



Before he became the Dark Angel of McClarron, North Dakota, Elis had a life on his homeworld of Inar'Ahben...or tried to. A younger brother tormented by his older sister. A Keeper hunted by the Shirukan. A best friend betrayed. And a survivor sent alone to Earth to protect a shard of the Starfire crystal. For Elis, peace was only a word.

Every story has a beginning. This is the beginning of Dark Angel...

**Origins of Dark Angel
(Starfire Angels: Dark Angel Chronicles Book 3.5)**

**By
Melanie Nilles**

Prairie Star Publishing * North Dakota

Origins of Dark Angel is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters, names, places, or incidents to reality is pure coincidence.

Origins of Dark Angel
E-book Copyright © 2011 by Melanie Nilles

Cover Art
Copyright © 2011 by Melanie Nilles

Published by Prairie Star Publishing; Bismarck, North Dakota.

All Rights Reserved.

For information, contact Melanie Nilles at melanie_nilles@yahoo.com or online at www.melaniennes.com.

*

This book is dedicated to the fans of the Starfire Angels series and, in particular, everyone who wants to know more about Dark Angel...Elis. I wrote this book for you.

*

Chapter 1

Elis sighed and lay back on the bed in the upper room of the house on the warm spring night, glad for the rest after a long night of training Raea. She still lacked confidence to perform some tasks with the Starfire energy, so he'd had to encourage her to move beyond her comfort zone.

She snuggled next to him and rested her hand on his chest. The closeness sent a thrill through him. His concerns about her training and the government watching over their shoulders melted away.

"I never knew there was so much to learn."

"But you're getting five years of training in a few months."

"Crash course."

To say the least. And they hadn't even scratched the surface of all the knowledge she would need to fully understand her duties, but she'd already had a fair start with the Shirukan and the Risaal. Raea had proven that, despite—or maybe because of—her human upbringing, she understood fairness and compassion, two key components of being a worthy Crystal Keeper.

"What was Keeper training like for you?"

"Boring." He clamped his jaw to hide the smirk from teasing her.

She slapped him lightly. "As if! I've been there. Starfire Tower wasn't boring."

He stretched and closed his eyes, one arm crooking around her and his other falling to his chest. Maybe she would forget asking and he could leave the pain and suffering of his past behind him.

Her fingers crawled over his.

Crystal fire. His heart burned bright in her presence. How could he resist?

By the warmth of the resonance, he recognized her intentions. He'd taught her better than he had expected. Warmth poured into his arm, the energy of the Starfire within her connecting to the Starfire in him and linking their minds.

It's a long story. He hoped that swayed her, but it was a weak argument at best.

I have all night. So much for trying to deter her. Her breath tickled his neck where she pressed next to him on top of the covers. How could any man resist when she asked like that?

My Keeper training was a difficult time in my life. The pain of his past ached in his heart with the resurrection of memories.

Then let me be here for you. Show me so I can understand. If we're going to share feelings, I want to know the real you. Her sincerity and the desire for sympathy opened his eyes to the beautiful face next to him.

He lifted his hand to brush away brown strands of hair from her smile, pride swelling inside him to defeat the darkness. She was the light in his life. Any hesitations about revealing himself died with her statement. In her shone the hopes and dreams he had clung to through all the troubles.

"All right." He adjusted their hands over his chest, his on top of hers, the Starburst marks glowing with the resonance.

It wasn't exciting like our lives recently, but it wasn't easy...

*

I'll never forget how it started, but Keepers never forget a moment of their lives. We are living recorders because of the Starfire within us, which is what makes us candidates for bearing

and protecting a shard of the crystal. I learned that from my father, Naolis, who was a Crystal Keeper.

Me, Elis...that was another matter. I was just a younger brother to a sister who thought she should be worshipped by her little brother, or younger in my case. (I was always an anomaly for height, so I suppose that bothered her.) Most Inari men are no taller than an average human woman. It could have been an advantage when dealing with Miyon, if not for the fact that she'd recently completed Keeper training and made sure I knew it. No matter how tall I was, I was still a nobody compared to her.

That's why I did it—she annoyed me and I couldn't stand it any longer. Besides, it was fun to see the results. It was harmless, or so I thought. Her? Well...she had a different opinion.

"You stinking, little vomit bag!" Miyon's face turned a shade of red I hadn't seen in a while. Impressive. Dark brown wings pulled tight to her back exposed by the straps of her lavender midriff top meant she was tense, *very* tense. I really got her this time, but she deserved it.

Except she was on a rampage and I was trapped in a closet.

"I swear when I catch you, Elis, you'll wish you had tried and failed at being chosen a Crystal Keeper! The Starfire would be more merciful than what I'll do!" All right, so she was more than a little upset, I'll admit. Thank the Starfire she didn't see me hiding in the closet. Instead, she growled and stormed past. The slit in the door might have given me away if she could have seen past her anger.

Miyon fumed hotter than I'd ever seen her. So maybe changing the protocols on her personal hygiene settings had taken things too far.

Then again, maybe not. I only wished I could have done the same to my cousin Nare—second cousin really and just as much trouble as my sister. I swear both of them conspired to torment me with their constant nagging to serve them. Inari had never forced others to serve them. Our leaders refused trade with any species practicing slavery, but those two didn't care.

I deserved as much respect as anyone. I was Jasheir Elis, son of Crystal Keeper Sarilov Naolis and Keeper Jasheir Mennara. Miyon might have been their eldest child, but I was also their child. I had every right to be treated as an equal.

But it was never going to happen at that rate. The best I could do was protest quietly in my own way, by annoying my sister right back.

At least that time she didn't find me. I waited for the hiss of the door, which meant she had left, to make my escape. The only problem with my hiding place was that it was a clothes closet. Although most of us don't have many changes, my father was a Crystal Keeper with several robes for special occasions, besides the everyday jumpsuits. My wings tangled in them but I managed to squeeze out, taking at least one with me. I hurried to throw it back inside.

Just in time too—my mother entered the room and halted. Crystal fire. I knew that look on her face; she suspected trouble. Her red-brown wings lifted slightly behind her. "Elis."

Here it came. I must have worn my guilt like the gray jumpsuit contrasting my black wings. Mother always had a way of seeing through the most innocent expression. I think I had given up by that point. Her dark brown eyes seemed to scan right through me into my heart to know what I'd done. I was completely exposed to her reprimand.

"Mother." I sounded more confident than I felt, or did to my own ears.

"What is it this time?"

Ahben depths! She knew! Or maybe she only suspected. I had to stay calm and pretend nothing happened, but I could only swallow my anxiety. This was my mother's test. If I failed, I'd be punished. If I passed...well...that had so many possibilities in the future, but I was only

concerned with that moment and avoiding punishment.

"This time..." I hoped I sounded innocent. "Nothing." I didn't *always* cause trouble, so maybe she would believe me.

Her eyes narrowed and sweat poured down between my wings, tickling and catching the chill of the room to send a shiver down my back. Mother had been out when Miyon started screaming and shouting. How would she know if I was telling the truth or not?

"All right." Her words said one thing, but the tilt of her head was a sign of her doubt. What could she say? It was my word against her suspicions, although she had a good reason to suspect trouble.

I'd gotten off, though, and breathed easier as she walked past, but when she stopped at the doorway to the dining area of our apartment, my breath froze. Questions rose in my head and I had to think fast if she decided not to believe me after all. "I suggest you disappear before she returns."

That confirmed it, but she had taken my side. That was a surprise, one of those mother-in-a-good-mood times when she couldn't prove what I'd done but knew I'd done something.

Filled with gratitude but afraid to show it and admit my guilt, I slipped out the door through which she had entered. I hurried through the corridor of our apartment tower to find the door at the end. That door was my escape to freedom, at least for a while. I'd have to answer to Miyon later, but by then she would be calmed down.

Oh, how I wished Miyon would just move in with Orlin and finished the bonding process already! That would have been real freedom. Of course, she had to make things difficult for me.

At least for a while, I had the wind and open skies, or relatively open skies. I stepped through the sliding door to the balcony overlooking the city of Sarteros. Towers floated over their signal anchors in the city base among high rises from that same base. The warm air ruffling through my hair and feathers called me to take flight. Flying was my passion, and I had worked hard to be one of the best flyers.

Miyon could cool down, although the water should have been cold enough. No more would I take her bossing me around. I was seventeen—fourteen in Earth years—nearly ready for Keeper training at Starfire Tower. I was also naïve, believing one day I would be chosen as a Crystal Keeper and that my sister would have to respect me. I was so bent on making her jealous that I couldn't see the truth, but I didn't want to.

It wasn't only Miyon. I had a chip on my shoulder for Nare too. Crystal fire. Recoding her control board wasn't enough to make up for the torment she caused me, but I had the satisfaction of knowing her messages to her then potential mate would be scrambled beyond recognition. She might still be mad about that.

But that was another matter.

Knowing exactly where I could wait out the storm named Miyon, I opened my wings and dove from the balcony. A warm current swirled up from below, lifting me in its twisting push. My friend Toril would welcome me. I'd be safe at his place; he understood. Besides, we wouldn't have much time left to practice sky hoops together. If not for being born a Keeper, I could have made one of the teams. I was better than good enough. I had wanted to play all my childhood—many Inari do—and I practiced hard, but they always rejected me, because I would be a Keeper and would have other duties. However, while I could never play in big games, I could help my friend learn the tight maneuvers so one day I could cheer for him.

If I'd only known then the truth behind his desire to fly better than anyone, but that's jumping ahead.

At the time, I wanted to do everything I could to make him the best flyer around. After all, I had overcome my exaggerated height to be one of the best. That always seemed to push him to try harder.

All that passed through my head while I banked around tall round towers with balconies forming spirals from rooftop gardens down the sides. Others out flying ignored me, being too occupied with their own business. I was just one of hundreds in the sky on a beautiful day.

The sun warmed my back while small clouds drifted past the city. A particularly dark one headed for me, threatening moisture, but I ducked down to avoid the weight of the water on my wings, which would have made flying difficult. I passed several towers before finally reaching the balcony of my friend's apartment—he lived across the city.

After a soft landing, I folded my wings and knocked on the door with the slant of glass. A few seconds later, the door slid open to reveal the long, lean face of my friend, who was also more than a hand span shorter, normal height and not likely to grow any more. He had reached maturity, being nearly three years older.

"Elis." Toril's smile sank. "What did you do this time?"

"I don't always visit when something happens." I couldn't help thinking he knew me too well.

One silvery eyebrow lifted. I knew that look and hated it, but I was big enough to admit the truth.

"Miyon. She deserved it." That's all I hoped to say. Toril of all people didn't need an explanation, and I didn't want to talk about it. He understood the torment caused by my sister and cousin. The two women were linked at the hip in friendship, and I swore they conspired to make my life as miserable as they could at every opportunity.

Toril simply shook his head, his silvery wings sinking behind his back, and stepped aside. "I suppose you want to hide here until Miyon is gone with Orlin. Aren't the two mated yet?"

I wished! That would mean Miyon would move out for the privacy to finish her bonding with Orlin and start her own family. Sweet bliss it would be! I would have peace finally, but that would be too good for Miyon.

I stepped inside to where the door automatically closed behind me. "Soon, I think." I said it with high hopes, doing my best to avoid the nasty truth that Miyon took things slowly. She had a right to, but it extended my misery. I had to wonder if she did it just for that reason, the ultimate kick. She'd finished Keeper training and had nothing else holding her back. How I hoped she would apply for an assignment somewhere far away!

But it was all a dream. Until it happened, I had Toril and could escape to his company.

I took a seat at the step in the center section of the room, where the floor sunk down to form a square central seating area, like the one in my family's apartment in Wayfro Tower. Toril sat on the other side and touched the pad on the step next to him. The holographic images sprang to life in the space between us from the tiny projector in the floor.

"You'll get a break soon. You start Keeper training in two months, right?"

Not soon enough, but the thought brightened my outlook. "Yes." The moving images between us made it hard to see Toril, but I thought he looked happy. "The next class."

"Five years."

"Five years of no Miyon or Nare bothering me." But also five years of not seeing Toril.

Still, Keeper training couldn't come soon enough. I opened my hands and stretched the Starburst marks. The aquamarine blotches with tendrils tapering out from my palms to my fingers and wrists might have been smaller on the backs of my hands, but I'd soon learn to use both sets of marks to release the power. I couldn't wait to learn how to refine it for different uses,

to be considered a true Keeper with all the respect due.

"Unless they return to Starfire Tower."

Crystal fire. Toril *had* to say that and shatter my hopes.

"Don't ruin it," I grumbled.

