



They've been coming here for thousands of years, using Earth as a sanctuary to escape threats from their own kind. Mankind knows them as angels, and one of them left a child upon her death to be raised as a human.

Raea is now a high school senior and her life as a human is about to end. The crystal shard she bears is not a pretty pendant; it's a collective of powerful entities who chose her as their Keeper, a protector of one of the four shards that power a machine capable of destroying whole worlds. Those who desire the Starfire's power have sent an agent to find her, but she's too busy evading a nosy reporter ready to exploit her secret and dating a hot new foreign student to notice. Nevermind learning what she really is.

Only one person on Earth can help her, the last person she ever expected. But he's not from Earth. Life as a human would be so much easier.

Starfire Angels

By
Melanie Nilles

Prairie Star Publishing * North Dakota

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Chapters

[Dark Descends](#)

[Miracles and Memories](#)

[The Magic Touch](#)

[Angel Wings](#)

[Double Date](#)

[Starfire Keepers](#)

[Nina Russet](#)

[First Flight](#)

[Dark Suspicions](#)

[Angels Rising](#)

[Cornered](#)

[No Ordinary Goose Chase](#)

[Two of a Kind](#)

[Connections](#)

[Angel Wings](#)

[Golden Demon](#)

[The Chase](#)

[Hell on Earth](#)

[The Good, the Bad, and the Wounded](#)

[Where Angels Live](#)

[Two Worlds, A Part](#)

[Saturday Revisited](#)

[Fatal Ultimatum](#)

[The Truth](#)

Dark Descends

Raea gasped and scanned the shadows around her. Her crystal pendant glowed faintly like the aquamarine splotches on the backs and palms of her hands, but it all faded to nothing before she could blink. Impossible. She couldn't have seen what she thought she saw.

Familiarity chased away the fire and darkness. Her room. She sat in her room in Debbie and Mike Logan's, her aunt's and uncle's, house, but her covers stuck to her.

Yuck. In the dark of her room, she threw back her wet sheet and comforter and picked off her brown hair sticking to her neck and shoulders. Much better. The cold March night made her shiver, but after dreaming of fire and waking up soaked in sweat, she welcomed the cold. She'd welcome a hot shower in the morning even more.

It must have been a dream. That's all it was. One more annoying dream to forget.

She closed her eyes. Tomorrow would come too soon.

* * *

"Watch out!" Linds' voice called over the noise of various conversations in the crowded second floor hall of McClarron High School.

Too late. Josh met Raea with a newspaper clipping held aloft in his hand. With his other hand, he swiped strands of dark brown hair away from blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Raea, you gotta see this!"

Not another one. The first story had piqued her interest and the second confirmed it, but after five reports shoved in her face about a mysterious black-winged angel helping local residents, she had no desire to see another. Small town news. Why did she have to live in little McClarron, North Dakota? Why couldn't her aunt and uncle live in a city, or even Fargo with several high schools? That was big enough to hide from news like this and still be close to Debbie's family.

But she wouldn't have her friends, including Josh, shortest guy in the senior class—her height—a total geek, and a just plain nice guy. He should've found a girlfriend already. Instead, he pestered her and the others with his obsession.

What did Josh have—sensors or tracking devices planted on each of them? He moved too quickly for her to avoid in the locker-lined halls without hurting his feelings. The least she could do was humor him. Josh might be obsessive about this, but he'd been a good friend since first grade.

She took the clipping he shoved into her hands and glanced down. Yup, another one. This time the angel had stopped a family from crashing on Highway 200 heading west to Washburn. She finished skimming the article and handed the clipping back to him. Her dreams about her mother with wings returned in vivid detail.

"Kay...So...Anything?"

Raea shook off her thoughts and focused on Josh. That pleading gaze waited in expectance of her to get excited. As much as she wanted to for his sake, she couldn't. "What do you want me to say?"

"What do you think?"

In answer, the bell rang. The squeak of sneakers and stampede with the slams of metal lockers around them made talking difficult. Saved by the bell. Josh was cool, but she and the others tired of hearing about their small town hero.

"I think we better get our butts into Biology," she said.

"Forget Biology. Don't you get it? They made the name official. They're calling him 'Dark Angel' for sure." He followed to her locker. Why her? "It's just wicked! I love it!"

She didn't care about his "Dark Angel." Why did they have to assign a name? Now that's all she'd hear from him.

"Oh, and there was another article."

"Josh, we don't have time." Hadn't he heard the warning bell?

"It just said a film crew from the Xplorer Channel is coming next week to interview people and try to catch a glimpse of the Dark Angel. Anyway, see ya in class."

Thank you, she mouthed and turned the dial for the lock on her green locker door. At least she wouldn't have to hear about it for a while. But a film crew? She could just see the madhouse with everyone wanting their moment of fame. Still, it would liven up their small town for a while. It would be interesting, to say the least.

With her books in her arms, Raea slammed her locker and hurried to her first class of the day.

The only thing she wanted to think about at the present was Linds's birthday party that weekend. Eighteen. Her friend would be an official adult, even if they were still in high school.

If only Raea's mother could have been there to see *her* reach adulthood. That would have been perfect. Her whole life would have been perfect if Padina had lived all those years. At least then Raea wouldn't have only her dreams. After her mother's and stepfather's deaths in the tornado thirteen years ago, Raea had come to live with her aunt and uncle and cousins.

Every day she wished she could speak to her mother one more time, so she could ask questions like the one that plagued her since waking last night. Had Raea really seen the marks on her hands glow last night? Like her mother's marks, the aquamarine blotches in her palms also showed on the backs of her hands, so she couldn't hide them by closing her fists. Worse still, jagged lines sprayed out from the center to her fingertips and beyond her wrists. The bullies liked them, as a reason to tease her.

Somebody bumped against her from behind, but she caught her balance with a step.

A moonlit vista of a large valley clustered with trees and dotted with a couple of rocky waterfalls stretched to the horizon.

"I don't care what you are, Padina," Scott said. "You're still the world to me. I want you to stay. Don't leave me, not like this."

Padina hesitated and the scene blurred a moment. It stopped on Scott in the wan glow of moonlight, his trim figure crossed with shadows from the trees rising high around him.

"Careful."

Raea blinked away the brief vision of her mother and stepdad and looked up at the last sight she expected. Elis Jasheir? No way. Disheveled black hair and gloves with the fingertips exposed—that was him. Deep purple eyes behind black locks made her look twice. Sure enough—purple. An odd color but attractive on him. Warmth rose to her face. What was she thinking? She wasn't, but when she turned away, she caught the smirk on Chad Cooper's face. Oh, no. She'd never live this down.

She pulled away from Elis. The creepiest guy in her class had caught her, and she blushed. This was *not* happening.

Elis left her to take his seat near the back of the room, near the shelves of jars of preserved samples of odd creatures Mr. Maviar collected for their study. He never said anything, just sat quietly and did his work. She almost felt sorry for him.

Not now. What was she thinking?

She hurried to join Josh at their lab table at the front and slumped down to hide. The worst was yet to come. She knew it. Chad always found time to harass her. Unlike other guys in her class, he and Joey had never grown up, and probably never would.

"Woo!" Chuckles erupted from Chad, and the other voice was probably Joey, who sat one table back and one row closer to the door. Two of the worst bullies in school.

Raea hunched down and hid her face in her hands. *Please, just leave me alone this once.*

"Freaky and Creeper sittin' in a tree..."

It was too much to hope. Twelve years of torture were almost over. If she could just hold out two more months, she would graduate and never have to see or hear him again.

"Don't listen to them," Josh said. "They just have to find some way to cause trouble."

"Yeah. For me." Why couldn't it be someone else?

Before the bell rang to start the class, she breathed easier. The handsome, young science teacher, Mister Maviar, had only to give Chad "the look" to silence him. It paid to be on a teacher's good side, although she could live without being called a teacher's pet. After all, she didn't fawn over him, not like the rest of the girls, or dress scantily to get his attention. She didn't have to. Her perfect grades gave her enough attention.

A familiar sound caught her ears. She recognized the clack of heels growing louder down the hall outside the open classroom door and waited expectantly.

Mrs. McKeen, the principal, entered the room. A thin smile cracked the rigid lines of her face. A few whispers circulated while she spoke to Mister Maviar.

From her place near the front of the classroom, Raea had a clear line to the door and saw the reason for the principal's visit. Whoa! Her breath froze in her lungs at the face peaking in. Were they getting a new student? She hoped so. Man, was he cute, and she didn't usually go for that look—golden blonde hair to the shoulders. A bit on the preppy side for clothes, but the

red and black crewneck fit him. Fit him *very* well. His eyes scanned the room with an intense precision that made her heart flutter.

I'm free. If only she was one of the pretty girls. Then again, he'd probably never be interested in her, like most of the guys in that school.

She couldn't wait to get out of that small town. None of the guys were worth going with—the good ones were taken and the rest were too stupid on so many levels. Only Josh had anything going for him, but he was a friend.

Why would a new guy have any interest in her? Oh, well. She could dream. Besides, he carried himself with that rich, snobby air, like some show-off, jock. He'd fit in well with most of the guys in McClarron.

"A new student?" Josh asked.

When Mrs. McKeen finished, Mr. Maviar stepped forward. Mrs. McKeen waved the new boy inside. Nope. Not a boy. Definitely a man. Oh, *man*. She couldn't be the only girl staring either.

"It has been brought to my attention by Mrs. McKeen that an exchange student will be attending McClarron High for a few weeks. I hope you'll make him feel welcome."

Mrs. McKeen stepped forward with the new guy. He looked older than most of the guys in the senior class, but so did Elis. Perhaps he had started school a year later in his country.

"This is Pallin Montran." Mrs. McKeen looked up to him. He was tall. And the toothpick-thin principal was in high heels. A moment of confusion passed across her face. "He'll be here temporarily, after spending most of his life in—"

"Small place," he said, his hands clasped behind his back and his feet shoulder-width apart. He stood like some marine from bootcamp, like on those shows her uncle Mike liked to watch. "It is not important."

Raea looked to Josh, but he shrugged. Where had she heard that accent before? It rang with familiarity, but she couldn't place it. Did anyone else know? She glanced around the room, but everyone looked to one another, shaking their heads and whispering. Elis was the only one who said nothing, but beneath the wild, black hair sprayed over his eyes, his expression darkened.

"Very well. I leave you with Mister Maviar's Advanced Biology class. You have your schedule. Let me know if you need any help."

Pallin smiled. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Ma'am?" Josh murmured.

No kidding. Raea choked on a restrained giggle, while others snickered. He sounded like he was in the military, too.

Mrs. McKeen marched across the room, her heels ringing with each step until she closed the door behind her.

"There's an empty chair next to Leo Kowalski." Mister Maviar handed him a textbook and pointed down the aisle to the table where Leo sat alone. "Please take a seat so we can begin."

Pallin made his way past the other tables, the eyes of most of the girls following, Raea included. For a second after he sat down, his amber eyes caught hers. Was that a smile? That was a smile. He smiled at her. *Ohmygod!* Raea turned around, her heart pounding a race. He was cute, no matter what her impressions of his attitude had been.

It was all she could do to pay attention in class. He couldn't have smiled at her, but she swore he had. Had he? He must have. But he couldn't have, not her.

When the bell rang after class, Raea gathered her books. She kept her eyes down when Pallin passed her, unable to look up. What would she say? She couldn't. Her tongue stuck.

She waited for the room to empty, glad for the break before English to recover her speaking ability.

"Wha'd'ya think?" Josh wove through the crowded locker-lined halls with her like a fish in water.

"The class or the new guy?"

"Pallin."

She stopped to turn to the commotion they had left. Behind them, the subject of the conversation managed to keep his feet going amid a group of students offering to help him to his next class. He never noticed her. She must have imagined that spark.

"We'll see. He's definitely easy on the eyes."

"You would say that. He's a poser."

"Whatever." Josh was so jealous. She didn't have time to stroke his ego, though. "I have to go. I'll see you in English."

Miracles and Memories

The rest of the day filled with rumors and talk about the new foreign student.

When the last bell rang, Raea was happy just to make it through without any more trouble. Thank old man time the day had to end. Although she wouldn't have minded watching Pallin more, seeing the other girls hanging on him made her sick. So what if he was a senior and foreign *and* the best looking guy now in McClarron?

Why was she worrying about it? She shouldn't even care.

"So, like, what happened this morning?" Josh asked a block from school. The sounds of that prison faded as they walked the few quiet blocks, passing houses with small sections of fenced and tree-lined yards until they reached the street where they parted ways. "You looked ready to faint when Elis caught you."

Did he really have to bring that up? The most embarrassing moment of her day and she hadn't been left to forget it. It's not like she would anyway—every memory stayed with her perfectly. Why did Elis have to bump into her? Why did she have to fall into another vision of her mother? Really. She literally *fell*. But Elis caught her, of all the people. That moment she looked up flashed through her mind—those eyes. Who had purple eyes? She must have imagined it.

Raea glanced behind and shivered inside her blue and gray jacket—she should've worn a heavier coat, or maybe spring should hurry up and chase away winter. Elis walked alone about twenty feet back, like every day, saying nothing and practically hiding from any attention. What did he think?

He didn't say anything about what happened. In fact, he had gone about his day as if nothing happened.

"Don't remind me." If only Pallin had caught her. Now, that would have been something.

"Why? Really. I won't say anything. You almost fainted, Raea. I'm a little concerned is all. It's not like you."

Why couldn't Josh drop the subject?

Because he cared. He always concerned himself with other people's problems. She supposed she could answer his question, provided he swore to say nothing to anyone. These visions were so unusual, but with his Dark Angel obsession, he'd probably love to hear about her strange dreams of good and bad angels, especially when her mother appeared as one of them. Or maybe his obsession triggered those dreams.

"I don't want to think about it." What bothered her most was that she didn't mind Elis catching her at the time. Sure, it felt odd since she had always avoided him, like most of her classmates, but he hadn't actually done anything wrong.

"Why?"

"It's just...Oh, nevermind. You wouldn't understand." She didn't really understand what made her feel weird. Elis had never done anything to anyone. In fact, he started their junior year at MHS with rumors that he fled his homeland. Someone said he came to their small town as a refugee after the death of his family in a war no one knew much about, probably because he never said what country he was from. Her mother had also been a refugee and alone when she arrived in Minneapolis and met Scott.

But her mother was *her mother*. Elis was quiet and somber. A loner. He never talked to anyone. He simply existed, but at the same time not, like a shadow. Yet the widow, Mrs. Johnson, had taken him in. Okay, so maybe he couldn't be too bad if Mrs. Johnson always smiled at church with him at her side. Still, his quietness bothered Raea. What went on in his head?

"Try me."

When would Josh give up? Never.

"Oh, all right. How can I expect you to understand when you're not a girl?" She sighed heavily. "It's simple. Some guys are outgoing and easy to talk to—like you. Others are, let's just say, odd, like they're thinking something they shouldn't." That didn't seem right about Elis. He wasn't creepy in that way. What was it about him?

Josh glanced back and shrugged. "Just because someone doesn't talk much doesn't mean they have a dirty mind. Besides, Raea, all guys have dirty minds."

She so did *not* need to hear that from him. Josh was a good person. How could he have a dirty mind? Thinking of him thinking of girls in that way just seemed...weird. He was her friend, not a boyfriend, but a close friend she trusted.

"I didn't hear that," she said.

"At least I'm honest, but not every guy you know thinks about it all the time or sees women as just an object for their own

gratification."

"Okay. I don't need to hear anymore." Why were they talking about this?

He chuckled. "Whatever. You don't even know him. None of us know him."

"Yeah, because he. Never. Talks." That didn't bother her. It was just...something.

"All right. Fine. Believe what you want. What about almost fainting? What happened?"

"When he bumped me, I had this flash of my mom and Scott." She lowered her voice to keep Elis from hearing her. Hopefully he took the hint, if he had overheard anything before then, and stayed away from her. "But in my sleep, I've been having the same dream over and over for a few weeks now. Not every night, but often enough. It's always the exact same. You're gonna love it—it's about angels."

That smirk on Josh's face made his thoughts clear. He looked far too self-satisfied.

"Don't go telling me about your 'Dark Angel' either. This is about mom. She's an angel in my dream and flying with a man who gets killed by the bad angels. She makes some sort of hole in the sky and disappears. Then I always wake up." That should satisfy him.

"Always the same?"

"Yeah. Exactly. Every detail." What happened to the gloating about angels?

"Angels, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I have no idea what it means—"

Raea almost smacked him for that. *Thanks, Josh. Lotta help you are.*

"But if you're having fainting spells and visions about your mom *and* dreaming about her as an angel, I'd guess you're looking at your grief and maybe anger. I don't know. Try lucid dreaming."

Cool. He didn't actually go into a spiel about angels, for once.

"Take control of the dream."

What good would that do? She was an observer in it, not a participant.

"It's cool that you see your mom as an angel. I'd guess I was rubbing off on you." He grinned.

If he only knew how close she was to kicking his butt back into smugville. Lucky for him, his corner came up. "Dream on," she said.

"That's what I should be saying to you."

All right. He won that round. Raea smiled and punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Smart ass. I'll see you tomorrow."

He glanced back and leaned close to her, keeping his voice down. "Don't let it bother you. You don't even *know* him. Maybe you should try actually, like, *talking* to him."

"Go." She didn't want to hear it any more. The day was done. The embarrassment was past.

"Tomorrow," he said and strode away.

She didn't want to think about tomorrow, and hearing all the stuff about Pallin, although it took Chad's attention off her.

She could almost feel Elis breathing down her neck and hurried the last block home. Josh was wrong. So, *so* wrong.

But she didn't have to be around Elis or talk to him at home. Only at school.

Home never looked more inviting, the blue house standing alone at the end of the last block on the edge of McClarron. And her cousin Dave was gone to basketball practice, a major relief. No Dave to annoy her, for a while anyway.

One good thing came that day. Or was it two? It had ended, and the sun shone bright. Yeah. She'd call that two good things. A bright ending on a gloomy start.

Better yet, Raea found a third positive moment. It might have been freezing, but the ice crystals sparkled in the air around her like magic dust.

She liked that.

Now, to get inside before Elis caught up to her. She wanted to run, but not when she might hit a patch of ice. One wrong step was all it would take to break an ankle. She had never been to a doctor or in the hospital and didn't want to start.

Raea took a misstep and gasped...

Scott moved close, a smile on his narrow face. He pulled off his glasses and laid his head on something. "There it is. Wow. That's quite a kick."

"Yes, it was." Padina's accent was heavy still. She stroked Scott's short, reddish brown hair.

"She'll be beautiful." Scott lifted his head.

"How do you know?"

"Because I know her mother is."

Padina blushed. "You are too good man for me."

"Not good enough." He kissed her.

"I am lucky woman. You accept us, but this is not your child. We cannot have...together any more. Only this." She rubbed the bulge of her belly.

He shrugged. "She'll be our child."

"Why 'she'?"

"I don't know. Maybe I always wanted a little girl to spoil. I can hope."

Padina laughed.

Raea shook away the image. Again. It happened again. These scenes of her parents couldn't be dreams. They were real scenes. She had never been there and wouldn't have imagined them on her own. Why did she see these images? The people she loved were dead. Although she wished with all her heart for both of them to be there, nothing could bring Scott and her mom back. Her chest ached to see them as vividly as if they had been there.

"Are you all right?" Elis helped her balance.

"What?" She blinked away the moisture in her eyes. "Um...Yeah. I have to get home." Before she broke down in front of him. This truly was the worst day of her life, second to the day her mom and Scott died. What was happening to her?

Despite her best efforts, the tears flowed cold on her cheeks by the time she entered the house on the end of the block. Raea kicked off her shoes and ran across the wood laminate main floor and up the stairs to slam the door of her room behind her.

It wasn't fair. Why did they have to die? Raea was only five; no more than a child.

It had taken all those years to let go and now these scenes rushed in on her. It wasn't fair. Remembering and seeing happy times that she had never been present to see tore open her grief. She had cursed the storm every day since the tornado destroyed only their house while she was at a sleepover. Life was so unfair and cruel.

She let the tears flow, soaking her pillow. Only the ringing of her phone succeeded in interrupting the flood of grief and tears, damming it for a while.

The caller ID displayed a welcome number. He had the best timing.

"Hey, Josh." She wiped her eyes with the pink sleeve of her shirt and sniffed.

After a couple seconds of silence, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"It's nothing." Nothing she wanted to think about it again.

"Sure?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Okay. I'm gonna be on national TV! You know that special on Dark Angel the Xplorer Channel wants to do?"

"Yeah. The one you mentioned this morning." She sniffed and wiped her eyes dry. If he hadn't called, she'd probably still be sobbing from the scenes burned in her memories now. She loved seeing them, but it hurt too much.

"Uh, huh. They heard about my interest in our angel and want me to help them."

"I'm happy for you." At least he'd have someone who would listen to all his stories and speculations, and in that light she could be happy for him.

"Oh, man! I'm shaking. I don't know what to do. I had to call someone. Actually, I have to call everyone. I get to help out and maybe be on TV!"

A laugh escaped her at the mental picture of Josh shaking in excitement. Just what she needed. "That's cool. Maybe some of your fame will rub off on the rest of us."

"This is going to be way more than cool. It's the *sickest!* I can't believe it!"

Neither could she, but she hoped for his sake that it didn't blow up in his face. "Be careful, though. Don't let them make fun of you." Like some kids did.

"No. It's not like that. This is *Miracles and Other Wonders*, the show that looks for credibility in what can't be scientifically proven."

"Then I guess you're set. It's right up your alley."

"Oh, yes, it is! I'm nervous and excited all at the same time. It's just...Wow! I don't know what to think."

She wouldn't either, but she didn't have his obsession with the McClarron angel. "Settle down and chill a bit. You said they won't be here for a week, so you have some time to put things together."

"That's just it. The assistant left a message and wants me to call them back ASAP with everything I've considered and any observations I've had. I haven't even tried watching for our angel. How can I give any credibility?"

"It's winter, Josh. It's cold. Who's gonna sit out and watch for an angel to fly over, let alone a senior in high school with tests to study for and papers due? I'm surprised they expect that much from you, or anyone."

"I'll have to ask who gave them the info. In the meantime, I gotta call Grandma. Oh, and Paul. Maybe he's the one they contacted."

His parish priest had been his closest ally in swapping stories and speculations, or at least based on the reports he brought back to them. She and the others had learned to steer him away from the topic. That could stay between him and Father Davison. She and the others preferred the old Josh, the geek who hung out with them and joked around and who wasn't constantly obsessed about every real or imagined appearance of their black-winged angel.

"Probably," she said. Anything to get him off the line so she didn't have to hear him go into the insights he had gathered, again. If only this angel would disappear. Life could go back to the way it was before that first sighting, and maybe her dreams or visions would end. "I'm sure your Grandma will be excited for you."

"I know she will. Thanks, Raea, and I hope you figure out your dream."

"Thanks."

"Kay. See ya tomorrow."

"Bye." She clicked the phone off. Wow. Josh had the full attention of a whole television crew. He was right—it was the sickest, minus the Dark Angel part.

The Magic Touch

"You trust her with it?"

"It is necessary. They'll look for me, not her. No one knew I was pregnant."

Scott stroked Padina's light brown hair from her face. "But she's only a child. She's likely to lose it."

"Better lost than in their hands."

Raea watched from the crack of their open bedroom door. Her parents sat up in bed, her mother with her head on Scott's shoulder.

"But if the wrong person finds it—"

"It will react. Unfortunate for them."

"If it's really as powerful as you've described, it shouldn't be in the hands of a child."

"Raea is my child." Padina's tone admonished him. "Never forget that. Do not forget what we are, Scott. We may look human sometimes—"

He gently tilted her head back and kissed her lips. "You'll always be my angels."

Padina smiled. "That's not what I meant."

The scene faded to the deep recesses of Raea's dreams. Faint voices in unison whispered from afar. Raea strained to listen but they vanished. *"Who are you?"* she called into the dream. *"I can't hear you. Speak up!"* Nothing.

* * *

Raea yawned as she sat down at the dining table, where Debbie sat with her morning coffee and toast, already dressed and made-up for work.

"Did you sleep well?"

"No. I've been having these weird dreams of...of Mom." Debbie didn't need to know details, but Debbie had known her mom well. She said she had helped with the birth. Padina had to be a saint to have a baby at home without any medication. Maybe her aunt could tell her something or give her some insight about her mother she hadn't considered.

"What kind of dreams?"

"The weird kind."

Debbie gave her the stop-messing-with-me look. No skirting the issue.

"For a while now I've had the same dream over and over. It never changes. But yesterday..." This was going to sound stupid, but Raea wanted answers. At least the boys weren't in sight or sound. Still, she didn't want to risk Dave and Eric overhearing and lowered her voice. Sound carried too far under the vaulted ceilings. "Yesterday, when Elis bumped me at school, and when I slipped on the way home from school, I saw scenes. It's like I was there but not. Like a fly on the wall."

"Hmm."

What did that mean? Debbie said nothing more but took another bit of her toast. Didn't she care?

"They were like scenes from *her* life. And last night, I dreamed of something I actually remember."

"Probably just déjà vu. But I'm concerned if you're falling into dreams in the middle of the day. I'll check with a specialist and see what they advise."

"Whatever." Raea shrugged and finished off her cereal. If that was all Debbie would say, what else could she do? See a neurologist?

Eric tromped down the stairs looking for food. The skinny sixth-grader was always hungry. If Raea ate like either of her cousins, she'd look like a blimp. Where did they put it?

Dave followed Eric and gave her a dirty look. Too bad. She had beaten him to the shower that morning. He'd live.

So far that day started out as the polar opposite of yesterday. Just what she needed to cheer up: A nice long, hot shower, annoying Dave, a bowl of cereal...Yup, major improvement over yesterday. Just in time for Linds' party coming up in two more days.

Why did the best days always follow the worst, though? It never failed, but she suspected that if she ever solved that riddle, her life would end or the world would collapse into nothing. At least she could enjoy the day and any further improvements that came her way.

On the way to school, even the sun seemed to shine brighter that morning. She didn't see Elis on the walk to school, a

relief and—in an odd way—a disappointment. Yesterday was totally weird around him. She didn't want to repeat it, but she wanted answers.

And no one would ever know. She wouldn't tell them. Elis didn't have a reason to say anything, a big relief. She did *not* need to invite any more mocking from Chad. Yesterday was bad enough, except he had teased her all her life. Avoiding any situations even hinting of fuel for his amusement was her daily goal. Now with Pallin distracting everyone, maybe that would end, for a while at least.

Only one other thing could have made the day better—not having to listen to Josh talk almost non-stop about the television program he was going to be on. On the bright side, it was better than Chad's teasing.

Josh shut up during class, but lunch was another matter. At their own round table near one of the windows, he had a captive audience of friends.

"O-*key*, Josh!" Linds' slumped back in her chair, shaking her head to throw her blonde-streaked hair back over her shoulders. "We get it. I was excited when I first heard, but you're wearing my patience thin. I don't suggest pushing it during calving season. Chill for a bit. Talk about something else."

Leave it to Linds to say it bluntly. Her farm girl toughness kept them all sane. Raea suspected what had her cranky. "Your dad make you go out and check cows?"

"Yes. I'm so tired. I don't need to listen to all the details of Dark Angel this and Dark Angel that. No offense, but it gets old *real* fast."

Yes, it did. Better that Linds said it and not her. Raea hated being the one to criticize her friends. Sure, it came easy with her cousin Dave, but he was like the most annoying pest on the planet. Let someone else say what they all thought when it came to Josh.

"Why can't he just make Terry or Jim do all the work?" Raea asked.

"Equal load. It was *my* turn to go out...at freakin' two AM!"

"How many calves left?" Jess stabbed at her salad.

"Too many. I don't know. We're just hitting the peak."

Raea tuned out Linds's rant about calving, her curiosity drawn to something else. And there he sat, alone and minding his own business. Both daytime visions had happened when Elis touched her. There had to be a connection, but she'd be damned if she would ask him. What a crackhead she'd sound like: "*Yeah, Elis, why is it whenever you touch me, I have visions of my mom?*" Before, she could watch from a distance and occasionally wonder if he liked being alone. Now, she didn't want anything to do with Elis. She hoped he stayed as far from her as possible.

At a sudden pressure that built up in her head, Raea blinked and rubbed her temples. She never had headaches. Why now? Not only did Elis cause problems when he touched her, but now he could curse her from a distance?

Under the drone of lunchroom conversations, numerous voices whispered in discord too low to understand. "What?"

"Huh?" Josh frowned.

"Not you."

"What's wrong?" Jess's hand rubbed her shoulder. Ordinarily, the concern of her friend would have helped, but not this time.

Not with this. The strange voices split her head with pain while no one else reacted. Didn't the others hear?

They watched her with concerned looks. "I'm fine. Just a headache." And strange voices, which, apparently, only she heard. Not exactly something she wanted the world to know.

The whispers grew louder but the words jumbled together. *Who are you and what do you want? Speak up. I can't understand.* Her head hurt. The fluorescent lights made it worse, along with the noise in the lunchroom. She had to lie down.

After shoving her unfinished tray of food aside, Raea laid her head on her arms. Good enough for now. She probably couldn't even walk home to reach her bed.

"Raea, are you all right?" Linds asked.

"No—My. Head. *Hurts.*"

"This is sudden. You look terrible."

Thanks, Jess. Raea groaned. The pain worsened every second, and the voices didn't help. She still couldn't make them out through the dissonance.

The tap of steps stopped behind her. A gentle rubbing on her neck massaged the aching away. "Mmm...Keep that up." She put her forehead to the table, exposing her neck to the pleasant massage parting her hair into a curtain on each side of her

face. Tingles of pleasant relaxation flowed down her neck.

"Ah...Of course," Josh said.

With each second, the voices and headache faded. She could have let him massage her neck all day like that. What a relief. Too bad he stopped, just when she really enjoyed it too.

"Miss Dahlrich?"

Raea lifted her head. No pain. Man, that felt better. Josh sat down fast again. She didn't even hear him slide his chair.

Or was it him? No. Mrs. MacRabb did not just massage her neck.

"Are you all right?" the old teacher asked. With her wide thighs and cheeks that sagged like melted wax, there was no mistaking the old English teacher, the last person Raea wanted to see. *No. Please, not her.* She'd never live down the teasing to the end of the year. "I'm fine. Thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yes." *Just leave me alone and let me crawl under a rock to die.* She dropped her head back to the table.

"You let someone know if you're not well."

"I will. Thanks."

Jess took her place again and Mrs. MacRabb walked away.

"He must have the magic touch," Linds said.

He? Then, not the old English teacher? But... "Who? Josh?"

"Um...No."

Raea lifted her head. Who else had relieved her headache?

Josh's eyebrows lifted and his eyes slipped away. "Not me. Him."

Raea turned and saw Elis leaving the lunchroom. Impossible. Why did he do it? How had he done it? Her headache and the voices disappeared. She couldn't believe it, especially when it contradicted what happened yesterday. "You can't be serious."

Josh's nod said he was serious.

"Why didn't you say something?" Josh of all people. He knew how she felt about what happened yesterday.

"He asked us to keep quiet." He put a finger to his lips.

"And you let him, after what we talked about? Josh, how could you?"

He shrugged. "It looked like he knew what he was doing. You needed something."

And what was Linds doing while this was going on? She could have said something.

"Don't look at me. I agree with both of you. He is kinda creepy, but you have to admit that whatever he did, it made you feel better." She shrugged.

"I know, but...you know?" Linds knew what she meant.

"Yeah. But it's done."

"I think I'd rather have the headache," Raea mumbled. In spite of her words, she felt some gratitude. Linds and Josh were both right. Maybe Elis was just trying to make up for bumping her yesterday morning. If that was the case, she accepted it. But the payback had been done. He didn't need to try any more. "I'll be sure to thank him."

"You looked like you enjoyed it." Linds grinned and crossed her arms over the UND logo on her sweatshirt.

Warmth rose from under Raea's collar. That was the last thing she needed anyone thinking. Sure, she had enjoyed it, but no one needed to know. Had it been that obvious? But she only liked it because it took away the headache. That was it. Nothing more.

But no one else would see it that way. This was worse than if a teacher had touched her. *Hurry up, graduation.*

"Hey." Jess poked her in the ribs.

"Ow." Raea rubbed her side. Jess didn't have to nudge her that hard. "What?"

"Look what just entered the cafeteria."

Raea turned to where Jess pointed, and her heart stopped. Pallin. Hottest thing since...well...no one else. Who cared about that gray turtleneck and gray pants formal preppy look? He looked right at her—*her*—and smiled. The heat rose to her cheeks and she turned away. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

"Did you see the look he gave you?"

Could Jess whisper any louder? Honestly. What was the point of whispering?

"Yes." She was going to be sick from anxiety. Why did she have to look?

Linds chuckled. "What's wrong?"

"I...Why me? I can't talk to him."

"We're here," Josh said. "You're not alone. Right, ladies?"

Linds gulped down a mouthful of food. "Right."

"Yeah," Jess said. That's *all* she could say? Jess, the talker?

"Just take a deep breath...That's it. Now another."

Easy for Josh to say. He wasn't the one under the microscope. Still, the breathing calmed her, if only a little.

"What's he doing?" She couldn't look up. What if he looked at her again? Her stomach twisted into knots.

"Ah..." Linds stared past her, her spoon frozen before her gaping mouth.

"Hello."

Raea jumped as if shocked, unable to look up.

"I may join you?"

That accent and funny English made her giddy while triggering a nagging sense of familiarity. Where had she heard it before? She'd heard it recently too, but in her flustered brain, couldn't pin it down.

"It's Pallin, right?" Josh asked.

A tray scraped on the tabletop. *Oh, no. Not here.* Her appetite vanished.

"Yes. I am not remembering names."

"I'm Josh. These lovely ladies are Lindsey, Jessica, and Raea. To what do we owe this honor?"

"I have chance to speak to Raea."

He *was* interested in her. She couldn't avoid it any longer. Raea took a deep breath and turned to face him. She'd be damned if she could speak, though. Her mouth went dry when he smiled, and her thoughts jumbled.

"You are pretty girl," he said.

Did he just say she was pretty? *Ohmygod.* "Thanks." *Good one, idiot. That's all you can say?*

"You are welcome."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"How do you like it here, so far?" Linds asked.

Thank you, Linds. Sooner or later, Raea would have to overcome the disconnect between her brain and her mouth and speak for herself.

"It is nice place, much peace but cold."

"McClarron is a happy little community." Josh's sarcasm passed for perkiness. She was going to hurl if he did it again.

"Yes. Many good people I meet. I would like to know more about you." Pallin's amber eyes studied Raea all the while he spoke.

The temperature in the lunchroom rose to unbearably warm, and she couldn't even look him in the eyes. The intensity of his gaze when she did sent her collapsing into herself. He wasn't like anyone she knew. Rather, he possessed the confidence of someone much older and she saw it in those eyes.

"You speak?" Pallin asked.

"Um...Yeah." Although her mouth seemed to quit working the last few minutes.

"Then we can having time together?"

Okay. No one had ever asked her out before, but Pallin, who could have had any girl in school, asked her? Hell must have frozen over, which was quite likely after that winter, but she wouldn't argue. "Yeah. I'd like that."

* * *

For the rest of the night, Raea could think of nothing but Pallin. He had been in two of her afternoon classes and they talked between. After school, she gave him her number to call her at home. He said he stayed at the local hotel, so he had a phone available.

She paced in her room, unable to focus on her homework. After ten and he hadn't called yet. Didn't he know how to use a phone? Had something happened?

No. She couldn't think that. He might be foreign, but he didn't seem stupid. In fact, he sounded pretty sharp for someone having difficulty speaking English. He was going to school while the others—parents, she guessed—had business in McClarron. He traveled with them, experiencing the military life, which explained his behavior. That she understood. Others

had passed in and out of their school. But what would the military want in a small town of four thousand?

She couldn't wait to see him in school tomorrow.

Her anxiety turned to fidgeting. Enough sitting in her room. She had to do something, *anything*. Even watching the news with Debbie would be better than laying in bed waiting and wondering.

Raea wandered down to the open main floor, where the furniture divided the living room from the dining room and foyer.

"You better get to bed." Debbie looked up from the couch, where she sat alone. Mike must have worked on the computer in another room.

"I can't sleep." Thoughts of Pallin circled through her head. She wanted to see him again. School wasn't good enough—too many people listening or watching. She needed a chance to go on a date, a *real* date. Why hadn't he called?

"Is something wrong?"

"No, just excited." Raea fell onto the chair to watch the news. Some television might help her get her mind off her anxieties.

The local anchor wore a somber expression on her pretty face. "Ryan Lake found his parents dead in their McClarron home when he arrived to visit for the weekend. Local authorities have reported no bullets found in their initial investigation, although the couple had both clearly been shot in their chests. No suspects have yet been considered, but police are continuing to investigate."

"That's depressing." Why couldn't the news report something upbeat? Then again, there wasn't much else to talk about in a small town, even if the station was out of Bismarck. Murder rarely happened there, so it was big news. She didn't want to hear about it though, especially when she remembered Ryan before he graduated and how fair he treated everyone.

"I can't believe it. That's Linda and Dean. I work with her older sister, Sheri. Poor Ryan. I'll bet he's having a hard time."

Debbie knew them? Then again, who didn't Debbie know? "Yeah." Raea could relate to losing one's parents. She sympathized with the guy.

"I can't believe this. They're good people. Who would want to murder them? I thought the cold was supposed to keep the riffraff out," Debbie said.

"Yeah. You'd think." Why were her parents in the storm thirteen years ago? That's what Raea wanted to know, but the only answer she would ever have was a tornado. No "riffraff" as Debbie put it, just bad luck and weather.

"I know it's not easy. I miss Scott too."

Raea missed them every day, but now wasn't the time to think about it. That made her think of the visions and the dreams. Raea didn't want to fall into that grief. Not now. Now, she wanted a distraction. She wanted to think about Pallin.

Raea jumped from the chair and curled up next to Debbie on the couch. The warmth felt good in the chilly room, but Debbie's arm around her felt better. "I'm glad I have you."

"I'm glad to have you too. What's with the sudden buttering up?"

"I never ever want you to die."

Debbie laughed. "I hope not."

"I love you, Debbie." Raea planted a big kiss on her aunt's cheek and laid her head on her shoulder. See what she thought of that.

"You're in a good mood suddenly."

"Yup." She didn't want to think of her parents, not with Pallin to look forward to seeing.

"Must be feeling better."

"Mm. Hmm."

"Something happen today?" The suspicious voice.

Uh, oh. Raea had gone too far. But part of her wanted to tell Debbie. The excitement ate through her desire to keep it secret. She couldn't stop herself. "We have this new guy at school. He's totally hot and is into me. *Me*. For once in my life, a guy likes me." Her, the "freak" of McClarron with the strange hands. Most of her classmates had grown up, but the underclassmen always whispered.

"Well...That explains this giddiness. No wonder you can't sit still."

"Nope." Raea hugged her aunt's arm and snuggled close. Debbie had to be on her side. She just had to. Debbie usually played devil's advocate and tried to scare her from decisions that thrilled her. This time had to be different.

"New kid at school, huh? So..."

"So..." Raea's tongue loosened. She went into all the details about Pallin, and when she finished, Debbie focused on the TV.

Not good. That somber mood meant devil's advocate. "Just don't lose your head over this guy. He may move on to someone else when he leaves."

That was the last thing Raea wanted to hear. Her enthusiasm shriveled like a deflated balloon.

"Or he could be planning to use you."

Oh, no. Here it came—the lecture. Why did Debbie always have to see the negative? Why couldn't she be happy about Raea's life, just once?

"Just be careful."

That was it? *Yes!* "I will. But if Pallin calls, please don't let Dave talk to him?"

Debbie smiled. "I'll be sure to hand the phone to him immediately."

"Debbie."

Of course, her aunt wouldn't. The wink she gave and the kiss on Raea's forehead confirmed that she was teasing.

"He'll never know."

"Thanks, Debbie." Raea stayed up until she dozed off next to her aunt, who nudged her and told her to go to bed.

Raea yawned and said, "Good night." The stairs must have grown, or the house had. Her bedroom had moved too far away, along with the soft bed inside it.

