,” said Marie.

“I’ll deal with him there,” said Elise. “See you later.” A mandala appeared, and she ran through.

Resh and the remaining drones emerged in the realm of security, in an old Japanese village at night. He was lurking in the empty lane-way, glaring down side lanes for a way out of this maze, when he heard laughter in the distance.

He glared at a house with a large verandah and paper doors. Flying across the clearing, he crashed through the paper doors and skidded over the tatami floor. The drones surrounded the house.

Elise materialised into the realm behind them and started to engage the drones.

Inside the house, Matsu was in the middle of hugging his young daughter.

“Goodnight, my little angel,” He noticed Resh’s sudden appearance with indifference.

His son looked at Resh curiously and said, “Okarsan, there’s a scary monster in our house.”

Resh was repulsed by the family bonding session and snarled in disgust. Matsu, noticing this, reached for his son and hugged him.

“I love you, son.”

His wife gently held his hand and whispered in his ear.

“I’ll put the kids to bed, while you deal with this uninvited guest.”

Suddenly, as Matsu’s wife and children went toward the stairs, Resh lunged at them. As he swung at one of the children they all disappeared! Resh went face first into the bottom of the stairs.

Furious, he sprang to his feet and dived at Matsu. Matsu backed up near a tiny dining table with cushions around it, firing at the angry Centurion with the powers of his ring.

The paper walls suddenly exploded at the front of the house, and a group of drones crashed through. More drones came in firing, and Matsu engaged them as the cushions around him exploded, with stuffing flying everywhere. Elise came in behind Resh and the drones and sent a large spiral of energy toward them.

Suddenly, a group of drones attacked Matsu in the corner. With quick thinking, he dived for the samurai sword hanging above the dining area. Spinning his body in quick movements, he struck out with the sword, cutting down the group of drones with decisive and deadly blows.

“You lose, Resh,” said Elise, looking around the house for more drones, but finding none.

Resh suddenly flew into the air and crashed through the paper wall. A dark anti-clockwise spiral of energy enveloped him, and he was gone. A handful of drones followed him from out in the yard and also disappeared through the gateway.

Resh, with his remaining drones, looked at the large crowd of people who had gathered in front of them.

He was in the realm of collectivity. He looked around at the city he was in and instantly recognised it. This was New York. But it wasn't the New York he remembered in the final days of the Shadow's dominion on Earth. No. The people were different. There were no Shadows here anymore.

Suddenly, from out of the crowd, a lone motorcycle came toward him.

Commander Mason looked at the Shadow Lord as his visor helmet automatically rose.

"Well, if it isn't the illustrious Lord Resh," said Bryan.

"Commander Mason," said Resh, eyeing Bryan's uniform.

"I'm not carrying a gun, if that's what you're thinking. Policemen have taken on a very different role in this day and age. See? My ring doesn't even work in this realm."

"That's pathetic! How can you control people without force?" spat Resh. He reached inside his suit. "In that case, you have no way of stopping me from killing you." He pointed the gun at Bryan triumphantly.

At that moment, the crowd began to converge towards Resh. He noticed Elise was also standing amongst the crowd. He paused.

"What is this trickery? How are you controlling them?"

"This isn't control, Resh. They all have free will. The community of Earth is so united now. They have no fear of the Shadows anymore."

"Tell them to get back or I'll start killing their children!" Resh noticed the children weren't even frightened of him or his drones. Even if he started shooting everyone, these people wouldn't even die in this reality anyway.

He was holding a gun now, but he wasn't holding it up. Unsure of where to retreat, he flew up over the top of the crowd. Looking back to see what his

remaining drones were doing, he went head first into an electronic billboard.

Chapter 9

Resh went right through the billboard and appeared on the other side in the realm of forgiveness. He landed in total darkness, except for a huge bright light that shone in the distance.

Ahead, Resh saw seven figures. The light behind them was so intense that he wasn't able to discern their facial features.

The bright light behind them was the portal – the portal that looked like and represented the Sun. It was also where the left and right ways met.

“Looks like the Shadow Lord is a little worse for wear,” said a female voice.

“The Oracle has taken its toll on him,” replied a male one.

“Your move, Resh. If you go on from here, it is suicide without your army,” said the female voice.

“Is that the tough bitch?” said the disoriented but seething Resh.

“Hey, that's no way to talk to a lady!” snapped Steve. He was careful he didn't say “my wife” in case Resh used this knowledge to his advantage.

“Tough words from a Realm Keeper,” said Resh. An army of drones suddenly appeared behind Resh. “Oh! My army has arrived.” The tall dark soldiers from hell stood at attention, weapons poised. He motioned two of them to stand beside him.

