

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

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