



One Shirukan, an elite soldier of the Shirat Empire, came to Earth for Raea's Starfire shard and failed.

Aware of the possibility of another attack, Raea trains to use the shard's power to protect it while preparing to graduate from high school. But she discovers that the Keeper training her has betrayed her trust and now she must decide where her heart belongs. She never imagined that distance from him would mean a universe apart.

After the Shirukan attack, she wakes up to find herself on the Inari homeworld. With the help of allies, she hopes to reach the Crystal Keeper known as Saffir to return home. First, she must elude the thousands of Shirukan between her and freedom.

Broken Wings

Starfire Angels Book 2

By
Melanie Nilles

Prairie Star Publishing * North Dakota

Broken Wings is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters, names, places, or incidents to reality is pure coincidence.

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Unexpected Guest

Through the connection with the entities of the Starfire, Raea experienced glimpses of other worlds, other beings. A pink triple moonset. A spiraling cloud of dust radiant with colors. Alien beings of a variety of shapes. The births of planets and stars.

Earth of the past.

And her mother, the last Crystal Keeper who died to protect the shard Raea now bore.

The visions shattered with reality.

She was Inari, one of the winged inhabitants of a world in another galaxy, and she had a lot of catching up to do in her training if she hoped protect the Starfire from the Shirukan who sought to take it. She'd almost failed once.

Never again.

The glow of the Starburst marks on the palms and backs of her hands and the glow of her shard waned with her distraction from the resonance.

"You almost had it that time," Elis said. The gentle berating drew her to the biggest distraction.

In the faint glow from her hands, Elis frowned. Wild black hair hid the deep purple of eyes she had grown to love and the only obvious clue that he wasn't human, since he hid his hands in fingerless gloves to avoid questions about the Starburst marks he also bore.

The disappointment on his face twisted her insides.

"You need to stay focused. Opening a portal through two dimensions requires absolute concentration."

"Easy for you to say." He'd had his training on the homeworld and without an actual shard to generate the portal and screw up their universe, unlike her. One wrong calculation on her part and—whoops!—bye, bye Earth. Although it would give new meaning to ending world hunger and war.

Black wings shifted on his back, tightening in a sign of the agitation he didn't show on his face. "If they come back—"

"I know. I *know!*" He didn't have to remind her that she'd almost been taken four weeks ago by a soldier from the Shirat Empire on the homeworld. They had two of the four shards already.

She wasn't about to give up her shard without a fight.

Elis could be such a nag about these things.

"It's hard. Maybe I'm just afraid. You know?" Raea looked up as the light from the crystal and her Starburst marks faded to the normal aquamarine color, mere shadows under the wan light of the moon over the prairie.

His hands rubbed the tension from her shoulders. "I was sent to protect you but wasted two years because your mother made Debbie promise to let you grow up human. After last month...They could be back any day."

At that thought, Raea shuddered and pressed close to the security of his embrace, her brown wings tight to her back. The late April night on the open fields of North Dakota brought a new chill with the reminder of the danger lingering only a portal away.

His warm breath blew across her hair, but the sound of his swallow was far from reassuring.

"Maybe Shirat Marin was overthrown."

"Or maybe they're being more careful for their next attempt to take you." His arms tightened around her and she welcomed the security.

He had good reason to be cautious, if a bit overprotective. If the Shirukan, the elite soldiers of the Shirat Empire, obtained all the shards, they would have full control of Heffin's Gate, and turn the portal generator into a weapon capable of destroying whole worlds. He didn't have to remind her of the danger.

"Can we go home?" Raea whispered. "We've been out here—" She pulled her cell phone from her jacket pocket and checked the time—9:50 pm. "Over an hour. It's late and we haven't had much flying. I'll try harder tomorrow. I promise."

Elis let out a deep breath and, in the faint moonlight, leaned down. His quick kiss sent a different kind of shiver through her, one she welcomed.

A second later, he stepped back, giving her room to spread her wings and flap into the air. He followed close behind and caught up to her when she leveled off at a warm layer of air over the moonlit patchwork of pastures and fields.

In the distance, a light-speckled area shone from the prairie; McClarron, home to only four thousand, her home for the last thirteen years since her mother and stepfather, Padina and Scott Dahlrich, had died in a storm. Scott's sister, Debbie, had been like a second mother since then.

Elis pointed ahead. "Look."

Up and down movement, almost glowing between the moonlight and the town lights, caught her eyes.

Fear gripped her heart and steadied her wings to gliding. Shirukan! How?

No, it couldn't be. She'd felt nothing from the Starfire, and a portal opening would have warmed through her from the connection, unless it had happened while she had found the resonance herself in practice.

But wouldn't they leave a portal open to take her back to Inar'Ahben? It didn't make sense that one would be out alone if they really wanted to capture her.

Everything inside her said this was wrong.

Elis flew close beside her, his wing tip feathers brushing hers momentarily.

"Land!" he yelled.

Land? Did he mean the land below? Was there something he spotted?

"Head to the field to land!"

Oh, *that* land. Good idea—their field where they took off and landed over the hill from the edge of town. Fighting in the air was tricky and would attract unwanted attention, and this way, they would be close to help *if* they were confronting a Shirukan.

On the clear side of the trees of the shelterbelt around an old farmstead, Raea flapped to slow her descent and touched down lightly.

Elis landed near her and stood close, his hand finding hers. His eyes fixed on the winged shape approaching but he didn't look worried; in fact, he stood with his usual calm, his hand relaxed around hers without the tension of someone expecting trouble.

"Who is it?"

Blue-white wings extended upwards and flapped to slow the descent of a woman with short blue-white hair and earrings encrusting the edges of both ears.

Elis's fingers tightened around Raea's.

In the light from the moon, a smirk lit up the woman's face as she unbuckled a backpack worn on her chest. "Hey, cuz! Long time no see."

Cousin? Then this was—

"Nare." Irritation ground in his voice.

"Ah, come on now. Is that any way to greet family after all these years?" The backpack thumped to the ground as if heavy, and Icy blue eyes that seemed to glow in the moonlight fixed on Raea. "And you must be Raea. It's an honor to meet you, Crystal Keeper." Nare spoke with a reverence surprising Raea after her flippant greeting to Elis, and she tipped her head, her wings open slightly.

A few seconds later, she straightened, a smile beaming from her face and her hands on her slender hips. "I trust my cousin's treating you well?"

Raea caught Elis's eyes in the light of the moon. The wild black hair hid much of the expression of those beautiful eyes, but she recognized that dark mood. "Very well."

He'd been a gentleman teacher, protector, and boyfriend from the beginning. In fact, he'd offered his support in the difficulties they'd endured without a word about any inconvenience to him, even when she knew he wasn't comfortable.

"That's good. I was afraid I might have to shake him up a bit." She grinned at Elis and winked. "For old times' sake."

"Old times?" Raea looked from one to the other.

"I don't need reminders," Elis said quietly.

"Aren't you the modest one now." After a few seconds of awkward silence, Nare picked up her backpack. "Any ideas where I can stay?"

"Stay? How long?" Elis spoke in a flat tone, almost grumbling.

"Just until next week. I can't waste all my vacation on you." Her eyes shifted to Raea. "Sorry. I couldn't be here sooner, unless I wanted to lose my job. Not *all* of us rely on Davrel for support."

Elis glared at her. "He offered, as an honor to serve the Crystal Keeper. I didn't ask."

Only now, upon meeting another Keeper, did Elis's words sink in. Twenty-three Keepers called Earth home. All but she and Elis had come by ship seven years earlier, apparently before anyone realized she was alive and in possession of the Starfire shard her mother had worn.

"Whatever." Nare crossed her arms and focused on Raea. "Anyway, I'm here now. I'll do what I can to protect you. The Starfire stays on Earth."

Raea hoped so. The thought of what could happen sent a shudder through her. The Shirukan intended to force her to give up her crystal shard, but the Starfire entities wouldn't allow their power to be used wrongly. As they had with other worlds, they would destroy the Inari homeworld, Inar'Ahben, before allowing anyone to abuse it. They had shown her in the visions.

