

WHEN ANGELS CRY
(a STARFIRE ANGELS novella)

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Horror tightened around Padina's heart in a stranglehold cutting off her breath. The muscles for her wings tensed at her back, and her fingers tightened on the balcony rail of the tower overlooking the city.

"Jerantis!" She whirled to search the apartment behind her, the long sheer skirt brushing against her leggings.

A man with dark-brown hair tied back in a tail appeared from inside wearing an ordinary gray flightsuit. He stopped at the balcony rail next to her, his face draining of color. "Larantan forces should have stopped them, unless—" He gasped. "Go!"

What? Go? But the invading forces—

He pushed her over the rail and followed her. They spread their wings and soared among the towers floating stationary over the mass of city structures. Moments later, thunder resounded from the apartment they had vacated.

Padina ducked her head under her open wings to see behind them. Black-clad figures rushed from the apartment balcony—a close call. The wedges of black shapes further out from the city must have been intended as a distraction to keep her inside with the mistaken belief that she would be safe. Meanwhile, the real threat was preparing to take her by surprise when she least expected it.

The aquamarine Starfire shard hung safely from the chain around her neck, the entities of the crystal quiet about this. Empress Shirat Marin sought the power of the crystal to bring Heffin's Gate online once again. With it, she could threaten instant destruction on any opposing city, like Laranta. Padina couldn't allow that and neither would the entities of the shard.

"Fly! Don't look back." Jerantis's voice pushed her forward.

They flew over the city and beyond the outer towers, pursued by the black-clad Shirukan, the elite forces of the Shirat Empire. Ocean stretched every direction far below, while a searoot island drifted serenely in the distance among the clouds. Not a sign of the local military. They were alone.

"Where are we going?" Padina shouted.

"The safest place we can. Open a portal!"

A portal, but the baby—

He didn't know yet, and they had little choice to protect the Starfire and their world; the Shirukan closed in quickly.

While Jerantis watched her back, Padina spread her wings to glide while she concentrated on escaping and pushed aside worries of losing her baby. In a thought, the resonance of the Starfire in her genes warmed through her, setting the Starburst marks on the palms and backs of her hands aglow with the rising power. She focused on the connection to the Starfire's original dimension, which allowed them to jump anywhere across their own dimension in a fraction of a second.

In the sky above her, lightning crackled and snapped around a growing ball of light.

She flapped to steady her flight amid the increasing disturbance of the atmosphere. The ball darkened into a black nothingness not far from her and exploded outward into a spiraling hole. The portal was nearly ready. They would be safe in moments.

"Hurry!" Jerantis shouted.

Padina focused on the void until it grew in diameter to three times her height, wide enough for their wings fully spread. There it ceased its growth, and she breathed easier. Forming the portal took all her concentration, while maintaining the connection required less focus but still drained her energy.

She turned to Jerantis. "It's done. The portal is ready. Let's go."

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

No. She refused to leave him. They wanted the shard of the Starfire she protected, but they couldn't touch it. Only the chosen Crystal Keeper was acceptable to the entities. They wanted *her*, not him.

She flew close to him as the Shirukan formation split apart to surround them. They didn't fire their weapons yet, but they wouldn't risk killing her.

"Go. Now." He turned to face her, hovering on an updraft.

No! Tears burned with the implications of what he said. Her heart ached as if torn from her chest. If she left him, they wouldn't hesitate to kill. "I won't leave you!"

Jerantis met her for a quick kiss and drifted back slightly to avoid interfering with her flight. "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, the Starburst marks on his hands glowing with the resonance of the building power he would release as a weapon against them. "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.

A release of energy from Jerantis's hands hit one of the Shirukan. Shots flashed in response from the weapons of two of them and found their mark.

"Jerantis!" Her back and chest ached where she shared his pain. For a moment, she fell with the stiffening of her wings. Her body went cold, empty of all connections to him. She didn't feel him anymore, the bond that had connected them as mates gone. His death had been instantaneous.

He fell to the ocean far below, his wings trailing his body.

The black fliers closed in. The portal behind her pulled at her with its gravity, but less than before; it shrank with her loss of concentration.

Padina turned and fled into the darkness.

Fire blazed through her body, the Starfire's energy burning as if to separate from their symbiosis. Her left wing numbed. The last images of Jerantis and the pain that seized her in the killing shots from the Shirukan ripped through her. Shared sensations had ended as if a part of her had been removed; what had linked them as mates was no more. For the first time in the last year, she was truly alone.

A moment later, she emerged into a sky stretching from sapphire to nearly black with stars from one horizon to the next. Below, the towers of civilization rose up with their lights in a blur of colors. Was this the world she had asked the Starfire entities to connect to? It looked nothing like their records.

She didn't have a choice anymore; she was there. The Starfire must have led her to Earth, the

safest place for her and the Starfire shard. Her shard would be one less to risk falling into Shirukan hands. If they never found her, the crystal would never be complete.

She struggled to fly, her left wing numb of some feeling. The portal hadn't caused that. The Shirukan must have hit her with a neutralizer, but it hadn't spread to her body. She could still fly.