Suddenly, he grabbed both soldiers behind the neck. As before, Resh became revitalised, while his hapless servants were drained. When it was all over, Resh was slightly larger and more powerful, but the drones were left as nothing but little black puddles on the ground.

“You see, I've always got a contingency plan.” Resh looked at the drones. “Get them!” he ordered.

Resh and the Shadow drones approached the Keepers. Elise raised the Oracle and waited for its manifestation.

“These drones look different,” said Elise.

Sean stared at them. “More powerful than the others that didn’t make it.”

Elise nodded.

Sean, Marie, Bernard, Matsu, Brayn and Steve focused on their connection to the Oracle and their connection with each other. All their rings absorbed the vibrations and started to manifest similar powers as the Oracle.

The Drone Lords fired at their energy weapons, as each of the Keepers responded with a clockwise spiral of positive energy from their rings. The drones were all knocked back, guns clattering to the ground. Resh unleashed negative energy from an object he suddenly revealed.

Elise stared at the amulet that Resh had picked up in the mall and tried to use, as she held up the Oracle. Elise noticed the dark energy from the object came spiralling toward her in an anti-clockwise direction, as the positive energy of the Oracle went toward Resh.

The two energies collided to the sound of a sonic explosion. Both drones and Keepers were knocked to the ground. In rage, Resh charged, grabbing hold of Elise and pushing her to the ground.

“This is my finest moment,” snarled Resh. Fighting against the positive energy that surrounded her, he managed to grab her throat. “I will kill you with pleasure!”

“Elise!” said Steve, shocked. His shock turned to anger as he diverted his attack on the rising drones. The other Keepers joined in, and there was a fierce exchange of fire. Steve managed to vaporise one as he ran toward Resh and Elise.

Struggling to breathe, Elise said. “I forgive.”

Instead of Resh thinking he was defeating her, he loosened his hold on her throat and stepped back, stunned. Memories flooded back to him from a time when he was a young Shadow Lord. Back then, a Guardian had said the same thing, right before Resh’s whole platoon was wiped out.

Suddenly, a loud noise echoed through the realm. From the central way

came a bright flash of light, which filled the realm with light.

Resh let go and turned his attention to the source, as Elise rolled out of his grip. Resh snarled as the energy approached him, enveloping him in a clockwise spiralling light. Then it carried him through portal, Resh roaring with anguish.

Suddenly, the light that had appeared all around them began to intensify. One by one, it started sucking the drones toward the portal, until eventually the light completely filled the realm.

When the realm closed down, everyone was standing inside the Temple.

Elise thanked all those Realm Keepers who connected through the holo-link and then closed the call.

She looked up to see a huge spaceship landing on top of the Temple. The craft's landing legs held the huge dome-shaped ship well above the top of the Temple.

"How did we get here?" asked Bernard.

"Wow!" said Marie.

"We're here because the Temple has been transformed," said Elise. She noticed the Primordial Fountain on the Temple dome was now glowing.

"Interesting, isn't it?" said Sean.

"Yes, I agree, sir," replied Elise. "Very interesting." She patted Sean on the arm.

Steve hugged her. "You OK?"

"Of course, my dear," said Elise. "Aren't I the tough b...?"

"In this case you had to be," said Bryan. "Otherwise, Resh would have easily destroyed you."

She nodded. "You've all done a great service as the Keepers of the Realm. As for me, I think my Guardianship is over."

“Correct,” said a familiar voice. A figure wearing a Indian kurta, tailored to look like a uniform, entered the temple and bowed. A small metallic mandala was displayed to the left of his heart.

“Arden!” said Elise and Sean together.

Arden motioned them outside, and they were all transported up to the Caldon ship on a hovering platform.

“Something is pulling us in!” cried the Shadow helmsman. The Shadow ship shook violently, and the crew could feel a sudden lightness in gravity.

“What’s the source of the power?” asked Resh’s First Officer, quickly glancing at the closest terminal screen. “Get us out of orbit! Full power to the thrusters!”

The ship lurched forward with a jolt of power, but still continued its rapid descent into the Martian atmosphere.

“We can’t break orbit,” said the Shadow helmsman, shocked.

“Is this full power?” said the First Officer.

“Yes!”

“Main bridge, this is Engineering,” cried a voice over the ship’s comm. “The drive core is over-heating, and we’re losing containment!”

Suddenly, a huge explosion ripped through the aft section of the Shadow Ship and broke away from the main part of the ship.

Before the remaining crew had time to think they were going to burn up in the atmosphere, the whole Shadow crew were completely stripped clean from every part of the ship by another force.

“Wow,” said Elise. “This is huge!”

Inside the ship was a huge open dome, which looked rather like a control room, except that there weren't any physical monitors or touch-screen displays. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the same level of comfort and interacting through holography and augmented reality.