He shook his head and touched a key on the pad, and the images changed several times before he left it. For a few seconds, I thought he had decided to ignore me, but then he pointed at an image of another city floating in the sky, one I didn't recognize, even though the camera must have been positioned to monitor the perimeter. All cities had monitors. Any citizen could access any camera at any time, but they're only located in public places as a security measure, especially for the protection of Keepers since Marin's rise to power. We'd seen several reports of citizens disappearing from cities in and near the tiny empire formed by Shirat Marin. It scared us all and, at the time I sat with Toril, I shuddered. Although the empire was located a thousand miles away, it wasn't far enough.

"Miyon is the least of your worries. Have you seen this?"

"No. Where is it?" I didn't watch the monitors, and over a thousand cities floated above the ocean encompassing our world, and that didn't even account for the higher number searoot islands. I didn't know what he specifically wanted me to notice.

Toril reached to the projection and touched a few keys, changing the cameras. He stopped on an image that froze my heart. Before a row of rigid black-clad figures stood a man in a dark green suit trimmed with gold, his gray and black hair tied back from a steely face. By the decorative style of his outfit, I guessed he was someone important. His wings shifted behind him, a sign of agitation which twisted my gut in sympathy; all those Shirukan behind anyone was reason enough to be sick. His throat flashed with a swallow and his fingers rubbed together at his side.

"Karnim," the man said, "has signed a treaty with the Shirat Empire agreeing to trade on mutually beneficial terms..."

My heart left me. I couldn't believe it. All cities outside Marin's small "empire" had signed a pact forbidding any trade with the handful of cities under her rule. "Mutually beneficial terms" nothing. This meant she had gained another city.

"Impossible."

"The bulletin played live half an hour ago. See that?" Toril paused the recording to point to the row of Shirukan standing grimly behind the governor. I saw it; I would have to be blind not to know what was going on. "They coerced the governor of Karnim. This wasn't a friendly agreement. I'd bet my life on it."

Me too. I had no doubts there was some force involved, although had there been an attack on a free city, all the world would have heard of it. How could this have happened?

"His daughter is a partial Keeper."

Once again, it seemed like Toril could read my mind. My insides knotted. I knew exactly where the conversation was leading. "And Keepers have been disappearing." It had started after an upset in Laranta, when the Shirukan had openly gone after their first Crystal Keeper—Padina. Since then, other Keepers had disappeared and rumors hinted of some sort of clandestine purge. No one accepted it. But this...this made me wonder if there wasn't some truth to the rumors. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to kill off Keepers, but Marin had condemned them, so I *could* imagine the Shirukan committing such atrocities.

While I tried to settle my stomach, Toril frowned and glanced away as if expecting someone, but no one disturbed us. I hadn't heard anyone else in the apartment.

"No one has said anything, but I wouldn't doubt they threatened him," Toril said in a low voice. "They'll be a part of the empire soon. I'd stake my life on that too."

I didn't want to agree, but I was sure my friend was right. We—all our world—had grown comfortable with the assumption that the empire had been stagnating and would eventually wither and die. Apparently, that was wrong. They had found other ways to invade the free cities.

"The other cities will pull together. Our leaders won't allow Marin to take over the world." I had to believe that. They would never let her gain that kind of power. They couldn't. I didn't want to imagine a world run by Shirat Marin.

"I wouldn't be so sure." Toril sounded so negative that day. I dreaded him changing the view to show two different camera angles. After a few seconds of ordinary traffic, a group of six Inari walked past in two precise rows in one picture, while a pair stood on a city street in another, watching passersby. My stomach twisted further into a sickening melee—those places looked familiar, but I could have been wrong.

"You have too much time to waste." Especially if he looked specifically for these. I couldn't be seeing what I thought I was seeing.

"And it's a good thing for you I do." Toril replayed the two scenes and paused them. He magnified the hands of the individuals in question and my blood ran cold. "Black gloves and the precision of their behavior...I'm sure they're Shirukan."

He had confirmed what I feared, except the location. I didn't want to hear any more, but I had to know. "Where is this?"

"Sarteros. Last night."

Chapter 2

This had to be a joke. Toril was teasing; he was good at pulling jokes.

But no. The grim expression on my friend's face said otherwise—not a joke.

I sat up, my eyes glued to those images while my head drowned in ideas. My father was a Crystal Keeper, a bearer of one of two shards of the Starfire still on Inar'Ahben. While three could not bring Heffin's Gate to full power, Marin had in the one shard she possessed the power to search for the missing fourth. My father was an easier target, and Saffir would likely be next.

If those really were Shirukan in Sarteros and they knew Naolis was there...

Crystal fire! I sprang to my feet, ready to warn my family, while hoping Toril was wrong. "You're sure they're Shirukan?"

Toril stood and walked through the projection towards me. "I can't be certain, which is why I didn't contact you sooner."

Certain or not, the possibility stared me in the face; I had a choice to make. All Keepers might be in danger, which meant my family especially would be. The strangers with the black gloves might not be Shirukan, but if they were, ignoring them would only be trouble.

I couldn't stay. I had to tell Naolis. My wings lifted, ready to carry me home to warn them of what Toril had shown me. "Thank you."

"Be well and be careful."

I gave him a nod and stepped to the balcony door, which opened for me. I flapped into the air, my head full of the images Toril had shown me. While I glided around towers and ducked and flipped around others flying from place to place, half my mind worried about my parents while the other half analyzed those images. What would my father say? What would he do? Naolis was a cautious man, but he was dedicated to serving. I was bound by his decision until invited to begin my training. I only hoped he saw reason.

I'd know soon. Our balcony came in sight in the middle of the hexagonal tower rising from the city base. I dove to gain speed with the pull of gravity and, at the last second, opened my wings to catch the air and slow my descent. I flapped to avoid crashing but dropped to my knees on landing. Never had I been so careless in flying, but my heart pounded in my ears, and my mission distracted me.

The throbbing in my knees was nothing. Breathing hard, I jumped to my feet and keyed open the door.

"Mother! Father!"

"Elis?" My father's voice came from the private sleeping room to my right. He stepped out, a man of normal height with a fair build and long black hair tied back in a tail out of his face. He entered the main room with its sunken middle like the apartment where Toril's family lived.

I let out a big sigh of relief to find him home. His work at the infirmary must have ended sooner than expected. I couldn't have asked for better circumstances.

Still breathing hard, I met him halfway around the sitting area. "I just came from Toril's."

He frowned, and I knew exactly what he thought. "I warned you to quit antagonizing your sister."

I'd grown too predictable, but it wasn't important. "Forget that."

"No, Elis. You're old enough to know better. How many times—"

Crystal fire! I didn't need a lecture right then. He had to listen. "The Shirukan are here."

That he heard. Naolis halted in his tirade and straightened, his wings disappearing behind his

back. For once, I had his attention on important matters. "How do you know? Are you certain?"

No, but I wasn't about to admit that. The best I could do was state the facts and let him make the decision. I hoped he would say Toril was wrong.

"Toril showed me recordings of groups of people acting suspicious and wearing the black gloves." Everyone knew only the Shirukan wore black gloves all the time.

Naolis's cheeks bulged briefly and his jaw hardened.

"What if they know?" My question made him pale. The identities of the Crystal Keepers were public knowledge and Sarilov Naolis was one of them. Our society believed in transparency to the letter. Without secrets, we had nothing to fear, until Marin had declared herself empress.

Dark blue eyes passed over me and looked away, the rest of Naolis's body following. "Mennara!"

No answer.

Naolis pulled his tri-comm from a pocket of the blue flightsuit he wore, his face ashen at that point. He tapped in a code on the oblong device and attached it to his cheek. My wings tightened to my back a little more each second I waited. In my increasing anxiety, I feared the Shirukan had already taken my mother.

Those dark blue eyes meeting mine with a look of worry ate at my emotions. My breath froze.

To my relief, the look melted away a few seconds later. "Mennara." Relief poured from my father's voice. "Where are you?"

After a pause, he said, "Contact Miyon. Make sure she's safe...Elis thinks the Shirukan are here." He paused for several seconds. "I realize that, but is it worth risking our lives?" Another long pause. "All right...I love you too. Hurry home."

By all the clear skies, I was so relieved.

Naolis tapped his tri-comm and focused on me, his cheeks bulging with the clamping of his jaw. His wings shifted with agitation and I knew I wouldn't like what he had to say. "I've heard rumors, and with this, I won't take any chances. Mennara will be here in minutes...Pack your things."

Wait. What? It wasn't just that I didn't like it. Two ideas clashed in my mind, until one realization jumped out. "You heard rumors? Why didn't you say something sooner?"

He turned away and headed for his and my mother's sleeping room. I refused to let him avoid me like that and rushed after him, determined to get an answer.

"Father."

His wings tightened and he halted in the doorway. "I said, go and pack, Elis. We have to leave *now*."

Already? Anger stirred within me that he had known about this but had waited until then, until I had finally settled into a life there and had a regular friend. I wasn't even getting a chance to say good bye to Toril.

"But—"

"Go."

Damn him. If that was how he wanted it, so be it. I exhausted my argument in a sharp exhale, despising my father for his decision, but I could do nothing. My mother had apparently agreed and I was still under their protection. I couldn't wait to start my training and earn my independence...and make my own decisions.

* * *

By the time Mennara returned, a transport met us at our balcony. My father and I had packed everyone's belongings, which didn't take much time. Our lives were at the whims of others, so we kept little, unlike so many species who seemed to mark their territory with clutter.

Miyon returned with Orlin, her future mate. I can't say I hated him and admit she had chosen well, but he never stepped in to take my side when Miyon derided me. Poor guy. I could only imagine how he would suffer under her domination, but it was his choice to pursue bonding with her. I mainly favored him because he might take Miyon away to no longer harass me.

I swear Miyon just loved to use Orlin to annoy me more than she alone could do, and he was too in love with her to care.

Once everyone sat down, the pilot flew us from Sarteros, which gave me something to watch other than them. The city shrank behind us, disappearing into the clouds along with my life. We'd lived there a whole year, an unusually long time period of staying in one place, especially since my father was a Crystal Keeper. Naolis was in high demand and traveled a lot.

In my heart, I said good bye to the city and my friend. Toril was gone. My life was gone. I'd never had any sort of life anywhere else. We never stayed anywhere long enough for me to form deep friendships and, by then, I had quit trying. Toril was special in that he was a close friend. I'd had only two others since my childhood.

I sighed away the thoughts, my chin resting on my hand and my back hunched. Sure, I'd keep in contact with Toril, but it wasn't the same as being able to meet him at a moment's notice. I wished I could be there to watch him get chosen for a team, because I knew he would make a fine sky hoop player one day. When the time came, I'd be cheering him on...or healing him. It was a dangerous sport.

I wished Toril had never shown me the recording, but I was grateful he had. Toril had proven to be the best friend I could have imagined and I didn't even get to tell him farewell. It would be a while until I saw him again, if I ever did, but I planned to contact him and express my gratitude for what he'd done to protect my family and to keep me sane for that year since the first time he invited me to join his group of friends.

I had no idea how long we'd be staying at Starfire Tower, but in a couple months, I'd start my training and call it home. I'd only been there a couple times when we'd visited Miyon while she trained. I might be settling there soon, but my family would only be staying until my parents found a new assignment.

Only after Sarteros disappeared from sight did I turn and face the others, but by then, Miyon and Orlin had quit their gushing over each other.

"I'll send my regards to Toril."

My father's words grated on my nerves. I avoided his gaze from the opposite side of the passenger area of the shuttle, still angry that he'd ordered such a hasty departure and upset even more that he would dare to mock me. He'd ordered us out, taking me from my friend.

"I'm sorry, Elis."

The sincerity of his voice made it hard to stay angry. He was good at that, but he *was* primarily a mediator and negotiator with offworld representatives who visited Inar'Ahben. He was far too good at his duties, but a natural tendency for it had led him to the role.

No one said anything more, except Miyon and Orlin, who whispered to each other. Their renewed gushing made me sick.

"Crystal Keeper," the pilot said from one of the two seats at the fore of the small airship.

"What is it?"

A dark shape streaked through the sky outside my window and my heart went cold. Black

from stern to bow with wings that arched out for atmospheric maneuvering, the short-range fighter shot past. "Shirukan," I gasped. We were in open air, beyond the city's defenses, in neutral territory.

"They were waiting for us." My mother's hand clutched my father's as our shuttle rocked from the air disturbance of another close fly-by of the fighter.

"They're demanding we land on the nearest searoot island or risk being shot down," the pilot said. "We've contacted the nearest city for support, but it'll be a few minutes."