From beneath the gloves Nare wore, a faint light glowed. Her wings shrinking shouldn't have surprised Raea, but the effect of watching those blue-white wings diminish to nothing mesmerized her. Of course, Nare was a Keeper if she was related to Elis. That shouldn't have surprised her. What caught her was the casual way in which Nare stood there making the transformation look easy.

Raea would have to do the same if she wanted to return home without attracting attention. Debbie knew the truth and the old widow who boarded Elis, Evelyn Johnson, knew the truth, but no one else did. She hoped to keep it that way and continue living the life she had on Earth.

She found the resonance with a thought and focused the warming power on her back. The shrinking of bone and sinew ached. Both Nare and Elis made it look painless.

Raea's fingers tightened around Elis's as he clutched her hand. *Pain. Pain. Pain...* The word rang through her skull. The transformation was never easy, one way or the other.

In the end, the three of them stood in the field looking human. Nare threw the backpack over one shoulder, holding the strap with one hand and smiling as if nothing happened. Raea loathed her for that.

"Have a spare bed?" she asked.

"Maybe." Elis led Raea by the hand over the hill, his long strides carrying them from his cousin.

Nare caught up beside her. "You're hospitable, Elis." Sarcasm dripped heavily from her voice.

Like her intrusion was any better?

"With that attitude, I'm surprised anyone would want to spend their life with you."

Warmth rose to Raea's cheeks. "Isn't that rushing ahead?" Sure, being with him made each day worthwhile, but that didn't mean she was ready to spend the rest of her life with him.

In the light of the street lamps, the color drained from Elis's face.

"Didn't you tell her?"

"Tell me what?" Raea lowered her voice as the town stretched out before them. Quiet pervaded the streets, while the soft glow of the lights shone from their perches atop the tall poles alternating through the closest neighborhood.

["I'm surprised you don't know."] She spoke in Inari and gave Elis an accusing look, but he stared ahead with a stiff lip.

["Know *what*?"] Raea looked up at Elis for an answer.

He gave Nare a dark look, but she ignored him and lowered her voice again. ["I know yours is a unique situation—having lost your mother and being raised to believe you were human and all—but that's no excuse for him not to be sure you understand being Inari—*everything* about being Inari, including bonding."]

In the light from the nearest street lamp, Raea caught the twitch of muscles in Elis's cheek.

["Inari form more than the typical human emotional attachments. Ours...Well, once we choose a long-term partner, there's no going back, although most *respectful* partners—"] Nare's eyes narrowed, burning Elis with a glare. ["—wouldn't dare touch their potential mate until she's decided if she wants to spend her life with him or not."]

"What are you saying?" And why hadn't Elis told her anything about this sooner?

["We're not human. Once we reach maturity, male and female Inari bodies react to frequent, prolonged physical contact with the opposite gender. Body chemistry changes and adapts. One-on-one relationships that continue synchronize two bodies so they eventually share pain and pleasure...permanently."]

Raea yanked her hand from Elis's as if stung. It all sounded so technical the way Nare put it, cold and unemotional. Still, did she really want that? She'd barely decided a month ago that she loved him. She thought she wanted to be with him, but the sudden reality of being attached in some way shattered that vision of perfection with the fact that he'd neglected to tell her. He'd effectively lied, and it cut deeply.

How could he do this to her? She loved him, trusted him.

This couldn't be real, but it was. None of the last six weeks seemed real but had been, much to her joy and sorrow. Why didn't Elis tell her about all this?

She suddenly had to decide if she wanted to bond with him, how much of her life she was willing to sacrifice for love. But what was love if he would lie about it?

Nare lowered her voice and grumbled, ["One more problem you can blame on the Starfire, since the blending with Inari DNA changed everything we were before then."]

The crystal had bonded itself in a perfect symbiosis to the Inari species five thousand years ago, creating the Keepers as a means to facilitate communication with the entities of the four shards. It also gave Keepers abilities humans regarded as supernatural, abilities using the energy of the Starfire within their genes, or, as in the case of a Crystal Keeper like Raea, sometimes the energy of the Starfire crystal itself. Being hunted for that shard was the worst of her problems, or so she had thought.

That was nothing compared to the turmoil twisting within her heart. She wanted him, loved him so deeply that his lie of omission wounded her emotions more than the Shirukan could ever wound her body.

"I'm sorry no one told you."

"Raea..." Elis reached for her, but she stepped away, afraid of his touch taking away her choice, despite the need for his closeness.

"Don't." He should have said something before then. Sure, in the beginning he was just training her, because he was the only one who could shrink the wings the Starfire forced to grow in her sleep. But in only two weeks, she had fallen so deeply in love with the gentle, quiet Dark Angel that she wanted to be close. Did he just expect to let it go on until it was too late? Was he that desperate for companionship after losing his family to the Shirukan?

She didn't want to believe that. He said he knew from the first moment he saw her two years ago that he would always love her. Part of her had always been curious about him too, but that didn't mean she wanted to spend the rest of her life linked with him.

But their time together had been wonderful. His touch soothed away her worries and inspired a need to be close.

No excuses. He should have said something. A lie of omission was still a lie.

"Now you know," Nare said.

"Yeah."

"Raea...I'm sorry."

["You should have told her."]

["Things have been complicated,"] he snapped at his cousin.

Nare folded her arms. ["Right. What's so complicated about teaching Raea *everything* about being Inari?"]

["You wouldn't understand."]

["What's not to understand? You're so desperate—"]

"Enough!" Raea didn't need to hear them fighting. Nare was right and yet didn't understand. On the other hand, yes, Elis should have told her, yet she had needed him more than anyone after the Shirukan came for her four weeks ago. When she needed him most, she hadn't worried about curling up in his arms to cry and forget the awful reality.

Around them, the night fell silent, a light breeze blowing loose strands of brown hair to tickle her face. Nare's arrival had crashed through the dreams, darkening the radiance of his attention with a bitter reality she wasn't ready to face.

"I'm going home." Raea wrapped her arms around herself and his jacket. The faint smell of him lingered on it, the scent of the man she loved, who hadn't told her about an important fact of what she was. "I have a lot of thinking to do."

She hurried away, afraid to look up to the face half hidden by the hair he needed to cut. Her heart ached in the tangle of emotions. She didn't want to leave him, but she couldn't face him now. He'd lied to her. She needed time to think, time alone.

"Raea, please—"

She whirled, tears welling up to cool the anger and desire struggling inside her. "Don't, Elis!" After a breath to calm herself, she couldn't talk. The choking hold of betrayal strangled her voice, which barely squeaked out when she spoke again. "You should have told me. I need some time alone."

Did he think he would trap her into a permanent partnership for the rest of their lives? It wasn't fair. All their time together...

No. She needed him too.

Which was why this was so difficult, but she needed space, at least for a while.

His eyes begged her to return to him, and her heart yearned to take those steps. But she had to know if this was right. Was Elis the one she would love the rest of her life, especially when he didn't tell her everything? She was only eighteen, and she loved him. But she barely knew him, especially if he would lie like this to her.

If she was human, none of this would be a concern, except she would still have trouble with a man who lied to her. How could she trust him with her life?

Raea swallowed the lump in her throat and wiped her eyes. "Just leave me alone for a while." She turned and ran before he could object, because he had the power to call her back. She wanted him to call her back.

Oh, God. What had she done? Why did she feel horrible?

Elis's eyes burned a hole through her back. He watched her, and she didn't have to turn around to know.

He said nothing, which hurt even more.



The Terran Brief

Thunder rumbled around Prime Commander Alshouan Valdas and vibrated through the dense black stone of the room to reach her feet, her dark wings open slightly for balance. The operators released the power of Heffin's Gate, after several hours to fire it up to full power. The portal, just a small one set to open from outside their atmosphere to a place outside the Solar System—beyond the detection of humans—would soon connect her to their operatives on Earth.

The black metal lining the room within the central corridors of Heffin's Gate protected her in her booth from the immense radiation of the Starfire's power.

Valdas sat back from the console and tapped the keys on the side of the oblong tri-comm against her cheek, her hand finishing with a swipe of a loose strand of auburn hair. She had already pre-entered Prime Commander Loran's code. He had only to respond to the signal she sent.

Now for the wait. At best, they could keep the portal open a little more than one Earth hour with the two shards in the machine. By their calculations, it should be about 8 a.m. on a Friday in his time zone. From what he'd said in previous communiqués, he should be available to answer her call.