She finally arrived and crashed not long after her head hit the pillow. One last thought passed through her mind—*was* Pallin too good to be true?

Angel Wings

Black-clad figures approached from a distance. They cast a dark shadow that sent others fleeing.

Padina stood on a balcony looking out over a bustling city brushed by the sun, her open-front skirt flapping around her light blue leggings. Entire structures floated at different levels, rounded towers dozens of floors high unattached to anything else. Hundreds of angels flew through the skies.

But the black-clad group stood out in their threat.

["Jerantis!"] The scene blurred and finally stopped, looking into a simple apartment.

The man came running from inside and gazed beyond the scene. ["Larantan forces should have stopped them, unless..."] He gasped. ["Go!"]

They dropped from the balcony and spread their wings. A crash sounded from behind.

Black-clad figures rushed from the apartment balcony they vacated moments ago.

["Fly! Don't look back."]

They soared over the city and beyond the outer towers. Ocean stretched below. An island floated serenely in the distance among the clouds.

["Where are we going?"] Padina shouted.

["The safest place we can. Open a portal."]

The dreaded black clad figures closed in fast.

Padina spread her brown and white speckled wings and called forth a power that set the marks on her hands aglow. In the sky above, lightning crackled and snapped around a growing ball of light.

She slowed her flight, her eyes fixed on the ball, which darkened into a black nothingness not far from her and exploded outward into a spiraling black hole. Her hands glowed yet.

["Hurry!"] Jerantis shouted.

Padina focused on the void until it grew in diameter to three times her height. There it ceased its growth.

["It's done. The portal is ready. Let's go."]

["You go. I'll be right behind."]

She hesitated and flew close to him. The black formation split apart. Some held back while the others moved around them.

["Go. Now,"] he said.

["I won't leave you!"]

He flew close and kissed her. ["Padina. You are the one they seek. You must protect the Starfire. It's your duty as a Crystal Keeper."] He glanced around them at the closing circle of soldiers. ["Go on. I'll make sure the portal is closing before I go through, so they can't follow. Hurry."] He pushed her away.

She flew to the portal but hesitated at the brink and turned.

Shots flashed from two of the flyers.

["Jerantis!"] For a moment, she fell with the stiffening of her wings.

After recovering from the plummeting of the man, she turned and fled into the darkness.

The dream again. Raea tried to take control as Josh had suggested, but the voices admonished her, or seemed to. They forced her to watch. She could change nothing. When her mother disappeared into the void, or portal, she gasped.

The voices roared in her head like a crowd at a concert. *I can't understand you. Stop shouting at the same time!*

In answer, a burning pain shot through her, ripping out her back. Raea screamed in agony. Tears of pain stung her eyes. *What are you doing to me? What do you want?*

The voices lowered, whispering among themselves as the pain subsided.

Raea blinked at the dark of night and wiped her eyes. Wetness cooled her fingertips. Tears. Then it hadn't been a dream. She had really been crying.

What about the pain? She shifted but something blocked her from rolling over. She was stuck, but not completely. A dark shape hovered over her, blocking out the faint light from her window.

In the dimness, she made out the outline of a large wing. Where'd that come from?

Suspicions drove through her mind. It couldn't be real. "It was only a dream. It had to be." Wasn't it?

To be sure, she reached around her side. Fingertips brushed soft feathers from a bulk of muscles on her back. The wings came out of *her*. This was impossible!

What would Debbie—

Debbie couldn't see this. No one could.

Raea jumped up, intending to lock her bedroom door, and staggered back. The wings added some weight to her back, though she'd manage. On a second try, she reached the door and pressed the button. The lock clicked. There. Now, she could keep everyone from seeing what a freak she really was while she tried to make sense of this.

But what could she do? She couldn't go to school like this.

She'd have to stay home sick and wait for everyone to leave before she could go out. Then what? She couldn't stay in her bedroom the rest of her life. What kind of existence was that?

It wasn't. She had to figure out a way to undo this.

She had no idea. Nothing.

Her life was over.

But there had to be a way. She just had to figure something out. Raea sat down on her bed. If she went out in public, she'd be a spectacle. She didn't want that. Everyone would make fun of her. Oh, Josh would love it, but he'd be the only one.

What about Pallin? Why now? She was so close to the possibility of a real boyfriend. After all this time being teased as a freak, now she really was one.

She buried her face in her hands. The wings shifted behind her. She hated this. *Damn voices. Whoever you are, I hope you're happy now for making my life miserable.*

She laid down and pulled the comforter over the wings and her head. Maybe she could go back to sleep and they would disappear. How had these wings sprouted from her back in the middle of a dream in the first place?

The answer hid within her, with those voices. She wished they would speak clearly. Who were they? What were they?

What the hell—or heaven—was happening to her?

Maybe Chad was right—she really was a freak. No. She couldn't think like that. There was a reasonable explanation; she just had to find it.

Reason? What reason was there for growing wings?

If she cleared her head, maybe the voices would come back. Calm. She needed that. *Deep breaths...Focus.* Each breath pulled her further away from the anxiety. The quiet invading her mind coaxed her to the peace of sleep.

A knock jerked her awake.

"Raea! Time to get up."

"Huh?" What time was it? A check of her clock told her—time to get up for school.

Debbie tried the door handle but it only jiggled. "Why's your door locked?"

Door locked? Oh, yeah. She'd locked it. Then, that meant...

Raea reached around her back, and her fingers brushed the soft feathers. Oh, no. It hadn't been a dream.

"Are you all right?"

No! I have wings. Yeah, right. As if she could say that, but she had to say something to satisfy Debbie or her aunt would never leave. "I...I don't feel good. Don't come in."

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Um...I'm not myself this morning. I can't go to school." She certainly didn't lie about not being herself. But what was she?

"Can you unlock the door?"

"That's not a good idea." What would Debbie think if she saw her like this? What would anyone think, besides that she belonged in some circus side show?

"What's wrong? It can't be that bad."

"Oh, yes, it can!" If Debbie only knew. But she never would.

After a pause, Debbie spoke in a tone of defeat. "All right. I hope you feel better soon."

"Me too." Good. Debbie gave up. Now what could she do? Raea couldn't hide in her room forever. Sooner or later Debbie—or worse, Mike—would find a way to unlock that door.

Raea's stomach rumbled, and she groaned. She needed something to eat. She couldn't stay there all day, but at least after everyone left, she could sneak out to the kitchen.

The morning passed slower than ever. For once, she didn't care when Dave called out that she could have the shower and all the cold water.

The voices and clatter of flatware on plates from everyone eating echoed up from the main floor. Her stomach grumbled in protest. *Easy. Soon they'll be gone. Then the kitchen is ours, stomach.*

When the phone rang, her heart leapt from her chest. What if Pallin called? Raea groaned. The hottest guy to ever show an interest in her would get away. The *only* guy to express any interest in being with her. Someone somewhere was having a good laugh at her expense. Why did this have to happen now?

What did the wings look like, though? Could she actually fly? Sure, and she hated heights. What good were wings? Still, she might as well look.

Raea crawled out of bed and hesitated. Curiosity had a cruel way of revealing unpleasant surprises. Maybe she should stay away from the mirror.

Could she move her wings?

They weren't as heavy as she thought. And moving them only took a thought. Like wiggling her fingers or walking. But the wings didn't do exactly what she wanted.

Could she stretch? How far would they go?

She tried, but her room blocked her from what she thought would be a full stretch. Her bedroom barely measured fifteen feet long. The wings had to be huge to support her and still bend with each wingtip out.

I wonder... Raea sat at the wall near the head of her bed and concentrated on making one brown wing flatten out in the morning light. Both stretched, one to the side and the other back, knocking into her dresser and bumping it into the wall behind her.

Stupid wings!

She took a deep breath and tried again. The one wing easily pressed into the glass of the window and the feather tips could have gone farther. How big were they?

A knock on the door startled her. She turned, forgetting about the inconvenience behind her. Her corkboard crashed to the ground.

"Raea, are you all right?"

"I'm...Yeah. Just knocked my board down. That's all."

Stupid, *stupid* wings. If she couldn't control them, how would she ever hide them?

"The boys and Mike left. It's just me here. Are you sure I can't come in?"

"No!" She sounded panicky. That wouldn't help matters.

"I can stay home and help you."

"No. Don't worry about me. I just need a day to rest." And figure out how to get rid of or hide those wings. Running away was always an option. But where would she go?

She was stuck.

"Really. There's nothing I haven't dealt with."

"I can take care of myself. Thanks anyway."

"All right." Debbie's footsteps faded from the hallway outside her door. Finally!

Soon, the house would be hers. Raea could sneak out, clean up, and grab something to eat. She listened for the click of the door and the hum of the garage that would mean Debbie left.

While she waited, she decided to finally see for herself what she had become. Raea swallowed her hesitation and approached the full-length mirror in the corner of her room. After a moment, she took a deep breath and stepped in front of it.

No doubt about it—she had wings. Dark brown feathered wings that matched her hair and eyes. She twisted to see where they came out and noted the tears through her nightgown in back. What had she become? She looked like...like her mother in her dreams.

Raea gasped.

Her dreams...and the voices. What had she been seeing? Her mother wasn't human. That was obvious now. She was

something else. But what was her mother? What was *she*?

A light knock on her door made her jump. Raea put a hand over her racing heart.

"Raea, open up, please."

Debbie wasn't going to give up. Raea should have expected that of her aunt.

Okay...Deep breath... Raea grabbed her flower-print comforter and threw it over her back to hide the wings. Sooner or later she had to face her aunt. *Might as well get it over with.* If she could trust anyone, it would be Debbie.

The door handle might have been set to bite her for all the apprehension restraining her from opening it. She unlocked it though and opened it only a crack.

Debbie couldn't have worn deeper furrows in her forehead. They smoothed out a moment later. "Thank God you're all right. Can I come in?"

"It's not a good idea."

"Please, Raea. I heard you scream early this morning. I'm worried."

"You did? I mean, I did?"

"Yes. You sounded hurt."

Debbie had good ears. But had Raea really screamed out loud?

"Are you okay?"

"Not really." Raea looked out beyond her aunt. Debbie was alone.

She didn't have much of a choice now and needed to trust someone. Better Debbie, she supposed, than anyone else.

Raea stepped away from the door and threw the comforter off. "Not if this is all right."

Debbie didn't look surprised or worried in the least. Okay. That was odd.

"This happened last night?" Debbie motioned for her to turn. "Was this why you screamed?"

Raea stepped around on the spot. "Yes. It hurt. And I can't go out like this." Why didn't Debbie act more surprised?

"No, you can't." Debbie sighed. "We'll have to do something about it."

"What can we do? I can't hide them. I can't even *control* these wings. What am I supposed to do? My life is ruined."

The smile on Debbie's face said otherwise. Oh, please, let her aunt have a plan.

"I know someone who can help."

Someone else? "What? No. No, no, no. No one can know about this. I'll be picked apart." She could just imagine the doctors and scientists. If Chad wasn't bad enough, being examined would really make her feel like a freak, if she survived. She wouldn't have any part of that. No one else could know.

"Relax, Raea."

Relax? How the hell was she supposed to relax about this?

Debbie's hands on Raea's face stopped her from panicking, her calm, motherly touch the one Raea wished had come from her real mother. "Your mother hid your wings when you were three."

What? She had *not* just heard that. Anger flew through Raea and she backed away from Debbie. "You *knew* about this? And you didn't tell me?"

"Your mother wanted you to live a normal *human* life. I promised to obey her wishes."

"I don't believe this. You lied to me?" Tears moistened her eyes. Emotions flared strong inside. "You—you *lied* to me? How could you?"

"Please, Raea. I didn't mean to hurt you. Your mother wasn't from this world. She came here to protect you."

"You should have told me...before...*this*." She threw up her hands, trembling in anger.

"Believe me, I wanted to, but Padina made me promise that if something happened to her—"

"Shut up!" No excuses. Nothing could make up for what had happened to her. "Leave me alone! GET OUT!" The wings lifted behind her and bumped the light globe on the ceiling.

As soon as Debbie backed out, Raea slammed the door. How could her aunt have lied to her? Debbie knew all along that she was supposed to have wings? Was she an angel or something else? She didn't feel unusual, though she wouldn't know what to expect. Why didn't Debbie rip out her heart and stomp on it while she was at it? Someone she loved had purposely lied to her about who she was, or rather, *what* she was. She wasn't even normal. Not human.

She didn't try to stop the tears but buried them in her pillow. Debbie's words cut through her heart. Why would they do this to her? And who, besides her mother, could possibly help her now?

Why did she have to be different?

["I'm sorry, Raea. No more flying. Someday, maybe we can return home and you can fly all over, but now we must be human."]
Padina gripped the girl's hands in hers, the marks on both their hands glowing with a faint light.

The topless child cried as her brown wings shrank to nothing. Her shrieks rang through the room. Tears streaked down Padina's cheeks also.

When the wings disappeared, Padina held the girl close and wept with her. Soon the child quieted and wiggled to run free, but Padina held her, until Scott entered the room and embraced her and the child raced off.

"It had to be done," he said.

"I know. I can't hide her forever. What kind of life would that be?"

"None at all."

Raea wiped away her tears with the backs of her hands. The marks. Those strange marks were the key. How did her mother make them glow? If she could tap into whatever power her mother had used, maybe she could return to normal.

She had no idea how.

"Raea." Debbie poked her head in the door. "There's someone here to help you."

"I don't need help." Least of all from Debbie or anyone Debbie knew. Debbie had known all along and didn't tell her or prepare her in any way. She, Raea, would figure this out by herself, somehow. It might take a while, but one way or another, she'd solve the problem and reclaim her life.

Debbie slipped out and closed the door. "Maybe you should come back later. She's upset, and I can't say I blame her." The door didn't muffle her voice much—she stood just outside.

"This is the best time. Now that she knows of this, she should know everything. I've waited long enough to teach her." By the pitch of that other voice, it was a man. Who else could possibly know?

"It was her mother's wishes."

"I understand, but now the Starfire forced it on her. The sooner she learns to control its power, the better she'll be at protecting herself if the Shirukan come." Determination hardened his voice.

"I did what Padina asked."

"It doesn't matter. I was sent to teach Padina's child to master the Starfire's power. Now that she knows the truth, nothing else matters."

After a moment, Debbie's voice lowered. "You're right. But she's not going to listen."

"I've gotten used to being ignored."

"All right. Good luck."

Debbie opened the door and stepped aside.

No way! No. Effing. Way. Raea didn't believe it. A moment later, anger seethed inside her. "You! You made this happen."

Elis shook his head.

How dare he deny it! "When you rubbed my neck yesterday, you must have done something."

"I only told the Starfire not to bother you." He said that way too calmly.

"How do I know you didn't tell it—this Starfire—to do this to me?"

"Please, Raea, just listen to what he has to say."

Raea ignored her aunt's pleading and crossed her arms.

"That's why I'm here," Elis said. "I'm surprised by this too. It takes a lot of effort to change form. The Starfire must have had a reason for forcing it."

"How would you know?" He sure acted all confident of himself suddenly. He'd never been that way any other time.

He pulled the gloves off.

What the hell! His hands bore the same marks as hers, but smaller. Okay, now everything was too weird. *Wake up, Raea. This is all just a dream, a very, very weird dream.*

"I know, because I also bear the Starburst marks. We're called Keepers, a symbiosis of Inari and Starfire to keep it safe. Your mother's shard chose you to bear it, just as my father was chosen."

Her mother's shard, as in a crystal shard? Her crystal? Raea lifted the pendant. All this time she wondered why her mother had said not to remove it for anything. Had this caused her wings to grow out? It couldn't have. It was just a crystal. Wasn't it?

"When I heard you tell Josh about your dreams, I knew they were trying to communicate."

She grimaced in shame; he had overheard. She had been rude to him, especially when he said nothing about it. At the time, though, she didn't know any better. "They? This crystal?" He was joking. Right? Crystals didn't communicate.

"The crystal is an intelligent collective of entities. They came to explore our universe, but can only survive in this form, this crystal we call the Starfire. They observe and store those observations. From what I've been told, they can project them into the bearer's mind, which is what I suspect your dreams are."

"No, this can't be real. This is all some big joke on me." Debbie could jump in any time to agree...Anytime. Much to Raea's disappointment, her aunt shook her head.

"It's no joke," Elis said. "You are Inari. Our kind come from another world, another galaxy."

"Right. Maybe you are, but I was born *here*. This world—Earth—is my home." She couldn't believe it; refused to believe it. No way was she an alien or angel or whatever excuse they made, despite the proof on her back.

["Your parents came from Inar'Ahben. You are the daughter of Cattalon Jerantis and Shartrael Padina. Both were Keepers, but Padina was also one of four Crystal Keepers. They fled when the Shirukan invaded their city, but Jerantis died protecting Padina's escape to Earth."] He spoke in her mother's language, making it hard to deny his story.

Her dreams flashed back in vivid detail, tearing through her emotions with what she knew to be the truth. Her dreams had been the last images of...her real father? "What?"

["She taught you to speak Inari?"]

["Yes."]

["Then you understand?"]

Too well. She wiped the moisture from her eyes, wishing he was wrong, that the dreams were all wrong. All this because of a stupid little pendant.

["I'm sorry, Raea."]

["What would you know?"]

His cheek twitched and his eyes dropped for a moment, his whole mood transforming into the somber darkness he usually wore at school. ["They killed my family, too. The Shirukan grabbed my sister and her mate and my parents and tortured and killed them all. My father was a Crystal Keeper, like your mother. If I hadn't been at Starfire Tower in training..."] He left the statement unfinished as a cloud settled over his mood.

What? He would have died too? So what? She hated him for having anything to do with this, but she didn't. She also regretted judging him as her classmates had now that she knew the reason for it. If all this was real, then he had lost more than she had.

["But I was sent here to find you and train you."] A smile alighted on his face, erasing the grief that had fallen over him. For a change, he actually looked pleasant. Despite the smile, sorrow lingered yet in his eyes behind the wild black locks. ["I waited only to satisfy your mother's wishes, but the entities want you to learn what you really are. We are Inari, but until you master the Starfire's power, I can help you to be *human*, to continue your hiding."]

["How?"] If she could be human again... That's all she wanted.

"Give me your hands."

He planned to touch her again. She hesitated. The last couple of times had brought on visions and the voices. What would happen this time?

"Trust me."

Trust him? She barely knew him. Still, his moment of openness washed away some of her hesitations. "What will you do?"

"Shrink your wings until you're ready to fly."

She recalled the vision right before he showed up. As a child, she had cried when her mother shrank her wings. "It'll hurt, won't it."

"Yes, it does."

Raea looked at Debbie, who shrugged. What did she know?

"Will this happen again? Can these wings come out any time?" Raea put her hands out, palms up. If she wanted to return to her life, she had no other choice. But would the Starfire choose a more inconvenient time to make her wings grow, like when she was in public?

"It shouldn't. They usually have a purpose for what they do. I suspect in this case, they wanted you to know what you are. You've hidden too long on this world, believing you're human. I can teach you what it means to be Inari...if you'll let me." He

clasped each of her hands in his. "Ready?"

"No." She would never be ready for the pain, but she wanted to be normal again. "But get it over with."

Elis closed his eyes and the marks on their hands glowed. Warmth flooded through Raea. The voices organized into one coherent thought, but the searing pain across her back stole her attention from whatever that thought was. *It hurts. It hurts. It hurts...* She breathed quickly, the mantra running through her head.

Soon, it ended, and Elis let go. She immediately reached around. Only two rips in the back of her gown remained. Her back was flat again. He did it. She could go out in public. She could see her friends. She could go to Linds' birthday.

And she could see Pallin. Was he worried that she wasn't in school?

Sweat beaded on Elis's forehead. A few of the wild, black strands stuck to his face. He looked like he had run a marathon and breathed hard too.

"Was that difficult?" she asked.

"I've only done it once before...in training. It's easier—*much* easier—changing myself."

Himself? Elis with wings. Something stuck in her head. It couldn't be. But she had to know. "Can you show me?"

"Not now." He swiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "We'll have plenty of time later, when you learn to fly."

"Fly?" She trembled at the thought, but with an excitement she hadn't expected. She had plenty of dreams of flying.

Still, the idea of learning from Elis made her uncomfortable. Ever since he arrived, he had never opened up and quietly went about his way, the reason Chad started calling him Creeper. The name stuck. Now that she understood why, it didn't feel right to think of him that way. However, while she was grateful for his help, she found it difficult to accept the idea of learning from him. She wasn't that comfortable with him.

"You need to learn. It's who you are."

Raea sighed, seeing no other choice. "All right. Fine. When I have time."

"Speaking of time."

She had forgotten about Debbie.

"Shouldn't you two be getting to school?"

Great. Raea could see the questions now. Turning up with Elis would look suspicious. What would Pallin think?

"You'll be okay?" Elis asked.

She nodded. "Just go. I still have to get cleaned up and eat. So what if I miss a couple of classes." And the sooner he left her, the better. Besides, at least if Elis showed up separately from her, it wouldn't look like they came together. She could salvage the day yet.

"Be careful on the ice." Elis smiled, his eyes sparkling—a purple that made her look twice—and he walked out.

Her cheeks warmed. No. She didn't just blush. Just because he helped her this time was no reason for her to feel embarrassed. So, she had taken a misstep yesterday and he caught her. So what?

Debbie's eyebrows lifted but she said nothing and closed the door behind them.

Life would never be normal again.

Double Date

"So, what happened this morning? Someone said you were sick?" Linds took a bite of her hamburger.

Sick? Must have been Dave who said it. What else did her bratty cousin say about her?

"Actually, I had back problems." Nothing like hiding the truth within a truth. Raea still couldn't believe she had sprouted wings, or that she wasn't human. Or that Elis was the same. Elis of all people. Her friends would never believe it. She hardly believed it. But she didn't intend to tell anyone.

"So, not sick then." Jess grinned and brushed aside wavy layers of brown-blond hair from her face. Raea knew what she thought. "Then you're good for a date. Speak of the devil."

She turned to follow Jess's gaze, and her heart stopped. Pallin smiled from the lunch line. Good thing she was already sitting. Her knees would have given out.

"So, has he asked you out yet?" Linds said.

"What?" Her friend's question caught up to her. "Oh. No, not yet."

"You do plan to stay in public areas, I hope?" Josh, the religious conservative of their group, always tried to keep the rest of them respectable, but sometimes he bordered on annoying.

"Of course. I'm not stupid." Her only problem now was getting away from Elis to see Pallin.

Elis didn't pay any attention to her at the moment, or at least seemed not to. He had overheard her conversation with Josh about her dreams, but that was on a quiet street. The noise in the lunchroom should keep him from hearing. He had no right to tell her what to do, any more than the Starfire, but the entities gave her no choice. If it was a part of her, a true symbiosis, she couldn't escape it.

She didn't want to think about it. She needed a distraction. "Josh, did you ever get a call back from that show?"

Jackpot. His eyes lit up like he'd won the lottery. "That's right. You weren't here this morning. They're sending someone up this weekend to check out filming locations and get things set up."

"What about my birthday tomorrow?" Linds gave Josh a dirty look.

"Oh...ah. I'm still planning to be there."

"You better. After everything I've suffered hearing about your 'Dark Angel', you owe me this." Linds's serious tone broke down into a snicker when Josh grabbed the finger she pointed at him.

Dark Angel. Her wings. Elis's wings. Raea glanced aside as the thoughts wiggled through her brain. Could it be? Now, she had to see his wings. She had to know.

"I can be sitting here?"

Hub? Raea blinked at the accented voice. Pallin. That was fast. Too bad Linds sat on one side of her and Jess on the other. "Um...Yeah."

He took a seat on the opposite side of the round table, in one of the two empty chairs. "I have not chance to talk today. Too much...work. I am wanting more time with you."

Here it comes. He was going to ask her out. She knew it. "I'd like that too." She could still live like a human, as she always had, like her mother intended.

"We may be together after school?"

Her insides flipped, kicking her heart into a race. "Dinner?" Oh, man. That smile made her stomach flutter.

"Yes. That would be good."

* * *

The afternoon dragged on with the sun bright and warm outside. Snow melted in rivers down the streets. March weather. Raea couldn't wait to get out and enjoy it. She couldn't wait to get out with Pallin, but she wanted to know about Elis.

On the walk home, Josh's excitement blurred his words, but Raea only half-listened with a few "Uh, huhs" and "Goods" thrown in to sound like she listened. He knew she couldn't think of anything right now amidst the excitement of meeting Pallin in a couple hours. She gave him credit for trying though.

At the corner where she split with Josh, Raea slowed. "Let me know when you hear anything *new*. Emphasis on the 'new'." He always talked a person's ears off about his obsession with Dark Angel. If he only knew how close to the truth he was, if she was right.

"I get it. Later."

Raea didn't have to work to slow her pace after Josh left. The pools and rivers of melting snow did that for her. Elis didn't seem hindered in the least, or he didn't care about the water.

She had almost forgotten about that morning. Now, she had to know. He walked a stride behind.

"Is it you?"

His steps fell quiet. Did he realize she spoke to him? Would he understand what she meant?

Raea stopped and turned.

"What?" He frowned.

"The one causing such a fuss?" Did she have to say it? She didn't want to, not in the open. Others might overhear.

"I don't know." He walked again and gave her only a passing glance. "We'll talk about that later."

Later? As in training her later?

"We don't make ourselves known here. Our purpose is to serve, not to gather fame or fortune, or draw attention to the power we wield. It's too dangerous."

"So, play the superhero thing and live a double life?"

His smile infected her. After all this time seeing him somber and moody, his smile seemed out of place. She looked again to be sure it was real.

["Not intentionally."]

"Why do you have to use the other language?"

["So you learn."]

Right. But she had always known, so it wasn't really learning. "You mean refresh?"

["Better yet."]

["I never forgot."]

["No. Probably not. Like the crystal shard you wear, the Starfire inside you records everything. I'm sure you can recall, with very little effort, any detail of your life."]

"Just those I want to remember." And most of what she didn't, despite her attempts to forget.

"I understand."

The statement sobered her. He probably did understand. Like her, he had lost his family because of that crystal. And the Starfire was a part of him. What good was it if it only brought trouble? Why should she protect it?

["Meet me at sunset."]

["Why?"]

["Training."]

"Um...I'm kinda busy tonight."

The muscles in his jaw tightened. What bit him?

Fine. She supposed she could give him some time. She did *not* want the Starfire making those wings appear, especially while she was with Pallin.

["All right."] At least with this "training", she should figure out how to control the Starfire so it wouldn't interfere with her life. It gave her no other choice.

He left her for Mrs. Johnson's yellow-sided house, while she hurried into her aunt's and uncle's house. *Now for Pallin.* She let out a little squeal.

The second she stepped through the door, Buddy slid into her and barked. "All right. Fine. Go do your thing."

At the same instant the dog shoved past her, a thought hit in regards to the slop outside. Too late. Buddy splashed in the slush and mud. Stupid dog. Now she'd have to bring him into the garage to dry off. He could stay there until Mike came home. It was his dog. Why should she have to clean up the mess for letting him out? She had to get ready for tonight.

After rounding up the muddy chocolate lab, Raea retreated to her bedroom.

Now, if Debbie would hurry home. Raea needed the car, or at least a ride.

* * *

When they neared the downtown area in the slanted light of the sinking sun, Debbie broke the silence of their ride. "Remember to stay here until I come back."

"Yes. I know. Stay to public places." Better that she say it than Debbie. Her aunt was nice, but the lectures Raea could live without. Josh had been bad enough.

They arrived at George's Diner, the local place she and her friends had told Pallin about over lunch. She couldn't believe it. She was going on a date with Pallin. This was too good to be true.

But where was he? Through the tall windows, she saw a few people sitting in the diner, but none of them looked like Pallin. And she wasn't late.

Uh, oh. Did Pallin have trouble finding it? Maybe she should have given him directions from his hotel, not just a general location. Man, she was no good at this. She was going to blow it.

Might as well try. Raea opened the car door and stepped out.

"Be careful."

She smiled at her aunt and closed the door of the sedan. Here went nothing. Her aunt pulled away as Raea stepped into the warm diner.

George's maintained a bright atmosphere. A simple colorful trim ran along the top of the white walls, where paintings of bright flowers alternated with decorative sconce light fixtures. The floor was a simple black and white checkerboard tile while the tables were marble patterns in different colors on white. Georgene had transformed what a few years ago had been a dark, foreboding bar into a warm, inviting restaurant.

Where was Pallin? A foreigner new to a small town, he couldn't have gotten *too* lost. While she studied the few other faces at the small tables and the wire-framed chairs around them, a cold wind chilled her back. She twisted around—

And swore her heart leapt from her chest. "Pallin." He made it. "Where should we sit?"

"You choose."

Okay. I choose. Right. Raea swallowed her anxieties and headed for a cozy booth along the side, next to a tall cooler of soda. She removed all her winter gear and sat down opposite him.

"This is nice place, very simple." He brushed golden hair away from those eyes.

"I like it." Raea clasped her hands on the table. *Say something.* This was so much easier with her friends at lunch.

After a few seconds of silence, Pallin asked, "How do we get food?"

"Oh." Raea's cheeks warmed. Of course, they would need to order, or at least look at a menu to see what was available.

"I'm sorry. Here—" She pulled the menu from its holder near the wall.

His smile took her breath away. He took the folded, laminated menu when she offered it.

"If you have any questions, just ask. I've been here a lot. I know what I like." She smiled, hoping he couldn't see how nervous she was.

"I have many, but most for later. Please to helping me read. English is...hmm...not easy."

"Oh. Sure. Um...Here..." She ran through every item and gave him descriptions. Pallin's lack of understanding surprised her, but it gave her an opportunity to share her knowledge; maybe he wasn't U.S. military, but that would be odd. Too much time spent overseas, she guessed.

When the waitress came to their table, Raea helped Pallin order.

Awkward silence filled the air. Her brain stumbled over words to find a coherent thought. "What country did you say you grew up most of your life?"

"It is not well known."

"Someplace too small to make any news, I suppose?"

"Yes." He took a deep breath and clasped his hands on the table.

"What do you like to do?" She asked.

"Not do much but travel."

"Oh? Where have you been?" How exciting to see new places, although she would tire of traveling frequently. She liked being in one place, having regular friends.

"Many places, never to stay long. Never to meeting people, to keeping...friends." He smiled that charming smile that melted her insides. "Tell me more of you."

There was a topic Raea had no trouble talking about. Nevermind she wasn't human. He didn't need to know that. Besides, it could have been a dream.

In the middle of their discussion, the food arrived.

The rest of the evening proceeded in much the same way. Pallin surprised her with his lack of understanding of some things she thought would have been common even in a small country.

When they finished their meal, the waitress took their plates and left the hand-printed bill. Raea tried to smile but played

with the straw in her water, stirring the lemon slice to settle her nerves.

"I am not good at this."

She looked up at Pallin. He thought *he* was having trouble?

"I am new to customs here and being not good company."

"It's as much my fault. I'm sorry, Pallin. I'm a bit nervous. That's all. I don't want you to think I'm uncomfortable, because I'm not. I just...I just..." How could she explain it? "I've never done this before."

A sly grin crept up his face. "I am new also."

"I don't believe it. You must have a girlfriend in every town you visit." *Idiot. What kind of stupid statement is that? What if he does?*

"No."

"Really?" Raea blinked and let out a breath that left her relaxed.

"I am...being not...good with friends."

She smiled with relief. The situation took on a new light, a ridiculousness that sparked a few giggles she tried to repress. However, when Pallin caught the laughing bug, she couldn't hold back. It continued for several minutes.

When the fit died down, he held his smile as if the laughter lingered beneath the surface yet. Or was it a dark satisfaction she saw in his smile? That couldn't be right.

"I feel...much better," she admitted. And she had managed some conversation, without Jess's help. Jess never had trouble talking to people.

"Yes."

At a quick glance of the clock on the wall, she gasped. Two hours had passed already. Although she would have liked to spend more time visiting with him, she had a commitment to Elis.

She had almost forgotten her training. She had to learn to control the Starfire. No way did she want those wings sprouting again without her consent. What if it happened in the middle of school, or in front of Pallin?

"I should get going." She grabbed her coat and stood to slip it on.

When he lifted his coat, she noticed that the layer down the middle on the outside was more than decoration—she could see through when he held it loose. A strange style, but Pallin was from a different culture, or, at the least, not used to dressing for North Dakota cold.

"We go now?"

"No. I'm sorry. I have other plans and have to meet someone soon." If not for her promise to Elis, she *could* spend more time with Pallin.

"Maybe we see together another time."

"Outside of school? I'd like that."

Her insides fluttered when he smiled. She loved this. Even if it couldn't last more than a week or two, she could at least enjoy the time they had.

* * *

Pallin's arrogant smirk left a bad taste in Elis's mouth. He had hated Pallin from the first moment he saw him. The accent was too familiar, too much like his own, before he learned to control it. Suspicion gnawed at him, fueling his hatred.

From the bench outside the large windows of the diner, he watched Raea and Pallin in their booth. Debbie had asked him to keep an eye on Raea for trouble, so Raea could enjoy herself but still be safe. He would have watched without Debbie asking, but this way was better. So far, this Pallin had done nothing to cause him alarm, but Elis wished he would. Any reason to keep Pallin away from Raea would suit him.

Before Elis's thoughts strayed too far, the two rose from their table. He hurried around the corner to a narrow space between buildings. He couldn't afford Raea's hostility if she knew he watched them.

A familiar sedan pulled up to the curb where he had sat. Debbie. Raea must have called.

Raea hurried to reach the car.

In his black coat and gloves Pallin smiled and waved as the car drove away. When the street emptied of traffic, the smile turned into something sinister. Pallin hurried down the sidewalk.

Something wasn't right. His appearance gave Elis chills. Elis followed at a distance, until Pallin turned into a lonely alley. What was the man up to?

As the sun reached the horizon, Pallin stopped and turned.
Caught. Elis couldn't hide the fact that he followed this man.

"You have question for me?"

"No."

"But you follow."

Elis knew that accent. There was one way to confirm it. ["I was sent to protect the Crystal Keeper."]

A grin curved up Pallin's lips. "I am understanding not."

Maybe he was wrong. But that coat, black and thigh-length, with the black gloves and that accent combined for one terrible image. Standing face-to-face with his nightmare gave Elis shivers. He hoped he was wrong. But the other night, the Starfire called itself, as it did when a portal opened. Right before Pallin showed up in school.

["You won't have her."]

Pallin frowned. "You speak English? Or this is why you speak not in school?"

"Very well."

"Ah. Yes. I help you?"

Either Pallin played dumb, or he really had no idea. But if he was Shirukan, he could hide and fake any knowledge. With just enough Starfire in their genetics to change form but not enough to bear the Starburst marks of a Keeper, they were indistinguishable from humans. That weak connection with the Starfire was the reason such individuals were chosen for the elite forces of the Shirat Empire. And they could absorb some of the power of the Starfire.

Whether Pallin was one of them or a human from another country on Earth didn't matter. Elis didn't like him.

"Stay away from her." Elis fought back the desire to wipe that smile off the guy's face. He almost wished Pallin was Shirukan, if only for the excuse to keep Raea away from him.

"You are...friend?"

"A friend who won't tolerate anyone hurting her."

"She makes decision to be not with you?"

Pallin's words cut through Elis. His fingers balled into fists, but he restrained his temper. The guy knew exactly what he said, good or bad English notwithstanding.

"You be leaving Raea alone." Pallin turned, ending the conversation.

"I'll be watching you."

"That will be...interesting."

Starfire Keepers

Where was Elis?

Raea sat in the sitting room with Mrs. Johnson. The house hadn't changed since she was a kid. The same faded green paint covered the living room walls and yellowed white lacy curtains hung in the front window, although the recliner and end tables in front of that window were newer. The television was brand new, too.

Before Joe's death, the old couple used to serve cookies to her and her cousins in the afternoon if they were out playing. Raea missed those days. After Joe died, Mrs. Johnson smiled less, until Elis came. Or was it? Now that she considered, that *was* about the time Evelyn Johnson smiled again.

He couldn't be too bad a person if the kind-hearted old woman took to him. Did she know about him, and her, having wings?

The old widow sat in her recliner near the front window, her cane leaning against the small table next to her. Good old Mrs. Johnson with her heart of gold and short, silvery gray hair. She was worth a mint in precious metals.

"He'll be home soon, dear."

"I hope so. I've been waiting for ten minutes." Ten minutes longer she could have spent with Pallin. Her heart pounded just thinking about him. He liked her.

Elis said to be there at sunset. Here she was. The sun had set a few minutes ago. But she saw no sign of him. If she was going to learn to control the Starfire's power—that sounded ridiculous, like some comic book superhero—she needed to practice. He insisted she do that.

So, where *was* he already?

She made sure to end her date with Pallin early enough to be there. Why couldn't he stick to it?

The door clicked.

Raea jumped to her feet. "What took you so long? You're the one who insisted I go through with this training of yours, but you can't show up on time?" Nevermind she wanted the training to keep her wings from sprouting again.

His jaw tightened as he pulled off his coat. "I'm sorry. Something came up."

Whatever. Waiting for him wore her patience thin. "So, what are we doing?" The sooner they started, the sooner they finished and she could go home and call Pallin, or wait for him to call her.

"The basics. First to find the resonance."

"What resonance?"

"Every crystal reacts to different pitches of sound, but this is something inside you. It's a part of you. You'll feel it throughout your body. That is the resonance of the Starfire in your cells. With that, you can access the power." He set his shoes in the closet and pointed up the stairs from the foyer to the second level, apparently unaffected by the fact that Mrs. Johnson could hear every word.

She knows!

"We'll need some quiet," he said.

"What about flying?"

"Maybe later."

All right. Upstairs. It should have felt creepy, but after that morning, actually *talking* to him, it didn't. Or, rather, it didn't feel as weird as knowing she was an alien with wings. She still had trouble believing what happened that morning was real. Then to have him, of all people, admit to being the same sounded like some fantasy Josh had dreamed up.

She climbed the stairs, noting the creaks of a couple of them. The old house had character. When Raea was young, Mrs. Johnson had babysat on more than a few occasions. Raea and Dave had played many games on those stairs, pretending at times that they led to the dragon's lair or that the two of them hunted ghosts. Those rare times they actually got along.

The memories flashed past with amazing clarity, like any memory she recalled. Until Elis told her the crystal recorded events, she thought she simply had an eidetic memory. That memory made school a breeze with a perfect GPA, and Elis matched her from day one. Not what anyone expected from a foreign student, but he was more than that.

Elis. I wonder... "How old are you?"

"In Earth years, twenty-one. It's about five Earth years to Six Inari."

"I *knew* you were older." She had always suspected. He seemed far too mature to be in their class.

"Why are you in high school?"

"Debbie made the arrangements so I could watch you, protect you in case of trouble." Around the top of the stairs and past the upstairs bathroom, he opened the door of the guest bedroom for her.

"Of course. And she arranged for you to live here."

"Yes."

His door opened to an immaculately clean room; not a mess in sight and everything organized. Books on various subjects packed a bookshelf on the nearest wall next to a corner desk, where a flat panel monitor glowed with power. The bed was made and not a sock littered the floor.

"Are you for real?" Raea stood in the doorway, aware of him close behind.

"Why?"

"No one is this neat." Not even her. She stepped inside, self-conscious suddenly about entering Elis's room. The room was sparse, but functional, a room for working and sleeping but little else in the way of decoration or personal touches. A few strange items lined the shelf on the back of the desk, but nothing else. The cross over the queen bed she guessed was Mrs. Johnson's, since this was probably also one of the guest rooms for when her family visited, or at least had been before Elis came.

"Are you disappointed?"

She turned from where she touched the computer desk in curiosity—not a dust speck. "No. Not at all. Just...surprised. Maybe I'm too used to Dave's and Eric's rooms being pigsties." Debbie had given up hounding the boys to keep their rooms clean. She'd flip to have Elis. For that matter, why didn't she? Except they had no room.

"You expected a mess?"

"Maybe. I didn't expect this." She was organized and kept her room clean, but she wasn't nearly as tidy. This went far beyond clean. "So, where do I begin?"

"Here." He patted the made-up bed. "Sit down on the edge with your feet on the floor."

Raea eyed the bed suspiciously but followed his directions. For all she knew, he could have intended something else, but he knelt on the floor near her. Good. He didn't assume any special familiarity. Hopefully Pallin soon would though.

