

# The Will of the Three

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## Chapter 1

“This will take you into the Dark Realms, Calana,” said Arden. “On a galactic scale, the Dark Realms have left the Realm of Innocence and are now in the Realm of Creativity.” He opened up his hand, and seven Golden Stars flew toward Calana, penetrating where the seven centres resided in her body.

At first, she was a little surprised, but then she became completely thoughtless, as a wave of new awareness washed through her senses. This was the first time she had received the temporary powers of the Incarnation.

“It's now time for the Guardians to go to the next step. It's time for them to take on the Shadow Masters,” said Arden.

Calana was twenty-seven, with a solid build and brown hair. Born in Varlia, Udicia, she was as patriotic as the rest of her compatriots. She wore a ninja-style uniform with a symbol of the Three Ways woven on her right breast pocket.

“Let's do this,” said Calana. She motioned to Arden. “Open it.”

“Just before you enter, it will rotate anti-clockwise for a few rotations,” said Arden. “This will let you in, undetected. But it will also make you sick.”

“I always come back sick,” said Calana.

Arden conjured up the special Mandala that was able to penetrate the anti-clockwise motion of the Dark Realms. A greyish Mandala started rotating slowly against the opposite spinning forces.

“Quick!” said Arden.

Calana jumped through the Mandala.

Her target was chosen on the basis of the vibrational knowledge received from the Galactic Council. A few select Guardians were chosen to conduct missions into the border regions of the Dark Realms, where several Shadow Masters had recently infiltrated. This was the region between the Transformed Realms and Dark Realms, and was potential ground for expansion of the Dark Realms.

The Galaxy was expected to transform much more quickly than Galaxies had done in the past. So it was important that these Shadow Masters were removed quickly. Also, as they were commencing the transformation of the Realm of Creativity, there was a risk at the Left Way of a significant breach. The planet that was directly in line with that was Pern.

After Daniel Withers was given the seven Golden Stars to defeat Gylith, the Council decided that it was time to empower many Guardians with these new strengths. This would also let the Incarnations put more of their attention on the Shadow Wraiths.

Calana had been trained to handle some overbearing negativity, but nothing had

prepared her for her entrance into this world. The planet was called Vorne and it resided on the Right Way in the Realm of Creativity. When she materialised, she vomited violently over the grass.

After regaining her composure, she moved swiftly across the countryside. She knew where the Shadow Master was, because the Oracle was indicating his whereabouts by radiating heat. She was running through the outskirts of a large, regional city. The air was thick with smog, and the houses around looked like they should have been condemned.

She had seen it all before, in varying degrees, across the border regions. The more Shadows on a planet, the more misery, death and destruction.

A vehicle suddenly rounded a corner, its headlights almost blinding her. It braked hard, and several figures jumped out, the doors rising like a lady beetle's wings.

"Way past curfew," said one of the soldiers.

She instantly knew, through the Oracle, that these soldiers were under the influence of a Shadow Lord. She threw the Oracle, and the discus made its rounds, knocking the guns out of their hands. She engaged the unarmed soldiers with wild karate kicks and flying punches, before catching the returned discus.

After all was quiet, she looked inside the vehicle and noticed a bulky computer screen protruding from the dashboard. She ran a finger on the screen, but it didn't respond to her touch. She felt something underneath it, something jutting out. It turned out to be a keyboard.

She was familiar with this old technology, as it was not dissimilar to that on Udicia. However, lately she had been to so many different worlds that she was becoming accustomed to more evolved computing. She'd seen keyboards and mice, touch-screens, holo-graphic controls, voice-only computers, and even robots.

She tapped quickly on the keyboard, and a schematic of the region displayed on the green LCD screen. This would lead her to the location of their leader. She jumped in the passenger seat, punching a soldier through the window, and drove down the road.

Calana studied the fortified compound as she approached. The best option for getting in would be to talk to the security guard. The vehicle, although quite sturdy, would not be able to smash down the gate.

Luckily for her, as she approached the gate, it opened. The Oracle was a universal key. Not only that, it was also a universal translator. Everyone spoke Varlian – or so it seemed to her.

She drove quickly into the compound, parking at the back of a large shed, which looked like a hangar. The heat was definitely coming from within this shed. After looking around, she dashed out of the vehicle and went to a side door of the building. There was a combination keypad on it. She waved the Oracle across it, and the door clicked open. She

loved having the best skeleton key in the Universe.

Inside, she crept her way along a rack of military equipment and weapon parts. She could hear a military-style voice talking to a group of soldiers in the distance. She went into the next aisle and peered across at the gathering. There was a large missile propped up on the floor in the centre of this gathering.

A technical person in a white coat was standing next to a screen built into the missile's side panel; but Calana wasn't looking at him. She glared at the man who was speaking. He wore a dark military uniform and a cap.

Something wasn't quite right; the information from the Oracle indicated that the Shadow Master was here. But this wasn't a Master; this man was only a Shadow Lord.

"...this is activated, the pathogen will become airborne and will quickly spread across the world," the Shadow Lord was saying.

"Won't this kill everyone?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Yes, it will," said the Lord with an evil grin. "It's the Plague." He picked up a syringe and squirted a little into the air. "But for everyone who is inoculated..."

"The shipments have now been delivered to all our allies," said the man in the white coat.

"Excellent," said the Shadow Lord. "All we need to do now is get this baby in the air."

"There's no honour in genocide," roared Calana, casually walking out into the open. She was holding a Guardian sword.

Some of the soldiers started laughing, because they all held machine guns.

"Well, well, well," said the Shadow Lord. "A Knight in shining armour." More chuckles. "Why don't you join us? You can watch as your family and friends die a slow and horrible death."

"Like I said, everybody deserves a fighting chance. This is cold-blooded murder, and I think I'll fight!" snapped Calana.

One of the soldiers fired his machine gun as if it were going to be an easy kill, but was shocked when the bullets fell short of their target. They were all hitting an energy spiralling from her sword!

A massive surge of the energy started spiralling around Calana's sword in a clockwise direction. She pointed it at a group of soldiers, and a flash of light turned them into white statues. One or two fell over, and a chalky-white powder drifted everywhere.

She charged and was soon sparring with a group of angry soldiers. They'd dropped their machine guns and held large Bowie knives. She kicked, punched and threw some opponents over her shoulders, while she slashed others. They were instantly whitened by the vibrations from her sword.

Meanwhile, the Shadow Lord had climbed up to a second-level landing and was holding a large rocket launcher.

“Sorry to break up the party... but I have to break up the party.”

The rocket fired, and it quickly bore down on Calana. She fired a flash of energy from her sword, and the rocket was pushed back toward the Shadow Lord. It exploded close to him, and he was thrown into the air, landing on the floor below. Pieces of the landing and the roof of the shed crashed to the floor.

She looked down at the Lord who was returning to his own form. He had a black, ghost-like appearance and large red eyes.

“It’s not...over...Guardian...” he croaked.

A large, dark vortex suddenly appeared over the top of the Shadow Lord and rotated in an anti-clockwise direction. Sickening negativity poured out as the portal expanded.

A new monster emerged from this dark void, looking more evil and more sinister than anything Calana had ever encountered before. The Master wore a black suit, a short cape and a pale sinister look, not dissimilar to a vampire’s.

“You didn’t waste any time getting here,” said Calana, a little surprised. Now she understood why she had picked up the Master’s trail here.

“I was expecting you, Guardian,” sneered the Shadow Master. A black tentacle suddenly shot out of what was his right arm and twirled around her neck. “Guardians! They always ruin things!” he snapped.

“Well, watch me ruin it some more!” snapped Calana, half-choking. She pointed her sword, and a large flash of energy struck the Master. The Master flew through the air, crashing through the side of the shed and out into the compound.

Calana charged through the hole into the shed, running with god-like speed. Springing to his feet, the Master met her sword with his staff, dark spiralling energy firing from it. She deflected the dark energy with her sword, but it struck the side of the shed.

Suddenly, there was a huge explosion from all the munitions that were stored there. Calana held her ground as waves of blasts hit her. She cringed momentarily, but soon realised that she now had powers that were protecting her.

When it all died down, she had a terrible thought about the warhead. It mustn’t have exploded, because it would have been much larger than any of the explosions she’d just endured. But the pathogens could have escaped.

The Master picked up on her thoughts and was grinning.

“Well, that may save me some time...”

Becoming angry, Calana fired a volley of energy into the Shadow Master, driving him into the ground with her fury. She quickly ran back to where the shed once stood and looked around. She found the missile intact, lying amongst the rubble. It was built to withstand extreme shock and temperature, with only a near-atomic blast able to break through its casing. Besides, the Oracle was now telling her it had not been compromised. She looked around for the Master, who had disappeared. But he wouldn’t be far away.

Suddenly, a giant Phoenix came down from the sky! It had long, black feathers, a large pointy beak and red piercing eyes. Huge talons extended toward the missile and locked onto it. It began to ascend into the sky.

Calana ran up a big pile of rubble and jumped to grab the end of the missile. Swinging from it, she realised the Shadow Master still had to climb very high and arm the missile, if he was going to disperse the Plague quickly around the world. Otherwise, it would only affect a small area, and his enemies would have enough time to come up with the same vaccine as the Shadows.

A tentacle came out of the wing. It flipped open the display on the missile and started punching in an access code. She stood on top of the missile, swung around the Master's giant leg and cut the tentacle with her sword. More tentacles came, but she sliced through those, too.

A huge beak and red eyes came into view from above. The Phoenix emitted an ear-piercing screech, and shook the missile violently. She slipped, unable to grab anything, and was falling back down to earth. As she fell, she thought, "If he can fly, so can I." She stopped in mid-air.

"OK, this is weird."

She thought of going forward, and suddenly she was flying forward, picking up speed as she became accustomed to this new power. She could see the Master in the distance; so she willed the distance to close. She flew like a rocket and stopped in front of the Master.

"Not so fast."

The Phoenix reared, and a fiery bolt of energy flew from its mouth. The Oracle transformed into a shield and repelled the anti-clockwise, searing energy.

"I think this is high enough, anyway," croaked the Phoenix, and let go of the missile.

Calana dived for it, remembering her sky-diving training. She quickly caught it, and started to slow it down.

The Phoenix was right onto her, snapping at her with its giant beak. Calana fired at the bird with bolts of energy, one shot hitting its wing.

Calana knew she needed to put the missile somewhere it wouldn't endanger this world, but where? Underground, under the ocean, out in space? It was a race against time, as the countdown on the LCD panel became frighteningly close to the end.

She could possibly take it up into space, but the Shadow Master was snapping at her heels. She looked up at the Phoenix, silhouetted over the glorious sun.

Of course! She had the Golden Stars! She didn't need the Keepers here. She lined the missile up with the Phoenix and threw it directly at the Master, with the Sun at the bird's back.

A Mandala opened around the three of them. Just before it closed, the Phoenix made

an ear-splitting screech, and they were all gone.

Millions of miles away from Vorne, a Mandala opened. The Shadow Master and the warhead were fried in the sun's corona.

As she descended back to earth, she realised one thing about her experience: her humanity had clouded her will. She was thinking too much like an ordinary human being while she had the temporary powers. If she'd realised the powers she had, she could have destroyed the Shadow Master with a thought!

However, it was all part of her experience and something she could take away to enlighten other Guardians.

## Chapter 2

"It's really changed, hasn't it?" said Penni. "Bersia, I mean. Since the secret police left."

Penni was nineteen, with a thin build, olive skin and short hair. Born in Bersia, she had been a Guardian for six years. She wore a black, ninja-style uniform with a symbol of the Three Ways woven on her right breast pocket.

"I know what you mean. It's not just the people," replied Sari, looking around the forest. "Have you ever seen so many animals, birds and insects?"

Sari was sixteen, with a small build, olive skin and long, dark-brown hair. Born in Bersia, she'd only been a Guardian for half as long as Penni. She also wore the same ninja-style uniform as Penni, with the same Three Ways symbol.

"We're in the true realms of the Goddess without the Shadows," said Penni.

The countryside of Bersia was scenic, with rolling hills covered in flowers and grand old trees dotting the landscape.

"Now it's up to us to keep it that way," said Sari.

"Not on our own, but we play a pretty significant part," said Penni, looking at Sari seriously. "You know all that training we've done; we'll have to put it all to the test sooner or later."

"Yeah, but let's not think about that now," said Sari. "We should be enjoying ourselves while we can!"

"You're right, Sari. Never look back and never look forward. That's what Dad always said."

"He did, didn't he?" said Sari. "He said a lot of things like that, and it never really sank in until Mum left."

"She was a strict woman and not exactly the greatest wife," said Penni, "but she is our mother, and look where we are because of her."

Both girls were silent for a while as they walked through the forest.

"Look at that huge butterfly!" said Sari suddenly. "Let's try and catch up with it."

Both girls gave chase. Soon they were running through a field of tall grass, giggling with each other as they ran. Suddenly, they fell into the grass, still giggling as they rolled over and looked up to the sky.

"We used to do that a lot, didn't we, Penni?" said Sari. "How long has it been?"

"Maybe five or six years," said Penni. "Since then, we've been running after Oracle-generated beasts. But it's nice for a change."

"Well, I've had my Oracle for three years," said Sari. "The Oracle has ruled our teenage years. It's like we've..."

"Missed out on growing up, perhaps?" said Penni.



"Maybe, but we've gained so much in other ways," said Sari.

"Like understanding people and being in tune with nature," said Penni.

"Yeah, but we already had that as Gurus," replied Sari.

"Having the powers to vanquish a Shadow Lord?" offered Penni. "Well, you can't beat that one!"

"Perhaps if all these things..." Sari trailed off. "Something has happened. I can feel it through the Oracle. I sense it's about to reveal something."

"I felt that, too," said Penni.

A large golden Mandala suddenly opened up behind the girls. They looked at each other, knowing that this was their first real quest. They quickly walked through.

Penni and Sari re-materialised and stood observing a picturesque scene. They were in the centre of the Realm of Innocence.

"We're still in Udicia," said Sari, breaking the silence. "It's too beautiful for there to be Shadows here."