The door behind her hissed open. Valdas swiveled her seat from the active console along the wall of the small room.

A female technician in an orange jumpsuit with three black lines slanted across the right shoulder—a senior tech—stepped in. ["The portal is open, sir."]

A formality and unnecessary. Valdas had spent enough time within some part of the machine or another to recognize the various sounds and vibrations.

She waved away the woman and turned back to the console to pull Tarolis's past reports. She'd read them all before, but this time was different. She needed something more.

While she skimmed through the most recent update on his activities, the tri-comm beeped. A moment later, she stared at a man in a dark blue suit and gold-accented red silk tie. So, he had turned the optical option on. Funny seeing him without his black uniform or brown-gold wings. He'd let his light brown hair grow too. He looked so *human*.

["Prime Commander Alshouan Valdas."] He smiled and leaned back against something she couldn't see, since the scan only included his body. And that connected directly to her optical nerve for privacy.

["Yes."]

["To what do I owe this honor?"] The cynicism wasn't lost on her. He might be older and more experienced, but he was still the same rank. Besides, he had given up the chance for promotion when he left for Earth with his unit fourteen Earth years ago. Despite being far younger, she outranked him, and, by the tone of his voice, he resented it.

["Commander Montran Pallin returned barely alive. He was badly burned and told us little before going into shock. I need to know what you know about his activities. He said you paid for his stay on Earth."]

["Yes, I did, but I wish I hadn't. You know he risked our presence here?"]

["He said a reporter knew."]

Tarolis crossed his arms, a scowl on his face. ["Because he told her. He begged me to clean up his mess. Some idiotic idea that she could help him. Now it's all over their news that he killed her because he was after some high school girl."]

["A girl?"]

["The Crystal Keeper. She's been raised by humans."]

["Shartrael Raea. Yes, he mentioned her, along with Jasheir Elis, Naolis and Mennara's youngest child."] Naolis was one of the two Crystal Keepers whose shards now powered Heffin's Gate. Their last surviving child had escaped capture two years ago, when Saffir sent him to Earth, apparently to protect the Crystal Keeper there.

Tarolis stepped away from whatever he leaned against and stood upright. ["If the authorities here make the connection to me, our activities may be compromised. Commander Montran was a fool, Valdas. He risked everything. I can't afford this right now, not when I'm this close—"] He held his thumb and forefinger close together. ["—to proceeding with our mission here. I can't afford any mistakes right now. Soon, *NeoGen Labs* will be ready for a live test. The others are in places of authority around the world, manipulating these humans for our benefit, and it could all crumble with media attention at the wrong time if they connect him to me. Bad enough all the attention on 'angels' in that small city."]

McClarron. Small was right at only about four thousand inhabitants. It was supposed to be in some remotely populated area too. She wouldn't have expected it to gain much notice beyond its own borders.

City nothing. Unlike Inari cities or islands, which floated in the sky, humans had built their homes on the ground, of which their world had plenty. Inar'Ahben was a unique world, as they had discovered in their explorations.

So was Earth, the only world where the top sentient species—in this case the only sentient species—were nearly identical in appearance, with a few ugly details. It had proven a valuable asset to Keepers over the last five thousand Earth years but no

longer. The empire would soon change that, starting with conquering all of Inar'Ahben.

["That is unfortunate. It seems we both have to clean up after his mistakes."] In her case, she would have to send in a team to retrieve the Crystal Keeper, since Pallin had failed.

["Yes. This world is far more complex than it once was. Their technology is advancing at an unprecedented rate. It complicates matters for me."] Tarolis folded his arms. ["It's all in my reports. I trust you've read them."]

["I have. What of the atmospheric distortions of the portal?"]

["The scientific communities are speculating on the phenomena, but religions are predicting the end of their world by that and the appearances of *angels*."]

Valdas smirked. Angels, indeed. So far advanced yet still so very superstitious these humans, but they could use it to their advantage, as the Keepers had.

["And,"] Tarolis added while handling a small device, ["others are connecting the dots, as they say here, on their *internet*. I suggest any move you make is done and over while a portal can be maintained. I'm sending an aerial image from one of their satellites. Commander Montran supplied me with the location of the Crystal Keeper's residence while he was here."]

Her tri-comm beeped. ["Received."]

["They make our job too easy in many ways."]

["But difficult in others?"]

Tarolis smiled. ["Do *not* underestimate these humans, Prime Commander Alshouan."]

["No. We won't make that mistake again."]

He tapped a strap on his wrist. ["I have to be somewhere soon. Is there anything else you need from me?"]

["Nothing more."]

["Prime Commander Loran out."] He disappeared from the room. But he had never been there, simply an image in her mind.

Valdas pulled the tri-comm off and placed it in a slot at her console. With a few keystrokes, an aerial image projected in a flat two-dimensional hologram before her. A white line circled one of the structures amid a grid of lines framing several structures in each square. This one lay at the far edge of that grid with open land beyond.

She would not fail. In fact, she would personally lead the team to extricate the Crystal Keeper.



What Are Friends For?

The empty chair in every class reminded Raea of what she missed. She caught Josh's questioning gaze in English when she looked past him to where Elis usually sat. He hadn't shown up for school that morning, and it ate at her conscience that she had hurt him over a simple misunderstanding. In her imagination, she pictured him brooding in his room, alone and sad. She hadn't meant to hurt him, but he was so sensitive about everything. That made it difficult to not feel sorry for him, especially when Nare was the closest family he had and she gave him trouble. Raea sympathized, given her cousin Dave's determination to make her life miserable.

He had forgotten to tell her about bonding. So what? She'd bet every Inari knew their own biology, just as she'd learned human and animal biology growing up on Earth. He probably took it for granted, never really considering that she didn't know better.

It was probably nothing more than an honest mistake. He wouldn't force her to do anything. She'd always had to make the first move.

No! She couldn't forgive him like that. He really ought to have said something. He *knew* she didn't know. Why did this have to happen now, when their lives were finally on the right path? The bullies had stopped teasing her about dating "Creepy" Elis, and all the commotion of four weeks ago was finally settling down and being forgotten.

She still needed time to decide. This was turning into a miserable day. How would she last one day like this, much less two or more?

Maybe that was her answer.

Near the end of her history class, a knock on the door quieted the usual whispers and hushed clowning. Raea looked across two rows of desks to the door open a crack.

That short-cut icy blue hair stood out from anything natural, although it was natural for an Inari. With her hands covered by black fingerless gloves like Elis wore in public to hide his Starburst marks, Nare motioned for Raea.

Whispers flew around the room, mostly from the guys: "Whoa!" "Check it out." And the one that made her gag—"Who's the babe?"

Guys! The drooling put dogs to shame.

"Quiet," Miss Devon said. She adjusted her glasses on her tiny nose and stepped away from her desk in the front corner of the classroom.

If only Raea could sneak out. No such luck, and Miss Devon wasn't the type to let her go without a good reason. If Nare was there, it had to be because of Elis. Raea just wanted to know that he was all right. A minute. That's all it would take.

Stupid clock. Time could go a little faster. Ten minutes until the bell rang. Ten minutes until lunch break. Then she'd have plenty of time to talk with Nare about Elis.

Miss Devon motioned her forward.

Yes! Raea jumped from her desk and hurried around the rows to the door, her heart pounding. *Please let it be news that he's all right.*

She stepped into the quiet hall and closed the door behind her. No one else needed to know.

"He said to bring this right away." Nare slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out a folded paper. "He's so pathetic right now."

Raea unfolded the paper, her hands trembling. A small black feather floated out, and she caught it. Her heart stopped. He'd gone through the trouble of pulling a perfectly good feather. Her poor Elis. "How is he? Is he all right?"

"He'll get over it." Nare waved away her concern and pointed to the note.

Get over what? She read the note...

Raea,

This is the 32nd time I've started trying to write to you. I'll try again, but I don't know if I can say it any better. I couldn't say it in person, because nothing sounds right, and this probably won't either.

I thought about you all night and what you said. I never meant to hurt you or force you into anything. I knew it was wrong of me. There's no excuse for upsetting you, and nothing else I can say sounds more adequate. I just want you to know how sorry I am and that I would do anything for you.