"Now, let your arms hang loose and breathe deep. I want you to meditate and free your mind. Only then will you find the resonance of the crystal inside you. After some practice, you'll start recognizing it instantly. For now, though, it may take a while."

"Meditate. Okay." Raea did as he instructed. He talked her through the relaxation in a gentle voice that guided her to a place she had never been before. Within herself, she found a place of peace and openness. There, a sweet music played, like the voices that had whispered in her dreams now harmonized. It focused on a single pitch and warmed through her. Every part of her tingled faintly as the warmth increased.

"Good. Not too much. Now think of something else and let it go."

Easy—Pallin. His bright, amber eyes sparkled and perfect, sculpted jaw shifted with his grin. The way his blonde hair fell aside along his face, outlined it in a halo of gold. And those broad shoulders and trim figure... She'd bet he had a nice body under that shirt that left much to her imagination.

"That was better than anyone I've known."

"Really?" The image of Pallin blew away. Better than anyone he'd known? The compliment boosted her confidence to try again.

"Yes. But, since the Starfire has been pushing you lately, I'd guess it's also guiding you. Most Keepers train before one of the shards needs a new bearer, but it has happened the other way, like with you."

Raea lifted the crystal. That such a simple object could contain so much baffled her mind, as did finding out she had wings. It still felt odd, unreal, like she lived someone else's life. "I remember Mom saying it would guide me, but I was young. I had no idea she meant this." That crystal had opened a whole world to her that she never knew existed.

She caught his smile on her and turned away. *Don't look at me like that.* Her face warmed.

"Try again to find the resonance, but listen to the Starfire this time. It made us what we are. We serve its purpose. Listen to what it says."

She considered that idea, but she hadn't yet been able to distinguish any words from the crowd of voices. Did he honestly

think it would be any easier now? But she had to try, for her own curiosity if nothing else.

She found the resonance quicker this time and listened. The voices remained quiet, though. Now they chose to say nothing? She should have known. When she wanted to hear them, they said nothing; but when she hadn't wanted to or hadn't expected it, they wouldn't shut up. *Where are you?*

Silence.

"The voices are gone."

"Try again. Focus on the resonance. That's your connection."

"I did. There was nothing."

He stared at the crystal, the muscles along his jaw tightening and loosening. After a few seconds of silence, he put his bare left hand before her, palm open to expose the larger Starburst mark. "Take my hand."

"Why?"

"I spoke to them before when I touched you. I'd like to know what they want."

"That makes two of us," Raea mumbled. Seeing little choice and hoping he knew what he was doing, she placed her hand in his. The resonance warmed through her.

The man, Jerantis, walked across a patch of strange brown and pink plants, his dark brown hair, like the feathers of his wings, ruffling in a breeze. He smiled and tossed a purple and orange ball to Padina. ["Davrel doesn't deserve a second thought. He's jealous that you turned him down for me."] He sat down next to her. ["I can't blame him, though."]

Padina smiled and dropped her eyes to the ball. Not a ball. She bit into the juicy fruit. ["He seemed so hopeful, but it wasn't right. I shouldn't feel bad, but I do."]

["I'm not sure why you chose me to bond with, what I did, but no matter what you decided, I would always love you."]

["That's why. I love you, too, and I know you'll never hurt me. You've always been kind and giving. Davrel's selfish. He's a good person, but not a mate. If I'm to share the pleasures and pains of one man, it must be someone I can trust."]

The scene blew away, replaced by another. In full view this time, a younger Padina stood with other Keepers of varying wing colors dressed in ceremonial-style robes of a pale blue and tied with gold. A stranger stood close to the crystal and reached toward it. In a flash of light, the Keeper collapsed from view. Two winged figures carried the unconscious individual away.

["Shartrael Padina."]

Padina hesitated, until someone nudged her to step forward. Slowly, she approached, growing larger from the crystal's viewpoint. She stood over the crystal, fear in her eyes, and looked back.

["You must try."] A blue-winged woman stepped near, a large shard of the crystal hanging at her chest. ["The Starfire will not hurt those who sincerely wish to understand the truth."]

["I understand, but I'm afraid, Keeper Saffir,"] Padina whispered. ["I don't want the trouble it brings."]

Saffir's eyes shone with her smile. ["And honor."]

["I don't care! I don't want to touch it."]

["Please, Padina. The others are waiting."]

Padina licked her lips and glanced back at the silent Keepers. ["Let someone else try."]

["You would prefer to give someone else a chance?"]

["Yes."]

["You're next in line and completed your training. It's your turn to be judged."]

Padina's eyes glossed with tears. ["I don't want to. I know I'm not worthy."]

["Unless you've hidden something from us, I see no reason to consider you unworthy. Is there something you haven't told me?"]

["No, Keeper Saffir."]

["Then touch the Starfire for judgment."] The gentle but firm command bordered on a tone of demand, but Saffir made no move to reprimand her charge.

Padina reached out to the crystal and hesitated. After a few seconds, she closed her eyes and touched it. [You do well to fear us,] voices in unison said, or implied with feelings that translated to words. [But we intend no harm. We wish to understand, and in exchange will share ourselves, so understanding may happen.]

Padina lifted the crystal in her hand. Behind her, all others knelt.

["Congratulations, Crystal Keeper Shartrael Padina. I had no doubts."]

Raea opened her eyes as the marks on hers and Elis's hands faded. Why did the visions always come of her mother and one of the two men in her life? What did they want her to understand?

The second vision needed no interpretation. Her mother never wanted to be a Crystal Keeper, but the Starfire wanted her. Elis squeezed her hand and let go.

"What happened?" Raea asked.

"They showed you what you needed to know."

"Did you see it?"

His smile answered her question.

"Did you see the other times?"

"No."

"Why this time?" She looked at her hands.

"Through the Starburst marks, the energy can flow, either out as pure energy, or between Keepers."

Okay, put that way it made sense. They acted as conduits for the Starfire's energy. Something else occurred to her. "So, how did you speak to them yesterday if your gloves cover your marks?"

Elis held out his palm and traced the tapering, jagged lines of aquamarine to the last knuckles before his fingertips on the index and middle fingers of each hand. "The gloves don't cover all of it."

"But you weren't touching my hands."

He shrugged. "The energy can still pass through. I couldn't hear them but they must have recognized me. To be honest, I wasn't sure it would work."

They recognized him? That must have been why whenever he touched her, she had visions. Why? Why *him*? What were these beings trying to tell her?

"Continue working with the resonance. Find it and let it go. Learn to turn it on and off." The instant he said it, his marks glowed. They faded to normal a couple seconds later. He made it look easy. "It'll become second nature soon enough. The Starfire wants you to succeed. It needs your protection, Raea. It's all but helpless without us."

"Could've fooled me."

His smile infected her. "If not for the connection to you, the Starfire would be a decorative crystal." He sat up on the bed close to her, but not too close, a thoughtful expression on his face.

["Our ancestors thought it was just a lifeless rock when it first appeared over six thousand years ago. They discovered it had enormous power potential, and that the energy was unlike anything else. A scientist named Heffin made the connection to another dimension. From their work, the idea for Heffin's Gate was borne. It was a noble idea, generating what humans would call 'wormholes'—holes through the Starfire's home dimension that allow instant travel between two points in our own universe.]

["Unfortunately, that much power tends to attract greed. Wars were fought to control it. After a thousand years, Heffin's Gate was to be turned on an opposing city, to send it into the other universe. The Starfire shattered. It broke into the four shards we have today. But, in the process, it sent out a wave of energy that touched all those within Heffin's Gate and blended its energy with their genes. That's how the Keepers came to be. The Starfire refused to be a tool of destruction. It made the Keepers as a way to facilitate communication with our kind, to further its purpose of studying our universe. That's why it grants us its gifts, as it told your mother. "]

Raea stared at him. So much, all at once. All in one day. She could hardly absorb it all.

["Its power has been sought by many since its discovery. It still is. Twenty-five or six years ago, Shirat Marin was elected governor of Naviketán. She gained a following among the *meistal*, the descendants of Keepers without the Starburst marks. She gave them special privileges in return for their fealty to her. They became known as the Shirukan, the honored of Shirat. With them, she went after Keepers, and swore to gather every shard of the Starfire to gain full power over Heffin's Gate, which would give her complete power over our world, and others. With it, she could even destroy Earth. "]

Raea lifted the crystal. Damn. One seemingly insignificant gem could cause an awful lot of trouble. No Earth. No Pallin. ["How many shards does she have? "]

["Two, with my father's. "]

The sorrow in his voice pulled at her sympathy. ["I'm sorry. "]

He nodded, but his throat flashed with a swallow. ["I wish I had been there to help fight off the Shirukan when they went

after my family."]

["Wouldn't you be dead too?"]

He sniffed and a moment later brightened with a faint smile. ["That's what Saffir said when she told me to come here."]

["She's important, isn't she?"]

["The most honored of Crystal Keepers. The shard she bears is the largest. The others turn to her for guidance, because she's the oldest and wisest, and at least one shard has always stayed within our line."]

["That explains the vision with my mother."] Raea dropped the crystal and looked away from him. The pain on his face reminded her too much of what she felt inside. She didn't need to see it on someone else, least of all on Elis. And she was afraid of crying in sympathy. The Shirukan must have been the black-clad figures she had seen in her dreams. They killed her real father and tried to capture her mother.

"You should get back to practicing." Elis stood up and exited the room, the familiar hunch of his somber mood weighing on his shoulders.

Had she said something wrong? Was it the memory of his family? Guilt twisted her stomach. She should have said nothing more. Now, she upset him, just when he was opening up.

She shouldn't have cared, but she did.

Despite feeling bad for him, she stayed behind to practice. He would return...she hoped.

The resonance came quicker each time she found it. Recognizing that pitch inside her made all the difference.

After an hour, she noticed the clock on the stand by his bed and stood up. Her back ached from sitting without support. She'd pay for it the next day. Oh, well. That's what Saturdays were for, besides birthdays.

So, why hadn't Elis returned yet? Where had he gone? She couldn't believe she sat in his room. Weirder still—it no longer creeped her out. After all that day had brought, she actually felt sorry for him, and guilty about her behavior.

She left his room. "Elis?"

"Down here." His voice came from the sitting room.

Raea thumped down the stairs in a hurry and caught herself at the bottom. Whoa. Before she thought to slow down, he met her at the doorway, standing tall once more. "I...ah...should get home." *In case Pallin calls.*

He nodded and stepped past her to the door. "We'll practice tomorrow."

Did she have to? What about Linds's birthday?

"The sooner you control the resonance, the sooner you can fly."

"Awesome! Really?" *Calm down.* Too late. His smile returned—he knew exactly how to tempt her. "I mean, that'd be cool." What would it be like to fly? She couldn't wait to find out.

Raea slipped on her shoes without tying them and hurried out. At the bottom of the steps, she stopped and turned. "Um...Thanks, for everything; and I'm sorry about the rest."

At the open door, he waited, but said nothing. Raea ran through the ice-coated snow to her door and waved.

He peeked out the door. "Sleep well."

Yeah. For once, she just might, now that she understood what her dreams were about.

Nina Russet

"I still can't believe this hot guy is so into you." Linds sank into her chair, a dreamy glint in her eye.

Raea treasured that look. She couldn't believe all this was happening either.

"You're *so* lucky." Jess brushed her hair behind her ear and played with the silver earring dangling there.

"Yeah. Lucky that Josh isn't here to lecture me. Where is he?" Raea looked around the pizzeria. After lunch, they'd head over to The Game Spot for the afternoon. Some indoor mini-golf, maybe some air hockey—Jess owned that game—and a few video games. But that had been Josh's suggestion. Where was he to follow through?

The answer shot to the forefront. She'd been so busy with Pallin and now the Starfire that she had forgotten his big news. "No. He wouldn't."

"Yup. Stood up for some hot shot from his favorite TV show." Linds sat back from the table and folded her arms.

"Not Josh." Raea couldn't believe it, and yet she could.

"He did."

"But you can't blame him," Jess said. "I mean, who wouldn't pass up the chance for fame? And it's not like he isn't known for his Dark Angel obsession."

"True. But you'd think he'd put his friends first." Linds looked out at something and scowled. "I can't believe it."

"What?" Raea twisted in her seat. Josh and a middle-aged woman with wavy bleached-blond hair—by the dark roots barely showing—and her leather jacket unzipped entered the restaurant. Was that the person he had expected to meet?

"Hey, guys. Sorry I'm late." Josh stopped at their table with the woman, who pushed her red sunglasses up to the top of her head like a headband to hold back the shoulder-length hair. "This is Nina Russet. She's here to check out the Dark Angel stories before the real crew comes." He introduced each of them.

The woman smiled pleasantly and offered to shake each of their hands. When she took Raea's, she stopped and stared at the marks.

Not good. That curious gaze gave Raea chills. Pull her hand away or let it go—Raea battled the urge to avoid questions with the desire to be polite. Nina let go before she could choose.

"I'd like to talk to you later."

"Uh...Sure, I suppose." What did she want? Raea glanced at Josh. What had he told this woman?

He shrugged. Did that mean he didn't understand her unspoken question or that he wouldn't talk about it in front of his guest?

"Actually," Nina said. "I'd like to talk to all of you, if you have some time." Before anyone could object, she pulled up a chair and started asking questions. They answered them, to be nice, but Raea had only to meet the eyes of Jess or Linds to know they shared her feelings—the woman was pushy and out for her story. With questions about their different religious views and how they felt, and whether this Dark Angel might have a hidden agenda that no one was willing to discuss, even Josh looked a bit off.

In the end, Raea was glad to see her leave. She didn't want to discuss her marks. A couple days ago, she could easily have feigned innocence. Now...Now she might slip up and give away the truth.

The truth... Was Elis Dark Angel? If so, why?

She'd ask him later.

In the meantime, she'd enjoy being with her friends. Nothing had changed there. She was still Raea Dahlrich, human at heart.

Yet she wasn't. With her friends, she could forget yesterday ever happened. Or, rather, she could almost forget.

Her world had changed. Why did this woman have to come at that time? Why did the Starfire choose then to force this on her?

At least for an afternoon, her life was normal. Normal for a human. What would her friends think to learn otherwise? That was something she didn't intend for them to find out. If the Shirukan could come to Earth, she certainly didn't want to stand in any spotlight as if waving her arms and yelling, "*I'm here! Come and get me!*" Yeah, that would help.

She arrived home in time for a visit from Josh and Nina. *Go away.* Oh, how she wanted to say it. But she couldn't. Instead, she let them in the house and introduced them to her family, who sat in front of the TV on the sofa and chairs. Nina took the other free chair before Debbie had a chance to offer it.

Damn, the bitch was rude. Did she just expect everyone would welcome her?

Raea hated her already, and from the expression Josh gave her, he was having second thoughts also.

"Raea. Those marks on your hands. I've seen drawings resembling your hands, usually to depict healing hands, but I never imagined anyone would take it literally. I'm told you always had those marks. Is that true?"

Raea glanced at Debbie. What could she say? Debbie gave a slight shrug. She couldn't say anything without giving away some hint of her secret.

"Yeah. Everyone calls her a freak." Dave smirked as if he couldn't wait to say that.

That little brat. She'd make him pay for that with a lifetime of cold showers.

For a second, Raea touched the resonance inside her. *Not now. Calm down.* She took a deep breath and let it out. She could only hope everyone's attention had been on Dave.

"David Anthony Logan."

All right, Debbie. Let him have it. Raea waited for the rest.

"Go to your room."

"But, Mom—"

"Go."

Yes!

"But—"

"David!" Mike's snap of his name acted like a whip. His dad didn't usually discipline him, so when Mike spoke, Dave listened.

Dave tromped up to his room, grumbling under his breath about it being unfair and him only speaking the truth.

"So, you were born with those marks on your hands? They're not tattoos?" Nina sat forward, her eyes widening and her full attention on Raea as if the incident with Dave had never happened.

That didn't bother Raea as much as Josh's sudden interest in her hands. Had he seen the marks glow? *Had* they glowed when she accidentally touched the resonance? She hoped not.

"This is fascinating. Have you ever worked any miracles, like healing anyone?"

"No."

"Then have you ever considered studying? I've heard of individuals like you performing miracles, but none have ever come forward. I'd love to learn more about you."

"No, you wouldn't." Raea didn't want the spotlight. Not now. Maybe, before all the stuff with the Starfire, and those wings. But no more.

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Buddy barked once but stayed by Mike. Saved by the door. "I'll get it." Raea jogged across the floor to answer the door. Who would show up at that time—besides Josh and Nina—Pallin? She could only hope.

Her heart leapt at the prospect that he might be there to rescue her.

Despite the fracturing caused by the design in the oval pane of the door, she recognized the tall, dark figure. It wasn't Pallin, but at least she had a good reason to leave. Elis. What perfect timing. She opened the door, and he stepped in from the cold. He didn't give her a chance to warn him *not* to enter. Couldn't he have called first?

Why did his coat bulge?

"Are you ready?"

She hadn't even noticed the time. Her training.

"Elis." Josh sounded surprised.

Oh, no. This couldn't be happening. Raea let out her breath, her shoulders sinking in defeat. *No. Please, let us get out of here without trouble.*

"This must be your boyfriend."

How had the woman reached them so quickly? Oh, man, she was nosy.

Raea's cheeks warmed. "No. No, he's not my boyfriend. Just...ah..." Josh's questioning look raised the temperature of the room. What was she doing with Elis when she was going out with Pallin? She read it all over his face. If he wasn't there, this would be *so* much easier. "We...are...working on a project together."

"You are?" Josh asked.

Raea gave him a look to shut up.

"Yeah, that one for Mister Maviar's class. That research project." *Take a hint, Josh.*

Josh shook his head. He didn't get it. He could be so dense sometimes. "That was a couple weeks ago."

Don't be so literal, Josh. I'm struggling here. Why couldn't he be on her side?

"This is a special project, for college," Elis said. "He's helping us to qualify for more advanced classes."

Impressive. Elis picked up on that quick enough.

Josh nodded, a crooked grin on his face. "Yeah. You two are way too smart. I'm sure you'll save some money and skip a year in your degrees."

"Really? Both of you are intellectually gifted?" Nina asked.

Did the woman have to pick apart *everything* they said?

"We really should be going." Elis looked about as uncomfortable as she felt.

Raea grabbed her shoes and coat. "You're right." She didn't want to stay any longer to be interrogated by the woman.

"They're co-valedictorians."

Raea cringed at Josh's affirmation, glad she had her back to them. Technically, Elis had the equivalent of a college degree already, but no one else knew he had already been educated on a more advanced world.

"While you're here, Elis, I'd like to hear your opinion of this mysterious angel. By the way, I'm Nina Russet of the Xplorer Channel. We're bringing a crew in next week for some on-location filming for our *Miracles and Other Wonders* special on this town's Dark Angel."

"I heard you were coming, but I don't believe in angels," he said.

"Oh, then you deny the reports of a person with black wings rescuing people?"

"No. They saw what they saw."

"Then you think there's a possibility of this person being real?"

"If people who saw your angel think he was real, then to them, he's real." A hint of frustration ground in his voice.

Good answer. He was quick on his feet.

Raea hurried to tie her shoes and zip up her coat while Nina questioned Elis. None too soon, she stood ready. "Let's go." She turned back and waved as Elis opened the door. "We gotta get some work done. Sorry to run out on you." As if. She was so, *so* glad to be out of there. "Bye."

The closing of the main door and the storm door cut off her dread. "That woman is annoying."

"Yes, she is." He descended the steps next to her, but he didn't turn to Mrs. Johnson's.

"Where're you going?"

"You wanted to learn to fly, right?"

Oh, yes! "Really? But—" She glanced back as they headed out to the field across the street. The snow had melted, exposing stubble and grass. Raea lowered her voice and jogged to keep up with his fast strides. "Won't growing out the wings hurt?"

"Yes."

He could have lied about that. That was one time she wouldn't mind.

"What about my clothes?"

He paused and unzipped his coat. So, that was the reason his coat bulged—he had another tucked inside. "I brought one of mine. Evelyn made some alterations for me."

And he had kept it warm. How thoughtful. "Won't it be a bit big on me? And how will I explain my shirt?"

He zipped his coat back up. "Unless you'd rather not."

"No. That'll be fine. All right. It's not like Debbie doesn't know." She had to learn, right? What was one ripped tee shirt?

One ripped tee shirt she liked. Oh, well. Too late to go back.

His smile warmed through her with her giddiness of the flying prospect, though her fear of heights turned that excitement down a notch. All her life she had wondered what it would be like to fly like a bird, before she knew that her dreams of flying as a child had been real. Now she had that chance.

She took his gloved hand when he offered it and ran alongside him to reach the other side of the hill.

* * *

The girl hid something from her, and the boyfriend helped. Not the boyfriend? Nina doubted that. Something interesting lingered in that girl, and she was determined to find out. "Cute couple."

"Yeah. Weird," Josh said. "She wouldn't talk to him two days ago. I'm surprised she'd work with him. Kinda odd since

she's seeing someone else."

"It was a last-minute idea from Mister Maviar," Debbie said from the couch.

"You said both are gifted?" The boy had provided her with a lot of good information about the people in this town. She hadn't even scratched the surface of the story potential. This was why she asked for a few extra days; one never knew what they would find on these assignments.

"Yeah," Josh said. "You'd never have known it when he first came. Elis could barely speak English a year and a half ago. We all thought he was slow at first, but he always pulled the highest grades. He just never talked much. I think that was the most I've ever heard him say, just now." Josh's brow furrowed. "Totally weird."

"You'd never know he was foreign." The young man's English was too perfect for a foreigner. "Where's he from?"

Josh shrugged. "I don't remember if he ever said."

"It doesn't matter." She was there to investigate Raea. She could track down Elis later. Surely the aunt and uncle could tell her more. Why was the young woman in such a hurry to get away? "I was more interested in Raea. Who are her parents?"

"Miss Russet, we don't talk about them." Josh spoke in a somber tone. "See, her mom escaped a war when she was pregnant and came here. She married Scott, Debbie's brother, but they died in a tornado thirteen years ago. Raea survived because she was at a slumber party a few blocks away."

"I'm sorry to hear that." It explained why the girl lived with her aunt and uncle, anyway.

"My brother loved her as his own. I took her in when she was five."

"Did you meet her mother?"

"Padina and I were good friends. In fact, I think I was her closest friend here."

She had struck a nerve. The emotions flowed now. She would have to tread lightly. Most people became defensive if they perceived a threat. They'd close up if that happened and answer no more questions. "Did Raea's mother—Padina—ever perform any healing miracles?"

Debbie clamped her jaw and shook her head. A moment later, she relaxed. "No, but Padina was a loving woman. The only miracle I ever saw was the birth of her baby girl."

The aunt lied. Debbie Logan knew something but refused to share that secret. Did the girl have the healing touch? It would make a bigger story than the elusive angel. She could dig that up later, though. For now, she'd play along. "Babies are miracles, aren't they?"

Debbie smiled at the young boy next to her.

"I see you have a lot of love in your heart, Mrs. Logan...Debbie. But I think I've bothered you enough. Thank you for your time."

"It was a pleasure."

And that pleasure was all Nina's. This town had a few discoveries to be made. She'd have to contact Ted tomorrow.

Nina strode to the door, eager to catch up with Raea. The boy followed but hesitated before stepping out with her.

"Thanks, Mrs. Logan."

"Anytime, Josh."

Outside in the cold North Dakota air, Nina shivered and turned to Josh as he shut the door behind him. "I'd like to talk to Raea tonight yet. Where would they have gone?"

"Oh...here." He hurried down the steps and around a soupy, slushy mess of lawn to the house next door.

How convenient. "Next door?"

"Yeah. The old widow took him in. Now, Mrs. Johnson is someone you should talk to. She never misses church and is always early for the rosaries. She prays for everyone. I'll bet she could tell you about angels."

Interesting. An old Catholic widow with strong religious faith should make for quite the conversation. Even if it wasn't the conversation she wanted right now.

After he knocked, they waited a while for the door to open. While the kid rang the bell, Nina glanced around and shivered. How long did winter last in that area? Back home it was already pleasantly warm, and what little snow they had was long gone. She would gladly have done this in the summer, but her producer wanted the show to air during Holy Week.

When no one answered after a minute, the kid opened the door a crack. Didn't anyone lock their doors?

"Mrs. Johnson? Hello? Raea? Elis?"

"Yes. Yes. Just a minute, dear."

He stepped back and flashed a smile to Nina.

Soon, a gray-haired old woman hunched over a cane appeared in the doorway and adjusted her white cardigan. A smile lifted her sagging cheeks. "Josh. What can I do for you, dear?"

"Mrs. Johnson, this is Nina Russet of the Xplorer Channel. She's here to gather information for the Dark Angel special of *Miracles and Other Wonders*."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Johnson."

"Evelyn, dear."

An old woman boarding a lone man who escaped from a foreign country at war. Wow! She *had* only scratched the surface of stories in this town. "It's my pleasure, Evelyn. I'd like to ask you a few questions about angels, but right now I'm more interested in speaking with Raea. Can I come in?"

"She's not here. I'm surprised you didn't catch her already."

Not there? Now she knew the girl was hiding something, and mister tall, dark, and non-boyfriend boyfriend helped her. None of their stories matched. "Do you know where they might have gone?"

"Out walking, probably. You'd be better off coming back after church in the morning."

"I'd love to sit down and chat with you."

Evelyn smiled. "I'll look forward to it. I'm sorry I couldn't help you more."

"Thanks, Mrs. Johnson," Josh said.

"Okay. Good night, dear." She shut the door.

"Sorry, Miss Russet. I don't know what to say. I thought I knew Raea better. I have no idea what's going on."

"That's okay. You gave me a lot of good leads, Josh. I have some thinking to do tonight, but I'll call you tomorrow if I have any more questions." She almost felt sorry for the kid. From all he had said, Raea was one of his best friends. Tough breaks that she lied to him to hide whatever it was Nina intended to find.

First Flight

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."

"How do you avoid being recognized?"

"Another time. Tonight, we fly."

Excitement raced through her, along with trepidation. Again the pain. Did she want to go through that? The resounding answer was "Yes." Otherwise she wouldn't have changed coats. His hung on her like a gunny sack, but it had a faint musky/outdoors scent she would forever associate as him. She offered her hands, wishing it didn't have to be like this but anxious for the end result. "Get it over with."

"You could try yourself." He pulled off his gloves, in spite of his suggestion.

"No. I'm not ready." She could hardly tolerate the pain when she wasn't in control. How would she manage the pain *and* focusing on the resonance? Raea put her hands to his.

"All right." The warmth of the resonance passed from his hands through her and concentrated on her back. It hurt. She clenched her teeth on the scream fighting to tear out of her. Now was not the time to attract unwanted attention. The pain! How did he do it?

It ended when she thought she couldn't take it anymore. She adjusted her posture with the weight. How did he stand upright?

["Start with simple movements. Stretch and flex."]

Yeah, simple. Right. Raea had to use all her concentration to make anything happen, like in her room yesterday. She could do it, but the movements were uncoordinated.

["Good. I might think you've flown before."]

["I think I did."] Raea paused as the vision from yesterday returned, along with memories from before it. She remembered woods, the smell of pine on a gentle breeze around her. The flapping of wings...

["You can't catch me."] Her mother's giggle came from above.

Raea laughed and flapped furiously to catch up to the woman with brown and white wings gliding away from her. Panic swept through her as the woman drew further away. ["Momma. Back. My want. My want momma."] Tears stung Raea's eyes. She grew tired from flapping her wings and couldn't catch up. Her mother would leave her.

Padina turned sharply and dove for her, sweeping her into the comfort of her arms to soothe her tears. ["Sssh. I'm here, my darling. It's all right. Oh, Raea. I wouldn't leave you."] The flap of giant wings faded as they lowered to the ground, to Scott waiting.

The memories wrapped her heart in grief and squeezed as if to wring out her tears. Her mother had left her a couple years later. ["Yeah, I did, before she hid my wings. I thought it was a dream."]

["Do you remember how?"]

Something in her remembered. She swallowed her grief. Damned be the memories that never faded. The Starfire didn't help that matter.

Arching the wings up and straightening them to push down lifted her feet from the ground a few inches. She touched down again a second later. That was easier than she expected.

["Excellent."]

His smile filled her with confidence and chased away the grief.

It didn't take long for her to gain altitude. Elis flew close beside her and insisted on going high above to avoid attention. Avoiding attention she agreed with. The altitude she could do without. But the rush of the wind chased away her hesitations. They flew over the countryside, practicing gliding and diving. The feeling of complete freedom rushed through her, clearing out any lingering acrophobia. They flew over slushy fields and around the naked shelterbelts of farmsteads. She didn't want to quit, but the fatigue of her muscles forced her to end the night's session after less than an hour.

Elis landed near her. ["You did great."]

["Let's just hope no one saw that last dive."] When she lost the air currents and tumbled a few seconds before regaining her bearings. She swore her heart had stopped.

["It happens to practiced fliers. The winds can change unexpectedly."]

["Yeah?"] He just said that to make her feel better. It worked. She stretched her wings to loosen the ache of her back. She was going to be sore tomorrow. ["What's that smile for?"] She felt the warmth rising inside her. Why couldn't he look away? Like playing chicken, she didn't want to give up, but self-consciousness made her give first.

["Tomorrow night?"]

["Yes!"] *Don't sound so excited.* It was only Elis. ["I mean, if the weather's good."]

His marks glowed and the black wings shrank to nothing. He made it look easy, or less painful. Either way, those wings disappeared without him showing much for it.

["Ready?"]

She hated this part. ["Do it."] *Get it over with.*

He took her hands and helped her through the transformation. It hurt no less than before, but now she knew what to expect.

Afterwards, she breathed deeply and the pain faded.

Her coat hung on the fence post where she had left it. Swapping was another story. It had chilled in the winter air.

["Find the resonance. Let it warm you."] He pulled his fingerless, black gloves on, hiding the Starburst marks again.

Good idea. Her Starburst marks glowed for the few seconds it took to generate extra warmth. ["Wow. This is useful."]

["Be careful. Too much energy built up is dangerous. You'll learn to release it, though, and control what you need."]

["Oh? What can you do with it?"]

["Almost anything you can imagine. It's pure energy, Raea. That's what the Starfire entities are."]

What had Miss Russet said about healing hands? ["Can it be used to heal?"]

["That's actually one of the reasons Keepers are called on most often."]

["Really? That Nina Russet said the marks on my hands remind her of some primitive art about healing hands."]

Elis shrugged. ["I wouldn't doubt it. Keepers have been coming to Earth for thousands of years. We've been deified by many cultures...Angels?"]

["Yeah. That. All right, Mister 'Dark Angel'—"]

His laugh was exactly what she expected from her joke, from any of her friends. Coming from him was strange. He never laughed at school. She liked it on him. "Let's get home. I'm tired and sore. But promise me you'll teach me how to heal?"

"In time, you'll learn everything. With the help of the Starfire, you'll probably pass my knowledge."

Right. As if that could happen.

On the walk home, she thought back to every nuance of flying and what she had learned. The last two days were better than anything she could remember, except for her mother. Memories hurt. Now, the only thing that would make it totally better would be to see Pallin again. The phone was hers tonight.

* * *

Raea frowned at the pillow of gray overhead. Great. More snow. That's all she needed on a Sunday afternoon with Pallin. At least she was with Pallin now.

And for now, she had some time away from Josh and—Ugh—Nina Russet. That woman grated on her nerves.

Don't think of her. She's not here. Unfortunately, she could swoop in at any second and question her. Not what Raea needed while out walking with Pallin. What would he think?

What *did* he think? He hadn't said a word about her hands, but he also made no move to touch them. Unlike every single other person she had ever met, he acted as if he saw nothing. Maybe he was just being polite. That had to be it.

He had met her at the school, arriving by shuttle from the hotel. Debbie insisted she stick to the neighborhood, especially since Raea walked. Her back ached from last night, but not enough to keep her from seeing Pallin again. Monday would have been too long to wait.

"You like new coat?" Pallin glanced down at the black and gray nylon coat. "It is keeping me much warm."

She adored that accent and the flaws in his English. "It's very nice on you."

"Hmm...We walk in cold. I being not used to cold." He shivered.

"It's a chance to talk. How long are you staying?"

"A couple weeks."

"Oh." That's all? Why couldn't he stay to the end of the year? Graduation was only two months away, if that. "Then you'll go somewhere else and forget about me."

"No. Not to be forgetting."

Not forgetting her? But what *would* happen? "Sure you will. You'll go to a new school, make new friends..."

"No. Not like here. Not like you." His smile made her knees weaken. She had to walk to stay on her feet.

"So, what did you do yesterday?" Did he meet anyone else? Was she only one girl of many he intended to see? *No. Don't think that way.* Besides, she would have heard rumors at school.

"I do homework at hotel...and think."

"About what?"

"About you, about other night."

He thought about her. Raea bit her lip to keep from squealing with glee.

"I wonder if not to be talking to you."

"Why?" There went her excitement like a lead brick in her gut.

"Other man say not to be seeing you?"

"Other man?"

"Special friend man."

"But I don't..." Elis wouldn't. He *couldn't*. "Know anyone."

Would he? No. He couldn't have. Why would he interfere? Why would he confront Pallin? The answer was simple—he was there to protect her. It made sense now. But she had to be sure. For all she knew, it could have been Josh. That's something he would do. Maybe. But Josh knew how much she liked Pallin, and Josh liked Pallin. It had to be Elis.

"Did he have sort of messy black hair that hung over dark eyes? Kind of on the tall, lean side?" Anger bit at the edge of her voice. Elis—no one—had any right interfering in her relationships.

"Yes. This is friend?"

"No."

Pallin's lips curved up into a smirk. "Then I should listening not of him?"

"No. It's *my* life." She would have a strict talk with Elis later about the boundaries he couldn't cross, this being one of them. "What did he say?"

"Not to hurting you. He watching will me."

"Oh. He will, will he?" She glanced behind. No one. *Was* Elis watching her with Pallin? She so wanted to catch him and give him a piece of her mind then and there.

No one was out. Well, there was that. She had her privacy for now.

"Something is not right?"

"No. Sorry. I'm a little pissed right now at him. That's all."

"I am glad not to being with not free girl. He is being not with you in school. This is good."

"Oh, I'm free...free to choose my own friends. He's not one of them, not like you think."

"Then I can be enjoying time."

"Yes, you can. Let's enjoy the time we have." And she would take out her fury later.

The late morning passed quickly. While Raea would have liked to invite Pallin for lunch, she didn't want anyone bothering him yet. She wasn't ready for him to meet her family, especially Dave. Pallin excused himself, saying he had a lot of work to finish before night anyway, which she could understand since he was playing catch up while there.

Raea walked home alone and scowled at the yellow house next door, as if she could burn Elis with her thoughts. It had

been him. But he wouldn't get away with this insult. Just because she needed him to teach her how to control the Starfire didn't mean she had to like him.

Whose white car sat out front? She'd never... She *had* seen it before. Last night.

The sticker on it displayed the logo of a rental company. It was a borrowed car.

Oh, no. Not now. Which house were they in? Nina Russet would not corner her again. Raea's best bet to avoid her lay in heading straight to Evelyn's. But that thought sparked her anger. Elis would be there. Right now she was in no mood to be reasonable.

She had no choice. She hated Miss Russet more.

Dammit, Elis. Why did he have to go and try to scare off Pallin? He had a lot of explaining to do.

She marched up the steps. Before she lifted her hand to knock, he opened the door.

"You were watching me."

"Get in."

She hated the situation, but stepped inside quickly. He shut the door behind her.

"You bastard." The smack of her palm against his cheek gave her some satisfaction. The bewilderment on his face added to it. That felt good. "How dare you tell Pallin to stay away from me!"

"I was trying to protect you."

"Don't." *And don't give me that hurt look.*

With his left cheek reddening, he left her for the sitting room. He wasn't getting away from her that easily. She wanted an explanation; and—by God—she was going to get it. "What makes you think I need protecting?"

"Debbie." Elis sat down on the couch in front of the television.

Debbie? What did she have to do with this? Raea waited for him to explain.

"She asked me to make sure you were all right." He spoke in a calm voice, free of any anger.

Why couldn't he argue with her? *Damn it, Elis.* Why did he have to be calm about this? It cooled the anger she wanted to feel. She hated that.

"She was worried, and so was I." The look on his face begged forgiveness. Raea fought to keep her anger. "But I watched him and...there's something...I'm not sure yet."

"What? What don't you like about him?"

"I think he may be Shirukan."

"What?" Had he landed on his head? What was he thinking? "He's foreign, not alien."

"You don't know that. The Shirukan have Starfire in their genes but no Starburst marks on their hands. He acted like he didn't know what I was saying when I spoke Inari, but his accent is too much like mine was."

Pallin, Shirukan? No. Elis was paranoid. That's all it was. He had no proof.

"And his black coat...The style is like the uniform of the Shirukan."

At that, she wrapped her arms around herself and left the room. Her dreams with the black-clad figures chasing her parents—she never had a close look at their uniforms. Pallin had worn black, but so did Elis most of the time.

Hell, no. Elis was totally wrong. Pallin wasn't Shirukan. Raea couldn't believe it. It was all coincidence—*fashion* coincidence. She marched back into the sitting room to face him. "I don't want to hear any more about him. I'll see him when I want. It's *my* life, Elis. Your job is to teach me how to use the Starfire, not to run my life."

That quiet look of concern. Was that his answer to everything? She *hated* that. It made her feel guilty. "And stop giving me that look."

Had Miss Russet left her house yet? She couldn't sit here forever with Elis and Evelyn. She needed distance to stay mad. In his calm presence, she couldn't stay angry like she wanted, adding insult to injury.

She peeked out the front window. The car was still there. Why was her quiet life turning upside down now?

"You could use this time to practice," Elis said.

"Yeah. Okay." She gave a low growl in concession and started up the stairs.

"I am sorry."

She halted. "Shut up." Why did he have to be so nice about it? She wished she could go back to thinking he was creepy and stay pissed at him, but she couldn't. He wasn't creepy, just shy, maybe, and a little annoying. Or was his patient, soft-spoken manner getting to her? She did have fun last night.

Oh, no. She was *not* liking him. This was all the Starfire's fault. She wished her mother had never passed it on to her, or

that it had rejected her. "Forget it. It's over. Don't talk about it anymore."

When he said nothing, she hurried up the stairs to his room. His room. Why couldn't she do this in her room?

That damned Nina Russet. That's why.

Why did the woman have to bother her? That's whose fault this situation was. Raea couldn't wait for the woman to go home. But what about the film crew she would bring back? They'd never have any peace, not for a while, anyway.

In some way this was Elis's fault too. He had played hero and caused the reports that brought attention here. Damn them both.

In her session with Elis, the resonance came easier, almost without thought. Letting it go took more effort. It warmed through her and each time grew warmer, until she couldn't quit sweating.

"Dinner's ready," Evelyn called up the stairs.

None too soon. Raea's stomach gurgled at the thought of food, especially Evelyn's cooking. When did she start thinking of Mrs. Johnson by her first name? She could blame that on Elis too. Too bad she couldn't blame him for Pallin leaving in a couple weeks.

"A good place to end. You're gonna burn yourself out if you keep trying too hard."

"Fine. Then I quit." She didn't want any of this. She wanted a normal life. Now she knew why Debbie hadn't told her.

She wanted food and shoved past Elis.

He caught her hand, stopping her at the door. How dare he—

"You're doing far better than I expected."

Damn, him. She hated him because she couldn't stay mad. She yanked her hand from his and hurried down the stairs. Not fast enough. She felt the blush warming her cheeks. How did he do that? It's like he knew exactly how to reach inside her emotions and make her feel better, which embarrassed her because of who he was.

"I mean it. You're months ahead of many Keepers." His steps thumped quickly behind her. "Raea?"

She turned and shoved him away. "Damn it, Elis. Life was so much easier when I could avoid you. But you have to be like...*nice*. I can't stay mad at you, and that's why I'm mad." He better not take that the wrong way. "But you're not off the hook about Pallin."

"I don't like him."

"Shut up. Just...stay away from him." She had to end this. Besides, it was time to eat. The scent from the dining room rushed her down the last few stairs.

"Come and eat, dear."