A few minutes we might not have.

My parents stared at each other, the Starburst marks on their hands glowing. They shared a connection, communicating privately without me or the others hearing. How I wished Miyon and Orlin would do that.

After a few seconds, the glow of my parents' marks faded and Mennara nodded. Naolis looked to the pilot. "Your life is valuable. Land as ordered. We'll deal with them."

He had to be joking. I could see my father's point in sparing the pilot, but I couldn't believe he would risk all our lives to save one.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that. I wasn't asking for opinions." The pilot's hands flew across the control board in front of him, the transparent display along the fore view showing the positions of the two vessels in relation to each other.

Crystal fire. I could have kissed that pilot. I just hoped we all survived to thank him later.

The pilot seemed to know what he was doing, until the shuttle rocked from a hit and metal squealed in protest. "We're hit! I have control but I don't know for how long. I'll have to land on the island below."

"Do what you have to." My mother's eyes passed over me, deep lines of worry grooved into her forehead.

In that instant, I forced the panic from my face, or hoped I did, despite my heart pounding in my chest. My parents needed me to be strong and I wanted to prove I was.

I looked out the window and saw a couple of islands floating in the sky, their bottom points covered in a tangle of thick brown roots which tapered upwards to the top edges. Several clusters of brown spore stalks topped by fanlike pink leaves circled the outer edges of the island topsides and the center structures of homes and landing platforms.

The shuttle bucked, but the pilot maintained control, at least enough to avoid crashing. The platform on the surface of the searoot island grew larger, while the pilot talked to the base controller through the tri-comm on his cheek.

The rough landing knocked the breath from my lungs, but I'd been holding it without realizing. We might have landed, but there might be more trouble to come.

What had happened to our attackers? Had the fighter landed with Shirukan ready to shoot us the moment we emerged?

My parents unstrapped and my mother started for the door. My heart leapt from my chest. An instant later, I stood before her, blocking her exit. "Let me."

"Elis—"

"No, mother. Take care of the others." I was neither a Crystal Keeper nor a woman. I was expendable, but I was also young and quick, despite my size. If the Shirukan were nearby, I would have the best chance of avoiding them, or be the least valuable one killed while my family stayed on board and out of gunshot.

No one argued, which disappointed me a little, but I met my mother's scornful look with steel determination. I would be the one to take chances, not them. Before she could object further, I

slapped the controls for the door, which split apart with the bottom dropping into steps and the top lifting away.

Holding my breath and my wings close, I stepped out.

A fresh breeze greeted me, along with silence. Nothing. Not a ship in the sky nor a black fighter on the platform.

"It's all right. Control reports the attacking ship flew off."

My breath gushed out and my ego deflated in an instant. Part of me had hoped to be put out of my misery. Worse, I foresaw Miyon teasing me for days to come. How I wished the Shirukan had been there, if only to end that part of my misery.

A hand on my shoulder drew my attention to the smile on my mother's face. "It was a noble gesture." Her kiss on my cheek cooled some of my embarrassment.

"That was stupid...or pretty brave. I'm not sure if I should tease you or thank you."

Miyon *would* say that.

I grinded my teeth on a restrained retort and took my bag from my mother, who had grabbed it when I left it behind on the shuttle. Bad enough to have my noble act turn on me than to argue with my sister under the scrutiny of both parents.

I bit my tongue hard, satisfied that my intentions had been sincere, and stared at the platform's two other shuttles. Their gleaming rounded fronts rose back to a level behind the pilot compartment and split along the sides to the wings stabilizing flight for atmospheric maneuvers.

"I wonder how they knew," my father muttered. His eyes lifted to the sky around us, but only a couple of islands drifted peacefully in the distance among the scattered clouds. Not a sign of the attack vessel, but it had been real. Our shuttle bore the scorch marks to prove it had been hit.

"The timing *was* perfect." My parents' eyes met and my mother's eyebrow lifted.

The suggestion planted a seed of doubt within me. The Shirukan would never have gotten past the security of Wayfro Tower, not with any hint of their uniforms. The only way to get to our family would be to flush us out. But it was Toril who had shown me the video alerting us. It seemed too convenient.

I refused to believe it. It was only coincidence. My friend would never have purposely put us in trouble.

Would he?

Absolutely not! I refused to believe it. I shouldn't even have been considering it.

Toril was *meistal*, like those chosen for the Shirukan. He had Starfire in his genes, but not enough to produce Starburst marks and make him a Keeper; but he would never work with them.

No. Toril had been my best friend. I had helped him train to improve his flying skills and we had shared each others' secrets. Toril would never have betrayed me for any reason. Never. I refused to allow any hint of the possibility to take root in my mind, but a part of it did in spite of my efforts, or I wouldn't have argued with myself.

"We'll have to be more careful in the future." My mother looked at me as she said it. The urge to object rose sharply, until she gave the same look to Miyon and Orlin, who paled under her accusing glare.

"It wasn't me." Orlin turned to Miyon, his wings tight behind him. I almost laughed at the sudden release of my tension in light of the fear my mother inspired in him. It served my self-righteous sister right.

"I would never betray you." He stumbled over his words. "You have to believe me."

Miyon smiled and caressed his cheek, her dark wings lifting slightly. "I do. I know you would never hurt us."

Ugh. The kissing went too far. I had to turn away before I gagged. Those two really needed to go off and complete their bonding.

I doubted Orlin would ever betray us. He was a partial Keeper with tiny marks on his palms and nothing on the backs of his hands—just as much a victim of the Shirukan as any full Keeper.

At the emergence of the pilot from the shuttle behind us, my mother turned. The brown-haired pilot halted in his tracks at the base of the steps, half a head shorter than her and slender, no match in a fight with any Shirukan, at least not against the Shirukan I had seen—they all looked tall and muscular, even the men. "No, Ma'am. I only received instructions of where to arrive. It said nothing of whom I was picking up. I would rather take my own life than let the Shirat Empire get their hands on the Starfire.

Mennara sighed, a sound I recognized as her frustration. We all wanted an easy answer, but there weren't any. "Let's go."

"This way." The pilot stepped ahead of us towards one of the other shuttles. "They've agreed to swap shuttles."

I followed him with the others but couldn't help searching the sky around us. In my mind, I was sure Toril would never have betrayed us, but I vowed to confirm it with a tri-comm call as soon as I had some time alone.

Chapter 3

After a couple of uneventful hours in the new shuttle, we arrived at the fortress that was Starfire Tower.

Actually, the name is misleading—it isn't a single tower but three white, skywalk-connected towers alone in the sky. Balconies spiral around the outer walls of the towers while glass-ceilinged skywalks connect each level to form a triangle from above or below. Only the four landing platforms—one jutting from each of two towers at different levels and two from the third tower—break that pattern.

It would soon be my home for five years of training. I didn't know what to feel at the time, but it didn't impress me. I shrugged away my cares and waited patiently in my seat.

Our shuttle settled lightly on one of the platforms. "Here we are." The pilot swiveled in his chair to face us in the passenger area. "Will there be anything else?"

"No. Thank you." Mennara unstrapped and stood, despite the faint drone of engines. Obviously, the pilot had no intention of staying and kept them running to lift off as soon as we disembarked.

My mother's expression worried me. The flat length of her cheeks gave way to muscles flexing from tension in her jaw. I knew that look—she tried to be polite but couldn't hide her worry. Miyon had once told me I did the same thing, but it wasn't a surprise. Other than my father's shorter, rounder face shape and black wings, I was often told I resembled my mother more.

The young man bowed his head. "It has been an honor to serve you. Stay well."

"Thank you." My mother granted him a smile.

My father's eyes paused on me and he gave a jerk of his head, which I understood as my cue to stand. The click of unbuckling came from Miyon and Orlin. I got the point, although I had an inkling to stay and return to Sarteros and Toril.

I obeyed my parents, though.

While I unfastened the harness and stood with my pack under my arm, the door hissed open. I followed my family out onto the landing platform in the warm sun.

Ahead, the door of the tower opened to reveal a trio of Keepers, including a woman with black wings whom I recognized. She wore a shimmering purple midriff top and leggings and was accompanied by two men in the standard gray flightsuits.

"Naolis!" The tall, black-haired woman raced to embrace my father, letting out a squeal of joy. No doubt about it—that was Tennara. I had wondered about my mother and her names being so similar but gave up long ago and attributed it to coincidence.

"I'm so glad to see you. I missed you, little brother. It's been too long." She stood back, her smile beaming brightly and wings lifted off her back. Her purple eyes shifted to my mother. "What are you doing here?"

My mother's lips twitched as if she considered smiling but couldn't. "Shirukan attack."

That's all she had to say, but she was a woman of few words when a look could suffice.

I swore my aunt's jaw would drop to the sea below. She had always been one to show her emotions. And that part about her calling father her 'little' brother—don't let it confuse you when I say he was older. She was just taller and liked to tease him. Sound familiar? Except I was taller than Miyon and *she* was older.

"No!" Tennara blinked, looking from Naolis to Mennara and back as if waiting for them to

say it was a joke. "In Sarteros?"

"Yes." Naolis growled the answer. "They couldn't take us openly, so they set us up to get us outside the city."

"Neutral territory." She nodded, her mood turning serious. "How?"

I wish my father hadn't looked at me. I knew exactly what he thought. Toril hadn't betrayed us, I wanted to argue, but I knew better and bit my tongue. There would be a time and place to discuss it with my father and then there wasn't it. I could only grimace and wait for my chance to talk to Toril to confirm that he was innocent.

Tennara frowned for a moment and shook off Naolis's silence without further questions. "Well, you're always welcome here...Crystal Keeper Naolis, Keeper Mennara, Keeper Miyon and—"

"Orlin."

"An honor to meet you, Orlin."

"Keeper Orlin," Miyon corrected. Partial Keepers trained with the rest of us, having all the same abilities.

Precious—he grinned awkwardly and said nothing. I almost laughed.

Except Tennara's eyes rested on me and that put me in a spotlight I didn't want, especially when her expression changed to surprise. "And young Elis. Ahben depths! You've grown since I last saw you. How old are you now?" Her eyes looked me up and down and I wanted to hide from the scrutiny. "It wasn't that long ago but you've changed so much."

"Seventeen," I answered.

"Ready for Keeper training. Wonderful!" She stepped back, apparently satisfied with us, and the two other two Keepers with her moved aside. "Come inside and we'll talk more about this. You'll have to tell Saffir what happened, Naolis."

"I intend to." His wings lifted slightly and settled back, a sign of his agitation. Worse, he gave me a look all too familiar. I dreaded that look—he intended for me to join him.

My insides twisted at the prospect, since it usually meant a reprimand. Some days I just couldn't win. I followed in obedience to avoid a more serious admonishment from my parents later.

While the two Keepers who had come with Tennara took our bags to our sleeping quarters, we followed her through the familiar arched corridors, skyways, and transport tubes. I might only have been there a few times, but once was all I had needed. Having recorded my last visit in perfect clarity because of the Starfire in me, I could name most of the tower rooms, at least those I had previously seen.

We stopped at a room in Tower Three.

"I'll see you later." Tennara touched the controls and stepped aside.

I had no idea what was on the other side, but I had a good guess. She definitely hadn't taken us to our sleeping quarters, the dining hall, or the infirmary.

We entered a large room cluttered with mats for sitting, one of the practice rooms. In this case, a meditation chamber for Saffir, who sat alone on a mat with her back to the window wall revealing ocean and sky. A few hundred feet away, a searoot island drifted through the clouds.

My mouth went dry, but I wasn't worried in the least about impacts; automatic systems would shift the tower's location to avoid a collision. What made my palms sweat was the seemingly benign figure alone in the room.

Saffir's pale blue wings splayed out over the floor in a relaxed pose. Her matching hair was wrapped up in an orderly tangle of twists and braids to reveal the slender neck and powerful

shoulder muscles of the Crystal Keeper. The woman's hands were covered by the aquamarine beyond her wrists with the rays wiggling out to her elbows.

My father fell to his knees and my mother joined him. It took a motion from her to prompt me, and my sister and Orlin, to do the same.

"Forgive our intrusion, Crystal Keeper Saffir." My father's voice carried the perfect amount of reverence, sparking a hint of guilt within me for not showing the proper respect the moment we entered.

"Welcome home, Crystal Keeper Naolis. It's a pleasure to see you and your family again." Even with the light behind her, I swore Saffir's smile brightened the room.

My father licked his lips. Apparently Saffir's warm greeting could not penetrate the cold cloud of worry hanging over him. "I only wish we visited for pleasure."