"This is Delicia," said Penni. "I know because I've seen that pyramid-shaped building in a brochure before." They were on a mountain, overlooking the city. The city was next to a large shipping port. "It's breathtaking."

"We must be close to a Keeper," said Sari. "Why else would we be here?"

They walked in silence for a while, both contemplating the fact that they were now on their first mission. They were moving along the side of a mountain, taking in the resort-style housing that overlooked the city.

"It's cooler this way," said Sari, pointing to one of the houses at the edge of the cliff.

They walked around the side of the building and noticed a man standing close to the back fence, looking out at the scenery.

"I was expecting you two," said Ulef, turning to face the girls and smiling. "Come through." He looked up the road. "Where's the other Guardian?"

Ulef was the Keeper of the Realm of Innocence. He was of medium build with brown, curly hair, and was thirty-eight years of age. He was wearing Lemarian clothing, which looked like it came from England in the nineteenth century.

"We haven't caught up with him or her yet," said Penni. She looked at Ulef's wrists. He wore gold bangles on each one, with disks covering his lower palms. There was an etching of the Mars-like planet of Marcia on each disk, representing the Realm of Innocence.

Ulef motioned them toward the back of the yard. He looked across the ocean and pointed to the land in the distance.

"Lemaria," said Sari.

"That's right, young lady, Lemaria. It's a beautiful country now, since the

transformation, but before that, it was under the brutal rule of a tyrant called Liro.”

“You played your role as a Guru,” said Penni. “You stayed united with other Gurus and gave the community hope.”

“We did survive, didn't we? Like yourselves,” said Ulef. He stared at Lemaria. “Look how close I was to freedom. I could have just got in a boat and come to Delicia years ago.”

“But you didn't,” said Sari. “You chose to be part of something significant and fight for the cause.”

“Like us,” said Penni.

There was silence among the three.

“Please come inside for a moment.”

Ulef's house was big inside, full of memorabilia from his home country, Lemaria.

“Why the two talismans?” asked Penni. “I remember the Earth people only having one.”

“You're right,” said Ulef. “All the Keepers of Udicia have been given the powers of the Left, Central and Right Ways, and now they only reside in the Central Way. I guess it falls in line with the three Guardians. Thus, I'm now sitting in Delicia, and not in my home country, Lemaria.”

“Three Guardians?” queried Sari. “I wonder why we haven't met the other one yet?”

“I haven't been given the privilege of that knowledge,” said Ulef.

“I guess we'll find out who the other one is eventually,” said Penni. “Do you know where we're going?”

“No, there isn't any need. All the Keepers are required to do is put their attention on the specific realms at the right moment. It doesn't matter where you are in this Universe; everything is connected.”

Ulef lifted his arms, palms up.

“Put your Oracles on each talisman.” Penni and Sari did so. “And whoever the third Guardian is, may he or she also become empowered by the subtle qualities of this realm.”

Penni and Sari materialised at the end of a dusty road, in a small village. This was the Realm of Creativity in the Central Way. They were in the country of Velonia.

As they walked along, they noticed people politely chatting in front of restaurants, cafes, and art and craft shops. The odd chariot went by, with passengers smiling and waving.

“Do you know this place, Penni?” asked Sari.

“It's still Udicia, but what country it is, I'm not sure. They look like Varlians, but their fashion is odd.”

A lady walked out of a sewing shop.

“Oh, my, young ladies, you are a long way from home. Beautiful fabrics like that, and

lovely olive skin. You must be Eeonians – no, Bersians.”

“That’s right,” started Penni.

“I’m Nellie. What are your names?”

“Penni and Sari,” said Penni, noticing a symbol in the window of the shop. It was the planet Lesnora, which symbolised the Realm of Creativity. She pointed towards it. “That’s interesting. Where did you get that?”

“Well, you are very perceptive,” said Nellie. “I’m not sure exactly, but the man in that art shop over the road might know.”

They walked across the road and entered the art shop as suggested; although art shop wasn’t the right description. This was quite a large gallery, with a variety of work from all across Udicia. The girls even noticed Bersian tapestries.

Something in one of the displays caught their eyes. There was a painting of the Oracle, the order of the rings, and even a Guardian sword.

“Look at this!” said Sari. “It’s the final battle!”

Most Udicians now referred to the opening of the Juncture as the final battle. War and legacy no longer held any reverence in the new order. The past was the past, and most Udicians just wanted to move on and leave the dark times behind.

“Such infinite detail,” said Penni, looking at the work. “Only an Incarnation could paint something like this.”

“It always felt like someone else was painting it,” said a man from behind the girls.

They turned around and looked at Sef, the Keeper of the Realm of Creativity. He was of small build, with straight black hair, and was twenty-nine years of age. He wore a suited version of clothing from Earth’s old west.

“Hello, I’m Sef, and you must be Larn’s girls, Penni and Sari?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Penni, looking at Sef’s rings. He had rings on both thumbs. The etchings on his rings represented the moon-like planet of Lesnora, closest to the sun. “I guess we’re here to make our connection with this realm.”

“Of course you are,” said Sef. He looked around the shop.

“We haven’t caught up with the other Guardian yet,” said Penni.

“Maybe she’s already in the battle,” said Sef.

“How do you know she’s a she?” asked Sari.

“That’s true,” said Sef. “The same way I knew these details: they just come to me.”

“So, where are you in this scene?” asked Penni.

“Here,” said Sef, pointing at the bottom of the painting. “That’s Ulef right at the bottom.”

“I see,” said Sari. “So the Gurus fought in order of your realms within the Juncture?”

“Yes, but not at first,” said Sef. “This is a snapshot toward the end of the battle. So this is Ulef at the Realm of Innocence, and then me in the Realm of Creativity. Viler’s here at the Realm of Contentment.”

“So you worked in a clockwise direction around the battles?” asked Sari. “Those Shadows within the battle circles, were they all the opposing qualities of the particular Realms?”

“Yes, you can see that, can't you Sari? Although we never thought of it at the time, we did circle the battles to counter their opposing forces. That was really the power in the battle, not the guns. It was also what the Guardians did with those winged creatures that helped.

“The Shadow Angels,” said Sari.

“Yes. Well, you can see here,” said Sef, “Cal is circling the Realm of Collectivity.”

“But he's firing at the Juncture,” said Sari.

“Gylith played that trick on the Gurus,” said Sef. “In order to try and break up our collectivity, he manipulated that very realm. With the transformation of General Nas, he had another means of blocking the Juncture and pulling Remm and Meln out of their realms.”

“I thought you said it was Uncle Cal's realm?” asked Penni.

“No, it was Remm's, but he was tied up in a battle with Nas. Cal was also a Varlian and a sniper. So he did the circling of Remm's realm.”

“Well picked up by the divine forces,” said Penni, looking in the Juncture. “Is that Nas and a Shadow Angel, flying through the Right Way?”

“Yes. The Gurus had little hope of bringing down Nas,” said Sef. “As you know, Meln tried to bring him down with a conventional weapon, but failed. Only a Guardian can kill a Shadow Lord.”

“You could now,” said Sari.

“In a way, I could, as Udicia is now working through the Planetary realms. If one was here I could move him onto the Juncture, which in our case now is via the sun,” said Sef.

“Ouch,” said Penni.

“As I was saying about the Gurus fighting in the Juncture, they never had any chance of destroying him.”

“But they could position him,” said Sari.

“Yes, put him in the right spot to be nudged up the way, which is what Meln did.”

“But at that point the Juncture wasn't open,” mentioned Penni.

“No, it wasn't. So Nas assumed his position at the wing tips of the Master,” said Sef.

“Wouldn't that have given Gylith more power?” asked Penni.

“It did, in a direct fighting sense, but he'd lost all his collective senses. You see, that war was all ingeniously prepared by the Guardians. All Gylith's Lords were sent back to their Master, via the Keepers. Armies were prepared from each realm and coordinated to appear at the Juncture when Gylith attacked. When he was about to invade, the Guardians let the readied armies through, the Sylonians being the first.”

“There’s something missing in this painting,” said Penni.

“The Guru who represented the Realm of Security,” said Sari.

“That’s right. That Guru was never there fighting on the ground. He was already fighting Shadows the way the Keepers will this time.”

“Who was he?” asked Penni.

“Considering you are moving your way up the realms, I think you will find that out by the time you get to that particular realm,” said Sef, staring at the large Mandalas spinning behind them.

## Chapter 3

The girls materialised in the Realm of Contentment, in the Central Way. This country was Olrone.

“This is like a round-the-world trip,” said Sari. “Another exotic destination.”

“This is strictly business,” said Penni, feeling for the coolness in the Oracle. She remembered when she was a little girl she used to feel for coolness in her hands. “This way.”

They walked down a dirt road, looking at the small farmhouse in the distance. Beside them was an orchard of lemm, a fruit similar to olives. Beyond the house was thick bushland.

“The countryside is picturesque,” said Sari.

“The Shadows drove a lot of this realm into poverty,” said Penni, “but it looks like the orchard industry is back on its feet.”

“Look, there’s a guy up there with a telescope,” said Sari, pointing to a tree next to the house.

“He’s cool,” said Penni. Sari gave her a funny look. “I mean he’s a Guru. He’s giving off cool vibrations. Let’s go and talk to him.”

The man climbed back down the tree and ran behind the house.

Soon they approached the house. Sari was the first to stand on the veranda. Two trapdoors suddenly opened! Sari did a full split holding herself over the hole.

“Lucky you’re really flexible,” said Penni. “Looks like someone wants to challenge us.”

Sari flipped herself back onto the decking. Both girls stood either side of the main door. The door eerily opened by itself. So they peered into the house.

As they walked into the entrance they saw something falling from above out of the corners of their eyes. It was a net! Penni quickly grabbed a sword from a nearby hanger and cut a huge hole in the centre of the net as it was about to engulf them. The net fell uselessly around them.

A man dressed like a soldier came flying into the room from the back of the house, swinging his arms around in karate motions. Sari raced toward the man, grabbed his arm and threw him over her shoulder. Startled, the man sprang back up on his feet and ran down the hallway.

“Is he our Keeper?” asked Sari.

“I think so.”

An energy bolt blasted a hole in the wall near Penni’s head.

“Get down. He’s shooting at us!”

“Where is he?”

“He just shot at us from down the hallway. Come on! Let's end this,” said Penni, running in his direction.

“We can't use the Oracle as a weapon against a Keeper,” said Sari.

“No, we'll have to improvise.”

They slowed down at the end of the hall and noticed that he'd gone outside, as one of the bedroom windows was still open.

“Wait,” said Penni, “we'll be sitting ducks if we go that way.” They raced out the front door and crept around to the back of the house. They scanned the bushland, looking for potential hiding spots.

“He's good,” whispered Sari.

“Yes, and look where he's leading us,” said Penni. “Into thick bushland that he's familiar with.”

Before Penni could say anything, Sari was quickly creeping through the bush. An energy bolt shot across the yard close to her. Penni quickly followed her sister, but left a bit of a gap. She wanted to get a bearing on where the Keeper was firing from.

He fired again, this time even closer to where Sari was hiding. Penni had a good idea where the shots were coming from. He was low this time. Was he climbing up and down trees, or was there another person?

Penni signalled to Sari, holding up two fingers and pointing in the directions of the mock enemy. Penni moved toward the last-known position, but instead of going in directly, she took a wider arc. The bush was getting thicker and made more noise as they moved. But Penni had done a lot of training in this type of situation. She knew Sari was very stealthy in situations like this.

Crawling silently, Penni spotted movement from the corner of her eye. She spotted the end of an energy-bolt weapon poking out of a large bush. She had found him! She would have to be even stealthier from this point. As she crept into a clearing she saw him about to sneak from one tree to another. Penni tapped on his shoulder, as Sari snatched his weapon from behind.

“I must be getting rusty,” said the man. “Been too long since I've done any serious combat.” He stood up and shook Penni's hand. “Hello, I'm Viler.”

Viler was the Keeper of the Realm of Contentment. He was tall and about forty-one years of age. He wore karate-style pants and a plain tee-shirt.

“I'm Penni, and this is Sari,” said Penni, looking at the rings on the middle finger of each hand. Each ring had an etching of the large gaseous planet in this system called Setov.

“Well, you girls are alert; I'll give you that much. Not a bad effort without any weapons,” said Viler.

“I thought we were supposed to feel contentment in this realm,” said Sari, “like a cuppa

and biscuits.”

“Well, contentment for a Guru is feeling confident that he always has enough money for what he needs, and good connections to his friends and family,” said Viler. “For a Guardian, contentment is the feeling of total confidence and fearlessness, even in the event of being personally under threat.”

“But we weren't under threat,” said Sari.

“I was firing live rounds and using cross-hairs to fine-tune my aim,” said Viler. “I was aiming to kill.”

“Well, we must be content,” said Penni, after a moment's silence. “There was never a moment of concern.”

“Excellent! You've passed,” grinned Viler, deactivating his weapon. “I also do warm brews and biscuits.”

Two Mandalas appeared beside them.

“Sorry, we have to keep moving,” said Penni. “Thanks for the information.”

They materialised in front of an Asian-style house in the country of Eeonia. This was the centre of the Realm of Security. Like Bersia, Eeonian houses had paper walls.

“This looks like Bersia, but I think it's Eeonia,” said Sari. “You can see the subtle differences in the design.”

“This must be the Keeper's house,” said Penni.

Larn appeared from inside and smiled.

“Hello, girls, fancy finding you here.”

“Dad!” they said together.

Larn was the Keeper of the Realm of Security. He was tall and fifty years of age. He was wearing a Bersian Kimono, belted around the waist, and moccasin-style shoes.

The girls looked curiously at each other.

“We've been meeting all the Keepers of the world. So, you must be a Keeper also,” said Penni

“Well, now you know,” said Larn. “Come inside and I'll show you something.”

Larn took his daughters to an altar set up in respect to the Goddess.

“Well,” started Sari. She noticed the large bronze Oracle sitting next to the photo of the Udician incarnated Goddess.

“You have an Oracle,” said Sari.

“I had it here back in the transformation time, too,” said Larn. “Arden gave it to me.”