Once again, Evelyn had outdone herself. The old woman had set out a full course meal. How did she do it? "I could never eat that much."

"You need some meat on those bones, dear. Sit down and eat."

Why did old women always say that? All that food looked divine. Raea took a seat near Evelyn. She had made enough to feed a few Daves. But Raea wasn't like her cousin. Then again, maybe this time she could be.

Sometime during the meal, she glanced out at a wall of white. Yay! If it snowed hard enough school would be cancelled. But so would any chance to see Pallin—boo. School or Pallin? Pallin or school? The worst choice in the world. But maybe that Miss Russet would be stuck at her hotel. Okay, then Raea chose school canceling.

When the phone rang, Evelyn started to get up.

"I'll get it." Elis jumped up before the old woman could fully stand. She smiled and settled back onto her chair. "Hello? Hi, Debbie...Yes, she's here...Don't worry...No, we just sat down to eat after another lesson...I'll let her know...Bye."

He hung up the phone. "Nina Russet was there. She left a little while ago, after questioning Debbie about you and your mother."

"Did Debbie say anything?" What would her aunt say about her? Debbie had kept her secret for over eighteen years. Raea doubted she'd give it out now. Still...What if she slipped and let out a hint of the truth? Nina Russet was sharp.

"No. She said she'll tell you when you get home. I heard Dave shouting in the background. She hasn't told any of them."

Good. Then Debbie must have said nothing. Her cousins didn't know. But Raea wanted to know what Miss Russet was asking this time. Until the woman left town with her story about Dark Angel, Raea expected nothing less than trouble.

Dark Suspicions

"Ted." Nina leaned back at the head of the queen bed with her cell phone to her ear. And to think she had expected that hole of a town to have no cell service. Shame on her. The place didn't have much going for it, though, other than the stories she had dug up over the weekend. Now she was stuck in the hotel with a white-out of a blizzard beyond her window. This was supposed to be spring. Where was the sunshine and rain? Why snow?

At least she could check in with Ted.

"Good to hear from you, Nina. How's the story coming?"

"I'm glad you asked. It seems this town has some interesting people. I haven't seen much—okay, nothing—of any Dark Angel yet, but I've met others worth a segment unto themselves."

"But the show is a two-hour special, Nina, completely focused on angels. We need all you can dig up on this town's angel."

"You'll get it, Ted. I promise. I met that kid the priest told us about. He's been escorting me, introducing people. Met some interesting ones. But best of all, one of his friends has some bizarre marks on her hands. I swear they match the images we found in the making of that ancient rituals episode. I've never seen anything like them anywhere else. But she won't talk about it."

"Will anyone else?"

"Somewhat. I think the aunt knows something, but she's not saying much."

"See what you can find out. But focus on the *angel*, Nina. See what you can find out about *him*. Don't get sidetracked right now. We're on a deadline and a *budget*. Bad enough you're taking more than a week. Contact the people who encountered him. Get their stories. The crew will arrive at the end of the week. I want you to work with them; sit out and try to catch a glimpse of this angel. I want video. Concrete proof. You'll have less than week with them. And I want interviews with the witnesses. Visit the sites where the encounters happened. Take measurements. Everything. Remember that you're there to find *proof*."

"I know. I'll get it done."

"Good. I have faith in you, Nina. But I can't chat. I have a meeting in five. Gotta go."

He clicked off before she could get a word in. Typical Theodore Feuerstein. Always busy. Always meetings, meetings, meetings.

Wasn't it early for a meeting?

Ah, no. He was an hour ahead of her.

No wonder she was hungry. She hadn't eaten yet and it was almost nine her time. The hotel had a complimentary continental breakfast downstairs. She could take advantage of that. And, since she was stuck inside for the day, or more, she could make phone calls. Josh would have the information she needed to contact the witnesses. She couldn't meet any in person for a day or two, but she could make appointments. The day wasn't a total loss.

Her stomach grumbled. "Yes. Yes. I'm going." She slipped on her shoes and headed down the stairs, past the indoor pool and hot tub—there was another way to waste the day—and into the lobby.

It was busy already with guests. Funny; she hadn't expected the hotel would be that full.

Two of the three round tables in the lobby were full. The third had a couple of people with chairs between them. What was it with people and personal space? Why couldn't they just sit close and chat? She could never understand that.

She grabbed a bagel and a cup of coffee and took a seat. Being alone without someone to talk to wasn't her style. She always thought if she ended up overseas and was captured by some extremist faction, all they had to do to torture her was to ignore her.

A television played one of the all day news stations. No one paid any attention to it, probably because it was turned down too low to hear over the idle chatter of other guests.

"Mind if I sit here?"

The handsome young man nearest her shook his head of shoulder-length blonde hair. He looked like someone who belonged on the beach ready to surf but he was a long ways from warm sand, something she would have died for right then. "You may. It is not claimed."

"Thanks. Interesting accent. You're quite a ways from home."

"Yes. Much distance." He grinned, his amber eyes sparkling. Maybe being stuck in the hotel all day wasn't such a bad

option.

"What brought you here?" She grabbed a packet of jelly from the bowl in the center of the table and smeared it on the bagel.

"I doing...important business."

"Yeah, sitting around watching the snow fly. There's important business." A few packets of sugar in her coffee ought to be enough. "Really, though. What's so special about this town?"

"I cannot be telling."

"Can't tell...Hmm...I suppose it's some secret military operation."

He turned away and sipped his orange juice. Curious. She had hit a bit close to the mark with her flippant comment. Now she had to pursue it. Her insatiable curiosity wouldn't let her quit until she had an answer.

"So, anyway, I'm Nina, from the Xplorer Channel." She wiped her crumbly hand on her jogging pants and offered it.

He shook her hand. "Pleased to meeting you. I am being called Pallin."

"Nice to meet you, Pallin. I've only been here a few days. How long have you been in town?"

"Not many days."

"How long will you be here?" In other words, how long did she have to enjoy seeing that handsome face?

He leaned towards her. "Many days more."

Behind the coffee mug she lifted to her lips, a smile formed. This could be interesting. Indeed, this town had more to offer her than she had given it credit. "What do you like to do for fun, Pallin?"

His suggestive smile sent a tingle of anticipation through her.

* * *

Time to quit. If Elis was right, Raea couldn't keep this up without hurting herself. And she was way too hot. She needed a break, or she needed Elis to help her with whatever came next.

What did come next? He hadn't said. Whatever the next step was, she needed him to show her.

She hated relying on him. Having him interfere in her life like he did with Pallin was unacceptable. So what if he was her connection to what she really was? He had no right—*none*—to confront Pallin.

Maybe she could call Pallin again. She hadn't been able to reach him yesterday after their walk. Either he was too busy or he had left town. No. Not the latter. He would have told her.

Raea grabbed the phone downstairs and took it up to her room. She might have a handset in her room, but this way Dave couldn't listen in. It wouldn't matter. The brat didn't notice with his eyes glued to the game he played.

She dialed the hotel and waited on hold for them to ring his room.

"Sorry, no one's answering."

Where was he, or his family? Obviously they hadn't checked out. What else could he be doing on a day like this, snowed in at his hotel? Wasn't he interested in her? Why wouldn't he call if he was? "Thanks, anyway." She clicked off and laid back on her bed, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. This couldn't be a good sign.

What were Jess and Linds doing? What about Josh? Without Nina Russet, he was probably bored. But he hadn't looked like he exactly enjoyed escorting her. Raea had avoided confronting her yesterday by staying at Evelyn's. Unfortunately, Miss Russet had shown up after lunch to ask Evelyn about angels. Raea hid in Elis's room, bored out of her skull for a couple hours while the woman spoke with Evelyn and Elis. Then again, not totally bored. The Starfire entertained her with more visions of her mother's life before Earth.

Just call. Josh deserves that much. She hadn't meant to duck out with Elis and lie about it. Josh probably felt betrayed. She would too.

Great. Now she hated herself.

She dialed his number and waited. When his youngest sister answered, Raea asked for him. Tess shouted into the phone for him. *Thanks. I needed a hearing check.*

Josh picked up in seconds. "Raea. I thought you'd be working on your 'special' project."

Ouch. Okay, she deserved the lash of his tongue. "I'm sorry, Josh. I had to say something to get out of there. You have no idea how annoying that woman is. Like some vampire needing innocent blood."

Was that a sigh she heard over the phone?

"I know. I didn't realize she'd turn into such a pest for you. What's goin' on with you and Elis, though? I thought you

couldn't stand him?"

He had to ask. She couldn't tell him the truth. She wasn't ready. What *could* she tell him?

"Debbie said he came from the same..." She couldn't say "world". That would give it away. Ah, yes. There was one word that fit. "The same land as my mom. He's kind of, like, showing me things from there. It's cool. He's actually pretty nice."

"That's great. See? I told you not to judge people. So, it's not a project for Mister Maviar?"

"No, but I didn't want your Miss Russet digging her claws deeper into my business."

"Sorry. Really. I didn't know she'd be like that. Honest. But I wish you could have told me sooner."

"It's not like I was expecting him to pop over like that. He kinda took me by surprise, and with her here...Not a good situation. I couldn't think of anything else."

"But when did this start?"

"Friday. I understood something he said, in his first language." Not the truthful answer to his question but part of it. Good enough for her to pass it off; she was a terrible liar. If Josh found out the full truth, he'd flip. And with him close to Nina Russet, her quiet life would turn into a circus. Raea didn't want any attention, or at least not that kind. From what she understood, Elis didn't want it either.

"So, your mom came from the same country he did? And you know the language?"

"Yeah. It's kinda like a big ice-breaker. You know?"

"No, but I can imagine. What's Pallin think?"

"He doesn't know. It's not his business." He wouldn't even be around much longer. Time to change the subject, sort of. "So...How's the Dark Angel research going?" She cringed. Oh, to be able to tell him how close he was.

His voice rang with a note of relief as he went into details about his introducing Nina Russet to a few people and their opinions on the sightings and unexplained healings. Unfortunately, that led to Miss Russet's comments about Raea's hands. Josh apologized again and jumped into mundane topics, like the snow.

In the end, Raea hung up the phone satisfied. She could always count on Josh to be reasonable, except for the truth in this case.

She checked the clock—almost lunch time. Ugh. She despised snow days. Dave shouted at his game downstairs, his curses reaching her through the door. Little Eric probably sat next to him, absorbing all his bad habits. Debbie read and Mike worked from home via the internet.

I hate this. This house is a cage. She wanted to go out flying again. That meant Elis.

She needed him. *No, I don't.*

But she couldn't progress with the Starfire. *Maybe they'll help.*

They hadn't reached that point. *I haven't tried. What can I do?*

It would be so much easier with his help. *Damn it.*

She had the phone. *Call already.* He was probably waiting for her.

The phone rang before she realized she had dialed. Why'd she do that?

"Hello?" he said.

She had to say something. "Uh...Hi. I need some help."

"How far did you get?"

"I get too hot."

"You need to release the energy. I can show you. You're welcome here anytime. Evelyn's words."

Yeah. She could imagine Mrs. Johnson saying that. In fact, she probably had at some point, and Raea had forgotten. But Raea didn't want to go out in that snow. On the other hand, having him there would incite Dave's taunting. The brat had already done that, though. *School's gonna suck tomorrow.* She could just imagine Chad. No. She did *not* want to imagine what Chad would say. Worse, what Pallin would say, which made her cringe.

Why me?

Oh, hell. The damage is done. Elis did that last night. No getting out of it now. Elis might as well show up there again. At least she could avoid the snow.

"Just come over here, if you really want to help me."

There. She said it.

"Give me a few minutes."

Why couldn't he refuse? "All right. See ya in a few."

"Bye."

She clicked off the phone. Well, he was coming. No use denying it to the others. *Might as well get this over with.* Besides, she had to take the phone back to charge.

Raea made her way to the main floor, passing Debbie with the newspaper at the dinner table. Wait—newspaper? "Don't tell me the paper boy delivered in this mess."

"No. Of course not. I didn't get a chance to read yesterday's," Debbie said.

That made sense.

The paper rustled as Raea set the phone on the charger. "So, you decided to come down?"

"It's only temporary. Elis is coming over." Hopefully Dave was too busy to have heard.

"I see. Then I should expect an extra mouth for lunch?"

Raea grimaced. She hadn't thought of the time. "Sorry."

"Not a problem. Don't worry. I'm just happy that the three of us can talk now."

There was that. "Yeah. About talking. Why did you ask Elis to snoop for you?"

Debbie frowned and folded the section of the paper she read. "He told you?"

"Yes, but Pallin told me first."

"Pallin? How did he know?"

"Elis confronted him."

Debbie opened another section of the paper. "Well, what's done is done. I'm sorry, but I can't let you be alone. Who knows what he might do to you?"

"I'm eighteen. Can't I live my own life?" Raea growled and hurried away to the front door. Just in time. A dark shape materialized from the white blur, and she opened the door, sweeping aside a bank of snow in the process. "Come in." She snapped the words in her frustration. The two of them—Debbie and him—tried to run her life. Three, if one counted the Starfire.

Elis stepped in and stopped on the door mat, where a pile of snow fell off his lower legs. The white stuff on his head and shoulders quickly melted to leave glistening drops weighing down the thick, black mess. ["We never see this at home. This is why the others all live in milder climates."]

["Others? Here? I mean, on Earth?"]

He nodded and pulled off his winter gloves, leaving the usual gloves on, which he wore underneath. ["They came by ship six years ago, I believe it was."]

["Why?"]

"Hey. What's with the —" Dave's game went silent. "Woo. Couldn't wait to see him again, Raea?"

"Shut up, Dave."

"You *are* seeing Elis. Wait 'til everyone hears about this. *And Pallin.* Holy shit!"

"David!"

He cringed at Debbie's scolding and returned to his game, mumbling about Raea and Pallin *and* Elis.

No. Raea smacked her hand to her face. Why did this have to happen to her? She knew Dave would torture her, but that didn't make it any more tolerable.

["He's like a little brother."]

Huh? The smile on Elis's face washed away some of her embarrassment. Did he understand?

["He'll grow out of it."]

She hoped so, and the sooner, the better.

Elis finished brushing the snow off his jeans and left his shoes to thaw on the mat.

["Up stairs. First door on the left,"] she said. The sooner they escaped to the privacy of her room, the sooner she could close out any taunting by Dave.

"Hi, Elis." Debbie looked up from her paper. "Oh, Raea, can you babysit Thursday evening for a couple hours?"

"Yeah, I suppose. Why?"

"The wake is that day. I want to go see how Sheri's doing. She's been out all week making funeral arrangements."

"Okay." Ryan Lake's parents. Raea remembered him—three years older, tall and lanky, bad acne, but nice to everyone. A shame it had to be his parents. "Did they figure out who killed them?"

"Nothing yet. According to Sheri, there were no bullets, just holes burned in their chests. She said it looked like something from a science fiction movie."

"Were there feathers?"

What? Raea turned to Elis. No. He couldn't be thinking what she thought he was thinking. Why couldn't he let it go? The hard line of his mouth said he was serious.

"She didn't say. There isn't anything in the paper either."

["You don't still think Pallin is Shirukan. Do you?"]

["Very much."]

["He's not. I'll bet on it. In fact, I'll prove it."]

["If not him, someone else is."]

Her insides went cold. ["Let's go practice."] If he was right, she'd never be ready to protect the Starfire. Now she really didn't want any attention from Miss Russet.

What if he was wrong? What if it was someone else? She hoped he was wrong, but something inside her felt that he might be right.

Angels Rising

It didn't happen in the morning, but Raea dreaded the day progressing. By lunchtime Tuesday, she wanted to hide, from Pallin too. She was going to kill Dave.

Passing Chad and his on and off girlfriend, Brittany, was torture. The mocking started by them was picked up by others around them. Everyone else turned to stare as she walked by with her tray in the lunch room. *Oh, God. Just kill me and get it over with.*

"Ignore them, Raea," Linds said from behind.

Easy for her to say. She wasn't the subject of humiliation.

A group of students vacated a table. She aimed straight for it. *Sit down and hide.* Embarrassment warmed through her. Or was it? A quick glance at her hands relieved her. No loss of control there. Thank goodness. What a pain it was to have to worry about displaying her special talents. Her whole world had changed in one weekend, one very *busy* weekend.

"Don't worry about it." Josh sat between her and Linds.

"Yeah," Jess said from her other side. "But what *is* going on with you two?"

"Nothing. I don't want to talk about it."

"Actually, it's pretty cool," Josh said.

"What is?"

"*Nothing.*" *Don't say another word. Everyone's listening.* Well, not everyone, but it felt like the whole cafeteria listened.

"But you have someone who can teach you about your mom's life—her culture—before she came here. What a way to get to know her."

"Through Elis? You've *got* to be kidding." Linds looked from Josh to Raea. "You are kidding...right?"

If Josh had kept his mouth shut... Too late. "No. He's from the same land as my mom."

"Shut up. Are you serious?"

"Yes, Jess." Raea sighed, picking at the food on her plate since her appetite had waned. *God, please don't let Pallin see me.*

"Wow. Who'dathunk?" Linds said.

"I know. It's weird, but..." *But what?* Her life was so different, she couldn't begin to describe it to them. Elis was nothing like what she had expected. In fact, he was the total opposite, and he was the town's Dark Angel, the hero in hiding. That was pretty cool. But the mystery had been interesting.

"Well?"

"Um...Just, he can be kind of...maybe...nice. I wouldn't have thought. He's just shy." Oh, no. Why did she just say that? She sounded like—

"You make it sound like you do like him," Linds said.

"I do not." Three days and a lot of time learning from someone didn't make them more than friends. "I like Pallin."

"Okay, this is too weird," Jess said.

"Can we talk about someone else? Anything? Maybe Josh's weekend?" There. That should shift the balance, and maybe her appetite would come back.

"Yeah. What happened with the lady from your favorite show?" Linds sounded more than a little upset.

"She's not what I expected." Josh dropped his eyes and picked at his food. "Once she saw Raea's hands, that's all she wanted to know about."

They turned to Raea. "Why?"

"She thinks Raea has the power to heal." He said it like he wanted an answer from her.

"No, I can't. End of story." *Move on.*

Silence circled over them like a vulture as they ate their lunch.

After a few minutes, Jess swallowed her last bite of sandwich. "So, Raea. How'd it go with Pallin?"

She should have known Jess would ask. At least that topic she didn't feel the need to shy from. Raea told them about her dinner and their walk and the awkwardness of meeting him outside of school. "I haven't been able to talk to him this morning since Dave opened his big mouth."

"I'm sorry. Maybe you'll have your chance." Jess motioned with her chin towards the front of the cafeteria.

So much for her appetite. Raea forced a smile when Pallin looked at her, but he didn't return it. Great. What did he think of this mess? Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if Elis was right. Defiance rose up like a cornered beast. No. Elis had to be wrong. He just had to be. Pallin was not a threat to her. Elis was jealous.

Yet he sat a couple tables away eating quietly as if nothing were amiss. God, she hated him. He might have seriously screwed up her chances of a normal relationship with a very hot guy.

Conversation shifted, but Raea knew her friends didn't look at her the same. They wondered about her and Elis—she saw it in their eyes.

Pallin joined them, but sat opposite her, not in the empty chair next to her. A bad feeling gnawed in the pit of her stomach. "Hi, Pallin."

Her friends said nothing. *Speak up. Someone help me here.*

"We must be talking. I hear...things."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's my stupid cousin. He totally twists everything to make fun of me."

"Is this true you work with him?" Pallin pointed to Elis, who peered aside at them through the black strands in his face.

"Only work. That's all. We're not...you know...a couple or anything. I'm not two-timing you. There's no way I'd ever be interested in him like that."

"This is good to hear. I would not like that."

"I can't blame you," she mumbled, picking at her food with her fork.

"We should like time together?"

What? She looked up. Had he just asked for another date? "Sure. Yes. I'd like that."

"I also. I will call later, but have much work."

"I'm looking forward to it."

He smiled, but something dark passed across his face. He looked down and the moment passed. Had she seen it? Impossible. She had imagined it.

* * *

The day wore on with the usual load of work, but at least Pallin talked to her. On the walk home, Josh glanced back at Elis behind them and to Raea in question. She understood. Fine. They could wait for him to catch up, but Pallin wouldn't hear about this. If she didn't need Elis's help, she wouldn't even bother with him.

Elis hesitated to pass them.

Josh put a hand out to stop him. "Hold up. We were waiting for you."

Raea answered the questioning look. "Yes. You."

"So, all right..." Josh looked up at Elis.

Seeing them facing each other made her picture Elis with his black wings. *Ob. My. God. Josh.* His obsession stood right before him, hidden in plain sight.

Giggles pressed for release at the irony. After her day, she needed it.

"So, you're teaching Raea about— What's so funny?"

"Nothing." Oh, the irony. She couldn't contain herself.

A hint of a smile from Elis broke any control she had. He knew. Oh, he knew, without a doubt, what set her off. And he enjoyed it. Drank it up.

"*What* is so funny here?"

"Nothing. I'm okay. Really, it's noth—" She couldn't help it.

"Elis?"

He shook his head, a grin on his face. "Private joke."

"Oh. Care to explain?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Fine. You two leave me out of your little joke. I'm glad you can be friends. Really. I mean, it's not like I wasn't your friend first or anything...*Raea*. No, I'm just a ghost." He sighed away the last statement, cutting Raea's giggles.

Always so melodramatic. "Josh. I'm sorry. It's not like that. I'd tell you if I could, but you really wouldn't understand right now."

"All right. I get it. You two have your fun, *at my expense.*" Despite his words, the curve of his mouth betrayed the

playfulness.

"Idiot. That won't work; I know you too well. Just keep your friend Miss Russet off my back and I promise someday I'll go into the whole long story." That someday would probably be a long time down the road.

"Deal."

They walked together the last half block to where Josh had to leave, Raea a step ahead of the other two. Elis answered Josh's questions about teaching her about the homeland she didn't know. Josh had no prejudices and seemed at ease talking with Elis. Why did she feel so self-conscious around him? Was it because she knew the truth? No. She had always been a little uncomfortable. Then what was it?

After Josh left, Elis stayed in step beside her. ["You would tell him?"]

["Maybe, years from now."] She glanced back, but Josh continued through the snow on the sidewalk.

["You don't trust him?"]

["I trust Josh, but right now, he's too close to Nina Russet."] She and Josh had been friends since first grade. He might not be popular, even dorky in some ways, but he was a good person. She might trust him, but she didn't want anyone to know about this. Not yet.

["I think he'd be a good ally."]

What? Raea halted in front of Elis. He had to be joking.

No. By the calm on his face, she knew he meant it.

["Raea, you don't have to live in complete secrecy. Look at Evelyn and Debbie, and Scott. They wouldn't tell anyone. And I think you underestimate Josh's good intentions."]

["No. I can't. Not now. If he slipped up and said something with Miss Russet listening...No."]

Elis sighed heavily. ["All right...Someday. But he deserves to know."]

Maybe someday, but that day wasn't today. She didn't want to be paraded on display like some freak in a sideshow. Bad enough knowing she was alien without being gawked at and hearing whispers. The whispers that cropped up since last week's teasing were bad enough without this latest news. No. She wanted her friends to treat her as a normal *human* being, as they always had.

At the walk to his door, they stopped.

["Are you still mad at me?"]

She looked up at the dark purple of his eyes. Such a unique color and vibrant, in spite of the sorrow she saw. Damn it. Why couldn't he be mean, so she *would* have a good reason to dislike him? But, no. Elis was trying to protect her, and teach her.

["No."]

["Then we'll fly later?"] he said.

Her heart thumped against her chest. She couldn't wait.

He chuckled. ["I knew you'd like that. You are Inari. Flying's a part of what you are. Come over later. We'll go out to practice releasing the energy, and fly afterwards."]

["Sounds good."] She contained the excitement inside. She hated that he could get her excited when she *so* wanted to hate him for causing problems with Pallin.

Flying *was* a part of who she was. From the visions she had of her mother, she knew Padina had felt the same. Scott had taken them out on frequent camping trips, not only to spend time with them, but also so her mother could spread her wings and fly. And sometimes she took Raea with her before she shrank Raea's wings for the last time. Raea remembered now. None of it had been dreams, as Debbie had suggested in the past to hide the truth. It had all been real. She had loved flying with her mother.

Now she flew with Elis.

Too weird. But she couldn't wait for later.

["I'll see you later?"]

"Oh, you can bet on it." She rolled up on her toes. Nothing could fully contain her impatience. She needed an outlet. She wanted to fly *now*.

He wasn't bad looking when she saw him eye-to-eye.

Stop it. Raea whirled and hurried away. God, if he saw that she blushed—she felt it warm all the way up to her cheeks—

he'd never say anything. What was she thinking? What was she feeling? This couldn't be right. She liked Pallin...didn't she? Not Elis. Pallin.

Speaking of him... Would he call?

She rushed up the stairs to the house. *Please let there be a message from him.* It would make her feel better. What about Elis? *No, no, no, no, no. Forget Elis. You. Do. Not. Like. Elis. Get your head straight.*

She unlocked the door and slipped her shoes off on the mat. Two seconds later she stood at the answering machine in the kitchen. No messages. Not *yet*. He might call later.

* * *

Well, there was a man who *really* couldn't hold his liquor. Half a glass of wine and he mumbled incoherently in his own language. She'd never believe it if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes.

Nina frowned at Pallin sprawled on the floor at the foot of the bed. He looked up, his amber eyes glazed. His wine glass lay on its side, wine splattered across the maroon hotel carpet. At least it would hide the stain. Or had they put in the color for a reason? Clever of them to think ahead.

But it shouldn't have been necessary, not in this case.

"Pallin..." She snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Come on. Stay with me here."

He flopped his head back to look up. A cold menace flashed across his face and he grabbed her fingers. "What...do?" His hand dropped to his side.

"Nothing. It was just wine. Honest. A little alcohol shouldn't do this." She had only thought it would loosen them both up. Yesterday had been fun. He was good, a bit painful, but good. She wanted more. With the streets cleared that morning, she had run her errands, met a couple of the Dark Angel witnesses, and stopped at a bottle shop on the way back to the hotel. Sure, she could have drugged him, but it would have gotten her nowhere, least of all where he had taken her in her room yesterday.

"Help me."

"You need a doctor?"

"No. Bed...Rest."

"All right, but you look terrible."

"Bed."

She pulled his arms. His legs made some effort to get under him but failed. After an awkward struggle, she got him on the bed and tucked the pillows under his head. "Better?"

"Hmm." He looked around, but his eyes fixed on nothing.

I guess that's a yes. So much for a little adult entertainment. How was she to know he couldn't drink? She had a full glass gone before he collapsed, and she felt no effect. It couldn't be the wine.

There went her night. But maybe she could still make something of it. That Dahlrich girl had avoided her Sunday. Maybe she could catch her at home tonight. Raea couldn't hide out at her boyfriend's all night. Okay, maybe she could, but from what the aunt had said, that wasn't likely to happen, not in the old woman's house.

"I guess you won't be wanting this." She grabbed the bottle.

"Wha' is?" His words slurred worse than a drunk's. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was on drugs.

"Cheap wine."

"Hmm." His eyes closed.

Nina grimaced and hoped she hadn't killed him. It had to be an allergic reaction, but she'd never heard of such a thing. This town got weirder and weirder. Talk about "Other Wonders". There was another idea for a story.

She closed the door of his room and returned to hers. Well, she still had her Dark Angel to find, the crew would be there in a few days, and she could spend her evening talking to Raea. Not a total waste. By tomorrow, Pallin should be recovered. If he still spoke to her, maybe they could get together again, alcohol-free. And she could get some information about his sensitivity for a new story. How many other people suffered in silence or weren't aware of the possibility?

Nina hurried to make some notes. Yes, a good idea for a story, but probably more in line with a medical program.

Before she could stake out the Logan house, she needed food. What better way to gather intel than to eat in a local diner, where she could observe, listen, and perhaps ask a few questions? Perfect.

By the time she finished, the sun set in the west. She walked out of the diner with a few opinions about the local angel, a recipe for green tomato pie, some advice on bottle-feeding calves—seemed it was calving season for the local ranchers—and a

lot of local gossip. Not bad for a couple hours work, although she could have done without the calving details.

Now, for Raea Dahlrich. *What are you hiding?* She drove up the darkening street at the edge of town and parked across from the two houses where Raea might be. Lights shone from both houses. If Raea was next door, she had to come out sometime.

Nina debated knocking on one door or the other. Which one first?

A flash of light stole her attention. It came from over the hill. Against the white of the snow, the shadows of two sets of tracks broke the smoothness of the hill. Curiosity tugged at her to investigate, but her desire to speak with Raea struggled to keep her in place.

What would a quick jaunt through the snow hurt? It wasn't far, and she could be back in a few minutes.

Hell. She couldn't argue against that logic *and* her curiosity.

Nina stepped out onto the snow-packed street and shivered. After snatching her hat from the rental car, she followed the tracks towards the hill. They weren't animal tracks but human footprints. Another flash of light and the sound of voices carried on the breeze startled her. What was going on? Kids?

She listened but couldn't make sense of what they said, especially since the wind blew away from her, muffling the voices. They quieted.

They must have heard her. Nina stopped and waited. Should she run? She had nowhere to hide in the open. What if poachers were out? They wouldn't hunt this close to town, though, and risk being seen. Would they?

Who was it?

A few seconds later, a steady beat of air came from over the hill. Two dark figures rose up on wings.

Nina stared in awe. "*Two* angels."

Cornered

Raea pointed at the figure against the white of the snow fifty feet below. ["Elis."]

He twisted around. ["Go."]

["What about you?"]

["I can handle this. Don't let her see your face."] He pulled his gloves off and tucked them in his pockets. ["Go!"]

He had done this before—no one had seen his face. Whatever trick he used, she was curious, but she didn't need Nina Russet recognizing her.

Something flashed bright behind her. *Elis?* Was he all right?

["Fly faster."]

Oh, thank God. He caught up beside her and motioned away and up. What had he done?

* * *

Nina stared at the darkness where the black-winged shadow had been a few moments ago. The night wind carried away any signs into silence. For a moment, she had thought the angel was coming for her, but he stopped and radiated a bright light, like all the witnesses reported. A warmth had filled her for a couple seconds and she swore she had died. But it faded, and with it, all signs of the two angels.

She had come as a skeptic, but now...

Now, she wanted to learn more. What had the two been doing? Why were there tracks in the snow if they flew? Where had they gone? Where had the second angel come from? What did this mean for this town, or even this world?

Or had it all been her imagination?

She ran over the hill from where they had risen. A few feathers littered the ground. Evidence. Then she hadn't imagined it. Ted would love this. And if the feathers were the same as the one kept by the little girl who had been rescued from the cornfield last August, they would have proof that she had seen the Dark Angel.

Thank you, Pallin. His adverse reaction had been the perfect answer to her prayers by giving her a reason to go out. And she still might be able to corner Raea about her hands. What a way to top off the day.

* * *

Raea glanced back. They were safe, she hoped. ["That was close. I hate that woman."] Now, why did the temperatures have to turn so cold again? Releasing the energy hadn't helped. The warmth brought on by the resonance vanished with the release of it. But now she knew how to let it out from the Starburst marks. Elis still had to help with her wings, though.

He sure was quiet.

Elis watched behind them, gliding rather than actively keeping up. In fact, she had to slow down to stay with him.

["Is something wrong?"]

He looked aside, his black wings outstretched and hardly moving since they reached a high altitude. ["I think she was studying our training area."]

Damn that woman. Couldn't she leave anything alone? Good thing Raea left her coat at Evelyn's and went out with Elis's spare coat, which, like many of his clothes, Evelyn had altered for his transformations—one good set for school and a separate set of shirts for flying. Had she left hers on the fence post again, Nina Russet would have one more reason to hunt her down.

["We can't work there anymore."]

Yeah. Figures. Nina ruins everything. Well, at least she avoided a run-in with the woman. ["Now what?"]

["We'll find somewhere else. Don't worry."]

["Do you think she recognized you?"] She hit a warm pocket and breathed easier. It passed too quickly, and the denser, cold air lifted her on a breeze.

["No."] Elis rose above and ahead of her.

["What did you do back there?"]

["A weak release of energy. The light makes the pupils contract and causes temporary blindness, especially in the dark. It gives me a chance to get away without being seen."]

Clever. ["If you read any of the stories, you'd know it works. They all think it's a light from heaven."]

He dipped his wing and dropped next to her, their wingtips nearly brushing. ["I know. Evelyn collected them all. My cousin called me on it a couple months ago."]

["Your cousin?"] She called him? Wait. ["On Earth?"]

["Nare. She lives in Denver."]

["How many others are there?"]

["Twenty-one, besides us."]

They must have fought the urge to fly or didn't show themselves with their wings if they did go out, or the stories were all local. She hadn't heard anything. Twenty-one...Twenty-three with her and Elis. She wouldn't have guessed.

["Where are we going?"] Last time they had gone out in the country was to practice some simple moves. They weren't doing much now—mostly gliding. But that was still practice. She had to make subtle shifts of her wings to hold onto the air currents.

["I want to check out the farm where that couple was murdered."]

["Why?"] What did he expect to find? Did he still think a Shirukan had killed them?

["To see if there are feathers."]

Of course. ["But they'd be buried under fresh snow."]

["Maybe not."]

["And how do you expect to find the place?"] In the dark from high above, where they couldn't see addresses.

He grinned and dove into a spiral.

Duh. So obvious. She wanted to laugh. The joke was on her. He'd been flying at night over the same land for almost two years. He probably knew every landmark from above by now.

What if he didn't find anything? Would he still suspect a Shirukan had come to the area? Would he finally give up his witch hunt of Pallin? Why would one of those "elite" of the Imperial militia kill a couple? What would the murderer have wanted?

She hated not knowing. Elis probably did too. Oh, but he suspected Pallin.

The joke was on him. Pallin was just a foreign student. She refused to believe he could be a murderer. He couldn't be a soldier.

She shuddered and shook away the growing worries that Elis might be right. Pallin acted like someone from the military.

Raea followed him through his flying exercises. They dove in a spiral, swooped straight up and twisted with the momentum, then straightened and flapped higher. He continued on with other moves. She lost her current while gliding and panicked as she fell, but caught an updraft of cold air. Too cold. No icicles, though. She could have sworn her wings had frozen.

Higher up, she found a warm layer and quit shivering. Elis flew close, his black wings nearly touching her brown.

["Use the resonance to warm up if you have to."]

Right. Resonance. Easy to manage now. The warmth passed through her. So much better. She should have thought of that. ["Thanks."]

A few seconds later, he pointed down. ["There it is."]

She followed him to one of many farmsteads spread far between on the white backdrop of fresh snow. Only the lone yard light shone out in the night. But fresh tire tracks blemished the perfect snow, and footprints led to the door from those tracks. She hoped no one was home.

Like him, she shifted her body to drop her feet and lifted her wings to let herself fall, until the ground came up and she flapped to avoid jolting her body. They landed in the wheel tracks. Normally she loved the snow, but now she wished it had melted. Anyone could see they were there by the tracks they left.

["Be careful?"]

Elis put up a hand and listened. Raea heard nothing. Silence surrounded them. Not even the cattle in the corral moved but stood or laid down under their shelter. Smart idea. Who fed them? Was that why someone had been there? Were they still there?

After a few seconds, Elis approached the house and turned the door handle.

Unlocked. Typical. Linds' house was always unlocked too. No one expected uninvited guests, or at least uninvited trouble.

He motioned for her to follow.

I don't like this. Entering someone else's house like that felt totally wrong in so many ways. The sooner they left, the better she would feel. Besides, two people had died there. How much creepier could that get?

Plenty. Elis left the lights off. One of the floor boards creaked under his foot. *Dear God, just like in those ghost movies.* Raea shivered and tucked her wings close. Her heart thumped in her chest.

Let's get out of here. She wanted to say it, but couldn't break the silence. It's hold overpowered her.

They passed through a small entry and into a living room, through a doorway and to a dining room and kitchen, then down a hallway and looked in each bedroom.

Elis passed through the bedrooms without turning on any lights. The yard light filtered through the windows sufficiently for them to make out the outlines of beds and dressers and chairs and knickknacks. One of the bedrooms reminded Raea of Eric's—cluttered with stuff on the walls and collectibles on shelves. Simplicity ruled the second, with a queen bed and two nightstands. It had to be the master bedroom. The door leading to a walk-in closet and another to a spacious corner bathroom confirmed it.

She had a bad feeling about snooping through the house. "Hurry up. Let's go," she whispered.

Elis nodded and motioned for her to lead the way out. They passed through the dining room and headed towards the door when light poured through the window of the front room.

Raea shoved Elis back. Where to hide? Where...There, the closet. "Get. In."

She didn't have to tell him. He opened the door and yanked her into what turned out to be a corner pantry with just enough room for them to stand squished together. Their wings took up more space than she would have liked.

The hiss of the screen door reached her faintly. Raea froze, alert to the intruder and to the warmth and closeness of Elis. His hands gripped her shoulders.

"I'll just be a minute. I have to get a couple things for Thursday." A woman's voice. The door slammed a moment later. Could that be Debbie's coworker, Sheri? Hopefully the woman would get what she needed and leave. It better not be in the pantry, though.

Raea tried to slide her arm to hold the handle, so no one could open it. The movement scraped the two nylon coats together, and she stopped. Stupid! They'd be caught for sure.

Steps grew louder outside the door.

Raea's heart pounded in her chest and her breath froze in her lungs. *No. No. No. Please, go. Go away. Just leave.*

Whoever listened outside the door huffed and walked away.

I promise I'll go to church with Debbie on Sunday. Maybe she would start believing, something her mother had never done. Raea let her head fall against Elis's chest. His heart pounded as hard as hers. *That was close. Way too close.*

He smelled good, better than his coat she wore. And the closeness...His presence had a calming effect on her. She liked it.

No, this is wrong.

Then why did she feel good with him? It couldn't be wrong. *But it's Elis, not Pallin.* No, it wasn't right for her to like the strangest, creepiest guy in her class. But he wasn't bad in any way, just reserved, quiet, maybe shy. He was like her, an outcast on that world. *I don't believe this. No, it's just being close like this. It's messing with my head. It could be anyone.* She barely knew him, even with the last few days of spending so much time together for her training. What was going on with her?

Padina laughed, soaring over deep blue oceans. Jerantis chased her close behind, and Padina swooped up.

She came around and ended up in his arms. ["Got you."] He suspended them both in the air.

Padina gave him a quick kiss. ["Only because I let you."] A moment later, she pushed away and dove towards the ocean.

["Padina!"]

She laughed and corkscrewed into a turn that put a floating island ahead of her. He disappeared from view.

She glided over the edge of the island and slowed to almost hovering on outstretched wings. ["Jerantis?"]

A second later, she gasped. Arms wrapped around from behind her.

["You're not getting away this time."] His gentle whisper subdued her.

She lowered her wings and let him carry her down to the island. He landed and loosened his grip, and she turned. With her arms around his neck she kissed him.

Raea blinked. Damned be those brief visions. Why did the Starfire continue to show her scenes of her mother and what must have been her father? Why now? What did it mean?

Always near Elis. It made sense. So, that was the game, was it? *Oh, no. No, you won't. I'll choose for myself, thank you very much.* She had to get out of that pantry and put some space between them. The insult. The Starfire had no right to control her life,

least of all who she should go out with.

Forget it. She had more pressing concerns at the moment anyway. When would the woman leave?

Steps hurried through the house. Raea swallowed. The sooner the woman left, the sooner she got out of that pantry and away from Elis.

Not soon enough, the door slammed shut.

Raea shifted, but Elis squeezed her shoulders. What?

A trick? The person faked leaving to lure them out. She should have considered it. Good thing he had.

They waited a while before the door opened and shut. A lock clicked and she thought she heard the storm door hiss.

Elis let go of her and opened the pantry.

Raea slipped out and stretched her wings in the cold air. Oh, hell. She had bent some of the feathers. It must have happened while they were stuffed inside the pantry. Elis hadn't fared any better.

["We'll pull them later,"] he said.

["Pull them? Excuse me?"]

["They'll grow back in a week. Remember the study of bird feathers in Biology?"]

Who could forget? Mister Maviar had them studying Condor feathers under a microscope. Josh wouldn't shut up about how he would love to study a Dark Angel feather.