I will always love you. Please come back.

Elis

He admitted his mistake, but what about the next time? Would there be a next time?

"Typical." Nare's eyes jumped from the paper to her, her arms crossed.

What was her problem?

"They never think before they act, do they?" Nare's bitterness softened away with a sigh. "I heard him crying last night, even though he denied it. He locked himself in his room. I tried to talk to him, but he told me to go away, said I shouldn't be there and that this was my fault. *My* fault. As if I had anything to do with his stupidity. Besides, Evelyn invited me to stay, and it's her house."

Crying? Over her? Her poor Elis. What had she done? Her stomach twisted into a wretched mess.

Elis...

"Anyway, don't worry too much. Take your time, Raea, and don't let him push you."

But he didn't push her. She wanted to be close. In fact, he'd pushed her away all last week. Elis had been the one encouraging her to spend time with her friends. "He's never pushed me into anything. He was just there, waiting." He'd never expected anything. And her perfect memory—another mixed blessing of the Starfire—returned of that moment she admitted her feelings. He'd been so surprised, as had she to find out he liked her the same way, but he'd never indicated he felt anything for her until she admitted it first. He'd always waited for her.

"Good. At least he did something right."

Raea opened her hand on the small curl of feather ready to lift away with the slightest puff of air, a part of him that he wanted her to remember. She would never forget. If only she could be sure now. But what would she give up? Bonding to one man the rest of her life sounded risky—shared pleasure and *pain*? What did that mean?

"He did everything right, except this. I just need time. I'm not abandoning him."

"But he's afraid you will."

Yes, he was. The letter said that. What if she did? She couldn't imagine being with anyone else, but she had to know without a doubt that he was right for her. Why couldn't Inari relationships come with instructions?

Raea sighed and closed her fingers gently around the tickling softness of the feather. "I'm not ready for that kind of permanent commitment yet, but I love him."

"Elis better count himself lucky to have you, or to have had you."

What? No. Past tense was wrong, so very wrong. Nare misunderstood. "I'm not leaving him. I just..." Why did she say that? All she was doing was spending some time away. Nare had a cruel way of making him into the bad guy. She totally didn't get it.

"Whatever. I should get back to the house. He's probably panicking or something. He told me a few times exactly how to get here and find you. Idiot. I remember everything as perfectly as him. We're all—" Nare lowered her voice and leaned close. ["We're all Keepers."]

Raea sighed and folded the note. Nare so didn't get it, but Raea knew no one else who could understand. "Thanks, Nare."

"No problem. See ya later?"

"Later?"

"I thought, since you wanted space to think but are still training, I could take over for a while."

Nare annoyed Raea with her critical view of Elis, but maybe she was right. Besides, hearing about Elis from someone else might reveal an important detail or at least provide some interesting stories.

"All right," Raea mumbled.

"Later." Nare strode away through the quiet halls.

Raea returned to class, where someone had to ask about the blue-haired woman she talked to. Disbelief poured from the guys that Nare could be any relation to Elis. She was too hot, according to them.

With a little trouble, she tucked the small feather into the wire holding her crystal shard. It curled around it to tickle her chest under her shirt.

The bell rang none too soon and Raea hurried from class to meet her friends for lunch.

Questions during lunch tempted her to run home to check on Elis in reassurance. No. She shouldn't. Besides, Nare was there to keep an eye on him. Her emotions didn't control her. Raea controlled them. And this issue was about logic.

But the hole in her chest from missing him ached as if to tear out her heart. She loved him. That should be enough.

Stop it! Raea slammed her fork on the table.

Next to her, Linds jumped and bland peas popped from her tray. "What the hell was that about?"

"Nothing." Raea didn't want to talk about it.

"Is this about Elis? I heard you had a fight or something." Linds rounded up the rolling peas and set them in a different corner of her tray.

"No." Who—

Josh looked up. "Wha?" he asked with a mouthful of food. Disgusting. He choked down the food. "Not me. I didn't say anything."

Right. He was the only one she'd told, only because he'd asked first thing that morning when she showed up at school

without Elis at her side and cried on his shoulder. He swore he wouldn't say anything about her temporary separation with Elis.

Unless he was innocent and rumors started because of Nare showing up at school. She should never have said anything about Nare being related to Elis.

"So, like, what *is* going on? Is he sick?"

That was one way of putting it. Heart sick, maybe. Odd that Linds would even care. She was the one most uncomfortable around Elis.

"No. I told him we needed more time apart."

"Why?" Jess's eyes widened from Raea's other side. "You're not breaking up already, are you?"

"No." Raea didn't want to think about it, much less talk about it. Like talking about her mother, talking about Elis brought back memories she didn't want to experience again until she was ready. It hurt too much. She wasn't ready. Honestly, her friends could be too nosy sometimes. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Dark Angel?" Josh would say that. He passed a hand over his hair to brush back the dark brown mess that looked like he'd just jumped out of bed. Blue eyes sparkled with excitement at the prospects of his favorite subject. He'd been way too eager to share stories ever since the first angel sighting almost two years ago, and the obsession had grown worse with each report.

Linds groaned. "Not that again."

"What?"

Dark Angel. Elis...

Elis stood before her with black wings.

Raea stared, hardly believing what her eyes told her. "You are the 'angel' everyone's talking about."

"Yes."

"You found the little girl in the cornfield and pulled that woman from her burning home and helped that kid who crashed his motorcycle on the gravel road."

His smile in the moonlight shone with amusement. "You sound surprised."

"I am. But after yesterday, I kind of expected it. But to see you like this. It's...What's the word..." The right word didn't exist, at least not in her shock-fuzzed brain. "I'm just...That was you."

"I was out flying at night to avoid being seen clearly. I didn't plan to do anything." He paused and his voice dropped. "There are certain responsibilities Keepers bear. Our job is to help anyone in need."

Her first flight six weeks ago.

Stop it. Stop it. Stop it! She didn't want to remember any of it, but she never wanted to forget either.

"I guess that leaves you out." Josh let out a heavy sigh and stirred the pile of macaroni and meat mush called hotdish on his tray.

Raea blinked away the memories and focused on him. "Out of what?"

"I was hoping we could all get together Tuesday at my place to hang out...maybe sit outside and watch for shooting stars."

"Shooting stars?" Linds snorted. "As if! You just wanna watch for your precious angel."

"So what?" Josh shrugged. "Okay, so forget the sky-watching. At least hang out and play games." His eyes met Raea's with a pleading look.

She knew that look. He expected her to agree.

Raea sighed away her objections. Oh, what the hell. Sure, she could go. She probably wouldn't be spending the evening with Elis, but if he was out flying, maybe that would satisfy Josh.

How ironic. What would Josh do if he knew the truth?

No. Nothing like waving a flag for the Shirukan to find her again. If people knew, they'd tell others and pretty soon her life would be a circus. Bad enough that reporter four weeks ago who had almost revealed the truth.

Josh waited for an answer. Damn him! He wouldn't leave her alone, and she didn't have any excuse with Elis out of the picture.

"Fine."

"Jess?"

She nearly choked on a mouthful of chocolate milk. "Sorry. Already have plans."

Sorry? Right. *Plans?* Great. Now Raea was destined to be alone with Josh all night watching the sky for Elis, although no one knew the Dark Angel was him, besides her and Debbie and Evelyn. And Nare.

Yes. Nare. That might work. "Mind if I ask Nare to come?"

His eyes widened, the smile on his face mirroring them. Exactly what she hoped. "Elis's cousin? The woman who came to see you? Of course! Yeah. That'd be cool. Is she into angels?"

Raea wiped her face with the napkin to hide the smirk. "It's a fair bet." Man, he'd go ballistic if he knew the truth, but she

wasn't ready to reveal that.

"Who's Nare?" Linds looked from Josh to her.

"Elis's cousin showed up last night. She brought a message to me this morning."

"Oh, man! Linds, you should see her. She's got, like, this white-blue hair and she's hot."

"Blue hair? That's the chick everyone's talking about. Must be from the city."

"Denver," Raea said. Elis had told her about his cousin a few weeks ago, when he mentioned the twenty-one other Keepers calling Earth home, or at least their temporary home, until the free cities of Inar'Ahben defeated the Shirat Empire. Although not believing in a God like her aunt, Raea prayed that the day came soon for that to happen.