“You're the Keeper that Sef was talking about!” said Sari. “He said you were working then, like you all will be now.”

A ring suddenly materialised on the small fingers of each of his hands.

“That's correct. Arden brought me in early, not because of my position in the Realm of



Security, but with you two being Guardians. This gives me the extra powers as a Keeper.”

“There’s a third power also,” said Penni.

“Yes, there is,” Larn said.

Calana was the third Guardian and was Larn’s other daughter. Penni and Sari didn’t know that yet, but they soon would. Larn hadn’t seen Calana for many years. In fact, he’d seen little of her since she was born. He knew his three girls were about to embark on something significant.

“Are you all right, Dad?” asked Penni.

“The Oracle is such a powerful tool and you both possess one.” He was regaining his composure. “There are a lot of things the Oracle will reveal, but there are a lot of things it won’t – until the right time.” He paused. “I need to tell you a few things, and I don’t think we have a lot of time. As you know, you’ll meet up with the Guardian of the Right Way soon. From this moment on, you will think of me more as your Keeper than your father.”

“But, Dad,” said Sari. She was always particularly close to her father.

“I’m still your father, but you’re Guardians now, and enemies of the Shadow Empire. Our relationship is our strength, but it could also be our weakness. As you know, Udicians have all become family since the war, regardless of our bloodlines.”

“We understand, Father,” said Penni. She had her eyes closed. “I’ve tried to see the third power but the Oracle won’t reveal him or her.”

“I can understand why,” said Larn, not elaborating. “I’ve been fighting the Shadows for a very long time, in a way. You know my marriage to your mother was a struggle for years. This was a direct influence of their reign, and it happened to many families. That’s their fundamental power, destroying society at the roots – the family.” He looked at his two Guardian daughters. “It was my second bad relationship, and the first time was worse.”

Penni and Sari looked at their father, shocked.

Penni said, “You were married before Mum?”

“I wasn’t married before Mum, but I was in a relationship,” said Larn. “The Shadows had a much stronger hold on this planet back then, and I guess you could say, they had some hold on me. Before I was a Guru, Gylith had his sights set on my being his Lord of this realm.”

The two girls were silent: another shock. Keeper, another marriage and potential Shadow Lord. What next?

“I was right into the silly attachments that everyone else was into, like alcohol, drugs and even sleeping around. As you know, sex shouldn’t be on your mind all the time. It should be spontaneous, preferably within marriage. This keeps the Realm of Innocence pure.” Sari was looking at her father with serious interest. “So, my conditionings were just about right to become the next Lord when I met a young Varlian woman, Lila. She was everything but innocent, and I wasn’t totally pure either. If I was, I would never have given

her a second look. I never had any feelings for her. As it was, I never loved her.”

“Dad, the past is the past,” said Sari.

“That’s true, the past is the past, and all is forgiven by the Goddess,” said Larn. “But in this case, my past is part of your future.”

“Dad, you’re starting to speak in riddles,” said Penni.

“You’re absolutely right,” said Larn. “There is something I can’t tell you as yet, but it will all come together soon. You see, Lila was under the direct influence of a powerful Shadow, unbeknown to her; a much more devious monster than Gylith. You have to understand, Lila wasn’t a Shadow herself, but was being used to get to me. The Shadows knew I would be an important part of what was going to happen in Udicia in the future.”

“Do you know who this devious Shadow monster was?” asked Penni.

“No, but I’m certain it was a Shadow Wraith. Masters only have powers over a Planetary Oracle, but Wraiths have powers over an entire Quadrant. It wasn’t Gylith, because it was a female voice.”

“I remember dreams I had when I was a child, about an evil witch. She used to talk to me in my dreams, but I knew she was telling lies,” said Sari.

“Yeah, I remember Mum’s voice changing years ago, like she was possessed or something,” said Penni.

They were all silent for a while, in collective understanding.

“If this is all true,” said Larn, “this Wraith might have something to do with our up and coming fight.”

“But we can’t fight a Wraith!” said Sari.

“Not directly,” said Larn. “We’ll fight them collectively. We fight them with our love. Shadows hate love.”

## Chapter 4

Later, the girls entered Varlia in the beautiful city of Neth. The city was majestic, with high-rise buildings, and chariots flying everywhere among them. On the street you could see the hustle and bustle of Varlians, walking down the streets with their high-collared suits.

"This place is huge!" said Sari.

"Yes, probably because it's also in a realm of its own," replied Penni.

"How do you mean? Aren't we in the Realm of Collectivity?" asked Sari.

"We are, but it's an extension of that. In Gurudom we call this realm 'Hum sa'."

"Of course, between the eyes on the subtle body. Also called the Realm of Sweet Speech," said Sari.

"Now, talking about that, where is our sweet talker, I wonder?" asked Penni.

A chariot suddenly appeared out of the traffic above, and a man grinned at them. People in the crowded streets were forced to dive for safety.

"Jump in, before an officer on the beat tries to book me for reckless flying," said the man. "My name is Remm Altonino."

Remm was the Keeper of the Realm of Collectivity. He was of solid build with brown hair, and was thirty-nine years of age. He wore dark army-style overalls, with large black boots.

"Nice chariot," said Penni, staring at the streamlined panels on the craft. It looked more like a spaceship. "I'm Penni and this is Sari."

"Buckle-up. This chariot doesn't always sit horizontal," Remm said.

"How do you mean?" asked Sari, quickly activating the restraint beams.

Remm accelerated the chariot with incredible speed and headed straight toward a tall building. Just as the girls thought they were going to collide with it, Remm pulled back the aircraft-style steering column, and the chariot shot straight up! The chariot was now going straight up like a rocket.

"I thought this was a spaceship," said Penni, looking up at the top of the building, which was racing toward them, fast. Remm brought the chariot over and landed on top of the high-rise.

"This chariot has illegal mods," said Sari.

"Well, someone had to clean up the pockets of negativity that were left after the transformation," said Remm.

"You're a cop?" asked Sari.

"Yes," said Remm, "although I wasn't always one. I was a secret agent during the war."

The girls looked at the rings on his left and right index fingers. The planets on his rings represented the ringed, gas giant in this system called Zovis.

"And a Keeper, too," said Penni. "I think I remember seeing you in Tyrone years ago."

"Did you? That must have been during the war. I wouldn't have thought you were old enough."

"Well, no, I just happened to have popped in," said Penni, with a mischievous smile.

"That didn't have something to do with a certain Oracle, did it?" queried Remm.

"Maybe."

"She was ordained with it at that time," said Sari, "at thirteen."

"It was the beginning of a lot of changes for Udicia, I know," said Remm. "We were all given greater responsibility from then. Not only for us Gurus, promoted into the new order, but for every Udician."

Remm paused, looking out at the aerial view of the city from the top of the high-rise.

"Varlia has become such a powerful world leader, and it's great how all the nations are now working well together.

"The Udician Alliance is no longer divided. The Sylonian and Nelven governments were always opposing the rest of the Alliance with Tyrone. We knew as Gurus that Sylonia and Nelve were on either side of the Juncture, pushing out those big national balloons of 'ego' so that no vibrational flows could get through. Gylith parked himself in the tiny gap, and then we were separated from universal truth.

"Varlians didn't perform their role well, either, at that time. Their leadership was poor, and they should have taken charge of world affairs. It was their job at the Realm of Collectivity. But instead, they became greedy, speech became slander, finances became dirty, and they lost sight of the true value of business and politics. Again, Gylith parked his Lord in the middle of all this, and we got a leader that sounded like he was the answer to our prayers.

"Thank God for the Guardians. Otherwise, we'd never have broken out of our trance. Fancy another ride in my chariot before you go?" Remm asked.

"Yes," said Sari. "Where to?"

"Well, just to make doubly sure I've done my job, and cleared this realm well enough, we can utilise that Oracle of yours."

"Oh," said Penni. "How's that?"

"By finishing off some clearing."

They all climbed into the chariot, and Remm quickly took off, gaining considerable speed. If he were driving this high in a civilian chariot, he would have been quickly pulled over by his fellow officers. As it was, his fellow officers were probably not impressed, and a crackle over his radio confirmed this.

“Sergeant, what the hell are you doing?” It was the Chief, who was probably informed by another officer. Remm snapped the radio off.

“Why are you flying so high, anyway?” asked Penni.

“I told you: we’re doing some clearing,” said Remm. “Hold that Oracle up.”

Remm went even faster and put the chariot into a slight turn.

“You’re going to do some big circles around the city and clear it out, just like we clear our own centres,” said Sari.

“Yep, we can’t afford to have any more negativity in this realm,” said Remm. “I hope to do the next few years of police work in one day.”

Penni looked at Remm. “You’re thinking like a Guardian.”

“You might be right,” smiled Remm. “I couldn’t do this before, because the rings don’t quite give me enough power.”

“We’ve got company,” said Sari.

Three Police chariots were in pursuit.

Remm was about to go faster, but Penni motioned for him not to. She turned around and directed the Oracle at their pursuers.

“Are you going to shoot them?” asked Remm.

“They’ll be fine,” said Penni, “unless they’re Shadows. I’m giving them a little vibrational persuasion.”

“Now you’re thinking like a Guardian,” said Remm.

Vibrations shot out of Penni’s Oracle in a clockwise motion and struck the trio behind them. They immediately slowed down and turned around.

“See, now they know what we are doing and will back you up later on,” said Penni. “You’re welcome.”

Remm grinned. “You’re going to be a hard opponent for the first Shadow you run into. I can see through the ring that you’ve put a lot into your experience and training so far. You’re the Central Way, and will be a very important part of your trio. In a way, it will be up to you to keep things together.”

“So I’ve been informed by the Oracle,” said Penni. “It’s all unfamiliar territory once we pass through the Juncture. Not just because of the new world we’ll be placed in, or the Shadows we cross, but because of the responsibility of our role in this great Universe.”

“I know how you feel, but not at your scale,” replied Remm.

Remm did a few more circles around the city and finally landed the chariot in a park. It was right across from the city centre.

“Well, I feel that we have finally put me out of a job!” said Remm, half-sad and half-glad. “Look at this place. It’s vibrant!”

The girls looked at the city and smiled. It did seem very peaceful.

“We haven't just transformed Udicia for ourselves,” said Remm. “We've transformed Udicia for the rest of the Universe. With all our national realms cleared and attentive Keepers at their posts, you will be empowered to emit beautiful loving vibrations for those who desire it out there and positive destructive vibrations for those who don't.”

“Thanks, Uncle Remm. You've been an inspiration,” said Sari. “We hope to talk to you again.”

“Going already?”

A huge Mandala appeared behind the girls.

“We have that sense when we have to leave,” said Penni. “So long.”

The girls gave Remm a quick hug and walked into the Mandala.

## Chapter 5

The girls materialised inside what was once Tyrone's Imperial Palace. They stared at the grand hall of the building. On the high walls they noticed paintings of Presidents from a bygone era – except that Gylith wasn't there. He'd been removed. Now this was the Parliament House of the first free democratic government. They walked over to the administration alcove and looked at the old lady behind the glass partition.

"Sorry, girls. This place is only for official government business – not field trips from school!" snapped the lady, annoyed.

"This is official business," said Penni, holding up the Oracle.

"Oh, I see," said the Lady with sudden understanding. "You're Guardians!" She came out and kissed the two girls, her grumpiness completely evaporated. "I will contact the President immediately."

Sari raised her eyebrows and grinned. "We're royalty here."

A man, who looked way too young to be a President, came bounding around the corner.

"I've been looking forward to this day," said the young man, beaming, "to see the return of the Guardians. Now, what do you need? Chariots? Weapons? An army?"

Benn was the President of Tyrone. He was tall, with short, sandy hair, and was twenty-five years of age. He wore an old-fashioned suit with a cloak. A gold chain hung out of his right-breast pocket.

Penni immediately liked the man for his enthusiasm, for his charm, his...

Sari nudged her discreetly and whispered, "It's forbidden to get involved."

Sari was right. If she became attracted to a man, it was all over for her. She would be immediately replaced as a Guardian. Guardians had to keep a chaste lifestyle. Marriage was fine, but a partner was vibrationally selected, meaning he or she would become apparent when the time was right. Having flings in between was absolutely forbidden.

Penni looked at his hand for rings – not wedding rings, but Keeper rings. There were none. "We need to see the Keeper immediately," she said.

"Straight to business," said the man. "I'm Benn, by the way. And who are you two?"

"Sari and Penni," said Sari.

"OK, this way," said Benn, curious to know why the girls were so serious. Oh well, he thought, who was he to question Guardian business?

Benn led them through the old palace to an office at the end of a long hallway. He opened the door, and a man looked up from his desk and smiled.

“Ambassador, I’ll leave you with the two Guardians, Penni and Sari.” Benn left, smiling at Penni.

“Hello, I’m Meln Lavos, the Ambassador of Sylvania.” He walked around his desk and shook the girls’ hands. “I’m really excited to catch up with Guardians once again.”

Meln was the Keeper of the Realm of Forgiveness – the Juncture. He was of medium build, with black hair, and was forty-five years of age. He wore a Sylonian suit, which looked similar to the formal Star Trek uniform. Meln wore rings on his ring fingers. Each ring had an etching of a sun – Udicia’s sun.

“So was everyone else,” commented Sari.

“Well, they would be,” said Meln. “The Guardians gave Udicia our independence.”

“I heard you did all right through the conflict,” said Penni.

“You mean with General Nas? Shadow Lords are impossible to kill without the silver from a Guardian’s sword, as you know.”

“Through the heart, at that,” said Sari.

“Yes, but it didn’t matter. We kept General Nas occupied, so he couldn’t organise the troops in Gylith’s legion.” Meln paused, thinking. “It really put everything into perspective when I put these rings on.”

“Yes, it does,” said Penni, knowing that the Oracle and the rings provided the same perception of knowledge.

“Gylith was only a small part of the Shadows’ grand scheme. We thought he was the ‘Puppet Master’, but he was merely a puppet himself.”

“Yeah, between the likes of him and the Shadow One, there are the Shadow Wraiths,” said Sari.