"Is it not time for your youngest to begin training?" Her eyes flicked aside to me expectantly.

"Soon, but we came because we were forced to abandon Sarteros."

"You had trouble?" Saffir's wings pulled up behind her.

"Shirukan pursued us."

"The empire is nowhere near Sarteros."

"But they are not limited to their airspace." A sideways glance from my father was all it took to ignite my anxiety again. "And they used others to do their work. I believe...I believe we were set up to leave the city in fear. Not until we reached neutral airspace was our shuttle attacked."

Crystal fire. My father *had* been thinking what I suspected. I refused to believe, but that inkling of doubt continued to irritate the back of my mind.

"Why do you believe you were set up to leave? What happened?"

My father's eyes on me sent an icy spear of accusation through my confidence and planted itself dead center of my doubts. Was I right to trust Toril? Could he have been a part of it?

No! My inner voice screamed. It wasn't possible, but apparently my father felt it was. He watched me, waiting for me to speak. Crystal fire. Why couldn't he just say what he thought? It was his suspicion.

Except then Saffir watched me too. I wanted to run from there, find open air and escape them and the doubts tumbling through my mind. My wings pulled tight, and I cleared my throat as the words formed in my head. I had to say it quickly, before they fed more doubts. "I...A friend showed me recordings of suspicious groups in the city and said he thought they were Shirukan, that he'd been watching them. I hurried home and told father. He ordered us to leave immediately."

Whew! There. I'd said it, but I didn't like it.

"I see."

She did? Her tone of voice turned my insides into a twisting mess. What did she see?

Saffir unfolded her legs and rose, her movements fluid and lithe in spite of her age. "This is unfortunate. I suspected Marin might send a team to find you, and the city guards were on alert, but I never thought they would use those you most trusted. We will have to be more cautious." Her eyes hesitated on Orlin for several seconds before she stepped towards Naolis. "You're welcome here until you find a new assignment, and perhaps this time you should not stay as long."

Pale blue eyes passed over me with a gentle smile, but I felt as if she probed deeper, as if she scanned my mind remotely. "You did the right thing, Elis. Burden not your heart." Her words confirmed that she had read my expression.

While her advice was easier said than done, her words released some of the guilt and anger I

felt about the possibility of my friend using me to help the Shirat Empire. There was a reasonable explanation; I just had to find it.

"Marin's ambition to possess the crystal shards is not your fault. You could not have predicted that she would work through your friend, *if* he was indeed a part of any set up. Marin cannot see all sides. Her forces may have been in the city ready and waiting for the right opportunity and hoping someone would alert you about the Shirukan with a ship ready for that moment. If your friend saw them, he may not have known he was being used. They may have intended other means but simply took the opportunity that came."

Yes, that made perfect sense. Toril would never intentionally betray me. She was right. "Thank you, Crystal Keeper Saffir."

Her smile brightened, until she turned to Orlin. Her critical eyes scanned Miyon's partner up and down. "So, this is the future father of the next generation of my brother's line." She stepped forward and took his hand to turn his palm up. "Partial Keeper. Not bad."

After her support of me, I gloated a bit at the intense scrutiny she gave Orlin, but only because it involved Miyon. Since my grandparents were deceased—killed on an offworld mission of peace—her authority stretched over her brother's descendants, which meant us. Only my mother's mother held more authority, but she deferred to Saffir out of respect for the Starfire. She had approved of Orlin, but now he faced a tougher challenge—Saffir's approval.

For once, Miyon had to face the consequences her actions, to none less than the most respected of all Inari. I couldn't have asked for better revenge on my sister.

After a few seconds, Saffir returned to my father, apparently indifferent to Orlin. I still had the satisfaction of seeing Miyon squirm a bit, the fear in her eyes feeding my ego. I had no problems with Orlin and didn't expect anyone else would, but it was a sweet moment to see Miyon's ego deflated.

"The others must be warned. Bring your family to the holo chamber in two hours." Those eyes passed over me, stealing my smugness. "You will explain these events once more so that all understand. Too many Keepers have disappeared. Our world will suffer if all are lost."

Naolis bowed his head. "Yes, Crystal Keeper Saffir."

She gave him a quick smile shadowed by worry. "Go now. Settle into your quarters." Her eyes returned to me; I hated it and wished I could shake off the feeling of dread which had settled into my gut. She expected something of me that I wouldn't like. I had a bad feeling her words had been directed as much to me as my father.

I grimaced and bowed my head, and hurried from the room after my family. Saffir would be asking me to speak before a holographic meeting of several thousand Keepers; I was sure of it. I hated crowds, even virtual ones.

* * *

Maybe leaving Sarteros wasn't too bad, not since it was exchanged for Starfire Tower. I had a complete apartment all to myself. Although it was small, it was no worse than my room in our family apartment in Wayfro Tower. The apartment I had at Starfire Tower was a single small room with a small bathroom separated by a door. The main room had a single sleeping mat, which rolled up when not in use to make space to move about. I had a small table with two chairs which could slide out from the wall, but I kept it hidden to save space, especially since I preferred eating fresh food instead of food from the processor and that meant I'd be eating in the dining hall. I even had my own balcony. I could avoid Miyon and relax; I was free.

Except for thoughts of Toril haunting me. I would never believe he had betrayed us. I trusted him and I trusted Saffir's judgment. So why did it still bother me?

I had to hear it from my friend and I had the time to contact him.

I pulled my tri-comm from a sleeve pocket of my blue flightsuit, entered Toril's code, and pressed the oblong device to my cheek. He would answer; he had to.

In the stretch of silence while I waited, I tapped the wall pad by the projector to pull up the holographic controls. The menu sprang to life in the air a foot from the wall. Small apartments like that didn't have space for the floor units.

On the menu before me, I touched a few keys and pulled up two separate screens, one of the exterior of Starfire Tower and the other from Sarteros. The latter left a lump in my throat. I missed that place more than I had expected. We should have been able to stay. I would have had two months with my friends—Toril wasn't my only friend, but he was my best friend.

I hated the Shirat Empire more than ever. They made living a chore, in spite of controlling only half a dozen cities. It was Marin's decree that all Keepers were abominations and untrustworthy and that the Starfire belonged to the people and should be assembled in Heffin's Gate for the good of all. Good of all nothing. She wanted it all for herself.

Luckily, most citizens disagreed with her and requested Keepers for various services and functions around the world and offworld. Inari had always been a peaceful race, except when it came to the Starfire, but power has a way of corrupting. Even our species wasn't immune to its influence.

While I waited for Toril to answer, the camera views of Sarteros changed every minute, showing me the outsides of buildings, workers going about their duties, ships docking at the east platform, even a brief shot of a group of children flying circles around each other.

After nearly ten minutes of staring at images and trying not to think about Toril, I started to wonder if he would answer. He never went anywhere without his tri-comm, and he never refused to answer my calls.

A new set of fears rose within me, fears that the Shirukan had used him and had punished him for being friends with me. My imagination sparked numerous different reasons to worry. More than ever, I wanted to know he was all right.

"Come on, Toril," I muttered. To distract myself, I stretched my wing out beside me to pull out broken feathers, which would be replaced in a week with new growth.

I wished apartments had cameras inside them, so I could peek inside Toril's and see what had happened to him. I hated not knowing if he needed help or not. That was the worst part for me—not knowing.

I finished my preening as the sun dipped low outside. By then, a small pile of feathers sat beside me, ready to explode into a shower of black at the faintest breeze. From the balcony, I'd be able to drop them into the ocean, rather than dispose of them in a recyc receptacle like we had in the city apartment. There was one advantage to living outside the cities—natural recycling.

With that done, my thoughts returned to Toril. *Come on, Toril... Tell me you had nothing to do with it.* My heart sank with each passing moment. Where was he?

Concern weighed on my mind, which replayed events of that day several times, every detail in perfect clarity. I searched the minutiae for answers, but nothing stood out, except Toril had made a point of showing me the recordings and had seemed nervous about it. Why?

An answer resounded in my head. He couldn't have!

No. I refused to believe he had been involved. Ahben depths. No. No. No.

Saffir's logic must have been right—he had been forced into it or it was mere coincidence. My friend would never have voluntarily helped the Shirukan.

They must have gotten to him. They might even have had Toril and possibly his family,

while I sat safe and sound in Starfire Tower. That had to be why Toril didn't answer the call—he couldn't.

Yes! That was it. Toril had tried to tell me and I hadn't understood. The recording of the governor accepting the trade agreement with the Shirat Empire and Toril's comments about the governor's daughter was his attempt to tell me, but he was being watched to be sure he cooperated, so hadn't been able to say it outright.

It all seemed obvious now. That had to be the answer.

Crystal fire. Not a good answer—Toril's family was in danger by my logic.

I jumped to my feet, my heart racing. I had to do something. I couldn't let my friend's family suffer at the hands of the Shirat Empire because of my family.

But what could *I* do? I was one person, and a Keeper. Sure, I had the powers, but I wasn't trained. And I'd be killed on sight by the Shirukan.

My hopes trickled away, except for one. There was something I could do, and no matter how small an effort it might be, I was determined to use the resources available to me to protect my friend. The city administrators would respect me, and they could check on my friend. Since I was a Keeper, or at least the son of a Crystal Keeper, I had contacts in the administrative offices of Sarteros. We had worked closely with those who kept the city functioning, and they provided my parents with itineraries where they were most required.

I could do something instead of feeling totally helpless.

On the holoscreen, I touched the keys to pull up the Sarteros city network and located Director Nomitor Savila. She would take my call, and contacting her through holoscreen would be more open than tri-comm, which would mean a more diplomatic encounter.

An image hovered in the air before me of a woman in a dark blue uniform with yellow wings and hair flecked with brown, her face clearly defined by angular lines with a small break in the hairline over her forehead from scar tissue. The avatar was a perfect copy of the real person, including her voice and inflection: "Director Nomitor Savila welcomes your call. Please identify yourself."

"Jasheir Elis, son of Crystal Keeper Sarilov Naolis." That would get her attention.

"One moment please."

A few seconds later, the image blinked and the same woman appeared, this time with a hard set to her face and a different background. "It is an honor, Elis. I trust your family is well?"

"We survived."

Yellow and brown wings tightened to disappear behind her back and her face paled. "Survived? What happened?"

"You aren't aware?" Hadn't they even monitored air traffic near the city? Her position was to oversee civil order, which meant the security of the citizens.

"Forgive me, but I was preoccupied most of the day. Where are you?"

"Starfire Tower."

Shock passed over her face for a second, but she regained her composure. "Crystal Keeper Sarilov Naolis is well, I hope."

What about the rest of us, I wanted to ask. Weren't we important too? I bit my tongue and took a breath to calm the agitation rising within me. "Yes. We're all well, but we were attacked by Shirukan."

I never imagined her face could redden like that. "Not in my city."

My words had been an affront to her dedication to the position she held. Not a very diplomatic choice of words, but my anger got the best of me.

"We were attacked outside the city, but we believe the Shirukan set us up to leave." I had to place the blame where it belonged, so Toril and his family wouldn't be publicly shamed for being forced to cooperate, while still clearly explaining the reason I called.

I took a deep breath to prepare myself and said in my most diplomatic voice, "Director Nomitor, I have a friend named Koraku Toril. I believe the Shirukan may have coerced him into setting up our flight into their attack path by threatening his family. He showed me recordings of what appeared to be Shirukan in the city. I can't reach him on tri-comm, which is unusual. Could you investigate this and let me know what you learn?"

"Of course." Her posture straightened and her wings lowered. Apparently, she understood I wasn't blaming her. Although I wanted to, it would do me no good. "An incursion by the empire will not be tolerated in Sarteros...I'm sorry you were targeted. I will tighten security. Please have your father contact me at his earliest convenience."

"I will." To my relief, she said nothing about my friend. Actually, she seemed to want to hurry off the link.

A hint of a smile softened her face. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Elis. We hope to host your family again."

My turn to gain the power, but I couldn't make any commitments for my parents. That would be for them to decide, but I hoped they didn't return there. "Stay well." I touched the key to end the connection before she could beg for any more of our attention and switched off the projector. Silence filled the room. In the seconds after ending the call, I noticed something disheartening—Toril had still not responded to my tri-comm call.

Something bad had happened. Every cell of my body ached in sympathy. Only trouble would have kept my friend from his tri-comm. I hoped with all my life that I was wrong. All I could do, though, was wait to hear back from someone. I would have preferred Toril, but hearing from the Director of Civil Order that my friend was all right would be enough.