["We don't preen like birds. We don't have the reach or the utilities. Inari feathers don't have barbules. We have chains, like microlinks."]

"Oh." *Oh!* They were more durable. Okay, so not a big deal. ["We can leave now?"]

["Yes. Let's go. There's nothing here, at least not in the house."]

Which meant he probably wanted to come back after the snow melted. He could do that on his own. Raea needed some distance and no more close calls.

No Ordinary Goose Chase

Elis slipped off his shoes and coat. He had proven nothing about Pallin or a Shirukan in the area, and Raea forbid him from saying anything more. He couldn't push the subject on her without proof. Bad enough that she left him with her coat with hardly a word. In fact, she'd hardly spoken after the close call at the farm house.

Elis hung up both his coats in the closet, which reminded him of the pantry. Standing in the tight space of the pantry with her had presented a unique opportunity for the kind of closeness he had only hoped for since seeing her the first day he arrived in that town.

For nearly two Earth years, he had longed to talk to Raea, but never knew what to say, which only made her avoid him. Like the human students around her, she ignored him soon after he started attending their local high school. Debbie's arrangements with the school allowed him to attend to watch over her, and Debbie's arrangements with Evelyn gave him a close place to live.

Now, Raea had trouble accepting his friendship. He saw it in the way she kept her distance. With the training, though, he hoped she would allow him in as someone she trusted, and maybe someone closer. For a brief time in that pantry, she had relaxed next to him. He could have stood there forever if she would have stayed. Every cell in his body found peace holding her. He hoped she would choose him to bond as a mate, but it seemed she had no intention of accepting him.

Only on landing in a new field a little further away from home than where they had taken off had she allowed him close again. And then it had only been to help her to pull the broken feathers, and afterwards to shrink her wings. She said little to him on the walk back through the snow.

What did he have to do to prove himself to her? The Starfire had brought this opportunity to be close in teaching her about what she was. He didn't know what else to do. Almost two years of silence and letting the students of McClarron High stick him with a negative label would be hard to break.

Some days he longed for home, despite the dangers. Earth could be much worse, even cruel, in many ways.

Elis sighed and closed the closet. Silence filled the house. Evelyn had gone to bed already. He respected her sleep, and he loved her as family. Her faith in her God inspired him. Maybe Earth wasn't so bad. And he had his cousin to talk to.

Nare. Maybe she could help him. He hurried up to his room, squeezing to the far left on the loose step to avoid making it squeak. From the desk in the corner, the computer fan hummed quietly. But he had another means to contact her.

He closed the door and pulled out the tri-comm from his jeans pocket. He carried it with him everywhere but didn't like to use it in public. Besides, while he liked to see who he spoke to, having that image move while he moved—because the signal connected to his optic nerve along with his auditory nerve—could be disorienting.

On the side of the flat, oblong device, he entered a code on the tiny buttons, the code for Nare's tri-comm. Unlike telephones, the devices had no need of a relay station when used within a few thousand miles of the tri-comm they dialed. No satellites or towers to relay messages. Inar'Ahben's orbit was far less cluttered than Earth's, except for the trading station.

He set the tri-comm on a line along his cheek from near his ear to his mouth and hit the transmit button. Now he could only wait.

While he waited, he could search. The monitor on the desk brightened with a click of a key. It had taken some time, but he had learned to type. His skills might not match others, but they were sufficient.

After some time—still no answer from Nare—and calls to the hotel, he had nothing on Pallin Montran, not even a birth record. The internet had anything on almost everyone in the world. Surely a man born to any U.S. military officer at least had a record with the government, if not a passport. Even he, Elis, had to jump through hoops, which he cleared thanks to Debbie's contacts through the office her brother Scott had worked in. He couldn't keep it all straight. The paperwork had given him a headache. She had done all the real work. What a mess. Humans had redundancies on top of redundancies.

Pallin had nothing.

Nothing. He might be able to use that.

No answer from Nare came after an hour. She had her reasons, or so he hoped. No worries there. She could take care of herself.

Elis removed the tri-comm and changed for the night. Debbie probably still knew enough people in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service.

The girl had evaded her again.

Nina growled and let the door of her hotel room slam shut. Hearing it knocked out some of the curses built up inside. The night had grown too late and too cold. She couldn't sit in that car forever. In summer, maybe; but winter, no. Where had Raea gone with that boyfriend? No one had seen them since supper.

You're good. I'll give you that. But you can't hide from me forever. Sooner or later, she would catch Raea. Questions piled up, demanding answers. She had to know. If Raea had nothing odd about her, why did she continue to hide? Something was up.

At least one good thing had come from her visit—feathers. Brown and black. Some had skated across the snow, blown by the wind, but she caught all she could. The black had to be from the mysterious Dark Angel. But who was the other? She could have sworn the two wore regular clothes. Why would beings supposed to be supernatural leave tracks in the snow, or need to dress warm?

There's more to this than I thought. Something doesn't add up. Where's the connection? I'm missing something obvious.

She held up the five feathers she had collected. In the light of the hotel room, faint mini rainbows shimmered across the brown and black when she turned them at a particular angle. Beautiful.

* * *

"Look who just showed up for lunch." Linds gaped at the figure that approached the lunch line.

Pallin. His morning call had sent shivers of anticipation through Raea, and pity as he explained the trouble with homework. When she took the chance to visit with him that morning before class, Pallin agreed to join Raea to go out for lunch.

"You are ready for food?" Pallin glanced about at the others. "I being not late?"

"Nope. In the nick of time," Josh said. "So, where're we going?" Josh's interest in Pallin switched to his stomach fast.

"Let's get out of here. We can decide in the car," Linds said.

"Agreed." Jess led them to the nearest door.

"How 'bout Pizza?" Linds asked.

"Sounds good," Josh said.

The quick lunch at the gas station cafe turned out more pleasant than Raea expected. Pallin said nothing about Elis, which disappointed her in a way. Shouldn't he be jealous? He had been yesterday. Or had the fact that he wouldn't be there long made him give up any hope of continuing a long-distance relationship?

During their conversation, he and Raea both reached for a napkin. When her hand brushed his, a jolt seized through her. Pain crushed her skull.

What the hell... Not now. What happened this time? The voices cried in discord. That damned Starfire. Why did it do this? First Elis. Now Pallin.

"Raea, are you all right?"

"No." She spoke through clenched teeth. *Someone make it stop.* "Shut up!"

"Sor-ry," Jess said.

"Not you." Raea gasped and held her head. *Quiet! I can't understand. Leave me alone!*

"Where's Elis when you need him?"

Josh said it. For once, she agreed. She could use that magic touch again. How did he quiet the Starfire's voices? *Go away. It's too much.* If they'd just leave her alone. What did she have to do to shut them off?

The voices faded, taking the headache with them. Good riddance. She had to find a way to keep them silent. For now, they went away without much trouble, and the headache faded.

"You okay?" Linds put a hand on Raea's shoulder.

"Yeah. I'll be fine."

"What happened?"

Raea looked up at Jess. "Just a sudden headache. It's gone now."

"Shit, Raea. That's the second time in a week. I'd get it checked out if I were you."

"Ahem..." Josh gave Linds that look. The look that warned them to watch their language.

"Whatever."

Raea agreed with Linds. 'Whatever' said it best. None of them cared about his preaching.

"This is not normal?" Pallin asked.

"No, but I'm fine." *Now. No thanks to the Starfire.* What set them off this time? She glanced aside at Pallin's hand on the table. He had never touched her before then. What were the entities trying to tell her? That they didn't want her to be with Pallin? Did they know something, like when Elis had touched her to ease her headache last week? So, they liked Elis and not Pallin. No one controlled her life. Period. End of story. She would decide.

But the headache made her wonder. Was he a threat? Is that what they tried to tell her?

If they really wanted her to understand, the least the entities could do was tell her clearly.

She returned to the school with her friends before the warning bell. The sun warmed her and melted the snow. Raea stood outside with Pallin, her friends giggling on their way into the school to give her some time alone.

"So...um...it wasn't much, but I'm glad you came." That sounded stupid.

"It was nice. I can have time later...alone?"

Another date outside of school. Another chance to find out if she was wrong or right. "Of course. Yeah. I'd like, like that." So, why didn't the proposition excite her like it did a few days ago?

"Good. I like also."

"Yeah." Now what?

Silence fell between them. *Say something.* "We should get back to school."

"Yes. It is...much work. You will be done soon?"

"No. A couple months. Then graduation. *Then* I'm all done, but of course there's college in the fall." Or would there be? What would happen with her not being human? What if Nina found out? *Don't think of that.* She would have a future, and she would live a human life, like her friends.

The bell rang. "We better get to class. Call me later?"

"I will call."

She waited, hoping he might offer a hug or something more, or at the least to hold her hand, but he never reached for her. He never touched her. Maybe Elis had frightened him off.

She'd kill him.

"Well...um...We should get going." She reached out, but he pulled his hand away. All right. So, that was weird. Had he felt the shock? This wasn't going as she hoped. Everything was wrong.

She hurried to the doors with him, where she caught Elis watching. Damn him. Why did he have to keep this up? Pallin wasn't there for her crystal. In fact, he had never asked about it, or her hands. And he'd been a gentleman the whole time. If Elis continued his wild goose chase and turned off Pallin, she'd never forgive him.

The afternoon brightened for her with questions about her man from some classmates and dirty looks from others. Those others could be jealous all they wanted. Pallin liked *her*, or so she wanted to believe. They weren't getting any part of him.

It all ended with the walk home. Elis said nothing about Pallin, and Josh said plenty, mostly complaining about the unfairness of Mister Carter's Government test. Raea hardly listened. From down the street, she spotted the dreaded white rental car driven by Nina Russet. Oh, no. Raea had nowhere to hide. None. Caught in the open. A deer in the headlights.

To hell with that woman. No more hiding. Raea could face her without giving away her secret. She just had to act like nothing was strange.

Great. That'll go over like a lead balloon. She was doomed.

Two of a Kind

Here they came. Finally. Nina started to think the girl would find another way to elude her. Not this time. Raea and her boyfriend parted with Josh and headed straight to her.

Nina no longer needed the kid. He'd been helpful, but she could manage on her own. Besides, she'd contacted all the local witnesses and arranged interviews. And D.C. and the crew would likely arrive tomorrow, in time for the weekend. They could start taping the interviews.

In the meantime, Raea's turn. Nina had questions yet to dig up answers to.

Nina stepped out of the car into a puddle. Goddam snow. How did people live in this? If the snow wasn't bad enough, the melting afterwards turned everything to a sloppy, soggy mess. She couldn't wait to get home.

"Raea." Cold water soaked her feet. Her best shoes, ruined.

The girl turned pale and averted her eyes at Nina's approach near the house.

"I've been meaning to talk to you while I can. If it's not too much, I have a few questions."

The girl lengthened her steps to the patio of the house. She wasn't getting away that easily. Nina stuck like glue. She had come for a story, and by hell or high water, she was going to get it; but she could do without the high water, at least the ice cold water that ruined her shoes.

"Your mother had the same marks on her hands, didn't she?"

Raea faltered at the bottom of the steps. Got her!

The tall boyfriend stepped between them. "That's not polite to ask."

"It's perfectly acceptable. If Raea's inherited her mother's marks, I'd like to know how." She rounded him to meet Raea on the steps. "What caused them? Did your mother ever show you anything unusual?"

"Leave me alone."

She wasn't getting off the hook that easily. But it would take some sweet-talking. Now for the act and her most innocent voice. "I'm not here to harass you. I honestly want to know. This is an astounding breakthrough. If there's any chance that it's a family trait, you should consider the possibilities. You'd be an international star, a religious icon rivaling the Pope. The power to heal the world could end wars, save the sick, and bring hope to the needy. You have a gift, Raea. A gift this world needs."

"She wants none of that." Elis stepped in front of her, while Raea slipped to the door. "Aren't you here to pursue your Dark Angel?"

"Yes, but this is also a story. I'm already here and might as well make the most of my time."

There. Nina slipped past him and leaned on the door, blocking the girl's escape. "Think about it. Let me bring in some experts to study your hands, maybe run a few tests. They're so unique and so very much like the legends of ancient tribes. And a few reports have come in the last few years of others like you around the world."

Aha! Raea knew something. The drop of her jaw and wide-eyes gave it away. Nina was on the right track.

A firm hand on her shoulder pushed her away. "Not today, Miss Russet," Elis said.

Oh, no. Raea wasn't getting away this time. Boyfriend or not, he would not separate her from the girl.

"I suggest you return to your Dark Angel."

"But—"

He shoved her back and stepped in front of her with an outstretched palm, while Raea unlocked the door. The two exchanged words in a strange tongue.

But, his hands. The exposed fingertips had bits of the same jagged lines of aquamarine as on Raea's hands. Impossible. It couldn't be.

Yes. There were faint lines of aquamarine on the undersides of two of his fingers coming out of the black gloves. *The conspiracy goes deeper. What are you two up to?*

Now Nina *knew* they hid something. But he hid his hands inside those gloves. All. The. Time. And no wonder—who wouldn't ask questions if they saw the two of them with the same markings? Two of them working together. Suspicion gnawed at her mind.

Nolan might know something. He had served as a consultant on a few shows. He was more than willing to offer his

expertise in this area.

"All right. You win." She'd find a way to expose them. Later, after she talked with Nolan.

Elis dropped his hand as Raea shut the door between them.

"I'll leave. I know when I'm not wanted."

His eyebrow lifted.

Yeah, Mister Innocent Protector Boyfriend. Play games all you want. In the end, I will win. They were two of a kind, Raea and Elis. Who were they really? Or should she be asking *what* were they?

Nina hurried to the car, anxious to reach some privacy for a phone call. She hit the speed dial on her cell for Nolan's office. With all luck, he'd still be in. When wasn't he in? The man lived out of his office, or it seemed that way. Even at an hour ahead, it wasn't five o'clock for him. On his short days, he didn't get out until after six.

The phone rang half a dozen times. He either had the machine off or set for a dozen rings. He preferred a chance to answer in person and had always said the machine was just back-up anyway. Besides, telemarketers often gave up after four or five rings, he had added.

On the seventh ring, he picked up. Superstitious bastard. "Hello?"

"Hey, Nolan, it's Nina."

"Hey, Nina. Where are you?" The scratchy, smoker's voice. He really should quit, but he always blew her off when she suggested it. If she could, he could. It would make her feel better about quitting.

Elis disappeared inside the yellow house. Good. At least he wasn't watching her. She started the car.

"You'd never guess."

"No. Probably not. You get around to some of the oddest locations."

"All right, wiseguy. I'm in North Dakota, investigating those Dark Angel stories. But I have something else." She switched to speakerphone and drove off. "I discovered a girl, and maybe a guy too, with strange markings on her hands. They're not tattoos, that I can tell, or even that I've been told. And they're not like an odd birthmark—it's on both hands. As far as I know, birthmarks don't have that kind of symmetry."

"Not usually. No. What do these marks look like?"

"That's the odd thing. I know I've seen something like them before."

"Which is why you called me."

"Exactly." Good old Nolan. He knew what to expect from her.

"All right. I'll bite. What are they? What do you need from me?"

"I need you to send me everything—I mean *everything*, pictures, interpretations, *everything*—on these marks. I swear I've heard about others with them in recent times too, but I'm not sure.

"Anyway, they're a kind of greenish bluish color. It's like something dropped in the center of her hands and sprayed outward, on the palms *and* the backs, but less on the backs. Kind of like a topaz or aquamarine sun with squiggly rays coming out. Got anything like that?"

"Maybe. I'll see what I can come up with. When do you need it?"

"Right away. I don't want to make another trip to this place if I don't have to. The crew'll be here tomorrow and if I can get two stories in one trip, fantastic."

"That's kind of short notice. Don't you think?"

Yeah, well, that's the business. Nina bit her tongue. No sense upsetting Nolan, not if she wanted his cooperation. "I'm here now. It's just easier."

"For you." He grumbled the words but let out a sigh in the end. "All right. Send it to your email?"

"Thanks, Nolan. I owe you one."

"Yes, another one. I'll add it to your tab."

Ouch. That was a bit harsh. "Point made. I'll repay you when the time comes."

He cleared his throat, or so it seemed, although she swore she heard a "Yahrigh" in there. Someday, she would repay him for all the research. "Call me if you need anything else, Nina."

"You know it. Ciao."

"Bye." He clicked off.

Nolan might be in a bad mood, but he'd come through. He always did. She hoped he sent what she needed within a couple days, though, before her schedule filled up.

In the meantime, she had a few feathers to overnight to their research team. The rest she would keep. She hurried back to the hotel, anxious to send off those feathers. Two angels. She still couldn't believe what she had seen with her own eyes.

Speaking of seeing with her own eyes. "Pallin."

He halted in the lobby of the hotel. Something dark crossed his face, for just a moment.

"You're looking better," she said. That was an understatement.

"I feel better."

"Hey, look. I'm sorry about the wine. It wasn't that good anyway, but I had no idea you couldn't drink. Are you on some medication or something that it overreacted in you?" Or was it an allergy she could study?

"No. I am never drinking wine."

"Yeah. Sorry, I wish I'd known." Hmm...Her ideas for a new study had a launchpad. "I hope we can get together again." For more than just research.

His smile suggested forgiveness. The way he stepped close to her with that commanding presence that had taken over the other day made her weak for the temptation.

No, she had work to finish first. Pallin could wait. Dear God, she couldn't wait. She would have to wait.

"I am liking that."

That's what I wanted to hear. He was the only good reason for visiting that town. "Then I'll see you later?"

Her temperature jumped at the lustful grin he gave her. She really couldn't wait for later.

Connections

The last two days of the week couldn't have gone fast enough. Raea spent the better part of each evening practicing with Elis before the nights grew too cold to want to fly, and after Debbie came home Thursday. Apparently it had been Sheri at the house and she had mentioned suspecting squatters but found no sign of anyone on a return trip. Warmer weather was promised for the weekend. With it, Raea anticipated the chance to spread her wings.

She had talked to Pallin at school, but Debbie didn't give her a chance to go out with him, and he didn't seem inclined to ask. What was going on? Doubts crept into her mind. She hoped to put them to rest, but Pallin kept his distance since their hands brushed. Had he felt it? Had it turned him off? What did it mean?

And just when the weather was good enough to go walking. They should take advantage of it. Spring weather could change at the drop of a hat. Since March had come in like a lion, she expected it to go out like a lamb. They were in the homestretch in the latter half of the month. Spring couldn't come fast enough for her.

The best yet—no Nina Russet. Unfortunately, as Josh informed her Friday, that was because the film crew had arrived. What a way to spoil her weekend. Now she had to worry about being videotaped and caught doing something un-human. She couldn't wait until they left.

After school Friday, Raea asked Pallin to go for a walk, but he had work to do. She could call later, though. Besides, she had the whole weekend ahead. That left her the option of practicing with Elis. She could now release the energy in a burst, but it was uncontrolled and strong. He warned that she could kill someone with it. That made her hesitate. She wanted to learn to refine her control, so she wouldn't hurt anyone.

What else could she do, besides hang out with friends?

Not this time. She wanted to push ahead with the Starfire lessons. Since getting into them, the visions and dreams had all but stopped. Elis it was.

With her mind set, she leapt the melting runoff meandering down the sidewalk, avoiding the slushy lawn altogether, and arrived in seconds next door. She pounded a triple knock and waited.

When the door opened, surprise flashed across his face for a moment. In the next moment, his smile washed it away. "Come in."

"Thanks." Was it warm suddenly? Oh, no. Not again. What was going on with her?

She ducked her face as she slipped past him. *Please don't let him see the blush.* The storm door hissed shut behind her. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and she removed her coat with her back to him. Ever since the pantry in the farmhouse, thoughts of being close to him occupied her mind.

"I didn't expect you this soon."

"I didn't have anything else." Pallin seemed to have lost interest but still talked to her at school. No one said he went out with anyone else, but he skirted the subject when she asked if something was wrong.

Elis shut the door and took her coat to hang it up. "You've been making incredible progress."

"It doesn't feel like it." Almost a whole week and she had managed to find the resonance inside her and release the energy in a burst. Sure, that was fast progress. When did she get to do the cool stuff?

"Really. You've learned fast. Most of us take a month's time to reach this point."

"Yeah, right." Damn, that crooked smirk was cute on him.

No. No. NO! I did not just think that.

Yes, she did. Good God. She was attracted to him. How did this happen? *When* did this happen?

No. She couldn't be. What about Pallin? He was hot. Elis was just like...sort of...cuddly cute.

Was this the reason she wanted to spend time with him, because she was attracted to him? *What do I do now? Why did this have to happen?*

"Of course, we get the basics around seven years, before we start primary school, and we're not pushed hard. It's light work. Once we have that, our parents help us, but the real training doesn't come until after secondary school. That's when we return to Starfire Tower alone for a few years to refine our control."

"Well, that's different. You were a child. I'm eighteen." And he probably didn't have the attention span as a child to focus for long. No wonder it took a month. She still felt slow.

"And you've been applying yourself and pushing hard." He glanced aside, his eyes unfocused.

He planned something. After the other night, she wasn't sure she trusted his plans to work out. Pantry. End of story.

"Nina has her film crew," he said.

"Yeah." What was he suggesting?

"We might do best to stay inside."

But she wanted to fly. She didn't want to stay inside. "What can we do inside?"

"You can practice growing your wings."

"Whoa. No way! I can't do it myself." It hurt.

A smile spread across his face. "It's time you learned."

No. She didn't want to learn it yet. It *hurt*. In fact, it hurt like hell. "I'm not ready."

"Yes, you are."

"I'll rip my clothes." And she was not going topless. If he suggested that, she'd bust his nose on the spot and leave. She so wanted him to suggest it. She wanted a reason to be mad at him.

"You've ripped a couple shirts already. Did you keep them?"

She couldn't even hold a dirty mind against him as a reason to dislike him. No. Of course not. He had to be *nice*. "Yeah, but—"

"Run home and grab one."

But she had just taken off her coat. Why couldn't he have said so sooner?

"Or use one of mine."

Too weird, but at the same time...His shirt? *His* shirt. Part of her liked that idea. Yeah, like the part of her she wanted to knock out for falling for the Starfire's influence. She didn't want this, but she couldn't help it. What could she do? Fighting proved almost impossible. She was losing, and losing bad. But wasn't that a good thing, in a strange way?

"That'll work. But don't get any funny ideas." She might still be able to convince herself that she wasn't attracted to him. But *his* shirt...Maybe she should run home quick.

Forget it. She was there. But her friends were *not* going to hear of this.

"What funny ideas?"

Faking innocence. She wouldn't fall for that, but she wasn't about to explain herself. "Nevermind. Find me a shirt. I'll be in the bathroom. I don't like this, you know."

"I know." He hurried up the stairs with his back to her.

"It hurts."

"I know." The loose board squeaked under his weight.

"Your shirt'll be too big," she called up as he reached the top.

"I know." Exasperation. Good. Maybe she'd wear him down and he'd back off this idea.

Not likely. He'd been pretty insistent with all of her progress so far. Why would he change now?

The scrape of the closet door reached her. Damn. He was looking. No getting out of it this time without a good excuse. She passed through the sitting room, where Evelyn smiled from her rocker near the window, to Evelyn's bedroom and the main floor bathroom around the corner.

Raea didn't wait long. In minutes, Elis's steps squeaked and clomped coming down the stairs. The old house made a lot of noise.

He appeared at the door with a gray t-shirt. "It's the best I could find."

"It'll have to do." She took it, expecting him to step out. "Ahem?"

He smiled shyly and stepped back. Much better. She locked the door behind him. This was so weird. Not the floral print towels and cracked porcelain of the sink. The whole situation. She was an alien raised on a world where she and everyone around her believed she was one of them. And who should she fall for, but the guy next door, another alien like her. *Inari*. Alien sounded so outer space. It hadn't been coincidence his living next door and such. But falling for him had been partly coincidence, partly the fault of some intelligent collective hinting to her.

Why fight it?

What would she tell Pallin? *Easy stomach*. It churned and twisted. Her nerves gave out at the prospects. Did Elis even feel the same for her? Should she completely end the little bit of hope with Pallin? If only these things came with directions. She had no experience in relationships like this. Besides, what would she tell her friends?

Why was she worrying? She wasn't even sure of what she wanted. *Get your head together.*

Raea shook away the confusion and changed shirts. Time to practice, not to worry. His shirt hung on her like a sheet. Could it be any longer, she could have belted it and worn it as a dress. What did she expect from an XL on a body that fit a medium? Well, here went nothing, except her back. A slight chill came through. She reached around. The slits left part of her back exposed, like a hospital gown. No problem. She'd keep her back away from him.

She opened the door to an empty bedroom. What? He couldn't stick around for her to model it? Mister Respectful. She should have known.

Voices reached her from outside the bedroom.

She found him talking with Evelyn, who looked up and chuckled. "A bit big, dear?"

"Yeah. Well. It's only temporary." Right. She could tell herself that all she wanted. Elis glanced down, a look of disappointment on his face, or so she thought. Or was it the Starfire influencing her interpretation of his mood? She couldn't even trust herself now.

"Let's get this over with." She couldn't stand that look on him and motioned him up the stairs ahead of her. No way would she turn her back on him.

He went ahead.

Upstairs, he stepped aside from the bed. "You might want to lay on your stomach, but sitting up works."

As if. She sat on the edge of the bed and he knelt before her.

["Now, find the resonance and think about flying. Think about using your wings, what they feel like, the muscles to control them."]

Yeah. She could do that, except for one thing. ["What about the pain?"] And why couldn't he just stick with English?

["It's only temporary. Work through it. You need to learn to control the transformation yourself. And this is a good time to practice."]

["Like that's so easy."]

["I won't lie. It takes focus. But it gets easier with practice. Remember—this is who you are. You are Inari, like me. We're born with wings. Not having them is unnatural, like having a limb amputated."] He patted her leg and stood. ["I know you can do it."]

Oh, how she loved his smile. Wait. *Don't go there. Not now.* Now was the time to focus on her wings.

What? Wait a sec— "So, like, you're just leaving me alone?"

"I'll be outside the room. This is something *you* have to do."

Alone. Joy. He knew she would ask his help. "You just have to make this difficult, don't you?"

"I never said it was easy."

That teasing grin. She swore she'd wipe it from his face, but not to hurt him. *Enough. Focus on the resonance.* She really was attracted to him. *Get over it. Now is not the time to think about Elis.*

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. One way or another, she would do this. The sooner she did it, the sooner she could show him.

Find the resonance. Check. Actually, the easiest part of the whole process. That now came with a thought since she knew how it felt inside her.

But to grow her wings? That wasn't so easy. Raea struggled with focusing on having her wings, but the thought of the pain hindered her.

After some time, she fell back on the bed, fanning herself from the heat of the resonance. She needed fresh air. She wanted to fly. "Elis?"

No answer.

Now, where had he gone?

"Elis?"

Still nothing.

Nope. There it came—the thump of steps. He hadn't stayed outside the door as he said he would. Rather, he'd gone downstairs.

She glanced aside at the digital clock on the nightstand. A half hour? That's it? It seemed like eternity.

"What is it?" He opened the door and scanned the area around her. "You haven't done it?"

"Oh, I've tried. I just can't. And I'm too hot now to continue." She wiped sweat from her forehead. That should clue him

in. "Where'd you go, anyway?"

"Downstairs to talk to Evelyn. You need to keep trying, but it's dinner time."

"Food." She sat up and shivered at the cool air that brushed through the openings at the back of the shirt. Food would feel better in her empty stomach.

"Come and eat. You can try again afterwards."

"You're gonna make me keep at this all night?"

"You can go home anytime. But, no flying until you can get it yourself."

He'd pay for that. She'd show him. "That's so unfair."

He shrugged and stepped back from the door. "Coming?"

"Yes."

"Maybe later we can go out and practice releasing the energy."

Raea halted before stepping through the doorway, next to him and comfortable with it. Out? As in... "And fly?"

"Not until you complete your own transformation."

Damn him. He was worse than their math teacher, and he had the nickname of Patton. Oh, well. She supposed she really should be able to change herself. "All right. Fine. But you're totally gonna pay for this."

"I know."

* * *

What a long, annoying day. Nina collapsed on her bed at the hotel. All day interviewing, setting up camera shots and equipment, packing up equipment. Repeat at the next house. Wash, rinse, repeat. And they had only been able to meet with three of the families. Three, out of something like six. Well, that was half. But it felt like nothing.

Not to mention they had observations yet and she needed to review the footage to see if they needed anything more. She had less than a week left.

"Crazy little town." She needed a cigarette. *No. Willpower. You quit last month.* Continuing her nicotine addiction would be the death of her anyway. She knew better, but quitting was harder than catching Raea.

"That's right." She sprang to her feet and grabbed her laptop from the dresser. The girl. She'd actually been too busy to think about her, but not now. "Let's see if you sent me anything. Shall we, Nolan?" She'd been out all day. After hearing nothing since her call, she hoped he finally got back to her with the information she needed.

"All right now." She typed her login and password. Had he found what she hoped? He had pictures. She remembered seeing them. At the time, it didn't concern her. Now, she had to know. Stupid computer. Why couldn't it load faster?

Or not. Her email came up and processed. New emails popped onto her screen. Something from post-production on her last assignment. No. Her cousin Mary. No. *Come on.* No, no, and no.

Then it popped up. "Bingo!"

What was this? Could he attach any fewer files? Four was all he could come up with? And so little explanation. Normally he'd talk a person's ear off about these things, or write a thesis of an email. She must have upset him.

"You can do better, Nolan. Ah, well. Let's see it." She opened the four files—three pictures and a document. The document was written by none other than...*Nolan. You didn't let me down. 'Atta boy!*

The pictures, though... *That's it! I knew I'd seen these before.* Sure enough, they were images from various civilizations showing some sort of radiance coming from a person's hands as they touched another prostrated before them. Two were of painted images, and one was a carving. The pictures showed a sequence of events that could only be interpreted as healing. In one of those sequences, the hands were upraised and open with some jagged blue-green markings on them. The individual was shown flying above the others with wings that weren't there before.

Wings? Like angels.

Nina pulled up the document and sat back against the pillows on the bed to read. Now she had to know what Nolan thought. Ideas formed in her mind about the marks and the black and brown feathers she found. The two angels rising into the night sky...

It couldn't be!

Angel Wings

Raea sat on the side of her bed, listening through her open door to the gunshots from the television downstairs. Typical Saturday. Dave played his games. Eric probably sat with him, watching, if Dave wouldn't let him play. Debbie cleaned and folded laundry. Mike had Buddy out for a walk.

She had to see Pallin, to be sure. Did she really want to be with Elis? What if she liked both? What if she was wrong? Maybe she only thought she liked Elis but that was because she spent more time with him but really had feelings for Pallin?

Why did it have to be so complicated and confusing?

Last night, Elis had left her mostly alone to concentrate, so they hadn't had much time together. She had hardly seen him, although she thought of him. They hadn't gone out flying, but she hadn't been able to overcome her fear of the pain to relax and let the wings grow out.

Waking up that morning refreshed her, but now that she had the afternoon open, she couldn't help wondering about how she really felt. Maybe Jess had some advice. She'd gone through a few boyfriends already. Or maybe Josh had some advice, as a guy.

No. She couldn't tell her friends she might like Elis. The whole school would find out. Then she'd never hear the end of the teasing. How would she break it to Pallin?

Now was a perfect time to call Pallin, again. He hadn't answered earlier. What was he doing? Homework couldn't take all night, or all weekend.

She picked up the phone on her nightstand and dialed the hotel and they transferred her call. Sometimes they didn't put her right through. Guess it depended on the person answering. It rang several times, each time stealing her hope of reaching him. Why didn't he or someone answer?

Raea clicked off the phone with a heavy sigh.

A moment later, she noticed the time. Duh. He was probably out eating.

She should have tried sooner. With luck she could have joined him. He could have called her, though. The phone worked both ways.

She hated this. He always did the same thing. Time to give up.

But he's always happy to see me at school. He's probably busy. He'll call when he's free.

Yeah, probably.

So why did she feel like he didn't care? Probably because he didn't. Or maybe having to stay close to home scared him. Maybe that was it. She needed to get away from parental supervision, so he could relax and they could enjoy their time.

What was right?

She might as well have stuck her head in the washing machine on the spin cycle. Her emotions spun out of her control. She was an alien with wings, not human. Her crystal was more than a crystal, a collective of intelligent beings. She kind of still liked Pallin, but he never called or made any effort to hold her hand at school, and the one time they touched, the Starfire reacted. And in the meantime, she learned about a world that should only exist in her imagination but was real, a homeworld she didn't know. Stranger yet, she was falling for the one guy she never in a million years would have expected to like.

The world is gonna end. That has to be it. What else could there be to explain this? Hell froze over. With as cold as winter gets here, I wouldn't be surprised.

Yeah. That made sense. Sure.

Raea groaned and fell back on her bed. When would the dream end? When would the world return to something like normal?

The ring of her phone startled her. Pallin.

She snatched it up without checking the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Hey, Raea. Doing anything right now?"

Her excitement fizzled out. "Hi, Josh. No."

"Good. I thought we could get together—all of us—and hang out."

"Sounds good." That might get her mind off where her heart belonged.

"Yeah. I have the house to myself."

Oh, she so wanted to tell him. She needed someone to talk to who wasn't involved.

But, no. They couldn't know.

She needed the advice. How was she going to keep it all inside? She was terrible at keeping these kinds of secrets. What had she told Josh? Oh, yeah. Elis was helping her learn about her heritage. Okay. Heritage. Got it. "Cool. Good...um...Can I, like, ask you something? But you have to promise not to tell anyone, not even Jess and Linds. No one else."

"Yeah. Sure. I won't say anything."

She knew he would keep his word. Josh had admitted to knowing about Jess's mother having cancer even before losing her hair in chemotherapy. Jess had trusted him until she was ready to talk. Jess had trusted Josh over her. While it had hurt, it spoke highly of how they could trust him. He wouldn't say anything about this relationship stuff.

"Good, cause I thought I liked Pallin, but, you know, he's not going to be here much longer; and I've been spending time—a lot of time—learning stuff from Elis. I mean, it's like there's this sort of like weird..." Raea huffed away the rest. *Just say it!* "I think I like Elis. Say anything to anyone, *anyone*, and you're dead." There. She said it. Her heart raced to escape the inevitable, but she had stuck it out. Or rather, spit out what she needed to say.

Silence.

"Josh?"

"Okay...This is totally unexpected. What do you mean you *think* you like Elis? Wouldn't you *know*?"

"Yes. Maybe. But it's not that easy. When I'm with him, I actually kinda want to be closer. But I'm not so sure he likes me," *because he leaves the room instead of helping me practice*, "so I don't want to look stupid saying something. And I'd feel bad about Pallin, leading him on."

"Hmm...I don't know. This is something Jess is better at."

Great. Now Josh knew but telling him was a waste, because he didn't know what to say.

"What do I do?"

"You're gonna have to say something to them. But Pallin's leaving anyway, so maybe forget about him, let him down easy. I'm not so sure about Elis. He doesn't say much and stays out of the way. I suppose you could see how he reacts to you making a move."

"That is the last thing I want to do." She'd feel like a total moron.

"He probably wouldn't object. He's a guy. You're a pretty girl. Maybe he's just scared. You know we get scared of rejection, too."

Maybe, but it just felt too weird. Elis. This was Elis she was considering. And, while she didn't consider herself ugly, she wasn't particularly beautiful or anything. *Thanks, Josh*. He knew how to make her feel better. She needed to hear that.

"I'll figure it out, but please, *please* don't tell anyone?"

"I won't. You'll probably tell me anyway when something happens. Everyone else does," he said. "Why does everyone have to tell me their secrets?"

"Because we know you can keep them."

"Yay. Good for me. Anyway, hurry over. Linds is on her way. She's picking up pizza for lunch."

Her stomach grumbled at the thought of pizza. "I'll be there in five."

"Kay. See ya."

"Bye."

Awesome. Something to do to get her mind off things. But now Josh knew. Maybe he was right. No matter what, she probably should call it off with Pallin. He wouldn't be around long anyway.

* * *

"This is a waste, Nina."

She expected that attitude. Travis and Jake didn't know what she had discovered, because she couldn't yet be sure. But she was damn well not going to sacrifice what she suspected.

D.C. had other business at the hotel. Too bad. She wouldn't have complained.

"Not if that girl is connected to our angels." Not if the girl *was* one of the angels. It had to be. The documentation with the images Nolan sent explained some ancient beliefs in higher beings with incredible powers who had flown to the heavens. One could take it literally as a description of angels, and when studying the paintings, she could see the similarity with the marks on Raea Dahlrich's hands. If she sprouted wings and took to the air, Nina wanted to be ready.

The crew had rented an SUV when they arrived to haul their equipment. Raea wouldn't recognize it as she had the white

rental car.

"Stay on her." Nina wanted every second on film. Where was the girl going on a nice day with her jacket unzipped? Where was Elis? Where were her wings? Surely she couldn't hide them under that jacket. Nina couldn't be wrong. Maybe the wings only came out at night. Whatever the case, she would make that discovery.

Were they angels? If not, then what? What was their purpose? Raea had grown up here. Her friends had confirmed that, along with the birth records, but they could all be lies and forgeries.

Nina had to know.

"You know, we could be interviewing more witnesses," Jake said from the driver's seat. His shiny bald head contrasted the dark shades he wore.

"No. This is too important." Was Raea walking to Josh's house? It seemed that way. Why?

"Uh, Nina? What about the Dark Angel?" Travis turned from the camera to her, his short hair looking like he just got out of bed, as usual. From the gray hoodie, faded jeans, and black stormtrooper tee, he could have been one of the kids they watched.

"This is about more than the dark angel. I think she may be one of them."

"One of what?" Travis turned to her.

"Get that camera back on her!" Better. She wanted every moment caught on tape. "One of the angels."

A momentary pause passed between the two men.

"If she's an angel, where's her wings?" Travis asked.

"Hiding."

"Where?"

Travis's question echoed her thoughts. Where, indeed, could the girl hide wings? Her back was as flat as any girl of her stature. In fact, she was too perfect and slim, too *human*.

"I...It doesn't matter. If she's an angel, she probably has ways of hiding them. Humor me." She met Jake's gaze, or assumed she did, through the shades. He shrugged. *'Atta boy. You've been with me too long. You know I'm usually right.*

"You're not seriously going along with this?" Travis looked from her to Jake, who gave a single nod of his head. He had only been on her crew for three months. The rookie had to be broken in the hard way.

Skeptic. You'll see.

"Do it," Jake said.

"All right. As long as I get paid."

The payoff would come when they caught Raea, and hopefully Elis, with wings. They hid among mere humans. Why?

And what had really happened to Raea's mother? There had been a Padina Shartrael married to Scott Dahlrich. She had been on record as pregnant when Scott himself put through her paperwork to enter the country. Debbie hadn't lied about that. How could an angel be born on that world? Didn't they just exist?

Something still didn't quite make sense. Either everyone lied or some detail evaded her.

Too many questions. Nina wanted answers. One way or another, she would find them.

Raea still seemed unaware of them. A rust-spotted white car pulled up in the driveway of the Baum house. Raea waved and jogged over as a girl with a ponytail stepped out—Lindsey, if Nina remembered right—one of Josh's other friends. Didn't the young man hang out with any boys his age? Then again, at his age, hanging out with girls was something most guys wanted. *Smart boy*. Linds, as the others called her, lifted two pizza boxes aloft.

"Oh, man. Pizza. When do we get to eat?" Travis said.

"Later." Nina hadn't thought about food. Was it lunchtime already? That would mean taking a break, and Raea could slip away. Nina would have to plan better next time.

Raea opened the door of the house for Linds, and they disappeared inside.

"That's it?" Travis lowered the camera. "Can we get food?"

How long would the girl be inside? What were they doing, besides stuffing their faces with pizza?

"Fine. But we'll be back."

"Why don't we get those last interviews before we track this girl?" Jake started the vehicle. "Next time we'll bring food."

A man after her heart. Jake understood. "All right. Let's do it. We should have time for one interview today." And hopefully the last two tomorrow, and a couple days to watch Raea and Elis.

Golden Demon

Raea stared at the last few pieces of cold pizza. Tempting. But what a pig. She'd eaten three huge slices four hours ago. They all had. She'd had her fill then and shouldn't be hungry again already, but she was.