Over her numb wing, she saw a dark shape with wings spread wide. He aimed his weapon.

No! Not here. She had to escape, but there was nowhere to hide.

With his wings fully outstretched on the winds, the Shirukan hung in the air facing her, his weapon steady. "Open a portal! Take us home."

"No!" That was the last thing she would do. If she hadn't killed her baby coming through the portal once, she wouldn't go back. And she certainly would not return for him and his kind to take her and the shard. She owed it to Jerantis's sacrifice and her world to keep the shard safe from the hands of the Shirat Empire.

"Do it!" He shifted the weapon, the end of it glowing with energy.

Padina's heart pounded in her chest. Wasn't it enough to have taken away the man she loved?

No. Not for them. They would stop at nothing for the power of the Starfire. Although she wanted to end the emptiness left by Jerantis's death, the entities of the crystal fought against it, insisting on her survival. And the Shirukan wouldn't kill her, not yet. He needed her alive

But she didn't have to give in.

She folded her wings and dove, twisted, and caught a warm current to carry her higher. After steadying her flight, she wiped her eyes and checked the sky around her—the dark shape had vanished.

Padina twisted her head to look up, and caught her breath. Strong arms pinned her arms to her sides and her wings at her back. In the air, she had no leverage to fight. A moment of panic swept through her, but determination chased it away.

"Take us home, Keeper," he growled in her ear. "Now!"

At least while holding her, he couldn't bring the weapon to bear. That gave her the chance she needed. Padina gripped his arm around her and touched the resonance. It burned from her hands.

His arms shifted but didn't pull away. She clamped on and continued to release the power.

After a couple seconds of his clothes smoking and the smell of charred flesh, he released her.

Padina dove, flying with all speed to escape another capture. After some distance, she shifted in the air and scanned the twilight sky. The dark shadow was gone.

* * *

Commander Kassel Taren dove away to dark territory below to hide.

He hadn't expected her to attack. These Keepers were supposed to be trained to serve, but he had heard reports of them hurting others. This proved the threat they could be. Empress Marin had been right to take over the academy and direct the schooling of *meistal*, Inari descended from the original Keepers but with no Starburst marks to release the energy. They were no threat the way Keepers were, but they could confront them with a greater chance of survival than ordinary Inari soldiers.

Crystal fire. His arm stung. A red welt formed on the exposed skin. He had absorbed what he could of her energy, but he could only disperse so much.

From the shadows, he looked up, but she had disappeared from the sky. Panic swept through him for a flicker of a thought, but reason calmed him. He was on a different world and would

have to adapt. And he would have to find the Crystal Keeper if he hoped to return home.

If she came here, she probably had a reason for it rather than staying on the home world. How long would she stay? Where was he?

In his distraction, Taren dropped down among shadows to a landing that jarred through his legs, and pulled his dark wings to his back.

"Whoa!"

He whirled on a pair of shadows in strange attire. They looked almost Inari, but without wings.

Humans.

One whispered to another.

The other made an abrupt sound of fright, and both sprinted off into the dark of a structure painted with random marks and images in an almost artistic style.

Earth. A slow smile crept to Taren's lips. It made sense. The Crystal Keeper could hide among humans with her wings hidden, except she bore the Starburst marks to give her away.

He could hide his wings too, and he would find her.

In a thought, the resonance burned through his back, shrinking the wings to nothing. He clenched his teeth through the pain and gasped at its release. Only in training had he done it before, but now he appreciated learning the technique, one of the few uses of the resonance his kind could manage without the marks.

His gloved hand reached inside the black frock coat of his uniform to a pocket of the flightsuit beneath, and he pulled out the flat, palm-sized scanner. On the screen, a green dot appeared, the unique radiation signature of the Starfire. The display indicated the direction and distance, almost out of range and heading quickly beyond. He'd have to move.

He winced at the sting of his arm where she'd burned him. It didn't matter and would heal soon. Capturing the Crystal Keeper was top priority.

* * *

Over a swath of green outside the light from the nearest street lamp, Padina dropped her legs as the ground came up and flapped to slow her descent to a light touchdown.

For now, she was stuck on Earth. She didn't want to stay, but could see no other choice. It wasn't worth risking the Shirukan finding her in any of the free cities of home; they'd done it once and they could do it again. And, if her child had survived, she'd have to wait a couple months before she could risk traversing another portal without losing it. In the meantime, she would have to keep her guard up for the Shirukan, because sooner or later, he would search for her. She could only hope it was after she returned home.

Home for a while would be Earth, the world her ancestors had discovered six thousand years ago, soon after the completion of Heffin's Gate. The machine focused the Starfire's power into portals anywhere in the universe, which had opened the gateway to Earth, but Keepers were the machines now.

The Starfire had created the Keepers to facilitate communication and prevent the abuse of their power, which was fought over throughout their history. Five thousand years ago, when one faction tried to use the power to destroy an entire city, the Starfire shattered itself—the crystalline form in which it survived that universe—and bound its power to the Inari within the machine, her ancestors. Since then, each shard chose a Keeper to bear it, sharing their secrets and guiding the Keeper.