"Figures." Linds folded her arms and sat back. "What's so great about her?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Um...not interested? Hello? Now, give me a hot guy, and I might get excited."

Josh retreated to his tray. Poor guy. Sometimes Linds could be a bit hard on him, not that Raea could blame her. He got on her nerves sometimes too. "Anyway, Raea. That'd be cool if you'd ask her."

"Sure."

The rest of the meal passed quickly, though not quickly enough for Raea. Her friends took the hint and, after just a couple questions to which she gave curt answers, they quit asking about Elis. But that didn't stop them from asking about Nare, especially Josh.

Raea didn't know anything, though, except that Nare and Elis didn't really like each other. That much she had seen for herself last night, but Nare wasn't exactly complimentary of him. Raea felt sorry for Elis. What had he done to Nare?

That was the question. Or did Nare just have a chip on her shoulder about men in general? From the attitude, Raea took that as the most likely issue.

When the final bell rang, she hurried to leave the school. Josh followed her outside into a cooler than normal late April day tempered by the clouds. Raea shivered and pulled her dark blue jacket tight to keep out the wind. Winter refused to give up without a fight, even after all the snow had melted.

They passed the buses chugging fumes in a line along the curb in front of the school and headed down the quiet street. An occupied car across the street caught her eyes. Two men sat in the front seat, one short and bald with a round face, the other tall and lean with neatly combed black hair. The lean man put his palm to the window, a black tattoo of a vaguely familiar symbol exposed.

The image blurred, the shouts and laughter of her schoolmates vanishing...

Uniformed angels stood before panels with patterns of lights—keypads of some kind—and displays around the walls of the room, except for three sections displaying only stars.

The view shifted and focused on a man in dark blue with a crimson sash around his waist standing at a display at the far end of the room. Next to him, a woman with golden brown wings entered data on the lit keypad before the display.

["General."] The voice originated from a face above the scene. The white of her hair over a gold-accented light pink body suit and leggings filled the opposite side of the view, which wrapped around her.

The man turned and smiled. No ordinary smile. His dark brown eyes betrayed a deeper emotion. His brown wings lifted slightly. ["Keeper Salera. What brings you to Command?"]

["I've never been off world and wanted to see with my own eyes where I've brought us."] She paused and the view shifted to some of the crew in the room. The golden-winged woman at the panel nearby glanced up at her with a curious look in her amber eyes. ["I hope I'm not interfering."]

["No. Of course not. Your navigation skills are perfect, Keeper Salera."]

Salera smiled, a faint color rising to her cheeks. The other woman rolled her eyes and moved off to another panel. ["I'd also like to discuss your purpose on this world, General Jakoru."]

["Didn't I say you can call me Vodin?"]

Salera dropped her eyes for a second and looked up with a broader smile. ["Vodin. What have you heard about Earth?"]

["Primitive. Barbaric."]

["But the natives look like us? That's why we came?"]

His face lit up with a grin. ["Most of the crew on this ship are scientists. They are here to study the humans."]

["And I'm the navigator."]

["Unless you'd rather spend a few turns of Lis in this ship going back."]

["No thanks."]

The general turned away and spoke to someone who wasn't there, but an oblong metal piece shone from his cheek, a tri-comm.

Salera gazed out the front viewport, where the black of space gave way to the lighter hues of sunlit atmosphere. At a small bump, she caught her balance on the panel before her, her white wings open.

Somewhere out of sight, Vodin spoke. ["Normal entry. Nothing to worry about."]

Salera straightened as he pushed her wing to her back.

["It can be unnerving leaving a machine to do what we do best, but you adapt."] His smile radiated his amusement and something more.

["Easy for you to say. I'll feel better when we're settled."]

He chuckled and turned to the woman standing at the console nearby, the woman with the amber eyes and dark expression. ["Commander. Hold at four kilometers."]

["Yes, sir."]

A series of orders issued from the woman to a few individuals in the command center.

The scene outside the nearest viewport lightened to blue hues over a world of green, brown, blue, and white.

["What is all that green?"]

["That green is a by-product of the chemicals in plants here to create oxygen."] He stood close to Salera, his eyes on the display where the commander stood.

["It's beautiful!"]

His smile broadened. ["Yes, it is, but according to our data, there are wonders even more splendid."]

["I want to see them."]

["In time."] He stepped aside to the commander. ["What's the status of the human civilization?"]

The woman stepped back to join another at the controls around a central three-dimensional projection of the planet. Red dots appeared in mostly coastal areas and some inland.

["Telemetry's receiving data from the probes."]

The image grew with Salera's approach.

Light from the hologram cast an eerie glow on the commander's sharp features. When she put a hand up to point at their location, her palm revealed a white patch, like a bandage. ["We're picking up no unnatural transmissions of any frequency. Nothing in the skies but organics and our probes. Looks like they haven't advanced much since we started monitoring this world."] For a second, the commander's eyes fixed on Salera—only a second—before the commander dropped them to the controls at a level below her waist.

["We'll save the assessment for another day, Talea. We don't go further until I know it's safe."]

The scene shifted with Salera's movements, but after a brief flash on the general, she returned her attention to the hologram.

The commander strode away without a word to Salera.

"Are you all right?"

What? Raea blinked away the vision. A Starfire vision. They had a nasty habit of interrupting her life at the most inconvenient times. It had started two months ago with scenes they had recorded of her mother's life when she bore the shard.

Why now?

Raea glanced back but the car was gone. Had she imagined it?

Impossible. She swore she had seen the car and the men in it. Was there a connection between them and the Starfire, or had she imagined that too? They were gone now, whatever the case.

She focused on Josh. "I'm fine."

After they passed beyond the din of schoolmates eager to head home, he asked, "So can I ask what's really going on?"

"No." What were they talking about? Oh, yeah—what was wrong with her and Elis. *That's* what Josh asked about.

"O—okay. Then, like, is there something I can do at least?"

He wasn't giving up. Couldn't he take a hint?

Not until he got a satisfactory answer. But she couldn't tell him she was an alien. He'd probably laugh in her face.

"Josh—"

"Seriously. Let me help, Raea. Something...Anything. I don't like seeing you like this."

Damn, he made it hard to refuse. "All right."

"Anything. Name it."

"Anything?" Anything...Even keeping a watch on Elis?

"Anything. I mean it."

"Well..." She jumped off the curb, over the water flowing into the corner gutter with a constant echoing splash. Someone watered their lawn up hill somewhere. "Would you mind keeping Elis company?"

"What? Elis?" He hesitated before rushing back to her side.

"Yeah. Nare brought a note and said he's not taking this break in our relationship so well. If you could keep him occupied, I'd appreciate it."

Then she and Nare could go flying without her having to worry about him begging her to change her mind or doing something to hurt himself, if he'd do that. He didn't seem like the type, but she didn't think he'd be the type to lie or to cry like it was the end of the world either. It worried her and touched her. He was sensitive and protective and caring and...

"Um...yeah. I suppose." He didn't sound committed.

"Please, Josh. It would make me feel better."

Josh jumped to the sidewalk next to her. Elis would have made it look easy with his long legs on that six-foot-one height, but Josh was short for a guy—her height. "What does he like to do? I mean, he like never mentioned anything, except reading,

and those were some heavy hitting books he mentioned. *Way* over my head."

With good reason. Elis grew up on a world far more advanced. Their high school education must have been like first grade stuff to him. It didn't help that he was around twenty-one Earth years, old enough to have graduated college. The only thing boring about high school for him, though, was math; too elementary for him. She agreed.

She could have graduated when she was ten, but Debbie hadn't allowed it. In some ways Raea was glad her aunt had held her to a normal education and social life with her circle of friends. It was good to have them now, when she needed them most, to have experienced a "normal" life like her mother wanted for her, even if she wasn't really human.

"He likes fiction too." Ooh! She had it. "And remember when you talked to him about Dark Angel?" Way back when she'd first started training with Elis. Man, had she had a good laugh then—Josh talking to Elis with the enthusiasm of a total fanatic and Elis grinning and biting his tongue. She might tell Josh someday.

Bingo. Josh's expression lit up like a roman candle. "You're right. Do you think he'd want to sit out and watch?"