The laughter and game competition worked up her appetite. Josh had munched all afternoon, and his mom invited them to stay for supper. Raea wouldn't say no to that. She needed the break. Spending a Saturday with her closest friends, joking and laughing, had been what she needed to erase the confusion of her heart.

But her thoughts shifted to Pallin and Elis often, especially when Josh gave her funny looks.

"So, I suppose you want to spend some time with Pallin?" Linds nudged her in the ribs with a suggestive smile.

"Actually, I'm not really into him like I thought."

Jess turned from her racing game against Josh. "What? What do you mean? I thought you two made a cute couple. Everyone at school is jealous."

"Not really. It's like he's too busy, except at school. Besides, he's leaving soon."

"But what about keeping in touch long-distance?" Jess turned back at a "Booyah!" from Josh.

"I don't feel right about that." True, but she couldn't tell them everything. Josh knew the real reason, and he kept quiet. Thank goodness.

"So, you're gonna break it off?"

"Break what off? There's nothing there."

"Well, you should at least make it clear to him."

"I suppose, but he never answers the phone when I call." Without Pallin to occupy her thoughts, she could focus on Elis. But how would she test him? What if he didn't like her the same? *Oh, God. Strike me down now. Spare me the pain.* She didn't want to think Elis might not like her. And to think a week and a half ago she had been totally against anything to do with him. She blamed the Starfire for everything.

"Then you should do it in person," Jess said. "So he knows you're serious."

Raea cringed. That was the last thing she wanted now. Whatever she saw when he had first appeared fizzled out. She really didn't want to go, but she'd never find the nerve at school with everyone listening. "I just want this over with. It's been bothering me for the last couple days. I'm so sick of worrying about it. Linds, can I beg a ride?"

"Where?"

"The Prairie Rose Inn."

"Sure. Now?"

"You're not going alone." Josh turned from his game. "If he takes it wrong... Maybe I should come too, just in case?"

Josh's support warmed her. She could always count on friends. "I think Linds and I can handle it."

"You're sure?" That look. He knew the details, but that didn't mean she wanted to say what had to be said with a bunch of witnesses. Bad enough to have to say anything to Pallin.

"Thanks." She could always count on her friends. "I think we'll be fine."

"All right. But if you change your mind, I'm ready." He was serious. The fact that he ditched his car in the racing game prove that, especially when he was winning.

Good old Josh. Why couldn't she have fallen for him? Why hadn't anyone else? Because Josh was a friend, not a boyfriend. She had never even considered it. Someday, some girl would snatch him up. But that someday and some girl wasn't her or now.

She didn't want to go through with this. But the others were right. It would only be fair to Pallin, if he was even interested, which was more than the courtesy he gave her. Besides, she could move on without worrying about it.

She and Linds grabbed their jackets and left for the hotel.

By the time they arrived, Raea's stomach somersaulted into a queasy mess, but she exited the car and walked with her friend to the front doors.

"You're sure about this?" Linds stopped with her hand on the lobby door of the hotel.

"Yeah. I have to get it over with."

"You don't look so good."

Ya think? What gave her the first clue, besides that Raea had talked about it the whole ride there? "I'll be fine. Jess is right. At least in person, I can be sure he gets the message. And he can't ignore me like he can a phone. This can't wait until Monday either. I have to do it *now*." Before she lost her nerve, and so she could sleep.

"Jess would know. She's dumped enough guys the last couple of years."

Definitely. That was why Raea trusted her opinion. This was her first time, though. She should have listened to Debbie. Why did this feel right but make her feel so sick? Why couldn't these things be easy?

They said little through the quiet corridors of the hotel and found his room on the top floor.

"Ready?" Linds asked.

Not really, but it had to be done. Raea took a deep breath and knocked.

After only a couple seconds of silence, Raea calmed. "Okay. He's not here. Let's go."

The opening of the door stopped her mid-turn.

Oh, man. He was so hot.

No. She couldn't think that. That's all he was.

"Raea. I left message with Debbie." His amber eyes flashed to Linds and back to her.

"You did? I...didn't know. My friends and I hung out at Josh's." Her temperature rose. Now was not a good time for the Starfire to act up. *Stay calm. Get it done. Don't linger.* She could do this.

"I am glad you came. Come in, and your friend."

"Oh, ah..." She glanced aside. "You remember Linds?"

"Yes, Linds." A shadow passed over his expression for a moment. "You can come in."

Why did he have to smile? It made this so much harder. Raea could hardly stand it. *Linds. Don't go in. That just means I have to do this.* Damn. She had to follow her friend into the room.

Pallin let the door thump closed behind them. An unopened bottle of wine stood on the table near the window. Where'd he get that? Did his parents let him drink? He slipped past them to retrieve it. "I have special surprise."

"Um...I don't drink." Then again, Debbie wasn't there to police her. What harm could one glass do? She wanted to try it. Debbie always refused to let her, even when her aunt and uncle celebrated with wine at the holidays. It wasn't like she wanted to get drunk. She just wanted a taste.

"I wouldn't mind a little."

Linds? Raea couldn't believe it.

"Mom and dad let me have a little bit when they get a bottle. I know what I can tolerate. Why not?" She grabbed three plastic wrapped hotel cups from the bathroom and started opening them. "Here. Only a third for me."

Pallin opened the bottle, which didn't have the usual cork, a sign of cheapness. Exactly what she'd come to expect from him. "It is good."

"So, why the special occasion?" Linds worked at the plastic around the other cups.

"Um, not staying long and want good memory."

Could he make this any harder for her? All Raea wanted was to tell him that she wanted a clean end and no more pretending to see each other. That's it. No more. But, now this. Her heart sank with the burden of guilt. How could she let him down?

Why did she listen to Jess? She should have followed her instincts and tried calling, or even waited for Monday.

As if she could wait. She wanted to free her mind of Pallin to clear it for Elis.

"So..."

"A drink first." He poured a little in each glass.

Raea took hers. The rosy pink liquid filling only a quarter of the cup couldn't hurt. Maybe it would even loosen her up enough to say what she needed to say. Or at least, from hearing Debbie, it might help.

"To what?" Linds asked.

"What?" His brows pushed together in a frown.

"Usually you drink to celebrate something."

"Yes, it is custom. Then, to Raea."

Me? She warmed, wishing she could hide the blush she felt on her cheeks the way she could the cold in her heart. He wasn't making this easy for her. "All right."

Linds lifted her glass to Raea and took a drink.

Raea followed. The smell wasn't what she expected. Not sweet in the way soda was. When she sipped, she tasted sweetness, but not like anything else. It was different, but she'd never had anything alcoholic before. If alcohol caused this odd flavor, she wasn't interested in drinking. But she could humor Pallin. She tolerated a little more before setting the cup down.

Seconds later, the room melted around her. Voices buzzed like insects in her head.

"Raea? Raea! What's wrong?"

She fought to clarify the blurring colors around her amid the confusion. They swirled and pain—or was it?—tingled through her arms and legs.

* * *

The girl went down, her eyes glazed and unfocused. He had what he'd come for. He'd gained her trust and found something better than he could have imagined for incapacitating her.

"Raea. Raea, are you all right?" Linds knelt over the Crystal Keeper.

Pallin set his glass down without having dared to touch the substance. His preparations for this assignment hadn't mentioned the effects of alcohol on the Inari system. And this stuff was easy to find.

Now to deal with the friend. Obviously the wine didn't affect humans the same.

Pallin had the answer in his hand. After dealing with the nosy Nina Russet, he had been sure to have it ready. He pressed the neutralizer into the bony part of her neck to be sure it knocked her out. The girl collapsed over her friend, unconscious. He shoved her aside and bent over the Crystal Keeper. The neutralizer had been intended for Raea, but she didn't need it yet. The wine was enough to keep her from causing trouble, for a while.

The Starfire hung in its finely woven wire on the chain around Raea's neck. Raea he didn't care about, except to get her back to the homeworld and force her to place the crystal with the other shards in the heart of Heffin's Gate. He'd have to be careful not to touch it. None but the Keeper chosen to bear it could safely handle it, exactly the reason he would need to take her back alive when the portal opened. They had given him almost two Earth weeks to locate and incapacitate the Crystal Keeper.

Only by accident had his superiors discovered that Padina had left a child on Earth and realized she must have left her shard with that child. Those on the ship sent to Earth thirteen years ago had found no trace of the crystal in Padina's human dwelling, and they hadn't thought to look for a child but had destroyed the house and its tenants to eliminate evidence of being there.

Now, he had her. In three days, the portal would open. He had only to keep her subdued long enough to take her back.

But he had one other problem—the other Keeper. Elis would search. Of that Pallin was certain.

The hotel would be the first place anyone looked and too easy to reach. The empty house he doubted. Pallin had cleared it upon arriving. From his office in Sacramento, Prime Commander Loran had given specific instructions of how to proceed after Pallin arrived on that world. Although the others on Earth couldn't help him physically, they provided more than enough information for him to formulate a plan.

Still, he used caution. Elis might figure it out.

Exactly what he expected to use in his plan to eliminate the other Keeper.

Pallin would be ready for a confrontation. He slipped on the black coat and gloves of the Shirukan over his flightsuit. He packed a flask of wine into an inner pocket and secured Raea's wrists with a rope. If a Keeper wanted, they could escape anything but the *tala* gel. He hoped to spare what he had for emergency use. Besides, with the liquor, he had only to pour a swallow every few hours into Raea's mouth to keep her intoxicated. He had discovered the hard way, and had Nina to thank for it.

Sunset would come soon. After dark, he would leave. Only his golden yellow wings might be seen, but with the superstitious nature of humans, he doubted anyone would think anything was wrong.

The Chase

Where was Raea? She should have come for her training already. Elis walked to the front door and opened it to check, but she would have come in without waiting. Still no sign of her, and the sun had set. He didn't like this. Had she changed her mind?

Maybe he should check with Debbie. Since Raea slapped him over the confrontation with Pallin, he had been hesitant to follow her everywhere.

He closed the door and went off to find the kitchen phone. Before he dialed, it rang in his hands. His heart skipped a beat and he clicked it on. "Hello?"

"Elis. I'm glad I caught you. Have you seen Raea?" Debbie sounded worried.

"No. I was just about to call you."

"Oh, dear God. I hoped she was there. She left to hang out with friends at the Baum house and hasn't come back. Apparently Lindsey didn't make it home either. Her mother called Josh, who said they left around five-thirty. She gave Raea a ride to the Prairie Rose Inn to see Pallin, but she isn't answering her cell."

His heart froze. Pallin. It was now a little after eight, and still too light to fly. "I'll go." What had Pallin done? If he was Shirukan...

"Thanks, Elis."

"Okay." He clicked off the phone. The Prairie Rose Inn? He knew where that was—downtown. Hopefully Pallin hadn't done anything to harm Raea already, but if he had—

Elis shook the thought away. The Shirukan had killed his family. He couldn't let them take Raea. Why had she gone? Why couldn't she give up on Pallin? Shirukan or not, he was trouble.

Why couldn't she accept him—Elis?

The rejection stung, but he pushed his feelings aside. Right now he had a duty to perform.

He opened the closet and pulled out his coat. "Evelyn!"

"Yes, dear." Her voice came from the sitting room where he had left her.

While zipping up, he peaked through the doorway. "I need your car."

"Take it."

"Thanks." He rushed to slip on his shoes and headed out into the cold. Debbie had taught him to drive and helped him secure a license. He had seen no reason to at first, but at times like this, he was glad he had learned.

On the quiet drive, his mind whirled with possibilities. What happened to the girls? Did they make it to the Inn? What if they didn't? He could backtrack afterwards. His suspicions about Pallin worried him more. Linds drove all the time. She knew how to handle a vehicle. Nothing would have happened on the roads.

The moment he arrived in the lot of the three-level hotel, his insides twisted and tightened. Linds' car sat empty in a parking space. *Please be all right.*

Elis parked close to it and hurried into the hotel.

At the front desk, he stopped. "I need to know what room a foreigner named Pallin Montran is in."

The girl checked her computer.

Impatience raced through him, until she finally said, "three-oh-two. Up the stairs and down the hall to your left."

"Thanks." Raea better be all right.

He shot away around the corner of the lobby.

And nearly collided with a familiar face.

"Elis." Nina's shock turned into a grin. "I wouldn't expect to see you here."

"No time to talk." He didn't need her snooping into his affairs. By Starfire, she'd better stay out, or he'd have a bigger mess than he could clean up.

Up the stairs to the top and down the hall to the left. He followed the numbers to 302 and pounded on the door. "Pallin, open up!"

No one answered. He pounded again. "Raea! Linds! Are you there? Raea!" He put his ear to the door.

A faint voice reached him from the other side. He lifted a fist to pound harder.

The door opened.

"Elis?" Linds blinked and rubbed her eyes groggily. "What's going on?"

He glanced down the hall and pushed past her into the room to shut the door. Someone would hear. Where was Raea? Why was Linds alone? Someone could have punched him in the gut for all the worry twisting inside him.

She wobbled but he caught her.

"Whoa." Linds groaned.

Elis guided her to the bed. When she turned he noticed the burn mark on her neck. His pulse quickened. It couldn't be! The burn mark of a neutralizer at close range. Now he had a true reason to worry. "Where's Raea? What happened?"

Linds glanced around. "I don't know. Pallin offered us some wine. She collapsed after a few sips..."

Alcohol. Raea probably didn't know about its dangerous effects on their kind. He'd been warned before coming not to consume it. Pallin must have known of its immediate narcotic effect.

"I don't know. I leaned over, trying to see what was wrong and I guess I collapsed too. He must have drugged us. Your pounding woke me up."

"You need to call home," he said. Where was Pallin now? Where had he taken Raea? "Did Pallin say anything about going anywhere?"

"No." She pulled out her cell phone.

Crystal Fire. Where—

The farmhouse. Pallin must have killed the family to clear a place to hold Raea. It had to be his work—burn marks in the chest could only be from his weapon set to kill. That's where they'd be.

"Contact Debbie and let her know that Raea's in trouble."

"She is? What kind of trouble?"

"Just call. I'll take care of it." He turned to leave, anxious to get in the air and hunt down Pallin. This was about more than Raea.

Linds grabbed his sleeve. "You'll take care of it? Elis, Raea's my friend. I have a right to know what's going on."

What could he say? Raea wasn't ready to tell her friends. He had to honor that. "Pallin isn't who we thought he was. He's a criminal." At least by the governments of most of Inar'Ahben, the Shirukan were. Only in the Empire were they the authority.

"Raea. What did she get herself into?"

"Tell Debbie." He hurried away as she dialed her phone.

"Where are you going?"

"After them." He let the door slam behind him.

"Elis. Fancy meeting you here, at Pallin's room."

He cringed. *Not now*. That woman had a way of butting into everything she shouldn't.

"Is he in?"

"No."

"But you were talking to someone."

He whirled on Nina, his patience wearing thin. "If you want to talk to him, I suggest you find him yourself. Otherwise, go back to your room and stay out of this." He didn't wait for an answer but headed for the stairs. The hotel opened to the roof for snow blowing, since it was flat. He'd seen it from the air before. They could only get up by stairway.

He found it without trouble and climbed out. He closed the trap door at the top and stepped into the chilly night. No one seemed to follow. Good.

With a touch on the resonance, he grew out the wings. The pain burned in his back, but he worked through it. One of these days Raea would have to, if she survived.

No. He couldn't think that way. She would survive. Pallin would be the one to suffer.

With his black wings out, Elis took off into the starry sky.

* * *

What was going on? Elis wasn't getting away that easily.

Nina ran to the elevator. With luck she could meet him downstairs and find out exactly what was going on. Unless...

He wouldn't. Would he? Had she missed her chance to catch him?

Where were Travis and Jake with the equipment?

Damn it! She had one chance yet to salvage this opportunity. When the elevator opened, she stepped in.

On the main floor, the guys waited in the lobby. They hadn't wasted any time getting ready for some observations. Perfect. "Jake, get the vehicle started. Travis, get that camera on."

"What's up, Nina?"

"Our angel. Get a move on." She shoved past them and others coming in through the doors. Outside, she looked up. There. Against the stars of the encroaching night. The black shadow of an angel. She had him.

Jake and Travis finally joined her. About time. Man, these guys moved slow. "Hop to it, boys!"

"Ahem."

"You too, D.C."

"What is it?" the other woman asked.

Nina pointed to the shape in the sky. "Our Angel. Let's go."

"Dear God! He's real."

"Yes, he's real. And if we don't get moving, we're gonna lose him." And the chance to expose him.

They raced to the SUV and piled in, Nina riding shotgun next to Jake, who drove. "Stay with him. We don't want to lose this. Travis, you got the camera out?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Get us a clean shot." She glanced out. Still in sight, and heading northeast. "D.C.?"

"On it."

Nina smiled. This was bigger than a small specialty program. She was going to make big news when they exposed Elis for what he really was and get some answers about his purpose.

* * *

Now to wait for the Keeper. Inevitably, he'd come. The murder of the house's occupants had been quite the story the last week, something Pallin hadn't anticipated. But things had settled down and the house remained empty. He had checked every night.

But Raea and Elis had been there. Their feathers littered the floor of the pantry. He had found them because of the feathers outside the door. They must have hidden inside.

So, Pallin could anticipate trouble. This was too perfect. He could take out the other Keeper and be free to continue his mission.

Raea hung tied to a beam in the unfinished basement with its clutter of garbage. The odd thing about Earth homes. But on the water-covered world of Inar'Ahben, even the dug-out homes of the floating Searoot islands didn't have more than one level, nothing like a basement. The cities floated among the clouds with generators at their bases.

Without her wings Raea had been easy to carry. And with the liquor, he could keep her from causing trouble. He was ready to face the Keeper, or anyone else who dared enter. The house was also well-stocked with food, so he could hide there for several days.

Until a portal was opened to return home with her, he would have no trouble. At least, no trouble after he killed the other Keeper. With Elis out of the way, his only obstacle would be the local authorities, and Prime Commander Loran promised to provide a distraction when he needed it.

He was ready. Now to wait.

Hell on Earth

Raea better be all right, but Elis doubted it. If Pallin was at the farmhouse, he had plenty of time to abuse her. *Please be there. Be safe.*

Part of him wished he was wrong, but he knew the truth deep inside. He had to find them before the empire opened a portal. If Pallin took her back, Elis would likely never see her again, and he would be stuck on Earth with the others unless a ship came or Saffir opened a portal. But if the Shirat Empire got their hands on three of the four shards, they might have the strength to threaten Starfire Tower and gain the last shard. Then nothing could stop them but the Starfire itself. And he would likely never see his home again.

Headlights of vehicles moved over the roads. One set in particular seemed to follow him north and east. They were too wide for a car, and it didn't stand out as white. This was larger and darker. Could it be Nina following him? Would she have taken a new rental? Or was it purely coincidence?

He didn't need this. Not now. Whoever it was, he couldn't let them interfere. This was too big for humans to get in the way. He had to do something.

He had only one weapon—himself. He had to do it.

Elis folded his wings and dove towards the headlights.

In the wan moonlight, he saw a shape stick out of the side of the vehicle as it slowed. A spotlight tracked from the vehicle towards him. That answered the question of whether they followed him or not. It had to be Nina and her crew. He didn't feel so bad about doing what had to be done.

Elis swerved and dove. The light flashed across his path and he swerved left, then right, closing in on the vehicle and averting the light. Whoever it was searched for him. He couldn't allow them to follow, not only to keep their secret safe from humans—whose governments would likely also seek the power of the Starfire if they learned of it—but also to avoid anyone being injured or killed when he faced Pallin.

When he could make out the details, he lifted his hands before him and found the resonance. The power warmed through him. The Starburst marks glowed bright. After a couple seconds of the energy building up, he released it in a narrow, focused stream as he passed along the side of the vehicle.

Smoke rose from the tires until they popped, carrying the foul odor of burned rubber with it. That would take care of his trackers.

Now to rescue Raea.

Elis spread his wings and caught the breeze. He flapped higher into the air. Rescuing Raea was his goal, and facing Pallin wouldn't be easy. He would need all his strength to face the Shirukan. Having to disable the vehicle had used a lot of that. The energy he released would have killed several people.

That was the difference between the Keepers and the Empire. Keepers sought to protect the Starfire and keep it safe. It had chosen them as its emissaries. The Empire wanted its power to control others for their own greed.

He approached the Lake house surrounded by sloppy mud from the melting snow. As he descended, he made out yellow feathers and man-sized footprints before the door. Pallin had come.

Elis landed at the front door. He opened it—unlocked. Pallin expected him.

What would he find inside?

Cautiously, Elis stepped inside. If he were Shirukan, where would he be?

Nowhere near any windows, but somewhere that he could secure a Crystal Keeper away from sight if anyone entered.

A basement. There must have been a basement or cellar. Elis would bet that's where Pallin was with Raea.

He passed the pantry and his emotions hardened in his throat. If he ever hoped to be close to Raea again, he had to keep her alive. He continued to a washroom, where he found a door. It opened on creaky hinges to a stairway lit by lights below. Pallin.

No. Hanging from the overhead floor supports was Raea, her head forward between her arms. His fears lumped in his throat. She'd better be alive. How cruel could Pallin be? What had he done?

Elis started down the stairs.

A black-clad figure stepped into sight and put an arm around Raea. Golden yellow wings opened for a moment. Pallin. He was Shirukan. And he held the rod-like weapon of his kind in one gloved hand, ready for use.

With his other hand, Pallin traced a line across Raea's cheek, a menacing smile on his face. ["So, you came for her. So soon, too. She must be more important to you than I thought. For someone she doesn't consider a boyfriend, you sure are protective. But I'm sure you hope to bond with her. She is lovely."] He continued to caress her, his hand sliding down over her breasts to below her waist.

Anger rose hot in Elis. No one touched her like that, least of all Pallin. He didn't deserve to. Elis wanted to take out the Shirukan. But he couldn't fire at Pallin so close to Raea, unless he kept the power low, a distraction to give him a chance to rush in for an accurate shot. Pallin knew it too.

["I'll bet you're considering exactly what to do. Let me help."]

In a flash, Pallin brought the weapon up.

Elis jumped back as a shot burned past and into the wall behind him. Another smoldered into the steps where he had fallen, but he rolled away.

On instinct, Elis called on the resonance and fired a weak blast from one hand. The shots stopped for a second, long enough to see that Pallin ducked behind Raea.

Pallin fired again, this time wide. Encouraged, Elis let another blast of energy go. This time it hit Raea and Pallin, who stumbled back.

His chance. Elis took it and sprang down the stairs at the Shirukan.

As Pallin brought his weapon up, Elis grabbed the other man's wrist. His Starburst marks glowed.

Pallin clenched his teeth and Elis removed his restraint on the power.

The hatred on the Shirukan's face contorted into pain and fear. He grasped at Elis's hand with his free hand, but Elis let the energy surge.

Pallin howled in pain and dropped the weapon. Elis shoved him into a stack of boxes until Pallin stumbled and knocked his head on the wall.

No more. Pallin represented everything Elis hated. The Shirukan had killed his family and this one threatened Raea, not only his charge but also one he loved.

No more. He wouldn't allow anyone to hurt her. This Shirukan would pay for what his kind had done.

The resonance warmed through him, ready at his call.

["You're kind don't kill."]

["How would you know?"] Elis hesitated, recalling his teachings and the values of his family and the majority of Inari. Keepers helped. They didn't kill. It was what set them apart from the Shirukan and their supporters. Killing Pallin went against everything he had been taught and would make him no better.

But his anger and his grief rose up after two years of mourning. The justification was there. He could have his revenge and rid Inar'Ahben and Earth of one more demon.

["It's forbidden by the Keeper code and your precious Starfire."]

Elis wanted too. For all the pain that ripped through him, Elis wanted to end it.

But ending Pallin's life wouldn't bring back his family. He knew that.

He would ensure the Shirukan wouldn't bother them again.

In Elis's hesitation, Pallin shoved him back. Elis bumped against Raea and stepped on the weapon, which slipped out from under his foot. He tumbled backwards, tightening his hold on Pallin for balance. The Shirukan freed a hand as Elis landed.

Faster than he could blink, pain slashed across his side.

Elis released his hold on Pallin's wrist and looked down to the rip in his coat and the faint trickle of blood. Black and gold feathers littered the floor, a spattering of crimson on them.

Pallin backed up and searched for his weapon.

Wincing in pain but determined to escape alive, Elis called on the resonance.

Pallin froze, a hint of fear on his face. ["You wouldn't dare."]

Without a word, Elis released the energy. The Shirukan fell back, stumbling over the tumbled boxes and grabbing at a set of shelves on the wall. They gave under his weight and dropped their contents onto him, knocking him down. He lay still.

Crystal Fire. Elis hurt. Everywhere. But especially the wound. Luckily, Pallin hadn't stabbed him. He had only slashed

across his side.

The Shirukan didn't move, but he was alive. The shelf and boxes had caused more injury than his small release of energy. Now was a good chance to free Raea and get her to safety.

He end this now, guaranteeing Pallin would be no more threat to them. His hands glowed with the resonance, but he couldn't do it. As much as he wanted to, as easy as it would be for him, he let the resonance fade and turned his attention to Raea. There were other ways on that world that would stop Pallin, and he had injured him. While Pallin recovered, the police could lock the Shirukan away.

He turned his attention to Raea. Elis untied the rope binding her wrists and cradled her close. She didn't move, but she breathed. She still lived, because Pallin needed her alive. But what had he done to her? Elis should have been there sooner, should have stopped her. This might not have happened if he had acted against Pallin sooner.

Tears trickled down his cheeks. ["You're safe now."] He kissed her cheek and held her close. This was his fault. Maybe if he had warned her about alcohol, he might have prevented Pallin from taking her. He could have done so much more. ["I'm sorry."]

A glance aside showed Pallin still unconscious. Elis had to get out of there. The use of energy tired him, and the wound stung. He needed to get them home, where they both could recover.

With Raea in his arms, he climbed the stairs. Each step made him wince, but he couldn't afford to let the pain stop him.

Outside in the cold night, he spread his wings. Pain wracked through the left wing, and he saw it—the blood at the leading edge from burned flesh. He hadn't noticed in the scuffle.

It didn't matter. He had to fly.

It hurt, but he worked through it. Carrying Raea didn't help, although it was easier without her wings, which would have made it awkward. But he would do anything for her.

He passed over where he had left the SUV. From high up, he saw it in the moonlight still there, but didn't know if anyone serviced it. The tires on one side would both be burned out. They'd have to be replaced. The occupants—whether Nina Russet or some other Dark Angel watcher—would have to find another ride. That would keep them busy for a while. Hopefully long enough for him to recover.

In the meantime, he just wanted to reach Evelyn's. Luckily, or maybe not if Debbie had any influence, he saw no sign of Linds or anyone else from high above.

Relief carried him down to the backyard, where he nearly fell to his knees on landing but caught himself and kept Raea from hitting the ground. Now to hide.

He hurried to the back door and squeezed through with Raea. Once inside, he closed both doors and caught his breath.

After a few seconds, he continued through the kitchen and dining room to the stairs. Curse the pain. His whole body ached from the fight and his stumble, and the cut. Soon he could rest, though.

Upstairs, he laid Raea in bed and covered her. In the light, he saw no signs of physical harm, except for the bruising on her wrists, but that didn't mean Pallin hadn't done something.

Although Elis needed strength to heal himself, she came first. He wouldn't let her suffer. He *couldn't* let her suffer, and took her hands in his and called on the resonance one last time. The healing power flowed differently than a simple release of energy, tingling down his arms like warm water. The crystal pendant glowed with their hands. Odd, but welcome. The Starfire entities helped.

For a moment, he thought he heard the voices of the Starfire. But only for a moment. It faded with his focus on the resonance.

Raea was safe, for now. He couldn't guess how long that would last. In the morning, he could call his cousin. Maybe she could visit and help.

Yes. Nare. She hadn't responded the other day. Hopefully she would this time.

Elis laid down on top of the blankets next to Raea, the wound crusted with dried blood. He could wait until morning. Inari healed fast.

* * *

["My little Raea. Momma's here."] Padina gently lifted her to sit up.

Raea cried after crashing her bike and hurting her leg. Blood pooled at her knee and ran down her bare leg in a rivulet of red. It hurt so much.

*Padina put her hands on Raea's leg and straightened it. Raea sniffed and winced. ["It hurts. Ow!"]
["Easy. There."] The marks on Padina's hands glowed briefly.
The pain faded, until Raea tried to stand. "Ow."
["It doesn't heal all at once. It'll take a little time, but this way is faster."
Raea sniffed and reached up. Padina took her in her arms and carried her into the house.*

["Momma..."]

The sound of her voice stirred Raea from the scene. She rolled over, aware of another body close to her. The faint musky smell generated thoughts of Elis and warm feelings. She snuggled closer to the warmth and relaxed. If only it was real...

The Good, the Bad, and the Wounded

Elis stretched, aware of something close to him. Not something. Someone.

Raea. How he wanted to believe she would. But she had rejected him. She always would. For a moment, he let himself believe she knew what she did, that she had closed the gap on purpose.

Only for a moment.

His hopes faded with further awakening, and the aches and stinging of his wounds. He had to get up and clean them.

Slowly, he rolled away, hoping not to disturb her and biting his tongue on a groan. She needed her rest. Who knew what Pallin had done or drugged her with. The wine might have only been a start.

Pain, mostly in his side but aching through his body. Movement hurt. Elis sat up and slid from the bed. Raea made no move. He'd let her continue to sleep.

Wincing with each movement, he grabbed a clean change of clothes from the closet and headed to the bathroom next to his room to clean up. He'd have to cut off the shirt and coat, though. He hadn't the strength to tolerate the transformation of his wings. Besides, he needed his wings out to heal properly.

But he could use some help. Hopefully Evelyn would be up to get ready for her Sunday mass.

The floor boards creaked with each agonizing step.

"Elis?"

Thank his timing, and her hearing. She was up for the day.

He stepped out to the rail. "Up here."

"Lord have mercy." The tap of her cane stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "I was afraid—" She gasped. "Oh, Dear God! What happened?"

"Pallin." He ducked into the bathroom. She'd be there soon enough. In the meantime, he had to pry off the blood-crusting jacket and shirt. The wound had scabbed over, but it would need cleaning and a bandage, as would his wing. The aches would subside in time, and they weren't bad. These two bloody wounds would be the worst of his troubles.

Not bad against a Shirukan. But this one was an arrogant bastard. And there was only one. He'd been lucky in that respect.

Evelyn stopped at the bathroom door. "The First-Aid kit is under the sink. Let me, dear."

He stepped aside as she knelt down and pulled out the plastic kit. Wincing, he helped her to her feet.

"Thanks, dear. Now, let's have a look."

He lowered the wing. Not a scrape, but a burn. Pallin's weapon had gotten him, and he hadn't noticed. He'd been too busy fighting.

But he had come out alive. That counted for something.

* * *

Nina woke up after a restless sleep. Too many questions had circled her head last night to sleep well and she wanted answers *today*.

What the hell was going on? Why had the Dark Angel attacked? Luckily, he had only disabled the SUV. But they had to wait for a ride back to town and couldn't follow. The rental company would be furious.

Screw them. She lost her opportunity.

Where had the angel gone? What about his flight back? What had happened in between?

What did this have to do with Pallin?

That she could check on. Where had Pallin gone last night?

After a shower and a fresh change of clothes, she walked through the hotel to his room and knocked. "Pallin. Are you there?"

"Go...away."

He was there. "I need to talk to you."

"No."

No need to lash at her. "Come on, Pallin. Open up. It's me—Nina."

"I know you are. I need rest."

What was going on around here? Why wouldn't anyone give her an answer?

Well, she could wait. Sooner or later Pallin would have to come out. She would return for an explanation.

In the meantime, she wanted a quick breakfast and some information. But first, she wanted to review that tape. If the Dark Angel was Elis, she would know exactly where to go for all her answers.

* * *

Raea shivered and buried her face in the covers. Mmm...They smelled different but familiar, like Elis.

Didn't he ever leave her mind? No. She *wanted* to think of him.

Whatever reminded her she welcomed, but...

Raea opened her eyes. This wasn't her room but she recognized it. She laid on the bed in Elis's room.? How had she gotten there? The last thing she remembered was Pallin and seeing the hotel room blur around her. It had to be a dream.

No. This made no sense. What happened?

She lifted the covers. At least she wore her clothes, but the same clothes she had worn yesterday.

What day was it? Where was Elis?

She sat up, and noticed a blood stain on the comforter near her. Where had that come from?

Had she— A quick check reassured her she was all right.

But who? One thought stopped her heart.

No! "Elis?" Raea threw off the covers and sprinted for the door. *Please, please be all right.* "Elis!" She hesitated at the rail over the stairs. Where had he gone?

"Elis. Oh—" She almost collided with him when he emerged from the bathroom bare-chested and caught her.

"Easy."

A bandage across his ribs? No, the muscling was all wrong, not like any human; but he wasn't human. Another on his wing? "Are you all right?" She reached toward the gauze taped to his side. "What happened to you?"

He pushed her hand away before she could touch him. "Pallin."

"Pallin?" She didn't believe it and looked up for confirmation. His cheek twitched. "What happened?"

"He made his move. He *is* Shirukan, and he's after the Starfire."

Raea covered the crystal with her hand. It still hung at her chest. "I don't understand."

"You were drugged unconscious the whole time."

Raea thought back to yesterday's events—leaving Josh's with Linds and arriving in Pallin's room, where he offered her wine. After a few sips, nothing made sense. "The wine."

A faint smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "We don't tolerate alcohol. He used it against you."

"What about Linds?"

"She's okay. I found her awake, but he used a neutralizer to jolt her unconscious. She should be home, safe."

"Oh, thank God. But what about you? What happened *to you?*" She followed his eyes down to the wound on his side.

"We fought. I was lucky that's all he did."

"And your wing?"

He stretched it around where he could see it. "That too."

None of this would have happened if she hadn't gone to see Pallin. She should have never let him charm her. "It's all my fault."

"No. He came for you. He planned it like this. One way or another, he would have come after you. It's him, Raea. Not you. It's his mission."

"But if I hadn't asked Linds to take me to see him, none of this would have happened." How could she have been so stupid? Now, she couldn't even look Elis in the eye. "If I had listened to you...I'm sorry." All along she had liked him but resisted. If she had listened to the Starfire and let them guide her, she would have been safe. They had known all along. More than ever, she wished he would hold her, to make everything right the way it should have been. She was such an idiot. She needed him more than she could admit, but only because of her schoolmates—and Chad's teasing—did she hold back. Josh had been right all along.

"I'm sorry for everything." For saying negative things. For not letting herself see the truth. For never giving him a chance. Her eyes burned. *No tears. Not now.* "You saved my life from Pallin, and I don't deserve it." She'd been rude and ignorant. He'd always been patient and giving. How could he forgive her? She had ruined her chance. Forget her feelings and the Starfire. He'd never accept her now.

She wiped her eyes and glanced down the stairs. She couldn't do anything there but cause trouble. "I should probably get home. I'm sure Debbie's worried."

"She knows."

"Oh. Okay. Then I'll quit bothering you, so you can rest." And she could cry like she needed to, without anyone watching. Raea pushed past him. Being close for that moment, his bare chest, made her pulse race. Oh, man. She had developed a real attraction for him. The desire to be close almost overwhelmed her. Worse, it sent her emotions spinning out of control. If she didn't hurry, she'd never get away without breaking down from the pain in her heart.

"You're not a bother."

She halted at the top of the stairs. Was he saying what she hoped he said without saying or was it just to make her feel better? She so wanted him to mean he liked her and wanted her to stay. But if he was only trying to make her feel better, it wasn't fair. She couldn't face that option.

She gave him a brief smile and hurried down the stairs. Her heart pounded. She couldn't take this. *Go home. Clean up. Everything will look different with time away.* Yes. That's what she needed. Time to think. Alone.

He said nothing more, but his eyes could have burned a hole in her back. He watched her. She felt it. She slipped on her shoes without tying them and grabbed her jacket and rushed out.

Outside, the cold air chilled away the tears. She ran across the icy lawns to her door.

* * *

How he ever made it back without being seen, Pallin could only count his luck. And his back ached. And his wrist. And his chest. The Keeper had used his powers for attack, something his superiors had warned could happen in a tight situation. He should have been better prepared. Next time he would be.

But now, he needed to rest and heal. His wings were bruised. A number of feathers had to be pulled for regrowth.

He should never have underestimated the Keepers. The girl he managed without trouble, but Elis was another matter.

[*Elis...It couldn't be the missing child.*] Was that it? Was that how Saffir had hidden Sarilov Naolis's and Jasheir Menara's second child? They had never found him after Naolis sacrificed his crystal shard to Heffin's Gate. The son had disappeared without a trace. [*Very clever.*]

What better justice could Pallin have asked than to finish the job from two years ago? All but one of the family of Keepers had been captured. Under his commander's orders, Captain Montran Pallin had tortured the women to convince Naolis to cooperate. They had killed them all in the end. Now he had the chance to clean up the last detail, and he had snarled it.

Not again. Elis would not escape. As part of Pallin's mission, he would clean up the job from two years ago.

Someone pounded on the door. Not again. Couldn't that woman leave him alone? "Go away."

"Pallin?"

Any other time he might welcome her intrusion. He needed the touch of a female, just as any man did. At least with humans, he didn't have to worry about bonding. That only happened between two Inari, although the occasional single nights with his own kind weren't a problem.

But these human women—or was it just this one?—could be tenacious. Nina Russet could make herself a pest.

"Pallin. I want to talk about last night. What happened with you and Elis? And those two girls, Pallin. What were you doing with them? Please. Open the door so we can talk?"

Crystal fire. Maybe he should have stayed at the house. But that would have looked more suspicious. He had tried to trap Elis to kill him but failed. Had he succeeded, he could have let Raea go until the portal opened. Taking her back would have been no problem with Elis out of the way, especially when she would have no memory of what happened. Now, he still had to figure out how to take the Keeper out of the picture, or at least keep him from interfering.

Maybe Nina could help. She was there to learn about her "Dark Angel". Maybe the truth could work to his advantage.

If not, one more death before he left would be one less problem for Prime Commander Loran and the others on that world.

He rolled out of bed, tucking his yellow wings close to him. He still wore the black flight suit and coat but no gloves. He stood behind the door and opened it, peering around. Good. Nina was alone. "Come in."

"I'm so glad you're okay."

He closed the door immediately after she stepped in.

"But— What the hell?" She stumbled back.

Pallin stepped away from the wall and opened his wings.

"What are you? You're one of them! Why didn't you— I mean, why are you here? Why now? What's going on?"

With a light hand, he guided her to the bed and sat her down. "I am here, a soldier of Inar'Ahben, to capture...criminals. Raea and Elis."

"What? I *knew* something was going on. They were the angels I saw. But how did you hide those wings? I mean, we were both naked. How do *they* hide?"

"It is special ability. They...have crystal I need. Padina stole from our world and gave to Raea." He pulled the wings tight behind him, making them all but invisible from the front. That brought her attention to his face. "Crystal is power. Keepers have all power." All the power they didn't deserve. They hadn't earned it. They were born with it and the crystal keepers hoarded it amongst themselves rather than let Heffin's Gate manage it to the benefit of all Inari.

"Do you mean that crystal Raea wears?"

"Yes. It is Starfire. It is danger to destroy many worlds."

"So...you're not angels? You're aliens, like real extraterrestrial aliens?"

"Yes."

"This is *incredible!* Tell me everything."

Pallin didn't hold back his grin. He explained how Keepers had been coming to Earth and interfering with human lives. He told her about his empress and her desire to unite their world and to one day expose their kind to the governments of Earth, when humans were ready. As he expected, Nina asked for details on everything. Some he couldn't give. Others were mundane topics about his world.

Then she returned to the matter. "Elis is this Dark Angel figure. But if he's dangerous, why did he help people?"

"Keepers make humans believe in angels. It is lie. He has powers to kill."

"Yeah. I've seen it." For a few seconds, she stared into her own thoughts. "But where was he going last night?"

"I take Raea to trap him. He tried to kill me, but I lived."

"I'm glad you survived. Now, tell me from start to finish what happened last night?"