With nothing else to do in the remaining time until Saffir's meeting, I stretched my wings as far as the small room allowed. Muscles ached for flight, to catch the breeze. Those balcony doors invited me to the sky. A flight around the area would fully stretch my muscles and release some of the tension from my worries. Just a quick flight; I didn't have much time, based on the chronometer display on the wall. Besides, knowing my surroundings would help me if I would be living there for any length of time and I'd never had the chance to see Starfire Tower from all angles in our previous quick visits.

Before I thought any more of it, I stood on the balcony, inhaling the fresh air ruffling my feathers and hair and inviting me into the abyss.

"Elis."

I started and caught myself with my wings out for balance. Crystal fire. My father's voice sounded like it came from nearby and my brain placed him in the apartment. But his voice came from no direction. It had come from my tri-comm, which connected directly to my auditory nerve. I'd left off the visual input, which can be disorienting while flying.

"I'm here."

"Did you contact Director Nomitor Savila?"

Oh, no. I wanted to be anywhere but there, somewhere far away until my father cooled off. I couldn't deny what I'd done—she'd obviously contacted him soon after I'd ended my call. I was caught.

"Yes." The word stuck in my throat.

In the brief pause afterwards, time seemed to have stopped. I imagined my father's face livid

with restrained anger. I couldn't escape it, even if he wasn't there.

"Thank you."

Whoa. Whoa. What? He wasn't upset? I straightened, words escaping me for a couple seconds at the shock. "Y—You're welcome."

"Stay close. Saffir wants to meet with us in ten minutes."

No. Not so soon. Crystal fire. My wings dropped with the disappointment of not being able to fly yet. At the rate the sun set, I wouldn't be flying until morning.

I could blame that on the Shirukan too; I hated them.

Chapter 4

Not long after my conversation with Director Nomitor, I stood in the chamber where we had met Saffir a couple hours earlier. My tri-comm had been programmed for the connection through Starfire Tower and stuck on my cheek with the visual off. I would have been relieved by that, except Saffir had called all the Keepers presently staying at Starfire Tower to join us in the room. Luckily, no one but my family and Saffir filled the room those last few minutes before the arranged time.

My father's wings shifted, and my parents locked hands together, like Orlin and Miyon.

I had no one but myself.

In her sheer white robe over a plain gray flightsuit, Saffir stood facing us, her face solemn. Her blue eyes fixed on me. "Are you ready to speak?"

No, I wanted to say but clenched my teeth and gave a nod. It wasn't a matter of whether I was ready but a formality warning me to be ready. I didn't have a choice, or didn't see one.

Her lips twitched into an attempted smile, probably to reassure me. I appreciated that she cared, but it changed nothing about my squirming insides. A second later, her eyes set on my father. "Are you prepared?"

"Yes, Crystal Keeper Saffir." The glance my father gave me only made my insides tangle worse.

My jaw tightened on the grimace struggling to emerge. My father had given a subtle admonishment reminding me of the proper address of one of Saffir's rank. Both my parents were good at that—subtle guilt.

"Very good." Saffir stepped away and turned her back.

In silence, we waited for the others at Starfire Tower to arrive. At the appointed time, they filed into the room with the dark, oblong tri-comms attached to their cheeks. Each took a place around us, filling every space available to stand until no more entered. Saffir wanted everyone present for this. The anxiety in me grew with the questions being asked. She could have just warned everyone in a general message, but this was a massive virtual conference call.

Once the door closed, Saffir touched her tri-comm. "Erani, we're ready."

The room felt small to me among so many faces. I could have stood in a closet and felt less enclosed than I did then. I couldn't breathe among so many people. To keep anyone from seeing me trembling, I clasped my hands behind my back and closed my eyes, but the Keepers were still there, filling my head with their images.

Ahben depths! It was too many. I wished the others could have linked in from elsewhere, but Saffir wanted to speak directly to as many as possible.

"Welcome, everyone." Saffir's voice reached me in a resonating pitch—both in my ears and from the tri-comm a fraction of a second later. "Thank you for joining us. We have important news to share and I wanted to speak to you all at once."

She stepped aside and her eyes passed over me; for the briefest instant, I swore a hand touched me but no one had. I wanted it over already, to escape to the seclusion of the sky.

"I can't say this any other way, so I'll be direct... You're all in danger. Crystal Keeper Sarilov Naolis and his family were routed from their home in Sarteros today and pursued by the Shirukan beyond the city. Help came almost too late..."

"It is believed—"

Crystal fire. I wished she didn't look at me like that.

"—That the Shirukan coerced someone the family trusted to encourage them to leave the safety of the city into neutral airspace. That's where they were attacked."

She kept it general rather than giving any hints about the reality of my friend betraying us. Saffir had said I shouldn't blame myself and that my friend may have had no choice, if he had been purposefully involved. She was discreet in not giving specifics to such a large group, and I appreciated that.

"If the Shirukan could operate in Sarteros, they could be in any of your cities. Use caution." Saffir lifted her wings slightly and settled them to her back again, as if shaking off the discomfort of the speech, not what I would have expected. But I understood; it was uncomfortable at best.

"Crystal Keeper Saffir, what should we do?" one of the Keepers asked, the voice unfamiliar to me but I didn't know them all anyway. "Should we return to Starfire Tower?"

"No. They must not know they can intimidate us. Stay visible to the public. Serve our world as we have for thousands of years. Our people need us, now more than ever, and need to see that we serve them. We give the public hope. No one wants the Shirat Empire to take over their lives. Seeing Keepers in public will show them that we are here, and it will keep them strong. Every citizen must stay positive and resist the Shirat Empire. We are part of that. Our service provides them with a reason to believe Marin will be defeated."

Saffir's wings tightened to her back. I might not have seen her face, but I could read her body language. This news bothered her more than her words let on. "And we cannot risk an attack on Starfire Tower with everyone here. To survive, we must spread out."

"Excuse me." The voice came only from the tri-comm but their presence wasn't important. What came next was. "What tactics exactly did the Shirukan use in this attack?"

What a dreadful question. Saffir turned to me and the tension shot up my spine, flattening my wings behind me while a bead of sweat tickled down between them. "Elis. Would you explain *exactly* what happened?"

All eyes in the room targeted me. "I..." If they didn't stare at me, speaking might have been easier. "I...um...I visited a friend's apartment and he...showed me a recording of the governor of Karnim standing before a row of Shirukan saying he'd accepted trade with the Shirat Empire. Then he—my friend...he said he suspected the Shirukan had threatened the governor's daughter, a partial Keeper."

The expectant silence pressed on me, but I took a breath and continued in a hurried voice: "He then showed me a recording of several people wearing black gloves. He said—and I recognized the location—that they were in Sarteros the night before. We figured they were Shirukan, so I rushed home." That was the hardest thing I ever had to do, but I said it exactly as I remembered it.

"And then?"

What? I blinked, my heart pounding against my chest in a desire to escape. Saffir wanted more, but I thought I'd said everything.

Her intent gaze pinned me. Crystal fire. I wanted to run, to escape the pressure of that moment, but I was stuck by the scrutiny of everyone present.

"I decided we should leave immediately." My father's calm voice acted like a drain on the panic rising inside me. A stirring of air along the sweat on my back sent a shiver through me, leaving me relaxed.

By the time my father finished describing the details of the attack on our shuttle to the time that meeting started, I could have fallen asleep.

"Thank you." Saffir's eyes passed over my father and me while a hint of a smile played at the

corner of her mouth. Her blue wings lifted slightly and she returned her attention to the others. "Although we know not the exact circumstances, we do know the Shirat Empire seeks all the shards of the Starfire to dominate our world, and we know that Keepers have been disappearing wherever the Shirukan appear. Peace be on Crystal Keeper Yakora."

The implications of her words weighed upon the room, holding the audience in silence. She paused and let out a deep breath. "For that reason, I may be asking some of you to make a great sacrifice...But I ask all of you to be vigilant and continue to serve those who need us."

I waited in anticipation while Saffir answered a few questions about what she might have planned, but she gave no hints of what her "great sacrifice" might entail. Even when asked, she refused to give details, saying only that, if she succeeded, Keepers would thrive.

The meeting ended with only a word of caution to those in attendance, and I couldn't have been happier. Finally, the spotlight was off me...and the others, of course, but I was only concerned with my own discomfort at the time.

The moment Saffir cut off the tri-comm connection, I breathed as if I'd been suffocating all that time. I pulled off my own tri-comm and shoved it into a pocket, glad to be done with it, except for one other purpose. In all that time, Toril had made no attempt to contact me. Although I couldn't have answered the call, knowing my friend was all right would have relieved the anxiety returning to my mind.

The others filed out of the room, their voices initially quiet but rising with concerns of what had just transpired.

As the last few stepped through the door, Saffir's wings sank. I can't imagine what she must have felt; she never expressed much emotion, or it was too subtle. But even when she remained neutral, you could sense when something bothered her. At the time, I had the impression that something bothered her, but I had my own distractions and didn't care.

"Thank you for your part. You may leave."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I had been excused and intended to find some solitude.

"Except Elis."

In mid-stride, my feet stuck to the floor, my mind scrambling for an answer. Why me?

A gentle smile returned to Saffir's face. "We must discuss your training."

Couldn't it wait just a little longer? I had two months before the next training group was scheduled to start; time I planned to use to find my friend.

Unfortunately, one didn't simply ignore or disobey Crystal Keeper Saffir, and I'd be scolded severely if I did. Seeing no other choice, I turned fully to face her.

"So soon?" My mother sounded worried.

"They grow up quickly." Saffir motioned with her chin to the door in a clear dismissal.

My mother sighed, a sound of defeat, and my heart sank with hers. I was attached to my parents and it hit me hard then that I would rarely see them once I started my training. All the time I had been eager to begin, I hadn't thought about what I would have to give up.

"Yes, they do...Excuse us, Crystal Keeper Saffir." My mother's sadness pulled at my heart, but I also wanted her to be proud of me. Her eyes caught mine and her fingers brushed across my cheek, filling me with confidence and sorrow. I'd rarely seen her look so sad.

I tried to be strong for her and to prove I could do it, although I wished I could wait. "I'm ready."

My mother forced a smile and turned away, departing with my father's arm around her shoulders and a black wing extended around her back like a blanket of solace. If she had her way, I might never be allowed to grow up, but in many ways, I liked being her baby boy. I loved

my mother very much.

"We are always our parents' children."

At the quiet voice behind me, I turned back to Saffir, whose face grew stern the moment those blue eyes settled on me.

"Given the circumstances, I'd like you to stay and begin your training immediately. I'll be sending for the others. We can't afford to wait even two months if the Shirukan will go to such lengths to ensnare Keepers. We must be prepared, and so must our young people. One more ready Keeper is one more chance of surviving this threat...I'm glad to hear you're ready."

She paused as if waiting for me to say something, then asked, "You're ready for training, but are you ready to stay when your family leaves?"

There was the heartbreak. I feared for them. Certainly. And I didn't want them to leave and risk their lives again. But I had to train. I had to make the most of my skills so I could protect others. But Saffir was right to doubt me.

The intensity of her gaze made me want to look away, but I met it with equal resolve. Besides, staying meant living in one place for five years—longer than I'd stayed anywhere in my life—and no more Miyon or Nare. *And* it meant gaining the respect of being a Keeper that much sooner.

"I am." And I meant that.

Her eyes pierced me as if to cut out my confidence. Wasn't that the answer she sought? What had I said to offend her?

Too weird—satisfaction returned the smile to her face a second later. I didn't know if I'd ever figure her out. "Good. I see the truth in you. You are a worthy nephew."

Should I have thanked her? Her ways baffled me about how to act. My grandfather, Saffir's brother, had been passed over as a Crystal Keeper when it went to Saffir. And when the time came with a different shard, Naolis had been chosen fresh from training, one of few males ever selected by the Starfire. I would prove myself worthy someday. I just knew it. Her words gave me confidence.

"Thank you, Crystal Keeper Saffir." While my heart lightened, I couldn't shake my dread concerning the fate of my friend.

"Settle yourself into your apartment for long-term living. You will begin training within a few days."

A few days? That was much sooner than I had anticipated, but I'd make the most of it. "Yes, Crystal Keeper Saffir." I had a few days to familiarize myself with my new home and probe into the welfare of my friend. Toril had better be all right. If the Shirukan hurt him or his family, I'd find a way to hurt the Shirat Empire once I was a fully trained Keeper.

* * *

After two days of flying, wandering the corridors of Starfire Tower, avoiding my sister while visiting with my parents, and growing more worried about Toril, I jumped at an alert in my apartment. The holographic unit sprang to life on its own, a block of blue with a blinking small circle of red at the bottom dinging in sync with it. The characters at the bottom indicated the call came from Director Nomitor Savila.