“Mmm, the Shadow Wraiths. The Masters orchestrate the national level, while the Wraiths, the broader universal level. As you know, Udicia was the staging point for their ‘universal’ plans to take back Earth. Luckily, Gylith failed.”

“I think I understand the implication,” said Penni. “The Shadow One may want to regain lost ground.”

“Exactly. There are several thousand light years between here and the Dark Realms. The Incarnations have been busily knocking out a lot of these Masters, although that has changed in recent times.”

“The Golden Stars,” said Sari. “We know that the Guardians are gradually starting to take over from the Incarnations there.”

“Yes. The Incarnations now need to focus their attention on these Wraiths, while the Guardians take care of the Masters.”

Penni and Sari looked at Meln, knowing he was about to tell them something important.



“The Galactic Council are certain the Shadows are about to make a major strike on the Ranger Alliance, in the border regions – at the planet Pern, in the region of the Left Way at the Realm of Creativity.”

“A vulnerable realm, that’s for sure. How do you know, anyway?” asked Penni, a little surprised. “A Keeper wouldn’t be privy to this, I don’t think.”

“Sounds like you’ve received a little intelligence,” commented Sari.

“Very alert of you both. You’re right. I spoke to Arden a few hours ago,” said Meln. “He’s eager to speak to you.”

“Ready to go,” said Meln, opening the door of his sleek-looking chariot.

“Nice carriage,” commented Penni, stepping into the chariot. “How come all the Keepers are so well-equipped?”

“Must be, kind of like, universal payment for our outstanding service to the cause,” said Meln with a grin.

“Oh, brother,” murmured Sari.

“Wait for me,” called Benn.

Penni pretended there was suddenly something much more interesting to see, and stared out at the beautiful countryside.

Sari grinned mischievously and said, “Hasn’t the President got more important matters to attend to?”

“Not at all,” replied Benn, with a smirk at Meln. “Guardians are the top priority. Even more so than Ambassadors.”

“Well, at least this ruler of Tyrone has a better sense of humour than the last one,” replied Meln, with a grin. “...and is much better looking, too.”

“Where are we going?” asked Penni firmly. She was annoyed that Benn had joined them, and she was annoyed at herself for dodging his gaze. She knew she was being ridiculously silly.

“What do you think, Penni?” asked Benn. “Are you ready for the great adventure?”

“Absolutely,” said Penni, feeling a weight lift from her shoulders all of a sudden. “More than ever.”

“Good. Let’s get you two out there,” said Benn, powering up the levitation gyros on the chariot.

After a few hours’ travel over Tyrone’s hilly countryside, they finally made it to the valley between the Thal mountains, Udicia’s Great Juncture; the place on Udicia where the Left and Right Ways meet. Once a place that was spiritually shut down because of the Shadow Empire, it was now open for universal business. Loving vibrations from the six realms now

flowed through like a torrent and instantly made people feel completely thoughtless, never wanting to leave.

The first order of business was becoming apparent as the President of Tyrone, the Keeper of the Realm of Forgiveness and the two Guardians arrived there.

"This place is a haven for wildlife," commented Sari, looking around at all the birds flying around.

"Yes, there weren't as many shrubs and trees around here, either, before the transformation," said Meln.

"And just the feeling of this place now," said Benn. "Back then, it felt like the killing field; now, it's just like heaven."

Penni was the first to see the subtle stirrings of a significant event around the Great Juncture.

"Look, the Juncture is widening," said Penni.

Big flocks of birds were flying away from the mountains as the wind picked up. Suddenly, a huge vortex appeared between the mountains, spinning in a clockwise direction. Everyone stood silently as the vortex widened and became three-dimensional, giving them the feeling that it was a long tunnel, leading to a far-away realm.

From a distant point within the tunnel, a large, spinning golden Mandala came toward them, becoming larger and larger. The Mandala stopped at the entrance of the vortex momentarily, before there was a flash of brilliant subtle light.

A white-robed man stood looking toward them for a moment, before turning around to look at the vortex. It was Arden, the Incarnation of the Great Juncture. He turned to study the Juncture and motioned his right arm in a clockwise motion. The Juncture responded and started rotating faster.

The vibrations from the Left, Middle and Right Ways increased, and the four stood on the chariot, speechless. The vibrations were actually visible now, like sparkling points of light, swirling around in a random sort of motion. There was nothing to say; there was nothing to think. They weren't in the past; they weren't in the future. This was the present.

With the Keepers at their realms and the girls having journeyed through them all to increase their clearing, Arden now opened the Juncture to increase the flow of the Ways. It was time for Udicia, like Earth, Caldon and other worlds, to use its enlightened standing to make an impact on the rest of the Universe. Then, Arden realigned Udicia's Juncture to the Realm of Innocence in the Ranger Alliance's solar system, thousands of light years away, in the planetary Oracle called Rune.

Arden turned and smiled, as everyone climbed out of the chariot, giving him a courteous, prayer-like bow. He turned to Penni and Sari.

"Udicia's transformation caused a cascade of transformations across hundreds of light years. The Shadow's hold on Udicia had restricted vibrational flow for worlds beyond your

world. You see, the Milky Way galaxy is spinning clockwise, with loving vibrations flowing as far as the border region of the Dark Realms, where their anti-clockwise flow of darkness is pushing back against this.”

“So, that's why the Shadows are desperate to counter that motion, and at least claim a large patch of heavily militarised space,” said Penni.

“Yes. The Ranger planet, Pern and allied worlds are approaching their transformations sooner because of the work we've done here. It will make it twice as hard for them to transform,” said Arden.

“And all that much easier for the Shadows to undo everything, considering their position in the Realm of Creativity,” said Sari.

“They may not be as ready as you, but you are more than ready. Forty-two Keepers have now become nine. Nine Guardians have now become three,” said Arden.

“Where is the other Guardian, anyway?” asked Sari.

“You will meet up with her very soon,” said Arden, “but before that I want to explain something about the Guardians and Keepers.”

“Why have our numbers been reduced so much?” asked Penni.

“Now that the Guardians are engaging the Masters, it's been decided by the Council that nine Guardians together in a particular battle are no longer required, since the application of the Stars.

“The three Guardians will each take on the three powers of the three Ways – the three powers of the Goddess.” He paused. “Also, because of the widespread campaign into the new realm, Guardian numbers need to be stretched.”

“As for the Keepers, they will no longer be anywhere near the battles. There are many transformed worlds now. They can do their job effectively from local realms.”

“What about the Shadow numbers?” asked Sari. “Aren't their resources also stretched?”

“Yes, but the Wraiths are desperately spawning more Masters to conquer the next world.”

“OK, so the Masters are the Wraiths' main chess pieces in this conquest. What about the Wraiths? How much control has the Shadow One over them?”

“Very good question,” said Arden. “They've been around since the beginning of creation, like the One. He was a Wraith himself once, who turned his back on the Goddess. You see, ultimately he's just a Wraith that happened to take power. He didn't earn Godhood; he just took it. ”

“So, Wraiths were once Incarnations like yourself?” mused Penni.

“Yes, and that's why we need you to take care of the Masters, as the Incarnations are very busy with these unpredictable Wraiths. Even now, most of my attention is on their movements. They could strike the border regions or beyond at any moment.”

“Then don't let us hold you up,” said Penni. “We're ready.”

He raised both of his hands, and the Golden Stars were swirling around in each one. They suddenly shot out toward Penni and Sari and entered their subtle centres where they reside in the human body.

At first Penni felt sick, as the torrent of vibrations went through her body, but that passed and was followed by a feeling of overwhelming euphoria! But not in a sexual way. Then, subtle knowledge began to manifest, not like the knowledge from a book or a computer, but a deeper understanding of the workings of the Universe around her.

Penni was eventually drawn to a “catch” at the left side of the Realm of Innocence. Without looking at either Benn or Penni, Arden said, “When this is all over, you can court. But for now, you must focus on the job at hand.”

Benn had left her mind completely, but the vibrations were so powerful they could pick up the slightest residue of a past wrong. Penni didn't feel embarrassed or guilty about it, which was a blessing of her past conditionings. Even more of a blessing was the fact that Arden didn't immediately stand her down. Innocence was what he stood for, and he was well-known not to compromise on it.

Benn held a poker face, but Arden knew. After all, he was the Universe. How many galaxies were swirling around in his body, anyway?

Penni and Sari looked at the Juncture and then at each other. They didn't speak, but their eyes conveyed that this was it; this was what they'd worked for. They held hands and walked through.

## Chapter 6

"Captain, we're detecting a large armada of Imperialist ships on long-range scans. They're approaching Ranger space!"

"My God, there must be fifty battleships!" said the first officer, looking at the communications officer's panel.

Ranger-Captain Raywond Hiler had mentally prepared himself for this day. The attacks by Imperialists had been becoming more frequent and more desperate in recent months.

Not only that: Hiler was holding a secret from the other Rangers. He knew the 'Imperialists' were actually Shadows, but he had to keep that to himself, for now. While the other Ranger captains could only see that they were aggressive humans, he could see that they looked like "demons".

He had a bad feeling about this latest incursion. Until now the Imperialists had been testing their defences, but now they were planning to break them. This was an invasion.

"Tell Ranger Command to send out more ships. We'll keep them busy at Rune."

Rune, once a barren planet like Mars, had been Terra-formed to become a tropical haven. Several large space cannons had been set up in the orbit of the planet as a defence shield. They could fire missiles hundreds of thousands of kilometres into space, and had very precise targeting computers.

That was all very good, thought Hiler, but how were they going to get an intercepting force big enough to counter the Shadows this time? They'd be lucky to have twenty ships in jump range.

"Sir," said his communications officer, "Admiral Band wants to speak with you immediately."

"Put him on the front-view screen," ordered Hiler.

"Sir?"

Normally he would take a message like this in his quarters, but there wasn't time. "Do it."

"Captain," said the Admiral's video image at the front of the ship, "I'll keep this brief. I'm sure you're aware of our dire situation and the unspeakable odds..."

"It's all right, Admiral. My crew are ready. They've trained for something like this for months..."

"I realise that, but things have gone from bad to worse," the Admiral trailed off, looking concerned. Hiler had never seen Band lose his composure before. "We've received long-range telemetry that an unidentified number of ships are moving toward us from the opposite direction. They're using unconventional means of travel."

“How do you mean, unconventional?” asked Hiler.

“A jump capability far more advanced than ours.”

Hiler thought about this. “So, they’re advanced. Perhaps they’re coming to help.”

“Help who?” snapped Band. “We have to assume they have hostile intent.”

“Our focus should be on the Imperialists, because we know who they are,” said Hiler. “We can’t assume anything about this advanced armada.”

“That’s exactly why I need you to...” The transmission was cut off.

Suddenly, the front-view screen changed, and a group of disc-shaped starships started appearing through a large Mandala in space. There was a stunned silence throughout the bridge. A figure appeared on the front-view screen.

“Hello, my name is Daniel Withers. Forgive our intrusion, but as you’re aware, the Shadow Empire is launching an incursion into your territories.”

“Daniel, my name is Captain Raymond Hiler. These incursions have been going on for several months. We’ve lost many ships to their superior technology.” Band trailed off, realising with whom he was speaking: it was the Tenth Guardian. Although he hadn’t taken any orders from him as yet, he knew this man was his real superior.

“I see,” said Withers, understanding Hiler’s discomfort. “It might be best that you tell the other ships to get behind us. We can take the brunt of the charge.”

“I’ll try, but...”

Five Ranger ships suddenly jumped into orbit around Rune.

“I demand that you identify yourselves,” said one of the Ranger captains.

“Stand down,” ordered Hiler, detecting the activation of their targeting systems. “They are here to help. Move into position behind their ships.”

It was too late to re-position, and at that moment there was a tremendous noise in space, like a clap of thunder, but many times louder. A huge, dark vortex appeared and began rotating in an anti-clockwise direction. A large fleet of crude, dark battleships began materialising from its centre. A tremendous negativity also began pouring out, which stunned the Ranger ships.

Seven Guardian ships went into an edge-on formation. The ships were circular in shape and had the Mandala etched into the bottom of their hulls. Effectively, seven huge Oracles were poised for attack!

There was a tremendous explosion of light from the giant Oracles, and then a spiralling wave of positive destruction headed toward the Shadow armada. Many Shadow ships were instantly vapourised, as the clockwise-turning spiral took its course. The Shadow ships responded, with an anti-clockwise spiral of darkness and destruction. One of the Guardian’s seven ships in formation was struck, and an explosion ripped out its hull.

A dog-fight erupted, and there was a fierce exchange of fire. Hiler ordered his ship away from the battle, as the fire power was beyond anything their shields could withstand.

Some of the other Ranger ships engaged. He realised the weaponry of these ships were much more advanced than the ships they'd been using in their previous attacks. It was a deception the Shadows were renowned for.

"Take us down into orbit," ordered Hiler. "We're no match for this."

Just as he uttered those words, stray deflected fire broad-sided their ship. There was an explosion at the stern.

"We've been hit!" called an officer. "Sections on the starboard side have been exposed to the vacuum. Crews have been lost. We're losing structural integrity!"

"All hands, this is the Captain speaking," called Hiler. "Abandon ship! I repeat, abandon ship!"

"Captain," said an officer, "should we separate the bridge from the ship?"

Hiler stared at the schematic of the red flashing ship on the nearest console. His heart told him he should be the last to go down, but he could see that the ship had very little time.

"Do it." At least he could save the senior staff on the bridge.

"Prepare for bridge separation," called an officer over the noise of the exploding ship. The bridge section shot away, as did several life pods.

Hiler stared out the closest window as the rest of his ship exploded in a fiery display. How many men did the Rangers lose? He looked back and watched the battle in space. He saw pieces of Ranger ships floating around in space, and was grateful that only six ships were caught up in it. It could have been an entire armada. If the Guardians hadn't shown up, the Rangers would have been slaughtered.

"Take us down to the surface," he ordered.

Some time into the battle, the vortex re-opened, and a huge Mother ship appeared. A darkness, beyond anything that any present Guardians had previously known, broke into their senses. Even Withers hadn't felt such sinister darkness from Gylith and his armies. This was a negativity that came directly from the Shadow's source itself.