Perfect. Except for one minor, or major, detail. She hoped to go out flying with Nare, who had white-blue wings to match her hair. Nothing like standing out against the dark night, but she had to get out and Nare had promised to train her.

Elis would probably appreciate watching her. More than probably. And she liked him watching her. She preferred him touching her, even just holding hands.

Don't go there. Not yet. She had to keep her distance. No touching unless she decided that she wanted the rest of her life with him. Why did this have to be so complicated?

Josh strode quietly beside her.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"You're sure that's all right? I mean, I don't want to interfere...you know...with you two."

As if. She recognized that glint of excitement in his eyes. He wanted to watch for the angel and would love to share that enthusiasm with someone, *anyone*. It didn't help that no one else wanted to hear it.

"I asked you. Remember? Of course, it's all right. Just keep him busy while I hang out with Nare a while. After everything we've been through, I think this will help me sort things out." She hoped. Missing Elis every minute made it difficult.

Josh gave her a small grin. He understood how much it meant to her, and that was a big reason he'd always been a good friend. If only she had fallen for him, things would be so much easier. But she hadn't and that wouldn't change.

"Cool. It'll be nice to have someone who doesn't roll their eyes when I mention angels."

Yeah. All right. She got the hint, though she couldn't have missed it if he ran over her with a combine.

Raea nudged him in the shoulder and he chuckled. The next two blocks they talked about sending out graduation announcements and the last book Mrs. McRabb assigned for the lit part of English class.

At the cement walk from the sidewalk to the yellow house, Raea hesitated. Her heart wanted to rush through that door into Elis's arms, but she held herself back. She had to know before she progressed with this bonding.

"You okay?"

She blinked and forced a smile to Josh. "Sure. C'mon." Her feet carried her to the door of the house, each step amping up her anxiety. *Slow down, heart.*

At the door, she hesitated for a breath to calm her nerves.

"You sure?"

"Yeah." *Liar.* Josh saw right through her. Raea wasn't fooling anyone. She gripped the wrought iron rail on the side of the cement steps. "Go on."

Josh opened the storm door and knocked on the main door. A second later, he opened it and stuck his head inside. "Hello? Mrs. Johnson?"

"In here, dear." The cracked voice came from the sitting room through the doorway on their left.

Raea took a deep breath and followed Josh into the house. Music drifted down from upstairs, muffled by a closed door. She recognized the song playing, not one she expected Evelyn to tolerate. This didn't bode well if the strict Catholic woman granted him that leniency.

From the open door at the top of the stairs—the guest room that stayed empty most of the time—Nare stepped out. "Hey! Raea. Who's your friend?" She tromped down the steps.

Raea glanced aside and did a double take. Josh stared at Nare, apparently unable to talk. That was a first—him not talking. "This is Josh. Josh, Nare."

"Kaershon," she added and held out a gloved hand.

Josh blinked and accepted the brief handshake. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. So, you came to check up on him? Or—" Nare looked from her to Josh and back, a disapproving look on her face. "Is this a way of testing the waters?"

The temperature spiked in the room. Raea met Josh's eyes for a moment; his smile hinted of amusement rather than alarm. "No. No-no-no. Josh has been a friend since first grade. It's not like that. He, like...He came to see Elis. Josh lives a few blocks away. We usually walk home part way together."

"Ah. Gotcha. I suppose you want me to go get him?"

In other words, did Raea want to see Elis? Yes and no. Not having him at school helped her survive that day without breaking down. She had no idea how she'd react to seeing him again. But she'd been worried all that time too and seeing him would put her mind at ease.

"Sure."

Nare's eyebrows lifted in question, and Raea nodded. Nare hurried up the stairs and around the corner of the rail and pounded on the door of his room. "Elis! You have company."

A few seconds later, the music cut off.

Here he came. Raea's pulse raced. She hooked her fingers in her belt loops to keep her hands still.

The door clicked and her heart stopped.

"Who is it?"

Damn the wall. She couldn't see him.

"A couple friends."

Josh leaned towards the stairs and waved.

So tempting! Oh, God. Just a few inches closer to Josh. *Stand still. Just wait.*

"Hey, Elis," Josh said.

A long pause answered. Raea held her breath. What took him so long?

Nare stepped into view on the landing outside her room, her eyes aside.

Elis stopped at the top of the stairs in jeans and a dark blue tee shirt and his black, fingerless gloves. The strands of hair over his eyes gave him that familiar dark, brooding appearance that transformed with the recognition on his face.

Her mouth went dry, but she managed a "Hi."

After a moment of no reaction, he hurried down the stairs. His purple eyes fixed on her through that wild black hair. She used to think he didn't comb it, but found out for herself that it refused to be tamed.

"I'm...glad to see you." Talk about an understatement!

He moved towards her and she put a hand out. "Not now. Not yet."

Not again. He looked ready to cry. Her heart gave a tiny whimper of sympathy.

"I...um...thought you might like—" *Say something, Josh!* He wasn't helping. "To hang out with Josh for tonight. You know—man to man. While I hang out with Nare." She gave Josh an obvious elbow in the ribs.

"Yeah. It'd be cool." Took Josh long enough. He rubbed his side and flashed her with a dirty look. Whatever. "We could, like, talk about Dark Angel, or something."

Elis gave her a questioning look.

She shook her head minutely. No, Josh didn't know.

Elis took a deep breath and let it out, his shoulders dropping. "That's fine. Your house or here?"

Oh, no. She wasn't falling for the pleading expression or the reading between the lines.

"Um..." Josh looked at her too.

Good grief. They couldn't make any decisions without her? "Your house. Trust me. You don't want to be around when girls talk."

Josh's eyes widened with recognition and his lip curled in disgust. *Yeah, Josh. That kind of talk.* The same kind of talk that had turned his face into a ruby when he walked in on Jess and Linds discussing their periods once. Only once. He'd learned his lesson. The two had planned it that way to get back at him for talking about the dark angel so much.

"I got it. My house it is."

"After dark?"

Those deep purple eyes she loved stared through her. Her knees threatened to give out with the racing of her pulse. She was worse than last night.

"I suppose. That's when he usually appears." Josh glanced from Elis to her.

"I'll be there." Elis's gaze never wavered from her.

It beckoned to her desire to be close. Just a couple steps. That's all it would take to be secure in his arms. A couple steps...

Nare thumped down the stairs, hitting the squeaky one on her way. "So, we're on for tonight, Raea?"

The muscles in Elis's jaw clenched and his face hardened. "Was this your idea?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Nare shoved him aside and stepped between him and Raea. ["Stay strong,"] she whispered close.

Nare stood back with a smile. "I'll see you later. Nice to meet you, Josh."

"Sure." Josh put his hand on the storm door handle and looked to Raea. "Coming?"

"Yeah. Yeah...um. See you later."

Nare smiled.

Behind her, Elis met her eyes for a moment.

No, she couldn't give in. Nare was right. She had to stay strong, until she figured out exactly if this was what she wanted. This was harder than she expected.

Raea ducked out behind Josh and fought the urge to look back for a hopeful glimpse of Elis. The inner door scraped closed behind them with the hiss and click of the storm door.

Where the cement walk to the front door met the sidewalk, Josh stopped. "I guess I'll see you later. Or not. Maybe I'll call afterwards."

She'd like that—hearing about him and Elis, especially Elis. "Thanks, for everything."

She gave Josh a quick hug before he hurried down the street to head home. Raea caught sight of her cousins on the walk from school a couple blocks away—Dave had to wait for Eric at the elementary school to walk him home.

Raea rushed through the front door of the blue house to reach her room, where Dave especially wouldn't see her tears.



Dark Angel

Of all the nights he could have been out flying, Elis had to keep Josh occupied. Meanwhile Nare and Raea flew in the perfect weather, except for the clouds and the chilly air, but the resonance would keep them warm. Hopefully Raea led Nare away. They'd left before him, to get a head start so Josh wouldn't see them, while he sat with Josh in the backyard on a rusty patio chair, using the resonance to warm him in the chilly night.

Elis blamed Nare for this, for everything. If she hadn't mentioned bonding, everything might be fine with him and Raea.