As they entered another area, a Caldor came over and bowed. He, too, wore the uniform-style kurta and the mandala on his shirt.

"I am Darmas. The pleasure is mine."

Elise felt really relaxed as soon as he spoke.

"Come this way," said Arden. "You must have many questions."

Elise thought Arden had completely changed from the last time she saw him. Not only was his dress-code different, but his nature had become much more subtle.

They walked over to part of the control room, where a huge head-up screen projected in front of them. On the screen displayed a top view of the Milky Way galaxy, overlaid with a mandala.

"Please make yourselves comfortable," said Arden, motioning to the stools around the almost featureless terminal.

An attendant brought out a tray of drinks and snacks.

"So, you said I was correct about not being the Guardian anymore," said Elise, taking one of the drinks.

"Well, you could say there was a shift in the order of things when you became pregnant on your journey here."

Elise choked a little on her drink. It tasted a bit like tea, but somehow different. "I thought so."

Steve hugged her. "This is great news!" he exclaimed, grinning.

"Is the baby the new Guardian?" she asked.

"Yes. The unborn child has already played its first role here and helped to protect you against the Centurion, Resh."

"You mean, the power of innocence," said Sean.

"Yes," said Arden.

“What’s this transition of the Martian Oracle all about, anyway?” asked Matsu.

“Good question. Look at the screen,” said Arden. The mandala that was overlaying the whole Milky Way changed to the subtle system.

“Same as on the Martian Oracle,” said Bernard.

“Yes. The subtle system is represented by all the deities that work through the Goddess, yet are very much part of her. They are very much part of us, too. As you’ve realised, your internal subtle system, countries and planets reside here, too.

“The Realm Keepers represent the deities through the realms. As you know, the Guardians have access to these powers any time.” The mandala came back on the screen. “The God and the Goddess reside in the mandala through these nine interlocking triangles.

“Look more closely at this mandala on the screen, and you will notice that these nine triangles interlock to make up forty-three smaller triangles. These quadrants are where other Planetary Oracles reside, the same as Mars. There are also nine Planetary Oracles in each quadrant.”

“Wow!” said Elise. “So the nine interlocking triangles represent the Guardians?”

“Yes,” said Arden. “And other universal powers.”

“What’s your role?” asked Sean.

“In the Galactic Council I’m referred to as the Tenth Guardian.”

“You must travel a lot,” said Elise.

“My God, how fast does this ship travel?” asked Bryan. Arden grinned.

“I’m not quite clear on one thing,” said Marie. “How is this related to our transformation forty years ago?”

“In very simple terms, back then the subtle system within you was completely freed from the dominion of the Shadows. Now, the subtle system of this solar system, the Planetary Oracle, has been freed from the Shadows.”

“They can’t enter our solar system anymore?” asked Elise.

“Correct.” Arden pointed to the small triangle, with Mars at the centre. Most of it was now shaded white. “You’ve all made a huge impact.”

“So, the Shadows in orbit are gone?” asked Bryan

“It was immediate,” said Arden, not elaborating further.

“Sounds painful,” said Elise. “So how exactly would the Martian Oracle have been compromised if the Shadows had succeeded?”

“If they had succeeded like they’d done before, they would have had access to Earth and possibly any part of this quadrant they desired.”

“From the realm of forgiveness?” asked Sean. “I take it they can't cross this portal.”

“It’s called the ‘Great Juncture’. It’s where the left and the right ways meet,” said Arden. “Only transformed individuals can cross there.”

The screen suddenly changed to a view outside. Sirek was trying to get to his feet.

“That Shadow is still alive!” said Marie apprehensively.

“I thought Resh had killed him!” said Elise.

“He's not a Shadow anymore,” said Arden.

A couple of Caldor officers went outside and brought Sirek inside. They laid him down on a couch a little way from where they all sat. Everyone walked over to him.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” muttered Sirek, coughing and spluttering. “They made me do it!” A translation of his language came through the Oracle.

“You are forgiven,” said Arden, placing his hand on Sirek’s chest and neck. Sirek settled down immediately and took a drink that an attendant passed him.

“Where are you from?” asked Marie. “You look a little bit Indian.”

“I’m from Udicia,” said Sirek. “I was a soldier in the Tyronian Liberation Army, until Lord Resh assigned me to this special mission.”

“Where’s Udicia?” asked Elise, looking at Arden. Arden touched a terminal close by and the same screen came up.

“See the dark patch still left in your quadrant. The Shadows have a very

strong hold on the planet in this region.”

“That’s Alpha Centauri!” said Elise, excitedly.

“Yes,” said Arden. “And I’ve just been updated. The Goddess is just starting her work there. The transformation of Udicia has only just begun.”