"All ships focus all your powers onto this ship!" ordered Withers.

At that moment, all the Guardian ships went edge on, exploding into brilliant displays of light. The spiralling waves of positive destruction came from all directions, raining down on the Mother ship.

Just before its demise, an arrow-head-shaped missile fired out of the front of the ship and headed for the surface of Rune. Closer scans confirmed that it was an escape pod.

Withers put his attention on the Oracle at the bottom of the ship. He needed special Guardians for this task. It didn't take long to get what he required from the Oracle. A large Mandala appeared on the bridge of his ship, and a female Guardian was glaring at him.

"So, you're the one pulling the strings now," she said, annoyed that she had been

pulled out of a new mission.

"Calana," said Withers cheerfully, ignoring her disrespectful tone. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Likewise." She looked out the front-view screen of the ship. "And what is this?"

"Rune, the planetary Oracle in this system," said Withers, staring at the planet, "and it's just been compromised."

"Why is this more important than where you summoned me from?" asked Calana.

Withers' face gave nothing away as he thought to himself that this young woman couldn't be much older than twenty-five. So young and so fearless!

"It's strategically more important," said Withers. "This system is in the Realm of Creativity on the Left Way, and this quadrant is part of eight other systems that the Shadows are planning to conquer." Withers looked serious. "This threatens to reverse the rotation of this entire galaxy."

The crude arrow-shaped craft ascended very fast into Rune's atmosphere. Close to the surface it de-accelerated so hard it would have crushed a normal human being. But this was no normal human being. When the craft hit the surface, the impact left a crater the size of a football field. There was a huge explosion of earth and vegetation, which took a while to settle down. Among this scene of destruction, the arrow-headed craft stood buried in the ground like a sentinel.

Suddenly, the sides of the craft blew apart, and a large black mass emerged. It was a giant bull. It had large horns, red eyes and a huge mace with three spikes poking out from the top of it.

"Are there other Guardians being summoned for this mission?" asked Calana.

"You will meet up with two other Guardians. The three of you combined will be a formidable force," said Withers.

Calana thought about this. There were very few Guardians that she knew of, doing secret missions into the border regions.

"They're not from the Guardian Elite Force," said Withers, picking up on her thoughts. "They will be familiar to you, but not in the way you'd expect."



## Chapter 7

The jump between realms felt a little longer than it had in local realms. Instead of thousands of kilometres like last time, this time they had jumped several thousand light years.

When the girls entered Rune, they both stood for a moment, adjusting to the lack of vibrations. They felt a strong negativity, but it felt like it was coming from somewhere far in the distance. Feeling a little sick in the stomach, they both breathed a few lungfuls of stale air to force it to pass. Penni's Oracle transformed into a bow. It was simple in design, with the Oracle still sitting at the centre.

"Keep your ears and eyes open, Sari," said Penni.

Sari's Oracle transformed into a circular cutting disk. It could be either thrown like a boomerang, or used in combat as a blade.

"I'm ready."

"We'll head straight for that source," said Penni, thinking about the other Guardian. "I suspect our third power will turn up when she's needed."

They both started running through the forest. There was no time to lose. The sooner they got there, the sooner they could take out the Master.

After moving swiftly through the forest for a few hours, they heard some shouts and gun fire in the distance. They crept up over an embankment and saw several soldiers bearing down on a female Guardian with a sword. It was Calana. There were several whitened bodies lying around the area.

Then Penni saw a whole platoon emerging from the forest. They wore military uniforms. The only thing that looked out of place were their black, demonic faces and red glaring eyes.

They were all sporting powerful energy weapons that looked like they'd do a lot of damage. Hand-to-hand combat with these Shadow Lords may have been easy with Incarnational powers, but the weapons would make it a challenge, especially with their numbers.

At first, a huge barrage of energy fire came toward the three Guardians, and they all took cover. After only a short break in fire, Calana's sword responded with a big burst of white energy. Several Shadows were lifted into the air and thrown back onto the others.

As they began firing at Calana, Penni sent several bolts toward them with her deadly bow, taking out a few of the closer ones.

Meanwhile, Sari neared a group of them. She threw her discus, cutting through several arms holding big guns. As the discus did its rounds, she dodged fire, and then caught her

weapon, slicing a few Shadows as she passed.

Penni fired bolts at Shadows that were trying to target Sari, while Calana sent more bursts of energy at the next wave. She then engaged some closer Shadow Lords with a few strikes of her sword.

It was a strange scene: three women with ancient-looking weaponry fighting a heavily armed platoon of professional Rangers.

Without the assistance of the Golden Stars, the women would have needed more drawn-out tactics, such as leading the soldiers through the forest and picking them off in smaller numbers. But with these new powers, they were far more dynamic and could easily preempt anything the Shadow Lords could throw at them.

There was also some close hand-to-hand combat with the more ruthless Lords who held barbaric-looking swords. Penni sparred with her bow, sometimes pushing an arrow through the odd Lord.

Sari did a somersault in the air, spinning at the same time, her disk cutting into several Lords as she landed. Calana gallantly fought like a master swordsman, out-matching any who challenged her.

Then suddenly everything was quiet. All the Shadow Lords had been slain.

Penni look around at the dead Shadow Lords. She saw that the bodies had tattered uniforms hanging from them – not Galactic Shadow uniforms, but a type of standard military uniform. And it suddenly dawned on her who these Lords once were: they were the allies; they were Rangers.

“Well,” said Calana, brightly. “You finally arrived. If you'd got here on time we could have staged this better.” She trailed off, looking at Penni and Sari with sudden understanding. It had been many years since she had seen them, but she now recognised them. The tenth Guardian was right: you will know them. They were her half-sisters.

“Hey, hang, on lady!” snapped Penni, rudely. It wasn't normal for her to talk like that, but they had run here as soon as Arden had let them go and fought like they had never fought before! Sari's face conveyed the same thought. “We got here as soon as we could. In fact we ran here. And the battle... I've never seen Sari so dynamic.”

Calana was very irritated at the mention of Sari. “The Tenth Guardian never said I would be baby-sitting.”

“Hey, that's not fair!” said Sari.

“How old are you anyway, little lady? Fourteen? Fifteen?” asked Calana, glaring at Sari. “Does your Mum know you're here?”

“Age is irrelevant,” said Penni firmly, “and after all, she was chosen by the Goddess.”

Penni noticed that struck a chord. She was entitled to pull Calana into line. She was the Central Way, and if the Right Way was going too far to the right, she had to pull it in.

The three were all silent for a while, before Penni looked at Sari.

“Hey, are you all right?”

Sari’s eyes warned her not to ask. Penni had completely dropped any expectations about this new Guardian and focused on business.

Calana was silent at first, still deciding how she would deal with this unexpected situation. She decided she definitely wasn't going to watch out for them, even if they were her sisters. They had to prove their worth. OK, they had a little triumph with the Rangers, but the real battle was still ahead. Sari still looked far too young and fragile to face the Shadow Master.

“You girls are way out of your league,” said Calana.

Penni pulled Sari aside and pointed at the closest dead Ranger.

“Just let her go for a while,” whispered Penni. “She's got something to sort out and she strikes me as someone who can be very set in her ways.” She grinned. “Did you notice the uniforms on the bodies?”

“Yes, Rangers,” said Sari.

“It's happens a lot. The Shadows lose numbers in their own galactic military and make up for it in the newly conquered worlds,” said Penni. “But all these Rangers being converted to Lords so soon?”

“There's no time for the Master to establish his dominion on Pern. He's transformed all his forty-two Lords and the nine Angels here on Rune,” said Sari.

“It may not be enough against Super Guardians,” said Penni. “I wonder what else is in store.”

Calana had listened but didn't respond. Suddenly she started walking away.

“Let's move.”

Penni and Sari looked at each other, but were both very keen to lighten things up between them. So they followed obediently.

The three Guardians raced through the forest, neither Penni nor Sari speaking another word. Between them, they had decided to give Calana as much space as she required. Becoming friends wasn't the immediate priority.

Back on Udicia, all the seven Keepers were in deep meditation. They were all working through their realms to strengthen the girls’ connection to them.

In Delicia, Ulef worked to coax them into moving clockwise around his realm, the Realm of Innocence. Approaching the centre of the realm this way and neutralising any Shadows moving anti-clockwise, would be the best offence against the Master.

In Bersia, Larn knew the three girls had finally come together. He was working out the Realm of Security between them, which was the heart centre in the human body. This

would bring the realisation of their real relationship in a subtle way, without distracting them from their goal.

In Varlia, Remm had his attention on their communication. Proper speech between them was essential, as anything less would drive them apart.

The Guardians moved across Rune very fast. Because of their powers they could run up to sixty kilometres an hour! This way, they could cover much territory and make a substantial curve to the rotation of the realm.

They were aware that the Master could send more reinforcements at any moment. But the sun was going down and, even if they looked like super heroes, they still felt like humans. They needed rest and decided to stop for a few hours before continuing on.

"You made good progress today," said Calana. It was pitch-black, and all they could hear were each other's voices and the sound of the forest, although they could look up and see a beautiful starry sky.

"We made good progress today," corrected Penni.

"It's neat running so fast," commented Sari.

There was a long silence.

"Has your father ever spoken about his past?" asked Calana.

"You know our father?" asked Sari.

"Of course! He's our Keeper," said Calana.

Penni could feel there was more than that. "Why do you ask about his past? What's it got to do with your connection to the Keeper?"

Calana was silent for a moment. "I'm not sure yet, but you girls have obviously been left out of the loop."

"OK, so let's talk about you," said Penni. "Where are you from?"

"Varlia," said Calana. "But I'm half Bersian."

"We're from Bersia," said Sari. "Which parent was Bersian?"

"My father, although I've hardly seen him throughout my life," said Calana. "I grew up in Varlia, and when I was twenty-one I became a Guardian. So I travelled all over the galaxy."

"How old are you now?" asked Sari.

"Twenty-seven."

"Ah, so you became a Guardian when I did," said Penni, "although I was thirteen."

"So, Sari, was I right about your age?" asked Calana.

"Actually, I'm sixteen," said Sari.

"I think it's too young, but who am I to judge? If you're here, you're meant to be."

Penni was glad Calana finally spoke, but she was hiding something close to her and Sari.

They all finally slept, but it didn't seem very long, maybe only a few hours, as it was

still dark when they awoke.

“Let’s keep moving,” said Calana.

They were moving fast again, this time through the night. They continued on their spiraling path, moving closer and closer to the centre of the realm, knowing that at any moment they could be under attack from the Shadows.

To be most effective, the spiral had to be done in three and a half turns. They ran for several more hours, but at the second turn of their spiral, they suddenly heard screeches echoing across the forest. The Master had sent another wave of minions.

The three women cleared the edge of the forest and looked up into the dawn sky. It looked like someone had stirred up a pack of flying foxes from their tree!

There must be about nine Shadow Angels coming in to land, thought Penni.

Penni lined one up in the air, with her specialised bow, sending a bolt through the beast’s heart with deadly accuracy. The Angel cried out, began slowing turning white and crashed loudly into the forest.

Penni was about to signal to Sari, but she had already disappeared. If there were any Angels on the ground, they won’t see her coming, she thought.

Penni ran into the clearing, firing energy bolts one after the other. A few made their mark, and another fallen Angel crashed loudly to the ground. Others she had missed, landed with a thud and a roar.

Calana engaged the first beast, cutting the barbed end of its tail, and then stuck her sword through its heart. The beast turned white and fell backward, the ground rumbling under their feet.

Penni was now sending bolts at a much closer range, which was just as effective. The Angels were shooting fireballs out of their mouths, which the Guardians continually had to dodge.

Just as the two felt they were starting to get pushed back, a flying discus sliced across the necks of the leading Angels. Sari had crept up from behind! She caught the discus when it returned and started running toward a beast. She flew into the air, over the top of the Angel, grabbed one of its horns and sliced through its heart as she flipped over the other side.

Sari was now in the middle of the pack and was cutting a few tails with her disk as they tried to swipe her. She bent over backward to avoid being cindered, the fire from one beast burning another. Penni picked off those that were about to attack Sari from behind, as Calana engaged another one.

Suddenly, the ninth Angel that had hesitated to land earlier, came down and cindered the three remaining Angels on the ground. The Guardians stood there bewildered. The

Shadow Angel did a few more circles in the air before landing before the girls. Slowly, it closed its wings.

"Hello," it growled. "I'm Captain Raymond Hiler." He pulled a disk out of his tattered uniform and showed the three.

At that moment they all understood. It was horrible: the Shadows had staged a nightmare. A nightmare that would haunt the women for the rest of their lives. They had just slain all the Keepers and Guardians of this world.

Sari vomited on the grass.

How could this have happened? thought Penni. A Master cannot pull this off. The Oracle manifests absolute truth, but why didn't we know the truth? Why didn't we know they were Keepers and Guardians?

"A Master cannot turn Keepers and Guardians into Shadows," said Penni. "At least not on this scale."

Calana was handling it better than the others, because she'd been in messed-up situations before, although not this bad. "No, but a Wraith can."

"Arden said he was watching these Wraiths very closely, in case we were in any danger," said Sari, wiping her mouth.

"I agree," said Penni, but still a dread haunted her. Not a dread because there was a Wraith around, but because of all these dead Guardians. She couldn't look at the bodies.

"Have you learnt anything through your connection with them, Captain?" asked Calana.

The Shadow Angel didn't look very well. He was struggling to deal with his Shadow awareness.

"I'm...not sure," said Hiler. "I'm fighting to get back to the Goddess and I'm fighting to push the Master away. So I haven't been under the spell like the others. I think it's because I had the Oracle, where the other Guardians were potentials."

"But your Oracle has been corrupted," said Penni.

"Not corrupted," corrected Calana. "It just becomes dormant when it goes into the wrong hands. But it's obvious the power from it has kept you from fully transforming."

"Which means he can help us," said Sari hopefully. "Can we move from here?"

Calana glared at Sari, but her face softened. She had coped well in this terrible situation, she thought.