No. He couldn't blame her. He wished he could. But the whole situation was his fault. He should have told her, but he just couldn't. It was so hard, and then it didn't seem important to tell her. He'd been wrong, though. It was important, more important than anything. He should have told her in the beginning, before the relationship progressed, as part of her early training.

Upon seeing Raea earlier, he'd wanted to hold her, but she pushed him away. She couldn't have wanted that distance, not by the look on her face. And what business did Nare have whispering conspiracies to her? What had she said to Raea at the school?

Sure, Nare told him that Raea said she loved him but needed a break from him, but Nare held something back. His second cousin had babysat him when they were younger—she being five years older—but he never forgot how she put him down at every opportunity.

This was no different. If Raea never came back to him, he'd blame Nare. She didn't understand what it was like to lose everything she loved, only to find penitence in true love and have it nearly taken away. Raea was more precious to him than his own life. He would do anything for her.

But Nare didn't understand. Instead, she was flying with Raea, putting thoughts in her head about leaving him, while he sat with Josh.

For now, he could do nothing if he wanted to keep from pushing Raea further away. Instead, he sat with Josh, who watched for the Dark Angel while not realizing he sat there with him. Humans held some odd superstitions.

Josh watched the sky intently through his binoculars.

"Looks like it might rain," Elis said. The clouds had threatened moisture all day without releasing anything. With the night growing cold as it was, freezing rain could fall; not unheard of in April but not normal either. But at least rain would bring Nare and Raea home, where he could listen to whatever Nare told Raea, unless they went next door to Raea's house.

If only Josh would call it a night, so he could return home to the warmth of the house. Evelyn liked her house warm. So did Elis. Inari didn't do well in the cold.

But he couldn't tell Josh that; he'd promised Raea to say nothing. And he'd do anything for her, especially to win back her trust.

"This is nothing." Josh aimed his binoculars at a different part of the sky.

So much for that thought. Sitting outside in the chilly night could have been worse. It would have been, if not for the warmth of the resonance. Luckily, the full gloves hid the glow of the Starburst marks on his hands.

"I think I see something, but it's so far away." Josh adjusted the binoculars, his face contorting beneath them. "I'd swear I saw something pale. Not our angel, but something."

Probably Nare. Elis had warned her that her wings would be easy to see, but, as with everything he ever said to her, she had brushed his warning aside. "Definitely not the dark angel." *He's right here with you!*

Oh, to say it. What would Josh do?

Elis couldn't. He'd promised Raea that he'd leave it to her when she was ready. Bad enough if she found out what he had told Josh of what he "knew", the little that was that wouldn't expose him.

"Any idea what Raea and Nare are doing?"

"No." He hated lying, especially after Raea's accusations made that point clear. A lie of omission was still a lie. He'd known, but it had been so easy to ignore the issue when she needed consoling through the horrors she'd experienced more than worries about attachments to him.

Josh sat in silence, completely focused on the night sky.

"So, like, what exactly is going on with you and Raea? She just said that she needed some time apart. She wouldn't go into details, but I know it bothers her. I worry about her. You know? Especially when she cried this morning."

Had he heard right? "She cried?"

"Not much, but she probably would've cried more if we weren't at school." Josh offered the binoculars, but Elis shook his head. He didn't want to watch the sky. Seeing Nare would be like her taunting him. He wanted to be up there with Raea.

Raea had cried? Why? So many reasons and possibilities circled that statement. He wanted to grab Josh and shake the answer out of him. Instead, Elis took a deep breath to calm himself.

Josh watched him expectantly. "Why is she upset?"

"It's complicated." If that wasn't an understatement, nothing was.

"Complicated? What's so complicated about a relationship? Did you do something or say something to upset her?"

"No...maybe...It's hard to explain."

"Try me."

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Josh's accusation could have been a slap on his face.

Anger flared from the embers of frustration. Frustration from not being able to touch Raea. Frustration from not knowing what she might decide. Frustration from everyone blaming him. And frustration that Raea had made him promise not to say anything to Josh about the truth of what the media called Dark Angel, which would have made everything easier to explain. "I can't. I promised Raea."

Josh dropped his eyes. "Sorry. I—I know it's not my business, but I just can't believe how fast it happened. I mean, one day she was all excited about Pallin. Then, before he even did anything wrong, she was asking me for advice about what to say to you, and now she's not sure *what* she wants."

"She did?" Raea hadn't said she talked to Josh, but as close as she was to the guy, Elis should have expected it. Had she said anything to Jess or Linds? Why would she tell Josh and not one of her girl friends?

"Yeah. It was weird. I have no idea what happened between you while you were teaching her about her mother and stuff—totally between the two of you. But, like, she was so sure she liked you better than Pallin and didn't want to screw it up. She thought since I'm a guy I might—you know—like, know what was in your head. I mean, come on. How was I to know? You know?"

"What did you say?"

Josh shrugged. "Not much, just that we, like, get scared to say anything and sometimes the girl has to make a move."

Had Josh hoped that move would be for himself? If he liked Raea but was afraid to say anything to her, they had more in common than Elis expected. Or was this Josh's way of testing him, to see if Josh could now steal Raea? That thought gnawed at Elis's gut, twisting and biting like a thrashing beast.

"Apparently I was right."

Yes, he was, but Elis wouldn't stand by and let Josh take Raea away from him. He'd waited too long for the right time and given her his heart. He wouldn't lose her without a fight.

The faint rush of the breeze filled the void of silence between them.

A minute passed before Elis spoke. "I don't think you're going to see any angels tonight."

"Probably not, but I kinda wanted to talk with you anyway. I mean, after what happened with Pallin, I don't want anyone hurting her again."

Josh would never fully understand, even after hearing the story of what happened that awful night a month ago. Elis had seen Pallin rape Raea through the vision from the Starfire that she shared with him. It sickened and angered him, eating away at the last of his control. Knowing the smug bastard was free after drugging and abducting Raea and was Shirukan, like the soldiers who killed his family, snapped something inside him. He had relinquished control to a dark monster seeking vengeance but also a need to protect the most precious part of his life.

"I'll never hurt her." He was there to protect her. If anything, he had failed and was more determined to keep Raea safe, part of the reason he disliked being stuck there while she was out flying. Nare didn't know the land like he did. If something happened...

"I thought that about Pallin too."

Josh sounded wary, with every right, but it still annoyed Elis. "So, you'd rather have me out of her life?"

"No. No, I didn't say that."

"But you were thinking it."

Josh sighed. "I'm sorry. It's just that, after everything... After you told me what Pallin did and how you went after him, you know, I...kind of...um...I wonder...I'm a little skeptical. I mean, you're like so quiet most of the time, and you just went off after Pallin. And now Raea needs distance from *you*?"

He hadn't thought of it that way. Josh made it sound like he was unstable, but at the time he had been. After figuring out Pallin was one of those he most hated and had hurt Raea in a way that could never be undone, his rage had exploded. The only resolution he saw at the time had been to hurt Pallin as he'd hurt Raea. He'd never experienced that kind of hatred before. "What would you have done if you knew the man who raped someone you loved was alive and free to hurt her again?"

"I don't know. You said *she* killed him in self defense. I never could have done that."

Elis could have and wanted to, not only for Raea but also for his family. Pallin had come as an undercover Shirukan, sent to take Raea back to surrender her Starfire shard and kill her afterwards. Pallin had been more dangerous alive than Josh would ever know.

Maybe he should know. He deserves to meet his Dark Angel, and maybe he'd realize the truth about Raea and realize she deserves to be with her own kind. Damn his promise to her! He bit his tongue on saying anything to Josh. "He was far more dangerous than you realize."

"Oh?" Josh set his binoculars down.

"Pallin was..." He couldn't break his word to Raea. Crystal fire. "He wasn't what he said he was." There. He didn't say it.

"I know...I checked at school, you know. I had to know, just because I couldn't stand him getting away with that. There's no record of his parents ever being there. Supposedly they registered over the phone. The papers were sent to an address in California, signed, and mailed back."

Elis's breath froze in his chest. An address on Earth. Who would have pretended to be Pallin's parents? Did they know what Pallin was? "What was the address?"

"The school wouldn't give it to me. That information's confidential. Does it matter?"