Throughout the years since discovering Earth, Inari had observed the humans at different stages of development, and it had proven useful when Keepers needed to escape persecution from those seeking the crystal's power, like her now.

Earth was primitive, human technology far less than Inari, at least according to their last visit. That wasn't what she had seen from above, though. This appeared far more advanced than their records showed, but in a big city, she might be able to hide.

In only her thin, backless top that left her midriff exposed, she shivered from the chill of the night. A touch of the Starfire's resonance warmed her, but she couldn't walk around like that. The glow of the Starburst marks on the palms and backs of her hands would alert anyone that she wasn't human.

She pulled her wings tight to her back for warmth, but she couldn't keep them either. Every Inari was taught that humans didn't have wings. If she wanted to fit in, she'd have to hide hers. She'd practiced it, but had never had a reason since to hide them.

At a touch of the resonance, bones and sinew and feathers shrank amid pain ripping down her back. She wanted to scream but clenched her teeth. *Breathe!* It hurt. It hurt more than she remembered from her training.

Before she expected to faint from the pain, it was gone, along with her wings and the muscles to control them.

Now to find shelter. But where? The street was empty, not a human in sight. At least, not in her immediate vicinity. From somewhere through the square-cornered buildings ahead, the sounds of machines rose into the night. Where there were machines, there would be humans to maintain them, if not operate them.

Hopefully the humans would be accepting of an outsider. She knew nothing about human culture except the mention in her training, but apparently that had been out of date.

So she would learn something new. This wouldn't be easy, but she didn't have a choice. She was alone on an alien world. Alone...

Emotions threatened to choke her, but she swallowed them and crossed a couple of streets, following the lights and sounds in the direction of a large open area near buildings where people walked to wheeled vehicles and back. The thought of finding someone to guide her on that world hurried her feet through the dark areas between her and them.

A chilly breeze made her shiver. Padina found the resonance for temporary warmth, glad that no humans would notice; the busier areas were still some distance away. She couldn't do that once she was among them.

In the soft glow of her hands, eyes glared from the shadow of a vehicle parked along the street. Below them, white teeth appeared. A growl from the darkness sent her heart racing.

Great moons of Iros! No one said anything about wild predators living among the humans.

From under the vehicle stepped a four legged creature. The thing approached slowly, its head low and sharp teeth bared. The growl emanating from its throat couldn't be good.

She backed away, her heart pounding against her chest, and fled from the red menace. Its growl and several barks pursued her.

In seconds, pain dug deep into her leg, sending her crashing to the ground, where her left hand gave a sickening crunch of bone.

She screamed in pain and kicked at the creature with her good leg. A solid connection with her free foot elicited a yelp and her release.

Padina rolled onto her back, but the animal jumped on her chest with a vicious growl. It lunged for her face, and she swung her head away and lifted her hands to stop it. Pain zinged up

her left hand. She bent that arm and braced against the creature with her elbow, but the animal barked at her and tried to maneuver its teeth closer to her face.

Determination to keep it from biting her overrode the pain in her hand. Her life couldn't end like this, not after escaping the Shirukan. There had to be a way to escape.

"Help!" The word choked out with a gasp.

The creature barked as if telling her to be quiet.

Someone please help. She whimpered in fear, but the more she cried, the louder the creature growled. It twisted its head and snapped its jaws at her arm. She instinctively pulled away, which gave the creature a chance to lunge.

In that instant, she found the resonance and released it from the mark on her hand. The creature yelped and backed off, whimpering with half its bloody face gone.

Finally. Breathing hard, she pulled her left hand to her chest and winced at the jolt of pain it sent through her arm.

Exhausted by the fight, she laid still and wiped her eyes with her right hand, trembling and sniffing with the fear and pain accosting her. Maybe she should have left the predator to kill her. Maybe she should never have come to Earth. Maybe she should return home and give the Shirukan what they wanted.

NO!

She shuddered at the strength of the emotion. It hadn't come from her, yet it had come from within her; the entities of her shard wouldn't allow her to give up.

She served the crystal shard she wore. It was her duty since they had chosen her as their Keeper. She had to go on, despite the pain and loneliness.

Movement hurt; an understatement of immense proportions. Her right leg also ached, and in the wan light from the posts above, she saw the red growing below her knee. It soaked through her leggings, which had ripped from the creature's teeth. She had healed others with the energy but she couldn't heal herself. Now she needed help more than ever.

She had to go on, to seek the humans and their healing, and hope the Shirukan didn't find her first. What she had done to him was nothing compared to what the wild creature had done to her.

Padina winced with each movement to get her feet under her. After some time, she stood and hobbled forward, holding her aching left hand as still as she could. Each limping step jostled her arm, and pain branched through her hand and wrist. A staggering trail of blood followed her from the leg wound.

The street brightened with the lights from buildings rising on each side. Shadowy figures strolled along the sides while vehicles occasionally passed between, their lights on the road ahead. A couple people passed her, but only stared.

"Help, please."

They didn't do anything. Didn't anyone care?

She stepped into a cross street and stumbled to her knees. Instinct thrust her left hand out with her right. Bad move. Pain shot through her arm to her skull.