"OK, let's move." She looked at Hiler. "Pass me your Oracle."

Hiler passed her his Oracle and she laid hers against it. The blackened Oracle returned to its silver colour and was now emitting vibrations.

She went to pass it back but hesitated. "You know this might turn you into a white statue."

"I know, but it's better than staying like this," said Hiler.

Hiler took the Oracle and suddenly cried out in pain. His wings and the horns on his head receded but didn't disappear. The red in his eyes became much lighter.

"He's much better," said Sari.

"Are you further away from the Master?" asked Calana.

"I...think so," stammered Hiler.

"The Shadows have staged a shocking blow to the future of the transformation in this quadrant. They're willing to do anything to break our will," said Penni. She looked at Hiler. "But no, our will won't be broken that easily. Captain Hiler is proof that we can fight back." She held her hands in a prayer-like pose. "Let's all thank the Goddess from the bottom of our hearts for giving us these strengths."

## Chapter 8

“Perhaps you can fly up ahead and gather some intelligence about the Master, and warn us of any more advances,” suggested Calana.

Hiler nodded. “I’ll come when you really need me.” He suddenly shot into the air and flew out of sight.

Calana shook her head.

“What do you think about Hiler? Do you think we can trust him?” asked Penni.

“I think so,” said Calana, looking at Penni, “but remember, he’s still partially influenced by the Master. We’ll see what happens, I guess.”

Penni nodded.

“I think we should keep moving,” said Calana, noticing the sun was moving up in the sky. “Judging by the strength of that negativity, we’re not far away from our goal.”

The Guardians once again raced through the forest. This time they moved with haste. The Master had gone too far this time, and they were eager to put an end to his little show.

They weren’t very far from the source when the forest started to get really dark and evil. It was like the trees were trying to reach out and grab them. It was like an old horror movie.

Something did reach out of the tree for Sari. She looked up to see a huge, black serpent with red eyes hissing at her. She threw her discus, slicing off its head.

“The Master is controlling nature,” said Penni.

“I don’t think a Master has that sort of power,” said Calana.

More snakes came out of the forest, rearing up and hissing. Penni fired bolts at them, while Calana and Sari cut them down with their respective weapons.

“Quick, let’s get past here,” said Calana.

They raced on further, but the darkness of the forest made it difficult. Sari didn’t see strands of web coming down from one of the trees and ran right into them. She tried to pull herself free, but was stuck.

A huge black spider with rows of red eyes raced down from above, alerted by the movement on its web. It moved quickly and was almost on top of Sari when a bolt smote its thorax. The spider started turning white as it crashed to the forest floor, its legs folding under its body.

“Thanks, Penni,” said Sari, freeing herself from the sticky web. But Penni was looking up at a huge number of spiders free-falling from strands of web above.

“Run!” cried Calana.

The girls ran, but the spiders were coming down too fast! They had no choice but to engage them.



Calana split one in front of her down the middle and bounced off its abdomen, slicing another spider in the air.

Penni was sending out bolts, and whitened spider bodies rained down around them.

Sari threw her discus, trimming legs off several spiders, incapacitating them. The girls ran out of there as soon as they could and finally made it into a clearing.

Then they saw pillars, a dome and a large Oracle. They'd made it to the centre of the realm.

The pillars and dome were still intact, and if it wasn't for the Master standing in the centre of the scene, it would have looked very auspicious. He was standing on top of the giant Oracle, which had blackened.

The Master looked like a black, giant bull. He was holding a huge black mace. On top of that mace three crude spikes protruded.

The Guardians walked toward the Master, weapons raised.

"Well, you made it," said the Master. "Rather surprising, considering your maturity."

"Well, don't be fooled by the schoolgirl look," said Calana.

The Master laughed. He dropped the mace for a moment, and then clapped his hands together. Two new black shapes broke away from the Master and quickly formed into exact copies of the original bull, but with one difference: instead of being nine feet high the three were now about seven feet high, and each bull held a giant mace with only one large spike poking out.

"Let's say I'm good at multi-tasking," quipped the original Master.

The three women all thought the same thing: they needed to lead the Masters away from the Planetary Oracle and into the forest.

"Another surprise," said Sari, running beside Penni. "What next?"

"Prepare for anything." There weren't any reports of a Master splitting into several forms, thought Penni.

Calana had already disappeared into the forest, and the other two followed.

Each of the three Master forms followed its respective opponent, crashing through the forest as it went.

With the three Masters in pursuit, each Guardian had to quickly make a plan to outsmart her opponent. They would each have to use the territory to fight the Master and limit hand-to-hand combat. Although they still had the Incarnational powers, one of the Master's opposing powers of the three Ways might become more powerful and overcome them.

The Master of the Left Way was frustrated with Sari, destroying much of the forest while trying to find her. Each time he honed in on her position, she eluded him. She even managed to slice him with her disk from time to time.

Penni was using the canopy of the forest, climbing to the tops of large trees so she could fire bolts down at the Master of the Central Way from this vantage point. The Master tried to shake her out of the trees, but she quickly jumped to the next one.

Meanwhile, Calana was on the ground dodging the odd swipe of the Master's mace. She managed to hide behind trees and come out to cut the bull's legs and run off again. The Master's legs were becoming more and more wounded. She hoped that eventually he would tumble, bringing his heart closer to the ground.

Just as the Masters became used to their tactics, the women would pass each other in the forest and quickly swap tactics.

Now, Sari was climbing up the large trees and throwing her disk down at the Master. Penni was firing from the ground and running off again, while Calana climbed halfway up trees and sliced the Master on the arms and torso, before fleeing again.

This went on for a while, and the girls became more deadly and precise, until Sari's opponent got lucky. She had thrown her disk from high in a tree and cut off one of her Master's horns. The Master angrily responded by hurling his mace at her, clipping her right shoulder.

Sari cried out, falling through branches and landing hard on the ground.

At that moment, Penni had mortally wounded her Master, with a bolt passing straight through the bull's neck. The beast held the bolt and slowly fell to the ground.

Penni raced through the forest at the sound of her sister's cries. Luckily, she wasn't far away, as Sari's Master was bearing down on her.

Penni fired bolts at Sari's opponent, one hitting the Shadow right between the eyes. The bull fell forward, face down, and was silent.

Penni looked at the wound on Sari's shoulder. It was deep. She held her Oracle over it, and the wound began slowly repairing itself. In the end, there was only a small scar.

"Just lie there a bit," ordered Penni.

"Thanks."

They suddenly heard roars getting closer and closer. Calana broke out of the bush nearby, closely followed by the Master of the Right Way. Its legs were badly injured.

"Look, your other powers have been defeated," yelled Calana. "And by the look of you, you nearly are, too."

Penni looked at the Master and thought he looked impressed, instead of concerned. Something didn't feel right: they'd defeated the Master's powers a little too easily.

"Calana..."

Calana looked around at Penni as if in understanding.

The Master laughed a long, evil laugh.

"Things aren't always as they seem, are they, Calana?"

He walked toward her, but his weakened legs caught a root and he suddenly fell

forward.

Calana quickly ran toward him and stuck her sword through his heart.

There was a moment of silence. The girls stared at each other, as they knew it wasn't over. Then, the three forms of the Master suddenly melted in unison, and the swirling black goo reunited. It began spinning anti-clockwise and, after a short time, was a raging tornado. Lightning bolts shot out here and there, and it was quickly moving back toward the Temple.

The girls followed at a jog, not speaking as they watched the mini-storm hovering over the Planetary Oracle. The rotation of the storm slowed, and through the dissipating black cloud, they could see a form appearing. It was a woman. She was surrounded by a mass of black, squid-like, spidery tentacles. She had red eyes, a tangle of black hair, a cruel face and a long, dark, high-collared dress.

She lifted her arms in the air as if in triumph, and the tentacles followed suit. Five larger tentacles headed out into space, looking more translucent than the others around her. They also weren't spidery in appearance like the rest. They made their connection with the planets that corresponded with the five realms above the Realm of Innocence. The sixth, which was also translucent, buried itself into the ground at her feet. This one represented the Realm of Innocence. This was also Rune's place at this quadrant.

The weather deteriorated suddenly, and Rune's orbital path was thrown off its natural course. It became very windy and rainy, and the storm quickly turned into a terrible blizzard. Soon the girls could hardly stand in the thick snow! But they were not getting stuck in the snow because the gravity was becoming weaker and weaker.

They had no choice but to attempt to fly. Calana was the first to levitate, as she had already used this ability before, but the other two struggled to do the same, as the snow hindered their progress.

Penni managed to shoot out of the snow, but fell flat on her face. Sari grabbed a large over-hanging tree branch. She climbed on top of it and looked out toward the Wraith. They all flew toward the Wraith, knowing that they would have to try and re-stabilise this realm very quickly, as the whole galaxy was at stake.

They all looked at each other in the air in understanding. They would have to spin around the Wraith in a clockwise direction. They flew around the Wraith several times, but the force of the opposing rotation was great. After all, this was a Wraith, a monster loyal to the Shadow One. They were mere Guardians, only recently able to challenge the Masters, who were subordinates of the Wraiths.

But it didn't matter; they would either die trying to fight this monster, or die for not trying. They couldn't run away, as the Wraith's reach was at least a solar system long.

The Wraith suddenly plucked them out of the vortex and threw them into the snow.

The weather had now settled down to a light rain.

“Well, I finally get to meet the all-powerful threesome,” snarled the Wraith.

“So, it was you all along,” said Calana, ignoring the Wraith's comment. “There never was a Master.”

The Wraith glared at Calana in contempt. “Because of you, because of what you've become,” she said, looking at Penni and Sari, “the Masters have proven to be inadequate.”

“So you've taken things into your own hands,” said Sari.

The Wraith glared at Sari like she was a child who had spoken in church. “Well, the little ones speak.” Her face softened cunningly.

“We might be small, but we've destroyed your army,” snapped Penni.

“My army?” mocked the Wraith. “Or yours...”

“Why, you...” started Calana, angrily. Penni glared at her not to react. That was exactly what she wanted.

“Well, I like the older, feisty one,” said the Wraith, “but the little ones might be of use also.”

Penni knew she was now considering transforming them, but she, like other the two, would prefer to die in an honourable fight than turn into a Shadow.

The weapons of the three transformed, and they immediately began firing them. Calana sent spirals of positive energy, Penni sent waves of bolts and Sari hurled her discus.

The Wraith responded with a huge wave of anti-clockwise energy which pushed back their energy, and knocked down the bolts and the discus attempting to cut through her tangle of spidery tentacles.

“You see, your powers are no match for me,” snarled the Wraith.

But she'd suddenly lost sight of the Guardians. They'd disappeared with their high-speed run. “So, you want to be elusive and find a weak point. Very nice tactics.”

She noticed a glint of silver at her side and grabbed Calana with one of her tentacles. “Excellent work. No other human has ever got so close to me so quickly.” She held her up to her side and looked out for the others.

There was a rustle in the trees above, like birds landing. The Wraith knew one of them was up there. Very impressive, she thought. Bolts suddenly rained down on her, but she shrugged them off with her powers. One bolt managed to find its target and pierced her right shoulder. The Wraith cried out angrily, as a small white infection spread there.

Annoyed, she honed in on any meagre sound, shooting a tentacle into the trees to try and find the Guardian. After several attempts, she pulled Penni out of the canopy. She held Penni up next to Calana, and tried to find Sari.

Calana noticed her anguish. “You can hold this whole solar system down, but you can't find a little girl in the forest.”

The Wraith wasn't accustomed to disrespect; all her Masters spoke to her like a Queen. "You will soon learn to respect me!" said the Wraith, squeezing Calana with the tentacle. "I will find this little mouse and squash it. Then you will bow to me as your Queen!"

So, she was the Shadow Queen, thought Penni. The next in line to the Shadow One. But why would the Queen be out on the front line? Have the Shadows become so desperate?

"I will...never...bow to you!" roared Calana. "Not now. Not ever! Go to hell!"

The Wraith would have killed Calana right then, but she had plans for her.

Suddenly, something shot out of the ground right in front the Wraith. It was Sari. Sari had gone far enough in the air to slice the Shadow Queen in the heart. She somersaulted backward and watched as the Wraith held her wound and faltered on her feet. The others were then able to free themselves from her hold.

The Wraith sagged a little with her head down, but suddenly looked back up and grinned an evil grin.

"I'm so impressed that I want the three of you as my Masters." She glared at the three who now stood before her. "But not ordinary Masters. You'll be special ones, like no others."

Sari looked at Penni and Calana. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry," said Calana. "You would have killed her if she was a Master. Apparently, she doesn't die the same way."

"...be a powerful force driving back the advancement of the Guardians..."

"Remember, too," said Penni, "she's not using her full power. She's still holding this system down and if she wasn't she'd probably kill us with a look."

"You are not listening to me!" roared the Wraith, glaring at them for talking amongst themselves.

"That's because we're bored with your talk," said Calana. "Your voice is irritating and we can't be bothered listening."

Penni noticed that struck a chord, and didn't give Calana a flash of disagreement this time. She was right: the Wraith was creating a drama that would ultimately end in their transformation to the dark side. Why not fight with words as well?

"Yes, you can stick your Mastership," spat Sari.

"Very well, if you won't listen to me," said the Wraith smugly, "I'll make you listen!"

A few black tentacles shot out and picked Calana up in the air. A black web came out of her tentacles, winding around and around her until she was almost completely covered. In the end, she looked like a black cocoon, with only her head poking out.

"Put me down, you witch!" spat Calana. She tried to summon the Oracle to break through it, but she was overpowered.

Penni and Sari began attacking the Wraith, but she pushed the bolts and discus back as if she had a new surge of power.

"It's frustrating, isn't it? Don't worry. Soon you will be under new management."

At that moment, Hiler the half-angel, shot out of the sky, firing jets of fire from his mouth. He managed to singe the tentacles and the cocoon holding Calana. This burned it enough to lessen the pressure in the cocoon, aiding her escape.