Finally! My heart thumped against my chest and my mouth went dry. I hoped to hear that Toril was all right.

After a deep breath, I touched the screen and the woman appeared, her face shadowed with a sullen frown. Ahben depths. My heart sank. It looked bad.

"Jasheir Elis. Greetings." The momentary smile appeared anything but natural.

I mentally prepared myself for the worst news and cleared my throat. "Director."

"I'm afraid I have bad news."

I took a deep breath to settle my anxiety but it didn't help. Images stormed through my head of what could have happened to my friend, each one worse than the previous.

"Your friend Koraku Toril has disappeared, along with his brother, Koraku Rylan."

No. No. No. That couldn't be right. They had to be in the city. She was mistaken, although Toril could have left with his family to escape an eventual invasion. "What do you mean 'disappeared'? What about their parents? Are they all right? What do they know?"

Director Nomitor licked her lips and touched the screen before her. Her wings disappeared behind her back, a clear sign of her own anxiety. On my view, two images popped up on either side of her, showing Toril and Rylan, his young brother. Text scrolled beneath their pictures.

"Both Toril and Rylan were last seen two days ago." She hesitated and touched the screen. The pictures disappeared, replaced by a smaller box beneath her showing a video recording.

It must have been a mistake. There was no way possible. Several black-clad men and women surrounded the brothers and formed up tightly around them, blocking any escape attempts. Neither one tried, but they must have realized the futility.

The Shirukan had my friend.

I barely controlled my anger, my wings lifting from my back with the heat rising inside. "How could you let this happen!" In that moment, I hated Director Nomitor with an emotion so intense it burned through me like acid. Never could I remember ever wanting to hurt someone so badly. It scared me but invigorated me with the desire to act.

A couple seconds later, guilt struck me cold in the heart with the dreaded realization that *I* had let this happen. I should have stayed with Toril or asked my friend to join us. If only I'd read the signs sooner. I shouldn't have been lashing out against the director.

"I'm sorry. Our security forces can't be everywhere. The empire is half a world away; we never expected them in Sarteros."

Excuses. I bit my tongue on the accusatory words I wanted to throw at her. Director Nomitor deserved my respect, despite the anger eating my insides. She might have failed in her duties to protect the citizens of that city, but no one would have expected Shirukan so far from the empire. Her blindness to the levels of cunning the empire would go to secure their goals was understandable. Our world would have to change to prevent the Shirat Empire from taking advantage of the liberties we enjoyed.

"We will coordinate with their parents in dealing with the empire for the safe return of the sons. I've sent a request to the Commandant of the Shirukan—" All the way to the top; that effort impressed me. "—that the boys be returned to their family...I'm hopeful we can negotiate a release."

"What if they refuse?" Why would they admit their crimes?

Her lips twitched into a grimace quickly masked in a frown. "I don't know. We've never encountered this before. The empire has never done this."

"That you know of." The accusation bit like acid on my tongue, but it had to be said. Director Nomitor was too naïve if she couldn't anticipate the Shirat Empire committing such atrocities. It didn't take much to stay up to date on the latest reports. And everyone knew the Shirukan were Keeper killers. Who knew what else they had been instructed to do?

"That we know of," she mumbled. "We'll do what we can to bring Toril and Rylan home."

Sure they would. From what I'd seen of her dragging her feet, not much would happen. Director Nomitor was like most Inari—comfortable and passive. She didn't want a confrontation.

If only I'd been fully trained then...

But I alone had no chance against a hundred Shirukan, trained or not. Crystal fire. A sense of helplessness weighed me down.

"Thank you." The words ground through teeth clenched to hold back what I really wanted to say.

"I'll contact you when I have more news."

She blinked off the projection, leaving me alone in the cold room. Although I wanted to search for my friend that instant, I had no chance alone against the Shirukan and would be killed on sight. My only chance to ever rescue Toril was to learn all I could about being a Keeper and to work hard to master the skills that came with my birthright. I could only hope that negotiations freed them, but it was a slim hope at best.

One day I would find the missing brothers, if they lived that long.

No, I had to remind myself. That way of thinking only led down a dark road. The Shirat Empire had no reason to keep the brothers. They would be useless, and there was no logical reason to kill them. The Shirukan would have to release them.

If not, I would one day put my skills to use fighting the Shirat Empire.

That day hadn't arrived yet. First, I had to train. I had learned the basics when I was young, but the complexities were taught after maturity.

Calm once again, my mind connected the logical points, and my stomach growled an admonishment of me not having eaten much the last few days. Worrying about my friend amid the commotion of Starfire Tower and exploring my home-to-be had stolen my appetite.

My head might have forgotten, but my stomach hadn't.

Finally ready to eat, I left my apartment for the soft beige corridors through Tower One. My family was in one of the larger apartments in Tower Three. After eating, I'd visit them. They would be leaving soon and I wouldn't see my parents again until my first break.

Chapter 5

"Focus on the resonance."

That was easy. I had learned to discern the unique pitch of the Starfire within me as a child. The feeling of a constant harmonic throughout my body came with little effort, warming me with the energy it generated.

I opened my eyes and stared at my hands in my lap, unsurprised by the results. My Starburst marks glowed on the palms and backs of my hands.

"Very good. You've all been taught well." Keeper Marili walked among the eight of us sitting around on the floor of the practice room, the first of a handful of teachers we would have for our studies. She pointed to a wall scored with burn marks. "Each of you will take turns demonstrating the release of the energy. Once we've established that you understand the basics, we'll move on to refining your control."

I liked Keeper Marili. She was a good teacher, but her subject was easy. I looked forward to the more challenging tasks of our studies. Later in the morning, we would begin Ethics training with Keeper Nadim and, after that, Alien Cultures and Diplomacy with Keeper Amaris. In our orientation that morning, she had promised that we would be meeting representatives from other worlds over the course of our studies. I didn't yet know what area of Keeper training would be my specialty, but that's what all the training was for. Not only was it to introduce us to aspects of our parents' specialties, but it also taught us a little of everything that was possible or expected from Keepers.

I was only beginning, like the rest of my classmates, and the lessons would intensify as we progressed. Although I expected to progress quickly, so I could face the Shirukan and rescue my friend, I had to start at the bottom.

When it came time for me to release the energy, I sent the burst of energy from my hands crackling and sizzling against the wall in an explosion which startled me. I hadn't intended it to be so powerful.

"Very good, Elis. A little stronger than I expected, but your aim is good...Darnel..."

Although the release of energy left me cold, embarrassment at the lack of control rose as a warmth from my middle to my face. I quickly sat down and studied my hands, wishing I could hide from my classmates. I had lost focus because of my ambitions. I could have hurt someone. That would have done me no good in my goal to excel in my training. It would only hold me back.

Toril's fate ate away at my mind and interfered with my concentration. I tried to push it aside, but it refused to go. It had been my fault Toril had been targeted. The Shirukan must have observed me visiting with him many times. I couldn't shake that guilt.

Other ideas exploded in my head. How long had the Shirukan been in the city undetected?

Ahben depths. How many were in any number of cities waiting for the right moment to act? My family would be safe nowhere. The whole world suddenly contracted around me with danger.

"Elis?"

My name. Someone had called my name. I blinked to clear the images from my mind, which had stolen my attention, and looked up to a petite face with a small nose and eyes that sparkled as if hinting of something exciting. "Yes, Keeper Marili?"

Her golden wings shifted behind her and she brushed aside a strand of matching hair which

had slid into her face while she leaned over me. "What is the first rule of using the Starfire energy?"

What? When had we discussed that? Put on the spot suddenly, I grasped for the answer among wisps of memories. Someone had told me once. I had learned it while I was young. I had kept it in my heart, despite my feelings about the Shirukan and the empire they served. "We must never harm anyone."

"Exactly." She straightened and continued her walk among us while lecturing.

I let out my breath and tried to focus on the discussion about balancing purpose with the decision of how best to release the energy.

My thoughts slid back to Toril and the Shirukan. When my training finished for the day, I would check back with Director Nomitor. She must have heard something by then. Good news would relieve my mind and allow me to concentrate better on my studies.

Half a mind was no mind. I needed my full attention on my training.

"Halting a defensive burst is the most important lesson you'll learn today. You can all release a dangerous burst—with immense power if you're not careful—" Her sidelong glance at me ignited a guilty warmth that made me want to hide in shame. I cowed under the attention. "—But restraining it may be necessary."

All right. So I had lost some focus and let off a stronger burst than I intended. It was only practice. I vowed to do better next time. My mind would be fully on the task the rest of the class.

"The first and easiest task is a simple release of energy, as you all know. It's a defensive move only, but you'll find that refining how you release that energy can be useful in smaller ways too. We'll progress to that in time. Being able to switch it off at the moment you're ready to release it is the second most important lesson you'll need out there." She swept her arm across the window view, her meaning about the threats posed to us clear in that motion. I could think of one exception—when I next saw a Shirukan, I wouldn't restrain myself.

"It requires control, but in a tight situation, you may not have time to think about it. You need to learn to react on instinct...Do no harm. Not only do we not punish others, but we also must recognize that sometimes we may lose control." Her voice quieted and the air in the room seemed to hang on her words. "Reclaiming it before that happens could also be a matter of sanity. You will never forgive yourself for even the smallest accident...because you will never forget."

As the human expression goes, you could have heard a pin drop. The somber mood choked me, but I was part of it. Since we're living recorders, we remember everything in exact detail from our lives. The others must have felt as I did at that moment—we would have to live with the guilt of taking another life always haunting us. We might have been young, but we'd all learned to live with remembering every experience in our lives and understood too well the implications.

Her next words sunk deeper after that.

"The energy wants to be released, but you must reabsorb it."

"Excuse me, Keeper Marili."

I turned to look at one of the other two young men in our class.

"I thought reabsorbing the power could kill us."

He made a good point.

"Better us than an innocent life, Jashim."

In the void following her words, Keeper Marili cleared her throat and continued. "Now, remember how you thought to release the energy and practice building it and switching it off."

When I was young, finding the resonance had been difficult. After growing up practicing that, it came automatically; switching it off was the hard part.

But I practiced. Others had trouble and required a release to spare themselves from overheating. Not me. I swore I would do it. By the time our first class ended, I was able to switch it off. I might have been sweating, but I did it. I might have been close to passing out, but I did it.

Keeper Marili promised that, next time, she would introduce distractions to challenge us. Wonderful. As if thoughts of Toril weren't distracting enough.

That triggered a pang of guilt again. I vowed to check on the status of the family as soon as I was done for the day. I had a short break before Ethics. I had some time in that break, maybe enough for a quick call to the director, and I couldn't wait to make it.

Once we were excused, I hurried from the room and jogged through those brightly lit corridors to reach the transport tube, where I had to wait with a couple others. My eyes fixed on the lights alongside the door as they lit up with the movement of the car. It seemed to take forever, like anything does when you're in a hurry.

"It's Elis, right?"

Hearing my name yanked me from my deep concentration on that door. I turned to the source of the voice and saw one of the girls from my class with an older girl in the corridor. One stood with her arms crossed the way Nare or Miyon usually did when talking down to me, except this girl dropped her arms and her eyes while the friend made no move. Who had spoken? I stood perplexed and confused, my mind inching back each silent second to the transport tube and my mission.

The first girl brushed brown hair behind her ear, her wings lifting slightly and tightening with her obvious discomfort, while the other stood calmly. Probably the first one.

I took a chance and rummaged my memories of the introductions that morning. "Risa."

Her smile was cute...*Ow! Sorry, but this was before you, Raea. Watch and listen...please?*

She looked up at me, her cheeks reddening, and I swear mine must have too. "Yeah...um...I, um..." Her friend nudged her in the side with her elbow and her face flushed a deeper shade of red. "I heard your father was Crystal Keeper Sarilov Naolis."

Was that all she wanted? My hopes sank like a searoot spore into the sea. I wanted to think she would be interested in who I was rather than whose son I was. She had just crushed my confidence and reminded me of how the world saw me. "That's right."

Her light brown eyes sparkled, but I hardly noticed, my attention already returning to the transport behind me. "That's...great, um..."

Her friend shoved her towards me and whispered in her ear. Risa's wings disappeared behind her back.

Behind me, the doors hissed open. I didn't have time to wait for her to ask about my father, but my parents had taught me to be courteous. "I have to go. I'll see you in Ethics study." I whirled and, after two Keepers stepped out, I hurried into the car with another waiting Keeper. As the door slid shut, I caught sight of Risa with her mouth open as if to speak, but it closed with the sinking of her shoulders.