He told her what he had done, after discovering the effects of alcohol on their systems, and how he had disabled Raea's friend to keep her safe while he lured Elis out to an abandoned house in the country. When he described the fight, she never blinked but listened with undivided attention to his every word. He showed her the burned wrist, which she studied in detail.

"Unbelievable. He seems so calm."

"You say nothing to anyone? This is mission I must finish. They know now I am Shirukan. I have two days and difficult. Must heal first."

"I suppose. Maybe I can help."

Her enthusiasm matched his expectations. Now, to pull her in with a plan.

Where Angels Live

"Raea. Come downstairs, please."

Now what? She'd barely showered and dressed. The boys weren't even awake to get ready for church. Raea hoped for more time alone. Too many ideas floated around her head. Mostly, she had to figure out what to do about Elis.

"What is it?" Raea shuffled to the stairs, where she could look out over the whole main floor. Debbie stood at the door with a police officer.

"Deputy Sandaman would like to get a statement from you."

The cops. This had to be about last night. What could she tell them? Nothing, really. She'd been unconscious.

"Coming." Better to get this over with so she could get on with her life. She stopped in the entry with Debbie.

"Miss Dahlrich?"

"Yes?"

"I need some information from you. I'd like your statement about what happened last night."

"Okay. But I was unconscious most of the time."

"*Most* of the time? What do you remember, Miss Dahlrich?"

He flipped a sheet on his pad and stood ready with a pen. She told him what she knew.

"That's it? You don't remember anything after the drink? Nothing at all?"

"No. Not until I woke up at a friend's."

"How did you get there?"

"I was unconscious. How would I know?"

"Who is this friend and where is their residence?" He waited with pen in hand.

"Elis Jasheir. He lives in the yellow house next door. Why?"

"Did this Pallin do anything to you?"

"I don't know."

"Would you be willing to submit to medical testing?"

"Why?" She didn't like the sound of that. What was he getting at? She looked at her aunt, who shrugged.

"Ma'am, not to be insensitive, but in these cases, we like to be sure we're not also dealing with rape. If, while you were unconscious, he committed any sexual misconduct, we would like to have physical evidence. Have you showered today?"

"Yes."

He made a note on his pad. "That makes things more difficult."

The thought of being raped while unconscious left Raea with a dirty feeling. What if Pallin had done something? A few hours had passed before Elis rescued her.

No. She didn't want to think about it. She hated the suggestion. "I don't want to know." She wanted to forget the officer even suggested it. Pallin wouldn't do anything like that. He just wanted the Starfire crystal.

"You're sure? If there's anything, we can put this guy away. If not, I don't have much to hold him. It's your choice, but without trying, you give that up. Do you want that?"

Debbie's arm around her pulled her close. Raea buried her face in her aunt's shoulder. Pallin couldn't have touched her like that. Could he? Oh, God. She didn't want to think about it. She needed another shower now. The very idea made her sick.

The thought of him getting let off on a lesser charge scared her, but she didn't want to know if he did anything. "No. I won't. I can't."

"Are you sure, Raea?" Debbie's quiet voice did nothing to calm her. "If he molested you, this is your chance for justice, and to put him away where he can't hurt you."

"No. I don't want to know." And she didn't want anyone to figure out she wasn't human.

Deputy Sandaman closed his pad. "All right. I can't force you. I'm sorry for what happened. Thank you for your time, Miss Dahlrich. Mrs. Logan." He tipped his head to Debbie and let himself out.

"You all right?" Debbie hugged her tightly.

"Yeah, but...what if that Deputy Sandaman was right? What if Pallin did something like...rape me? I wouldn't even

know." She shuddered to say it.

"Don't think about it."

How could she not think about it? Not until Pallin and all his Shirukan were gone and left her alone could she forget.

More than ever, Raea needed Elis. She hadn't been raped. Pallin couldn't have.

Raea wanted to forget the last ten days. Had it only been ten? It seemed like a lifetime had passed. She had changed so much in that time that a lifetime could have passed. She felt like she lived another life, someone else's. This wasn't her life.

That life was so much easier. Thinking Elis was creepy and avoiding him. Believing without a doubt she was human. Having no secrets to hide, or nosy reporters to avoid. Never meeting Pallin.

She hurried to her room and shoved her face into her pillow. This was Pallin's fault. And the Starfire's. She wished she'd never met him, that her mother had never passed the crystal to her. That she'd never been born.

Everything had gone to hell. She'd take Chad's teasing just to live her old life again.

What about Elis? She hoped he felt better. He suffered because of her. Why did he risk so much for her? She could call him. In fact, she wanted to see him, to know if he had feelings for her. She needed him now more than ever. What would she say, though? What could she do?

She was afraid to find out he didn't. *Just do it.* Elis was wounded rescuing her, but his job was to protect and train her. That's all. Or was it? He said Pallin drugged her and knocked out Linds. But why hadn't he brought her home?

His wings.

Right. He couldn't expose his wings. He had done nothing to hurt her in the last week. Elis had been a gentleman. He was a friend and a teacher.

Dammitall! She wouldn't have any peace of mind until she talked to him, until she found out. She wished that officer had never suggested the possibility of rape. It made her need Elis more than any other time, for the comfort and peace he brought to her. But he might not want to give her that comfort.

Raea picked up the phone in her room and dialed. Here went everything.

After a few rings, Evelyn answered. "Hello?"

"Yeah. How's Elis?"

"Is this Raea?"

"Yes."

"Let me check, dear."

Raea bit her lip and listened. Over the phone she heard Evelyn's muffled call to him. *Hurry up, before I lose my nerve.*

After what seemed an eternity, Evelyn's cheerful voice came back. "He's coming, dear. Hold on."

"Thanks." She waited, her nerves snapping like live wires.

"Hello?" His voice was coarse, like he'd just waken up.

"Elis? How are you doing?" She swallowed her heart back down.

"Better. Still sore. How are you?"

"Fine."

"Good, then the healing is complete. I forgot to ask earlier, but you ran out so fast."

"Healing? What healing?" Had she been injured?

"Pallin had you hanging by your wrists from the floor supports in the basement of the Lake house."

"He did?"

"He didn't care how beat up you were, by the looks of things."

"Um...yeah. I was wondering about that. Do you think he might have...um..." She cleared her throat to free the words that stuck there. "Like...raped me while I was unconscious." The last words rushed out before she could stop herself.

Silence hung on the phone, broken only by a heavy breath. "There's one way to know." He sounded bitter. ["Find the resonance and use it to contact the Starfire. Think back to last night and let it fill in the gaps after you were unconscious. And let me know."]

The Starfire? Could it show her what happened? It *had* shown her scenes of her mother's life. Did she want to know the truth?

Yes. Maybe. If Pallin had done anything to her, she *should* know. But part of her didn't want to think of him raping her, or see it happen. If she saw it, she would always remember. She didn't want to remember anything like that.

["I'll try."]

["Do it!"]

Yikes. She'd never heard him so upset before. "Okay. I'll work on it."

"I'm sorry; I'm not mad at you. It's Pallin and his kind."

"I understand." The Shirukan had killed his family. Finding one of them here and not being able to do much about it without bringing attention on himself must have really hurt.

"I'll let you go to work on it."

So much for asking about how he felt. But he cared enough to be mad about Pallin possibly doing worse to her. He cared. "Thanks, Elis."

"You're welcome."

She clicked off the phone. What had Pallin done? Had he really hung her by her wrists?

Raea examined her wrists but saw nothing. Elis had healed her, at least physically.

What if Pallin *had* raped her? No. He couldn't have. Could he?

Raea sat back against the head of her bed and stuffed a pillow in her lap. The Starfire could show her what happened. If Pallin had done nothing, they could reassure her. But if he had, she didn't want to know.

She had to try. If nothing else, it might bring her closer to understanding the Starfire entities.

Raea took a deep breath and sat up. The resonance came with little effort. Her whole body vibrated with a faint pitch, or so it felt like. She closed her eyes and let it rise with the heat.

Voices formed in unison from the perfect harmony: *WE HEAR YOU.*

Raea gasped and lost the resonance. The words came as a feeling rather than as spoken words, but with a meaning. She had never heard them like that. The times they had risen up had always been in discord.

She had to try again. This time she found the resonance and thought of what she wanted—last night. A part of her resisted, but she pushed through it.

Pallin knelt over her, dressed completely in black, a smirk on his face. ["You're all mine, Keeper. Once we dispose of the other, you'll come back to Naviketan and face the machine. But we have some time."]

The images blurred and jumped to him carrying her through the air. They landed at the Lake farmhouse. He opened the door and threw her over his shoulder. In the dark house, he found his way to the basement and flicked on a light switch. They descended into an unfinished area piled with boxes and miscellaneous items. A white chest freezer stood out at the bottom of the stairs.

["Now to set the trap."] Pallin set her down and tied her wrists with a rope, tossed the loose end over a beam of the floor supports for the main level above and hoisted her up. ["The bait is ready."]

He prepared an area and waited, using the freezer as a chair.

Soon Elis appeared, or it had to be him. The black wings lifting from the shadow at the top of the stairs could only belong to him. He stepped into the light, they exchanged words and fought.

When it ended, Elis untied her and lowered her to the ground. Tears trickled down his cheeks. ["You're safe now."] He kissed her cheek and held her close. ["I'm sorry."]

He cradled her in his arms and carried her out, pausing frequently, his breathing heavy. Outside, he lifted into the night and flew her to Evelyn's back yard. Rather than taking her to her own home, he carried her inside and up the stairs, where he laid her in his bed and covered her. Seconds later, he crashed on the other side of the bed, blood crusting over a rip in his coat.

Raea woke up from the vision and hugged her pillow close. Elis cared for her. The way he held her, and kissed her—he kissed her cheek—said more than his words. Why didn't he tell her? Or was this something other than the romantic feelings she had for him? But why would he kiss her cheek and hold her tight like in the vision if he didn't feel that way?

But the skip. Why had the vision jumped from the early moments after her collapse to later? Was there something the Starfire didn't want her to see? Maybe she should leave it alone. If Pallin did something to her, it might be better not to know.

No. She had to try again.

The vision still skipped. Why?

What did it mean? Did the Starfire fail her?

Elis might know. And now she wanted to see him more than ever. Did he like her as more than a friend? Why had he kissed her?

She wouldn't rest until she knew. Her feelings for him pushed her to the hope inspired by the vision. She rushed from her room through an empty house. Everyone had left for church.

Like earlier that morning, she slipped her shoes on, and without tying them, stepped out into the chilly air. A quick race down the steps and across the lawn brought her to the front door of the yellow house.

Raea knocked once and paused. If Debbie was at church, Evelyn would be too. They attended the same church. It was one of the reasons Raea rarely went—Elis always joined Evelyn, and Raea had always hoped to avoid him.

Until now.

When no one answered, she let herself in. Evelyn never locked her door when she was home, unlike Debbie and Mike. She still believed in trusting her neighbors.

Nothing stirred. Had Elis gone with Evelyn?

"Elis?"

Nothing. He wouldn't have left the house, not with his injuries.

Oh, God. What if he started bleeding? What if he laid unconscious from the loss of blood?

She kicked off her shoes and rushed up the stairs. Through the open crack of his door, she saw him sleeping with his back to the door. His side rose and fell with his steady breathing. Thank God.

Raea tip-toed into the room and crept around the bed to the far side. Wow. He looked so peaceful. So calm and relaxed. He really did look like a sleeping angel.

A sleeping angel with a long strip of gauze taped to his side and another on the leading edge of one black wing. Now, if she knew how to heal, she could help him.

His relaxed expression teased a smile from her. She loved it. That face. That gentle face hidden by a thick shag of hair he didn't keep trim. It always gave him a dark look, except when he smiled.

Oh, man. She really did like him. Maybe even more now that she had seen how much he cared for her. Pallin had been too good to be true, beautiful on the outside but a monster on the inside, only out to trap her. But Elis cared, really cared, and she had refused to look beyond the outside to see the beauty within.

Raea sat down on the edge of the bed by his chest and brushed away strands of black hair from his cheek. Not even stubble? Didn't he grow facial hair? Why would he? An odd assumption, but while they might both look human, neither of them were. Their kind had evolved on a different world, one she had never seen except in the visions. Maybe one day, when it was safe, he'd take her there. She'd like to know where her mother was from, the place he also called home.

Where angels lived.

He sighed heavily and moved his arm until he bumped against her.

"Wake up, sleepy."

His brows pinched together and he looked up. "Raea? What're you doing back so soon?"

"Soon? Evelyn's out for church. It's after ten."

"It is?" He twisted to look at the clock on the nightstand. "I feel like we just talked." He rubbed his eyes, brushing his hair back into a mess.

"How's the wound?" She didn't want to talk about the vision, not yet.

Elis pulled back the blankets. A faint red colored the gauze down the middle. His muscling was different than what she had seen on her cousins and uncle when they went topless. She never saw much difference on herself, but she never studied the change in musculature while she had wings, despite the tightening of her clothes.

"You need that changed?" A good excuse to stick around, until she built the courage to say what she really wanted to say.

"It's fine."

"No. Stay here." Raea stood. No way would he get out of taking care of himself. He had done so much more for her. At least he could let her help him. If he was going to be stubborn, she had to act fast. "Bathroom. Right?"

"I'll be fine."

"No. It needs changing," she called back from outside his door.

"Raea—" Heavy steps followed after her. "I just covered it a few hours ago. It doesn't need changing."

She searched the cabinet above the toilet and under the sink and finally found the First Aid kit. "Aha! Now—" She stood and turned.

And caught her breath. He should have stayed in bed. It would be easier to change his bandages while he was laying down, and there was barely room for two people to squeeze by, without wings, in the cramped bathroom.

"Leave it. I'll take care of it later." He tried to take the plastic case, but she held on. He would not get out of this. That bandage was filling with blood, more since he stood.

"No. I'll take care of it now so you can help me. I'm having trouble seeing parts of last night."

He hesitated. "The Starfire's holding back?"

"Something is." What could she say? He looked just as confused. But she didn't want to think about it right now. "You still need changing. I mean, look at this..." She reached toward the reddening center of the gauze.

He grabbed her hand. "Don't. It's fine. It's not important."

"Yes, it is."

"No. It's not."

"Yes. It is." Man. He pissed her off with his macho attitude.

Stalemate. He had both her hands busy. She couldn't get the kit away from him. How could she make him sit still?

"Dammit, Elis! Just let me help. You don't have to do everything yourself." She let her breath out in a huff.

His hold on her hand loosened, and he let go of the plastic case.

"Good. Now, do you want me to do this with you standing or lying down? Personally, this bathroom's a little crowded, but it's your choice." Not that she minded being close to him, but this was about treating his wound. She wasn't ready to talk about *them*.

His shoulders dropped. "Lying down."

"Good." He'd given in. For a second, she wasn't sure he would. She followed him back to the bedroom, where he laid on his back with the wings out to either side. Raea sat down next to him and opened the kit.

"I was able to see last night, most of it."

"I'm not surprised. You've become pretty adept at finding the resonance."

Raea peeled off the tape, noting the tightening of his muscles by the definition around them when he flinched. He might not be hairy like her uncle—why couldn't Mike keep his shirt on in summer?—but even she knew how wound tape could hurt coming off and tried to rip it off quickly.

"It showed me what happened." There. She pulled off one end. Now to peel back the gauze and the tape along the long sides.

"What did you see?" He winced.

She knew why. The blood had crusted to the gauze as if he hadn't cleaned it properly. Oh, man. She hated the sight of blood. But he really did need this. *Deep breath. Okay. Keep talking. Don't think about the blood.*

"I saw Pallin over me in the hotel room, then it jumped ahead to him flying with me to the farmhouse and everything after that." Everything after, including Elis's kiss. Oh, how she wanted to ask him directly. But the right words wouldn't come. Instead, she focused on changing his bandage.

The last of the gauze peeled off. With a quick yank, Raea pulled the tape. "Jeez, Elis. This is messy."

"I know." He didn't look at her or what she did but stared at the ceiling.

"Wait here. I'm going to get a washcloth and clean it up." He better stay this time. She hurried to soak a washcloth—a dark one to be sure, as Debbie would have scolded her for staining a good, light one with blood—and returned to him still lying on his back. At least he knew what was good for him.

Raea wiped off the crusty blood around the cut. It wasn't as deep as she feared, but she couldn't tell with the dark scab filling the cut. "You know, for such a small thing, that's a lot of blood."

"Yeah. But we heal faster than humans. In a couple weeks I *might* have a scar."

Only a couple weeks? That was fast. Guilt tempered her surprise, although she wasn't too surprised given her own experiences growing up. But he had received the cut by protecting her. That left a bitter taste of guilt. "I'm sorry about this. If it wasn't for me, you'd be all right." She finished cleaning the cut and pulled out a length of gauze from the roll in the kit.

"It could have been worse. I'm alive. *You're* alive. That's what matters."

"Yeah." He was. But it didn't take away all her guilt. She covered the wound in fresh gauze and pulled out the tape. "I should have taken Josh with me like he offered."

"Why? Weren't you going to be with Pallin?" Was that bitterness she heard in his voice?

"Yeah, to tell him I didn't want to see him again. He never called. He never returned my calls. Or at least, not very quickly. He never even offered to hold my hand, in case you didn't notice. Now I know why—he didn't really care. But before last

night, I thought he just wasn't, like, serious, because he would be leaving soon. And if he..." She couldn't finish the statement and choked on the disgust of what she didn't want to know.

She hurried to finish taping the fresh gauze without saying anything more. Elis said nothing as she worked, nor when she packed up the kit and carried it away.

When she came back, he was standing and stretching his arms. Black wings spread open as far as the walls allowed. The tape pulled off in a couple places.

"Elis. Hold still." If she didn't know better, she'd think he did that on purpose. She hurried to his side and pressed the tape back down. "I probably should get more tape. I didn't expect it to come off like that. But if you hadn't stretched, it wouldn't be a problem."

"It's fine."

"No." She pressed the tape down, making sure it stayed stuck to his skin.

"Raea." He grabbed her hands away. "It's good."

"But—"

"Really." He fought her attempt to try again. "I *can* take care of myself."

I know, but...I have to do something. Something so she didn't have to look him in the eyes. She couldn't look without her emotions overflowing. And if he didn't share the feelings the Starfire inspired in her...

The Starfire entities had been right all along. The one time she and Pallin had accidentally touched, the voices screamed in discord, a warning that they knew what he was. Yet when Elis had first touched her, they showed her loving scenes. They made her wings grow that first time. They showed her what she needed to know. They helped her to understand what she was.

But they couldn't control her. She still had the power to choose. Or did she? Maybe she had chosen long ago but wasn't ready to face it. Maybe they had only shown her what she had denied—a hidden curiosity about Elis.

Raea sighed and hung her head. "But it's all my fault. I went to his hotel. I let him catch me. I told myself he liked me. I wanted to believe that. I trusted him. I..." She sniffed back the turmoil rising up. Oh, God. Not the tears again. Why was this so difficult? "I didn't want you to get hurt. I never thought...If I had trusted you, trusted myself... Instead I told myself I didn't like the person who's kindness and patience meant more than all the fake charm in the world. Someone who was always there, and I was mean and cruel and...and I let myself be blinded." Nothing sounded right. "I'm sorry."

"This isn't about last night." His soft voice calmed the emotions. "Is it."

She pulled her hand away to wipe her eyes and shook her head. No. It was so much more that she couldn't put to words. Why wouldn't he say what he felt? Why did he only show it when she was unconscious? Or had it been a lie?

A warm touch on her cheek soothed away the confusion inside. *Don't let go, Elis.* She put her hand up over his and leaned into his touch. Nothing else felt so right. He *must* have felt the same to touch her like that. "I know you would never hurt me. This last week has shown me that. And I like the lessons...spending time with you."

His hand dropped away from her cheek. What did she say? She looked up as he stared, dumbfounded. A second later, a sheepish grin spread across his face.

Gah! Raea chuckled at his sudden embrace that lifted her off her feet, and she flung her arms around his neck. Elis. He did like her. Why had it been so difficult to say?

Black wings rose behind him. Her Dark Angel.

He held onto her for a long time, but she didn't care. He held her. He wanted her, as she wanted him. Now she knew. Josh was right. Josh was *so* right.

"Thank you." The warmth of his breath in her hair sent ripples of pleasure down her back.

"For what?"

He shrugged, the rise of his shoulders lifting her head up. She leaned away to see his smile as he set her down. Wait. He looked like he was about to cry. Did it mean that much? Or was he hiding his pain from the wound?

"For this chance," he said. "I've waited a long time."

No way. All this time? For her? "Why didn't you speak up?"

"Would you have listened?"

"No." She couldn't deny the truth, especially when she had admitted it not long ago. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea how you felt. You never *said* anything."

"It was hard. Fitting into a new world, much less among a different species..."

"Yeah." Her face warmed. "I think I understand."

"And finding a beautiful woman of my own kind."

Man. He knew how to make her blush. She felt that. But this time she didn't care or try to hide it. "Okay. *That* I wouldn't know about."

He laughed. Then winced.

"Sorry."

"Elis! Lunch is ready." Evelyn was home already.

"We'll be down soon," he called back.

"Is Raea up there?"

"Yes, she is." He called the words to Evelyn, but stared at her. At Raea.

Oh, man; oh, man! She loved—*loved*—that smile. It chased away all her problems. And the way his eyes sparkled when he looked at her—his whole demeanor changed. Now, *that* was a transformation.

"Let's go." She led him by the hand out the door.

"After lunch, we'll work on that skip in the vision. I want to know what the Starfire is hiding."

Raea stopped. She had a bad feeling about why the vision skipped. She didn't want to see it. "Why?"

"I won't hold back next time I see Pallin."

The sudden hard lines of his face chilled her. He was serious.

Two Worlds, A Part

Pallin finished fastening his pants as Nina shut the door behind her. Revealing his true form had given him more than an ally. She would be useful, for a while. While she expressed a desire for justice against the dangerous Keepers, somewhere in her devious little mind she was only in it for her story. He'd give her the story she wanted, but it would never be seen. He wouldn't let her expose the others.

Prime Commander Loran Tarolis could ensure that never happened.

Pallin picked up the phone and called. Tarolis had chastised him the first time he contacted him by tri-comm and advised Pallin how to behave on that world, and he had set up an account to fund his stay. Since then, Pallin had only contacted him once by phone at his office at NeoGen Labs, a company Loran had started to fund the work he and the others did on that world. Tarolis was a scientist, and the work he did wasn't tolerated on Inar'Ahben and nearly impossible with Keepers around; and some of it involved the humans.

Pallin had no intention of staying long term like the others. In a few days, he'd be gone and the Crystal Keeper with him.

The phone clicked. "Loran here."

["Commander Montran Pallin reporting, sir."]

["You have something?"]

["Yes, sir. The Keeper escaped, but I know how to finish the job."]

["You'd better, Commander. I can't help you. Make certain he stays out of the way, any way you have to."]

["Actually, sir, you can help me. I've revealed to one human my identity and she's agreed to help. She understands that the Keepers are dangerous and is willing to play a part in their capture."]

["Then you'll leave another problem here for us."] Tarolis growled the statement.

Pallin flinched. ["That's where I need you. She's agreed to help in exchange for full coverage of the Keeper in his natural form."]

["Coverage? You collaborated with a *reporter*? You're a fool, Commander. Kill her. End this now before it skyrockets. I'll have no such idiocy."]

["But she can provide a distraction. The Keeper will do all he can to avoid her identifying him on video. That threat can work to our advantage, my advantage. But in the end all evidence must be destroyed."]

["You're damn well right it must be."]

Surely the prime commander could see reason. Pallin had to convince him. ["You can be sure of that. She's Nina Russet of the *Xplorer Channel's Miracles and Other Wonders* series. I'll take care of what I can here, after my use for her is done, but there will be details to clean up."]

["So, you want me to clean up after your mess?"]

["In the end it won't matter. Soon we'll have three of the shards. Saffir can't hold out forever. Once we have the fourth, we'll have all the power of the Starfire. After Inar'Ahben, Earth will be nothing. The Keepers will have no place to hide, and we'll know peace under one rule, without their interference."] No longer would the Keepers dictate to the Inari people how to live their lives by threat of withdrawing their "services". The Inari people had lived without them once, and they would learn to live without them again. The Shirukan would clean up their world, so the people could choose for themselves how to live.

["All right. I'll get someone on it. Her story will never see airtime. Do *not* fail, Commander."]

["No, sir."] Pallin's breath froze. The punishment for failure of this magnitude would be death. He had been the executioner a few times. He had no intention of turning the role around. ["Commander Montran Pallin out."]

* * *

This was so wrong. Raea shouldn't be at school. Elis suffered because of her. But Linds...

Could her friend ever forgive her? What if Pallin had raped her? Had Linds done the medical tests to find out?

Raea couldn't do it. Not only did she not want to know, but she didn't want to let any doctors figure out she wasn't human. She had never been in a hospital for any reason, and Debbie had never taken her to a doctor, which was why she wasn't allowed in sports. Now, she understood that her aunt had protected her. Raea wasn't about to change that.

She still hadn't been able to get past the skip in the crystal's memories, even with Elis's help. She didn't want to see if Pallin had done anything so despicable to her. Nor did she want to see him that day. Would he show up? If he didn't have to be there, would he continue his charade since he exposed the truth to her?

"Raea."

She jumped. *Whoa. Slow down heart. It's only Josh.*

"Raea. Are you okay? What happened? I waited at the corner this morning, but I didn't see you."

"I'm...fine. How's Linds Have you seen her?"

"Yeah. She's good. She said Elis rescued her. What happened on Saturday?"

"Pallin's an ass. A dirty, filthy sonofabitch. I never want to see him. Ever!" She threw her books in her locker with excessive force and one bounced out and slammed to the floor. She had been *so* stupid.

Too bad the locker wasn't bigger, or she could hide in it.

"Geez, Raea. What did he do? I heard you both passed out and Elis came."

"Yeah. Something like that." She picked up her book and finished putting things away.

"Do you remember anything?"

"No. Just...don't ask me any more questions. I already told the police what I know. Nothing. I was unconscious."

"I'm sorry." He glanced around. "Where's Elis?"

"Injured."

"How?"

"What is this, the Inquisition?" She let out a heavy sigh and turned to face him. "I'm sorry. It's just...I have a lot on my mind right now. Can we not talk about anything related to Saturday or Pallin? If he shows up today, I don't know what I'll do."

"Okay, but does this count?" He started unfolding a newspaper clipping.

Oh, no. Not another one. "Not even your 'Dark Angel'." It only made her think of Elis and how much she wished he was there.

He folded the article away. "That's okay. It just says that there were two angels seen Saturday. And Nina Russet reported having some video footage of Dark Angel."

No. Elis! Her heart raced. *Calm down. It might be nothing.* "Did she get a clear shot?"

"Nothing that wasn't blurry or too dark. She said he attacked their SUV with some sort of beam that melted their tires."

So far, so good. Elis had only damaged the vehicle. "He didn't hurt anyone."

"No. I called her at the hotel and she said they pursued him out into the country somewhere. Apparently he didn't want to be followed."

Elis must have been chasing Pallin down to rescue her. He didn't want any witnesses to their secret. She could ask him later to be sure, but a fair guess that's why he did it. "Did Miss Russet say anything else?"

"Nah. Just wondered how you were."

Yeah, right. Just wondered how she was. A million to one, Nina Russet was prying to confirm what she suspected.

Raea finished putting away her coat and gloves and gathered her books for first period. At least Elis's secret was safe. But how long did they have until Miss Russet put the pieces together? How long until her crew got a clear shot of his face?

He couldn't risk flying. Not until they left. Probably not an issue since he was hiding out while he recovered from his wounds.

"How much longer will she be in town?"

"Just a few more days, I guess. Not sure."

A few days more? Why her?

The warning bell rang.

"I'll see ya in class," Josh said.

"Whatever." Mondays sucked.

* * *

The first chance she saw Linds after first period, Raea pulled her close at their lockers. An easy catch when they had chosen lockers next to each other.

"Are you, like, mad at me?" Raea asked.

"No. Why? Did someone say I was?"

"No. I was afraid after what happened. You know?"

Linds reached out and embraced her. "God, no, Raea. I was so worried about you. I had no idea that he would be so devious. I'm glad he didn't do something bad to you. That's why I went with, to be there in case he tried something. I feel bad

insisting on trusting him for a drink. I didn't even think he might have drugged it. It was unopened."

"Thanks." She returned the hug and stood back. "You talked to the cops?"

"Yeah. I didn't have much to say, but I was so worried about you. If it hadn't been for Elis, who knows what Pallin might have done if he came back. Mom insisted I get to the emergency room and get checked out right away."

"Did you?"

"Don't worry. He didn't do anything. What about you?"

"No." At least he had left Linds alone. Some of Raea's tension melted away.

"No, you didn't go; or no, he didn't do anything?"

Raea looked away. "I didn't go."

"Why? It's not painful or anything. Maybe a little uncomfortable."

Raea shrugged and played with a corner of her notebook. How could she tell Linds? *What* could she tell Linds? Maybe if he hadn't touched Linds, he hadn't touched her either. Raea could hope. "I didn't think of it and had a shower before the cop came. So I kinda figured, why go?" She looked up to Linds shaking her head. *Don't give me that. I know I should have. But you wouldn't understand. I'm not like you. I'm so not like you and the others.*

"Don't you want to see him in jail after what he did?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to think of it anymore. I just wanted to be sure he didn't hurt you."

Linds frowned. "I called yesterday. Debbie must have forgot to tell you. She said you were with Elis."

Warmth rose to Raea's cheeks. "Yeah...um...I kinda broke the ice between us."

"As in..." The suspicious, leading voice.

"As in we're kinda...like...well, we like each other."

"Oh, my God! When did this happen?"

Raea shrugged. There was one secret out. "I think I knew a while ago but I didn't want to accept it."

"Wow! I mean, really, it's a surprise, but after last week, it's not really. I make no sense. Do the others know?"

"Josh does."

"Why does everyone go to him first?"

Raea shrugged. She knew, but she wouldn't say it. Besides, the question was more hypothetical than rhetorical.

"Anyway, we better get to class." Linds glanced at her watch. "Less than a minute. We'll talk at lunch." She started off through the mostly empty halls. "I'm glad you're all right."

"You too."

Well, the cat was out of the bag, at least as far as her and Elis were concerned. She'd better keep her mouth shut about the Starfire and having wings. Oh, and not to mention being an alien. Like anyone would believe *that*.

Maybe Chad.

Oh, crap. How was she going to deal with him?

Not as badly as she expected. No one laughed at his jokes, not even at lunch in the middle of a full cafeteria. That deflated his ego. But a few people asked where Pallin was. She didn't care and was glad he didn't show up.

Maybe being considered a public couple with Elis wasn't so bad. Josh seemed happier, since he didn't have to hide anything.

"Man. You're gonna have some smart kids."

What? Raea gulped a bite without chewing. It went down hard. "Josh. Isn't that jumping ahead, like, a *bunch*?"

"Exactly. Sheesh. Give it some time. Will ya?" Jess swatted him on the back of the head.

"Hey. I'm just saying..."

"Enough 'saying'. Let them decide," Linds said. "By the way, where is he?"

"Injured."

"How?" Josh asked.

"Fighting Pallin."

"Whoa." Josh paused with his fork in the air, his eyes wide. "He really fought Pallin to rescue you? Linds said he went after you, but I didn't think... The dude's a genuine hero."

"Yeah. He kinda risked his life." And hers, based on the Starfire vision. But he knew how to control his power not to hurt her. Pallin was the one using her as a shield.

"This is mister quiet-and-somber Elis?" Jess asked.

"Yeah. Who'dathunk, huh?" Raea shoved a forkful of food in her mouth. At least by keeping her mouth full, she couldn't talk. That meant avoiding spewing out details related to her secret. But when she was with her friends, at school or elsewhere, she was human. She belonged here.

With Elis, she was something else.

Her life would never be the same. She had two lives now. And she intended to keep them separate.

"Wow. I mean, totally. Wow, Raea! I wouldn't have expected it." Jess leaned over her tray, apparently unaware that her necklace was about to take a dip.

"Took me by surprise too." Why couldn't Jess let it go?

"And you really like him, I mean, like, want to be with him?"

"Yeah. Is that so hard to believe?"

"No. It's just so shocking." There went the necklace.

"Okay. Can we get past the surprise now? Please?" Was it that unbelievable?

"Sorry."

"Moving on," Josh said. "Anyone see the paper this morning?"

"Oh, no," Linds groaned.

Oh, yes. Josh laid it all out for them. Raea paid attention this time, curious if he gave out any details he hadn't given her that morning. Not much more, but it relieved her to hear it again. Nothing yet. Nothing about the farmhouse or the identity of their Dark Angel.

How was Elis? He'd have work to catch up with classes when he returned to school. Funny. He was in high school. Wasn't that backwards for him? Would he continue to graduation now?

Why not? She hoped to stay on Earth, at least for a while. It was her home. Sure, she might want to see Inar'Ahben, but it could wait, at least until it was safer. Her mother had come to Earth to hide from the Shirukan. The least she could do was honor her mother's sacrifice. She doubted Elis would leave her, especially now. Maintaining some semblance of humanity while living there would keep them safe from attracting unwanted attention and help her feel normal, if that was possible anymore.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. On the walk home, Raea hurried next to Josh, anxious to see Elis.

Until she saw the familiar white rental car and groaned. "Doesn't that woman have anything better to do?"

"Apparently not. Should I stay with you?"

"No. No, go on. I can handle her." Alone, rather than risk Nina exposing her before Josh, if the bitch had made any connections.

"All right. Tell Elis I hope he feels better soon."

Raea smiled. "I will. Thanks, Josh."

He left at their corner where they usually parted.

Now to deal with the bitch from hell. With all luck, Nina Russet would leave her alone, but Raea doubted it.

Sure enough, at her approach, Nina stepped out of the car, her frizzy bottle-blond hair pulled into a rough ponytail.

"Raea."

Raea stopped on the sidewalk before Evelyn's house. "Now what?"

"I'd like the full truth. No more lies, Miss Dahlrich."

Was the woman crazy? Did she honestly expect Raea to just blurt it all out? "I've told you everything I can." No way was she going to say anything more.

Raea hurried to Evelyn's door, but Nina followed at her heels, grating on her last nerve. "Leave me alone, Miss Russet."

"I'll leave you alone when you tell me." Nina leaned close and lowered her voice, her breath stinking of cheap coffee. "Or do I have to expose your boyfriend as the real Dark Angel?"

What? How did she know? No. She couldn't. Nina was guessing.

Or was she? The confidence in her grin and the way she crossed her arms made Raea's heart beat faster. She couldn't know. "You're pulling rabbits out of a hat. Nice trick. But you're so totally off your mark."

"Am I? I know he has the same marks on his hands you do. And he went after you Saturday night. I followed him. I saw him flying, and he attacked us."

"Show me proof." Josh said Dark Angel attacked Nina's vehicle, but that Nina had admitted to the video being blurry or

something. She didn't need this. Not now. Raea opened the door; she had to get away from the woman.

"I have it on video, Miss Dahlrich."

It had to be a trick. What if it wasn't? Could they take that risk? They had to get that video. It couldn't go on the air. Their lives would be ruined.

"I'll make you a deal. I'll show you the proof if you answer a few questions."

"No deal." Raea opened the inside door. "I have nothing to say."

"Then I guess the tape will air, showing everyone the real threat that is their precious Dark Angel."

Threat? Where did she get that idea? No. Raea couldn't take the bait. Nina was fishing. That's all. Raea stepped inside.

"You know where to find me. I'm in town until Thursday. You have until then, Miss Dahlrich."

No. No. *No!* Raea slammed the door behind her and dropped her bag. Anger shook through her. Nina wanted to paint them in a dangerous light. She wanted to ruin their lives, make people afraid of them. What did she have against them? It wasn't fair. They hadn't hurt anyone. And Elis had only disabled their vehicle. Besides, he had always helped people before then. Surely people would remember that.

"Hello?" Evelyn called from her sitting room. "Is someone here?"

"Just me, Evelyn." Raea slipped off her shoes and rushed to the window near the old woman. "Is she gone?"

"Who, dear?"

"That bi—" *Not in front of Evelyn.* Raea took a deep breath. "That wicked witch from the east, Nina Russet."

Nina walked back to her car. Good. She was leaving. But what would she do now? Would she expose them?

"Oh, her." Even Evelyn sounded disgruntled by the name.

"Is Elis upstairs?" Raea rushed to the stairs before Evelyn could answer. "Elis!"

She rushed up. He had to know.

"In here."

She stopped at his door. He held a globe of light between his hands.

"How're you doing that?" Her eyes fixed on the swirl of energy from the Starburst marks. Now that was control.

"Precision."

"I'll say." Raea blinked away her daze. "Nina knows, Elis. And she has you on tape attacking their vehicle."

The energy dissipated. "What?" Black wings pulled close to him.

Raea stepped towards him and sat down on the bed. "She knows. She confronted me just now and threatened to tell the world, to *show* the world if I don't tell her everything."

He sat down beside her and she leaned her head on his warm shoulder. "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing. Let her tell the world what she thinks she knows. We can hide the evidence. So, no flying for a while. That's all. If she needs you to tell her, then she must not have anything solid."

Mmm. He smelled good. Raea wrapped her arms around his bare chest and back. When she sat close to him, all her problems seemed so small, except the one resulting in the bandage next to her. "How's it healing?" And what about the wing? She looked up. The bandage was off, exposing pink flesh but no blood.

"Good. It doesn't hurt much. I should be able to fly without any pain by the end of the week."

"I'm glad. I can't wait to go out again, and this weekend is supposed to be nice." This weekend, before Nina exposed them.

His smile infected her. Nothing else mattered, at least not for the moment.

"Then I better be ready." He twisted to face her but his face pinched with pain.

"Still hurts?"

"Yeah, but only when I move wrong."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault. It's Pallin's." He straightened and let out a deep breath that relaxed his face. "Speaking of him...Are you ready to try again to see Saturday night?"

Not this again. She wasn't ready. But Linds was okay, and she was checked.

Linds was also human. Raea and Pallin were the same species. *That doesn't mean he would be more likely to do something like that.* She couldn't even use the word now. Even the idea behind the word made her squirm in discomfort, a discomfort she couldn't escape with a shower.

"Do I have to?" *Please say no.*

"No, but I'd like you to try again."

"Now?"

"Before you can think about it."

He was right, but she had thought about it. All day, in fact. She couldn't escape it. But if she learned he hadn't done anything wrong, she could rest easier.

"All right. Let's do it, before I change my mind."

His hand caressed her cheek in reassurance and dropped down to her hands. He took both of her hands in his. "Find the resonance and focus. Ask the Starfire about Saturday night."

Right. Easier said than done. Part of her still resisted. However, she did as he suggested and closed her eyes to focus. Saturday night.

YOU ARE NOT READY.

Raea gasped and opened her eyes.

Elis frowned. "What is it?"

"Didn't you hear them?"

"No." He adjusted his hold and leaned close. "Try again. I'm here. Nothing can hurt you now."

Raea closed her eyes and tried.

Pallin knelt over her and smirked. ["You'll never get away. And Elis will be long gone before you know what's happened. This was much easier than I expected. But we have some time. How would you like to spend it, Raea? Should I take what I can, as you Keepers do? So high and mighty, worshipped and adored. You don't deserve it."]

He leaned in close, his black-sleeved arm moved to the side of the view and slid down.

The image blurred and skipped ahead to him carrying her from the room. Linds laid on the floor on her side. The door closed.

Raea opened her eyes. "I can't. I don't want to see."

"You need to try. Just relax."

"No. I don't want to *know*, Elis. Everything I see I remember in detail. If I see something I don't like, I'll always see it. I'll always remember. I don't want that."

"But you need to know."

"No." She pulled away from him and stepped back to his closet. He couldn't force her. She wouldn't let him. Why did she have to do this? Why couldn't she go on without ever seeing it?

Because she would always have a little voice nagging her. Somewhere in her thoughts, she wanted to know; but not yet. Maybe the time was just too soon.

"I can't." She swallowed the lump in her throat. *I am not going to cry about this.* But she couldn't help it.

Raea wiped her eyes and cleared her throat.

Elis waited in silence, his eyes on her. "I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you."