"Why, you traitor..." snarled the Wraith, directing a huge surge of energy toward Hiler, singeing one of his wings. He crash-landed between the Guardians and the Wraith, but was quickly on his feet, swinging his tail.

"You're losing the connection to the One," said the Wraith, curiously. "How can that be?"

His will is strong, thought Penni. She doesn't realise how powerful the Guardian's will and desire and the other powers of the Left Way can be.

The four Guardians all began fighting the Wraith in unison. Hiler jumped up on one of the Wraith's tentacles and was swinging his tail toward her face. Suddenly, a tentacle shot toward Hiler and pierced him through the chest. The Wraith flung him to the ground where he landed in front of the other three.

"It's been an honour to serve with you..." managed Hiler. Blood was coming out of his mouth.

"We'll tell your world that you fought a noble battle and died; as a Guardian, defending this important realm," said Penni.

He didn't have the strength to say anything and died. A light appeared at the top of his head and headed up into the sky.

Suddenly, the whole scene around them changed, as if someone turned on a virtual reality program. It was the Planetary Oracle; it had been activated. The three Guardians hadn't done it, because they needed all the Keepers' attention to do so. But Incarnations could activate it if they were close by. Or the Goddess could activate any of them, anywhere, from wherever she desired to be.

The Wraith quickly acted on this and transformed the scene to her advantage.

The three girls were suddenly in Varlia, a long time ago.

"You see," said Calana's mother, with the Wraith's voice. She was holding Calana as a baby. "I've been with you all along. I've been waiting for this time."

"But you're not my mother. You're the one who drove my mother mad! You put voices in her head," roared Calana, with sudden realisation.

Larn entered the scene, and the Wraith, as her mother, threw a piece of crockery at him, shouting abuse. The object hit his head, hard.

Penni and Sari suddenly realised: Larn was Calana's father, too. This was the previous relationship he had mentioned.

The Wraith probably drove their mother to madness, too, thought Penni. She said, "You've been there all along, even through our family..."

Just to prove her point, the Wraith changed the scene to a long time ago in Bersia. Two little girls were running around the house, giggling. Penni looked about six years old, Sari three.

"You're turning strange, just like all those cult people you hang around with!" roared Rosi. "You just need something to cling on to...a god...symbols..."

Larn said nothing, but Rosi grinned at the girls, appearing as the Wraith from the past. "You see, he was good-for-nothing, your father..."

"Was he! Was he!" snapped Penni. Calana looked at Penni, bewildered. "Look at him now. You're frightened of him. He's one of the most powerful Keepers ever. He's the reason there are no Shadows between here and Udicia!"

"Well, well. The middle one can be a little feisty, too," said the Wraith as her mother. "But I'm bored with all this."

The scene changed back to the temple of Rune.

"Eenie Meenie Miney Mo," said the Wraith, pointing at each girl. "Which one will be the first to go? Perhaps I'll convert the little one. She hasn't said much. She can be my silent killer."

"Leave her alone," said Penni, shooting a bolt at the approaching tentacle. The tentacle suddenly wrapped around Penni and held her up before the Wraith.

"You'll do. I don't care in which order..."

At that a blinding light appeared, followed by a huge golden Mandala. A dirty, white-robed Incarnation walked into the scene. It was Arden. He looked like he'd been doing a lot of fighting.

"Put her down!" he ordered.

## Chapter 9

“Well, if it isn’t the prodigal son, Ar’desh,” said the Wraith.

“Salura, there will be consequences for your atrocities against the Guardians,” said Arden.

The Master's guise had hidden her from the eyes of the Incarnations. To fight Arden now, she would have to let go of the whole solar system, which she was reluctant to do.

“I’m not concerned,” said Salura.

Salura decided it was best to reduce her power over the solar system and increase her attention on fighting Arden. Thus, she diverted most of her powers onto Rune, increasing the wind and rain. Thunder and lightning followed.

Suddenly, clockwise powers started swirling around Arden’s hands and heart. He blasted Salura with the positive destructive energy and threw her many kilometres across Rune.

Salura sprang back from the other side of the continent, flew into the air and directed large spirals of anti-clockwise energy toward Arden’s location. Trees exploded all around the area. The Guardians ran for cover as Arden responded with more of his powers.

Arden fired waves of mantric energy at the Wraith. In the air, she struggled to dodge the onslaught as she fired her powers. Suddenly, both powers collided, and there was a loud boom which knocked her out of the sky. She landed roughly, not too far away.

“Let’s uproot her,” said Calana to the other two Guardians.

The girls ran toward the Planetary Oracle and began firing their weapons at the thick, translucent tentacle that had buried itself into the Oracle.

Rune's weather suddenly became much worse. The sky was a raging storm, with lightning strikes and mini-tornadoes springing up everywhere.

“I’ve got too good a hold for you to stop me,” snarled Salura, racing toward the Oracle.

The girls ignored her and continued to fire at the tentacle.

While Salura was distracted, Arden grabbed hold of one of her tentacles, spun her around and around then let her go. She rocketed into the air and broke orbit.

“Create a vortex around it,” said Arden. “I’ll keep her occupied.”

Rune represented the Realm of Innocence in Pern’s solar system, and the solar system represented the Realm of Innocence in the entire quadrant. Salura was in a prime position to project her collective sorcery to easily bring down the other eight adjoining Planetary Oracles as well. This would further darken the Shadows in adjoining infected systems, causing the galaxy to rotate in the opposite direction.

Arden flew into space in time to see Salura directing her powers against the planet’s atmosphere. He engaged her with his powers, but she took off, spinning around Rune in



an anti-clockwise direction. Massive cyclonic storms start to appear around the planet, with Arden close at Salura's heels.

He changed direction and confronted her in the next rotation of the planet, but she suddenly broke orbit, leaving behind a fiery blaze.

Arden quickly dived after her, catching the Shadow Witch as the fire on their burning bodies was extinguished. He fired his powers at her, stopping her graceful ascent, and she crashed through the forest like an out-of-control airliner. However, by the time Arden landed near her, Salura was standing up grinning at him.

In the meantime, the three Guardians had created a vortex around the tentacle buried in the Oracle. The powers of the vortex were strong, but the Wraith's powers were stronger.

"It's getting too cold," said Sari, within the vortex. "Regardless of our extra powers, we're still going to freeze."

"In that case, we have to keep going until we do," said Calana. "Guardians never retreat. That's our duty."

They were both right, thought Penni. It was as cold as Mars now; a normal human would have perished long ago. But they also had a duty to protect transformed worlds beyond this point. "Maybe we don't have to freeze. Just direct some of that attention of yours, to pray for the Goddess to keep us warm enough to continue to fight."

The Oracle began to glow after a while, and they did feel the heat, which in turn increased their powers.

"You can feel it, can't you, Ard'esh? You can feel that your Guardians are failing?" Salura asked.

She wasn't talking about the local Guardians particularly, but all those fighting across the nine systems. Arden didn't feel any human pain, suffering or loss. He didn't feel any physical discomforts, but he had lived enough human lifetimes to know what they must be going through. Right now, he knew that the temperature was well below zero.

"Their wills are beyond defeat, Salura. Their wills are beyond death," said Arden.

"If they die, you've failed," said Salura triumphantly. "We now have a good enough hold on this whole quadrant to put a halt to your Guardian advancements." She put her hands in the air and looked into the stormy sky. Lightning flashed. "The Dark Realms are heading back to Udicia and Earth! Back to Caldon!"

Suddenly, a global blizzard set in across Rune, and the air temperature plummeted. Large cracking noises could be heard all around as the landscape was snap-frozen.

The girls were making little progress on the Wraith's evil foundation, when everything suddenly went silent and peaceful. As they heard the loud, cracking noises around them,

they suddenly became extremely powerful. Sari noticed that Penni and Calana had sprouted white, crystallised wings. Her sisters looked like beautiful angels.

“Penni! Calana! Look, we’ve got wings!”

The realisation dawned on Penni. They were dead. Their guardianship had crossed over to the other side. They were Guardian Angels.

Calana looked at her physical body from outside of it, completely covered in snow. Then she turned to look at the Planetary Oracle. “Now, let’s pull this bitch out!”

“Oh, Ar’desh, how long has it been? Eleven, twelve thousand years of wars across countless worlds? How ironic that I’ll finally claim my rightful place as the Queen of this entire galaxy!” Salura grinned an evil grin. “First, I’ll take out her number one son.” She grabbed Arden with several of her spidery tentacles, lifting him up like a giant spider admiring its prey before eating it.

Arden’s powers had become weaker as the Shadows began to overcome the local galaxy. He drew some of his power from the Guardian collectivity. Salura’s powers had become much more powerful as her hold became stronger.

Arden fired his powers, but she moved him around so they’d shoot into the air.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment.” A large tentacle, shaped like a spear, headed toward Arden.

She stopped talking suddenly and looked toward the Oracle, which was several kilometres away. “What have those little wenches done? I thought they were dead!”

“Sorry, tried to warn you, Salura,” said Arden falling gracefully on both of his feet. He hit her with a blast of his powers, and Salura was thrown in the direction of the Oracle. She crashed close to it, as Arden flew off after her.

When he arrived there he noticed the vortex had taken on a mind of its own. The Guardians no longer had any control over it. Ard’esh had now taken over.

Arden charged at Salura knowing she would be losing her grip by now, with no direct power over the Realm of Innocence. He hit her and she flew into the air, crashing through the trees. There, she lay still.

He looked toward Salura, but was more concerned about the Guardians. He could see a large group of Guardian Angels congregating around the vortex. A lot of Guardians crossed over today, he thought. The three girls were talking to the new arrivals. He quickly made his way toward them, but spinning powers shot out of the vortex and struck him. His powers that had been blocked by Salura were coming back, thanks to the Guardians.

And just in time, too. A loud rustling noise was coming from the forest.

A dark form quickly loomed into view. Six red eyes glared at him from the front of a monstrous thorax. Without the bonds of the local Universe holding her back, she could

easily take her Shadow form. She was the Queen of the Shadows; a giant black spider.

“You look like a very tasty meal to me,” she mocked. “I have no restrictions on me now, Ar’desh.”

A golden, blazing Oracle suddenly materialised in Arden’s hands. He held it up in anticipation. “You may try.” He threw the Oracle, which soared through the air, a burning tail trailed behind it.

Salura quickly responded with rounds of spinning disks of web, but the Oracle managed to break through the tangle and severed one of her eight appendages. She shrieked, but the leg quickly started reforming.

She scuttled quickly toward Arden, trying to get him with her huge fangs, but the golden Oracle changed into a long, gleaming sword, and he struck her at the front of the thorax, leaving a large gash between her eyes.

Salura flew back, startled, losing her stance momentarily.

“You getting a little slow in your old age, Salura?” asked Arden. “Perhaps I should get one of the Guardians to continue what they started.”

Mention of the Guardians angered her, and she quickly looked around the vortex to spot them.

“Where the hell did the little wenches go, anyway?”

“Like you, we’re still here,” said Calana to Hiler who had approached the three Guardians.

“I see,” said Hiler, looking at their white, crystallised wings. “Even after death the fight continues.”

“So it seems,” said Calana. She stared at all the Guardians who they had slayed as Shadows. “Are they cool with us?”

“Absolutely, they don’t blame you for their deaths. They see this as their destiny. They don’t mind which front they fight on,” said Hiler. He grinned mischievously. “These Sorcerers think they’re so clever, projecting their invisible armies, but the Goddess has all that covered, too.”

When he referred to Sorcerers he meant Lords, Masters and Wraiths, as that was what they were. The Lords’ powers spanned a community, Masters’ powers spanned a nation and Wraiths’ powers spanned a galaxy. “It’s pretty bad out there in the Dark Realms.”

“I know,” said Calana.

“So are you our boss now?” asked Sari, curiously.

“No,” said Hiler. “Arden said to wait here for him. He has other plans for you.”

“Thanks, Captain,” said Penni, watching the Angels walking one-by-one through the vortex. “God speed.”

Hiler saluted and followed the last angel through.

“They’re not far,” said Arden. He eyed the vortex as it started to increase its rotation. He could feel his powers increasing as the Incarnations and Guardians across the other nine systems won battles to regain their respective Planetary Oracles. But this one was a major block; he needed to remove Salura soon. “This quadrant is in dire need of cleansing.”

Salura was very cunning; she could sense Arden’s scheme, although he had the best poker face. She shot a web into the trees and started swinging toward Arden, shooting venom at him from her deadly fangs. This wasn’t just a poison; it was like acid. Everywhere it landed was like a downpour of acid rain!

Arden formed an Oracle shield shaped like an umbrella. He could see all the grass, bushes and trees around him being instantly dissolved. It was like reality was disappearing around him!

But Arden wasn’t deterred. When the deadly torrent of acid stopped for a moment, he instantly formed a golden bow and fired multiple white-hot bolts at her. They fired like mini missiles, striking the spider all around her body.

Salura screamed and fell from where she was hanging in the trees. She crashed into the bushes upside down, her eight legs struggling to get her upright.

Arden didn’t waste a moment, a sword forming from his golden Oracle. He raced toward her and jumped up onto her huge abdomen. He dived toward the region of the heart, at the centre of the thorax, holding his sword up high.

Salura shot a web, catching the sword which she flung into the bush. Arden slipped and slid down the side of her thorax and landed on the ground below.

She managed to get herself back onto her legs and dived toward Arden with her huge fangs. Arden rolled away as the fangs penetrated the ground where he had just been.

Arden formed powers around his hands and heart and blasted Salura, who slid along the ground toward the raging vortex. He reached back, and the golden Oracle returned to his hand. He held it up, and a large clockwise spiral of energy formed. The energy shot out and blasted Salura again.

She was picked up and heading toward the vortex when she shot out a web toward the closest tree. She quickly shot out two more webs and created a small padded area.

There she sat, with only the web stopping her from being pulled into the vortex. She started losing her spidery form and shape-shifted back into human form. She looked much smaller amid the web.

“I think you’re caught up in your own web,” said Arden. He watched as the three Guardians headed toward each end of the thick strands holding her. “Seems like you didn’t make too many friends while you were here, either.”

Salura couldn’t see the Guardians before, but they now suddenly came into focus.