If she was only interested in my father's shard, I could introduce them another time, but my family had left the night before from Starfire Tower. I'd seen them off and returned to sleep before the day began. In a few months, I'd have some free time to visit, but until then, I was on my own and I wasn't going to introduce anyone.

I wanted to use what little time I had to learn about Toril, if there was news. I wasn't permitted to answer calls during training classes, except in dire emergencies. Investigating

Toril's disappearance didn't count as an emergency, but it should have.

The moment the doors opened, I rushed through the apartment corridor, ignoring anything else and dodging the only other person I encountered. I passed several doors before stopping at mine.

Still running on automatic, I entered the code at the panel. The door slid open and the lights came up inside, although the sun shining through the etched glass of the balcony door would have given me enough light to see by. Inside, I pulled up the holographic projection controls and keyed in a request for Director Nomitor.

A second later, the director's avatar smiled in the air before me. "Director Nomitor Savila welcomes your call Please identify yourself."

"Jasheir Elis." I tried to keep the exasperation from my voice—the avatars were programmed to detect the nuances of emotions and respond accordingly, although always politely. I'd have to be more careful addressing the real director.

"One moment please." The woman disappeared for a second and blinked back a moment later. "I'm sorry but Director Nomitor Savila is unavailable. I will inform her of your call. Thank you." The image vanished with the link.

Crystal fire! What could be more important than a simple call inquiring about my friend? At the time I couldn't imagine anything else and it annoyed me that she would deny talking to me. This was important and I had gone to painstaking lengths to keep patient to that point.

How little I knew back then.

I was so mad, I clenched my teeth and tightened my fingers, but it wasn't the director's fault. Rather, I wanted to strangle all the Shirukan with my bare hands and demand my friend's release. The lack of communication left me with more worries about the outcome of the director's inquiry to the Shirat Empire.

It wasn't good enough. While diplomats negotiated, my friend was a prisoner of the Shirukan, who probably tortured him for befriending a Keeper. It stabbed me inside with guilt. I've learned that no matter what the situation, we always tend to blame ourselves when bad things happen to those we care about. It's a natural part of the grieving process, but at that time, I didn't understand how irrational my thoughts were.

"It's all my fault." I wished I could apologize to Toril for what I had let happen. What kind of friend would I be if I let my friend suffer? What kind of Keeper would I be if I let harm come to others because of me?

My parents had taught me that service to others came before my own needs. I would serve my friend if it was the last thing I did, and I knew that it very likely would be.

I'd have to plan carefully if I hoped to search within the empire. The moment I was identified by Shirukan, I'd be killed. I needed a way to find my friend and rescue him. I needed resources and ideas, probably diplomats and soldiers and a million other things. The logistics overwhelmed me. It was impossible. I'd never succeed.

That's how it went every time—my determination would flare and reality would cool it. There had to be a way, *something* I could do; but I was only one person and not even a fully trained Keeper. To Ahben depths with them all! Tears stung my eyes, drowning me in hopelessness, and my wings stretched in an instinct to fly. I could do nothing for my friend.

Toril deserved a better friend than me.

The rest blurred in my mind. I remember wiping tears from my eyes and pounding my fists against the wall, but that was the only physical sensation at the time. It hurt but not like the helplessness and guilt eating away inside me. I cursed them all. Damn the Shirukan! Damn the

administration of Sarteros! Damn me for being the catalyst for it all! Damn us all!

I pounded away, oblivious to anything but the pain twisting and burning like a poison inside. I pounded my fists past the point of bruising to where pain meant nothing and I could see nothing but a blur through my tears. I didn't care how long or hard I pounded, only that I might escape the guilt. I hated myself and everyone. Nothing was fair.

Out of the mist of memories, only one thing stopped me from continuing until I passed out. Something clamped around my arms and restricted my movement.

"Let me go!" I struggled, but the dark blue uniformed figures secured my arms to my back and pressed my chest to the wall. "Leave me alone!" I didn't deserve to live. I would rather die than live with the agony of knowing I had caused harm to my friend.

"I'm sorry, but we can't do that." The stern but steady voice came from my right, where a woman stood out of my reach.

"What are you doing?" I tried to pull away, even to lift my wings to throw them off, but they had me pinned. With my cheek pressed against the wall of my apartment, I breathed hard and sniffed back the tears.

"Protecting you."

"Me?"

"From yourself."

"Let me go." The statement was only half-hearted by then. Like a pressure valve, the pounding had released the pent-up frustrations and anguish.

"Not until you calm yourself." From the corner of my eye, I caught a streak of black on her cheek that could only have been a tri-comm.

I sniffed and pinched my eyes to clear the moisture, but the tears tickled down my cheek, leaving cool streaks that did nothing to alleviate the guilt inside me.

"Take it easy." Her voice softened, calming the torment of my tears and stealing the tension from my body. "That's better."

The hold on my arms and wings eased, and they pulled me away from the wall and turned me. Tears still flowed, although less than before, chilling my emotions with cold hard reality.

"Will you cooperate?" the woman before me asked.

Seeing no choice, I nodded, my voice choked on the regrets and guilt clogging my throat. I could do nothing for myself, much less my friend. The security forces had proven that more effectively than any words.

"Will you come with us to the infirmary?"

Infirmary? I had expected them to lock me in the brig.

"We don't want to hurt you."

I glanced aside at each guard holding me and sighed. They gave me no other options, but I'd take medical care to incarceration any day. "Yes."

The woman motioned to the guards at my sides, who released me and stepped back.

"Follow me."

I did, thinking all the while that I would be in huge trouble with my parents. I dreaded the repercussions of whatever I'd done but cooperated in the walk through the corridor and into the transport tube car. After a quick ride and crossing through the skywalk, we reached the infirmary in Tower Two.

The glass door slid aside at our approach and a medic looked up from the display arched around the corner of the room. Like the other medics, she wore the familiar red flightsuit and long jacket. "Kiri. What have you brought me?" She rose from her seat and approached, her

brown hair tied back from her face in a single braid. Her eyes held me with unwavering focus, despite my desire to duck away in shame.

"Jasheir Elis," the security officer said. "Looked like an emotional breakdown. He was pounding his fists into pulp against the walls." She gently reached for my hands and I let her turn them over.

For the first time, I noticed the bruising and the throbbing pain. How hard had I been pounding? How long?

"Internal sensors alerted us to a possible altercation, but we found this." While the medic took over one hand, the security officer let the other go.

Brown wings shifted on the medic's back and her full lips pursed into a thin line. "It's nothing. I can fix this quickly."

"Jadeen." The officer motioned for the medic to join her for an aside in the far corner.

While the two most likely talked about me—the frequent glances and low, unintelligible voices were a good indication—I touched the blotches of purple and blue along the side of my hands and noticed the swelling. It wasn't bad, but I hadn't noticed in my anguish that I'd hurt myself that much. I remembered only the emotional pain and frustration for feeling helpless. Tower security had arrived in time to save me from myself.

Still, I knew that what I suffered was nothing compared to what my friend must have at the hands of the Shirukan. In my mind, it had been a twisted sort of redemption. Until Toril and Rylan were safe, my conscious was determined to torture me, because I imagined that I caused them to be tortured and I saw myself deserving far worse, but I couldn't see the insanity of my logic failure then.

Instead, I struck upon the idea of contacting Toril's and Rylan's parents when I had a chance.

Unfortunately, that chance wouldn't come until much later. The way the security officer watched me, even while talking quietly to the medic, I wouldn't be getting much privacy for a while.

The medic gave a curt nod, her wings tight behind her, and both returned to me.

Medic Jadeen inhaled sharply. Her eyes flicked to the security officer and her cheek muscles twitched as she returned her attention to me. "I'm going to suggest you undergo a few tests before returning to your training."

Testing? I didn't need testing. I needed my friend safe and sound, but since they couldn't do that, I saw no use arguing. I also suspected that's what they expected me to do. "I'm all right."

Fine eyebrows lifted and she turned over my hand to expose the discolored skin. "This is not 'all right', Elis." She lowered my hand and let go, her demeanor relaxing. "It's perfectly normal to feel frustrated with the training and being separated from your family for the first time, especially as Saffir is rushing you kids lately. We need to assess whether you're truly ready for this. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

They were far from the truth. I wasn't ashamed of anything except failing my friend, but I didn't feel like sharing my troubles with a security officer and a medic whom I hadn't known for more than a few minutes. Nor did they give me much choice.

"If you'll follow me, we'll take care of your injuries."

I glanced over my shoulder at the guards, who stood unmoved before the door; they wouldn't let me out without approval from their superiors. Seeing no choice, I followed Medic Jadeen to a corner of the infirmary. Luckily, I was the only patient at that time. No one else would know what had happened, sparing me from further embarrassment.

A couple other medics glanced up from their work, but they said nothing and returned to

their tasks.

Medic Jadeen led me to one of the beds in the corner of the bright room and patted it. "If you'll lie down, I'll take a look."

All right. Whatever good examining me might give her, I'd let her have her "look". I climbed on and found a position where my wings could fall back beneath me comfortably. The bed was short and my feet teetered at the bottom edge.

"You are a tall one. Aren't you?"

Not again. I don't know how many times I'd heard that in my life. Few Inari stood six feet or more, but I still had some growing and didn't doubt I would add another inch or two. The odd part was that I was a naturally gifted flyer. Most tall Inari were clumsier flyers than those of normal height. I'd always been strange, though, as my cousin had stated many times.

I pushed those thoughts out of my head and watched the medic position a scanner over my head. Its bluish white light shone across my vision.

Medic Jadeen made an adjustment on the scanner and lifted my right hand, the one nearest to her. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Could I? Yes. Would I? That was another matter. I didn't want to, but Saffir and my family already knew what bothered me. Sooner or later, they would learn of my self-inflicted injuries.

"I pounded the wall."

"Obviously." The flat tone of her voice hinted of annoyance. While she reached for a tool on the tray next to her, I studied the colored blotches on my other hand.

She aimed the stylus-shaped cellular growth stimulator at the wound. It hummed faintly with the blue light she adjusted to a narrow beam from the pointed end. It would heal the tissues, but it could never heal what really ailed me.

"Why were you pounding the wall?"

"I was upset."

"At the training?" With the precision of a machine, she directed the beam at the first injury.

"No."

The skin prickled and ached behind the slow passing of the beam, a result of the rapid tissue regeneration and repair. With all the Keepers in the tower, I would have expected a simpler healing session. The Starfire energy could be used as a weapon but also to stimulate the body's natural healing processes. Instead, the medic used a tool that was quicker and easier for superficial wounds like mine.

Her eyes narrowed, focused on the beam. "Something someone said?"

"No."

She finished the first hand and switched the beam off. Her eyes fixed me with a hard gaze. "Do you get upset often?"

"No." Crystal fire. She looked at me as if I had committed a crime. The medic had no right to judge me. "Forget it." I didn't want to tell her anything more, and I didn't have to. I didn't owe them an explanation.

She huffed indignantly and walked around to my other side. There, she lifted my left hand more roughly than she had my right, making me wince at the throb of pain, and aimed the stimulator. "It's my job to question how anyone gets hurt, Elis. If you need extra help, I'll make sure you get it."

"I'll be all right." I wasn't in the mood for an argument, especially with someone I had just met.

"You're sure about that?"

No, but I wasn't about to discuss it with her. "Yes."

"Hmm..." She grew quiet, while the tickling of my left hand told me the tissues healed. After a few seconds of silence, she shut down the device. "I'm going to confine you to your quarters until Saffir and I both agree that you are 'all right'."

Wonderful. I could only grimace at the prospects of what that meant. The next thing I'd know, Saffir would be contacting my parents, and my sister would learn that I had failed on my first day of training. I'd never live it down. Already, her laughter rang in my head to taunt me.

I chased it out by watching the medic, who studied the scanner readouts displayed above me where I couldn't see. I could only try to read her expression, but she gave away nothing.

After a long pause, she switched off the light and slid the scanner away without further hint of her thoughts. She offered me a hand, but I sat up on my own.

"The guards will escort you back to your quarters. After I speak with Saffir, we'll let you know the results."

"Thanks." I slid off the exam bed.

A firm hand settled on my shoulder. "Take care of yourself, Elis. We're here to help you, not cause problems."

It sure didn't seem that way, but I only nodded and rejoined the guards. One walked ahead and one behind me through the corridors until I reached my apartment, where they stopped outside.

I entered alone, glad to be rid of my escort but afraid.

That was one of the worst days of my life, or so I thought at the time.