"It might." Especially if someone else was helping Pallin. If they were also Shirukan, Raea was in real trouble. But why wouldn't they have acted sooner? It didn't make sense. They were up to something. But what?

He had to track down whoever pretended to be Pallin's parents. That address would be a start. He should have thought of it sooner, but he had other things to worry about, like taking care of Raea. Now, he had nothing else to do, and it would keep his mind off Raea, until she came back.

His heart raced with anxiety, warming him against the cold.

No. Not anxiety. The warmth increased throughout his body, all the way to his fingers. The resonance. The Starfire! But Josh's questions had distracted him from using the resonance.

If he didn't, then... *No!* Only a Starfire portal could call to the Starfire in Keepers from a distance. *Raea!* He had to reach her immediately.

"What's with the wind?" Josh looked around at the tree in the backyard waving in the sudden wind stirred up by the portal in the atmosphere.

Elis had to get up there. Raea and Nare needed him. He looked aside at Josh. There wasn't time to waste.

But he had promised Raea.

Keep her promise or protect her? He knew the answer without thinking. "Where'd you see the pale wings?"

Josh pointed to the northwest. "That way. Wait." He lifted the binoculars. "Whoa! There's—"

"Thanks." Elis found the resonance inside him and directed its burning power to grow the wings. He clenched his teeth on the pain of muscle, bone, sinew, and feathers in rapid growth through the hidden folds Evelyn had sewn into his jacket, until he stretched his wings. Now to get up there.

"Oh, jeez!" Josh startled and fell over his chair backwards.

Elis helped him stand. "Careful."

Josh stumbled back. "Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. *Whoa.* No way! This. Is so *not* real. You're the Dark Angel?"

"I don't have time to explain. Raea's in trouble." Josh would have to accept it, but Elis didn't have time to answer questions. "She didn't want you to know. She doesn't want *anyone* to know." Elis stepped back and spread his wings.

Josh ducked at the wind of black wings flapping. With luck, Elis would return to clear everything with Josh later. For now, he had to race to catch up to Nare and Raea so far out of town. The black maw of the Starfire portal spit out a few faint dark shapes against the backdrop of moonlit clouds.

No. Not yet! He fought against the winds stirred by the forces of the portal. He'd never make it in time.



Attack Plan

How fortunate the Keepers were out flying. Valdas didn't need the map to find the houses, nor did they need to break into any structure. They could make this short and sweet.

She adjusted the heads-up display on her helmet visor showing the radiation traces of anything living. Through the shades of red, she found them not far away. The Starfire gave off a unique radiation signature that registered the Keepers as green, contrasting the yellow of her squad members.

The wind was another matter. It would make accurate flying difficult. Not impossible but risky. The portal disturbed their atmosphere the same. They had managed to fly through it there; they would manage in this.

["Keepers sighted,"] Lieutenant Tourval said. He flew straight for them as they planned. Daeltrian should be somewhere above, provided the wind didn't hinder her efforts.

Karnalan and Luranik would flank the Keepers.

Only one direction remained open to them.

["Tourval, hold back. Give Daeltrian a chance to get ahead."] The tri-comm worked perfectly in close proximity, and they could hear a whisper. Unnecessary to shout, even in this wind.

A gust sent her tumbling over herself, but Valdas righted within seconds.

["I'm in position,"] Daeltrian said. ["I don't think they see me."]

Indeed. Based on the colored images from the goggles, the Keepers had hardly moved while the young lieutenant was nearly above them. Did they expect a fight? Why did they wait instead of run?

Remember Montran. They had attacked him, burning him severely from what must have been a very strong release of Starfire energy. ["Ease up. They may be waiting for a clear shot. Wait for the others to get into position."] She wouldn't underestimate these two as the commander had.

["I don't think they see me, sir."]

["I said 'hold'."] No sense firing and missing, and alerting the Keepers of the attack. They would have one chance to surprise the pair.

["Yes, sir."]

The others were almost ready. The next move would take her away from optimum viewing while she took her position. For those brief seconds, she would lose sight of the situation.

Valdas shivered. Damn the weather. Loran could have warned them to dress warm.

["They're fleeing!"]

Sure enough. The green shapes flew away. Crystal fire! Valdas spread her wings and pulled up. ["They spotted us. Two-point-one. Karnalan, go."]

["Yes, sir."]

The yellow figure dropped to pick up speed against the wind and cut off the Keepers. A warning shot would chase them back.

["Daeltrian, hold position. Tourval. Luranik, flank pursuit."]

All three confirmed and took up the chase.

A light flashed from Karnalan's weapon. It went wide.

Clever. The pair split up. Valdas was smarter. The two in pursuit each took one Keeper. The chase was on.

["These two burned Commander Montran. Keep your distance. Disable them so we can go home."]

She joined the pursuit, fighting the strong winds throwing them at the portal. If they could use that to their advantage...

It would never work. The Keepers would do all they could to avoid it now that they knew Saffir hadn't sent for them. Valdas and her team had hoped the Keepers would assume the portal was generated by the last Crystal Keeper on Inar'Ahben and linger near, but the advantage had been lost.

She'd never fought like this while a portal was active. Given the wind and threat of return fire by the Keepers, she wished she had brought more support. If she had suspected this world's climate could cause problems, she would have.

The Keepers looked to have difficulty too, though. The green shapes occasionally jerked as if caught by a gust of wind. One of them in particular had more trouble than the other. Which was that? The shape looked feminine. If so, that was their primary target, but also the most dangerous. Human-raised. That might have something to do with both factors. She might be easy to catch, but they would have to neutralize her quickly to avoid the Starfire.

But the other looked feminine too. Wait. A third shape approached in the distance. It couldn't be. *Three* Keepers. One of the others must have joined them.

The brighter green headed for Valdas, or near her at least. Close enough for a clear shot if the female stayed on course. The wind proved a challenge to staying still or for the Crystal Keeper to fly straight.

One shot. That's all Valdas needed. One shot to knock out the Crystal Keeper. The other Keeper gave her team a good challenge, but this one didn't seem to understand. Two of her teammates chased the Crystal Keeper to her.

Valdas flapped against a gust at her back. Seconds later, the Crystal Keeper veered away.

Valdas pursued, sending Daeltrian away in the hopes they could chase the female to her.

The wind roared around them. Cold numbed the exposed parts of her face. Ahben depths! The cold numbed every part of her. The others didn't complain, but she would bet they felt the same. If they continued much longer, they'd all freeze. It didn't matter—they weren't important. That crystal shard was. She ignored the cold. She couldn't fail.

She felt the effects of the cold on her movements and saw it in her team. Their quick turns widened. Their response times to the Keepers' tricks slowed. How *did* the Keepers go on?

The pair joined up again, allowing the yellow figures to encircle the green shapes, although Karnalan and Daeltrian were a little slow. Or did they hold back in case the Keepers made another run?

[Or in case they fall. Good thinking.] Once hit by the neutralizer, the Crystal Keeper would lose consciousness. The other could fall to their death, but Shartrael Raea would be needed alive, if possible, to handle the Starfire safely.

A couple shots of bright green flashed on the scene, but the green shapes flew around one another.

One of the yellow shapes faltered.

["I'm hit!"]

Tourval's voice. The Keepers fought back. They attacked her teammates, taking the offensive and sending the men and women of her hand-picked squad fleeing from them.

Valdas pursued the more skilled flyer, who chased Luranik. If she could get one clean shot, they'd regain their advantage. *[What took so long for you to defend yourselves? That oath to serve is a farce. You Keepers are nothing more than hypocrites and liars. You're abominations to our kind.]*

If she could get a clear shot, she could take out one more. The third Keeper was almost there. ["Hurry! We're getting company."]

Perfect aim. She fired. The Crystal Keeper fell.

Daeltrian and Tourval swooped up, their yellow shapes merging with the green. ["Got her!"]

Finally. ["Let's go."] Valdas followed the pair carrying the limp green form between them. The last green shape spread his wings and glided. *[Too late.]* The Crystal Keeper vanished into the darkness with her team. She followed.

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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. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, which includes her husband and kids, and a few cats. Her published works include the *STARFIRE ANGELS* series and the *LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON* epic. Besides writing, she also trains and shows her horse in dressage. For updates, visit her website at www.melanienilles.com.

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