“Oh, ladies! You know that deal about becoming my elite Masters is still on. If you help me down we can arrange your...”

“You are kidding, aren’t you, lady?” snapped Calana. “Can’t you see we’re dead? I think you’ve spun your last lie.” She brought a shining, crystallised sword down on her strand. The patch of web fell closer to the vortex.

Salura looked around nervously and said, “Penni, Sari dear, be good girls and help me down.” She was using their mother’s voice.

“You’re not our mother!” snapped Penni. She struck the strand with her Guardian sword but it didn’t break. Salura swung even closer to the vortex but eventually came back to the same point. She had a horrified look on her face as she could see where the vortex led to.

“Ar’desh, send me anywhere, but not to her!”

“I’m sorry, Salura, but she insisted. Penni!”

Penni struck the strand and it broke. Salura swung into the mouth of the vortex.

“Oh, Ar’desh, get me down. I’ll come back with the Incarnations! Anything, don’t let me go!” She looked toward the end of the strand. “Sari. That’s a good dear. Now pull me toward you. You and I, my little mouse, we can...Sari...Sari...where have you gone?” She looked down, and the four of them were standing down below. “Oh. Thank the One. You’re going to get me down!” She was hysterical now.

Sari held up a bow and was testing the invisible string on it. She shot a bolt into a log, which exploded.

“Good shot, sis,” said Penni. “Maybe you should use my Oracle. Well, when I’m alive...”

“Sari, Sari, what are you doing, my dear?” asked the hysterical Wraith.

“Just practising my aim.” She aimed the bow above Salura’s head and fired. It missed.

“No, try using her hair as a target. See that bit sticking up.”

Salura quickly pushed it down, but the bolt went through her hand.

“Sari, don’t do it, my little mouse. Ahhhhh!”

“A good marksman should always shoot to kill, not torture their target,” said Penni. “Try this. Become part of the bow. Be part of the weapon. Feel the strength of pulling the invisible twine. Look sharply at the target.”

“Sari, no! No!”

Sari released the bow, and the bolt struck the strand.

Salura fell into the vortex. “This is not the end. This is only the beginning of the end.” The vortex closed up and disappeared behind her.

“I didn’t mean to terrorise her before she died,” said Sari.

“Don’t worry,” whispered Penni. “I think she deserved it.”

Battered after fighting the second most powerful Shadow in the galaxy, Arden managed to form a Mandala and disappeared. He visited all the other nine systems.

He destroyed other Wraiths in other worlds, but in most cases they decided to retreat. Guardians who hadn't yet defeated the Masters were now able to do so.

The nine realms were restored, without the Queen's powers holding down the Realms of Innocence, and their anti-clockwise movement slowed down and started to move back the other way.

Arden returned from his jaunt far and wide around the galaxy. A golden Mandala appeared before the Guardians who were hanging around their dead physical bodies, waiting for his return.

"Just had to fix up a few loose ends," Arden said. Subtle powers immediately formed around his hands, and he directed them toward their dead bodies. The girls suddenly felt their angelic forms being drawn back toward their physical forms. For a while, they hovered over their foreheads, before transforming into a row of seven Golden Stars. The Golden Stars penetrated each girl's forehead, going in one by one.

Calana was the first to pull her physical body out of the snow, overjoyed that she was having this experience once again. The other two girls also stirred back to life.

"You brought us back," said Calana.

"The Goddess needs you. I need you," said Arden. "Your wills have helped to win this great battle." He paused, looking admiringly at the three. "You see, it's not the physical fight that brings down the Shadows each time. It's the surrender. Daniel also surrendered himself to the Great Juncture to defeat Gylith. This also took him beyond death and back. You now know that even after death the Guardians continue to do their work.

"Nonetheless, you have brought the Guardians up to a new level. But just because you acquired temporary powers of an Incarnation, doesn't mean you've become one. You will never become Incarnations or Gods, but you'll continue to become closer and closer to them."

Penni said nothing. She stood admiring the sunshine that began pouring over Rune, melting the snow.

"What about Pern? They don't have any Keepers and Guardians anymore?" asked Sari.

"You need not worry about all the Keepers and Guardians. There are plenty of candidate Gurus there who can step up to the plate. We've made up some time for them by dethroning their Queen. The Shadows will take a long time to recover from this loss."

"Shouldn't we stage an attack on their garrisons while they're weak?" asked Calana.

Arden grinned, but not mockingly. "We're not the military, my dearest Calana. We never stage sorties or campaigns against the Shadows. Admittedly, we are strategic and

we do place our strengths where needed.

“No. As always, our best methods are neither offensive nor defensive, but collective; keeping our galactic family connected, strong, dedicated and faithful to the Goddess. We should also be reaching out to those poor souls who are beyond the borders of the Dark Realms. Except for the deepest and darkest Shadows, they are the ones who will one day join us.”

At that moment, a silver Mandala opened, and Daniel Withers walked through.

“Lord, ladies,” said Withers. He bowed toward Arden. “The impact of the death of the Queen is tremendous.”

“We did it together. Managing that entire fleet against such a massive assault was a feather in your cap, Admiral.” Arden grinned at Calana.

Withers frowned a little at the mention of Admiral, but quickly understood he missed a moment between Arden and Calana. He saluted mockingly.

“Yes, sir.”

“But, like I mentioned before, just because the Shadows declared war on us, doesn’t mean we’re at war with them. The Galactic Alliance is not a nation fighting against another nation, a race fighting against another race. We’ve found the truth; we found God. Most of those in the Dark Realms haven’t as yet. We’re part and parcel of the grand scheme to transform this galaxy, but they aren’t as yet. All those Shadows out there in the Dark Realms aren’t our enemies; a smaller number will never be brought back, but still they aren’t our enemies, either. It’s our duty to bring those who are under the influence of the Shadows to join us as we move further and further into those realms. I think human beings are now closer to knowing what their part is.”

A huge golden Mandala appeared behind him. He looked around at the four Guardians admiringly, before stepping through.

There was a long silence.

“He always does that,” said Withers. “He never stays for long idle talks and tea.” The three girls giggled. “But I do. After all, I’m human.” He gave the three sisters a hug. “So, you finally found out that you’re all sisters!”

“Yeah, the things we have to keep secret to hold this Universe together,” said Penni. She hugged Calana.

“She’s feisty, but she’s OK,” said Sari, also hugging her.

“Hey, little girl, watch it,” said Calana. “But I will take that back about you being out of your league here. That move on the Queen was really something.”

The three hugged each other for a while and then all looked up at Withers.

“Your newfound strengths will make Udicia a much more collective world. That’s the beauty of family; it’s the root of our unity.” He paused, staring at the glorious blue sky of

Rune. "Now, about your being needed, I need you also, to help build Pern into a better place. On Earth and Udicia we enjoy the freedoms of the Goddess and the absence of the Shadows. Pern should also enjoy these freedoms. The Guardians will have a large presence here, more so than our worlds had. This is the fringe of the Dark Realms, and the state of Pern is far worse than they were beyond our borders. But, like Arden said, we won't be here as a military build-up, or preparing for war, but to guide this world and share the knowledge that we are also still continuing to grasp."

Three bronze Mandalas suddenly appeared behind the girls.

"Who would summon us so soon?" asked Penni, bewildered.

"That's the Keeper colour," said Withers. "It must be a powerful Keeper to open realms. You'd better jump through and see."

The girls said goodbye to the Tenth Guardian and walked through the Mandalas.

The three girls materialised back in Udicia, in Eeonia, before Larn. He was standing in front of an altar with a photo of the Udician incarnated Goddess. Beside that photo was a bouquet of flowers, a candle and a large bronze Oracle.

Larn was wearing a Bersian Kimono, belted around the waist and moccasin-style shoes. He was overjoyed when he saw his three daughters together. Penni and Sari went to him and gave him a big hug.

"I thought I'd lost you," said Larn, "but here you are."

"Apparently, we're still needed," said Sari.

"You know us; we always manage to get out of trouble," said Penni.

"What about you, young lady?" asked Larn, looking at Calana.

"Bit of both, I guess," she said. She looked at the large Oracle on the altar. "Where did you get that?"

"Who else but the Goddess? I needed it to get me out of trouble," said Larn with a grin.

"How do you think I got you here? Come here." Calana walked toward Larn and they hugged. "It's been a long time. I missed you," he said.

Calana said nothing, not being accustomed to sentimental emotions. She'd spent years fighting the Shadows with no contact with family or friends. Besides, she hardly knew her father.

"Well, we should do something about our distant relationship," she managed to say.

"Good idea," said Larn holding back tears of elation and joy. "I've prepared a little homecoming dinner."

"Oh, Dad," said Penni, looking at the large spread of wholesome foods, "where did you get time to prepare this fea..." She froze when she noticed Arden, Daniel and Benn sitting at the large table, chatting.

"Told you I do dinners," said Daniel, grinning. "I had to twist his arm to come." He was



referring to Arden. "But I didn't have to twist his," he said, grinning at Benn.

"I'm glad you made it," said Benn. He motioned for Penni to sit next to him, and her face flushed a little.

"Well, I was officially dead up until an hour ago."

Benn passed Penni a small box. She took it and opened it. It was a beautiful Tyronian cluster ring, set with a mixture of diamonds and gemstones.

"Will you come back to Tyrone with me and be my wife?" asked Benn.

It was all happening so fast, she thought. "Yes, I will!"

Everyone burst out cheering and clapping.

"I love weddings," said Arden. "Let me marry you both at the Juncture."

"Yes, please," said Penni. She hugged her father who was elated at the news.

"Sounds like we have a lot to celebrate tonight," said Larn. "We celebrate the success in this phase of galactic transition, the re-union of family, and the engagement of this beautiful couple."

They all made a non-alcoholic toast with grape juice.

In the end, Benn and Penni were married between the Thal mountains in Tyrone, Udicia's Great Juncture. It was the place on Udicia where the Left and Right Ways met.

Tremendous vibrations from the six realms came through like a torrent. It was the direct impact of Udicia's support in the expansion of these vibrations further into the galaxy.

"On this day, on this joyous occasion, I unite Benn and Penni in divine matrimony," said Arden, looking more like an angel than a priest.

Penni felt like she was in a fairy-tale wedding. She couldn't believe it! It looked like a fairy-tale wedding as well! The Tyronian dress was similar to Cinderella's. Benn was even wearing tight stocking-style pants with his suit.

The whole scene around them was enchanting, with many trees, rolling hills, and an abundance of birds and butterflies. The Tyronian palace could be seen like a shining jewel in the distance.

There were a lot of Tyronians at the wedding, as Benn was, after all, their President. Also, many of Penni's Bersian relatives came from abroad. All the Keepers had come, also. Larn brought most of them through via the realms.

Later, at the reception inside the palace, Benn, Penni, Sari, Calana, Withers, Larn, Ulef, Sef, Viler, Remm, Meln and Arden managed to get together after hours of mingling with the other guests.

"I'm not sure how you did it, my dear," said Benn. "Saved the galaxy, then came back to go through all this. I'm just about spent!"

"The night's not over yet," said Viler, winking at Penni.

“It was a beautiful wedding,” said Remm to Penni and Benn. “All the best.”

“Thanks,” said Penni.

“Congratulations,” said Ulef. “May you both enjoy years of happiness.”

“We will,” said Penni, looking at Benn admiringly.

“Well, congratulations to you both,” said Sef. He looked at Larn. “I’ll bet you’re a proud father.”

Larn kissed Penni on the cheek and shook Benn’s hand.

“As an extension of my speech on wishing the bride and groom all the best for the future, I also want to note that the President of Tyrone has now married the Guardian of the Central Way in the centre of the Realm of Forgiveness. Not only is this a joyous thing for the newly-weds, but it establishes a very important foundation for the future of Udicia.”

“Very much so,” said Withers. “On Earth, the Guardian and Keepers also ended up in positions of authority within their realms.”

“Yes, and that’s what makes this whole, in our honourable Arden’s words, ‘grand scheme of the galaxy’, so well-orchestrated. We’re just the actors, while the Goddess, Arden and other Incarnations are constantly preparing the stage for us,” said Larn.

There was a moment of silence. Sari looked at Calana, who was holding the bouquet she caught. “Looks like your stage is being prepared.”

Calana grinned. “I have no idea who it will be, because I’ve never had the time to court.”

“That’s the best way,” said Penni. “Leave it to the Goddess.”

“So what of the Guardians now?” asked Meln, looking at Arden. “I know they are growing with the help of the Keepers and Gurus, but what is their destiny?”

“This is a very good question, and I see that, although you are all powerfully in the moment, your outlook is also very dynamic,” said Arden.

“Humanity took a very long time to become enlightened and, as you know, there have been many Incarnations taking birth on your worlds to bring you up to the Great Juncture. Even the Father himself, the Goddess and the Son have taken birth many times. You now know who I am. I am that very son,” Arden held up his arms as if to embrace his younger brothers and sisters.

“On some worlds I have taken on the more destructive attributes of myself, mainly where there are no Guardians present. As you’ve seen, I’ve also used the more forgiving attributes of myself.” Arden paused. “I told the Guardians on Rune that we have a responsibility to save those lost souls in the Dark Realms, and we don’t have a lot of time left to do it.”

Everyone stood, captivated by Arden’s words.

“My work with the Guardians has ended for now, but there are still another five hundred years with the remaining Incarnations. By that time, the Shadows will be very

powerful indeed. It will be just the right time for the Father to take his birth and lead them into one of the darkest times the Galaxy has ever seen. The Guardians may be very powerful by then, but so will the Shadows. The Dark Realms may have become much smaller, but so dark that no seeker of truth will be able to survive there.

“The Father you know as Rael will bring down all His destructive Powers, as His job will be to destroy. He will destroy anyone in this Galaxy who hasn’t found the truth. He won’t even be interested in any Guardians who are not progressing well. He may even punish them. He will give orders and expect them to be carried out immediately. I would say your future lives will be with Rael. So, fine-tune now. Get ready. This is my job, to toughen you all up, after the Goddess has gently given you your enlightenment and prepared you for your Father.”