Chapter 6

The day got worse. Director Nomitor never returned my call, and Toril's parents didn't answer on their tri-comms or the link in their apartment.

Crystal fire. What happened to them? What was going on?

I couldn't stand the wait and tried to contact the director again, but she never returned my calls. I could do nothing to hurry an answer.

The worst part was being stuck in my quarters alone, until someone decided I was all right to rejoin normal life. While sitting with my back to the wall, I pulled my knees to my chest and pressed my face into them, then spread my black wings around me in a shelter to block out the cruelty of the world. I wanted nothing to do with it. It hurt. It taunted me. Nothing was going right. At least alone in my shelter, I knew I was alive and safe.

A beep from the door hardened my determination to block out the world. They could go away.

The alert beeped again. Why couldn't they leave me alone?

Whoever it was probably knew I was there. The internal scanners would have shown my presence to those with the proper authority. I could only wish to hide and be completely alone where no one could find me, but that was impossible on a world where everyone could see nearly anything.

The door hiss warned me that someone had the code or an override. I guessed the latter since more than two hours had passed after my return from the infirmary, and I expected Saffir's visit. What had the medic discovered in her tests?

Even Tennara would have been preferable, but she had taken a Keeper post in a city right after we'd arrived.

"Elis."

Saffir's voice made me cringe, despite being soft with concern.

"Elis. Are you well?"

A couple faint steps interrupted the quiet, until the door hissed shut. For only a flicker of a moment, I hoped she had left, but the soft rustle of fabric accompanied several more steps.

"We're alone. It's only me."

Only her? She was Saffir, *only* the most honored of all Keepers.

"I'd like to know what happened." Her voice was gentle and coaxing, like my mother's, but it wasn't Mennara. This was Saffir, my grandfather's sister. She was family, as well as a Crystal Keeper. It might not have been my mother, but I couldn't ignore her.

"You know what happened," I muttered in the hope of not having to explain.

A light touch on my right wing pulled it down. "Do I? I knew about your friend, but I didn't know it bothered you so much, unless there's something else...Look at me...please?"

Why Saffir? I could've excused anyone else.

I let her pull my wing back to remove the privacy around me and shifted my left back with it.

Her lip twisted into a look of pity. "There's more to it. Isn't there?"

So much more, I wanted to say, but my emotions clogged my throat so I could only nod. If I'd known she would understand, I would have spilled it all, but I hardly knew her and was in awe that she would even pay attention to me, blood ties notwithstanding.

"I'm sorry, Elis. I didn't make the time to listen. Tell me now. What's really going on?"

Easier said than done. I swallowed the lump in my throat and had to think of the right words,

but they wouldn't come. All I could say was, "It's my fault. They must have known we were friends and used him to get to me."

Crystal fire. The tears threatened and I looked away to hide it as I wiped my eyes. "And I can't do anything to help them. It's my fault!" I ground the words through clenched teeth while my wings lifted behind me. I didn't mean to yell at her, but the anger flared so hot I almost couldn't control it.

"The Shirukan have them because of me and I can't do anything. I'm one person. I have no training and would be shot on sight if I even tried to fly into an Imperial city. I can't save them. He tried to warn me and I...I can't help." She had to understand. I wanted someone to tell me they would fight for my friend, where I could do nothing, or to offer a solution I hadn't considered. If anyone could make something happen, it would be Saffir. Everyone respected her.

Her blue wings shifted and her expression dropped into something somber. "I'm sorry for your friend. I am. But you can't blame yourself for something you didn't know."

Yes, I could. I'd been too selfish and afraid for my own family to see that my friend had needed me too. Why couldn't she tell me something useful?

"You didn't know it was a set up, *if* your friend was involved in that."

She tried hard to absolve Toril, and I appreciated that, but it changed nothing. I was frustrated beyond reason. "He was. I know it. Director Nomitor showed me a recording. The Shirukan took Toril and Rylan. They took them away!" Damn her. I wanted to do something to wake her up to the reality, something harsh, or to tell her to leave me alone if she wasn't going to help. I couldn't sit there and listen. I'd had enough. My patience had been worn thin that day.

I jumped to my feet and turned my back to her, a clear sign of disrespect, but I couldn't stand to look on her and that calm pity. "And there's nothing I can do. He was my friend. Friends stand together. What good am I if I can't even be there when he needs me most? What kind of friend am I? What good is a Keeper who can't serve others?" I felt like a total failure, and her silence only shoved the knife of guilt in deeper.

I whirled on her, ready to demand an answer.

She shook her head. "You missed your Ethics training today. Had you been there, you would see, Elis. We're not infallible, but we can do no good to the public if we place ourselves in purposeful danger."

It was like she hadn't been listening, and I wanted to shake her into understanding what I was saying. "He was my friend, my closest friend." Didn't she understand the implications on my life? "We never stayed anywhere long enough for me to trust anyone like him. And he trusted me. He trusted me to help him. He probably hopes for me to rescue him now, and when I don't, what will that show him?"

It was no use arguing. Saffir had closed her ears to my concerns.

Closing my wings tight, I stepped to the door of the balcony with its glass etched with swirls to cloud it. The sky tempted me with its open air. "You wouldn't understand. You live here all the time."

"Don't underestimate anyone." Her scolding tone sparked a rage of defiance within me, but shame made me bite my tongue. "I see many come and go. They're all friends, and...the empire has killed many." The solemnity of her voice tempered my anger. "I've lost many friends, Elis, and there was nothing I could do to help them. I blamed myself too, but I didn't put a gun to their heads or neutralize them. I've had to learn to accept that some things cannot be changed. I am one person. *You* are one person. We do what we can but we're not omniscient or omnipotent."

Ouch. That hurt, because the truth always hurts. I learned a valuable lesson that day, but it

took time for it to sink in.

Saffir stood up, her poise once more confident and authoritative. "Your loyalty is commendable, but you must learn to let go of guilt. There is a time and place for it, but this is neither."

Easy for her to say, but I saw her point. My guilt dulled with the truth in her words. I couldn't help seeing the situation differently. Looking in from the outside gives one perspective. However, from the inside, you miss so much of the full picture. I needed to hear her words, no matter how much I despised her for it.

Her aquamarine hand swiped back a loose strand of blue hair from a face too young for its chronological age. The fine lines around her lips and eyes hinted of her real age but one would have guessed far younger than the truth.

Saffir sighed heavily, her shoulders sagging. "The cities refuse to acknowledge the threat; the empire doesn't overtly attack, so they mistakenly believe their citizens are safe." The cold tone of her last words surprised me as much as the words did.

"Keepers disappear from cities half a world from the empire, and they blame me. They close their eyes and think the problem will disappear. Too long has our world known peace, I think. We have forgotten our past. Not twelve years ago we lost a Crystal Keeper." She played with the fingers of one hand. "I can only guess where she went. Five years later, they killed Yakori and took her shard. I worry about Naolis, far from the empire but not far enough. Since they chased out Padina, we've cut off all trade with the empire. They've grown more cautious and covert in their activities, using threats and lies to obtain their goals. This world isn't safe..."

Saffir tightened her fingers into fists, her eyes staring into thoughts only she saw. What did she mean? Why was she telling me these things? Did she blame the city for not protecting my friend? A mountain of hidden meanings hid within her words, yet it might be nothing but my imagination clinging to a glimmer of hope.

When she focused on me, a gentle smile lit her face as if nothing had happened. For a moment, I thought I understood, but only for a moment. It blew away like a down feather in the lightest puff of air. Saffir was a mystery to me. I respected her and held her in awe, all the while despising her for doing nothing to help my friend.

"You're a good person, Elis. You care. Never lose that virtue, but don't let it fill your heart with guilt. You did nothing wrong. You did only what you could under the circumstances. No one could expect anything more." Her smile lifted higher. "My nephew is a special young man and a generous person to show such sympathy for a friend, but it must be tempered with reason."

If only it could have been that easy, but I couldn't see through the cloud of emotions.

Like a mother, she took my hands in hers and held them, her touch strange but soothing. "I promised Mennara I would look out for you, but she had not to ask. You're family, and like my own grandson. I wish the best for you and am here for you while your family returns to serve our world... We're all here for each other, but you must let me know your heart. Holding so much anger inside is destructive." She turned my hands over and studied the healed area.

I understood what she meant, but it didn't erase my guilt. Rather, a new sense of guilt grew to conflict with the shadow of emotions about my friend. My world needed me. Toril wouldn't want me to throw my life away chasing him against the odds. Although I hated myself for not trying to do more, I would serve my world best by training and eventually taking my place as a Keeper to serve others who needed me. Whatever happened to Toril and Rylan was nothing compared to the suffering I could end once I could control the Starfire energy.

That's what Saffir was trying to tell me. It haunted her voice and shadowed her words. She

was right—reason would temper my emotions—but it wouldn't be easy.

Yet, I saw more clearly than I had in a while. Toril was one person, but he valued our world and the work Keepers did. I could save many in his name.

That didn't mean I had to give up on him. I could still follow up on the status of my friend's captivity. I would never forget him or blame him for helping the Shirukan.

"Talk to me, Elis. I want you to succeed."

I had almost forgotten about Saffir. She still held my hands and gazed at me with those deep blue eyes so much like my father's. "If you have any problems, I want to know."

"I'll be all right." I pulled my hands from hers, not wishing to connect at that level but feeling a need to express myself so she understood. "It's...frustrating, the whole situation. I can't do anything but I want to save him."

"I understand how you feel, but you must promise me..." Her eyes held me, preventing me from turning away. "Do not punish yourself for what is out of your control."

Damn those eyes. They reached through me with sharp daggers, as if spearing through any veil of deceit. I couldn't lie to her, nor could I hide my desire to fly off and demand the release of the Koraku brothers. I had to break her connection.

After a few seconds, I was able to look away. "I'll try."

"That's all I ask, but I will have to inform Mennara and Naolis of this."

Crystal Fire. I let out a soft groan. "Why?" My stomach lurched at the prospects—my mother would worry about me even more than she already did, and my father would think I would never be worthy of the Starfire. Since I was a child, I'd hoped to one day ask for the honor of trying for the acceptance of my father's shard. Now that would never happen. I'd have to work twice as hard to be considered half as worthy.

"They worry. They're still your family and will always care about you."

Nothing like piling guilt upon guilt. Saffir was good at that, better than Debbie ever proved to be, but that's jumping ahead.

My shoulders sank and my wings dropped. I'd never live this down with Miyon. My stomach twisted worse.

No, it wasn't only thoughts of Miyon but hunger that churned my stomach. I had missed the midday meal. How convenient that it gave me the perfect excuse to escape Saffir's overbearing presence. "May I be excused to eat?"

"Of course."

That was almost too easy. All right, it was too easy. Something was up. After the intrusion by tower security, the exam, and a visit by Saffir, they would just leave me to wander alone. Or would they? I'd have to test it.

"Thank you, Crystal Keeper Saffir."

She tipped her head in acknowledgement, my cue to excuse myself. Trying not to look too anxious to leave, I stepped past her to the door, which opened at my approach.

"You are never alone, Elis."

I hesitated and looked back at the gentle smile on her face, which aroused suspicions in my mind about what she meant. Whatever it was, it could wait. I really was hungry and hurried off through the corridors to reach the dining hall.

To read more, order online or from your local bookseller.

ORIGINS OF DARK ANGEL (Starfire Angels: Dark Angel Chronicles Book 3.5) is available in the following formats:

Ebook: \$3.99

Paperback: \$10.99

Thank you for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Nilles grew up on a western North Dakota cattle ranch and farm. Along with her interest in horses, she always had a fascination with science fiction and fantasy. After high school, she graduated from North Dakota State University with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, which includes her husband and kids, and her cats. Her published works include the *STARFIRE ANGELS* series, *Legend of the White Dragon*, and *Tiger Born*. Besides writing, she also trains and shows her horse. For updates, visit her website at www.melaniennes.com.

Other Books by Melanie Nilles:

BROKEN WINGS

(Starfire Angels: Dark Angel Chronicles Book 2)

CRYSTAL TOMB

(Starfire Angels: Dark Angel Chronicles Book 3)

WHEN ANGELS CRY

(A Starfire Angels Novella)

Coming in 2012:

FOREVER DARK

(Starfire Angels: Dark Angel Chronicles Book 4)

Other Series:

LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON: LEGENDS

LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON: LEGACIES

LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON: DESTINY

LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON: LEGENDS, LEGACIES DESTINY

(Three Complete Novels)

FIREBLOOD (A Legend of the White Dragon Novel)

A TURN OF CURSES

Books by M. A. Nilles:

TIGER BORN (Demon Age Series)