She took a deep breath and stepped towards him, her arms around herself. "I know you don't, but this might. I'm not ready. They said that."

His face dropped into a frown. "The Starfire said it?"

"Yeah. I heard them say I wasn't ready."

His cheek muscles twitched with his hardening expression. She recognized that look. What could anger him? One thing. Did he think the Starfire entities held back because Pallin *had* done something?

No. God, no. That couldn't be right. She refused to believe it. Fresh tears blurred her vision. No. She wasn't raped. Pallin couldn't have. But he could; over three hours had passed while she was unconscious in his grasp.

This wasn't real. If that's what Elis thought, he'd better not say it.

Gentle hands steadied her and helped her to the bed to sit. "We'll try again when you're ready. Try focusing on growing your wings."

Yeah. Her wings. She needed to get past the pain of the rapid growth of tissues. That would keep her mind off the matter. Or the other matter would help distract her enough to get past the pain. Either way, Elis was right.

After she changed in the bathroom, she returned to the bedroom and he stayed to coax her with his soft voice.

Saturday Revisited

Tuesday and the day was over. Raea slammed her locker shut and gazed across the sea of bodies flowing through the halls to the nearest doors. Three days had passed since Pallin abducted her and her life was returning to normal. She didn't want to think about what he might have done, though sooner or later she would have to, especially if he did something. The consequences could be worse than anything Pallin did.

"Hey! Raea!" Josh shoved through the students to meet her. "Tell Elis I hope to see him soon."

"Thanks, Josh." No prejudice there. She could count on that from him, though. He might be odd at times, but Josh was good to everyone. "He's healing fast and should be back by next week."

"Awesome. Come on. Let's get out of this dump."

Exactly her thought. They stepped into the flow and stayed with it out to a brisk day that made her shiver and zip up her jacket. "I want spring."

"No kidding."

They hurried past the busses chugging fumes at the curb near the front doors. When they reached the end of the block and left the school behind, Raea looked up the street and hesitated. "Oh, no."

"What? Oh."

Nina Russet's rental car.

"She's leaving in a couple days," Josh said. "Then things'll be normal again."

What was normal anymore? Her life certainly wasn't.

Maybe he was right. Or at least, she could put things close to normal. If she at least could put Saturday night behind her, she could move on with a "normal" life, or at least her life. Things might feel normal without that bothering her.

But she still had other things to worry about.

"Don't worry. She's just a pest. That's all."

If only he knew. Someday she would tell him, but not now. She wasn't ready to share her secret. And she wasn't ready to explain the Starfire. She could just imagine what the U.S. military would do with it and with her and Elis.

That secret Nina threatened to spill. What if she did have Elis on tape? What would happen once it aired? There would go everything "normal".

They continued with little talk. Where they parted, Josh gave her a hug. "I'm sorry I got you into this with her. I'll find a way to make it up."

Good old Josh. Raea returned his hug and smiled. "Thanks. I might hold you to that."

"I'm sure you will. Good luck." He left her to walk alone. Now she really wished she had Elis with her. He helped her escape Nina once. Without him yesterday, she struggled to escape the leech, unlike the other time he'd been there to block her.

How would she get away this time?

She couldn't avoid it. *Might as well get it over with.* She and Elis had a couple days yet to decide on whether to take the woman's threat seriously. All she needed to say was they were thinking about it and hadn't decided.

Raea walked to the end of that last block at the edge of town. As expected, Nina met her on the sidewalk.

"Go away."

Nina stayed in step beside Raea on the path to Evelyn's door. "I don't think so, hon. You see, I've decided to up the stakes. You tell me what I want to know or I'll take this up a level, directly to the U.S. government as a threat to national security, to world security."

Cold dread washed through her, freezing her in her tracks. Nina would do it. The woman would do anything. Raea was certain of it.

"Whatever you're hiding, I want the full story, or I'll take what I know to them. Think about that."

The bitch. Raea watched her retreat to the car. Exposing them as a threat to this world? Her life would be ruined.

Nina knew it.

Raea couldn't let that happen. She hurried into the house, dropped her books, slipped off her shoes, and thumped up the stairs before Evelyn asked who came in.

"Elis." Raea found him at his computer. He looked so much better today than yesterday.

He looked up as she burst in, a long-sleeved, dark green shirt hiding the bandage on his ribs, but no wings. How had he

managed that?

Raea shook off the distraction. "Nina caught me again. This time she threatened to go to the government. Our lives will be ruined."

The tight lines of worry softened away. "Would they?"

"What?" Was this a joke? Didn't he understand?

"We haven't done anything wrong. Who's gonna believe her?"

"But what about the Starburst marks? That's pretty obvious. Or if they look closely? Or what about them taking a video of you?" Talk about the end of her life. She might as well walk into Pallin's hands. It might be easier than subjecting herself to whatever the government might do.

"Take it easy." He took her hands in his and coaxed her to sit with him, or rather across his lap. "She hasn't done anything yet."

His touch calmed her. She laid her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her. His shoulder rose and fell with each breath he took. Man, he smelled good, and felt good. She could sit there all day. The world slid away with her worries when she was with him. Maybe things would be okay. Maybe no one would believe Nina.

"Maybe. I'll have to think about it." Mmm...His gentle squeeze chased away the last of her troubles.

"Don't let Nina scare you. I'm not worried."

How could he be so calm? Even the gentle expression on his face left no room for argument. Oh, God. She loved that about him. If only she could accept things the way he did.

"It's Pallin I'm worried about. Sooner or later, he's going to try again. I don't think he was injured like me."

Not Pallin. Raea grimaced and stood up. Now she knew why Elis wasn't worried about Nina. The wicked witch was nothing compared to the devil Pallin was. "What do you think he'll do?"

"He'll want to take you back to sacrifice the Starfire to Heffin's Gate. He can't just take the crystal."

She remembered the vision of it accepting her mother and what happened when it rejected someone. Too bad Pallin didn't try to take it. Let the Starfire have him. Raea looked down at the crystal hanging at her chest. All that trouble for one seemingly insignificant gem. Far too powerful for its own good was more like it. If not for the Starfire, none of these problems would exist, although they probably wouldn't exist since history would be different.

But she couldn't change history, nor did she want to. Rather, she wanted to survive the present. She had accepted this.

"So, he'll come after me?" Scary thought. She could just imagine how bad it might be. Or she couldn't. She didn't even know what he was capable of doing.

"It's not like you'll fall for his trick again."

"No. Definitely not." She moved to the bed and looked up as Elis joined her. "So, what'll we do?"

"We can't do much but be prepared. And if we're together, we have a better chance."

"I think I can handle that." Yeah. Elis and her. He had rescued her from Pallin. She had all the confidence in him.

"You're ready to practice controlling the energy?"

Raea nodded and focused on the tasks he set for her—fine-tuning her control by adjusting how much energy she built up.

After a quick supper, they returned to his room. By the later hours, she let the Starfire energy radiate from her hands in a weak discharge like a light bulb.

["You're learning faster than I could have imagined."]

["Lately I've been able to hear the Starfire, to sort of feel their guidance. It's like they're showing me what to do and I only have to keep the connection through the resonance to let them work through me."]

What was that look for? He looked like the cat that swallowed the canary. He knew.

["You're opening yourself up. That's good. Then the Starfire's doing all the training."] He paused and that self-satisfied grin melted away. ["Do you think you're ready to let them show you Saturday night?"]

Was she? Raea hadn't thought about it that day. Now, after achieving a modest level of control, her confidence rose. Still, the idea, the possibility, oozed like slime poured over her. She would never escape it, nor could she forget. But she did not want to go there. Maybe Pallin did nothing. She could get it over with and be done. Finished. No more worrying. No more doubts.

But she hesitated. What if he had...raped her? The thought sickened her.

No. Get it over with. Nothing happened. Pallin couldn't have. The day was almost done. She could go to bed without any

questions hanging over her head. Only Nina would linger.

"All right." She turned to face Elis and put her hands out. Sure, she could probably do it herself now, but she wanted his presence, just in case. He held her hands, his touch reassuring. "Let's do it."

They focused on the resonance together. It warmed through her and images coalesced.

Pallin knelt over her and smirked. ["You'll never get away. And Elis will be long gone before you know what's happened. This was much easier than I expected. But we have some time. How would you like to spend it, Raea? Should I take what I can, as you Keepers do? So high and mighty, worshipped and adored. You don't deserve it."]

He leaned in close, his black-sleeved arm moved to the side of the view and slid down. His face shifted out of view and the scene bounced and shifted. Soon he reappeared, his face close with his body over hers.

Tears burned in her eyes. It couldn't be true. She couldn't believe what she saw. The Starfire lied to her. It had to be.

Elis let her hands go and pulled her close. "I'm sorry. So sorry."

Sobs trembled through her. Why had she chosen to see it? She should have let it go.

She couldn't. Not knowing and forever wondering would have been intolerable. She had wanted to see nothing and ignored all the logic pointing to the worst conclusion. That scene would be with her forever. A part of her memories. Nothing could erase it. Like the scenes with her mother, this horror would stay with her, all because of the stupid Starfire.

Raea grabbed the crystal. The stupid crystal. She hated it. All this was their fault. Everything.

A firm grip on her hand stopped her from yanking it off. "Don't."

"Let go, Elis." She pushed away and tried to pry his hand off hers. "I hate it! Let him have it. I don't want this anymore. I'm sick of it controlling my life."

"Raea." He struggled with her until he held her so tight he pinned both her arms between them so she couldn't move. "Raea, stop. This isn't the Starfire. It's Pallin. He made the choice to hurt you. Not the Starfire."

"But—" *Damn, it Elis. Let me go.* He held firm. "He hurt me because of this." She might have been unconscious and not directly experienced it, but she had seen as an observer what he had done to her body. *Her* body. The filth of that realization could never be washed away.

"Don't give it up. You can't. You're stronger than this, Raea. I know you are. You know it, too. Your mother wouldn't have given up, and she wouldn't want you to give up."

Why did he have to bring up her mother?

"Every Keeper has some memories they'd like to forget but never will. It's the nature of the Starfire in us to record events and experiences, good or bad. But don't give up the Starfire. They chose you and trust you. The responsibility is an honor. And you can't undo knowing what happened, but you can prevent him and others like him from these crimes on others."

She sniffed and made a half-hearted effort to pull free. His arms held her tight. Why did he have to sound reasonable? Didn't he realize what this meant? How much it hurt?

Pallin had...had...done it without her even being able to object. She didn't want any of it. Although she hadn't felt anything, but had observed it through the view of the Starfire crystal, she had been the victim.

Elis's warm breath blew softly through her hair. For a moment she could forget. A moment that sparked logic from the turmoil of her emotions. She would have those memories for many years, not because of the crystal, but because of the part of that crystal within her. She couldn't escape that. It was a part of her.

And if she gave up, Pallin and his Shirukan won.

Raea took a deep breath and relaxed, despite the tears. "You're right. I hate it, but you're right."

His arms relaxed. She wiped her eyes and buried her face in his chest. Why did this happen to her? Why couldn't she have just called Pallin? Or let Josh come along? Why did she have to trust him?

Why couldn't she have listened to Elis?

Elis. He was always there for her.

His gentle rubbing of her shoulder and back soothed away the last tears and the images. She closed her eyes and focused on him. Elis. Gentle, quiet Elis. He would never hurt her. He cared for her, protected her, maybe even loved her.

Fatal Ultimatum

After a while, Raea noticed a tension hardening Elis's arms. His fingers gripped her shoulders rather than rubbed. Raea sat back. The air about him seemed to have chilled and thickened into something impenetrable. He smiled at her, though. She knew better. Something wasn't right.

"You'll be all right?" he asked.

Oh, how that soft caress could melt her troubles away, but not this time. His touch was different. She didn't know how, but it wasn't the same. "Yeah."

"Practice focusing on your wings for a while." He stood up and headed to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"This is something you need to do alone."

"But—"

"Don't worry. Practice." He left before she could question him.

This wasn't right. He wasn't the Elis she knew. He was upset.

Upset at Pallin.

Pallin!

Raea jumped to her feet and rushed downstairs. Where had Elis gone? The beep of the phone in the kitchen drew her. Elis hung up the phone and headed for the back door, his coat and shoes on already.

"Where are you going?"

He halted in the middle of the dark kitchen. "To get some air."

Oh, no. She knew better. "You're not going flying without me."

"Practice growing your wings, Raea." The cold snap of his voice glued her feet to the ground. Something hard and cold burned in his eyes.

No. He wouldn't. But he had said it three days ago—if he met Pallin again, he wouldn't hold back. "You're going after him."

"Stay here."

"No. You can't." She crossed the kitchen as he opened the back door and grabbed his arm. "Elis, don't. Let it go." *I might lose you.*

"I can't. He's Shirukan. He's dangerous, and he thinks he's safe in his hotel room. His kind killed my family *and* yours. He'll come for you, and these humans know nothing. They can't even arrest him and hold him, because we can't tell them the truth. They can't know about the Starfire. I'm the only one, Raea."

"I won't lose you, too." Why did he feel compelled to take the fight to Pallin?

"You won't."

"You don't have to do this, not now." She refused to let him pull away. He'd get himself killed if he faced Pallin. He almost had last time.

Elis whirled on her, his face contorted in rage and sorrow, or was that from the pain of his wound. "He hurt everyone I love and the one I love the most. It ends now."

"But—" His words struck her dumb. The one he loved the most?

He yanked his arm away, sending her stumbling into the door frame as he rushed out into the cold. Seconds later, black wings spread behind him and he flapped into the night sky. This. Was. Not. Happening! Not Elis.

She couldn't leave him alone. She had to stop him. But how? She couldn't tell anyone. Even if she did, no one could drive her to the hotel fast enough.

She had to fly. That meant transforming herself. Oh, God, it hurt. She'd fail and Pallin would kill him. She couldn't let that happen. She had to try.

But first a coat and shoes. She rushed back to the foyer and grabbed his jacket from the closet and slipped on her shoes.

"Better hurry, dear. I've never seen him this upset before." Evelyn's voice carried through the doorway from the sitting room.

Raea swallowed. *Neither have I.* She slipped the coat on as she hurried to the back door. There, she focused on finding the resonance. *I need my wings.* One other thought occurred to her. She knew now how to communicate with the entities and let them guide her. Maybe they would show her the way. Through the resonance, she sent out her thoughts. *Starfire, help me. Elis is in danger.*

Burning pain seized her back. *Breathe.* It hurt. She groaned as the wings and muscles grew out. Seconds later, air rushed from her lungs in relief. Brown wings stretched with a thought.

She did it. She really did it.

No time to celebrate. She had to catch up to Elis. Raea rushed out and flapped down, climbing into the night. In the distance, a lone shadow hovered over the hotel. She would barely catch up. Then what?

No time. She had to try.

Raea flew in the direction of Elis's shadow and found the top of the hotel by the bright sign next to the building. They had a roof entrance. She hadn't even known. How convenient.

Elis was nowhere in sight. *Oh, God. If you really exist, please keep him safe.*

With a miscalculation, she landed hard enough to crash to her knees. No time to rest though. Now for the wings. She had to hide them again.

With the Starfire's help, she shrank her wings. Why couldn't it be painless?

That would be too easy, she thought on her way through the trap door. Down a short ladder to a landing at the top of a stairwell, she climbed. No sign of him.

Raea raced to the first door marked by a blue "3". Top floor. Pallin's floor.

Barely had she opened the door when she heard a heavy pounding through the hall and Elis's voice. ["Open up, Pallin! I'm done playing fair."]

What was he thinking? Did he want to attract attention?

Raea caught up as Nina Russet appeared from around a corner. *Oh, hell no. Not now.*

Elis seemed not to notice but pulled off one of his gloves and put his hand over the key card swipe of the door lock.

"What're you doing?" Nina stopped near him.

"Why are you here?" He snapped the question at her.

"I was on my way to see Pallin."

Raea blinked. What? To see him? She knew Pallin?

"You want the truth, Miss Russet? You'll see the truth." Elis never took his eyes off the glowing Starburst marks.

"Don't do this, Elis." *Please stop. It's not worth the trouble.*

"He's not getting...away...with...this." He strained with the energy he released, but the metal wasn't burning. What was he doing?

"What's going on?" Nina stepped close behind Elis, her eyes on his hands. "What're you doing?"

"Doing what I should have done Saturday."

"Dear, God." Raea gasped and stepped back, afraid of what she was hearing from him. He wouldn't. He *couldn't*. "You can't kill him."

"No. But you're getting some justice, and so...am...I." The lock clicked and he threw open the door. A second later, he jumped aside.

Nina stumbled back, a burned hole in her chest.

Raea jumped to catch her as she collapsed. "Nina."

A crash sounded from the room before the door slammed closed.

"Elis." But Nina—

Why me?

Nina's eyes opened and she peered down at her chest then up at Raea. "I know you can fix this."

"No. I can't. I don't know how." Raea looked around. No one. Didn't anyone hear the commotion? "Help! Someone help us! I need a doctor!"

Nina grabbed her hand, wincing with the movement that cracked the flash-cauterized edges of the wound. Blood flowed over Nina's dark shirt and vest. "Do it." She pressed Raea's hand to the bleeding wound. "You have the power. Pallin told me."

Raea trembled as blood oozed over her fingers and Nina's. She was going to be sick. "No. I haven't learned—"

"Try." Nina gasped and winced as if breathing hurt.

"I could kill you."

"I'm dead if you don't." Nina pressed her hand over Raea's.

A series of crashes came from the room and the door flung open. A dark shape flashed past with another right behind.

"Elis."

He hesitated chasing Pallin through the door to the stairs. A red line trickled down his cheek.

"I need your help. I can't do this."

He glanced back the way Pallin had gone and past Raea. "She's beyond my help." With that he disappeared through the door.

Nina's hand fell limp over hers. No. No, this wasn't real. She couldn't be dead.

Footsteps thumped towards her. "What happened?"

Raea looked up at a couple of men who knelt down. "She's been shot."

"What?"

"Take her." Tears burned in her eyes. Dammit, Elis. He and his stupid "justice". Nina should have come first. If he hadn't opened that door—

But Nina had been stupid enough to stand behind him, and Pallin had fired the shot.

Maybe Elis was right. She didn't know what he could and couldn't heal. Maybe this was more than he could heal. If that was the case, she'd never be able to save him if he was shot.

She had to stop him.

"Take her." Raea lowered Nina to the floor. She wiped the blood off her hand with the sleeve of Elis's coat and raced after him. The men would know better what to do, she hoped.

* * *

Crystal Fire. Pallin reached the rooftop. If Raea hadn't stopped him, Elis could have caught the Shirukan and secured him.

Pallin stood with golden wings and fired.

Elis ducked down as a shot sent gravel hurtling everywhere like tiny missiles, pinging off the metal door.

When he re-emerged, Pallin was airborne. Now he had to catch him from the air. Cornering the bastard in the hotel room hadn't worked. Both of them were sore with injuries, but Pallin was too well trained. Using the Starfire energy to subdue him would only have worked for a short time; but Elis couldn't even get his hands in position long enough. Instead, Pallin whipped out his knife. Elis ducked, but Pallin gave him a cut along his scalp. The line of blood cooled on his cheek in the chilly night.

Elis climbed onto the rooftop and grew his wings, his eyes fixed on Pallin flying higher. If Raea hadn't asked for his help—

He hadn't lied. Nina's wound was too deep and she was too far gone to save. Although he didn't like the woman, he would never want anyone hurt. She had been hurt because of him. It wouldn't be for nothing.

How had Raea followed so closely? She must have finally overcome the pain to grow her wings.

There was that.

He opened his wings and flapped into the air. Pallin would not escape. This would end tonight. Pallin wouldn't hurt Raea, or touch her, ever again. No more Pallin. No more Shirukan. Their lives would see peace.

Pallin reached a peak and hovered a moment. Here it came.

Elis swerved. A blast of energy from the weapon grazed his wing. The Shirukan had good aim, but so did he. A touch of the resonance gave him all he needed. He released the energy at the moving shadow.

The shadow dove. Or was it a fall? Had he struck Pallin?

No. Pallin spiraled and swooped up towards him, the targeting beam of his weapon glowed. No neutralizer beams here. The Shirukan shot to kill.

Elis pulled in both wings and dove head first. Nothing hit him.

Now, if he could lead Pallin away from the town, he might have a chance to survive without witnesses. And he could lure the Shirukan away from his real target—Raea.

Elis glanced back at the hotel far behind them. A dark shape outlined by the lights of the town approached.

Why couldn't she stay behind? Why couldn't she have stayed home? She didn't have the skills to avoid Pallin in the air. He'd easily catch her.

Maybe Pallin wouldn't notice. Elis had to end this quickly, before that happened. Or at least keep him busy.

Another shot flashed close to him.

Crystal fire. Elis flapped harder, partially riding an updraft to gain altitude and working at it.

Pallin climbed after him. Good. As long as the Shirukan didn't look back.

Beyond the edge of town and far above the patchwork of fallow fields and pastures, Elis dove on his adversary.

Pallin hesitated and brought his weapon up.

In a feat of acrobatics from years of aerial games on the homeworld, Elis swerved and zigzagged sharply in the air with variations of wing movements. The shots flashed past him.

A hundred feet away, Pallin brought the weapon up for a clear shot as Elis leveled with him.

Elis raised his hands and released a burst of energy, while flying straight for his adversary.

Seconds later, a blinded Pallin grunted from their impact.

Elis spread his wings like a parachute and nearly halted his fall. Pallin tumbled away.

Near the ground far below, the shadowy figure opened his golden wings and arched upwards.

For a few seconds, Elis could catch his breath.

Raea approached fast. How he wished she wouldn't. Too late. She was almost here. Now, he not only had to worry about Pallin, but he had to keep her safe.

Something stirred inside him. The Starburst marks glowed faintly. The wind picked up, fighting his efforts to glide as the currents shifted faster than he could adjust. Raea struggled, but stayed airborne.

He knew that feeling. The touch of the Starfire calling to itself. A portal. But who—Heffin's Gate or Saffir?

Pallin climbed into the sky as a ball of lightening flashed and crackled above them. Elis risked a look up. Within the electric discharge, a black ball formed. The lightening exploded outward, exposing the disk of the portal opening to about the size of a house. Lightening streaks spiraled around it

A scream over the rushing of wind in his ears jerked his attention. Raea!

While flapping hard, Pallin dragged her upward with an arm around her neck.

Elis refused to let him succeed. He had to be careful, though. Pallin looked up at him and put the weapon to her head, a challenging expression on his face. Pallin dared him. Elis had no doubt the Shirukan would kill her if he had to. The Starfire was his true target. Taking her alive would help, but one way or another, he intended to gain the crystal.

What could he do for her?

Elis didn't have to do anything. Raea lifted her wings, knocking Pallin's weapon hand away, and the Starburst marks flared.

A moment later, Pallin's arm yanked away, the pale flesh showing through the fabric of his sleeve. She had burned him. While Pallin tucked his arm close, Raea flew away to Elis.

["I'm not done with you! *Either* of you."]

Pallin lifted his weapon.

No. Elis dove at Raea, knocking her away from the deadly blast.

"What're you doing?" She pushed away from him.

["You have to watch your back."] He glanced at Pallin, who flew after them, and let her go. He needed a plan. But what? He had nothing, except...

Too dangerous. He couldn't risk her, but he didn't know what else to do. Besides, she *had* defended herself with the Starfire's power. He saw no other choice.

["Split up. Keep him distracted so I can disable him."]

She nodded and spread her wings. Now, to take care of the golden demon in the black uniform.

* * *

Distract him, huh? Okay. That didn't seem too hard. Raea flew away and glanced back at Pallin. He circled slowly. Which way would he go?

Stupid wind. Whatever that disk in the sky was—it looked like a blackhole, especially with the twist of energy around the event horizon—it upset the weather. The wind hindered her efforts, but also caused problems for the men.

Pallin lifted his weapon. A shot went wild to her left.

Her heart leapt into her chest. She had seen what that weapon could do. No way was she going to end up like Nina. Having it at her head had been scary enough. She almost hadn't dared to move, but something inside her insisted.

Raea caught a gust that sent her higher, towards the black maw. What was that thing?

She wasn't going to find out. Its appearance coincided with her marks and the crystal glowing faintly, and her body warmed but she hadn't touched the resonance.

She didn't have time to worry about it except how to stay away. Raea pulled her wings close and dove. The fast fall scared her, but she had no choice. Tucking them close turned her into a missile with gravity pulling her stronger than the hole in the sky.

It didn't last long. Away from the phenomenon, she opened her wings and caught the air like a parachute and looped around.

Elis maneuvered into a position opposite her from Pallin, who fired and dodged blasts from Elis. Someone had to end this.

WE WILL HELP YOU.

What? She paused, her wings outstretched. Who—

The Starfire. They spoke to her, in their own way. The important thing was that she understood.

NO RETURN. WE MUST NOT BE JOINED.

Joined? Joined to what?

NO ONE DESERVES ALL POWER. NO MORE MISUSE.

Fiery rivers flowed. Explosions burst around her. Fire. Death. Smoldering corpses sank into the molten rivers. Cities crumbled.

The dark of space. Cold, empty. But in the distance, a world of fire.

Another world circled by moons. Bursts of volcanic activity thrown miles up into the atmosphere and clearly visible from space.

A flash of energy. A deafening roar.

Massive asteroids hurtling through space. Not asteroids, chunks of planetary debris. Green covered one side of a large piece. Ships fled the scene.

Raea gasped and caught herself from a fall. Planets. All of them destroyed. She had seen other worlds exploding. Populated worlds. Billions of lives. Was that what would happen to Inar'Ahben?

WE DID THAT. INTOLERANCE. TOO OFTEN. NONE LISTENED. YOU ARE WARNED.

Yes, she was. She got the message, loud and clear. The Starfire would destroy any worlds where the residents abused their power. She had to protect it.

Raea turned back to the fight. They had to chase Pallin away. He couldn't take her alive, and he wouldn't get the Starfire from her dead body. She knew how to release the energy.

With her hands out before her, she chased Pallin. But focusing on the resonance and releasing the energy while fighting the buffeting winds, which strengthened the closer she flew to that black void, took more concentration than she had. The one shot she managed went wide.

Near the churning even horizon, Pallin turned on her with his weapon.

Raea flapped to stop her forward momentum. Where was Elis?

Pulling a maneuver away. He must have thought Pallin still chased him.

She was on her own.

Raea turned and fled. A gust sent her tumbling as a streak of light flashed past. For a couple seconds, she thought she would crash to earth. Her heart raced, but she regained control and spread her wings, steadying her.

She neared the dark hole.

Where was Pallin?

Nearly on top of her.

Now or never. Instinct rose up and guided her to find the resonance while she focused half her attention on remaining airborne. Her body warmed from the energy building up. She had to release it.

Raea flipped around to face him and flapped her wings, her hands up. Pallin aimed his weapon, not fifty feet away.

NOW!

Blinding energy sprayed from her hands without any thought, as if she didn't control it. Raea closed her eyes to shut it out, afraid he would hit her.

The energy expelled itself, leaving her cold and shivering from the sudden change. No one hit her. Raea opened her eyes.

Despite the spots in her vision, she saw no sign of Pallin. Where'd he go? Would he come around again and catch her?

Something inside said he was gone, that she had killed him. But she saw no one, not even a falling body.

That is, no one except Elis, who flew towards her from a distance.

The black maw in the sky continued to swirl with lightening above her.

A moment of dizziness swept over her, distracting her from flying.

Not until strong arms caught her and she faced Elis did she realize she had fallen. ["Are you all right?"] Elis's black wings flapped behind him as he carried them up.

["No. Weak. I think."]

["I'm not surprised, with the energy you released. I've never seen anything like it before."]

["You haven't?"]

["No. I was afraid the energy would disintegrate you. Luckily, it only took Pallin."]

["It did?"]

["He's gone."] His sober tone told her all she needed.

She had disintegrated Pallin. She had killed a person. ["I didn't mean to kill him."] Yes, she had meant to disable him and she despised him for all the trouble he brought into her life. But that didn't justify killing him.

["You did what had to be done."]

["But to kill?"] She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close. Her stomach twisted with the thought that *she* had killed. It sickened her. She had the power to kill, and—worse—she had used it.

WE DID. YOU ARE THE VESSEL.

The Starfire entities? *They* killed Pallin? Had they taken control of her? Raea shuddered, afraid of the implications.

WE GUIDE, NOT CONTROL, AND DEFEND US AND OUR KEEPER.

["It's over. He would have killed you if you hadn't acted."]

["It's still not right."]

A crackle from the maw drew her attention to a shrinking black ball of lightening. ["What was that?"]

["A Starfire portal. Probably Heffin's Gate, activated for him to return with his target."]

["Me."] The idea sobered her. All this was so beyond what she would have imagined two weeks ago.

["You and the crystal. But he's gone."] His arms tightened around her as he flew down to their field. From the sky, she spotted the flashing lights in the distance concentrated near the center of town. Emergency services had been contacted.

Nina was dead. Pallin was disintegrated without a trace. The cops would investigate. Now what? How would they explain it all?

The night wasn't over yet. Weak yet from the fight and the wild ride of emotions that night, she left the flying to him.

["What're we going to tell people?"]

["We'll think of something."]

The Truth

The cops stopped them outside the hotel. "Sorry. Nobody gets in or out right now."

"But we were here." She shouldn't be. She really shouldn't, but Raea wanted it over with. Then she could rest, at least physically. She hurt, and Elis hurt. He had fought with injuries only days old still healing.

But it couldn't heal the emotional wounds. She would never forget what Pallin had done, nor that she had killed him.

At least they could give their sides before the cops came knocking, and maybe they could find the tape Nina had described. If for nothing else, they had to get their hands on any copies of the video the woman had taken of Elis. The night was far from over.

"What do you mean you were here?"

"Nina died in my arms."

The officer said something into the walkie-talkie clipped to his shoulder and ushered them inside, where another uniformed officer met them. His familiar face hardened into a frown. "You again."

Yeah, her. Deputy Sandaman could think what he wanted. She tightened her hold of Elis's gloved hand.

"Tell me what you know, *all* of it."

Raea let Elis speak first. He went into his portion of the story and described chasing Pallin down and fighting, but said Pallin escaped into the night. A partial truth, but they couldn't say he was dead. That would lead to far too many questions and their secret.

From somewhere nearby, Raea caught the phrase "Dark Angel" and turned. A group of three individuals sat at one of the tables in the lobby, a brown-haired woman and two men, one of them a tough-looking bald man and the other a young, scrawny guy with a goatee.

"I don't know what we'll do." The woman sipped a mug of coffee.

"It's just one more mystery. We have enough to show he exists. So what if the footage is blurry or obstructed," the bald man said.

"But she seemed to think there was something about the girl. I don't know."

"It's Nina." The bald man shrugged. "She was always chasing leads. Half them end up in lala land."

The three fell silent for a while, all of them lost to their own thoughts for a time.

Of all the damndest luck. Nina had lied. She didn't have any evidence that Elis was the Dark Angel. For once in a long while, Raea relaxed. The worst was over.

"Miss Dahlrich?"

"What?" She blinked and returned her attention to Deputy Sandaman.

"What happened after you arrived at the hotel?"

"I ran upstairs..." The rest was truth, except for how Elis broke into the room. So what if they said the lock didn't work?

Their secret was safe. No one knew about them being aliens that looked like angels. And no one knew about the Starfire. For now, *it* was safe.

But the responsibility of bearing that power weighed on her mind after all she had experienced. The entities were right. No one should have that power, unless the Starfire chose. They had chosen her, and she had no intention of letting them fall into the hands of those who would use that power for selfish purposes. She had to learn to use it the right way, and never again to kill.

Next time the Shirukan came, *if* they came, she would be ready. She would train with Elis.

"You shouldn't have pursued him yourself. You should have contacted us immediately, although I'm not sure how you discovered he raped you." Sandaman looked from Elis to her.

"I remembered, but the memories were fuzzy from the drug."

"Not enough to press charges without physical evidence," he mumbled while scratching a note on his pad.

As if she'd give them that. No way was anyone examining her to find out she wasn't human. And she wanted to put it all behind her.

"But you'll be after him for murder?"

"Had you contacted us, this might not have happened."

"Or you would have done nothing, because you have no evidence, as you already stated." Elis pulled her closer and Sandaman gave him a dark look.

"Playing the protective boyfriend does more harm than good, in any case I've heard or seen. Remember that."

Point made. Raea hoped Elis took it to heart. *No more running off to finish your business.* They were on Earth, not Inar'Ahben. Here the rules were different.

Elis gave the man a curt nod.

"If I have any other questions, I know where to find you. Thanks for coming back. We'll find this creep."

Next to her Elis tensed.

Creep. Creeper. The nickname Chad had started and most of the school knew Elis as, or used to. Because of what he did Saturday, most of the school saw him as a quiet hero, but he hadn't been back yet. Elis had a few surprises when he returned to school. And from his performance tonight fighting Pallin, she had no doubt he was well enough to return, even if still a little sore.

"Ready?" she asked.

"What about those tapes you wanted to find?"

"I overheard some people talking—I'm guessing her crew—and they said they didn't get, like, any ID on Dark Angel. Too blurry or obstructed."

He squeezed her hand. "Dark Angel is safe."

For now. Raea led him out to Evelyn's car in the parking lot. Elis winced as he sat down and let out a deep sigh once in his seat.

She knew it. "You fake it pretty well."

"What?"

"Not showing any pain."

"Good."

"You're no angel, you know. You're not supernatural or invincible."

"I know."

"And you need rest. We both do." And time to heal emotions. All that had happened hurt. She only wanted to forget, but she never would.

He started the car, a grin crawling out. "I know."

This game again? She chuckled, glad to forget for a moment. "You know...you're way too agreeable."

"I know."

One more. She had to say it, just to see his reaction, and to hear the truth. "I love you."

He turned to her, his grin stretching wide. He didn't even have to say it. She knew.

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 three 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. 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 winter 2011:

ORIGINS OF DARK ANGEL

(Starfire Angels: Dark Angel Chronicles Book 3.5)

Other Books:

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

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FIREBLOOD (A Legend of the White Dragon Novel)

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TIGER BORN

By M. A. Nilles

Sneak peak from BROKEN WINGS:

Leksel turned, the muscles in his neck tightening like his wings. ["They're onto us. We make this fast and we get out. No questions. No staring. Understand?"] His eyes fixed on her with a momentary shift to Cris.

Then she was right; the Shirukan were closing in on them. Her heart pounded at the narrow escape. That *was* close, closer than she thought possible. They had almost been caught. More than ever she wanted to get out of that city and off that world. She would never argue with Dave again if she found her way home.

How did they know where they were? Unless...["Your computer access alerted them."]

His expression lightened. ["No. We have current access codes. It was you."]

["Me?"] How? Was it her behavior? What had she done?

["The Starfire gives off a unique trace radiation. Another scan and they'll know where we're heading. We'll have to hurry,"] Leksel said.

Cris moved close to her. ["You're thinking like one of us. I must be rubbing off."]

In his delusional dreams.

The computer double-beeped and the doors opened.

["Let's go."] Leksel led them through another corridor.

Raea cringed at the number of men and women in uniforms, many of them Shirukan. The glass walls over the walkway gave her a view of towering, rounded city structures, one of them ahead. From the view of clouds below and around them, they strode through a tunnel connected to a small section of the city separate from the large city proper. Through the glass ceiling, she made out a flat area ahead where a large, sleekly curved ship took off straight up. Some of the ships like she had seen in the docking bay they left flew among the clouds outside.

A grasp on her arm pulled her attention ahead. Cris let go when she hurried to catch up.

Leksel and Corsa led them into a different docking bay, this one with three tiers on each side and a dozen open doors to the sky around each tier. The smell of fresh air filled her lungs, despite the crowds of plain-clothed people and Shirukan. The smallest ships resembled oversized beetles with windows and small wings.

Leksel rushed them past several empty, red cross-hair sections on the main deck where there should have been ships. He stopped at a panel on the wall next to one of the shuttles. At his touch, a holographic display lit up before him in a pattern of colors.

Corsa tapped her shoulder and pointed.

Raea turned and her heart froze. Oh, hell no.

["Uh, oh."] Cris stepped up beside her. He could say that again.

A large group of Shirukan entered.

["Leks,"] Cris said.

No answer.

["Leks, you better see this."]

["Crystal fire!"] Something pounded behind them.

Leksel tapped on the colored keys again, a scowl on his face.

["Leksey, we have trouble."] Cris jumped back and grabbed his arm.

["Leave me alone!"] Leksel yanked his arm away. ["It's not taking the code."]

["Leks. Shirukan?"]

At that, the big man looked up.

A large number of Shirukan followed a woman with her dark hair pulled back. Those already in the bay lined up as if for an inspection.

Corsa pulled Cris forward with her. What was she thinking?

Raea caught her breath at a sudden jerk on her arm.

Leksel pulled Raea around the nose of the shuttle pointing out to an open sky. A stiff breeze blew in through the open bay door. It would be so easy to fly out, but he held her close to him.

He put a finger to his lips and peeked around the shuttle. Raea leaned close to see around him. Standing against him felt strange, but she didn't mind any more. Besides, his attention focused on the mass of black-uniformed Shirukan. It wasn't like he did it because he liked her, although that thought lingered in the back of her mind. Corsa should never have suggested it.

All the Shirukan, and Corsa and Cris, lined up in neat rows on either side of the center, where the woman stood. ["We traced the Crystal Keeper to this location minutes ago. She's here now. No one leaves until every person is searched, and I expect—"] She raised her voice. ["*Every* civilian to cooperate fully. You will be free to leave after you've been scanned."] The woman met the eyes of several of the Shirukan. Her stern face settled into a frown and her eyes lingered on Corsa and Cris before passing over others.

Next to Raea, Leksel's muscles hardened. If she thought him tense before, Raea was way off. That was nothing to being able to bounce a quarter off him.

["Do I make myself clear?"]

A chorus of voices in unison rose up: ["Yes, sir!"]

At that, the Shirukan scattered.

["Crystal fire!"] Leksel muttered under his breath and straightened at the nose of the shuttle. ["They've locked out the release codes for the shuttles."]

This couldn't be happening. ["How do we get out of here?"] It couldn't end like this. They were so close!

["If we drop, we may not be noticed, then we can fly low to the nearest island."]

A tingle of excitement passed through her at the thought of flying again and her wings lifted slightly, until her stomach rumbled. Flying on an empty stomach didn't appeal to her, but escaping did, hungry or not.

["We're all hungry, and tired."] So, he'd noticed. ["As soon as the others—"]

[Leks."]

He spun so fast, he bumped her. She hadn't noticed how close they still stood. Only a couple days and she was comfortable with him, but it felt like a lifetime had passed.

Cris joined them. Corsa glanced back and crossed to Raea's other side.

["Now what?"]

Leksel glanced at Raea.

If he wanted her opinion, she couldn't give him any, except to agree with him. She wanted to spread her wings and catch the air. She missed flying. ["Sounds good."]

His jaw muscles flexed.

["What sounds good?"] Cris looked from her to Leksel.

["We fly."]

["Are you insane?"] Cris's wings lifted slightly.

["Maybe,"] Corsa said.

The sound of voices and footsteps grew louder.

["Go!"] Leksel shoved Cris towards the bay door.

["You can't bypass the lockout?"]

["No. Go!"]

Cris looked like he wanted to argue again.

To hell with it. Raea didn't want to wait, or to be caught, and she didn't care what Cris thought. At least Leksel made a decision. She rushed into the open air and plummeted through puffs of clouds, momentary blocks of fog that left her shivering and her heart pounding.

A sense of freedom rushed through her as the ocean spread out below. Above her, the city loomed enormous. Three shapes fell her direction.

["They're onto us!"] Leksel's voice came through clear on her tri-comm. ["Fly, Raea! Here they come."]

She opened her wings. The sudden parachute effect strained her muscles. A sharp pain twinged in her back, but she couldn't falter.

Once level, she searched the sky around her. Leksel leveled with her, Cris flew above and opposite. Corsa followed slightly behind and above.

Behind them, black shapes formed a wedge in the sky.

["How are you in a storm?"]

She didn't like the sound of that. ["Um...I don't know."] What did Leksel have in mind?

Oh, no. A dark cloud piled up to their left. He had to be joking.

He angled towards it. Not joking.